Bringing the Distant Near or Making the Ancient Contemporary

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The title of this article cuts to the core of the Jewish educator's eternal challenge. How are we to make ancient texts come alive for today's students? If our mission is, as we broadly maintain, to facilitate the literacy of the next generation, then we need to attend to three goals. We must equip our charges with the skills needed to become independent learners, with the base of knowledge that can qualify them as Jewishly literate, and with the passion to become life-long students of Torah.

To that end, there have been three broad curricular directions taken in the past half century of student-driven education. These include the two poles of the approachability spectrum, with a third occupying a wide middle space. It may be best to exemplify this range via a midrashic question asked about the relationship between God and downtrodden humans. The Gemara (BT *Sotah* 5b) commenting on the phrase in Isaiah 57:15, "*v'et daka ushephal rua'h"* ("with one who is of a contrite and humble spirit"), cites a dispute between R. Huna and R. Hisda as to whether it means that God humbles God's self, so to speak, to reside with the meek—or whether God raises the contrite to join God on high.

This dichotomy can be seen in the choices made regarding the text chosen for that most valued component of yeshiva education—Talmud. Some directors or teachers will select a tractate such as *Berakhot*, *Ta'anit*, *Megillah,* or *Pesahim* (typically the last chapter) to make the daily grind of Gemara "meaningful" and "relevant" to the students, insofar as the material speaks to their own religious practice, whether daily, seasonal, or annual. It is prudent to note that these choices inevitably bring their own challenges to the "relevance" doctrine, as each of these popular tractates contains long and difficult aggadic passages that are abstruse and inaccessible to the students, as well as numerous halakhic topics that are well out of the reach of our contemporary students.

Some will take this approach one step further, developing "topic-based" curricula which select passages from various tractates, including discussions about abortion, privacy, and other hot-button issues. This strategy is, to wit, God lowering God's self, so to speak, to reside with the downtrodden.

There is a small but identifiable tendency to choose a text that has no contemporary relevance and speaks to no practical aspect of the students' lives. A teacher may choose to teach a specific chapter (such as the first seven chapters of *Yoma*) or even a tractate (such as *Zevahim*) that has no contemporary practicum. The thinking behind this choice is that there is a purity involved in studying something which is completely theoretical, an opportunity to study for study's sake (*lishmah*) and a chance to teach without the clutter of "that's not what we do at home/in my synagogue." There may even be a subtle Messianism involved in such a choice. This approach as the mirror to the first, is God elevating the downtrodden to an august and lofty perch, to join God on high.

The mainstream has traditionally staked out a middle ground between the two, hovering close to earth without touching down. The common courses of study in yeshivot have been *Nezikin(Bava Kama, Bava Metzia, Bava Batra*), along with the four major tractates of *Nashim* (*Yevamot, Ketubot, Gittin,* and *Kiddushin*). Although many of the discussions in these tractates are removed from the daily life of our contemporary students, the legal principles that underlie the various rulings are accessible, and students are readily motivated to find contemporary applications. For instance, it is safe to assume that most yeshiva students—at any point in their secondary education—have had no direct experience with cisterns, oxen, or donkey-rentals. Nor will they comfortably relate to a society so resource-poor that a legal squabble over the rights to an animal's dung is on the legal docket. Yet, the concepts that can be inferred as underlying the halakhot affecting these (currently) exotic cases are readily applicable to practical and everyday cases in the students' lives. There is good reason for this being the optimal choice, backed up by over 200 years of yeshiva curriculum. As R. Yishmael avers (m. *Bava Batra* 10:17) "One who wants to become wise should engage in the study of *Nezikin*, as there is no greater discipline in the Torah, and it is like a flowing spring." The conceptual foundations suggested by the medieval commentators and the intricate analyses of the brilliant minds of the last four centuries bear witness to the centrality of these tractates to the ongoing process of Gemara.

To the teacher of Tanakh, all of this sounds like an otherworldly luxury.

Admittedly, there are any number of narratives in Tanakh that can spur discussion about contemporary ethics and values. The *Akedah,* Binding of Isaac, (Gen. 22:1–19) is a case in point; much ink has been spilt around that momentous event and its import for allegiance, obedience, family, and morality. One cannot, however, compare the intensity of text study that invariably accompanies such discussions with the rigorous text study of certain talmudic discussions that flower into exciting debates about claims and credibility. With some notable exceptions, values-driven discussions about scenes, major and minor, in Tanakh usually lack attention to the many disciplines that inform "*peshat*" study—i.e., philology, anthropology, the *sitz im leben,* and so forth. It is as if the text can *either* be studied analytically, with a systematic review of the relevant commentators and with a nuanced introduction of modern disciplines—*or* it can be a homiletically oriented lesson or discussion about meaning.

Both the rigorous textual as well as the homiletic approach have their place, as evidenced by the midrashic literature that sits, side-by-side, with the talmudic tomes on many a Jewish bookshelf. A

darshan, whose job is to inspire, move, cajole, console, or rebuke, will likely resort to the latter approach. Yet a Tanakh teacher who endeavors to accomplish those three lofty goals adumbrated above—skills, breadth, and passion—cannot indulge in this mode often.

So, asks the teacher of Tanakh, how do I raise the student up to the text, rather than lowering the text to the student?

I believe that this seemingly daunting challenge is within reach of a committed educator. The strategies for bringing the student and the text together will vary by genre. Teaching narrative is a more accessible task than teaching poetry, lamentation, or prophetic rhetoric; yet each of these can be met with success.

For the purposes of this article, I will share a few strategies utilized when teaching the Dothan scene in the Joseph story (his being cast into the pit and his eventual sale to the Midianites). I will also present several exercises I use when teaching a narrative in *Sefer Shofetim*. Some of the tactics I will sketch out are native to narrative and can hardly be translated for use with other genres, while others are universal.

Many narratives are immediately made more accessible by prefacing the study with either a frontal presentation or a reading/viewing (depending on the age and sophistication of the students) of information about the world of Tanakh that touches on that particular story. For instance, reading about the slave trade in the ancient world helps illuminate the story of Joseph and his brothers and bring it into a more familiar light. Along with that, a brief study of the topography of Dothan (with tools such as Google maps) will make the route of the caravan of Ishmaelites clearer and bring the student into a more personal relationship with that story. That is helpful and, surprisingly, can sometimes illuminate some Midrashim and comments of the Rishonim (medieval commentators).

A more consistent and accessible strategy that consistently works is to ask each student to become a “fly on the wall” of the scene and note what they see, what each character seems to be aware of and, more critically, what each character doesn’t know. This is, parenthetically, one of the most common pitfalls that prevents an accurate and sympathetic reading of the narrative. The reader is as omniscient as the author (or Author) wishes the reader to be and is often too blinded by the knowledge of what each character is thinking to remember that the other characters do not know that—they haven’t yet read the story in which they star.

I will often stop in the middle of teaching a narrative and ask the students to imagine themselves standing somewhere between Judah and Reuben (in our example) and tell the class what they see, what they hear, what they know and what they *think they know*. Are the brothers eating their meal at the side of the cistern or a distance away? (Here’s where topographic maps help demonstrate where they were, as they could not have seen the caravan from the foothill where the cistern is located.) Was Joseph aware of his brothers’ violent intentions as he nears them? Which of the brothers are there in Dothan at the time? Encouraging their presence on the scene allows them—gives them social permission, so to speak—to leave their twenty-first century environs and enter, if only in the shadows, the second millennium bce and become part of the story, if only as a passive onlooker. This generates an identification with the story and can, in turn, motivate serious analysis of the text, looking for nuances and for helpful guidance from the classical commentators to enhance the student’s

presence around that cistern.

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The story of Samson is exciting, rambunctious, and filled with surprises—yet is a challenge to teach as anything but escapist fantasy. If the teacher focuses on the incredible, such as a mortal tearing a lion apart "just like one would tear up a goat(!)" or of his lifting the gates of Gaza and bringing them up to Hebron, then the story remains hopelessly distant from the student. If the teacher chooses to direct the class's attention to the legalistic challenges brought up by the protagonist's quasi-Nazirite status or his marriage to a Philistine woman, this still leaves the student out in the cold relative to the warm, exciting, and invigorating text of *Shofetim*.

One successful strategy is to have the student shadow Samson and his parents, from his request of them to arrange his marriage with the Philistine enemy, through their two journeys south to Timnah and culminating at the wedding feast. Instead of frontally presenting the text to the students, get them engaged in the "real world" of pre-monarchic Israel.

For example, ask them to identify local customs and traditions that they can infer from the story. They ought to be able to conclude that it was common practice in the region to have a wedding feast and that that feast lasts for a week. This observation could then be confirmed and supported by a similar story in Haran, over 500 miles to the north and over 500 years in the past, when Jacob celebrated with Leah for seven days and only then was allowed to marry Rachel. This will also generate a new awareness for many of them that these practices (which many of them will recognize from their own family's celebrations) are not uniquely Jewish. They may also recognize that it was expected that a groom would have his own entourage and failing that, a group of 30 groomsmen would be provided by the local community of the bride's family. In addition, the entertaining game of posing riddles and betting on the success of the riddler at wedding feasts (or, perhaps, festive gatherings in general) could be identified as a local custom. This engages students in careful reading of the text while encouraging them to build out from the text to a larger understanding of the society and community that form the backdrop of our narrative.

Another way to invest the students in the narrative is to pose a challenge and have them gather clues to solve the problem via a careful reading of the text. To take another example from the Samson narrative, ask the students whether Samson, from a *peshat* reading of the text, was banned from drinking wine. The astute learner will recall that his mother was prohibited from drinking wine and that the only "Nazirite" prohibition on Samson explicitly noted by the angel in the annunciation scenes (Judges ch. 13) was getting his hair cut. Parenthetically, this is a great opening for the teacher to have the students open up Numbers 6 and to identify the three areas of prohibition affecting a Nazir and comparing it with the story of Samson. Instead of this being just another text (and more homework or testable material), it becomes part of a puzzle that the students are unearthing; it is the challenge that turns them from passive listeners to invested stakeholders.

When the parents accompany Samson to Timnah, they mysteriously separate at the vineyards of Timnah. This separation proves to be vital to the story, as it leaves Samson alone to barehandedly

kill the lion. Then, upon their return to Timnah for the wedding, they evidently separate again and Samson is again alone in that same location, setting up the famous riddle of the lion and the honey. Again, it is only by imagining oneself in that vineyard that the student notices that the parents are not there—but Samson is there. Perhaps the students may conclude that this "Nazirite of God" was not banned from drinking wine, which can provoke a discussion about the multivocality of words (such as *nazir*) in Tanakh.

In sum, there are numerous strategies available to the teacher which can potentially spark interest and creativity among the students. This can lead—and I have seen it lead—to a self-generated interest in studying Tanakh in-depth and learning to master that Book of Books. There is, however, one caveat to all of this. The teacher who facilitates this type of engagement *must* be passionate about Tanakh and personally delight in constantly discovering new treasures between the lines of the Bible. Passion is contagious and students can become joyfully infected and on their way to becoming that life-long learner of Tanakh.