Coaxing the Waters from the Rock Tanakh Education in Yeshiva High Schools: The Real and the Ideal

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The primary question any educator must ask him or herself before determining *how* to teach particular material is *why* it should be taught at all, which will lead to *what* should be the "take-away" for the student. Is the teacher a *purveyor of information* that is vital for the students' success in acceptance to college? Is the teacher an *educer of values* that the student already holds dear, and will that teacher only feel a sense of success if the students identify his or her own ethical anchors? Is the teacher, perhaps, a *demagogue* (rather than pedagogue) who measures his or her success by the percentage of students who end up subscribing to his or her particular value system? Or, is the teacher a *facilitator of skills and knowledge*, who sees his or her own job as empowering students to feel a sense of comfort with difficult texts and, ultimately, the ability to master those texts and synthesize them into their own worldview as they use critical judgment (fostered along the way) to evaluate those self-same texts and the lessons learned from them?

Most of us—committed teachers, invested parents, and members of the community alike—would dismiss the first three "teachers"—especially the middle two—as failing in their educational mission. Nonetheless, the reality that many who inspire our children in their Judaic studies in yeshivot—from elementary through secondary schools—fall short of the educational ideal is a shortcoming we recognize and admit. How often are our students given reams and reams of information to commit to memory, some of which strains credulity while much is of questionable relevance to the student? Questionable teaching is a phenomenon I have encountered in meetings with students from numerous communities. More crushing are the reports we hear, too frequently, of teachers who use their position as well as the text, as a vehicle for promoting (sometimes questionably appropriate) dogmas and viewpoints. This could be ascribed to teachers from insular viewpoints (commonly called "Haredi"),

who are teaching in institutions where the students ostensibly come from “Modern Orthodox” families and the teachers feel themselves obligated to preach “proper” values which are often at odds with those stated by the school and those held dear by the parent body. On the other hand, we occasionally meet teachers who seem to have walked “right out of the 1960s,” and intuit, Rogers-style, that all the truth lies within the student and the text is a great vehicle for allowing the student to find that “truth within.” It should be noted that in the descriptions above, a “text” may be a passage in Tanakh, a particular commentary on that passage, a secondary source—in a sense, the vehicle matters little when it has little to do with the end-goal. At least the “information-purveyor” is concerned with a particular paideia (curricular body of knowledge) that he or she wants the students to master—but they master by memorizing and the text remains foreign to them and, teflon-like, bounces off of their souls.

We often make the mistake of thinking that students will find relevance in a text if we can show them why it is meaningful to them. However, this doesn’t work, as relevance is something that must be intuited, not explained. No one can convince me that I ought to feel that news about elections in Israel ought to be relevant to me; rather, it is relevant because I have a deep emotional, familial, social, and/or spiritual investment in the welfare of Israel, which determines its relevance to me as opposed to, say, the rise or fall of the GDP in Niger.

Before moving on to explore how our hero, teacher #4, the “skills-and-knowledge facilitator,” succeeds where others fail, one note must be sounded about the role of the personality of the teacher in the classroom. There is no doubt that the charisma, warmth, humor, personal connections (including home hospitality for Shabbatot, ability to play guitar, lead a kumsitz, play basketball with students, and so forth) play a helpful role in the teacher’s success in the classroom. Ultimately, however, the classroom experience is one that succeeds best if it is one that ties the student to the discipline, not to the “middleman.” While having a relationship with a teacher is a central component in the life of any Ben or Bat Torah, it is chiefly due to that teacher’s role as a “matchmaker” between the student and a body of texts which, ultimately, the student must personally embrace. Sometimes, counter-intuitively, the charismatic teacher is at a disadvantage as he or she can paper over a lack of substance with a thrilling classroom experience—but the students still leave class no richer in knowledge or skills than 40 minutes (or a year) earlier.

The Model

Our ideal educator, the “skills-and-knowledge facilitator,” is a far more complex construct than we may wish to imagine. This type of teacher must combine a clear sense of what needs to be accomplished with an awareness of who is doing the accomplishing; a group made up of an entirely different set of students than the previous year—and each individual student comes to the table of Torah with unique background, expectations, abilities, fears, and attitudes. We will be able to flesh this out by studying a small piece of Tanakh together.

Let’s take, as an example, the brief story of Moses and Aaron at the waters of Meribah (Numbers 20:1–13):

> 1. And the children of Israel, even the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month; and the people abode in Kadesh; and Miriam died there, and was buried there. 2. And there was no water for the congregation; and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. 3. And the people strove with Moses, and spoke, saying: 'Would that we had perished when our brethren perished before Hashem! 4. And why have you brought the assembly of Hashem into this wilderness, to die there, we and our cattle? 5. And wherefore have you made us to come up out of Egypt, to bring us in unto this evil place? It is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates; neither is there any water to drink.' 6. And Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly unto the door of the tent of meeting, and fell

upon their faces; and the glory of Hashem appeared unto them.
7. And Hashem spoke unto Moses, saying: 8. 'Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes, that it give forth its water; and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock; so thou shalt give the congregation and their cattle drink.' 9. And Moses took the rod from before Hashem, as He commanded him. 10. And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said unto them: 'Hear now, ye rebels; are we to bring you forth water out of this rock?' 11. And Moses lifted up his hand, and smote the rock with his rod twice; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their cattle.
12. And Hashem said unto Moses and Aaron: 'Because ye believed not in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.' 13. These are the waters of Meribah, where the children of Israel strove with Hashem, and He was sanctified in them.

The information-purveyor may be concerned that each student know—perhaps by heart—the various approaches among the classical commentators as to exactly where Moses (and Aaron) sinned; he or she may focus on the Midrashim that connect Miriam's death with the "thirst" that (seemingly) occasioned the events that led to the striking of the rock, and so forth.
The *values-educer* may wish to enable the students to explore their own feelings about divine justice, higher standards to which great leaders are held, or the impact of the death of a loved one on even the greatest human beings.
The *demagogue* (or *values-inducer*) may choose to highlight the greatness of Moses—in that he was held to such a high level of perfection that even a minor slip cost him dearly, or to underscore the powerful impact of great leaders and the terrible loss felt at their passing (the midrashic well of Miriam and its disappearance at her demise).
The *skills-and-knowledge facilitator* wouldn't necessarily be put off or feel a lack of success if his or her students were to learn and internalize any or all of these approaches. Rather, this teacher is far more concerned with *how* the knowledge is attained than by the amount of knowledge gained. In a sense, this educator may be the least result-oriented of our four models, as he or she measures success by how well the students have become *part of the process* of developing information, as opposed to end-users—which is the real key to developing a sense of "relevance" about any text.

Relevance—A Function of Excitement, Anticipation, and Success

Relevance is directly related to the excitement the students feel when they anticipate success at a task that is a challenge—yet that they can succeed in mastering.
When students walk into a classroom where they are asked to internalize information given to them—there is no challenge, except for "making room" in their heads, among the terabytes of social, cultural, and assorted academic data, for a list of opinions about why Moses and Aaron were punished. To an inquisitive mind, this is the essence of ennui. Students may appreciate having their opinion solicited, but when it is requested on the basis of no work, no research, and no background—the students themselves have little respect for the process. If, in the case of the *demagogue*'s classroom, the students can anticipate being told what conclusions they ought to draw from a particular story, law, or comment—there isn't a whole lot to make it feel relevant.
If, however, the students know from experience with this teacher that in each session they will learn a new skill, review and strengthen an already taught-skill, or find a new way to utilize that skill—they will find immediate relevance and be excited about what comes next.
Two critical points to maintain relevance and keep students excited about the next skill—the exercises and the skill must be immediately tied in to the material being studied so that the students will see that mastering that skill will reap immediate benefit in their studies. Secondly, the skill ought to be

integrated into regular study, such that each skill taught becomes a regular part of their "learning arsenal" and they continue to use it such that it becomes as natural an instinct.

Back to the Quarrelsome Waters

In order to illustrate how our *skills-and-knowledge facilitator* would instruct, let's go back to the wilderness of Zin and see how the story of the "quarrelsome waters" (*Mei Merivah)* might be taught. There is much more to investigate about this passage; we will limit our observations to those germane to the method highlighted herein.
As a prefatory note, any of the skills assumed to have been internalized and habituated below could just as well be brand new to the class; in which case, this passage is a perfect opportunity to teach that particular skill.

A: For openers—the panoramic view
Students will have learned, during the course, to read the passage, looking for words they don't understand (and given translation strategies, such as context clues, looking for the radicals ["roots"], anticipating the word, and so forth) and learning two critical "big-picture" strategies:

1. To place themselves "inside the narrative" and read it from the perspective of an Israelite living in the first month of the (presumed) 40th year of wandering
2. Look for anomalies in the text—unexpected turns, odd juxtapositions, and the like

Immediately when reading the text, besides the obvious question of the gravity of the punishment meted out to Moses and Aaron and identifying the particular sin for which they are held liable—are two other oddities. The mention of the death and burial of Miriam seems to have nothing to do with the rest of the story and doesn't seem to belong here.
One critical note must be injected here—for us to be successful in facilitating skills, students have to learn to look at a text with fresh eyes. That means temporarily withholding interpretations and applications that are not found in the text but have become very popular and identified with the text. A case in point is the midrashic device of Miriam's well (*Tosefta Sotah* 11:1, *Seder Olam Rabbah* Ch. 10). The well seems to have been reported here in order to answer a question—which is exact oddity that we've noticed—since Miriam's death, on the face of it, has nothing to do with the encounter between the people and Moses, perhaps her death occasioned an unexpected thirst that caused the crisis. A cursory look at the sources cited above will bear this out.
By now, the students may have realized (or been coached into seeing) that deaths and burials are never inherently significant enough—any death and/or burial mentioned in the text is reported due to a secondary consideration. Often as not, it is a demonstration of the fulfillment of a divine promise (for example, the funeral of Jacob was a direct fulfillment of God's last words to him in Genesis 46:4; the death of Sarah was occasion for Abraham to finally realize God's commitment of over 60 years that he will inherit the Land). Those students who have internalized this lesson will immediately realize that the mention of Miriam's death and burial seems to be unnecessary here.
Next, the students, placing themselves "inside the story," should notice that the complaint of the people *isn't about thirst*—they only mention "*u-mayim ayin lishtot"* (there is no water to drink) as an apparent afterthought—strangely enough, their main complaint is about the desert not being a land for seed, figs, grapes, and pomegranates, which the students should immediately recognize as an odd premise. Why would the Israelites think that this way-station on their way to the "good, wide land" should have

any of those resources?

The students, by now, should have understood a principal reason for the need to become "part of the story"—we, the omniscient reader, know how everything is going to turn out; we know that Pharaoh will refuse Moses' requests; we know that Esau will discover Jacob's masquerade; we know that Rachel will die on the road—and we know that Moses will never enter the Land of Israel. We have to remember that none of the players know that until they do—either when it happens or when they are prophetically given that information.

The Israelites do not know where they are—just that they have been traveling for a long time with a beautiful land awaiting them at the end of that journey. They may have heard that the land to which they are traveling is "flowing with milk and honey;" they may have even heard about the famed seven species (although only adumbrated in Deut. 8:8)—but all that they've seen is grapes, figs, and pomegranates. If they don't remember this from chapter 13 (if, for instance, they are only studying selected passages and didn't recently delve into the story of the "scouts"), then a quick concordance-check will lead them straight back to 13:23, which, surprisingly, lists exactly the same three types of fruit, the absence of which they bemoaned here. (This is usually when a few students are heard to mutter, under their breath: "cool"—that's when "relevance" kicks in!)

So…the Israelites must have thought they were in Israel—and that's why they are complaining about the lack of fig and pomegranate trees and grape vines. What might have given them the idea that they had already reached their destination?

If the students have effectively walked into the narrative, they can be prodded—"What have we been carrying with us since we can remember"? They may first answer that the Testimony ("*luhot ha-Edut*") has been with us—but we can ask them about another box that we've been carrying—and they will readily remember that Joseph's bones have accompanied us since we quit Egypt. Why didn't we bury our ancestor in Egypt? Evidently, we bury important people in the Promised Land—Joseph has a special location (cf. Gen. 48:22), but no one is buried "out there" (except for the entire generation that passed away in the dessert and whose death was a fulfillment of a divine decree). So…if Miriam died and was buried "there" ("*sham*"), we must have arrived at the Land of Israel!

We can now understand the catalyst for the crisis—the people believe that they've arrived—but the "beautiful land, flowing with milk and honey, boasting fantastic fruit" is nowhere to be seen. "And what of the grapes, figs, and pomegranates that we've seen with our own eyes (or our parents saw and related to us)?"

B: Assessing what we've discovered and anticipating further

Now that the students have addressed the text from the "long view" and found the people's misjudgment (that they've already entered the Promised Land) and its cause (Miriam's burial "there"), they should be able to anticipate what *should* come next. We would expect that Moses' response—or that directed by God that he take—would be to assure them that they are still on the road, not yet arrived and that, indeed, the land to which they are coming is truly filled with luscious fruits and grains.

It takes a strong imagination to be able to see the text as it is *not*, to imagine what *might* have come next and then to "be surprised" at what actually ensues. This is nothing less than the traditional approach of Midrash (especially Midrash Halakhah), which is built on what *should* be written and then allowing what *is* written to teach additional lessons. By training our students to recognize a rhetorical pattern in Tanakh, whether it be nomenclature (see Rashi's comment at Gen. 1:1 noting that the "unexpected" use of *Elokim* followed, in chapter 2 (v. 4 ff.) by *Hashem Elokim* indicates a change in "divine policy" vis-à-vis creation), presentation of laws or any other genre of biblical literature, we train them to notice what is "off" about a particular passage and what that unusual twist may be signaling. This also makes reading the classical medieval commentators that much more empowering and impactful, as the students can already identify with "what's bothering Rashi/Ramban/ibn Ezra (etc.)?"

As such, we are surprised that God neither instructs Moses to march them into the Land or to inform them that they haven't yet arrived—which we can take in one of two ways. Either our hypothesis is wrong and the confrontation between Moses and the people isn't about the Land, but about thirst—or we may be right, but there may also be something bigger going on, beneath the superficial complaint, and that is what God is instructing Moses to address.

C: Back to the panoramic view

If we take a look at the passage, we can see that the people's complaint doesn't jibe with what we know about the narrative. We know that God took the people out of Egypt, that God is leading them through the desert and directing their travels—but we are so accustomed to hearing the people's plaint to Moses (and Aaron): "Why have YOU brought the assembly of Hashem into this wilderness…And why have YOU made us to come up out of Egypt…" that we don't necessarily pick up on the incongruity of their complaint. Why aren't they angry at—or disappointed with—God, who has led them to this place?

There is a simple answer that the student may discover and, when he or she does, that "magic moment" happens; the student realizes that the Israelites of this new generation believe, as did their parents, that it was Moses and Aaron who led them out of Egypt and who are leading them through the desert. In effect, nothing has changed since the complaints first registered just after we were miraculously brought through the Sea (Exodus chapters 15–17).

Pedagogic interjection: Much of this development may be beyond the independent scope, background and ability of the students, even at an advanced level; but, with training and a bit of coaxing or Socratic-style questioning, they can put most of it together on their own. There may be a point, here or there, that needs to be bolstered and proven. To that end, the teacher may choose to assign homework or to give an inquisitive student who asks a sharp question an opportunity to earn "extra credit" by researching the topic with guidance.

D: Discussion—the meaning of conflict

At this point, in order to help the students discover the next layer of meaning in the text, the teacher may choose to direct a discussion about conflict; it is easy to draw students out once they are sufficiently invested in solving an enigma—and we still haven't addressed the "big" question of the sin imputed to Moses and Aaron. Conflict is a universal experience and one that can be described in terms common enough to apply elsewhere—in our case, the point that every conflict is really about something deeper (couples who fight about sleeping with the window open or closed are invariably experiencing a much deeper conflict).

The students can then identify three different issues going on in our passage—

1. An elemental and existential need for water—as confirmed by v. 2
2. A disenchantment with the "Land" that they believe they have come to (v. 5)
3. A gross theological error about who (or Who) is leading them

Once the students have identified these three, they can create a causal chain of malaise (peeling the layers off the onion)—the lack of water opens up the wounds about the place, which in turns reveals a festering problem of belief.

E: Testing the hypothesis

If our students are right (and this entire process may have taken several days), then we should expect God's response to address the ultimate problem of belief; He does so (as we will discover forthwith) without sacrificing a solution to the most immediate problem of water. He directs Moses to act in such a way that belief in God's all-encompassing role in their deliverance, journeys and eventual destination would be confirmed.

The command to take the staff implies that Moses should use it to strike the rock (as Ibn Ezra argues, and based on the parallel story in Exodus 17); what are we to make of the directive *"ve-dibbartem el ha-sela."* Here again, the students' familiarity with the rest of Tanakh, their learning to focus only on the text (and suspend interpretive memories) and to read with anticipation will help. As there is no other occasion in all of Tanakh when anyone is commanded to speak to (and command) an inanimate object, the students may be willing to challenge the usual translation of the prepositional *el* and to read, rather *al* (once guided, using the concordance, dozens of examples where the two are interchanged) and read, rather, "speak *about* the boulder" and understand that Moses and Aaron were directed to speak to the people, in front of the rock, about that selfsame boulder. But what were they to say?

Once we recall the underlying crisis of faith that lies at the heart of our textual onion, the students may, of their own accord, come to the conclusion that Moses and Aaron were to use the rock as a way of showing the people that it was God, not they, who were directing the people's lives, feeding them, leading them and protecting them through the desert.

Our hypothesis, developed with the students, that the real cause of the crisis was the people's misconception about Moses and Aaron's role in their destiny, can now be substantiated and, at the very least, we can continue to use it as a tentative approach as we come to the denouement of the passage.

F: The "sin"

This is a wonderful opportunity to open up a discussion about leadership and the need for a shepherd to know his flock and for his communication skills to be apt for his following. What do we expect Moses to say at this point? "I will bring water from the rock, something no human can accomplish. Therefore, you all see that it is God Almighty who is protecting and leading us"….or something to that effect. Instead, Moses used the device of a rhetorical question to make his point *"ha-min ha-sela ha-zeh notzi lakhem mayim?*"—but a rhetorical question will only work if the intended audience knows how to interpret it. When a teen's mother declares "Do you call this a clean room?"—her son understands that she is calling it a mess—but if an immigrant has just moved in and she says the same thing—he may think that she is impressed with his work or even asking him what he thinks about the room.

Evidently, the new generation of Israelites didn't properly understand Moses' intent and his opportunity to inspire belief was lost—they could have been moved by his words to renew their belief in God, but instead (evidently) understood his words as anger, or defiance; either way, as confirmation of their belief in Moses as the "wizard" who was leading them.

The students, again guided to read the text carefully, will notice that Moses and Aaron were not punished with being condemned to die in the desert—but were stripped of their leadership. Read not *"lo tavo'u*"— you shall not come—rather *"lo tavi'u*"—you shall not lead; the inability to lead this new generation, evidenced by a communication gap between the old leader and the new community, necessitated a removal of Moses and Aaron from the helm of leadership.

Afterword

I have presented four models of instruction, each of which has ample representation in Jewish secondary schools; I have argued that the facilitator of skills and knowledge is the only one whose method and goals will generate interest, mastery and a love of the material—all of which spells the relevance that we always seek to engender in our students. The texts will speak to our students if we

teach the students to interact, in class, in *havruta* and alone—with the texts themselves.