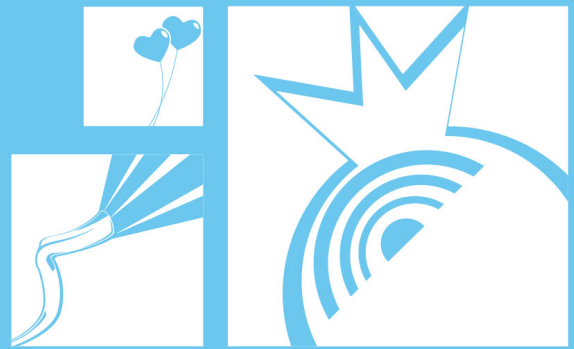




THE INSTITUTE FOR EXPERIENTIAL JEWISH EDUCATION



# JEWISH PEDAGOGIES RESEARCH PAPERS

AUGUST 2021 | אלול תשפ"א

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM COHORT 1 OF M<sup>2</sup>'S JEWISH PEDAGOGIES CIRCLE

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## **Jewish Pedagogies**

Research Papers

By Cohort 1 Fellows

M<sup>2</sup>: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education

August 2021 | Elul 5781

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## LETTER OF ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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A number of years ago, I was teaching a class in one of our programs. We were exploring one of M<sup>2</sup>'s signature pedagogies—a certain approach for teaching and learning. I shared an academic research-based pedagogical framework and inserted a “Jewish twist” to connect the framework to a Jewish idea. I walked out of the session frustrated; despite the fact that I tried to escape the “what’s Jewish about...?” trap, I found myself in it again: it was as if I was saying—by adding the Jewish connection—that this is what makes the pedagogy “kosher.”

An idea started brewing: What if we flipped this around? What if instead of presenting an academic-based pedagogy and then adding a “Jewish twist,” we started from a “Jewish Pedagogy,” and then added an “academic twist?” As if to say the pedagogy is Jewish at its core, and here’s what also makes it “academic.”

A question emerged: is there such a thing as a Jewish Pedagogy? What would qualify as one? These questions turned into a research project among my colleagues at M<sup>2</sup>. We brought along scholars and researchers and dug into these questions.

After much debate and testing, we developed a definition and a set of qualifiers to help us capture what a Jewish Pedagogy might be. For the purpose of curating and revealing Jewish pedagogies, we suggested that a Jewish Pedagogy should (1) emerge from within a Jewish ritual, custom, or *mitzvah*; (2) be pervasive in the Jewish tradition; (3) be educational in nature; and (4) be in conversation with the mishnah of *Kinyanei Torah* found in Pirkei Avot 6:6. This mishnah outlines 48 ways through which Torah can be acquired.

The framework we developed is arguable and certainly not scientific; rather, we designed it as a “sandbox”—a container that is narrow enough to pose limitations yet broad enough to allow for research and creativity. The concept paper which outlines our approach can be found [here](#).

We then sought to engage a cohort of Jewish educators and thinkers to research and surface old and new Jewish pedagogies. We convened a group of outstanding and diverse practitioners and we provided them with space and resources and support to create, test, and document Jewish Pedagogies. For over eight months, the group met every two weeks. They presented their research, received feedback, tested, and

adapted their work. The articles in this publication are the fruits of the fellows' labor. Each article focuses on a particular method of teaching and learning that can constitute what we call a "Jewish Pedagogy."

The work before you could not have been accomplished without the dedication of a passionate group of people. The Jim Joseph Foundation and the Lippman Kanfer Foundation supported this program and encouraged us to experiment and push boundaries with a true openness to learning. We are deeply indebted to them.

The program faculty and mentors – Rabbi Burt Visotzky, Jonny Ariel, Rabbi Yehudith Werchow, Dr. Sharon Feiman-Nemser, Dr. Orit Kent, Allison Cook, Rabbi David Jaffee—prodded, demonstrated, and directed fellows along the way.

Past and present M<sup>2</sup> staff: Kiva Rabinsky, Clare Goldwater, and Emily Faber helped develop and execute the program. Stephen Markowitz and Rabbi Zach Truboff worked tirelessly to craft the concept paper. In the early stages of the program, we also benefited from the advice and support of Dr. Jon Levison and Dr. Arna Poupko Fisher.

Hila Ratzabi edited and helped shape many of these articles.

This initiative would not have been possible without the head, heart, and hands of the magical Mollie Andron, Senior Program Director at M<sup>2</sup>. Mollie crafted and facilitated every aspect of this initiative.

"מַרְבֵּה תוֹרָה, מַרְבֵּה חַיִּים" — When one increases Torah, one increases life.

And finally—to the Jewish Pedagogies Circle Fellows: for pushing, pulling, learning, teaching, and most importantly, for being true pioneers. We thank you.

**Shuki Taylor, CEO**

**M<sup>2</sup>: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education**

**Jerusalem**

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## JEWISH PEDAGOGIES CIRCLE: THREADS OF COMMONALITY

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### Introduction

***“Rabbi Ishmael his son said: He who learns in order to teach, it is granted to him to study and to teach; But he who learns in order to practice, it is granted to him to learn and to teach and to practice.”***

**—Avot 4:5**

The Jewish Pedagogies Circle sprung from the quest to gather senior-level educators in a Studio & Lab experience to investigate how Jewish wisdom can inform how we teach, learn, and practice education. This endeavor was born from the desire to dig deeply within Jewish tradition to surface new pathways for teaching and learning. Through the development and dissemination of the pedagogies, our attempt is to better align the relationship between various common places—those known and those lesser known: the educator, the learner, the educational process, and Jewish wisdom. Indeed, the goals of the Jewish Pedagogies Circle are both 1) to offer the space to examine how Jewish wisdom informs and forms particular pedagogies, and 2) to equip educators with the tools to apply their learning in their educational setting and affect broader change in the field of education.

The fellowship followed a particular process. Each participant began by identifying their worldview. The fellows asked themselves: what is an educational need at this given moment? What is missing from the world of Jewish education? What do I, as an educator, deeply care about? Through bi-weekly meetings, fellows presented their worldviews to the group, using each other to sharpen their vision. The second component was identifying educational practices that could lead learners to enact their pedagogy that stemmed from their worldview. With the meticulous push of Dr. Sharon Feiman-Nemser, participants were able to articulate the routine actions learners and educators need to do in order to enact the pedagogy. The final stage was turning these practices into an educational resource that educators could use with their learners. Kiva Rabinsky prodded and pushed fellows to think expansively about how the form of the resource can best align with the pedagogy itself. The fellowship culminated in the assembly of eleven unique research papers along with a collection of educational resources that can be found on M<sup>2</sup>'s website.

Through the fellowship, we gleaned certain discoveries about what educators are seeking in this particular moment. They are thirsty for collaboration and partnership. They are looking to be challenged, supported, and held accountable by equally invested partners. They are craving opportunities to take a pause from the mundane and reconnect to why they have chosen this sacred profession. The Jewish Pedagogies Circle was a vessel through which fellows could bring their thinking to the forefront in order to deeply and intimately explore their conceptions around Jewish education with others.

Threads of commonality wove between many of the fellows' pedagogies, surfacing the tensions, challenges, and deficits that educators are looking to respond to. The first theme that we noticed spoke to the idea of seeing and being seen: who do we see, how do we see them, how do we respond to what it is that we see through a range of physical manifestations? **Yoshi Silverstein** explored how educators move through space and adapt to learners' needs. He grounded his pedagogy in the piece from the mishnah in Pirkei Avot, "one who knows their place." Silverstein believes that educators need to practice creating spaces where their learners feel grounded and remain perceptive enough to notice how their learners relate to content and nimble enough to adapt to their needs.

As Silverstein explores seeing students in order to adapt to their needs, **Rabbi Lisa Goldstein** practices a different form of visibility through encouraging educators to see their learners through *brachot*. Through the practice of offering a *brachah* at the end of a learning session, the learning community can elevate the uniqueness of who is in that space, what they have learned together, and what they may need as a community when they walk out of the learning experience.

The notion of seeing and being seen can be elevated to a place of blessings and deep recognition—that recognition also manifests itself in the educational imperative for *tokhahah*, or mindful communication, and the ways in which we do so out of deep care and love. **Rabbi Ari Weiss** explores how this pedagogy manifests from a place of deep respect and an attempt to understand the other through inquiry, empathy, and acceptance of difference.

**Adam Eilath** asks how educators can construct group work where the success of a group project is measured by the love that is cultivated by its members. In Eilath's pedagogy, the teacher is not the focal point, but the classmates are each others' focal point through joint learning. The classroom can model the love, collaboration, and good citizenship that will hopefully reach beyond the classroom, as well.

**Simon Klarfeld's** pedagogy speaks to another type of educational experience. It is one where the parents are an active partner in their child's education. The teacher can teach, but the parent can impress the learning at home and become partners in the child's learning of Torah.

**Jon Adam Ross** and **Marta Jankowska** delve into the practice of using a text as a common ground from which to navigate divisive subjects or personal experiences. In Ross's pedagogy of mutual humanization, he offers a step-by-step approach to studying a "sacred text" that can create a communal sense of deep connection and understanding of each participant's humanity. Ross's pedagogy is especially applicable in discussions centering divisive topics and histories; similarly, Eichelberger-Jankowska explores *petichta*, or 'opening,' and how to teach in a way that intentionally preserves all views, even conflicting ones, to highlight the importance of variety in our tradition as opposed to single-mindedness.

Another set of pedagogies explored different modes of integration with the physical space, the texts that belong to us and how we make them our own. **Dr. Chana Silberstein** explores how we draw upon practices of repetition to center a text in such a way that it becomes inseparable from the learning experience. **Jake Marmer** explores the imperative to claim and recognize contemporary poetry as sacred ritual/text, as texts are our gateway to ancestral connectional, prayer, and communal bonds. Marmer believes that the Jewish canon is due for a reckoning with its long exclusion of sacred voices and visions from women and non-binary folks, Queer Jews, secular Jews, and interfaith Jews, and so many others. While Marmer examines sacredness through the lens of expansion, **Shira Hecht-Koller** explores how educators can create sacred space through deliberate restriction and limitation; how we mark, construct, use, and sanctify space deepens learner engagement and results in intensification of experience. **Rabbi Rachel Bovitz** marks time through a pedagogy of *siyyum*, or closing of a unit of learning through ritual, that relaunches learners into their next unit of study.

We offer you these sacred research papers written by thoughtful Jewish practitioners who have years of experience and keep taking their learning to new heights. As the text says, *nahafoch kola ba*, turn it and turn it again, for there is much wisdom and insight in these papers. We are grateful to those pioneering participants and faculty of the Jewish Pedagogies Circle, and we hope their contributions to the field will serve to stimulate, excite, and prompt more work in this area and invite feedback and participation in this important conversation.

## JEWISH PLACE AND POSITIONALITY: A CHOREOGRAPHY OF PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

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Yoshi Silverstein

גְּדוּלָה תּוֹרָה יוֹתֵר מִן הַכֹּהֲנָה וּמִן הַמַּלְכוּת, שֶׁהַמַּלְכוּת נִקְנִית בְּשָׁלֹשִׁים מַעֲלֹת, וְהַכֹּהֲנָה  
בְּעֶשְׂרִים וָאַרְבַּע, וְהַתּוֹרָה נִקְנִית בְּאַרְבָּעִים וּשְׁמֹנֶה דְּבָרִים. וְאֵלּוּ הֵן, בְּתִלְמוּד, בְּשִׁמְיעַת הָאָז, וְ  
בְּעֵרִיכַת שְׁפָתַיִם, בְּבִינַת הַלֵּב ... הַמִּכִּיר אֶת מְקוֹמוֹ ...

*Greater is learning Torah than the priesthood and than royalty, for royalty is acquired by thirty stages, and the priesthood by twenty-four, but the Torah by forty-eight things. By study, attentive listening, proper speech, an understanding heart ... [Learning of Torah is also acquired by one] **who knows their place ...***

—Mishnah Kinyan Torah, Pirkei Avot 6:6

*Gd is the place of the world; and, the world is not Gd's place.*

—Midrash Rabbah 68:5

### The Pedagogy

Skilled Jewish educators are well versed in developing content and methodologies for Jewish learning, identity development, and community building. As we know, however, learning experiences do not happen in a vacuum—they occur within the context of physical spaces, imbued (whether intentionally or not) with cultural and ecological elements and psycho-social dynamics. As Jewish educators, the way we position ourselves and our students in relationship to each other and the physical spaces we inhabit during Jewish learning experiences has a material impact on the quality and efficacy of learning dynamics.

This pedagogy of Jewish place and positionality articulates the use of a combination of prescribed physical preparations of space based on a range of Jewish typologies alongside emergent responsive positioning based on foundational Jewish narrative archetypes to more effectively shape and respond to interpersonal and spatial dynamics. Through use of these dually prescribed and emergent practices as a “choreography” for their use of space and positioning, Jewish educators “who know their place” (*hamakir et m'komo*) are better equipped to tap into powerful embodied practices that can elevate the learning and teaching experience and create stronger conditions for Jewish meaning-making and connection.

## The Worldview

“Torah is acquired by one *‘who knows their place.’*” As educators we guide our students through the experience of learning and exploration—the Torah of meaning-making and connection. We read Torah as a transcription of our Jewish ancestors’ experiences with meaning-making and connection in relationship to their own identities, to the interpersonal identity dynamics of those around them—both in the inter-tribal sense as well as with people fully outside the Israelites’ tribes—and in relationship to the place of the ancient lands of Egypt, Canaan, and Sinai that shaped the journey and evolution of our people. This story is still ongoing today. The more we as Jewish educators can tap into the powerful pedagogies of our past, the more we empower students to make meaning, find connection, and position themselves in relationship to both time and space in past, present, and future. Most of us are not creating learning experiences in the Sinai wilderness; we are still, however, serving as guides, helping our students navigate their relationship to place and community wherever they are and in places that would feel no less distant (if not exponentially *more* distant) from our Israelite ancestors than the wilderness of our formative past.

Education is a dance—the ongoing, dynamic choreography amongst and between educators and learners, by which one may lead, then follow; step forward, then step back, then to the side; through which we create moments of surprise and delight between rhythmic and coordinated movements in step with the beat of the music, across the surface of the dance floor, in connection with our fellow dancers around us. Through education we similarly encounter ideas and concepts, learn skills, and deepen our understanding of and relationship with others, with ourselves, and with the places we are in.

Through strengthening and articulating the choreography of how we as educators approach our relationship to Place—our physical positioning of self to other—we may tap into powerful embodied pedagogies that allow for deeper connection and more effective learning. Relationship to place—how we work with place, move within it, and position ourselves in relation both to our environment and to the others who are in it with us—should be a backpack essential for effective Jewish educators. We make use of relationship to place through two interrelated core principles of practice: prescribed positionality (*makom kavua*) and emergent positionality (*makom norah*).

## Connection to Jewish Tradition

*Makom*—place—has multiple uses and meanings in Jewish tradition. Where and how is it significant in Jewish text and tradition, and how does our relationship to place as Jews impact the ways in which we relate to ourselves and each other, and to moments of learning and meaning-making?

In Jacob's travels following his hasty departure from home, having stolen Esau's birthright, he spends a night in Haran on the road and dreams of a ladder between heaven and earth, and of God standing above him. Upon waking, he says, "*Ma norah haMakom ha'zeh. Eyn zeh ki im beit Elohim, v'zeh sha'ar hashamayim*—How full of awe is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."<sup>1</sup>

Jacob then positions a nearby stone as a pillar and anoints it with oil; marking the space as distinct through an act of spatial design, Jacob elevates this place and calls its holiness into memory through what we might think of as the first act of Jewish landscape design. This responsive choreography is an example of what we might call emergent positionality, or *makom norah*.

Later in our narrative, God tells Moses to build a sacred space—a *mikdash*, a place that is in some way *kadosh* (holy, sanctified)—which Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild describes as "separate, distinct and special, that embodies an idea and directs us towards it. What the mikdash does NOT do is to embody God, or in any way be a place where God actually lives. The phrase that God uses, *Assu li mikdash v'shachanti betocham*—"let them make for me a *mikdash*, a sacred and separate space, and I will dwell among them"—is key.<sup>2</sup>

We might then ask: is all space, and therefore every place, holy? Does God reside only in particular places or in every place? How does our relationship to place elevate or distinguish the ways in which we assign meaning to our relationship with ourselves and with the world around us?

At its most exalted, *HaMakom* (The Place) is a name of God: "Gd is the place of the world; and, the world is not Gd's place."<sup>3</sup> In other words, God is immanent throughout and beyond the entire world—the Place within which the world exists—yet God also exists beyond this place, and certainly beyond any one singular location.

Perhaps on the flip side, we learn in Talmud the concept of *makom kavua*, a regular or "fixed" place: "Whoever fixes a place for his prayer has the God of Abraham for his help ... For it is written (Gen. 19:27), 'And Abraham got up early in the morning to the place where he had stood.'"<sup>4</sup> *Makom kavua* is typically associated with prayer, the habitualized location to which one returns for regular practice, for the purposes both of increasing concentration and of stripping away external influences on one's ability to be in a prayerful state of being.

On the one hand this certainly makes sense. Prayer is about our inner connection and not being swayed by external environmental factors ... right? And yet, if God's presence is everywhere, why should a *makom kavua* be important? Should not we be able to pray in any place—to tap into a sense of

connection with the divine—without discernible difference in affect or connection? What about the ways in which we purposefully shape spaces to help alter our mindset (our soulset?) or bring ourselves to beautiful, awe-inspiring places specifically because of the ways in which these places change our perception of inner and outer connectedness?

Between the *makom kavua*, “fixed place” of Abraham, and the *makom norah*, “place-based awesome encounter” of Jacob, lay the polarities of our relationship to Place. In Abraham we see the habitualized practice of returning to the same place, the cyclicity of repetition, the proactive use of *keva* (structure) to guide *kavanah* (intention) in daily practice. In Jacob, we see the flash of divine connection, the awe-inspiring encounter—life-altering but made manifest by such a complex web of circumstance that we may feel challenged in ever hoping to catalyze such an experience for ourselves or our students.

If we are to tap into the power of place for meaning-making and connection in Jewish learning experiences, we must utilize both the prescribed positionality of *makom kavua* and the emergent positionality of *makom norah* in our pedagogical practice.

## The Practice

The pedagogical practice of utilizing place is most effective when part of a holistic approach to aligning our use of place alongside our articulation of learning goals and outcomes in the planning process and design for a program or learning session. As we consider both the teaching program (what) and the teaching environment (where), we may ask: Where is the ideal location for this learning experience? What is the ideal spatial arrangement? Are we sitting or standing? How are we moving from one piece to the next?

We are then best scaffolded for the how—our readiness to maximize our knowledge of place in service of learning, connection, and meaning-making. This practice utilizes two interrelated core principles: prescribed positionality (*makom kavua*) and emergent positionality (*makom norah*).

## Makom Kavua — Prescribed Positionality

*Makom Kavua* centers the preparation of a learning environment to best position the educator and learners in relationship to each other and the place of learning, for maximizing the learning experience and effectively accomplishing the learning goals of the session.

In general, educators and educational place-makers should consider these learning goals alongside psycho-social dynamics, environmental factors, and spatial constrictions.

Environmental factors include:

- Inside or outside
- Temperature (comfortable, very warm or cold, windy/drafty)
- Light — if there is natural light, which direction does it come from? Does it move significantly over the course of the learning session? Are there overly bright spots that impede visual sensation? Dark spots? Is the space evenly illuminated? Do particular locations or objects need extra light?
- Seasonality — does the character of the space noticeably change with the seasons? How might you respond to and/or create response to the change of seasons?
- What visual elements are part of the space? Which are attractive or calming vs. distracting or unattractive? How might you orient the students toward or away from them accordingly?
  - ♦ If inside, are there windows? Does every student have equal access to looking outside? Is the outside view calming or distracting? Are there attractive visual elements inside the space? Distracting visual elements?
  - ♦ If outside, what are views that should be highlighted or included? Views that should be avoided? Pleasing natural elements? Interesting architectural or artistic elements?
- What is the soundscape surrounding the learning environment?
  - ♦ If loud or distracting sounds cannot be completely blocked, it may be more helpful to place the distraction behind the students (with their backs to the sound) rather than behind the educator.
  - ♦ On the other hand, pleasant sounds can create a certain ambiance that may be helpful for mood and tone-setting.
  - ♦ Ambient sound levels may also be considered for how they impact the ability for students and educators to hear one another—for example, they may need to sit more closely together in a space where sound diffuses easily and/or there are distracting sounds, but could sit further apart in a more enclosed space with fewer distractions and/or better acoustics.

Spatial constrictions may also shape or limit the use of certain prescriptions. Constrictions may include:

- Limited space
- Lack of availability to move or rearrange seating and other positional objects
- Lack of time for significant place-making changes
- Challenging or inhospitable materials, e.g., muddy outdoor conditions, hard or uncomfortable flooring

In such cases, educators are encouraged to work within these constraints using creativity where possible. Can smaller objects be moved or repurposed to create certain effects? If rearranging all seats is unfeasible, can just one or a few be moved? Can you as the educator change your orientation to the space in a meaningful way?

### *Makom Kavua Typologies*

After the above elements are taken into consideration, the space is ready to be set as a *makom kavua*. The following typologies demonstrate a range of useful spatial arrangements corresponding to common learning goals and contexts. They should be considered in tandem with environmental factors and spatial constrictions.

### *Hakafot — Circle Variations*

Learners are standing or sitting in a variety of circular forms. Each student can see all (or most) of the other students as well as the educator and the space between.

- Psycho-social dynamics
  - ♦ Good for broad or collective focus—not on one person or object but on the whole group
  - ♦ Socially oriented
  - ♦ Multi-perspective (everyone looking at something somewhat different)
  - ♦ Delineates some form of collective common—e.g., *eiruv/eiruv*
  - ♦ Creates experience of being part of/making the circle, shaping the space

- ◆ Useful for discussion, group sharing, collective shared experience where focus is communal
- ◆ Typically only one learner (or a small number in an ongoing exchange) is able to speak or share at one time, which may limit either whether all learners have the opportunity to speak and/or may influence the length of time of a learning session
- Considerations
  - ◆ Educator may be a part of or outside the circle to differing effects
  - ◆ Note when teacher is still central focus vs. subtle guiding presence
  - ◆ What structures are put in place to guide the learning, sharing, and experiencing when circle spaces are being utilized? Circles have high potential for egalitarianism, yet can also give way to pre-existing social dynamics if group norms are not strongly established and/or adhered to
  - ◆ Circle is typically one layer but can also be adapted for concentric circles to similar effect for larger groups, which in some cases may yield better intimacy than one very large circle in which participants are too distant from the other side of the circle to create a strong feeling of connection

### *Bima—On Stage*

Learners are arranged such that the focus is entirely on one place or location (the “stage”). They can see each other but are not primarily focused on each other in the learning experience—rather, on the person, object, or phenomenon happening on stage.

- Psycho-social dynamics
  - ◆ Has a singular, narrow, or contained focus
  - ◆ Can utilize both rectilinear and (semi)circular variations
  - ◆ May be unidirectional, create shared perspective in or forward (everyone looking at the same thing, though may be from different angles)
  - ◆ May be the educator, another person, and/or other object(s) at center of focus
  - ◆ Attention is not primarily focused on the group of learners but on an external person, object, or phenomenon

- ◆ Learners may have limited or no opportunity to directly speak or share during the primary portion of the learning session
- ◆ Can create a shared collective experience of witnessing and/or engaging in the same person, place, performance, or experience
- Considerations
  - ◆ Should all learners have the same viewing angle or might it be helpful to have many perspectives viewing the focal experience?
  - ◆ Is the experience uni-directional (learners view/receive experience) or bi-directional (learners directly engage and interact with the person or object “on stage”)?
  - ◆ Framing and reflection—how are learners prepared for the shared experience beforehand? How can follow-up discussion and reflection practices grow and deepen learning and meaning-making based on the learning experience?

### **Beit Midrash — Clustered Group Learning**

Learners are segmented into small groups within a larger space for learning, discussion, workshopping, etc. Commonly used for *chevruta* pair-learning in Jewish spaces.

- Psycho-social dynamics
  - ◆ Small groups create extensive opportunities for learners to contribute to and engage with learning and discussion
  - ◆ Groups may engage in learning and discussion around a specific object, concept, project, or idea
  - ◆ Fewer competing voices may be less intimidating
  - ◆ Learning and discussion must typically be more self-directed—this can be supported through prompts and/or secondary facilitation
  - ◆ Can work well in tandem with either of the above typologies to create a space either for additional processing and sharing, for creative work, or for “co-working,” in which students work individually but alongside their peers

- Considerations
  - ♦ Educator will not be able to deeply observe all groups simultaneously—may be able to “walk the room” and be available for assistance and support for one group at a time
  - ♦ Existing social dynamics may be exacerbated if not managed appropriately or if group selection is not made thoughtfully

### Additional Considerations

#### Supplemental tools and practices

- How might these typologies be used with frequency and in connection with certain thematic content or recurring practices such that the arrangement of place becomes by itself an indicator for learners of the learning experience set to happen that day?
- How might the educator create a scaffold for students to ultimately set up their space in accordance with their own personal and collective learning goals?

#### Patterning considerations

- What is the order, the *seder*, to the use of positioning? I.e., is it random or determinant?
- If determinant, by what? E.g., age, “seniority,” role, cyclical rotation, height, temperament
- How might the educator use ordering for useful purposes? E.g., structure, discipline, clarity
- Who decides the order?
- How does the order change over time and under which circumstances or guidelines?

### Makom Norah — Emergent Positionality

No matter how well set a learning environment may be, educators must be prepared to respond to emerging needs and dynamics as they occur. We may capture such moments in modern learning environments that strike us as particularly powerful, unique, or notable. Perhaps a student has asked a particularly compelling question, or experienced a powerful emotion or moment of insight. Or a wave of increasingly personal and emotive shares have moved through the space and await an equally powerful response from the educator.

In such moments we might use the framework of *makom norah* as an emergent (re)positioning of ourselves in relation to learners and place, and we may look to Jewish ancestral archetypes to guide our response. For this thought piece, I have compiled three such representative archetypes: Yaakov (Jacob), Miriam, and Moshe (Moses). Through cultivating a practice based on our archetypes' emergent responses to incredible moments, we ourselves elevate our ability to utilize surprise, delight, and inspiration to create flashes of insight and understanding that deepen or spark the drive to continue in the learning process.

## Archetypes for Emergent Positional Responses:

### 1. **Yaacov** — *Changing the physical space in response to a moment*

***"Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on the top of it."*<sup>5</sup>**

As discussed earlier, Yaakov experienced the first specifically "Jewish" emergent response to an incredible, awe-some moment from which he felt a deep sense of divine connection and desire to make meaning from this experience. Thus, he intentionally repositioned the spatial objects around him and created a ritual to mark the moment.

The Yaakov response is to change the space itself through repositioning and ritual. What this specifically looks like will depend entirely on the unique space and learning context. Examples include repositioning seating/standing arrangements, or moving students from one place to another, or adjusting your position as educator; placing, changing, or moving an object at study to a (different) focal point; marking (appropriately) a space to honor or commemorate a particular moment (e.g., making an art piece with natural objects in an outdoor setting, placing an artwork or symbol in a physical space); or handing to or placing on a student a physical object (a stone, a necklace, an amulet, a sticker, a covering) that in some way recognizes a particular moment or emergent change in status.

### 2. **Miriam** — *Capturing the energy of the moment through ritual and movement*

***"Then Miriam the prophetess ... took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her in dance with timbrels."*<sup>6</sup>**

Crossing the Sea of Reeds, safe from the Egyptian soldiers at their backs, was a momentous and transformative moment in need of an equally powerful response. Miriam the Prophet knew exactly what to do, capturing the energy of the moment to catalyze song and dance.

No matter how well set a learning environment may be, educators must be prepared to respond to emerging needs and dynamics as they occur. We may capture such moments in modern learning environments that strike us as particularly powerful, unique, or notable. Perhaps a student has asked a particularly The Miriam response is thus to use ritual and movement (which may or may not include song or music) to respond to an emergent moment. This may involve level shifts (e.g., moving from sitting to standing or vice versa, or jumping/climbing on an object to get even higher up), spontaneous songs or *niggunim* (wordless melodies), energy captures (moving with the momentum of the room to either continue exciting and lifting or continue calming and slowing the energy), and energy shifts (e.g., using movement to awaken an overly tired or somber space, or breathing practices to calm excitement in need of transition). Timbrels optional.

### 3. **Moshe** — *Pause and slow down to notice and observe what is happening in this moment*

***" ... and he looked, and behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said: 'I will turn aside now, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.'"***<sup>7</sup>

When Moses came across the burning bush, the first notable act was not the beholding of the bush but simply the noticing. How long would Moses have needed to observe the bush before recognizing it was burning yet not being consumed?

In moments such as these, the Moses response is to pause, to slow down, to gaze deeply, to witness and behold. Then, as one recognizes the true awe of the moment, to approach with gentle care and deep connection—just as Moses is instructed to remove his sandals, for that place was holy ground, we might similarly tend to our presence in response to such emergent moments.

In these moments, we consider how we approach with care, whether and when we speak up and when we hold back and observe moments of deep tenderness and inspiration before calling the attention of ourselves and/or other students to the moment. We also approach the student and the moment with allowance for them to set their own terms—Gd in this case also tells Moses not to come any closer as well as to remove his sandals—for how we might approach what is happening in this moment. A learner in these experiences may desire close connection with the educator, or they may prefer to be witnessed from further afar. We as the educators should attune ourselves to these needs and position ourselves and all those in the space accordingly.

## Conclusion

The Rabbis of Bamidbar Rabbah say that “there are seventy faces to the Torah”<sup>8</sup> to emphasize the point that there are multiple ways in which the Torah may be interpreted—seventy different facets, like sides

of a crystal, all witnessed from different positions in the moment of revelation at the place of Sinai. No single person has access to the entirety of Torah. Likewise, the learning experience is comprised of a multitude of perspectives, in part shaped by and responding to the way in which students and educators have positioned themselves in relationship to each other and the place in which they are learning.

Perhaps there are configurations of position that enable us to see, if not all seventy faces of Torah, a more maximal expression of the learning possible in a space. Through the thoughtful use of *makom kavua* — prescribed positionality—we may optimize the opportunities for such multitudes of learning experiences.

Similarly, while we may never truly see the world from any perspective other than our own, we can attempt to approximate it through how we position ourselves in relationship to place and community in the emergent moments that call for *makom norah*—emergent positionality. As a final example, we look at the moment in which Moses seeks to directly observe Gd, and Gd's subsequent response: Rabbah say that "there are seventy faces to the Torah"<sup>8</sup> to emphasize the point that there are multiple ways in which the Torah may be interpreted—seventy different facets, like sides

*The [Moses] said, "Oh, let me behold Your Presence!"*

*And [Gd] answered, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name LORD, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show. But you cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live."*

*And the LORD said, "See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock and, as My Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen."<sup>9</sup>*

There are many interpretations for this passage, of course. One that was once shared to me (exactly from whom has unfortunately been lost to time) is the idea that when we look at someone's back—when we look from behind—we may then be positioned look over someone's shoulder, and thus see a glimpse of the world from their perspective. This was the gift given from Gd to Moses in this moment. And may this be the gift that we as educators receive from our students should we prepare and position ourselves appropriately: the chance to see, even for a fleeting moment, the world from their perspective, and be all the richer for it.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 28:17.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild, *Parashat Terumah: In the making of Sacred Space, we create Sacred community*, January 27, 2014, <https://rabbisylviarothschild.com/tag/mah-norah-hamakom-hazeh/>

<sup>3</sup> Midrash Rabba 68:5.

<sup>4</sup> Berakhot 6b:6–8.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 28:18.

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 15:20.

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 3:2–3.

<sup>8</sup> Bamidbar Rabbah 13:15–16.

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 33:18–23.

## THE PEDAGOGY OF BLESSING/BERAKHAH

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### Rabbi Lisa Goldstein

#### The Pedagogy

The pedagogy I am proposing is that of *berakhah*, the practice of offering a spontaneous, specific blessing to students at the end of each session as a way of developing a capacity for love and awe. The blessing offers a moment of reflection, connection, and holiness at the conclusion of a class. It may address the collective needs and aspirations that have arisen during the class. It may also be a way of translating the intellectual content of the class into a more emotional or soulful integration. The blessing may be given by the teacher. Over time, students may be invited into the practice as well.

#### The Worldview

We are living in challenging times, even if we take the current pandemic out of the equation. We know that people, both children and adults, are experiencing anxiety and isolation in unprecedented numbers and that the issues that face us, ranging from the political to the environmental, are daunting. My worldview is grounded in the premise that one of the best ways we can bring greater healing to each other and the larger world is by cultivating our capacity for *ahavah* (love) and *yirah* (awe). These two elements of a strong spiritual core give us internal tools to be able to reach out more skillfully to one another in care and connection, while at the same time, to accept with greater peace and wisdom the things that we are powerless to change.<sup>1</sup>

How do we begin cultivating these twin capacities? My suggestion is the simple practice of offering personal blessings. A blessing is the articulation of a deep desire for another's wellbeing (which is an expression of love) wrapped in a formulation that implicitly acknowledges that the fulfillment of that desire is not in the hands of one who blesses, but rather far beyond. (This is an experience of *yirah*.) We do not bless people with things we can simply give them. We bless them with what we hope for them. A blessing is short, can be both personal and impersonal, and can be adapted to a wide variety of contexts. It has the power to transform both the one who blesses and those who receive it.

#### Connection to Jewish Tradition

Personal blessing, the act of a person uttering a desire that God provide for the wellbeing of another, is an ancient Jewish practice that goes all the way back to Rebecca's mother and brother, who blessed her with many victorious offspring when she left her home to marry Isaac.<sup>2</sup> It is fascinating that this earliest example involves a daughter, brother, and mother; the more common practice in the biblical narrative is

that of a father who is anticipating his own death and blesses his male descendants.<sup>3</sup> In the Bible, these blessings are adapted to reflect the specific relationship and the love (and sometimes harsh judgment) that is inherently part of a parent-child bond. Over time, this practice became standardized as the custom of blessing the children on Shabbat evening, expressing the desire that the children follow the example of our ancestors and that they experience safety, goodness, grace, and peace. This custom goes back at least as far as the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the Ashkenazi world<sup>4</sup> and perhaps even further back in the Sephardic world, where spontaneous individualized blessings are still widespread. This blessing can be a very sweet way for parents to express their love and good wishes to their children at the end of the week.

A second category of a personal blessing in Jewish life is *Birkat Hakohanim*, the Priestly Blessing.<sup>5</sup> Although it is included in the parent's blessing on Shabbat, the Priestly Blessing on its own represents a different kind of experience of love and awe. This is an impersonal love and concern, because it does not depend on the quality of individual relationships between the *kohen* and the specific members of the community. Instead the priests are participating in and communicating divine love and care for the people. In this blessing, both the priests and the people are invited into an experience of *yirah*, or awe. The priests are opening themselves to be channels of divine abundance directed to the people, and the people hide their faces in respect and reverence.

The teacher stands somewhere in between the parent and the priest. On the one hand, there is a personal relationship between the teacher and the student that often involves sincere affection, care, or even love, which, of course, must be held within appropriate boundaries. On the other hand, the teacher has the responsibility to teach the entire class irrespective of personal connections. Like the *kohen*, the teacher is standing in as the messenger of something much bigger, the conduit of a whole body of knowledge, values, and ways of being in the world that they are charged with sharing with their students.

The Talmud records at least one case<sup>6</sup> of a standardized blessing that was recited when one of the sages took leave from the study hall of Rabbi Ami (or perhaps it was Rabbi Hanina). This is a beautiful example that expresses a deep care for the wellbeing of the individual who was departing and awakens a sense of awe upon reading it. This blessing also highlights another layer of the potential of blessing: It asks that students of Torah be blessed with the core values of the house of study, such as understanding, wisdom, and a life of Torah, along with the more personal benefits of joy, ease, and a lasting legacy.

This might remind us of a related teaching in the Breslov custom of turning Torah into prayer. As part of his teaching on *hitbodedut*,<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Nahman of Breslov instructed his students to integrate the intellectual learning they did into their prayer life, the devotion of the heart. While this prayer is not a blessing for

others but rather a heartfelt petition from the learner directly to God, it offers some additional direction on how to create a blessing for a classroom. Like the talmudic blessing, it reminds the blesser to anchor the care they feel for those to be blessed in the values, content, and culture of their learning.

Blessing is a way of concretizing three ways of acquiring Torah: through *yirah* (awe/fear), through love of God, and through love of other people. In fact, this whole project came into being by asking how one might cultivate the capacity for love and awe. One of the intriguing suggestions the Mishnah offers us is that not only can the stance of love and awe help us learn Torah, but perhaps there is new Torah to be learned from our experiences of love and awe.

## The Practice

Personal blessings are most often associated with leave taking; it is often in our parting that we notice our good wishes for one another. So blessing the class should take place in the last few minutes of a session. In addition to its other purposes, the blessing can serve as a *chatimah* or seal for the session, as a way of creating a few moments of sacred intention before bursting on to whatever happens next.

But planning for the blessing should begin earlier. In introducing the practice, the teacher should model how to bless for a period of time. Eventually, the teacher might determine that students could also participate. It should always be clear at the beginning of the class who will offer the blessing.

### Step 1:

The blesser will keep a part of their attention on elements that arise during the class that might be integrated into the blessing. This is a kind of SEI (Social & Emotional Intelligence) attunement to what is happening. The elements might include:

- The emotional mood of the class. Are people engaged? Worried? Distracted? Excited?
- A communal need or aspiration
- An aspect of the lesson that seems particularly meaningful or inspiring

### Step 2:

In the last few minutes of the class, the blesser gets ready to say the blessing by taking a moment to feel a real sense of affection for their students or classmates and to remember that the fulfillment of their desire for their wellbeing is not in their hands. **This is the most important step. In truth, what is actually said is not that important; a blessing isn't a speech. It is a heartfelt expression of the desire for another's wellbeing.**

### Step 3:

The blesser then says the blessing. Some ways to start might include:

- I want to bless you with . . .
- May we . . .
- *Yehi ratzon milfanekha* . . .

Here are some examples of blessings:

- Addressing the emotional mood – *I want to bless you all with the courage and support you need so that you can face any challenge before you.*
- Addressing a communal need that is present – *Yehi razton milfanekha that we are blessed with the patience and diligence we need to do our best on our test tomorrow.*
- Addressing an inspiring moment in class – *May we all be blessed with the awareness to appreciate how amazing it is that light rolls away from darkness and darkness from light.*

Some additional notes:

- It is important to respect any vulnerability that may have arisen. This means keeping things fairly general so people feel included but not identified.
- It is sometimes easiest to consider a particular *middah* or quality that the blesser might want to bestow in a particular context. Examples might be courage, patience, generosity, kindness, trustworthiness, etc.
- Mentioning of the Divine Name will vary widely, based on the culture and halakhic orientation of a specific context.

### Step 4:

The last step is for the class to respond “Amen.” This step allows those receiving the blessing to really take in the desire for their wellbeing.

## Field Observations

The most important thing that arose from the testing of the pedagogy is the realization of how automatically we move into thinking about the “right thing” to say instead of anchoring down into our own inner experience of caring for those we are blessing. As a result, the emphasis of the practice needs to be shifted to the moment **before** the blessing itself to give the blesser a moment to connect with their own affection for the class. The words that emerge from that will be sufficient.

In fact, one person who tested the practice reported, “I found doing the *brachah* today super-enjoyable: ESPECIALLY because there was no possibility to prepare, so no pressure to come up with something amazing (or overthought). Just a chance to share from the heart. It is hard not to channel *ahavah* when you are giving a blessing. I left the class feeling more blessed than when I came in.”

## Next Steps

It would be beneficial to further consider how to help teachers teach their students how to take on the blesser role. Also, some thought should be given on how to measure or assess whether this blessing practice really does cultivate the capacity for *ahavah* and *yirah*, both for the teacher and for the students.

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<sup>1</sup> This is not an easy ask for Jews, for whom powerlessness has often been—with good reason—equated with annihilation. We are often much more comfortable with what Parker Palmer, in his article *Leading from Within*, called “functional atheism, the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with us.” Nevertheless, in my worldview, an acceptance of our own limits is an essential and liberating spiritual stance.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 24:60. Of course, examples of God uttering blessings goes back to creation, but this is the first example of a person blessing another person.

<sup>3</sup> Examples include the subsequent patriarchs: Isaac (Genesis 27) and Jacob (Genesis 48 & 49).

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Buxtorf, *Synagoga Judaica* (1604), ch. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 6:22–27.

<sup>6</sup> BT Brachot 17a.

<sup>7</sup> Likkutei Mohoran II:25:2.

# TOKHAHAH: A PEDAGOGY OF LOVING REBUKE

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Rabbi Ari Weiss

## The Pedagogy

The pedagogy implicit in the work of *tokhahah*, of loving rebuke and dialogue, is deeply needed in the ideological wars and toxic environment of the last few years. I came to this topic in reflecting on my experiences as a Hillel educator and Executive Director mentoring Jewish college students in the middle of a bruising BDS campaign at Cornell. For one semester my life centered on mediating conflict: conflict between Jewish students and conflict between Jewish students and other identity groups who supported BDS because of their intersectional ties with Palestinians. I observed an underlying dynamic in these conflicts: ideology was deeply connected to one's moral self and identity. Due to this bundling up of identity and ideology, having a different stance was seen as a rejection of a student's sense of self, which led to the demonization of the other. And while my experiences took place on a college campus, they are paradigmatic of conversations happening in the greater culture in America and in the larger world. For instance, conversations and debates about police disarmament quickly devolve into ideological positions: Black Lives Matter vs. Blue Lives Matter.

I believed then, and even more so today, that our tradition can offer an alternative approach through a more robust ethics of disagreement, one in which we move beyond identity politics and into conversation. This form of dialogue can be transformative and perhaps even holy. I think the practice of *tokhahah* is a necessary antidote to Twitter wars and the trolling of our politics. And while I think there is a universal application of *tokhahah*, I've fashioned it as a pedagogy initially for Jewish educators in a Hillel setting who are mentoring Jewish young adults involved in the ideological battles that take place on campus.

## The Worldview

As people, we are multiple. We have different narratives and goals: we view and understand the world differently. Jewish tradition is deeply aware of our plurality: the Mishnah in Sanhedrin comments that while we are all descended from a common ancestor and therefore share a common humanity, "all stricken from the same mold," each and every one of us is different.<sup>1</sup> Given that multiplicity is constitutive of who we are, in creating community we need to mediate our different worldviews with each other. Failure to do so leads to conflict.

## Connection to Jewish Tradition

One could read large portions of our Jewish tradition as an attempt to reconcile these competing needs: of affirming selfhood and at the same time of attempting to live peacefully with each other in

community. For instance, the Book of Genesis can be read primarily as documenting the conflicts of our progenitors and their attempts at resolution. Likewise, the rabbinic project of interpreting and understanding the word of God is self-aware that core disagreements often lead to irresolvable conflict. It is full of mediating statements such as “these and these are the words of the ever-living God” as a way of both affirming the self and, at the same time, creating a religious framework to harmonize conflict.<sup>2</sup>

Difference can lead to celebration or disparagement: to love or to hate. The Torah recognizes both impulses, and Leviticus chapter 19 enjoins us to both love our neighbor, even as they are different, and not to hate them (it further commands us to love those most different than ourselves—the stranger). Significantly, when focusing on the commandment not to hate, the Torah provides a process of moving beyond hate. The verse reads in full:

*You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely reprove your fellow and not bear guilt because of him.*

—Leviticus 19:17

Like many verses in the Torah, there are some deep ambiguities present in this verse. Why is it that you shall “reprove” your fellow? How do you do so? And why, if you fail, do you bear guilt?

One traditional way of reading this text is to focus on the conduct of the other person, the one you hate. In this telling, the other person is in the wrong. And if you do not reprove them by pointing out their shortcomings then you will have allowed sin to prosper and will therefore bear the guilt of sin, which is communal and contagious. This is perhaps why you hate that person. To put it differently: it is the other person that will need to change. Their difference will need to be erased.

There is a second, and I believe simpler, way that our tradition has understood this verse. In this telling the drama is internal to the subject; the movement is within the self. I might feel hatred toward someone because of some difference between us. In order to remove that hate, it is I who must change by entering into conversation with the other. If I do not, I will remain in sin and therefore bear the guilt of hating someone. Or, as R. Eleazar ben Matya interprets the verse in *Tanna de-Ve Eliyahu*: “If there is some issue between you and him, speak to him [about it], and do not be the one who has sinned through that person.”<sup>3</sup>

The verse in Leviticus points us in the direction of conversation as a means to resolve conflict. It further suggests that the goal of entering into dialogue is to effect an internal change: to move beyond hate. The text remains silent though on the form of these conversations and how this inner work happens. It is here that the rabbinic tradition expands this kernel into a developed pedagogy of conflict resolution.

The Rambam devotes a chapter of the *Mishnah Torah* to explicating the commandment of *tokhahah*, of resolving conflict. Rambam begins by introducing the notion that we are often in conflict, and that one must rebuke someone who transgresses against them.<sup>4</sup> Here, Rambam introduces dialogue and open-ended inquiry into the framework of *tokhahah*. In order to reprove we have to make our position known and we have to attempt to understand.

Rambam continues to develop the parameters of how to engage in these difficult conversations. They include:

1. Speaking calmly and employing soft language.<sup>5</sup>
2. Continued and sustained attempts to enter into conversation.<sup>6</sup>
3. An abundance of respect and ensuring that shame is absent from the conversation.<sup>7</sup>
4. Understanding the limits of conflict resolution and recognizing that not all conflicts can be resolved.<sup>8</sup>

This theme of open-ended inquiry as a means to resolving conflict is deepened in the writings of Rambam's contemporary, R. Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor, in his biblical commentary. In Rambam, the other is still considered a sinner. Bekhor Shor introduces the idea that the other might inhabit an alternative moral and/or conceptual universe.<sup>9</sup>

In Bekhor Shor's telling, the point of dialogue is not just an open-ended inquiry but an attempt to understand the otherness of the other. Through this give and take I will be able to empathize with the other, our differences will be identified, and we will be able to work through conflict. Not only will I be changed; you will be changed as well. *Tokhahah* is revealed to be dialogical and relational. As contemporary rabbis Zvi Weinberger and Baruch Heifetz put it in *Sefer Limud le-Hilkhot ben Adam le-Havero: Lo Tisna et Ahikha be-Lvavekha*, "It therefore follows that this mitzvah [*tokhahah*] is fulfilled not only through the reprover talking but also through listening [i.e., he must both talk and listen]. The reprover must be prepared to listen to the response of his friend, for as long as he is only coming to *talk* and berate his friend, and he's not prepared to listen and accept what his friend has to say back and the explanation that he may offer—he does not fulfill the mitzvah."<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps we can go even further in teasing out the theological ramifications of the ethical relationship that *tokhahah* manifests. By focusing the movement of change within the self, that is, by resolving the initial hatred I have of the other by attempting to understand the other through inquiry, empathy, and acceptance of difference, *tokhahah* points to the limits of the totality of self and the idea of an infinite beyond the self. By doing the inner work of *tokhahah*, I realize that my initial view of the world can only go so far and that others have life-projects that transcend my perceived understanding of the world. In the conversation with the other, I not only increase my knowledge of others, but I become

transformed. I understand that there is difference and come to celebrate it. I move from self-love to love. It is in this vein that Rabbi Yose bar Hanina once said, “*Tokhahah* brings to love” and that “any love without *tokhahah* is not [true] love.”<sup>11</sup> The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot identifies this stance as “one who loves *tokhahah*.”<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, this acknowledgement of the limitation of the self is at the heart of Judaism, which, as the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas writes, is a “wisdom of love” and not a “love of wisdom” and points the way to God. “To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it,” writes Levinas in his magnum opus *Totality and Infinity*. He continues, “it is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity.”<sup>13</sup>

## The Practice

This pedagogy includes three frameworks that an educator can use in conversations with Jewish young adults: purpose, ethics, and technique.

**Purpose:** I believe that this is the most important framework and consists in the type of reflections that have animated this paper: humans are plural; we ought to celebrate difference; when we engage in *tokhahah* it is to engage in dialogue to effect a change in us; and that this type of inner work is *Jewishly* meaningful.

**Ethics:** By ethics I mean the manner in which the Jewish young adult is to engage with others they disagree with. The framework is animated by the parameters described by the Rambam above: that one ought to speak calmly and employ soft language; that there should be continued and sustained attempts to enter into conversation with those we disagree with; an abundance of respect and ensuring that shame is absent from the conversation; and an understanding of the limits of conflict resolution and recognizing that not all conflicts can be resolved. In my work with college students, I have found that the ethics of the conversation is often disregarded, which easily leads to toxicity.

**Technique:** By “technique” I refer to the art of having difficult conversations. The Jewish sources I’ve encountered and referenced point to the need to ask open-ended questions, to be inquisitive, and to listen—all of which, I believe, serve an important interpersonal point: to reorient *tokhahah* away from changing the other and to focus on inner work. These sources, however, scarcely offer an actual technique of having tough conversations. To help flesh out this framework, I turn to the work of Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project. In their work *Difficult Conversation: How to Discuss What Matters Most* they make explicit what is implicit in the traditional sources. Stone, Patton, and Heen claim that when we are engaged in difficult conversation, we are really having three different types of conversations: the *what happened* conversation, the *feeling* conversation, and the *identity* conversation.

- The **what happened conversation** is a conversation about who is right. Its criteria is truth. The conversation can be about what happened or what the correct policy should be. Examples can include: “Did I forget to call the vendor?” or “Did Israel forcefully expel 700,000 Palestinians in 1947/8?”
- The **feelings conversation** goes beyond what happened and focuses on affect. Examples include, “Are my feelings valid? Appropriate? Should I acknowledge or deny them, put them on the table or check them at the door? What do I do about the other person’s feelings? What if they are angry or hurt?”<sup>14</sup>
- Like the *sod* (secret) of Pardes (the mystical framework of four levels of interpretation of Torah), the **identity conversation** is the deepest question and concerns meaning. The practice of *tokhahah* aspires to inform this conversation, but it is ultimately, as the authors put it, “an internal debate over whether ... we are competent or incompetent, a good person or a bad, worthy of love or unlovable. What impact might it have on our self-image and self-esteem, our future and our well-being.”<sup>15</sup>

In this framework all three conversations are happening concurrently: it is up to the educator to help tease out which conversation the Jewish young adult is engaging in.

By being conversant with these three frameworks—purpose, ethics, and technique—I believe the educator will be fully engaged in the Jewish pedagogy of *tokhahah* and by doing so will transform conflict. As Resh Lakish once commented, “*Tokhahah* brings us to peace ... any peace without *tokhahah* is not [true] peace.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5.

<sup>2</sup> Eruvin 13b.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Howard Kaminsky, *Fundamentals of Jewish Conflict Resolution: Traditional Jewish Perspectives on Resolving Interpersonal Conflicts* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2017), 226.

<sup>4</sup> Rambam, *Hilchot De’ot* 6:1. “If one man commits a sin against another man, the one sinned against shall not remain in silent hate against the sinner... but, on the contrary, it is obligatory upon him to make it known to him and say unto him: ‘Why have you done to me thus and such, and wherefore have you sinned against me in that particular matter?’; for, it is said: ‘And thou shalt indeed rebuke thy neighbor’ (Lev. 19:17).”

<sup>5</sup> Rambam, *Hilchot De’ot* 6:7. “He who rebukes his fellow, whether it be regarding a sin committed between man and man, or whether it be regarding matters between man and God, it is essential that the rebuke be administered only between them both; and he shall speak to him calmly, employing soft language, telling him that he does not speak of it to him, save for his own good, to bring him to a life in the world to come.”

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<sup>6</sup> Rambam, *Hilchot De'ot* 6:7. "If he receive it attentively from him, it is well; if not, he should rebuke him a second, even a third time. So is the constant duty of a man to continue to rebuke his fellow, even until the sinner strike him, and say unto him: 'I will not listen.'"

<sup>7</sup> Rambam, *Hilchot De'ot* 6:8. "A man is, therefore obliged to guard himself against putting his fellow to shame publicly, regardless of whether he be young or old; not to call him by a name of which he feels ashamed, nor tell aught in his presence of which he is ashamed."

<sup>8</sup> Rambam, *Hilchot De'ot* 6:9. "He against whom a fellow sinned, who did not want to rebuke him, nor to say anything to him, because the sinner is extremely common, or possessed of a distorted mind, but within his heart forgave him, and lodged no hatred against him, though he rebuked him not, behold, such is a pious conduct, for the Torah did not concern itself with anything save against hatred."

<sup>9</sup> Bekhor Shor, Leviticus 19:17. "If your brother does something that upsets you, do not hate him in your heart. Rather, you should reprove him and say to him, 'Why did you do this to me?' Since it is possible that he never intended what you had thought, or he couldn't help himself, or he will give you some [other] explanation. And through this [mitzvah of *tokhahah*], you will come to realize that he never did something improper to you."

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Kaminsky, *Fundamentals*, 248.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis Rabbah 54:3.

<sup>12</sup> Pirkei Avot 6:6.

<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 51.

<sup>14</sup> Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, *Difficult Conversation: How to Discuss What Matters Most* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Stone, Patton, and Heen, *Difficult Conversation*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Genesis Rabbah 54:3.

## LESHA: LEMIDA SH'GORERET AHAVAH: LEARNING THAT LEADS TO LOVE

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### Adam Eilath

ועוד זה יתנו ממחצית השקל, להורות שכל אחד חלק מהגוף וצריך לשיתוף חברו  
וכמו שאמר מרן רבי יוסף קארו, זיכרו לברכה, בספרו 'אור צדיקים': שאל יתגאה  
אדם, שאפילו הוא לבדו נחשב לאחד. לכך צריך מחצית השקל, לומר, שכל אחד  
צריך לחברו.

חכם יעקב פיתוסי  
ירך יעקב, דף לה', עמוד ב'

*The Jewish people contributed a half shekel to teach that every single person is a part of the nation (body) and needs the partnership of their fellow. As our great sage Rabbi Yosef Karo wrote in his book Or Hatzadikim: "A person should not be so proud that they think they are whole even when they are alone." For this reason the half shekel is required to teach that every person needs their fellow."*

—Hakham Yaakov Fitousi, Algeria, 19th century

### The Pedagogy

*Learning that leads to love* is a pedagogy that utilizes educational experiences to cultivate love between students in a Jewish classroom. A teaching approach that is rooted in *LeSHA* is founded on the belief that loving relationships between learners is a primary vehicle for deepening the acquisition of Torah. Similarly, this teaching approach posits that the act of acquisition of Torah was **designed primarily** to cultivate loving relationships between all members of *Am Yisrael* regardless of their backgrounds, practices, or beliefs. The purpose of this pedagogy is to see the classroom and Torah learning as a laboratory for *Ahavat Yisrael* **outside** of the classroom. This pedagogy seeks to decrease strife, hatred, and apathy and to increase love, empathy, and knowledge of the other within *Am Yisrael*. This work is timely, as educators are seeking tools, language, and frameworks to cultivate deeper understandings between diverse groups of Jewish individuals. The Jewish educational world is filled with wonderful tools that have been adopted from the secular world of diversity, equity, and inclusion. **However, there is an approach within the Jewish tradition that sees the fulfillment of the mitzvah of *Ahavat Yisrael* as specifically focused on cultivating love between radically different types of Jews through the study of Torah.**

## The Worldview

Young students encounter the notion of “love” in a variety of disconnected contexts. Parental and familial love is, hopefully, expressed verbally, physically, and materially on a regular basis in healthy households. Children are socialized to develop love toward objects they are fond of, including stuffed animals and toys, physical settings, or experiences.<sup>1</sup> As students get older and are potentially exposed to developmentally appropriate storytelling they may encounter other romantic notions of love (Disney films or other traditional children’s stories). Children’s stories and films are replete with storylines that focus on friendships that develop between different individuals, but it is unclear whether that friendship can be characterized as love or whether it has elements of loving others within the context of belonging to the same nation/people.

In a Jewish elementary school, students will often encounter three concepts of love in the Jewish tradition. The first is the notion of loving G-d, which students often encounter as they learn to recite and understand the Shema. Students will also likely encounter the notion of loving their fellow as themselves in the phrase *ve’ahavta le’reacha kamocha*, and they may learn the importance of treating others as they would like to be treated. Lastly, students may encounter interpersonal love in the stories of the Tanakh as they read about the love that Avraham had for Isaac or that Jacob had for Rachel.

Teaching students how to love *Am Yisrael* is not a natural next step from these foundational encounters with love. As noted in the introduction to the curricular guide on the concept of *Ahavat Yisrael* (ed. Bernshteyn, Eitan, and Shalit) designed for national religious schools in Israel:

People, especially youngsters, are accustomed to treating love as a spontaneous feeling. A feeling that fills the heart suddenly and that can vanish as it appeared. Such an approach means that you either love or don’t love. Subsequently, one treats the mitzvah of *Ahavat Yisrael* exclusively as applicable toward the people closest to them (who they likely already love), or as a feeling extended to all of the Jewish people in general, as a far off concept which exists regardless of the people you encounter on the street or on the bus. The common denominator in these two approaches is the lack of struggle with the

אנשים, בייחוד צעירים, רגילים להתייחס לאהבה בתור דבר ספונטני בלבד. רגש חזק שממלא את הלב, כך פתאום, ויכול להיעלם כפי שהופיע. במבט כזה "או שאתה אוהב, או שאתה לא," ואז אחד מהשניים: או שתייחס את מצוות אהבת ישראל רק אל הסביבה הקרובה, אותה אתה אוהב ממילא, או שתפליג אל "כלל ישראל" רחוק, ואותו תאהב, מבלי קשר לאנשים שאתה פוגש באוטובוס ובמכולת. המשותף לשתי האפשרויות הוא חוסר ההתמודדות עם הקושי לאהוב, ועם העבודה והמאמץ להגיע אליה. אוהבים) או שלא) זהו זה. אם נישיר מבט אל האהבה, נראה כי בעצם כל אהבה

difficulty of loving. With the labor and the struggle that is required to achieve love. You love (or you don't love) and that is all ....

If we dive deep into the study of love, we understand that all serious love is connected to hard work. Even close friends have breakdowns and difficulties. Spontaneous love makes room for a more mature love which is sustained by thoughtfulness and effort.

The mitzvah of *Ahavat Yisrael* is first of all a mitzvah. We have to work hard in order to fulfill it. The Holy One Blessed Be He commanded us to love, to seriously love, other Jews from all different walks of life. This love can only be produced through hard work. This is love. Love that is acquired from a thread that comes from the depths of our hearts, and over time becomes an inseparable part of our humanity.<sup>2</sup>

## Connection to Jewish Tradition

My pedagogy is built on a particular tradition that identifies *Ahavat Yisrael* as the promotion of a worldview of unity. Pervasive in the writings of North African rabbis in the 19th and 20th centuries and of the founders of Hasidism is an approach to *Ahavat Yisrael* that emphasizes the importance of loving those who are different from you (see appendix for a full list of sources). At a foundational level, it appears that North African rabbis believed in a relationship between *Matan Torah* (the giving of the Torah), *Achdut* (unity), and *Ahavat Ha-acher* (loving the "other"). One of the most quoted verses referenced by North African rabbis who write about *Ahavat Yisrael* is the description of B'nei Yisrael before they received the Torah:

Exodus 19:2

Having journeyed from Rephidim, they entered the wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness. Israel encamped there in front of the mountain.

רצינית קשורה לעמל. אפילו בין חברים קרובים יש רגעי משבר וקושי, ואז הספונטניות מפנה את מקומה לאהבה בוגרת, אהבה שמתקיימת מתוך חשיבה ומאמץ. מצוות אהבת ישראל, היא קודם כל מצווה. וכמו כל המצוות, אנו נדרשים לעמול כדי לקיים אותה. הקדוש ברוך הוא מצווה אותנו לאהוב, ממש לאהוב, את היהודים שסביבנו שונים ומשונים ככל שיהיו. אהבה כזאת נוצרת מתוך עבודה, וכן, זאת אהבה אהבה שנרכשת מתוך עמל משתרשת עמוק עמוק בתוך הלב, והופכת עם הזמן, לחלק בלתי נפרד מן האישיות.

שמות י"ט:ב

ויסעו מרפידים ויבאו מדבר סיני ויחנו במדבר ויחן שם ישראל נגד ההר.

Numerous commentaries, as early as the Mekhilta and including Rashi, noted the shift from the plural use of “encamped” (*vayahanu*) in the wilderness to the singular use of the verb “encamped” (*vayihan*) there in front of the mountain. As Hakham David Kadosh (Marakkesh, Morocco, 20th century) writes:

Our sages explicated the verse, “Having journeyed from Rephidim, they entered the wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness. Israel encamped there in front of the mountain.” As Rashi explained in the name of the Mekhilta, “As one person with one heart, but with the rest of the encampments they had fights and arguments.” **Unity is an essential condition for receiving the Torah.**

לב דוד, כרך א', עמוד צ"ח

וכן דרשו על הפסוק: 'ויסעו מרפידים ויבאו מדבר סיני ויחנו במדבר ויחן שם ישראל נגד ההר' - וברש"י בשם המכילתא: 'כאיש אחד בלב אחד, אבל שאר כל החניות בתרעומת ובמחלוקת' עד כאן. ואחדות זו היא תנאי הכרחי לקבלת התורה.

Hakham David Kadosh is not the only rabbi who draws a connection between this verse and the value of *Ahavat Yisrael*. Hakham Shlomo Uzan (19th century, Tunis) elaborated on this verse and established the connection between love, Torah, and the interdependence of the Jewish people:

“The Torah of Hashem is perfect, restoring the soul.” “Soul” is written in the singular form to hint that B’nei Yisrael only merited the Torah due to the unity that existed between them. As our sages of blessed memory explicated on the verse, “And they encamped there in front of the mountain.”... Since the Torah contains 613 commandments and there are some commandments that not every individual can fulfill, for example the laws associated with Kohanim, or levirate marriage ... as such, through unity, all of Israel can become one. One person fulfills their commandments and another person fulfills their own different commandments and this is the only way the entire Torah is fulfilled.

יריעות שלמה, עמ' ל"ח ב

תורת ה' תמימה משיבת נפש' - ואומרו נפש לשון יחיד, לרמוז שלא זכו ישראל לקבלת התורה אלא על ידי האחדות שהיה ביניהם, כמאמרם זיכרונם לברכה על פסוק: 'ויחן שם ישראל נגד ההר'...

וכבר נתנו חכמינו זיכרונם לברכה טעם לזה, מאחר שהתורה כלולה מתרי"ג מצוות, ויש בהם כמה מצוות שאין כל אדם יכול לקיימם, כגון מצוות השייכות לכוהנים, ויבום וחליצה, על כן על ידי האחדות יהיו לאחדים כל איש מישראל, וזה יקיים זה וזה יקיים זה ונמצא שעל ידי כולן תתקיים כל התורה.

HaHakham Uzan articulates an idea that is particularly useful for the pedagogy in this paper. We must cultivate a mindset that we need each other in order to make the Torah complete. We need to feel a sense of unity with those who are different than us because individuals who are different than us have the ability to fulfill mitzvot that not every individual can fulfill.

Although not from North Africa, Hakham Hayim Kesar (20th century, Yemen) specifically links this verse to the study of Torah.

In the Midrash it says: When they left Egypt, they fought all along the way, but when they arrived at Sinai, they became one people, as it is written "and Israel encamped [*vayihan*] there" and it was not written "they encamped" [*vayahanu*]. **The Holy One Blessed Be He said, "All of the Torah is peace, and who shall I give it to? To the nation that loves peace and fulfills 'all its [Torah] paths are peace.'" This comes to teach us that Torah is acquired only by a group of people who learn together and love one another.**

קיץ המזבח, עמ' ל"ח

במדרש אמרו: כשיצאו ישראל ממצרים, כל המסעות היו במריבות, וכשבאו לסיני, הושו כולם אגודה אחת, כמו שכתוב: 'ויחן שם' - ולא כתוב ויחנו. אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: התורה כולה שלום, ולמי אני נותנה? - לאומה שהיא אוהבת השלום, ומתקיים 'וכל נתיבותיה שלום' עד כאן לשונו. בא ללמדנו שאין התורה נקנית אלא אם כן החבורה שלומדים יחד הם אוהבים זה את זה.

Rabbinic writings throughout the modern era from across the globe acknowledge the importance of regarding the Jewish people as a singular body that is only complete if an affective shift occurs in the minds and hearts of Jewish individuals. For example, Shneur Zalman of Liady (also known as the Alter Rebbe and the founder of Chabad Hasidism) writes the following about the value of *Ahavat Yisrael*.

Therefore our Sages state: "Be humble of spirit before every person," because every person possesses a quality and an attribute that their colleague does not possess. Each one needs the other. Thus every individual possesses a unique distinction and positive quality that [in its own particular way] surpasses [the qualities possessed by] their fellow, [causing] their fellow to need them [for their own fulfillment]. For example, a person possesses a body that is comprised of a head, feet, [and other organs].

ליקוטי תורה פרשת ניצבים,  
ד"ה "אתם ניצבים"

"וְלָכֵן אָמַרְנוּ רַבּוֹתֵינוּ ז"ל הֵי שֶׁפֶל רוּחַ בְּפָנֵי כָל אָדָם לְפִי שֵׁשׁ בְּכָל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד בְּחִינוֹת וּמִדּוֹת מֵהַ שְׂאִין בְּחִבּוּר, וְכֵלָם צְרִיכִין זֶה לָזֶה. וְנִמְצָא שֵׁשׁ יִתְרוֹן וּמַעֲלָה בְּכָל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד שֶׁגִּבּוֹת מִחִבּוּר, וְחִבּוּר צְרִיךְ לוֹ. וְכַמֶּשֶׁל הָאָדָם שֶׁהוּא בַּעַל קוֹמָה בְּרֹאשׁ וְרַגְלִים, שְׂאֵף שְׂרָגְלִים הֵם סוֹף הַמִּדְרָגָה וְלִמְטָה, וְהָרֹאשׁ הוּא הָעֲלִיּוֹן וּמַעֲלָה מִמֶּנּוּ, מְכַל מְקוֹם הָרִי

The feet are on the lowest level—the bottom [of the body's hierarchy, as it were]—and the head is the highest and most lofty. Nevertheless, the feet possess an advantage and a higher quality, for *they* are required for mobility. Moreover, it is [the feet] that support the trunk and the head. Also, when the head feels heavy, it is healed by drawing blood from the feet and [in this way, the head] receives vitality. Thus the head lacks fulfillment unless [it joins] with the feet. Similarly, the entire Jewish people are like one body. Thus, even one who thinks that they are comparable to a head in relation to their fellow [must realize] that they cannot attain fulfillment without their colleague and must find something lacking within their soul to which their colleague can contribute perfection. This will cause them to submit to that colleague and humble themselves before them, [creating a state of unity among the people] so that a beginning or an end cannot be found [among them]. As a result of this *bittul* [self-nullification], the Jewish people will come together as one, enabling the oneness of G-d, [which stems] from the realm of holiness, to rest [among them].

בְּבַחֲנֵה אַחַת יֵשׁ יִתְרוֹ וּמַעַל לְהַרְגְּלִים,  
שְׁצָרִיד לְהֵלֶךְ בָּהֶם וְגַם הֵם מַעֲמִידֵי הַגּוֹף  
וְהָרֹאשׁ. וְגַם כְּשֶׁאֲרַע כְּבֹד בְּרֹאשׁ, מְקִיזִין דָּם  
בְּרַגְלִים וְנִרְפָּא וּמִקְבֵּל חַיּוּתוֹ מִמֶּנּוּ, וְנִמְצָא  
שֶׁאִין שְׁלֵמוֹת לְהָרֹאשׁ בְּלִתֵּי הַרְגְּלִים. כֵּךְ הִנֵּה  
כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל קוֹמָה אַחַת שְׁלֵמָה. וְנִמְצָא אֲפֹלוּ  
מִשְׁמַחֲשָׁב בְּדַעְתּוֹ שֶׁהוּא בְּחִינַת רֹאשׁ לְגִבִּי  
חֲבֵרוֹ, הָרִי אֵין לוֹ שְׁלֵמוֹת בְּלִי חֲבֵרוֹ, וְיִמְצָא  
חֲסָרוֹן בְּנַפְשׁוֹ מֵה שֶׁחֲבֵרוֹ מְשַׁלֵּמוֹ. וְעַל יְדֵי זֶה  
יְהִיָּה בְּטֹל וּשְׁפֹל רוּחַ לְגִבִּי חֲבֵרוֹ, מִבְּלִי יִמְצָא  
הָאָדָם רֹאשׁ וְסוּף.”

רבי שניאור זלמן מליאדי

Another wonderful example of this worldview is expressed by Hakham Yaakov Gedisha from the island of Djerba in Tunisia in his commentary on Masechet Meila.

If a Jew sees themselves as one piece of the whole (of the Jewish people), and possesses the quality of unity, and sees themselves as incomplete without their fellow Jew, this person is like a pomegranate filled with mitzvot. As it says, “filled with mitzvot like a

מעיל יעקב בתוך 'בכור יעקב', עמ' ב'  
כפּלח הרימון רקתך - אפילו ריקנין שבך  
מלאים מצוות כרימון' - ויש לדקדק אם כן  
למה הכתוב: 'כפּלח' - שהרי הם מלאים  
מצוות כרימון, משמע - רימון שלם ... וכוונת  
מאמרם: 'ריקנים שבך מלאים מצוות כרימון' -

pomegranate." Even if a person is empty because they have not performed any mitzvot so long as the person sees themselves as a part of the Jewish people as a whole, then it appears to me that they should be considered filled with the mitzvot of their fellow Jew.

דהיינו ש'ריקנים' - מיעוט רבים שניים, ומשום כך בהצטרפות שניהם יהיו כרימון שלם, שכל אחד הרי הוא 'כפלח'. אמנם לפי האמור יפה ומובן שאמר: 'כפלח' דהיינו: מי שחושב עצמו כאילו הוא פלג גופא - דהיינו שיש לו מידת האחדות, שחברו הוא פלח השני, והוא נחשב רק פלח לבדו - אז הווי הרימון. דהיינו: מלא כרימון במצוות, אפילו הוא ריק, וכל מי שלא עשה שום מצווה, אפילו כך - מלא במצוות שעשה חברו כנ"ל.

In summary, there is a well-established worldview, theology, and belief that sees *kinyan Torah* is intricately related to the value of *Ahavat Yisrael*. In the North African tradition, this belief was specifically extended to a proactive approach by rabbis to ensure that seemingly more pious members of the community would see their fate as being intertwined with non-observant members of their community (see appendix for more sources). The fact that this idea is so pervasive reflects the reality that divisiveness existed within these communities and that it was a priority for rabbis and other leaders to ensure a sense of unity and interdependence. As we move into the next section, adapting this worldview to an educational context implies that heterogeneity is necessary in Jewish learning environments, as different personalities, observance levels, abilities, skills, and beliefs help us acquire a more complete Torah.

## Focusing on schools and learning

As we zoom in on how this worldview applies to formal learning environments, one of the earliest statements that hints at a more inclusive and heterogenous learning environment can be found in Avot d'Rabbi Natan. It appears that during the period of the *Zugot* there existed two answers to the question of "who belonged" in the academy. According to Beit Shamai, the only learners who belonged were wise students and the children of wealthy parents. According to Beit Hillel, everyone was welcome in the academy. To support this belief, Beit Hillel argues that many criminals and violators of Torah precepts became great Torah scholars.

אבות דרבי נתן

"והעמידו תלמידים הרבה" (אבות א, א) שבית שמאי אומרים אל יִשְׁנָה אדם אלא למי שהוא חכם ועניו ובן אבות ועשיר. ובית הלל אומרים לכל אדם יִשְׁנָה, שהרבה פושעים היו בהם בישראל ונתקרבו לתלמוד תורה, ויצאו מהם צדיקים חסידים וְנִשְׁרִים.

Perhaps one of the more interesting examples supporting heterogeneous learning environments comes from 20<sup>th</sup>-century Morocco. In a responsum from the turn of the century, Hakham Shlomo Ibn Danan in Fez shares a question he received from a parent of a school-aged student.

One student came home to his father around lunch time, and the father asked his son, "My son, what did you learn today?" His son answered, "From the morning until now, we barely learned anything except for a little bit of Gemara, since there was a new student in class and we had to go slowly until he understood it; because of him, our learning was delayed." When the father heard this he quickly angered and refused to send his son back to the same teacher. Thus the parents and teachers sought my guidance to understand whether the parent owed the teacher a salary for his work, whether he should be fined or whether he was exempt from paying ... The parent also added, "Since this teacher got to this place and delayed and took away learning from the group for the sake of the individual, I do not believe that he will be swift and careful to give my son the education he deserves ... and we pay a great deal for our children's education."

אשר לשלמה, שו"ת לרבי שלמה אבן דנאן,  
סימן סג

וכאשר בא אחד מבני המדרגה ההיא אצל אביו בסעודת הצהריים, שאל האיש את בנו: "בני, במה למדתם היום?" השיבו כי: "מאז הבוקר ועד עתה לא למדנו כי אם מעט בגמרא [...] לרגל הילד החדש הבא אצלנו שהוכרחנו להתנהל לאטו עד אשר למד אותה [...] ומצדו העיכוב בא לנו." כשמוע שמעון אביו את דברי בנו, היטב חרה לו וגמר אומר שלא להושיב את בנו אצל מלמד זה. ובכן, הגישו עצומותיהם ראובן ושמעון, לדעת אם חייב שמעון לשלם חלקו בשכירות המלמד או שייתן קנס, או שמא הוא פטור מכול וכול... (והוסיף שמעון:) "כיוון שהגיע המלמד בשביל היחיד... אינו מאמינו עוד שיהא זריז ונזהר לתת לבני חלק ערכו. ובכגון זה לא הרשינו אותך... ואנו נותנים שכר הרבה. ועל כיוצא בזה אמרו: "חזקה היא שלא משליך אדם כספו בחינם."

As a head of school in the 21st century, I can say that this conversation could just as easily take place today in any part of the Jewish world. The father is justifiably upset that his son spent an entire day "not learning anything new." He is frustrated that due to there being a new child in the class, his son did not learn any new content. And what can we say about this educator? What values did he hold? He decided that for the sake of a new student he would not teach anything new until the new student understood what was happening. Was he trying to teach the rest of the class a lesson?

Hakham Ibn Danan's response is fascinating. In his extensive ruling he argues that the educator did nothing wrong. His multi-pronged response includes a rationale that the students who already knew the Gemara could also learn from hearing the content being taught again. He also argues that their hearts will expand as they encounter a teacher slowing down to bring a new student up to speed. But perhaps most fascinating is Ibn Danan's quotation of a midrash on how the Oral Law was taught to Moshe, Aharon, and his sons and the elders.

Eruvin 54b

The Sages taught the following *baraita*: What was the order of teaching the Oral Law? How was the Oral Law first taught? Moses learned directly from the mouth of the Almighty. Aaron entered and sat before him, and Moses taught him his lesson as he had learned it from God. Aaron moved aside and sat to the left of Moses. Aaron's sons entered, and Moses taught them their lesson while Aaron listened. Aaron's sons moved aside; Elazar sat to the right of Moses and Itamar sat to the left of Aaron. Rabbi Yehuda disagreed with the first *tanna* with regard to the seating arrangements and said: Actually, Aaron would return to sit to the right of Moses. The elders entered and Moses taught them their lesson. The elders moved aside, and the entire nation entered and Moses taught them their lesson. Therefore, Aaron had heard the lesson four times, his sons heard it three times, the elders heard it twice, and the entire nation heard it once.

**Moses** then **departed** to his tent, **and Aaron taught** the others **his lesson** as he had learned it from Moses. **Aaron** then **departed** and **his sons taught** the others **their lesson**. **His sons** then **departed** and **the elders taught** the rest of the people **their lesson**. **Hence everyone**, Aaron, his sons, the elders and all the people, heard the lesson taught by God **four times**.

עירובין נ"ד ע"ב

כיצד סדר משנה: משה למד מפי הגבורה. נכנס אהרן, ושנה לו משה פירקו, נסתלק אהרן וישב לשמאל משה. נכנסו בניו, ושנה להם משה פירקו. נסתלקו בניו, אלעזר ישב לימין משה, ואיתמר לשמאל אהרן. רבי יהודה אומר: לעולם אהרן לימין משה חזר. נכנסו זקנים ושנה להם משה פירקו. נסתלקו זקנים, נכנסו כל העם ושנה להם משה פירקו. נמצאו ביד אהרן ארבעה, ביד בניו שלשה, וביד הזקנים שנים, וביד כל העם אחד. נסתלק משה ושנה להם אהרן פירקו. נסתלק אהרן שנו להם בניו פירקו. נסתלקו בניו, שנו להם זקנים פירקו. נמצא ביד הכל ארבעה.

The concept of love or *Ahavat Yisrael* does not appear here, but this *baraita* does add an important layer to our worldview. According to our tradition, the first Jews to hear the Oral Torah learned it four times. Surely, Aharon could have become a disengaged learner by the time he heard the same lesson the third or fourth time. This *baraita*, however, is trying to convey something valuable about learning in

heterogeneous learning environments. We grow in our understanding of Torah as we encounter others who learn in different ways. We develop empathy for different learners. We grow to love Torah and all of Israel as we serve as witnesses to their learning of Torah.

## The Practice

A pedagogy of *Ahavat Yisrael* has a number of practices associated with it. For the purposes of this paper, I will articulate a few, and subsequently I will focus on one practice that I will be researching in my “field observations” segment of this fellowship.

- A pedagogy of Ahavat Yisrael means that all students are welcome in a Jewish studies classroom regardless of their socioeconomic status, learning needs, ethnic or religious background.
- A pedagogy of Ahavat Yisrael tries to expand students’ knowledge and experience of different Jewish customs and rituals from across the globe. Understood in this practice is that Jews need to expand their horizons of what is Jewish to appreciate all Jews. Additionally, the more expansive students’ knowledge is of different Jewish practices, the deeper their appreciation of Torah will be.<sup>3</sup>
- A pedagogy of Ahavat Yisrael shifts a conversation from discipline in the classroom to a conversation of empathy and understanding. Teachers are encouraged to model *rahamim* (compassion) toward their students. Teachers are trained to see the complete world and context of a student. Instead of seeing a student as bothersome in the classroom,<sup>4</sup> they are concerned with what needs are not being addressed.<sup>5</sup>
- A pedagogy of Ahavat Yisrael utilizes heterogeneous groupings of students (group work) to shift the goals of classwork from an individualistic, content-driven approach to a collaborative and reflective mode that has a primary goal of deepening loving relationships between different classmates.

### 1. Group Work

The final section of this paper will focus on the practice of group work within the *LeSHA* pedagogy to model what *Ahavat Yisrael* looks like in a specific classroom situation. I want to return briefly to the responsum from Hakham Ibn Danan. This source describes a parent frustrated by their student’s reporting that they did not learn due to the teacher “slowing down the lesson for the slower student.”

Although this source does not describe what we typically think of as “group work,” our tradition does describe the learning of Torah in groups. We have examples of classrooms in ToSHba; there are also examples of debates within the *beit midrash* and of course numerous texts describing *chevruta* or individual study.

In Jewish day schools today, there are four modes of learning: 1) *Chevruta* (two learners); 2) Individualized (student learning on their own, or independently learning material from a teacher in a whole class setting); 3) Group learning (three or more students learning together); and 4) Whole class interactive learning (the whole class purposefully learning from each other and not directly from the teacher). Although there is a fair amount of overlap between each of these categories, this practice mostly focuses on the third category in this list. However, the classroom context and the fourth category are inextricably linked to the practice of group work.

An abundance of scholarship supports the notion that tracking is not an effective long-term strategy in elementary schools. Further, it seems that more damage is caused, especially for learners tracked in the non-advanced classes. Extensive educational research has been conducted into group work in general. Johnson and Johnson (1997) articulated a three-pronged structure for group learning experiences: competitive, individualized, and cooperative. “A learning experience specifies the type of interdependence existing among students—the way in which students will relate to each other and the teacher.” In my experience as an educator, educational leader, and administrator, there is often not a great deal of thought put into the outcomes of group work other than the fact that it is an alternative to individualized work. Teachers often assign a group a singular task, meaning that the entire group needs to produce one final product reflecting their learning.

For more on group work see Appendix, Sources 1, 2, and 7.

### **a) Group work for the purpose of cultivating *Ahavat Israel***

Before moving forward, it is important to review a number of key assumptions that inform our discussion of group work:

- Based on the Aristotelian/Maimonidian notion that everything in the universe has a “higher form” it must align with (e.g., one might argue that the highest form of music is experiencing a live orchestra or in Islam that the purest sound is the recitation of the Quran without a loudspeaker), the highest form of active learning in Judaism was the learning that was experienced at Mount Sinai. From this starting point, the worldview of *Ahavat Yisrael* seeks to deconstruct one of the conditions that was necessary for this being the “highest form of learning,” namely, the unity experienced by B’nei Yisrael as a consequence of their love for one another.
- In the contemporary day school world, “UBD” or “Backward Design” dominates the structuring of units of study across elementary, middle, and high school curricula. The implication of this mode of curricular design is that all students are measured against a standard final project where they are able to demonstrate a skill or area of content knowledge. The unit is constructed in reverse with all formative assessments unlocking a path to the completion of that final skill/content assessment.

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- In the contemporary day school world, “UBD”<sup>7</sup> or “Backward Design” dominates the structuring of units of study across elementary, middle, and high school curricula. The implication of this mode of curricular design is that all students are measured against a standard final project where they are able to demonstrate a skill or area of content knowledge. The unit is constructed in reverse with all formative assessments unlocking a path to the completion of that final skill/content assessment.
- Perhaps the most important assumption is that the goal of the teacher is never to bring every student to the same level of comprehension. Differentiated instruction is the name of the game in progressive education today. The assumption built into differentiated instruction is not only the reality that every student has a different learning style but that they have different capacities and abilities. In other words, every student’s learning ceiling is different, and it’s our goal to get each student as high as possible on the ladder of learning.

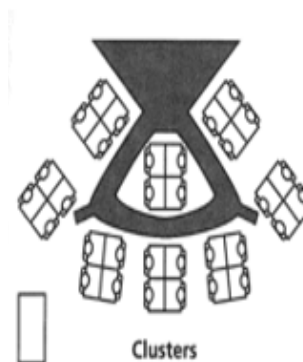
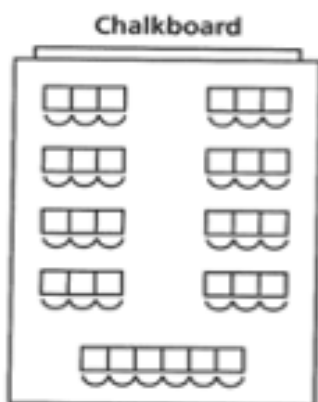
**b) What if we reimaged “group work” within the pedagogy of LeSHA?** *What if the goal of classwork was not to facilitate the highest possible level of learning for each student but rather to facilitate love between students in a Jewish community? What if our goal was to cross the line of comprehension as one group? Or, to stand under the mountain together?*

This pedagogy argues that educators need to be thoughtful about the arrangement of heterogeneous learning groups in order to cultivate loving relationships between Jewish learners. Teachers should act as architects of groups where every single student has a purpose and where the vision of the rabbis (cited in section 2) can come to fruition in helping students understand that their work is incomplete without their group members. Below is a multi-pronged guide to conducting group work that cultivates *Ahavat Yisrael*.

- **Discover students' strengths and gifts:** To purposefully cultivate *Ahavat Yisrael*, teachers need to understand every student's gifts and strengths. Therefore, an active experimental stage where students try on different tasks that are carefully observed by the teacher in the first weeks and months of school is necessary. Teachers need to understand which students help lead, disrupt, innovate, create, abstract, or question. Teachers need to know the skill sets and talents of each student. Are there exceptional writers, artists, builders, designers, singers, or athletes in the class? Teachers need to take inventory of strengths and traits before creating highly intentional group work.
- **Curate groups based on strengths:** Students need to be placed in diverse groups that create feelings of interdependence.
- **Pair diverse groupings with group outcomes that play to the strengths of each student:** Teachers should create projects where students need to rely on each other's strengths to succeed. For example, students might work in groupings where each student needs to create four models of Revelation at Sinai represented through four mediums (art, literature, model design, and interpretation) and each student in a group is charged with leading the other members in the dimension that they feel strongest in.
- **Groups should be long-term relationships:** Groupings of students should be long term in order for love to be developed between students. As such, teachers should be prepared that the relationships between group members may have ups and downs and might need guidance and support from the educators in the room.
- **Put a premium on reflection:** Teachers need to prioritize reflection in order to cultivate love among students. Teachers can model reflecting to students by showing that they value the contributions of each student. Students can successfully demonstrate love by reflecting on long-term group members and their contributions to their own learning. Reflection can create a culture where everyone is valued.
- **Utilize students as peer teachers:** When students are encouraged to teach other students in the classroom, they deepen their understanding of the content. Students learn to love by feeling responsible for their peers. Undoubtedly this approach needs the support of parents and the emotional resilience of students.

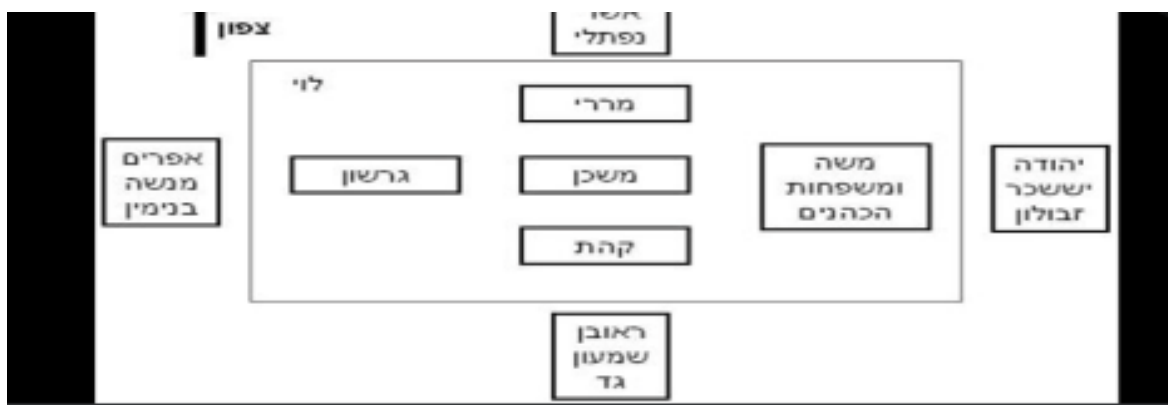
## Classroom Structure

In the spirit of this fellowship, I have attempted to reclaim what group work could look like if it was created in the authentic spirit of the Jewish tradition. As part of my field notes for this fellowship, I observed 23 instances of group work at the school that I lead. One of the first things I noticed was the arrangement of students.<sup>8</sup>



These two images are sourced from a popular teaching manual, “The Skillful Teacher.” Each of the images reflects a different worldview; however the commonality between both of these arrangements is the place of the teacher. In my observations, I realized that classes are set up so that the default arrangement is the teacher delivering content to the class. Whether students are in clusters or rows, teachers are able to break students out into groups where they turn their attention away from the front of the classroom toward their peers. However, what remains the same is that the students need to return to this arrangement at the beginning and end of class for a set induction or closing reflection.

This fellowship pushed me to consider: what would the native orientation to structuring a Jewish learning community be? I don’t know how the Israelites encamped against the mountain, but the best description of an encampment can be found in *parashat bamidbar*.



In reflecting on the arrangement of the tribes in the wilderness there is a marked difference between the classroom arrangements native to our classrooms today. The biblical text shows the tribes arranged equidistant from the center of learning and practice (the *mishkan*). The Levi’im act as intermediaries

between the tribes and the *mishkan*. Most teachers don't have four teachers to mediate between learners and the center of content, but nonetheless, the space that exists between the *mishkan* and the tribes is equal.

The structure of the classroom brings us to an important feature of LeSHA in how group work is implemented. For the purposes of grounding the difference in a real-life example, I want to compare the way a group might learn in a traditional classroom environment versus a LeSHA environment. For the traditional classroom environment, I have purposefully chosen a cooperative group work project, which is the most progressive and aligned with the values of LeSHA.

Non-LeSHA cooperative group work	LeSHA group work
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Teacher provides students with classroom assignments. The local city government is looking for a company to design a new campaign to reduce the use of plastic. Instructions are distributed or projected, but the teacher goes over the instructions verbally and leaves room for questions. Groups are formed by the teacher with thoughtfulness about different strengths and capacities among students. The teacher gets frustrated when a few students ask too many questions that the teacher feels could have been answered easily if the students paid attention or took the time to read the instructions.</li><li>2. Students start working by dividing up tasks based on their perceived strengths. One student wants to come up with ideas, another wants to design a website, another wants to write the script for an advertisement, and another wants to draw. They sit across from each other and work collaboratively, sharing ideas and</li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Teacher provides students with classroom assignments. The local city government is looking for a company to design a new campaign to reduce the use of plastic. Teacher distributes instructions but does not read them out loud. Groups are formed intentionally around differences in gender, socioeconomic background, and learning style. These groups will work together throughout the semester on a variety of projects. Students read instructions in their groups, and time is allotted to clarify questions, but the teacher does not intervene. The goal is for students to reach an understanding among themselves and only go to the teacher for clarifications once they have exhausted one another as a resource. Although some students get impatient with this process, others develop pride in their ability to help their peers.</li><li>2. Students begin the project by reflecting on their group formation</li></ol>

<p>exchanging tips with one another. The teacher walks around the classroom answering questions and encouraging students to stay on track.</p>	<p>and themselves. They share what they are nervous about and the aspects of the project they feel excited about. Students share previous group work experiences that felt empowering or challenging for them. They talk about what worked in the past. If this is the second or third group work project in the year, they reflect on their last time working with these same students—what worked well and what was challenging. They ritualize the moment with an intention that could involve drawing on a rock and putting it in a cup or turning over a leaf and putting it in a box. Some sort of non-verbal ritual has been completed before students start working. The result is that students are not only reflecting on the task at hand, but on the relationships that exist between themselves as a group.</p>
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Reflection is able to happen in the *LeSHA* model because students' relationships are recognized as the most important outcome of the project. If students are unable to work together and experience respect, love, and unity, the project will not be a success.

## APPENDIX

### Source 1

#### **“The Skillful Teacher”: Area 9 Grouping, p. 294**

Now let’s look at the data from elementary studies. Tracking in elementary schools doesn’t seem to affect the achievement of either the high or low performing students much. Slavin (1993) argues that the reason for this low effect in elementary tracking probably does not reduce real heterogeneity very much. Thus the elementary tracks are still quite heterogeneous. Many authors, such as Jeanne Oakes (1985, 1995), speculate though, that damage to self-esteem and motivation that befalls elementary children labeled as low track is deep and permanent and shows up later in secondary school performance. Therefore, tracking children in elementary schools seems all loss and no gain. The one exception is that certain studies show that gifted students may be advantaged by homogeneous grouping in the elementary school. Many of their needs, however, can be met by differentiated instruction in the regular classroom by teachers who have extensive repertoires.

### Source 2

#### ***Learning Together and Alone, Johnson and Johnson, 2nd edition, p. 7***

When students are working together to find what factors make a difference in how long a candle burns in a quart jar, they are in a cooperative goal structure. A cooperative goal structure exists when students perceive that they can obtain their goal if and only if the other students with whom they are linked can obtain their goal. Since the goal of all the students is to make a list of factors that influence the time the candle burns, the goal of all the students has been reached when the students generate a list. A cooperative goal structure requires the coordination of behavior necessary to achieve their mutual goal. If one student achieves the goal all students with whom the student is linked achieve the goal. When students are working to see who can build the best list of factors influencing the time a candle will burn in a quart jar, they are in a competitive goal structure. A competitive goal structure exists when students perceive that they can obtain their goal if and only if the other students with whom they are linked fail to obtain their goal. If one student turns in a better list than anyone else, all other students have failed to achieve their goal. Competitive interaction is the striving to achieve one’s goal in a way that blocks all others from achieving the goal. Finally, if all students are working independently to master an operation in mathematics, they are in an individualistic goal structure. An individualistic

goal structure exists when the achievement of the goal by one student is unrelated to the achievement of the goal by the other students; whether or not a student achieves her goal has no bearing upon whether or not the other students achieve their goals. If one student masters the mathematics principle, it has no bearing upon whether other students successfully master the mathematics principle. Usually there is no student interaction in an individualist situation since each student seeks the best for themselves regardless of whether or not other students achieve their goals.

### Source 3

רבי נחמן מברסלב, "שיחות הר"ן" אות כג

"בְּעוֹלָם הַבָּא מִנְחִין בְּנֵי אָדָם בַּחוּץ וְהֵם צוֹעְקִים בְּקוֹל מֶר: "תֵּנוּ לָנוּ מֶה לֶאֱכֹל," וּבְאִין אֶצְלָם וְאוֹמְרִים לָהֶם: "הֲרִי לָכֶם אֲכִילָה וְשִׁתָּה, אֲכָלוּ וּשְׁתוּ," וְהֵם מְשִׁיבִים: "לֹא לֹא. אִין אָנוּ צְרִיכִים אֲכִילָה זֹאת. רַק אָנוּ צְרִיכִים אֲכִילָה וְשִׁתָּה שֶׁל תְּזוּרָה וְעִבּוּדָה." וְכֵן מִנְחִין בְּמֶה בְּנֵי אָדָם עֹרְמִים בַּחוּץ וְהֵם צוֹעְקִים גַּם כֵּן מֵאֵד: "תֵּנוּ לָנוּ בְּמֶה לְהִתְבַּסּוֹת," וּבְאִין אֶצְלָם וְאוֹמְרִים: "הֲרִי לָכֶם מִלְּבוּשִׁים," וְהֵם מְשִׁיבִים: "לֹא, אִין אֵלּוּ מִלְּבוּשִׁים נִצְרָכִים לָנוּ כָּלֵל. רַק אָנוּ צְרִיכִים מִצְוֹת וּמַעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים לְהִתְלַבֵּשׁ בָּהֶם." עֲנָה וְאָמַר: "אֲשֶׁרִי מִי שְׂזוּכָה לֶאֱכֹל בְּמֶה פְּרָקִים מְשִׁנִּיּוֹת, וְלִשְׁתּוֹת אַחֵר כִּךְ אֵיזָה קְפִיטְלִיךְ [פְּרָקִין] תִּהְיֶה לְהִתְלַבֵּשׁ בְּאֵיזָה מִצְוֹת!"

### Source 4

דברים רבה פרשת עקב

מעשה בשני תינוקות שהיו מן שכונה אחת. והיה האחד בן עני והשני בן עשיר. והיו הולכים לבית הספר בכל יום. בן העשיר היה הולך לבית הכנסת ועמו חתיכות בשר וביצים, מה שהוא מתאוה, כל דבר ממה שאביו מותיר. בן העני היה הולך לבית הכנסת ועמו שני חרובים, והייתה נפשו מתעגמת עליו. והיה אביו העני רואה את בנו פניו משונות. הלך אביו ולקח לו ליטרא אחת של בשר ובישלה. כיוון שבא הנער מבית הספר אמר לו אביו: "בוא ואכול מה שהיית מתאוה." עד שהוא הולך לתת לפניו, נכנס הכלב והושיט ראשו לתוך הקדרה (וביקש להוציא את ראשו ולא יכול היה להוציאה. ויצא הכלב וברח וראשו לתוך הקדרה). אמר לבנו: "עמד ונראה לאן הלך הכלב, הואיל ולא נעשה תאוותך, נציל את הקדרה." עמד הוא ובנו ורצו אחר הכלב, וכיוון שיצאו מתוך הבית נפל הבית. אמר לבנו: "בני, נודה ונשבח לקדוש ברוך הוא שלא יצאנו להציל את הקדרה אלא למלט נפשותינו"

## עין לבנון פרוש משנה אבות

## Source 5

[לא] השנית, "אוהב את הבריות", ופירשנוהו היטב בברייתא של ר' מאיר [כל העוסק בתורה לשמה], וגלינו פירוש מצות "ואהבת לרעך כמוך" שאמר ר' עקיבא (ספרא, פ' קדושים) "זה כלל גדול בתורה, וכן עזאי אמר זה ספר תולדות אדם כלל גדול ממנו", והודענו שגם אהבת הבריות תלויה בהכרה ובהשויה. וההכרה היא שיכיר שנבראו כולם בצלם אלהים, ושהוא שוה לכולם בענין זה. וצריך לזה תבונה גדולה להבין בסוד נפש האדם, ולהוסיף תבונה על תבונה עד שבעבור כן יאהב את כל הבריות, שמזה מסתעפים קיום כל המצות שבין אדם לחבירו. וכדתנן (אבות, א) "הוי מתלמידיו של אהרן, אוהב שלום ורודף שלום אוהב את הבריות ומקרבת לתורה" ובכלל זה כל מיני גמילות חסדים, שיגמול חסד עם [כל] נפש האדם שהיא בצלם אלהים, ולאו כולי עלמא זוכים לזה, זולתי האיש שנקבצים בו כל המדות ששנה בראשונה, עד שזכה להגיע למדת האהבה שאוהב את המקום ב"ה. והוא זוכה ג"כ למדת אהבת הבריות, ומשום הכי תני לה באחרונה. ואין צורך להאריך בענין אוהב את הבריות, כי פירשנוהו בפרקין.

## Source 6 Complete Responsum of Shlomo Ibn Danan

שאלה חברה שהסכים ונתקשרו בניהם בקנין גמור ושלם לזו ציא את בניהם תשוב ד מאת המלמד שהם אצל המלמד  
אצל מלמד אחר שיביאו מעיר אחרת. והרשו את ראובן אחד מבני החברה שיביא מלמד מעיר אחרת. ונתחייבו לו בקנ  
שכל החבור בו יתן לו קנס כ"כ. כמשות"ב פי' תו"מ וכן היה שהביא ראובן מלמד מעיר אחרת. והושיבו בניהם אצל  
כתנאם. והנה הילדים האלה אינם במדרגה אחת שיש מהם שהורגלו בתורה שבכתב אצל המלמד הראשון עד גדר שבס  
הענינים אינם צריכים שום עיכוב, ובהעברה בעלמא בלשון ערבי סגי ליהו. ובתורה שבע"פ גם כן לומדים בהבנה ובספר  
אם מעט. ויש מדרגה אחרת פחותה מזו כ"כ דבתורה שבע"פ לא ניסו כלל לא בגירסא ולא בפ' המילות. וגם בתור  
שבכתב צריכים טורח בלשון עברי ובפסוק הטעמים וכ"ש בלשון ערבי שהתחילו מקרוב ויש עוד מדרגות אחרות למט  
זו מזו. ובקיץ שעבר סמוך לביאת המלמד הבא הושיב את בן ראובן המורשה שהוא מבני המדרגה הב' אצל בני המדרג  
הראשונה ללמוד בתנ"ך משלי איוב וכו'. והם לא יעברו עד שיהא הפסוק שגור בפיו בענין שלא יהא רבו צריך לחזו  
עמו עוד הפעם. באופן שבני המדרגה הא' הם מוכרחים שיתעכבו ויתבטלו מלימודם בעבור זה הבא אצלם מחדש. שו  
בתג הסוכות שנשלם ששה חדשים זמן הקצבה שקצבו עם המלמד. חזרו וחדשו קצבה אחרת ואין פוצה פה. ואחר הד  
שבאו הילדים ללמוד אצל רבם. הושיב בן ראובן אצל בני המדרגה הראשונה גם בלימוד תורה שבע"פ. וכאשר בא ז  
מבני המדרגה ההיא אצל אביו בסעודת הצהריים. שאל האיש את בנו בני כמה למדתם היום. השיבו מאז הבקר ועד עת  
לא למדנו כ"א מעט גמרא חק לישראל שאנו רגילים בה מקודם, וגם אותה לא השלמנו בפרטותי' כל' לרגל הילד הב  
אצלנו מחדש שהוכרחנו להתנהל לאטו עד אשר למד אותה בגירסה וחזר ושנאו בפ' ומצדו בא העיכוב לנו. כשמוע שמע  
אביו את דברי בנו היטב חרה לו וגמר אומר שלא להושיב את בנו אצל מלמד זה ובכן הגישו עצמותיהם ראובן ושמעון  
לדעת אם חייב שמעון לשלם חלקו בשכירות המלמד או יתן קנס, או דילמא פטור מכל וכל. והו סדר טענותיהם ראוב  
טוען שכבר היה בזה מימות הקיץ, וראו כולם ושתקו ולא מיתו, זה הוכחה שסברו וקבלו. ואם יאמר שמעון שהוא ל  
ראה ולא ידע מזה יקבל עליו בתרם חמור שכן הוא שלא ידע מזה כלל. השיבו שמעון קושטא קאי שלא ידעתי. ואת  
שידעתי ושתקתי אינו דומה ההפסד והנזק המגיע מהעכבה שהיו מתעכבים עבורו בתורה שבכתב להנזק המגיע ש  
התערבו עמהם בתורה שבע"פ שצריך הרבה שובה ונחת בפרט להילדים רכים אשר בגיל בני דכולי האי ואולי יקלו  
מעט הבנה וסברה במיצוי תוכן הענין שיהיה, לא כן עתה כאשר בנך עמהם שעדיין צריך לימוד בגירסא ופירוש המלו  
וכו' והם צריכים להקשיב ולהאזין אליו שפה ולשון אחר והנהגה אחרת בקל ישתבשו ופסידא דלא הדר הוא. עוד ט  
ראובן אם אינו בדיון שיהיה בני עמהם, יושיב אותו המלמד בחבורה בפ"ע ויתן לכל א' וא' ולכל חבורה וחבורה חלק  
במנין השעות לפי ערך מתן דמי שכירותו. וגם ע"ז השיב שמעון כיון שהגיע המלמד למדרגה זו דשביקה להימנותי  
יעיב והפסיד את הרבים בשביל היחיד לאהבתו אותו ולא חשש לעצמו בינו לבין קונו לעשות מלאכת ה' באמת ובתמו  
לא ניכר שווע, כדבעי למיעבד לכל המלמדים ללכת בדרכי יושר איני מאמינו עד שיהא זריז ונזהר לתת לבני חלק ערכו  
ובכנון זה לא הרשינו אותם ולא נתקשרנו עמך להביא לנו מלמד ללמוד עם בנך ואנו נותנים שכר הרבה. ועל כיוצא בזה  
אמרו חזקה לא שדי אינש זוי בכדי. ע"ז יורו המורים הדין עם מי. ויבא שכמ"ה. נאם הח"פ תאזא יע"א שני ימים למרחש  
תרנ"ז לפ"ק. ע"ה אברהם בן סוסאן ס"ט.

תשובה הא ודאי דמקרי דרדקי דפשע בהו בינוקי דבלא התראה מסלקינן ליה שכ"כ מרן ז"ל בחו"מ סי' ש"ו ס"ח וז"ל הנוטע אילנות לבני המדינה שהפסיד [ויש אומרים דה"ה ליחיד] וכן טבח של בני העיר שנבל הבהמות והמקוץ דם שחבל הסופר שטעה בשטרות ומלמד תינוקות שפשע בתינוקות ולא למד [אפי' רק יום או יומים] או למד בטעות וכל כיוצא באלו והאומנים שאי אפשר שיחזרו ההפסד שהפסידו מסלקין אותם בלא התראה שהם כמותרים ועומדים עד שישתדלו במלאכתם הואיל והעמידו אותם הצבור עליהם ע"כ. והמה דברי הרמב"ם ז"ל בפ' עשירי מהל' שכירות. וכתב הה"מ וז"ל ומלמד תינוקות כו' רש"י ז"ל פי' דמשום דשבשתא דעל על והוא לה פסידא דלא הדרא. ובהלכות, דפשע בינוקי פי' שמתבטל מלמדו. ושני הפירושים כדברי רבינו, ופירשו לדעת רש"י ז"ל כגון שהמלמד עצמו טועה בדבר ואינו יודע בכון ובהו הוא דמסלקינן ליה. אבל אם היה יודע הוא הדבר ואינו משגיח על א' מהתינוקות אם אומר הדבר בטעות לא מסלקינן ליה ע"כ. ונראה דלזה כיון ידידינו הרב השואל הי"ו במ"ש בדברי טענת שמעון בקל ישתבשו ופסידא דלא הדרא הוא. דכוונתו לרמוז להאי דינא.

ואולם לדידי לא שמייע לי. משום דמצינו פלוגתא דרבוותא בהו לגבי יחיד. וגם מרן ומו"ם ז"ל ג"כ פליגי בהו. ומבואר טעמיהו בטור וז"ל להרמב"ם נתן טעם בדבר הואיל והעמידו אותם צבור עליהם וכ' ג"כ שתל של כל בני המדינה, ונראה שאין חילוק בין לשל יחיד לשל רבים מההוא עובדא דרונניא שתלה דרבינא הוא וסלקיה בלא התראה ע"כ ובב"י כ' וז"ל ומ"ש רבינו ונראה שאין חילוק בין יחיד לשל רבים כההיא עובדא דרונניא שתלה דרבינא הוא, בהשגות ג"כ כתיב וכן

## Source 7

### "Supporting Cooperative Dialogue in Heterogeneous Classrooms," Van. Dijk, 2011

The results of this study could imply that teachers who wish to implement heterogeneous cooperative assignments in their elementary classroom should (a) offer support that addresses children's individual responsibilities for sharing knowledge and (b) make children aware of their individual roles in the group's process and group members' mutual interdependence on one another. Within this context, the jigsaw method could serve as an initial frame. However, the effects of the jigsaw method could be strengthened when it is properly supported. More specifically, this means that the cooperative assignment could profit from a script-like structure that distinguishes different steps that stress different activities such as knowledge sharing, discussion of the shared knowledge, and application of this knowledge. At the same time, these activities should make sure that group members are aware of their specific and indispensable role in the cooperative process. The notion that fruitful heterogeneous cooperation is not merely attained by putting together people with relevant knowledge (van den Bossche et al., 2006) applies not only to the elementary school context but also to team learning. Knowledge creation in teams and organizations also benefits from information sharing between actors in a group; herewith, the division of information over actors is especially considered relevant (e.g., Carlile, 2004; Lin, 2010; Mitchell & Nicholas, 2006). Differences in knowledge require more effort from group members to successfully complete a group process (Carlile, 2004). According to the hidden profile paradigm, information that is uniquely divided over group members is not always shared, as group members tend to focus on discussing common information instead of of the uniquely divided information (Lu et al., 2012). Furthermore, sharing personal knowledge

such as insights and ideas sometimes leads to resistance (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005). Similar to cooperation in the school context, social interdependence is considered a relevant phenomenon that influences sharing of knowledge in teams (Courtright, Thurgood, Stewart, & Pierotti, 2015). However, social interdependence is known to vary across teams but can be fostered to lead to higher quality team functioning and knowledge generation (Lu et al., 2012). The outcomes of the current study might provide insight in how to structure cooperation in teams and organizations; the jigsaw method could serve as an initial outline for structuring the cooperative process, and, if necessary, support could be offered that further scripts the cooperative process by focusing on social interdependence.

## Source 8

## חכם אביעד שר שלום באזילה

במה אדע כי אירשנה' - שאפילו יחטאו ישראל, לא יפסידו ארץ ישראל להיותה ירושה ... עוד אמרתי שאפילו בשאר הטובות שנתן הקדוש ברוך הוא לישראל, על מנת שישמרו המצוות, עם כל זה נמצא חילוק גדול בין פרשת 'והיה אם שמוע', והיא הגדולה והמאומתת - שכן הושמה בתפילין ובמזוזה, ובין פרשת הברכות והקללות, שלא נאמרו אלא לגזום סתם, וכמו שאמרו המפרשים עיין בספר 'בינה לעיתים' לרב רבי עזרא פיג'ו, והוא שבפרשת בחוקות כתוב: 'אם בחקותי תלכו ואם לא תשמעו לי' וכן בפרשת כי תבוא, אבל בפרשת 'והיה אם שמוע' לא כתב כן, לפי שהתחיל 'והיה אם שמוע' תשמעו אל מצוותי ונתתי מטר ארצכם בעתו - אבל לא סיים 'ואם לא תשמעו וחרה אף ה' בכם', אלא כתב 'השמרו לכם פן יפתה לבבכם' וגומר 'ועצר את השמים ולא יהיה מטר' - הרי שתנאי זה לא נעשה כהלכתו, בהן קודם ללאו, וקיים לנו שהתנאי בטל והמעשה קיים, ולכן אפילו לא ישמעו ישראל למצוות ה' בחסדו הגדול - נותן להם המטר בעתו ואוספים דגן תירוש ויצהר.

## Source 9

## חכם אברהם בושערה

שעל ידי השלום נחשבים כגוף אחד, וכל המצוות שמקיימים כל ישראל, נחשב להם כאילו כל אחד מהם, כאילו קיים כל התרי"ג, שהרי חשובים כאחד. בזה יובן דברי התנא: 'רבי חנניא בן עקשיא אומר: רצה הקדוש ברוך הוא לזכות את ישראל לפיכך הרבה להם תורה ומצוות' - והטעם הוא שעל ידי ריבוי המצוות, אין לך אדם מישראל שלא יעשה מצוות, שאם לא עשה מצווה זו, יעשה מצווה אחרת שתזדמן לידו, וכן על זה הדרך. ומה שחיסר לזה שלא עשה הוא, עשהו חברו. והרי על ידי השלום מצווה זו שעשה חברו כאילו הוא גם כן עשה. וכן

תלמוד תורה: גם אם לא למד הוא וחברו למד, בהיות לו מידת השלום, הרי הוא גם כן, כאילו הוא למד, באופן שעל ידי השלום הוא משלים כל התרי"ג מצוות, וכאילו עשה וקיים הוא בעצמו כל התרי"ג מצוות בשלימות, והרי משלים חוקו ושלימותו על ידי השלום. ואחר שהשיג התכלית, שהוא השלימות, שוב אינו חוזר לבוא להתגלגל פעם אחרת, אחר שהשלים חוקו. כלל העולה שעל ידי מידת השלום, הולך ואור, לאור באור החיים הנצחיים, ולא יוסיף עוד לשוב בדרך הזה עוד, והיינו זה שפירשנו לעיל בתנא דבי אליהו, שבא לומר 'כל השונה הלכות בכל יום מובטח לו שהוא בן העולם הבא' - שפירושו שלא יחזור עוד לבוא בגלגול פעם אחרת.

#### Source 10

אברהם אבוחצירה

ועשית מנורת זהב טהור מקשה תעשה המנורה' - ולדעתי אפשר להוסיף נופך משלי לדרכו של המנורה, שהיא רומזת לחוכמה, כמו שאמרו חכמינו זיכרונם לברכה: 'שולחן בצפון ומנורה בדרום, הרוצה להחכים ידרים', וכמו שהמנורה שהיא כולה מקשה אחת - כך ישראל בשביל לקיים את התורה צריכים להיות באחדות אחת.

#### Source 11

חכם ציון כהן יונתן

הלל אומר אל תפרוש מן הצבור ואל תאמין בעצמך עד יום מותך'. - לקשר שני דברים אלו, אפשר במה שידוע שזכות הצדיק מגן על הדור. היינו דווקא אם ישראל כולם באחדות ונחשבים גוף אחד, ואז הזכות של זה מועיל לזה. אבל אם הם בפירוד הלבבות ואין ביניהם אחדות, אז כל אחד נחשב לעצמו ואין זכותו של זה יועיל לזה... וזהו הלל אמר 'אל תפרוש מן הצבור', דהיינו שלא תהיה במחלוקת עם הצבור ותהיה פרוש מהם. יען כי 'אל תאמין בעצמך עד יום מותך' - לומר שלא יהיה לך שום עוון להיענש עליו. שגם אם בזה הזמן לא יש לך עוון, אפשר שבזמן אחר יהיה לך עוון, ואם אתה באחדות עם הצבור יועיל לך זכות הצדיק.

#### Source 12

הרב קוק

אַהֲבַת יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהַעֲבֹדָה שֶׁל הַסְּנִיגוּרִיא עַל הַכָּלָל וְעַל הַפְּרָטִים אֵינָהּ רַק עֲבֹדָה הַרְגִּישִׁית לַבְּדָה; כִּי אִם מְקַצֵּעַ גָּדוֹל בַּתּוֹרָה וְחֻכְמָה עֲמָקָה וְרוּחָבָה, וּבֵת הָעֲנָפִים.

## Source 13

חכם משה הזקן מזוז

אמרו חכמינו זיכרונם לברכה: שעל ידי האחדות יזכו ישראל לקיים כל המצוות. כיוון שהכול כאיש אחד - מה שמקיים זה חשוב כאילו קיים זה, ויתרבה זכות בתורה וזכות המצוות.

גם על ידי האחדות ישמח בריווח חברו ויצטער בצער ויהווה לנו - כאילו מקיים כל התורה כי 'ואהבת לרעך כמוך זה כלל גדול בתורה' כמו שאמרו חכמינו זיכרונם לברכה, ויקיים מצוות 'וחי אחיך עמך' והחזקת בו - גם על ידי זה לא יהיה שנאת חנם שהיא גרמה כל הגלות, ובמקום איבה יהיה אהבה שעל ידי זה שורה השכינה. גם על ידי זה יהיה רודף במידת האמת כי כמו שהוא רוצה שאין האחרים מעקמים עליו, כך הוא לא יעקם על אחרים, וכמו שרוצה בעצמו שאם יש לו טובה וזכות שאחרים יעשו לו אותו זכות או טובה, כמו כן להיפך.

וגם על ידי האחדות ינצל שלא יהיה מאותם הנותנים חתיתם על הציבור, שלא שם שמיים, אלא בשביל הנאתם וממונם שעל ידי זה יחשוב שכל ישראל בני מלכים הם - ויעריך אחרים כמו ערך עצמו.

## Source 14

**"Facing Our Faces Thoughts for Parashat Terumah," Rabbi Marc Angel, Feb. 21, 2015**

In his book, "Creativity, The Magic Synthesis" (Basic Books, 1976), the late psychiatrist Dr. Silvano Arieti discussed the process of creating a work of art. The artist perceives something directly and then attempts to interpret it through imagery. Various processes are at work. "Preceding thoughts and feelings about an object affect the way he perceives it directly. In other words, past experiences of the object—everything he knows and feels about it— influence the way he sees that object" (p. 194).

This is true not only of artists, but of everyone. How we perceive reality is shaped by our memories, sensitivities, experiences and our general attitudes. Different people can see the identical thing...but have entirely different reactions. An optimist and a pessimist experience the half- filled glass of water based on their own internal worldviews.

This week's Torah portion describes the components for building the Mishkan, the sanctuary that accompanied the Israelites during their wanderings in the wilderness. Among the features was a table upon which the "lehem hapanim"—showbreads--were to be placed. Vayikra 24:5-9 notes that there were to be 12 loaves arranged in two rows, and that these loaves were to be replaced each week on the Sabbath.

The term "lehem hapanim" is not easy to translate. While the usual translation is "showbreads," it also has been translated as bread of the Presence, or more literally as bread of the faces.

The Hassidic Rebbe Avraham Mordechai of Gur offered a unique insight into the “lehem hapanim.” Each person who looked at the bread could see an image of his or her own face! A pious, kind and faithful person would see the bread as being fresh and warm. A cynical, mean and skeptical person would see the bread as being stale and cold. The “lehem hapanim” reflected the face—and the inner being—of the observer.

The bread was the same bread: but the experience of the bread varied according to the personality of the person who observed it. The lesson: one must strive to develop a positive worldview so as to be able to experience life in a positive way.

This idea is also reflected in a teaching of the Kotsker Rebbe on Shemoth 15:23: “And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they [i.e. the waters] were bitter.” The plain meaning of the text is that the Israelites couldn’t drink the water because it was too bitter. The Kotsker Rebbe, though, interpreted the verse as follows: “And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they—the Israelites—were bitter.” Because they were in such a foul and bitter mood, everything seemed wrong, even the water tasted bitter. Reality was experienced through the prism of a negative worldview.

Judeo-Spanish-speaking Jews would refer to some people as “mal de contentar,” malcontents who never seemed satisfied with life. Others were “cara de Tisha b’Av,” people with sour, sad outlooks, whose faces always seemed to be in a Tisha b’Av mood. But, fortunately, there were also those with “cara de risas,” smiling, happy faces who added cheer wherever they were. And there were “bonachos,” and “bonachas” whose goodness shone from their faces and whose company was always welcome.

We each have the power to define who we are and how we face life. We each shape our external experiences by our internal attitudes.

### Source 15

**“Cooperative Learning in a Competitive Environment: Classroom Applications. Simon Attle, Ashland University & Bob Baker, George Mason University. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 2007, Volume 19, Number 1, 77–83 <http://www.isetl.org/ijtlhe/> ISSN 1812-9129**

Student teams can employ cooperative learning techniques such as group brainstorming, which in one study generated double the number of ideas when compared to individual brainstorming (Osborn, 1957)

Certainly, successful cooperative learning experiences in the classroom require as much care in their development and implementation as do traditional individualistic and competitive experiences. Cooperative and collaborative learning experiences require that instructors attend to the formation of the group, the composition of the group, the dynamics of the group, the assessment of student work, and the design of group tasks (Ventimiglia, 1994). Individuals diverse in backgrounds, goals, skill sets, and interests will be required to collaborate with each other in activities directed toward group outcomes. For example, in planning, implementing, and controlling a strategic marketing plan, Shank (2002) noted that effective communication and “interacting well with others within the sports organization” (p. xx) is essential. Principles for fostering success in a cooperative professional studies classroom include distributing student leadership, grouping heterogeneously, encouraging positive independence, facilitating social skills acquisition, and allowing for group autonomy (Parrenas & Parrenas, 1993).

Vedder (1985) also sees effective cooperative learning as a result of an explicit process. According to the theory of cooperative learning he developed from a more general view of teaching and learning, the children’s role vis-à-vis each other should be that of teacher and pupil. For cooperative learning to be effective, Vedder reasoned that pupils must control and evaluate their partner’s work. Also, help that is given should correspond to a model of a correct problem solving process. After finding that cooperative groups did no better than the control condition on a set of geometry lessons, he performed an in-depth analysis of videotapes to see if students were actually regulating each other’s problem solving process. The pupils in the cooperative condition were taught how to regulate one another’s solving of geometry problems. The analysis revealed that the students were fixated on finding the right answers which interfered with their attempting to regulate each other’s process of problem-solving. They spent little time thinking and talking about problem-solving strategies. They hardly used the resource card that contained useful information on problem-solving strategies.

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<sup>1</sup> In “How Children and Teachers Demonstrate Love, Kindness and Forgiveness? Findings from an Early Childhood Strength-Spotting Intervention,” Haslip, Allen-Handy, and Donaldson studied the use of the word “love” in 16 classrooms. In reviewing the transcripts and interviews of the classrooms studied they found that the term “love” was often used in situations where a teacher was expressing empathy with a student or when a student was expressing empathy toward a teacher. In almost all situations, love was expressed spontaneously as opposed to kindness and forgiveness which were often the result of careful curricular planning and scheduling. These findings reinforce the belief that is expressed in the quote from the Israeli Ministry of Education’s curriculum (below). Included is a quote from the section studying the use of love in early childhood classrooms:

*Our analysis identified a variety of reasons for educators demonstrating loving behavior. The most common reason was to provide affection and comfort to a child in distress (empathy). Three examples follow, from Danica, Teresa and April: (1) “A child was away for 2 weeks and coming back to school was hard for him. He was hugged a lot throughout the day.” (2) “Another child needed a hug when his feelings were hurt.” (3) “When my student with severe separation anxiety from her parents was so upset that I held her hand and let her sit close to me during morning meeting.”*

<sup>2</sup> Translated from the Hebrew by Adam Eilath. Accessed at <https://cms.education.gov.il/NR/rdonlyres/AB2E4C30-7589-484B-B93C-D9A6286FA912/131648/AhavatIsrael.PDF>.

<sup>3</sup> This idea is attributed to Eli Bareket, the CEO of Kol Yisrael Haverim in Israel. In an interview with Eli Bareket as part of my research for this fellowship, he called this practice “Elijah’s chair.” In his own words: “Educators need to ask themselves, ‘Which seat can I add to the table? What can I do to expand a Jewish student’s knowledge of different Jewish traditions in the world?’”

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps one exception to this is Mishnah Haggigah 2, which articulates a minimum number of learners required for a certain subject (forbidden relations, Ma’aseh Bereshit). This mishnah leads us to the gemara of the four who entered Pardes; although that text does not feel authentic to the enterprise of group work.

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix, source 4.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the ideal form of learning, see Maimonides’ eighth principle in *Sefer Hamadah, Yesodei HaTorah*, where he describes Moses’ intellectual acquisition of Torah as the highest form of learning.

<sup>7</sup> UBD = Understanding By Design, and is the dominant pedagogic structure that encourages teachers to begin the construction of a unit by first planning the final assessment of the unit. Most teacher-training programs in the day school world encourage the use of UBD.

<sup>8</sup> Observations for this paper were done during COVID-19, so teachers were limited in how they were able to construct space. .

# PARENTS AS LEARNERS, TEACHERS, AND PARTNERS IN THEIR CHILDREN'S JEWISH EDUCATION

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Simon Klarfeld

*"Rabbi Ishmael his son said: he who learns in order to teach, it is granted to him to study and to teach; but he who learns in order to practice, it is granted to him to learn and to teach and to practice."*

—Avot 4:5

## The Pedagogy

As with almost every sphere of human life, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a major disrupter of our society's education systems.

As remote and home schooling became the norm for millions of children and teachers, and as the pandemic has forced us to be socially distant, quarantining, and remaining hyper-vigilant of hygiene and our general health—what has become clear to me—both as a parent and educator—is that the physical school, along with the teachers who facilitate its classrooms, while essential, should not be seen as the only environment in which learning takes place.

It may have taken a pandemic to remind us that the home provides a critically important place for education that, at minimum, can and, I believe, should supplement the formal education institutions in our communities, and, in fact, be seen as a primary environment for non-formal learning.

## The Worldview

*When the child sees the parent looking for something, it is as natural for it also to look for the object and to give it over when it finds it, as it was, under other circumstances, to receive it. Multiply such an instance by the thousand details of daily intercourse, and one has a picture of the most permanent and enduring method of giving direction to the activities of the young.*

—John Dewey, *Democracy in Education*, 1916

When a child hears reinforcing messages from school and home, there is far more likelihood of that child learning and incorporating that learning into their lives. Or, to put it in more negative terms—which unfortunately is often the case—if there is inconsistency, incongruity, or even contrary messaging through words or deeds, it is hard for the child to be anything but confused and questioning which authority should be listened to.

Furthermore, the “whole child” approach to education—that acknowledges and addresses the fact that a student’s learning is significantly influenced by their social-emotional state—is built around the following core influencers of a child’s readiness for learning: a child needs to be healthy, safe, supported, engaged, and challenged. The best of our schools and educational institutions do just that—they address those needs for all students, creating an environment ripe for learning, relationships, and community to grow. But these five components of a child’s openness or readiness to learn must be provided at the family level, at home, where their emotional anchor is most tied. This is especially crucial today with anxiety now being at epidemic proportions among children. Engaging parents in the education of their children, therefore, from a social-emotional perspective will enable the child to flourish in their Jewish learning on a deep, applied level—wherever that learning takes place.

While COVID-19 has underscored or uncovered many pre-existing societal problems, including in our education systems, it has also shed light on several opportunities that we should consider taking advantage of in “the new normal.” The pandemic forced us to remain in our homes for far longer stretches of time than we could have imagined and placed an enormous burden on families; at the same time, it revealed the under-tapped resources of the family and home as an integral part of a child’s development and learning. This is not to suggest that the home is the best place for all forms of education, but that certain aspects of education may benefit from taking place in the home. What, then, is the home and family best suited for in terms of teaching core ideas and themes, and how can we enhance and improve the efficacy of this sphere or setting of education when the world “returns to normal” or settles into “the new normal”?

## Connection to Jewish Tradition

To answer these questions, let us focus on the field of Jewish education. The two instances where the parents’ obligation to teach their children is most explicit occur in the Book of Deuteronomy:

וְשִׁנַּנְתֶּם לְבָנֵיכֶם וְדַבַּרְתֶּם בָּם בְּשִׁבְתְּכֶם בְּבֵיתְכֶם וּבִלְכֶתְכֶם בְּדֶרֶךְ וּבְשָׁכְבְּכֶם וּבְקוּמְכֶם:

*Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up.*

—Deuteronomy 6:7

וְלִמַּדְתֶּם אֹתָם אֶת־בְּנֵיכֶם לְדַבֵּר בָּם בְּשִׁבְתְּכֶם בְּבֵיתְכֶם וּבִלְכֶתְכֶם בְּדֶרֶךְ וּבְשָׁכְבְּכֶם וּבְקוּמְכֶם:

*and teach them to your children—reciting them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up.*

—Deuteronomy 11:19

While on initial reading these two sections seem to be repetitive, a closer look at the text points to two quite distinct verbs—actions that must occur for a child to learn: *impress* and *teach*. Perhaps a way of understanding the role of parent in relation to teacher in this instance is that a teacher can focus on teaching while the parents can focus on impressing: the teacher's focus is primarily imparting *knowledge*, whereas the parent's focus is primarily on *experience*. Together the central component of Deuteronomy can be realized.

A further reading of the verse **וְשִׁנַּנְתָּם לְבָנֶיךָ וְדִבַּרְתָּ בָּם** allows us to explore further what we mean by the term “to impress.” A thesaurus provides the following synonyms for the word “impress”: affect, awe, excite, inspire, and touch; whereas “teach” includes the synonyms: demonstrate, develop, direct, explain, instruct and—perhaps most poignantly—prepare. In other words, the role of the teacher (in our case, the day school educator) is primarily that of preparing a student for Jewish life. The function of the Jewish home, in contrast, is the experiencing or living of Jewish life in reality. Therefore, imagine the possibilities were both elements of preparation and experience combined through the partnership of Jewish educator and parent. Here one can refer to the “ABCs of learning”—affective, behavioral, and cognitive—with the Jewish family and home being extremely well suited to the affective aspect of learning and implementation of the behavioral, while the school expertise is on the cognitive component and preparation for the behavioral.

In short, just as in the best examples of experiential Jewish education (summer camps, Israel experiences, youth movement retreats) home is where Judaism actually lives and breathes. It is not the rehearsal of the classroom; rather it is the big event itself. Our texts quoted above explicitly refer to the home as a central site of Jewish education; this notion is so pervasive in Jewish life and ritual that Deuteronomy 6:7 is recited twice daily as part of the Shema. It is also clear from Pirkei Avot 4:5 that Judaism emphasizes the value of learning for the sake of practice: “Rabbi Ishmael his son said: he who learns in order to teach, it is granted to him to study and to teach; but he who learns in order to practice, it is granted to him to learn and to teach and to practice.” There is no institution in Jewish life greater than the home as a stage for where Judaism plays out.

If we do not recognize and actively embrace the importance of reinforcing Jewish learning at home, we will be doing our students a great disservice. If there is a profound disconnect between home and school in terms of what is being taught, at best the student will receive mixed messages, and at worst they will be confused and find one if not both institutions' values and teachings to be meaningless or irrelevant to them.

## The Practice

Translating the pedagogy of impressing upon the heart into practice (or practices) requires a further exploration into the definition of “to impress.” In the hopes of beginning a communal conversation into this question, I will suggest several elements of this methodology. Impression—if it is to be deep, profound, and long-lasting—requires intention and attention, consistency, and persistency, involving—at its best—all senses of the learner and educator alike. Here are some of the ways that an individual may acquire such profound learnings and impressions.

- Making learning personally meaningful
- Repetition enough to learn and replicate what is being learned
- Role models expressing and exhibiting the importance they feel of what is being transmitted
- Practice (“trying it on for oneself”)
- Ability to adapt, edit, redact the original into the contemporary
- Verbal articulation
- Experiences
- Building memories
- Seeing the value added
- Reflection on all of the above

## The Roles of Parents as Learners, Teachers, and Partners

### 1. Parents as Teachers

But before jumping into how parents can play a role as teachers and partners in their child’s Jewish learning (for which the educational setting will provide resources and support) I encourage us all to engage them authentically in their own Jewish learning, having them first reflect on and express their own personal connection to the Jewish enterprise and the reasoning behind their strong desire for the children to be immersed in the Jewish world.

By articulating the answers to these—and similar—questions for themselves, parents will be in a far better position to engage with their children in their Jewish education: they will understand instinctively that their role in their children being raised with Jewish learning—as primary impressors upon their child’s heart—is no less critical than the Jewish educational institution they are entrusting their children with in raising passionate, educated, committed Jews.

We must feed the Jewish souls of our parents if we are to truly engage them as partners in this endeavor. For those parents who do not feel knowledgeable enough—and even for those who think that they are—providing meaningful learning experiences for them (as adults) must become a key component of this approach by any educational organization.

Too often, Jewish educational institutions encounter parents in one-way information sessions to inform them of what is and will be going on in the educational program and what the institution's expectations are of the learner and their families. Such sessions can be opportunities for so much more: for educators to inspire parents in their roles as partners and educators of their children. Before jumping into a listing of logistical and administrative requirements, what if the educator or leader of the educational institution were to ask and engage in conversation with parents as to why they have chosen this Jewish experience when secular, non-sectarian experiences are also abundantly available? Why have these parents chosen to educate their children in Jewish tradition, thought, and life? Why is it important to them? If the parents are prompted to reflect and articulate why being Jewish and Jewish learning is so important to them, it will be the first significant step in encouraging, supporting, and guiding them to play an instrumental role in the Jewish education of their children—as those best positioned to instill positive Jewish impressions on their children.

Throughout the academic year, educators' communication with parents should move beyond reporting ("what did Sophie do this week"). Parents need to understand the content of what their children are learning and the issues they may be grappling with, but not simply by replicating the children's work—rather by engaging parents as learners, at the level that they as adults are able to engage with the subject, in more sophisticated and nuanced ways.

## **2. Parents as Teachers**

Clearly, in Jewish life the primary goal of a family's impressing on their child's heart is for the child to have a positive emotional connection to being a member of the Jewish people. A child must experience positive Jewish events and, upon reflection, have pleasant and positive memories of those Jewish experiences. Parents and family members are in a unique position to make such positive impressions on a child—in part because the parent-child relationship has a built-in mechanism for transmitting values through role modeling.

Here we must help parents articulate their own passion for Judaism, their own feeling of the importance of Jewish learning and living, their own desire for continued Jewish learning and growth. And we need to encourage parents to wear that passion "on their sleeves"—to openly express to their children their love and pride of belonging to the Jewish people and desire for their own continued learning about Jewish ideals and values. This provides multiple opportunities for parents to role model their love of Jewish learning to their children.

Here, the Jewish educator can play a critical role—not only in providing the appropriate tools and mechanisms to families, guiding, and empowering them to utilize any one or more of the above elements—but also in prompting parents who have chosen Jewish education as an important component of their child’s upbringing to be reminded of why they made that choice and what their hopes for their children are in terms of Jewish learning and growth.

### 3. Parents as Partners

Here partnership means many different functions for the parent: co-creator (both with their child and with the educator), fellow traveler through the Jewish journey their child is on, synthesizer and integrator of Jewish ideas into active Jewish life—helping their child see the relevance, personal meaning, and ways that lessons learned can be translated into real-life actions.

The key to fully engaging parents as partners in the educational endeavor—be that throughout the student’s year of learning (as in the case of the Jewish day and supplementary school) or at the end of an educational experience (as with a retreat, camp, Israel program, etc.) in helping the student “debrief,” enabling them to articulate for themselves what their experience has been and what it means to them—is communication. For the parent to be of assistance, they must know and understand the topics that a student will be exposed to (formally or informally) while “in class” for there to be reinforcement and reflection to take place at home.

### Learning at Home

Based on initial research, I am currently suggesting that there are four main categories of ideas or themes that are best suited for teaching in the home: *values*, *personal history*, *ritual*, and *reflections on core questions*. Each of these categories is built on the following strengths of the family setting:

- Home as a safe space to experiment, explore, incubate ideas
- Home as reality, the place in which life actually plays out
- Home as personal domain, where I can “try on” ideas to make them mine
- Home as intergenerational, where relationships between generations best occur

### The Role of the Jewish Educator

How can Jewish educators best support parents in setting the stage for at-home reinforcement of Jewish learning? The school application, admissions, and orientation processes are a perfect time to begin a positive working relationship between educator and parent. As many day schools already do, we need to ask how we may use this time to engage the parent as learner, teacher, and partner?

During the application process, why not include a specific question addressed to the parent, such as “why are you choosing to send your child to this Jewish educational program? What do you hope they will get from this experience?”

Then, as part of the acceptance packet, which typically focuses on administrative, financial, and logistical elements of the education institution, perhaps include a written agreement or “brit” for the parent to cosign, about the expectations the institution may have of the parent in their supportive roles throughout the child’s education as well as the institution’s commitment to support the parent throughout that process.

At the orientation program, again beyond the logistical and traditional question-and-answer session, with talking heads from key administrative figures, incorporate a high-level interactive educational session designed specifically for parents as adult learners. One example of such a session theme could be “entering a new experience,” looking at Jewish perspectives and wisdom on welcoming the stranger, celebrating a milestone in life, and an invitation to become full members of the community.

There are so many ways to engage parents constructively, much depending on the type of educational setting and existing relationship that the educational institution has with parents. A Jewish day school—with daily, year-round connection to children—has an enormous number of opportunities to engage parents throughout the child’s time at the school. Organizers of an Israel experience have a far more finite set of opportunities. But I would argue that any Jewish educational organization can create the opportunity for this important step of engaging parents in the Jewish learning of their children.

The focus of a conversation between educators and parents does not have to be as broad as the overall importance of Jewish life and education in general. An Israel experience educator may well focus a discussion on the question, “Why is Israel important to you?”; or a bar/bat mitzvah class educator could ask parents, “From the (listed) core Jewish values, which do you think is the most important in helping to create a better society? How does this value play out in your life?”

While the focus of this practice and examples provided are specific to the Jewish day school setting, I would argue that the role of parents in helping students reflect upon, internalize, and make being Jewish relevant to daily life is as appropriate for the experiential educator as to the schoolteacher.

The mountain-top experiences of summer camp and the teen Israel trip need not stay on the mountain-top—however special that place may be—if we are to truly affect young Jews, then we must move beyond the mountain-top; and here, again, the family and home are ideal settings for nurturing and furthering that impact.

What, then, is the role of the Jewish educator in supporting and embracing this approach?

*If Jewish education is to prove its worth in this, the scope of the Jewish teacher must be enlarged to include the home of the child he teaches. In fact, most of the influence he wishes to exert upon the child he must learn to exert through mediation of the parent. The teacher should be the one to establish the point of contact between the moral and religious generalizations and the specific situations and occasions in which they should be embodied. He should be the pastor to the families of the children in whom he has to inculcate the patterns of Jewish conduct.*

—Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism and Civilization*, 1934

Here, Kaplan provides us with a core understanding of the role of teacher in a world in which we have supported and embraced explicit Jewish life at home facilitated by the family. Rather than seeing the classroom as the hub of the wheel in Jewish learning—the place that knowledge and practice is imparted by the expert with hope or expectation that the student will carry this out via spokes toward the wheel of life beyond the classroom—the educator in fact becomes the facilitator, interpreter, and teacher in the classroom, in addition to being a supporter of parents outside the classroom. Instead of the hub of the wheel, the teacher becomes the toolkit and bicycle pump which will inflate, repair, and expand upon the core home experience. Put another way, the school is no longer the center of Jewish learning and life for the family but one of the critical learning environments that deepen the knowledge and commitment of our children.

The educator will subsequently become not only an educator to the children but also to their parents. We can therefore suggest new outcomes of the work of the Jewish educator:

- Helping to teach and build *mentsches* (as now)
- Helping to educate parents, empowering them to play active roles in their child's Jewish education, including helping them to build homes with vibrant Jewish life
- Helping to strengthen relationships between students and other family members through shared experiences
- Strengthening the relationship between family and school, resulting in a more holistic, meaningful Jewish experience from which the child will learn, grow, and develop

## Conclusion

For many families, Jewish education has been outsourced to such an extent that almost all ownership of teaching children now falls on the (professional) educator and educational institution. Our aim here is to recalibrate the relationship between home and school, teacher and parent, Jewish knowledge, and Jewish life by fully engaging parents as partners in Jewish education: impressing on the child's heart in a more profound and holistic manner.

If we can educate, inspire, and train our parents to be facilitators of meaningful Jewish experiences with their children, we will both inspire our children toward Jewish life and empower parents to actively fulfill the mitzvah of teaching their children.

## PEDAGOGY OF MUTUAL HUMANIZATION

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Jon Adam Ross

### The Pedagogy

In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Friere says: “From the outset, the revolutionary educator’s efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for **mutual humanization**. [The teacher’s] efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them.”

Mutual humanization may sound like an audacious goal. But it is, on an intimate scale, achievable through the application of the pedagogy laid out in this paper. This pedagogy is not focused on content, though the process promises deep content immersion and serves to foster personal connection to content in novel ways. Rather, this pedagogy is about the participants, the learners, as people sharing space within a classroom, a community, a planet. The hope is that this step-by-step approach to text study can help build new relationships and strengthen existing ones, creating a communal sense of connection and a deeper understanding of each participant’s humanity.

The aspirational title of this pedagogy is also a provocation. While this pedagogy can be applied to the simplest text or concept, it has been tested on the hottest of potatoes, in high stakes circumstances (for instance, in Bible study sessions in Charleston, SC, in the immediate wake of the massacre at Mother Emanuel AME Church that took place during Bible study). What makes this process work (and what makes it useful as a tool for community building) is also what makes it a bit scary: the entire process is public. My contention is that by participating in a public text study exercise that places one’s lived experience in immediate relationship with the lived experiences of others, it may be possible to establish relationships that transcend inherited systems of division (and even oppression).

### The Worldview

This approach makes manifest the mantra **כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲרֻבִים זֶה בָּזֶה** (all Jews are responsible for each other; Talmud, Shevuot 39a) but with a twist. The only way to honestly, authentically understand and apply this pedagogy is to accept a worldview informed by the mantra: **עֲרֻבִים זֶה בָּזֶה כָּל אֲנָשִׁים** (All humans are responsible for each other). So often we reflexively go to our corners, our safe spaces, and reside there unchallenged and uncomplicated by the lived experiences of others. But how can we fully understand all the possible meanings and interpretations of a text if we only have our own limited lived experience and perspective through which to view it? The truth is, if we’ll be bold enough to admit it: we cannot.

## Connection to Jewish Tradition

In the claim above, there are three key words: **public**, **study**, and **relationship**. These are the underpinnings of this pedagogy, and Jewish practice shows us a way to leverage those concepts for this work. In the Talmud (Berakhot 63b) it says, **אין התורה נקנית אלא בחבורה** (The Torah is only acquired in a group). This statement is a profound acknowledgment that if we think the inherited wisdom of the Torah is a crucial element of our Jewish practice, we are only going to acquire that wisdom if we study our inherited texts together with others in our community. This is a radical concept that democratizes access to knowledge, while implying, excitingly, that communal (read: public) study leads to greater understanding. This notion suggests a reliance on the community by the learner. We need the group, and the group needs us. This pedagogy embraces the traditional Jewish concept of quorum (*minyan*) and places an emphasis on the relationship between the learners.

As will be explained below, this practice relies on the sharing of lived experiences around the study of a text, a topic, or an idea. It is an intentional expansion beyond the binary model of paired study (*chevruta*) that serves to increase the number of perspectives included in the exercise. The participants/learners end up studying not just the text, but also each other.

This pedagogy is directly tied to Pirkei Avot 6:6, which posits a worldview that we are all responsible for identifying and sharing the burdens (experiences, perspectives, etc.) of our society with our neighbors (**נושא בעל עם חבירו**). There are burdens we carry collectively as a community: shared, inherited, and problematic systems, lore, and experiences. These burdens can be eased, and these problems transcended if we agree to gather together and acknowledge their existence and set ourselves to the work of undoing harm. That work starts with listening.

## The Practice

1. **Select a text.** This pedagogy holds space for “text” in broad terms. This could be at the end of a unit, in review of a sacred text that was studied. Or it could be a conceptual set induction for a unit, a conversation topic, or a complicated law or civic document, for instance. The only requirement for successful implementation of this pedagogy is that the community of learners/participants has a pre-existing relationship with the “text” or that the facilitator establishes a relationship between the participants/learners and the text. It is absolutely okay if participants/students are unfamiliar with the text you have selected, as long as you take the time to teach the text before implementing the steps below so everyone can participate fully without feeling at a disadvantage.

One question that often comes up is “how do I choose a text?” There are several strategies that we have found to be successful for pairing texts with the lived experiences around the conversation that

we want to have in the room. For example, we applied this pedagogy to a project in Charleston, SC, immediately following the massacre at Mother Emanuel Church. After a series of conversations with community leaders, it became clear that systemic racism often manifests in that community as **favoritism**. So we looked for a text where favoritism was a key theme and selected a story from the book of Genesis about a mother named Rebecca who played favorites among her twin sons.

## 2. Make a list.

- (a) Ask the participants (all folks in the room, including facilitating artists) to ascribe **one word or phrase** as their response to a prompt and to share their answers OUT LOUD. It's important to ask for just one word or phrase so that the answers are easy to see all together. The prompt can be connected to a text: *What is one word that you would use to describe Rebecca's behavior in Genesis chapter 27?* Or it can be connected to the space the group occupies (the city, the community, the school, etc): *What is one word or phrase that comes to mind when you hear "Omaha"?* Pirkei Avot 6:6 posits that wisdom (Torah) is acquired by one who recognizes their place. As those words/phrases are shared OUT LOUD by each participant, the facilitator should write/display them in front of the group as a vertical list on a poster or whiteboard/chalkboard. This is very important. It makes the list **public**. Instead of having to take notes or just remember in our heads, everyone can see the list manifest in front of them in a permanent way. But this first step isn't quite done yet. There's more to do to complete the first list.
- (b) **Ask the group as a whole if any words are missing from this list**, and add any that are offered to the list as well.
- (c) **Then invite anyone to ask someone else about a word they offered to the list**, giving folks a chance to learn a bit more about the perspectives in the room. This is a very important step that allows for folks to reach beyond their experience and begin to study each other THROUGH their examination of the concept/text.

3. **Make a second list.** The next step in the exercise is to create a second list of words/phrases in response to a second prompt. This prompt should be complementary to the first. If you asked about Rebecca's behavior in Genesis chapter 27 in the first prompt, the second prompt could be: *What's one word or phrase that names a situation/place/time where favoritism happens in your life?* OR *What's one word or phrase describing a bad consequence of favoritism in a community, a classroom, a system?*  
\*Note: the notion here is that one list is text related and one list is derived from the lived experience of the participants/learners in relationship with themes/ideas from the other list. As we collect the second list, we display it vertically next to the first list (with a bit of space in between that we'll use later in step 4). And we again invite folks to offer up any words that are missing, and to inquire about words on the list which pique their curiosity.

4. **Connect the lists.** Once the two lists are complete, we begin connecting them by asking folks to name words from each list they see as being in relationship to each other (as in agreement or disagreement, for instance). This is the most important step as it is the moment when folks start to understand that our understandings of place and topic/text are parallel truths that can co-exist in a relationship, even when that relationship is opposition of thought. And those connective links that we draw on the board become the scaffolding for what could be an emergent new text which can be built on the legs of the first two lists. That emergent text could take the form of theater, a poem, a piece of visual art, an essay, etc. But to be clear, it is not necessary to create something new out of the exercise. This exercise is, in itself, sufficient as a set induction to relationship and mutual humanization.

## Field Observations

So what does this look like in practice? For the past six years, this pedagogy has been developed by artists working with The In[HEIR]itance Project, a national arts organization that creates space for communities to navigate challenging civic conversations through collaborative theater projects inspired by inherited texts, traditions, cultures, customs, and beliefs. In the example in the image below you can see a list created in Omaha, NE, during a theater workshop with interfaith clergy. The column in green is a list of responses to the prompt word “Omaha,” and in red is responses to the prompt word “Exodus.” The orange is the derivative conversation that becomes the seed of the new emergent text. In a different kind of example, [this video](#) provides a verbal example of the orange text, in which In[HEIR]itance Project artist Joy Vandervort-Cobb takes the lists and finds the connective tissue by using her artistic interpretation to create phrases of meaning, turning the lists into instant performance.



This pedagogy has been successfully applied to processes with start-to-finish durations of anywhere between 90 minutes and 18 months. It is like water, and can fit any container. For example, if a teacher is introducing a unit on *kashrut* (Jewish dietary laws), this exercise can immediately establish a cross-section of lived experience and inherited narratives among the students, allowing for folks to learn each other’s perspectives in advance of the learning that’s about to ensue. Or if you are a teacher taking a class of 9th graders to the zoo, this pedagogy could be applied with the intention of co-creating a new chapter in Darwin’s *Origin of Species* to express the class’s perspective on humanity’s relationship with the animal kingdom.

This exercise of connecting experience with text can be applied in numerous settings, so long as the facilitator/educator/artist understands that application of this methodology inevitably leads to a sharing of perspectives which requires brave and honest engagement among participants and leads to deeper and more complex understandings.

Explicitly, this exercise immediately allows participants to **see** and **hear** their perspectives in relationship with other perspectives in the room. Within the first few minutes of a workshop, this exercise allows us to immerse participants into an act of mutual humanization where they are both sharing their own truths of others. This can make some participants uncomfortable, and it is incumbent upon the teacher/artist/facilitator to set ground rules for participation from the start to make brave space possible for this exercise. There are many systems of active listening and civil participation in group discussion. For the purposes of this pedagogy, we begin by acknowledging that everyone's lived experience is their own truth and that we cannot challenge what anyone else has experienced even if it differs from our experience. We only speak in "I" statements. And we can always ask questions of each other, but the questions must be phrased without judgment.

## Conclusion

When applied to Jewish tradition, there is a clear relationship between Friere's pedagogy and the development of the Talmud. There is no one truth, but rather a conversation that illuminates the possible true understandings of our inherited wisdoms. This pedagogy was designed to start that conversation.

## (MIDRASHIC) PETICHTA PEDAGOGY

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Marta Jankowska

### The Pedagogy

In recent years, we find ourselves living in a world dominated by strife, division, alternative facts, contradictory statements and beliefs that seem mutually exclusive. People fight for their one and only truth and leave no space for discussion or consideration of another point of view. Following in the footsteps of Franz Rosenzweig, who believed that answers to modern Jewish dilemmas can be discovered through a careful study of classical rabbinic texts, I posed the following questions: How did the Sages of the era of classical Judaism react when they found themselves in a highly divisive social environment? How did they deal with multiple contradictions and paradoxes found in the Torah and in rabbinic literature? Why are the contradictions in the text at all? And what can they teach us? As I was researching, a common midrashic literary form known as the *petichta* came to my attention.

In the literary form of *petichta*, common to the genre of homiletic midrash, we are encouraged to investigate, “try on” a different truth, to enter into dialogue with it and open up to a new understanding. Inspired by this literary form, I developed the *petichta* pedagogy, which aims to help people engage with disparate and even conflicting statements or ideas. It strives to help them see and appreciate how one understanding, or one person’s truth, can illuminate and enrich that of another.

### The Worldview

The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire reflects a similar approach: “[f]or apart from inquiry, apart from praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world and with each other” (Freire, 1970/1997, p. 53). The *petichta* pedagogy embraces this worldview that emphasizes the importance of multiple perspectives and learning through engagement with others.

The *petichta* pedagogy is deeply rooted in the multivocality of midrash and the trope “*davar acher*,” which literally means “another thing.” It consists of positing another, sometimes alternative view. The literary form of *petichta*, prevalent in the Jewish classical tradition, is educative in its nature as it highlights the value in having a diversity of opinions. Moreover, it presents us with a method of engaging with this variety and of facing the challenge involved in understanding the other. It teaches that a deep exploration of a different perspective does not necessarily threaten our own “truth” but rather contributes to our understanding of it. It also offers a model for addressing situations of conflict and disagreement without the need of finding resolution. Instead, it provides a space where disputes and dialogue are meant to go on.

## Connection to Jewish Tradition

The original *petichta* (lit., opening, also translated as “proem”) is built around two biblical verses. The first one, an opening verse from the Tanach, serves as an introduction to the second one, “the lectionary-verse that begins the weekly reading from the Torah” (Stern, 1986, p. 107). The two are, at least seemingly, unrelated or contradictory. They are also in a relationship with each other which constitutes the *petichta*’s structure and which is explored throughout the whole form: firstly, in an “atomization” step, by an in-depth reading and analysis of each word, its context, and reference to some earlier interpretations. Secondly, in the “bridge” step, in which “[t]he darshan or preacher evolves a chain of interpretations ... [starting] from ... the petichta-verse ... [and] stringing one bead of interpretation upon the next, until he arrives at a point where he makes the connection to the lectionary-verse with which the petichta concludes” (Stern, 1986, p. 107). Thus, a connection is built between the two verses, and, as a result of this mini-sermon, the lectionary verse is given a new interpretation with which the *petichta* concludes.

Among the striking features of midrash as a whole is its preoccupation with substantive contribution to meaning (Stern, 1988, p. 138). Exegetes seem to be understanding their task of clarifying the scriptural message in an unconventional way. Rather than striving to disclose the essence of the verse or some hidden insight, they focus on unpacking the significance of each phrase and supplying additional layers of meaning (Stern, 1988, p. 138). This approach is quite revealing about their understanding of truth as something which is far from simple. The word *drash*, which is the root of the word midrash, means “to study,” “to search,” “to investigate,” and “to go in quest of” (G. L. Bruns, 1992, p. 104). Thus, the name of a large corpus of rabbinic literature itself implies that the truth is not something obvious, and that its discovery is a process involving a journey and an investigation—both of which tend to offer rather unexpected results. It should not be surprising, therefore, that discussion and elicitation of more than one meaning are encouraged throughout midrash and perceived as “a path towards holiness” (Stern, 1988, p. 150). In this pluralistic, democratic, and dialogical worldview, there is space for disagreement and validity of more than one interpretation or truth. As a result, minority opinions are recorded alongside the majority ones which become the practice. Nonetheless, the minority views are still considered legitimate. This choice of preserving all, even conflicting views, highlights the importance of variety in tradition as opposed to single-mindedness. Thus, the status of ultimate, dogmatic truth is not assigned, and the danger of in-fighting and factionalism is minimized.

Such a multitude of legitimate interpretations may lead to confusion, as is pointed out in a *petichta* of Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah in the talmudic tractate of Hagigah 3a–b. The issue is raised and then resolved by reminding readers that the source of the multiplicity of meaning lies in God:

וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה

“... [as] God spoke all of these words” —Exodus 20:1

This is only one of many verses tracing the complexity of meaning back to the Divine. Elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 34a) we find:

מנהני מילי אמר אביי דאמר קרא (תהלים סב, יב) אחת דבר אלהים שתיים זו שמעתי כי  
עז לאלהים מקרא אחד יוצא לכמה טעמים ואין טעם אחד יוצא מכמה

*Abbaye said: The verse says, "Once God has spoken but twice I have heard" (Psalms 62:12). A single verse has several senses, but no two verses ever hold the same meaning. (Stern, 1988, p. 135)*

And in Isaiah 45:7 it is written: — יוֹצֵר אוֹר וּבוֹרֵא חֹשֶׁךְ עֹשֶׂה שָׁלוֹם וּבוֹרֵא רָע אֲנִי יְהוָה עֹשֶׂה כָּל-אֵלֶּה  
"I form light and create darkness, I make peace and create evil; I am God; I do all these things," which implies that not only is God the source of a multitude of meanings but also of conflict. After all, it suggests that conflict exists in God—the Creator of both good and evil. So what should our approach to conflict be? According to Hagigah 3a–b, both conflict and polysemy should be embraced:

*Therefore, make your ear like the hopper and acquire a perceptive heart to understand the words of those who pronounce unclean and the words of those who pronounce clean, the words of those who prohibit and the words of those who permit, the words of those who declare unfit and of those who declare fit. (Stern, 1988, p. 138)*

The recommendation here is to get into the spirit of dialogue (G. L. Bruns, 1992, p. 116), to try to understand that which we disagree with, and to open up to the complexity in the Torah, in God, and in the world we live in.

## The Practice

The *petichta* pedagogy is primarily geared toward teenagers (16–19 years of age) and adults who are learning about a situation involving conflict. The *petichta* model can be adapted to subject areas other than biblical exegesis, such as history, and could be used in preparations for a Holocaust study visit, in Israel education, and in other settings. Depending on time available, this practice could be condensed into a two-hour workshop or stretched over two or three separate lessons. When teaching Jewish history of Interwar Jewish Poland for example, it can be used as an introduction to the subject. Juxtaposing two different approaches of the Jewish political parties, such as the Bundists and Zionists, to contemporary issues will allow for an in-depth study of the historical context and realities. The workshop can be

followed by an exploration of what were other stances taken by parties and social activists, such as Agudas Yisroel, the Universalists, or the Assimilationists. The general context of the Second Polish Republic, with its newly regained independence, diverse society, and pressing identity questions, can be taught at any time before, during—using additional materials—or after the workshop.

## Workshop Process

- The participants are **presented** with two different interpretations of some historical phenomenon, in place of the traditional two unrelated biblical verses—one they are more “familiar” with, perhaps even perceived by them as a sort of “truth,” and another reflecting a different perspective.
- The group is **given time to read, analyze, and engage** with the two “truths” and work on their individual interpretations.
- **The educator divides them into pairs** and encourages them to ask each other clarifying and probing questions.
- Once they have expressed what their initial understanding of each statement or account is, and what their feelings about them are, **the educator summarizes** what has been said so far.
- In the following phase, students are provided with **more historical sources and background information** that situate these “truths” in a larger context of the time period. Like the “atomization” step in the midrashic *petichta*, this stage allows for a more **in-depth reading** and for **a possible reevaluation** of initial interpretations. The educator encourages participants to share some of their new insights.
- Then they are **divided into two groups (A and B) of two halves** (alternatively they are asked to work in pairs) and faced with a problem to solve.
- The task in front of them is to perform the “bridge” step, i.e., to find some compelling **points of contact** and to bring these disparate views together. A Venn diagram can be used as a helpful tool in identifying common elements. It is possible that the point of contact will turn out to be something general, like fear underlying both perspectives or the wider issue they are both addressing. Nonetheless, realizing what this broader issue or emotion is can change our understanding of the statement or account at hand. This exercise reflects the problem-posing concept of education, an approach proposed and advocated by such impactful educators as proponent of the social-emancipatory perspective Paulo Freire and promoter of andragogy Malcolm Knowles.

- After completing this assignment, participants return to the whole group and the **presentation of all the different points of contact** or possible ways of harmonizing the two statements takes place.
- **A comparative analysis of proposals** ensues as well as the naming of the different ideas presented.
- The educator sums up the discussion again.
- In the final stage participants regroup and consider the following questions: Has your understanding of the statement you chose initially changed after this exercise, and if so, how? How is this new understanding relevant to your lives? What contemporary or more general questions does it help to answer? The workshop ends with a final round of sharing insights followed by a summation.

Throughout this process, the role of the educator is crucial. It is up to the educator to choose the issue and the materials to be examined, to ensure a safe space for this discussion, when necessary to pose insightful or investigative questions, and to accompany and guide the participants through this challenging series of activities.

## Field Observations

### Description

In order to test the *petichta* pedagogy in practice, I tried it out on a small group of participants, who were taking part in a professional development program for Jewish educators in Poland. As the testing stage was happening in the midst of the pandemic, my initial target groups—participants in Holocaust study visits and educational trips to Poland—were not available. With a small group of four people, I tested a simplified version of the pedagogy. The workshop in this form took about one hour.

For the purpose of the trial session, I prepared a history workshop on pre-war Jewish parties and identities in Poland, which did not aim to cover the full scope of the topic. Highlighting the diversity of Jewish life in that period and increasing participants' knowledge of these movements in their historical context was the content-related objective.

As the two opening, conflicting statements, I used historical quotes from representatives of the two Jewish political parties, the Bund and the Zionist party, that thrived in the pre-World War II Republic of Poland. I chose statements which reflected their opposing perspectives on the issue of a Jewish homeland, which addressed the following question: where should the Jews of Poland live? The answers revealed conflicting views, as the Bund, with its concept of "*doykayt*" (i.e., hereeness) saw Poland

as the home of Polish Jews, and Zionism postulated that the historical land of Israel, the British Mandate of Palestine at the time, is the ultimate Jewish homeland.

I opened the session with a short introduction and overview of the *petichta* pedagogy and its stages. Then I presented the two quotes. The names of the representatives for the two statements, their party affiliations, and the year they were uttered, were all displayed. I asked the group to read the quotes, consider what they are about, and how they feel about them. They were then asked to consider: Which of the two quotes reflects a perspective that is closer to their own? What is this about and what emotions does it stir in you?

In response, each of the speakers expressed their feelings and associations with the word “Zionism.” One of these was a reflection on a difficult experience with a group of American Jewish educators and high school students who were on a Holocaust study visit to Poland. The speaker was outraged at the narrative presented about the murdered Jewish residents of a town the group was visiting in Poland which presented all the pre-war Jewish residents of that town as ardent Zionists. Such unfounded, simplified, and irresponsible claims constitute a historical distortion which, in the view of the speaker, was then used to engage in emotional manipulation. For the speaker, the Zionist quote brought back the memory together with many strong emotions reinforced by the fact that this example was not an isolated experience for him. Several participants recalled similar attitudes and behavior they experienced in their interactions with such groups. Even though it was somewhat off topic, I made space for sharing of this story and of the rest of the group’s reactions. Once the thoughts and emotions were expressed, I acknowledged them and tried to paraphrase what was said, to inquire further: “Let me paraphrase what you said. You associate the quote with the behavior you’ve just described which was a display of an extremist form of contemporary Zionism? Did I understand you correctly? I want to ask you now about the quote itself ... What was the reality back then? What were the objectives of Zionism before World War II?”

The conversation thus continued with me asking more probing and clarifying questions bringing the conversation back from the emotional sphere to the subject of the quotes. The above example confirms what I anticipated when designing the *petichta* pedagogy. The emotions and associations on the subject referred to in the quote are powerful and so they often overshadow the topic itself. This example shows how the quote may release a flow of very strong feelings and opinions. Many former experiences and preconceived ideas may come to the fore. Often they are only vaguely connected to the historical issue and taken out of the historical context. Nonetheless, these connotations and emotions need to be vented and expressed, before the participants will be able to see beyond their experiences. Only then will they be able to focus on the quote itself.

It is worth noting though that not all of the participants’ sharing was as volatile. One of the speakers expressed empathy with both statements and movements and followed up with the following

reflection: “I agree somewhat with both quotes and perceive, in the spirit of Hegelian dialectics, the diversity of opinions as a value in itself.”

In terms of organization and scheduling of the session, stage one, as it was conducted in a small group, took about 20 minutes. When working with larger groups I recommend dedicating a minimum of 30 minutes for this part and leading it in groups followed up by an educator-led sharing in the general group. Stage two was composed of a 10-minute reading of additional materials which provided historical context and included more quotes. In larger groups, I recommend that the participants do the reading in small work groups.

The question posed to the group in the second stage was: Has your understanding of these statements changed in any way after the reading of these additional materials?

Participants of the trial shared that they were familiar with the history, some of them being graduates of Judaic Studies programs, and they knew the history of both movements. As this was the case, the reading of the additional materials had seemingly little effect on their stances. Nonetheless, the materials evoked reflection and the exercise helped them to see the subject from a different perspective. The questions asked at this stage were intended to facilitate reflections. For example: “According to you, what is the essence of the disagreement or discussion between the two movements? What, for you, is the most important aspect of the discussion between them?”

Interestingly, even prior to the list-making stage in the workshop, participants observed that despite stark differences, the movements had a lot in common. For example:

“Proponents of both movements had clear ideas for what a Jew should be and what a Jew should be doing and provided clear instructions on how to attain these goals and structures, such as schools, youth movements, sports organizations, press titles to help in attaining them. Though many of the goals were different, the methods were alike. Both tended to ignore the importance of individual choices. Both movements were addressing the challenging situation of Jews in pre-war Poland and looked for ways to improve it. Thus, they had one ultimate uniting goal to help the Jewish people in Poland.” These observations were helpful in completing the next task which was to create a list of all the points of contact that they can find based on the readings and their discussions. This second stage took about 25 minutes, including the 10 minutes for the reading. In larger groups, I recommend about 30–35 minutes for this part. Again, firstly the impressions after the reading (10 minutes) should be first exchanged in small groups (10 minutes) and then in the general group (10–15 minutes).

The participants of the trial were familiar with the history of both movements and issues raised in the workshop. Nonetheless, even though they did not receive a lot of new information, they were surprised

by the final outcomes of the session, namely the insights they gained from creating the points of contact list between the two movements. Despite all the differences, it became clear to participants that the proponents of the two movements faced the same difficult issues and challenges and reacted in similar ways to that reality. Their answers to the problems may have been different, but the diagnosis of the situation and ways of coping with it were quite similar. As a result of these insights, a shift in participants' perspective occurred, and the level of sympathy for both movements and their struggles increased. As the understanding of the challenges, undertakings, and achievements of both parties deepened, the participants were able to see beyond their preconceived ideas which had been activated in the first stage of the workshop. They were also able to discover and contextualize other aspects of the relevant history. Thus, the *petichta* succeeded to attain its main goal, namely to shift the attention from the conflict represented by the two statements to a more general matter, one underlying the conflict, in this case: the complexity of the situation of Jews in Poland in the period right before the war and the variety of responses to it. Once this became the focus, the struggle of both parties to take care and serve the needs of the Jewish people became evident.

## Analysis and Reflection

At the very beginning of the workshop, during open discussions, some of the participants' reactions and insights came as a surprise. For example, even though I anticipated some level of emotional reaction to the quotes, their intensity and the randomness of some associations were puzzling. The impact that these affective reactions had on cognitive thinking was significant considering that this was a group of Jewish educators familiar with the subject of the exercise. This flow of emotions and associations highlighted the importance and role of experience in education, a topic addressed and explored by Malcolm Knowles (1980) when he was formulating andragogical assumptions about learners. He stated that adult learning is experience-centered. Since an adult accumulates a growing reservoir of experience through life, it becomes "a rich resource for learning" (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 47). "Cognitive psychologists, such as Piaget, Bruner, and Ausubel, strongly acknowledge the role of experience in a person's ability to process information[too] (...) [as do d]evelopmental psychologists and educators [who] also see development as the processing of life experiences" (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 49). When these experiences, the negative ones in particular, are ignored, they can hinder the learning process, since "to adults their experience is who they are. The implication of this fact for adult education is that in any situation in which the participants' experiences are ignored or devalued, adults will perceive this as rejecting not only their experience, but rejecting them as persons" (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 50). On the other hand, as evidenced by the above described session, when space is made for acknowledging and expressing recollections and emotions, learners have an opportunity to observe them closely and to realize the connections between them and their convictions. In this trial, the participants realized that the negative feelings they had toward Zionism were strongly related to contemporary issues and tied to the specific phenomenon of Holocaust educational trips to Poland.

Once they saw that, their understanding of the said experience was impacted. Moreover, they were able to distinguish between the contemporary reality and that in the 1930s and direct their attention to the historical issue being studied.

The end result in the form of the list of points of contact was not the one I expected. When preparing the workshop, I saw the Jewish identity issues, the attempts by both movements to define what constitutes Jewish identity, as the ultimate connection. The participants found another. To them, it was the similarities in the strategy and methodology of helping and building the Polish Jewish community that struck them as a characteristic that was common to both movements. This made for a fascinating learning experience for me and proved once again the value of expressing a variety of perspectives and of learning from one another. The multiple-truths perspective was again manifested. Moreover, it pointed to the importance of keeping an open mind when conducting this pedagogy. It is important that the educator, rather than expecting a certain outcome, makes space for the unexpected, for the surprise to occur. The *petichta* pedagogy constitutes an open ended, rather than prescriptive, learning experience, as the participants, as a group, are encouraged throughout the exercise to construct their own meaning and understanding of the issues. This aspect proved successful in the trial version. Not only did the participants come up with an insightful list of points of contact, they also found a sense of discovery, joy, and satisfaction in the process. As they created the list on their own, without any guidance from the educator, they felt empowered by their ability to find answers. Moreover, as the insights were a result of their own work, they saw truth in them and embraced them eagerly. Furthermore, their insights contributed to a growth in their understanding of the subject.

While the increase in knowledge is important, it is the change of attitude that is the central aim of the *petichta* pedagogy. Such changes in “how” people understand their experience, in “how” they know, are the focus of the transformative learning theory. This educational approach, according to Mezirow (1991), “is essentially a learning process of making meaning of one’s experience. ... [It] involves an enhanced level of awareness of the context of one’s beliefs and feelings, a critique of their assumptions and particularly premises, an assessment of alternative perspectives, a decision to negate an old perspective in favor of a new one or to make a synthesis of old and new, an ability to take action based upon the new perspective, and a desire to fit the new perspective into the broader context of one’s life.” (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 84). Many of these elements are reflected in the *petichta* pedagogy, as it is designed to serve as a transformative learning experience meant to help people overcome and see beyond their fixed patterns of thinking.

All the participants of the workshop were familiar with interwar Jewish history in Poland, and yet they reported that in this session they did learn new content, as the change in attitude increased their interest in the subject. This suggests that addressing the issue of attitudes and feelings in open cognitive

discussions coupled with study of, as in this case, historical sources, contributes to an increase in participants' knowledge. In other words, addressing both the cognitive and affective domains allows the two to complement each other and thus enhance the learning experience.

The participants shared that the ultimate result of the workshop, namely the change in their perspective, surprised them. They identified creating the points of contact list as the crucial moment for when this change occurred. Using the transformative education vocabulary, the list turned out to serve the role of a "disorienting dilemma," a phenomenon that according to Mezirow is most likely to trigger the transformative learning process (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 84).

While the understanding of the historical context of the statements was clearly enhanced by the workshop and constitutes a successful learning outcome, addressing the issue of relevance of the statements to the lives of the participants today was not as explored. The main reflection in this respect was that as a result of the extreme stances taken in the past, a variety of choices is possible today. As a result of the Zionist stance, Jews today have an option of living in the Jewish state. Owing to the struggles of Diaspora Nationalists, such as the Bundists and Folkists, and of the Integrationists who also proudly affirmed their sense of belonging in Poland, or any other place Jews find themselves, contemporary Jews can feel a part of a long tradition of proud Jewish citizens of the countries they live in.

## Lessons Learned

### 1. Make the sources neutral

As the trial session was carried out on a group of educators, I asked them for their informed feedback on how the pedagogy can be improved. The first advice they offered was to remove the information about the authors of the quotes and their affiliations when presenting the statements. In this case, involving Zionist and Bundist Jewish parties, the emotions involved are intense and they cloud judgment, as often happens when dealing with conflicting views. Removing such information would minimize, at this early stage of the exercise, the volatile emotional response while evoking connotations and feelings raised by the quotes themselves. The aforementioned details would be then supplemented later as part of the additional materials.

### 2. Enable revelation

In order to enact this pedagogy with purpose and flexibility, it is important to be fully open to what the participants are communicating. Part of the educator's preparation would be, on one hand, doing the necessary research, preparing materials, and creating for oneself a possible list or lists of points of

contact, and on the other, if needed, freeing oneself of any expectations regarding the possible results of group work. The *petichta* pedagogy can be an adventure and a learning experience not only for the participants but also for the educator. Not all of the learning outcomes can be predicted, as the participants' individual and unique perspectives are a part of shaping this experience. Thus, the principal role of an educator when conducting this workshop is to be ready to listen attentively and assist the participants in the task of identifying, investigating, and understanding their thoughts and feelings on the issues. Acknowledging what participants are saying, asking clarifying and probing questions, and paraphrasing, are all important elements that enhance dialogue and group learning. In addition, following paraphrasing up with a probing question can be an opportunity to redirect a conversation, when necessary, back to the subject of the statements. For example, when a participant is engaging in conversation on the current issues in Zionism, stating something like that "I hear/understand that you are concerned with the perspective of some Israelis/Zionists according to which every Jew should live in the State of Israel. The attitudes you described from your experience are worrisome. Nonetheless, as the situation today and in the 1930's is different, why do you think the Zionists were so determined to build a Jewish state in the ancient Land of Israel back then?"

### 3. Seed imagination

While an educator should create his or her own points of contact list as part of preparations for the workshop, the participants should not be expected to nor guided toward creating the same list. It is vital to keep in mind that there are more lists than one possible and so the groups need to be able to work independently of an educator who would later assess the work. Nonetheless, only factual, content-related mistakes and not opinion-related differences should be addressed. The list should be well received and accepted even if it does not represent an outcome that the educator expected. The educator, like the participants, needs to be open to the possibility of being surprised and of learning to see the issues from a different perspective. It may prove helpful for the facilitator to keep in mind that

*Learning is an internal process and that the important implication for adult-education practice of this fact "is that those methods and techniques which involve the individual most deeply in direct self-inquiry will produce the greatest learning" (Knowles p. 56).*

The *petichta* pedagogy was designed with an andragogical approach to education in mind and, therefore, familiarizing oneself with the andragogical method and assumptions can be helpful in preparing a session. The view of a learner as one capable of self-directing rather than being dependent on an educator, the role of experience in learning, and of readiness to tackle a subject, its relevance to the learner, all need to be considered and addressed. The form of this pedagogy is dialogic and

interactive and so it requires being present and in nearly constant conversation with the group. Asking questions which enhance inquiry of “what” and “how” the participants know, questions that challenge their habitual thinking patterns are crucial for the success of the workshop. While many may think that the role of an educator is one of clarifying any possible confusion that may appear in a learning process, when enacting the *petichta* pedagogy it will turn out that at times it needs to be exactly the opposite, namely, to confuse learners. The objective and the principal projected outcome of this pedagogy is that the learners will be able to overcome black and white thinking patterns, to see beyond a tendency to ascribe truth to one point of view, and discover and appreciate the value of having multiple perspectives that contribute to our knowledge and understanding. For that to occur, learners need to undergo a level of disorientation and confusion, as their thinking and understanding transforms.

Finally, an educator should keep in mind that ensuring a safe space for all the above mentioned conversations is vital. This can be initiated in the introduction to the workshop perhaps by creating a contract with the group by agreeing on its points with the participants and ensuring that the need for mutual respect is agreed upon. Furthermore, the educator needs to be very attentive to the group dynamic and ready to react when this agreement is in danger of being broken.

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## CHAZARAH AND SHINUN: REVIEWING TO THE POINT OF MASTERY

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Chana Silberstein

*"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God; the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and with all your means. And these words, which I command you this day, shall be upon your heart. And you shall teach them to your children and speak of them when you sit in your house and when you walk on the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for ornaments between your eyes. And you shall inscribe them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates."*

—Deuteronomy 6:4–9

*"Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha says, 'Whoever studies Torah and then forgets what he learned resembles a woman who gives birth and then buries her child.'"*

—Sanhedrin 99a

*"When a person understands and comprehends, correctly and fully, a halachah in the Mishnah or in the Talmud, his intellect grasps and encompasses it and his intellect, too, becomes dressed by it at the same time. ... Behold, he comprehends and grasps and encompasses with his intellect the will and wisdom of the Holy One, Blessed Be He. ... And in knowledge of the Torah, aside from the fact that the intellect is dressed in God's wisdom, God's wisdom is also within it ..."*

—Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, Tanya,  
Likutei Amarim, Ch. 5

### The Pedagogy

What would it mean to us as Jewish educators, and to our students, if we made the mastery of Jewish texts more intentional? Relevant ideas, dilemmas, wisdom, and inspiration abound, but unless we ground them in Jewish texts that we master and make part of ourselves, our pedagogies and learning experiences are fleeting—thin rather than thick articulated expressions of our values—too general and undifferentiated to memorably and meaningfully bring alive our Jewish identity and connection.

Adult learners in particular tend to shy away from areas in which they feel incompetent or disconnected. They also chafe against doing “assignments” and “review” (and “homework” can set off an outright rebellion). But if we are explicit with them about why we want them to review, and what this mastery of material will give them, then we can both give them the homework and build their sense of being competent, connected Jews. Conversely, I have known many devotees of Jewish adult education (and, increasingly, graduates of ten years of Hebrew school) who nevertheless feel totally ignorant, because while we may have created many thoughtful, relevant experiences for them, we never asked them to master Jewish texts or practices.

As American educators and program designers, we shy away from repetition and review, in favor of novelty and creativity. We are driven by mass marketing principles, looking to grab interest with what is new, different, colorful, and emotionally resonant. And while these are valuable ways to attract and hold the attention of the student, we should not forget that we are not only trying to attract them into the store but also to have them walk out having “purchased” something that they can keep. This requires regular reviewing of what has been learned, to the point of mastery.

Mastery—absorbing material so it lives within us, not within a book—can be useful intellectually. (It’s convenient to know the blessings over food or the books of Tanach without having to look them up). Mastery can also lead to deeper thinking. We might encounter a point of view in a text and immediately think of another text that has a somewhat different perspective. The effort to reconcile those differences can lead to a more nuanced understanding. But the most powerful reason to master texts is because it creates a feeling of deep connection. The things we love, we love to talk about. And the things we constantly talk about, we come to love. In the words of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, Jewish learning connects us to the “mind” of G-d and builds a deep and intimate spiritual bond.

**Ironically, we may find in the process that review and mastery are not the enemy of creativity and experiential richness—but rather that the two approaches complement each other: constraints inspire creativity and out-of-the-box and sensory experiences enhance memory and mastery.**

When program designers incorporate a text that is short enough and rich enough to revisit repeatedly over the course of an experiential program, to the point of fluent mastery of the text, we create a sense of deep ownership, belonging, and Jewish connection as the text begins to live within the learner.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Worldview**

As a developmental psychologist and someone who has been involved in Jewish pedagogy for 35 years, I had two criteria in choosing a pedagogy. The first was I wanted it to be truly Jewish and rooted in our

tradition. So much of what we do in Jewish education is simply a reflection of the latest secular educational fad. I wanted a methodology with time-worn roots, that also spoke to our deep relationship with Torah learning as a way to connect with G-d—knowledge that could be practical and relevant but also relational and transcendent.

My second criteria was I did not want an “easy sell.” My late uncle, Rabbi Immanuel Schochet, was my intellectual mentor. He was a rabbi, writer, scholar, professor of philosophy, and a fierce debater. And he was great fun. I learned from him never to settle for easy answers, for platitudes. If you could not defend a true but unpopular position, then you could defend nothing at all.

And so the second starting point for me was: what is the most aversive Jewish pedagogy I can think of? All of us hate rote review and memorization. We love the new and exciting. It can be hard to revisit what we have learned already. Indeed, it was hard to get volunteers to test my pedagogy without including a bribe of sorts (and this, too, is the traditional way to incentivize children to review).

On the other hand, I did not want to choose a pedagogy only for its unpopularity. I needed an unpopular pedagogy that in fact was central, important, and transformative. As I spoke to artists in the group (thank you, Jon!), I learned of the Meisner technique, of the depth of appreciation that could come as one recited something over and over and over again, each time learning the nuances. From the poet in our group (thank you, Jake!) I was referred to a book about learning poetry by heart and, in the process, making it a part of ourselves. From Rachel I learned about *siyyum*, bringing closure and reflection to our learning; from Lisa, about how our learning also changes our personal connections. Shira spoke of professors who told them to carry the constitution in their pockets; Sharon told me about passages learned in childhood that she still carried in her heart; Adam shared with me *teshuvot* about how reviewing what was learned already was not a waste of time but “added value.” My daughters and sons-in-law, gifted teachers in their own right, shared the ways they built review and mastery into their classes and how it made children feel.

And what I took away from this is that while rote review may be boring and mind-numbing, learning “by heart” can be inspiring and enriching and affirming. The key, then, is how to ensure that the oldest, least appealing pedagogy is transformed into the greatest gift learning can give: rich, transformational knowledge that lives within us and that becomes an integral part of who we are. As teachers, what will inspire us to build in needed time for review so that students can master a subject, rather than simply looking for endless new experiences? As Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karcha poignantly states, it would be tragic to put in the effort to “birth” the idea only to subsequently let it die.

## Connection to Jewish Tradition

The first paragraph of the Shema is a powerful, self-referential text that speaks deeply to both the importance of frequent review (to the point of mastery) and to the fact that to master something, it cannot just be repeated by rote, but must penetrate us in a multifaceted way:

*"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God; the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and with all your means. And these words, which I command you this day, shall be upon your heart. And you shall teach them to your children and speak of them when you sit in your house and when you walk on the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for ornaments between your eyes. And you shall inscribe them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates."*

—Deuteronomy 6:4–9

This paragraph tells us how to relate to G-d with all our heart and all our means, and all our being; that this command should be studied and mastered fluently; that we should speak of it to different audiences: ourselves, our children, our households, and our wider circle of acquaintances; that we should speak of it in different times and circumstances: morning and night, at home and while traveling. Further, we are instructed to use visceral reminders—binding these words upon our hands and our heads—and that our space should be constructed to remind us of this passage (we place it on our doorposts). What a testament to holistic and experiential learning used in the service of the relationship between G-d, Torah, and the Jewish people: drawing upon our senses, our emotions, our intellect, our social network, our personal space, and our larger environment.

## The Practice

### Who is it for?

While this is a pedagogy that can be applied in many contexts, for the purposes of this project I would like to apply it to the field where I feel it is most lacking: Jewish adult experiential education. Too often, such experiences are carefully crafted (often around "thin" values—building unity, resilience, self-reflection, etc.) while the Jewish grounding is an afterthought, a search on Sefaria, a one-off session that is not memorable and does not reverberate through the program. The purpose of this pedagogy is to allow educators to create thoughtful experiential programs whose purpose is to bring Jewish content alive, making it a powerful driver of Jewish connection.

### When should this pedagogy be used? When should it not be used?

Mastery is "expensive," requiring time, effort, and engagement (while Google search is cheap). It should be reserved for the things that matter, the things that we want to live inside us, rather than on a page. Thus, this pedagogy is not a strong match for technical training programs.

In addition, because mastery is built on repetition, this pedagogy does not do well in programs where not all participants are there for the entire duration of the program (i.e., they drift in and out) and/or there is no expectation that participants will share core experiences (e.g., a fair or expo kind of setting).

This pedagogy is best used in programs that center around a particular theme or “big idea” and can use a core Jewish text to ground that theme or purpose in a Jewish way and help participants internalize it.

### How should one choose the text to be mastered?

While all instructors complain of too much to teach and too little time (and thus tend to sacrifice review and mastery to cramming in just one more component) this pedagogy is directed primarily at the leader/designer of Jewish immersive experiences. The challenge here is to refrain from being too ambitious, so that there is time to properly master and process.

Too often in experiential settings the learning (almost always chevruta or discussion) is an add on, a process of finding a relevant text or two divergent texts on Sefaria that can serve as the springboard for discussion and bringing in personal experience. Personalizing texts is important, but so is learning to listen to them, to see what they teach us, in what way they guide, encapsulate, contextualize, or expand our previous understandings and experience. For this to happen, the texts require more than one review, and as educators we must choose texts that can sustain repeated review in ways that are meaningful to the participants.

The text(s) we choose to master in an experiential setting should be resonant, should speak to the goals of the program through a Jewish lens, and should be multifaceted and poetic, i.e., able to embody meaning on more than one level. We should aim to go deep, rather than wide.

### How should one introduce the text to be mastered?

What will be learned and mastered **should be set as an explicit goal at the outset** (or, at the very least, as soon as the core text is introduced), as students will attend to the text differently if they know they are expected to master it (i.e., Mindfulness 101). In some cases, it may even be appropriate to include the text in the promotional or informational materials that are shared in advance of the program.

For adult students in particular (who are participating by choice), it is helpful for the target text material to be resonant—metaphorical, “poetic,” applicable to many contexts, and/or encompassing many layers of meaning. These texts will be the most edifying to read and review multiple times, the benefits of which will be most readily apparent.

During the course of study, there should be repeated opportunities for review to the point of fluent mastery. Some classic methods of “chazarah” are listed below, and the teacher may have other favorites, but what is key is that the educator makes explicit that mastery is expected, and builds in the opportunities for review—and for testing to ensure that the mastery has been achieved.

Successful mastery requires multiple repetitions and meaningful processing. Ideally, each review allows the student to identify new layers of appreciation for the text. As a starting point, program planners should build in a minimum of four opportunities for review of the target text over the course of the program, varying the techniques for review.

Some examples of review techniques that deepen connection to a text and aid mastery include: a dramatic reading/video of the text, an opportunity for chevruta to discuss the text, an artistic rendition of the main theme of the text, summarizing the text in 25 words or less, writing an op-ed based on the text and then engaging in small groups to decide which five best represent the text, setting the text to music and singing it at the beginning and end of each day of the program.

### How to review for mastery?

Some key strategies for “mastering through chazarah” that have traditional Jewish sources include:

1. Mnemonic devices for sequencing a list of key points (e.g., acronyms are frequently used in the Talmud, as is the noting of the number of items to be remembered)
2. Repeating the material to be mastered out loud (Beruriah’s method: *chayim hi le’motz’ei hem*)
3. Reviewing previously learned material at regular intervals (as noted by Elisha ben Avuya), such as reading out or singing the target text at the beginning or end of each day of a program
4. Teaching or repeating what one has learned to a chevruta (who can check for accuracy and assist when you are stuck), a student (who has not heard it before), or a teacher (who can correct misconceptions or inaccuracies)
5. Changing one’s partner when reviewing: e.g., hearing it again from someone other than the teacher, or reading it to a different chevruta than the one with whom one studied originally (Maimonides, Introduction to *Peirush Hamishnayot*)
6. Chanting while reciting out loud, emphasizing the cadences and rhythms of the text, often while pacing, or swaying, i.e., allowing oneself to “hear” the text and “feel” its rhythms.

Other “rich” encoding techniques can be employed as well:

1. Creating a study aid that includes the first letter of each key point to be remembered—or a series of keywords to allow recalling of the text
2. Grouping items logically
3. Creating a “doodle” or sketch to remember the key points of an argument in order
4. Summarizing the reading in the form of a poem or song
5. Creating an outline or diagram showing the relationship between the parts of the argument
6. Reading a text to be memorized verbatim rhythmically in ways that take advantage of the cadences and sound of the text, e.g., by taking advantage of accented syllables (sing-song recitation) and rhyme
7. Setting the words of a verse or list to music (or a beat)
8. Self-testing (and having the teacher test) to make sure that the material has actually been mastered.

What is important here is less that the teacher or student adopts a particular technique, but that it is suitable to the mastery of the target text at hand. It is also important to engage a variety of modalities. This keeps the review fresh and the student mindful, critical factors for effective review.

In conjunction with this project, two tools have been created to help you incorporate review into your program: a planning guide for review, and cards that enable students to literally carry a mastered text “in their pocket.”

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<sup>1</sup> This may also be why Jewish camp is so successful in study after study at building Jewish identity and connection. Birkat hamazon, Shabbat, Havdalah, Hebrew language, etc., are woven into the experience, with the expectation of mastery of the content, not just enjoyment of the one-off experience.

## CONTEMPORARY POETRY AS A SACRED JEWISH TEXT

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Jake Marmer

### The Pedagogy

The pedagogy I would like to propose is a mode of studying, teaching, and composing contemporary poetry as a sacred Jewish ritual/text. There is a need for new (inclusive, contemporary) Jewish texts to be held sacred, and to help us discern the mythic outline of what it means to be Jewish today. Jewish educators can go through a process of careful selection and deep entanglement with contemporary poems to learn to hold them as sacred texts and create an environment in which these poems can be shared, taught, analyzed, and truly received.

While later in the paper I offer an array of specific practices meant to create a stimulating environment for learning such texts, I would like to stress that at the core of the practice is a set of self-reflective, meta-cognitive, and, frankly, self-doubting questions that are necessary to propel the practice forward. “I think that God has no meaning outside of our search for God,” wrote philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Much the same can be said of the sacred writ large, and the truly effective sacred texts enact the same search that is propelled specifically by their inability to ever provide a fully satisfying answer. The beginning of this pedagogy and practice, then, is the question of what the very word “sacred” means to us, and how texts, experiences, and narratives become sacred to individuals and communities.

At the end of this paper, I offer a list of markers or tendencies which, I believe, can indicate the sacred potential of a given text. My hope is that it isn’t used as a shorthand, or an oversimplification, but a beginning of one’s own discovery, and generation of one’s own reluctant answers to the question of what makes a “sacred text.”

The goal of this pedagogy is, above all, to rekindle our communal relationship with the sacred, to rediscover sacredness on the ground that it is inviting to all who are willing to participate. While the impact of this pedagogy may appear on the surface difficult to measure—can you measure one’s encounter with the sacred via a Google form?—and its effects can seem impossible to capture, in my experience, one of the clearest indicators of the pedagogy’s efficacy is the level of profound connections built by those involved in the learning process. These texts touch us in personal ways, and invite the kind of trust and openness that is less common for educational spaces and is more expected of intimate, communal ones. In our age of increased alienation and loneliness, of ruptured connections, this experience is invaluable. Profound connections to the self, others, and the divine – isn’t that what the encounter with the sacred is all about?

## The Worldview

Jewish spiritual experience is synonymous with a spiritual encounter with sacred texts. The text is a gateway to wisdom and transcendence, ancestral connection and communal bonds, prayer, and epiphany. However, it has become clear to many educators and learners alike that the sacred Jewish canon can no longer serve its purpose without a serious rethinking of the question of inclusion of sacred voices and visions of those who have long been excluded from the canon: women and non-binary folks, queer Jews, secular Jews, interfaith Jews, and so many others – Jews whose very notion of Jewishness is fraught with reluctance—who comprise the vast majority of the English-speaking Jewish population today.

I believe that the boundaries of the “sacred Jewish text” as such, and the idea of the Jewish canon, need to be significantly expanded. If the Jewish idea of the sacred canon coincided with what was termed as the “cessation of prophecy,” I’d like to propose that poetry and poetic texts are a form of contemporary prophetic, visionary discourse, and as such, can serve as building blocks for a new Jewish canon.

This act of expansion, aside from a healthy measure of both humility and chutzpah, involves a deeper understanding of a very ancient intertwining of poetry and prophecy. Prophecy – and its divine origins – is what marks texts as sacred; cessation of Jewish prophecy is the image held as a time-bound marker of the Tanach.

While most contemporary poets may balk at the idea of “faith” and “holiness,” nearly all will attest to prophetic tropes and practices that animate and inform their work. Poet Denise Levertov wrote: “To contemplate... means not simply to observe, to regard, but to do these things in the presence of a god. And to meditate is... to muse... ‘to stand with open mouth’... to breathe in. So—as the poet stands open-mouthed in the temple of life, contemplating his experience, there come to him the first words of the poem.”

Having had profoundly impactful, spiritual experiences through and within texts that are not a part of the classic Jewish canon but are, nevertheless, deeply Jewish, secular texts, I’ve come to believe that these texts are a kind of personal, newly sacred Jewish canon. At times, these texts are marked with resistance to traditional forms of Jewishness, or even an auspicious absence of Jewishness altogether. It is clear to me that such acts of reluctance are exactly what has drawn me to these texts to begin with. While spiritual in their existential quests, these texts also allow for profound doubt, subversion, self-reinvention, and humor. What else if not these profoundly human elements inspired Rav Kook to write: “There is no poetry in the world in which the sacred glimmerings of faith do not shine forth, and when sanctity is manifest in the poetical spirit in its purest and most whole form, then it is truly holy poetry.”

Indeed, approaching these poetic texts liturgically, studying and teaching them as sacred sources of Jewish knowledge, can be an impactful and illuminating form of nourishment and community building.

## Connection to Jewish Tradition

Conversations about prophecy and canonicity are pervasive in Jewish textual traditions, and are, in fact, intrinsic to the tradition itself, as is the process of gentle probing of the boundaries of the sacred discourse, and attempts to expand it with one's own voice.

Such attempts, and conversations around them, are educational insofar as they set out to illuminate anew life's deepest spiritual and existential questions through texts that allow us to do so. Additionally, I would like to read the phrase in Pirkei Avot 6:6, "To hear and to add" (שומע ומוסיף), as a model of writing, reading, and encountering contemporary poetry as a prophetic sacred text. "To hear and to add" (שומע ומוסיף) as the mishnah attests, is one of the ways of acquiring Torah. To stand "open-mouthed in the temple of life" is to "hear," and to compose is to "add" that which is heard to broader Jewish conversation. Poetry is a kind of contemporary version of that which the ancients called "prophecy," and this particular pedagogy is bound to start with an "open-mouthed" conversation around the question of what "sacred text" means today, and an attempt to not only find it anew but perhaps also to have a hand in composing it.

## The Practice

To distill this pedagogy into a single practice is meaningless: it exists as a series of components in dialogue with each other, a combination of rituals that can be invoked and molded depending on the context. I would like to suggest a sequence for a practice, and a few of its key components; each practice is a world of its own, and may require a significant amount of time, but under the right circumstances can be used as a link toward a further practice.

The practice of teaching a poem as a sacred text starts from a place of deep relevance and personal connection to the text being taught. Personally, I feel moved to teach and hold sacred poems I read in auspicious moments of my life, or those that were introduced to me by dear friends, who may have been the texts' authors. In these kinds of moments poems really open up to us beyond just layers of meaning, but through their sacred kernel. And that is the point of departure. To share the circumstance of this intimate relationship with the text is to model what it means to hold a poem sacred. Such storytelling also opens a door to vulnerable, real storytelling, to connections to texts and people and people-as-texts that we've held sacred.

Whenever possible, at the outset, before getting into the text, it is worthwhile to have a framing conversation about what it means for a poetic text to be sacred. This is where I often like to use as a prompt a quote from contemporary poet Susan Howe, who said, famously: “Religion hunts for poetry’s freedom, while poetry roams religion’s Sacred Source.” To thematize the relationship between poetry and prophecy, poetry and prayer, song whose words sustained you and got you through complex experiences is to open this conversation and create the space for a discussion around a poem. This is where people will speak and share.

Then comes the reading out loud. There are certain recurring methods I’ve used: read it out loud a few times, with different people reading, going around with each person taking a line, but at all times creating a liturgical sense, which is already a beginning of interpretation.

My mode of literary analysis involves assigning people lines or words. I invite questions, invite people to look for things that do not make sense. Poetry is poetry because it has things in it that don’t make immediate sense. This frustration is where the sacred moment of a given poem usually resides. What is important is to model a sense of certainty that poetic text is infinitely meaningful in its layers, and that each individual word is there for a good reason, oftentimes a reason that the poet may not have been fully conscious of at the time of composition. This is the relationship of poetry and prophecy. If all that is on the page is what was intended, it is not a poem.

Finally, there must be an opportunity for writing, which doesn’t even have to be a poem – just a text that is one’s own, a reaction to the session and a surfacing of a deeply held conclusion or conviction, distilled into a few final words. Those reluctant to write poetry may surprise themselves finding that their “final words” sound a lot like a poem.

Here is a quick summary of the above, step by step:

## 1. Curating and Framing

- a. Creating source sheets that include sacred and secular texts side by side to deconstruct the sacred/secular binaries;
- b. When teaching these texts, using introductory framing: sharing one’s own relationship/ personal account with the text (learned it from... read it with... read it often when... etc.);
- c. Thematizing the question of the canon/“sacred text”: communal and organizational discussions of what makes a “sacred text,” and opportunities for community members to share and discuss texts they hold as sacred. Similarly, problematizing the line between “sacred” and “secular.”

## 2. Liturgical Readings

- d. Communal reading poetic texts as invocations: at the opening of an important gathering, at the closure as a ritual;
- e. Liturgical models for group reading of poetic texts: dividing up the lines (as in around the circle), call and response, a cacophony of voices.

## 3. Communal Analysis and Close Reading

- f. Facilitated group close readings: reading texts one word / one line at a time;
- g. Close-reading intentions: each word as infinitely meaningful/sacred, as language is sacred and infinitely meaningful.

## 4. Writing as a Sacred Practice

- h. Composing group poems: going around and sharing thematically linked images as a form of performance/ritual/breadth of the subject
- i. Collaborative writing a la *corpse exquisite* meditations with intentional subjects to mark occasions, shared activities, etc.;
- j. Erasure and insertion practices: using texts to erase parts so as to reveal other dimensions (“blackout poetry” technique, or to create openings for one’s own voice);
- k. “Total Translation” technique (per Jerome Rothenberg), “translating” sacred texts and rituals into sharply contemporary language;
- l. “Clairvoyant Writing” technique (per Hannah Weiner)

## Field Observations

One of the simple but striking observations I’ve had over time is that these practices do not work well in diffuse spaces—there has to be a certain enclosure, a setting for intimate conversation, for people to share personal, vulnerable things, for people to speak in a small voice, for people to be moved. It is very special to study these texts in sacred spaces—synagogues, out in significant natural locations, but also in friends’ living rooms, etc. Conventional classrooms are the least conducive spaces for these practices. In a way, this observation is applicable to virtual spaces too: if anybody can drop in and out at any time, or turn their camera on or off, the level of intimacy will not be the same. It is best that all cameras are on and that the space feels comfortable and safe.

Another important observation is that while throughout the practice there has to be a balance of good will and openness, a measure of skepticism is critical, as well. If everybody is on board with the

notion of poetry as a sacred experience the sessions quickly become boring and predictable. If and when people push back—and I recommend finding ways to encourage that—there is a great deal of possibility: my deepest relationships with my students are with those who pushed back, and eventually came around.

Finally, I'd like to point to the world of difference that it makes to end a session with writing—asking the learners to create at least one line as an artifact or a memento opens up the possibility of the continuation of the process of not only expanding the canon, but contributing to it.

## Further Reading Materials

*Some markers of the Jewish Sacred found in secular texts*

1. Big Questions – questions addressed in the text are profound human questions through which you can understand something significant about yourself (timeless);
2. Hiddush – maybe this text is not the only one of its kind, but it is a turning point of a certain kind of thinking, the only text that uses language in a way that it does;
3. Open text (as in “open poem”) – beyond the cliché of being “open to interpretation” it is a text that lacks a surface meaning altogether;
4. Difficulty – text that requires a struggle through it, either thematically or formally, or one as expressing the other;
5. Aura of transformation for the person teaching this text – someone had a transformational experience through it, treats it as such;
6. Presents Jewishness that is as ambiguous and complex as Jewishness is.

## Background Texts and Further Reading

- *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania*, by Jerome Rothenberg
- *Saved by a Poem: The Transformative Power of Words*, by Kim Rosen
- *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority*, by Moshe Halbertal
- *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, by Mircea Eliade
- *Reading the Book: Making the Bible a Timeless Text*, Rabbi Burton Visotzky
- *Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture*, ed. Stephen Paul Miller and Daniel Morris
- *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion*, by Jeffery Kripal
- *Beyond the Graven Image: A Jewish View*, by Lionel Kochan
- *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos*, by Steven Wasserstrom

## JEWISH PEDAGOGY: CREATING SACRED SPACE

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Shira Hecht-Koller

### The Pedagogy

Creating sacred space refers to deliberately defining, giving express purpose to, and sanctifying space through restriction/limitation. After having spent many years teaching in a variety of different settings—both formal and informal—and after more than 20 years of building a home as a laboratory for my family’s growth and education, I am prompted to step back and reflect on the principles that underlie the spaces we design and the practices they inform. We construct spaces all the time. How deliberate are we about their purpose? Do we infuse them with sanctity? If so, are we conscious of how we might preserve that sanctity?

Offering educators and parents alike a practical toolkit, a set of practices, and questions for reflection offers me the chance to be an architect for the sacred spaces constructed by others.

Some questions that have emerged from my teaching, thinking, parenting, and constructing include:

- In what ways can and do we invite our students and children to be partners in the process of creating sacred spaces?
- Are we deliberate and intentional in our design and use of space in our homes so that those values are elevated?
- How do boundaries, limitations, and restrictions serve to sanctify space?
- Who has the authority to define those boundaries?
- How can our homes become sacred spaces for Jewish education?
- Does the nature of what is sacred shift? How can we adapt our spaces for different activities and modalities of the sacred?
- How can we construct sacred spaces when we are on the go? Is there a model for itinerant sacred space?
- What do jointly crafted sacred spaces look like?
- How can overlapping maps of sacred—i.e., one space that is deemed sacred to different people/groups for different reasons—co-exist?
- How can our sacred texts inform our practices?

For an educator, or anyone designing a “sacred space”—be it a sanctuary or a salon, a *beit midrash* or a bedroom—deliberate planning is required. One cannot just walk into a space and expect it to magically transform itself into a sacred one, just by virtue of the activity taking place there.

As teachers, parents, and spiritual leaders, we often hope that spaces will transform us and our children/students, but we are reminded that first we must transform them.

Such transformation can be achieved through:

- Developing a set of practices to give learners/family members an opportunity to define both sacred activities and sacred spaces, and delineate those spaces together.
- Developing frameworks for the imposition of restrictions and limitations whose aim would be to preserve the sanctity of space.

## The Worldview

### Torah as Blueprint for Design

God's creating is not haphazard; there is vision and deliberate planning from the outset. The midrash in Genesis Rabbah 1:1, a rabbinic text composed in 5<sup>th</sup>-century Galilee, tells that just as a human king builds a palace, he does not build of his own knowledge but uses the knowledge of an artisan, and an artisan does not build of his knowledge but has parchments and wax tablets to know how to make the rooms, so too God looked in the Torah and then created the world. There is a blueprint for God's design.

Burton Visotzky has pointed out that this midrash agrees with the surmise of art historians and archaeologists that ancient artisans consulted scrolls, plan books, design templates, and pattern-books to lay down their mosaics. Constructing sacred space involved deliberate planning and artistry. With this knowledge of archeology, the reader can appreciate the appropriateness of this metaphor in the midrash: "Without scrolls and codices, God could not engage in the works of creation. It is as much to say that without both the written Mosaic Torah scroll, and its oral Torah of *midrash* on the *pinax*, there would be no universe."<sup>1</sup>

In the Jewish worldview, the narrative of the creation of the world is also the model for creative work. God crafted the world deliberately and with express purpose, and then sanctified it. Midrash Tanhuma on *parashat pekudei* points to the many verbal parallels between Creation and the construction of the *mishkan*, drawing the conclusion that "the place of the *mishkan* is equivalent to the creation of the world." In both narratives, there is "seeing," "finishing," "blessing," and "sanctifying." Humans, therefore, emerge as partners in the creation of the world, which is only truly completed when the container that is to house God is completed. On the sixth day of creation, the composite parts of the physical world are there, ready and waiting to be infused with purpose. The ultimate purpose—dedication to service—is only realized once man and God are creative partners, the sanctuary is built, and space is deliberately defined, given express purpose, and sanctified through limitation and restriction.

## Connection to Jewish Tradition

Sacred space as both framework and practice is deeply embedded within Jewish thought, texts, traditions, and practices. Designing and constructing sacred space presupposes the existence and delineation of categories of the sacred. Creating spaces to serve as containers for sacred realms, activities, and people involves:

- a. Emulating God in creation
- b. Incorporating the three elements that make space sacred: deliberate design, express purpose and restriction

Sanctification of space has its roots in the biblical narrative, and is manifest in the construction of the *mishkan*, the *beit ha-mikdash*, and in all sanctuaries, synagogues, *batei midrash* (houses of study), and homes that are imbued with sacred purpose. The Talmud delineates hierarchies of sacred spaces and imposes laws, restrictions, and limitations on the use of such spaces. The related and all-encompassing laws of ritual purity and impurity help maintain sanctity of space in Jewish law and thought. Sacred space also incorporates many different aspects of the mishnah of *kinyan torah* (acquiring Torah), such as study, attentive listening, awe, fear, and *recognizing one's place*.

## Giving Express Purpose to Objects and Space

Jewish texts and sources provide varied frameworks for how we endow objects and spaces with express purpose.

In a technical discussion involving the contraction of ritual impurity, the mishnah in Kelim 25:9 states:

כָּל הַכֵּלִים יוֹרְדִין לִידֵי טְמֵאָתוֹ בְּמַחֲשָׁבָה, וְאֵינָן עוֹלִים מִיְּדֵי טְמֵאָתוֹ אֶלָּא בְּשֵׁנוֹי מַעֲשֶׂה,  
שֶׁהַמַּעֲשֶׂה מְבַטֵּל מִיד הַמַּעֲשֶׂה וּמִיד מַחֲשָׁבָה, וּמַחֲשָׁבָה אֵינָהּ מְבַטֶּלֶת לֹא מִיד מַעֲשֶׂה וְלֹא  
מִיד מַחֲשָׁבָה

*All vessels become susceptible to uncleanness by intention, but they cannot be rendered insusceptible except by a change-effecting act, for an act annuls an earlier act as well as an earlier intention, but an intention annuls neither an earlier act nor an earlier intention.*

In Jewish laws of purity and impurity, an object can only become ritually impure once it is defined as an object with an express purpose—a *keli*—a utensil. In other words, things are defined by the consciousness of their creation. Only once something is endowed with an express purpose for use can it be said to contract ritual impurity. That very fact is an expression of its value and worth.

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While this mishnah operates in the realm of objects, we can extract conceptual frameworks that can be extended in our thinking about definitions of space. Spaces are defined by the consciousness of their “express purpose.” We could say, then, that something is not a classroom until *I say* that it is a classroom. Giving space an express purpose elevates its status, thereby making it sacred.

### Sanctification through Restriction/Limitation

There are two elements to what makes something *kadosh* (holy) in Jewish thought.

1. Something sacred connects to a transcendent purpose. This is a category that is not just “special” for use, or set aside at random, but rather allows one to connect in a deeply existential way to oneself, to others, or to a higher being/ God.
2. Something *kadosh* is something that can’t be instrumentalized, can’t be used for a purpose other than the express one for which it is deemed sacred. The concept of *kedusha* (holiness) has at its core the giving up of dominion over something and creating boundaries for limitation.<sup>2</sup> The more sacred something is, the more restrictions and boundaries will be placed upon it.

Sacred spaces in Jewish tradition are those that we don’t have the immediate ability to approach; we can’t just come when we want, act however we want. There are regulations to follow and protocols to keep. The more sacred something is, the more boundaries there will be.

A classic example of restriction as giving up dominion, and therefore sanctification, is that of the *kodesh kodashim*, the innermost sanctuary of the Temple, a space designated and restricted for use by one person on only one day of the year, the *kohen gadol* (high priest) on Yom Kippur.

A much more common restriction on sacred space is the law that a synagogue may not be used as a *kapandaria*, a shortcut between two thoroughfares. There is a relinquishment of activity and control over this space—one cannot use it as they please—which allows it to retain its sacred purpose and nature.<sup>3</sup>

## The Practice

While the worldview and theoretical constructs developed and outlined above offer a distinctively Jewish guide to inform our practice, the pedagogical tools offered below invite us to act.

The core practices outlined in the following sections rest upon deliberate and conscious planning, building, marking, and restricting of space as a mode of sanctification. How we mark, construct, use, and sanctify space deepens learner engagement and results in intensification of experience. The hands of the designer guide at every moment.

To illustrate how a pedagogy of sacred space works, we will explore the core principles and practices in two different settings: the family home and the campsite.

These examples are presented as case studies of more broad categories of fixed/permanent (*keva*) spaces and malleable/impermanent (*arai*) spaces. The principles outlined in these particular settings are representative models which can then be expanded into other, similar educational settings. The core practices implemented in the fixed space of a home can be transferred to other fixed settings, such as the classroom or the board room. The core practices modeled at a campsite—which is much more malleable—can be used in other transient settings such as travel programs and immersive environments.

For each setting, we will look at the three components involved in creating sacred space—deliberately defining, giving express purpose to, and sanctifying through restriction/limitation—and offer core practices that can be utilized at each step.

**We will then briefly consider the unique space of a “Zoom Room,” a setting which has a hybrid identity, with some dimensions that are more fixed in their nature and others that are more flexible, and offer core practices and points to consider when designing and sanctifying online spaces.**

*Two notes of observation:*

### 1. The Order

The three components involved in creating sacred space are presented in the same order for each of the settings explored below. That decision is primarily for ease of use. However, it may be useful for the educator-parent-designer to ask themselves at the outset whether the order makes a difference for the particular setting and situation at hand. It may or may not matter. The order in which the components are presented below is—in many ways—a natural one, with each prong building upon the prior one, but it is not the only way to move through the progression.

## 2. Implicit/Explicit

The practices outlined and modeled below are explicit in their definitions and design of sacred spaces. They do not rest on subtle design choices of the educator/designer, but rather all learners are actively drawn into the process of design and sanctification. It can be useful to call attention to the pedagogy in action—learners are deliberately conscious of their surroundings and are active stakeholders in the design and sanctification decisions that are made. This will hopefully result in deeper engagement and more committed buy-in on the part of the learner. On the other hand, being explicit does come with its drawbacks—the power of a learner being transformed by the purity of experience is potentially minimized when they know they are going through the process.

### Fixed Setting: The Family Home as Template

#### a. Deliberate Design

- Offer recognition that construction of sacred space is a collaborative project between the creator and user, the educator and learner, the parent and child.
- Encourage family members to **walk around** their home with a sketchpad, envision how the space can be arranged and **draw** what it can be used for.

#### b. Express Purpose

- Arrive at joint definitions for “what is a sacred activity” that would take place in a “sacred space” at home. Sacred activities might mean different things to different people. For some, it might mean *tefillah* (prayer), Torah learning, Shabbat cooking, spending special time with grandparents.
- Ask family members to **list** sacred activities that take place in a home.
- Ask family members to **make a list** of areas where they have spontaneously felt a special connection with themselves and/or with others. Leave space for flexible arrangements—both physically and socially—that allow for the opportunity to assess, take stock, and make changes.
- Provide family members with a blank map, or blueprint/model of the home and have them **mark off sacred spaces** keyed in a different color or texture. (What is essential is not the art, but the deliberate act of defining spaces as sacred.)
- Then ask them to **brainstorm and write down** strategic ways/rules to put in place to preserve the sacred nature of the space. (See section on limitation and restriction below.)

### c. Restriction

- Technology Restricted Zones

One example of an imposed restriction in a home where the goal is to foster connections or a sense of higher purpose is the creation of technology-free zones. In my own home, our design principles and home construction were motivated by creating spaces that were ripe for gathering and activities, including the use of technology, while deliberately keeping technology out of other zones. There are no phones, computers, televisions allowed off the main floor of the home. Such a restriction designates bedrooms (on the upper floors) as sacred spaces for connecting with one's partner or one's self. Our lives are filled with the blessings and distractions of technology, but to truly connect with another, and oneself, the space must be restricted to its core essential purpose, and not instrumentalized for other purposes.

There are many variations on how such connection can be achieved, but the key take-away is that restriction of an activity or presence in a space is a way to maintain its sacred nature. This will look different for different families, and at different stages of life, but the framework is a universal and timeless one.

- Ask family members to **brainstorm and write down** strategic ways/rules to put in place to preserve the sacred nature of the space.
- **Write down** a set of family space-related rules.

## Flexible Setting: The Campsite as Template

### a. Deliberate Design

- A campsite provides a more flexible opportunity to establish sacred spaces, since it is characterized as a place with no pre-existing or defined "spaces" and can be imagined from scratch each time one goes camping.
- Before immediately pitching tents and collecting wood, have campers walk **around, survey, and assess** the area, looking for "ideal" conditions for "sacred" activities.

### b. Express Purpose

- Like in the home, have all camping participants **list** activities that are to be defined as "sacred" while camping. These might include *tefillah*, space for quiet reflection, singing together, meditation, art, lying in a hammock.

- Have campers come up with different plans/models for how the area can be divided into sacred and non-sacred uses. **Write them down.**
- Empower campers to **demarcate** the spaces using objects, strings, posts, signs, and rocks to offset and bind spaces.
- Use camping rope/cord and **decorate** with casual art/drawings hung with clothespins, to delineate spaces that are “sacred.”

#### c. **Restriction**

- Eiruv construction

Camping on Shabbat is an opportune way to experientially create sacred space through boundedness and restriction based on the prohibition of carrying outside an *eiruv*. While camping on Shabbat, arrange the tents and eating areas in such a way that each serves its function but preserves a central space that will be sacred. Then enclose the area with an *eiruv*, the boundedness and demarcation collectively defining the entire camping site as a sacred one. The very act of coming to a vast forest, or an open field, and enclosing it, fosters the sense that any domain can be sanctified by closing it off to others. By enclosing a space around a collection of tents, picnic tables, and firepit, even with just a few wooden stakes and a string, and limiting carrying objects to the space inside of it, one can take what would previously have felt like a random placement of tents, bags, picnic tables, fire pit, camping chairs, blankets, beach balls, books, and board games on the grass, and make it a domain for Shabbat. The power of doing so is real and shared by all who partake in the experience.

- Have campers **define the boundaries of the eiruv**, and, in accordance with halakhic requirements, then **tie** wire to outline and define the space.
- **Select** an item and **place it** (strategically) to serve as the focal point of the defined space.

### **Hybrid Setting: The Zoom Room**

The Zoom room and all virtual learning platforms occupy a niche that is a model of hybridity in its nature—they contain dimensions of both a fixed setting as well as a flexible one; users are tied to a particular platform and model, but there is also room for individualized and creative arrangements.

- As we shift more and more to permanent online spaces, how do we apply the theories articulated above to a virtual world?

- In what ways can online spaces be deemed sacred?
- What restrictions are required to be put in place in order to sanctify them?

## Core Practices

### a. Deliberate Design

At the beginning of a Zoom session, **give learners the opportunity** to look around their space and

- **remove** physical items of distraction
- **close** any unnecessary computer tabs
- **collect** an object, book, or learning tool to keep close by

### b. Express Purpose

- At the beginning of a Zoom session, **provide a roadmap**—an oral outline, and/or physical schedule of what will take place in the duration of the session, thereby limiting the virtual space to the express purpose for which it was designated.

### c. Restriction

- In advance of a virtual session, **provide** learners with license, agency, and encouragement to shut out all “non-sacred activities” (if possible)
- **Encourage** the muting of cellphones
- **Outline** the parameters of chat usage, muting, and unmuting
- In advance of a session, establish the **norms** by listing/outlining a list of what the space is designed for and what it’s not.

## Summary and Expansions

Sacred space as a guiding principle for both conceptual reflection and practical pedagogical implementation is deeply entrenched in Jewish texts and thought and can be adapted for a variety of educational settings, both formal and informal. Inhabitants of a home, and learners in both physical and virtual spaces, can be transformed by their setting. With strategic and deliberate articulation of principles and implementation of limitations, the arts of learning and living can be elevated, no matter where one finds themselves.

The analysis, framework, theory, pedagogy, and practices outlined here are limited to conceptions of space (deliberate definitions, express purpose, limitation through restriction), but can be expanded to other areas such as time, objects, people/relationships, and language.

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<sup>1</sup> See Burton L. Visotzky, "Genesis Rabbah 1, 1 – Mosaic Torah as the Blueprint of the Universe – Insights from the Roman World," in *Talmuda de-Eretz Israel: Archaeology and the Rabbis in Late Antique Palestine*, Steve Fine and Aaron Koller, eds. (De Gruyter, 139).

<sup>2</sup> For a lengthier discussion, see Moshe Halbertal, *Makom Ha-Mekudash* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7rTXFHBbgY>

<sup>3</sup> See b. Berakhot 62a..

## A PEDAGOGY OF *SIYYUM*

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### Rabbi Rachel Bovitz

#### The Pedagogy

A pedagogy of *siyyum* is described most simply as a closing of a unit of learning that in some way relaunches learners into their next unit of study. While I will suggest certain rituals and components for a *siyyum* ceremony, this *siyyum* pedagogy is about the larger, intentional approach to concluding a learning unit that is celebrated in such a ceremony. This approach needs to be considered by a teacher throughout the unit of learning so that the end is kept in mind as an educational moment that will be marked and celebrated.

While classically a *siyyum* ceremony is designated for the completion of studying specific books of rabbinic literature (a tractate of Talmud, an order of Mishnah, etc.), this pedagogy applies the concept more broadly. A *siyyum* pedagogy can be applied to any complete unit of Jewish study whether organized around a specific topic, a series of related sessions, a cohort learning experience, or any other situation in which there is a beginning, middle, and end to a program of learning.

There are three main outcomes or purposes in this *siyyum* pedagogy that can be achieved regardless of the specific content. The first purpose is to celebrate the learning accomplishment of both the individual learners and the group that has learned together. The celebration emphasizes each learner's connection with their fellow Jewish learners—past, present, and even future. Another way to describe this purpose is that the learner comes to see themselves as part of a chain that is inheriting and passing along wisdom. This chain links them to their ancestors, to their contemporaries learning at their side, and to whomever they will share their learning with into the future. The second goal is to understand and integrate whatever content was explored in the unit of study. This articulation and integration fosters a sense of agency so that learners become involved in the ongoing creation of Torah. It recognizes that Jewish study includes adding new layers of understanding contributed by the learners themselves. And finally, a critical purpose of *siyyum* is to launch the learner into their next study adventure. A pedagogy of *siyyum* is an affirmation that Jewish learning is a lifelong journey for each of us.

A pedagogy of *siyyum* is intended to help raise up a new generation of Jewish learners who feel connected to their heritage in a meaningful, creative, and ongoing manner. This pedagogy is important to develop because many study units today are shorter, and therefore educators are less likely to think of the value of closing and relaunching at their conclusion. *Siyyum* is classically understood to be an adult activity, beginning only with b'nei mitzvah. While it can be adapted, the focus here is not on education for children. While most of the goals do apply to youth education, the final purpose described above, of the learner seeing themselves as a lifelong learner, seems to be specific for adults. It is in adulthood that

one makes the personal decision to value *torah lishmah* (torah for its own sake) as a lifelong avocation. Kids' learning is often not voluntary but rather being done at the direction or insistence of their parents.

Setting aside the time and resources necessary to create *siyyum* experiences is not only an investment in the individual learners but in building and nurturing learning communities. On the most basic level, one might see *siyyum* as a retention tool—a way to keep people engaged in an organization's educational programming. But on a deeper level, it can establish something that goes beyond a re-registration. Ideally, it instills a deeper sense of belonging as a Jewish learner, something that they might feel a kinship toward but often makes them feel unschooled or inauthentic. A positive *siyyum* experience that includes a re-launch reminds all present—learners, teachers, and guests—that Jewish learning is an endeavor of a lifetime, one that beckons each of us and that joins us together..

## The Worldview

This pedagogy of *siyyum* stems from an educational worldview that at the heart of Jewish education should be a focus on giving learners accessibility to Jewish ideas, texts, and wisdom (in other words, torah with a small "t" that includes the widest multi-disciplinary corpus of Jewish sources) so that learners come to claim it as their inheritance as part of the Jewish people. The initial focus is therefore on unlocking gates, opening doors, and giving learners the tools to explore and grapple with what they find. For the learner to truly claim their spiritual inheritance, they also need to feel like their voice and ideas are recognized in the application of their learning to their time and life experience. This process of assuming agency can involve incorporating into one's life teachings that are sustaining and inspiring, identifying that which still seems foreign or problematic, and hopefully also discovering torah that becomes aspirational.

As someone who has focused most of her career on adult learners, these ideas feel urgent to me. Our communities invest a great deal in the educational experiences of children and young adults and assume that this learning magically carries them through adulthood. But adults need to access Jewish learning anew, approaching torah with their adult questions and concerns, through the lenses of their life experiences and sophisticated ways of thinking. If not, Jewish wisdom runs the risk of having mainly nostalgic or pediatric value. This means that not only are individual Jewish adults missing out on the richness of their tradition, but our broader Jewish community is diminished by fewer adults invested in a deeper connection to torah.

For adults who are deeply invested in classical study, such as a *daf yomi* experience, *siyyum* is part of a natural learning cycle. While not typically using the term, in liberal Jewish circles there have been several *siyyum*-type experiences that have been in practice over the last 40 years as adults completed specific

programs of learning. These include a one- or two-year adult b'nei mitzvah which typically culminates in the leading of prayers and reading Torah, much like a teen's bar/bat mitzvah, but also celebrates the end of a program of study.

Also, in the Florence Melton School and other similar programs, adults “graduate” after two years of study, marking the completion of a specific curriculum. In both cases, these moments seem to solidify the identity of an adult Jewish learner by giving them a chance to reflect on their journey and claim a new identity (bar/bat mitzvah or graduate). As anyone working with these adults will tell you, the ceremony of completion is strikingly different than its corresponding equivalent is for kids. Rarely is an adult bar/bat mitzvah or graduation an ending; it is most often the launch for adults to see themselves as lifelong Jewish learners.

I am particularly interested in developing a pedagogy of *siyyum* as fewer adults are committing to invest time in these multi-year study programs, and, therefore, we do not have the bar/bat mitzvah or graduation celebrations as a “natural” moment to mark and celebrate both the accomplishments of learners and their ongoing investment in learning. I am particularly interested in exploring whether a pedagogy of *siyyum* can increase the impact of shorter programs of learning. I am hoping that this intentional approach to closing out a unit of study might help adults to feel an important sense of ownership of their learning and inculcate a desire to consider their next step as a Jewish learner.

## Connection to Jewish Tradition

The ritual of celebrating the end of a unit of Torah learning is mentioned in midrashic and talmudic literature and then spelled out clearly in the Codes. The main emphasis early on is on a festive “mitzvah” meal, such as what Abaye prepares for those who complete a tractate of Talmud (Shabbat 118b–119a). The tradition grows to include customary prayers (e.g., the Hadran) and other rituals related to ending the text that has been studied and beginning the next text to be studied.

Perhaps the most widespread practice of *siyyum* is the annual holiday of Simchat Torah, in which we hold a communal celebration to mark the end of the Torah reading cycle and begin again with Bereishit. The tradition cites the origin story of *siyyum* to be a feast King Solomon holds after being given wisdom by God (Kohelet Rabbah 1:1). Among those accustomed to Talmud study, the Hadran prayer printed at the end of every tractate also points to the way in which *siyyum* has become a standard learning practice. And finally, another custom that has made *siyyum* pervasive among halakhically observant Jews is the way in which *siyyumim* are arranged to fall either on fast days (e.g., the fast of the first born before Pesach) or during seasons when one does not partake in meat eating (beginning of Av) so that the festive meal, the *seudat mitvah*, cancels out the eating prohibitions.

The rabbinic enterprise emphasizes the importance of review of one's learning. The rabbis in the Talmud (Chagiga 9b) hyperbolically speak about reviewing one's learning 101 times. Centuries later, in his letter of instruction to his son, Ramban speaks cogently about how one should not end their learning before reflecting carefully on what has been studied and extracting what can be put into practice. "Chazarah," or the value of review, is an essential part of the *siyyum* experience. The other explicit educational activity is the initiation into whatever next learning step is to be started. This part of the ritual drives home the educational philosophy that learning is a never-ending process. Even as one celebrates completion, the impetus is to review and to reengage in Jewish learning.

While one could associate a number of the ways by which torah is acquired listed in Avot 6:6 with *siyyum*, the two that stand out as essential to this pedagogy are #47—"who is exact in what he/she has learned"—and #43—"who listens [to others] and [him/herself] adds to [their knowledge]." The *siyyum* instantiates and celebrates both practices.

In emphasizing review and integration, there is a specific intention for the learner to really embrace a deep understanding of what he/she has learned. This follows the Maharal's comment on *hamekaven et shmuato* in which he emphasizes the importance of understanding and not taking for granted that what one has heard or can even repeat is understood. The *siyyum* provides an opportunity to have the learner articulate what they have come to understand about a particular text or subject matter by putting it in their own words.

*Shomea u'mosif* really speaks to how a learner adds their own insights, *hiddushim*, or applications onto a particular learning. Ideally this follows a process of deep listening to the meaning of the text as explicated both by one's teacher and one's fellow learners. The Mishnah cites *shomea u'mosif* as the value which makes this a collaborative process—we are encouraged to listen before we add our voice. Another understanding of this phrase, found in the commentary of R. Mattitya HaYitzhari, is that listening is a deeper kind of learning where we search out the roots of a teaching. In this way, one's addition is a process of integration. This involves weaving together what one has just learned with their past learning to make connections between ideas. This is another important element of the integration process of *siyyum*.

## The Practice

The first question to consider about the practice of *siyyum* is when it occurs and when it does not. Part of the educational argument above is to encourage a *siyyum* to happen more often in Jewish learning—at

the completion of units of study of various lengths. That said, a one-off or even two-part program probably does not call for a *siyyum*. Three, four, or more sessions seems to be the minimum required to warrant time designated to *siyyum*. In these types of shorter units of learning, it is presumed that a short *siyyum* might be incorporated into a final session rather than be its own standalone gathering.

The practice of *siyyum* will vary from one context to another, but should recognizably include activities that serve the purposes of celebration, integration, and relaunch of learning. These components can be briefly highlighted in a short (15 minutes or so) component of a final session or there can be an expansive standalone ceremony that delves more deeply into one or more of these areas of focus. Designating the time for a *siyyum* is really in the hands of the educator, as is the crafting and carrying out of most of the ceremony conversation.

Ideally, the educator considers all of this before they teach their first session and design the full educational experience with the *siyyum* in mind from the beginning. This type of advance intentionality is spoken of so beautifully about Shabbat in L'cha Dodi: סוף מעשה במחשבה תחילה—"made at the end, and planned from the start." Similarly, a joyful, meaningful *siyyum* is at least partially planned for from the start. In addition to scheduling appropriate time for a *siyyum*, some of the other suggestions for educators to consider ahead of time include recording or taking notes on sessions so as to be able to recall and highlight educational moments from sessions as well as building in a reflection process throughout so as to acculturate learners to this practice. It may also be helpful to consider at the beginning the possible next steps for the learners so as to begin conceiving of the launch part of the *siyyum*.

A *siyyum* that includes celebration, integration, and a launch into new learning would include, at a minimum, one activity corresponding to each of these elements. These activities could take up a short amount of time (e.g., making a *l'chaim* with a libation) or could be extensive (e.g., chevruta work to look back through past learning and make a presentation to the full group). While the intentionality and planning largely originate with the educator, the ideal is for the *siyyum* to be highly participatory. All elements are focused on the learners—their learning is being celebrated and integrated, and the *siyyum* is intended to launch them into the next step on their learning journey. A *siyyum* can certainly celebrate educators as well, but the primary focus is on the learners. Family and friends of learners can be invited to witness and celebrate the accomplishments of the learners.

The Sample Siyyum and ritual guide that accompanies my research paper (click [here](#)) include more particular suggestions around *siyyum* design, prompts, and special activities that can be used in planning the ritual.

## Field Observations

In order to try out my pedagogy, I taught a new 6-session Melton course (OMG: Can You Believe?) to a group of online learners. I included a final 7<sup>th</sup> session *siyyum* as part of the course schedule. The group knew that they were a “lab group” in that the learning material was new and that I wanted to particularly test it out with their demographic (everyone was in their 40s or early 50s) but they did not know about the *siyyum* aspect in advance.

I designed quite an extensive *siyyum* in order to test out a variety of activities and maximize my ability to observe what worked and what did not. My PowerPoint can be found as an appendix, but here is an overview of the various activities I included and the purposes behind each:

1. Short Video Clip from *The West Wing* – I opened the *siyyum* with a question, “Can we speak about God any more decisively than Tobey?” This introduced the integration task ahead, to probe whether our learning had helped us to solidify any understandings of God. (Integration- 5 minutes)
2. I shared goals of the *siyyum*, explaining a bit of history about how *siyyumim* were typically celebrated. Since one learner’s mom had just passed away, we dedicated our session in her mother’s memory and brought this learner into the group even though she wasn’t in attendance. (Celebration- 10 minutes)
3. Chevruta based integration activity. I broke the group into partners or triads and gave specific texts to look back at from the lessons we studied along with guiding questions. The groups had 20 minutes to discuss. When we came back together, they shared an answer to at least one question they discussed. (Integration- 30 minutes or more)
4. Learners were each asked to reflect on one of 3 prompts and to share their responses with the group. (Integration and Launch- 10 minutes) The prompts were:

Something I thought about differently before the class than I do now is...

Something I learned that I have shared or plan to share with another person in my life is...

Something I want to explore further as a result of this class is...

5. I shared slides that contained highlights of what members of the group had contributed over the 6 previous sessions. I made sure to include teachings/reflections from each person in the group *b’shem omro*. (Celebration- 5 minutes)

6. I had planned to look at a final text we hadn't covered previously but skipped this due to time.
7. Since this was a lab group, there was not a specific next learning step for the group. But since we were meeting a week before Passover, I knew we all had ahead a seder ahead of us. For this reason, I shared a few short teachings that connected our learning to parts of the seder. The intention was to give the learners the tools to share some of their learning in the seder context with their families. (Launch- 5 minutes)
8. I introduced a Spotify playlist of songs related to our theme as a "party favor". (Celebration- 2 minutes)
9. The group recited an adapted version of the Hadran to conclude the siyyum. (Launch- 2 minutes)

## Analysis and Reflections

The most meaningful way I can see to analyze and reflect on the *siyyum*, is to share the personal reflections of the learners that I captured on video and later transcribed. As you'll see in the responses, the prompts opened up multiple pathways for reflection- on the topics of the course, on the experience during this (COVID) time, on children and parents, on belief and on the journey of learning itself. It was certainly a highlight of the siyyum for me and reinforced my central claim to the value of this pedagogy. Here are snippets from this part of the siyyum:

**Learner 1:** I want to explore more, but from the first class, just the idea of thinking about God not as something in a human form, the whole thing of being made in God's image and how that can mean so much more than just a physical image. I had a whole discussion with my family at dinner about it afterwards

**Learner 2:** ...It's a shame that we haven't taught this to our children... I don't know that I've ever taught my children what is meaningful to me when we're lighting candles, or what I'm thinking about when I'm davenning and to be able to use it as an opportunity to really teach the children that it's not about reading necessarily the words on the page, which is what that text (we studied) said, but about using it to live as a tool for making life more meaningful.

**Learner 3:** So my daughters go to Jewish Day School... And so one of the things that I got out of this was really my first exposure to studying text in this way and making connections between different texts on the same topic and through time, which I've observed through some of their homework. But now I can relate to some of what they're learning to do and finding meaning through....

**Learner 4:** It confirms why I feel the United States in general is such a great place to be a Jew- as any kind of Jew you can be...And that's something that is really absent where I come from in Turkey. And therefore, so many of my friends or people around me have chosen either to go really fully into Judaism, or many of them have, slipped away because they have no place to find themselves in Turkey, we only have orthodoxy...

**Learner 5:** One of the things I really appreciated was early on, the first week (was) to have a discussion with my family about what is God and I thought that was really beautiful and interesting and eye opening...this class, it just reminded me how many different great thinkers have struggled with God, and what it means... there's something that feels more heart opening.

**Learner 6:** I thought this was tremendously useful because I really never dug into any of these texts... But also I did appreciate our conversations, because it sort of distilled some of this stuff to language that I understand a little better, and maybe (can) more relate to what's going on in the world. Also it gave me a chance to read Viktor Frankl and read a little bit more (after class).

**Learner 7:** I think it enriched my conceptualization of what it means to be truly human, and what our responsibilities are as people and how we look at other people. It also helped to explain some things that might otherwise have been contradictory, like the notion of God giving us freewill. On the one hand, God is all powerful and all knowing, but it doesn't mean therefore that, God *is* controlling everything and really gave me a more sophisticated understanding of reconciling that notion of freewill with God being all knowing and all powerful.

**Learner 8:** I was just excited first of all to hang out with everybody and do something intellectual during this time.....it's also been a hard year, I lost my father and he was my inspiration for Judaism. Both my parents. So this was very meaningful for me because it came at a time when I was wanting to do something a little more and for his blessed memory. So as I've been reading, I've been thinking about he might think about things...Each text brought something to me that was really mind-opening. The way we discussed it and analyzed it was really interesting to me and something I've never done.

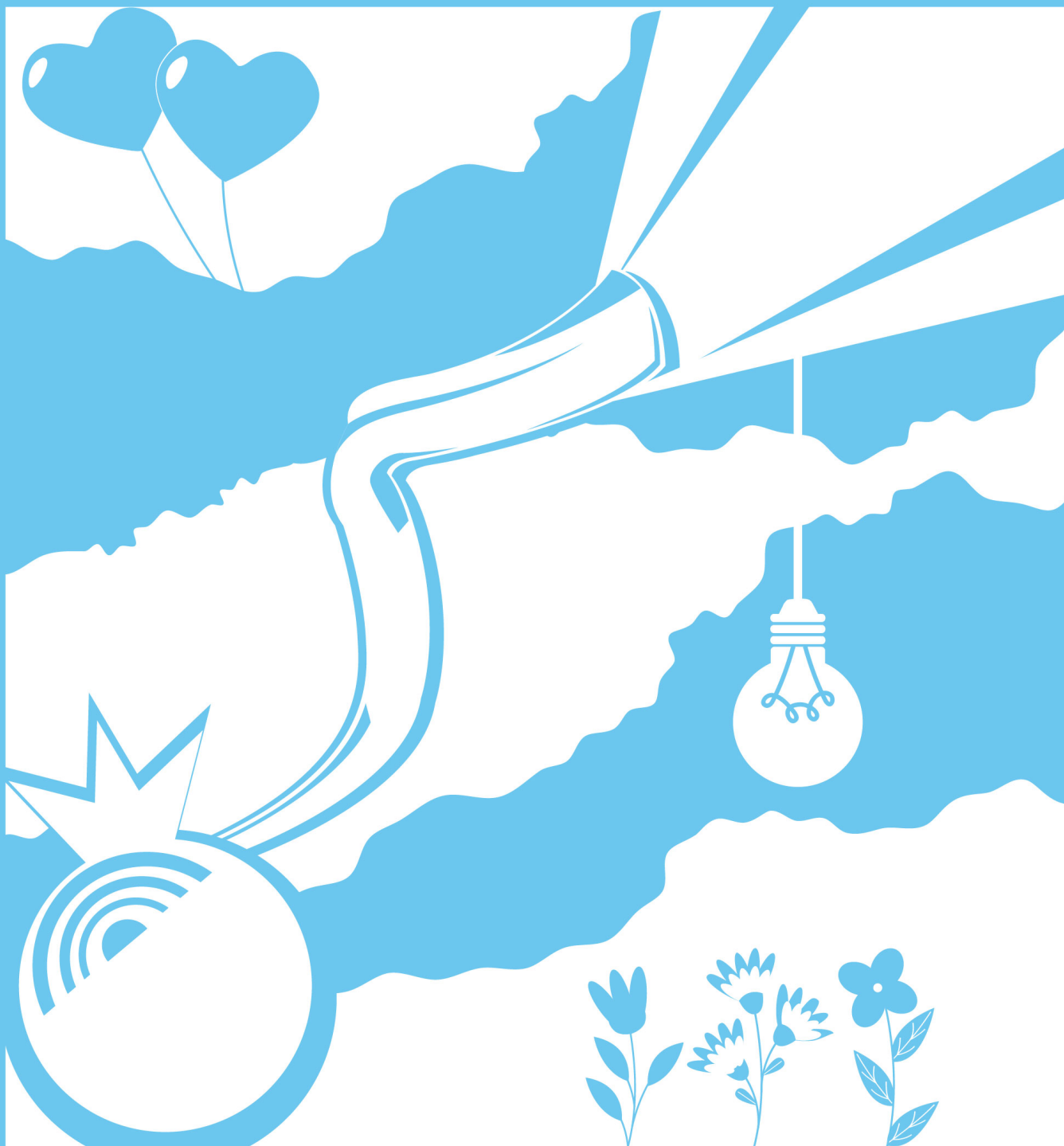
## Lessons Learned

Going into this “full-scale” experimental *siyyum*, I wondered if it would feel too much, too repetitive or too long for the learners. I was pleasantly surprised that the group stayed engaged and wanted to participate fully. In a survey afterwards, I asked the learners what part of the closing session was most meaningful to them and they overwhelmingly identified that it was the chevruta integration activity (#3

above). This activity gave them an opportunity to connect with one another. As one person remarked “I appreciated the time to digest and make sense of the texts in intimate dialogue.” Another indicated that it was during this time that they were able to identify a change in perspective towards the material. While the full group experience is important, I think activities of pairing off or creating small groups within a *siyyum* is critical to include as it creates space for all the learners to speak, share and connect apart from the teacher.

As illustrated above, the prompts opened up rich reflection and sharing. While I tried multiple ways to build a sense of celebration online, I do think that aspect is naturally more pronounced when a group can be together for a festive meal. Finally, the group was quite engaged as I shared back their teachings from previous sessions. Honoring their contributions to our learning is something I really wanted to emphasize as it connects to my worldview. I think it is critical that adult learners come to recognize what they bring into their Jewish learning even if the texts are initially foreign to them.





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