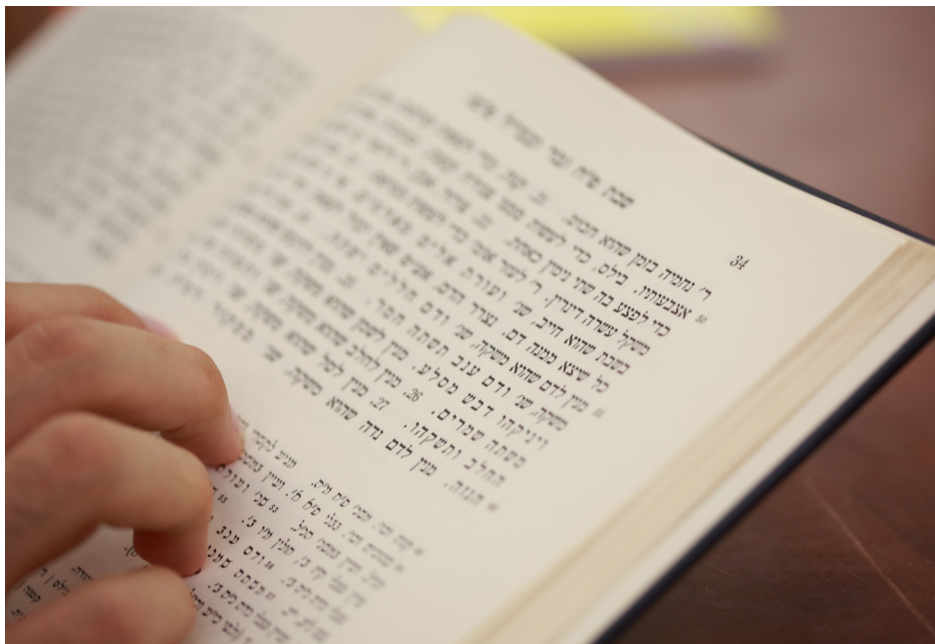


# GLEANINGS

Dialogue on Jewish Education from The Davidson School



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**The William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education** is the largest multid denominational school of Jewish education in North America, granting masters and doctoral degrees and providing professional development to educators currently in the field. Drawing upon cutting-edge thinking in both Jewish and general education, its pedagogy emphasizes experiential education, is informed by best practices and new developments in teaching, and engenders leadership in a variety of educational settings from day schools to summer camps, Jewish community centers to congregational schools, Israel experiences to environmental education, and early childhood to adult Jewish learning.

- MA In Jewish Education
- Doctorate in Jewish Education
- Professional Development and Curriculum

## Teaching Jewish Texts

“Turn it and turn it, since everything is in it. And in it should you look, and grow old and be worn; and from it do not move, since there is no characteristic greater than it.”

*(Pirkei Avot 5:22)*

At the core of our tradition sits a collection of sacred texts which inform and inspire Jewish action. Our texts contain insights into the history of the Jewish people and the world at large, and a code for living a meaningful life. Engaging in text study not only reveals these insights, but is also a practice that cultivates critical thinking, dialogue, teamwork, initiative, and reflection.

The art and science of text study is an area in which many scholars and practitioners affiliated with The Davidson School devote their time, attention, and passion. We are

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MA Degree



DSLTI



Ivriyon



The Legacy Heritage Instructional  
Leadership Institute

particularly excited to have launched an initiative creating the first ever compendium of standards and benchmarks for the teaching of rabbinic literature through our Jewish Day School Standards & Benchmarks Project. We are honored to steward this project in partnership with leadership teams from over 15 day schools, scholars, and leaders across academic institutions and agencies throughout North America and across all denominational lines. To sit with them is to truly feel the roots in the legacy of the Jewish *beit midrash!*



## On Critical Thinking and the Teaching of Tanakh

BY DR ALEX SINCLAIR

“Critical thinking” has become an educational buzzword that lies at the core of the curricular mission of many of the schools that we’ve worked with through the Jewish Day School Standards and Benchmarks Project. Schools want their students to engage in what Ennis (1991) defines as “reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do.” This kind of thinking involves the higher levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy and puts learners in situations where they have to evaluate multiple alternatives, make and defend judgments between competing claims, analyze, deduce, and infer.

Critical thinking is also a major element in the [Understanding by Design](#) (UbD) approach to curriculum design. Standards and Benchmarks uses many aspects of the UbD model but dramatically expands its focus on “unwrapping” desired educational outcomes and places a greater emphasis on the connections between an educational institution’s vision and the articulation of the overarching outcomes it seeks for its students (Abramson and Sinclair, 2010).

Most parents and Jewish educators, I’m sure, would place critical thinking high on the list of what they hope schools will teach children. But would they see Tanakh as the subject matter where that happens? Parents may be more likely to see the secular curriculum as the place where critical thinking occurs. And Jewish educators might argue that rabbinics, with its Talmudic *shakla v’tarya* (the back and forth discussion of the Gemara), its halakhic fine-tooth combing, and its midrashic interpretive gymnastics, might be a better bet for critical thinking.

So: how do we teach critical thinking when Tanakh is the subject matter?

In the Standards and Benchmarks approach, one of the main tools for critical thinking that we train Judaic studies heads and their faculties to use is Essential Questions (EQs). Here, we are squarely in UbD territory, and we, too, see EQs as ones that “pose dilemmas, subvert obvious or canonical ‘truths’ or force incongruities upon our attention” (Bruner, quoted in Wiggins and McTighe, 2005, 107), and that “provoke deep thought, lively discussion, sustained inquiry, and new understanding” (Wiggins and McTighe, 110).

But in the study of Tanakh, a really good essential question is also an “ultimate question.” Here I refer to the term used by Mike Rosenak, *z”l* (1987), who adapted it from the work of Tillich and Phenix. An ultimate question is one that deals with ultimate concerns—matters that are critically important, supremely valuable, of deeper human significance, holistic in their scope, and evaluative about right conduct and orientation.

By integrating the idea of “essential questions” with “ultimate questions,” we arrive at not only a set of criteria for evaluating the quality of essential questions that we come up with in our teaching of Tanakh, but also a rationale for why Tanakh can be a site for critical thinking and indeed for critical thinking of a more

powerful nature than that which occurs in other subject matters.

Firstly, in terms of criteria, we should push ourselves and our colleagues to come up with EQs that also deal with, touch on, or hint at questions of ultimate concern. So, “How can communal leaders be great even when they are deeply flawed individuals?” is a nice EQ (and is typically the kind of EQ that comes up in the study of Moses). It checks all the boxes of what an EQ should be. It will certainly lead to critical thinking on the part of the learners. But “How do I know if something is holy?” is arguably a better EQ, because as well as checking those boxes, it also moves the learner into the realm of ultimate concern.

This leads us to the second point. When we write essential questions that are also ultimate questions, we strengthen the rationale for Tanakh as a site for critical thinking of a *particularly intense kind*. If the study of Tanakh only generates essential questions, then that’s fine, but it leaves the discipline open to the critique often voiced by students and, more dangerously, felt but left unsaid by parents: when all’s said and done, we’d rather learn critical thinking by studying subjects that are “useful.”

But when we teach Tanakh using *ultimate* essential questions, we provide a powerful rationale for the discipline. Yes, you might be able to think about leadership in English literature and social studies; but only here will you grapple with questions of holiness, of humankind’s place in the world, of what it means to be a good person in the Jewish sense of the term, and so on.

Moreover, we want students to engage in critical thinking about these questions. Which of the Tanakh’s various definitions of holiness is most convincing? Where do I find the text’s notions of holiness to be problematic? Perhaps I want to offer a different, more contemporary definition of holiness, in dialogue with those offered by the text? How, if at all, should my thinking about holiness influence my everyday actions? What does this mean for me as a Jew? These kinds of questions, emerging as they do from the core EQ about holiness, bring the learner to a place where s/he is not just engaging in critical thinking, but doing so on a religious, theological, *ultimate* plane that other disciplines will find it hard to reach.

Critical thinking is a profoundly important educational goal across the curriculum. The teaching of Tanakh offers us the chance not just to achieve this goal, but to do so with unique, ultimate depth.

*Dr. Alex Sinclair is director of programs in Israel Education and an adjunct assistant professor of Jewish Education at The Davidson School, where he also serves as a Tanakh education consultant for the Jewish Day School Standards and Benchmarks Project. His main area of research is Israel education, a subject on which he has published numerous academic articles, written many op-eds for newspapers such as Haaretz and the Jerusalem Post, and lectured widely. His forthcoming book is titled Loving the Real Israel: An Educational Agenda for Liberal Zionism. He received an MA from the University of Oxford, an MSt from Oxford’s Balliol College, and a PhD from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.*

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# Avoiding the Around and About to Teach the Text

BY SHARON FREUNDEL

I had a Bible Professor who often said about the Biblical text, “Everything else is around it or about it. This is *it*.” I feel that way about the various genres of Jewish texts, both biblical and Rabbinic. For our children to be educated Jews, it is not enough for them to learn around them or about them. They need to learn *them*.

Teaching Jewish texts poses a number of challenges in Jewish day schools: limited instructional time, different levels of ability to access and interpret the texts independently, and perceived or actual lack of relevance to our students’ lives, to name a few. Conversely, the opportunities are abundant: exposing and connecting the students to the rich literary history of our people, developing their abilities to read and interpret texts throughout their lifetimes, using Jewish texts to inform their moral development and day-to-day values, having shared texts that children—no matter what their denomination or personal family practice—can unwrap and discuss, and a host of others.

At the Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation’s Capital (JPDS-NC), a pre-K through sixth-grade community school and the only Jewish day school in the District of Columbia, we confront these challenges and opportunities in a number of ways, two of which are described below. Our faculty and staff have worked particularly hard to define the reasons we teach biblical texts and the bottom line standards we expect our graduates to take with them into the future. The two major standards<sup>1</sup> that we teach to at JPDS-NC are:

1. Students will become independent and literarily astute readers of the biblical text in Hebrew.
2. Students will develop a love of Torah study for its own sake and embrace it as an inspiring resource, informing their values, moral commitments, and ways of experiencing the world.

Teaching specific skills to the students so that they can access and interpret the texts, ultimately independently, and using big ideas and essential questions are some of the ways that we achieve our goals.

As we are a pre-K–6 community day school, planning to expand into middle school in the near future, one of our greatest challenges has been how to expose our children to the various biblical genres in addition to the multiple genres of rabbinic literature and how to balance the needs of the different students. For some of our children, elementary school serves as the foundation for their continued intense Jewish learning; for others, graduation signals the end of their deep continuation of *Limmud* Torah, at least for the time being.

Our sixth-grade Judaic studies teacher, Shifra Chelst, created a curriculum that addresses these issues. The new curriculum was actually sparked by sixth graders expressing their belief that they had *humash* study down pat and that they “knew it all.” We brainstormed on how to disabuse them of that misconception, and based on the ideas that developed, Shifra created a curriculum that comprises 10 discrete units, each focusing on a different genre of Judaic literature. The themes of all 10 units relate to the grade-level intention of “insiders and outsiders,” a topic that nascent middle-schoolers relate to and concern themselves with continually.

<sup>1</sup> The Jewish Day School Standards and Benchmarks Project of The Davidson School.

Below is a chart of the various units outlining the kind of text, the content, the culminating project, and one or more essential questions for each unit. This is, of course, a work in progress (as curriculum always is and should be), and will continue to evolve. Even if we do not get to all of the units, the children will be exposed to a wide variety of Judaic literature in a thoughtful, reflective manner.

In addition, we have developed a culminating unit called *Derekh Hayashar* (The Way Forward) in which we explore the theme of *chesed* using the various genres, presented chronologically, together with some non-Jewish materials such as the Code of Hammurabi and the Sermon on the Mount. The theme of “reaching out to help others” is an important one for rising seventh graders, and the unit draws together everything the students have learned over the course of sixth grade.

Month	Genre	Readings/ Content	Project	Essential Question(s)
Oct.	<i>Humash</i>	<i>Beshallah</i>	Wilderness journals	How do a group of individuals become a nation?
Nov.	<i>Ketuvim</i>	<i>Megilat Ruth</i>	Pictures of <i>pesukim</i>	What makes a Jew? How does an individual join a society?
Dec.	<i>Neviim</i>	Ten Tribes and modern Israel history	Timelines	What makes someone part of <i>B'nei Yisrael</i> ?
Jan.	<i>Ketuvim</i>	<i>Megilat Esther</i>	Independent analysis of Yosef compared to and contrasted with Esther	What is a hero? How is a hero an insider? An outsider?
Feb.	<i>Acharonim</i>	<i>Iyov</i>  <i>Kuzari</i>  Holocaust responsa	Holocaust memorials	How do individuals and communities react to tragedy? How do we respond when bad things happen to good people?
March	Mishnah	<i>Masechet Rosh Hashanah</i>		How does a society adapt to fit the challenges of its times?
April	Gemara	<i>Arvei Pesachim</i>	Mishnaic Seder	What is the role of details (small picture) in Jewish practice?
May	<i>Tefillah</i>	?	Illustrated Siddur	How does prayer both connect us to the community and allow us to be individuals at the same time?
June	<i>Rishonim</i>	Mishnah Torah	Personal belief journals	Are there Jewish beliefs? Is belief required in Judaism? What is the role of shared belief in a community?

Our curriculum has succeeded in instilling in our graduating students the notion that there is a whole lot more to learn in terms of Judaic literature, whether or not they are continuing their studies at a Jewish day school. It also has opened their eyes to more advanced philosophical and theological questions. One came up in teaching the Code of Hammurabi. The teacher explained that frequently, “the gods” were invoked to put an extra imprimatur on the code to assure increased compliance with the rules. One child questioned whether this also applied to the Torah. Although this is perhaps not the question we were seeking or expecting, it opened a rich line of discussion about the authority of the Torah.

And, after all, isn't stimulating deep thought to help us figure out our lives what teaching “it,” the text, is all about?

*Sharon Freundel attended Stern College for Women of Yeshiva University and graduated with a BS in Nursing from the University of Maryland. She did graduate work at Teachers College Columbia University and earned an MA in Jewish Education at the Baltimore Hebrew University. Following several years of working in the nursing field, Mrs. Freundel became engaged in the teaching of Torah. She taught and was the department chair for Tanakh (Bible) and Torah SheBa'al Peh (Rabbinics) and was the mashgicha ruchanit (spiritual guidance counselor) of the Upper School at the Melvin J. Berman Hebrew Academy. She is currently the director of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at the Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital and teaches adult Jewish education classes throughout the greater Washington DC area on topics such as Tanakh, Jewish philosophy and contemporary halakhic issues in multiple venues such the University of Maryland, the George Washington University, Georgetown Medical School, the American Jewish Committee, the Jewish Federation, Israel Bonds, and others. She has lectured in Canada, Australia, Israel, and throughout the United States.*



## Making it Personal

BY DAVID WOLKIN

My first job after graduating from The Davidson School was as a full-time educator at a large Reform synagogue on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. A few weeks into my time there, one of the rabbis asked if I could substitute-teach her weekly adult Torah-study class, and I jumped at the opportunity. That kind of class was a dream gig for me—the students were engaged and committed to the material at hand, and no classroom management was necessary. I had my own fond memories of sitting in on my father's weekly class at his synagogue, a tight-knit group of congregants who spent more than 30 years learning together.

With little time to prepare for that first class, I spent about 30 minutes reviewing the parashah and came up with a few pointed questions about what this ancient text could possibly have to do with our lives today. It turned out to be more than enough, as those questions yielded a robust and engaging discussion.

The success of that first substitute-teaching gig soon led to something of a regular job, and while I can't remember each individual class, there is one that stuck out in my mind. Our conversation about Parashat Metzora, which focuses on ancient ritual responses to physical ailments, covered everything from the emotional trauma of being put outside a community to early responses to HIV/AIDS in the 1980s. A text about treating biblical skin diseases easily led us to reflect on our lives today.

Those classes have stayed with me for close to a decade now, and the experience we had together is representative of how I think about teaching text. I will admit that my philosophy tends to be much more successful with a group of adult learners who are already deeply engaged, but I have had similarly engaging experiences with second graders. (I'll never forget the brilliance of eight-year-old Olivia, who said, "I don't think these stories happened, but I think we have a lot to learn from them.")

I embrace the view that the Torah and the texts that follow are not inherently divine, but instead represent the ongoing documentation of the story of our people, one that continues to be written today. In holding this perspective, I put the onus on myself and my learners to discover a sense of holiness in our relationships with the text. I consider this framework to be an authentic and honest reflection of who I am as both an educator and a Jew, which is frankly the only way to teach. One of the values of this approach is it there is no need to rationalize the aspects of the Torah that are so clearly out of line with a modern and progressive mindset, such as the prohibition against homosexuality.

To put this approach into vaguely mathematical terms, I would indicate the following:

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<p><b>Kaplanian Reconstructionism:</b> our relationships with text must continue to evolve, just as we do.</p>	+	<p>The constructivism that I learned with Dr. Shira Epstein: my learners must develop their own meanings out of this text.</p>	+	<p>The personalization orientation, as taught to me by Barry Holtz's: in his words, "the goal is to see the relationship between text and the life of today."</p>	=	<p>How I generally think about teaching text.</p>
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This approach does not eliminate divinity from the process; in fact, it is the process itself in which divinity may reside. My learners become closer to one another through wrestling with the text together and connecting it to their lives, revealing themselves in the process. A true I-Thou experience.

As an educator, I find myself freed from the bounds of having to teach with an ideological agenda. Rather than attempting to have my learners connect with the text in any kind of prescriptive matter, I can structure the entire learning experience as an open door. Experience has taught me that asking my learners to share why a text doesn't work for them is as fruitful as asking why it does. If a text makes them angry, then we are presented with the opportunity to engage honestly with this raw emotion and see where we end up on the other side of it. I'm free to be honest with them and say, "Hey, this text makes me angry too, but I refuse to ignore it. Let's deal with this together."

This is not to imply that I want my learners to say they don't connect with the text—it simply means that I don't consider this outcome to be a failure. I find it rewarding to help them find a point of entry to the text.

To be honest, the Torah makes it easy for me. There is no better document of the potential of individuals, groups, families, communities, tribes, and peoples. Our ancestors reveal moments of transcendent courage and dignity, as well as utter human failing. As old as this story may be, it continues to be a powerful mirror to hold up to ourselves as Jews. And, it is my job as an educator to enable my learners to see their reflections.

A recent example of how I brought this approach to studying Torah: While teaching Parashat Ki Tissa and the narrative of the Golden Calf, I framed the incident as an act of communal backsliding in the face of making a major commitment. I asked the group the following question: "Have you ever experienced a moment in your life where you were about to take a big step—maybe getting married, maybe starting a new job, etc.—and you suddenly found yourself inexplicably breaking into old habits you thought you'd gotten over years ago?" Everyone in the room nodded their heads at me. Not only did we find a point of immediate common ground, but we managed to see ourselves in a story about ancient Israelites worshipping a large golden cow.

When I have the luxury of choosing a text, I attempt to create a menu. If I'm teaching about Shabbat, I'll collect a vast array of traditional and contemporary texts about the subject so that my learners have options. When I do the same with the topic of social justice, I want to show learners how much our tradition has to say. But with Torah at least, the text is often chosen for me by the calendar.

I don't always measure my success in the most pedagogical way, but if there is a deeper sense of closeness and connection in the space, if my learners have opened themselves up to one another and found themselves in the text, then I know my work is done.

In my current work in the area of social justice with AVODAH, I teach our corps members the art of storytelling, and I make a point of connecting this practice with our tradition. One of the things I tell them is

that as Jews, we tell the same stories over and over again, even though we always know how it ends. We do this because each telling tends to yield a different revelation, new learning. As an educator, my job is to help my learners experience that revelation every time they engage with the text. I've already confessed that in my view that revelation isn't quite from Sinai. It's in their hearts and right in front of them in the eyes of their peers. There's nothing I love more than making that happen.

*David Wolkin (DS '07) is the director of communications at Avodah, as well as an educator, facilitator, writer, and storyteller. He has worked in the Jewish world in a diverse range of settings since 2002, most recently as executive director of Limmud NY. He has told stories on many stages, including the 92nd Street Y in New York City and Sixth & I Historic synagogue in Washington, DC. David lives in Maryland with his wife, Keeli, their cats, and far too many comic books.*



## “From the Intuitive to the Intentional”: Designing a Constructivist Online Course

BY DR. OFRA BACKENROTH AND DR. MEREDITH KATZ



The goal of teaching *Humash* for me is not to teach the content, or even the message of the text, but rather it is methodological—to train a student how to study so that he or she can be an independent reader of the text. (Walter Herzberg, “From the Intuitive to the Intentional,” 1997.)

The Davidson School's online MA program serves students diverse in their geographic locations and professional experiences. In the evolving field of online learning, instructors experiment with different approaches to transmitting content and building skills and community across the web. Research shows that there is high retention associated with courses that incorporate group work and that students' motivation increases when instructors use student-centered methods and give regular feedback. However, online students do not necessarily expect to collaborate or appreciate the push to become part of a learning community (Xu and Du, 2013).

At The Davidson School, the faculty is particularly committed to a learner-centered educational approach known as “constructivism.” This theory claims that people construct their own knowledge and understanding of the world experiences, individual reflection, through social interaction, and with facilitation from an expert. Just as students don't expect to do group work online, educators often find it hard to conceptualize their practice in a constructivist manner in an online context (Zhao, Lei, Yan, Lai, and Tan, 2005). Dr. Walter Herzberg, a bible scholar and a popular professor at JTS, is unique in his willingness to take on the challenges of online teaching and learning. He has adapted the Introduction to Parshanut course (Parshanut-Pentateuch with Rashi) and *havruta* learning (commonly used to refer to two people studying Jewish texts together) and constructivist approach to the great benefit of our online students. As online instructors ourselves, we wanted to explore how Herzberg's goal to train students to be independent meaning-makers of text could be adapted for online students, and became “student-observers” in the class.



## THE ORIGINAL IN-HOUSE COURSE

Initially designed specifically for on-campus education MA students, Herzberg structured a course to include *havruta* work, introductions to literary conventions, and brief readings about approaches to teaching text and commentaries. He also included weekly *havruta* preparation outside of class, continuation with *havruta* work, and reflection on the *havruta* process. Herzberg encourages students to construct meaning through *havruta* learning. He carefully selects commentaries and scaffolds questions that both model how to approach commentaries generally and call attention to specific elements of the commentaries individually and in relationship. Students are given multiple opportunities for individual coaching and feedback from the instructor, to learn with peers, to ask their own questions, and to offer their own interpretations. Herzberg's goal is not content-knowledge mastery but rather for the students to develop the ability to deeply understand the text and why certain interpretations were offered in various contexts. His pedagogy is geared towards introducing tools, or literary techniques, that allow students to investigate the texts. Throughout the semester Herzberg develops individual relationships with each student in order to "meet the learner where he is" (Brooks and Brooks, 1999).

Consequently Herzberg is making a lifelong change in the way students view these texts and their ability to learn these texts. He hopes that students will move from "the intuitive"—using their natural curiosity and analytical instincts—to "the intentional" in terms of their approach to text analysis. For example, although he does not use the term, Herzberg uses a constructivist approach to teaching and learning in which students are immersed in *havruta* study from the beginning. He uses carefully organized commentaries with intentional question prompts that both model how to approach commentaries generally and call attention to specific elements of the commentaries individually and in relationship. Students are given multiple opportunities for individual coaching and feedback from the instructor, to learn with peers, to ask their own questions and to offer their own interpretations.

## THE ADAPTATION

This year, Herzberg taught the course online a second time. Through our analysis of the course experience during our work as participant-observers, we found that the constructivist approach to text study practiced in the in-house course proved readily adaptable to an online setting, with careful attention to:

- Course materials selection and design;
- Detailed guidelines for *havruta* work;
- Building individual relationships with each student; and
- Building class community.

According to Herzberg, his work with the online students has caused him to become more "intentional" in his efforts in both the online and in-house settings, pushing him to articulate more specifically his teacher "intuitions." His experience is in line with research findings on best practices in online teaching. (Baran, Correia, and Thompson, 2013).

## COURSE MATERIALS: SOURCES AND SCAFFOLDING

Each week Herzberg posts a packet of commentaries based around a specific biblical chapter. His content selections are deliberate. For example, the first text Herzberg asks the students to explore is Genesis 18 since it is a familiar text and considered to be easily accessible. As the semester continues, Herzberg adds texts that showcase certain skills he would like the students to encounter, such as learning about the distinction between *peshat* (direct) and *derash* (inquiry), epithet, and other literary devices.

Each week, the consistent arrangement of texts helps the students to become more comfortable with the analytical process. Each text is followed by a prompt, asking for the student's initial response to the biblical text, then their investigation of a related Rashi text, and then a series of related commentaries.

Herzberg also uses questions to prompt students to compare and contrast the texts, ultimately to decide which interpretations work for them and how they might use these texts as a teaching opportunity in their various professional settings. These consistencies of style and format are helpful to the in-house students as well, but they are of greater importance to online students who are navigating course materials without direct guidance (Baran, Correia, and Thompson, 2013).

## **GUIDELINES FOR *HAVRUTA***

### **Investigating Texts**

Each week the students are asked to investigate the materials individually and then engage in significant synchronous study with a *havruta* through video conference or phone conversation. The *havrutot* are set up at the beginning of the semester and remain constant throughout the semester. This year, for example, a Pardes administrator in Israel worked with an H. L. Miller Cantorial School graduate in Madison, Wisconsin. Herzberg encourages the students to set aside two to three hours to engage in *havruta* once they have worked through the materials individually. The materials are distributed through Google Drive so that partners can share in writing the answers, as each *havruta* is expected to submit only one set of answers. Significantly, besides the Google Drive and Skype accommodations, *havruta* work in the online course remarkably resembles *havruta* work done for the in-house course: face to face on the students' own time.

### ***Havruta* Feedback**

Herzberg provides weekly feedback on the work submitted by each *havruta*. He asks them to review this feedback together before they start a new assignment. He often also provides a set of suggested answers he has composed as a point of comparison. As the title indicates, Herzberg does not offer the "correct" answer, but rather offers the students a different way to think about the texts, in addition to his individualized comments on their submitted work.

### **Online "Constructivist Delay"**

In the online context, the student-student *havruta* process becomes more dominant when students need to wait for a response to an email or for a posted set of answers as forms of feedback. In both the in-house and online settings Herzberg asks the students to work meta-cognitively to analyze the difference between their own answers and the suggested answers. However, the responsibility and effort for this process actually weighs more heavily on the online students who must conduct it on their own time without the immediate facilitation of the instructor. That is the inevitable feedback delay in the asynchronous online course, which actually intensifies the constructivist experience of the learners.

### **Building Individual Relationships**

A major tenet of constructivism is "meeting the learner where he is" in order to build on prior knowledge and experiences. Herzberg overcomes this challenge to teaching online by using simple tools such as a phone conversation and emails. At the start of the semester Herzberg engages each student in a half-hour orientation phone call. In addition to serving a social function, Herzberg studies a text with each student. In this way he can gauge their level of facility with text and Hebrew, and the students are introduced to his teaching style. Over the course of the semester Herzberg makes himself available to students via email

and phone calls and often responds individually to their posts on the group discussion boards. His students recognize these efforts:

“I was very nervous to take part in text study for one of the first times and with your guidance, directed questions, and most importantly, with the space you created for us to think critically on our own and ask questions, I feel much more confident in my text study ability.”

“Utilizing similar techniques every week, I see myself improving with my *havruta*. This would not be possible without close readings of the text, critique on the way in which my *havruta* and I are thinking and writing down our thoughts, positive feedback when we are on the right track, and open dialogue—either online or beyond—when we are confused.”

### Building Class Community

Herzberg uses weekly discussion boards to amplify the academic sense of the course by asking students to respond to brief articles as the main forum for building a learning community beyond the individual *havrutot*. Like the weekly *havruta* assignments, the discussion board prompts follow a consistent format. Herzberg asks students to post their own responses and then to respond to one or two of their classmates over a four-day period. Although he uses discussion boards periodically in the in-house course to address similar prompts, he notices more thoughtful responses from his online students. In the example below, students both expand an academic conversation and model supportive dialogue:

#### *Evaluating the Laws of Leviticus*

Discussion board prompt:

Which comment(s) . . . in Assignment #6 (Lev. 19) were most meaningful/worthwhile to you? Do you think teaching non-narrative or legal material is more challenging than teaching stories?

H: *I think the legal materials are easier than the teaching stories because I find them more black-and-white. When one reads a story, nothing is clear-cut, and you can get so many different possible lessons out of one story. When you're trying to understand something from a non- narrative perspective, there is often one correct answer.*

T: *H . . . I wonder if the legal section is black and white? As you said about Source 9 [commentary on prohibition about putting a stumbling block before the blind], it shows the reader it is not only about the victim but also about one's character. I don't know if the legal is necessarily black and white but rather more extreme and less of a middle path?*

Here, student H offers a strong perspective about the difference between legal versus narrative texts. Student T supports Student H's focus on Source 9, but politely encourages her to reconsider her opinion about how black and white the legal texts are. Students H and T are not *havruta* partners so this discussion board offers them the opportunity to expand the perspectives to which they are exposed as members of the course community.

### CONCLUSION

The accepted, commonly expected model of online learning is straightforward: reading and submitting assignments and moving to the next course. In the case of this Parshanut course, Herzberg emulates his in-house teaching practice and successfully implements the traditional learning modality of a *havruta* to foster independent skills of text analysis in a community of learners. With limited technological bells and whistles

(Google Drive, discussion boards and emails) and with careful attention to the traditional triad of curricular relationships between instructor, student, and content, Herzberg structures and maintains a constructivist online course. Through reflective conversations with us throughout the semester Herzberg observed that his efforts in the elements of course design discussed here (course materials, instructional guidelines, instructor-student relationships, and building community) were becoming more intentional, building on the pedagogic intuitions he adapted from his repertoire as an in-house instructor. As Herzberg works to further design these elements of his courses, other online instructors could benefit from his experience.

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# Reflecting on Why I Teach Jewish Text

BY NANCY ROSEN

As a young adult, I experienced two transformative experiences that formed the bedrock of my identity as a Jewish educator. The first occurred during my sophomore year at Cornell University. On the night before my very first college Bible class, I sat, cross-legged on my bed, cracking open the binding of my brand new King James edition of the Bible. With great excitement, I turned immediately to Genesis to find my favorite Bible story, anxious to revisit an old friend in anticipation of what would surely be a fantastic class. Forty-five minutes later, I was at first perplexed and then shocked to discover that the story of Abraham smashing the idols in his father's shop was not in the text. At that very moment, the foundation of my Jewish learning was shaken to the core.

The following fall, as a French major, I left for a year abroad of study at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Studying with Nechama Leibowitz, I discovered the world of the *mefarshim* (commentators), but perhaps even more important, I fell in love with the joy of uncovering the deeper meaning of seemingly simple words and phrases. My adult journey into text study had begun in earnest.

One year later, I returned to the States a Jewish Education major filled with great passion and conviction. I imagined my classroom as a place where my students would encounter the text in a way that would be appropriate to both their developmental and cognitive levels, and abilities. They would learn to interact with the text, experiencing that same joy of discovery. Midrash would not become intertwined with the text but rather would be understood and appreciated as a tool that could help them to approach the text from a different angle. I would strive to give my students the tools to become lifelong learners of a text that continues to inform and shape our lives today. Most important, my students would never have to “unlearn” anything that they learned in my classroom!

Fast-forward 40 years to the Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Hartford. For the past few years the Judaic Studies faculty has worked extensively to transform our approach to both the text and to our students' learning. We are reshaping all of our Tanakh units based on two standards<sup>2</sup> that best reflect the vision of our school: 1) Students will view the Tanakh as the formative narrative of the Jewish people—past, present, and future; and 2) Students will view the Tanakh as an essential text through which Jews continue to grapple with theological, spiritual, and existential questions.

As a team, we have brainstormed what our Schechter graduates need to know and be able to do in order to become literate and knowledgeable Jewish adults. From there, we mapped out the narrative units that we teach to our students from kindergarten through eighth grade. Before creating any unit, we first engage in text study, immersing ourselves in the richness of the language and the themes of each narrative. It is during this text study—each and every time!—that wide-eyed, I relive that original thrill of discovery: turning phrases and uncovering textual riches.

My colleagues and I bring the product of our collaborative work to our individual classrooms. There, the magic begins as we, the teachers, have the wondrous opportunity to open the eyes of our students to the beauty of Torah study. In the first phase of study, my students work to acquaint themselves with the language of the selected Hebrew narrative. They locate familiar grammatical forms, repeating words,

<sup>2</sup> Jewish Day School Standards and Benchmarks Project of The Davidson School

familiar vocabulary and names of places of characters<sup>3</sup>. As they work in *havruta*, their excited voices fill our classroom like a real *beit midrash*, and their eyes light up as they discover that they, themselves, hold the keys to unlocking the treasure that is Torah. This initial *havruta* study is followed by a close reading of the text during which the students share their findings with the whole class.

Once the students have a good understanding of the text, they are ready to dive deeply into the narrative to discover and uncover deeper meaning. It is in this stage that they develop their own understandings of the events and characters' motivations, honing critical thinking skills within the parameters of the big ideas and essential questions that have been created by the Judaic studies team. Through activities such as role-play, discussions, and writing, students interact with the text, finding themselves within the text, as well as discovering and applying lessons that they glean from the text. My students especially enjoy the opportunity to record their insights in personal journals, later sharing their thoughts with their classmates. In addition to giving students the space to think independently, this exercise also encourages students to learn to listen to and respond respectfully to ideas that may differ from their own. In completing performance assessments at the conclusion of each unit, students have the opportunity to synthesize and create personal understandings of the biblical narrative. These moments of personal reflection are what allow students to internalize the text and make it their own.

The most effective means to understanding our style of learning is to hear from the students, themselves. In a third-grade class on Bereishit, the students offered their thoughts on God's feelings about the world, backing up their opinions with a quotation from the text. One student observed that something momentous must have occurred on the seventh day, causing God to declare the day holy for all time. Basing his opinion on the verse "Elohim blessed the seventh day and made it holy," the student wrote:

[On the seventh day] God saw everything God did and was so happy that God made the day when God saw everything holy. God had created things bit by bit, but seeing it all together was an amazing sight. With the trees swaying, birds chirping, fish swimming and everything living in harmony—that made God very happy and proud of what God did.

My fifth-grade students continue to learn to interact with the narrative as they empathize with characters, developing an understanding of human nature, and, in particular, of themselves. During a discussion on the lessons of the Jonah story, one student offered, "Don't run away from your problems," while another added, "Don't blame someone else for what you did to yourself." It is clear that our students are already learning methods and approaches that will guide them on their way as lifelong learners of Jewish texts.

When my daughters were young, I would advise them to find careers that would nourish their minds and souls on a daily basis. I feel so fortunate that this is my lot. Each and every day, I continue to have the opportunity to engage with the text in a rich and meaningful way as I revisit familiar narratives, learning with and from my students—and with no smashed idols in sight!

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<sup>3</sup> Based on the MaToK Bible Curriculum



# God Is Uno

BY SARA BETH BERMAN

I cleared my throat and looked out across the gym. I was about to lead about 220 kids—Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant—in the Shema.

Let's back up, so I can explain myself. In my job as the Nadiv educator at URJ Camp Coleman and the Davis Academy in Atlanta, Georgia, I'm the lead on our interfaith program, working closely with our school rabbi and faith leaders and religion teachers from other faith-based schools around Atlanta. For a few years, Davis Academy eighth graders meet with Marist School eighth graders. Marist is a Catholic school that has a fair percentage of kids from other faith backgrounds, the majority of them Protestant. We do interfaith learning and teaching, social action projects, and social justice learning.

In preparing for the interfaith program, we had several meetings between the leadership at both Marist and Davis. We wanted our students to make friends, learn about their different faith backgrounds, and engage in meaningful programming as partners. We want them to engage in social action work, learn about social justice, and commit to a better world for everyone. We hoped that through their work, they will role model world-changing good that is respectful of all faiths.

When combining text traditions, our study of holy books proved to be fascinating. My Marist colleagues—and their hardworking and curious students—had memorized far more text than I (hold on, let me open Sefaria). My recall of dates, chapters, and numbers wasn't the strongest, but I wasn't a total weak link in the group. I was able to pull deeper meaning when translating from the original Hebrew and added color from the rabbinic insights that have guided Judaism for many, many years. I'm not an expert in Talmud, but I still found that my wide survey of knowledge of rabbinic literature helped to inform our understanding(s) of each other's religious texts.

Davis students have taught about Jewish holidays and *tikkun olam*, and Marist students have explained the symbolism of the cross and their guiding principle, the Marist Way, which, in Jewish (and Hebrew!) terms, is very similar to the concept of *derekh eretz* ("the way it is" or "the decent way"). We connected *v'ahavta l'reiacha kamocha* (love your neighbor as yourself) with the concept of ardent love of neighbor, a nearly direct translation. We've bonded over usage of palm fronds for religious ritual and symbolism, and realized that loving our neighbors and welcoming guests are just two other things that make our faiths far more similar rather than very different.

We played interfaith bingo, participated in scavenger hunts, and enjoyed multifaith taboo games. We sang together and read responsively. The students became friends. We built a *sukkat shalom* (shelter of peace) by creating a square-type formation with our hands held up and over toward the middle of our rectangular-type space. We discussed why building this shelter of peace was important and how our interfaith fellowship is going to make the world a better place. Our example of happy and safe learning and working together is a model for the rest of the world.

In one of our meetings, we searched for a basic text that both student populations would have experienced before the big program. Over the course of many programs, we have focused on blessings before and after meals, Old Testament text, and religious symbols from our faiths. This meeting's search didn't take very long. As it turns out, Deuteronomy 6:4 is popular at Catholic school, too! In seventh grade, Marist students learn in English (and Hebrew, bless their hardworking teacher), the words of the Shema. To wit: "Yo yo yo yo, Israelites! Trinity is my Master Homey G! God is Uno!"

Wait. Is that not how YOU translate the Shema?

In my previous work at Storahelling, I had learned the Maven Method. I loved the exercise for creative translation of the Shema, used to glean meaning from text. It had been a while since I'd pulled out this particular activity, one that I hold dear. My colleagues at Marist were stoked that we'd found another common text and a cool program with which to frame that text so that we could use it to bridge our students' faith traditions. And so, as part of our full day of programming, we turned Deuteronomy 6:4 into a giant game of human anagrams. Each group had to create a list of possible translations for each word of this six-word prayer. Then, they wrote down their favorite translated words onto construction paper. Finally, they sent up representatives to translate the Shema. There were students hollering "yo" to Israelites, and listing various names for God: Elohim, Adonai, Allah, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They said "one" in a panoply of languages, including Latin, Pig Latin, Hebrew, and Spanish.

I cleared my throat and looked out at our students. They had a great(er) understanding of a foundational text. They worked with interfaith counterparts to figure out their own Shema translation. They realized that they had a shared text and a tradition with many similarities. Perhaps the most important piece of all of this? The veritable quilting of faiths into a new, shared understanding. A commitment to social action and social justice. Working together. As an interfaith Uno.

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## Teaching High School Talmud: Making the Text Accessible While Keeping the Challenge Authentic

BY RABBI DAHLIA KRONISH

The Jewish community at large—and high school students in particular—find accessing the Talmud to be a rather daunting task. The language, the brevity of the argumentation, and the nature of the discourse serve as quite a barrier. A natural response is to place an expectation on those who teach Talmud to make the text accessible to our students. There are many ways to make the text accessible, including offering students background to understand context, studying the text in translation, or replacing formal text study with the study of the main ideas raised in the text. In my experience, students learn most deeply when they are sufficiently challenged, and students better appreciate and understand the Talmudic enterprise when they are guided to study the text as independently as possible. Thus, my goal as a teacher of Talmud is to find ways to raise the bar and maintain the authentic challenge embedded in the learning of Talmud while making it a challenge my students are able to reach.

The key to finding the balance between accessibility and challenge is knowing your audience. I understand this to be an important (if not the most important) component of Lee Shulman's category of pedagogic content knowledge. In order to successfully teach Talmud, we must be able to scaffold each text to match



our students' present skills and to identify the ways in which we want the text to further advance their skills and understanding. When preparing to teach a text, I ask myself several questions. Ultimately, the answers to these questions guide me to figure out what scaffolding is necessary while ensuring that there is inquiry involved. I organized the questions below into three categories:

**1. Vocabulary—the answers to these questions shape the word bank.**

- Which words are key to interpreting the text?
- Which words may cause my students to stumble or feel particularly stuck?
- Which words are simply an exercise in dictionary usage? In other words, which words simply require a one-word translation without additional explanation or interpretation?

**2. Structure—the answers to these questions shape the questions and guidance offered in the *havruta* assignment.**

- Have my students had prior experience with the technical terminology that will help them figure out the structure of the text?
- Which structural elements will be at the heart of our interpretive and meaning-making discussion?
- What guidance can I offer that will help start their journey without bringing them straight to the finish line?

**3. Conceptual Understanding—the answers to these questions shape our class discussions and projects.**

- How does this text connect conceptually to prior texts students have learned? What prior ideas will shape their understanding of this text?
- What knowledge might the students have yet to acquire that will be important to their grappling with this text?
- What concepts will be further elucidated as we go through the material?
- What are the core ideas that in actuality are the reason we are studying this text? In other words, what are the big ideas or essential understandings on which we should focus?

I will now turn to a text I teach at the end of the 11th-grade Talmud curriculum. I will work to demonstrate how I answer these questions differently when preparing to teach this text to my advanced honors students at the end of their rigorous year of study versus the way in which I might teach this text to the students I teach in the 10th grade (students who may struggle with language acquisition).

<p><b>Sanhedrin 74a</b></p> <p>Rabbi Yochanan said on behalf of Rabbi Shimon son of Yehotzadak: they counted and voted in the attic in the house of Nitze in Lod:</p> <p>All transgressions in the Torah—if they say to a man: “transgress and you will not be killed”—he shall transgress and not be killed with three exceptions: idolatry, prohibited sexual relations, and murder.</p>	<p><b>סנהדרין עד עמוד א</b></p> <p>אמר יוחנן משום רבי שמעון בן יהוצדק נימנו וגמרו בעליית בית נתזה בלוד כל עבירות שבתורה אם אומרין לאדם עבור ואל תהרג יעבור ואל יהרג חוץ מעבודה זרה וגילוי עריות ושפיכות דמים.</p>
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## 1. VOCABULARY

- The most challenging vocabulary in this short text is the phrase **עבור ואל תהרג**—specifically, figuring out how to pronounce (and therefore translate) the word **תהרג**. Similarly the phrase **יעבור ואל יהרג**. In scaffolding this text for my 10th-grade class, I would need to provide some assistance in pronunciation and likely in translation as well. For my 11th-grade honors students, I would not provide any assistance, as this translation is at the core of understanding what Rabbi Shimon son of Yehotzadak is teaching.
- The words **נימנו וגמרו** often delay my honors› students as they work through this text. I immediately direct them to the Jastrow dictionary where they find a clear and complete explanation of this phrase in context of this teaching. This entry explains the full historical context of Rabbi Shimon son of Yehotzadak›s teaching. I would likely provide some of this historical context for my 10th-grade students before we begin to explore the text, as having the background would help them better uncover the meaning of the words.
- The three exceptions—students rarely have difficulty understanding **זרה עבודה** and **שפיכות דמים**. In the 11th-grade curriculum, by the time we reach this unit, the students have already encountered the phrase **שפיכות דמים**. I would likely decide to include the phrase **תירע יוליג** in the word bank for my 10th-grade students. It does not add to their learning of skill or content to look up the word on the own as there is no interpretive question here.

## 2. STRUCTURE

The hardest structural element in this teaching is identifying the phrase **כל עבירות שבתורה** (All transgressions in the Torah) as an introduction to the sentence. It does not translate easily and often confuses students at the honors level. By the end of they year, I provide little to no support to my honors› students when working in *havruta*. I do answer their questions, though I would likely not answer their questions immediately, rather suggest that they consider relocating the phrase to later in the sentence.

For my 10th-grade students, I would likely decide to provide them with assistance in translation and suggest that they add the words “with regard to.” Additionally, I would suggest to my 10th-grade students that they work to divide this teaching into two sections: the general rule and the exception.

## 3. CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Our 11th-grade Talmud curriculum focuses on values in tension particularly as played out in the courtroom and the rabbinic justice system. We look at *sugyot* on questions of the death penalty, self-defense, and protecting others. This teaching introduces our final *sugya*, which explores the questions of when in fact we should transgress God’s law for the sake of living and when we should sacrifice our life for the sake of sanctifying God’s name. Thus, from our teaching perspective, this unit culminates the yearlong study as it pushes students to think about questions of boundaries and the ways in which values in tension shift where you draw these boundaries.

Here are some questions I ask the class to consider when discussing this text (before we transition to the rest of the *sugya*):

- What do the three exceptions have in common?
- Why might these be exceptions to the rule?
- Why is the setting of the Attic in Lod important in order to fully understand Rabbi Shimon son of Yehotzadak's teaching?

The rabbinic answers to these questions are elucidated as we continue to explore the Talmudic text. Time and student ability will determine how much class discussion we devote to exploring student answers to these questions.

In preparing a text for teaching, it is important to consider your audience's Hebrew ability, understanding of Talmudic logic, and conceptual background. The questions above offer a template to assist you in your preparations. What is most important to remember is that there is no one right way to teach a text successfully to a group of learners. Rather, teaching text is an art. We continuously change our strokes to improve our masterpiece.

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## Making Choices: Yom Kippur is Upon Us, What Text Should I Teach?

BY MARJORIE LEHMAN

In a casual conversation with a friend recently, I encouraged her to send her children to a camp called Szarvas in Hungary where my son had spent two weeks this past summer. The experience was profoundly enriching and left an indelible mark on him. I proceeded to explain how the program is built not only on developing Jewish identity within a pluralistic setting but that it also is committed to enabling the participants to self-actualize by speaking personally about their emotional struggles, whatever they are. And then she asked me, "So what is the connection between enriching Jewish identity and the personal social-emotional issues of the adolescent?" All I could say was, "Everything."

To date teaching adolescents Talmudic literature in Jewish day schools has focused more on teaching content and developing skills and less on issues of social emotional development (Gardner and Mansilla 14–19). We all find ourselves torn between wanting our students to graduate knowing what rabbinic sources say about the observance of Yom Kippur, to cite one timely example, and a desire to teach interesting texts that might be better able to draw our students in. Indeed, even within Orthodox Jewish day schools there is often not a clear line that can be drawn between text study and meaningful observance or between text study and Jewish identity formation. No doubt, there is a lot at stake for those of us who devote our lives to the education of Jewish children.

However, if we are armed with such rich Jewish literary material that addresses everything from the value of

fasting on Yom Kippur to sexuality, cruelty, rejection, insecurity, and immorality, the question is, “Why don’t we begin to make curricular choices governed by whether a text addresses the social-emotional struggles of the typical adolescent?” What about issues like anxiety, stress, body image, and relationships with parents, teachers, and, most of all, friends?

Sam Intrator in his book, *Tuned In and Fired Up: How Teaching Can Inspire Real Learning in the Classroom*, about students in an English class confronting Marge Piercy’s provocative poem, “Barbie Doll,” enables us to hear the students that he observed saying, “We never read stuff about real life. It is always sugar coated,” and “We’re dying to talk about stuff that’s important, it’s just that we rarely have opportunity to do that in most classes.” In fact, students argued that often issues that matter to them are ignored or shut down in favor of recalling literary details and devices, as well as ensuring the comprehension of plot structures. Intrator argues that as a result, the study of literature often does not uncover the “meaty complexity of a text” for the high school student (Intrator 70–79).

And so, I would like us to think more about teaching our students about Yom Kippur while enabling them to work through what they worry about in the hope that by creating a dialogue between them and a sacred Jewish text, they will keep coming back for more. If students learn that rabbinic texts can provoke conversation, bring out issues that weigh upon the adolescent mind, we might have a better chance of growing their Jewish identities while they work through getting to know the people that they are. In saying this, I am not making the argument for a values-based curriculum per se, but rather one that, while focusing on those Jewish texts that define us religiously and spiritually, will also bring to the surface students’ anxieties, worries, challenges, and insecurities. In fact, I would even go so far as to say that we might not be able to afford to teach a Talmudic text just because it speaks about Yom Kippur or Shabbat or Shema, or just because it teaches important skills. Somehow we have gotten lost in graduating educated Jews who know *what* is in the Talmud and *who* can read the Talmud, but have yet to see the Talmud as a document that can provoke thinking about what matters to them. As Israel Scheffler has noted, “Emotion without cognition is blind . . . [but] cognition without emotion is vacuous.” (Intrator, 129–130; Scheffler; and Nussbaum, 4).

When I am dreaming large, when I am thinking about what is going to ensure that high school students become passionate about the Talmud, I think about needing to find a way for the texts of the Talmud to inspire passion within them, which means finding texts that will provoke them to speak out and express and develop a relationship with ancient rabbis they did not think possible. In other words, I am not advocating that we teach them texts about Yom Kippur and its rituals so that they know about Yom Kippur. I am arguing for thinking more creatively about how to choose texts that relate to Yom Kippur that do more than merely grab their attention, they draw students into a conversation about themselves.

I am sure that I am not alone in having taught the eighth *perek* of Mishnah Yoma in preparation for Yom Kippur. Mishnah Yoma 8:1 is quite clear, offering a list of Yom Kippur prohibitions that includes fasting. In this chapter of Mishnah, issues of life and death come to the surface and the requirement to apologize to people we have wronged; but it was thinking about the requirement of barefootedness that led me to think about teaching Bavli Yoma 9b, either in conjunction with mYoma 8:1 or in place of it. I had come across this text days after watching all of the girls at my son’s high school graduation, all in the same white gowns, prance along the synagogue stage in the most beautiful pairs of high-heeled shoes I had ever seen. Some were steady and confident, others tripped on the stairs going up or coming down, but they were all absolutely stunning and very, very tall. I could not imagine that any of them were comfortable, but I also envied the look. The boys, on the other hand, were comfortable in loafers, although some were in sneakers. I asked myself, what if I were to explore with my students the reasons for the prohibition against wearing shoes on Yom Kippur, rather than begin with the obvious ritual of fasting. What if instead of asking them to

examine the contents of the Yom Kippur *vidui* (confessional prayer), we began to think together about the motives of a group of male rabbis who added the prohibition against wearing shoes to the list in mYoma 8:1 as they began to form the system that we have inherited. And then, what if we were to think about how shoes affect our gait, how we use them to construct a particular body image of ourselves, what they have to do with making ourselves feel attractive, what they say about our socioeconomic position, and what they say about the people we are? I might even begin this unit by asking students to bring in their favorite pair of shoes and explain to the class why they chose such shoes as favorites. What do their shoes convey about them? Then I would introduce the following text from Bavli Yoma 9b as a way not only to think about shoes and feet, but also as a way to think about why mYoma 8:1 commands us to be barefooted on Yom Kippur<sup>4</sup>:

On what basis was the first Temple destroyed? Because of three things that existed there: idol worship, illicit sexual behavior (*gilui arayot*), and spilling of blood . . . Illicit sexual behavior: [As it says in Isaiah 3:16] “Moreover the Lord said: because the daughters of Zion are so vain and walk with their heads thrown back/outstretched necks, with roving eyes and with mincing gait, making a tinkling with their feet.” “The daughters of Zion are so vain”—[this means that] they would walk a tall [girl] next to a short [girl]. “And they would walk with outstretched necks”—[this means that] they would walk with erect posture. “And with roving eyes”—[this means that] they painted their eyes blue [with makeup]. “And with mincing gait”—[this means that] they would walk heel to big toe. “Making a tinkling with their feet”—Rabbi Yitzhak said: They would take myrrh and balsam, place them in their shoes, and when they reached the young men of Israel, they would stamp [their feet] and spray them, driving into them the evil inclination, like the venom of an angry [snake]. (bYoma 9b)

Indeed, a running exegetical comment on a verse from Isaiah (3:16) lets us know that the illicit sexual behaviors of women, and not men, led to the destruction of the first Temple, highlighting the very seductive nature common in rabbinic depictions of women. This time seduction is generated by the erotic strutting of women and by the aroma that wafts from their feet when they walk in their shoes. The rabbis use women’s feet and their shoes as a metonym for female personhood, forcing upon them an inferior social status, albeit while granting them a degree of power over the men they seduce (Nahshon, *Jews and Shoes*, 15). While we might consider shoes as the symbol of our mobility and freedom to walk anywhere, feet and shoes, for the Rabbis, are the way they communicate here that girls not only entice young men to commit illicit sexual acts, but they are the producers of the evil inclination in men, luring them with the smells of myrrh and balsam coming from their feet as they walk in their shoes. Men, in and of themselves, are upright until led astray, even weakened, by the sexual advances of the smells that emerge from the feet of women. In fact, the depiction of women as actively luring men to arousal disclaims male ownership of their own bodies and desires. The awakening of their desire is the result of female manipulation. And so fault rests with women and not with men (Bordo, 6). These women awaken impulses that promote chaos and bring about destruction. In this case, culpability extends to the destruction of God’s holy house.

I can only imagine what types of conversations will ensue as the students, both male and female, argue about the disturbing description of young girls in this text. The teenage dilemmas of body image will surface before the students even begin to recognize the power that shoes have in influencing the way they walk, the way they carry themselves, and the way they wish to be perceived. My hope is that such a text will provoke students to raise the issues that worry them as they navigate through their high school years trying to figure out how to be accepted, even popular. In the face of a present-day culture infused with provocative sexual

<sup>4</sup> Note that today many of us wear sneakers and follow later rabbis who prohibited better-made shoes, like leather shoes and not canvas ones. See Bavli Yoma 78b for allowances made to wear certain types of flimsy and inferior types of shoes put forth by the later Amoraic rabbis. See Bavli Yevamot 101a regarding the material used for making shoes.

imagery at every turn, we cannot ignore the effect this has on both girls and boys. Surely, we cannot ignore the rabbinic texts that will engage and provoke them to flesh out what is disturbing to them.

Eventually, the moment will come when we can and should refocus the discussion to bring the students back to the prohibition on barefootedness on Yom Kippur. Indeed, barefootedness developed as a clear physical way to signify a relationship with God, in keeping with God's first commandment to Moshe at the burning bush, "Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground" (Exod. 3:5). Joshua too, upon meeting God's servant for the first time, took off his shoes as commanded in order to mark the place where he stood as sacred (Josh. 5:15; Bavli *Berakhot* 62b; *Shemot Rabba*, Vilna ed., Parashat Shemot 2). The physical act of removing one's shoes and the fleshly act of touching one's feet to the ground, inscribes a particular place as holy and, at the same time, evokes a feeling of spiritual connection with God, certainly important for observing Yom Kippur. This would surely account for why m*Berakhot* 9:5 warns against entering the temple wearing shoes or even with dust on one's feet (also see: y*Shekalim* 5:1, 48d; Bavli *Sotah* 40a). Holiness can be expressed physically. Ridding ourselves of our beautiful shoes on Yom Kippur transforms us into people who are all equal, one with the other, people with humility who focus our thoughts on God and repentance, rather than on personal body-image, at least for one day in the year.

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