

Searching for Rabbinic Texts in a Jewish Early Childhood Center

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I've argued that the teaching of rabbinics [begins sooner than you might think](#). How would early childhood educators respond to my theories? I went on the road to find out.

Recently, I spent two days with the faculty of a Jewish early childhood center in a Jewish day school, to launch their participation in the [Legacy Heritage Instructional Leadership Institute](#) Rabbinics Initiative, a project of the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary. One of the consultation's goals was to raise teachers' awareness of the ways in which rabbinics was already a part of their curriculum.

From the onset, teachers had some reservations about the notion that they were teaching, or were teachers of, rabbinics. That they were teaching in a Jewish school whose curriculum was shaped by Jewish values, the Jewish calendar and Jewish practices was apparent, yet faculty shared a commonly held assumption that the starting point for the study of rabbinics begins when a book from the rabbinic canon is placed in front of students.

There is a certain logic to this assumption. Because, for the most part, we encounter the rabbis – and their stories, thoughts, ideas, and values – through texts, we equate the discipline of rabbinics with the study of rabbinic literature. Because rabbinic literature is often complex and, due to its language and logical structure, can be challenging to learn, we wait until students have acquired the appropriate skills and intellectual maturity before we engage them in the study of rabbinic texts.

Yet, while rabbinic texts might be absent from the early childhood environment, rabbinic literature has significant influence over many of the topics in the curriculum. Jewish early childhood programs, therefore, do teach rabbinics.

In an attempt to bring this to the attention of the faculty, I asked teachers to participate in a classroom walkthrough protocol. Teachers were asked to observe two different classrooms (not their own) for seven minutes each.

During their walkthrough, teachers were asked to look for evidence (explicit and implicit) of the school's Judaic studies curriculum, and to record each item that they noticed in a short phrase or sentence.

In planning this activity, I anticipated that teachers would take note of a variety of things that pointed to the school's Jewish culture and curriculum. I imagined that some, but not all, could be identified as rabbinics, including items that had both rabbinic and non-rabbinic elements.

For example, a poster depicting a variety of foods labeled with the appropriate blessings to recite before eating them is rabbinic because the rabbis developed the formula for blessings and the specific language of individual ones; and, the blessings first appear in the Talmud, a rabbinic text. A poster with the words to *Hatikvah*, the Israeli national anthem, would be an example of something that is part of the Judaic studies curriculum in the school, but not rabbinic.

A *mezuzah* on the door to a classroom is a combination of rabbinic and non-rabbinic, as the commandment to affix a *mezuzah* to the doorpost is biblical; however, the specific regulations about how to hang it were developed in the rabbinic era. It is interesting to note that, technically, there is no rabbinic requirement to hang a *mezuzah* in a school, because no one resides there; yet, many Jewish schools hang *mezuzot* on their doorposts nonetheless.

My hope was that this activity would lead to an interesting post-walkthrough discussion that would help us formulate some useful definitions of what the study of rabbinics was and would raise awareness that rabbinics was already a part of the school's curriculum.

Following the walkthroughs, the teachers were asked to sort all of the recorded descriptions into five categories:

- practices and rituals
- ideas and concepts
- values
- stories and narratives
- other.

My intent was to help the teachers construct an advanced organizer to help them identify things that are found both in their classrooms and in rabbinic texts. I assumed that later on, as we studied rabbinic texts together, we would repeat the exercise, "walking through" a particular text instead of the classroom and then consider how the practices, ideas, values and stories that we encountered in that text could be brought into the classroom.

As anticipated, teachers returned from their walkthroughs with a pile of notes identifying an array of artifacts and activities that they had observed. They entered the conference room to find the categories posted on the walls and were given the instruction to begin categorizing the data. It was at this moment where something unanticipated emerged.

Many of the teachers began to follow the directions and assign their notes to one category or another. A number of them paused, perused the categories a second, and perhaps a third, time, and said something like "Hmm, I see where this is going here, but these are not the categories I would have chosen," or "I think I did this wrong, the things I wrote down don't fit into these categories," or "I don't think about what goes on in my classroom in this way."

As I checked in with the teachers who made these comments, they said that rather than separating the rabbinic from non-rabbinic and sorting the rabbinic into categories, it would be more useful for us to identify the “texts” of the early childhood classroom, the ways in which children interacted with them and the ways in which teachers set up their classrooms to facilitate the students’ encounter with them.

When we debriefed the walkthrough experience, I shared the comments that I had overheard with the group and asked them to reflect together about what would have been more useful categories for them.

They suggested the following:

- classroom environment,
- materials and manipulatives,
- dramatic play,
- classroom routines and rituals
- interactions and relationships
- art
- books.

As we processed this experience and thought about the differences between my list of categories and theirs, we arrived at a new way of thinking about bringing rabbinic literature to the early childhood classroom.

In searching for rabbinics in early childhood education, I attempted to organize the content of rabbinic texts that could be studied by teachers and then integrated into classroom learning. I thought this would be useful to teachers as they explored how to bring rabbinic texts into the classroom. This approach did not align with the ways in which they were used to thinking about the planning of classroom activities.

As the faculty articulated, in their classrooms it is the artifacts, the performance of rituals and the dramatic play centers that are the “texts” that engage their students in the learning of rabbinics.

As this became clear, it helped the teachers become more comfortable with the notion that they were teachers of rabbinics. They were already aware that their classrooms were meant to be open environments in which their role, in part, was to provision the classroom in ways that would encourage students to engage with the artifacts that they encountered, spark their curiosity, and shape investigations that would lead to new understandings of the world in which they lived. What emerged from our work was the idea that by studying rabbinic literature, the faculty could enhance the classroom environment and provide a richer array of materials for their students to explore.

Through our deliberation, we discovered rabbinics in the early childhood classroom and noticed that the texts that students encounter come in many different forms. Looking forward, I am eager to explore how engaging the faculty in the study of texts in their traditional form will help them

to design learning centers and provocations that draw deeply from rabbinic literature and deepen their students' encounters with rabbinics.

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