Jewish Text Engaging with Our Students’ Souls

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By Nancy Rosen

When asked to share an important lesson from the biblical account of Creation, adults often answer, “It’s a children’s story!” But, if you ask an eighth grader at The Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Hartford, she might answer you, speaking in God’s voice: “I tried to create a world with imperfections, that throughout time would evolve, creating more imperfections, while fixing some. That is why I started the world incomplete because with completion there is no evolution.” Such a reflection is the result of an intentional, collaborative journey that our faculty
is taking in order to guide our students to connect, engage, and contribute to sacred conversations.

At our school, we aim to graduate knowledgeable Jews who are at home with Tanakh – and we strive for much more. Success, for us, is our alumni armed with a toolbox of strategies, as well as a passion for lifelong learning that will enable them to independently explore biblical text well beyond their years in our building. They are critical thinkers who question, challenge, and dive deeply into a text to discover the treasure that is the Tanakh, to discover 70-plus faces of Torah. They connect to Tanakh not as a relic of the past, but rather as a living text that has as much to teach us today as it did a few thousand years ago.

Much like our eighth-grader’s view of creation, our approach to the study of Tanakh is also an evolving, ongoing process. Our journey began with the adoption of the MaToK curricular approach to teaching text. This was our first stop in our pursuit to give our students the skills and knowledge they need to independently read, understand, and interpret the biblical text. Today, our third graders begin to analyze new sections of text in havruta within weeks of beginning Torah study. In the grades that follow, students continue to further develop those all-important skills, key to independent access to our sacred texts.

We knew that access to text was just their first step. Having found a solid approach to helping students gain independent reading skills, we were able to turn our attention to deepening our students’ connection to Tanakh through a standards-based approach to teaching and learning with the support of the Legacy Heritage Instructional Leadership Institute, a program of the Davidson School’s Leadership Commons.

To understand the power of this approach, consider a cross-country train trip. Traveling nonstop to reach our destination, the scenery will fly by in a blur. However, should we choose to narrow our focus to a few handpicked locations, we will have the opportunity to explore each site, discovering the beauty inherent in each. It is much the same in Tanakh. With a clear vision of our goal, as a faculty we chose standards that align with our school’s mission and that allow our students to take an intentional trip through the Tanakh with particular goals leading the way. Now, as a faculty, we study each text together, sharing our various perspectives and planning the itinerary that results in an enriching, memorable journey for our students. In building each unit, we deliberately choose the “stops on our trip” so that students have time to “visit” and become strongly connected to events and characters, including their moments of courage and moments of weakness.

In designing our approach, we create a space for our students to connect to the text as unique individuals and as members of the Jewish people whose stories are contained within the Tanakh. As close readers of the text, they uncover values such as compassion, kindness, and responsibility, as demonstrated by a student, who shared this insight on the Burning Bush text, from the book of Shemot (Exodus): “Sometimes in life, you have to do hard things to make others’ lives easier.”

Integral to the study of Tanakh is the opportunity that our students have to act on these lessons and values. At the conclusion of the Bereishit (Genesis) unit in which they focus on our
responsibility for the world in partnership with God, our third-grade students choose avenues for community service. Past projects have included raking leaves at a group home for the developmentally different and making sandwiches for the homeless. Throughout the school year, in cooperation with the student council, our students support school-wide tzedakah initiatives such as Giving Tuesday, collecting food for the local food pantries and toiletries for teens at risk, and raising funds to help a hurricane-ravaged classroom in Houston. In each case, our students clearly understand the direct connection between text and action.

In addition, we give them the space to explore a relationship with God, with the understanding that this is a fluid relationship that will continually morph throughout their lives. Pondering God’s connection to people, a student wrote (assuming the voice of God), “I think my relationship with people is like no other. I know that I am there for them, but it is a complicated relationship. They can neither hear nor see me, and because of that, they question my existence. I created the world, and it started out as a blank canvas. I draw in the lines, and it is their turn to paint the world and make it their own, with some of my guidance.”

This approach beckons all of our students to find their places in Tanakh, whether their learning style is a straight road or whether their paths take the long way around. Our students now grapple with the Torah, Prophets, and Writings in a way that we never would have imagined, diving into the text, turning it over and over, discovering their places in the text and where the text touches their souls.

With great joy, we anticipate the beautiful canvas that our students will paint, enriched by their questions, insights, kindness, and compassion. It will indeed by a stunning work of art.

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