How We Learn Is What We Learn

ALLISON COOK AND DR. ORIT KENT

Let us listen closely to what voices of Jewish wisdom teach us about learning:

- Each human being is created *bitzolam elokeym* (in the image of God). Each of us is immeasurably valuable in our own singularity (Gen. 1:27, JT Sanhedrin 37a).

- The entire community of Israel, through every generation, received the Torah (Shemot Rabbah 28, Midrash Tanhuma Nitzavim).

- Each person heard the Torah according to their particular capacity, in their own language (Talmud Shabbat 88b, Pesikta d’Rav Kahane, 12).

- The Torah isn’t sustained by one who studies on their own (Taanit 7a), and the Shekhinah (God’s emanation on earth) resides when we study in community (Shabbat 63a).

These sources, especially when we weave them together, offer profound instruction for Jewish education to meet the needs of our generation and to ensure that both Jews and Torah may flourish and thrive. From these teachings we learn that each person, in their particularity, possesses Torah that only that person can reveal, as shaped by their unique capacities, languages, and experiences. It is no wonder then that tradition teaches that learning in relationship with others becomes the ideal site of connection with Torah and God. When we learn together, we expand understanding of Torah beyond our personal horizons into new insights and implications for living as individuals and in a covenantal community. In order to thrive, people and Torah need one another to reveal and be revealed in mutual fullness. This ideal posits that through relationships grounded in mutual accountability, we will flourish. Thus, these sources represent not only core content—the “what”—of a Jewish education but they illuminate the “why” and guide us in the “how” of Jewish learning.

For Jewish educators, the work of designing and facilitating educational experiences must be guided by such an ideal, that learning should be centered around individual expression brought into relationship with others and with Torah in such a way that all of these participants, Torah included, need one another to grow and thrive. In this way we align the “why” of Jewish learning with the method. In the Pedagogy of Partnership, our Jewish professional development organization, we call this relational mode of partnership learning, “interpretive learning.” This mode is distinct from factual learning or personalization learning.¹

The factual mode of learning is characterized by questions and activities that pursue one right answer that can be definitively pointed to in the text. In the factual mode, there is a concrete right and wrong. Learners can get inside the details of what a text says, memorize important textual facts, get the story or the law straight, and collect information. The factual mode is all about the text; it is not about the reader. Factual activities do not draw on or require the particularity of a learner’s individual experiences or reading of a text because the answers to factual questions will remain the same no matter who is looking for them. In Jewish education today, in many contexts, the factual mode remains a core goal and at the core of learning activities. In these contexts, learners are accountable to the content.

In contrast, the personalization mode is all about the individual. Questions and activities that animate personalization learning privilege individual expression and may use text or Jewish content as a springboard

¹ The work of the Great Books Foundation provides one of the bases of this distinction that we are drawing. See for example, *An Introduction to Shared Inquiry*, 4th ed. Chicago: the Great Books Foundation, 1999.
for personal reflection and sharing, but the learning activity quickly leaves the text behind. To respond to a personalization question, the learners need only look into their own opinions, judgments, and experiences to formulate their responses. In this mode learners are accountable to themselves. In many contexts in Jewish education, the personalization mode dominates the learning activity. Plenty of room is made for individual expression and opinion. Very little room remains for the voice of the text in its own integrity to be heard and considered deeply on its own terms or even in relationship to its readers’ experiences.

Both factual and personalization learning are indeed important in the mix of learning activities. Within the dominant cultural forces that shape our generation, however, it is too easy for Jewish education to be pulled in one direction or the other. Taken to the extreme, the domination of factual learning can have an alienating effect, leaving individuals to feel that there is no room for their humanity and particularity. On the other end of the spectrum, personalization learning feeds into narcissism such that students learn that they need not be accountable to others or to a tradition that, in its wisdom, beckons us to look outside of ourselves. Ironically, both of these modes are often practiced for the purpose of bringing people into relationship with Torah and yet alone, cannot sustain that relationship.

There is a third way, interpretive learning. Jewish wisdom points us toward this mode and models it within our textual tradition. Educators in any context can make this third mode more central to the “how” of Jewish education. Different from the factual mode, learners in the interpretive mode explore questions that are personally meaningful—thereby bringing themselves to the table—and the questions have multiple answers. But different from the personalization mode, the answers depend on both the text and people’s particular experiences and knowledge. The text will place boundaries on answers so that there are wrong answers and those that are more compelling than others based on the evidence one brings to bear from the content. At the same time, each person may notice something different in the text and may pursue a different line of discovery based upon their personal framework. Furthermore, in interpretive learning, learners work in conjunction with other learning partners to discover much richer and deeper learning than they would if focused only on what was meaningful to them. In the work of interpreting, learners must draw upon their own views, questions, and voices while simultaneously honoring those of the text and their human learning partners.

In other words, interpretive learning holds learners and Torah in relationship. In order to convert fixed words into living ideas, or expression into meaning, the Torah needs human partners to notice it, wonder about it, grapple with it, and appreciate it. In turn, individuals need the text to invite them, through its complexity, beauty, difficulties, and sacredness, into new horizons of understanding and growth—intellectually, ethically, and spiritually. And finally, individuals need one another, with their different insights, in order to shed light on the text’s meanings and to support and challenge one another to stay accountable to all of the participants in the learning encounter.

Learning in the interpretive mode teaches us that to thrive, we each must bring something particular to the task of making meaning of Torah and of the world around us. At the same time, it teaches us that we also are in need of others to stretch our thinking, go beyond the self, and hold ourselves, one another, and Torah itself accountable in a dynamic state of responsiveness to one another. Our mutual accountability makes learning in the interpretive mode an act of ethical engagement.

Whether it be in text study, in our interactions in Jewish communal life, or beyond to the town square,

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For another discussion of this interpretive mode specifically in relationship to Tanakh education, see Allison Cook and Orit Kent, “Interpretive Experience as the Fulcrum of Tanakh Education.” Ha’Yidion (Summer 2012). 58–60.
Jewish education must focus deliberately on building the discrete skills and dispositions necessary for this interpretive engagement. It is not enough for these skills and dispositions to be in the hands of a few; they must be taught and made available to individuals of all ages. In the Pedagogy of Partnership we seek to do just this, because we believe that Jews and Judaism thrive in relationship and that how we learn is ultimately what we learn.

Allison Cook and Dr. Orit Kent are teacher-educators and researchers. They are the founders and co-directors of the research-based Pedagogy of Partnership (PoP), providing cutting-edge professional development to 21st-century educators.

PoP’s comprehensive model enables learners of all ages to develop the habits of wonder, empathy, and responsibility toward others and toward Torah. It also teaches learners concrete tools to improve their communication and interpretive skills and be better able to seek understanding, work collaboratively, and engage with Torah as an ongoing source of Jewish wisdom and instruction. For more information, visit www.hadar.org/pedagogy-partnership.