

## Thriving – A Textual Deep Dive

### *Session Two – Multivocal Nature of Jewish Texts*

***Textual Principle #2 – For my students to thrive, I must allow the text to speak in multiple voices and co-create meaning from the texts together with my students.***

#### ***I. What is Thriving?***

**Thriving:** is the product of the pursuit and engagement of an authentic life that brings inner joy and happiness through meeting goals, being connected with life passions and people, and relishing in accomplishments through the peaks and valleys of life.”

**Jewish Education That Leads to Thriving:** Jewish education that leads to thriving draws from mainstream scientific research and Jewish wisdom to allow learners to live a more meaningful, develop relationship-driven, and responsible life. Jewish Education that leads to thriving gives Jews the capacity to be the best possible versions of themselves and ensures that the learner is at the center of their own growth and learning. Thriving provides Jews with the tools to help bring about a more equitable and just world, and the tools to grapple with what does God ask from me? (The Jewish Education Project)

#### ***II. Jewish Text is Central to Thriving***

##### **1) Let’s Make the Early Rabbis Uncomfortable in Our Classrooms, Aaron Dorfman and Rabbi Ayalon**

###### **Eliach**

<https://www.jtsa.edu/hidden-page/an-outline-for-educating-for-applied-jewish-wisdom/>

Today, the world is changing at breakneck pace, but Jewish life and education are all too often built on a model of preservation rather than adaptation. We need to regain the sacred chutzpah of Joshua, the elders, the prophets, and the Members of the Great Assembly to rework Judaism, often in radical ways, so that it can continue to be a source of guidance in our lives. As Dr. Jonathan Woocher (ז”ל), founding president of Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah (LKFLT), put it, we must switch our guiding educational question from, “How can we keep Jews Jewish as they go through the process of embracing American life?” to “How can we help Jews find in their Jewishness resources that will help them live more meaningful, purposeful, and fulfilling human lives?” (*Reinventing Jewish Education for the 21st Century*, 2012)...

...When the Members of the Great Assembly and early Rabbis replaced sacrifice with prayer, they looked to the structure and function of the sacrificial cult for inspiration and guidance for creating new forms, without being beholden to the earlier ones. They were only able to draw on this wisdom because they committed to retaining, studying, reinterpreting, and drawing on the texts and praxis that preceded them. The scope of Jewish tradition is even larger today, but the lesson remains the same: interrogating the past offers unique perspectives for thinking about and designing the future...

...If the early Rabbis had just created the Talmud without an effective means of transmitting it, it’s unclear how successful their approach would have been. Part of what made their work so successful is that Jewish educators developed a pedagogy to accompany it: havruta learning. They realized that a multivocal text was best studied multivocally, and they popularized a form of dyad-learning to support that.

### III. Text is Multivocal

#### **2) Hermeneutics and Jewish Education Caryn Beth, Broitman, The Reconstructionist, Spring 2002, pp. 10 – 11, 16**

A moderate hermeneutics, represented best by Hans Gadamer in Truth and Method, “denies the possibility of an objective interpretation”. It denies the claim of conservative hermeneutics that we can overcome our historical limitations through the careful use of guidelines for reading; and it denies the claim of critical hermeneutics that we can overcome the limits of ideology by breaking false consciousness and establishing - a true consciousness. Not only are readers and writers of texts conditioned by their social and personal histories, language itself is. There is no sphere outside language, and inherent in language are limitations that preclude the communication of objective meaning. While language limits communication, however, it also enables it - through dialogue. Through dialogue, or conversation, we are able to achieve a "fusion of horizons," according to Gadamer. **The meaning of the text, therefore, lies in the meeting of the - reader and author (and the contexts that each brings with them). Each is transformed by the meeting, and each participates in creating that meaning.** Interpretation is not, as conservative hermeneutics claims, reproduction. It is production. Meaning is produced with the help of creativity, dialogue and openness on the part of both reader and text...

**When, therefore, we seek meaning in a text, the meaning is never fixed, but it is governed by what Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia." Heteroglossia insures the primacy of context over text.**

At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions - social, historical, meteorological, physiological - that will ensure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other condition. Who is reading the text is of course part of the conditions, and therefore is part of the text's meaning, not because of our subjectivity but because of the heteroglot reality of language.

#### **The Role of the Teacher**

In this context, we can say something about the role of the teacher. In adult education, some have argued that the teacher is a facilitator, while others have argued from a conservative hermeneutical position that she is an authority passing down knowledge. Within a moderate hermeneutic, the teacher is neither facilitator nor objective authority, but a partner in dialogue who brings to the exchange her knowledge and experience in interpreting the text and the learning process. The students are not equal to her in this regard. **She has something special to offer.**

**Nevertheless, she does not pass on objective knowledge to the students as much as produce meaning together with the students. In addition to dialogue with a classroom, the moderate hermeneutic points to dialogue within the text itself.**

### IV. The Value of Multivocality

#### **3) Dr. Ziva Hassenfeld - Why Jewish Day School**

<https://www.jewishboston.com/read/why-jewish-day-school/>

The traditional layout of the Hebrew Bible constantly reinforces the value of multiple interpretations, that Jewish learning approaches a text as fundamentally ambiguous and able to accommodate more than one “right” answer.

***This task of learning how to hold multiple interpretations is at the heart of Jewish learning and is the skill I value most in Jewish education.*** This skill, to listen carefully to what others say, ground your own beliefs in close reading and evidence and to remember that there are limitations to any position or worldview transfers “off” the page. It is a skill that comes into play when reading people, situations and contexts. When my kids spend half their day engaged in Jewish learning, they are not only learning their own history and culture but they are learning a way of thinking and reading that is a deep training in empathy and perspective-taking.

## V. Putting it into Practice!

### Protocol for Small Groups/Chavruath Learning (15 minutes)

1. Please introduce yourselves briefly - and share where you are coming from *in this moment*. (2 minutes each)
2. One of you should read the text from the Talmud below out loud – and then, spend some time as a pair discussing these questions:
  - What do you think the Talmud means by being flexible like a reed? Which of these characters is showing flexibility here? Which shows rigidity? Explain your answer using the text.
  - Please note that there are several places where the text is ambiguous about who the speaker is. Attempt to read the text in multiple ways – and address how your different reads would change the meaning of the text.
  - As you read and learn this text– please notice:
    - What previous ideas, assumptions, and opinions are coming up for you that are contributing to your understanding of the text?
    - How does your understanding of the text differ from your chavrutah's (learning partner's) understanding?
3. Now, you can give each other a virtual high five, express your gratitude, and we'll see you in the larger discussion!

### Background to the Talmud Text:

The following text is a section from the Talmud. This Tractate of the Talmud discusses the various rituals performed when there is a draught, and no rain has come. This story is found in a conversation regarding which character traits a person should be grounded in.

#### 4) Babylonian Talmud Tractate Ta'anit 20a-20b

Our Rabbis taught: A person should be flexible like a reed and not hard like the cedar.

It once happened that Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Shimon came from his Rabbi's house in *Migdal Gedor*, riding on a donkey, traveling by the river. He was extremely happy, very taken with himself after having learned so much Torah.

He came upon a very ugly man.

He said to him: "Shalom, Rabbi."

He did not return his greeting.

He said: "You are empty! How ugly that man is! Are all the people of your town ugly like you?"

He said: "I do not know, but why don't you go and tell the Craftsman who made me 'How ugly is this thing You have made!'"

When he himself realized that he had sinned, he got off his donkey and he bowed before him.

He said: I have spoken improperly to you. Forgive me!"

He said: I will not forgive you until you go and tell the Craftsman who made me 'How ugly is this thing You have made!'"

He followed him until he reached his town.

The townspeople came out to greet him, saying: Shalom, Rabbi, Rabbi! Master, Master!"

He said to them: "Who are you calling 'Rabbi, Rabbi'?"

They said: "This man, walking behind you."

#### תלמוד בבלי מסכת תענית דף כ עמוד א - ב

תנו רבנן: לעולם יהא אדם רך כקנה ואל יהא קשה כארוז. מעשה שבא רבי אלעזר ברבי שמעון ממגדל גדור מבית רבו, והיה רכוב על חמור ומטייל על שפת נהר, ושמה שמחה גדולה, והיתה דעתו גסה עליו מפני שלמד תורה הרבה.

נזדמן לו אדם אחד שהיה מכוער ביותר.

אמר לו: שלום עליך רבי!

ולא החזיר לו.

אמר לו: ריקה, כמה מכוער אותו האיש! שמא

כל בני עירך מכוערין כמותך?

אמר לו: איני יודע, אלא לך ואמור לאומן

שעשאני כמה מכוער כלי זה שעשית.

כיון שידע בעצמו שחטא ירד מן החמור

ונשתטח לפניו,

ואמר לו: נענית לך, מחול לי!

אמר לו: איני מוחל לך עד שתלך לאומן

שעשאני ואמור לו כמה מכוער כלי זה שעשית.

היה מטייל אחריו עד שהגיע לעירו.

יצאו בני עירו לקראתו, והיו אומרים לו: שלום

עליך רבי רבי, מורי מורי!

אמר להם: למי אתם קורין רבי רבי?

אמרו לו: לזה שמטייל אחריו.



He said to them: If this is a Rabbi, may there not be more like him in Israel!”  
They said to him “Why?”  
He said to them” “This is what he did to me...”  
They said to him ”Nevertheless, forgive him, for he is a great man of the Torah.”  
He said: “For your sakes, I will forgive him, on the condition that he not do this again.”  
Immediately, Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Shimon came in and taught: “A person should always be as bending as a reed, not as rigid as a cedar. Therefore has the reed merited to be used for the quills with which we write the Torah scroll, t’fillin (phylacteries) and mezuzot (scrolls of parchment).”

אמר להם: אם זה רבי - אל ירבו כמותו בישראל.  
אמרו לו: מפני מה?  
אמר להם: כך וכך עשה לי.  
אמרו לו: אף על פי כן, מחול לו, שאדם גדול בתורה הוא.  
אמר להם: בשבילכם הריני מוחל לו. ובלבד שלא יהא רגיל לעשות כן.  
מיד נכנס רבי אלעזר בן רבי שמעון ודרש:  
לעולם יהא אדם רך כקנה ואל יהא קשה כארז, ולפיכך זכה קנה ליטול הימנה קולמוס לכתוב בו ספר תורה תפילין ומזוזות.