

## Chapter Two: First Encounters with the Torah Opening Up the Text to our Many Questions - *At P'Tach Lo*

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## Preface to First Encounters with Torah Text and Talmud Torah

Introducing the TEXT as an object of study is the first step of turning bible stories into a disciplined, critical study of text. As in all critical study we take a step back from content to look at form, at **how the object presents itself and how we approach it**. This first encounter precedes engagement in a particular text from a particular disciplinary angle, such as a historical study of Hagar and ancient surrogate mothers or the moral message of Jacob cheating his brother.

We look both at the "object" which is presented not naively but with a particular texture and geography and language, but also at the "subject" - ourselves as reflective investigators with a particular questioning stance and seeking evidence and reasons and meanings.

One might say the teacher invites the student to join in examining and exploring this object of inquiry (see Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*). Teacher and student are co-students of the Torah mediated to us through a text, a written text.

### *What is that Torah behind the Book?*

Torah is not the book. It may not even be the letters and the words. If we separate between the paper or parchment book and the Torah, then we may say that Torah is 1) the Jewish wisdom tradition, 2) Jewish history as our national autobiography, as our recollections of encounters with the Divine, 3) God's instructions, 4) God's self-revelation, 5) Hazal sometimes say: the everflowing Divine wisdom to which each generation adds, so inclusive of written and oral tradition as well as the latest comment of a Torah student, so they stipulate that we may say the blessing over Torah study about the words of contemporary rabbi, 6) Ramban says the Torah is God's name written in black fire on white fire, 7) Joel Girshaver in his curriculum *Being Torah* prefers the Hassidic and ultimately Kabbalist notion that we are Torah, that each person is a holy letter and only when all 600,000 souls are combined to do we have complete redeemed Torah.

In short the Torah both as book and as a scroll is not THE Torah, but a mediation of Torah. There are many different mediations and each one has its own texture and geography to be learned. What form does this Torah take and how do we get oriented to exploring it?

### *Is the Torah the written Torah?*

Once upon time the Torah was an oral creation - God's word creating the world, God's commandments to Moshe, God's Ten Words pronounced at Sinai, parents telling their children the story of the Exodus and even today the reading aloud of the Torah in the synagogue. However beginning with the carving of the two stone tablets at Sinai and continuing with the writing of the Torah in Deuteronomy 17 the Torah has become a text marked on material - stone, then parchment (animal skins), then cloth (text from textile), then paper (book from the German term for oak) and today electronic letters. The visual layout, which has changed over time, is now part of the data of the Torah text, its texture, to be interpreted, as much as its musical notations - *taamei hamikrah*.

Introducing the Torah therefore includes the visual including the musical notations standardized in Tiberias in 9<sup>th</sup> century, the book divisions, the spaces, the *parshiot*

determined for weekly Torah readings and now since the Christian Middle Ages the chapter numbering and verses. Each issue of layout affects issues of meaning and interpretation.

However this written Torah may be just a temporary status to be returned to the oral realm of speech. The Torah is read - but *Kriyat HaTorah* is not silent reading to oneself typical only since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is public reading aloud to an audience with musical and other emphases that perform the Torah.

Learning the geography of the Tanakh as a text is also learning how its borders were shaped through canonization (for example, the Old Testament or the Tanakh and its many variant order of books or the Septuagint or through its synagogue performance divided into *parshot hashavua* etc.

For most readers the Tanakh presents itself through a translation that is its own interpretation, so its contribution must be considered. Public Torah reading has almost always involved Targum, some kind of recognized translation/interpretation/expansion. How does the translation mediate the Torah to us? It is clearly not merely transparent medium but one that bridges listener and text. The medium necessarily affects the message and that of that we must become aware.

All this is the "object" side of Torah, but we must pay attention to the "subject" - the learner. No student comes to a text without a lens, without his/her own apparatus of mediation. One begins with spontaneous questions and *kushiot* that arise. For the Rabbis and most educators the ideal reader is an active interrogator of the Torah text. Gradually we move from the intentionally undisciplined first encounter, the first barrage of questions, to one or more disciplined approaches.

In this introductory chapter *before* the Torah is placed into disciplinary contexts, let us begin with:

- (1) an orientation to the Tanakh text enabling us to review its structure, its book titles, its transmission issues as presented by Baruch Sienna from his website Bible course for adult learners of the Liberal Judaism Toronto Kolel
- (2) asking questions
- (3) translating

Educators may find ideas for their introductory unit about Torah or Tanakh. Of course the "introduction" may be presented not at the beginning of Torah study but as a moment of reflection back on what content has been studied. There may be a series of reflective breaks in the study of the narrative to get a bird's eye view of the Tanakh's geography.

Similar the catalogues of questions presented by Joel Grishaver and Baruch Sienna may guide the teacher's checklist of tools to be added to the student's toolbox but it may also be made explicit to the student who will become aware of being a critical investigator of the Torah text.

## A. Orientation to Torah Study by Baruch Sienna

from the Liberal Judaism Kolel of Toronto -  
<http://www.kolel.org/torahstory/module1/humash>

### Introduction: The Word "Torah"

What is meant by the word, 'Torah?' The word Torah can mean a number of different things. And in addition, there are a number of different words we use to describe Torah. Let's take a moment to clarify the different terms used to describe Torah, and related sacred texts.

#### Torah

The word Torah comes from a root that means teaching, (like the Hebrew word: Morah - or Moreh) or instruction, as in the verse, (Ex. 24:12). In the Torah itself, the word appears 52 times. It can indicate 'law,' (as in *Torat haz'vahim...*, the law (Torah) of the sacrifices Lev. 6:7), and it was this meaning that was conveyed when it was translated as *nomos* in Greek and *lex* in Latin.

The different instances when the Pentateuch speaks of a written Torah refer to a variety of different documents: the Covenant Code in Ex. 24:12; general instructions in Deut. 17: 18. Scholars disagree whether the passage 'Write down this Torah...' (Deut. 31:9) refers to portions of Deuteronomy that precede it, or the poem that follows (the Torah itself and even the book of Deuteronomy as we now know them not yet being in existence).

The root of the Hebrew word for Torah is 'to shoot,' like an arrow. Using last week's theme, we could say the Torah is a 'one-way' arrow sign, that indicates the 'way to go.' Similarly, the word for Jewish law, 'Halacha,' comes from the root, to walk, or to go.

The Torah (usually with the definite article- the) refers in its most basic sense to the five books of Moses or to the handwritten parchment scroll (the topic of next week's class).

#### The Torah Scroll

Although the purpose of this course is to introduce you to how to study Torah, we can't open the text before taking a moment to consider the actual physical object, the Torah scroll.

The Torah Scroll is the most sacred and precious possession of the Jewish people. It is kept inside the synagogue in a cabinet structure called the Aron Kodesh and behind a curtain called the Parochet. It is beautifully decorated with silver ornaments and protected with silk or velvet coverings. Each ornament has both a functional as well as a decorative purpose.

This material is based on the [Gates of Torah CD ROM](#) produced by Kolel.)

1. To learn about the outside of the Torah: [How the Torah is dressed and why.](#)
2. To learn about the inside of the Torah: [How the Torah is written.](#)

Typically, the Torah is studied from a book, not the Torah scroll itself. You can find some examples of how the text of the Torah scroll differs from a printed Chumash in part two. We, however, are now going to study not even from a physical book, but from our computer screens.

### **How are the words Humash and Pentateuch related?**

Because the Hebrew word for five is '**Hamesh**,' another word for the Torah is **Humash** (also seen, Chumash). (In English, we see the same play on the word for five in the Greek derived word: Pentateuch- from the Greek penta- like pentagon). The Humash is a book that contains the text of the Torah, and the volume for synagogue usually contains the additional (Prophetic) portions (Haftarah) read on Shabbat morning after the Torah reading. Haftarah (sometimes pronounced 'Haftorah'), does NOT come from 'half' the Torah! It actually is a completely different Hebrew root (spelled differently) than Torah and means 'completion.'

### **How is the Torah divided?**

The five books are subdivided into 54 smaller literary units called a Parashah (Parashiyot, pl.), usually 3-6 chapters in length. (VaYeLech, Deut. 31 is the shortest parashah with 30 verses.) The name of each Parashah comes from the first (important) word just like the Hebrew name of the book. Typically, every Shabbat, one parashah is read - in sequence - so in a year, the entire Torah is read. Occasionally, two parashiyot are read, and when holidays fall on Shabbat, additional readings that are out of sequence are added as well.

The name of the Parashah also lends itself to that Shabbat (and the coming week), so each week has a 'name,' such as Shabbat Toledot, or Shabbat Yitro. You can find out what Parashah is being read this week (or any week) by using a Jewish Calendar. You can find Jewish Calendars on the Internet that list holiday dates, and here is [a page that generates the Parasha for any month \(or year\)](#).

The weekly readings can be seen in a [chart](#). Some synagogues follow a triennial cycle, dividing each Parasha into thirds, so that it takes three years to complete reading the entire Torah.

### **What is the difference between Torah and Tanakh?**

The word Bible (from the Greek, Biblia) means The Book (or books!). Actually, as we will see in topic D, the Bible is actually a library of books. Surprisingly, there is no word for 'Bible' as such in Hebrew! The word **Tanakh** is actually an acronym, (like SCUBA, (who knows what SCUBA stands for?) or RADAR), that stands for **T**orah, **N**evi'im (Prophets), and **K**etuvim (Writings). After the Torah reading, a small portion from 'Nevi'im' is read, called the Haftarah. Unlike the Torah portions that are read sequentially, the Haftarah is a passage chosen by the Rabbis (of the Talmud) that in some way **relates** to the Torah reading.

There is a word, Mikra, (from Reading) that would be like the English word: Scripture (from Writing), that has the sense of 'Holy Writ.'

So, to summarize: All of the Torah is in the Tanakh (or Bible) but not all of the Tanakh is in the Torah. To give some examples: The books of Isaiah, Psalms or Esther are in the Bible, but not in the Torah!

### **Why do Jews not use the term 'Old Testament'?**

The Tanakh, or Hebrew Scriptures (from the root: script meaning writing) is NOT the same

as the Old Testament. The Old Testament is a Christian term. The term 'Old Testament' implies a 'New Testament' so it is commonly not used by Jews. But there are also important differences between the two besides semantics. Chapter divisions were a Christian innovation, and while Jewish Bibles have adopted these Christian divisions, they do not always agree with Jewish literary divisions. Even the way the Ten Commandments are divided is different.

The books of the Bible are in a different order in the Christian Old Testament and in the Jewish Bible. For example, the book of Ruth is placed immediately after Judges in the Christian Bible, (for chronological reasons) but in the Tanakh in Writings as part of the Five Scrolls (Megillot). The book of Daniel is considered a prophet in the Christian Bible, but is in the Historical Writings in the Tanakh.

Finally, the Christian Bible includes several books in the Old Testament that are not part of Tanakh (such as the books of Judith, Tobit and Maccabees). These (later) books that are not considered part of the Jewish canon are termed apocrypha.

### **What is the Oral Torah?**

While "Torah" can mean the five books of Moses, there is a much wider meaning as well. What we would call culturally transmitted ideas and practices, in ancient times was 'oral Torah.' Since society changed much less rapidly than today, and valued the past more, greater stock was placed in old traditions. Rabbinic tradition referred to the written Bible as '**Torah Shebikhtav**,' (often translated as the Written Law, or Written Tradition) to distinguish it from '**Torah Sheb'al Peh**,' the Oral tradition, or Oral Teaching.

The written Torah needs to be interpreted because it lacks many details for putting the laws into practice. For example, Deuteronomy mentions a '*sefer keritut*' [a writ of divorce] required for a divorce, but nowhere hints at what might be in it. Surely the scribes of the times knew from tradition what this document contained. Or what, for example, constitutes the 'work' that is prohibited on Shabbat? At first interpretations were probably understood from established practice and legal precedents. In time, this material grew, as laws continued to adapt to changing conditions. This is the very nature of an oral tradition - being transmitted orally, it is not immutable and fossilized but alive and evolving.

As different interpretations and traditions developed, the rabbis faced the need to relate these independent 'oral' traditions to the written text. This was necessary both to respond to challenges from alternative, sectarian claims as well as to attest to the authority of the transmitted tradition. Just as the Oral Torah depends on the Written Torah, there can be no real existence for the Written Torah without an Oral tradition.

Initially, this growing oral tradition was indeed transmitted orally, and there was reluctance to writing it down. Eventually, though, it was necessary to transcribe and codify this material, or it would have been forgotten. It was the Rabbis of the first and second centuries responsible for this first layer of 'Oral Torah,' known as the 'Mishnah,' (literally Recitation, or Recapitulation). While the Mishnah appears to systematize Jewish custom and law into a coherent legal system, it is not strictly a legal code, as it contains non-legal material, unresolved disputes and technical terms that are often assumed to be understood.

This newly compiled 'Oral Torah' itself now became the focus of oral discussions (*Gemara*, meaning learning), which, like the Mishnah, eventually were transcribed. The *Gemara* and the Mishnah are combined together in a 63 volume work called the Talmud (also from a root that means 'learning.' Do you get a sense of a pattern here?).

In the wonderful volume, *Back to the Sources*, (ed. Barry Holtz), he explains in the introduction, that all of Jewish literature can be seen as a kind of inverted pyramid, with Torah at its apex. Everything emanates from Torah.

"To the contemporary reader the Jewish textual tradition is unusual in that virtually all of it is based on the single originating point of the inverted pyramid, the Bible. In that sense Jewish literature is strikingly unique: it is creative, original, and vibrant, and yet it presents itself as nothing more than interpretation, a vast set of glosses on the one true Book, the Torah." *Back to the Sources*, (ed.) Barry Holtz, Summit Books, NY, 1984, pg. 13

Holtz continues to explain (quoting the scholar G. Scholem), that the Rabbis understood Torah as perfect Truth. Truth, therefore, only needed to be transmitted, and perhaps re-understood. The scholar may 're-discover' truth that was always there. All learning then is seen as a kind of commentary.

The point of all this is to explain that Oral Torah is not seen as a separate work, but indeed like its name suggests, part of Torah itself. The Written Bible (i.e. the Tanakh), (called '**Torah she-bikhtav**') to distinguish it from the 'Oral Teaching (or Torah *she'be'al peh*) is sometimes referred to as simply 'Torah.' Torah can also mean 'learning' and as such can be used as a synonym for the entire Hebrew Bible, (which includes much more than these 5 books) or the entirety of Jewish literature! In fact, the totality of Jewish learning is termed Torah. The Rabbis of the Talmud, medieval commentaries, even today's scholars are all contributing to this 'Torah.' And in fact, what we are doing right now is all part of a greater 'Torah.'

## The Geography of the Tanakh: How to Find a Verse

In this module, we have explored what Torah is, the terms we use to describe Torah, and the Torah Scroll itself. Examine the four categories below. Match them with the appropriate definition or description.

- |                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| 1. Physical           | a. The Torah was written 2500 years ago in Babylonia            |
| 2. Historical         | b. Before the universe was made, the Torah was God's companion. |
| 3. Content            | c. The Torah is made of parchment and kept in the Aron HaKodesh |
| 4. Poetic or Mystical | d. The Torah contains teaching about how to live a Jewish life  |

One last introductory item remains: the 'geography' of the Tanakh. Tanakh is really a 'library' of books, on three shelves: Torah, Nevi'im and Ketuvim. Because in Torah study, one often needs to be able to jump around the Bible, let's take a minute to make sure we are all comfortable 'navigating' through the Tanakh.

**You will need to have an English Bible beside you for this lesson.**

To proceed you need a Tanakh. Many of you may have the Plaut Commentary. The Plaut 'Torah' is not a Tanakh. It is a Chumash. It contains the five books of Moses, as well as the Haftarot, the Prophetic readings for each Parasha.

A Tanakh, such as the Jerusalem Bible, (pub. by Koren) or the Tanakh (pub. by JPS) is needed.

### How is Tanakh a library?

We already saw (in Topic B) that the word Tanakh was an acronym for Torah, Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings). It is the Hebrew word for Bible, and like the word Bible suggests, the Tanakh is actually a collection of books. Like a library, books are kept in a certain order. Below is a list of the 39 books. Some books (I & II Kings) are combined (and the 12 Minor Prophets are counted as 1), and are sometimes referred to as the '24 books.'

### Tanakh at a glance:

Here is how the Tanakh is divided and subdivided:

#### Torah

Genesis  
Exodus  
Leviticus  
Numbers  
Deuteronomy

#### Nevi'im (Prophets)

##### Early (Historical Prophets):

Joshua  
Judges

Samuel I & II  
Kings I & II  
Later (Literary Prophets)  
Isaiah  
Jeremiah  
Ezekiel  
12 Minor\* Prophets  
Hosea  
Joel  
Amos  
Obadiah  
Jonah  
Micah  
Nahum  
Habakkuk  
Zephaniah  
Hagai  
Zachariah  
Malachi

#### **Ketuvim**

##### **Wisdom Literature:**

Psalms  
Proverbs  
Job

##### **The 5 Megillot (Scrolls):**

Song of Songs  
Ruth  
Lamentations  
Ecclesiastes  
Esther

##### **Historical books:**

Daniel  
Ezra/Nehemiah  
I & II Chronicles

**Notes:** The 12 'Minor' Prophets are not minor, i.e. less important. Minor here simply means shorter. We do not have records of these prophets' utterances. Obadiah for instance only contains 1 chapter, making it the shortest book of the Bible. The fact it was included, though indicates that it wasn't minor at all!

Each of the five scrolls is identified with a holiday. Do you know the connection for each one?

Song of Songs: Pesach  
Ruth: Shavuot  
Lamentations: Tisha B' Av  
Ecclesiastes: Sukkot  
Esther: Purim

Daniel is considered a historical book. In the Christian Bible, Daniel is in the 'Prophets.'

## Where do the names of the books of the Humash come from?

In Hebrew, the books are called by the first important word (or words) of the first sentence (like the Parasha). So the second book of the Torah is called Exodus in English (like the word Exit) because it tells of the Jewish people leaving (Exiting) Egypt, but in Hebrew is called Sh'mot- Names, because the first verse begins, Now there are the names of the children of Israel....

There were also older Hebrew names of the Bible recorded in Rabbinic literature that did refer to the book's content.

Look at the chart below. Using your Tanakh, finish filling in the chart. (You can print this page out, if you wish).

English Name	Meaning	Hebrew Name	Meaning
G		Breishit	
E		Shmot	
L		VaYikra	
N		BeMidbar	
D		Devarim	

## How is the Torah divided?

We already saw how the Tanakh (and the Torah) is divided into books. The actual Torah scroll has almost no divisions: no punctuation and no chapters. Only the five books are separated by a few blank lines. The Torah is divided into Parashiyot which are divided into individual Aliyot/readings but neither of these is indicated in the Torah text.

The only other division is that some paragraphs, (technically called pericopes) are left open, or others that are closed. The printed Humash, often records these 'breaks' with the Hebrew letter 'pey' for the open paragraphs, and 'samech' for the closed ones. (There was even a game in Eastern Europe looking for these mysterious letters!)

One unusual oddity is found in the book of Numbers, where a verse is set apart with what appears to be two upside down 'nun's, or brackets.

The Parashah, and chapter and verse divisions are only found in the printed Humash. A verse, by the way, is like a sentence, but not always: especially in English translations, what we might consider to be one sentence might be 2 or 3 verses and vice versa. A smaller unit than the Parasha (usually containing 5 or 6 chapters) is the chapter. These were actually introduced by Stephen Langton, the Archbishop of Canterbury in the 13th century. The divisions into chapters were not a Jewish division, but were finally adopted by Jews, out of the necessity to be able to quote chapter and verse in disputations with Christian clergy. Sometimes, the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible differ as to the numbering of verses, as in

Also note: chapter divisions were introduced quite late and often don't agree with the Jewish division, or the context of the story. Look how the creation story of Chapter 1 is artificially interrupted at verse 31 leaving the final 3 verses of the story to begin chapter 2. Or for example, Parashat Va'era begins on verse 2, Exodus chapter 6.

### **Gen. 2:1**

Just like every book in a library has its own access code (Dewey decimal system), every verse can be accessed by a code, that includes the book, (often abbreviated), the chapter number (sometimes in Roman numerals) and the verse number (separated by a colon). This is called a citation. The above citation is read: The book of *Genesis*, chapter 2, verse 1. A hyphen is used for contiguous verses; multiple verses in the same chapter are separated by commas. New chapters are separated by semi-colons, so a citation could be: (Ex. 2:1-5, 7, 9; 3:1,2). Is this clear?

It is also possible to use this system in Hebrew. The chapter numbers (and sometimes verses) are represented by Hebrew letters: so Aleph is chapter 1, Beit is chap. 2, Yod is 10, Yod-Aleph is 11, Kaf is twenty, etc.

To use this system, you need to know the numerical value of the Hebrew alphabet.

### **How to Find a Verse**

You should now be able to navigate through the 'maze' Torah, so you could find:

1. a specific English (Gen. 9:9) or Hebrew (Breishit Tet:9) citation
2. a Parasha, aliyah and verse (Can you find the 2nd verse of the fifth Aliyah of the second Parasha of the book of *Genesis*?)

But what if you wanted to find:

1. The first time the word 'covenant' appears. (PS. all three answers for the above are the same).

To find where specific words are mentioned, we need to use a different technique. If you are looking for a specific word but you don't know where to find it, you can use a 'Concordance.' A Concordance is (like a dictionary) an alphabetical listing of every word in the Tanakh and where it appears. There are a number of English and Hebrew Concordances and Lexicons of the Bible. Today, however, there is an easy way to do this kind of search without such a specialized volume. Luckily, on the Internet, there are many 'electronic' Bibles which allow you to search in Hebrew or English. (Be aware that many of these sites are Christian, and use Christian translations etc.) Bibles on CD ROM of course also have this search capability. Sometimes finding out how many times a word appears, or where it appears can have surprising results.

Try using these search engines (we will be using some of these when we discuss translating the Bible in module 4:

[Chumash Search](#) with links to the [ORT Bible site](#) and [Bible Gateway Scholarly Technology Group](#)

Find where the word 'ark, (Teivah)' appears.

How many times does the word 'Tsohar (window)' appear?

How many times does the word 'Torah' appear in the Torah?

## Biblical Treasure Hunt

The Masoretes (8-10th Century) were biblical scholars who studied the biblical text with great attention to the tiniest detail. They counted the number of verses, words, and even letters in the Torah and in each Parashah.

Print out this page and use a Tanakh to find the answers (If you have kids, they're allowed to help).

### Help the Masoretes find:

(I have provided clues on the right hand side; **Answers not in order**)

The longest word in the Tanakh	Gen. 8:19
The longest word in the Torah	Gen. 26:6
The only 2 Aramaic words in the Torah	Gen. 31:47
The shortest verse in the Torah	Ex. 7: 19
The longest verse in the Torah	Lev. 11:42
The longest verse in the Tanakh	Lev. 13:33
The longest chapter in the Torah	Numbers 7
The longest chapter in the Tanakh	Jeremiah 6:7
The shortest chapter in the Tanakh	Obadiah
The shortest book in the Tanakh	Psalms
The longest book in the Tanakh	Psalms 117
The middle verse of the Torah	Psalms 119
The middle letter of the Tanakh	Esther 3:13
The middle letter of the Torah	Esther 9:3

### ANSWERS

I Kings 3: 25	Ex. 3: 2	Ecclesiastes 3:1	II Chronicles 1:18
Jeremiah 23: 5	Daniel 5: 25	Amos 3:3	II Samuel 12: 7
I Samuel 20: 42	Isaiah 2:5	Joshua 1:1	Lamentations 3:55
Judges 14:14	Ezra 1:3	Deut. 6:4	Hosea 2:21
Ruth 1: 16	Numbers 13:2	Gen. 12:1	Psalms 150:6
Lev. 19: 14	Micah 6:8	Job 38:4	Proverbs 31:30

## Verse Bingo

Mark five spaces in a row by finding where they are in the Tanakh.

Print this page out. Estimated completion time: 15-20 minutes.

The mixed up answers are below; just match them with the quotations in the squares.

Whosoever there is among you of all His people...	Hear O Israel the Lord our God, the Lord is One	O house of Jacob, come ye, and let us walk in the light of the Lord	And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire	To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose ...
Now the Lord said to Abram, "Get thee out of thy country..."	I called upon thy name, O Lord, out of the lowest dungeon	And the king said, "Divide the living child in two."	Behold the days come, says the Lord	Now it came to pass after the death of Moses
Grace is deceitful and beauty is vain.	And Nathan said to David, 'Thou art the man.'	<b>FREE SQUARE</b>	And this is the writing that was inscribed, MENE MENE TEKEL UPHARSIN	Send thou men, that they may spy out the land of Canaan
Where was thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?	And I will betroth thee unto Me for ever...	And Jonathan said to David, "Go in peace."	Now Solomon purposed to build a house for the name of the Lord	Will two walk together, except they have agreed?
And he said unto them, "Out of the eater came forth food."	Let every living thing that hath breath praise the Lord.	And Ruth said, "Entreat me not to leave thee.."	Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind.	It hath been told thee O man, what is good...

## Tanakh Recipe

Now that you know how to find פסוקים (p'sukim, verses) in the Tanakh using chapter and verse, here is a recipe for you to figure out. Each פסוק (pasuk) mentions one of the ingredients (except for Ex. 12:19, which mentions something close enough that you can figure out what the ingredient is.) The idea of presenting a recipe in verse form comes from an American Protestant tradition called 'Scripture Cake.' This Jewish adaptation is by Jeanette Schreiber of Seattle, Washington. Different editions of the Bible sometimes have slightly different chapter and verse numbers, and of course, different English translations. If in doubt, check the JPS Tanakh (Tanakh: A New Translation).

Making this type of food is a lot of fun, and this is a fairly simple recipe but it is still a complex and messy process. Only try making it if you have some time to spare. It is a large recipe; you might want to make a half recipe (divide everything by two) It is a 'classic recipe' and 'most reliable.'

### Ingredients

4 teaspoons Genesis 19:26  
1/2 cup Genesis 28:18  
(plus a little extra)  
2 packages dry Exodus 12:19  
1 cup boiling Numbers 20:10  
3 Deuteronomy 22:6  
1 Tablespoon I Samuel 14:29  
7 cups II Kings 4:41  
(plus a little extra)  
1/3 cup warm Psalms 23:2  
some Psalms 126:6 (poppy or sesame)

Big mixing bowl; Smaller bowl; Egg beater or whisk and bowl; Clean towel; Clear counter space or wooden board; Metal baking sheet; Baking brush; Racks for cooling; Oven.

### Instructions

Pour 1/2 cup Genesis 28:18 (\_\_\_\_\_), the Genesis 19:26 (\_\_\_\_\_) and the I Samuel 14:29 (\_\_\_\_\_) into the large mixing bowl.

Add the boiling Numbers 20:10 (\_\_\_\_\_) and stir.  
Add the cold Exodus 15:27 (\_\_\_\_\_).

In the smaller bowl, dissolve the Exodus 12:19 in the warm (but not hot) Psalms 23:2.

Beat the Deuteronomy 22:6 (\_\_\_\_\_). (Save one tablespoon, and add the rest to the large mixing bowl.

Add the Exodus 12:19 in the Psalms 23:2 (the contents of the small bowl) to the large mixing bowl and mix well.

Add 7 cups II Kings 4:41 (\_\_\_\_\_). Empty the contents of the large mixing bowl onto the board or countertop. Knead for a long time, until it does not stick to the board or your hands. Add more II Kings 4:41 if necessary.

Place in the large mixing bowl, cover with a clean towel and leave it in a warm place for about 1 hour to rise (till double its size). Cut it into I Kings 11:30 (\_\_\_\_\_). Knead each piece with a little II Kings 4:41 until it is not sticky.

Let the pieces rest while you rub a baking sheet with Genesis 28:18 (\_\_\_\_\_).

Roll each piece into a strand, and braid three pieces together. Makes four.

Put the finished pieces on the baking sheet and let them sit for 45 minutes at room temperature to rise.

Brush the tops with the tablespoon of beaten Deuteronomy 22:6 (\_\_\_\_\_). Sprinkle with Psalms 126:6 (\_\_\_\_\_).

Bake at 375 degrees Fahrenheit for 30-40 minutes. (But check earlier; if it smells baked, check.)

Put on racks to cool. Ecclesiastes 9:7

## Transmission of the Tanakh

According to Jewish tradition, 'Torah' has been handed down as a (largely unbroken- but see below) chain. In Pirkei Avot, we read:

Moses received Torah from Sinai, and passed it down to Joshua. Joshua passed it to the elders; the elders passed it on to the prophets, and the prophets passed it on to the men of the Great Assembly. (Pirkei Avot 1:17)

A Sofer copies from a Tikkun, or a 'master' scroll. This itself is a copy of an earlier scroll. How far back can we go? Although we read that Moses received the Ten Commandments written on two stone tablets, did he actually 'write' down the Torah? (Remember the word Torah in the Torah does not refer to the Torah!) Traditionally, we speak of Moses 'writing' the Torah, (the Five Books of Moses- although in Hebrew we say, Hamisha Humshei Torah.) And even if Moses did write the Torah, is our scroll an exact replica? Have any changes been made to the text in the last 3000 years? What about errors- after all, even the Sofer is human. To begin our story, we need to 2500 years. Even the Talmud recognizes that transmission has not always been perfect:

When Moses died Joshua forgot 300 laws and had 700 doubts about the law.

Temurah 16a

**Who wrote the Torah?** Most scholars do not believe Moses wrote the Torah. Many scholars, influenced by the 19th century work of Graf and Wellhausen, accept the view that a final redactor pieced together several different authors/layers/sources from different periods. This is called the **documentary hypothesis**. Who you believe wrote the Torah will have serious impact on how you look at the biblical text. Want to review some **biblical history**? Use this **timeline**.

There is a difference between looking at the china dishes in a museum and going to pick out dishes from a department store. In the former, I might admire the quality or technique, but whether I particularly care for it, or whether it would be practical for my family isn't relevant. In the latter, I am much more interested if the design suits my taste, and whether it is dishwasher safe. What is Torah for us? A museum piece we look at, or dishes we want to use everyday?

Once the Torah assumed its final form, it has been modified in different ways in different periods of history. In the final part of this module, we will explore the work of the **Sophrim** and the **Masoretes**.

One last comment. Rabbi Plaut writes in his introduction to his Torah Commentary:

The reader will therefore do well to keep in mind that the Torah not only speaks of history but has made history by helping to shape human thought.

The origins of Torah are one thing, its life through the centuries another, and its ability to speak to us today yet a third.

Who do you believe wrote the Torah?

How does your choice affect how you read the text?

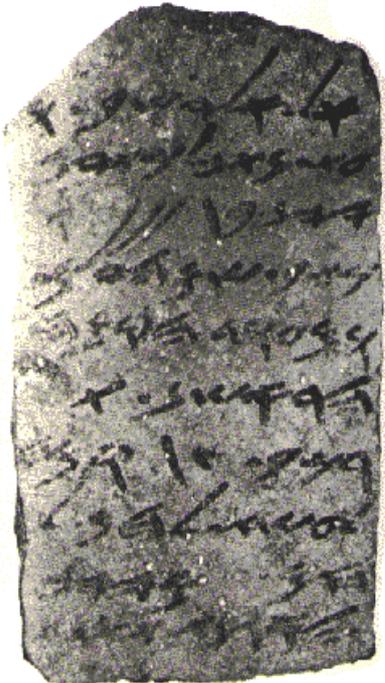
How accurate a copy of the 'original Torah' do you think today's text is?

## Canonization

The Hebrew Bible did not spring into existence all at once. The formation of the Biblical canon was a gradual process. The word 'canon' comes from a Hebrew root that means 'reed,' using as a measure or rule. Canon, thus means a 'standard' by which things may be judged.

First, the Torah text was established. It became the focus of study. Much later the 'Prophets' were added to what was considered to be 'Holy Writ.' Finally, the writings were incorporated. The Rabbis of the second Century had discussions as to which books were to be included: a heated debate over the Song of Songs for instance was won by Rabbi Akiva. Other books were not so fortunate: Ben Sira, Judith, Tobith, and the books of I & II Maccabees were not included. (These books have been lost to us in the original Hebrew, and exist in their Latin translations.) They are included in Christian Bibles and are available as a separate collection called the 'Apocrypha' - the 'outside' books. The book of Esther was the last book to be included in the canon and is the only book to have not had even a fragment found in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

## How did this process of canonization happen?



The year is 621 BCE. Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned 31 years in Jerusalem... And it came to pass in the 18th year of king Josiah, that the king sent Shafan... the scribe to the house of the Lord, saying, "Go up to Hilkiyahu the high priest..."

...And Hilkiyahu the high priest said to Shafan the scribe, I have found a book of the Torah in the house of the Lord. And Hilkiyahu gave the book to Shafan and he read it. And Shafan the scribe came to the king...and read it before the king. And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the Torah, that he rent his clothes...

This passage taken from II Kings 22 and 23, tells the story of the high priest finding a scroll. The king is shaken, and responds by leading his people back to the worship of the God of Israel. We now believe that the scroll

The book of Deuteronomy was written in the ancient Hebrew script (similar to the inscriptions found on ostraca (broken pieces of pottery), rings, and seals. The script would be changed by Ezra

After the Jews had been exiled to Babylonia (586 BCE) by Nebuchadnezzar, some 140 years later, under the reign of King Cyrus, they were allowed to return. The book of Nehemia relates the story of Ezra (the scribe) assembling all the people (like Moses

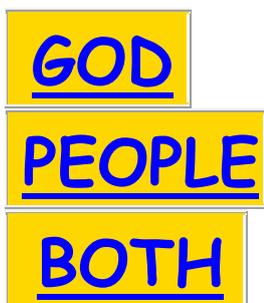
had done in Deuteronomy), and reading the Torah on Rosh Hashanah. Legend has it that Ezra miraculously 'found' the book Moses had written from the fountain of Siloam. Many scholars now feel that it was Ezra who actually 'wrote' the first Torah. In fact, the Talmud seems to even give this away, when they say, 'Had Moses not given us the Torah, then God would have chosen to give the Torah through Ezra.'

Ezra was responsible for many innovations: he instituted weekly readings on market days (Mondays and Thursdays). He changed the ancient script to the Aramaic script. This may have been to make the Torah more accessible to the community of Jews who had adopted the Aramaic language (as well as the script). It may have also been to distance the small and weak Jewish community from the Samaritan community (coming from Samaria), who were a group hostile to the Jews. They did, however, share in belief of Torah which they continue to write in an ancient script (similar - but no longer identical) to the ancient Hebrew script shown above. Their Torah is NOT identical- it contains thousands of minor textual differences. Their text replaces 'Zion' or 'Jerusalem' with 'Mount Grizim' their holy mountain. They also add the book of Joshua as a historical book, but do not include the prophets or writings as scripture.

## Authorship

Who we believe 'wrote' the Torah, and how it was passed down, impacts on how we read the text and how we will interpret it. Our beliefs form a set of assumptions that color the questions we ask (and answer) of the biblical text. Each system has a discipline that is often bothered by the same textual problem. But what question we ask will be different.

**Who Wrote the Torah?** There are three main answers:



**God:** According to Jewish tradition, God 'wrote' the Torah. That is to say, God is the author. However, even among most Orthodox, it was a human (usually identified as Moses) who actually penned the parchment. The 'midrash' very fancifully has God actually writing the Torah in very anthropomorphic terms. The point is, that if God is the author, (discounting scribal errors on the part of Moses, human secretary), the book is Divine. Divine authorship means that the text is perfect: no contradictions, no extraneous information, and no mistakes. Anything that appears problematic is because of OUR limited understanding. If the Torah seems to contradict scientific knowledge, then either science will be proven wrong, or we do not understand the Bible properly. If the Torah is God's word, then every word and letter has deep

meaning. The Torah is eternally valid, and speaks to today as much as it did to our ancestors. This is the traditional approach to Torah study.

People: Critical scholarship holds that the Torah is a human document, written over a [period of time](#), by numerous authors. (This explains the apparent contradictions, repetitions, etc.) The Torah is a product of a specific time period, and the Torah (like a pot found at an archeological site) is an article that allows us to peek into a window of how the ancient Israelites lived and what they believed. Even the medieval Rabbis had their doubts about Moses being the sole author (like when the Torah writes, 'and Moses died.'). But it was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (along with all the other intellectual revolutions) that 'Mosaic/Divine' authorship was seriously questioned. The most famous proponent of this was the Graf/Wellhausen theory called the [documentary hypothesis](#). Using literary style, names of God, and other clues, they identified four strains or sources they called J, E, P and D. This is the scholarly, 'critical' approach to Torah study.

Both: We can believe that both God and humans had a 'hand' in writing the Torah. If Revelation means that God revealed (communicated) the Torah to humans, then God **AND** people share in its writing. God inspired the people who wrote the Torah. That means we can find both God's eternal message, as well as layers of a historical process. (Which is which is sometimes a problem). This approach posits that God 'reveals' divine truth (in a way only known to God) that individual(s) wrote down, or passed down. This may have been much like the composer's or inventor's flash of inspiration. Another possibility is that the Torah is our response to historical events shaped by God's master plan. As modern liberal Jews, we have the option to try and balance both these approaches. Our Torah study can be sensitive to the nuances of the text (as if God wrote it) yet aware of the historical processes and analytic tools of scientific criticism. This way we can synthesize both traditional and modern methods of Torah study.

No matter what our personal beliefs, two things seem indisputable: the Torah is a record of the ancient Israelites' encounter with the Divine; for thousands of years, Jews have read/studied the Torah as a way of connecting with that Divine voice.

Rabbi Plaut, in his introduction to this commentary writes,

While God is not the author of the Torah in the fundamentalist sense, the Torah is a book about humanity's understanding of and experience with God.

However, unlike the biblical scholar who sees the Bible simply as an antique document that describes how the authors and their listeners saw the world, Plaut continues:

We believe that it is possible to say: The Torah is ancient Israel's distinctive record of its search for God. It attempts to record the meeting of the human and the Divine, the great moments of encounter. Therefore, the text is often touched by the ineffable Presence. The Torah tradition testifies to a people of extraordinary spiritual sensitivity. God is not the author of the text, the

people are; but God's voice may be heard through theirs if we listen with open minds.

One other distinction is important:

...one should keep in mind that what the authors said in their own time to their own contemporaries within their own intellectual framework is one thing and what later generations did with this text, what they contributed to it by commentary and homily is another. This long tradition of holding up the book like a prism, discovering through it and in it a vast spectrum of insights, makes the Torah unlike any other work.

### **Transmission**

Over the centuries, the Torah text has been handed down with great precision and care. However, at different points in Jewish history, there has been some confusion about the accuracy of the text, and leaders have had to decide which text was the correct one worth preserving.

The very late Talmudic story of Chanukah and the little jar of oil may be similar to what happened in the tale told in the Talmud of three scrolls. There, three scrolls are found in the Temple Chamber. Although almost identical, each scroll has one minor difference with the other two. In Exodus (24:5), two scrolls have na'arei (young men) while one scroll has 'za'atutei' (the Aramaic form). It is therefore called the 'Za'atutei' scroll. The other scroll is the Ma'on scroll. They adopted the best 2 out of 3 to determine the text.

Whether Ezra wrote the Torah or not, Ezra's followers, called the Sofrim (scribes), continued the chain of tradition. These scholars established the text of the Torah, and were responsible for explaining it. Ultimately, they preserved the identities and unity of the Jewish communities by preparing scrolls for them. Because of their work, the Torah became the authority for regulating Jewish life and allowed them to withstand to threat of Alexander the Great's conquest and Hellenism.

What did the Sofrim do? They introduced the five 'medial' forms. Five Hebrew letters have a 'final' form, and contrary to popular supposition, it was the final form that was the original letter. (Four of the five have long tails that are 'bent' up to make it easier to write at the beginning or middle of the word.) They also introduced the 'open' and 'closed' paragraphs (called pericopes) that are often signified by a 'pey' or 'samech' in a printed chumash. The Sofrim also made changes to spelling to aid in reading the unvocalized Hebrew text by using the largely silent letters: aleph, hey, yod and vuv. They instituted the substitution of 'Adonai' for God's (ineffable) four letter name: YHWH.

The Sofrim also took liberties in editing the text: they felt it was unseemly to have Gen. 18:22 read: 'and God was still standing before Abraham,' so they changed it to read, 'and Abraham was still standing before God.' They also censored the name of Baal so Jerubbaal (he contends with Baal) was re-written (Jeruboshet) to mean he contends with shame[ful idol]. Finally, when some books ended on a discouraging note, the Sofrim instituted appending the penultimate verse to end the book on a more

optimistic tone. The Sofrim may also have disqualified certain books from inclusion in the Biblical canon.

Over history, more and more scrolls were needed by the Jewish community. Scribes copied scrolls: some did an excellent job; others were average in abilities. Depending on their location, they might not have had access to an accurate master copy. Over time, differences appeared in the text. Having a correct, fixed text became the task of the Masoretes.

In another period of Jewish history, a different group of scholars was responsible for the transmission of the biblical text. In the 9th and 10th centuries in Tiberias, two academies flourished. These scholars are known as the Masoretes. They devoted themselves to a patient and careful study of the biblical text. They were responsible for establishing how the Torah was to be written and read. They added (i.e. invented) vowels and cantillation (singing) marks that helped in the correct reading of the text. They also established K'ri and K'tiv- over a thousand places where they felt we should not read what is written. For example, look up in your Tanakh Exodus 4:3. The printed (K'tiv) word is not vocalized, and the word in the margin/footnote is read in its place.

Of all the Masoretes, the most famous was Rabbi Aaron ben Moshe ben Asher. He supervised the production of a manuscript called the 'Ben Asher Crown.' This most famous 'codex' (hand written book - not scroll) was probably used by Maimonides and became the standard that everyone relied on. He relates that he found many scrolls at the time with errors. It is now known as the Aleppo codex as it was housed in a synagogue in Syria for many years before being smuggled to Israel. Another famous codex from Ben Asher (1008 CE) is known as the Leningrad Codex.

In the 1500s the process continued. When the first printers attempted to find an authoritative text, they collected Masoretic texts from all over. Jacob ben Hayim spent seven years collecting and scrutinizing the manuscripts to determine the best reading. He writes (quoting Exodus 12:30), There was not a house where there was not a corpse (i.e. there was not a text without an error). Until the modern period, printed Bibles were based on ben Hayyim's edition. In 1937, two scholars, Kittel and Kahle published an edition of the Bible based on the Leningrad Codex. This is known as the Biblia Hebraica, and includes comparisons with ancient translations and manuscripts noted at the bottom of each page.

Printed Bibles popularized chapter and verse divisions and numbering. So we see, in its long history of canonization and transmission, the Bible has endured, yet, the copy we have is only our best guess as to what was given at Sinai. This history of the biblical text is only one of many arguments as to why the "Bible Codes" recently popularized is such a fallacy.

## Deciphering

There are three steps in 'reading' the Biblical text:

1. First, we have to determine what the text is. This is called lower criticism.
2. Second, we have to decide what the text says.

3. Last, we have to figure out what the text means.

We have seen that modern editions of the Bible are end products of a long and complex textual history. Textual corruptions are readily apparent (repetitions of letters and words, missing letters, etc.). The work of reconstructing the most authoritative text possible, based on ancient languages, manuscripts and early translations is known as 'lower criticism.' I guess the Masoretes in their own way were trying to do the same thing. Ideally, lower criticism lays the groundwork for the second stage of Biblical study known as higher criticism (or historical or literary criticism). This discipline seeks to understand what the biblical author intended, and the historical forces that influenced the production of their work. This generally is not our approach either.

Generally, when we read the text (especially in translation) we are accepting the translator's understanding. We are allowing the editor to bridge the gap between the ancient document to us, the modern reader. We do not have the scholarly backgrounds to properly confront these problems. A biblical scholar needs to know several ancient languages (Sumerian, Akkadian, Ugaritic), and history, as well as study archaeology, ancient Near Eastern documents, Greek and Latin, compare ancient manuscripts, Rabbinic interpretations, etc.

Why is the Bible difficult to understand? As we have already discussed, every message needs to be interpreted by the receiver. But, the Biblical text is further complicated by the fact that it is an ancient, written document. This means that we don't always know how the biblical author intended us to read the text. Here are some examples:

1. **Ancient language**

Archaeologists have not yet ;-} discovered a Bible-English dictionary. When the Torah uses words that appear only once that we cannot determine from context, how are we to understand it. A few examples: the list of birds in Lev. 11 (the JPS footnote reads: a number of these cannot be identified with certainty. Plaut explains (Lev. 11:5) shafan as daman, a member of the hyrax. He notes: earlier translations 'cony' and 'rock badger' are misleading... (We will discuss translation in the next module).

2. **Ancient Way of Life**

The Torah refers to a life that archaeologists are attempting to reconstruct. But evidence is often fragmentary. What were the birthstools that the Israelites used? What about books that are referred to in Torah that are lost to us? Isn't this written in the Book of Yashar (Josh. 10:13)

3. **Vowels/Punctuation**

The Masoretes, we learned, added the symbols we now use as vowels and singing notes (that provide punctuation).

Punctuate this sentence: He said I am going.

Which was meant?

He said, "I am going." means he is going.

He said I am going. means I am going.

Hebrew is a language written without vowels, much to the frustration of beginning Hebrew students. Clearly, depending on what you think the vowels are can affect the meaning.

### **Transmission Errors**

We have already seen that sometimes the text is not clear- perhaps because it was garbled through its centuries of transmission. Ancient translations sometimes give us a clue to variant possibly correct readings.

We assume the [English, (usually)] text before us is the best possible rendering, before we begin OUR task, of interpreting it. And our first step in that task is to learn how to read it. But let us always remember, that we are ASSUMING that the text says what we have before us. We will see one way of not taking the [English translation] text for granted in the next module.

## Close Reading

The first thing we have to (re) learn, is how to read. Reading the Biblical text requires that we read differently than we're used to. We must slow down. Joel Grishaver of Torah Aura calls this 'close reading.' The questions below are to guide you into thinking about how the Torah chooses its words carefully.

### PART ONE

First, read **Gen. chapter 1** carefully and slowly.

1. Why does the text\* use the cardinal number ('one day,' v. 5), but use ordinal numbers (2nd, 3rd, and so on) for the remainder of the week?  
(\*Actually, your translation may indeed use the word 'first', but the Hebrew does not use Rishon - instead it uses 'echad.' We will look at the kinds of things we can learn from different translations in the next module.)
2. The midrash suggests that the moon and sun were originally created the same size, and the moon was made smaller (for complaining). What is the basis in the text for this midrash?
3. What is the meaning of 'us' in v. 26? Why is this a problem?
4. If the sources of natural light (sun, moon, and stars) were created on the fourth day, what light was created on the first day?
5. How many times does the word 'good' appear in chapter 1? What does this suggest to you?

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**Reading the traditional commentators** is often helpful in getting the answers to these kinds of questions. The problem is, the question is rarely included in their commentary; here is an example of an exception:

#### **Gopher wood** (Gen. 6:14)

So it is named. And why from this type of wood? Because of gophrit [sulphur] by which it had been decreed to blot out humanity.

The trick is, then, to imagine the question that the answer is resolving.

Read the following commentaries to determine the difficulties that bothered the Rabbis. You may want/need to check the context of the original verse(s). Try and compose the question that each difficulty generates.

#### **6. Neither shall you touch it** (Gen. 3:3 see 2:16,17)

She added to God's command, therefore she was led to diminish it.

7. **Where are you?** (Gen. 3:9)

God knew where he was- but wanted to open the conversation with him....

8. **Do I know? Am I my brother's keeper? or I didn't know that I am my brother's keeper!** (Gen. 4:9). This is a question.

9. **Tzohar** (a light ?) (Gen. 6:16)

Some say this was a window; others say that it was a precious stone that gave light to them.

10. **And the rain was upon the earth** (Gen. 7:12)

But later on it says, *And the Flood was upon the earth* (v. 17). The rain descended gently at first, so the people might repent; when they did not, it became a flood.

## B. Asking *Kushiot* Questions and *Kushiot* as a Way of Life

Before we begin to discuss and interpret Torah we read the Hebrew text and often translate or read a translation out loud. Then the analysis begins seeking *kushiot* of all kinds. The **brainstorming of difficulties** in our first encounter with the text generates the curiosity out of the detailed features of the text, the texture of what was once printed on textiles. Each thread in the woof and warp of the words woven into a tapestry can be identified and given a tug to see how it functions. The search for coherence, for an explanation that makes the flow of the narrative seem natural, must be delayed until the questions are made explicit and the possibility of more than one pshat or midrash becomes plausible. Closure is not desirable at this stage, nor do we wish to close off exploration by quick answers or by ruling out in advance what seem like simplistic or off-target questions. The rules of brainstorming make the students' queries valuable in and of themselves in a safe atmosphere. Do not allow other students to put down their fellow student's questions or even answer them too quickly. There is plenty of time to weed out false starts later. We can however push our students to make explicit what bothered them in the particular text on which we are focusing. We can solicit the underlying assumptions about the Torah or about human life that generate their curiosity or sometimes anger at a text. The list of initial student generated questions - each with the student's name attached - can guide further study as the teacher focuses the broad sweep of questions on the ones to be explored in depth with various tools.

The engagement in this initial process of interrogation of the Torah is more important than the bottomline "knowing" of the plot or the answer to the question - what does the sentence say. The goal is text study, not merely summarizing what happened. Of course students do need the plot facts and they can learn them in many ways - charts, skim reading in English, even cartoon retelling of Biblical history. But our goal is to show how much more can be learned from close reading of a text whose story may be well-known, since Jewish learning always circles back on classical texts to rejoin the multi-generational conversation they generate.

### **Shelot and Kushiot: What is Really Bothering You?**

Questions is the key to John Dewey's theory of education and Kushiot are the central to Rabbinic education. For Dewey students begin with their own questions - seeking knowledge out of pragmatic need as well as curiosity.

Knowledge is not abstract but concrete, learning is not academic but learning-in-doing.

Therefore the quest, the project, is the form of ideal learning. .

Thus a teacher is facilitator of the student's quest - helping find resources to learn as well as creating a rich environment that inspires questions.

Hazal also recommend that learning begin with questions -as it says in the Mishna Pesachim 10:4 - "here the child asks." Questions precede storytelling

The ideal question is phrased as a kushiya - a difficulty generated by the student's meeting with the text or the experience. The classic four kushiot on Pesach are phrased as contrast or even a contradiction between what we are used to, what we expect on daily routine basis and what we are surprised by in this new instance. Anomaly generates a search for coherence. The learner is an active not because of goal oriented project of problem solving but because of a search for coherence - both internal to the text and dialogic between what the reader expects to find and what one actually finds.

The text is an object that we interrogate, but also personified as a subject that answers us, that tells us. However it speaks best only when hard questions, challenging contradictions are posed to its coherence within itself or with our expectations of its moral and literary order. The more challenges the more responses forming the 70 faces of Torah.

Torah study is not merely opening up to receive passively but actively hitting the text with our hammer to arouse sparks and to send chips of meaning in many directions. The gap between the interpreter and the text-world is the space in which questions and answers are sought.

## **METHOD**

**Stage One** - general questions - brainstorming

Read a provocative text - a brief one of a few lines or a paragraph at most so the student will concentrate on words not on general plot.

The text can be provocative because of its internal contradictions or because of its yawning gaps or because of its controversial views in comparison with what the students think.

First read aloud the several key verses. Then ask each student for 5 minutes to list questions that come to mind that the student REALLY wants to know the answer to - not standard questions whose answers one already knows.

Look at text with new eyes for new issues.

Focus on details or on general presentation as you wish but tie question to a particular phrase

Then share your questions with partner at your right and pick your favorite three questions.

Do not give answers, but let questions percolate. Remember that no question is stupid or obvious. This is divergent exercise that allows shooting from the hip. Later one can weed out false trails or crazy ideas.

Go around the class to ask each student to raise one question that generally bothered them and to quote the verse and phrase before asking the question.

All students should turn to that verse. Then ask what is really bothering student behind the initial formulation. Write it on board. Ask other students if they have their own questions to piggy-back on the first question on same verse. Do not answer or put down other's questions.

**Stage Two - From Questions to Kushiot**

Categorize the list of questions on the board: psychological/theological/ logical/ factual/ grammatical etc /literary/moral

Then explain difference between simple question that asks to "borrow" information as opposed to kushiya that identifies a difficulty, a tension between what I would have expected and what I actually found.

**Stage Three - Focus on one set of questions and explore possible answers - more than one - then compare to parshanim.**

## Mapping Kinds of Teacher Questions by Noam Zion

Teachers are obsessed by questions.  
Let me suggest four broad categories:

I. Mainly the teachers use questions for worksheets - **guided questions** to help students analyze a hard text - and for discussions. In both cases the teachers generates the questions to guide the students responses. It is important that questions proceed to **higher stages** of abstraction and deeper levels of reflection. While beginning with the cognitive, the questions then go on to personal evaluation and imaginative exploration.

II. Alternatively the Haggadah's wise and simple child and John Dewey prefer **questions generated "spontaneously" by the student** when his/her curiosity is aroused by a problem to solve or a discrepancy (*ma nishtana*) to harmonize with their usual expectations. The teacher facilitates kushiot by providing a rich environment or one with seeming contradictions or by eliciting problems that students wish to solve.

III. Then there are the **authority confrontation questions** of the Rasha and of the interrogating teacher testing one another's authority. God interrogates Adam and Eve seeking to elicit a confession. The Rasha seeks to show up the parents and deny their claim on his loyalty. Questions then are about submission or liberation in an Oedipal way.

IV. **Discussion Questions** that seek to arouse interest and develop the social interaction of the conversation.

## Benjamin Bloom's Taxonomy of Understanding - A Summary

### KNOWLEDGE - What?

Here the basic knowledge is noting facts, so student must get this level first. Guideline questions can help student see and decipher these basics. Don't skip this level or basic comprehension to go to higher levels. Note that sometimes it is good to make introductory statements in the worksheet or offer vocabulary help before asking questions of the text.

Test recall.

Then knowledge rises to putting facts into categories. So teacher must provide the categories or vocabulary.

Test identification of facts under categories.

### COMPREHENSION

Here we have facts and categories but we ask student to translate into his own language to see if he comprehended. Why?

At a higher level one translates into another medium. For example, turn story into flow chart or a drawing or organize into grid.

At even higher level, one organizes these facts and categories into a cognitive map. In constructivism, the student constructs his own categories and map, not one handed to him by teacher of the discipline. Here one inducts to principle so rules or general categories.

### APPLICATION

Take the category or the rule or the cognitive map, apply it to new instances. Go from abstract general to particular, from theoretical to practical.

At lower level this is sorting and at higher level it is problem solving.

### ANALYSIS

Bloom puts this after APPLICATION, but it may come directly after COMPREHENSION. Here is subdividing of the text and then search for inner structure beneath the surface. So it emphasizes both break down into part and then reassembly into a whole which might be better called "synthesis" - the complementary opposite of analysis. BUT Bloom has reserved the term "synthesis" for creative functions of imagination that go beyond logical combinations.

After analysis into parts and reassembly of the whole, there is comparison between wholes and parts.

Knowledge and Comprehension precede Analysis- dividing and reuniting - and Application, then we transcend the merely Cognitive Logical to Imaginative Creative Synthesis and Affective Evaluation.

**IMMAGINATIVE SYNTHESIS** uses the parts to create new wholes in new situations. It is not merely application of category to fact but more creative.

It explores what if and potential consequences thru extrapolation.

**AFFECTIVE EVALUATION** involves evaluating relevance of object to the subject, to me. It goes from mere value clarification to argued judgment based on analysis. So while I can express my feelings about something OR creatively use it in new ways of collage without knowledge or comprehension or analysis, it will be deeper after use of cognitive analysis.

NB. WHEN actually writing a worksheet, one will not use all stages because its boring but each student needs to go thru stages on way to deeper understanding and teacher must ask questions of different kinds including evaluation and creative new applications.

### Discussion questions

#### A. class "openers" involve:

- 1- pre-guessing, hypothesizing where the sources are leading even before full analysis. So lead by hypothesis like reader response and like Karl Popper's search light.
- 2- Brainstorming facts and then organizing into categories
- 3- Provocative evaluative statement - I think all abortions are immoral. Then request responses
- 4- Start with questions about analogous situation before approaching text
- 5- Invite kushiot - you ask questions
- 6- Propose a problem to solve

#### B. open ended questions

Then provide WAIT time or ask to jot down answers before answering

C. Probing questions to push student to test his answer, not judge his answer as teacher- Socratic - What if...

D. Checking - Did you understand or better? Shall I give another example? Can you give me an example of what you think I meant? Can you summarize what I said or what another student said?

E. Should teacher give an answer? Should teacher evaluate answers? Should their be reinforcement? What kind?

F. Use fixed and precise vocabulary of questions to teach student to use these terms:

Compare

Pro con

Expected consequences

Interpretation

Evidence or justification

Give two reasons for and against and your view and why

## **FIVE TYPES OF KUSHEYOT by Joel Lurie Grishaver**

*Learning Torah: A Self-guided Journey through Layers of Jewish Learning,*  
Torah Aura/UABC Press (p. 153-159)

### **CONTRADICTIONS**

If God wrote the Torah, then there can be nothing written there which contradicts another part.

#### **DIFFERING DETAILS BETWEEN TWO VERSIONS OF THE SAME STORY/LAW**

"...male and female he created them." *Gen. 1:27*

"and the Lord God formed the rib that He had taken from the man into a woman." *Gen. 2:22*

#### **ONE STORY CONTRADICTS THE FACT OR PREMISE OF A PREVIOUS STORY.**

"And Cain knew his wife, and she conceived...." *Gen. 4:17*

(Where does she come from-Adam and Eve had only two sons?)

#### **A BROKEN PATTERN OF SERIES:**

(Once the Torah sets up a pattern, it must have a reason for breaking or changing it.)

In *Gen. 1*, we have " one day... a second day... a third day... the sixth day...." (Why no "first day"? Why does day six rate a "the"?)

### **EXTRA LANGUAGE**

If God wrote the Torah, everything in it must be there for a good reason. Nothing would be done just for emphasis or literary effect. Everything which seems to be extra, everything which is repeated, must be there to teach us something.

#### **A PHRASE OR INCIDENT IS REPEATED:**

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth...." *Gen. 1:1*

"When the Lord God made earth and heaven...". *Gen. 2:4*

(Once should have been enough.

Notice also: heaven-earth/earth-heaven)

#### **A SERIES OF PHRASES OR WORDS SAYING THE SAME THING:**

"Go from your land, from your birthplace, from your father's house to a land that I will show you."... *Gen. 12:1*

(God could have just said "Go to where I show you.")

#### **EXTRA WORDS IN A SENTENCE:**

"And these are the days of the years of Abraham's life which he lived, a hundred threescore and fifteen years." *Gen. 25:7*

(Is "which he lived" needed?)

#### **WORD REVERSALS:**

"Honor your father and your mother...". *Exod. 20:12*

You shall each revere his mother and father.... *Lev. 19:3*

(If we are going to repeat something, why change the order?)

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### NEXT TO EACH OTHER

If God wrote the Torah, then there must be a logic in the way it is put together. God must have had a reason to connect passages which don't immediately seem to follow one from the other.

#### TWO STORIES OR EVENTS ARE LINKED:

"And it came to pass after these things...." Gen. 22:1

(Look it up and try to figure out after what things?)

#### TWO DISTINCT SUBJECTS JOINED INTO ONE SENTENCE:

"You shall each revere his mother and his father, and keep My sabbaths...." Lev. 19:3

(What does revering mother and father have to do with Shabbat? If the two are next to each other, there must be a connection.)

#### GRAMMAR/MEANING

God should write Hebrew perfectly and clearly, but we find in some places obscure words or even bad grammar. There are some places where the meaning is confused or impossible to comprehend. (Many of these *kusheyot* are impossible to translate.)

#### SOMETIMES WE EXPECT ONE THING AND GET ANOTHER:

"Let them make me a dwelling-place [sanctuary] that I may dwell in them." Exod. 25:8

(When God is talking about a sanctuary, we would expect that God, and not, we, would dwell in it.)

#### SOMETIMES THE WAY A WORD IS USED IS INTERESTING:

"Noah walked with God." Gen. 6:9

"The Lord before whom I [Abraham] walk." Gen. 24:40

(Why does Noah walk with and Abraham walk before?)

### BEHAVIOR

If God wrote the Torah, we would expect to find no limitations or evidence of human weakness in God. Similarly, biblical heroes should be the most righteous and law-abiding people imaginable.

#### SOMETIMES GOD SEEMS TO DO THINGS WE FEEL ARE "UNGODLIKE":

"And the Lord God called unto the man and said to him: "Where are you?" Gen. 3a

(Shouldn't God know where he is? Does God need to ask?)

#### SOMETIMES BIBLICAL HEROES SEEM TO VIOLATE SOME OF THE

**COMMANDMENTS:** "and he [Abraham] took cream and milk and the calf which he dressed, and he set it before them." Gen. 18:8

(Doesn't Abraham keep kosher? Biblical heroes are expected to follow all the commandments.)

### Kusheyot Exercise I

In the following quotations you'll find at least one koshi.  
They've all been put in italics for you. Your job is to:

- a. Define these kushyot. (What is the problem? What question does the text make us ask?)
- b. Categorize the kind of koshi. (Contradiction, extra language, next to each other, behavior, or grammar/meaning.)

6 And the Lord called unto Moses and spoke to him outside the Tent of Meeting, saying... Lev. 1: 1

- c. Identify where (what story or section) they come from.
- d. Remember: Look for questions we'll find answers later.

I And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. Deut. 6:5

II And you will say to Pharaoh: "Thus saith the Lord: `Israel is My first born.... "' Exod. 4:22

III And the Lord said to Cain: "Where is Abel your brother?" Gen. 4a

IV "Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites"...and there passed by Midianites, and they drew and lifted Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites...and the Midianites sold him in Egypt. Gen. 37:27-36

V And God said: "Let Us make man in Our image, after our likeness..." and God created man in His own image. Gen. 1:26-27

VI And Jacob was left alone, and there wrestled with a man until daybreak .... And he said: "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and man and prevailed." Gen. 32:25-29

And God said to him: "Your name is Jacob: your name shall not be called any more Jacob but Israel shall be your name." And they called his name Israel. Gen. 35:10

VIII "How can I, myself, alone, bear your cumbrance, and your burden, and your strife. " Deut. 1:12

IX And the Children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceedingly mighty .... Exod. 1:7

## Kusheyot Exercise II

In these selections you'll find hidden kusheyot

- a. Circle or underline these kusheyot.
- b. Define/describe the koshi. Sometimes this involves comparing two quotes.
- c. Remember-find questions, not answers.

A. Cursed be everyone who curses you and blessed be everyone who blesses you. *Gen. 27:29*  
Blessed be everyone who blesses you and cursed be everyone who curses you. *Num. 24:9*

B. Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well of you upon the land that the Lord your God gave you. *Deut. 5:16*  
Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which your God gave you. *Exod. 20:12*

C. And if a man shall open a pit, or if a man shall dig a pit and not cover it, and an ox or an ass fall into it, the owner of the pit must make good, he shall give money to their owner and the dead beast shall be his. *Exod. 21:33-34*

D. And Sarah laughed to herself, saying: "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment with my husband so old?" Then the Lord\* said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying: 'Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?'" *Gen. 18:12-13*

E. And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of the bush ...and when the LORD saw that he turned aside, God called to him out of -the midst of the bush.... *Exod. 3:4*  
(Up to now, Abraham was talking to three visitors).

F. And God spoke unto Israel in the visions of the night, and said: "Jacob, Jacob ...." *Gen. 46:2*

G. I will bring you out from under the \_ { burden of the Egyptians, and I will V deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm. ...And I will take you to Me for a people. *Exod. 6:6-7*

H. The LORD, the LORD God, is merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy unto the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and Sin. *Exod. 34:6-7*

### Kusheyot Exercise III

- a. Find the kusheyot in each of the pairs of quotes.
- b. Then find the koshi discovered by comparing the quotations.

1. Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy ...for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth ...and on the seventh He rested .... The Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it. Exod. 20:8-11

Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy. For you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day. Deut. 5:12-15

2. And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying: "Speak unto the Children of Israel, saying..." (Over a hundred times in the Torah)

And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying: "Speak unto all the congregation of the Children of Israel, and say unto them..." Lev. 19:1-2

3. The Lord spoke unto Moses, saying, "Send men to scout the land of Canaan which I am giving to the Children of Israel. Send one man from each of their ancestral tribes, each one a chieftain among them." Num. 13:1-2

Then all of you came to me [Moses] and said: "Let us send men ahead to explore the land for us and bring back word on the route we shall follow and the cities we shall come to." I approved the plan, so I selected twelve of your men, one from each tribe. Deut. 1:22-23

4 And Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and water and gave it to Hagar and put it on her shoulder and the child, and sent her away. Gen. 21:14

And Abraham rose early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he cleaved the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place that God had told him. Gen. 22:3

**Asking Questions by Baruch Sienna** – Introduction to Torah -  
Kolel, Toronto <http://www.kolel.org/torahstory/module1/humash>

To begin interpreting the Bible, we need to ask questions. Based on the exercise in close reading, you saw that the reader needs to pay attention to details, repetitions, meaning and connections.

I have developed a chart of seven categories of problems. These questions are called questions of **Parshanut** (Interpretation or Commentary).



Imagine that a word or a verse is a simple arrow:

(This is an appropriate symbol, since we talked about how Torah tells us the 'way to go.'). Unfortunately, the arrow is not always so straight and unambiguous. I like to use these graphic symbols, each made of arrows,

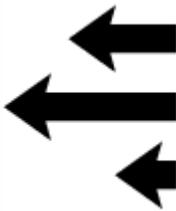
Category	Type	Image	Description
<b>DETAILS</b>	<a href="#">Missing Information</a>		Something is missing: a word, a sentence or important details. This is very common.
<b>FREQUENCY</b>	<a href="#">Duplication</a>		The Torah tells us the same thing twice, or tells us something we already know.
<b>MEANING</b>	<a href="#">Literal</a>		A word, or verse that we don't understand. Examples are words that appear only once in the Torah (called 'hapax legomenon!') or verses with difficult grammar that don't make sense.
<b>A or B</b>	<a href="#">Contradiction</a>		The Torah says one thing here, another thing there.
<b>CONNECTIONS</b>	<a href="#">Echo</a>		The Torah re-uses a word or phrase from one story in another, creating a kind of 'hypertext' link / association) between the stories.
<b>SEQUENCE</b>	<a href="#">Symmetry</a>		The Torah writes words or verses in a symmetrical pattern (like A,B,C and C,B,A).

<b>PROBLEMS</b>	<a href="#">Compare &amp; Contrast</a>		The Torah or a character repeats what happened or what was said with a small but important difference: omission, addition, or changes). (Compare to Duplication, above)
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### Asking Questions: Part Two

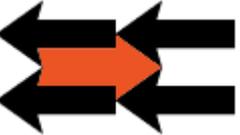
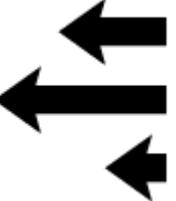
Our seven categories of Parshanut questions can be further expanded. In addition to the first 7 simple examples, we can add these more complex ones:

Category	Type	Image	Description
<b>DETAILS</b>	<a href="#">Extraneous</a>		The Torah tells us something that seems unnecessary
<b>FREQUENCY</b>	<a href="#">Number or Theme Word</a>		A word/root is repeated 5, 7, 10 or more times in a single literary unit.
<b>MEANING</b>	<a href="#">Figurative Meaning</a>		The Torah uses a word or phrase that isn't meant literally, but figuratively.
<b>A or B</b>	<a href="#">Ambiguity</a>		The Torah says one thing that can be understood in more than one way. This is the opposite of contradiction. Contradiction is when the Torah says two different things (black and white); here the Torah only says one thing, but it can mean two things. Tone of voice is a common example.
<b>CONNECTIONS</b>	<a href="#">Juxtaposition</a>		Two (seemingly) unrelated topics/stories appear side by side. A new idea is

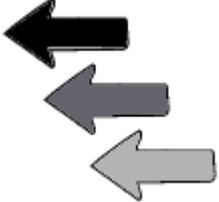
			created by the juxtaposition of the two verses or stories. (Do you see the 5th arrow is created out of the other four!?)
SEQUENCE	<a href="#">Out of Order</a>		The sequence of events is unclear or out of order. Sometimes the Torah tells us events out of order; sometimes it is just not clear just because the Torah tells us event B after event A doesn't necessarily mean event B occurred after A.
PROBLEMS	<a href="#">Something Wrong</a>		The Torah tells us something that is morally problematic: God, or a character behaves in a way that is surprising or immoral.

### Examples

Types	Verse
 Extraneous Information	When Kenan had lived 70 years, he begot Mahalalel. After the birth of Mahalalel, Kenan lived 840 years and begot sons and daughters. All the days of Kenan came to 910 years; then he died. (Gen. 5:12-14)
	Cain said to his <b>brother</b> ...Cain set upon his <b>brother</b> ... Where is your <b>brother</b> , Abel?... Am I my <b>brother's</b> keeper....Your <b>brother's</b> blood...

Number/Theme Word	
 Metaphor	You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on <b>eagle's wings</b> and brought you to me. (Ex.1 19:4)
 Ambiguity	The king of Egypt spoke to the <b>Hebrew midwives</b> , one of whom was named Shifrah and the other Puah...(Ex. 1:15)
 Juxtaposition	<p>[Nadav and Avihu bring 'alien fire' and die 'before' God... (the text continues)]            ...And so do not go outside the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, lest you die, for the Adonai's anointing oil is upon you. And they did as Moses had bidden.</p> <p>And Adonai spoke to Aaron saying, 'Drink no wine or other intoxicant, you or your sons, when you enter the Tent of Meeting, that you may not die...' (Lev. 10:1-9)</p>
 Out of Order	<p>On the first day of the <b>second month</b>, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, Adonai spoke to Moses ...(Num.1:1)</p> <p>Adonai spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, on the <b>first new moon</b> of the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt...(Num. 9:1)</p>
 Moral Problem	<p>And Moses looked this way and that, <b>and seeing no one, he struck down the Egyptian</b> and buried him in the sand. (Ex. 2: 12)</p>

## Examples

Types	Verse
 Missing Information	And Cain said to Abel his brother, [...] and they were in the field. (Gen. 4:8)
 Duplication	This is the story of Isaac, son of Abraham. <b>Abraham begot Isaac.</b> (Gen. 25:19)
 Literal	Notes on Gen. 4:7 (JPS)  The preserved text is not in order when the feminine noun has to serve as the subject of the masculine form of the participle, rovetz; and even the conjectural emendation of the masculine rovetz to the feminine tirbatz lacked meaning when it is remembered that the suffixes in the second half of our verse are both masculine.
 Contradiction	They came to <b>Reuel</b> , their father... Moses was a shepherd for his father-in-law <b>Yitro</b> , a Midianite priest. (Ex. 2:18, 3:1)
 Echo	When she could hide him no longer, she took a <b>little-ark</b> for him... and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. (Ex. 2: 3)

 <p>Symmetry</p>	<p><i>Genesis 3:11-19</i>  <i>God questions <b>man</b>; man points to <b>woman</b>; woman points to <b>serpent</b>.          God passes judgment on <b>serpent</b>, <b>woman</b> and <b>man</b>.</i></p> <p>There are many examples of symmetry in larger stories that are hard to illustrate with one or two verses, such as the plagues, the flood narrative etc.</p>
 <p>Compare &amp; Contrast</p>	<p><i>And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment - with <b>my husband so old?</b>" Then the Adonai said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I in truth bear a child, <b>old as I am?</b>' ..." (<i>Gen. 18:12,13</i>)</i></p>

## Hard-edged Questions: *Kushiot* and the Dialogues of Parent-Teacher/Child-Student by Noam Zion

Teachers use questions as a daily tool of their trade of **pedagogy**. They serve many functions. Here are a few of them:

- (1) Testing to see what the students already know as a diagnostic technique before teaching,
- (2) Testing what they have learned in a summative and evaluative activity after they have studied
- (3) Climbing the cognitive ladder from facts to concepts to applications as illustrated in Bloom's taxonomy
- (4) Implementing discovery learning where students are encouraged to ask the questions and pursue the research in project-based manner
- (5) Opening up brainstorming in "divergent" questions or focusing in greater detail in "convergent" questions
- (6) Interrogating a student's response to uncover deeper assumptions, inner tensions - what did you mean by that?

However questions are also about **authority relations**. When the teacher is probing to see if you learned what you were meant to, there is a concern to see whether the teaching has been helpful but also a show of inquisitorial power. When a student is asking: "prove it!" there is a critical empowerment but there may also be testing of limits and a challenge to authority.

Teachers ask questions and students answer them. That is the social order of all so-called liberal schooling. It is not about lecturing which means, literally, "reading" from the accepted knowledge as was typical of medieval universities whose canon was Aristotle's encyclopedic books. In theory the teacher's questions are meant to model for the student's questions. First the teacher is meant to challenge and interrogate the tradition seeking reason in place of arbitrary opinion and social custom. Then the student is invited to join that critical questioning. However often the questions are merely tests to see if the student recalls and can reproduce what the teacher or the book has already taught - "lectured." School researchers report that in American schools in a thirty minute period of "instruction" an average of 20 questions are asked but almost all are by the teacher who supposedly already knows the answers. One or two questions are raised by students about the material and a few seek the teacher's permission to go to the bathroom or inquire whether the material discussed will be included in the test.

In the educational literature on Habits of the Mind it has become fashionable to make the student aware of the habits of thinking that are useful not only in school but in thoughtfully lived life. Asking questions is central. In the literature of the Reflective Practitioner the teacher too must become aware of the way questions are used in teaching. Much has been written on questions especially Bloom's famous taxonomy of questions rising through six stages of cognitive abstraction. This essay seeks to present the art of asking **questions in dialogue** using insights from several recent writers. The insights are not merely about teaching methods but about the social context and personal motivations of the questioning

process both when initiated by student and by teacher. This topic is one that we would recommend be explored directly and self-consciously by teacher and student in class as an act of reflective practice. The study of the haggadah's four questions and four children offers a natural subject matter through which to raise these big issues, so we will often refer to them.

Implicit in our focus on **questions in dialogue** is the Biblical-Rabbinic model of the Four Children in dialogue across generations. However the term "dialogue" has perhaps too idyllic an association implying open sharing in free space of security and mutual acceptance. These Biblical-Rabbinic dialogues are initiated by children questioning the sense and often the authority of the traditional practices, the mitzvot and even the familial-national narrative identity of the parent-child. The two interlocutors are related in **power relationships** of older and younger, parent and child, teacher and student. Dialogues of power and knowledge can also be initiated by the authority figure challenging the student. "Where are you?" (*Ayeka* - Genesis 3:9) asks God of Adam who is hiding in guilt and shame after violating God's command. "Why has your face fallen?" and "Where is your brother Abel?" (Gen. 4:6 and 8) asks God of Cain whom God knows has suffered rejection of his gift and whom God knows has killed Abel. This is an interrogation - not a scientific search for the mystery of the beautiful Divine-natural order. Even before God's hard-edged questions, the first Biblical question comes from the snake enticing the woman to suspect God's protective command not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. "Did God tell you not to eat from any tree in the Garden?" (Gen.3:1) says the snake in an obvious misrepresentation of the truth that undermines trust in the Divine mitzvah/ order's goodwill. Power and confession and subjection are the topics of these not at all innocent questions. The question itself involves a cover-up just as seeks to uncloak suspicious acts of cover-up. The world of the interrogation of criminals and of seducers and masters of sedition is the context for the Biblical first questions. Later in Exodus the context is intergenerational curiosity - "What is this ritual to you?" (Exodus 12:26) but the Rabbis heard some overtones of authority confrontation - the Rasha.

## **The Socratic Teacher's Questions**

The teacher, since Socrates, has always been the one asking questions. For Socrates the questions were the midwives in an often painful process in which the answers emerged out of the womb of the student. The birth analogy does not capture the political import of the Socratic question. In the Socratic dialogues as presented by Plato the Socratic questioning breaks down the socially accepted answers that students have in order to release truth that is within in dialectical logical attack on so-called knowledge which turns out to be opinions often covering the power interests of society. No wonder Socrates was accused, convicted and executed of corrupting the youth and undermining the order of the polis.

## The Biblical-Rabbinic Child's Questions

In the ideal Biblical and Rabbinic educational process as enshrined in the Seder' Four Kushiot, it is the child who asks the questions and the leaders of the social order - the rabbis and the parents - who provoke and encourage the asking of questions. Taken-for-granted social construction of reality of which Peter Berger wrote so insightfully is the opposite of the Rabbinic understanding of intergenerational Jewish education. Education is not designed to foist on the student the self-evident nature of the ways things are as if it has always been that way, as if God created and mandated the social order which is confounded with the natural order. Surprisingly Jews who do believe in God the creator as God the lawgiver who created the Jewish social order - the Torah, encourage asking of questions that assume the world could be different and that whatever is, demands a rational justification transparent to the participant's in this Divine Seder. In fact it is undermining of unquestioned acceptance of "Seder" that is mandated in the Four Questions about the contradictions - not just differences - between the daily order and the Pesach order. Once the Pesach order is brought up for scrutiny so of course is the daily order - in fact all order and all orders (*mitzvot*) must be accountable to the logic of the child who has right to know and even a duty to demand that knowledge.

The famous four *kushiot* of the Seder are not merely naïve questions of the youngest child but a "testing of the borders" of the order (the *Seder*) of society. The child notices how this night deviates from the accepted order. The question demands an account that will make rational sense of both the usual order (*she-b'khol haleilot*) otherwise taken for granted without justification and of the intentional breaking of the pattern. The world and its variations are seen not as a natural variety but as a contradiction amendable to reason. The child challenges the authority figure, the parent (*oreich haseder*) to explain this rupture in the flow.

Paradoxically of course in Jewish tradition the parent's educational quest is to provoke such destabilizing questions, to awaken the child's sensitivity to the anomalous, because it that skepticism that will open the child to the parent's answers, to the narrative of a miraculous night 3200 years ago that broke open the expectations of the slave people and liberated their minds and bodies from the taken for granted rule of Pharaoh. The parent seems confident that not only are children's questions desirable but that Jewish tradition can effectively cope with these challenges, that there are convincing *taamei hamitzvot*. The presupposition of the *Arba Kushiot* practice is that a dialogue of challenge and response can build bridges between the logic of the child, of the parent and of the tradition. So such hard-edged questions are not a threat to authority and tradition but the best way to maintain continuity across the generations.

That optimism is an educational philosophy worth exploring but one may never forget the chasm that every *kushiya* opens up. The child's discovery of the power to interrogate the adult world, the parent's moment of panic when forced to justify what is taken for granted and the potential for revolt and not only for innovation within continuity.

Let us examine this art of hard-edged questioning as unpacked by several contemporary thinkers.

## **Questions are a Paradox** by Steve Greenberg from *Wrestling with God and Men*

The key to Jewish exegesis is to assume that nothing is obvious. Questions are the great cultural paradox. They both destabilize and secure social norms. Khrushchev once explained why he hated Jews. He said, "They always ask why." Questions tend to democratize.

Ease with questions conveys a fundamental trust in the goodwill and the good sense of others. Autocrats hate questions. We train children at the Passover Seder to ask why because tyrants are undone and liberty is won with a good question.

It is for this reason that God loves it when we ask why. Consequently we celebrate challenging the Torah to make sense, and above all to be a defensible expression of Divine goodness.

As we read the verses of the Torah ... let us make no assumptions in advance in regard to their meaning. Later we will need to engage the full history of these verses from the Talmud on. For now, let us read as if the Torah was given Today. When we ask good questions the Torah is given anew on Sinai at that very moment.

## **The Fourth Child who does not know how to ask**

Let us take a step back from the optimism of a fruitful exchange between questioners and those challenged. Maybe the fourth child, the silent child of the haggadah who does not ask questions but puts up with the parent telling him whatever the parent wants to lecture about is lacking not in curiosity but in courage. Perhaps that child has been silenced by those in authority who are always probing and testing for faults. Perhaps the model of asking question as a form of coercion is not one the child wishes to imitate.

Questions are often threats to authority or ways to assert authority. They play on a field of power relations between parent and child, ruler and subject. That is why they often lead not to dialogue or exploration of knowledge but to rhetorical putdowns and defensive shutting down of information exchange.

Note how educators Joseph Lukinsky and Lifsa Schachter unpack the fruitless question typical of home and school when the parent/educator - not the child/student - is initiating the questions, running the interrogation.

**Teacher Questions that Shut Down Dialogue** by Joseph Lukinsky and Lifsa Schachter<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Are Questions Necessary?" in WINTER 5756, JEWISH EDUCATION NEWS, page 15

The title of Robert Paul Smith's classic book *Where Did You Go? Out. What Did You Do? Nothing* (1957) captures the withdrawal and boredom that **adult questions** so frequently evoke in children. Both on the street and in the classroom, adults assume that it is their right to engage children in questions: *How are your parents? What grade are you in now? What caused the destruction of the Second Temple? Who was the first Jew?* and the ubiquitous, *What did you do on your summer vacation?* Parents who speak this way regularly find that their children find that they respond as if to an interrogation and consequently tell as little as possible. By contrast, children who ask questions are often seen as rude and presumptuous.

[**Teachers questions** are not much better in the answers they evoke:] The students are, as they will so frequently state, trying to find the answer that the teacher wants.

There are two hidden messages inherent in this kind of [teacher] question asking.

(1) First it establishes a power relationship with the teacher on top. Students are placed on the defensive; tension is raised which stands in the way of thinking and communication.

(2) A second hidden lesson in this way of teaching is the reinforcement of the idea that there must be an answer to every question, an answer that the teacher already knows.

Adults who overuse conventional adult-child questioning techniques do not come across to the student/ child as real engaged, fully present. There is no revelation of personal life, interests or feelings, no model of what the teacher cares about or how the teacher thinks, no disclosure of what the teacher finds interesting or exciting. Frequently, the students are not answering a **true question** at all (investigating a problem, inquiring into a matter, discussing some doubtful point - definitions of "question" from the Oxford English Dictionary). As a result, there are no **true exchanges** in the classroom. "*What did you learn today? Nothing.*"

Aviva Zornberg explores the **obscene nature of questions asked by adults to children** which follow on God's interrogation of his guilty creatures trying to force their confession: She quotes a radical thesis on questions by Slavoj Zizek:

... there is something obscene in the very act of asking a question, without regard to its content. It is the form of the question as such which is obscene: the question lays open, exposes, denudes its addressee, it invades his sphere of intimacy; this is why the basic, elementary reaction to a question is shame on the bodily level, blushing and lowering our eyes, like a child whom we ask "What were you doing?" It is clear in our everyday experience, that such a questioning of children is a priori incriminating, provoking a sensation of guilt ... The basic indecency of the question consists in its drive to put into words what should be left unspoken, as in the well-known dialogue: "What were you doing?" "You know what!" "Yes, but I want you to tell me" . . . It aims at a point at which the answer is not possible, where the word is lacking, where the subject is exposed in his impotence.

Aviva then notes that "conversely, children question their parents: 'Father, why is the sky blue?' - 'The child is not really interested in the sky as such; **the real stake of the question is to expose father's impotence**, his helplessness in the face of the hard fact that the sky is blue . . .'" Thus authority issues both from the student

testing the limits and from the teacher testing the student often can turn questions into the coercive opposite of dialogue - a dance of cunning and invasion of private space in pursuit of embarrassing lack of knowledge or acquiescence, on one hand, and of cover-up and stonewalling defensiveness, on the other.

### ***Mah Zot* - The Simple, Curious Child or the Stupid Child who Closes off Discussion?**

At the seder many would hope that the questions flow from the children as their own true questions, reflecting the wonder of the *Ma Zot* simple child. So too **parental questions could be a form gentle guidance** to see differences that arouse wonder. In the Mishna the four questions are actually attributed to the parent seeking to evoke wonder in a child who does not know how to ask because they do not see the differences. But Aviva Zornberg makes us aware how such questions do not merely flow in natural pursuit of curiosity but emerge as failure of communication, of forgetting, as an intentional avoidance of the deeper issues (the stupid child) and as Oedipal struggles (the Rasha) to break down order and authority.

#### **The Stupid Child's Question by Aviva Zornberg<sup>2</sup>**

For Rav Hutner, **the ability to question must now govern the relationship between God and man, as between parents and growing children.** The aim of the relationship is to create, in Rav Hutner's imagery, the "face of one who can receive," who actively generates meaning by asking questions. Now, the dialogue is the model for evoking narratives. **Without the capacity to ask, to open up the closed issues, to break through the obvious, the self-understood, there can be no meaningful narrative.**

In terms Rav Hutner's analysis, the Four Sons in the Haggadah, whose questions and answers represent an **essential dynamic in the transmission of memory.** *Someone must ask a question*; someone must become aware of a difficulty, a blank, a dissonance. **The worst case, in this view, is the son "who does not know how to ask."** In such a case, *at petach lo* - "You open up for him": but this opening is, by default, an act of *haggadah*, of **telling - an unsolicited narrative, which represents a failure in the dynamic of the narrative that is engendered by questions.**

If the son who does not know how to ask questions is in the worst case, the "simple" son, who asks, in two words: *Mah zoth?* "What is this?" (Exodus 13:14)- is, in some readings, not a much better case. Rashi is scathing: **"This is a stupid child, who does not know how to deepen his question, but blocks it, by asking, `What is this?' ... There a child who does not know how to ask, a child who asks in a closed-off way (*stmuah*) and one who asks in a wise way."** While most commentators regard the simple son as somewhere between the wise son and the wicked son, Rashi is more critical. The very form of this question "blocks" a penetrating answer; what he receives is the simplest version of the narrative: *"It was*

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<sup>2</sup> *THE PARTICULARS OF RAPTURE*, p. 180 ff

*with a mighty hand that God brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage . . ."*  
(I3:I4). ....

Questions can be evaluated. Three of the four sons ask questions; the fourth does not know how. This structure seems to imply that there is an art, or at least a skill, to the question. Rashi's harsh criticism of the simple son, who does not know how to "deepen" his question, who "blocks," stops up the gap where a good question would have created an opening, is thus a negative description of what a question should be. To block-*sotem* - in Talmudic rhetoric is the movement to hide, to leave implicit what might have become explicit. The good question, we might then say, is the one that strives to put something into words, that presses against the boundaries of the unsaid. The simple son, with his too-general question, skates over the surface: he is given an equally superficial, though correct answer.....

Rashi's comment [based on the Talmud Yerushalmi's description of the third child as *tipeish*] is, in fact, a comment about narratives, and about the questions that engender or stifle narratives. Narratives, then, are engendered by questions of a particular type.

## **Forgetting, The Generation Gap, and the Wise Child's Question by Aviva Zornberg**

The first question of children to parents cited in the Torah - the question later attributed by the Rabbis to the "wicked son"- occurs in Moses' words to the people, preparing them, even before the historical reality of redemption has been played out, for a future of memory and forgetting:

*"And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this rite?' you shall say: It is the Passover sacrifice to God, because God passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt . . ."* (Exodus 12:26-27).<sup>3</sup>

The paradox underlying all questions about history is indicated in the Mechilta:

At that moment, bad news was brought to the Israelites: that the Torah would be forgotten. Some say that good news was brought to them: that they would have children and children's children!

The good news arises if we read *ki* as "when your children ask you," not as "if your children ask you." There is an assurance of generations to come. **The bittersweet nature of questions has to do with forgetting and the desire to know.** Without forgetting, there would be no questions. Is this - the inevitability of forgetting - bad

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<sup>3</sup> According to the original Biblical context the question attributed by the Midrash to the Rasha is not wicked at all but wise. Rashbam, Hizkuni and Seforno explain that the child notices that this sacrifice on Pesach, unlike any holiday sacrifice, is not on the holy day but the day before, not cooked but roasted, not tied to natural or agricultural events like harvests but to a historical event that cannot be seen but only heard about. In the pshat it is clear that blood is placed on the doorposts even after the first Pesach in Egypt, thus arousing the question. (Ibn Ezra while citing this view disagrees and follows the Rabbinic midrash halacha that blood on the doorpost is only in Pesach Mitzraim).

news? Or is it good news, implying the constant rebirth of narratives, responses to the questions of those in whom distance and forgetting create desire?

The issue is not decided, as so many true questions are not decided. It does, however, evoke yet again the ambiguity that, in rabbinic commentary, haunts the notion of narrative. How do we understand the questions of the future? Are they tragic, deplorable? Or a manifestation of life? For **questions do destabilize**: they find difficulty and distance, where one might have dreamt of ease and continuity.

The **wise son's question** is ...a real question. On one level, it asks for information, it questions the meanings of a detailed list of laws. And the answer apparently addresses this technical level: "Tell him all the laws, ending with the end of the Seder, the Afikoman." Again, however, this is not the answer written in the Torah, to the question; "What are the statutes and decrees and laws which God our God commanded you?" (Deut 6:20-25). There, the answer is a long narrative that begins with Egyptian slavery, covers the redemption, the gift of the Holy Land, and God's commandments "for our good." This benign history of goodness and life has as its frame the fulfillment of God's commandments. In effect, the answer given in the Haggada is a kind of foreshortened version of the same response. Narrative and law nurture one another - the redemption narrative explaining the gratitude and responsibility of the people, the laws evoking wonder at the continuing narrative of goodness and life.

This is the classic understanding of the wise son's question. What makes it a real question, however, is not its encyclopedic categories of laws, but precisely the awkward word, *etchem* - "... commanded you." This is awkward because it seems akin to the wicked son's terminology - "What is this ritual to you?" The wise son, too, asks a disturbing question, in which he opens up a distance between his father and himself. The father and his generation were there; he was not. This distinction between generations is always true. From his situation outside, the questioner, by the very word *Mah* -What? - asks for words to describe what is beyond words.

The wise son, however, articulates his question with exquisite care: ... which *our* God commanded you." He speaks of "*our* God"; as Rashi says, "He does not exclude himself by the word, 'you,' because he says, "*our* God.'" "*Our* God" is the expression of relationship, of responsibility to the Other. This is a given in the wise son's question. He is both inside and outside, committed to God and His commandments, but not directly present at the original site of commandment. This is the eternal distance between child and parent, questioner and answerer. The wise son's question, therefore, does not merely demand information; it disturbs in its distance, even as it articulates a basic commitment.

Unlike the narcissistic alienation of the "wicked" son, the effect of the wise son's question is to touch on deeper levels of the father's knowledge. ...the interpretations of God's commandments.

## The Rasha' Kushiya: Transgressive Questions by Aviva Zornberg<sup>4</sup>

The "hard-edged" sense of language that comes with the negative form generates questions. The Talmudic word for the question is *kushiya*. At its heart is the idea of the hard, *kasheh*, the difficult, the resistant. ...[As quoted above] a radical thesis on questions is described by Slavoj Zizek:

... there is something obscene in the very act of asking a question, without regard to its content. It is the form of the question as such which is obscene: the question lays open, exposes, denudes its addressee, it invades his sphere of intimacy

In Zizek's deliberately provocative rhetoric, shame and guilt are always engendered by questions. Interestingly enough, Zizek's model is the relation of child and father: the "obscenity" of the question applies in both directions, since there is an "innermost, intimate kernel" (the *kasheh*, the resistant core) to the self, that refuses to yield to words. This is a "leftover of every signifying operation, a hard core ... which simultaneously attracts and repels us - which divides our desire and thus provokes shame."

Zizek's perspective, sweepingly and even violently articulated as it may be, fleshes out a challenging sense of the **transgressive dimension of questions**. If guilt and shame inform the obscenity of questions, their attack on the "inner residue that cannot be spoken of, and cannot be dominated," .... Zizek is right: questions are transgressive, tactless ...

This "hardness" (*kasheh*) is the core-idea of the *kushiya* - the question, in Rabbinic Hebrew. Hardness is fraught with mystery and pain. It resists language; it is, to use Slavoj Zizek's expression, the "rock of the Real," which "resists symbolization," which "persists as a surplus and returns through all attempts to domesticate it, to gentrify it." A true *kushiya* has something of the Sublime, in Kant's sense: it disturbs order, it is limitless, terrifying - and yet evokes its own kind of pleasure, even of enthusiasm. The kind of question that we are describing touches on issues that defy "gentrification," that relate to desire, and thus retain their protean force in the face of all answers.

"To question," says Jabes, "is to break with something; it is to establish an inside and an outside." "Outside, that is to say, **outside of order**," adds Marc-Alain Ouaknine, and quotes Heidegger: "We go beyond that which is the order of the day. We question over and beyond the ordinary and the 'in-order' that is well ordered in everyday life"; and Nietzsche: "[the philosopher is the] man who never ceases living, seeing, conjecturing, hoping, dreaming of extra-ordinary things." .....

### Answering the Outsider

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<sup>4</sup> *THE PARTICULARS OF RAPTURE*, p. 180 ff

**The wicked son does ask a real question:** "What is this *avoda* to you?" The word *avoda* is capable of a wide range of nuances: "worship, devoted service, ritual, hard work, slavery." ...

Its success as a question can be seen most readily in the response of the Haggadist. He recommends to the father: "Blunt his teeth!" (*Hakheh et shinav*). The emotion that the father is to express is clearly anger; he is to retaliate for the injury caused him by his son's question. The question has indeed been obscene. It has pressed him to "put into words what should left unspoken." It "aims at a point at which the answer is not possible, where the word is lacking, where the subject is exposed in his impotence." As with Zizek's model question, ...the "real stake" of the question is to expose the father's impotence. At this point the word fails; because of the enormous demand of that relationship, and in face of the divided response of the father, the question creates shame.

**"To question is to break with something; it is to establish an *inside* and an *outside*."** The Haggadah diagnoses the problem of the wicked son's question: "he has excluded himself from society." By not simply asking, "What is this *avoda*?" but "What is it to you?" he has placed himself outside the order of things: he is not involved in the *avoda*, in the relationship with God, in all its historical meanings. In this sense, his is a true question: it arises to disturb the sense of obviousness in which all is implicit. It arouses shame and anger.

The father's answer is cryptic: "'For the sake of this did God *to me*, when I came out of Egypt' - to me, not to him. If he had been there, he would not have been redeemed." The clearest fact is his marking of the son's "outside-ness." ....

The answer that the father gives **the "wicked" son** thus emphasizes the son's exclusion, and defines the ritual acts as God's desire of those He redeems. Since the questioner has already excluded himself, we wonder why this answer should hurt him, why this "blunts his teeth"? An original notion is proposed by the Spanish Talmudist Ritva: this "blunting of the teeth" is the frustration of one who sees everyone eating, while he is excluded. He cannot participate in the paschal meal, his father tells him, because of the prohibition: "No stranger may eat of it" (Ex 12::43). He has denied the principal beliefs of Israel, effectively alienating himself. Again, we might ask, why should this exclusion trouble the questioner who has already excluded himself?

Eating a meal with others, however, is an experience that, in a primary way, is a fulfillment of desire. Not merely the sensual aspects of the meal - the smell, the sights, the textures, the tastes - but also a sense of community felt by those who eat together - these constitute a moment from which it is hard to be excluded. Socially and culturally, the questioner is made to feel his outside-ness as an untenable attitude. The cost of the question is borne in upon him, making him aware that facile outside-ness" is an illusion. He discovers his own desire to participate, to be part of the story. There is, in fact, no answer to the alienated violence of his question.

**The Fifth Child, the Patient One - Who Knows Not to Ask for Answers  
...Yet**

There is an alternative to the hard-edged questioner who insists that a full logical accounting be given of the social order *now* or let the authority stand down. The poet Rilke praises the patience of the "one who knows how not to demand answers *now*" - how not to demand answers *before one is ready* for them.

**Maria Rainer Rilke, poet -**

**Love Questions Like Locked Doors, Be Patient until You can Live the Answers**

Be patient towards all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves liked locked rooms ....Do not now seek the answers; that cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now.

Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

Perhaps we might say that the praise of the kushiya is the praise of the *Rasha*. Rilke instead praises the silent child usually defined as the child who does not know how to ask. Yet he sees that the child does know how to ask and knows how to be patient with the unanswered question and the long process of questing for answers. It is not the parent who must answer, who must make sense or step aside but it is the questioner who must answer for him/herself when ready, not on demand.

Aviva Zornberg also praises the question that does not seek an answer in her unpacking of Rabbi Nachman:

At the heart of ...the problem of the question is **the unanswerable question**. It is the measure of the great tzaddik to be capable of asking questions, "without irritably reaching after fact and reason." R. Nachman says elsewhere: "This is the way that the human being is like God: God, too, has unanswerable questions." In asking questions of God, against God, without answers, the human being enacts his likeness to God. In this mode of the question, the tzaddik expresses his understanding that, because God is beyond human understanding, "it is necessary that there be questions of Him, against Him." Again, the paradox: the question against God is appropriate to a God who cannot be articulated, or "gentrified," to use Zizek's expression:

**The real question does not expect an answer.** And if there is an answer, the latter does not satisfy the question ... Any answer should bear in it the essence of the question, which is not extinguished by the one who answers.

The space out of which questions emerge tells of separation - separation from God and from other human beings. Bridging this gap, which is taut with potential relationship, comes language; but the "distance is not abolished, it is not even diminished. On the contrary, it is preserved and pure by the rigor of the speech that sustains the absoluteness of the difference."...

**A Conversation beyond Authority, beyond Power**

Can the a parent-child, teacher-student relationship transcend power and positioning, challenging and testing? Can it lose its hardness? What would such questions look like? How would teacher/parent evoke such a conversation?

As we saw above Joseph Lukinsky and Lifsa Schachter wrote:

Adults who overuse conventional adult-child questioning techniques do not come across to the student/ child as real engaged, fully present. There is no revelation of personal life, interests or feelings, no model of what the teacher cares about or how the teacher thinks, no disclosure of what the teacher finds interesting or exciting. Frequently, the students are not answering a **true question** at all (investigating a problem, inquiring into a matter, discussing some doubtful point - definitions of "question" from the Oxford English Dictionary). As a result, there are no **true exchanges** in the classroom.<sup>5</sup>

Implicit in their critique of teacherly adult-style interrogation or in testing questions is a positive alternative. They evaluate a question by its ability to open up a dialogue. Most authority generated questions produce children who do not want answer, they produce our silent fourth child. On the other had when the teacher shares **personal life** and real open-ended questions, then the student too will wonder and ask in an open way and perhaps share his/her own personal perspective. Perhaps *V'higdta l'vincha* - telling and sharing of a personal journey may precede and open up questioning. Rashi explains the child who does not know how to ask (Exodus 13:8) as "one to whom we open with words of agadah that draw the heart" - not words of law, as to the wise child.

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<sup>5</sup> "Are Questions Necessary?" in WINTER 5756, JEWISH EDUCATION NEWS, page 15

Sophie Gordon in *Turning the Soul* promotes the **interpretive question leading to an egalitarian open-ended discussion** as the key method to achieve such dialogue. Teaching literature in high school she practices a Platonic, not an Aristotelian search for truth. For Aristotle truth are demonstrable by reason and the teacher presents the systematically compiled and organized body of knowledge to the student. It is either true or false governed by the law of contradiction. Truth is objective and capable of logical proof in those areas of exact science that achieve true knowledge - unlike practical realms like history or poetry or ethics which are only matters of "more or less." Medieval lectures on Aristotle's sciences, logic and philosophy were not about discovering truth but about demonstrating the truth of received traditions of Aristotle's investigations.

She seeks to return to Plato where knowledge cannot be implanted rather it emerges from us through the midwifery of the teacher. Nor can knowledge be demonstrated by logical syllogism as entailed in the concepts. Knowledge is perceived, apprehended by the inner eye.

The indwelling power in the soul is the instrument for apprehension. An eye could not be converted to the light from the darkness except by turning the whole body around... together with the soul to contemplate the essence. (Republic 518)

Questions help "turn the soul around" and opens one's eyes (*at ptach lo*) but it presumes that one has the power of sight, for the blind cannot be made to see. The ability to learn - one's eyesight - is assumed to be indwelling. One asks not, can you "prove it" but let me see if I can see what you mean.

Here Sophie Gordon adds her own pluralist interpretation of Plato insisting that personal knowledge, inner eyesight is different from one to the other and hence inherently tolerant of alternative views.

The method of interpretative questions and conversations:

- 1- The teacher poses an **interpretive question** - not a fact question, not a logical conclusion, not a question with a cut and dried answer waiting in the wings. An open question is a **real problem** that bothers the teacher, not one where the teacher has an answer and the students must guess it. Later student generated questions are invited as long the student genuinely cares about this issue.
- 2- Students are asked to explore, not to answer the question, and **no consensus is expected** or sought.
- 3- **The discussion** proceeds **without hierarchy** with student and teacher suggesting perspectives. Rules must be in place to prevent judgmental responses to exploratory comments. This must be safe space to share the personal as well as to express a minority position.
- 4- **Personal experiences** that have produced personal knowledge are presented along with logical argument. ("It is because of what God did for *me* when I went out of Egypt.")
- 5- Building a **conversation** means referring back to what others have said to build on them or dissent from them. It is not a series of monologues, of declarations. It means referring to the text as a conversant. (*What is the Torah trying to tell us?*)
- 6- Knowledge is presumed to exist **within** each student based on experience and self-reflection. So teacher is a midwife of that personal knowledge. Questions come not to test to disprove but to clarify: what did you mean by that? Why did you say that?

7- **Beware:** the teacher must NOT use the discussion as a technique to highlight the points that the teacher had already chosen in advance as the real knowledge to be learned.

8- **Beware:** the teacher should NOT push for a premature closure. Let the group conversation wander until it finds its own genuine concern and then until it maps out the options. The teacher should not be the decision maker.

9- **Trust** the students' interests and their inner fairness when sifting through ideas. **New ideas** will be generated as soon as the students are given permission to think without fear of being judged externally by an authority figure. Let the marketplace of ideas show the students what works and what does not.

10- **Respect for detail and careful analysis** will grow as details are they are seen to be decisive in subjects of passionate searches for meaning. Yet each detail can produce more than one interpretation.

11- Both student and teacher must be **prepared to grow**, to discover new perspectives over time as the conversation develops.

The driving force of learning and sharing is the question as quest for personally relevant knowledge. Franz Rosenzweig wrote of the Frankfurt Lehrhaus that in the modern era adult Jewish learning begins not with the text as a self-contained and self-validated world but with the life, personal interests. Torah is Tree of life but the approach to Torah starts a different point:

It is learning in reverse order. A learning that no longer starts from Torah and leads into life, but the other way around, from life...back to Torah. (*On Jewish Learning*)

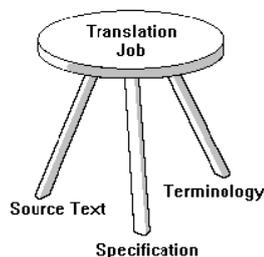
When the quest - rather than the source of authority is in the center than the conversation is open to anyone contributing to the search. Hierarchy and deductive logic no longer define knowledge or relations among learners and teachers.

In fact, Barry Holtz notes that the quest for knowledge is not the only goal but the quest for collegiality, for a social community built around true exchanges. Once, he reports, his Jewish studies high school teacher demanded: "So why do we spend all this time studying?" The teacher answered himself: "We study so that we can talk to one another." The text is the common table around which we talk and share. The conversation around Torah is worldwide and multigenerational.

The teacher seeks not to impart knowledge only but to invite the students to join the conversation in which teacher-student relations may melt into a comradeship of true dialogue in quest for truths of personal import. In that way parent-child and teacher-student relationship may dissolve upon passage into adulthood into collegial sharing.

## C. Comparative Translation: Translation as Commentary

By Steve Israel and Noam Zion



Paradoxically **the best translations may be the worst enemies of close text study** inspired by student *kushiyot*. The new JPS translation, for example, seeks smooth, contemporary flowing English prose style. Its historical scholarship is impressive but it sometimes makes our lives as commentators too easy. Everett Fox's translation based on the Buber-Rosenzweig German translation seeks to preserve poetic style (repeating roots, midrash on Hebrew names, bizarre words, ambiguous syntax, oral reading breath pauses) so that the "bumps" in the textual flow, the texture and form evoke curiosity. He never lets us forget that this is translation from a different language and culture and that its translation is the beginning of a Buberian dialogue with God who gives this text its authority and its claim on us. After reading a translation we have not yet understood the text but we are just ready to begin to identify its difficulties and to interpret it.

One solution to this problem is to compare various translations. If Hebrew is the language of study, then some teachers ask the students to translate the text in their own words and then compare their efforts with alternative translations. A seminal text like *hashomer achi anochi* can be learned by heart in Hebrew and then comparative translation applied. In fact comparative translation can raise the student's awareness of the importance of learning Biblical Hebrew.

An English professor wrote the words:

"A woman without her man is nothing" on the chalkboard and asked his students to punctuate it correctly.

All of the males in the class wrote: "A woman, without her man, is nothing."

All the females in the class wrote: "A woman: without her, man is nothing."

## On the Issue of Biblical Translation

One of the major issues that needs to be dealt with in any study of the Bible is the issue of translation. Over the centuries hundreds of translations of the Bible have been made into almost all the different languages in the world. The Bible is the most translated book in the history of the world and it is important to remember that the vast majority of human beings who have ever encountered the bible have done so through the medium of a specific translation. It might be thought, superficially that translating is principally a technical job and that the task of the translator is to get the general message across to the reader. A brief thought will be sufficient to realise that this is insufficient.

The Tanakh is far more than a series of messages that a translator might wish to convey to the best of his or her understanding. The Tanakh is written in a particular style and it is to a large extent the style itself in the original Hebrew that contained a great deal of the power of the text. This has been recognised by countless translators themselves and most translators have made some kind of an attempt to get beyond the mere transmission of the general sense of the text and to use the translation in order to try and convey some of the majesty of the text. However, it has been recognised by many that a great translation must go beyond *both* the transmission of the message of the text and the capturing of the dramatic power. There have been those who have realised that much of the message and the content of the text is actually contained in the form of the text. By its use of techniques such as alliteration, repetitive leading words, puns and verbal association, the Biblical narrator or narrators attempt to deepen whatever ideas they are trying to convey. Thus especially (although not exclusively) in recent years translators have placed emphasis on the attempt to convey some of these meanings through a subtle wordplay that in their mind conveys some of the intentions of the original narrators of the texts that have come to us through time.

One of the greatest and most conscious of these attempts is found in the great and important German language translation made in the 1920's by the two great German Jewish thinkers and scholars, Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig.

Not only did they spend years on their translation but both of them and more particularly Buber, reflected on the process and on their aims in many essays and speeches that were published in those years. We bring here a selection of Buber's comments on what he and Rosenzweig were attempting to do in their translation.

1. *The "Old Testament" has never before been translated by writers seeking to return to the concrete fundamental meaning of each individual word; previous translators have been contented to put down something "appropriate," something "corresponding."...*

*[For example] Abraham, complains that he will die 'ariri; and what does that mean? All previous translations say, "without children." The etymology of the word, however, says something else, something more concrete and vivid, namely, "stripped naked" - for to these oriental people, children are a living garment and a second body... That is why Abraham calls himself not "childless" but "childbare,"*

*"childstripped." To undertake a genuine translation of the Bible entails now and then venturing such words; whether posterity will receive them or reject them is not for the living to know.*

2. *This approach to rendering the text does not at all imply the obligation to retain the original word-order; that would often entail doing violence to German syntax. Luther's "let there be light" [Es werde Licht] in all its beauty diminishes the force of the elemental word, as Herder saw; but Herder's "be there light" [Sei Licht] makes the call that creates ex nihilo [out of nothing at all] sound like a conversational imperative. We have to re-order the words to attain the true equivalent in German, with its different sequence of subject and predicate: "Light be!" [Licht werde!].*

3. *[Biblical] scholarship [which sees the text as being the product of many human hands] may dissolve a sentence into genuinely or supposedly independent components; we however may consider and imitate the forged work of the totality - meaning by "imitate" not the stupefying attempt to repeat an established form in different matter, but the striving to create for that form, in the differently ordered language into which we translate, a correspondence or a series of correspondences. The auditory patterns of German can never reproduce the auditory forms of Hebrew; but they can, in growing from an analogous impulse and in exercising an analogous effect, correspond to them Germanically, can Germanize them.*

*To meet the demands of such a task, the translator must elicit from the letter of the Hebrew text its actual auditory form; he must understand the writtenness of Scripture as for the most part the record of its spokenness - which spokenness, as the actual reality of the Bible, is awakened anew wherever an ear biblically hears the word or a mouth biblically speaks it. Prophecy, psalm, and saying were originally born not of the pen but of the tongue; but the same is true of report and law. The holy text is for all uninterrupted antiquity an orally transmitted text - transmitted orally even where it coexists with a highly cultivated secular repository of writing.*

4. *The Bible seeks to be read as One Book] so that no one of its parts remains self-contained; rather every part is held open to every other. The Bible seeks to be present as One Book for its readers so intensely that in reading or reciting an important passage they recall all the passages connected to it, and in particular those connected to it by linguistic identity, resemblance, or affinity; so intensely that all these passages illuminate and explain one another, that they cohere into a unity of meaning, into a theological doctrine not taught explicitly but implicit in the text and emerging from its connections and correspondences. These linkages are not introduced by interpretation ex post facto; rather the canonical text came into being under the influence of precisely this principle, and we can legitimately presume that this principle was a factor in the choice of what the canonical text was to include and of which versions were to go into it. But clearly the same principle controls even the composition of individual portions. The repetition of homonymous [like sounding] or near homonymous words and word sequences within a passage, within a book, within a sequence of books, exercises a quiet power that nonetheless overwhelms the reader prepared to hear.*

5. *To assess what we have achieved is possible only on the basis of an impartial understanding of what we have attempted: to transmit the reality of the Bible to*

*western men and women in a western language. This cannot be done - regardless of what greater accomplishments may follow our own - by an "entirely different ordering" of the text; we cannot dissolve the unity of this book, whatever its genesis, into its component parts without robbing it of its life. Rather it can be done only along the path we have taken, only by remaining true to the words, the sentences, the rhythms, and the structures of the book.*

*6. We have, as I said, had in mind the Bible "aloud." We proceed from the notion that the Bible is a product of living recitation, and is intended for living recitation; that speech is its nature, and the written text only a form for preserving it. Hence our method of rendering its rhythm. Our translation is the first colometric translation... i.e. the first that gives the text its natural division into lines of meaning as these are determined by the laws of human breathing and human speech, with each line constituting a rhythmic unit.*

*7. We have attempted another thing not accomplished in previous translations: to distinguish synonyms wherever German permits, i.e. not to render two distinct Hebrew words by one German one, nor - at least within a single sequence - to render a single Hebrew word by two German ones. We have further attempted, in cases where a common root linked various words, to retain that link in German.*

*8. Those who listen will hear the higher meaning in the similarity of sound. A connection is established between one passage and another, and thus between one stage of the story and another - a connection that articulates the deep motive of the narrated event more immediately than could a pinned-on moral.*

Let us now try and introduce some of these ideas to the students.

#### **ACTIVITY: TRANSLATING.**

- Ask the students to define the job of a translator. Now ask them to define the job of a Biblical translator. Discuss the two questions and point out the enormous responsibility of any would-be Biblical translator who takes on her or himself the task of mediating for the reader what many perceive as the direct word of God and all see as a text of immeasurable importance for human culture in general and for people's lives within that culture.
- Present to the students the following scenario. They are experts in the issue of Biblical translation and that they have been invited for the forthcoming world conference "On Biblical Translation" to prepare a paper on Buber and Rosenzweig's approach to the text in their great translation of the 1920's. Tell them that their working materials are eight fragments of Buber's writings that have recently come to light from his personal archive and give them some or all of the above pieces from Buber on Biblical translation. They should work singly or in pairs, going through the fragments and trying to reconstruct the method and the approach of Buber and Rosenzweig to the task of translation. As they prepare their paper they must not content themselves with explaining the approach but must add their own comments

regarding the enterprise. How do they relate to the ideas expressed by Buber? Do they make sense? Do they seem logical? Illogical?

- Explain to the students that over the years many have supported the general ideas (such as they have been understood), while others have opposed them. As great experts on the subject, the students are being asked to give the 'last word' to the conference that they are going to address. As such, their responsibility is very great, both to explain the system and to assess it.
- Let a couple of students give their papers (to the assembled conference of experts) and let the whole group discuss them.

## When Harry Meets Hebrew by Sarah Bronson

Back in 1999, when Gili Bar-Hillel was given the task of translating “Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone”—known in the U.S. as “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone” or simply as Book One of the renowned seven-volume series—no one yet fathomed the boundless commercial success that would characterize the Harry Potter franchise. Indeed, Israeli publishers Yedioth Ahronoth Books and Books in the Attic gave Bar-Hillel the Potter project as a tryout, of sorts; a fairly experienced translator, she’d been asking them for work. Knowing that she was a member of the International Wizard of Oz Club, the publishers figured that she had enough enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, children’s fantasy literature to accurately render the story from English to Hebrew.

Eight years later, however, Bar-Hillel is a bona fide Israeli celebrity, known nationwide as the woman who makes the imaginative world of Harry Potter accessible to thousands of Hebrew-speaking fans. Still, the differences between Hebrew and English syntax, the unique vocabulary and culture of Harry’s universe, and Bar-Hillel’s inability to find out background information missing from the books—series author J.K. Rowling’s British publishing house, Bloomsbury, carefully shields her from the public—all combined to make Harry Potter an often befuddling project to translate. Indeed, the issue of what constitutes an “accurate” translation has engaged Bar-Hillel throughout her unlikely rise to national fame, as well as led Israelis to sometimes laud, and other times deride, her word choices and judgment.

Quoting the Italian maxim *traduttore, traditore*—the translator is a traitor—Bar-Hillel notes that lovers of literature often feel suspicious when it comes to translators, who, by definition, create both a bridge and a filter between the reader and the original text. Given the challenges inherent in translating Harry Potter from English to Hebrew, she said, it is inevitable that some readers will disagree with her choices. What surprised her, however, was the depth of emotion with which even young fans fought for their personal linguistic interpretations.

“I had a child complain to me about how I translated the word ‘wand,’” she said. “The complaint was that ‘wand’ has a pleasing, round sound to it, and ‘sharveet’ sounds harsh. What can I do? That’s the Hebrew word for wand.”

While initially such criticism bothered her, Bar-Hillel quickly came to see it as a positive: in an age of extreme digitalization, in which communication is increasingly fast and language increasingly casual, her work is allowing even young readers to scrutinize literature with a heightened level of subtlety and attention to nuance—and that can only be a good thing, she decided.

Still, the fanaticism of Potter fans has forced Bar-Hillel to prepare her translation of “Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows,” the series’ seventh and final book (the

English edition was released in July; the Hebrew version is expected in January) with the spirit of a defense attorney. "Any choice I make where I could have made another," she says, "I prepare an explanation of why I made the choice I did."

A married mother of three, Bar-Hillel, 32, is the child and grandchild of professors at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her grandfather, Yehoshua Bar-Hillel, was a Vienna-born philosopher. Her mother was a professor of psychology who frequently lectured in the United States. As a child, Bar-Hillel spent a lot of time in the United States and learned to read English before she did Hebrew. She studied at The Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University and Harvard, and has a B.A. in dramatic writing and dramaturgy.

While the process of translating any work creates challenging choices—perfectly literal translations are rarely desirable, even when they are possible—the differences between English and Hebrew syntax create difficulties at the most basic level.

As an example, Bar-Hillel points to a conversation at the beginning of Book Seven, in which Mrs. Weasley orders her son, Ron (Harry's good friend), to clean his room. Chafing at the order, Ron starts to say, "Why in the name of Merlin's saggy left ..." before he is interrupted by his father, who scolds him not to talk to his mother like that. We never find out what noun Ron was going to use at the end of the sentence. The omission creates a problem for Bar-Hillel because in Hebrew, adjectives are placed after the nouns they modify. Without knowing exactly what item or body part of Merlin's was saggy and on the left, Bar-Hillel will be hard-pressed to translate Ron's question without using judicious guesswork.

"I'll either have to decide on a noun or completely rearrange what he was going to say in some creative way," Bar-Hillel predicted.

In addition, according to Sarit Suel, a third-year graduate student at the Bar Ilan University translation program, there is also the challenge of helping young Israeli readers understand Harry Potter's world, which is steeped in the bourgeois culture of British boarding schools. Suel, who is writing her thesis on how Bar-Hillel's choices have changed over the course of the series, points out, for example, that there is no word in Hebrew for "prefect," so Bar-Hillel chose to render it as "madrach." While the word is an imperfect parallel, it accurately connotes a young leader with semi-formal responsibilities over younger charges.

"I wouldn't want to be in her place," Suel says. "This book is really challenging to translate. You have all these references that no one knows unless you know British culture very well ... Baked beans don't mean the same thing to the Israeli reader that it means to a [British] child. In Britain, it's a kids' food that children usually like. [In Israel], it's just a can of beans."

Indeed, Bar-Hillel confronted a food-related challenge at the very start of the series, in the first chapter of Book One. Professor Dumbledore, headmaster at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, is discussing the death of arch-villain Voldemort with his colleague, Professor McGonagall, when he reaches into his pocket, takes out some candy and offers her a "lemon sherbet." In the Hebrew translation, Bar-Hillel chose to have Dumbledore offer McGonagall a krembo, the uniquely Israeli snack that has not a drop of lemon flavor. The choice angers many fans, but Bar-Hillel explained her decision with equanimity.

"I had a friend from England send me lemon sherbets so I could understand what they were," Bar-Hillel recalls. "They are a lemon candy with a sort of fizzy feeling in the mouth, and they are seen in Britain as a children's treat. Adults don't eat them so much. The point of the lemon sherbets is to tell us something about Dumbledore's character—that this wise old wizard with a long white beard carries around a children's treat in his pocket. The equivalent children's dessert in Israel is the krembo. If I'd translated it as a lemon sucking candy, it wouldn't have imparted the same image of Dumbledore."

Beyond the lack of British cultural parallels, which can be true anywhere outside of England, for Bar-Hillel there is also the issue of Israelis' relative ignorance of Christianity, references to which play a small role in the series. A line that posed a special challenge appears in Book Five, where Sirius Black, Harry's godfather, passes Harry's door singing "God Rest You, Merrye Hippogriffs" toward his pet hippogriff, Buckbeak. Knowing that Israeli kids would not typically recognize Sirius' melodic outburst as a parody of a Christmas carol, Bar-Hillel rendered it as a play on a Chanukah tune: *Mi yimallel Hippogriff she-ochel*, ("who will recount the story of the eating Hippogriff"), a play on the popular Chanukah song that begins *mi yimallel gvurot yisrael* ("who will recount the heroic acts of Israel").

"Of course I could have translated it literally," she said, "and there are many people who would prefer that I had. But I think the fact that Sirius is using a real holiday song and changing the words is important for understanding him and for the spirit of the book, and, in that sense, it is more accurate to use a Chanukah song, which the readers recognize, than to lose the playfulness of the original text."

But in another instance, Bar-Hillel chose not to pander to Jewish sensibilities. A child recently wrote to her, she says, that he doesn't like that Harry eats bacon and could she please say that he eats chicken instead? Bar-Hillel sent an answer to the boy, gently explaining that as Harry is not Jewish and lives in a different culture, eating bacon for breakfast is normal for him. "It's what he actually eats," she wrote in her answer and left it at that.

If Bar-Hillel has so many different considerations to account for when translating actual English into Hebrew, imagine the challenge she faces when rendering those

words that Rowling made up, such as Polyjuice Potion (shikui polymitzi, according to Bar-Hillel), dementors (soharsanim) and animagus (animagus).

"Take the word 'mudblood,'" says Suel. "You have many choices of what to do with that. On one extreme is to transliterate it, to write out the sound 'mudblood' in Hebrew writing. You could translate mud and translate blood, and then turn them around to put them into Hebrew syntax. Or you could make up something new which keeps the feeling of the word. [Bar-Hillel] translated it as botzdamim, mud-bloods. The plural form somewhat removes the problem of having to say whether the subject is male or female, though when Hermione is called a mudblood, Bar-Hillel uses botzdamit, the feminine form.

"If you would choose to leave it as 'mudblood,' transliterated, critics would ask, 'Why not translate it,'" Suel continues. "But if you translate the words literally, they say, 'You lose some of the meaning.' You will always lose something. There are few win-win situations."

In addition, both Suel and Bar-Hillel point out the difficulties in translating character names in the Harry Potter series. Minerva, as in Transfiguration teacher Minerva McGonagall, was the name of the Roman goddess of wisdom, Suel says. But since Englishspeaking children are only slightly more likely than Israeli ones to know that, there would be little point in changing it to a Hebrew name that connotes wisdom (such as Bina). And Hebraicizing the names of fictional characters—to something like Miriam or Malka—has gone out of fashion among Hebrew translators.

But what of Remus Lupin, the beloved Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher introduced in Book Three, "Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban"? Shrewd readers may notice that "Remus" is a reference to the co-founder of Rome, who, according to legend, was suckled by a she-wolf. "Lupin" recalls the word "lupine," which means "having to do with wolves." Indeed, poor Remus Lupin is revealed at book's end to be a werewolf, though he more or less has his condition under control.

"If I transliterate the name," Bar-Hillel says, "then Israelis completely miss out on the references. But if I keep the references, if I call him Ze'ev Ze'evi [literally 'Wolf Wolfy'], then the secret becomes too obvious."

In the end, she chose to transliterate the name.

To be sure, by far the greatest difficulty in rendering books one through six in the series is the fact that the story was translated one installment at a time. Not having access to the whole story—to the solutions to mysteries, to the connections between events and characters, which might affect the meanings of enigmatic words—"is a nightmare for a translator," Suel said, and Bar-Hillel confirmed that many unanswered questions led to several errors in her translations.

The first book, for example, mentions that a child named Blaise Zabini is inducted into Slytherin House, one of the four academic and residential units in Hogwarts, but it doesn't say whether Blaise is a boy or a girl. In Hebrew, it was impossible to translate the text without assigning Blaise a gender, so Bar-Hillel made a guess and called Blaise a girl in Book One. In Book Six, however, Blaise reappears, and it is revealed that the character is actually a boy.

"I think they fixed that in later editions," Bar-Hillel says, "but not knowing the end has caused me a lot of anguish. I never know when something is important. The smallest fact could turn out to be significant later, and there is no way for me to know when that is the case."

With the release this summer of the series' final installment, Bar-Hillel's curiosity about the books' many mysteries has finally been satisfied. She stood in line the night of Book Seven's release to buy her copy and started translating it the next day. "I get letters from fans asking, 'Why does it take you so long to translate the books?'" she said.

"Of course, I also get letters asking, 'How can you expect to do a good job in such a short amount of time?'" she adds, laughing. "So you see, everyone has a different perspective about my job."

Sarah Bronson is a Jerusalem-based freelance writer and frequent contributor to World Jewish Digest.



## Translations by Baruch Sienna

- Introduction to Torah - Kolel, Toronto

<http://www.kolel.org/torahstory/module1/humash>

Introduction

Mini History of Translations

Problems

Styles

### Introduction

Every translation is an interpretation. Read the wonderful passage by Everett Fox in your handouts (pg. 16) Speiser, another scholar, writes, in his introduction to his translation of *Genesis* (Anchor Press)

"The main task of a translator is to keep faith with two different masters, one at the source and the other at the receiving end...If he is unduly swayed by the original and substitutes word for word rather than idiom for idiom, he is traducing what he should be translating, to the detriment of both source and target. And if he veers too far in the opposite direction, by favoring the second medium at the expense of the first, the result is a paraphrase. The task is an exacting one even with contemporary or relatively recent sources. With ancient sources, the difficulties are compounded as problems of text, usage, and cultural setting increase progressively with age."

### Mini History of Translations

The Jewish community of Alexandria, Egypt under the influence of Hellenism, could no longer understand the Bible in the original Hebrew. In the third century BCE, the Bible was translated into Greek. This translation is called the **Septuagint**, after the legend that 72 scholars translated it.

Aramaic translations were next, and are called **Targums**.

When the Christian church began to use Latin, the Church Father, Jerome (4th century CE) produced the official Latin version, called the **Vulgate**.

The most famous English version is of course the King James version (1611), a revision on the earlier Tyndale edition. The Bible has been translated into every human language. There are a number of fascinating 'polyglot' editions that include with the Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, English, Latin and Greek translations on the same page.

### Problems

Because no two languages are equal or identical, a translator cannot simply substitute one set of words in one language for a different set in another. For example, bayit, means house. But it also means family, and dynasty. The translator must determine the correct meaning from the context.

In translating, it is impossible to avoid:

1. adding information: Punctuation, bias, hidden agenda.
2. losing information: word plays, echoes, alliteration, scribal oddities.
3. choosing information: ambiguity. The Torah can mean A or B; the translator can only choose one.
4. guessing (making up?) information: Unknown meaning. In the Joseph story, Joseph is dressed in special clothing and paraded through the people shouting, 'Abrek.' (Gen. 41:43) What does the word mean? **Check your English edition to see how they render it.**

The translator must resolve these problems in rendering the text.

## Styles

Translations differ in three major ways:

1. Ornamental: Thee and Thou instead of You; Fowl instead of bird.
2. Philosophy: where the translator(s) are on the literal-idiomatic spectrum.
3. Understanding: different translators may disagree about what a word means.

The Hebrew (I Sam. 27:1) reads: וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל לְבֹ

*vayomer David el libo*

And David said in his heart	And David said to himself
Literal (almost) word translation: this is the closest to the Hebrew English will allow. It gives us a feel for the original Hebrew image, and words.	Idiomatic translation: It takes the Hebrew phrase and uses the equivalent English expression. This gives us the true meaning of the text without getting bogged down with the words.
When we use both (or more) we are able to get the full meaning of the text. Comparing translations is a very helpful way to catch any red flags. If a word is translated differently in three different translations, then it means the word is unknown, or ambiguous. Whatever the case, it makes it a worthwhile area to explore further.	

## Stephen Mitchell on Comparative Translations

– from his introduction to his translation of *Genesis*

The great Russian Jewish poet Boris Pasternak identified the central issue in the art of translation when he said, "The average translator gets the literal meaning right but misses **the tone**; and tone is everything:' This is just as true of prose as of poetry: **Tone is the life-rhythm of a mind**. Reading a translation that renders a great writer's words without re-creating their tone is like listening to a computer play Mozart.

My method in establishing the tone of this *Genesis* was to listen to the Hebrew with one ear and with the other ear to hear into existence an equivalent English. In the process I had to filter out the sound of the King James Version - insofar as that is possible. **English-speaking readers usually think of biblical language as Elizabethan: magniloquent, orotund, liturgical, archaic, full of *thees* and *thous* and *untos* and *thereofs* and *prays***. But **ancient Hebrew** especially ancient Hebrew prose, is in many ways the opposite of that. Its dignity comes from its **supreme simplicity**. **It is a language of concision and powerful earthiness, austere in its vocabulary, straightforward in its syntax, spare with its adjectives and adverbs - a language that pulses with the energy of elemental human truths**.

My job was to re-create this massive dignity and **simplicity** in an English that felt like it was mine. ...Simplicity means not only using as few words as possible, but also it sounds **completely natural, unliterary**, in some sense unwritten: **the words of a voice telling ancient stories without adornment and without self-consciousness**. This biblical style is a creation of the highest literary intuition and tact. No other Western classic has anything like it. **It is worlds away from the exquisitely precise, elaborated, gorgeous language of the Homeric poems**, the other great texts at the source of Western culture.

The translation of prose, almost as much as of poetry, requires an ear finely attuned to **the sound of words**. It is fatal when a contemporary *Genesis* confuses the natural with the vulgar or imitates the cadences of the King James Version. **Stiff formality is one extreme, vulgar breeziness the other**; in Dryden's terms, you must be neither on stilts nor too low. But finding the right tone is not a question of testing the levels of diction the way Goldilocks tested the mattresses, of finding the midpoint between high and low. You can't measure tone with a ruler or a compass. You have to find the sound of the genuine.

*It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.  
It has to face the men of the time and to meet  
The women of the time.*

As I worked on *Genesis* and began to talk about it, people kept asking, "How is your translation different from other translations?" (I felt I was always responding to the question of the youngest son on the first night of Passover.) I would sit him down with three other versions of some central passages and let him compare for himself. This is the most direct way.

In the following excerpts the first entry is from the Revised English Bible, the best of the committee versions; the second is from E. A. Speiser's *Anchor Bible Genesis*; the third is by Everett Fox; the fourth is mine.

The passage is the beginning of the dialogue between Eve and the serpent. Here everything depends on **the genuineness of the spoken word**. The serpent must sound colloquial, offhand, devious almost in passing. He is not asking Eve a question; he is, delicately, insidiously, arousing her curiosity; his first speech is nothing but a raised eyebrow. Eve, on the other hand, has to speak with the syntax and the innocence of a child.

**REVISED ENGLISH BIBLE [Genesis 3:I-6]**

The serpent, which was the most cunning of all the creatures the LORD God had made, asked the woman, "Is it true that God has forbidden you to eat from any tree in the garden?"

She replied, "We may eat the fruit of any tree in the garden, except for the tree in the middle of the garden. God has forbidden us to eat the fruit of that tree or even to touch it; if we do, we shall die:"

"Of course you will not die; said the serpent; "for God knows that, as soon as you eat it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God himself, knowing both good and evil:"

The woman looked at the tree: the fruit would be good to eat; and it was pleasing to the eye and desirable for the knowledge it could give. So she took some and ate it; she also gave some to her husband, and he ate it.

**E. A. SPEISER, *Genesis***

Now the serpent was the sliest of all the wild creatures that God Yahweh had made.

Said he to the woman, "Even though God told you not to eat of any tree in the garden.. "

The woman interrupted the serpent, "But we may eat of the trees in the garden! It is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God did say, 'Do not eat of it or so much as touch it, lest you die!'"

But the serpent said to the woman, "You are not going to die. No, God well knows that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be the same as God in telling good from bad:' When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eye, and that the tree was attractive as a means to wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate; and she gave some to her husband and he ate.

**E V E R E T T F O X**, *The Five Books of Moses*

Now the snake was more shrewd than all the living-things of the field that YHWH, God, had made. /

It said to the woman:

Even though God said: You are not to eat from any of the trees in the garden ... ! /

The woman said to the snake:

From the fruit of the (other) trees in the garden we may eat, /  
but from the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden,  
/ God has said: You are not to cat from it and you are not to  
touch it, / lest you die. /

The snake said to the woman: / Die, you will not die! / Rather,  
God knows / that on the day that you eat from it, your eyes will  
be opened / and you will become like gods, knowing good and evil.  
/

The woman saw / that the tree was good for eating / and that  
it was a delight to the eyes, / and the tree was desirable to  
contemplate. / She took from its fruit and ate / and gave also to  
her husband beside her, / and he ate.

**STEPHEN MITCHELL**

Now the serpent was more cunning than any creature the Lord had made. And he said to the woman, "Did God really say that you're not allowed to eat from any tree in the garden?"

And the woman said, "We are allowed to eat from any tree in the garden. It's just the tree in the middle of the garden that we must not eat from, because God said, 'If you eat from it, or even touch it, you die.'"

And the serpent said, "You will not die. God knows that as soon as you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil:"

And when the woman saw that the tree was good to eat from and beautiful to look at, she took one of its fruits and ate, and gave it to her husband, and he ate too.

## One Word: Rakia

Here are the steps to take to sometimes understand what the text is saying.

### Step 1. Read the text.

The account of the second day's creation appears in *Genesis 1: 6-8*. After creating light, the text now tells us that God creates a 'Raki'a' to separate the water.

The Hebrew is quite simple and straightforward. The only difficult word is 'Rakia.' We are curious about this word. What exactly does it mean?

### Step 2. Compare translations

When a word is translated differently it is especially cause for suspicion! What other differences do you notice?

REVISED STANDARD VERSION	NEW JPS	FOX	Other
<p>And God said, "Let there be a <b>firmament</b> in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters."</p> <p>And God made the firmament and separated</p>	<p>God said, "Let there be an <b>expanse</b> in the midst of the water, that it may separate water from water."</p> <p>God made the expanse, and it separated the water</p>	<p>God said: Let there be a <b>dome</b> amid the waters, and let it separate waters from waters. God made the dome, and it separated the waters which were below the</p>	<p>Other translations use:</p> <p>God said, "Let there be an <b>vault</b> in the midst of the water..."</p>

the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament. And it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.	which was below the expanse from the water which was above the expanse. And it was so. God called the expanse Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.	dome from the waters which were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome: Heaven. There was evening, there was morning: second day.	
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### Step 3. Consult Commentaries/Other sources

The earliest translation of the Bible into Latin from the original Hebrew is called the Vulgate (from the Latin *Vulgata*). It was done by a Church Father named Jerome (342-420 CE). His Hebrew was very proficient, and he lived for some time in Palestine. His Latin translation was accepted by the Catholic Church as the official version of Scripture. His use of 'firmamentum' has entered the English language as 'firmament.'

### Step 4. Check the Bible for cross references

Sometimes seeing where else the word appears in the Bible is helpful. (A word that NEVER appears anywhere else is often problematic; such a solitary word is called a 'hapax legomenon.')

Luckily in this case, the word *Raki'a* not only appears 7 times in *Genesis*, chap. 1, but it also appears in *Psalms* and *Ezekiel*. We use a volume called a 'Concordance' that is like a dictionary of every word of the Bible listed alphabetically with where it appears. There is a Hebrew concordance, as well as several English editions. Sometimes the name 'Lexicon' is used. Consult a store that carries Bibles and religious volumes.

The Concordance is available as a book, but the equivalent function today can be accomplished by using the search function of any Bible on CD (several Hebrew editions are available), or nowadays on the [Internet](#). There are a variety of Bible search engines. Of course, searching in English means knowing how the Hebrew word has been translated; it is quite possible that the same Hebrew word is translated differently, yielding inaccurate search results. You will need to experiment.

In our case, searching for Rakia yields the following sources:

Ezekiel 1:22,23

Ezekiel 10:1

Psalm 19:2

Psalm 150:1

Daniel 12:3

Check out the verses above. The Hebrew root ( **ר.ק.ע.** ) also appears in Isaiah 42:5, 44:24, and Psalm 136:6, with the meaning 'to spread out' (like a tent), or 'establish.' Job 39:14 reads: Can you help God stretch out the heavens, Firm as a mirror of cast metal? It is also used to mean stamp [your feet] in Ezekiel 6:11; 25:6. We see in the construction of the Mishkan, that the root is used in stamping metal. "The ephod was made of gold...They hammered out sheets of gold..." (Exodus 39:3)

### **Step 5. Study Commentators**

The Rabbis are always a handy source for help.

Rav said, 'The heavens were in a fluid form on the first day, and on the second day they solidified.' Rav thus said, 'Let there be a firmament means let the firmament become strong.' Rabbi Yehudah the son of Rabbi Shimon said, 'Let the firmament become like a plate, just as you say in the verse (Ex. 39:3), 'And they did beat [from the same Hebrew root] the gold into thin plates.' (Breishit Rabbah 4:1)

### **Step 6. Find a teacher/study partner**

### **Step 7. Come up with your conclusion**

What do you think 'Rakia' is?

## D. Four Levels of Reading – A Teacher's Perspective

by Lee Shulman from *THE WISDOM OF PRACTICE*, p. 220

I break reading skills into four levels:

**Level 1** is simply **translation**.... It is understanding the **literal meaning, denotative**, and frequently for students that means getting a dictionary.

**Level 2** is **connotative meaning** and again you are still looking at the words.... What does that mean, what does that tell us about the character? ...

We looked at *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne described a rose bush in the first chapter.

Literal level is: What is a rose bush?

More important, what does a rose bush suggest, what is it that comes to mind, what did you picture?

**Level 3** is the level of **interpretation**.... It is the **implication** of Levels 1 and 2. If the author is using a symbol, what does that say about his view of life? In *Moby Dick*, the example I used in class was the boots. The boots would be the literal level. What does it mean when he gets under the bed? And the students would say, he is trying to hide something.

Level 3 would be what does Melville say about human nature? What is the implication of this? What does this tell us about this character?

**Level 4** is what I call **application and evaluation** and I try, as I teach literature, to get the students to Level 4, and that is where they take the literature and see **how it has meaning for their own lives**. Where would we see that event occur in our own society? How would people that we know be behaving if they are doing what these characters are doing? How is this piece of literature similar to our common experiences as human beings?

... So my view of reading is basically **to take them from the literal on the page to making it mean something in their lives**. In teaching literature I am always working in and out of those levels.

Nancy employed this conceptual framework in her teaching, using it to guide her own sequencing of material and formulation of questions. **She taught the framework explicitly to her students** over the semester, helping them employ it like a **scaffolding** to organize their own study of the texts, to monitor their own thinking. Although as a teacher she maintained tight control of the classroom discourse, her teaching goals were to liberate her students' minds through literacy, eventually to use great works of literature to illuminate their own lives.

**E. Teacher PREPARING THE TEXT by Joel Lurie Grishaver**  
(abbreviated from *Jewish Teacher's Handbook*, p. 413 ff)

**THE FIRST READING**

The first step for any Bible teacher is to do a first reading of the intended text. The purpose of a first reading is *not* to decide what to teach or to find deep scholarly insights into the passage.

1- A first reading is a **scouting mission**. It is a formal introduction or a renewed acquaintance with the text. We are just looking over the terrain, learning the topography, familiarizing ourselves with the characters, the setting, and the words.

2- **Begin by listening to the text.** (Everett Fox, a contemporary Bible scholar, suggests that  
-you read it out loud.)

3 - **What is the first thing it says to you?** Is there a special tone? Is there an overt message? Is there an interesting ambiguity?

4 - Next, **consider what you already know about this text.** Are there some key insights that you already possess? What are your past associations with the text? (Remember your interests, but don't be afraid to discover something new.)

5 - Does the text have **external connections** which are important (e.g., is it the theme of the congregation's stained glass window, or part of the Friday evening service, etc.)?

6 Then analyze **what bothers you** about the text, what calls out to you, "Explain me."

7 - Does the text contain **echoes** of other things you want to identify? Is there anything you want to know more about?

Up to now, you have not yet begun to make decisions regarding the lesson you will teach.

Now it is time to come up with answers to the following questions:

- 1) What is the text I will be teaching? Which **verses** will I include? If I am going to be telling a story, or reading a story version of the text, how much of it will I use?
- 2) What **textual issue** (s) will serve as the focus of the lesson? If I am working from a text, what will students look for in it? If I am telling the story, what portion of the actual text will I bring to the students?
- 3) What information do the students need to know in order to handle this text, e.g.,  
previous incidents, social phenomena, vocabulary, or geography?
- 4) What **skills** will the students need to handle this text, e.g., how to compare two stories, find extra language, imagine how someone would feel, etc.
- 5) What **information** (facts) should the students **retain**? Is there a line or two (perhaps a passage) which they should know, or almost know, by heart?
- 6) What will the students "own" from this passage? What will they find **interesting** in it? What will they believe is important about it?
- 7) What does my class need right now? What kind of learning experiences are appropriate - more group work, fewer worksheets, a chance to role play, etc.?
- 8) How can this story relate to **past learning** and to things students will study **next year**? If I show them X, will they be able to relate it to Y?
- 9) What do I want to teach? **What is important in the text for me?**

### PREPARING THE TEXT: REFERENCE WORK

A good working library for serious Bible teachers consists of about 30-35 volumes. These provide the basis for preparing almost any lesson. Ideally these books belong to the teacher. However, a synagogue or community library can be used instead.

#### **Pre Step**

To prepare a text, start with a **notebook and a photocopy**. (The later enables you to mark up the text.) Then complete the following steps:

#### **Step One - Text and Translation**

Examine three **translations** of the text: the 1917 and 1962 Jewish Publication Society translations and a translation by a modern scholar such as Everett

Fox (*Response*, Winter 1971-2 and Summer 1974). Compare the translations, noting instances in which the translators differ significantly. Locate idioms which capture something important about the biblical mind. Identify patterns in the language which come through in only one or two of the translations. For questions about the meaning of a word or phrase, consult *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah*, edited by Orlinsky.

You might also look up the verse in the **Anchor Bible**, a non-sectarian, scholarly translation. This work is still in process and volumes do not yet exist for every book in the Bible. The Anchor Bible includes an introduction, an original translation, and two sets of notes. The first set discusses the text as a whole, defining patterns and focusing on the possible sources which underlie it. The other set consists of line by line notes in the text itself.

You might also wish to look up some geographical locations in a biblical atlas. One excellent atlas is The Macmillan **Bible Atlas** by Aharoni and Avi-Yonah. One further tool is a **concordance**, a book which lists all the words in the Bible and every instance that each appears. There are many different ones available; the best is in Hebrew. Use the concordance to locate other places in which the words from your passage appear.

## **Step Two - Commentators**

Look at what the **traditional commentators** have to say about the passage. Start with books by Nehama Leibowitz, an Israeli Bible scholar who has authored five excellent books on the Torah: *Studies in Bereshit (Genesis)*, *Studies in Shemot (Exodus)*, etc. Leibowitz presents three to eight sermons/studies on individual issues for each Torah portion. She focuses on one problem in each, defining why the issue is an issue, then quoting a number of commentators and Rabbinic sources.

Next, turn to **Louis Ginzberg**. Ginzberg was an American scholar who collected midrashim. His collection is published in two editions: *Legends of the Bible* [or check *Sefer HaAggadah* by H.N. Bialik]. [Then go to great **modern commentators**. like the JPS Commentary.] ....

## **ORGANIZING RESEARCH INTO A LESSON**

It is likely that you now feel comfortable with the story and have made some basic decisions about what you will teach. You know the text you will teach, how much of it you will use, the textual issue (s) on which you will focus. You

have done your research and have the resources to deal with unanticipated questions which might arise. You are now ready to organize your lesson.

At this time you will want to choose one of the patterns to apply to the text, using the examples provided in the early part of this chapter or others you know. Isolate a question or theme for the class to discuss and explore based on what they discover in the text. Carefully formulate how you will encourage each student to manipulate the text and come to "own" it. Sometimes this manipulation will mean that students identify their own solutions to issues in the text. Sometimes it will mean that they evolve their own solutions to issues in the text. And other times it will mean that you foster the creative expression by students to material in the text.

The above formats are not the only ones possible, but they are the ones which work most often. It is often effective to include **three activities in the course of every session**. However, if the material lends itself, you can introduce the three over two, three, or more periods or weeks.

The central issues when organizing a Bible lesson are the nature of the text to be studied its specific difficulties, loadings, and context.

- a. If the text needs **clarification before your students can approach it**, or if it needs extension before its "lesson" can be made clear, then the placement of the text in your sequence of instruction is especially critical.
- b. If there are **issues to which students need to be sensitized**, address yourself first to this.
- c. If there is a **complex skill** needed (one that can't be picked up as it is applied), take time to introduce it and drill it.

Once the text has been introduced and probed, don't stop there. You want your students to learn by experience that **a biblical text always leads us somewhere - to a reflection of human nature, an insight into ethical relations, or a further understanding of Jewish tradition**. Rather than conclude with the text, end by helping students find a way to make the text their own, through individual interpretation and expression.

## CHOOSING ACTIVITIES: ASSEMBLING THE LESSON

With your basic lesson format decided upon, you now begin to **select the activities** you will use. Some teachers find it helpful to keep a file of 3" x 5" cards, each of which contains an idea for a lesson. These can be collected from a variety of sources -from books, other teachers, your students, workbooks, things you have picked up at conferences and idea exchanges, and from workshops and lectures you attend. Ideas can also be borrowed from other disciplines, and even from other religions. (Many good ideas for teaching Bible can be drawn from such Christian resources as *Twenty New Ways of Teaching the Bible* by Griggs and *How To Teach Bible Stories for Grades 4-12* by Keithahn and Dunshee, both published by Abingdon.)

To spark your own creativity, here are a few activities from my own card file.

For example:

### FAMILIARIZATION WITH BIBLICAL TEXTS

#### Introductory Activities

1. Identify characters as they are introduced.
2. Have students keep lists, charts, cards, etc., of the characters.
3. Post a visual record' in the room. e.g., charts, posters, timelines, etc.
4. Give examinations on the material; have a "College Bowl" type quiz.

#### Application

As characters are introduced, or reintroduced, have students establish their position and relationship.

Have students categorize characters by role, personality, or position.

#### Individual Expression

1. Have students design creative review formats - games, posters, etc.
2. Develop quiz formats.
3. Act out (in any medium) various personalities and their relationships.

### TEXT SKILLS

#### Introductory Activities

1. Lecture /introduce the concept.
2. Develop a **visual format** to enhance the insights. Use (a) capital letters or underlines to enhance perception (split the text into parallel columns) (b) have students color code the two parts of a document, (c) use circles and arrows.

3. Use two or more photographs/pictures and compare them for differences, similar to "What is wrong in this picture?"
4. Use an outside example to introduce the concept, then have students apply it to the text.

### **Application**

1. Use visual displays to study the text, e.g., posters, charts, timelines, etc.
2. Have two students alternate reading. One reads the first version, the second reads the repetition. Identify and analyze the differences.
3. Once a pattern is clearly understood, have students find examples of the pattern on their own.

### **Individual Expression**

1. Draw "lessons" or conclusions from the repetitions and changes in the text.
2. Compare and evaluate traditional insights.
3. Express the themes and variations creatively through art, music, drama, film, etc.
4. Devise extension activities based on the moral of the story, such as a role play, creative writing exercise, etc.
5. When there are conflicting details in repeated stories, have students see if they can  
(a) identify ways of deciding which version is right or (b) figure out how both could be correct.

### **Personal Views of the Text**

1. The learner has a history of evolving his/ her own interpretations of the text.
2. The learner has a history of correlating the metaphoric material of the text to his/her own experience.
3. The learner has evolved his/her own sense of the importance of Bible study.

## F. The Nature of the Biblical Text and the Kind of Teaching it Invites

by Joel Lurie Grishaver

(*The Jewish Teacher Handbook*, A.R.E. pp. 388)

### INTRODUCTION

The basic premise of this chapter is simple - the Torah is an environment. Once you have spent time with the Torah, once you have let its texts stew in your mind and cook in your gut, Torah gives you a good idea of how it wants to be taught. The many ways of teaching text are for the most part interchangeable and adaptable to any content base. I am going to describe the nature of the biblical text and the kind of teaching it invites.

### BACKGROUND

**The Torah contains the oldest written prose in the world.** Before there was Torah, stories were told through poetry. All of western fiction has its roots in the original ways the Jewish people developed and told their most important stories. Shemaryahu Talmon, an important Israeli Bible scholar, has suggested that biblical narrative, the **Torah's storytelling style, was created as a unique and original art form to express a unique Israelite belief in the one God.**

The ancient Hebrew writers purposefully nurtured and developed prose narration to take the place of the epic (poetic) genre which, by its content, was intimately bound up with the world of paganism ... In the process of total rejection of the polytheistic religions and their ritual expressions in the cult, epic songs and also the epic genre were purged from the repertoire of Hebrew authors.

When we study Torah stories from the text, we are reconnecting ourselves to an important western literary tradition, but more importantly, perhaps, . we are actually touching the art form created to express the revolutionary idea of the *One God*.

### PART I: TEACHING TORAH IS ABOUT FILLING IN FEELINGS

When you read Torah (or any biblical narrative) you quickly notice that it is primarily made up of only two kinds of statements. You have **statements of action**.

And every beast, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the group, went forth by families out of the ark. (Genesis 8:19)

And you have **dialogue**, the actual things that people say:

And God blessed Noah and his- sons, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." (Genesis 9:1)

When the text wants to display **emotion**, it is usually described **as a physical reaction**:

So Cain burned (was angry) and his face fell. (Genesis 4:5)

And when Torah wants us to know how a person feels, it is done as a monologue, a public presentation of an **internal monologue**.

And when the Eternal smelled the pleasing odor, the Eternal said in the Divine heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of people, for the imagination of people's heart is evil from youth; also I will never again 'destroy every living creature as I have done." (Genesis 8:21)

**There is just about no description of any detail in the Torah.** We don't get any more than the context and the series of actions. Torah doesn't actually tell us how people feel, any more than the things we could observe in their face and body language if we were there.

From the vantage of being teachers of Torah, the limitation of the Torah text to external observable behaviors gives us two challenges that become two advantages. First, like radio (rather than film) we get to imagine the biblical characters and the settings. We don't know who is short and who is tall. We don't know who has what color hair. We don't know what color people wore, etc. That validates the text being interpreted via imagination. But, secondly, and more important for teachers of a spiritual-ethical tradition, this narrative style forces us into "empathy" as a major learning process.

Let's look at an example:

Cain said something to his brother Abel. When they were in the field, Cain rose up upon his brother Abel and killed him. (Genesis 4:8)

We do not know a lot about this situation. We can imagine that Cain is angry, but we don't know the degree or the direction of that anger. We have no notion of what Abel is feeling. We have no sense of his reaction. We do not know how many conversations Cain and Abel had before that incident in the field. We do not know if the anger grew or began to subside. We only know that something was said (and we don't know what) and then Cain killed Abel. One aspect of Torah study, therefore, consists of painting in the emotional tones. There are lots of ways of doing this. Here are a few.

**Asking** - It is possible to ask directly: What do you think Cain was feeling? What do you think Abel was feeling? How long do you think this went on? Did Adam and Eve try to do anything about this? Etc. The questions can also move to, "What do you think will happen next?" We move from our feeling of empathy to our prediction and anticipation of the character's reactions. Both *I Can Learn Torah* and *A Child's Garden of Torah* (Torah Aura Productions) work on this model.

**Bibliodrama** - This is a process of acting out situations by inventing the missing dialogue. It would include staging a conversation between Cain and Abel after the sacrifices were accepted and rejected. It might include a conversation between \_ Adam and Eve about their children. Also, it could have Cain's response to God about "being careful" because "sin crouches at the door." Staging each of those missing conversations and expanding the dialogue, is a way to work on the skill of perceiving feelings and projecting reactions. To learn more about Bibliodrama you can read *Scripture Windows* by Peter Pitzele (Torah Aura Productions).

**Midrash** - Midrash is a body of literature created by the Rabbis. Think of the Bible as an album of family snapshots. When you look at that album with your parents, they can often tell you stories behind and between each picture. Sometimes they tell you the context, the setting of each photo. Sometimes they tell you more about the person in the photo. And, sometimes they tell you the story of the picture itself. Often, the midrash supplies extra dialogue for a biblical scene, revealing more of the feelings and motivation of each character. The two easiest places to find good midrashim are Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Jewish Publication Society), and *The Midrash Says* (Benei Ya'akov Publications). The Rabbi's Bible (Behrman House) and *Torah Toons 1* (Torah Aura Productions) use midrash in a teaching frame.

**Writing original midrash** - Once students have a sense of how midrash reads, then writing rather than acting out midrash is a wonderful process. This makes Torah study a creative writing experience. One only needs ask students to create "a complete scene" behind a biblical story.

**Torn paper midrash** - This is just one of many artistic techniques that can allow you to focus on feelings. The process is simple and the results usually stunning. Give students paper and glue and no scissors and ask them to "tear" their version of the story and then explain it. The process of tearing takes the emphasis off making a perfect image, and allows students to concentrate on interpretations. **Jo Milgrom's Handmade Midrash** (Jewish Publication Society) describes this process.

**Comic books** - This is a perfect vehicle. In comic books there are three kinds of writing on a panel. One is the narrator in a box. Another is the dialog in a speech bubble. And, the third are the cloudlike thinking bubbles. By cartooning specific biblical scenes, students can include the dialogue and the thinking behind the dialogue.

Common to each of these interpretive processes is a **focus on the feelings of each of the biblical characters**. What is clear in this process is that people use their own experience to flesh out the story. Sometimes the work is biographical, sometimes **autobiographical**. The Torah clearly invites this kind of study because it asks us to make sense of an apparently incomplete story, teaching us wisdom in our process of reconstruction.

## PART 2: HOLES

One of the best kid's books I have read in a long time is called *Holes* by Louis Sachar. It is the story of a 12-year-old sent to a work camp for being caught with stolen sneakers. At this camp there is a warden who makes the boys dig a hole in the desert every single day. We learn that she is hunting for something. The bottom line, however, is that what she wants is indeed found, but not in one of the holes. It is found rather by the connections and the stories that are evoked. **The Torah is a book of holes - holes we are required to fill in order to make sense.**

Let's work with one example. This is the end of Genesis 11.

26 When Terah had lived 70 years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

27 Now these are the descendants of Terah. Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran was the father of Lot.

28 Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans.

29 And Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah.

30 Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.

31 Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there.

32 The days of Terah were two hundred and five years; and Terah died in Haran.

We would normally skip over this passage. It seems to have no story. It seems to be just a **boring**

**list of names.** But, it is at the foundation of some of the most important "oral" Torah we know. It triggers the most famous midrash of all times. Here is how we get there.

Imagine that the Abraham family had a photo album. It would have a series of photos with these **captions**:

1. Terah with his sons, Abram, Nahor, and Haran
2. Haran and his son Lot, just before Haran died.
3. Abram and Sarai and Nahor and Milcah.
4. Milcah and her children and Sarai (who had no children)
5. The Family before we left Ur.
6. Terah, before he died in Haran

Anyone looking at the photo album would ask questions like these:

- a. How did Haran die?
- b. Why did the family leave Ur and go to Haran?
- c. What was it like for Sarai to be childless?
- d. How did Terah die?

If we had been looking at the album with an older family member, a grandparent or parent, he or she would reach back into the family memory, the family oral tradition, and tell us what she or he remembered or knew about these people.

**Consider the Bible, with its holes, to be the family photo album.** In the same manner, know that the midrash represents the "**oral tradition**," the remembered back stories of what happened behind, around, and between the photos.

The famous story of Abram smashing the idols is one such hole "filling." It is part of a longer story that explains that Abram and family were kicked out of Ur because Abram told people that Nimrod, the king, was not a god. The "**background stories**" that are the memories -from in between the photos are called midrash.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I talk about **how one teaches the holes.**

1. **As problems:** One can simply ask, "How do you think Haran died?" "Why do you think that Abram's family moved twice, first to Haran and then to Canaan? The process of solving these problems can involve using "facts," much like a detective

gathers clues. These clues can come from other places in the biblical text, or they can come from geography or anthropology or lots of places. But the process of study here can be to use the information we have to fill in holes - project the information we don't have. Filling holes can also be a creative process, using our imagination to complete the story. Such books as *The Rabbis' Bible* by Solomon Simon and Morrison Bial (Behrman House), *A Torah Commentary for Our Times* by Harvey J. Fields (UAHC Press), and *Torah Toons 1 and 2* by Joel Lurie Grishaver (Torah Aura Productions) work on this principle. The best way to find these "holes" (in the first place) is often to work backward, using a commentary such as Rashi' to isolate the problem and then create the activity.

2. ***As Artistic Opportunities:*** It is possible to use all of our basic tools of expression to work on "filling the hole." Here is an opportunity for theater or creative writing, for dance or song writing, or any art form. Students are given a chance to work alone or in groups to create their own completion of a biblical text. When they engage in this creative act, they are paralleling the world of Rashi and of midrash. All this is an act of "creating one's own midrash." After engaging in this process (or even before) one can study traditional responses, reading collected midrashim or Rashi's commentary.

3. ***As a Choice:*** Very often the midrash gives us more than one way to fill the same hole. It is very possible (and not very hard) to find two or three different answers to the same question. A good way of studying is to work backward. Start by reading collections of midrash such as *Legends of the Jews*, *The Book of Legends*, *The Midrash Says*, or even *Midrash Rabbah*. Pick a section that has a "Davar Acher" (Another Interpretation). This expression denotes that more than one midrashic tradition already exists.

**Divide the class into groups, and give each group a different midrash-solution to each group and have them act, draw, dance, sing, argue, etc., the point of view suggested.**

For example, in *Being Torah* (Torah Aura Productions) we work with the story of the Tower of Babel. We ask the traditional question, "Why did God feel the need to stop the tower's construction (when heaven is not really the top of the sky anyway)? We share three solutions: (a) Because people were trying to fight a war with God and conquer God (taking away God's authority), (b) Because people were trying to "be" gods (and take away God's authority), and (c) Because people were so obsessed about building the tower that they forgot to take care of each other. They cared more about the tower than they did the people who worked on it. These three different answers can easily be the source for three parallel groups that make a skit or a dance or a mural explaining and exploring their "solution." These can also be the basis of a debate, challenging each group to find "proof" in the Bible for their point of view. (Note that most activities done by groups can also be done by individual students.)

**"Teaching the holes" is an old idea.** It is the core of much Rabbinic work. In the Zohar it is said that the Torah is made up of "black fire written on white fire." The idea is simple, **the negative space, the space between the letters, teaches us just as much as the letters themselves.**

## PART 3: OUR LIVES AS TORAH, TORAH AS OUR LIVES

### The Insight

We start with a story:

Rabbi Shneur Zalman, the Rav of Northern White Russia (died 1813), was put in jail in Petersburg, because the Mitnagdim (those Jews who were against the Hasidim) had denounced his principles and his-way of living to the government. He was awaiting trial when the chief of the gendarmes entered his cell. The majestic and quiet face of the Rav, who was so deep in

meditation that he did not at first notice his visitor, suggested to the chief that the man he had before him was a thoughtful person. He began to converse with his prisoner and brought up a number of questions that had occurred to him in reading the Bible. Finally he asked: "Why did God, the All-Knowing, have to ask Adam, 'Where are you?'"

"Do you believe," answered the Rav, "that the Bible is eternal and that every era, every generation, and every person is included in it?" "I believe this," said the jailer. "Well then," said the Zaddik, "in every era, God calls to every person, 'Where are you in your world? So many years and days of those allotted to you have passed, and how far have you gotten in your world?' God is speaking to you, 'You have lived 46 years. How far along are you?'"

When the chief of the gendarmes heard his age mentioned he pulled himself together, laid his hand on the Rav's shoulder, and cried

"Bravo!" But his heart trembled.

But let us examine the story more closely. The chief inquires about a passage from the biblical story of Adam's sin. The Rabbi's answer means, in effect: You yourself are Adam, you are the man who God asks: 'Where are you?'"

In this section, we are going to visit a special kind of **personalization of the Torah**. There is a basic idea that flows through the reading of many biblical commentaries that the stories in the Torah are not just "history" and not just a Jewish "mythology," but actually represent archetypal moments in human experience. That is why the Maharal wrote that "the Torah is written in eternity not in history."

The Torah tells the story of the enslavement of the Jewish people in Egypt. It goes into a great deal of detail. Basing itself on one word in that long account, the Mishnah clarifies that experience by saying, "Every person is required to see him/herself as if he/she personally went out from Egypt." The text of the Haggadah then personalizes that idea further by saying, "Not our ancestors alone, but us did the Holy One redeem from Egypt." Many of the Hasidic teachers, rooting themselves in the Zohar, push this idea even further, teaching, **"Each of us has our own Egypt. Our 'Egypt' is the thing in our life that keeps us enslaved and out of which we need to be liberated."**

The tradition follows the same progression with the experience at Mount Sinai. We learn first that the Jewish people were at Sinai, then that we were at Sinai, and finally that each of us has our own Sinai experience.

When **Hasidim**, extending the thinking of both Talmud and Zohar, thinking, try to explain good Jewish teaching, they use the **Maggid of Mezrich** as their paradigm. His students explain his

teaching by saying, "He got each one of us to tell him our own story of what it was like to leave Egypt and what it was like to stand at Sinai."

Nachmanides, the Ramban, makes a comment on the parts of *Genesis* in which Abraham camps here and there, digging this and that well. This is the kind of biblical detail that most of us tend to skip. The Rambam, however explains, "*Ma'aseh Avot siman l'vanim*," "6 our ancestors' stories are signs of what will happen to their children. That is the kind of Torah learning we will explore here, using the Torah's stories as a direct parallel to our own lives...."

**The personal match** - This is actually very simple, once you get the hang of it. It is the asking of either one of two questions. Sarah is old and barren. The lack of a child causes her much pain on many levels. God tells her that she is going to have a child. Sarah's response is a laugh and a statement of doubt. One way of studying this is trying to investigate the nature of Sarah's laugh. We would do that by asking, "Why did Sarah laugh?" or "What kind of laugh did Sarah have?" Another way of approaching this question would be, "When have you laughed the way that Sarah did?" Likewise, you can ask, "When have your feelings been tested the way Sarah's were? How did you respond?" Once again, the secret is in the question. The mode of expression could be any one of dozens of ways. It could be Sarah as a guest on a talk show, exploring her feelings with other guests who share their experiences. It could be any art form. It could be a "Quantum Leap" experience where you step into Sarah's shoes while she steps in yours. Once you have the question, the activity follows.

**From my life to the Bible** - This one is harder, but it is also fun. Often when people tell their own story, it is actually a Bible story. Here is a perfect example - a family story that I collected in a workshop.

I grew up downtown during the Depression. We had a big house and every day we served a big lunch. Some days it was just potatoes and sweet potatoes, but it was a big lunch. The whole family gathered, and often beggars would come to the back door and get their share, too. Later we learned that somewhere, on the front of the house, hobos had put a mark indicating this house as a place that would feed them. I have taken that time into my life - and always seen my house as that kind of place. This is clearly the story of Abraham and Sarah who spent much of their life offering hospitality to others.

The way of using this second insight is to **invite students to tell family stories and then match them to the biblical text**. This may sound a little risky, but it is not really that hard. Yes, you do need to know some biblical stories. Yes, you do have to be comfortable recognizing patterns, but it is really not that difficult. Practice a little with friends and you will see.

Working in these personal ways with the biblical text is a powerful way of developing connection. It gives you the chance to turn to your students and say, "This is your story."

## **PART 4: TEACHING TORAH IS MAKING CONNECTIONS**

Torah was never engineered to be read for the first time. Its writing style demands an active reader, one who is always manipulating and processing the text.

Here are just a few examples:

- The Hebrew word for Noah's ark, *teva*, shows up again as the name for the basket in which Moses is floated down the Nile. The Torah also makes a point of sharing the detail that both vessels were coated with the same tar.  
When you see the connection, you get to answer the question, "How was Moses' basket like Noah's ark?"
- The Ten Commandments appear twice in the Torah, once in Exodus and once in Deuteronomy. When you compare their texts, they are just about the same. The one big exception is in the Shabbat commandment. In Exodus, the command is to "Remember" Shabbat and the justification is "because God rested on the seventh day." In Deuteronomy, the command is to "Keep/ Guard" Shabbat and the justification is "because you were slaves in the land of Egypt. When you compare the two sets of commandments, two questions immediately emerge: The first set of questions is: Why do we need both to "remember" and "keep" Shabbat? (What is the difference?)  
Second: How do the creation of the world and the Exodus from Egypt connect to a day of rest? How do we live each story?
- After Adam and Eve are kicked out of the Garden of Eden, God puts a set of heavenly creatures called "Keruvim" (cherubs, not angels) as the guards at the Garden entrance. When God gives directions to build the Ark of the Covenant, they include sculptures of winged creatures, Keruvim - the same word.  
When you notice the connection, you are immediately prompted to ask: What is the connection between the Holy Ark (where the Torah is kept) and the entrance to the Garden of Eden?...

### Finding the Echoes and Repetitions in the Torah

The Rabbis believed that nothing in the Torah is an accident. Every paragraph, every sentence, and every word has a specific meaning to convey. One of the keys to unlocking the Torah's real meaning is repetition. The midrash and all of the literature that descends from it affirms that **nothing is repeated without a purpose**. Every repetition is there either to make a connection or to establish a contrast.

Here is an example.

When Abraham is leaving for what he believes will be the sacrifice of Isaac, the Torah tells us that "he saddled his donkey" (Genesis 22:3). It seems funny that a rich man would do this kind of menial -labor. Later, when Pharaoh changes his mind and chases after the families of Israel in order to return them to slavery, the Torah tells us that "he harnessed his chariot" (Exodus 14:6). In each case it would be possible to assume

Much of classical Torah commentary centers on interpreting not only the words in a given story, but in finding their relationship to other words used in other stories. The first place to go to find such **connections** is in the commentaries. Know that most Torah scholars do not discover these connections on their own, rather they are like someone walking through the forest, following a trail that has been blazed and marked by other scholars.

### PART 5: LEARNING TORAH IS ABSORBING SYMBOLS

Now we will work with a really simple idea. One important part of learning Torah is the process of playing with and absorbing individual images and symbols. Let's take a very simple, wonderful example. In Genesis 28, we have the story of Jacob's dream with a ladder that goes from earth to heaven. **It is one thing to study the text of this story by investigating its biblical and midrashic context, it is another thing to pluck the image out of the story and examine it on its own.**

Here are some examples:

The midrash is filled with stories of ladders that take people from earth to heaven. One example grows out of a passage in the Talmud in which Moses goes up to heaven to battle with the angels to receive the Torah.

What we learn is that many **biblical metaphors/images have lives of their own that transcend the texts** in which they are found. Some other clear examples are the Garden of Eden, the tree of life, Noah's ark, the Tower of Babel, the coat of many colors, basket in the bull rushes, and the burning bush. The process of mastering these strong biblical images, of playing with them, of finding connection with them, is another way of bringing Torah into our daily life.

Let's look at some practical examples of how to do this.

**Synecotics** - Synectics is a brainstorming process. Dr. Gail Dorph, in particular, uses synectics as a Torah teaching tool - and it can be very powerful. For example, ask: How is studying Torah like climbing a ladder from earth to heaven? The same kind of adaptation can be made for most biblical metaphors.

**Tell the story through objects** - Scripture Windows contains an exercise in which biblical stories are told through objects. For example: When Moses got to the burning bush, he was told to take off his sandals because he was standing on holy ground. Imagine having your students tell the story of the burning bush from the sandals' point of view. Imagine the conversation between Moses' sandals and other famous biblical sandals. After this word play you could make sandal collages.

**Personalizing the image** - What else is like eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil? Cut images and words out of magazines to tell the story of a time when you felt as if you were eating new knowledge, and the knowledge changed you forever.

**Create the symbol** - Design your own coat of many colors!

**Literature and art search** - How many different arks can you find? Collect all of the stories you can with the image of Noah's ark. Educator Debi Rowe used to have a poster in her house of a blimp loaded with oodles of animals. Some times you can compare the way different artists drew the ark, sometimes you can find stories that use the ark as a different kind of image.

Usually we try to understand the Bible in its own context. When we study symbols, we take the image out of the story and give it a life of its own.

## PART 6: TEACHING OUR STUDENTS HOW TO ARGUE

### Why Argue?

We live in an age when arguing has fallen out of favor. We live in an age of moral freedom. ...when we ask our students most questions about meaning, we get back a perfectly deconstructed answer - it is a matter of opinion. And, **when life is reduced to a matter of opinions, nothing is worth arguing about because it is all a question of ... is there enough salt in this gravy?**

One of the goals of Torah study is to teach two diverse lessons. One, that there is a way that God wants us to see things. God has taught us truth via the Torah. And, two, our job is to struggle to find that truth. The struggle, the argument, and the search purifies Torah and gets it to shine.

That is why Jewish tradition is really big on teaching us how to argue. In the Torah we learn the story of Korach, one of Moses' relatives, who confronts Moses and tries to take over the leadership of the Jewish people. The argument ends in a lot of violence and with a number of deaths. The midrash expands this story, clarifying what was wrong with the way that Korach argued. By the time we get to Pirke Avot, the matter is clarified and reduced to a basic principle:

There are two kinds of arguments. Every argument that is in the name of heaven will create something permanent; but those that are not in the name of heaven will create nothing. Which arguments are in the name of heaven? Those that are like the discussions between Hillel and Shammai. And which arguments are not in the name of heaven? Those that are like the controversy of Korach and his gang (5:17).

**The deep notion here is that one of our Torah obligations is to teach our students how to argue.**

### Argument Is at the Core of the Torah

After the conflict with Korach was over, God told Moses, "No one should ever act like Korach" (Numbers 17:5). No one was quite sure what was actually being forbidden; different Rabbis have different ideas about this:

- Rabbi Joseph D. Epstein thought that it taught, "It is bad to start an argument but worse to continue it."
- Rabbi Reuven Margolies taught that it means, "One is never allowed to hate."
- Rabbi Zalman Nehemiah Goldberg taught that it means, "Never be the one who starts an argument - especially if you can not help worrying about being right. And especially if first saying, 'I'm sorry' will prevent it." He adds, "It doesn't matter who really did the wrong thing to begin with."

In these three responses, we have an "argument" over what's bad about arguments. Taking all of the pieces, we have a great lesson:

1. Study the story of Korach in the Torah (Numbers 16). Have your class figure out what Korach did wrong.
2. Study some of the midrashim on Korach - see the changes in the "expanded story."  
Says would be good places to find these "extra" stories.
3. Read the piece from Pirke Avot found above. Collect opinions about the ways that we should not be like Korach.
4. Read the collection of three commentators who all have different opinions of how not to be like Korach.
5. Point out that we have had a "Hillel and Shammai" type of argument over the argument of Korach.
6. End with: "Pirke Avot teaches, 'Every argument that is in the name of heaven will create something permanent.' What permanent things have we created today?"

### **The Argument Centered Classroom**

Here are five things you can do to create a culture in your classroom that supports constructive arguing:

1. Develop and post a class list of Rules for Arguing. This should include such things as Be Polite, Disagree with Ideas, Not People.
2. **Ask questions about texts/stories that invite opinions.** These are the kinds of Torah questions that are really worthwhile.

## **Appendix: A Culture of Questions — “The more one challenges and confronts, the more commendable it is.”**

by Noam Zion

I once heard some teachers in elementary school who were exasperated with pupils who asked a lot of questions. To put an end to the queries, they retorted, “What are you asking so many questions for? This isn’t the Seder!” The teachers apparently wanted to get on with the lesson as they had planned it, and to get their “messages” across without any “interference” on the way. But by doing so, they are combating a very deeply rooted Jewish learning tradition. The old joke has it that a Jew answers a question with another question. And indeed, since the time of the Torah, and especially in the culture of the Rabbis, a Jew is judged by his or her ability to ask questions and to find contradictions in our sacred sources.

On the first nights of the Festival of Freedom, this cultural characteristic is embodied in the Four Questions. This article will attempt to understand the general significance of asking questions in the culture of the Rabbis and the specific link between questions and the Festival of Freedom. A teaching method that uses questions not only contributes motivation to learning, by providing an external stimulus to curiosity, but also reflects the concept of freedom which is the very essence of Passover.

Questions for the Children — the Power of Surprise

In the Talmudic debate concerning the Seder night, the role of the Four Questions is perceived primarily as a sophisticated educational tool to pass on the tradition from one generation to another. With the very clear insight that young people are not always thrilled to listen to autobiographical stories from their parents (“When I was young . . .”), the Rabbis looked for a way to kindle their interest artificially, to focus their attention on the story of the Exodus from Egypt. The ritual changes on Seder night are intended to awaken the children’s curiosity by manipulating the subject closest to their world — eating. By removing the bread and placing a pillow and bitter herbs at the table, the Rabbis were certain to arouse the questions — Where is the bread? Why do we have to eat the bitter herbs? Why do we recline on cushions to the left side?

Maimonides expanded further the types of changes that should be introduced on Seder night, so that children already used to the usual special Pesach customs would still take notice and ask:

One should make some change in procedure on this night of the fifteenth of Nisan, in order that one’s children should notice it and ask, “What makes this night different from other nights?” to which one would reply, “this and this is what happened, and this and this is what took place” [in the story of the Exodus].

In what way might the procedure be changed? By distributing parched grain or nuts to the children [distributing desert at the beginning of the meal], by having the table removed before the meal begins [clearing the table before anyone has eaten], by each trying to snatch away the other’s unleavened bread [playing games with the food like the stealing of the afikoman] and so on. (Maimonides, Laws of Chametz and Matza, Chapter 7:3)

The examples Maimonides brings from the Talmud fundamentally threaten the sense of order of the meal as the child knows and is familiar with it. When s/he sits down to eat: The table is “stolen” right out from under him or her before s/he has a chance to eat! The matzot s/he planned to eat are grabbed right out of his or her hand! This idea later

developed into the game of hiding the afikoman which is still a central element in generating Seder memories. Still each year parents must invent new tricks of this type to grab the children's attention anew.

Let us compare the original ritual differences of the Four Questions with Maimonides' new techniques. The didactic device suggested by Maimonides seems to move away from the central goal — imparting the story of the Exodus from Egypt. While in the Four Questions, the changes relate to the halachic symbols which, though odd, are also intended to direct attention to the historic referent. The grabbing of the matzah has no historic or conceptual significance, but the eating of the bitter herbs reminds us of the fact that the Egyptians embittered our lives. Beyond the surprising deviation from routine which arouses the curiosity of those present, the Four Questions (or at least three of them) focus on the symbol whose form leads the querier to its content.

Only the symbol of the dipping, which is also the subject of one of the Four Questions, is not directly related to a historic event, and that is why later generations added historic interpretations, which correspond to the interpretations given in the text to the matzah, bitter herbs and Paschal lamb.\* The salt water was explained as a symbol for the tears of the Children of Israel or for the Red Sea, and the karpas — the greens — as a symbol for the month of spring when the Children of Israel left Egypt . . . .

The symbols of Passover, the matzah, bitter herbs and even salt water and haroset generate a direct link to the world of the child — after all, he or she eats the symbol and tastes the experience that is symbolized. In the case of the bitter herbs, s/he tastes the bitterness, and in the case of the haroset, s/he also prepares it in the manner the mortar was prepared in Egypt. The cinnamon sticks that it contains remind us of the straw to reinforce the mud brick. The grinding and pressing of the ingredients parallel the hard labor involved in the preparation of the bricks from straw and earth.

Maimonides (Chapter 7:11) explains:

The use of haroset . . . is meant to serve as a reminder of the mortar with which the Israelites worked in Egypt. How is haroset made? Dates, dried figs, raisins, or the like, are taken and pounded, vinegar is added, and the mixture is seasoned with condiments in the same way as mortar is seasoned with straw; it is then brought to the table on Passover night.

Questions for Adults — Contending with Contradictions

The significance of the questions should not be confined to being a concrete educational tool for the purpose of teaching historical information to children having a limited sense of abstraction and who bore easily. The questions are a characteristic of the adult intellectual culture during the time of the Rabbis. In the Mishna, the child is the one who asks and the parent teaches, but in the Talmud, another source is quoted which requires the adult to ask questions of him or herself:

Our Rabbis taught: If his child is intelligent he asks him, while if he is not intelligent his wife asks him; but if not, he asks himself. And even two scholars who know the laws of Passover ask one another. (Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 116a)

Here the point is not to recount the story of the Exodus to children, but rather to create a dialogue of questions and answers among adults. The questions of the wise child may be thought provoking to the father, but so may the questions of his wife or colleague. Someone who knows all the laws of Passover is still required to ask questions, and scholars on their own at the Seder are required to ask themselves questions. Why?

At a certain level, the questions serve as an external pretext to refresh the memory in order to raise the level of consciousness concerning the Exodus even for those who have passive knowledge of the information. At another level, someone who asks himself or herself questions and then answers them, can delve deeper and discover new aspects of knowledge. This is the educational method practiced in the Lithuanian yeshivot — two students on the

same level, study the text by asking each other questions, raising hypotheses and debating the issues, without hearing lectures from a teacher "who knows the answers." This is common practice in universities, where a researcher finding himself or herself at an impasse, takes a walk alone while conducting an internal dialogue which may culminate with new insights into a subject s/he is very familiar with. The question is a very powerful tool for the advancement of the thinking of both the one who asks and answers the question.

The Rabbis identified a particular type of question, known as a kushiya. A kushiya queries a practice which contains an internal contradiction or which runs contrary to other authorized sources. Unlike the kushiya, an ordinary question generally begins with the word "what," for example, "What time is it?" It is as if the object of the question has something, information, that the one asking the question needs, and that the one asked "lends" out (literally, *sh'ayla* in Hebrew).

The formulation of the kushiya is more sophisticated: "One would expect that such a thing would happen or be written, but why has something else, something unexpected happened or been written?" The poser of the kushiya comes equipped with information and expectations for a certain world order, and this makes him or her aware of deviations, contradictions and the disappointment of expectations. "How is this night different from all other nights — On all other nights we eat leavened bread and matzah — but on this night we eat only matzah?" The one posing the kushiya sees the whole picture and has expectations of a rational world order. That is why any contradiction requires a rational explanation. We might expect that the more one learns, the fewer questions s/he might ask, after all, s/he already has so much information. But the true intellectual will pose ever more kushiyyot because s/he is all the more aware of the complexity of the world which is arranged according to so many principles. Curiosity is increasingly aroused and that is why the wise child is the one who asks the kushiyyot of his or her own volition while the younger children need the help of the parent to ask even the simplest question.

Paradoxically, the search for rationality is sustained by the unusual and not by the regular orderly routine. People do not query that which can be taken for granted, even if the explanation is unknown. For example, based on experience of many Passovers and Seder nights, to the adult Jew, the youngest child asking the Four Questions is taken as a matter of course. But as soon as s/he discovers a different version of the questions, such as the one we saw in the Mishna, s/he asks "Why do we ask these questions and not others? What is the reason?" or "Why does the Mishna say the parent says *Ma Nishtana* rather than the child?"

The search for rationality in our familiar world is sustained by the ability to imagine alternatives to the existing order. There is a set introduction to the *midrashei halacha* — homiletic interpretations and inferences of the Rabbis (in the *Mekhilta*). It involves the raising of a hypothetical question, as in this example from the *Haggadah*. The Rabbis wondered about: "You shall tell your child on that day: 'It is because of this, that the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt.'" Could this verse mean that you should begin to tell the story at the beginning of the month (in which the Exodus occurred)? No, for the verse explicitly states "on that day" (of the Exodus). Could that mean that we start when it is still daytime? No, for the verse explicitly states: "because of this." "This" refers to matza and marror laid before you (only on seder night) (*Mekhilta*). "This" implies that the parents must point at the matza and marror, using them as visual aids to tell the story (Rabbi Simcha of Vitri).

"Could this verse mean" introduces an imaginative, alternative hypothesis based on the Biblical text. "No, for the verse explicitly states that" is a strict construction of the meaning of the existent version of the text which neutralizes the feasibility of an alternative suggestion. This is a process which corresponds to the comparison of two versions of the same text, as we have shown in the two versions of the Four Questions or Four Children (see

LG p. 27; p.55). Indeed, the midrashei halacha ask even when no additional version has been found, and only an imaginative person could envisage other reasonable possibilities. There is no attempt here to undermine the accepted text or religious practice, but rather to understand what lies behind it.

If so, then the study method of the Rabbis is seemingly founded on a paradox. In order to understand the reasons for the existing order of the customs or the words of the Biblical text, we must be able to conceive of another order based on alternative logic. Only that which is not self-explanatory and is not accepted blindly as tradition can lead to a process of thought and discovery of the rationality it contains. The ideal scholar in the culture of the Rabbis is not an authoritative figure acting on the basis of a simplistic faith, who accepts basic premises without question.

A fascinating example of the Rabbinic encouragement of posing queries can be found in the story about the gentile who came to Hillel and Shammai, requesting to convert: Our Rabbis taught: A certain heathen once came before Shammai and asked him, 'How many Torahs have you?' 'Two', he replied: 'the Written Torah and the Oral Torah.' 'I believe you with respect to the Written, but not with respect to the Oral Torah.' But Shammai scolded and repulsed him in anger.

When he went before Hillel, Hillel accepted him as a convert. On the first day Hillel taught him: Alef. Bet. Gimmel. Dalet. The following day he reversed [them] to him. 'But yesterday didn't you teach them to me otherwise?' he protested. Hillel retorted: 'you see that you must rely

upon me [for the oral tradition of how to pronounce the letters of the Written Torah]. Then rely upon me also with respect to the whole Oral Torah too.'

The gentile who requests to convert to Judaism exclusively on the basis of the written Torah is rejected by Shammai for a number of reasons. He has the presumption to want to convert to Judaism while dictating his own definition of a Jew according to the written law alone, refusing even to learn the oral tradition from the Rabbi who is authorized to convert him and recognize him as Jew. Shammai rejects both the insolence of the man's character as well as his desire to pick and choose basic axioms in Judaism, which Shammai believes must be accepted as a whole, in good faith, from a recognized traditional authority.

Hillel, on the other hand, is aware of the positive intellectual motives of the gentile, who nonetheless wants to become a Jew. The gentile wants to base his faith on solid ground, on words received directly from God, and not on rumors passed on by word of mouth or on human interpretations given by rabbis over generations in the development of the oral law. The gentile that Hillel converted, with no conditions, wanted to accept the Torah, only on condition that it is indeed true to the original divine revelation of the written law.

Following the conversion, while at the stage of learning Judaism only according to the written law (as Hillel agreed in advance as a condition of the conversion), Hillel prepares an educational exercise to awaken the gentile, a known cautious skeptic, to ask questions and to come to realize the need to trust Rabbinic oral tradition. On the first day of his Biblical Hebrew lesson, Hillel teaches him that the graphic symbols a, b, g, d . . . are called aleph, beit, gimmel, dalet . . . . This lesson is vital so that the gentile can read by himself the written law he has accepted. The next day, Hillel repeats the letters, mixing up their names, calling aleph "beit" and beit "aleph" and so on. The skeptical convert immediately asks Hillel, "But yesterday you taught me something different, didn't you?" Yes, answers Hillel, but look at the trick I played on you and you will realize that you must trust the teacher in order to learn how to read the written law. Relying on the living tradition of Hebrew-reading teachers, who inherited the tradition of the oral law concerning how to pronounce the written letters, is unavoidable. Even as a skeptic you have no other way to learn the written law. Therefore, it would be wise for you to trust me concerning other aspects of the oral law. You, however, can

remain skeptical about everything, but if you wish to enter into a tradition of any kind, you must take the chance of trusting the oral tradition. Hillel's point is not to "prove" the contents of the oral law as absolute, or to demand blind faith. Rather he leads the gentile, by using the ability to pose questions, to broaden his faith in the tradition. Hillel's study ideal is not to shut the one asking questions up or to demand acceptance of authority in advance, but rather to build up trust by encouraging the ability of the student to discover contradictions and to settle them whenever possible. When certitude is not available, one must learn to live with trust and uncertainty.

Freedom —

#### The Ability to Conceive of Alternative Possibilities

In our opinion, this intellectual process of posing questions concerning the accepted order while comparing it to other orders, existent or imaginary, is the very essence of human freedom. The difference between slaves, whose minds are subjugated, and free people in an open society is the ability to conceive of a different life, a different social order. Slaves rebel against their masters not because of their urge for freedom of expression, but rather because they have discovered another possible world order in which they need not live as slaves. Slaves born into slavery may imagine that it is their nature to be subjugated and the tyrannical social order into which they have been born reflects the natural order, or the divine order. Moses, however, who was born into slavery but who grew up in Pharaoh's palace, is able to comprehend both humiliation and the meaning of freedom. Nechama Leibowitz explains the principle in the light of the comments by the Spanish exegete Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (New Studies of the Book of Exodus, pages 43-53):

Divine Providence arranged things so that the redeemer of Israel (Moshe) would emerge from an idolatrous, hostile foreign upbringing. He was educated as an Egyptian, cut off from his people and his ancestors' tradition. Why was that?

Abraham Ibn Ezra the medieval Spanish exegete suggested: "Perhaps, Moshe had to grow up in the King's palace so his soul would become accustomed to a higher level, not a degraded one, like the slaves who have become habituated to the House of Bondage" [and who will not rise up against injustice and who do not feel the indignity of a lack of freedom].

Similarly, it was Herzl, the assimilated Jew who grew up in a Western society during the onset of democracy and the rise of German nationalism who was able to become the visionary of the Jewish state, bringing to his brethren in autocratic Eastern Europe, the vision of liberal national freedom. Herzl's Western education led him to demand the national dignity and autonomy which many Eastern European Jews did not take as their due. The ability to conceive of a different world for the Jewish people based on its glorious past and the changes other nations were undergoing in the present, are what made him the visionary that he was.

The ability to question the political present often derives from the memory of a very different past. The Afro-American author Alex Haley wrote a historical novel about the enslavement of his family brought from Africa to the United States. He describes an encounter between a rebellious slave and a submissive slave. The rebellious slave was born in Africa and remembered what it meant to be free, while the submissive slave was born in America into a social reality in which he knew himself and human hierarchy only according to white people's criteria. After this encounter, the rebellious slave decides that his children and grandchildren must know that they were African aristocrats and that their origins defined their essence as free human beings, despite the external enslavement of their bodies. This story was passed down from parent to child for two hundred years, until Alex Haley decided to research his roots. The result was a novel-cum-family biography that contributed to the restoration of the freedom of the black race in America, which he called the "Afro-

American nation." In Alex Haley's book, there is a very strong link between the ability to recount the past and the ability to fight for freedom in the present.

The capacity to conceive of a world in which I see myself as if I left Egypt, going from enslavement to freedom, gives me a special perspective on society and allows me to criticize the current social order to which I am enslaved. The Jew who lives successively in the world of Pharaoh, Ahashverosh, the Romans and the Nazis, all in accordance with the holiday being observed — Passover, Purim, Tisha B'Av or Holocaust Day — has untold possibilities for comparison. That Jew can query the existent situation and discover the logic behind it and then choose his or her way in life. Three elements converge on Seder night: the commandment to recount the story of the Exodus from Egypt; the commandment to pose questions about the existent order; and the goal of education towards freedom.

Questioning is related to the tendency of Jews throughout the Diaspora to be original in whatever they do. This phenomenon is called in sociological terminology, the "creativity of the marginal man."

Isaac Deutscher affectionately calls them "Jewish heretics." George Steiner celebrates them as "meta-rabbis." Daniel Bell lauds them as "prophets of alienation." They are referring to the modern Jewish intellectuals and to the fact, as Steiner puts it, "that the Jewish element had been largely dominant in the revolutions of thought and of sensibility experienced by Western man over these last one hundred and twenty years . . . Without Marx, Freud, or Kafka, without Schoenberg or Wittgenstein, the spirit of modernity, the reflexes of argument and uncertainty whereby we conduct our inner lives would not be conceivable. The disproportionate number of Jews among the intellectuals — individuals of critical dissent and cognitive originality — of Western society continues to intrigue the student of modern culture.

Authors who assume the former, sociological perspective generally emphasize the marginality of the Jewish intellectual. Having left the Jewish community, the Jewish intellectual has embraced secular culture without adopting, in Thorstein Veblen's words, the gentile's "heritage of conventional preconception."

Other students of the subject feel that Jewish intellectualism must be explained culturally, by the peculiar Jewish bent of mind. George Steiner ascribes it to a cognitive inheritance bequeathed by traditional Judaism. He observed that the traditional mode of Jewish thought was hermeneutic, based on a canonical text and the need to understand the present in terms of the eternal truths and the divine promise for the future contained in that text.

Paul Mendes Flohr, *Divided Passions*, pp. 23-24

According to this approach, the source of the power of tyranny is not confined to the superior physical power of the tyrant. It lies in the overriding social totalitarianism of that regime. Tyrants teach their subjects to view the tyrannical order as natural and exclusive, and therefore the only rational one possible. People living under these regimes are not permitted to visit other countries, to read other views or even to read history books or literature that could lead them to conclusions other than those of the current regime. In the Soviet Union, for example, history books were changed each time there was a change of government in accordance with the new line of the regime. The famous joke on this subject has it that all over the world the future is obscure and uncertain, impossible to predict. But only in the Soviet Union was the future known, but history kept changing according to the dictates of the government. In communist Bulgaria, the government used to employ a large number of policemen who received financial incentives to supervise the behavior of the Bulgarian citizens. Candidates for jobs in the police had to waive their right to carry a passport and travel outside of Bulgaria — including to other communist countries, where they might see that things could be different.

Hard Labor and Abraham the Skeptic

The Rabbis tried to characterize the worst form of enslavement in the context of the halachic definition of "hard labor." They wished to distinguish between ordinary slavery as an economic system in the ancient world in general and in Jewish society in particular, and the "hard labor" imposed by a despot, like Pharaoh, who caused such great suffering to the Children of Israel. A Jewish master is forbidden to impose this type of hard labor on his Hebrew slave (Leviticus 25).

It is forbidden to work a Hebrew slave harshly (befarech). What is the definition of "harsh labor"?

(1) work without end [without a pre-assigned time limit] (2) work without purpose [useless work] whose only purpose is the master's desire to keep the slave working and prevent idleness. For example, the master should not say: rake under these vines until I come back," for that is a task without a set quota [in time or product]. For example, the master should not say: "dig here," when the master has no need of this labor, nor even "heat up this cup of food or cool it off," when there is no need for it. (Maimonides, Laws of Slaves, Chapter 1:6)

Hard labor as halacha defines it means being involved in activity that has no purpose. Even if the work is not physically taxing, useless work is a torture for a slave. The inhumane sting of pointless labor stems not from the coercion or arduous work that exhausts the body, but rather from the irrational waste of human effort. The Rabbis assumed that every human being, even if he or she must do forced labor, seeks the significance of their efforts. The greatest slavery voids the feeling of purpose. In a culture of questions like that of the Rabbis, they wish to understand the purpose and the reason for each commandment and every social institution and to exercise free choice between options. This type of education is critical by nature and it generates not only the aspiration to political freedom, but also spiritual and intellectual freedom.

That is why the Rabbis took the image of the first Jew, who obeyed unquestioningly the divine commandment of *lech lecha* — "Go out of your land" — and accorded the spiritual hero the content appropriate to their world. The Rabbis, like Philo the first century Jewish philosopher, attribute to Abraham a search for truth that involved challenging the accepted beliefs of his idolatrous society. (See the midrash about Abraham the iconoclast in the Haggadah itself p.75)

It is noteworthy that the Rabbis, and following in their footsteps, Maimonides, painted a portrait of Abraham as a doubter, someone who questions society's conventions and is searching for a philosophical truth. He also tries to free others from their intellectual bondage by creating a situation which forces them to pose questions, as Hillel did with the proselyte and as the Rabbis demanded that each parent do on Seder night with one's own child. Here, the Rabbis painted a portrait of Abraham based on the Biblical nucleus of the story of Sodom, in which God encourages Abraham to ask tough intellectual and moral questions, challenging the supreme authority — God.

"Shall not the judge of all the land be just?" — This rhetorical question seems defiant toward God, and yet God invited this defiance by involving Abraham in the debate concerning the fate of Sodom. Why? Why did God not fear rebellion? Why did God agree to enter in the extended negotiations which involved making concessions to the product of God's own creation, Abraham?

The answer, in my opinion, lies in a radical educational approach — God's desire to teach humans to willingly participate in God's plan, out of rational understanding and recognition of the intrinsic justice of God's Torah. The Rabbis also took this direction and constructed an educational method based on the idea of the mentor, the apprentice. In this relationship, there are no questions that may not be asked, no doubt that may not be raised — as long as the true motive for the question is a genuine desire to learn. The child and spiritual heir, who raised doubts and discovered the inner logic of the Seder, who queried and

contributed to its ongoing design in a process of questions and answers, will continue the tradition most faithfully. A genuine question is not a rebellion against authority, but rather authentic curiosity which enables the tradition to be passed on. It is not easy for authoritarian figures who are already convinced of the rationality of their world and of the unreason of other ways, to listen to criticism from the younger generation. It is vital that the parent-teachers learn at the very least how to open themselves, their teachings and the existing social order to the new questions. If the parent and teacher discover that they have innocent pupils before them who do not know how to ask, they must open up to them and open them up to the asking of incisive questions.

In summary, democratic society can learn a great deal from the openness of our Rabbis to the culture of kushiyot — questions. A kushiya is not merely an educational tool to arouse the interest of students in the “material” of Passover, but rather an educational “form” which educates teacher and pupil, parent and child to the dialogue of freedom.

**70 Faces of Torah: A "How To Guide" for Torah Study  
by Joel Lurie Grishaver**

**The Ecology of Torah Study/Teaching**

Rule # 1: We assume that good Torah comes from talking, exploring, searching for meaning- -not from memorizing or swallowing Torah whole.

Rule # 2 - :We assume the best about the Biblical Text. We assume that it is meaningful. That it is purposeful. That what is there is intended to be there.

Rule # 3: We assume that nothing in the Torah repeats accidentally that every repetition is the key to a deeper meaning

Rule # 4: We assume that we study Torah for the words which make Lip tile stories, not for the stories alone. The heart of Torah is in "the telling" not "the tale." That means, the closer to the text. the truer the Torah.

Rule # 5: We assume the one part of the Torah, can, and often is explained by another. This means you need to "know" all of Torah to fully understand any part of Torah,

Rule # 6: As Jews, we study Torah in a tradition. We can stray from that tradition. We can add to that tradition. It is traditional to argue with the tradition. But, there is a path through the text, and a set of tools which are our heritage..

Rule # 7: We assume that God can be encountered in the process of Torah study (met between the words) and/or the visions of God held by others can be met there. Either way, Torah is an encounter with Divinity".

## Education as Putting Real Questions by John Dewey

*From Democracy and Education*

The giving of problems, the putting of questions, the assigning of tasks, the magnifying of difficulties, is a large part of school work. But it is indispensable to discriminate between genuine and simulated or mock problems. The following questions may aid in making such discrimination.

(a) Is there anything but a problem? Does the question naturally suggest itself within some situation or personal experience? Or is it an aloof thing, a problem only for the purposes of conveying instruction in some school topic? Is it the sort of trying that would arouse observation and engage experimentation outside of school?

(b) Is it the pupil's own problem, or is it the teacher's or textbook's problem, made a problem for the pupil only because he cannot get the required mark or be promoted or win the teacher's approval, unless he deals with it?

No one has ever explained why children are so full of questions outside of the school (so that they pester grown-up persons if they get any encouragement), and the conspicuous absence of display of curiosity about the subject matter of school lessons.

...

As a consequence of the absence of the materials and occupations which generate real problems, the pupil's problems are not his; or, rather, they are his only as a pupil, not as a human being.