Engaging Students with Torah Mi-Sinai: Creating Tanakh Curricula in Jewish High Schools

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Beth Kirshner Wiesenberg is the Chair of the Tanakh department at Ida Crown Jewish Academy in Chicago. She completed her teacher's training at Orot Israel College, and earned degrees in Judaic Studies and English from the Blitstein Institute of Hebrew Theological College. Beth has taught Tanakh to students in grades 4 through 12, and she considers herself fortunate to send new generations of Torah scholars and Jewish leaders into the world. Beth's current area of interest is Tanakh curriculum development that is meaningful to students in Orthodox High Schools.This article appears in issue 15 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

We recite the original command for Jewish education daily in the *Shema*: "You shall teach them diligently to your children and speak in them" (*Devarim* 6:7) … "and you shall teach them to your children" (*Devarim* 11:19). The Sages learned from these verses that parents are obligated to ensure that their children receive a Torah education, and if the parents are unable to personally provide this instruction, they must hire a teacher in their place. Shimon ben Shetah was the first to establish a mandatory elementary education system in Israel during the Second Temple era, and the success of this directive was ensured by Yehoshua ben Gamla, who installed teachers in every city for children ages six and older (*Bava Batra* 21a). Since then, establishing and maintaining Torah schools has been a mandate to Jewish communities as they are built and wherever they are established throughout the world. As the Talmud states, "The world stands on the breath of schoolchildren … Any city that does not have (a place of learning for) schoolchildren is destroyed" (*Shabbat* 119b).

As educators, we seek to inspire students to believe, yet we also encourage them to look critically at the texts with which they are engaged. The study of Tanakh in high school should be structured to make each student's experience meaningful and relevant, and to foster a connection to God and the Jewish people through study of divine words.

Our first teachers are our parents, from whom we learn by example what it means to be committed to Judaism. It is through extreme passion for, and commitment to, formal Jewish education that parents

enroll children in the Day School system. This system of education feels natural to the children, and that is the first key to the schools' success: Torah education is a given right to every Jewish child. This is the true meaning of the verse in *Devarim* 33:4, "*Torah tzivvah lanu Moshe, morashah kehillat Yaakov* – Moshe commanded the Torah to us as an inheritance for the Jewish people."

In preschool and early elementary school, students are taught to decipher and create letters in two languages, one that reads left to right while the other reads right to left. Students learn to give Hebrew names to things that they had, until now, only identified in English. Teachers during this stage provide the foundation for their students to become learners of Tanakh through exciting storytelling, which makes Torah vibrant and engaging. In upper elementary school, Tanakh learning skills begin through introduction to Hebrew root words and letters, prefixes and suffixes, and basic sentence structure. In the Chicago Day School system, the Humash curriculum moves from the more familiar stories contained in *Bereshit* and *Shemot* to the more complex ideas and laws through the Israelites' experience in the wilderness in *Bemidbar* and *Devarim*. As Humash teachers provide their students with skills to explore, and not just decipher and decode, biblical text, they must also give students the confidence in their own abilities to identify and solve problems; to ask questions, and to feel as if they will be able to find resolution.

Once students graduate from their respective Day Schools, then, it is assumed that they possess the skills they need for continuing their Torah education. But to ensure that these skills are actually put into use, we need to design a high school Tanakh curriculum that both challenges and inspires the next generation of Jews (though, of course, a skill-building agenda in text and *parshanut*—classical interpretation—persists). While some students choose to dedicate time after high school at yeshivot, seminaries, or programs in Israel to focus exclusively on Torah study, for many students, this is their last opportunity to study Tanakh in a formal, structured classroom as they graduate and move on to secular universities. Both of these groups must rely on their own motivation and acquired skills to continue their pursuit of Torah study once it is no longer essential to maintaining their GPA; it is therefore the job of Jewish high schools to build upon the foundations of skills and knowledge laid for students in elementary school and to foster love for learning Torah in its own right.

The modern Jewish high school serves as the bridge between a sheltered Day School life and the realities of a world in which graduates must face multiple perspectives with clarity and conviction. It is for us, as educators and administrators, to determine what will be the most effective and important planks to include in building that bridge. When conducting a Tanakh curriculum review, each school makes choices based on its theological and educational philosophies, and on the needs of its student body. When my school's committee set to work on the courses we had in place, we questioned whether each class was fulfilling our stated mission of "inspiring *b'nei* and *b'not* Torah to thrive in the modern world." We found many reasons to be proud of what we were accomplishing; our courses were challenging, and some were innovative. However, we were concerned when we did not necessarily see our students connecting with the texts they studied. Upon investigation we realized that part of the reason for this was that they lacked fluency and perspective in the story of Tanakh. With that as our goal, we evaluated each *sefer* (biblical book) that had been included and that we felt should be included. We rearranged course structure at each grade level and selected units within each *sefer* that would have greater relevance to our students. We created a four-year continuum that shows students that the books of Tanakh create a picture of our history, and we hope that, when they have completed their course of study, our students will have gained increased textual and analytical skills while also seeing their place within that history.

Administration members must look not only at the course of study, but also at the role of the high school Tanakh teacher, which continues to evolve with each generation of learners. Successful implementation of any curriculum requires the support of faculty, and continuing education for all teachers is essential to establishing universal standards among staff. One curriculum model recommended by Dr. Jeffrey Glanz was developed by Ralph Tyler in 1949. "[This] model is practical in the sense that principals can work with teachers to establish curriculum goals that can then be translated into instructional objectives. Through curriculum development, teachers identify learning activities to provide students with meaningful learning experiences."[1] There are some teachers who

feel their job is primarily to provide a good feeling about Judaism in general, and they use the text to segue into personal homiletics rather than focusing on textual interpretation and analysis. Other teachers view their classes as being just another course of study, and they either teach text dispassionately or, at the other extreme, are relentless in drilling memorization and dissection of words without imparting meaning. Neither ideology is effective in a Torah classroom. Our students are not passive recipients of knowledge. We cannot, and should not, expect them to take whatever we teach them and accept it without question. Indeed, the entire structure of the Oral Law, beginning with the Talmud and continuing through written commentaries on Tanakh and halakha, center around *shakla ve-tarya*—a debate of details in the text. Jewish students should be encouraged to ask questions when they are not satisfied with the text at hand. The Mishna states, "*lo ha-bayshan lamed*"—one who is embarrassed to ask questions will not learn (*Avot* 2:5). It is our imperative to create a classroom environment in which students are encouraged to debate and question what they learn until it makes sense to them. Students do not have to agree with everything they learn, but they should understand and appreciate multiple perspectives on what we teach them. When teachers are involved in the changes to curriculum, they are more likely to create the classroom climate necessary to engage students.

Chicago's Jewish elementary Day Schools teach the books of Tanakh in sequential order. Humash begins with *Bereshit* in first or second grade and finishes in eighth grade with *Devarim*. Logically, then, one might assume that high school Humash classes would re-start the cycle with a new look at *Bereshit*, through which students can ease into learning at the high school level with familiar stories, and then continue to learn the subsequent books in order. Indeed, many schools follow this model. However, even at the ninth grade level, there is a depth to *Bereshit*, especially to *parshiyot Bereshit* and *Noah*, that cannot be uncovered with 14-year-old students. Although they may be capable of learning complex ideas and debating morality theoretically, they lack the maturity and awareness to understand and internalize it practically. Because of this, schools that study *Bereshit* with freshmen often avoid those *parshiyot* and begin instead with the stories of Avraham and Sarah at the end of *parashat Noah* or the beginning of *Lekh-Lekha*. By doing so, students are deprived of any opportunity in their formal education to delve into the mysteries of creation from the Torah's perspective. Even in studying the stories of the forefathers and foremothers, freshmen are unable to truly obtain the insight into the characters' lives and relationships with God, each other, and the people around them in a meaningful way; in the words of Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, "to discover the ways in which life and text inform each other."[2] Dr. Leon Kass also writes that studying *Bereshit* as adults "invite[s] our active participation in a world larger than our own. We are drawn into the stories only to discover there a profundity not hitherto available to us. When we analyze, ponder, and discuss the text and when we live with its stories, the enduring text comes alive, here and now. We … are offered a chance to catch a glimpse of possibly timeless and transcendent truth about … whatever matter the text has under consideration."[3] As the book in which students can connect so much of the material to their personal lives, and as the source of a great deal of unexplored textual depth, it makes sense that *Bereshit* be learned by seniors who are more emotionally and intellectually mature.

Many schools would agree that their Humash curricula should include full-year studies of *Shemot*, which, Ramban writes, begins the fruition of God's promise to the forefathers,[4] and *Devarim*, which contains, among other things, a review and explanation of *mitzvot* and Moshe's final charge to the Jewish people. However, *Vayikra* is the *sefer* of Humash, aside from *Bereshit*, that creates the most pedagogical questions. It deals heavily with the laws of *korbanot*, sacrifices, the reasons for which, according to Nehama Leibowitz, we do not understand in the absence of the *Bet ha-Mikdash*, the Temple.[5] It is a shame to completely omit *Vayikra* from the curriculum, though, as there are tremendous lessons in other sections, including *parashat Kedoshim*, which has so many well-known laws and practical applications. Additionally, one may gain from studying the story of Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon who died after bringing an erroneous offering at the dedication of the *Mishkan* in what my teacher, Rabbi Michael Myers, calls "the 9/11 tragedy of the generation in the *midbar*." Since we only have four years of high school, it does not make sense to take up an entire year of study with *Vayikra*; it is best paired with another *sefer*. *Bemidbar* makes the most sense for this,

both chronologically and thematically.

Determining Humash curricula predicated on what we have discussed so far gives us several options. Schools may choose to review the story of Humash chronologically, with one year each dedicated to *Bereshit*, *Shemot*, *Vayikra-Bemidbar*, and *Devarim*. Another curriculum model is for the entire school to learn the same *sefer* at the same time on rotation. The latter creates unity and a sense of camaraderie in the school's learning and prevents faculty from becoming stagnant in their teaching, but at the cost of anyone becoming experienced at teaching a particular content. In both of these designs, where seniors are not studying *Bereshit* as their primary *sefer* of focus, it behooves the administration to consider adding a seminar for seniors on issues in *Bereshit*, or to dedicate part of senior year to an exploration of under-learned and misunderstood passages. The model that best supports learning the greatest number of units in each *sefer* would have freshmen learning *Shemot*, sophomores tackling *Vayikra-Bemidbar*, juniors studying *Devarim*, and seniors doing an enhanced *Bereshit* course.

Nakh can be the harder part of the program in which to set the curriculum just because of the number of *sefarim* that can be included. Many students who attended Day Schools learned the *sefarim* of early *nevi'im* beginning in third or fourth grade with *Yehoshua* and finishing with *Melakhim* in eighth. In theory this would allow the high schools to go straight into learning the later *nevi'im* and the *ketuvim*; however, unless the stories are reiterated over time, it is unlikely that students will remember a narrative that was learned up to nine years earlier. The question becomes each school's goal in teaching Nakh. Where the school's focus is to be innovative and to introduce students to the most diverse *sefarim*, the options are tremendous. In such cases administrators tend to create themes based on authorship or time period, such as "the writings of Shelomo" or "books of the exile," and they must consider whether students will relate more to the prophecies of Habakkuk or the dreams of Daniel. If the school's primary goal is that its students graduate knowing the story of Tanakh, they should have a review of early *nevi'im* while simultaneously delving into the later *nevi'im* and *ketuvim*. Examples include learning the story of Ruth, which takes place in the time of *Shofetim*; studying *perakim* of *Tehillim* when learning about the troubles and triumphs of David in *Shemuel*; and reading the attempts of Yonah to avoid helping the enemy of the kingdom of Yisrael, and the exhortations of Yirmiyahu and his personal experience with the people and kings of Yehudah while learning of the downfall of these kingdoms in *Melakhim*. This program of studying Nakh adds greater depth and perspective to the earlier texts. Older students would also benefit from the practical wisdom imparted in *Mishlei* and *Kohelet*, whose messages lead to discussions on Jewish philosophy and the timeless question of humanity's role in this world.

When properly implemented, the experience of learning Torah in a strong Jewish high school program will send our students into the world with a greater knowledge of the story of Tanakh: where we come from, who we were, who we are because of it, and how to apply these lessons to our lives. In developing a curriculum for learning Tanakh, each school must choose the proper *sefarim* for each grade level and appropriate *perakim* and units within each *sefer* and at each level that will both motivate and challenge students. It is our goal to foster a connection to the books of God and the Jewish people, and to inspire Jewish youth to remain dedicated to their heritage, to become leaders within their communities, and to feel they are part of the legacy of our forefathers and foremothers, not just as links in a chain of transmission, but as contributors to Torah and its practice, *le-hagdil Torah u-le-ha'adirah*.

Notes

[1] Jeffrey Glanz, "Improving Instructional Quality in Jewish Day Schools and Yeshivot: Best Practices Culled from Research and Practices in the Field," New York, 2012, 60.

[2] Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995), xi.

[3] Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 19.

[4] Ramban, Introduction to *Sefer* Shemot.

[5] Nehama Leibowitz, *Iyyunim Hadashim be-Sefer Vayikra* (Israel: *HaSokhnut HaYehudit*), 9.