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### HaYidion: The RAVSAK Journal

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# From the Editor

■ by **BARBARA DAVIS**

**T**HE second most wonderful thing about serving as an editor of *HaYidion* (the first is working with Elliott Rabin and the members of the editorial board) is the opportunity it provides for me to engage in my own Jewish learning. In addition to the in-depth reading of the work that appears in each issue, I have the chance to do some research in order to write an introduction that measures up in some degree to the scholarship and experiences embedded in our contributors' pieces.

In the case of this quarter's issue, the task was compounded by the seriousness of the theme. In Shabbat 127a, we read: "These are the things for which a person enjoys the dividends in this world while the principal remains for the person to enjoy in the world to come. They are: honoring parents, loving deeds of kindness, and making peace between one person and another, *but the study of the Torah is equal to them all.*" The task of teaching and studying Tanakh is weighty, for so much is riding on it. It is far more than a subject, like science or math. Proverbs 3:18 tells us that "the Torah is a tree of life to those who cling to it. All who uphold it are happy." Its importance in our faith is prodigious. In Pirkei Avot (1:15), we are told that Shammai taught, "Make the study of Torah your primary pursuit."

But in today's world, in today's classrooms, in today's day schools, the task of studying the Bible, much less teaching the Bible, is fraught with new challenges, not the least of which was foreseen by Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotz who told parents, "If you truly wish your children to study Torah, study it yourself in their presence. They will follow your example. Otherwise, they will not themselves study Torah but will simply instruct their children to do so." Most of us deal quite regularly with students whose parents are not studying Torah, Nevi'im or Ketuvim in their presence, and thus the job of the teacher of Tanakh becomes not only that of the pedagogue but also that of the parent in leading by example. Fortunately, as you will see when you read through this issue, there are many incredibly dedicated, talented and creative teachers confronting and meeting the challenges of teaching Tanakh today.

One of the most significant features of the articles in this issue is the fact that so

many excellent practitioners are employing the "best practices" of contemporary educational theory and research in the teaching of Biblical text. Differentiated learning, authentic assessment, standards-based, project-based and active learning are all incorporated in original approaches to this timeless subject. But perhaps an overarching



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framework for this Shavuot quarterly can be found in the "advice to the teacher" by David Hartman which appears in the Shalom Hartman Institute's "Tanakh Teaching." I believe that all of us in Jewish education will find that these words resonate with us:

*If it is not meaningful to you, don't teach it. Jewish teaching is not communicating mere knowledge or technique but sharing your religious passion, your moral integrity, your personal search with your students. Share your integrity, your yearnings, and your doubts and let your student meet you in the classroom.*

I hope you will find that this *HaYidion* offers you inspiring ways to make those classroom meetings deeply meaningful on many levels. ■

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# Letters

Presented here is a sample of the responses to Michael Berger's article "Developing a Theory of Jewish Day School Leadership" on pages 24-26 of the spring issue. The article generated a robust discussion with many contributors; to see all of the responses, go to [ravsak.org/hayidion/avichai](http://ravsak.org/hayidion/avichai).

**Susie Tanchel, Watertown, MA**

Berger's vision not only has the potential to guide us in our own work, but it also offers us the opportunity to clarify our own vision. I would suggest adding a more explicit statement of the need for a clear vision of teaching and learning. As the core instructional leader, a head needs to have an educational philosophy that she can articulate and use to inspire others. Moreover, I think a head's "Jewish lens" should stem from a working knowledge of Jewish texts and/or Jewish history and comfort with Jewish tradition and living. Finally, in the same way as learning and reflection are essential stances that a leader takes in an organization, I would add curiosity and active listening to the list of indispensable tools.

**Mark Stolovitsky, Dallas, TX**

This framework is excellent because it integrates that which we have learned from the independent school world and the specific niche that is Jewish day school. But I do not think that many lay leaders understand the factors that make up educational leadership or Jewish educational leadership. This year, I saw this borne out in two very different situations. The first dealt with a compensation committee whose business members kept floating ideas from the private sector only to be met with how educators' motivations were different. The second came when we were hiring a new K-8 principal: the lay leaders on our Head Advisory Committee told me that hearing and seeing educators interview other educators was an experience that they would not have understood had they not witnessed the interaction.

## New in this issue

On this page you'll find a new section, Good and Welfare, where schools can share news with the field. Check out some of the great things going on at Jewish day schools! Our thanks go to Dorothy Thursby, an art teacher at the Gideon Hausner Jewish Day School in Palo Alto, for the beautiful image accompanying this issue's Olami column on page 71.

In the fall issue we're starting an advice column called Dear Cooki, authored by Cooki Levy, longtime head of school at the Akiva School in Montreal. Send questions school-related to [HaYidion@ravsak.org](mailto:HaYidion@ravsak.org), with Dear Cooki in the subject line. Questions may be submitted either with your name or anonymously. All stakeholders are welcome to submit.

**Nora Anderson, Greenwich, CT**

I would like to suggest an additional quality for a successful Jewish day school leader: the ability to effectively confront conflict. In order to do so, a leader must possess a clear vision of the policies and actions that are negotiable and non-negotiable within their institution. These policies need to be clearly communicated to all constituencies, not left for interpretation and upheld if violated. It is the trust and transparency built with the different constituencies that create an environment where disagreements do not lead to disrespect. The ability to confront issues constructively and uphold the integrity of our institutions, whether with a parent, faculty or community member, is a clear indication of an effective leader.

**Jill Kessler, Phoenix, AZ**

I wish I would have had some of this information when I began in leadership 22 years ago. One point I would add is Establishing School Culture. The head and the leadership team set the tone for the school community. What is the feel of the school? In visiting great schools, there is always a feeling which emanates from the leadership, teachers, students and involved parents. It transcends traditional markers of success—it is all about the people. This doesn't happen by accident. It takes adherence to the mission of the school and the leadership team to bring everyone together. ■

*Take part in the conversation! HaYidion welcomes letters to the editor; send your thoughts to [HaYidion@ravsak.org](mailto:HaYidion@ravsak.org).*

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# From the Desk of Arnee Winshall, RAVSAK Chair

**A**s we approach Shavuot, we cannot help but think about the giving and receiving of the Ten Commandments and how these key tenets have been at the core of what it means to be Jewish, to be a good human being, to develop awe and respect for God and God's creation, and to respect and care for each other. We think about the significance of relationships between God and humankind and between people. What are the obligations and qualities that ensure these relationships will be strong, nurturing and infused with moral compass?

At a time when the prevalence of bullying demonstrates a demise in our treatment of each other, strengthening the study of Tanakh—our guiding light—is all the more important. How do our schools enable students to grapple with the Torah's teachings on how we lead our lives and how we view others, so that they are inspired to fulfill the blessings and responsibilities that come with being created in the image of God? God reminds us that we must address the mundane as well as the sublime, and that we must view our work in this world through a lens of how it continues to repair the world.

The focus over the past year or so of the board of RAVSAK has been an example of this for me. We have been devoting our time, energy, thinking and financial support to developing a business plan for RAVSAK, keeping in mind what drives this work and what is at stake, that RAVSAK's existence is to ensure that our day schools will continue to thrive and provide the educational context in which our children and all stakeholders are impacted and guided by these teachings. Our client is the Jewish future.

We know that with your involvement and support we will continue to make a significant impact as we focus on building the field of Jewish community day schools, developing strong Jewish leaders, amplifying Judaic program excellence, and



*Arnee Winshall is chair of RAVSAK's Board of Directors and founding chair of JCDS, Boston's Jewish Community Day School. Arnee can be reached at [arnee@ravsak.org](mailto:arnee@ravsak.org).*

galvanizing appreciation and support for day schools. Over the coming months, as we roll out the plans, share them with all of you and solicit your involvement to ensure their success, we will keep in mind what the work of RAVSAK is: to ensure that the Jewish learning in our schools is strong, that it informs how our children live their lives, and that it sets them on a path of lifelong learning.

This motivates us to advocate for and invest in day schools. It is an investment in our children, and our children are our future.

Arnee



## חג שבועות שמח

RAVSAK's Board and Staff wish you a Happy Shavuot



# Good and Welfare Posts from RAVSAK Schools

**T**he **EAST VALLEY JEWISH DAY SCHOOL** in Chandler, Arizona, held its 1st Annual 5K Family Fun Run on April 24th. It was our goal to bring the community together to support the school while promoting health awareness. Even though our school has an enrollment of 24 students this year, over 100 people attended the event. It was a huge success and we will continue it for years to come.



Another professional learning community coming to the **HILLEL ACADEMY OF TAMPA**. Seeing the success of our innovative learning space for grades two through five, this summer we will renovate our existing middle school building.



Unique furnishings, creative teaching spaces and outdoor learning areas will make this the most exciting educational environment in our area.



8th grader Isaac Heller and 6th grader David Lipman of the **R. C. WORNICK JEWISH DAY SCHOOL** in Foster City, California, were winners in the San Mateo County STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) Fair held February 3rd. Isaac won first place in the materials science category and David placed second in the sixth grade physical science division.

An anonymous local donor to the **MILWAUKEE JEWISH DAY SCHOOL** has established a tuition support program for 2012-2013 that should eliminate any financial barrier to enrollment when used in combination with the school's existing financial aid. Both new and returning students will receive subsidies of varying amounts depending on the child's grade; for ex-

ample, new 1st-5th graders will receive a full tuition grant for the first year and up to \$4,000 per year for the next four years. School officials estimate the gift ultimately could be "in excess of \$1.5 million."

On March 27, **DONNA KLEIN JEWISH ACADEMY** hosted its first student-led Leadership Day, one of the criteria for consideration as a FranklinCovey Leader in Me Lighthouse School. DKJA is the only Jewish day school in the nation with the acclaimed designation as a Leader In Me School. DKJA presented Leadership Day to school administrators, board and community members, with interactive demonstrations showing how the Leader In Me Program has positively impacted DKJA by incorporating Stephen Covey's 7 Habits of Highly Effective People into both Judaic and General Studies curricula.



The **ADDLESTONE HEBREW ACADEMY** of Charleston, South Carolina, took all its 12 eighth grade students on a trip to Israel. Parents, students and friends of the community raised \$12,000 from cake sales, selling snacks after school, student jobs, etc. to help defray costs. As one student said, "Being in Israel was like finishing a puzzle. We were the missing pieces and once we got there, the puzzle was complete." ■

# The Torah of Relevance: A Dinosaur Deserving Extinction

■ by **ERIC GROSSMAN**

In broad strokes, this article challenges the field to question the mantra of “relevance” or at the least to broaden our notion of what would be relevant to our students.

**N** ever question the relevance of truth, but always question the truth of relevance.

—Craig Bruce

For at least a generation, Jewish educators have striven to engage students by making class material more relevant, the theory being that teens tune out during Bible (and rabbinics) because the topics and texts we teach are not sufficiently germane to their lives.

While this hypothesis appears, *prima facie*, both logical and reasonable, it is supported by little more than anecdotal evidence. Deeper scrutiny suggests just the opposite: that the best strategy for engaging our students is to embrace the Bible’s irrelevance. Let us begin, in the beginning, with dinosaurs.

Rare is the student not enraptured by dinosaurs. Children unable to name five states or identify their capitals can name ten species of dinosaur and tell you whether they are herbivores or carnivores. This is certainly not because dinosaurs have any relevance to their lives—nothing gleaned from the experience of prehistoric raptors can be properly applied to the youth of the 21st century. Indeed, it is precisely the Jurassic era’s utter lack of relevance that makes it so interesting to students. The dinosaurs’ unimportance is part of the joy of learning about them, Torah lishmah in its purest sense.

In her fine essay, “From China Shops to

Jungle Gyms: Evaluating the Durability and Fragility of Our Classroom Learning Cultures,” Tali Hyman contrasts the uninhibited exuberance of learning in general studies courses (the Jungle Gym) with the careful and confined culture of the Jewish studies classroom that she cleverly christens The China Shop. To follow her metaphor, the contents of our limudei kodesh classes are too precious. When teachers are overly concerned about driving home fundamental lessons, the content becomes too fragile to play with.

One of the pleasures of Bible study is that the stakes are so low. Because the Biblical text is traditionally of no relevance to practical halachic decision

are invested in the outcomes of the Bible class, the more we constrict the arena in which we allow our students to play.

Traditionally, Jewish children were taught our Testament beginning with the book of Leviticus, as recounted in Vayyikra Rabbah 7:3: “Rav Assi said that young children begin their studies with Leviticus and not with Genesis because young children are pure, and the sacrifices recounted in Leviticus are pure, so the pure study the pure.”

Whatever the original rationale of this scope and sequence (the reasoning in the Midrash, while charming, is transpar-



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**It is precisely the Jurassic era’s utter lack of relevance that makes it so interesting to students, Torah lishmah in its purest sense.**

making or theology, we have allowed much greater latitude in exploring the Biblical world than other spheres of Judaic scholarship. Radical peshat and wild midrashim enjoy a high level of tolerance even in traditional Chumash study due in large measure to the fact that, regardless of how outlandish the student’s suggestion, it will have no impact on formal Jewish practice or thought. We introduce more relevant readings into our classrooms in the hope that our students will care more about what they are studying. But paradoxically, the more we

ently post facto), its effect was to frame the study of Bible for the Jewish student through the lens of the cult rather than primordial and patriarchal narratives. This approach had two effects. One, it clarified that while the Torah combines narrative and law, it is the law that is primary (cf. Rashi on Gen. 1:1). Two, wittingly or not, giving primacy to Priestly law transmitted the message that the world of the Bible is foreign and fantastic. While it is true that Leviticus contains most of the Torah’s proverbial 613 commandments, the majority of them are ir-





relevant in that they are not practiced, but belong to a world long ago inhabited by clerics in jeweled robes ministering before a now-lost golden ark guarded by armed sentinels and winged griffins.

We have become so focused on achieving relevance in our Bible classes that we have ignored what often makes texts and topics interesting: how the worlds they portray and the ideas they convey are so different from our contemporary reality. Which brings us back to the dinosaurs. True, we can learn nothing of immediate applicability from studying the Tyrannosaurus Rex, but isn't a 20-foot lizard awesome? The lost world that literature portrays is part of its lure. Michael Weingrad, in his lament on the paucity of Jewish fantasy writing, "Why There Is No Jewish Narnia," captures this beautifully:

*The experience of wonder, of joy and delight on the part of the reader, has long been recognized as one of the defining character-*

**While not fantasy literature in any strict sense, the Hebrew Bible is filled with the fantastical: witches and wonders, miracle workers and magical talking animals.**

*istics of the [fantasy] genre. This wonder is connected with a world, with a place of magic, strangeness, danger, and charm; and whether it is called Perelandra, Earth-sea, Amber, or Oz, this world must be a truly alien place. As Ursula K. Le Guin says: "The point about Elfland is that you are not at home there. It's not Poughkeepsie."*

While not fantasy literature in any strict sense, the Hebrew Bible is filled with the fantastical: witches and wonders, miracle workers and magical talking animals. For hundreds of years our rabbis and scholars have so rationalized and allegorized our canon's marvels that we have exsanguinated the spirit that animated both the scripture and its student.

But the 19th century is over, and the 20th too, for that matter. Students in today's Jewish schools are not asking the same questions as their parents or grandparents. The latter wanted to know that the holy writings that were central to their nation—and their nascent state—made sense. Today's students are not part of generation how or generation why but generation zzz. Bible is a burden or at best, a bore. The supernatural plagues, splitting seas and food falling from the sky that may have unsettled Enlightenment Jews have the power to excite the postmodern student by allowing her a fifty minute passage into another reality.

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Making Tanakh relevant certainly serves to make our ancient scrolls more accessible to today's children and teens. Focusing on issues such as parental favoritism, sibling rivalry, leadership, and ethical decision-making undoubtedly makes hoary Writ feel contemporary, but

to imagine a universe different than our own, with values and ideals that run against the grain of polite society.

Which is why we must allow the sacred words to speak for themselves. When we sacrifice potentially inspiring texts on the altar of relevance, we transmute the

ner that mimics the Shulkhan Arukh, in more liberal institutions the Bible needs to enforce or foretell ideals of tolerance and egalitarianism. The agendas are competitive, the results are identical: in order to make the Word relevant its words must be twisted, forced and expunged. When this fails or cannot be done, students are instructed to critique the text from our modern vantage point. Forcing a text to speak in this way renders it not only irrelevant, but rubbish.

Finally, a risk of making Tanakh relevant is that anything that is fashionable will, *ipso facto*, cease to be so with time. While it is a venerable Jewish practice to connect the weekly parashah to events transpiring in society at large, it is precisely the freshest and most pertinent sermons that have the shortest shelf life.

Real relevance comes when our students enjoy the Bible as a beloved classic, a great work that has stood the test of time. True relevance is not about being timely, but about being timeless. Our role as Jewish educators is to relay the ancient and everlasting value of our Holy Writ. Our own relevance rests upon our ability to offer our students transcendent ideas they will get nowhere else, a taste of eternity. Such wisdom is not easily attained or understood; it is hard won, not Wiki-ed. Classical Scriptural virtues like faith, commitment, honor and Truth might not be consonant

## The supernatural plagues, splitting seas and food falling from the sky that may have unsettled Enlightenment Jews have the power to excite the postmodern student by allowing her a fifty minute passage into another reality.

doing so renders them pedestrian. Gone is the magic and mystery of a time long ago in a faraway land, replaced by texts concerned with the same struggles pervading our students' lives, just with more opaque language. They have the right to ask—and many of them do—why they must endure the rigors of mastering Biblical Hebrew only to discover the same values they learn from our general culture.

I am reminded of a father whose son came home from Hebrew school with the assignment: Complete the sentence, "To be more like God I will..." The child had been given examples from class such as, "To be more like God I will take care of the earth," and "To be more like God I will work for economic justice." The father suggested instead something simpler such as, "To be more like God I will kill the firstborn of my enemies."

We sit up, all senses firing, when we encounter literature that awakens us from our dogmatic slumber. The fact that the Bible contains ideas irrelevant and counter to our current culture should make students question the world around them rather than reactively challenging the text. This is the widest that we can open the young mind: to allow it



The Gathering of the Manna, c. 1460-1470.

## This is the widest that we can open the young mind: to allow it to imagine a universe different than our own, with values and ideals that run against the grain of polite society.

learning experience from one of intellectual discovery to one of imbibing the ideological message of the institutions in which they are taught. If in traditional schools it is important to portray our ancestors observing the mitzvot in a man-

ner with our students' lives today, but challenge them to imagine what life could be. If we cannot offer this in our Bible classes we will simply be adults trying to make old books look hip. In another word, dinosaurs. ■





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# Philosophical Inquiry with Tanakh

■ by JEN GLASER

Glaser has developed a method for students to engage with philosophic concerns such as truth, meaning and justice through engagement with stories in Tanakh.

Sometimes innovation in Jewish education doesn't come by way of a totally new invention, but from taking an idea or practice that has proven itself in general education and applying it to our work as Jewish educators. Multiple intelligences, Understanding by Design, service learning, summer camp and blended learning are not Jewish inventions, but they have found their way into Jewish education because they provide us with tools that enhance our ability to respond to the challenges and realities of contemporary Jewish life.

Philosophical inquiry with Bible is just this kind of innovation. It embodies a particular approach to introducing young people to philosophy that emerged in North America in the 1970s called Philosophy for Children, which has today an educational presence in over 80 countries.

In recent years, experiments at integrating the approach of Philosophy for Children within Jewish education have taken place in America, Australia and Israel, resulting in the Bible curriculum "Moving On: Journeys that Matter." Focusing on journeys in Torah (journeys *towards* and journeys *away*; existential journeys; individual and collective journeys; planned and unplanned journeys; journeys of maturation; journeys of heritage, and more), the curriculum explores themes relevant to the journey into adulthood of 7th-9th grade students.

This year, through the generous support

of a Covenant Foundation Signature Grant, I am working together with Jeffrey Schein and Howard Deitcher on a project based within the JECC in Cleveland to train educators in this innovative approach through a project centered on philosophical inquiry with parashat hashavuah (in collaboration with the Israel Center for Philosophy in Education and the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children at Montclair State University). This cohort of educators is both cross-contextual, consisting of educators in day and synagogue schools, and cross-communal, spanning Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist institutions.

## PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN

### PHILOSOPHY AS A PRACTICE

When you think of doing philosophy in the Jewish studies classroom, what picture does this conjure up? If it brings forth an image of studying the Great Philosophers (Plato, Maimonides, Kant or Levinas), think again! While there is a long and rich tradition of teaching philosophy as a "history of ideas" in schools, *doing* philosophy—philosophizing—is the practice of making sense of our experience and developing a worldview. Philosophy begins with a stance of curiosity and wonder—we need to be *puzzled* by, or *curious* about, something that grabs our attention and invites us to think, to try to make sense of it, to understand the meaning and

significance of it. Heschel suggested that philosophy is "the art of asking the right questions." The kind of questions philosophy deals with are open-ended, an invitation for ongoing engagement and response. Examples of philosophical questions include:



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What is friendship?

Are there different kinds of truth?

What do we mean when we say something is a miracle?

How can a slave imagine (and thus come to desire) freedom?

What kind of life is worth living?

Inducting children into philosophical thinking opens a space where students can engage in this kind of meaning making. Philosophical questions, like the ones listed above, might sound abstract, but they are played out in the context of our lives, and our interest in them is awakened through everyday experiences with our family, friends and tradition.

For example, children from a very young age use the word *friend* and have their own ideas and theories about what this means. This meaning changes as they grow, but as long as they are using the word, we can reflect with them on the meaning it has for them in their lives. Young children might say "a friend is someone I enjoy playing with," for older

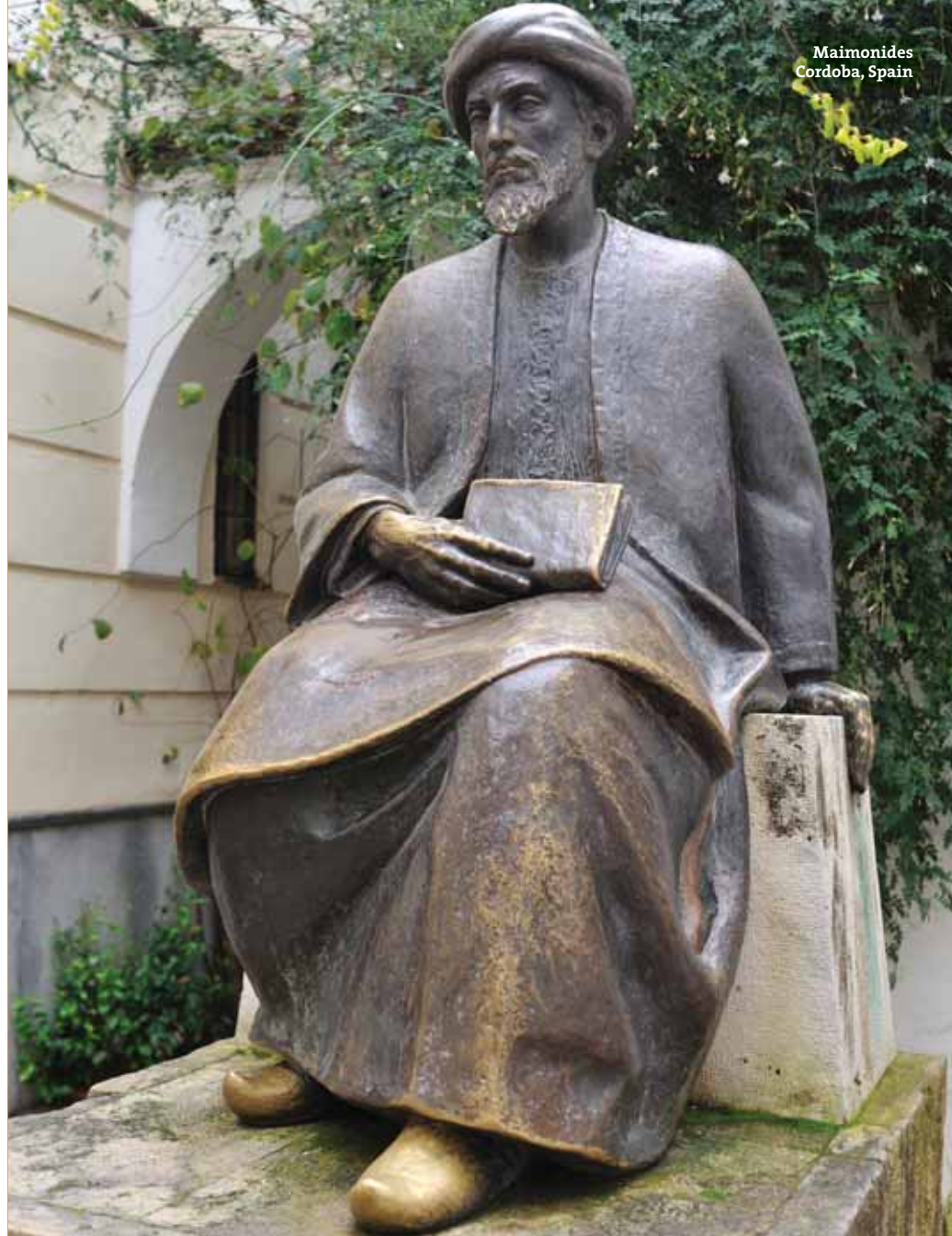


children it might be “someone I can talk to about things that matter” or “someone I know will look out for me,” or “someone for whom I am responsible” (and of course these are not mutually exclusive). Reflecting on concepts in use in this way enables children to form a worldview and gain mastery and nuance over their lives, to grow as a person.

Exploring the meaning of philosophical concepts and ideas in Tanakh offers students new interpretative possibilities for the text—for instance, when thinking about the relationship between Jonathan and David, or Naomi and Ruth. By exploring the way friendship is enacted in the Bible between different characters, the students come to interpret themselves within the categories of their canon. In this way it brings together two semantic fields—the world of the child and the world of the tradition.

I came across a good example of this when walking down a primary school corridor—the 4th grade was getting ready for a field trip and the teacher was rushing the children to grab their bags and water bottles and get to the bus. One child turned to another and exclaimed “What is this? An exodus?” The child had internalized the meaning of exodus as an interpretive structure for their own life. This is one of the reasons that Tanakh is such a rich text for philosophical investigation, for it gives expression to the full tapestry of life: family, leavings and homecomings, births, deaths, trickery, bravery, enemies, law and lawlessness, freedom, destiny, longings and regrets, topics that are both deeply human and beyond the human. Focused on life, it is a text infused with philosophical potentiality.

In Philosophy for Children, discussion typically takes place in a circle with the students maintaining openness to interpretative possibilities. It is a space where, after a good discussion, students may not have come to have their question answered but leave satisfied that they have made progress with it, perhaps by realizing more fully what is implicated in the question they were exploring, or by becoming more sophisticated and nuanced regarding the meaning of a concept they were exploring,



**Tanakh is such a rich text for philosophical investigation, for it gives expression to the full tapestry of life: family, leavings and homecomings, births, deaths, trickery, bravery, enemies, law and lawlessness, freedom, destiny, longings and regrets.**

or by seeing connections that hadn’t had previously occurred to them.

#### COMMUNITIES OF INQUIRY

The community of inquiry is a collaborative space where students put forward and

test out ideas with one another as they delve into the issue at hand. It is a space where thinking is guided by four Cs—collaboration, care, creativity and critique—and where *thinking for oneself* happens by participating *as a member* of a thinking

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community. It is based on the underlying idea that we develop our autonomy (and our identity) through our relationships with others. As such, in a community of inquiry the emphasis is not only on developing good reasoning skills, but also on developing social skills and moral virtues that enable us to participate productively with others (especially others with whom we disagree).

## Students develop attentive listening and an ethos of responsibility where, even if they are not personally interested in a question, they bring themselves fully to it because it matters to another person in their community.

Practices within a community of philosophical inquiry will involve such moves as giving reasons for one's opinions, exploring consequences, active listening, making distinctions, and looking for alternate points of view. As a community it also means helping others in the community make progress with their thinking—for instance, by helping another member of the group find the right words to express their idea, or by suggesting an alternative, or helping to frame a question—and this means developing attentive listening and an ethos of responsibility where, even if you are not personally interested in a question, you bring yourself fully to it because it matters to another person in your community.

In an age of individualism that privileges self-sufficiency, one of the tasks of Jewish education is to educate students into community participation, both as active participants and as people who will assume responsibility for the communities of which they are part. In secular education, the pedagogical practice in communities of inquiry is seen as a form of citizenship education, and has been one of the strongest motivational forces behind the spread of Philosophy for Children.

One of the reasons why Philosophy for

Children is such a powerful mechanism for inquiry into Tanakh is that it employs a distinct “community of inquiry” pedagogy that combines four foci:

**The child:** making sure the inquiry is owned by the students.

**Procedures of inquiry:** wherein students learn how to identify and make progress with big questions.

**Systems of meaning:** in philosophical inquiry we have to figure things out for ourselves, but we do so in dialogue with other voices (present and past) who have engaged with these questions before us. Here specific attention is given to three meaning systems: that of the Jewish textual tradition, of the Western philosophical tradition and the meaning system of the child's own world.

**Social inquiry:** participating in a *community* of thinkers who are figuring things out together, rather than philosophy as requiring withdrawal from others, as captured in Rodin's *Thinker*.

In sum, philosophical inquiry with Tanakh responds to the following challenges of contemporary Jewish life:

Building vibrant communities engaged in the Big Questions concerning how we ought to live, both as individuals and communities.

Connecting Jewish learning to the development of Jewish identity.

Developing in students the capacity to make reasonable judgments as they negotiate their lives as Jewish Americans.

Empowering students to live as active engaged members of a Jewish

community for which they assume responsibility.

### WHAT IS A TYPICAL LESSON LOOK LIKE?

A typical session consists of a group of students sitting in a circle reading a biblical text together, with each child reading a line (thus turning a written text back into shared speech event). Then students raise questions of what they found puzzling or interesting in the text, which form the agenda for discussion. In the inquiry students draw upon carefully constructed plans and exercises which help maintain focus and encourage depth of discussion. These open up the field of meaning around concepts—both within the child's world and from within the tradition. Additional written material, Jewish sources, images and recordings are also used to stimulate or further inform the inquiry. Drawing and drama can also be used as a vehicle for extending the discussion.

An example of a child's question that might be raised and explored with parashat Bereishit: “What does it mean when it says “and God says that this was good”?”

This could then lead to a discussion of the concept of *good*.

Sample Discussion Plan (3rd grade): What does the word *good* mean in the following situations?

Your mom says, “Our car is a good car”

You finish painting a picture, stand back and say, “This is a good painting”

You take a bite of an apple and say, “Mmm, what a good apple”

Your teacher says, “You are such a good girl”

You get good grades

Sarah says, “You are such a good friend”

You consider a particular toy good to play with



These questions open up different possible meanings of the term good (reliable, “just as I wanted it to be,” “just as it should be,” morally good, compliant, achieving a high standard, “brings out the best in me,” loyal, interesting, to name but a few). The students return to the text and ask themselves how each of these meanings changes their understanding of the world God created and the relationship between God and what God created. The students might then turn to other biblical passages where the term *tov* appears and discuss which of these offer insight into the Bereishit text.

They might then discuss what it would take to care for the world, to look after it in light of these meanings, and finish the class with an activity where student draw one of the days of creation according to their own interpretation of *good* in the

## The students ask themselves how each of the meanings of “good” changes their understanding of the world God created and the relationship between God and what God created.

text. While the examples in the discussion plan would change depending on the age of the child, the meanings they put forth will not change, since the various kinds of good are interesting to people at all ages. The question “What is good?” is one we can keep going back to because it is a philosophical question that remains with us throughout our lives. ■

### TO LEARN MORE

*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on Philosophy for Children: plato.stanford.edu/entries/children

The Israel Center for Philosophy in Education: [philosophy4life.org](http://philosophy4life.org)

“Thinking Together: Developing Communities of Philosophical Inquiry around Parshat Hashavua”: [covenantfn.org/grants/grants-past-recipients/grants-2011](http://covenantfn.org/grants/grants-past-recipients/grants-2011)

The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children: [cehs.montclair.edu/academic/iapc](http://cehs.montclair.edu/academic/iapc)

For a sample curriculum unit: [tinyurl.com/6pun52v](http://tinyurl.com/6pun52v)

## JCAT Welcomes Four New Schools into the Program!

**R**AVSAK is pleased to welcome four new schools into JCAT, the Jewish Court of All Time.

Adelson Educational Campus (Las Vegas, Nevada)

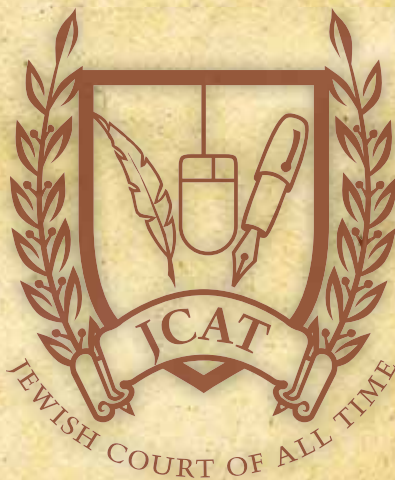
Chicago Jewish Day School (Chicago, Illinois)

Ronald C. Wornick Jewish Day School (Foster City, California)

Samuel Scheck Hillel Day School (North Miami Beach, Florida)

These schools join the twelve that have already taken part in the program, for a cohort of sixteen RAVSAK schools connecting through JCAT!

Teachers from these schools will travel



to Ann Arbor for a teacher training seminar in using JCAT, run by professors from the Universities of Michigan and Cincinnati. They will learn about the goals, steps, methods and educational resources of JCAT, become familiar with the multifaceted online

platform where students participate and interact, discover the roles that graduate students play in mentoring their students, and plan how to integrate this program within the pre-existent classes within which the program will take place. They will also learn about the professional development that takes place through JCAT, thanks to the conversations facilitated by faculty at the University of Cincinnati.

JCAT is RAVSAK's dynamic, cutting-edge program for the teaching of Jewish history in RAVSAK middle schools. The program is funded through the support of a Signature Grant from the Covenant Foundation. To learn more about the program, contact Dr. Elliott Rabin, RAVSAK's director of educational programs, at [erabin@ravsak.org](mailto:erabin@ravsak.org). ■

# Staying Abraham's Hand: On Withholding Disturbing Biblical Texts

■ by **ORA HORN PROUSER**

Many passages in Tanakh present considerable challenges to the reader for a host of reasons. This article suggests some tools to help student struggle successfully with those texts.

I am frequently confronted by adults who learn about biblical texts that are disturbing, and who cannot believe that they have never heard of them. They wonder what else they don't know, and why their educators chose to keep certain texts from them. While I understand their frustration, I also know that one of the most challenging parts of designing a Bible curriculum is choosing which texts to teach. No matter what we choose, we know that we are omitting sections that are essential to the education of our students. Regardless of how many hours are spent on teaching Torah in the school, we still come away feeling that there are very important texts that we have neglected.

While working on the MaToK curriculum sponsored by United Synagogue and The Jewish Theological Seminary, we discussed this very topic: what to include and what methods to use with the different texts. One excellent educator joked that she thought we should spend all twelve years of Torah study in day schools just covering Genesis 1-3. Then, she said, we could really do it well, and include all the areas that we thought were necessary. Though she was being facetious, there was a compelling truth beneath her words. If we had been asked to create a comprehensive curriculum for twelve years based on just those three chapters, it would have been possible.

But any Bible curriculum which is time-limited must exercise textual triage and

it is common to omit disturbing biblical narratives. Even those who include these difficult texts often do so in a way that circumvents or minimizes their disturbing nature. I would like to consider, however, the very important role that these disturbing texts might constructively play in Bible curricula.

Biblical texts can be disturbing for a range of reasons. For example, they can make us ethically uncomfortable, they can cause us to look at our "biblical heroes" in unflattering ways, or they can conflict with our modern sensibilities and understanding of the world. But there are ways to deal with such unsettling texts that can apply as teachers of Hebrew Bible discharge their sacred task.

One method of confronting disturbing texts is to look at them in their historical context. That does not mean that one need read them as historically accurate. Rather, when they are consciously read as products of a time period very different from our own, new understandings of the moral or emotional difficulty in the text may well present themselves.

A classic example applies this methodology to the biblical law of *lex talionis*. The Bible states clearly that there should be retributive justice for murder and injury: "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for

tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise" (Exodus 21:23-25). Some feel that this represents a difficult moral concept, as evidenced by the fact that rabbinic law interpreted this text as the need to pay monetary compensation, not literally to maim perpetrators. However, when one reads this biblical injunction in the context of ancient Near Eastern legal codes, it becomes clear that it was actually a major step forward in penal law.



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Many ancient Near Eastern law codes, including the well known Code of Hammurabi, base punishments for crimes on the social status of the perpetrator and the victim. Crimes against those of high station were punished more heavily, especially when committed by those of lower social status. Thus, when the Bible states that every eye is of the same value, rather than it being a law we find troubling and in need of reinterpretation, it can be seen as a major moral advance, a truly progressive step in the march of civilization. The statement that every eye is of equal value asserts the value of every human life, and the dignity of every individual. Studying the ancient Near Eastern context allows for an instructive and deeper appreciation of what at first appears to be a disturbing text.

Another method of approaching disturbing texts is to address them anew,



from a non-classical interpretive framework. Sometimes, our reading of Bible is filtered through an interpretation that has been passed down for centuries, and our inability to see past that interpretation can lead to difficulty. Approaching the texts anew, without exclusive recourse to its exegetical history, changes the conversation presented by the text.

A good example of this is the very difficult narrative of the Binding of Isaac in Genesis 22. Readers of this text have long been troubled by the actions of both God and Abraham. The questions are well known to all of us. How do we understand a God who asks a man to sacrifice his son as a test? How do we make sense of an individual's willingness to place his son on an altar? Traditional commentators address these questions in a variety of ways. Some portray God as helping Abraham to show how loyal he really was. Others defend God by saying that a test was really necessary based on Abraham's earlier behaviors, perhaps not focusing on God enough after the birth of Isaac. For many readers, these types of answers do not satisfy our struggle with God or Abraham.

The willingness temporarily to put aside traditional interpretations and address the text anew can lead to alternative explanations. For example, the approach that Abraham was testing God as much as God was testing Abraham paints a very different picture of Abraham. By reading Abraham's statement to his servants that both he and Isaac will return together after their sacrifice (Genesis 22:5) as truthful and confident rather than evasive and deceptive, we can understand that perhaps Abraham had no intention of sacrificing his son. To the contrary, Abraham wanted to make sure that the God to whom he was devoting his life would not really ask him to go through with this horrific action.

After all, God had already promised that Abraham's descendants would come from Isaac (Genesis 21:12), and if Isaac were to die, God's covenantal promise could not be fulfilled. Why, Abraham thought, would he sacrifice his son to such a deity? If, as this nonstandard reading of the



Sacrifice of Isaac,  
by Rembrandt, 1636

**For many readers, the traditional commentaries on the Akeidah do not satisfy our struggle with God or Abraham in the story. Perhaps Abraham was testing God as much as God was testing him? Or what if we understand Abraham as having failed the test?**

Akedah suggests, Abraham were waiting for God to stop him, but ultimately had no intention of sacrificing his son, we are presented with a very different understanding both of Abraham as a character and of the difficulties in this text.

Similarly, we might understand Abraham as having failed the test. What if we assume that God was dismayed that Abraham had been willing to "sacrifice" every member of his family? He already allowed Sarah to

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be taken by two different monarchs, and he sent away Hagar and Ishmael. Perhaps God is waiting for Abraham to say no, he is not willing to sacrifice another member of his family. Could God be waiting for Abraham to plead to be taken instead of his son? Abraham, however, made no such moves or gestures, and did not stop until God stopped him, thus failing the test. This can be supported by a pattern of distancing evident in the narrative.

## Showing our willingness to wrestle lovingly, carefully, and intimately with the difficulties in our sacred literature is in and of itself an educational statement: that we consider the whole Bible to be Sacred Text, even when we find it complicated.

While God spoke with Abraham in the beginning of the chapter, it was only an angel who stopped Abraham in the later verses, and God does not speak with Abraham again. If we read the test in this way, then, a very different understanding of God and what is desired for humankind by the Divine emerges.

Of course, there is a lot more behind each of these readings, but for our purposes here, what is important is that by putting aside the traditional reading, and reinterpreting, the text takes on new meaning, and the difficulties, though not entirely resolved, are significantly altered.

There are other times that the disturbing nature of the text is such that reinterpretation or rereading do not help us with the difficulties. There are times that our devotion to the biblical text compels us to confront it clearly and honestly. That is, even if it were possible to interpret the text differently, or, to understand it in its historical framework, the current popular understanding is so damaging to modern sensibilities that it needs to be faced. Sometimes, the only answer we have to a disturbing text is to affirm that there are statements in the Bible that seem to encourage behaviors that we do not accept today.

A good example of that is when we read the narratives of Hagar and Hosea. In both of these cases, we have divinely condoned abuse of a woman. Hagar is abused by Sarah, and, after her life becomes so miserable that she flees, she is told by God to return to Sarah and to continue enduring the abuse. In the Hosea narrative (chapters 1-2), Hosea's relationship with his wife Gomer, which is developed as a metaphor for God's relationship with Israel, is described

in terms of abuse. Gomer is verbally abused, her food, drink, and travel are restricted, and she is publicly humiliated. There is also a succession of loving and abusive language which parallels what is often seen in abusive relationships.

While commentators have long sought to explain away the difficulties in the story of Hosea and Gomer, insisting that this is simply an allegory, and never actually happened, that does not really solve the problem. The question of whether this occurred in real life is secondary. God condoning expressions of spousal abuse is difficulty enough. Commenta-

## Sometimes, we need to affirm that there are statements in the Bible that seem to encourage behaviors that we do not accept today.

tors also rightly make the point that this text worked in its original context specifically because it was meant to be shocking. If it were the norm to treat women in an abusive way, this text would have lost its power. We certainly do not need to assume that behaviors described in Hosea were reflective of the norms of the day. That, however, only helps to a point.

What do we do with this dilemma? In my opinion, we need to make a point of focusing on these very difficult texts, study them in all of their contexts, and then be willing forthrightly to state that we are troubled as individuals and as a community by the language and ideas. It behooves us, especially in light of the all too real issue of spousal abuse in our world, to speak up and state that we as devoted readers of Sacred Text, and as a Jewish community, do not support this type of behavior.

Ultimately, in each of these cases, the process involves making a principled point of studying disturbing texts. Showing our willingness to wrestle lovingly, carefully, and intimately with the difficulties in our sacred literature is in and of itself an educational statement. It shows our students that we consider the whole Bible to be Sacred Text, even when we find it complicated. It also gives our students the opportunity to confront those difficulties together with us. Why should we have adults with strong Jewish educations wondering how it is possible that they never heard about some troubling text that was just brought to their attention—wondering if their longstanding relationship to Bible was built on deception and less than full disclosure? Why not provide children the tools to struggle with our most important texts?

By making a point of addressing these complicated texts together with our students, whatever method or methods we choose, we are modeling our closeness

with the Bible, which is, at least in my opinion, one of the indispensable goals of study. Yes, we want our students to grasp the text, to be able to understand methodological approaches, and to have some sense of beki'ut. Among our primary goals, however, should also be to develop an intimacy with the Bible that includes wrestling and cherishing, struggle and devotion. ■



## Victory for All at The Moot Beit Din Shabbaton

This spring, eighty students and their advisors from 21 schools throughout the US and Canada converged on southern Florida for this year's Moot Beit Din Shabbaton and competition. This year's students were in high spirits right from the get-go: they bonded over fun icebreakers, teamed up to create rap songs, were unafraid to don amusing hats and glasses, and took a boat tour of the Intercoastal Waterway in Fort Lauderdale while shouting "Support Jewish education!" to quiz-zical onlookers. They also knew when to take things seriously, giving of themselves during the chesed project where they cleaned up a riverside park, pouring their hearts into the student-led davening, delivering divrei Torah, studying advanced topics with the teachers, and erupting in spirited singing throughout Shabbat.

The students had worked hard to pre-



pare a challenging case concerning worker's rights. Each school's team comprised a Beit Din, a Jewish court, charged with solving the case using precedents from Halakhah. They submitted their psak, their written decision, in January and received an evaluation from the people in Florida serving as judges, the same judges who were present at the oral competition. The teams prepared for their presentations by condensing the argument, often enhancing it with informative and amusing visuals or by working it up into a dramatic scenario (the union organizer confronts the rabbi!). The judges asked them questions that required the students to think on their toes and push themselves to consider the consequences of their decision.

In the "case" of the Moot Beit Din, the cliché is true: every participant is a winner. A special mazal tov to this year's winners!

### Ruach Award

- Adelson Educational Campus (Las Vegas, NV)

### Group A

- First Place: The Weber School (Atlanta, GA)
- Second Place: TanenbaumCHAT - Kimel Centre (Toronto, ON)

### Group B

- First Place: Tarbut V'Torah (Irvine, CA)
- Second Place: Milken Community Jewish High School (Los Angeles, CA)

### Group C

- First Place: American Hebrew Academy (Greensboro, NC)
- Second Place: San Diego Jewish Academy (San Diego, CA)



*My three years at the Moot Beit Din have all been among the most uplifting Shabbats and most fun social experiences I've ever had, meeting so many great Jewish teenagers from around the US and Canada, forging friendships and learning from one another. Moot Beit Din has really shaped who I am today.*

**EYTAN PALTE**, student, The Weber School

# A Reform Approach to Tanakh Education

■ by **ERIC PETERSIEL**

The author shows the way that a Reform school approaches Tanakh, informed with resources from ancient Near Eastern scholarship and comparative mythology as well as within Jewish tradition.

It is somewhat paradoxical that I developed a Reform outlook on Torah from an Orthodox rabbi, but I was not the only one who found Rabbi B. Barry Levy's introduction to Jewish studies at McGill University an eye-opener. The only text for the course was a Tanakh, in any form, and the required reading was all 24 books of the Hebrew Bible. While I was familiar with Torah and certainly the major stories of Shoftim and Yehoshua, this class introduced me to the depth of narrative and human insight in the stories of the kings, the minor prophets, and the wisdom literature. The lessons driven home by Professor Levy continue to influence my thinking on how I understand Torah and have shaped the way holy text is taught at The Leo Baeck Day School in Toronto.

Leo Baeck, the only Reform day school in Canada, embraces an international mindset centered in critical thinking and was authorized last year as the only Jewish International Baccalaureate World School in North America. Inherent in this educational philosophy is the belief that multiple perspectives best enable us to deeply investigate any problem, an approach mirrored in the traditional Jewish dialectic of biblical interpretation. Two key messages which formed the basis of Professor Levy's teachings have helped to shape the way Leo Baeck approaches the study of Tanakh.

## **THE HEBREW BIBLE WAS NOT WRITTEN IN A VACUUM**

In addition to a close reading of Tanakh,

Rabbi Levy helped me to view biblical text and stories within a historical context. I developed a love of archaeology, studied ancient Near Eastern cultures and a range of Semitic languages, including Aramaic and Syriac. And just as he presented Tanakh to eager undergraduate students, we too teach our students to see the parallels between the holy text and the historical world around it. A familiarity with Hammurabi's Code and the Epic of Gilgamesh are more than useful in understanding the legal and literary context of Tanakh, a message we teach from a young age. The innovative nature of the legal and moral code presented in Torah, especially against the background of the day, is one aspect of the text which we must highlight for children. That it speaks so deeply to the formation of the morality code by which we live today also highlights the potential divine inspiration.

These few examples applied to Tanakh help us create a similar process for the study of all texts, ancient or modern. It is not dissimilar from the way our students study *To Kill a Mockingbird* together with students at The Davis Academy in Atlanta. Understanding the factors which influence how we read the context of any literature is a vital element for exploring the bias we put into our reading of a text; our Canadian students compare their understanding of this seminal work exploring racial inequality in the

South with the understanding of their peers from Atlanta.

Armed with a basic understanding of the world which surrounds the Ancient Israel presented through Tanakh, students can explore similar world literature in other cultures through the same lens. For example, students study a variety of examples of flood myths. A critical investigator



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of Torah cannot help but acknowledge that the flood story (or stories) presented in Bereishit is stunningly similar to those in a myriad of other cultures. Students must come to terms with how it is even possible that such similarity exists. They are able to hypothesize, just as scholars do, that perhaps this is evidence of the existence of a great flood, and we teach them other theories to help explain the phenomena.

## **THE BIBLE IS NOT A HISTORY BOOK**

Perhaps the greatest struggle we have in interpreting Torah in the modern world is our need for it to fit into the patterns of contemporary historiography. Using Joel Lurie Grishaver's classic material from Learning Torah to engage students at their level, Grade 7 students read the first two chapters of Bereishit side by side and compare the two stories of creation described there. They are often struck by the contradictions which must be "explained away" in order to make Bereishit read as a singular historical account. The most basic example is the presence





of water and then the sudden absence of it in the second chapter of Bereishit, which provides an opportunity to explore the reason for the existence of Torah, and how we find meaning in it. Professor Levy first opened the possibility for us that even the Masoretes had a variety of Torah texts before them from which to winnow a definitive scribal tradition, evident as far back as the disagreement in Kiddushin 30a as to which letter is the middle in the Torah (which simple counting demonstrates is far off the center of our accepted Masoretic text today).

Once students can accept that Tanakh is not linear or perfect, that it possibly uses parable as a literary technique and that in the ancient world two separate and contradictory stories of creation could exist side by side, they are forced to search more deeply for their own meaning in the text. For me this epiphany is the most satisfying moment in the study of Jewish text. Freed from the shackles of having to view Tanakh as a linear his-

## A critical investigator of Torah cannot help but acknowledge that the flood story (or stories) presented in Bereishit is stunningly similar to those in a myriad of other cultures.

tory of human existence and the Jewish people, the door is now open for each child, as it was for me, to move from a superficial acceptance of the historicity of Torah to a more mature study of the nuance and divinity in a text rife with apparent contradiction.

Armed with a modern approach to the study of Torah, our students must grapple with mature insights into the text and its impact on our Jewish lives. Rabbi Elyse Goldstein teaches that the average adult Jew's understanding of God is stunted and immature, as many have stopped considering theology seriously after celebrating Bar Mitzvah. If we similarly held onto pre-teen views of love, of adolescent

views of sex, how stunted would we be as adults?

Our job as educators is to equip students with the skills and background necessary to continue the quest into a mature understanding of the mysteries unveiled through the study of Jewish text, the most notable mystery being the role of God in our lives and our own Jewish identities. If straightforward logic demonstrates that Torah cannot be a trusted historical account, then what is left for us, for our students, to cling to? Giving students the tools to investigate such complex existential questions provides one of the core elements of our educational

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# Redesigning Tanakh Curriculum to Meet Our Students Today

■ by **BATIA DRAGOVETSKY-NEMIROVSKY**

A leading Jewish educator in Argentina approaches the problem of the Tanakh's relevance to students today by putting biblical sources in dialogue with songs and writings from contemporary Israel.

*e hashir she-saba shar et-mol le-aba, / Vehayom, ani...?* ("This is the song that my grandfather sang yesterday to my father. And myself, today?") From "Chai" by Ehud Manor

Until recently, the importance of Tanakh in Jewish education was a given. During lessons and conversations with young students, I used to say, with complete certainty, holding on to the sefer Tanakh with my hand: "With the writings in this book my forefathers have conversed. It has spoken to my great-grandparents and grandparents, my parents, it speaks to me and I trust that it will speak to my grandchildren."

And just as it is inferred from everything I learned while conversing with the text, I did not hesitate to take the verses of "Chai" (quoted above) in order to highlight the unbreakable bond between the Tanakh and each and every member of our people, no matter their religious convictions. At the time, those of us who worked in Jewish education insisted on recreating what we had experienced as students.

This possibility to dialogue, converse, disagree with the text and continue to interrogate it was, in my personal experience, always mediated by teachers who conveyed passion and love and opened the doors to insight and questions.

Where do we stand today?

In the dawn of the new century, we find

ourselves in a different scenario. Nowadays, the debate regarding values is not univocal as it was in the past, and every person who cares about Jewish education as a key to continuity should feel concern about Manor's question.

In my experience, there are few elementary schools that devote sufficient hours to Hebrew language instruction in order to enable students, as they grow up, to read the Tanakh in its original language, without excessive idiomatic difficulty.

In some educational settings, the study of the Tanakh transpires chapter after chapter, verse after verse, in the middle of a swarm of *bi'urei milim* (explanation of words); the content loses relevance and authenticity for the student, speaking in a different language, foreign, incomprehensible and strange. Some of the messages and stories are perceived by the students—and probably by the teachers as well—as fictions distant from the interests and questions that move them.

In regards to the educators, it is sad to say but many Tanakh teachers have never received formal training in the field of Tanakh pedagogy. They face challenges and difficulties in the classroom for which they have never been properly prepared.

The teacher is not a mere transmitter. He or she has to act as a mediator between the learners and the culture and symbolic

language of our people, so that the students can perceive their own closeness to and familiarity with our sources and be convinced that they belong to the world of Jewish tradition. This is not an easy undertaking. It requires not only a deep knowledge of the field but also the development of teaching-learning strategies enabling teachers to select appropriate materials to be used in class and an approach that is relevant to the student.

The appreciation of the Biblical text in its multiple interpretations should constitute to each of us teachers an unavoidable



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able commitment. We have to be able to feel "this matters to me, its message belongs to me, it enriches me, I wish to display it, transmit it and teach it. It is enjoyable and important to do so because I choose it for myself first."

We should encourage teachers to approach the study of the Tanakh from this perspective of dialogue with the text. A dialogue nurtured by questions related to the themes and issues that are relevant today and that allows us to rediscover, in the troubled times we face, the source of spirituality contained in the Tanakh.

When preparing to share the wonderful experience of reading the Tanakh with the young, we'd have to ask ourselves about them and their traits and interests: Who are the students? What are they searching for (and not only what we want them to know)? How can we help them shape their own learning journey?



How can we help them be aware of the resources and opportunities they can discover in this unending source of wisdom? How can we enable them to access and manage these possibilities?

Recently we celebrated Passover. If in our Tanakh classes Passover is reduced to the enumeration of customs and laws, the tale of the birth of Moshe and the exodus from Egypt, we would have just been good transmitters of "knowledge." If we can manage to work with our students (starting from their own personal experiences and their interests, using multiple resources) on the value that the concept of freedom has in our tradition and to our people; if we can explore the meaning of the formula *zeicher litziyat mitzraim* (a reminder of the exodus from Egypt) in our daily prayers; if we spend valuable time analyzing the role given to women in Exodus, we can probably add meaningfulness, relevance and authenticity to the experience of studying Shmot.

The teaching of the Tanakh and the adequate selection of what and how to teach continues to be an important matter to our Jewish education system. We know some of the issues that children and young adults care about: ecology, injustice, the horrors of war, hunger, the rights of the weakest, among other topics. Each and every one of these issues lends itself to discussion based on Biblical sources that are put in conversation with material from different sources, such as newspapers, magazines, prose and poetry, etc.

I propose the following text by singer/songwriter Ehud Banai as an example:

#### יום כדור הארץ

מדברים עבשיו לא מעט על מצבו העגום של כדור הארץ ואני שומע,  
בולם אומרים, חייבים בדחיפות לעשות משהו כמו: יום ללא מכונות,  
ללא רכבות, יום ללא מטוסים, יום ללא אוטובוסים ואופנועים, יום ללא  
עישון, יום ללא עשן, יום ללא מכונות כביסה, יום ללא מיבשי כביסה, יום  
ללא מדיחי כלים, יום ללא טלפונים, יום חיסכון באנרגיה, יום ללא ביטוח,  
יום ירוק, יום כחול, יום סגול, יום ללא תאונות, יום ללא עבודה, יום ללא  
לחץ, יום עגול.

ואני אומר:

יש לנו יום כזה מאז שאנחנו זוכרים את עצמנו כעם.  
יש לנו יום כזה מאז ומתמיד. מאז שנברא העולם.

יש לנו את השבת, כן, שבת, רבותי, שבת!  
שבת זה הרי היום הטובאלי למען כדור הארץ.  
זה טוב לאויר, זה טוב לאדמה, זה טוב לכביש, לים, למים ולרוח לנשימה  
ולנשמה, זה זמן איכות לסביבה, זמן איכות למשפחה, זמן איכות למנוחה...

"ויברך אלוקים את היום השביעי ויקדש אותו"  
כי בו שבת מכל מלאכתו אשר ברא אלוקים לעשות"

#### EARTH DAY

*These days we speak a lot about the sad state of the Earth and I hear everyone saying, We need to do something fast like: a day without*

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 24]

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*cars, a day without trains, a day without planes, a day without buses and motorcycles, a day without smoking, a day without smoke, a day without washers or dryers, a day without washing machines, a day without telephones, a day to save energy, a day without cooking, a green day, a blue day, a violet day, a day without accidents, a day without work, a day without pressure, a round day.*

*And I say:*

*We have such a day from the time that we remember being a people.*

*We have such a day from that time and forever. From the time the world was created.*

*We have the Shabbat, yes my friends, Shabbat!*

*Shabbat is the perfect Earth Day. It's good for the air, good for the earth, good for the highway, for the sea, for the water, for the wind and breathing and the soul; it's the time for environmental quality, family quality, rest quality...*

*"And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy*

*For on it He rested from all His work that God had done."*

We'll promote a dialogue about this situation and search, within Banai's text, the references taken from the Tanakh.

We begin our path though the tale of the initial harmony of the creation, the seventh day of Shabbath, and highlight the verb לעשות, *la'asot*, to do or make (Bereishit 2:3). We include the dimension of human responsibility toward the earth: *leovda uleshomra*, to work and protect it (Bereishit 2:15). We continue

**To set forth a new way of teaching Tanakh, based essentially on meaning rather than only in knowledge, routine and skills, will be one of the keys to reach the general objectives of Jewish education in the Diaspora.**

by highlighting precepts from Tanakh such as shemittah (sabbatical year) and yovel (jubilee year), and by guiding students to study this verse in chavruta: "For the land must not be sold in perpetuity, for Mine is all the land" (Vayyikra 25:23).

Let's share our thoughts with the entire group and listen to the multiple views and interpretations of our students, influenced by their own experiences. When we close the activity, we can summarize the voices of the texts:

*First and foremost, our tradition proposes that the earth and everything it houses it a creation of God. The existence of this world has not been decided by human efforts, nor does it exist only for our benefit. God created this world and the life in it and we are the temporary inhabitants of this planet.*

*We, as creatures with free will, are the only ones responsible for the order established in creation, and our duty is to care and work for it.*

During a great part of the 20th century

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 33]



## RAVSAK Announces the Launch of Reshet ECE

The first of many anticipated networks of professionals and lay leaders has taken wing! Reshet ECE, a network for Early Childhood Education, held its first conference call on May 22nd. The network will hold monthly conference calls on issues of vital relevance to our schools and host its own listserv.

The purpose of this new network of practitioners is to provide mutual support and shared learning in order to make early childhood education in our

schools as exceptional and enriching as possible. Topics of discussion might include models of effective practice, important new research, the sharing of curricular and other resources, school promotion, tuition and affordability, as well as common challenges faced by the field. Most important, the participants in Reshet ECE set the agenda.

Our thanks go to Debby Kinman-Ford, the head of school at B'nai Israel Community Day School in Gainesville, Florida, for spearheading this network.

Anyone who is the administrator of your school's early childhood program, whether a specially designated ECE director, or a principal or head of school with responsibility for those years, is welcome to take part in Reshet ECE. Contact Dr. Elliott Rabin at [erabin@ravsak.org](mailto:erabin@ravsak.org) to add your name to the network.

Don't miss out on this exciting opportunity to strengthen your school by strengthening the field of Jewish education! ■



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# Advancing 21st Century Skills through Tanakh Education

■ by **SHARON FREUNDEL**

Freundel shows a process that schools can take to bring Tanakh education in line with the aims of today's leading educational theorists.

One of my Tanakh professors, in defense of his chosen academic specialty, would say, "Everything else is around it or about it; this is IT." Community day schools have no better way to instill knowledge of and commitment to our Jewish heritage than to engage students in the study of the ancient texts of Torah, Nevi'im and Ketuvim that we all share. How we teach IT will make a meaningful difference in how our students relate to Tanakh now and in their future lives. Twenty-first century pedagogical practice can guide us on how to assure that our lessons instill a Torah perspective into our students' lives.

In his book *The Global Achievement Gap*, Tony Wagner posits that our students must acquire and develop seven skills to succeed in today's world: critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration across networks and leading by influence, agility and adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurship, effective oral and written communication, accessing and analyzing information, and curiosity and imagination. Current thinking stresses that when we do not have a destination in mind before we begin a journey, we may end up anywhere. If we are not mindful of what we want our students to know and to be able to do, they could end up with the "achievement gap" that Wagner addresses.

The Tanakh Standards and Benchmarks Project of the Jewish Theological Seminary has provided tools to help us determine our destination. In this approach,

the teacher first figures out what he or she wants the children to know and to be able to do. Following that, the teacher identifies big ideas (BIs)—also known as enduring understandings—and essential questions (EQs) relevant to the unit the students are going to encounter, and a performance assessment based on Bloom's Taxonomy, utilizing both basic knowledge and higher-order thinking skills. Only after this initial reflection and work does the teacher create lesson plans, always keeping in mind the big ideas and essential questions.

The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital is in its second year of using a Standards and Benchmark approach to the teaching of Tanakh. We teach primarily to two standards: "Students will become independent and literarily astute readers of the biblical text in Hebrew," and "Students will develop a love of Torah study for its own sake and embrace it as an inspiring resource, informing their values, moral commitments, and ways of experiencing the world." Through both the content of Tanakh and the process of learning with Standards and Benchmarks, our 21st century children move forward in the journey of acquiring the seven skills mentioned above.

## CRITICAL THINKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING

By definition, learning the peshat (literal) meaning of a Torah text and figur-

ing out what the Author is telling us and what moral messages we may glean from this represent exercises in critical thinking and problem-solving. Standards and Benchmarks advance these skills through the formulation of EQs and BIs. For example, when learning the story of destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Bereishit 18-19), students encounter big ideas such as "Take responsibility to do what is right" and "Actions have consequences" together with essential questions like "To what extent are we responsible to help others?" and "To what extent are we responsible for other



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people's actions?" With guided instruction and independent practice, students confront these and other major ideas which develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Such questions as "Was Avraham right to argue with God?" and "If you were Lot, what would you have done?" make even young students confront tough issues.

## COLLABORATION ACROSS NETWORKS AND LEADING BY INFLUENCE

Chavruta learning provides a method of teaching collaboration. Whether students are in chavruta to read and translate text or to dissect pesukim and the messages contained in them, they learn to listen to someone else's opinion, express their own, and come to some sort of accord to present their findings to the class. The dialectical discussions in





chavruta are intrinsic to Jewish learning, as illustrated in Chagigah 16a: “Hillel and Menachem did not debate; Menachem left and Shammai entered.” We know about Hillel and Shammai precisely because they disagreed. Who has ever heard of Menachem?

#### AGILITY AND ADAPTABILITY

In the early grades, students learn Tanakh stories such as those of Creation, Noah’s Ark, the forefathers and foremothers, and the slavery in Egypt and redemption from it. They may learn parashat hashavua, being exposed on a weekly basis to stories from both peshat and derash perspectives. By third grade, they need to confront the text differently, as the approach to text will change. In addition to listening to stories, they learn to read and parse the verses, drawing meaning from each word, and to differentiate between the text itself and midrashim derived from it. For some, this is a stark awakening. For others, it offers an exciting development. Once the

In Task 1, students produce a comic strip which summarizes the story beginning with Avraham’s conversation with God and ending with Lot’s escape from the city. Task 2 is an advice column for Lot, Task 3 an editorial on whether Lot should have been rescued.

teachers add the layer of parshanim, the students possess another methodology for delving into the Torah text, while still utilizing previously learned methodologies, developing their agility in applying different modes to learning Tanakh.

#### INITIATIVE AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Once the children have been introduced to the methodologies of Standards and Benchmarks, the teachers give them more latitude to make the texts their own, whether by coming up with their own EQs and BIs after perusing and chunking verses, or by responding to higher-

order thinking questions such as “What is the moral message that the Torah is trying to teach us in the story of Sodom?” Each child can relate to the text according to what resonates for him or her, and not infrequently, we hear from parents that their children have come home and shared what a particular text means to them.

#### EFFECTIVE ORAL AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Performance assessments are written using an engaging scenario, as explained

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below. Three tasks then follow: the first assessing basic knowledge and the other two measuring various skills as outlined in the next section. No matter what the scenario or what the tasks, at least a portion of every performance assessment in-

cludes a written assignment. For today's students, effective written communication will likely be key to any enterprise they undertake. Not only do they need to think through what they want to communicate; they must communicate it in an intelligible, coherent manner. In addition, during the course of each unit, teachers give a number of opportunities through class discussions and formative assessments for every student to compose and share both verbal and written thoughts and ideas.

**The approach encourages teachers to reflect much more about what they teach and how they teach it. It calls for more objective measurements of what the students have actually learned rather than what the teacher has taught.**

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### ACCESSING AND ANALYZING INFORMATION

Some of the first benchmarks in Standard 1—"students will become independent and literarily astute readers of the biblical text in Hebrew"—include "Knows the alpha-numeric of Hebrew," "Articulates the names and order of the Five Books of Moses in Hebrew," and "Differentiates between section, book, chapter, and verse of Tanakh." Having this knowledge allows the children to access and place the text. Additional benchmarks help them develop skills to facilitate analysis of the meaning of the text on multiple levels: "Understands verb prefixes and suffixes," "Identifies roots in verbs and nouns," and "Recognizes repeating words and roots." The benchmark skills for all of the standards are spiraling and cumulative. By the time the average learner graduates, he or she should be able to do an indepen-

dent leynung or translating, explaining, and analyzing a previously unseen text. The latter two skills in performance assessment measure how each student has mastered analysis and evaluation of the material learned in the Torah text. For example, in the Sodom unit, the three

### CURIOSITY AND IMAGINATION

tasks might be: writing a summary of the Sodom narrative, giving Lot advice on what to do when the residents ask him to turn over his visitors, and composing an essay about whether Lot was a tzadik or not and whether he deserved to be saved. These three tasks incorporate both lower- and higher-order thinking skills.

As mentioned above, every performance assessment begins with an engaging scenario. This puts the students in an "imagination mode," so that the performance assessment becomes an exercise in creativity. Returning to the example of Sodom, the engaging scenario might be something like: "Archaeologists recently discovered remnants of a newspaper from the time of Avraham with the headline 'SODOM WAS DESTROYED!!!' Unfortunately, the newspaper was ruined because it was in the desert and left to the elements for 3,700 years. You, an expert in document restoration (the art of restoring the document to its original state), have been called in to recreate the following newspaper articles." Task 1 then becomes a comic strip which summarizes the story beginning with Avraham's conversation with God and ending with Lot's escape from the city. Task 2 involves writing an advice column on what Lot should do, and Task 3 calls for an opinion piece on the editorial page about whether Lot de-

served to be saved, including three reasons supporting the stated position with quotes from the Torah to back up the opinion. Each task comes with a mastery list, so that the student can check off each part of the task as they complete it.

Students report that they love learning using EQs and BIs and enjoy doing the performance assessments as well. They certainly assimilate more than they did with other methodologies. We have seen other advantages as well. The approach encourages teachers to reflect much more about what they teach and how they teach it. It calls for more objective measurements of what the students have actually learned rather than what the teacher has taught. The method is constructivist, with the students themselves uncovering a great deal of the knowledge and developing their skills.

We have also encountered some challenges with this approach. Each unit takes a great deal of time to develop. Even after a full unit has been written, it needs revision based on results of the performance assessments. Perhaps the assessment itself was confusing, or perhaps the results demonstrated that the students did not achieve mastery over the goals the teacher targeted for that unit.

Each unit also takes a great deal of time to teach. We have found that the minimum instructional time for each full unit is approximately one month, and the performance assessment can take up to five class periods to complete. Schools need to approach this methodology understanding that it lends itself to *iyyun* (depth expertise) rather than *beki'ut* (breadth expertise). This teaching approach fits most naturally if we look at Tanakh learning as a lifetime pursuit rather than as a grade school activity. If we truly instill Standard 8 ("Students will develop a love of Torah study for its own sake and embrace it as an inspiring resource, informing their values, moral commitments, and ways of experiencing the world") into our students, then indeed, they will spend their lifetimes learning IT. ■



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# Teaching the Seventy Faces of Torah

■ by ZIVA T. REIMER

The author advocates for using Tanakh to cultivate “cognitive pluralism,” the ability to hold two or more conflicting interpretations in mind without rushing to choose a “right” one.

While engaged in a lesson in a Shemot unit focused on parshanim (commentators), my students seemed visibly frustrated. We had spent the morning looking at two parshanim’s very different resolutions of a single textual ambiguity.

Although the commentators arrived at incompatible explanations of the text, the focus of the class was not on deciding between them. The ambiguity we were studying centered on an apparent repetition in the text and had no obvious resolution. There was no clear criterion by which to decide between the competing interpretations. For many of the students this was unsettling, and as we continued to study the two competing interpretations, some students seemed to become increasingly uncomfortable.

At the end of the class I followed up with the student I felt most concerned about. This student, who always contributes thoughtful and sophisticated insights to our class discussions, had spent the class in complete silence. I asked her if everything was alright. “Yes,” she said calmly, “I didn’t speak today because I don’t understand how I am supposed to learn Rashi and Rashbam’s commentaries on this verse if I don’t know *which one is right*.”

I felt a sense of relief. The struggle of facing a text with multiple compelling

interpretations without knowing how to choose between them was precisely the struggle I had intended for my students to experience. The dilemma was fitting for her age and developmental stage. My student felt that Rashi and Rashbam could not both be correct—one had to be right and one had to be wrong. She wanted to know which was which so that she could remember the right one and forget the wrong one. I could not give her an answer. Nor was I willing at that moment to give her a strategy for figuring it out. I wanted her to experience the struggle.

It is not unusual in a Tanakh class to encounter two conflicting interpretations. If we teach even two parshanim, we will inevitably present two conflicting readings. Each teacher has a choice about how to approach conflicting interpretations. Rather than seeking resolution, I choose to suspend my students between both readings. I actively encourage my students to refrain from siding with a particular commentary in my classroom and to consider what is compelling about each. I do not give my students steps to figure out which reading is right. I do not give them criteria for determining which interpretation of the textual ambiguity is better, be it textual criteria, moral criteria, or theological criteria.

I have a different teaching strategy with a different goal. I understand and appreciate my students’ need to have one,

uniquely right and true answer for any question—one right and true reading of any text. My goal is to push back against this desire. When a student is confronted with two readings, she responds with anxiety. She feels destabilized by not knowing which reading is right. The student then rushes into firmly supporting one of the readings. My strategy is to develop the students’ comfort with a liminal space. My goal is to teach the students how to be able to consider each reading before prematurely concluding that one reading is better than another. This pedagogical approach promotes the development of what I call *cognitive pluralism*.



Ziva T. Reimer teaches in the Biblical Literature Department at Gann Academy in Waltham, Massachusetts. She can be reached at [zreimer@gannacademy.org](mailto:zreimer@gannacademy.org).

I strongly believe that the development of cognitive pluralism lies at the heart of Jewish learning. The classic rabbinic expression of this is *shiv'im panim laTorah*, there are seventy faces to the Torah. Our job as talmidei Torah is to uncover those seventy faces. When Ben Bag Bag says in Pirkei Avot 5:22, “*Hafoch ba vefafoch ba dekula ba*,” “Turn it over and over, for all is within it,” he’s reflecting on the inherently multivocal nature of Torah.

We know this and experience this regularly in our Torah study. When we study the story of Moshe striking the Egyptian (Shemot 2:10-2:13) we are confronted with ambiguities in the text that invite many interpretive possibilities. Whether Moshe knows he is a Hebrew, whether Moshe intended to kill, whether the





The Rylands Haggadah: The Plagues of Wild Beasts and of Cattle Disease (right); The Plagues of Boils and of Hail (left), Catalonia, 14th century

Egyptian was striking the Hebrew in an unusual manner, all of these questions are left unanswered in the text. When we turn to our canon of commentary we are confronted with both condemnation of Moshe and defense. One midrash says that for this crime Moshe was not allowed to enter Israel, while another midrash fills in the ambiguities of the text to build a clear defense of Moshe's actions.

As we see, our tradition demands multiple readings. Yet how can we uncover all seventy faces if we can only tolerate a single reading at a time? The true richness of Torah study is the ability to appreciate the unique insight of each of the seventy faces. Through teaching my students the skill of cognitive pluralism, we grant them access to the full depth of Torah study.

Having made the case for teaching in this style, let me illustrate what facility with cognitive pluralism looks like. Here is a story of two students who, over the course of a year in my class, developed their skill of cognitive pluralism. One can see how they are able to use this skill to get at important identity questions. Last year, in a 9th grade class, I had two difficult students who both struggled in my class. One was a smart, angry, atheist student who refused to engage because he had decided that he did not belong.

The other was a smart, angry, Orthodox student who was reticent to engage because he was unsure whether Tanakh in a pluralistic high school qualified as "real Tanakh." Because of my belief in the power of text study I decided to make them a chevruta, a learning-pair.

Studying I Samuel chapter three, the two students quickly fell into a debate about whether Eli was gay. My atheist student eagerly expounded his theory that Samuel and Eli were in a homosexual relationship. His chevruta listened intently as he pointed out the various words in the text that supported his theory. Soon, his

**My student felt that Rashi and Rashbam could not both be correct. She wanted to know which was which so that she could remember the right one and forget the wrong one.**

chevruta responded with equal eagerness. The problem with this reading, according to the Orthodox student, was the misunderstanding of the meaning of the Hebrew root of "lie down." He explained to his chevruta that they need only do an intertextual Tanakh search to find its real meaning. The two students agreed to do the search together. In watching this process, I saw two students begin to explain

their identities to each other in a way that the other could hear. The medium through which they could express themselves was the study of Tanakh, the skill that allowed them to hear each other's experience was cognitive pluralism.

Through their comfort with generating multiple interpretations around the meaning of the text, my students were able to consider readings that might not toe their ideological line. My students could try on ideas through interpretations. Most significantly, they could begin to dialogue with one another about the issues that matter most.

In a Jewish and global world that has become increasingly divided and polarized, a good Tanakh education focused around cultivating the skill of cognitive pluralism serves as a strong defense against intolerance. Textual ambiguities in Tanakh can and should serve to develop the skill of hearing and considering other opinions—a skill that lies at the heart of Jewish learning and Jewish living. ■

# Of Rabbis and Rebbes

## Studying Torah Texts for Meaning and Jewish Identity

■ by **TZVI BERKSON**

In considering the different goals that schools have in teaching Tanakh, the author sees two primary models, one based in the acquisition of skills, the other oriented toward an engagement with meaning.

Imagine that you are at the Shabbat table with friends. The hosts are lovely people who send their children to one of the local Jewish day schools. “So, tell us something about the week’s parashah, Jacob,” the father asks his sixth grader. Jacob recounts the details of the week’s Torah narrative with verve. “The Jewish people became frightened when Moshe didn’t come down from Mt. Sinai after forty days and demanded that Aharon, Moshe’s stand in, make them a Golden Calf to lead them.” He can also name the specific gold items that were melted to make the calf, and whom they were gotten from. Then he tells you how the commentator Rashi explains the absence of Chur, the son of Miriam, who was also deputized by Moshe at the time. Father and mother beam with pride at their child’s accomplishments. You are most impressed at the little Einstein demonstration you’ve just witnessed.

Next week you are driving a mix of neighborhood kids, including Jacob, to Little League, when you overhear Michael, a student at a different Jewish day school, leading a conversation about having personal integrity in the face of peer pressure, as it relates to the latest Little League team crisis. Jacob is silent. You turn around at the next stop light and ask Michael where he learned about those things. “In Torah classes” is his reply. “Moshe left Aharon in charge of the Jewish people while he was up on Mount Sinai and he had to stand up to

everyone when they wanted to make a Golden Calf.” “I felt that Aaron did the right thing in trying to accommodate them slightly, given the circumstances. I think that there are times when you have to move your moral boundaries and give in a little bit, in order to prevent something worse from happening.” The light is about to change and you turn around. You ask yourself in disbelief, “Was that just a conversation with a sixth grader?”

The difference in what these two boys can do lies in the goals and objectives that the two schools have set as their desired outcomes. Jacob is being taught to know the book. His Jewish identity is being shaped in the mold of a classic talmid chacham—a rabbinic scholar, inward looking, encyclopedic in the Torah’s content and dedicated to the study of text for its own sake. Parents and teachers measure success by his ability to master the content sequentially and to recall it in detail, as well as master the language skills to access the text. Often, this group can assume that Judaism is already relevant for the identity of the student and that each experience of Torah study fortifies that; and if a child’s commitment to a Jewish identity is lacking, it can be increased through more text study.

Michael’s school aims to use the text to create a connection to other areas of life and intellectual pursuits through the

book. His Jewish learning experience is preparing him in the manner of a classic chassidic leader—a rebbe, outward looking and creatively engaged in all aspects of the human condition. In order to reach this goal, parents and educators are willing to negotiate the amount of material to be covered and the extent of Hebrew to be mastered. The student’s ability to make personal meaning of the text now is the criterion that drives unit planning. To this group of educators and the community they work for, the knowledge of content serves the goal of relevance and is not an end in itself.



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So, which one is better? Since one could quote the words of our tradition to support either side, ultimately, the answer lies in the school’s goals for teaching Tanakh. In other words, Tanakh educators must constantly ask, “Why do we want the students to learn this material?” “What is the impact the study of Tanakh will have on the choices the student will make in the future?” Generally, the answers to these questions lie deep in the hearts and minds of the teachers and administrators and are a well kept secret. Jewish day schools know it’s important to teach the Bible but rarely articulate why. Most faculties spend a lot of time discussing the question “How can we get the students to learn this material?” and rarely drill down deep to ask “What are the multiple motivations for why we should we teach this material?”



Of great help to our school in clarifying our goals were the Tanakh Standards and Benchmarks Project of the Melton Center at the Jewish Theological Seminary. After studying the standards, we decided that our school mission demanded that our students, first and foremost, experience the Tanakh as the “formative narrative of the Jewish people, past, present and future,” and that they consider it “an inspiring resource, informing (their) values, moral commitments and way of experiencing the world,” and to a lesser extent, those standards that address biblical Hebrew, theology, rabbinic interpretation and the land of Israel.

Our Tanakh curriculum spans the narrative of the Torah and early Nevi'im sequentially, highlighting those characters and events with themes that offer the most relevance to the students. In our curriculum, only the access skills, details and minutiae that align with the standards are included in a unit. This objective material is usually assessed in the formative stage with pen and paper. Application skills are assessed at the final stage through problem-solving activities that demand higher order thinking skills and require knowledge of the text and real world application. This is not to be confused with an abridged sequential curriculum, in which you exclude this Rashi

or that Ramban because they are difficult, or certain Biblical texts because they are not age appropriate. Rather, it means choosing the right text and the right Rashi or Ramban with the big ideas that can be explored and applied.

This emphasis on personal meaning raises the question, couldn't the students learn the same values from a well-crafted novel studied in English class? Aren't the lessons universal? You could argue that the

is what their ancestors did and what Jews all over the world do today. It is our hope that they will feel that the book is a part of the person that they are and will become.

It's been several years now that we've had this focus, and we continue to look for new themes in the texts. We have also found that over this time the student body's knowledge of content has also grown, perhaps because it is now learned

**Although they do not have to agree with every point of view found in Tanakh, as they shlep it to class each day and pore over it for years, they come to realize that this is their source of wisdom.**

Tanakh's values are uniquely nuanced or that it is the cultural identification with a Jacob or David that makes studying the Tanakh different. The answer I give is that while they are studying the Tanakh's universal lessons, they are simultaneously building a relationship with Judaism by studying our fundamental text in a formal way. Although they do not have to agree with every point of view found in Tanakh, as they shlep it to class each day, hold it, read it sequentially and pore over it for years, they come to realize that this is their source of wisdom. Talmud Torah

in a meaningful context. Recently, we interviewed a group of students about their academic experience in our school. When they described Judaic studies they commented that it was unique among the disciplines in that “it teaches you about yourself.” For us, the rabbinic expression *לא המדרש העיקר אלא המעשה*, “It is not the study but the deed which is essential” rings truest. In the end, it is important for Klal Yisrael to be made up of Jacobs and Michaels, inward and outward lookers, encyclopedic and creative minds, rabbis and rebbes. ■

## Redesigning Tanakh Curriculum to Meet Our Students Today

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the purpose, manifest or latent, of Jewish education was to make Jews more Jewish. A great part of the Jewish learning, including the selection of Biblical texts by schools, had been designed to motivate and make all Jews equals regarding the practice of Judaism. These objectives did not always respond to the fundamental questions that many Jews ask themselves today: Why does this matter to me? How can I add meaning and purpose to my Jewish identity?

Today we need to generate an approach to Judaism not as an endangered possession

that must be protected. Judaism is a rich, multidimensional system that favors living a good life. It must be explored from many angles, enriched with new concepts and perspectives.

To set forth a new way of teaching Tanakh, based essentially on meaning rather than only in knowledge, routine and skills, will be one of the keys to reach the general objectives of Jewish education in the Diaspora, so that we can go from question to affirmation:

*Ze hashbir shesaba, shar etmol le-aba, vebay-*

*om, ani: Ani od chai! (I'm still alive!)*

For us as educators today, the biggest and most substantial challenge we have to face is transforming each and every one of our students into true partners and co-creators of their educational experiences, so that they can question the text, question us, share their comprehension of some answers locked in it, open the door to new questions so that the poetry—shirah—of the Torah can be enriched by multiple voices and interpretations, that allow each generation to find places of inspiration between its lines. ■

# Constructing a Love of Learning: Constructivism in a Torah Classroom

■ by **BENJAMIN CZELADNICKI**

Czeladnicki finds the constructivist educational philosophy to be essential for Tanakh study and offers several exercises that exemplify this approach.

In Bereishit, after the first murder took place, God asked Cain, “Where is Abel, your brother?” Rashi explains that while God knew exactly what had happened between Cain and Abel, the purpose of engaging the murderer in conversation was to open a channel of communication. The goal of such an exchange was to have Cain, by his own volition, regret and repent his horrible actions. While this may seem like a basic understanding of an exchange between God and the first person to have committed murder, it is also an important lesson about how to communicate with those we want to teach and ultimately a Tanakh pedagogy that can be utilized in our classrooms. In Bereishit we find the first lesson plan containing constructivism, attempting to educate someone to learn something new.

“Constructivism” refers to the idea that learners construct knowledge and meaning as they obtain information. Constructing meaning is learning, and learning is internalizing information that has significance to the learner. Instead of God directly telling Cain that he should regret his actions and repent, God constructed a line of dialogue the purpose of which was to lead Cain to that knowledge on his own, thus generating a higher level of meaning.

Constructivist theory proposes to alter learning from a passive experience to an active experience. A constructivist syllabus creates learning exercises that re-

quire the learner to do more than simple information replication. Hands-on experience is necessary for learning, especially for children. Ideas can be transmitted through theory but have a greater impact when the learner is actively involved and is able to see the results of their labor. As the old proverb states, “Tell me and I will forget, show me and I may remember, involve me and I will understand.”

How does one go about increasing the level of active learning and involvement for Tanakh skills? In my fourth-grade Chumash curriculum a majority of the time is designated for the learners to discover the translation of verses on their own. These students already have a healthy knowledge of pre-

My role changes from being a “sage on the stage” to being a “guide on the side.” The students connect words together with the prefixes and suffixes that are present and then construct the translation. As a class, we review the verses together and find what translations are closest to the actual translation. Through trial and error students are exposed to what is considered proper translation and what isn’t.

How can such a model be applied to students who may not possess the prereq-



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uisite skill and knowledge? Modification and accommodation are the answers. If a learner has a less than average amount of root-word mastery, list the necessary nouns and verbs for that learner prior to

**In Bereishit we find the first lesson plan containing constructivism, attempting to educate someone to learn something new.**

fixes and suffixes and, on average, have a vocabulary of 200-300 classical Hebrew words. By giving them a list of the difficult words or WYRMs (Words You Rarely Mention, my students appreciate funny acronyms), the students can approach new, uncharted territory and discover the joy of translating verses independently.

the lesson. With the information readily available for them to use, such learners will be able to participate with learning exercises and internalize the root words they may not be familiar with through active learning.

A great exercise that demonstrates strong constructivist elements would be having



students translate and explain verses in the Chumash that they have not learned yet but contain vocabulary that they are familiar with. Another great exercise would be to send your students on a scavenger hunt in the perek that you are learning to find how many times a certain root word appears and seeing how the context changes the definition. With older students have them connect similar events or ideas that are expressed by commentators and compare and contrast them. The ultimate goal of this pedagogical strategy is to have the students increase their involvement, critical thinking and application.

People learn how to learn as they learn: learning consists both of constructing meaning and constructing systems of meaning. Another example is that if we know that a letter “vav” means “and” in the word *Vayomeir / and he said*, than we know that that same vav has the same meaning in the word “*Vayeilech / and he went*.” Each meaning we construct makes us better able to give meaning to other areas and by which can fit a similar pattern. Therefore, by allowing students to independently explore uncharted territory

within the Parashah that they are learning you are giving them an opportunity to “construct” their own definitions and meaning. Creating these opportunities for self-exploration within the Tanakh period will have a greater chance of teaching skills and develop longer lasting knowledge.

Another aspect that requires attention is who is doing the majority of the talking in the class. On the empirical level researchers have noted that people talk to themselves as they learn. The more that students have the opportunity to share thoughts and conduct a healthy dialogue the greater the chances for more meaningful learning. Classes that implement constructivism are more student centered and interactive as opposed to teacher-centered and passive.

We can see this most prominently in traditional centers of high-level Judaic studies. Learning partners are conducting lively discourses in their study of the Talmud and practical law and such exchanges are the basis for the models of higher learning. We are more likely to be successful in our efforts to educate if we recognize this

principle rather than try to avoid it.

Much of Western education is directed towards isolating the learner from all social interaction and towards seeing education as a one-on-one relationship between the learner and the objective material to be learned. In contrast, progressive education recognizes the social aspect of learning and uses conversation, interaction with others, and the application of knowledge and skill sets as an integral aspect of learning. This form of learning has been used since the reception of the Torah. The Talmud is replete with the retelling of incidents between the students and their rabbis and the exchanges that they had with each other. The lessons of our Tannaim and Amoraim were not merely disseminated, but observed, discussed and debated.

Learning is contextual. We do not learn isolated facts and theories in some abstract ethereal land of the mind separate from the rest of our lives; we learn in relationship to what else we know. A great learning opportunity for Judaic instruc-

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## Israel: A lifetime of memories

Alexander Muss High School in Israel (AMHSI) works closely with Jewish day schools and community organizations to customize an Israel experience that meets the school's and organization's educational philosophy and goals. AMHSI offers campus-based programs, travel programs, creative itineraries and committed educators who bring Israel's history to life. Through AMHSI, teens discover, explore and embrace their connection to Judaism as well as the people and culture of Israel.



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# Hebrew Poetry Contest

*The golden key to Jewish education is the Hebrew language. Bialik*

This quotation comes not from Mayim Bialik, the popular Jewish actress, but from the “other” Bialik, Chaim Nachman (who happens to be Mayim’s great-great-grandfather’s uncle). Bialik (1873-1934) has a strong claim to being the greatest Hebrew poet ever, certainly on most people’s short list. He achieved in poetry what Agnon did in his novels, adapting the language of the Jewish tradition to the issues and concerns of his Jewish contemporaries in the early 20th century. His poems range from tragic to comic, from heart-wrenching descriptions of pogroms and searing reflections on Jewish history and religion to fanciful ditties for children. His sublime, tranquil song “Shabbat HaMalkah” is still sung by many at their Shabbat table on Friday evenings.

Bialik wrote most of his Hebrew poems in Odessa, years before he made aliyah to Tel Aviv. (His house is a museum called Beit Bialik, located on Rechov Bialik.) As a Diaspora Jew, Bialik would have understood our students’ difficulty reading and writing in Hebrew. Hebrew was not his first language, and he grew up at a time when Hebrew was still primarily a religious language being consciously recreated into a modern tongue by an elite group of former yeshiva students who were *meshuga le-davar*, mad about Hebrew, primarily writers and ardent Zionists (often both).

RAVSAK’s Hebrew Poetry Contest aims to foster students who are *meshuga le-davar* over Hebrew. For indeed, as Bialik noted, Hebrew is the key to Jewish education. Without access to Hebrew, the treasury of Jewish writing and wisdom remains locked or at best just ajar. In order to embody the words of Jonah ivri anochi, I am a Hebrew, students not only need to be able to read the language, they also need to internalize it as a language for expression.

The poems in the following pages, chosen among hundreds of submissions, represent the flowering of Hebrew language instruction by dedicated teachers throughout the RAVSAK network. We want to thank especially this year’s judges, Professors Adriana Jacobs of Yale and Yaron Peleg of George Washington University, poets and scholars both, who plunged into the project with great enthusiasm. Perhaps some of these student poets will study with one of these professors in just a few years.

Next year we encourage all students in RAVSAK schools to submit a Hebrew poem to the contest!



## Elementary School

### FIRST PLACE | NONNATIVE SPEAKER

#### NOAM BEN GIDEON

MADISON JEWISH COMMUNITY DAY SCHOOL

MADISON, WISCONSIN

Rivka	רבקה
Resh - the head of Rivka	ר ראש של רבקה
Vet/Bet - the house of Rivka	ב בית של רבקה
Rivka	ק קול של רבקה
Kof - the voice of Rivka	ה השם
Hey - HaShem/The Name	

Yaron Peleg: A concise rendition of the image of Rivka by evoking images connected with her and her connection to the divine at the end.

Adriana Jacobs: I like the use of the anagram and the shape of the poem. The language is very spare and very evocative. Concluding with “ha-shem” is also interesting since the poem itself is built around Rivka’s name.

### HONORABLE MENTION | NONNATIVE SPEAKER

#### MOLLY KRULEWITCH

SEATTLE JEWISH COMMUNITY SCHOOL

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

Only Frog	רק צפרדע
Moses went to Pharaoh for the second time	פעם שנייה משה הלך לפרעה
Pharaoh said NO – I will not let you go	פרעה אומר לא – לא נותן להם ללכת
God was very angry	זה קצת מאוד מאוד
God sent many, many frogs	זה שלח צפרדעים הרבה, הרבה

### RUNNER-UP | NONNATIVE SPEAKER

#### RACHEL IZENSON

RONALD C. WORNICK JEWISH DAY SCHOOL

FOSTER CITY, CALIFORNIA

Miriam	מרים
My name is Miriam	השם שלי מרים
I am a prophet	אני נביאה
I am Jewish	אני יהודיה
I am a brave hero	אני גיבורה, גיבורה
My brothers are Moses and Aaron	האחים שלי משה ואהרן
My mom put Moses on the water	האמא שלי שמה את משה על המים
And I watched him	אני ראיתי אותו

# Hebrew Poetry Contest

**FIRST PLACE | NATIVE SPEAKER**

**NOY JACKONT**

ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL DAY SCHOOL

NORTHRIDGE, CALIFORNIA

## Brave Shimshon

A couple next to Jerusalem  
Had an amazing baby boy from Hashem,  
A good looking, healthy boy,  
Unique, special and a particular joy.

The parents chose the name Shimshon,  
Because he reminded them of the light of the sun.  
And so Shimshon grew up tall,  
Always first, leading and powerful.

God chose him to be a prophet,  
And gave him guidance and a plan  
To lead the Jewish people into the Promised Land.  
Shimshon led them perfectly and always stood out.

His source of energy came from his hair,  
Over the locks of his head he must always beware.  
“Don’t cut your hair and don’t tell anyone” was the law!!  
Lest his secret be revealed by flaw.

Shimshon follows all of God’s commands,  
And blessed God in public stands.  
The Philistines fought him by all types of methods:  
soldiers, trackers, women and threats.

Their methods didn’t work so well,  
To his power and wisdom there was no limit at all.  
His strong belief in the Essential One  
Protected him always from everyone.

With the power of his touch,  
He split a cub and removed honey from a beehive.  
He propounded a riddle to the Philistines,  
And let them find the solution in one week’s time.

“From the eater comes food to eat,  
and from the powerful comes sweetmeats.”  
At the end of the time no solution was found,  
So the Philistines attempted one last round.

They asked his wife to get the answer,  
And if not, they threatened to burn her by fire,  
If she didn’t cooperate and get the solution,  
Because the only one who knew it was Shimshon.

Delilah was the next wife in line,  
She was evil and didn’t decline,  
She nagged him at all times  
To reveal to her the secret line.

## שמשון הגיבור

לזוג הורים ליד ירושלים,  
נולד תינוק יפה עיניים,  
גדול בריא, מאוד חזק,  
תינוק יפה וענק.

את השם שמשון ההורים לתינוק בחרו,  
מפני שאת אור השמש הזכיר להם הוא,  
וכך גדל הילד שמשון,  
תמיד מוביל, חזק וראשון.

א-לוהים בחר את הילד להיות נביא,  
ונתן לו הוראות מה לעשות ומה להביא,  
להוביל את העם היהודי להיות חזק ושולט,  
שמשון את ההוראות מילא ולטובה התבלט.

כוחו של שמשון היה בשערו,  
לכן חובה עליו לגדל מחלפות ראשו,  
לא להסתפר אף פעם ולא לגלות לאיש,  
שמה יתגלה סוד כוחו היש.

שמשון פעל לפי הוראות הא-לוהים,  
וקידש שם ה' ברבים.  
הפלישתים נלחמו בו בכל האמצעים,  
חיילים, מעקבים, איומים ונשים.

דרכם להכשילו לא צלחה,  
לתבונתו וכוחו לא היו מנוחה.  
אמונתו החזקה בבורא עולם  
הגנה עליו תמיד מפני כולם.

בעוצם ידו שיסע כפיר אריות,  
ורצה דבש מכוורת דבורים חיות,  
לפלישתים במשתה הוא חד חידה בעניין,  
ולפתור אותה נתן להם שבוע זמן.

“מהאוכל יצא מאכל ומעו יצא מתוק,”  
שבוע של משתה הוא זמן מספיק לבדוק,  
בסופו של הזמן לא נמצא פיתרון,  
והפלישתים ניסו מוצא אחרון.

את עזרת אשת שמשון הם פנו לבקש,  
ואיימו כי ישרפו אותה באש,  
אם להם לא תעזור בפיתרון החידה,  
כי אותו רק שמשון ידע.

דלילה היתה האישה הבאה,  
אישה קשה ורעה,  
לשמשון היא הציקה מאוד,  
שיגלה לה את הסוד.

Yaron Peleg: The faithful rendition of the Samson story is made interesting by the richness of the vocabulary and the forceful and enthusiastic fullness with which the story is narrated.

Adriana Jacobs: Excellent rhyme and cadences. End rhymes, in particular, call attention to interesting images and tensions in the story.



## Middle School

### RUNNER-UP | NATIVE SPEAKER

**LEERAN GOLDIN**

**ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL DAY SCHOOL**  
NORTHBRIDGE, CALIFORNIA

#### Shimshon Hagibor

Shimshon Hagibor was a  
hero  
Until his hair was cut and  
his power was cut out  
with it.

Delilah was a wife for him  
People asked her to tempt  
him to tell her what was  
his power source  
When she found out what  
was his power source

Nothing well happened to  
Shimshon  
Shimshon what a wonderful  
person  
He was strong because of  
his hair.

#### שמשון הגיבור

שמשון הגיבור היה גיבור,  
עד ששערו נגזר גם כוחו איתו  
הלך.  
דלילה היתה לו לאישה.

הפצירו בדלילה לפתות את  
שמשון  
כדי שיגלה מהו סוד כוחו,  
אך כשזה קרה

מזה דבר טוב לשמשון לא יצא.  
שמשון איזה איש נהדר  
היה חזק בגלל השיער.

### HONORABLE MENTION | NATIVE SPEAKER

**KEREN HEL OR**

**GIDEON HAUSNER JEWISH DAY SCHOOL**  
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

#### The Snake

What did I do!?  
I was just being nice  
I gave Eve an apple,  
And she snatched it before my  
eyes!

Why be angry?  
That's what you want  
That there will be peace in the  
world,  
Or something like that?  
And what's with the punishment?

What's the idea here?  
Isn't it enough that I don't have  
any friends  
and that I'm crawling on my  
belly?

Why? Why? Why?  
I know it's annoying  
But if we won't ask  
We won't be in the knowing!

#### הנחש

מה אני עשיתי?  
בסך הכל הייתי נחמד.  
הצעתי תפוח לחוה,  
והיא חטפה לי מהיד.

למה לכעס?  
זה הרי מה שאתה רוצה  
שיהיה שלום בעולם,  
או משהו כזה!

ומה עם הענש?  
מה הרעיון?  
לא מספיק אין לי חברים,  
או שאני זוחל על הגחון?

למה? למה? למה?  
אני יודע שזה מעצבן,  
אבל אם לא נשאל,  
זה לא מעניין!

### FIRST PLACE | NONNATIVE SPEAKER

**SONIA MARIE GAYSINSKIY**

**RONALD C. WORNICK JEWISH DAY SCHOOL**  
FOSTER CITY, CALIFORNIA

#### Samuel

Samuel. Loyal, intelligent,  
courageous.

Samuel. One with the voice of  
God.

Samuel. One who follows the  
choice of God.

Samuel. Boy wonder of Hanna.

Samuel. Who taught King Saul  
through the wisdom of God.

Samuel. Teacher, loyal, wise  
and courageous.

Samuel. Who always judges the  
people of Israel.

#### שמואל

שמואל. נאמן, חכם, אמיץ.  
שמואל. אחד עם קולו של  
אלוהים.

שמואל. אחד שעוקב אחרי  
הבחירה של ה'.

שמואל. ילד הפלא של חנה.  
שמואל. מי לימד את המלך  
שאל באמצעות החוכמה  
של אלוהים.

שמואל. המורה, נאמן, חכם  
ואמיץ.

שמואל. מי לעולם שופט עם  
ישראל.

Yaron Peleg: The repetition of the name Shmuel at the beginning of each line surprisingly breaks the monotony of recounting the prophet's biography by paradoxically emphasizing his presence and uniqueness.

Adriana Jacobs: The repetition is powerful and reads like prayer. The repetition of the first line in the final stanza gives the poem a touch of rhyme that brings all of the lines together. The list emphasizes the qualities that make Shmuel an important figure in the biblical tradition while the repetition of the name emphasizes his individuality.

# Hebrew Poetry Contest

## Elementary School

### RUNNER-UP | NONNATIVE SPEAKER

**AUDREY IMELL**

**JEWISH DAY SCHOOL OF METROPOLITAN SEATTLE**

**BELLEVUE, WASHINGTON**

#### Ishma-el

Yitzhak is the favorite son,  
Of Abraham and God,  
And I and am here only for the sake of an arrangement,  
I am the planned child,  
Abraham loves me,  
But doesn't stop Sarah who doesn't want me,  
Yitzhak laughs at me,  
My name  
Ishma-el  
Is a lie  
I am here,  
But they don't hear me.

#### ישמעאל

יצחק הוא הבן האהוב  
של אבא והשם  
ואני פה רק בשביל העסקים  
אני הבן המתוכנן  
אברהם אוהב אותי  
אבל לא הפסיק את שרה  
שאותי לא רצתה  
יצחק צוחק לי  
השם שלי  
ישמעאל-א-ל  
הוא שקר  
אני פה  
אבל לא שומעים אותי.

### HONORABLE MENTION | NONNATIVE SPEAKER

**ZACH BERGER**

**RONALD C. WORNICK JEWISH DAY SCHOOL**

**FOSTER CITY, CALIFORNIA**

#### Noah the Savior of the Sad Monkey

Noah is a good man.  
Noah is the savior of animals.  
The dogs like Noah,  
The cats like Noah,  
But the monkey does not like Noah.  
Noah asked the monkey, "Why are you sad?"  
The monkey said, "Where is my brother?"  
Noah was surprised.  
The monkey said, "I like my brother and I want Bobo!"  
Noah said, "Bobo isn't here. Bobo is on the ground or in water."  
The monkey was screaming, "I WANT BOBO. WHY DIDN'T YOU BRING BOBO?"  
Noah said, "I only brought two monkeys. You and your wife."  
The monkey was sad, but happy. He expected a different life.

#### נח המושיע והקוף העצוב

נח איש טוב  
נח המושיע של החיות  
הכלבים אוהבים את נח  
חתולות אוהבות את נח  
אבל הקוף לא אוהב את נח  
נח שאל את הקוף - למה אתה עצוב?  
הקוף אומר - איפה אח שלי?  
נח מופתע  
הקוף אומר - אני אוהב את אח שלי ואני רוצה את בובו  
נח אומר - בובו לא פה  
בובו באדמה או במים  
הקוף צורח  
אני רוצה את בובו  
למה אתה לא מביא את בובו  
נח אומר - אני רק מביא שתי חיות  
אותך ואת אשתך  
הקוף עצוב אבל מבין  
והוא מצפה לחיים אחרים



FIRST PLACE | NATIVE SPEAKER

ABIGAIL AMIT

RONALD C. WORNICK JEWISH DAY SCHOOL

FOSTER CITY, CALIFORNIA

Noah's Wife

I really don't understand how I got here  
39 days have already passed  
My husband Noah was a righteous man  
Who wanted to be a lawyer  
One day he came from his studies  
And said, "Honey, the flood is coming rapidly, like a rocket.  
God wants to punish everyone  
And I'm the one He wants to save!"  
I thought that once again he's just telling tales,  
When He told me to call the boys  
He wanted us to build a giant ark  
Before there would be clouds  
He said we need to organize in pairs  
All kinds of animals in the world  
And to lead them into the ark  
In order to save them all.  
I hate all the animals  
And I'm allergic to all fur.  
They have lice and also fleas  
And they dig into the garbage.  
So there Cham and Yefet built the ark  
And now it started to drizzle.  
Noah shouted out to me, "Come help me!  
All the animals I am gathering!"  
In pairs, pairs the animals got organized  
And marched into the ark.  
And I love when it's quiet and clean  
Without any stink in the area.  
Noah, contrarily, loves the animals  
But he doesn't really work.  
I spend all day baking crickets  
And chopping up mice and straw.  
Now I'm serving the food  
To animals with sharp teeth.  
One must, when putting the food into the mouth  
Guard one's fingers.  
Just as I want to rest  
I need to collect the bucket.  
Because all that I've given them  
Came out the other side.  
Everyone calls my husband Noah  
"A righteous and innocent man."  
Only I ask myself,  
"Why isn't he a lawyer?!"

אשתו של נח

אני ממש לא מבינה איך הגעתי לכאן  
כבר עברו 39 ימים  
בעלי נח היה איש צדיק  
שרתה להיות עורך דין  
יום אחד בא מהלימודים  
ואמר, "מותק המבול בא כמו טיל.  
אלוהים רוצה להעניש את כולם  
ואותי הוא רוצה להציל!"  
חשבתי ששוב הוא מספר סיפורים,  
כשאמר לי לקרוא לבנים  
הוא רצה שניבנה תיבה ענקית  
לפני שיהיו עננים  
הוא אמר שצריך לסדר בזוגות  
כל מיני חיות בעולם  
ולחביל אותם לתוך התיבה  
כדי להציל את כולם.  
אני שונאת את כל החיות  
ואלרגית לכל פרווה.  
יש להם גם כינים וגם פרעושים  
והם חופרים בתוך האשפה.  
אז שם לם ויפת בנו את התבה  
ועבשיו התחיל לטפטף.  
נח צועק לי, "בואי תעזורי לי!  
את כל החיות אני אוסף!"  
בזוגות, זוגות היסדרו החיות  
וצעדו אל תוך התיבה.  
ואני אוהבת כששקט ונקי  
ללא סירחון בסביבה  
נח דווקא אוהב ת'חיות  
אבל הוא לא עובד ממש.  
אני כל היום אופה צרצרים  
וקוצצת עכברים וקש.  
עבשיו אני מגישה את האוכל  
לחיות עם שיניים חדות.  
צריך כששמים את האוכל בפה  
לישמור על האצבעות.  
בדיוק שאני רוצה לנח  
אני צריכה לאסוף את הדלי.  
כי כל מה שנתתי להם  
יצא מהצד השני.  
כולם קוראים לבעלי נח  
"איש צדיק ותמים."  
רק אני שואלת את עצמי,  
"למה הוא לא עורך דין?!"

Adriana Jacobs: "Poem retells a classic tale from an unexpected point of view. In this poem, Noah's wife offers different ways of understanding Noah's devotion to divine will. Wonderful balance of biblical language with contemporary diction."

# Hebrew Poetry Contest

## RUNNER-UP | NATIVE SPEAKER

**AVIA PAZ**

**GESHER JEWISH DAY SCHOOL**

**FAIRFAX, VIRGINIA**

### Atalia

Atalia just wanted to be queen  
She did not care about the rest of the kingdom, she was so mean  
Atalia was born to be royal  
Her husband, king of Judah, to whom she was not loyal  
She had killed her own family for no reason whatsoever  
She was such an evil queen, but probably very clever  
Atalia was crazy, desperate, and eager to rule  
Even though she had no reason, she was simply cruel  
Before she had died she was the only one  
Besides her grandson, Yoash, there were none.

### עתליה המלכה

עתליה רק רצתה להיות מלכה  
לא היה אכפת לה משאר בני הממלכה  
בעליה היה יהורם מלך יהודה  
וגם היא למשפחת מלכים נולדה  
היא הרגה את כל משפחתה ללא סיבה  
פזאת היתה, מלכה לא טובה  
היא היתה משגעת לשלטון  
גם אם לא היה בזה שום הגיון  
היא היתה השליטה היחידה  
עד שנהרגה והממלכה עברה ליואש נכדה.

## HONORABLE MENTION | NATIVE SPEAKER

**ZEV STRAVITZ**

**GESHER JEWISH DAY SCHOOL**

**FAIRFAX, VIRGINIA**

### Yosef

Yosef had a coat with many colors,  
He had himself and many others.  
He dreamt many times,  
That out of all his brothers, he was the prime.  
His brothers were mad that he had the coat,  
Especially because he would gloat.  
One day Yosef was sold,  
And at that point, his life was bitterly cold.  
In Egypt there lived a Pharaoh,  
But to them, Yosef was like a passing arrow.  
Pharaoh told Yosef one dream,  
And then Yosef's life was like a latte with lots of cream.  
Now Yosef had lots of work,  
And the only thing on his face was a big smirk.

### יוסף

ליוסף יש מעיל עם הרבה צבעים,  
ויש אחים גדולים וקטנים.  
הוא חלם הרבה פעמים,  
שהוא הכי טוב מכל האחים.  
האחים בועסים שהמעיל שלו,  
והם רוצים להרג אותו.  
יום אחד האחים מכרו את יוסף לזרים,  
והוא עבד במצרים הרבה ימים.  
במצרים גר פרעה,  
והוא חלם הרבה מאוד.  
פרעה ספר ליוסף חלום אחד,  
ועבדיו יוסף לא כל כך לבד.  
יש ליוסף הרבה עבודה,  
ונה לא רק יום אחד.



## FIRST PLACE | NONNATIVE SPEAKER

**Alec Delaney**

AMERICAN HEBREW ACADEMY

GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

### We Are Both Yitzhak

Both of our births were miraculous  
and blessed,  
Even though beforehand we were a  
joke, at best:  
A sign of life, a story of laughter and  
cheer,  
And, of course, something to which  
the power of love can attest.

Perhaps time has passed, and his  
house is far from here.  
But I promise that, if you check, it's  
quite clear  
That the two of us are more similar  
than one might guess  
And, between us, a bond, deep and  
dear.

Because everyone faces their own  
respective test  
And an arduous life without a  
moment's rest.  
But in every single person is a smile,  
And in all our names, a story  
expressed.

Yaron Peleg: The poem chooses to focus on the commonalities between the brothers rather than their differences, which are the gist of the biblical story. Original and refreshing.

Adriana Jacobs: The final stanza is quite beautiful. The rhymes are well executed throughout the poem but especially so at the end, where the poet demonstrates great restraint and economy. The idea of a common ground between brothers resonates poignantly in these times.

### שנינו יצחק

שתי לידותינו נס  
וברכה,  
אפילו שלפני זה היינו  
בדיחה:  
סימן של חיים, וסיפור  
של צחוק,  
ובנדאי הוכחה לכח  
של אהבה.

ואולי זמן עבר וביתו  
רחוק.  
אבל אני מטיח אם  
תבדוק  
שתראה ששנינו יותר  
דומים,  
ותראה שבנינו קשר  
עמוק.

כי לכולם יש מבחנים  
וחיים קשים וקצרים,  
אבל בכל אדם חיוך,  
ובכל שמותינו  
סיפורים.

## RUNNER-UP | NONNATIVE SPEAKER

**Noa Havivi**

AMERICAN HEBREW ACADEMY

GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

### Dina

They say that every person has  
a name.  
Mine? Dina.  
Even though my name means  
that God judged, I don't think  
he did a good job.  
What did he judge?  
That I would be different from  
everyone?  
That I wouldn't get rights?  
Why does no one remember  
me?  
Why didn't I get the same  
rights my brothers got?  
It was hard to grow up in a  
house full of boys; they played  
basketball and learned from the  
Torah with Abba all the time.  
They never would have  
dreamed of inviting me.  
It's hard to believe that I grew  
up with 12 boys and there  
aren't stories about me, right?  
I'm hardly even mentioned, like  
I wasn't there at all.

### דינה

אומרים שכל איש יש שם.  
שלי- דינה  
למרות שהשם שלי אומר  
שה' עשה דין, אבל אני  
חושבת שהוא לא עשה  
עבודה טובה.  
על מה הוא עשה דין?  
שהיה שונה מכלם?  
שלא אקבל זכויות?  
למה אף אחד לא זוכר  
אותי?  
למה לא קבלתי את אותן  
הזכויות שקבלו האחים שלי?  
היה קשה לגדל בבית מלא  
בנים, כל הזמן הם שחקו  
בדורסל ולמדו מהתורה עם  
אבא.  
הם מעולם לא הזמינו אותי.  
קשה להאמין שגדלתי עם  
21 בנים ואין סיפורים עלי,  
נכון?  
בקשי מזכירים אותי, זה כמו  
לא הייתי שם בכלל.

# Hebrew Poetry Contest

## HONORABLE MENTION | NONNATIVE SPEAKER

**JAKE FELDMAN**

FRANKEL JEWISH ACADEMY  
WEST BLOOMFIELD, MICHIGAN

### God

God is like the weather of winter  
in Michigan.  
God can be harsh like the roads  
with snow...  
God can test people like people  
sitting in traffic when there is  
snow.  
God can bring snow and it did  
not come from people...

ה'

הוא כמו מזג האוויר של  
החורף במישיגן.  
הוא יכול להיות קשה כמו  
הקבישים עם שלג...  
ה' יכול לבחון אנשים כמו  
בשאנשים יושבים בתנועה  
בשיש שלג.  
ה' יכול להביא שלג וזה  
לא בא מאנשים...

## FIRST PLACE | NATIVE SPEAKER

**YUVAL ELYA**

AMERICAN HEBREW ACADEMY  
GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

### Treasure

Children cause a lot of problems,  
They cry, yell, and do a lot of nonsense,  
While mommy breaks her back after a spot-less wash on the floor,  
With mud they walk into the house and ignore her when she screams.  
And despite all of the responsibility that kids bring with them,  
They also bring with them joy of life,  
And that is what Sarai wanted to experience throughout her whole life.

God added an to her name,  
And with the new name came some good news,  
Sarah heard that she will give birth to a boy,  
And cracked up for she thought that it is unreal,  
That soon her nest will expand,  
And she will be full of grace.

The days were getting closer and Sarah was getting older with every  
passing hour,  
And magically at the age of 90 she gave birth,  
So excited she was, Sarah,  
And really felt happiness for the first time,  
Yitzchak she named her son,  
For she laughed when she heard the news,  
That once seemed so far away,  
And today she holds in her hands.

Yaron Peleg: The unusual approach to the story of Sara by beginning with a contemporary reference to the hardships of childrearing lends the poem a light, humours and refreshing, updated air.

Adriana Jacobs: The contemporary opening is unexpected but also reinvigorates a very familiar subject with an interesting and updated point of view. Rhyme is fluid, and the poem as a whole offers a nice balance of elegant and colloquial diction.

### אוצר

ילדים עושים הרבה בעיות,  
הם בוכים, צועקים, ועושים המון שטיות.  
באשר אמא שוברת את הגב אחרי שטיפת בית מקרצפת,  
עם בץ הם נכנסים ומתעלמים ממנה כשהיא מצפצפת.  
ולמרות כל האחריות שמביאים אתם הילדים,  
גם שמחת חיים הם מביאים,  
ואת זה רצתה שרי לחוות לאורך כל החיים.

הוסיף השם ה' לשמה,  
ועם השם החדש גם באה בשורה טובה.  
שמע שרה שתלד בן,  
והתגלגלה מצחוק כי חשבה שזה לא יאמן.  
שעוד מעט יגדל לה הקן,  
ותהיה מלאת חן.

הימים התקרבו ושרה התבגרה עם כל שעה שעברה,  
ובארח פלא בגיל 90 היא ילדה,  
כל כך התרגשה היא שרה,  
ובאמת הרגישה שמחה בפעם הראשונה.  
יצחק היא קראה לבנה,  
מפני שצחקת בששמע את הבשורה,  
שפעם נראתה לה כל כך רחוקה,  
והיום בידיה היא מחזיקה.

**RUNNER-UP | NATIVE SPEAKER**

**LAURENNE KAUFMAN**

FRANKEL JEWISH ACADEMY

WEST BLOOMFIELD, MICHIGAN

**God is a Hurricane**

God has strength. God helps the People of Israel and  
sometimes God doesn't help...  
God is a hurricane because God brought a flood to the  
world  
God is a hurricane because He brought the Ten Plagues  
to Egypt  
The people of the world don't know what God will do  
It can be wind, rain, or a tornado...

**ה' הוריקן**

לה' יש כח. ה' עוזר לבני ישראל.  
ולפעמים ה' לא עוזר  
ה' הוריקן כי הוא הביא מבול לעולם  
ה' הוריקן כי הוא הביא את עשר  
המכות למצריים  
האנשים בעולם לא יודעים מה ה'  
יעשה  
זה יכול להיות רוח, גשם, או ...  
טורנדו

**Teachers**

**FIRST PLACE**

**DORIT LEVANOVI**

JEWISH DAY SCHOOL OF METROPOLITAN SEATTLE

BELLEVUE, WASHINGTON

**Miriam**

And the forbidden fruit is born into the world  
Without future, he cries.  
His mother will cover him. She'll shed her tears  
For he is still soft and vulnerable  
With heavy heart, with heavy steps,  
Yocheved went  
Yocheved built  
Yocheved hid  
A basket of reeds needs fixing  
For such is the decree  
For such is what others are doing  
And she places him in the basket on the Nile bank  
Days as long as nights  
Sister Miriam keeps a watchful eye  
With arrested alertness  
Hiding among the reeds  
Eyes affixed  
Weeping for his bitter destiny  
her destiny  
their destiny  
What's wrong with this world?  
And then,  
He's been found, thirsty  
A life changing moment  
And she approaches  
And she bargains  
Farwell brother  
I'll be seeing you soon.

**מרים**

והפרי האסור בא לעולם  
הוא בוכה ועתיד לו אין  
תכסוהו אמו ותזיל דמעותיה  
בי כך ופגיע עדין  
וכבר הוא לבה של יוכבר וכבדים צעדיה  
ותלך ותבנה ותצפין  
תבת גמא צריכה להתקין  
בי כך וגזר וכך נקבע וכך עושות כלן  
ותניחוהו על שפת הניאור  
וימים ארבים כלילות  
צופה בו מרים האחות  
בדריכות ובשקט אסוף  
מסתתרת לה בין קני הסוף  
לא משה ממנו ולא מש מעיניה  
ומרה מרים על מר גורלה, גורלו, גורלם  
הביצר זה השתנה העולם?  
והנה  
הוא נמצא וצמא  
וחיו השתנו מקצה  
ותבוא ותתן תתמקח  
שלום  
ולתראות  
לך  
אח.

Yaron Peleg: Motherly sensibilities and a sense of vulnerability are beautifully conveyed through the personal voice and the natural metaphor—the young fruit. The pointed, short ending with **אח** concentrate all feelings in that one, evocative word that defines as well as conveys longing to the brother/son.

Adriana Jacobs: A finely crafted poem. The poem's structure creates a fluid reading experience but also surprises the reader at the end. The word "ach" is indeed evocative, offering an intriguing visual conclusion that also feels like an exhalation that propels the poem forward.



# To Teach a Subversive Canon in a Digital World

■ by AVI WARSHAVSKI

Warshavski assesses the dramatic challenges of online Tanakh education, and the unprecedented opportunities that it affords, by referencing key precedents in the history of biblical interpretation.

the shared constructive narrative of the community. On the other hand, the Bible is the first and oldest text of Judaism's canon—the first turtle on which all the other textual turtles stand, one on top of the other. Above them unfolds a tapestry

*Mercy and truth surround His countenance. Truth and justice and righteousness are the basis of His throne. He divides the light from the darkness. He prepared the dawn in the knowledge of His heart.*

These verses are a passage from a psalm. At first glance, they would not seem out of place in the vista of the Psalms, but when we look at them again, we might feel confused. This psalm, and another six like it, were among the scrolls uncovered in 1947 at Qumran. What is troubling about these psalms is that they appear to be like any other passage in the Book of Psalms, but are not part of the traditional Biblical text that has come down to us. If someone were to insert these passages into a booklet of Psalms, we would have happily murmured the words, without sensing any difference, but while the 150 chapters included in the traditional text of the Book of Psalms are canonical hymns, known and recited by heart by worshippers throughout the world, the seven passages found at Qumran are preserved behind glass in an air-conditioned room, and are known only to a handful of researchers and aficionados.

The canonical nature of the Bible is not a quality inherent within the text. Rather, it is the outcome of a long process, in which its readers had a no less important role than its authors. But even those who are familiar with this phenomenon still find it difficult to relate to the psalms

from Qumran in the same way that they relate to the psalms included in Tanakh. The canonical nature of the Biblical text and the spiritual implications of this canonicity should concern not just researchers and historians. They are a key to identifying some of the fundamental challenges of teaching Bible over the years, and particularly in the Information Age.

## IN WHAT WAY IS THE TEACHING OF BIBLE DIFFERENT FROM THE TEACHING OF OTHER HUMANISTIC SUBJECTS?

At first glance, the teaching of Bible should not be different from teaching any other text-rich humanistic subject. Across this whole family of subjects, we have to deal with language gaps, with a world of content that is distant from the students' daily lives, with a world that demands that we clarify its relevance, and so on.

Yet a second glance will show that the unique canonical nature of the Bible is a characteristic that differentiates it from other knowledge area, even from knowledge areas based on canonical texts such as the Mishnah or the Talmud. We might call the unique canonicity of the Bible "subversive canonicity." The oxymoron in this name hints at the paradox inherent in the canonical nature of the Bible. On the one hand, the Bible is a canonical text, and as such has an important role in society as part of the textual lore—a basis for shared discourse, an important component in building identity, and part of



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of Jewish cultural and spiritual identity.

Its position at the "bottom of the pile" and the fact that this pile of canonical texts is so tall, spread across thousands of years, has created a gap between the ancient Bible and the texts that followed it. This gap has, over the centuries, been mediated by a binding or quasi-binding interpretative tradition—from Chazal through the commentators of the Middle Ages, until the most recent commentaries. However, notwithstanding the binding reading traditions, over the years the temptation has developed of listening to the primal, clear and simple voice of the Bible, the voice that is heard without rich interpretative mediation. It is no coincidence that some of the outstanding attempts in Jewish (and not just Jewish) history that attempted to undermine the traditional hegemony developed through the return to a "bare" reading of the Bible, one that was (supposedly) free of the bonds of tradition. Such was the approach of the Karaites, who sought to undermine the tradition of the Oral Law; such was the approach of figures such as Spinoza and Uriel da Costa, who reevaluated their Jewish identity in light of living as crypto-Jews; and such was the activity of significant figures in the Zionist movement, who

wished to make a secular, non-Diaspora voice heard.

## THE SUBVERSIVE CANON AND THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

The distant, ancient text leaves room for interpretations that allow innovation, and new, different points of view, yet at the same time allows a connection and bond to the community whose authority one is trying to challenge. The ability of the Bible to function as a kind of Trojan horse within the innermost core of the canon has led to the fact that, within the haredi Ashkenazi yeshiva world, the Bible has almost no place as a field of study, so much so that the common saying, that yeshiva students only know those verses that are quoted in the Talmud, is not far from the truth.

The subversive canonicity of the Biblical text has, over the years, given rise to a number of parallel reading traditions, competing and sometimes even conflicting. From an educative point of view, this characteristic of the Bible is at one and the same time an opportunity and a challenge. An opportunity, since it is part of the Bible's eternal youth and its ability to be constantly relevant. A challenge because education, however pluralistic it may be, still wishes to transmit certain messages and not others.

If we educate from a religious point of view, we will be less tolerant of secular readings of the Bible; if we educate from a secular starting point, we would not wish to emphasize the perspective of haredi Orthodoxy; and if the education that we are providing is a Jewish one, we would not consent to accepting Christian readings of the Bible as a fundamental aspect of imparting the text. In the Old World, educators had tools to regulate the exposure that their students had to alternative reading traditions. These traditions could come into the classroom in a measured way, in keeping with the educator's values, or not come in at all, and await curious students between the shelves of the library.

## THE SUBVERSIVE CANON IN THE INFORMATION AGE

In the Information Age, all of this chang-



**A search for information on a Bible topic will elicit—on one page—a Chabad text, an academic paper, a Christian reading, a Zionist exposition and an amateur post.**

es. In order to understand the magnitude of the change, we need to abandon the erroneous metaphor of the Internet as an enormous library. A library is a passive space, while information in the present age does not wait quietly on the shelf. It is in the air, and it assaults us from all sides—on the first results page in Google, on our Facebook page, and on the telephones that we use. In such a world, exposure to readings other than those that we teach is a given. A search for information on a Bible topic will elicit—on one page—a Chabad text, an academic paper, a Christian reading, a Zionist exposition and an amateur post. A student growing up in such a world doesn't have the sen-

sitivity to identify the various ideologies and professional paradigms. Although he will probably not convert to Christianity as a result of reading a Christian interpretation, nor join Chabad as a result of exposure to a Chabad weekly newsletter, he will internalize certain messages, insights and perspectives, not all of which will be appropriate in the eyes of his educators.

How do we cope with this challenge? It is apparently necessary to create tools and methodologies for mapping and understanding the dynamics of the online world of knowledge, tools that will assist in put-

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ting the content we encounter into its proper context. This mapping may be divided into three relevant “Biblical” mapping strategies.

### A RETURN TO THE TEXT

One of the more fascinating elements of the Jewish-Christian encounters of the Middle Ages is the growth of interest in peshat, the plain meaning of the text, both among Jewish commentators such as Rashbam, Rabbi Yosef Kara, and Rabbi Yosef Bechor Shor, and among Christian commentators such as Nicholas of Lyra and the exegetical circle of the St. Victor Abbey.

In our days, too, when we are exposed to a range of interpretations, some having an activist or missionary slant, it is very important to discern the difference between the text as such and interpretative-ideological perspectives. The text as such, of course, is not always unambiguous, but the aiming at a minimalistic reading that relies on the fewest underlying assumptions, and a distinction between the first level, that of the plain meaning, and the subsequent levels of interpretation and homiletics, helps us to develop a critical sense and identify agendas that are not part of the original source.

Education to identify the plain meaning takes place, of course, primarily in the classroom, but it can be aided by the way in which we operate in the digital world. For example, we make a graphical, hierarchical distinction between the Biblical text and the commentary—this distinction is familiar to us from the classical Mikra’ot Gedolot editions of the Bible, but it also lives on in the Internet, where we encounter it in the way in which the Biblical text is displayed on the Mikranet ([mikranet.org.il](http://mikranet.org.il)) and Psookim ([psookim.com](http://psookim.com)) websites. On Mikranet, the text of the Bible is displayed as a separate category in the Collection of Sacred Literature, with the secondary literature in a category of its own in the various information collections. In Psookim, the biblical text is placed in the center of the screen, while the accompanying commentary and

interpretative content surround it as a kind of satellite collection.

Another way of bolstering the text in and of itself is to focus on the non-semantic aspects of the Biblical text—the tone of the text, and the typographical representation of the text. There are many educational advantages in developing such a sensitivity, but one of its byproducts is to emphasize the Bible text as a separate entity from other texts. This link—[tinyurl.com/warshavsky](http://tinyurl.com/warshavsky)—shows an animated film clip focusing on the text and the music of the verses in Parashat Noah that deal with the spilling of blood.

### EDUCATING TOWARD CONTEXT

Part of the student’s difficulty in coping with content on the web lies in its lack of context. Much of the content that we

**Just as it is impossible to experience falling in love by watching movies, so too it is impossible to be fully at home with digital content without being an active partner in the mechanisms that create content in this world.**

encounter comes to us detached from its original context—in a Google search or in a posting on some social network, without the textual continuum within which it appeared previously, and without a sufficiently transparent indication as to the original author, his expertise, the time when the text was composed, and so on. This lack of context is a significant characteristic of texts on the web, which can be compensated for by artificial means.

The Internet offers powerful tools that can create context. Thus, for example, this link—[tinyurl.com/mikranet](http://tinyurl.com/mikranet)—to a CET website shows Biblical information layers imposed on Google Earth. Display of the information on a three-dimensional platform provides the context that is hard to imagine in the pre-virtual world. Another example of creating context is the use of dynamic timelines. The issue of dating in the field of Bible is a complex one, subject to debate, but nonetheless there is great educational

value in generating a general delineation of the chronological context of events. At this link—[cet.ac.il/mikranet/Time-Line](http://cet.ac.il/mikranet/Time-Line)—from the Mikranet site, you can see a timeline that organizes information items in the field of Bible along an axis which allows users to move from one event to the next.

### INTERPRETIVE ACTIVISM

Just as it is impossible to learn to swim by correspondence, or experience falling in love by watching movies, so too it is impossible to be fully at home with digital content without being an active partner in the mechanisms that create content in this world. Students’ participation as active creators of interpretation, through the use of tools such as blogs, YouTube, and wiki-based tools, will make clear to them, better than any learned lecture,

the way in which this dynamic operates, the tone at which one should consume information on the web, and the range of professional levels that we are likely to encounter on the web.

This activity also has value for the student’s involvement and identification with the content. At this link—[tinyurl.com/mikravideo](http://tinyurl.com/mikravideo)—for example, you can view dozens of film clips created by students that deal with expressions used in the Bible.

Beyond these strategies, and other similar ones, we need to understand and decode this new reality in which the varieties of information are out there, floating in the air, and are no longer subject to being filtered by educators. We need to internalize how the covert, subversive side of the Bible text becomes visible, accessible and part of the overall picture. This is a challenge, with all that it implies, both positive and negative. ■



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# Innovative Tanakh Programs in the Land of Milk and Honey

■ by **HOWARD DEITCHER**

Learn about some of the larger trends and structural issues that impact Tanakh education in Israel, as well as some innovative programs recently developed that are worthy models of emulation.

**I**n 1961, a native-born Israeli teacher was teaching Hebrew grammar to a group of 8-10 year old Kurdish immigrant children in a transit camp off the main Tel Aviv- Jerusalem road. In attempting to attract their attention and establish a sense of decorum, the teacher told her students: “If you are good and behave, then I’ll read you Bible stories.” This pedagogic strategy succeeded as the children loved the biblical texts and were prepared to improve their behavior in order to hear more about their biblical heroes.

This intriguing anecdote is frequently told in order to demonstrate the singular status that the Tanakh once played in Israeli society. To be sure, Bible study is still regarded as a core subject in the Israeli education system: Israeli children are introduced to the Tanakh in early childhood and continue to study the various texts until the end of secondary school when they are required to take a matriculation examination that carries serious implications for their tertiary studies.

In light of the social fabric of Israeli society, Tanakh education is especially vulnerable to political, social and sociological trends. Oftentimes well-meaning Ministers of Education use the Bible program as a platform to trumpet their ideological positions, and in so doing, introduce a host of dramatic and far-reaching changes in the curriculum that are swiftly overturned when new political coalitions take root. For obvious reasons, this sense of political instability produces a series of educational chal-

lenges for the educational system in general, and Tanakh education in particular.

This brief social/historical background is intended to set the stage for a cursory exploration of several innovative trends and programs in Israeli Bible education. In selecting three specific initiatives, I will examine one from the national system (*mamlachti*), a second from the national religious system (*mamlachti-dati*) and a third from the world of early childhood.

## CURRICULUM REFORM: A NARRATIVE APPROACH

A bold initiative in Bible education was recently launched in middle and secondary schools in the national school system. Traditionally, Tanakh study in these grades followed an historical order, whereby books and chapters were selected according to their chronological sequence, with an emphasis on their social/cultural historical context. The explicit goal of this approach was to provide contemporary students with a sophisticated understanding and appreciation of the Bible within its historical context, and to foster a love for the ancient land of Israel and the wider context of Near Eastern culture. This approach shaped the content of the educational materials and matriculation examinations, as well as the extensive professional training programs that were offered across the country. (The curriculum and its goals can be found here: [cms.education.gov.il/EducationCMS/Units/Tochniyot\\_Limudim/MikraMam/AlYessodi](http://cms.education.gov.il/EducationCMS/Units/Tochniyot_Limudim/MikraMam/AlYessodi)).

Several months ago, Dr. Roni Megidov, the incoming superintendent for Tanakh education, headed a committee that decided to shift the focus of the curriculum away from the historiographical



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approach. In its place, a loose narrative is woven together from the various biblical books that appear in the national curriculum. This approach is built on Sartre’s famous observation: “Man sees everything that happens to him through them [stories], and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it.” The current program underscores the narrative links between the various texts, and invites students to examine the common use of language, plot, themes and characters across the biblical canon. The emerging program identifies specific skills that must be taught at different grade levels, as well as guidelines that allow students to appreciate the links between the selected texts. The proponents of this new program believe that the narrative approach will forge strong links between the students and the biblical text, as the biblical story will be more accessible and relevant to the lives of Israeli students.

## AN INTEGRATED ARTS EDUCATION PROGRAM

The Pelech Religious Experimental High School for Girls is deservedly rec-

ognized as a leading school for pioneering and cutting edge programs in both Jewish and general studies ([http://www.schoolly2.co.il/pelech\\_jer](http://www.schoolly2.co.il/pelech_jer)). In recent years the Pelech Tanakh faculty has introduced an innovative and creative program in the eleventh grade that integrates Bible study with a range of topics from the world of the arts. This program mirrors an educational approach that Mitchel Malkus labeled “the curricular symphony” and draws on theories of multiple intelligence and differentiated learning styles for the Jewish classroom. The Tanakh and Arts program is organized thematically, and addresses such topics as holiness, family and women, justice, leadership and the place of Jerusalem. This program’s methods of study are significantly different from those experienced by Pelech students in other grade levels, and through them the girls are introduced to a new set of learning skills and diverse concepts that add a new dimension to their Tanakh study.

The selected topics are initially studied in an intensive way, as the teachers include a heavy dose of classical and modern exegesis, literary criticism, historical context, midrash, etc. At the conclusion of this initial stage, the girls are invited to select a topic that grabs their attention, and, over the course of a month, they conduct an independent study of the topic that builds on and expands the range of analytical resources that were studied earlier. Students are paired with teachers who can help guide them and serve as sounding boards for further developing these topics, and provide them with methodological guidance for the next stages of the projects.

## At the House of Bible in Ramat Gan, children experience biblical stories as active participants in a journey through time.

The students are then invited to focus on a particular point of interest, and to choose an art form that they feel would allow them to present their ideas in a creative and compelling way. The students are encouraged to select from an array of art forms, including visual arts, photography, theatre, music and dance, and, under the guidance of a teacher, to refine their

ideas and prepare an art project that both demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the multiple messages of the text and exploits the arts medium as an educational tool. The completed projects are exhibited in the school auditorium and

## Ministers of Education often introduce a host of far-reaching changes in the Bible curriculum that are swiftly overturned when new political coalitions take root.

the larger school community is invited to view them, while an evening for parents and friends allows students to share their creations and to explain the process of preparing them and the learning experience engendered by the entire process. Finally, it is worth noting that these projects are graded and comprise a portion of the students’ matriculation grade in Tanakh.

This pilot project is widely regarded as a huge success in Tanakh education, and the National Religious school system has undertaken to replicate this initiative in a host of different secondary schools across Israel.

### ACTIVE LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

A unique and powerful Bible experience for young children is offered at the House of Bible, a center in Ramat Gan (<http://www.ramat-gan.info/Teachers/merkazim+limudim/beit+hamikra.htm>). This program serves as a time tunnel for children to learn, discuss and engage with

The House of Bible includes three main stations, each designed to involve the children in a different learning experience. The child’s introduction to the House begins with animated performances of key stories from the book of Bereishit.

For example, in the story entitled “Rivka and the Slave,” an actress uses life-size puppets to convey the slave’s message. The children accompany the slave on his trek to Aram-Naharayim and, throughout the journey, learn more about his mission. They eventually meet Rivka at the well, where the boys help the slave to “test” Rivka as the girls provide her with suitable replies. The group proceeds to Rivka’s home, where all the children attempt to convince Bethuel and Lavan about the appropriateness of the impending marriage and the need for her to move to Canaan. Finally, the children lead Rivka and the camels to Abraham’s tent, where they join in the extensive wedding festivities. Upon completing this journey, the children are invited to prepare artwork that reflects their impressions of the learning experience.

The second station is an activity center which includes three-dimensional games, puzzles, and a host of different audio and visual programs that are linked directly to the selected stories. The final station is an exhibition room that displays the children’s artwork as well as a computer center where they can access additional resources about the various Tanakh narratives, and independently learn more about the different stories.

In conclusion, this article has described three innovative and refreshing programs that are infusing creative energy into Tanakh Study in different parts of Israeli society. One additional program that is described elsewhere in this issue is the Mikranet project, which serves thousands of Tanakh teachers across

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# Bayamim Hahem Bazman Hazeh: Teaching Nevi'im and the State of Israel

■ by **JEFFREY SCHRAGER**

Almost alone within Judaism's large canon of sacred texts, the books of the Prophets present exemplars for the modern State of Israel by depicting the travails of a sovereign Jewish nation on its own territory.

For almost two thousand years the words of the prophets served as messages of hope that we would one day return to our homeland. In modern times, having been blessed with a mass return to Zion, we must turn again to the words of the prophets as they instruct us as to the meaning of and practical realities surrounding the Jewish presence in the Land of Israel. We, as educators, must help our students view the prophets (Nevi'im) as a resource for understanding the modern State of Israel. As the only Biblical text dealing with the Jewish people living in their own land and with their own government, the books of the Nevi'im, and those from Joshua through Kings in particular, provide essential lessons related to the governance and maintenance of a successful Jewish presence in the Land of Israel.

The reasons for viewing the modern state through the prism of Nevi'im are twofold: our students, some of whom have trouble relating to Israel as the area identical to the land promised to our forefathers, must understand the intrinsic connection between Biblical events and the modern State of Israel. We have suffered extensively from an inability to articulate to the world and, perhaps, to ourselves the reasons behind and importance of our presence in the Land. In an age where Israel's right to exist is brought into question, our students must view the modern state as a continu-

ation of the story of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel. Viewing the modern state through the Nevi'im also helps our students understand that Tanakh deals with the issues facing modern Israelis, and that in turning to the Biblical text we may formulate a distinctly Jewish approach to matters of state.

## JEWISH SOVEREIGNTY

For the duration of our exile, the study of many sections of the Nevi'im had to be done in the theoretical. That is, Jews could not identify with the notion of Jewish self-governance, particularly in the Land of Israel. Throughout our long Diaspora, texts from Nevi'im relating to Judaism's encounter with other nations may have seemed more relevant and engaging as they offered advice on dealing with oppression and methods of approaching the government. With the advent of the State of Israel, however, the lessons inherent in the Nevi'im gained a new level of meaning. The words of the prophets became a guidebook to the values and administration of the Jewish state.

One of the most common issues dealt with implicitly in the Nevi'im is that of Jewish unity, and specifically the role unity plays in the Jewish state. In Joshua and Judges we find two examples of

moments where national unity is compromised, and in both the nation as a whole suffers. In Joshua 7, a previously unknown soldier causes the deaths of thirty-six soldiers by taking forbidden spoils from Jericho. Later, in Judges 20, we find an episode that stands in stark contrast. Following the horrific account of the concubine in Gebah, the Israelite tribes unite to punish and nearly annihilate the tribe of Benjamin. Looking at these two stories, our students should consider on the one hand, the power of the individual to sabotage the group and on the other, the consequences when a group unites to pursue a catastrophic goal.

One individual may be able to shake the foundations of a community, but unity for an evil purpose must also be condemned. How do our students deal with



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the tension between the individual and the community? Does the individual in a Jewish state have an obligation to support its leadership? What sorts of groups do we encounter in modern times that become radicalized and can ultimately lead to ruin? Our students may struggle with the questions, but we must push them to understand that a question may carry greater value than its answer.

Maintaining Jewish unity becomes one of the most pressing issues facing

the kings, and indeed Saul's first victory comes after unifying the nation, albeit through a threat (I Samuel 11). During the reign of David we see very few moments of internal strife, with the notable exceptions of the rebellions of Absalom (II Samuel 15-18) and Sheba ben Bichri (II Samuel 20). Then Solomon's kingdom falls apart resulting in two separate kingdoms, one of which has been lost for thousands of years.

While the unity of any nation is important for its security, our students must be encouraged to identify specific and distinctly Jewish ideas. To what extent must we go to preserve unity? What sorts of conditions, individual and communal, result in unity or disunity? What methods were used by rulers to secure their positions and their futures? To what extent is Jewish unity forced upon citizens, and what role should they have in determining the direction of the government? Obviously, the modern State of Israel is not a perfect analogue to Biblical times; David ben Yishai and David Ben Gurion demand separate treatments. Still, the narrative of the Nevi'im will shed light on some core principles of a Jewish state.

### A JEWISH ARMY

Having a Jewish country necessitates a Jewish army. Our students can reflect on the role of a Jewish army by placing stories from Nevi'im in a modern context. We see several examples of the Israelite army in action, both in victory and defeat. I Samuel alone affords discussion of the role of a defensive army vs. an aggressive force (chapter 14), treatment of civilians (chapter 15), and leaving behind the dead (chapter 31). We can discuss overconfidence in the army's strength when learning about the Ark being taken in the days of Eli and Samuel (chapter 4).

One of the best examples of such an exercise might be Saul's ill-fated attack on the city of Nov (I Samuel 22). Saul screams at his soldiers to surround the inhabitants of Nov, a city of kohanim, and annihilate them. When none of his regular soldiers obey, Doeg the Edomite slaughters the kohanim by himself. In this dramatic scene, our students must discuss and think deeply about the role of an army and the

## Sample Lessons

Here are examples of ways to bring texts from Nevi'im into discussion with contemporary events in Israel.

### *Text: I Samuel 3*

Contemporary situation: The assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Read articles from the time in order to convey the full perspective to students.

Discussion: How do Joab's actions affect the kingdom? What would Joab argue gave him the right to kill Abner, and how does that reasoning compare to the rationale given by Yigal Amir? Abner and PM Rabin were both involved in peace processes. What effect do both assassinations have on their respective peace processes? David clearly takes some of the responsibility for Abner's murder on himself. To what extent were contemporary Israelis responsible for Rabin's assassination? As a closing, the teacher should consider reading Rabbi Yehuda Amital's speech following the assassination, available at <http://www.vbm-torah.org/alei/4-02rabin1.rtf>.

### *Text: I Samuel 13, 15; II Samuel 15-16*

Contemporary situation: The disgrace and downfall of President Moshe Katzav

Discussion: What happens when a leader makes a mistake? Is there a difference between personal mistakes and national errors? What traits should be viewed as a fatal leadership flaw versus a personal flaw? How has the prevalence of international media changed the way we view leadership? What was the fallout from individual leaders' mistakes?

### *Text: I Samuel 31, David's response in II Samuel 2*

Contemporary situation: The Israeli MIA movement and Gilad Shalit's captivity

Discussion: What is the Jewish position on redeeming captives or recovering their remains? Why specifically did the people of Jabesh Gilad recover the bodies of Saul and his sons (see I Sam 11)? Is there an analogue in their reasons that may apply to the State of Israel? What does David's response to the people of Jabesh Gilad show about the importance of retrieving the dead? We may couple our learning with acts of kindness to Israeli soldiers and/or support for the families of the missing.

### *Text: Joshua 6-9; Judges 3-7; I Samuel 4, 8, 13-15, 17; II Samuel 5, 8-10; I Kings 3, 10-11, 20-21*

Contemporary situation: Israel's complex relationship with its neighbors

Discussion: Was the Israelite army one of aggression or defense? Was that position a constant or did it change over time? What conditions were necessary for the Israelites to be at peace? Were internal conditions more important than external? We can focus on issues like regime change in Egypt or other countries and compare them to II Sam 10 where David initiates peaceful overtures.

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obligation to take orders, especially when those orders contradict their conception of morals. It might even be beneficial for students to read articles about the disengagement from Gaza to frame the question.

Now, we must be careful not to push the connection too forcefully, lest our students mistakenly believe the Israel Defense Forces to be analogous to the murderer Doeg, but thinking about the soldiers that witness the massacre at Nov, our students should be challenged to define the role of a Jewish soldier. Learning the text with an IDF veteran could prove a potentially transformative moment for our students, especially if they can ask what the soldier would have done in a similar situation.

We should take this opportunity to point out that by shying away from difficult discussions about either the State of Israel or actions on the part of figures in Nevi'im we are not doing our students any favors. Students must, at all times, feel empowered to express their individual views free from reprimand or ridicule. Analysis of the Biblical text will inevitably lead to challenging differences of opinion between students or between students and their teacher. Our students must understand that the situations we are dealing with, like most situations in life, are not black and white. When discussing issues like the disengagement, we hope to encounter passionate emotions from our students and strongly held positions. Disengagement and similar situations have been painful episodes in Jewish history, and pretending that such situations do not exist does a disservice to our students and to the Jewish people.

#### ISSUES FACING ISRAEL

In at least three other areas we must note the importance of learning Nevi'im in our students' understanding of the State of Israel. Unfortunately, we occasionally deal with scandals on the part of Jewish leaders. The Prophets have no shortage of examples of Jewish leaders doing the wrong thing. Important discussions can be had by contrasting the sins of Saul (I

Samuel 13 and 15) and David (II Samuel 11) with an accompanying discussion of why David is allowed to remain king and have a dynasty, while Saul is deposed. Adding to the question, Solomon also makes mistakes and pays the consequence (I Kings 11), but he continues the Davidic dynasty, albeit with only two tribes. Students must look at the text's approach to different mistakes made by Jewish leaders. How are those mistakes dealt with? Are the consequences meted out by God or man? What fallout does a nation experience when its leader strays?

These questions will inevitably lead to a discussion of leadership and what makes

**In contrasting Ahab and Josiah, we may ask whether leaders are responsible solely for ensuring social stability, or do they have a role to play in the moral sphere? Characters in Nevi'im can guide us as we reflect upon our expectations for Israeli leaders.**

a good Jewish leader in particular. The Prophets present us with several examples of both positive and negative leadership. Should a leader bend to the will of his or her constituents like Saul? Should a leader openly defy the population, challenging them to rebel (I Kings 12)? In contrasting Ahab (I Kings 16-22) and Josiah (II Kings 22-23), we may ask whether leaders are responsible solely for ensuring social stability, or do they have a role to play in the moral sphere? Our students must grapple with these challenging issues, particularly as they relate to the State of Israel. As the only Biblical example, and one of the few examples overall, of Jewish leaders attempting to navigate the complexities of governmental administration while simultaneously providing vision and direction, the characters in Nevi'im are uniquely capable of guiding us as we reflect upon our expectations for Israeli leaders.

Viewing the current state of Israeli affairs, the seemingly constant conflict with Israel's neighbors claims the bulk of our attention. In this area as well the Nevi'im can inform our opinions.

As an example, an interesting story in I Kings 20 recounts the seemingly high odds stacked against King Ahab in his war with Ben Haddad and the nation of Aram. When Ahab defeats Ben Haddad and rather than treating him as a captive almost grovels that they be "brothers" again, Ahab is taken to task by a prophet and punished for his mercy. A compelling discussion must take place about the role of a conquering nation and the balance between dominance and benevolence. Even more tantalizing is the fact that territorial negotiations are a key part to the dispute that brings about war. The process of our students distilling the messages about dealing with

those that would attack us will necessarily bring about a greater understanding of the current political climate in Israel, but should also be helping our students build a political viewpoint based on our classic sources.

One caveat: many of these issues raise understandably passionate emotions on the part of teachers. As educators, we must focus on our students developing their own passionate feelings regarding the important issues facing the State of Israel. As a result, the teacher must avoid, as much as possible, inserting their opinions into the discussion. Our students must understand that we should not approach the Nevi'im simply as a prooftext for our individual political philosophies, but rather as a guide in developing those philosophies. Different schools will, of course, have different "party lines," but the only way we can effectively educate our students to be the possessors of strongly held and well informed opinions is to force them to formulate and defend their positions. This very difficult road must be navigated by educators if we are to succeed in our great task. ■



# Constructing a Love of Learning: Constructivism in a Torah Classroom

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 35]

tors to use is to have their students “flex their muscles” by applying a skill set to uncharted territory. By finding verses in not yet learned areas that contain the same root words, prefixes and suffixes students can experience a sense of independence in discovering for themselves what a verse is saying. Learning is active and not passive, and a curriculum that focuses on the construction of new knowledge built upon a set of previous knowledge ensures a greater level of motivation and enthusiasm for growth in Torah. Motivation is a key component in learning.

The balance between skill development and content mastery in Torah is incredibly challenging to maintain. While deep and meaningful understanding is important, exposure to broader and larger areas of information is viewed as crucial in building a “database” for the learner to refer to. How does a Judaic studies teacher generate equilibrium between reaching the content benchmarks established by your administration and setting aside enough class time for the stu-

dents to be exposed to learning exercises where they can apply a set of translation and comprehension skills? Constructivism may be the answer.

We need to ask ourselves what are our valued outcomes within the development of our Chumash or Navi curriculum. What is being gauged in your assessments and homework? Is there a set of defined skills that your students will be able to demonstrate at the end of the year? By analyzing the answers to these questions you can determine the presence of constructivist elements in your curriculum development.

So in preparing your curricula for next year keep the following suggestions in mind:

1. Experiments: Take the predetermined vocabulary that your students have mastered and allow them to learn with a chavruta to try and translate and explain areas within your parsha or perek independently.
2. Research: Ask the students a series of

questions that can only be answered by their own research. Provide information for them to use, whether it is a translated Rashi or any number of other commentators and allow your students to flex their “muscles” in answering your query.

3. Class discussions: Have your students voice their opinions and thoughts about certain situations that occurred within the context of an area of Tanakh and see where the conversation leads to.

Ultimately, one must concede that the goal of any Tanakh curriculum is to generate a learning environment that presents the learning as an enjoyable and fulfilling practice, something that the learners will want to pursue outside of the classroom and of their own volition. Through generating lesson plans in Tanakh that keeps the students knowledge and skill in mind, one can develop a learning environment where the learning is more participative, and thus more satisfying. ■

## A Reform Approach to Tanakh Education

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21]

experience and ensures that our students can truly be lifelong learners of the most difficult subject matter.

In the introduction to his Torah commentary, Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut says, “The Torah is a book about humanity’s understanding of and experience with God...While individual authors had a hand in its composition, God’s voice may be heard through theirs if we listen with open minds.” Having compared in depth various flood stories, students explore the theory that in fact the story of Noah is a composite of two original tales woven

together. Pulling apart the contradictory details (did the flood last 40 days or 150 days?) gives students a realistic understanding of how to understand the structure of Torah, but it opens for them this most difficult question of all, that of the authorship and accuracy of Torah.

Perhaps in contrast to the majority of Jewish day schools in North America, we teach our students the basis of the Documentary Hypothesis as a tool for understanding Torah, to grapple with the possibility that our Torah is not a unified text, but in fact drawn from a variety of sources to tell the story of our people.

Just as we teach students the critical skills to discern the bias of the author of a website, we teach them to look into the rationale which may have influenced the various sources. Understanding the human need for order inherent in the first chapter of Bereishit brings us closer to the text as answering deep-seated human questions, in our current era just as in the ancient world. Against this backdrop we can move from a superficial understanding of the role of God in our lives and in the history of the Jewish people to a deeper, more complex struggle that we all have, and must equip our next generation to consider as well. ■

# Authentic Tanakh Assessments: a Typology

■ by **ALEX SINCLAIR**

A professor involved with the Tanakh Standards and Benchmarks Project at JTS suggests creative ways of assessing student achievement in Tanakh and points out some of the common pitfalls.

## AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENTS AND “REAL LIFE”

Assessments are authentic, write Wiggins and McTighe, the creators of Understanding by Design, if they are “set in a scenario that replicates or simulates the ways in which a person’s knowledge and abilities are tested in real-world situations”... and if

they “[replicate] key challenging situations in which adults are truly ‘tested’ in the workplace, in civic life, and in personal life.” There are other criteria for what makes assessments authentic, but the idea that they be as connected as possible to “real life” is critical, harking back to Dewey’s argument that education should be about living, rather than preparation for future living.

Readers who know the Understanding by Design (UbD) literature well will no doubt recall the kinds of assessment examples suggested by Wiggins and McTighe: figuring out the ideal size for packing containers (math); designing a nutritional menu for a camp (health studies); building a four-day tour of Virginia for a group of foreign students (geography); and so on.

It’s noticeable that many of the UbD assessment examples come from the sciences, where it’s much easier to create “real life” scenarios for assessments. In real life, you do need to use math in designing packing containers; you do need to use geography to design a study tour. The demand for such “real life” assessments presents a challenge for us as teachers of

Tanakh, where there are no analogous “real life” situations in the workplace, civic life and personal life. How, then, do we create authentic Tanakh assessments?

## A TYPOLOGY OF APPROACHES FOR AUTHENTIC TANAKH ASSESSMENTS

I would like to suggest a typology of four helpful approaches to authentic Bible assessment. This typology has emerged from many years of experience as a consultant for the Jewish Day School Standards and Benchmarks Project. This is a project of the Melton Center for Jewish Education of the Davidson School of Education of the Jewish Theological Seminary, funded by AVI CHAI, and has over the past seven years worked with many schools in the RAVSAK community.

In what follows, I’ll use examples all drawn from Genesis 16. In this chapter, Sarai, barren, suggests that Abram procreate with Hagar as a surrogate; “chaos ensues.” The examples all assume that students have been studying Genesis 16, and that the teacher wishes to seek evidence of their learning. Ideally, the students will have received the assessment instructions early on during their learning of the unit, so that there is clarity about the kinds of skills they will be expected to demonstrate.

### 1. PRETEND YOU’RE IN THE TANAKH

A typical example of this kind of assess-

ment would be as follows: Imagine you are Abram, and you are writing your journal entry the morning after Sarai has told you to procreate with Hagar. How do you feel? What possible responses might you consider? What are the pros and cons of doing what Sarai suggests?

Of course, the scoring guide or rubric for this assessment would require students to show knowledge of the text, to quote verses and perhaps commentaries, and to express empathy with the characters. The journal entry that the students submit would, we hope, demonstrate their mastery of the text itself as well as the various questions of motivation and relationship that pervade this rich story.



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This assessment attempts to recreate a sense of “real life” by placing the students *in* the Biblical text and asking them to grapple with it as if they were there. It’s written Bibliodrama, as it were. Is it as “real” as the assessment examples given by Wiggins and McTighe? No: but it seeks to make things as real as possible.

### 2. TRANSPORT THE TANAKH INTO CONTEMPORARY SITUATIONS

If the “pretend” mode of authentic Tanakh assessment asks students to pretend that they are in the Tanakh, the “transport” mode does the opposite, and asks students to transport the events of the text into contemporary scenarios. Staying with Genesis 16, a different



From left to right: Abraham, Sarah and Hagar (1897), Abraham's Departure (by József Molnár), Abram's Counsel to Sarai (by James Tissot, c. 1896-1902)

## One way to assess students' knowledge in an authentic manner might be to ask them to create a reality show concept based on Genesis 16, entitled "Real Housewives of Canaan."

way to assess students' knowledge of the chapter in an authentic manner might be to ask them to create a reality show concept based on Genesis 16, entitled "Real Housewives of Canaan." The assessment might ask them to write a script for an episode of this imaginary show, in which Sarai and Hagar argue their positions to the camera, followed by a decision-time moment for Abram. As in the previous example, the students would have to demonstrate through this assessment that they understand the text deeply, quoting verses in Hebrew, explaining, in the characters' voices, why they feel the way they do, etc.

It doesn't have to be a reality TV show; there are multiple ways to transport the Tanakh into real life contexts and scenarios. Students could be asked to create a modern-day version of the story set in their hometown; or to write Yishmael's Facebook page. Of course, this isn't "real" in the same way that the UbD examples are real, but it's a way to bridge the gap between the text and contemporary reality.

### 3. COMPARE THE TANAKH TO REAL LIFE

An example of this approach might be to write a book review comparing the

relationships between Abram, Sarai and Hagar to relationships in *The Help*. Students would have to discuss how the power struggles between the biblical characters are similar to and different from the ones read/seen in the contemporary book/movie. How do the characters in each story succeed or fail in transcending the social barriers between them? What difference does the narrator's voice make? And so on.

While this particular example might be a nice assessment for slightly older students, changing the contemporary context could easily change the developmental level to that of younger students: imagine a similar kind of assessment based around, say, asking students to compare Joseph's relationship with his brothers to Harry Potter's with his cousin Dudley.

### 4. RELATE THE TANAKH TO QUESTIONS OF MODERN JEWISH IDENTITY

This mode of authentic Tanakh assessment is more appropriate for the late middle or high school grades. You might ask students to set up and video a panel debate between two opposing Jewish psychologists who disagree about whether Abram should be a role model for modern-day

Jews. Is his religious approach something to be admired or condemned? How is the religious faith of Abram relevant to the questions of religious identity that we face as young contemporary Jews?

Many biblical texts can be related to questions of modern Jewish identity in this way. Again, the scoring guide or rubric would require students to demonstrate mastery of the Hebrew, deep understanding of the dynamics of the text, and any other elements that were taught in the curriculum.

### THE DANGERS OF TRYING TOO HARD TO BE AUTHENTIC

In writing assessments for geography or health studies, there's a danger of trying too hard to be authentic. Students may end up spending so much time on the fonts and graphics for the camp menu that their actual content work is too shallow and does not demonstrate in-depth knowledge and understanding of the content.

In Tanakh assessments too, here are some of the red flags that you might be trying too hard to be authentic:

**It's a cute idea, but it's too much of a push to make it "fit" what you are trying to assess.**

A teacher I was working with had a fabulous and creative idea to have students de-

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# Doing the Work: Interpretative Experience as the Fulcrum of Tanakh Education

■ by **ALLISON COOK** and **ORIT KENT**

The tasks of translation and personalization, finding relevance, should not be confused with interpretation, a true engagement with the text's meaning.

The pioneering work in recent years on teaching Tanakh—including the Standards and Benchmarks project and Barry Holtz's book *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and in Practice*—has helped teachers and schools articulate their vision for what teaching Tanakh could mean. These ideals and objectives, however, are not always evident in the reality of what students are asked to do. We would like to share our observations of trends of student activity in Torah learning and urge educators to fine-tune their practice so as to emphasize and create authentic interpretive learning experiences of Tanakh for students.

In our visits to early childhood through high school classes, we have seen that student work and experience of Tanakh lean toward two major kinds of student activity: language/translation and personalization. Language exercises range from picking out patterns of suffixes and roots in the original text to doing full written translations of Tanakh passages. Personalization exercises include exploring a pre-determined theme from Torah and applying it to students' own lives. Classic examples of this kind of activity are discussion of students' relationship with their siblings as prompted by the Jacob and Esau narrative, or answering the "what would I do in this situation" question.

Teachers employ both translation and personalization exercises for thoughtful and inspired reasons, such as wanting to

provide students with practice and skills that can give them access and "mastery" over the text and wanting to help them connect to the Torah in a real way. But when these instructional tasks dominate student engagement with Tanakh, we see the limits of these exercises in achieving teachers' worthy objectives and aspirations.



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The experience of students working on translation tasks is often technical and disengaged from the meaning of the text. An analogy for this might be a music student practicing scales or transposing a composition while rarely playing a piece. While some students enjoy the technical aspects of "breaking the code" and may experience rigor and satisfaction in their work, others experience tedium and frustration—or the common experience of feeling dependent on a more language-minded study partner. When these tasks make up most of Tanakh study, students are not guided to understand or experience the deeper significance of the text.

Personalization activities for students risk eclipsing the Tanakh altogether, instead giving students an opportunity to talk about themselves with little or tenuous

connection to the actual text. Students may enjoy (or not) thinking or talking about their own lives and sharing experiences with their peers, but when this dominates student activity, the Torah disappears. The text becomes a springboard for self-exploration, and ironically, students will likely not see the Tanakh as relevant to their lives.

We believe that a core task of Torah learners is not to translate texts or to apply them to one's own life but to be engaged in interpreting texts, to come to

understand them and make meaning of them. Ultimately, students make meaning of texts based on a combination of what they read in the text itself and the mental schema (preconceptions, experiences, etc.), which they bring to the reading. The application of their schema must be rooted in close and careful study of the text itself. They need to read the passages in full, understand what the details contribute and notice the questions that the gaps in the text call forth. Interpretation and meaning-making necessitate engagement in discussion or other activity in which multiple potential meanings can be explored, negotiated and drawn on to develop compelling interpretations.

We therefore propose that a third type of instructional task, the interpretive exercise and the interpretive experience,

become the centerpiece of student work on Tanakh. In the interpretive exercise, students do the work of discovering meaning from the Torah to apply to their own lives. Students are required to examine the Torah, in its particularity of language and form, to arrive at insights, instruction and connection. The use of the interpretive exercise applies to classrooms that study Tanakh both with and without classical commentaries, since one must also interpret the commentaries. An authentic interpretive experience is one in which both the text and the student work in partnership in order to make meaning. It is what transpires when the Tanakh and the learner need each other. The text needs a human partner to notice it, wonder about it, grapple with it, and appreciate it in order to convert fixed words into living ideas, expression into meaning. The human partner needs the text to invite the student, through its complexity, beauty, difficulties and sacredness, into new horizons of understanding and growth, intellectually, ethically as well as spiritually.

## Personalization activities for students risk eclipsing the Tanakh altogether; the text becomes a springboard for self-exploration, and ironically, students will likely not see the Tanakh as relevant to their lives.

Many of the tasks that effectively operate as rote translation or personalization experiences have the potential to become interpretive exercises but stop short. Take, for example, the common practice of having students read or hear part of a Torah narrative and then illustrate a scene of the story.

When students are drawing a picture based on Torah text they are of course interpreting the text through their drawing; however, they are not necessarily having an interpretive experience or becoming skillful interpreters. Why? Because students may not be conscious that they are engaged in an interpretive act at all. Students may not be aware of the interplay or relationship between the text and their own schema in forming this new work or interpretive rendering. Students might well assume that they just drew “the facts,” and might experience the task as a technical (rather than interpretive) exercise. They might not appreciate that their drawing has filled in a gap in the text, answered a question begged by the text, or wonderfully reflected a rabbinic interpretation of the text. It is when students become aware of the dialogue between text and self—either by having the opportunity to reflect on this process or by studying the completed drawing in light of the text—that a relationship between text and learner is formed and felt, because it requires the student to main-

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tain an attentiveness both to the particularities of the text as well as to their own ideas and imagination.

Teachers can bring students to awareness of their meaning-making process by building in mechanisms for attentiveness, such as asking students to keep going back to the details of the text, keeping the text available to the students

## Teachers can make students aware of their meaning-making process by asking them to keep going back to the details of the text and keeping the text available to the students throughout the work.

throughout the work, and perhaps reading the text multiple times throughout the task period. Teachers can help students become aware of their decision points in the process of their drawing, encouraging students—through private conversation or a structured protocol—to reflect on the origins, development and expression of their own ideas in relation to the text.

For young children, teachers can initiate students into the interpretive process by gathering them around their drawings of a scene from Torah. They can ask students to notice the details of their drawings, similarities and differences among them, and to consider how those comparisons illuminate details, themes and questions in the text, which they then can explore further.

For older students, teachers can further refine illustration exercises to be interpretive experiences by asking students to respond specifically to an interpretive question—one that does not have an explicit answer in the “facts” of the text but requires an amassing of evidence from the text to form a plausible and cogent answer. An “interpretive question” is one for which there can be multiple answers. The answers must be formulated through details in the text and thus can be more or less compelling depending on the strength of textual evidence. Notably, interpretive

answers are rooted in the text, which includes the text under study as well as other related Jewish texts, rather than solely in the learner’s own experience or opinion. (For further discussion of interpretive questions, see the Great Books Foundation and books by Sophie Haroutunian Gordon.)

An example of a drawing exercise crafted around an interpretive ques-

tion might be: “Based on the Jacob and Esau narrative from birth to birthright, draw character portraits of Jacob and Esau and try to express through your drawing the relationship between them. You should be able to point to details in the text that support your design.” In this way, the prompt for drawing cannot be satisfied with either a rote or purely personal response.

Another common kind of task, particularly among older students, involves pairing students into chavruta to work with the Hebrew text. Teachers may assume that since individual students with different perspectives, skills and knowledge are working together on translation and questions about the text, the discussion will naturally produce

## Designing a chavruta task that requires students to be in conversation with the text as well as with each other requires explicit scaffolding and instruction.

interpretations and an interpretive experience. We see in our work that this is often not the case. Instead, these instructional tasks typically channel students through a well worn pattern of moving from a translation activity to a personalization activity with very little real interpretation activity. Such chavruta work can turn into task-completion

experiences for students, a division of labor for translation paired with a launch into a personal conversation ultimately disconnected from the text. Designing a chavruta task that requires students to be in conversation with the text as well as with each other requires explicit scaffolding and instruction.

Teachers can create and examine their own tasks according to the following considerations in order to design for an interpretive learning experience for their students:

Is the task asking students to generate and/or answer *interpretive* questions as a central feature of the exercise?

Are questions open-ended *and* do they require responses to be grounded in the text?

In tasks that have language and translation components, do those components also contribute to a big picture understanding of the text as part of the task?

Does the task ask learners to keep going back to the text?

Does the task ask learners to revisit their ideas?

The work of translation and personalization are no doubt worthy of attention in Tanakh learning, but vital to the enterprise as a whole are both the skill and experience of interpretation. Translation and personalization exercises must

balance across the fulcrum of an interpretive core which is the locus of the relationship between text and learner and the mutual awakening of each. If we truly engage learners in the work of interpretation, which is well within our capacity as educators to do, we will better be able to reach our highest ideals of Torah learning. ■



# Authentic Tanakh Assessments: a Typology

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 57]

sign a GPS device that, through its functions, would mirror elements of Abraham's spiritual journey. It was a great idea, but the "real life" context was too far from the content that he actually wanted to assess. The students were confused and spent too much time trying to make the text fit the assessment; the results were poor.

**Students spend too much time on the "form" rather than the content.**

I call this "PowerPoint syndrome." There's nothing wrong with having students present their work using technology and new media; just be careful that the desire for sophistication of presentation does not overshadow the core goal of assessment, which is for students to demonstrate evidence of mastery of the content and skills that they have learned.

**It's too ambitious.**

Whenever I see teachers coming up with ideas for students to film movies as assessments, I get nervous. Doing this properly takes a lot of time. If you are going to ask students to use a complex vehicle to demonstrate their learning, make sure you give them enough time, and that you can justify that curricular time spent.

**It's engaging for you, but not necessarily for the students.**

Sometimes I see teachers get tremendously excited about an assessment scenario, and forget that their students may not find it as exciting. First-graders don't watch *Big Brother* (I hope). So while you might be excited about that as an assessment idea, they might not.

**It's not asking students to enact the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.**

Truly authentic assessments require students to demonstrate higher order think-

ing skills. An assessment scenario, no matter how cute, funny, or "real-life," is not authentic unless it demands higher order thinking by the learners. Unless the assessment requires students to evaluate, compare, suggest, classify, formulate, support, recommend, and all those other verbs that embody higher order thinking, it's not authentic.

Authentic assessment should involve serious writing, at every age and every level. "Authentic" doesn't mean less academically rigorous. Indeed, as I hope these brief examples have shown, authentic Tanakh assessment almost by definition involves higher order thinking and sophisticated writing skills. But I hope that these examples have also shown that higher order thinking and sophisticated writing skills don't only happen in five-paragraph essays; you can require students to exhibit them, together with their mastery of the text itself, in assessments that are as authentic and real-

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# Differentiation: Road Maps to Torah Study

■ by **BETH BURSTEIN FINE**

Fine presents an approach to differentiated instruction called Layering Torah that adapts a successful pedagogy for application in the Judaics classroom.

Day school students come to the study of Torah with all kinds of abilities and challenges. There are students for whom Hebrew is their first language, who swim through the words of Torah text with ease; students whose learning challenges make breaking the code of Hebrew almost impossible; students who think abstractly but cannot find a pencil, and students who think concretely and cannot find the main idea in a piece of text. Nonetheless, Torah study is a core part of a day school program. As Mishnah Peah says, תלמוד תורה כנגד כולם—Torah study is as important as all other mitzvot. It is critical that we develop ways to welcome all students into our learning environment and to spark in all students a love of Jewish text study. This article addresses how differentiation can allow a teacher to adjust curricular goals and tasks to specific student needs.

Differentiation offers a teacher a necessary set of skills for today's day school classroom. But before we turn to the teachers, the larger school community must lay the necessary groundwork if this complex approach is to succeed. First, day schools must be able to answer the question "why study Torah?" with a guiding vision, an approach to methodology and defined content and skill objectives. Many schools know what they teach and how they teach, but may not have articulated why that is so. Before we look at how to differentiate the learning activities in the

classroom, we need to know why we dedicate precious time to Torah study and what we strive to achieve through this endeavor.

Is the school's guiding vision to give students enough background so as to make life choices based on Torah learning? Is the vision to encourage a love of Jewish text study and therefore encourage future Jewish academic work? Is it to engrave the rhythm of weekly Torah study and reading so as to encourage our students to be active participants in synagogues throughout their lives? It is incumbent upon us to articulate both our vision of Torah study in particular and Judaic studies in general to our families, as well as their ancillary benefits (critical thinking, presentation skills, text analysis, facility with partner and group work, to name a few). However an individual school defines the purpose of studying Torah, this vision must guide the way the curriculum is designed.

A clarified vision becomes a roadmap of student learning, which allows teachers and students to reach their goals by varied routes. Along with this roadmap, teachers need two more sets of professional tools: a grounding in differentiation as an approach to curriculum planning which benefits all students, as well as a deep and detailed understanding of their students' learning styles. Both of these areas require professional devel-

opment (classes, conferences), collaboration with colleagues (book discussion groups, meetings with in house and private learning specialists) and sufficient time to process and assimilate the new information. Day schools must invest time and money in teacher training for differentiation to succeed.

One approach to differentiation which I have found theoretically sound and easily applied to Torah study is that of Kathie Nunley (see her website [www.help4teachers.com](http://www.help4teachers.com)). Nunley identifies



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three principles in designing a differentiated curriculum: choice, accountability and critical thinking. She reminds us to encourage our students by giving them choices, support our students by holding them accountable for completing the task and inspire our students by helping them to think deeply and critically. Nunley uses a menu approach called the Layered Curriculum which organizes sets of tasks by level of complexity. Students work through required and choice activities on the basic, intermediate and advanced levels. These principles benefit all types of learners by making our classrooms relevant and lively. But they also provide a seamless structure for adjusting tasks based on individual learning profiles.

While Nunley's work was originally developed for public high school classrooms, it can be easily applied to

Torah study in an approach I call Layering Torah. I have organized the learning activities around sets of Torah text and a menu of activities, some required and some optional. The activities are grouped on three levels of complexity that correspond to three traditional questions which guide Torah study: what does the text say, what does the text mean and what does the text mean to me. On the first level students focus on reading the text, finding vocabulary words or the names of familiar characters, searching for the shorashim (Hebrew roots) of verbs and other basic skills. The second level has students begin to build meaning through activities like matching Hebrew phrases to English phrases, illustrating or diagramming individual pesukim (verses) or acting out parts of the text.

The third level asks students to connect the text to themselves through creative writing, art and drama as well as grappling with commentaries and midrashim. The Layering Torah system ensures that all students work on all levels, experiencing the range of learning objectives while still making personal choices. It is differentiated with the interests of every student in the room in mind. As the year progresses, students begin to design their own learning activities and thus contribute to their classmates' understanding. This move to take charge of one's learning is infectious; students become excited by trying activities designed by classmates, and may begin suggesting ways to adjust or extend tasks to better meet their interests or learning style.

A differentiated structure encourages all students to work to their strengths as well as stretch themselves in areas of discomfort, and thus experience the joy of success. Yet further adjustments must be made to the system so as to meet the learning needs of students with pronounced learning challenges.

Students with attention issues abound in our classrooms. This challenge often brings related issues, including lack of organization, difficulty following directions and difficulty staying on task.

These students benefit from an approach which is highly structured, with activities presented in a consistent manner. A set of tasks that looks overwhelming in September becomes comfortable by November, as students become familiar with the structure. These students also need to know they will be held accountable for completing a reasonable amount of defined work. They benefit from checklists and menus which help them make choices, track their progress and reach for success.

Some students with deficits in attention need no more support than the menu used by all students in my classroom. Others benefit from an adjusted menu with fewer choices, modified tasks and less text on the page. Many students

## A differentiated structure encourages all students to work to their strengths as well as stretch themselves in areas of discomfort, and thus experience the joy of success.

need teacher assistance in making good choices and using their time wisely. The Layering Torah system allows most students to work independently, and therefore allows the teacher to focus attention on those students who most need individual support.

Other students may have a range of language-based challenges—auditory processing, dyslexia, nonverbal and verbal learning disabilities, to name a few. In order to help these students succeed in Torah class, the teacher needs to understand their specific needs and clearly define the learning goals for each activity. If my goal is for a student to identify the shorashim in a piece of Torah text, I may want to give certain students a tool like flash cards with shorashim to manipulate and match with words in the text. Another student may be successful in locating the shorashim, but will struggle if asked to transfer those words onto a separate worksheet. A third student may need to work with the text in translation or in a small directed group with teacher support. A fourth student may have interesting thoughts to share about deep

questions, but need a teacher to scribe his or her answers.

There are many students who struggle when faced with tasks that involve personal or social risks. They may be intimidated by making choices, by moving from individual to partner to group work or by working effectively in these varied ways. These students may not have defined deficits, but their learning style makes deciding what to do and with whom to do it tricky. What a gift it is for these children to work on these areas of discomfort in a structured environment. Some students need help in choosing tasks for the first several months of school; the teacher can talk through his or her deliberation out loud and model how to weigh different options. Eventually, most children take

on this privilege with confidence. Other students need support in deciding when to work alone, when with a partner and when with a group, as well as assistance in navigating the social issues which arise in group work. Layering Torah allows a teacher to work one on one with students and help them make their way through these challenges, while the rest of the class works independently.

Torah study involves process and product, a way of learning and an outcome of knowledge, both of which are important pieces of Jewish heritage. When we give students the tools to tackle text and connect with Torah, we connect them to their people's past, to themselves, and to their own future. Each of us who are tasked with this sacred work need to think carefully about our goals, our students' learning needs and our methods for unlocking the joy of Torah study for all of our students. Our schools must develop a clear vision of the purpose of Torah learning based in discussion with faculty and the community, a clear road map to guide our journey into the Jewish future. ■



# Museum Learning: Entering Torah through Pictures

■ by **IAN SILVERMAN** and **MICHAEL DRUIN**

A set of beautiful drawings, rendered by a rabbi who is also an artist, depicting scenes from the weekly parashah gives all students, especially visual learners, a different kind of portal to reflect upon the meaning and interpretation of Biblical stories.

pressing deeper emotional and broader understandings than verbal expression. Perhaps this portal into the parashah can begin a process of a deeper and more penetrating interaction with the holy text.

These illustrations, although they affirm the ultimate meaning of Scripture and its truths, are not attempts to document

Children, as the four sons of Passover teach us, learn in multiple ways. Any of the five senses that we can stimulate in our teaching methodology of Chumash is worth exploring and developing.

Rabbi Ian Silverman has spent many years drawing 53 paintings, each depicting a verse from one of the parshiot of the Torah. When these paintings were first displayed at The Jewish Academy, an elementary school in Suffolk County, it became apparent what an amazing tool this can be for “museum learning.” Students can be divided into small groups, or they can walk around alone, and are given open-ended tasks involving writing and/or drawing inspired by the paintings in front of them.

The beauty of Torah text is that one comes in direct contact with the proverbial content of the sacred tradition. Whether one focuses on the text or the commentaries that have filtered through the understanding of Jews through the ages, it is all holy content. But sometimes for many students the sheer quantity of information and amount of words begins to overwhelm.

A vibrant illustration of a scene from the Torah portion featuring a central text can sometimes focus the mind and ignite the imagination in a child. Thus he or she has gained a portal into the text. (The choice of design of the images as a

circle surrounded by a circular mat seeks to create this effect.)

The passages chosen often have ethical ramifications. For instance Aaron’s silence at the time of his mourning the loss of his sons (Shmini) and Joseph’s fleeing from the advances of Potiphar’s wife (Veyeshev) are designed to challenge the viewer to formulate some of their own thinking on these dilemmas and difficulties. Other illustrations endeavor to capture certain faith orientations elic-

ited by a sedra (i.e., starting from scratch after the Flood...Creation moving from a point of color and light to a far more complex reality of intelligent life) or intriguing questions the portion asks (why is it that Moses is chosen to show Aaron how to sacrifice (Tzav) or how can a house get *tzara’at* and what can that teach? (Metzora).

It is hoped too, that the children seeing the vibrant colorful depictions will themselves be spurred to develop some of their own artistic renderings of other evocative passages in the text. Studies in art therapy have established that art is sometimes far more effective in ex-



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historic or scientifically precise truth for the children. Nor do they necessarily fully agree or disagree with certain traditional renderings and conceptions. These scenes are the artist’s alone; he has enlisted poetic license, midrashic interpretations and some arbitrary design and color decisions to create a vivid running display of the 53 portions of the Torah.

Students are asked to choose one of the paintings and then given such tasks as the following:

How does this painting depict the verse chosen by the artist?



In your opinion, does the painting portray the meaning of the verse accurately and why?

If you were the artist, how would you depict this verse?

Describe a midrash or commentary associated with this verse that is or isn't included in this painting.

D	<b>Describe</b>	Describe what you see, experience and can measure
E	<b>Explain</b>	Explain what you know or understand, what you experienced or think
A	<b>Analyze</b>	Analyze the information to draw conclusions or determine what you believe and why
L	<b>Link</b>	Link with previous knowledge or information

Which verse would you have chosen from this parashah to be your central painting, and why?

One may choose the D E A L approach (which is often used in science) to explore ideas about what is seen, develop the thinking and analyses of what is seen, make links with previous learning, cul-

tivate the ability to apply what has been learnt, and forge connections with other areas of previous learning.

These works of art are not just beautiful and Judaically enriching. They are also an educational tool to be used in the hands of talented teachers. Educators who seek to provide students with mul-

tipl modalities of instruction have here a perfect tool to teach Chumash in a visual versus textual way. Some teachers use it as an assessment tool, while others use it as a way to introduce a parashah. All in all, Chumash education has taken on a whole new approach at the Jewish Academy thanks to these 53 works of art. ■

## Innovative Tanakh Programs in the Land of Milk and Honey

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 51]  
the country ([www.mikranet.org.il](http://www.mikranet.org.il)). This extraordinary educational resource provides teachers with a wealth of valuable content sources as well as pedagogic guidance that are most relevant for Tanakh teachers around the world.

This site is updated on a regular basis and informs Tanakh educators about new resources that can be easily adapted for Jewish schools worldwide. The educational heads of Mikranet are keen to include examples of good practice in Tanakh education from schools world-

wide and this site can serve as an educational platform for a rich exchange of ideas and approaches. The potential impact of Mikranet is most significant and we encourage all Tanakh educators to take advantage of this outstanding educational resource. ■

# Promoting Torah Literacy: Strategies from the Field of Literacy Education

■ by **Yael Sacks**

Tools from the field of literacy education provide ways for teachers to introduce critical thinking skills into the study of Tanakh.

**I**magine that you are a new teacher about to engage with your students in a study of the weekly Torah portion. You envision a classroom where students think critically about the text and engage in discussions that probe for deeper meaning, but you aren't sure where to start. The Teachers College Reading & Writing Project at Columbia University, has developed a powerful curriculum for teaching students to think critically about text. Grounding our practice in this field's methodology will make our Judaic studies instruction more meaningful for our students.

Literacy education has identified several key strategies of effective readers: asking questions, making predictions, making connections between texts and your own life, and making inferences. These same skills can empower our students to get more out of biblical texts by visualizing the stories of Torah, asking questions about characters' motivations, making inferences about why characters are acting the way they do, and beginning to synthesize theories about these characters based on their actions. This article describes the way in which literacy resources and three common literacy teaching strategies were used to help students develop critical thinking skills during a unit on Megillat Esther, and suggests how school leaders might support teachers in implementing literacy resources and strategies.

This spring, my co-teacher, Mary Setton, and I, in a combined 3rd/4th grade class

at Beit Rabban in Manhattan, prepared for a mini-unit on Megillat Esther with a pre-assessment that asked students to think about the traits of major characters. The majority of students responded with standard caricatures. Haman was "mean," Esther was "nice" and "beautiful," and Achashverosh was "silly." When we asked students for evidence of these traits, they often had trouble answering. We wanted to teach our students to go beyond stereotypes and make inferences based on the text, to think critically about these characters and begin to understand the complex politics underlying the Purim Story.

I began by telling my students, "Today I want to teach you that good readers pay attention to characters' actions and use them as clues to figure out what kind of person that character is. Watch how I do this for Achashverosh. In the third year of his kingship Achashverosh makes two huge parties, one for all of his officers, and one just for the capital city of Shushan. I'm thinking that this is kind of irresponsible. He's the king! Shouldn't he be trying to make laws or protect the people? Why is he spending all his time on parties? I'm thinking maybe he really cares a lot about what other people think, so he wants to impress them with parties." I recorded on the chart: "irresponsible" and "cares what other people think" next to the evidence of "his first action as king is to make two huge parties."

The chart described above, listing Achashverosh's actions and the inferences that we made, is called an "anchor chart" because it serves as an anchor, or constant reminder of the skill of making inferences. Literacy teachers use "anchor charts" like this one to reinforce their critical thinking instruction. They refer back to these charts to remind students to use the critical thinking skills that they have been taught. Later in the unit, during discussions of other characters, I



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would be able to point to this chart saying, "Remember when you paid attention to Achashverosh's actions and used them as clues to figure out what kind of person he was? Try that for the characters that we read about today." This would reinforce the skill and remind students to use it.

Like any other skill, critical thinking requires constant practice. Literacy educators often use a strategy called "turn and talk" to get all of their students practicing a thinking skill out loud with a partner. In order to get students to use inference by paying attention to characters' actions, I asked my students to "turn and talk" to partners and try to make some inferences based on another of Achashverosh's actions.

When Vashti refused to come when Achashverosh wanted her, he asked his advisors what to do and then followed



their advice to get rid of her. At first, many students were shaky and unsure, but when they realized that I honestly expected them to make some inferences, they rose to the task. I was able to support groups that struggled by asking them questions to draw out ideas. After a couple of minutes I stopped the talk to record ideas in the chart and summarized saying, "I heard a lot of different ideas from you and I'm so proud of how you are making inferences based on Achashverosh's actions. Many of you said that maybe Achashverosh is a person who worries a lot and that he listens to his

As we moved on to further study of the Megillah it was exciting to see the kids' theories about characters deepening beyond the simplistic "good guy/bad guy" formulations as they began using the inferencing skills we were teaching. One student question, "How could Achashverosh agree to destroy an entire community without even asking who they were?" led to a discussion of what we can infer about Achashverosh from this action, as we thought about whether Achashverosh was a foolish king, or perhaps just didn't care about the people under his control.

thinking and emphasize those skills.

Skills commonly taught as "reading skills" are used by effective thinkers in all disciplines. By integrating the Judaic and general studies we not only bring insights from literacy into our Torah study, we also provide students with an opportunity to bring Torah insights into their thinking about every area of life. ■

### To Learn More

tc.readingandwritingproject.com: The website for the Teacher's College Reading & Writing Project—see especially the Resources tab

*A School Leader's Guide to Excellence: Collaborating Our Way to Better Schools* by Carmen Farina and Laura Kotch

*Units of Study for Teaching Reading* by Lucy Calkins and Colleagues at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project

*A Curricular Plan for the Reading Workshop (Grade Specific)* by Lucy Calkins and Colleagues at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project

**"In the third year of his kingship Achashverosh makes two huge parties, one for all of his officers, and one just for the capital city of Shushan. He's the king! Shouldn't he be trying to make laws or protect the people?"**

servants instead of thinking for himself. Others inferred that maybe he is impulsive and doesn't think through the consequences of his actions." An advantage of "turn and talk" is that every student gets the chance to talk and practice the strategy that has been taught.

Integrating the methodology of literacy education into Judaic studies can benefit both general and Judaic studies. Teachers in both areas can work together sharing their understanding of how to create critical thinkers, moving towards a day in which all teachers use the same language to talk about critical

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# The Quality of Life Wheel: A Tool for Reading, Understanding and Living

■ by **M. EVAN WOLKENSTEIN**

The author has developed a map of qualities that students apply to biblical stories and use to navigate the relationship between Tanakh and their own lives.

In the field of Tanakh study, students learn translation, interpretation, forming and articulating arguments, writing, and in the best cases, problem-solving, cooperation, and application of creativity. Indeed, these skills make better students. They make more articulate meaning-makers. They enrich students' intellects. Several years ago, I began to wonder if there were also some skills that students could learn from Tanakh that could help them understand their lives better. Could Tanakh help them chart healthy pathways through life? Make them more compassionate, more helpful, more able to understand the ways life can bring us down and more able to restore quality to life when it gets difficult?

With these questions in mind, I developed a tool which I call the Quality of Life Wheel. It is designed to help students analyze and understand a wide range of subjects. At the Jewish Community High School of the Bay in San Francisco, 10th Grade Tanakh II uses it to understand text, Jewish history, and our own lives.

## AN OVERVIEW: MMMMCCCC

To begin with, look at the Quality of Life Wheel (QOL). You will notice that it is divided into eight wedges, each labeled with the name of a quality, and a few brief notes to explain the quality. Underneath is a chart to help explain each.

## THE MISHKAN: A QUALITY OF LIFE SANCTUARY

Three decorative motifs point to qualities

central to the text. Gold is a prominent building material in the Mishkan, and as Rafael Kushick (a furniture designer) teaches in G-dcast Parashat Teruma, the Mishkan features brass in the exterior courtyard, silver in the curtained passageway, and gold on the interior. This suggests that the most **Meaningful** things in the Israelites' lives are found in the innermost recesses of the Tabernacle.

The Ark of the Covenant, made of gold, contains the Law, and it is crowned with two Faces—the cherubim, posing face-to-face. **Connection**, *bein adam leMakom / bein adam lechaveiro*, is our most sacred value, so much so that it must be regulated and guided by the Law, so much so that God “speaks” from the eye-to-eye region between two angelic (and yet human) faces.

The Mishkan is designed for portability. The furnishings feature poles that are never to be removed; the Mishkan is always, as it were, ready to be moved. This teaches that movement, adaptation, growth, and change—**Creativity**—is essential to the Israelites ability to survive and thrive.

Other qualities inhere in the form and function of the Mishkan.

**Control:** Not every space in the Mishkan is free and open at every time. Some areas are sacrosanct, for the high priest alone, on one day of the year. Likewise,

the Law dictates the mitzvot, which set controls in place for a civil society.

**Memory:** The Ark contains the broken tablets, smashed by Moses after the Golden Calf incident, as well as the new tablets, and a jar of manna, suggesting that both difficult and inspiring elements of the past must be borne along with us, throughout life. In the synagogue, the Ark and Torah reading are symbols of **Continuity**, as each new



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generation experiences the **Meaning** anew, forming **Connections** with the past, with one's family, from generation to generation, and with the **Mystery** beyond and within.

## STUDENT ASSESSMENT I: A PERSONAL MISHKAN

Part of the **Meaning** of the Mishkan for Jewish civilization has to do with the motifs and messages within: Gold, Portability, and Faces, as discussed above. But much of the **Meaning** of the Mishkan has also to do with Jewish civilization's **Creativity** in the face of the destruction (**dis-Continuity**) of the Temple (itself, a **Continuity**-adaptation of the original Tabernacle).

The rise of verbal prayer, the emphasis on tzedakah, Torah study, and a large number of our most cherished mitzvot and customs are **Creative-Continuities**, and the embodiment of the Mishkan Motif of Portability—**Creative** adaptability.

But in order for students to appreciate the **Creative-Continuity** following the destruction of the Temple, they need to appreciate the destruction. And while students may intellectually understand the loss of the Temple by studying it, there is no avenue towards emotionally relating to the trauma of the loss of the Temple, nor the relief and joy of the **Creative-Continuity** that follows, without emotionally entering into the Mishkan. Just as the seder has us imagine ourselves as if we left Egypt, ourselves, I let students imagine the loss of the Mishkan as their own loss. They designed a personalized Mishkan, reflected on its loss, and celebrated the joy of moving beyond the destruction.

Students use Homestyler to design a “Mishkan” that includes rooms for fostering a healthy, quality life, and they present these personal Mishkanot to the class. An example can be seen at [tinyurl.com/bshyz4n](http://tinyurl.com/bshyz4n).

## STUDENT ASSESSMENT II: INTERVENTION FOR TRAUMA

Using the QOL, students learn a bit of social psychology, reflecting on how communities suffer collectively, anticipating which areas of society can suffer trauma, and in turn, anticipating what sorts of interventions can help a community get back on its feet.

In turn, students gain a deeper appreciation for Jewish history, understanding, for example, 5th century BCE Judeans as more than victims of Babylonian destruction, and Jews during WWII as more than victims of Nazi persecution. They were both creative, adaptable people faced with a terrible task: to rebuild their QOL after enormous trauma.

How is **Meaning** to be restored in the face of such tragedy? What is the purpose of life when all appears lost? How will the Jewish people maintain **Continuity** in the wake of such upheaval? Will societies in exile manage to rebuild **Connection** with the homeland, with each other, and with their God (the **Mystery**)? What role must **Creativity** and **Mastery** play as communities reform around new ways of relating to the tragedies of the past (**Memory**) and the challenges of today?

## QUALITIES OF LIFE



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SCAMPER technique by Bob Eberle

QUALITY	LOOSELY DEFINED
<b>Mystery</b>	Some sense or relating to a higher Being in the universe, whether that be God, the “Oneness” of all things, or, in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s eloquent phrasing in <i>The Scarlet Letter</i> , the “sanctity of the human heart”
<b>Meaning</b>	Some sense of there being a purpose to one’s existence, a big-picture benefit to difficult things one has lived through
<b>Memory</b>	Some sense of where one has come from; cherished recollections, family and collective history, national myth
<b>Mastery</b>	Some sense of finesse, to be “good at” something, to apply talent and skill towards the aesthetic and functional shaping of the world—from music, sports, art, etc.
<b>Connection</b>	A sense of not being alone
<b>Creativity</b>	Using one’s human, intellectual endowments to reshape and recombine the familiar into the new, to adapt, to grow
<b>Control</b>	A sense of order, predictable outcome to the world, freedom of thought, action, and movement
<b>Continuity</b>	A sense that the future will contain familiar and valued elements of the past and the present.

The Quality of Life Wheel helps students develop an eye for understanding and “reading” the world around them, relating to classic Jewish text, modern history, current events, and personal experience as

overlapping fields that inform each other. The curriculum is not just about what is on the page, but also about what is within people. The skills are not just for school—the skills are for life. ■



# The South Made Me the Jew I Am

■ by **LISA ENGEL**

I didn't learn how to be a Jew until I moved to the Deep South. I arrived in Birmingham, Alabama, over 30 years ago, after growing up in Miami and graduating from Northwestern University, to work at *The Birmingham News*. I was completely unprepared for the welcome I received from an intern, who exclaimed, "I'm so glad to have another Jewish person working here!" Then I learned that out of 700 employees at *The News*, only a handful were Jewish.

This was quite shocking to me coming from Miami. I further realized that I was the first Jew many of my co-workers had met. There was much curiosity and many questions. Why did we celebrate the Sabbath on Saturday? What was Yom Kippur fasting about? Why did we celebrate Hanukkah for eight days? The questions kept coming and I did not have adequate answers. My Jewish upbringing was limited to Sunday school, and though I observed the holidays, I didn't know how to explain our traditions.

Thus began my quest for Jewish knowledge. My husband and I took a Federation trip to Israel. Not only did I learn about Jewish history, Middle East politics, and Jewish philanthropy but also I realized, for the first time in my life, that I was proud to be Jewish. When my feet landed on Israeli soil, I knew intuitively that I had come home!

This trip was the beginning of my Jewish journey in Birmingham. In talking to co-workers about my Israel experiences I was surprised to find that not only were they interested in Judaism, but as people of deep Christian faith, they respected my growing Jewish beliefs. And, they also shared my new love for Israel.



Illustration by  
Dorothy Thursby,  
Gideon Hausner  
Jewish Day School

In addition to the trip, my Jewish journey was strengthened by the small but vibrant Jewish community I connected to in Birmingham. Although only about 5500 in number, most belonged to synagogues and affiliated with Jewish causes. I was no longer anonymous within a larger Jewish community. The Birmingham Jewish community needed me and I loved my

newfound identity.

The more Jewish questions I was able to answer, the more I thirsted for Jewish knowledge. I signed up for a Jewish leadership course, learned to read Hebrew, became a dedicated volunteer for the Birmingham Jewish Federation, and became a strong advocate for Israel.

However, perhaps the most impactful decision I made was to send my children to a Jewish day school. I realized I wanted my children to have the Jewish knowledge I never had as a child. I wanted them to embrace their Jewish identities from a young age. I wanted Hebrew to flow from their lips and davening to be a natural part of their days. I wanted them to walk into a synagogue anywhere in the world and be at home.

But I got more than a Jewish education for my children at Birmingham's N.E. Miles Jewish Day School. Our whole family was enriched by the experiences of our children. We started having Shabbat dinners, putting up a sukkah, observing kashrut, attending shul, and the list goes on.

Now, 30 years later, I can knowledgeably speak about being Jewish. I debate issues with other Jews and dialogue with Christian friends. And, whenever I can, I tell out-of-towners that Birmingham does indeed have a great Jewish community. We are small but warm, active and engaging. I also tell them with pride that Birmingham is where I learned to be Jewish! ■

*Do you have a special story to tell about your experience in day schools? Share it with the field! Send an essay of 600 words to Haydion@ravsak.org. Submissions from all stakeholders welcome.*

# Terms for Biblical Study

The following are some of the terms used in the articles in this issue.

**Ancient Near East:** the larger geo-political area in which ancient Israel was situated, including Mesopotamia, Egypt, Anatolia/Asia Minor, and Persia

**Aramaic:** the language of part of Tanakh (especially in Daniel) and predominantly used in the Talmud; also the language of the Targumim

**Bamidbar:** the book of Numbers; a parashah at the beginning of that book

**Be'iyun:** learning a particular passage in depth; slow reading

**Beki'ut:** learning aimed at acquiring widespread familiarity with a text; fast reading

**Bereishit:** the book of Genesis; a parashah at the beginning of that book

**Chavruta:** a method of study in pairs commonly used in the study of Jewish sacred text

**Chazal (חכמינו זכרונם לברכה):** the sages whose teachings are included in the classic rabbinic collections of the Mishnah, Talmud and ancient midrashim

**Chumash:** the five books of Moses

**Derash:** a homiletical, nonliteral interpretation, usually with a moral aim

**Devarim:** the book of Deuteronomy; a parashah at the beginning of that book

**Documentary Hypothesis (also Higher Criticism):** the theory prevalent in the academic study of Tanakh that the Torah consists of different strands, written by different groups of Israelites at differ-

ent times, and woven together by editors into its current form

**Hammurabi:** first king of the Babylonian empire, who lived in the 18th century BCE, famous for his law code that was discovered in modern times by archeologists and serves as a point of comparison for biblical law

**Lex talionis:** the principle of retributive justice—"an eye for an eye"

**Masoretes:** Jewish biblical scholars from the early Middle Ages who assembled the Tanakh, using pre-existing manuscripts and traditions, into the form in which it is codified today

**Midrash:** capitalized, the body of homiletical interpretations compiled by the ancient rabbis; lower case, an example of such a rabbinic interpretation

**Midrash Rabba:** the "great Midrash," a large anthology of midrashim divided according to the books of the Torah: Bereishit Rabba, Shmot Rabba, Vayyikra Rabba, Bamidbar Rabba, Devarim Rabba

**Mikra'ot Gedolot:** the "rabbis' Bible," an edition of the Chumash which includes many of the classic commentators (frequently reprinted)

**Mishkan:** Tabernacle, especially the portable Temple established by the Israelites in the wilderness described in Shmot chapters 25-31, 35-40.

**Minor prophets:** also known as "the twelve," the books of the prophets from Hosea to Malachi; called "minor" because these books are short, not because

they are less important

**Parashah (also parashat hashavua; pl. parshiot):** the weekly portion of the Torah read in synagogue

**Parshanim (also meforshim):** traditional commentators on the Torah and other books of Tanakh, mostly from the Middle Ages, whose comments appear as glosses—line by line explanations below the biblical text

**Pasuk (pl. pesukim):** a verse from Tanakh

**Perek (pl. perakim):** a chapter of Tanakh

**Peshat:** literal interpretation

**Shemot:** the book of Exodus; a parashah at the beginning of that book

**Shoftim:** the book of Judges

**Syriac:** an ancient language into which the Bible was translated

**Tanakh (also TaNaKH):** a Hebrew acronym for the Bible: Torah (five books of Moses); Nevi'im (Prophets, including the historical books from Joshua to Kings as well as fifteen books written under prophets' names); Ketuvim (Writings, a collection including diverse material)

**Targum (pl. Targumim):** ancient Jewish translation of the Torah and Tanakh into Aramaic

**Vayyikra:** the book of Leviticus; a parashah at the beginning of that book

**Wisdom literature:** a genre of writing widespread in the Ancient Near East, consisting of proverbial sayings by sages, sometimes addressing issues of philosophy or theodicy; includes the books of Proverbs, Job and Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) from Tanakh ■

**RAVSAK**

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# North American Jewish Day School Conference

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