

Text Study: Memory and Identity

In small groups, after saying the blessing before study, read the following texts out loud and answer the questions following each text

A person is a small world.

The Midrash (of Rabbi) Tanchuma

1. What do you think this statement suggests about a person's life?
2. What are the aspects of one's world that determine who he/she is?

...If we wish to know about a person, we ask what is his story--his real, inmost story? For each of us is a biography, a story. Each of us is a single narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through, and in us--through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and, not least, our discourse, our spoken narration. Biologically, physiologically, we are not so different from each other; historically, we are each of us unique.

Oliver Sacks, Jewish neurologist and author of *Awakenings*

3. Share an example of an experience or an event that shaped who you are and became part of your "story." How did it make you a "unique" person?

In every generation one is obligated to see oneself as if s/he had gone out of Egypt. For it says [in the Torah, the Book of Exodus] "And you are to tell your child on that day, saying: It is because of what YHWH did for me, when I went out of Egypt."

From The Passover Haggadah

4. What is the benefit, do you think, of personalizing the Exodus experience? Who benefits? In what ways?
5. If we all share in the "memory" of this experience, how might that make us, as a people, unique?



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As we go through life, each of us constructs a story about: who we are; to whom we owe allegiance; what we like and dislike; what we choose to do and not do; and what are our achievements, failures and longings. Throughout our lives we each continually construct and reconstruct this story. Our stories act as filters and frameworks organizing our lives, informing our choices and views.

Each person constructs this story in relation to others, both individuals and groups (Fowler, 1981, p. 17). My story interacts with the stories of my parents, my family, my school(s), my neighborhood, my community, my country, my God and my people, the Jewish people. Moran (1983) describes the relationship between a community and personal stories: “One of the marks of a community is the story, its people hold in common, a story expressed in symbols, codes of behavior, styles of humor, modes of dress and address, ways of sharing sorrow and the like” (p. 101). The story of the Jewish people emerges from a variety of sources including the Bible, Talmud, family tales...The Task for Jewish educators is to make connections and links between “my story” and the “big story”-the story of the Jewish people. (Groome, 1980)

6. What would you want to add to or disagree with in the Goodman quotation above?
7. Can you describe a time that you crafted a lesson or helped others design a learning experience that links learners’ evolving personal story and the Master Story of the Jewish people? Based on your experience, what value do you see in linking a learner’s personal story and the Jewish Master Story?
8. Assuming that linking an individual's story with the Jewish Master Story has a significant impact on a learner, how might you approach and educator who is accustomed to designing learning that addresses either words of tradition or the learner's individual needs, history, interests and values, but does not usually link the two?



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Text Study: Jewish Living and Learning

After saying the blessing before study, please read this text and discuss the questions below.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת קידושין דף מ עמוד ב

וכבר היה רבי טרפון וזקנים מסובין בעלית בית
נתזה בלוד, נשאלה שאילה זו בפניהם: תלמוד גדול
או מעשה גדול? נענה רבי טרפון ואמר: מעשה גדול,
נענה ר"ע ואמר: תלמוד גדול, נענו כולם ואמרו
תלמוד גדול, שהתלמוד מביא לידי מעשה.

Rabbi Tarfon and the Elders were once reclining in the upper story of Nitza's house in Lydda when this question was raised before them: Is study greater than practice? Rabbi Tarfon answered, saying "Practice is greater." Rabbi Akiva answered, saying, "Study is greater for it leads to practice." Then they all answered and said, "Study is greater because it leads to action."

Kiddushin 40b

1. Where do you weigh in on this debate? Rabbi Akiva offers one reason supporting his opinion. What reasons can you give in support of your opinion?
2. Rabbi Akiva suggests this is not an "either/or" debate but, rather, that there is an interplay between learning and doing. What was one experience in your life in which the integration of learning and living -- of learning and doing -- made a difference?



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Researchers continue to document psychological influences of religion on the physical and emotional health and behaviors of U.S. youth and adults. In some cases the magnitude of influence is staggering—among adults going to religious services weekly provides a positive effect on lifespan that is comparable in magnitude to the negative effects of smoking a pack of cigarettes a day: about seven years (Hummer et. al 1999).

Regernus, Christian, & Fritsch, *Religion in the Lives of American Adolescents: A Review of the Literature*

3. When thinking about learning that leads to living, we usually mean leads to action. The research above suggests a connection literally between religious learning, action and living a healthier and longer life. What about Jewish living/practice might lead to improved health and well being? How might you shape learning that reflects the research that weekly religious services have such a significant impact on the learner's life?

Life's transitions and passages present opportunities for connecting people's lives to the sacred in explicitly Jewish ways. In some way, knowledge and content must be linked to experience, the fabric of life. In a similar, fashion, everyday occurrences such as tragedies, accomplishments, relationships, first-time happenings, decision making, and moral dilemmas present fertile material for linking people's lives to Jewish values (especially the sacred) and the community on a daily basis. Capturing the richness of experiences in the educational setting remains a challenge.

Roberta Louis Goodman, *What We Know About...Faith Development*

4. What would you want to add to—or disagree with—in the Goodman quotation above?
5. Can you describe a time that you crafted a lesson or helped others design a learning experience that links learners' personal experience and Jewish tradition/teaching? Based on your experience, what value do you see in linking a learner's personal experience and the Jewish Master Story (Jewish tradition and teaching)?
6. Assuming the significant role a regularized community of practice can have on a learner, how might you approach an educator/educational team that is accustomed to designing learning that had as its ultimate goal good results on paper and pencil tests about the big ideas and the details of information studied?

Background

Rabbi Tarfon – One of the leading sages of the 2nd century and a colleague of Rabbi Akiva.



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Nitza – A woman (?) mentioned periodically in the *Talmud*. Her claim to fame seems to be that the Rabbis gathered in her home in Lydda, often in the attic, to discuss and argue Jewish law.

Lydda – Currently the town of Lod in Israel, site of Ben-Gurion International Airport.

Rabbi Akiva – One of the greatest scholars of the *Mishnah*, he was the spiritual leader of the Bar Kochba revolt against the Romans. We are told that he did not begin serious Jewish study until he was 40 years old.

Kiddushin – One of the tractates of the *Talmud* that deals primarily with the laws of marriage and the legal acquisition of bondsmen, chattel and real estate



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Text Study: Community

After saying the blessing before study, please read these texts and discuss the questions below.

אל תִּפְרוֹשׁ מִן הַצְּבוּר

Hillel says: Do not separate yourself from the community.

(Pirke Avot 2:5)

(Commenting on Hillel’s statement) Rashi thinks that one should not separate from the community when it is experiencing difficulties so that one can be united with it when it experiences joy. Bartimoro adds that one who will not be with the community in time of sorrow will never be able to be with it at joyous times.

From *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics* edited and translated by Leonard Kravitz and Kerry M. Olitsky, p. 21

1. In what ways might someone “separate from the community?” How does that feel to the individual? To the community?
2. As autonomous people living in a secular society, we opt in and out of groups all the time. What does the second text suggest is the price we pay for such mobility? Do you agree?
3. What was one moment, big or small, in your life when being part of a community mattered?

A holistic Jewish education, anchored in the life of real Jewish communities and capable of interpreting and communicating the depth and complexity of that life, is the only kind of Jewish education that is likely to have a decisive impact on the development of Jewish identity. There is, then, a consistent bottom line to my analysis of the potential strategies for promoting Jewish continuity: To be significantly more successful than we are today, we need to create many more and richer contexts in which Jewish culture is the prevailing socially operative framework within which activities are being undertaken and interpreted. That is, we need more Jewish *community*, not just more Jewish *programs*.

Jonathan Woocher, “Toward ‘A Unified Field Theory’ of Jewish Continuity” in Aron, Lee, and Rossel (eds.) *A Congregation of Learners*, p. 33



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4. Woocher emphasizes the need for more Jewish community not just more programs. What do you think he means by that? In what ways do you agree/disagree?
5. Share a time when you have been able to design learning/or have experienced learning that is “anchored in the real life of a Jewish community.” What was the difference in the learning and the result of this kind of learning vs learning that you may have designed/experienced in isolation of a community?
6. Assuming the significant role community and relationships have on a learner, how might you approach an educator/educational team that is accustomed to designing learning that takes place apart from an authentic Jewish community/communal experience?

Background

Hillel – Babylonian-born authority on Jewish law who became the religious head of the Palestinian Jewish community from about 30 BCE to 10 CE. He is also the founder of a school of thought, *Beit Hillel*, through which his disciples represented his philosophy and teachings into the 5th century CE.

Rashi (1035-1105 CE) – Name is an acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchak. Highly regarded Biblical and Talmudic commentator who also was a grape grower in Troys, France. His commentary appears alongside the Talmudic text in every edition of the *Talmud*.

Bartinoro – Rabbi and commentator on the *Mishnah* during the second half of the 15th century. He traveled to Jerusalem and became spiritual head of the Jewish community there in 1488.

Pirke Avot (“Ethics of the Fathers”) – A tractate of the *Mishnah*, compiled in the early 3rd century CE, made up of story-like material and maxims from many of the famous rabbis of the time.



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Text Study: Parent Involvement

After saying the blessing before study, please read and discuss the questions below.

וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם עָלֶיךָ לְבָבְךָ:
וְשִׁנַּנְתָּם לְבִנְיָיִךְ

And these words, which I command you this day, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them to your children...

From V'ahavata prayer

Just as a [parent] is obligated to teach [a child], so, too, is [a parent] obligated to teach [a grandchild], as Deuteronomy 4:9 commands “and you shall teach them to your [children] and grand[children].”

Furthermore, this charge is not contained to one’s children and grandchildren alone. Rather, it is a mitzvah for each and every wise [person] to teach all students, even though they are not his [or her] children as Deuteronomy 6:7 states: “And you shall teach them to your children...” The oral tradition explains: “Your [children], “These are your students, for students are also called [children], as II Kings 2:3 states: “And the [children] of the prophets went forth.”

Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:2

1. The texts indicate a shared responsibility for educating children. Who are the responsible partners?
2. What does it mean that parents need to have the words on their “heart?” What links have you seen between parents who have the words on their heart and the engagement of their children? Do you also see disconnects between parents who have the words on their heart and their children?

...getting Judaism out of the four walls of the school (synagogue, JCC, summer camp) and back into the car with the family—and then into their homes and real lives with them. Jewish family education strives to bring families and Jewish institutions into a more balanced partnership in the challenge to “Jewish” the next generation.

Rachel Brodie & Vicky Kelman (eds.),
Jewish Family Education: A Casebook for the 21st Century



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3. The reading above suggests that the partnership among parents, adults in the community and the school are out of balance. What have you observed resulting from this lack of balance? What have you done in your work that has successfully helped shift the balance of responsibility?

Without the family, the task of religious education is much harder. It comes as no surprise that children look to their parents as they begin to define their level of religious practice and their sense of being Jewish. When parents value their Judaism, children are more likely to find it important. When parents understand and practice their Judaism, children are more likely to practice it as well.

Behrman House, *Why Jewish Family Education*

4. In what ways would you agree or disagree with the above statement?
5. In your work with congregations today, share a story where this partnership is shared to the benefit of the children. What was the congregation able to do to achieve that helpful balance?
6. Assuming the significant impact parents can have on children, how might you approach an educator or educational team that is accustomed to designing classroom learning with only sporadic engagement with parents/caregivers?

Background

Maimonides – One of the great Jewish philosophers of all time who was a physician and lived in Moorish Spain, the Middle East and North Africa. He compiled the *Mishneh Torah*, a code of Jewish law, and wrote the *Thirteen Articles of Faith* and *Guide for the Perplexed*.



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