Re-circling Around the Fire
Reviving Oral-Performative Tradition
As a Pedagogy for Teaching Rabbinic Texts

FINAL

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1. Abstract

This study explores the revival of oral-performative tradition as a pedagogical approach for rabbinic texts in modern Jewish education. Using classical models of rabbinic transmission and contemporary theories of reflective, dialogical, and experiential learning, it suggests that meaning in rabbinic literature is not just found through textual analysis but is co-created through embodied acts of listening, speaking, communal interpretation, and reflection. Unlike traditional print-centered, analytical methods, it advocates an alternative pedagogy that emphasizes voice, presence, and performative engagement as primary tools for learning and meaning-making.

The research uses qualitative data from facilitated learning sessions in which rabbinic texts were taught orally, without printed source sheets. These sessions involved slow, line-by-line reading, pauses, and group reflection. Listening—by participants to the text, each other, and the teacher—was a core practice. Data sources include session transcripts, participant reflections, surveys, and observational notes. Thematic analysis reveals patterns in learners' cognitive, emotional, and relational engagement, such as increased attentiveness, greater comfort with ambiguity, and a developing sense of interpretive agency and communal ownership of meaning.

The findings suggest that oral-performative pedagogy cultivates a unique learning environment in which interpretation is experienced as an ongoing, shared process rather than a search for fixed answers. Participants described a sense of "slowing down," a deeper connection to both the text and the group, and a renewed appreciation for the ethical and relational aspects of studying. The teacher's role was seen not as an authoritative source of knowledge but as a participant-model of listening, presence, and interpretive responsibility, shaping the learning environment through modeling reflections and attitudes as much as through content.

The importance of this study lies in its contribution to rethinking both rabbinic pedagogy and broader educational practices today. In a time when learning is increasingly driven by speed, fragmentation, and individual accomplishment, this research presents a countercultural model that highlights relational depth, attentiveness, and communal meaning-making. By describing and empirically studying an oral-performative pedagogy, the study connects ancient Jewish transmission methods with modern educational theories, showing how tradition can be experienced as a living, dialogical process. The findings have implications for Jewish education, adult learning, and text-based teaching, suggesting ways to foster deeper engagement, ethical presence, and ongoing interpretive conversation within learning communities.

2. Acknowledgements

3. Contents

4. Introduction

The first day of teaching *Torah-Lishmah* at URJ Camp Newman is always hectic. For many campers, this is only their second day at camp; not all campers and counselors know each other yet. Adding a session focused on Torah, especially one with Hebrew in its name, doesn't sound inviting to many. Campers want to hang out with friends! Splashing in the pool or throwing a frisbee sound like much more fun ways to spend the next hour.

Camp Newman offers campers the choice to select the *Torah-Lishmah* sessions they want to join, and I was offering a group exploration of Talmudic stories for the third year.

As the learners' group assembled for their first of three sessions, I was delighted to see a few campers who had explored stories with me the previous summer, along with some new faces.

During the introduction, I always ask campers what motivated them to join our learning. Jenny, a new camper, shared

> *"Oh, my friends said that it was a fun experience last year, they wanted to come back for more, and I was very curious to see what they were talking about."*

I was happy to hear this, and at the same time, I didn't take it for granted: teens aged 12-15 return year after year to learn more Talmud and bring along friends to study it. This isn't obvious.

We, the Jewish people, see ourselves as *people of the book[1]*. Many Jewish study sessions begin with the book or, nowadays, a source sheet. We are also very accustomed to studying in small groups, a *havruta*, delving into the text together.

However, in the learning sessions I led, there was no text or small group work. Instead, I provided a different experience: participants sat in a circle, listening to me tell the story very slowly, piece by piece, often pausing for questions and discussion. Throughout the session, participants listened to one another and engaged in thoughtful sharing and open conversations.

In this learning experience, I offer a contemporary version of an oral-performative tradition that Jewish teachers and students have used for centuries to share, study, and discuss Jewish texts. I deliberately slow down the learning process to guide reflective group exploration,

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[1] Halbertal (1997, pp. 6-10) uses the term *text-centeredness* describing the Jewish people relation to text.

using a combination of open-ended questions that encourage learners to engage with interpretive and reflective exploration and to pursue transformative insights. While guiding the process, I also synthesize and weave voices and perspectives emerging in the group inquiry in real-time, offering them back to the group to deepen the discussion. Within this collaborative framework, I serve as a facilitator, guide, and participant, modeling the reflective practice myself. Learners practice engaging with unfamiliar and challenging content, examining their own prejudices, assumptions, and worldviews, and develop skills in reflective inquiry, with patience, curiosity, and openness.

I've realized that I employ a unique approach to studying rabbinic and other Jewish texts—one that differs from most teaching methods. This approach resonates strongly with people of all ages, from teenagers to adults, encouraging them not only to return but also to invite friends to join.

Over the past few years, I've led close to a hundred study sessions using this method. The participants came from diverse backgrounds and had varying levels of experience with rabbinic texts, but they all shared one thing: attendance was voluntary, and many returned for more sessions. These gatherings took place outside traditional academic settings (such as university courses or structured Jewish day school programs).

Every one of us who has experienced learning rabbinic texts is familiar with the encounter with these very different texts: they are in languages many of us do not know or master, they follow a different style, with a unique way of presenting arguments and counter-arguments, or describe experiences in a way that is very different than what we are used to.

If we're lucky, we're introduced to these texts with an able guide who can lead us through them, using a translation into a language more familiar to us. However, we're often asked to read and respond to unfamiliar texts, either paired with a learner colleague (havruta) or in small groups, and we may feel "alone" as we struggle to understand what is written.

From my own experience, I've identified many barriers for someone engaging with rabbinic texts, especially if they do so by their own choice.

First, it's about relevance, interest, and motivation: why should we even study this text? Why is it important to us here and now?

Second, there is a reluctance to engage with rabbinic text. The language – Hebrew and Aramaic – feels foreign to many of us; the texts are structured very differently in how they

present arguments, proof texts, and rabbinic intertext references. Sometimes they are very concise, and many times lack a clear conclusion or bottom line, creating what may feel like a *mishmash* of arguments. Many contemporary lay learners frequently lack the foundational background necessary to comprehend context—whether historical, halakhic, or related to individuals referenced, their values, priorities, and the broader context of the texts they engage with. This lack of familiarity leads to a fear of even trying to approach such texts. I would add that for many Israelis, especially those from secular backgrounds, there is a cultural reluctance to engage with anything that seems rabbinic, due to how Jewish identity divides play out in contemporary Israel.

Third, I noticed a certain arrogance in some learners when engaging with rabbinic texts. Whether it stems from feeling that the values or perspectives presented are foreign or even repugnant to our own, it often prevents these learners from approaching these texts with curiosity and an open, pluralistic attitude.

And yet, learners came to learn and returned for more.

I became curious about the methodology I am using. First, I wanted to understand how it works, why it is effective, and what its educational principles are. Second, I was wondering whether and how other teachers might apply it to similar texts. This became the motivation, foundation, and framework for the exploration presented in this paper, which draws on existing research, pedagogical theories, and my own teaching experience.

Ultimately, these questions led me throughout the research:

- What core educational principles underlie this approach?
- How does the methodology I am using function in practice?
- Why is this methodology effective for learners?
- How can other teachers apply this methodology to similar texts?

The first part of this paper focuses on *theory* – the *"halakha"* or the theory grounding this pedagogy. This part begins with a theoretical framework that identifies the primary characteristics of the pedagogy I am using, followed by an in-depth literature review of these characteristics.

The second part of the paper focuses on *practice – lema'ase*, outlining the pedagogy as practiced. It begins with a detailed description of the pedagogy—*the teaching protocol*, followed by a thorough analysis and discussion based on my experience using it, while considering the insights I've gleaned from the literature research.

The third part draws conclusions and outlines directions for further study.

The appendices include several session plans as examples of this pedagogy, along with a comprehensive list of resources I've used to research and design learning sessions.

I hope that modern educators will find my approach and findings a helpful resource when teaching rabbinic and other texts.

5. Theory: *Halakha*[2]

5.1. Theoretical Framework

In evaluating the pedagogical approach as implemented[3], several distinct features emerge regarding the facilitation of the learning process, including –

1. Learners do not use written texts; instead, the teacher reads the text aloud, emphasizing oral transmission and reenactment of the text with tonal inflections, as applicable.

2. The story unfolds at a very slow pace. Sometimes, only a single sentence or a few words are introduced at a time, allowing participants to engage fully with the material.

3. After each segment of the story, the teacher pauses to encourage and facilitate group discussion. This creates opportunities for personal and collective reflection, inviting participants to contribute their thoughts and experiences. This process helps learners question their assumptions, judgments, understanding, and the meaning they may derive from the text.

4. The teacher synthesizes participants' input in real-time, directing the discussion and including insights contributed by the group. A shared understanding forms as events unfold, guided by the slowly revealed story and reflections from all participants.

5. The group is arranged in a circle, whether in-person or virtually, fostering a sense of community and shared experience around the proverbial fire. The teacher is part of the circle, not only guiding the process but also actively participating in the conversation. By contributing personal reflections, the teacher models engagement and vulnerability for the learners.

My theoretical research focused on better understanding the pedagogical foundations of these features of teaching rabbinic texts using this approach:

1. Oral-performative tradition
2. Slowing down

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[2] The word *halakha* here is used only to indicate outlining a relevant conceptual and practical pedagogical framework that will be explored, considering the suggested pedagogy.
[3] The detailed teaching protocol is described in chapter *The Teaching Protocol*, page 77

3. Listening and Reflection
4. Weaving and synthesis of ideas and contemplations
5. Role modeling of a way to approach unfamiliar texts

The latter chapters of this study present my findings and insights about the principles, nature, methods, and effectiveness of each aspect of the pedagogy. My aim is not only to understand why and how they work but also to explore their limitations and potential ways to use them more effectively.

In addition to the theoretical aspect of the research, I also draw from my experience of using this pedagogy over the last few years in numerous learning sessions. For that, I am employing an approach closely aligned with what is commonly known in social science qualitative research as *Autoethnography*. Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as

an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze through an ethnographic wide-angle focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations (p. 739)

Typically, autoethnography is used to research, uncover, and discuss aspects of culture or subculture, typically underprivileged, marginalized, or socially underrepresented groups (pp. 735, 740, 744, 748), especially when the author-researcher is a native participant in that culture or subculture. Yet, Ellis and Bochner offer that autoethnography could also be used when "authors use their own experiences in the culture reflexively to bend back on and look more deeply at self-other interactions" (p. 740). In this research, I am not examining the cultural aspects of our learning or the learners; instead, I am reporting on my own experience to reflect on and discuss elements of this pedagogy.

By reporting situations, incidents, interactions, results, as well as personal attestations of what occurred, along with my intentions, reactions, thoughts, and feelings, I am both presenting evidence from "the field" on how different aspects of this pedagogy were implemented and operated *in-situ* (in practice, *le-ma'ase*), to establish a baseline for discussing how the theoretical concepts manifested in real-life situations. This also helps draw insights and conclusions, generalizing and formalizing this pedagogy.

5.2.   About Oral-Performative Tradition

Re-entering the Circle

One notable difference in this teaching approach is the absence of written materials for learners. We are so accustomed to starting a Jewish learning session by distributing source sheets, whether in paper form, shared digital format, online, or presented on screen. In this pedagogy, we form a circle and listen to the text, one section at a time, as the teacher reads it.

In the *Network for Research on Jewish Education* (NRJE) June 2025 conference, during a roundtable panel discussion about *Rethinking Jewish Text Study*, Rabbi Dr. Jane Kanarek offered that while it seems to many teachers and learners today that using written text was always the primary way of studying Jewish texts, whether in a group or a smaller *havruta*, the reality is that this tradition was made possible and more common only after the invention of movable type printing in the 15th century Europe, comparing to the more than 1,500 years of oral teaching and learning traditions preceding it.

We also recognize that oral tradition is deeply embedded in Jewish teaching, which states that the Israelites received two Torahs at Sinai: a Written Torah and an Oral Torah, restricting the transmission and study of the Oral Torah to oral means only.

This chapter explores Jewish oral-performative tradition as a learning method rooted in presence, voice, and relationship. It begins with the philosophy of orality versus writing, then traces its development in rabbinic culture. The discussion covers how performance re-enlivens text, how sound and gesture shape meaning, how the teacher's presence influences learning, and how orality fosters community.

Philosophical Grounding of Orality and Writing

The tension and relationships between speech and writing have long preoccupied philosophers. In the opening sentence for *On Interpretation*, Aristotle (2000) states:

> Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. (para. 1)

Clearly, there is an inherent connection and relation between speech and written language if the latter represents the former. In his seminal work *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong (1982, 2012), researched the fundamentals of orality and literacy and the impact of the transition

between them. When comparing to the permanency of the written word, Ong observes that the spoken word is distinctively transient, "Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent … If I stop the movement of sound, I have nothing—only silence" (p. 32). Yet, Ong clearly observes that even if the spoken word is transient, it is essential for the permanent written word, which is dependent upon oral expression:

> The basic orality of language is permanent … Written texts all have to be related somehow, directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield their meanings. 'Reading' a text means converting it to sound, aloud or in the imagination, syllable-by-syllable in slow reading or sketchily in the rapid reading common to high-technology cultures. Writing can never dispense with orality … Oral expression can exist and mostly has existed without any writing at all, writing never without orality. (p. 8)

Spoken language, orality, is foundational and ever-present, while written texts always depend on the world of sound for interpretation and meaning.

Copeland (1984) connects the action of reading and the Hebrew word לקרוא, which is both reading and calling out, "Throughout ancient and medieval times - and not only in Jewish culture, but universally - readers customarily pronounced the words of their text aloud - even when alone" (p. 194). By that, Copeland emphasizes the traditional vocal, loud nature of reading.

Many have noticed and researched the powers, some might say even magic, associated with the spoken word. Ong (2012) relates this aspect to the Hebrew word root דבר, "For anyone who has a sense of what words are in a primary oral culture… not surprising that the Hebrew term *dabar* means 'word' and 'event'… oral peoples commonly and probably universally consider words to have magical potency" (pp. 32-33). From the first creation story in Genesis Chapter 1, first Adam's naming of the animals in Genesis 2:20, or recalling the common, and probably mythical, belief that the magic keyword *Abracadabra* originates from the Aramaic אברא כאדברא, *evra k'davera*, "I create as I speak" (Kushner, 1993, p. 11).

In his research, Ong asserts that literacy changed humanity, "More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness," as writing established a discourse that is autonomous and context-free, "a discourse which cannot be directly questioned or contested as oral speech can be because written discourse has been detached from its author" (Ong, 2012, p.

77). While orality is experienced in-person between a speaker and their audience, in a direct and unmediated experience, interaction, and context, literacy by its very nature introduces a distance – detachment, according to Ong - between the author and the reader, in space, in time, and in lived context. This detachment presents challenges for both the author and the reader. Ong remarks on the challenges of the author:

> To make yourself clear without gesture, without facial expression, without intonation, without a real hearer, you have to foresee circumspectly all possible meanings a statement may have for any possible reader in any possible situation, and you have to make your language work so as to come clear all by itself, with no existential context. The need for this exquisite circumspection makes writing the agonizing work it commonly is. (Ong, 2012, p. 103)

Writing is challenging because the author should consider how readers might read the text and perceive its meaning. Similarly, Paul Ricoeur (1971) acknowledges the challenges introduced in writing—and in reading—due to the distancing created by the act of writing and subsequently reading:

> Indeed, the writing-reading relation is not just a particular instance of the speaking-answering relation. It is not an instance of dialogue. Whereas dialogue is an exchange of questions and answers, there is no exchange of this sort between the writer and his reader; the writer does not answer the reader … the reader is absent from the writing of the book, the writer is absent from its reading. (p. 136)

The acts of writing and reading are separate in terms of time, space, and presence. Instead, there is a medium – the text – that substitutes for the direct relationship.

Through the introduction of a medium, text, literacy transformed thought into a visual dimension, adding a sensory modality, a different analytical processing mode, and potentially embedding or implying layers of meaning not possible in oral utterances, as Ong expresses:

> With writing or script in this full sense, encoded visible markings engage words fully so that the exquisitely intricate structures and references evolved in sound can be visibly recorded exactly in their specific complexity and, because visibly recorded, can implement production of still more exquisite structures and references, far surpassing the potentials of oral utterance. Writing, in this ordinary sense, was and is the most momentous of all human technological inventions. It is not a mere appendage to speech.

Because it moves speech from the oral– aural to a new sensory world, that of vision, it transforms speech and thought as well. (2012, p. 85)

The added layers of potential meaning in text are not only a challenge for the author and the reader, but also an opportunity, as Ricoeur (1971, p. 136) sees them as an invitation of the text to be read, explained, and interpreted in the absence of the speaker's immediate presence (i.e., the author).

Speech and writing are deeply connected, with spoken language forming the basis of written language, and reading involving converting text into sound and meaning. Spoken words are transient, while written text is permanent and allows complex analysis. The distance between author and reader brings challenges and opportunities: authors must expect varied interpretations without nonverbal cues, and readers engage independently, enabling new ways of understanding beyond speech's immediate context.

Defining Oral-Performative Tradition

Michael Jaffee (2001, pp. 7-8) distinguished three overlapping traditions relating to oral renditions: oral-literary, oral-performative, and text-interpretive. The *oral-literary tradition* refers to texts designated for elevated recitation, beyond everyday speech, to be shared in public settings, such as liturgy. The *oral-performative tradition* involves vocalization, tone, gesture, and interpretive amplification, in which oral-literary tradition is summoned from memory or read from a written text and delivered in public settings. The *text-interpretive tradition* arises from the cumulative ways audiences hear, remember, and interpret performances, some of which may be captured in writing at some point; rabbinic literature is an example of such a tradition.

Jaffee explains that oral-performative tradition is "not only the recitation of the written text, but also the inflections of voice, gesture, and interpretive amplification through which the performer gave audible life to the script" (p. 8). This framing highlights that oral tradition is not merely a means of transmitting content, but a cultural mode of meaning-making.

This research highlights the *oral-performative* tradition as a central aspect of the proposed pedagogy, contrasting it with a focus on written text study. It also recognizes that the term oral-performative in this context encompasses elements of oral-literary practices—such as selecting texts for oral communication and study—and oral-interpretive practices, which involve fostering an interpretive and collaborative environment.

One key aspect that arises from recognizing the oral-performative nature of this pedagogy is that oral performance includes an interpretative view, expressed through what Jaffee called "inflections of voice, gesture, and interpretive amplification." The implications of this element will be further explored in this paper.

The Historical Landscape: Oral and Written Tradition in the Jewish World[4]

The Mishnah and Talmud embody the complexities of orality and writing in Jewish tradition. On one hand, there is a rabbinic ban on writing and studying *torah-shebe'al-peh* from written script, and scarce mentions in the rabbinic texts of any written manifestation, as documented and analyzed by Jaffee (2001, pp. 65-125). Jaffee shows the emergence of applicable halakha, mostly Mishnah and Tosefta, promoting the outright orality of *torah-shebe'al-peh* attributing it to days of Moses, and the revelation of both Torahs at Sinai. At the same time, he analyzes Mishnaic compositions showing it is hard to fathom that it was solely oral tradition, "While the received texts of the Mishnah indeed reflect deep roots in a rabbinic culture of oral performance, that 'orality' is thoroughly 'literate' and, indeed, 'literary'" (p. 124). Jaffee suggests that some text inscribed in the Mishnah is "a foundation of a scripted performance analogous in some ways to a dramatic or musical presentation. The script or score is created with the assumption that its meanings will be activated primarily in performance before an audience" (p. 101). Jaffee's conclusion (pp. 124-125) is that writing of rabbinic texts may have existed as early as the first century CE, not to replace oral tradition, but to support it.

Elizabeth Shanks-Alexander (2006) analyzes how some Mishna arguments' presentation suggests an oral, conversational origin, captured in content before being written. This may serve as incidental proof that oral tradition was fundamental in rabbinic society, influencing the text and discourse.

In his comprehensive review of historical research, Stern (2023) examines the deeply rooted Jewish oral tradition and highlights that there is no parallel in the Greco-Roman world—which was neighboring to and often connected with the Jewish world of the late Second Temple

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[4] Much research has been conducted on the oral and written traditions of Jewish texts, examining the process of committing torah *shebe'al peh* from oral transmission to written form. Although this topic is not central to the focus of my research, relevant aspects will be included where appropriate.

period and post-destruction eras— of a similar oral tradition of texts as complex and intricate as the rabbinic texts.

By looking at oral traditions in Galilean Amoraic discipleship communities, Jaffee (2001, pp. 126-127) focuses on the way Rabbi Yochanan developed and promoted the concept and ideology of *torah-shebe'al-peh*, as part of a move to ensure "the Torah master as a religious authority and the sort of relationships he should cultivate with his disciples" (p. 127). As mentioned, Jaffee suggested that using text to support oral tradition may have been practically acceptable. Still, the ideological move was to deny it and insist on *torah-shebe'al-peh*, fostering master-disciple relationships.

Stern's work reviews and collates multiple researches on the topic of oral transmission as the primary mode of public and formal instruction of Mishnah, to conclude (2023, pp. 466-467) that "the persistence of oral transmission in classical rabbinic culture cannot be viewed as anything but remarkable" and suggest that it was not one leading reason, but an evolution of rationale and different motivations over time, including: 1) creating a clear theological distinction between Written Torah and Oral Torah (halakhically known as דאורייתא and דרבנן), 2) encouraging and enforcing the personal presence of the transmitter (similar to Jaffee and Alexander), "Oral transmission guarantees the personal presence of the sage whose 'personhood' is the subject of transmission, as much as the traditions he passes on" (p. 469), 3) as early Christians appropriated the written Hebrew Bible, "Oral Law was invented and orally mandated to maintain Jewish identity against Christian encroachment; orality thus becomes a mark of insular uniqueness" (p. 469), and 4) oral tradition allowed better edition and access control, as the author (the master) could control the teachings and decide who is in their circle of disciples.

Jewish tradition shows complex links between orality and writing. Rabbinic texts highlight oral transmission of *torah-shebe'al-peh*, with research suggests that writing may have supported rather than replaced oral performance. Oral tradition shaped rabbinic texts, and Jewish orality remained distinctive and resilient compared to neighboring cultures. The preference for oral transmission served multiple motives: maintaining distinctions between Written and Oral Torah, preserving teacher authority, reinforcing Jewish identity against Christian influence, and allowing masters more control over transmission and editing within select circles.

Re-enlivening the Written Text

When a written text is read aloud to a group, something shifts. The written word, typically still and silent on a page, comes to life through performance. Jaffee describes the oral-performative tradition not just as reciting words but as the "inflections of voice, gesture, and interpretive amplification through which the performer gave audible life to the script" (2001, p. 8). The text transforms from mere content to something embodied and enacted before listeners.

Ricoeur helps us see this transformation, suggesting that "Reading is like the performance of a musical score: it betokens the fulfillment, the actualization of the semantic virtualities of the text" (1971, p. 145). In this sense, the written word contains multiple possibilities, and performance actualizes them. The voice, like an instrument, brings out tonalities and meanings that would remain dormant in silent reading.

Copeland emphasizes the same point in visceral terms: "The written word represents a kind of freeze-drying of the spoken word. In order to let it give us its full message it has to be converted back to its original state" (1984, p. 197). To read aloud is to thaw language, returning it to its living medium of sound, from potentiality to actuality. In oral performance, he writes, "we meditate on speaking wisdom that happens and inspires" (p. 201). Reading aloud, then, is not just conveying information but creating an event that may inspire its hearers.

Re-enlivening the word - "thawing it" - from being captured in text, back to life is not only creating an event, but also puts it back into the living world, and being part of what Ong calls *real human communication* (2012, p. 173), where "the sender has to be not only in the sender position but also in the receiver position before he or she can send anything … communication is intersubjective" (p. 173), creating a real-time interactive multi-directional experience of a shared space between the speaker and listener, communicating live. Re-enlivening of written text is bringing it back to a reality of what Ong calls *total situation*, recovery of a message in a medium to an intersubjective communication:

> The condition of words in a text is quite different from their condition in spoken discourse … The word in its natural, oral habitat is a part of a real, existential present. Spoken utterance is addressed by a real, living person to another real, living person or real, living persons, at a specific time in a real setting which includes always much more than mere words. Spoken words are always modifications of a total situation which is more than verbal. They never occur alone, in a context simply of words. (p. 100)

It is important to recognize that a performance, whether of a musical score or a written text, embodies a particular interpretation—one or a subset among many possible realizations of the original work. As Ricoeur wrote, "we can remove the text's suspense, accomplish it in a way similar to speech, returning it to living communication, in which case we interpret it" (1971, p. 139).

We can see how reading aloud transforms written text into a living event, animating language through voice and gesture. This oral performance makes the text dynamic and interpretive rather than static, and situates communication in a real, communal context.

The Learner's Experience in Oral Learning

Our reading is creating an experience for the listener. Copeland (1984) contrasts between silent reading "a relatively detached, scientific-secular, information-oriented, objective, theoretic, abstract, individualistic attitude" and oral reading providing "a more empathic, mythic-religious, value- and relation-oriented, subjective, aesthetic, concrete, communal-dialogic outlook" (p. 208). The listener is not just processing relayed information, but the listening experience evokes a different world altogether. Oral learning situates the text within relationships, values, and community, creating an experience that is "speaking wisdom that happens and inspires" (p. 201).

Ong (2012) explains why this is so: "oral culture learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known" (p. 45). This is happening not because the words change from written to spoken, but because sound proceeds from within the human person to others, as he writes: "Because in its physical constitution as sound, the spoken word proceeds from the human interior and manifests human beings to one another as conscious interiors, as persons, the spoken word forms human beings into close-knit groups … Writing and print isolate" (p. 73). In oral performance, learner and speaker engage collaboratively; in silent reading, every person reading is detached in their own reading.

We have observed before (Ong 2012; Ricoeur 1971) that written communication presents unique challenges for both writers and readers, primarily because it lacks the nonverbal cues that facilitate understanding in spoken communication. Oral learning bypasses the complexities of textual interpretation by providing additional personal, tonal, and sometimes physical cues from the speaker, thereby reducing interpretive obstacles and streamlining comprehension.

Embodiment and the Teacher-Disciple Relationships

Rabbinic tradition holds that Torah is transmitted not only through words but through persons. Jaffee (2001) captures the tension directly when he asks: "…the precise role of face-to-face encounters in the shaping of disciples. Where, after all, was the real text of instruction—in the written word or in the living presence of the teacher?" (p.128). For the rabbis, Jaffee suggests, the answer was clear: Torah was not confined to written text but was encountered in the embodied presence of the sage. The disciple learned not only by hearing words but by observing gestures, intonations, and ways of life[5]. This pedagogical move was transformative because it placed the presence of the disciple with their teacher as the center of instruction. Jaffee extends, the student was "to be transformed by what one possessed. The privileged path to such transformation [lies] in emulating the living embodiment of that knowledge in the writings and deeds of one's teachers, and their teachers' teachers. In the person of the philosophical Sage, the instructional text came alive" (p.147).

This insistence on presence was not accidental. As Stern (2023) emphasizes, oral transmission itself "guarantees the personal presence of the sage whose 'personhood' is the subject of transmission, as much as the traditions he passes on" (p.467). The decision to mandate orality in the study of Torah was, among other things, a way to ensure that learning could not be separated from the teacher's presence and character. The very mode of learning thus bound disciples not only to their teacher's words but to their presence.

Levisohn (2016) offers a contemporary perspective. He asserts that teaching always involves developing emotional bonds. For him, "the establishment of an emotional connection between teacher and student is fundamental to learning" (p. 2). These ideas align with Jaffee and Stern's concept that oral study connects the learner not only to words but also to the embodied presence of the teacher, where oral-performative pedagogy may be especially instrumental. The student learns by listening to tone, watching gestures, and tuning in to the teacher's emotions — aspects that are unavailable in written text alone.

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[5] This is demonstrated in several Talmudic stories about disciples learning from their teachers' behavior and conduct, such as BT Berakhot 62a, BT Sukkah 21b, M Berakhot 2:5, BT Horayot 12a.

The Communal Dimension of Orality

If embodiment grounds oral learning in the presence of the teacher, its broader implication is the formation of community. Ong (2012) stresses that the very act of speaking binds people together compared to reading written text:

> When a speaker is addressing an audience, the members of the audience normally become a unity, with themselves and with the speaker. If the speaker asks the audience to read a handout provided for them, as each reader enters into his or her own private reading world, the unity of the audience is shattered, to be re-established only when oral speech begins again. (p. 73)

For Ong, speaking and sound form a group connected through shared presence and the collective experience of listening to the speaker, which is disrupted when listeners are asked to read from a printed page. Ong's description may resonate with many modern teachers and students of Jewish texts when students read from source sheet handouts in isolation during their individual comprehension process before rejoining the group discussion.

Copeland (1984) and Jaffee (2001) expressed similar ideas, which Copeland referred to as a "communal-dialogic outlook" (p. 208) and Jaffee highlighted the community-generating power of oral-performative tradition during Rabbi Yochanan's period, creating a "distinctive social form of rabbinic community" (p. 146).

Stern (2023) points that oral-performative tradition not only creates a community, but also allows the master to control who is in the community of disciples and thus have access to the text by making it "far easier to control access to the text … once a written text was released—'published,' as it were—its author effectively lost all control over it" (p. 467) and "The sage could decide whom he could allow into his disciple circle, whom he wished to teach or permit to pass on the tradition" (p. 468).

In this way, orality serves a dual role: it is both a learning and a generative medium. It requires presence, dialogue, and responsiveness to occur, and simultaneously, it defines the social circle of learners connected to one another and to their teacher. The Jewish oral-performative tradition in the rabbinic period understood learning not as an individual act of decoding text, but as a communal practice of shared presence and responsive dialogue.

Summary: Orality as Living Presence

Exploration of the oral-performative traditions reveals that across its philosophical, historical, and pedagogical dimensions, orality emerges as a practice that shapes relationships, ways of knowing, and communal identity. Sound, voice, and presence remain essential to the production of meaning. On the other hand, re-enlivening written text not only translates text into voice but also adds an interpretative layer.

Within the Jewish world, and in the tradition of *torah-shebe'al-peh*, the oral transmission of Torah was not simply a practical necessity, but a theological and communal choice: knowledge was to be encountered through presence, through speech, and through lived exchange between teacher and learner, thereby creating and preserving relationships and communities.

5.3. About Slowing Down

The Meaning of Slowing Down

Another distinct aspect of this teaching approach is its slow pace, which allows time for the text to be revealed and explored within the learning group.

Slowing down is not unique; teachers across various traditions recognize that genuine learning requires time to think, listen, process, and make meaning. This chapter examines the importance and effects of slowing down in education and Jewish learning. It first considers the forces that hinder slowing down. Then, it explains why slowing down is beneficial, and finally, it reviews practical ways for teachers and students to adopt a slower, more intentional learning approach.

Why Are We Not Slowing Down?

The pressures of contemporary education create an environment in which the demand for speed carries both teachers and learners forward. In this section, I will explore how pedagogy is often shaped by the constraints of coverage, ingrained habits of rushing toward results, and cultural associations between speed and intelligence. As a result, slowing down becomes counterintuitive and countercultural, even when teachers and students recognize its value.

One challenge to slowing down is the imperative for teachers to "cover" material. The pressure to complete a set curriculum within a limited time forces acceleration, undermining

depth. Parker Palmer (2017) describes the effect clearly: "When facts about the subject are dumped en masse, students are overwhelmed… they fail to understand the subject, retaining the information just long enough to pass the test" (p. 124). Palmer continues by framing the core tension: "How can we reconcile the demands of space and stuff? … I asked myself, 'What is the optimum use of the brief time my students and I share in the space called the classroom?'" (p. 124). When the teacher's task is defined as coverage, slowing down seems irresponsible.

Closely related to coverage is the way education often privileges the transfer of information over the cultivation of knowledge. John Dewey (1933) pointed to this tendency in higher education: "A false opposition is … in higher education, between information and understanding. One party insists that the acquisition of scholarship must come first, since intelligence can operate only on the basis of actual subject matter that is under control" (p. 63). When the assumption is that students must first acquire bodies of data before they can think, teaching turns into simply delivering a sequence of facts, leaving little space for thinking, deliberation, or interpretation.

The challenge of slowing down also stems from learners themselves, who are influenced by cultural values that associate speed with success and intelligence. Kanarek (2013) observes this dynamic in the Talmud classroom: "Fast reading is a knowledge marker in certain parts of the Talmud world" (p. 130). Dewey likewise noted how society itself draws this connection: "The common classification of persons into the dull and the bright is made primarily on the basis of the readiness or facility with which suggestions follow upon the presentation of objects and upon the happening of events" (1933, p. 42). In this framework, Dewey observes that

> The dull make[s] no response; the bright flashes back the fact with added value. An inert or stupid mind requires a heavy jolt or an intense shock to move it to suggestion; the bright mind is quick, is alert, to react with interpretation and suggestion of consequences to follow. (p. 42)

And Dewey continues, "Many a child is rebuked for slowness, for not answering promptly, when his forces are taking time to gather themselves together to deal effectively with the problem at hand" (p. 45). Dewey's assertion, that "Slowness of response is not necessarily dullness" (p. 45), reminds us that thoughtfulness and slowness may belong together, yet the cultural association of quickness with brightness continues to shape educational practice.

Beyond cultural valuation, there is also a psychological dimension: the natural impulse toward immediate action. Dewey (1938) described this tendency: "The alternative to externally imposed inhibition is inhibition through an individual's own reflection and judgment. The old phrase 'Stop and think' is sound psychology" (p. 27). Dewey relates it to personal tendency,

> A person may jump at a conclusion without weighing the grounds on which it rests; he may forego or unduly shorten the act of hunting, inquiring; he may take the first 'answer,' or solution, that comes to him because of mental sloth, torpor, impatience to get something settled. (1933, p. 16)

The tendency to act before thinking encourages learners to rush into action, and teachers to respond to this by moving quickly instead of pausing for reflection. Without developing habits of waiting, slowing down feels unnatural to both teachers and students.

Finally, cherished practices within Jewish learning itself provide models that reinforce pace over depth. The daily page of Talmud (*daf yomi*) has become a cultural hallmark of Jewish study, celebrated for breadth and for continuity. Yet by its very structure, it privileges coverage and speed. The alternative method of *iyyun*, which dwells deeply on a sugya, runs against this cultural tendency. In many ways, the rhythm of *daf yomi* sets expectations not only for how much is to be learned but also for the pace at which learning should proceed.

The outcome of these pressures is that slowing down contradicts both institutional expectations and cultural habits. Teachers are motivated to cover more material, students are conditioned to associate speed with intelligence, impulses push both toward immediacy, and valued traditions emphasize pace. Recognizing these forces explains why slowing down in education is so challenging and why intentional practices of slowness are essential for fostering depth, reflection, and wisdom in learning.

Why Should We Slow Down?

The forces that drive teaching and learning toward speed create a constant temptation to rush through material. Slowing down allows ideas to mature, practices to be established, and learners to truly listen to what they encounter.

Dewey (1933) argued that meaningful thought cannot be rushed:

Sometimes slowness and depth of response are intimately connected. Time is required in order to digest impressions, and translate them into substantial ideas. … The slow but sure person, whether man or child, is one in whom impressions sink and accumulate, so that thinking is done at a deeper level of value than by those with a lighter load." (p. 45)

For Dewey, reflection demands pause:

The working over of a vague and more or less casual idea into coherent and definite form is impossible without a pause, without freedom from distraction. We say, 'Stop and think'; well, all reflection involves, at some point, stopping external observations and reactions so that an idea may mature." (p. 271)

Dewey emphasized that teachers must allow this process of digestion to occur:

A silent, uninterrupted working-over of considerations by comparing and weighing alternative suggestions is indispensable for the development of coherent and compact conclusions. Reasoning is no more akin to disputing or arguing or to the abrupt seizing and dropping of suggestions than digestion is to a noisy champing of the jaws. The teacher must permit opportunity for leisurely mental digestion. (p. 272)

These insights are echoed in later teachers. Palmer (2017) observed the outcome of rushing: "[students] fail to understand the subject, retaining the information just long enough to pass the test, and they never want to pick up a book on that subject again" (p. 124).

Kanarek (2013) observed the effect of privileging speed over precision, when students sacrificed precision for speed of reading the assigned material. Their use of speed as a marker of their own success often had the effect of shutting down opportunities for their own questions—questions both about the content of the text and the intricacies of its structure. Once they had finished reading and translating the text, they believed their analysis was complete. (p. 131)

Without slowing down, education risks becoming superficial and closed off to inquiry, even when questions arise within the students themselves.

If slowness is vital for depth, it is also essential for cultivating the habits of reflective practice. Dewey (1933) criticized the classroom culture of speed: "The holding, metaphorically, of a stop-watch over students … exacting prompt and speedy responses from them, is not

conducive to building up a reflective habit of mind" (p. 272). Instead, Dewey (1938) defined thinking as postponement:

> For thinking is stoppage of the immediate manifestation of impulse until that impulse has been brought into connection with other possible tendencies to action so that a more comprehensive and coherent plan of activity is formed…. The ideal aim of education is creation of power of self-control. (p. 27)

Palmer (2017) frames this as a matter of teaching learners to think within their disciplines rather than just memorize information. He argues for including less material to "to help students understand how a practitioner in this field generates data, checks and corrects data, thinks about data, uses and applies data, and shares data with others" (p. 124). This method, he insists, "honor[s] both the discipline and our students by teaching them how to think like historians or biologists or literary critics rather than merely how to lip-sync the conclusions others have reached" (p. 126). By slowing the pace of coverage, teachers create room to model inquiry and cultivate disciplined habits of thought. It is about creating a space where the teacher needs "less time filling the space with data and my own thoughts and more time opening a space where students can have a conversation with the subject and with each other" (p. 123).

A related outcome of slowing down is the cultivation of attentive listening - both to texts and to one another. When students slowed down, Kanarek (2013) observed: "Slowing down not only contributed to the students becoming more attentive readers but also to stronger class dynamics" (p. 273). Similarly, Holzer and Kent (2014) describe the challenge and how slowing down facilitated a different listening: "good listening is much more complex. It involves intentionally focused attention, and an openness toward something that may not be easily grasped because of its elusiveness and complexity" (p. 107), and "The swift pace of the interpretive process: … particularly difficult for the learner to derive the maximum benefit from the effects of the interpretive process, when information that originates in the text challenges his preconceptions and all the more so, to engage in listening" (p111); their instructional strategy was slowing down the reading and the interpretive process, which they observe "students will have an opportunity to record some of the pointed moments of their listening, and to become aware of how this kind of proactive listening may contribute to the unfolding process of interpretation" (p. 111). Later, they connect this to attentiveness over time:

Establish explicit connections that might have occurred between what they listened to and the unfolding shape of the meaning they take from the story … line-by-line method turns text study into a playful experience, it also helps them listen attentively; they often experience shifts and changes in the unfolding meaning of the story they have been processing during this study session. (p. 117)

Slowing down transformed reading and learning from an automated process into one of deepened listening and awareness.

These sources show how, without slowing down, learning turns into superficial memorization and premature conclusions. With it, students gain the depth to digest ideas, the discipline to cultivate reflective habits, and the capacity to listen to texts and to one another.

Practices of Slowing Down

If slowing down is to be more than an intention, it must take shape in practice. Teachers cannot simply tell students to "go slower"; they must design environments and embed practices that naturally shift the pace of learning away from speed and coverage toward depth and reflection. The sources examined offer a range of strategies, some rooted in textual practice, others in the rhythms of classroom dynamics, the structuring of time, or the habits of thought we try to cultivate in students.

As Jewish education is traditionally associated with text study, it is not surprising that some have found textual practices to be instrumental in slowing down. Kanarek (2013) actually calls the pedagogy she is presenting "pedagogy of slowing down", incorporating textual practices; for example, "the first component of the pedagogy of slowing down is precision. Precision begins with the accurate reading and translation of Hebrew and Aramaic" (p. 135). By attending carefully to words, students cannot simply skim or rush - they are compelled to stay with the text.

But precision alone is not the goal. Slowing down also means dwelling with questions of meaning, "thinking about meaning … consider how particular words or phrases may open multiple interpretive possibilities … look for ideologies and tensions in a *sugya*, fault lines where the dominant ideology may break down" (p. 136). This approach keeps learners in the uncertain areas of interpretation instead of shutting them down prematurely. Kanarek adds that consulting

the *rishonim*, the medieval commentators, and stepping back to construct the "big picture" of a sugya both work against the rush to resolution (p. 137). These extend the interpretive process, inviting learners to listen to voices across generations and to place details into larger conceptual frames. The practice of decelerating and broadening the interpretive framework in learning need not rely solely on *rishonim* or traditional commentaries, and Lev (2020, pp. 190–191) demonstrated that incorporating poems and a Hasidic narrative as external framing devices also naturally slows the pace of study and deepens engagement beyond the primary text.

Another, perhaps more mechanical practice used by Holzer and Kent (2014), involved revealing the text line-by-line.

> The text is covered by a thick sheet of paper. Students are told that they will only be allowed to uncover and read specific lines when we tell them to do so. This procedure is meant to slow down the interpretive process and help them listen to what they will hear from the text and their havruta partner. (p. 113)

Deliberately revealing and focusing on each text forces learners to slow down the pace at which they address the unfolding meaning emerging from the text.

Similar ideas shape the dialogue between teacher and learner. Kanarek (2013) recalls choosing to ask questions rather than quickly give answers, modeling inquiry (p. 144). This act of restraint acts as a pedagogy of slowness, allowing students time to think. Kanarek also used integrative questions, linking new sugyot to earlier passages, encouraging pauses and connections (p. 143). Holzer and Kent (2014) emphasize the importance of deliberately interrupting reading's automaticity. They provide "Reflection Pauses" where students reflect to increase attention (p. 116). Instead of following habitual rhythms, teachers insert breaks, prompting students to articulate their understanding. In both cases, questions slow dialogue, helping learners hear not only words but also how meaning is created.

Slowing down also takes shape in how teachers structure classroom time. Holzer and Kent's line-by-line slow revealing of the text is "meant to slow down the interpretive process" (p. 113). Palmer (2017) goes further, arguing for silence itself as an essential practice; for Palmer, silence is not absence but presence: "The [learning] space should welcome both silence and speech …. silence gives us a chance to reflect on what we have said and heard" (p. 79). Yet,

silence can be challenging for many learners, and Palmer approached it by asking students to write down their reflections, "… asking students to take a few minutes to reflect on the question in silence, the silence that most students require to think their best thoughts. Since simple silence is awkward for most people, I asked them to make notes as they reflected, giving them something to do" (p. 81). This is another way to slow down the pace, by pausing to let learners write their reflections.

We see that teachers can foster slowing down not just by telling students to go slower but by designing classroom practices—such as precise reading and translation, introducing additional sources, open-ended questioning, integrating reflections and pauses, and gradually revealing material—that shift the focus from rushing to thoughtful inquiry.

The Value of Slowing Down

Modern life is fast. This applies in many ways to modern education, which often strives to "cover" content in a given and short period. To teach and learn slowly is to resist the modern tendency of acceleration, coverage, and throughput. The exploration of theory and practice in this chapter demonstrates that the refusal to rush is a practice in embracing thoroughness. Slowing down is deepening learning. However, practicing slowness is not just about classroom pace; it is a broader attitude towards knowledge and others. In slowing down, teachers move from managing the transmission of a set amount of information to cultivating the practice and habits of inquiry, with patience, questions, and conversation.

5.4. About Listening and Reflection

Introduction: The Arc of Meaning

Humans are meaning-seeking beings. Learning is not merely the accumulation of information but an attempt to make sense of experience and of the world. Dewey (1938) notes that "all genuine education comes about through experience" (p. 8) but asserts that experience alone does not necessarily lead to understanding. For learning to become meaningful, the learner must engage in processes that derive significance from what is encountered.

This chapter explores three interrelated processes through which meaning emerges: listening, interpretation, and reflection. These are not isolated practices but contributors to understanding. Listening is the attitude of receptivity and openness; it is the learner's willingness

to be addressed by something (a text, an experience) or by someone (another human being). Interpretation is the derivation of meaning, a conversational process in which understanding begins to take shape. Reflection is the deliberate, methodological integration of insight, examining, and organizing thought in light of experience.

The theoretical grounding of these processes draws from several key thinkers. Gadamer[6] understands interpretation as relational and dialogic (Levisohn, 2001, pp. 21-23), requiring openness to being questioned. Ricoeur deepens this view by seeing interpretation as a discourse not only with us, as interpreters, but also with our reality and our self-understanding (Ricoeur, 1971, pp. 137-138). Dewey[7] presents reflection as a disciplined inquiry, describing it as the foundation of meaningful learning because it transforms encounter into understanding.

The chapter's first part develops the framework of listening, interpretation, and reflection as meaning-making components. The second part explores how teachers foster these through triggering reflective inquiry, dialogue, and transformative learning that reshapes understanding.

Listening as a Relational Posture

Listening involves a condition of openness – before interpretation, before understanding, before reflection, as Holzer and Kent (2014) write, "Listening is central to learning, good listening … involves intentionally focused attention, and an openness toward something that may not be easily grasped because of its elusiveness and complexity" (pp. 107-108).

In a conversational learning context, listening is not merely passive reception but an active, relational posture. In Jewish tradition, this relationality is inherent in the tradition's very first pedagogical imperative: *Shema*—listen. We are called to listen so we can be present in the encounter and be present so we can listen.

Holzer and Kent continue to analyze the listening in the learning and interpretive dynamics to identify a triad of participants in the process, "... listening in the interpretive process entails paying attention both to what is said by the text and/or by the havruta partner, and to what he, the learner himself, does with what he heard" (pp. 108-109) further identifying the three related practices:

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[6] I did not read Gadamer in the original, but culled his ideas as presented by Levisohn (2001), Lev (2020), and Holzer & Kent (2014).
[7] Both in the original 1933 and 1938, as well as from Rodgers' (2002) analysis of Dewey on Reflective Thinking.

Reviving Oral-Performative Tradition as a Pedagogy for Teaching Rabbinic Texts

Listening in interpretation functions as a textual practice (in the interaction between learner and text), an interpersonal practice (in the interaction between havruta partners as they comment on the text to each other), and as an intrapersonal practice (in the listening one does to one's own thinking, enabling the uncovering, examination, and revision of preconceptions). (p. 109)

The role of listening is essential in what Holzer and Kent call interaction and practice, as a fundamental component in the larger scope relationships developed in these three surface areas of the learning encounter. To interact with another, you need to be listening to them.

Levisohn (2001) described Gadamer's "presenting three competing views of the nature of hermeneutic experience as parallels to three kinds of human relationships — relationships between one person, an *I*, and another person, a *Thou*" (p. 21, italics in the original), where these parallel the relationships between the self (the *I*), and the subject (the text) as *It* or *Thou*. Lev (2020) sees these encounters as pedagogical opportunities for her students "I want to provide students the opportunity to use their encounters with rabbinic texts to deepen themselves in multiple ways: as individuals, in their relationships with others, and in their relationship with the material itself" (p. 176).

Listening as a practice, then, is not simply hearing words; it is the learner's readiness to be present in the encounter and to be in relationship and conversation —with text, with self, and with others. Listening opens an opportunity to make deeper meaning through conversation, interpretation, and reflection.

Listening to the Text

Engaging deeply with a text calls for intentional, attentive listening, setting aside preconceived notions to allow genuine openness. Holzer and Kent (2014) suggest:

A practice of good listening—not only to one's human partner, but to the text as well. With any text, it is important to 'hear' it on its own terms, rather than rushing and projecting our prior assumptions onto it or making it fit our expectations. (p. 106)

This approach invites us to honor the voice of the text[8], ensuring that our understanding emerges from careful listening rather than from imposing our own ideas.

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[8] An extended discussion of reading while assuming text-autonomy, self-containment and independence will be presented in section *Ricoeur's Interpretation as a Personal Encounter* (page 37).

Listening to a text involves engaging with it as a living entity rather than a static object. Lev (2020, p. 177), drawing on Gadamer (and indirectly Buber), refers to this as an *I–Thou* encounter. The learner's task, then, is not to master the text but to meet it. Encounter means a stance of presence, where the text has something to tell us and is thus worth listening to.

The text may be calling us to be read and interpreted, as Ricoeur (1971) suggested "the text … waits and calls for a reading; if a reading is possible, it is indeed because the text is not closed in on itself but open out onto something else" (p. 144), and continues "what the text wants, is to orient our thought according to it. The sense of the text is the direction which it opens up for our thought" (p. 148). For Ricoeur, the text is an active participant in the encounter, with "wants" and gestures that invite the reader to explore as it opens, if one listens and pays attention. Palmer (2017) describes these relationships using a stronger image where "we must believe in the subject's inner life and enter with empathy into it" (p. 108); Palmer calls us to be in an empathic relationships with the subject – the text, because "the subject calls us out of ourselves and into its own selfhood. At the deepest reaches, knowing requires us to imagine the inner standpoint of the subject" (p. 108).

Listening to the subject, the text, then becomes an essential part of relationships and an interpretive discipline; not only reading *about* the text or learning *of* the text but reading *with* it.

Listening to the Self

Another component in the triad of encounters and relationships is our inward voice. Lev (2020) notes that the study of rabbinic texts can direct the learner toward self-reflection: "It is a text that pushes our buttons and by which we can be pushed to become ever more reflective, understanding, empathetic, discerning, and expansive" (p. 177). In teaching, Lev's intention was "to cultivate an encounter that views the text as summons, a call to look within" (p. 193). The act of listening to the self, then, comes from the experience of a genuine encounter, in which listening to the text evokes listening to how it resonates or resists within one's own self-world. Holzer and Kent (2014) pointed out that listening to oneself is "a defining element of intrapersonal practices, as it engages the student with different aspects of his personality and his identity as a learner" (2014, p. 61). As before, one cannot be in relationships without listening.

Rodgers (2002) follows Dewey in connecting listening to and acknowledging the self-voice as a responsible act, "Being responsible also means acknowledging that the meaning we are acting on is our meaning, and not a disembodied meaning that is 'out there'" (p. 862). Palmer

(2017) goes further to suggest that listening to oneself not only responsible, but essential if we want to know the other, "The inner life of any great thing will be incomprehensible to me until I develop and deepen an inner life of my own. I cannot know in another being what I do not know in myself" (p. 113).

We are part of the triadic relationships, and listening inwardly is a crucial element that helps us stay fully present and authentic in these relationships.

Listening to the Other

Extending the posture of attentiveness and openness is listening to the other. In dialogic learning, meaning is not constructed in isolation but emerges between voices. Palmer (2017) states that learning "demands community—a dialogical exchange in which our ignorance can be aired, our ideas tested, our biases challenged, and our knowledge expanded, an exchange in which we are not simply left alone to think our own thoughts" (p. 78). For Palmer, learning cannot be done alone.

Not all communities, or learning social environments, are the same, and Dewey (1938) noted that while all "education is essentially a social process," its quality is "realized in the degree in which individuals form a community group" (p. 25). Thus, a stronger community group leads to better experiences and, according to Dewey's pedagogy, to a better education. Stronger bonds mean relationships built upon respect, attentiveness, openness, patience, and listening.

Jewish tradition attributes great value to group study[9]. The primary foundation of havruta study, which is explored by Holzer and Kent (2014), is based on the pedagogy of paired study groups. Ways of cultivating listening practices in the relational triad of text, the self, and the other, played a major role in Holzer and Kent's research.

We will explore listening to the voice of the other further in the following sections of this chapter, when discussing interpretation and reflection.

Challenges for Listening

Listening is foundational and also challenging.

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[9] For example, BT Berakhot 63b "אף שני תלמידי חכמים מחדדין זה את זה בהלכה", BT Taanit 7a "אין תורה נקנית אלא בחבורה", BT Shabbbat 63av"... שני תלמידי חכמים המקשיבים זה לזה בהלכה"

Gadamer, as quoted by Holzer and Kent (2014), used the term "the incapacity for listening" (p. 110), which he identified as ignoring what others say, mishearing, not hearing someone's silence, and stubbornness. Gadamer attributes this incapacity to his observation that most people typically listen to themselves because they have not learned and trained listening as a practice to make it habitual.

Palmer (2017) identifies a related challenge: psychological effort is required for attentive listening. Palmer states that "Attentive listening is never an easy task—it consumes psychic energy at a rate that tires and surprises me" (p. 138). Being present and attentive in learning relationships demands deliberate effort. Listening as a practice takes concentration, particularly for those without specific training in this area.

Gadamer offered another challenge, which is the fear of vulnerability together with the desire to control the relationships: "when one is open to what the text has to say, one is willing not only to question the text but also to question one's own beliefs" (Levisohn, 2001, p. 25). This approach can lead to defensiveness or to shallow engagement in all learning relationships, with oneself, the other, and the text. When we read text that speaks, it may evoke intense experiences and emotions in us, requiring us to be vulnerable, it "requires us to see the struggles, decisions, opinions, and behaviors of those in the texts as connecting with and relevant to our own lives" (Lev, 2020, p. 194), or when we converse with ourselves and confront out inner-self "In conversation with ourselves, we expose our vulnerabilities, conflicts, choices, and values" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 748). It is very challenging and scary to be vulnerable, especially if one has not developed the attentive listening muscle.

These challenges highlight the teacher's task: creating conditions that foster learning, protection, invitation, and practice of listening.

Interpretation as a Conversation

Between Listening and Meaning

Listening opens the learner to encounter; the process of interpretation begins to transform that openness into understanding.

Gadamer conceives that "interpretation as a kind of dialogue" (Levisohn, 2001, p. 21), so to interpret, then, is not to extract information but to enter a relationship in the encounter, to let meaning unfold between us and the text.

Ricoeur's hermeneutics combines two approaches: *explanation*, which considers what the text communicates independently of its audience, and *interpretation*, which engages with the text in a dialogical and personal manner.

We will explore here Gadamer and Ricoeur's dialogic views of interpretation.

Gadamer's Models of Relationships

Gadamer, who views interpreting a text as a form of relationship, holds that the nature of relationships determines the quality of interpretation. He elaborates his statement using an analogy of three types of human relationships between one person, the *I*, and another person, a *Thou* (Levisohn, 2001, pp. 21-23).

The first type of relationship Gadamer identifies involves perceiving the other individual (or text) as an *It* rather than a *Thou*. Such relationships are characterized by dynamics of control or dominance and present significant ethical challenges, as they involve treating others as "as means towards other ends rather than as ends in themselves" (p. 21). In the context of textual analysis, this approach results in stripping the *Thou* of its unique characteristics, reducing it to merely an example of a general rule, whereby any particular meaning or significance is lost. In effect, the text is deprived of its voice, and we are not receptive to its unique contribution.

In the second scenario Gadamer presents, we perceive the other as a *Thou* - an individual rather than merely a data point—yet we fail to fully recognize our interconnectedness, thereby preserving a sense of distance. While there may be an authentic interest in understanding the Thou, a lack of open-minded listening can lead to a superficial claim of understanding, thereby precluding genuine dialogue. Asserting knowledge of another's intentions - for example, stating "I know *why* you said what you said, and therefore I know what you *really* meant"[10] (p. 22) undermines authentic interpersonal connection and exchange. In relation to texts, this approach risks aligning with what Gadamer described as "the ideal of perfect enlightenment" or "historical consciousness," in which one assumes that knowing the comprehensive historical context and author's intent enables the definitive interpretation of a text. This perspective introduces both an epistemological issue—presuming that meaning is fixed and inherently discoverable within the text—and an ethical concern regarding a potentially arrogant stance towards interpretation.

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[10] Italics here in quotes from Levisohn are in the original

Ultimately, such an approach leaves little scope for attentive listening or for the development of authentic dialogue.

The third kind of relationship Gadamer describes is where "The *I* acknowledges the individuality of the other person, and allows for the possibility of hearing something new" (p. 22). Curiosity, humility, and "fundamental *openness* of our own stance" (p. 22) characterize this type of relationship. A mutual involvement and mutual responsibility lead to "genuine openness, genuine belonging and commitment, genuine dialogue" (p. 22) When we move from the analogy to our relationships with text, this kind of relationship takes place when we approach the text with similar attitudes, acknowledging the text has something to tell us, allowing for the possibility that the claims of the text "may 'provoke' me, may help me to see that my own beliefs and assumptions are wrong" (p. 23). This attitude fosters a genuine dialogue, takes the text's claims seriously, and allows them to challenge our own conceptions, helping us develop our own views through the process of interpretive dialogue.

Lev (2020) echoes this Gadamerian view when she says the learner must "truly see the Other in that 'Other's' fullness and not as a mirror reflection of ourselves" (p. 178). Interpretation requires precisely such openness to the text as the Other. Moreover, Lev continues, the rabbinic texts are filled with "unfamiliar characters making choices we ourselves would not make, plus a foreign language and a foreign culture" playing here the role of "paradigmatic 'Other'" (p. 178).

For Gadamer, interpretation is a relational event where we actively engage with the text as a present Other, responding and interacting instead of merely searching for meaning within it.

Ricoeur's Interpretation as a Personal Encounter

Ricoeur (1971) proposes a model of a dialectical interplay between *explanation* and *understanding* (interpretation) when we approach a text. For Ricoeur, *explanation* resembles close reading and structural analysis[11] of the text, assuming text autonomy, self-containment, and independence, both from the author and from the reader. Ricoeur continues and calls for an

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[11] Ricoeur's use of *explanation* has relations to New Criticism, which was common in the mid-20th century in American literary criticism, and was practiced in some Israeli secular groups in the 1980s-90s when approaching Jewish texts, and was known as *barefoot reading*, קריאה יחפה, promoted by Batei Midrash in Israel, like *Elul* and *Alma*. This approach was later criticized by several (Shaked 2011, Pinchasi 2016). I will not delve into these hermeneutical approaches or their criticism in this paper, but will review how Ricoeur approaches his similar methodology in relation to interpretation.

additional approach, which he terms *interpretation*. This approach is dialogical in its essence, where "the text is not closed in on itself but open out onto something else … reading is a linking together of a new discourse to the discourse of the text" (p. 144); Ricoeur calls for an open dialogue with the text.

For Ricoeur, the process of interpretation involves an act of *appropriation*, which he understands first as seeing interpretation to be a component of reflective practice for developing self-understanding and meaning: "the constitution of self and that of meaning are contemporaneous" (p. 145); this is like Gadamer's notion that interpretive dialogue helps us build our own views. Second, appropriation means bringing us closer to the text and its background, closer "to the system of values to which the cultural background of the text belongs … interpretation 'brings together,' 'equalizes,' all of which … was previously foreign" (p. 145). Third, appropriation – and the most significant for Ricoeur – means bringing ourselves to the process of interpretation; Ricoeur is comparing it to a musician performing a musical score, actualizing the "semantic virtualities of the text", bringing it "*hic et nunc*" (pp. 145-146), *here and now*.

Ricoeur redefines interpretation as responding to what the text itself wants to convey, rather than recovering the author's inner intention (p. 148). Meaning, he writes, is found in "the injunction of the text"—the direction it opens for our thought. Interpretation is, therefore, less a subjective act imposed by the reader and more an act of the text that orients and transforms us. Beneath its surface structure lies a "depth semantics[12]," a web of meaning that calls for continual reinterpretation—the text itself is participating in the process of understanding. Thus, the act of making meaning and understanding includes both listening, from our own personal perspective, open with our thoughts, as well as an objective, careful, attentive close listening to what the text has to say; not either-or. We bring both our openness and ourselves, **and** we accept the text as a participant to create a genuine dialogue.

Gadamer holds a similar approach (Levisohn, 2001, p. 23), in which we are not divorced from our own interpretive tradition or from our historical and communal situatedness when approaching a text. Understanding always occurs within a tradition that makes meaning possible. As he writes, "to be situated within a tradition does not limit the freedom of knowledge but

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[12] Ricoeur gives examples of structural text analysis, unveiling additional layers of meaning embedded in the text.

makes it possible" (p. 23). Our belonging to a tradition provides a foundation for our inquiry; it initiates questions and interests that allow the text to speak to us[13]. Gadamer believes that, in doing so, genuine openness requires reflecting on our own assumptions—examining the tradition that shapes us so that it, too, can be challenged and transformed in conversation with the text.

For both thinkers, interpretation is dialogical—happening in conversation—and personal—shaped by the individual. Learners both take in and reply; the text speaks and is restated in their own words.

Reflection as a Disciplined Inquiry

Interpretation, as we have seen, unfolds in conversation with text, others, and the self. Yet dialogue alone does not ensure learning, as Dewey observed that while all genuine education comes from experience, not all experiences are genuinely or equally educative (1938, p. 8). The insights that arise through interpretation must undergo a deliberate process of reflection to transform understanding, which is central to Dewey's 1910/1933 seminal book, *How We Think*. In this book, Dewey defined *Reflective Thought* as an "Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 9). Thus, according to Dewey, reflection is –

1. **Active**, not a passive reception or musing, but rather a deliberate process. It means doing something with our beliefs and assumptions: examining, testing, and reforming them.
2. **Persistent**, aligned with Dewey's view of continuity and sustained attention; reflection unfolds over time as one revisits their assumptions in lieu of their experiences and their consequences. It is not a momentary insight.
3. **Careful**, meaning disciplined and methodical consideration, inquiring our own thinking, testing it against experience.

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[13] Similarly, certain scholarly voices reflecting on the paradigm of New Criticism—often referred to as "barefoot reading" within secular *Batei Midrash*, as mentioned in a previous footnote—have advocated for an integrative approach. Tel-Orr (n.d.), for example, underscores the importance of engaging with Jewish texts through a personal lens, while simultaneously considering traditional frameworks.

4. **Forward-looking**, consideration of "further conclusions to which it tends" is the act of transforming and shaping a future based on the past and the present. Dewey highlights and advocates considering the rational, moral, and ethical aspects and implications of reflective thinking.

Rodgers (2002) distilled Dewey's ideas about reflection into the following criteria differentiating reflection from other modalities of thought:

1. Reflection is a meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next with deeper understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas. It is the thread that makes continuity of learning possible, and ensures the progress of the individual and, ultimately, society. It is a means to essentially moral ends.

2. Reflection is a systematic, rigorous, disciplined way of thinking, with its roots in scientific inquiry.

3. Reflection needs to happen in community, in interaction with others.

4. Reflection requires attitudes that value the personal and intellectual growth of oneself and of others. (p. 845)

Reflection is thus not mere contemplation but a disciplined inquiry process that brings order and continuity to experience. It "effects internal control of impulse through a union of observation and memory; this union being the heart of reflection" (Dewey, 1938, p. 28).

The following subsections will each focus on a different criterion of reflection as defined by Rodgers before reviewing the challenges facing reflection.

Reflection as a Driver in the Continuity of Learning

For Dewey, reflection is the primary process through which experience becomes meaningful. Experience has a very broad context for Dewey, occurring as an interaction between an individual and objects, or an individual and other people, which he calls a situation happening in an environment. Dewey defines an environment as "whatever conditions interact with personal needs, desires, purposes, and capacities to create the experience which is had" (1938, p. 17). What is essential here is the interaction of an individual with their environment, which constitutes the experience.

A very essential concept for Dewey (1938, pp. 12-14) is *continuity*. At its core, continuity is a fundamental concept that applies to every aspect of our lives. For example, our life is a continuous stream of experiences; our environment is also a continuum (e.g., we do not open a door and walk onto Mars). Our society and history are continuums. Our own experiences build on previous ones, relate to prior knowledge of the world, and serve as bridges to future experiences and new knowledge.

Dewey is looking at continuity of experience as related to the impact of experiences on us, asserting that "every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent experiences. For it is a somewhat different person who enters into them" (p. 12). In a way, Dewey reflects Heraclitus' River metaphor: experience changes us, whether we want it or not, whether we direct it or not, and whether it leads to effective growth or not. For Dewey, this principle applies also to being changed by experiences of others: "the principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (p. 13).

Rodgers synthesizes interaction and continuity, the elements of experience, as "the x and y axes of experience. Without interaction, learning is sterile and passive, never fundamentally changing the learner. Without continuity learning is random and disconnected, building toward nothing either within the learner or in the world" (2002, p. 847).

Dewey (1938) acknowledges that "every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into" (p. 14), calling for the use of disciplined practices – such as reflection- to make learning effective. Reflection allows us to make meaning from experiences so we can use them as drivers for this continuity of learning. Continuity is essential in reflective thinking itself, as an orderly sequence leading to insights and conclusions (Dewey, 1933, p. 47). As Rodgers (2002) summarized

> The function of reflection is to make meaning: to formulate the 'relationships and continuities' among the elements of an experience, between that experience and other experiences, between that experience and the knowledge that one carries, and between that knowledge and the knowledge produced by thinkers other than oneself. (p. 848)

For Dewey, reflection is key to giving meaning to experiences in interactions between individuals and their environments, to understand their impact, and create ongoing development.

Reflection as a Systematic and Rigorous Way of Thinking

Rodgers's second criterion stresses that for Dewey, reflection is not a casual or spontaneous process but a disciplined form of inquiry.

Dewey (1933) argued that reflective thought is different from impulsive thought or conclusion because it follows a method—a sequence of observation, interpretation, hypothesis, and testing. He warns against "jump[ing] at a conclusion without weighing the grounds on which it rests," insisting that "one can think reflectively only when one is willing to endure suspense and to undergo the trouble of searching" (p. 16).

Rodgers (2002) clarifies that reflection follows an ordered cycle that "mirrors the scientific method," moving from presence to an experience, through description and analysis, to intelligent action or experimentation (pp. 854–855). This structure ensures that reflection is neither a random contemplation nor a detached analysis—it is disciplined inquiry directed toward insight and action.

Dewey (1938) links such discipline to freedom, arguing that reflective inquiry converts impulse into thought and thought into considered response, which leads to freedom: "The only freedom that is of enduring importance is freedom of intelligence, that is to say, freedom of observation and of judgment exercised in behalf of purposes that are intrinsically worth while" (p. 26).

Reflection in Community

The third criterion identifies reflection as a social process (Dewey, 1938, p. 25). Learning gains depth when it is articulated, questioned, and expanded through shared, communal inquiry.

Dewey believes that ideas should be articulated, as articulating requires stepping outside the experience, seeing it as another would see it, and, when shared with the other, the other can see something of another's experience in order to respond through one's own (Rodgers, 2002, p. 856). Rodgers explains (p. 857) how collaborative reflection 1) affirms the value of one's experience (feeling "I am not alone"), 2) seeing things "newly", broadening the field of understanding, and 3) fosters engagement in the process of inquiry, support, responsibility, and mutual accountability, "When one is accountable to a group, one feels a responsibility toward others that is more compelling than the responsibility we feel to only ourselves" (p. 857).

This act of sharing one's meaning both clarifies thought and broadens understanding. Holzer and Kent (2014) describe a similar pedagogical situation, where the group expresses a

"shared concern for understanding, and a recognition that others can teach us about a subject matter so that it is only through our dialogical engagement with them that we can reach our own self-understanding" (p. 197).

Community reflection is essential to the reflective process. Where self-reflection may be limited, collective reflection enhances depth, breadth, and significance.

Reflection as a Set of Attitudes That Value Growth

The fourth criterion emphasizes that reflection depends on the attitudes the thinker brings to the process.

Rodgers draws this criterion from Dewey's triadic attitudes of *open-mindedness*, *whole-heartedness*, and *responsibility* (Dewey, 1933, pp. 28-33). These are not optional virtues but preconditions for genuine inquiry. In Rodgers' words (2002), when "desire, fear, need, or other strong emotions direct the course of inquiry, we tend to acknowledge only the evidence that reinforces that premise" (p. 858). Dewey suggests that these attitudes help resist such distortions.

Open-mindedness (Dewey, 1933, pp. 30-31) is freedom from prejudice, partisanship, and similar habits that close the mind, making it unwilling to consider new problems and entertain new ideas. It includes a genuine desire to listen to multiple perspectives; to pay attention to facts from any source, to consider alternative possibilities, and to acknowledge the potential for error, even in our most cherished beliefs. This demands using intellectual and emotional curiosity and humility, which is difficult when we are attached to our ideas.

Whole-heartedness (pp. 31-32) is the capacity to be "thoroughly interested in some object and cause" (p. 31), drawing full attentiveness to the subject matter and the process of learning. Too often, our attention is divided, and only when we are fully absorbed do new questions arise spontaneously, ideas emerge, and further inquiries are triggered followed. "A genuine enthusiasm is an attitude that operated as an intellectual force" (p. 32).

Responsibility (pp. 32-33), where intellectual responsibility involves considering the consequences of a planned action, and being willing to accept them. It requires integrity; otherwise, some would continue to "accept beliefs whose logical consequences they refuse to acknowledge … unwilling to commit themselves to the consequences that flow from them. The result is mental confusion" (p. 32). Intellectual responsibility also demands thoroughness, defined as the "power to carry something through to its end or conclusion" (p. 33).

Dewey adds another attitude, *readiness*, which is to "consider in a thoughtful way the subjects that do come within a range of experience – a readiness that contrasts strongly with the disposition to pass judgment based on mere custom, tradition, prejudice, etc." (p. 34). Dewey emphasizes that it is not enough to simply be aware of the required attitudes; one must also have the desire and will to use them, along with an understanding of "the forms and techniques that are the channels through which these attitudes operate to the best advantage" (p. 30). All of these attitudes are also personal qualities, traits of character, and carry a moral dimension as well. They are crucial for developing the habit of reflective thinking (p. 33).

Holzer and Kent (2014, pp. 193-201) are adding several refinements and required attitudes based on ideas by Gadamer and others. These include adding *sensitivity to the other* (be it the text, or others); adding *vulnerability*, willingness to allow one to be challenged or provoked by the subject matter as well as by others; seeing *wholeheartedness* in one wholly committed to letting the text and their partners speak, and in taking others' ideas seriously before delving to criticize them; in employing *open-mindedness* when supporting the other's interpretations even they are not convinced by them; and adding *ethical commitment* to responsibility, a sense of mutual caring and commitment, standing up for oneself and care for the others.

Reflection grounded in these attitudes is not only intellectual but humanizing, valuing growth, humility, and integrity in oneself and others. It is also challenging, as we will explore next.

Challenges and Conditions for Reflective Inquiry

The discussion of the essential attitudes for reflective inquiry reveals multiple challenges in acquiring and practicing these attitudes. Dewey (1933) details many of the challenges associated with reflective thinking and education centered around it. For example, open-mindedness can be hindered by one clinging to their "'pet' notions," so they tend to become defensive and close their "mental eyes and ears to anything different" (p. 30). "Unconscious fears" may also drive us into defensiveness that shuts out new conceptions or even prevents us from making new observations (p. 30). Reflective inquiry requires courage and energy to investigate (p. 3). Palmer (2017) discusses at length the presence of fear and the essentiality of courage in teaching and in learning.

Whole-heartedness is challenged by our very common divided attention and interest, learning for the sake of a grade or some other objective leading to modulation of our interest and attention, not to mention tempering our desire and curiosity.

Learners may not employ intellectual responsibility when studying subjects that are "too remote from their experience, that arouse no active curiosity, and that are beyond their power of understanding" (Dewey, 1933, p. 32), or when they are subjected to a "multitude of subjects or disconnected facts is forced upon the mind" and there is not enough "time and opportunity to weigh their meaning" (p. 33). This last point resonates with our discussion of the need to slow down and to leave enough time for reflection. Dewey suggests "Fewer subjects and fewer facts and more responsibility for thinking material of these subjects and facts through to realize what they involved would give better results" (p. 33), and we have seen similar approaches suggested by Palmer and others.

Addressing these challenges is essential for effective reflective thinking. The following sections will review approaches from the literature to address them.

Reflection as a Practice

Reflection is a disciplined way of learning, not just a discrete activity. Dewey states reflection transforms experience into learning through continuity and inquiry, while Rodgers outlined four criteria from Dewey's ideas: reflection as creating meaning, a form of systematic thinking, community interaction, and required attitudes valuing intellect and care. These aspects define reflection as both a method and a stance to support learner growth.

After reviewing the theory of reflection, the following sections will explore its practical aspects: how to initiate and sustain reflective inquiry.

Sparking Reflection

Reflective thinking rarely begins on its own. It must be awakened—sparked by a moment that disturbs us or invites us to see differently. Dewey (1933) observes, "... the origin of thinking is some perplexity, confusion, or doubt. Thinking is not a case of spontaneous combustion; it does not occur just on general principles. There is something that occasions and evokes it" (p. 15). Reflection begins when experience unsettles us.

In educational settings, such moments are typically intentional rather than coincidental. They may be cultivated through thoughtfully designed experiences or encounters, such as

engaging with texts that prompt tension and possibility, ultimately fostering inquiry. These processes are supported by framing that provides direction for the inquiry, and by questions that encourage deeper and expanded exploration. Lev (2020) articulates this approach when describing her use of Talmudic stories to facilitate encounter: "A text that pushes our buttons and by which we can be pushed to become ever more reflective" (p. 177).

This section explores how reflection is triggered and invoked, the framing that gives purpose and direction, how framing establishes a field of inquiry, and how well-crafted, probing questions can invite and foster reflective thought.

The Evocative Text — Encounter and Provocation

Reflection starts with disturbance. Dewey (1933, p. 15) noted it is not spontaneous but triggered by something that provokes it; it arises from *perplexity*—when the familiar isn't enough, and we are unsettled by something hard to categorize. A good learning experience doesn't seek comfort but constructive unease, leading to inquiry. Dewey (1938) stated, "experience occurs when... conditions interact with needs, desires, and capacities to create the experience" (p. 17). Reflection begins when external triggers meet the learner's inner world, provoking a response.

Lev (2020) calls this practice "reading the text as 'summons'" (p. 182). The text, for her, is not an object to be decoded but a voice that calls. She deliberately chooses rabbinic stories that "might disrupt the students' equilibrium" (p. 184) yet "preserve the balance between familiarity and healthy distance" (p. 184). The desired effect is a constructive dissonance and tension —a moment that "cause[s] a disruption in what Paulo Freire calls 'circles of certainty'" (p. 184). In this state of tension, students are compelled to ask, to interpret, to locate themselves in relation to the text and to one another. The text becomes both a mirror and a door-opener, reflecting back assumptions while opening them for reconsideration.

Lev's approach highlights the qualities that make a text truly evocative. Such texts are ambiguous enough to invite questioning: "I could not use a translation that 'answers' a question before the readers ever realized there was a question" (2020, p. 186). They carry emotional and moral charge, pushing students "to empathize with the Other" (p. 182). Shulman (1986) captures this moral aspect in his analysis of teaching cases: "A parable is a case whose value lies in the communication of values and norms" (p. 12). The parable, like the Talmudic story, functions not by telling learners a compelling story or what to think, but by placing them inside a moral

landscape where reflective thinking awakens. Haroutunian-Gordon (1998) adds complexity as another quality: "The text must also be complex enough to permit resolution to be pursued, so that the conversation both develops and addresses questions about the meaning of the text" (p. 35). While simple situations can convey meaning, complexity creates unresolved elements that spark curiosity and invite discussion, encouraging deeper conversation and exploration.

Palmer (2017) makes a similar argument for the power of good texts to provoke rather than prescribe: "A good text embodies both openness and boundaries… Students do not learn from a text that raises all the right questions and gives all the right answers" (p. 80). Ambiguity, he adds, "demands our engagement, giving students space to move into its field of discourse and think their own thoughts" (p. 81). The text becomes an encounter space, bringing one's intellect and emotions into play, where perplexity is not something to resolve but an invitation to participate.

Framing Reflection — Orienting the Encounter

Reflection does not happen in a void with no direction. Dewey (1933) observed that "a question to be answered, an ambiguity to be resolved, sets up an end and holds the current of ideas to a definite channel" (p. 14). Reflection, in his view, is not aimless wandering but guided exploration, with a sense of direction. Framing the inquiry establishes a context for this purpose. It defines what calls for attention, why it matters, and how one might approach it, while leaving space for uncertainty and questions.

Lev (2020) illustrates this principle in her use of poems and Hassidic narratives as frames and context for learning. She designs sessions that begin with a thematic or ethical focus—such as cultivating empathy and moral awareness—so that the text is not simply studied but encountered within a larger intention. In one example, she told the learners that the session "demonstrated skills for understanding the Other… in all his/her/its complexity" (p. 190). This framing presented this learning as a moral conversation rather than solely a cognitive process, establishing a specific context for inquiry. By introducing the additional texts to the group, the learning experience shifted from focusing on rabbinic stories or halakha (Jewish law) to considering morally challenging situations relevant to contemporary life. Lev describes her aim explicitly: "I wanted the students to understand and apply this teaching: that we all have within us that which we tend to condemn in others" (p. 191). Yet her framing remains open; it sets a direction without fixing the outcome. "Ensuring passion and insight," she writes, "requires us to

leave open the possibility that there is 'something even better' ahead" (p. 202). In her approach, framing serves to direct the reflective inquiry while leaving it open to whatever else may come up.

Palmer (2017) describes a similar tension as a quality of good learning spaces, which he calls both "bounded and open" (p. 77). Palmer writes:

> The [learning] space should be bounded and open… the boundaries are created by a question, a text, or a body of data that keeps us focused… The openness reminds us that the destination we plotted at the outset may not be the one we will reach. (p. 77)

Framing maintains attention and shared focus while still allowing participants to move freely within that space, discovering meanings that could not have been predetermined.

As understanding develops, the original framing may shift and be reinterpreted in light of new insights. Reframing is an integral part of reflection: starting with a direction, staying open-minded, and emerging with a renewed perspective and understanding.

Asking Questions — Driving Reflective Thinking

Reflection is propelled by questions. Where framing gives inquiry its direction, and evocative texts provide its spark, questions supply its movement. Good questions focus attention while opening space for thought, moving the inquiry forward and deeper.

In Jewish learning, questioning has long been the driver of interpretation and reflection[14]. Dekel and Braudo (2022) developed the *BINA* learning pedagogy – מבט, ראי וחלון (*mabat–re'i–chalon*) – embodying a layered process of questioning through three lenses or perspectives, as movement between seeing, reflecting, and envisioning:

- Using the View (*mabat,* מַבָּט), *an interpretive lens*, learners are asked to *look outward*, prompted to examine the text and its specific features carefully. For example, this perspective encourages inquiry into what transpires within the narrative, the narrative flow and structure, what is omitted, what can be discerned, and which aspects remain ambiguous.
- The Mirror (*re'i,* רְאִי), functions as *a reflective lens*, helping learners *turn inward*, guiding learners to introspect and engage in critical self-reflection. Through this approach,

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[14] As evident in common rabbinic texts language phrases, such as מאי משמע ,מנין ,מאי טעמא ,מנלן ,מאי ביניהן ,מאי נפקא מינא.

individuals are invited to relate moments or scenarios from the text to their personal experiences, consider whether they have encountered similar situations, reflect on their potential responses, and identify elements of the story that may be unexpected based on their own experience.

- The Window (*chalon*, חַלּוֹן), is *a transformative lens*, asking the learners to *look beyond*, urging learners to extend their analysis outward, contemplating broader implications for themselves and society. This lens encourages consideration of the insights the text may offer about our world, actions it may inspire, or new perspectives gained through engagement with the narrative.

For Dekel and Braudo, the BINA questioning framework is what "generates energy of connection and encounter" (p. 3). In the framework questioning sequence, each question deepens or widens the inquiry—from interpretation ("what does it say?"), to reflection ("what does it say about us?"), and ultimately to transformation ("what might we do or become because of it?").

Lev (2020) models a similar approach in her pedagogy of questioning. She uses questions to bridge text and self, explaining that the teacher's role is to ask "questions about the text that bridge between it and ourselves", and to ask "questions about ourselves that reflect back on the text" (p. 183). Her questions are often personal and vulnerable, inviting students to reflect rather than evaluate. "Is there anything in this text that spoke to your life," she asks, "made you think differently about yourself, made you question something, or helped you learn something about yourself?" (pp. 195-196). Such questions are emotionally charged; they do not seek information but engagement. They invite the learner's full presence. Lev notes that when students encounter multiple questions or interpretive possibilities, "the more that new options for reading were introduced, the less certain students became of their original readings" (p. 188). Moreover, lacking simple answers opens the space for more questions: "The realization that they could not simply map their own reality onto the text gave them pause and opened space for more questions" (p. 189). The perplexity invites more questions to come up by learners, not only by the teacher.

Both Haroutunian-Gordon and Holzer and Kent describe questioning as invaluable tools in dialogic pedagogy. Haroutunian-Gordon (1998) explains that a good discussion begins with "the basic question about the meaning of the texts that cannot be resolved definitively but can be explored given what the text presents" (p. 38). For her, the basic question is the pivot around

which exploration revolves. Holzer and Kent (2014) offer another role for questions in creating a reflective practice by embedding in their classes "reflective pauses [that] have [learners] think about the *temporary* meaning they make of the story at different stages of the interpretive process" (p. 117). Such use of questions in reflective pauses sustains tension rather than resolve it, enabling learners to make new meaning as they progress through the text.

It is important not only to ask questions, but to ask the right kind of questions, questions that invite thought without overwhelming or constraining it. As Palmer (2017) observes, "Some questions close down the space and keep students from thinking … Other questions open up so much space that they lose students in a trackless wasteland … The questions that help people learn are found somewhere between these extremes" (p. 136). Finding the right balance "somewhere between" requires experience, practice, and is not easy. Lev (2020) honestly shares, "I am still pondering how to ask self-reflection questions that are multi-dimensional and mirror the complexity of the text" (p. 197).

It is good practice to formulate questions in advance when preparing for a learning session. Haroutunian-Gordon (1998) describes such practice where

> Teachers should prepare for class by developing clusters of questions about the meaning of the texts for themselves — questions of genuine interest to them and ones for which they are unsure of the answers. They should spend time perusing the text, writing down questions that occur to them, relating the questions to one another so as to identify issues of deeper interest and passages in the text that help to explore these issues. (p. 58)

Haroutunian-Gordon emphasizes that thoughtful preparation includes probing the text for meaning while developing questions that genuinely matter, questions driven by authentic curiosity, and uncovering themes and issues of deeper significance. Haroutunian-Gordon suggests that "the teacher might never pose the cherished questions, especially if the students wish to put their own on the table" (p. 58), and yet the process "allows one to pursue reflection upon issues of genuine interest to oneself" (p. 58) and "it breeds deep familiarity with the text, which enables the teacher to listen to students with an open, free mind so as to help cultivate their questions and interpretations" (p. 58). Preparing questions using this practice ahead of time serves the teacher and learners in multiple ways, paving the way for deeper experience and reflection, even if some (or many) of the questions are not used in the learning session.

Summary — Forming a Reflective Encounter

Reflection does not emerge by accident; it is awakened. The teacher's task is to evoke it—to design moments that invite learners to pause, question, and make meaning. We have seen three ways to do so: evocative texts that stir emotion and inquiry, framing that provides direction without closing possibilities, and questions that foster curiosity and personal reflection.

These approaches are interconnected, and when employed together, they help create an environment conducive to meaning-making.

Facilitating Reflection

Facilitating reflection involves guiding a dynamic, collaborative, and very personal process. This section focuses on practical aspects of facilitation: creating environments that balance safety with challenge, sustaining inquiry through pacing and questions, and gleaning meaning from diverse perspectives. Facilitation involves emotional awareness, attentiveness, responsiveness to group energy, and flexibility, using these skills to deepen reflection and promote shared understanding.

Designing the Reflective Space

Reflection thrives in spaces intentionally designed to hold both safety and challenge - a place where learners feel secure enough to take intellectual and emotional risks. Parker (2017) described the space as "hospitable and charged… [and] invite the voice of the individual and the group" (pp. 76). Hospitable on one hand, so it feels open, safe, and trustworthy for learners, and at the same time charged, to invoke curiosity and reflection.

Creating such a space is not accidental but deliberate design; Palmer writes that he considers classroom dynamics when designing the teaching and learning space, and explains that space means a combination of factors, including "the physical arrangement and feeling of the room, the conceptual framework that I build around the topic my students and I are exploring, the emotional ethos I hope to facilitate, and the ground rules that will guide our inquiry" (p. 75). The reflective space, then, is multidimensional—physical, conceptual, and emotional—and it requires attentiveness to all factors.

On the conceptual level, the approaches we reviewed in the chapter exploring triggering a reflection, *Sparking Reflection* (page 44), are components in designing and creating a reflective space.

A hospitable space should be both *bounded and open* (to use a Palmer's term we've encountered in *Framing Reflection — Orienting the Encounter*, page 46) – inviting, safe, trustworthy, and free. Framing creates shared direction and prevents drift. Openness fosters exploration and risk, with boundaries serving as a safe return point.

A space is charged when it encourages curiosity and wonder, using evocative texts (see *The Evocative Text — Encounter and Provocation*, page 45), and questions (see *Asking Questions — Driving Reflective Thinking*, page 47) that evoke curiosity and inquiry.

Physical space can communicate invitation and vulnerability. Levisohn (2016) describes a small but deliberate act of reconfiguration as he enters the classroom:

> When I walk into the classroom, the students are seated at small movable tables that are arranged in a rectangle, mimicking a large seminar table. I go to the front of the room and move one table back, out of the rectangle, leaving the other tables in the shape of a U. I position my chair in the opening of the U. I don't want to be sitting behind a table, much less standing behind a podium. I want to be more exposed, more accessible. (p. 1)

The gesture of removing the barrier and changing the room layout embodies the paradox Palmer describes: it maintains focus while increasing accessibility, signaling that reflection is a shared effort, not a performance from the front. The space itself sends a lesson: it's for conversation, and we're in it together.

Such environments depend not only on design but also on the dispositions that both teachers and learners bring to them. As we've seen before, Rodgers (2002) identifies three attitudes fundamental to foster reflective inquiry based on Dewey (1933, pp. 28-33): open-mindedness, whole-heartedness, and responsibility. These attitudes give the reflective space its ethical foundation.

Intentional design of the learning spaces, considering physical setup, conceptual and emotional tones, will support reflective inquiry and meaningful learning.

Guiding and Sustaining Inquiry

Once the reflective space has been created, facilitation becomes the practice of sustaining inquiry—keeping curiosity alive, conversation balanced, and learning directed without being constrained. Facilitation, in this context, is less about control and more about guidance: pacing, questioning, framing, listening, and modeling the attitudes that enable reflection to occur.

Pacing and Patience

Reflection needs time. The tendency to rush toward clarity can easily diminish the ambiguity and openness essential for meaningful reflection, as we've seen in the chapter *About Slowing Down* (page 22). Palmer (2017) offers that "the space should welcome both silence and speech… silence can be a sort of speech" (p. 79). Silence here acts as a pause that helps ideas form. Slowing down gives learners time to process and connect ideas internally before they respond outwardly, and we observed how Holzer and Kent (2014) include reflective pauses within the teaching rhythm for that purpose.

Fostering and Enriching Inquiry Using Questions

Questions are essential tools of facilitation, used not to test comprehension but to keep the current of thought in motion, as we've seen in the section *Asking Questions — Driving Reflective Thinking* (page 47), and specifically in the *BINA* learning model developed by Dekel and Braudo (2022), which offers a helpful framework for this process through its three "lenses" of questioning.

Valuing Every Voice

Facilitation means cultivating a space where each learner's voice can emerge authentically. Palmer (2017) writes, good teaching "must invite students to find their authentic voices, whether or not they speak in ways approved by others" (p. 77). Authentic voice emerges not when learners echo what they think is expected, but when they feel free to express their own developing understanding. Honoring every voice does not mean accepting every statement uncritically; it means listening attentively and helping each participant "find the best meaning in what he or she is saying by paying close attention, asking clarifying questions, and offering illustrations if the student gets lost in abstraction" (p. 82). Through careful listening and thoughtful inquiry, the teacher communicates respect while fostering intellectual depth.

Equally important is honoring silence as a legitimate form of participation. Palmer says, "I affirm their right not to participate overtly" (p. 83), observing that such permission "seems to

evoke speech from people who are normally silent" (p. 83). When learners are freed from pressure to perform, they are more likely to speak from genuine engagement. By granting such freedom, the teacher creates an environment where expression—whether voiced or held in quiet reflection—is still part of the shared process, allowing all learners to feel included.

Weaving Meaning, Framing, and Reframing

As reflection unfolds, the teacher's role evolves from triggering inquiry to guiding the reflective conversation and helping learners connect the voices into a more integrated whole. Dewey (1933) explains synthesis as related to thinking as

> Synthesis is the operation that gives extension and generality to an idea … as soon as any quality is definitely discriminated and given a special meaning of its own, the mind once looks around for other cases to which that meaning may be applied. (p. 158)

Seeking parallels and connections is a natural process, according to Dewey; through synthesis, individual insights begin to connect, to belong to "the same kind of thing" (p. 158).

Rodgers (2002) elaborates Dewey's idea of synthesis in contemporary terms:

> Experiences alone, however, even educative ones, are not enough, claims Dewey. What is critical is the ability to perceive and then weave meaning among the threads of experience.… Rather, it is the meaning that one perceives in and then constructs from an experience that gives that experience value. An experience exists in time and is therefore linked to the past and the future. (pp. 847–848)

Reflection, she notes, is the act of weaving - connecting experiences across time, situating the present conversation within a larger arc of learning. This is an expression of Dewey's principle of continuity.

Lev (2020) offers an example of this weaving in her classroom practice: "But what was more significant was the active interweaving into our personal stories of references back to the text itself" (p. 199). Similarly, Holzer and Kent (2014) describe their role to "establish explicit connections that might have occurred between what they listened to and the unfolding shape of the meaning they take from the story" (p. 117). Here, reflection is neither purely personal nor purely textual; it lives in the space and connection between them. By continually returning to the text while interpreting it through lived experience, learners construct meaning.

But continuity is not limited within and for the individual: when learning is in a group reflective inquiry, weaving and synthesis are the connection of multiple insights and threads of

multiple individuals within the group, creating a conversation. Mezirow (1997) describes this as a process of critical conversation:

> Discourse, as used here, is a dialogue devoted to assessing reasons presented in support of competing interpretations, by critically examining evidence, arguments, and alternative points of view.… We learn together by analyzing the related experiences of others to arrive at a common understanding that holds until new evidence or arguments present themselves. (pp. 6-7)

The conversation itself becomes the site of synthesis, where multiple interpretations intersect and are reshaped through interaction. It is important to note that the common understanding Mezirow refers to is not necessarily a shared conclusion or final closure of the inquiry, but rather the development of a shared understanding of the inquiry domain and its boundaries, which helps clarify the inquiry landscape.

Palmer (2017) captures this communal dimension of the reflective process as

> The teaching and learning space must be more than a forum for individual expression. It must also be a place in which the group's voice is gathered and amplified, so that the group can affirm, question, challenge, and correct the voice of the individual. The teacher's task is to listen for what the group voice is saying and to play that voice back from time to time so the group can hear and even change its own collective mind. (p. 77)

Through listening and "playing back," the teacher helps the group hear itself, perceive its own progress, and locate continuity amid diversity. Later, Palmer calls this practice "lifting up and reframing what my students are saying … articulate what we have learned in a way that relates it to where we have been and where we are about to go" (p. 137-8). Reframing, in this sense, is both reflective and forward-looking.

Teachers thus engage in an ongoing act of weaving: connecting experiences, integrating voices, and reframing understanding during the reflective process. Between framing and reframing, of analyzing and synthesizing, the teacher guides learners in seeing their own insights as part of a continuity of meaning, as the conversation unfolds.

Awareness and Attunement

Facilitating reflection in a community requires not only intellectual guidance but also emotional awareness and attunement. The teacher must be able to sense where the group is—its

readiness, tension, curiosity, or fatigue—and to respond in ways that sustain the learning process without breaking its progress. Dewey (1933) described this pedagogical sensitivity as an awareness:

> The teacher … observe[s] the mental responses and movement of the student… The teacher must be alive to all forms of bodily expression of mental condition—to puzzlement, boredom, mastery, the dawn of an idea, feigned attention, tendency to show off, to dominate discussion because of egotism, etc.—as well as sensitive to the meaning of all expression in words. He must be aware not only of their meaning, but of their meaning as indicative of the state of mind of the pupil. (p. 275)

Dewey emphasizes that the attentive teacher needs to read gestures, silences, and tones of voice, responding in ways that will sustain the process, for example, by offering a reflective pause or grounding back to the text.

Effective listening by teachers requires awareness of both intellectual and emotional aspects. Haroutunian-Gordon (2007; p. 147, 152) describes two complementary modes: *cataphatic*, which involves classifying and making sense of what is observed, and *apophatic*, which involves suspending classification to listen emotionally and tune into the messages being conveyed. Both modes involve active questioning to understand meaning. The reflective teacher must shift between these modalities, sometimes focusing on concepts and other times listening beneath the surface to emotional undercurrents in the learner and group.

Rodgers (2002) summarizes such awareness to "the extent of the teacher's own ability to observe, pay attention, perceive, and be open—in short, be present—to all that is happening in the classroom" (p. 854).

The Dynamic Nature of Reflection

Facilitating reflection requires recognizing that the process will not proceed according to a tidy plan. Although teachers may plan an outline of the learning session, reflection unfolds in unexpected directions, as Palmer (2017) captured:

> [the] process is nonlinear. Its tracks lead in diverse directions, sometimes circling back on themselves, sometimes jumping far ahead. In the midst of this creative chaos, the teacher must know when and how to draw a straight line by connecting comments that have been made, revealing a trajectory of inquiry that can both confirm what we know and take us somewhere new. (p. 138)

The teacher's role, then, is not to impose order but to discern emerging patterns—connecting, weaving threads across contributions so that coherence gradually forms without constraining discovery, which might not be along the initially planned direction or frame. Palmer described the reflective process as "circular, interactive, and dynamic" (p. 106).

This non-linearity requires the teacher to remain flexible and responsive. Lev (2020) describes her own need to "think on [her] feet" (p. 202) when classroom dynamics took unanticipated turns because she "expected an entirely different response to the text" (p. 202). The evolving reflective conversation may not follow what we plan, expect, or hope for.

Teaching tools like questions to trigger or deepen reflection, or techniques to slow down, are not to be applied orderly, in a linear procedural fashion throughout the learning process, but rather as needed throughout the learning. Kanarek (2013) observes in her study of slowing down Talmud study, "Although I have described the four components of slowing down in a linear fashion, more often these components were interwoven with one another" (p. 138). What appears structured in theory is, in practice, interwoven and recursive, shaped by the flow of the group and the process at that moment.

Integrating the Practice of Facilitation

Facilitating reflection is a dynamic process based on presence, responsiveness, and trust. The teacher creates a supportive space—physical, emotional, and conceptual—for learners to explore complexity. Tools like pacing, silence, and questioning support group inquiry. The teacher's listening and vulnerability foster genuine dialogue, weaving experiences and insights into an evolving whole. Sensitivity to the group's rhythm and emotions helps keep the process both charged and safe, structured and open. Reflective learning is non-linear, so the teacher guides without controlling, allowing the conversation to flow naturally. Throughout this process, and supported by these practices, reflection evolves as a communal and personal process of meaning-making.

Summary: Learning from Listening to Reflection

This chapter starts with listening, then moves to interpretation, and finally to reflection. The teacher's role is to foster conditions for the reflective process to take place. Listening creates a foundation: it's an open and attentive attitude that welcomes experience, text, and voices. Interpretation turns openness into dialogue, shaping meaning through conversation; it involves

respect and curiosity, co-developing meanings rather than imposing them. Reflection consolidates these steps into a disciplined inquiry, linking experience, understanding, and moral insight, potentially leading to transformation; it requires time, structure, and community as learners connect new insights with past experiences and future goals. These practices together form a process of making meaning.

5.5.   About the Evolving Meaning

Introduction: Meaning as a Living Process

Meaning, in this chapter, is considered not as something fixed to be uncovered but as something living, unfolding, and co-created through relationship and conversation. Learning, in this view, is not the transfer of knowledge from one who knows to one who does not, but a collaborative process in which understanding arises from the interplay of teacher, learner, and subject. Drawing from Dewey's conception of experience as a "co-operative enterprise" and Palmer's vision of knowledge as "an eternal conversation about things that matter," this chapter explores how meaning evolves through dialogue, interaction, and shared inquiry, employing attitudes of curiosity, humility, and openness.

Meaning as Co-Created and Evolving

Theories of experiential and dialogical learning converge on the view that meaning is not a static property to be transmitted, but a living process that unfolds through interaction. Dewey (1938, p. 31) described that the development of meaning is "a co-operative enterprise, not a dictation. The teacher's suggestion is not a mold for a cast-iron result but is a starting point to be developed … through contributions from the experience of all engaged in the learning process."

Palmer (2017) extends the relational aspect of this idea. In what he calls a *community of truth*, knowledge arises through a network of relationships in which teacher, learners, and subject all participate. For Palmer, truth is not an object to be possessed "but an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline" (p. 105). The classroom thus becomes a place where meaning is co-authored, not discovered once and for all. The teacher's task is to hold open a space where the subject itself can speak and where each participant's insight may shift the collective understanding. The teacher's awareness that meaning is not something they simply bring into the classroom but instead involves sharing openness,

anticipatory wonder, and possibly even yearning to discover what lies ahead is expressed by Lev (2020), who suggests that it "requires us to leave open the possibility that there is 'something even better' ahead, and to strive for that something in all that we learn" (p. 202). Similarly, Grossman and Shulman (1994) emphasize that understanding develops within this dialogic process. In the interpretive classroom, they note, "there are multiple readings possible of any given text" (p. 8), and "teachers will develop new understandings of the text prompted by student readings" (p. 9).

Triadic Models: Encounter and the Centered "It"

Literature converges around a vision of learning as an encounter between teacher, learner, and subject.

Hawkins (2002) wrote, "the direct object must be something treasured which is not I, and not Thou" (p. 64). This seemingly simple statement anchors a relational epistemology: the subject of study—the *It*—is not a passive object to be understood but a presence that demands respect and attention. The teacher and learner stand together before it, seeking it together. As Levisohn (2016) observed, "It must be *treasured*: valued, desirable and desired" (p. 9).

Palmer (2017) expands this setting by naming the subject itself as the "*third thing*" or "*great thing*" that sits at the center of the learning circle. "We must put a third thing, a great thing, at the center of the pedagogical circle" (p. 119), a subject that can hold, he writes "both me and thee accountable to something beyond ourselves" (p. 119). The teacher and students are bound not by personal allegiance or hierarchy but by a common relation to that "great thing." When Palmer adds that "great things … [are] the subjects around which the circle of seekers has always gathered — not the disciplines that study these subjects, not the texts that talk about them, not the theories that explain them, but the things themselves" (p. 109), he shifts the emphasis from procedure and content to reverence — suggesting that genuine knowing requires humility before what is beyond any single viewpoint. Palmer recites a Robert Frost poem — "We dance round in a ring and suppose, / But the Secret sits in the middle and knows" (p. 107) — capturing this dynamic: the "Secret" in the middle is the *It*, the living center that draws the circle, a community, together, cherishing it with respect – and maybe awe - even as the It resists possession.

Levisohn (2016), drawing on Schwab, relates to the relationship between teacher and student as a shared project oriented toward the same subject matter. Teacher and learner, he notes, "can be engaged in a shared inquiry, with a shared object of desire" (p. 8), creating something new, "a shared production of a work that embodies their now-shared ideals" (p. 8), and a project on which "they work side-by-side" (p. 8). Yet, Levisohn warns that the learning triangle collapses when the teacher presumes to have all the answers

> … this only works if the question, or the quest, is genuine. If the teacher has all the answers, or even if he believes that he has all the answers, then whatever it is that he actually desires—the object of the teacher's Eros—is not the same as the object of the student's Eros. There is no triangle, no shared 'It,' no 'third thing' as the focus of the pedagogic community. (p. 11)

Teachers and learners are co-seekers, connected by a shared pursuit of something valuable—the "great thing," the "treasured It," the living subject that holds them accountable. Meaning emerges from that shared engagement driven by curiosity, humility, and reverence, with the understanding that the center—like Frost's secret—may never be fully grasped.

Communal Dimension

We've already seen that learning is not a solitary act but a shared endeavor —a process that unfolds within community and becomes possible through it.

Palmer (2017) describes a community of truth where knowing involves participation in a web of relationships. He writes that reality "is a web of communal relationships, and we can know reality only by being in community with it" (p. 97). Knowledge is a part of being with others, held together "not by civility but by the grace of great things" (p. 106). Palmer's reference to Robert Frost offers a vision of communal orientation around a shared thing.

Palmer extends and offers that community is "a chance to look at reality through the eyes of others, instead of forcing them to process everything through their own limited vision" (p. 131). Community is thus a sort of a mirror; Dekel and Braudo (2022) describe this communal mirror, "only through it can we descend together, as a group, into the depth of the text… Each person uncovers within it a different layer. We need all the mirrors to understand the text in its depth" (p. 3). Each learner's perspective becomes essential; no single view can encompass the

text's depth. The community functions as a reflective surface through which the text—and the learners—are mutually revealed.

The communal experiential dynamic reflected in Dekel and Braudo's description of study circles, depicts the revelation of innovative meaning itself as a communal event:

> The heavenly voice (*bat kol*) appears regularly within the public sphere, within the circle, within the collective being. What was once a male quorum that formed the synagogue fellowship can now be understood as an egalitarian Beit Midrash circle that creates the learning community together, and from within it rise voices of renewal and spiritual uplift (p. 4)

Their use of the image of a heavenly voice could be related to Palmer's reverence for the *It*. For Dekel and Braudo, the rabbinic depiction of that voice of divine truth is now arising in contemporary egalitarian circles around text and one another.

The generative creation of knowledge and meaning not only occurs within the community, but is also driven by the shared endeavor itself. Haroutunian-Gordon (1998) describes:

> Discussants and leader work to define the question that the group addresses and to pursue resolution by identifying and interpreting aspects of the text that seem relevant to it. The parts of the text that are 'covered' in the discussion are those that have bearing upon the questions that arise in the conversation, not ones the leader believes 'everyone should understand', as one might say. (p. 35)

It is the conversation - the dynamic relationship, as Palmer offered – within the group, the community, which leads the endeavor, not the teacher. Recalling Palmer's reverence for the It, the great thing, along with Dekel and Braudo's reference to the divine voice, creates a sense of mystery to how this process unfolds within the community.

It is not only that meaning is co-created in a learning community, but the community itself is also created in the process of meaning-making. Lave and Wegner (1991) present the concept of *legitimate peripheral participation*, where newcomers become full members of a community of practice by gradually moving from the periphery to the center through active, meaningful, and legitimate participation; a common example of that is learning and practice through apprenticeship. For Lave and Wegner, "learning is not merely condition for membership, but is itself an evolving form of membership" (p. 53), thus the process of learning

is co-creating the community itself when new members join from the periphery and through learning become contributing participants of the community.

These voices depict a community-based pedagogy where knowing emerges within a shared process. The learning space becomes a communal generative medium of meaning and of the community itself.

Reflective and Transformative Dimensions

Reflection is the process by which experience becomes meaningful, leading the way to transformation: reflection does not happen after learning; it is an essential part of the learning.

The evolving meaning - the *It* - is a participant in the communal dialogical relationships, even as the *It* evolves. Levisohn's (2001) reading of Gadamer about the hermeneutics of text adds highlights the reflective and transformative aspect of these relationships, as he writes:

> Engaging with someone – or, as Gadamer helps us to see with some *thing* – in dialogue entails confronting that person as an interlocutor whose assertions are to be taken seriously. … We may accept the claim or reject it, but we may not ignore it, so that even if we reject it, we are changed by the encounter with it, by the demand to provide a response (p. 26, italics in original)

Not only do the person, some things—the *It*, the text—become partners in the reflective dialogue, making claims that cannot be ignored and demanding responses, but this encounter also drives change and transformation, because "we are changed by the encounter."

Dekel and Braudo (2022) advance this relational process as reciprocal transformation: it's not only us that change. In their description of the Beit Midrash, they offer that

> The relationship between the learner and the text is reciprocal… We changed as a result of reading the text, and the text also changed because of our reading. It is the special dance that takes place between learner and text, in which both change one another. (p. 3)

By employing the metaphor of a dance, Dekel and Braudo highlight the dynamic nature of this interaction and relationship, as each participant is attentive to their partner's movements and those of others on the floor. Together, the dancers collaboratively shape a unique experience that unfolds in real-time, adapting and transforming all participants.

Summary: The Dynamics of Co-Created Meaning

Meaning, as this chapter has shown, is not transmitted or possessed but continually shaped in relationship. It grows through encounter—between teacher and learner, learner and text, self and community. From Dewey's vision of learning as a cooperative enterprise to Palmer's *community of truth*, the process of knowing emerges as a shared act of creation. Meaning evolves through dialogue and interaction, sustained by the mutual responsiveness of all participants. The teacher's role is not to set or show meaning but to help hold the space in which meaning can unfold, expand, and grow.

The communal process of making meaning through reflection affects all participants: the individuals, the community, and the emerging meaning.

5.6. About Role Modeling

The Teacher as a Model

Teaching inherently involves modeling, whether done intentionally or otherwise. Students are learning from the teacher's stance, presence, and way of being. Every gesture—how we stand, sit, move, speak, listen, question, respond, hesitate, or pursue meaning—becomes part of what is taught. This is why discussing role modeling is essential.

This chapter explores different modeling types related to teacher presence, including participating in learning communities, reflecting, showing reflective attitudes, and viewing the teacher as an individual. These aspects influence how teachers serve as models for learners.

Teacher As Part of The Learning Community

The teacher's genuine participation in the shared project of learning can significantly influence learners: the teacher is "in it" too, and as Levisohn (2016) phrased "We [teachers] too are playing in the playground" (p. 11).

Being "in" could be either literally sitting together in the circle (Levisohn 2016, p. 1; Haroutunian-Gordon 1998, p. 35), or figuratively – being engaged, questioning, and vulnerably participating alongside the students. The teacher's way of being during the learning experience becomes a living demonstration of what reflective inquiry in a community looks like. It is through this embodied presence, rather than through instruction alone, that students begin to internalize how to listen, reason, and care about understanding.

When a teacher becomes a part of the group, it reflects a shift of authority. Dewey (1938) describes this participatory stance as a redefinition of authority itself: "The teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator but takes on that of leader of group activities" (p. 25). The teacher's leadership is thus not exercised from outside the group but from within, influencing through engagement rather than hierarchy. For the learners, it models a form of leadership rooted in partnership and responsibility.

The physical and symbolic act of sitting in a circle embodies the teacher's membership in the group. Even as the teacher brings greater experience and preparedness for this specific session, their participation signals that they, too, are subject to the same norms of evidence and reasoning as the other participants. As Haroutunian-Gordon (1998) writes, "The authority and arbitrator of the dispute is sought in the text itself, not the leader or teacher; evidence is culled from the work, and arguments are formed to explain the evidence" (p. 35). By deferring to the process rather than their personal opinion, the teacher demonstrates intellectual humility and teaches by example that integrity in inquiry exceeds individual dominance.

Such modeling depends on the teacher's willingness to engage in the same practices they expect of students. Lev (2020) describes her decision to fully participate in her students' reflective exercises: "I myself did each exercise that I assigned to the students and then posted my writings for them" (p. 195). Her participation made the reflective process transparent and credible. The students could see what it looked like to wrestle with a text and to take risks in writing. She modeled not the mastery of reflection but its practice—the ongoing, imperfect work of making meaning.

Being part of the learning community also means joining students in their uncertainty. A teacher who prepares not only content, but also authentic questions demonstrates that inquiry is never complete. Haroutunian-Gordon (1998) advises, "Teachers should prepare for class by developing … questions about the meaning of the texts for themselves—questions of genuine interest to them and ones for which they are unsure of the answers." (p. 58). This powerful advice acknowledges the teacher's own pursuit of finding meaning, additional meanings, and possible answers to questions of genuine interest for them. It demonstrates that not knowing can be a generative state and that intellectual courage and humility involve confronting the unknown and learning together.

When the teacher participates as a co-learner, the class gains a shared center, a "third thing", holding both teacher and students accountable, creating a space for a collective endeavor.

Teacher As a Reflective Practitioner

In a learning community, a teacher's role as a reflective practitioner serves as a powerful role model. By externalizing reflection, they demonstrate their thinking, inquiry, and facilitation methods. When teachers embody reflection in action, they make the invisible visible, teaching students not just what to think, but how reflective thought unfolds—sustaining curiosity, embracing uncertainty, and pursuing ideas with integrity and interest.

Modeling reflection involves making the usually unseen process of reasoning behind one's actions and decisions visible to the learners. Shulman (1986) offers that in order to teach reflection, a teacher should be "capable of reflection leading to self-knowledge… and capable of … communicating the reasons for professional decisions and actions to others" (p. 13). The teacher who can reflect and then articulate their reflection process—explaining why a question is asked, why a line of inquiry is explored, or where more options are considered—demonstrates a reflective approach in action. Similarly, Grossman and Shulman (1994) observed: "if our goal is to encourage multiple readings… then teachers will need to talk about the invisible aspects of interpretive processes" (p. 8). By thinking aloud—showing how they consider different interpretations, make connections, or test assumptions, the teacher exposes the otherwise invisible process.

It may be easier for the teacher to provide the bottom-line conclusion or answer and not delve into the how, but it is imperative for the teaching to demonstrate how to inquire rather than simply providing answers. Kanarek (2013) recounts a teaching moment where "it would have been quicker for me to simply supply the link… I was modeling a process of inquiry" (p. 144). Instead of shortcutting the process, she chose to guide students through the steps of reasoning, linking, and discovery, with patience and persistence. Kanarek modeled here also her trust in the evolving group process. Similar trust in the learning process is echoed in Haroutunian-Gordon's (1998) advice for teachers to prepare their own questions about the meaning of the text, yet during the session, "the teacher might never pose the cherished questions, especially if the students wish to put their own on the table" (p. 58). This flexibility models both humility and respect for the group's capacity to lead somewhere else.

Teacher Modeling Attitudes

Beyond technique and participation, teachers model attitudes they embody toward knowledge, inquiry, and others. Students learn not only from what a teacher says or does, but also from the teacher's way of being—how they embrace uncertainty, respond to differences, and hold themselves in relation to what is coming up in the group. Palmer had plainly expressed it in the opening of his seminal book *The Courage to Teach* by stating, "We Teach Who We Are" (2017, p. 1), or what Levisohn (2016, pp. 4-5) called "modeling a way of being."

We encountered the fundamental attitudes for reflective inquiry outlined by Dewey (1933, pp. 28-33), being *whole-heartedness*, *open-mindedness*, and *responsibility*. The theory, rationale, and motivation for such attitudes can be explained and analyzed through case studies (Shulman, 1986; Grossman & Shulman, 1994; Shulman, 2005). However, from a pedagogical perspective, the effect may be more vivid for the learners when a teacher personally demonstrates and practices these attitudes.

An example of shifting from explaining an attitude to holding and living an attitude of open-mindedness is a teacher's recognition that meaning is not singular and that understanding emerges through multiplicity. Grossman and Shulman (1994) offer that "teachers must believe that there are multiple readings possible… [and] help students develop the ability to enable students to make their own meanings from texts" (p. 8). This belief is not just a pedagogical technique but a fundamental stance. By embracing diverse interpretations, the teacher models humility and trust in others' ability to interpret, viewing disagreement as a productive state that promotes learning.

Lev (2020) offers a vivid example of this orientation in practice. She describes her approach to teaching texts by

> "supplying more than one translation, complicating the reading using historical context, and rarely giving an unequivocal answer to a 'factual question'—foster[ing] a feeling that the totality of our 'knowing' must be examined and re-examined… they were feeling that accretion of information shifting uncertainly beneath." (p. 196)

By doing this, Lev's goal is not to undermine confidence but to model intellectual responsibility and curiosity, to question proposed meaning, and to be open to engaging with additional venues.

When teachers demonstrate reflective practices (as we had reviewed in the previous section), they model not only techniques but also the underlying attitudes that foster a disposition for reflective inquiry in students.

Teacher As a Person

Teachers are human. Being a teacher does not mean representing an idealized image of perfection but rather living one's humanity in the presence of one's students. Palmer (2017) opens *The Courage to Teach* with the now-classic statement: "We teach who we are" (p. 1). Teaching, in this sense, is not merely an act of transmitting knowledge but of revealing the self through relationship. Students learn not only from what we know or how we act, but also from who we are. And this becomes a model for students, too.

Palmer underscores that the teacher's individuality is not an obstacle to good teaching but its essential source, when one is authentic. For him, the most transformative educators teach from integrity, allowing their passion and personality to infuse their work. Recalling one such teacher, he writes (2017), "The passion with which he lectured was not only for his subject but for our learning" (p. 140). Here, passion serves as a form of modeling: the teacher's emotional investment indicates to students that intellectual life is not cold or detached, but deeply human, and that engaging the mind is also engaging the heart.

> A teacher's authenticity also exists in their genuine participation. Levisohn (2016) offers, We too are playing in the playground. We are also acknowledging our own Eros, our own desiring selves, our own questions and quests. We offer up this 'third thing' to the student not as a mere curiosity, but as an object of our own passion. We are saying, 'You can be like me, if you want'—but to be like me, in this model, is not primarily to know what I know or act like I act, but to desire what I desire, or to desire in the way that I desire. (p. 11)

When teachers are genuinely willing to fully engage by vulnerably exposing their emotional attitude ("desire", per Levisohn), and not only their intellectual aptitude, they model a way of being.

Lev (2020) provides vivid examples for modeling authenticity. When she joined her students in the reflective exercises, she observed: "While this did allow me to model the process, I also hoped that my own vulnerability would invite them to follow suit" (p. 195). By sharing her

own work, Lev's involvement demonstrates openness and transparency, revealing her struggle instead of hiding or working around it. This creates a safe space for students to risk their own self-expression. Lev's later reflections—her emphasis on continuing to "be open" (p. 202) and on modeling reflective questioning (p. 197)—extend this idea: the teacher's openness and own embrace of reflective inquiry are the most powerful invitations for others to join in.

Levisohn (2016) offers us that

If the teacher is on a genuine spiritual and intellectual quest for herself, if she is open and vulnerable and genuinely shares her pursuit with her student so that their quests are aligned, if they are trying to figure it out together, then we can start to envision … a triangular relationship suffused with Eros but devoid of manipulation and abuse. (p. 11)

When the teacher brings her own openness, vulnerability, and humanity to the learning, it becomes part of her own spiritual and intellectual quest, modeling full, authentic participation.

Summary

Role modeling in teaching is not an abstract idea but a lived, relational practice, where teachers learn, question, and seek alongside others. The teacher models by being *in* the circle and *of* the circle.

As a reflective practitioner, the teacher models how thought unfolds: how to make reasoning visible, how to embrace uncertainty, and how to engage the group in shared inquiry. Through reflective attitudes such as open-mindedness, intellectual humility, curiosity, and responsibility, the teacher embodies the dispositions that sustain genuine learning. Finally, as a person—a human being with passion, fear, and vulnerability—the teacher demonstrates that knowledge and self grow together.

Together, these dimensions of modeling reveal that teaching and learning, the teacher and students, are not separate but rely on each other. Palmer (2017) reminds us, "Students are dependent on teachers for grades — but what are teachers dependent on?… When we are not dependent on each other, community cannot exist" (p. 142). When teachers allow themselves to rely on their students as co-participants in the search for understanding and meaning, they embody what Palmer calls "the interdependence that the community of truth requires" (p. 144). We are interdependent, and the classroom is a microcosm embodying this interdependence.

6. Practice: *LeMa'ase*

6.1. Introduction

This section of the paper examines the practical application of the suggested pedagogy.

The section begins by outlining my goals and motivations for developing and implementing this approach and then provides an in-depth account of how it was put into practice. I share a comprehensive report on my experiences over recent years, detailing my perspectives, intentions, concerns, and reflections, as well as specific situations, challenges, interactions, outcomes, and feedback from learners. I include examples of materials and texts used, questions posed, and notable teaching moments with different groups of students.

The reports on my experience are based on personal notes taken during the planning and preparation stages of learning sessions, reflective notes written after sessions, written and verbal feedback from learners, and selected excerpts from interactions during the sessions. These observations are based on both my recollections and recordings of several sessions. Quotations attributed to learners are verbatim excerpts from (optionally anonymous) written feedback submitted by eight adult participants at the end of a series of six sessions[15] held at Congregation Etz Chayim in Palo Alto, California[16].

This comprehensive report supports the evaluation of how theoretical concepts, insights, and findings from the literature review are reflected in real-world contexts. The purpose is to facilitate broader conclusions and formalize key aspects of this pedagogical approach.

The chapters detailing the experience report and analysis are organized thematically according to aspects of the pedagogy as they were presented in the theoretical review:

1) Preparation of the material and lesson plans
2) Telling the story, the oral-performative practice
3) Slowing down
4) Facilitating the sessions
5) Co-creating meaning, and
6) Role modeling

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[15] Typically, a series consisted of 3 to 6 sessions; however, there was one multi-series program for the same group of learners comprising of over 20 sessions.

[16] The process of capturing feedback and recordings of these sessions was approved by the AJR IRB, and all participants gave their written consent to use written and oral feedback, as well as recordings, in this research.

6.2. Intentions and Objectives

I had several intentions and objectives in mind that led me to develop and practice this pedagogical approach for teaching rabbinic texts.

As mentioned in the introduction, most learners had little previous experience with these texts. Many were unfamiliar with Hebrew and Aramaic, or with the linguistic and logical patterns typical of rabbinic literature. Their knowledge of the historical background and figures referred to was also limited, and they knew very little about halakha or the relevant biblical passages. All sessions were elective; some were conducted as standalone events, while others were part of a series, as previously described.

The interpretive model[17] articulated by Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (1960), as presented by Levisohn (2001), offers a valuable framework for clarifying my instructional goals. Gadamer describes three distinct types and levels of interpretation, which align with the corresponding tiers of my teaching objectives:

1. **Inviting Curiosity**

    At the outset, my objective is to **get learners' attention and curiosity to engage with unfamiliar material, to understand its plain meaning**, as Levisohn represented "to clarify the meaning of the text … capture some of the meaning of the text given the set of assumptions of a particular interpreter living at a particular time" (p. 24).
    Many times, we refer to this level in Jewish tradition as the *pshat*. In the BINA methodology[18], this is comparable to the View – interpretive - stage, *mabat*. For that, I need to bridge the unfamiliar language, literary constructs, and historical, rabbinic, and halakhic contexts of the presented text so learners can comprehend what it says.

2. **Engaging in a Reflective Encounter**

    My next objective is to **have learners engage with this unfamiliar and to use this encounter to question one's assumptions in the context of one's life**, or as Levisohn captured Gadamer's approach, to "bring our assumptions and beliefs, both about the text and general beliefs as well, into a situation where they will be challenged and

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[17] See section *Gadamer's Models of Relationships*, page 35
[18] See section *Asking Questions — Driving Reflective Thinking*, page 47

transformed" (p. 24), because our prejudice, expressed in our assumptions and beliefs, is not challenged "while it is operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, provoked" (p. 24).

At this level, I intend to provoke learners' reflective contemplations, and potentially transformation. This aligns BINA's methodology Mirror – reflective - stage, *re'I*. It is extending the encounter with the text to an encounter with oneself and with others.

3. **Cultivating Openness**

The last objective is to **practice a way of approaching the unfamiliar, may it be rabbinic text, other types of texts, or even situations in our life**, or as Levisohn captured Gadamer's idea "deepening of the kind of openness that should characterize the interpretive encounter in the first place … the conclusion … of interpretation is not really a conclusion at all, but in some sense a gateway, opening up towards further inquiry, further experience, and further insight." (p. 24).

Thus, my objective is to cultivate in the learners that "kind of openness", a way of being when encountering an experience, especially the unfamiliar. This aligns with BINA's methodology Window – transformative - stage, *chalon*, opening to the future, a way of living and being.

The teaching approach for rabbinic texts considered that most learners encountered these materials for the first time, often with limited background in languages, logic, or history. Using Gadamer's interpretive framework and BINA's methodology, the objectives were threefold: first, to spark curiosity and clarify basic meanings by bridging linguistic and contextual gaps; second, to engage learners in reflective encounters that challenge personal assumptions; and third, to foster ongoing openness and inquiry, viewing interpretation as a continual path to deeper understanding.

With these teaching goals and objectives in mind, we will outline the teaching protocol as implemented in the next section.

6.3.   The Teaching Protocol

This chapter presents the teaching protocol, which consists of two key phases: (1) preparing for the session[19], and (2) facilitating the session following a recommended structure.

Preparation: Laying the Foundation

Preparation typically includes the following steps:

1. Formulating objectives and choosing a theme
2. Framing with Essential Questions
3. Researching, selecting, and translating
4. Preparing the text: divide into sections and formulate questions
5. Reviewing session flow, choosing a warm-up question

The following sections will explain each of these steps in detail:

1. **Formulating objectives and choosing a theme**

   The first step is to develop clear objectives and a central theme around which the session will be built. These should consider the target audience and setting—such as teens at a Jewish summer camp or adult learners in a community Jewish education program—along with the context, like a Jewish holiday or a community event. It's also important to account for the learners' prior exposure and familiarity with similar texts and learning methods, as well as whether the session is a one-time event or part of a series focused on a common theme. In some cases, a specific text may already be chosen, and the goal is to design a session around it.

2. **Framing with Essential Questions**

   An *Essential Question*[20] articulates the overarching inquiry that the session seeks to open—not necessarily to answer. The term was coined by McTighe and Wiggins (2013), as part of their *Understanding by Design* (UbD) methodology. Essential Questions (EQs) are a method to frame the key learning themes by presenting the learners with open-

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[19] Several examples of lessons demonstrating how material is prepared for a session can be found in the appendix *Lesson Plan Examples*, page 131.
[20] I was introduced to the term and practice of *Essential Questions* by Leah Kahn, from Assembly, https://assembly.community/

ended and complex questions, which are engaging, relevant, provoking and stimulating inquiry, and encouraging higher-order thinking, in a certain context. Formulating one or more EQs at this point helps clarify and focus the topic, guides the session's direction, and assists us in choosing and preparing materials for the learning session.

3. **Research, selecting, and translating**

   This stage involves searching across a range of resources[21] to find those that best illuminate the chosen theme and reflect the essential questions. The selection is guided not only by scholarly relevance but also by the text's potential to speak dialogically to the intended audience. Good texts include ambiguity in situations and actions or lay a foundation for a rich reflective discussion on values, conduct, and human behavior, typically by presenting a challenging situation.

   Several texts can be selected and arranged to support the development of the theme throughout the session.

   Since the texts are usually written in Aramaic and Hebrew, they need to be translated into either Hebrew or English. The widely used Steinzaltz Hebrew and English translation should not be used as is because it adds extra interpretive layers, while our goal is to present the text as directly and faithfully to the original (נאמן למקור) as possible. A better approach is to translate the text using resources like the Jastrow dictionary. Sometimes, keeping the original Aramaic or Hebrew word or phrase can be helpful, as it opens an opportunity during the session to highlight the text's intrinsic ambiguity or obscurity.

4. **Preparing the test: divide into sections and formulate questions**

   Each piece of the curated material is first divided into small sections, usually just one or a few sentences. Occasionally, a smaller part, even just a few words that don't form a complete sentence, may work better.

   The purpose of this segmentation is to 1) slow down the reading and unfolding of the story, and 2) create pauses to ask learners questions, encouraging and supporting reflective conversations.

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[21] Appendix *Rabbinic Texts Resources* page 109 provides a list of useful resources for researching and selecting rabbinic texts.

As we divide the text into segments, we also generate key questions for each part, usually from the perspective of one or more of BINA's metaphoric lenses:

- **View (*mabat*, מַבָּט):** interpretive questions relating to our understanding of what is happening in the story, what is not happening, what we understand, and what remains obscure.

- **Mirror (*re'i*, רְאִי):** reflective questions designed to encourage reflective contemplations; for instance, connecting an event or circumstance in the narrative to personal experiences, considering whether one has faced a comparable situation, articulating feelings in such situations, contemplating potential or past responses, identifying any aspects of the story's presentation that may be unexpected, and the way they provoke us to question our own assumptions and beliefs.

- **Window (*chalon*, חַלּוֹן):** transformative questions designed to elevate the discussion by prompting potential insights into the text, our engagement with it, and the understanding it may offer regarding our world and lives. These inquiries encourage reflection on how the text might inspire us to act or perceive differently, as well as to recognize new perspectives that were previously unnoticed or unconsidered.

These questions are designed to *evoke* rather than to direct, to open conversation rather than to close it. These methodological perspectives and questions are not linear steps but interwoven threads in a non-linear process; there is no particular order or necessity to formulate questions that cover all perspectives of every segment. During the session, we might use all, some, or none of the questions we prepared, depending on the flow and how the session progresses.

The breaks between segments are also good opportunities to determine whether to explain historical or halakhic background and context to clarify the sometimes-unfamiliar settings of rabbinic stories for our contemporary learners.

It's helpful to prepare short interim summaries at various points during the process, highlighting key insights we anticipate or plan to reveal in the learning session so far.

A similar summary can be prepared for the entire session, highlighting key points and potential takeaways.

5. **Reviewing session flow and choosing a warm-up question**

   At this stage, review the entire session flow, starting with the chosen theme, the Essential Questions, chosen texts, segments, and reflective questions, as well as summaries and the overall session summary; update and fine-tune as needed.

   We will typically start the session with a round-robin of responses to a warm-up question, which may also serve as a personal introduction (if needed). The warm-up question should be formulated to invite personal engagement, helping participants locate themselves within the theme before approaching the text. It is good practice to relate this question to a personal experience, assumption, or viewpoint.

Session Facilitation: A Dynamic Flow

While each group has its own rhythm, a typical session follows these stages:

1. Welcome
2. Warm-up and framing
3. Text study and reflective dialogue
4. Closing reflection
5. Shared takeaways
6. Optional follow-up

The following sections provide a detailed description of each of these stages.

1. **Welcome**

   Take a few moments to have everyone arrive and ground, setting the tone for full presence.

2. **Warm-up and Framing**

   Initiate the session by presenting a warm-up question and facilitating a round-robin of shared responses. While participation is optional, this approach encourages active engagement, allowing learners to connect their experiences to the session's theme. Conclude by introducing the Essential Question(s) to frame the session and establish its focus, thereby setting the context for the reflective discussion.

3. **Text study and reflective dialogue**

    The core of the session is an iterative process of engaging with the texts:

    - Introduce each text with a brief background and context; for example, the tractate it appears in, the surrounding circumstances, and the discussion leading to this text.
    - Read each segment or "voice act" it with tonal inflections, then moving to a reflective conversation using a combination of-
        - Questions, prepared or spontaneous, to be used as needed for the session progression. The questions aim to encourage participation, promote reflection, expand or deepen the conversation, and, if necessary, reframe it.
        - Pauses, which allow time for learners to process information, reflect on the questions, their own reactions, contributions from other learners, and their thoughts before formulating responses.
        - Active facilitation of the discussion by inviting shares and contributions from learners who wish to participate, without pressuring those who do not volunteer, while striving for balanced participation across the group. Participants may respond with their insights, reflections, questions, share personal experiences, relate to other shares, and more.
        - Real-time weaving and synthesis of the learners' shares by the teacher, integrating shared insights, linking them to preceding shares, insights, relevant text segments, warm-up prompts, and essential questions, thereby supporting the group toward emerging understandings and meanings.
        - Active participation by the teacher, offering their own voice, while being sensitive to balance their voice with other voices in the group
        - Keeping the session pace and progress, moving to the following segment
    - Upon completing a text, pause for a reflective and integrative conversation and synthesis to discuss what was shared, developing insights and meanings. This reflection connects the conversation back to the essential questions, places it in a larger context, and, when appropriate, helps guide the transition to the following text.

4. **Closing reflection**

    At the conclusion of the text or when time necessitates closure, revisit the essential

questions as a group: "In light of our learning, how might we now respond?" This provides learners with an opportunity to reflect collectively on both the text and their shared experience throughout the process.

5. **Shared Takeaways**

   End the session by inviting every learner to briefly respond to the prompt:[22]

   > *"Share one thing you are taking away from this session: something new you learned, something you hadn't previously considered, or something a friend said that really resonated with you."*

   This prompt is designed to help participants ground their learning and experience as the session is closing.

6. **Follow-up (if applicable)**

   You may send a follow-up message to the session participants a day or two after the session: a note of appreciation, relevant texts or links, a brief summary of a few collective insights, possibly adding a personal reflection and takeaway. If this session is part of a series, the follow-up provides context that connects previous discussions to upcoming sessions, building curiosity and excitement.

   The following chapters describe in detail the experience of applying this pedagogy in practice, along with an analysis of the experience considering the theoretical findings.

6.4.   Experience: Preparing

This chapter reviews my experience and lessons learned preparing material for sessions, and is broken down into different stages of preparation, as presented in the section *Preparation: Laying the Foundation* (page 71).

The Essentiality of Preparation

Reflective learning requires creating a reflective space for the learning to take place (see *Designing the Reflective Space*, page 50), and requires a thorough preparation, as Palmer (2017) observed includes "conceptualizing the course of study, selecting materials, framing assignments

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[22] I was introduced to this practice of concluding with one takeaway by Leah Kahn, from Assembly, https://assembly.community/

and exercises, and blocking out the time" (p. 136), and where he warns "If I do not make these decisions in ways consonant with opening space, the space will disappear before the class begins" (p. 136). This section will describe my experience relating to the preparation stage.

This pedagogical approach places significant demands on the teacher, who serves as host, facilitator, weaver, integrator, synthesizer, participant, and role model, among other essential functions. Each role requires thorough attentiveness to both the group's dynamics and personal self-awareness. Preparation can alleviate some of these challenges.

I resonated with what Dewey stated (1933) "The teacher must have his mind free to observe the mental responses and movement of the student" (p. 275), continuing to warn:

Unless the teacher's mind has mastered the subject matter in advance, unless it is thoroughly at home in it, using it unconsciously without need of express thought, he will not be free to give full time and attention to observation and interpretation of the pupils' … reactions (p. 275)

For the teacher to lead the session effectively, they must be fully attentive, which requires mastering the subject matter in advance, making informed choices and decisions, as Palmer suggested.

Preparation, in my experience, proved to be an essential step. After one of the learning sessions, during which I felt hesitant and even somewhat confused, I wrote in my notes, "*I wasn't clear enough with the flow myself - need to be better prepared.*" In this case, the issue wasn't a lack of text mastery but rather how the text was divided, which disrupted the natural flow I wanted to create for the learning experience. I wasn't fully clear on why I chose specific divisions or how they supported my intended flow and framing. This led to friction for both myself and the learners.

Choosing a Theme and Framing

Framing Rabbinic Texts

Rabbinic texts contain considerable depth and complexity, allowing for varied and distinct avenues of study. The same passage can be explored across diverse contexts and learning objectives; therefore, selecting an appropriate theme and establishing a clear framework for the learning experience are essential. These choices impact other preparatory steps, primarily the session's questions: the essential question, warm-up question, and the reflective questions.

An example of a rabbinic text that can be used to support learning about different themes is the midrash about Miriam and her father Amram responding to Pharao's decree (BT Sotah 12a). It can be used to explore themes of resilience and hope, or themes related to the empowerment of marginalized groups, and the significance of underrepresented voices. Similarly, the narrative of Rabbi Eliezer (Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer chapters 1-2) can be used to explore topics such as the relationships between students and their teachers or parents, personal transformation through education, determination in pursuing one's goals, and more.

Choosing No Framing

A text may be examined using an open and inquisitive approach, without imposing predefined direction, context, or limitations. This method aligns with the notion of *barefoot reading* (see *Ricoeur's Interpretation as a Personal Encounter*, page 36), where learners interact with the material directly, with no prior analysis or contextual framing. Such exploration can provide meaningful insights, may reveal unexpected directions for understanding; it emphasizes collaborative engagement to uncover and discuss insights arising from the content.

I've used such an open, unframed approach in several sessions. However, I found that this method is often too unstructured for most learners, especially in group settings where conversations tend to drift. In these cases, it is difficult for some to follow the discussion threads, leading to discussions that lose focus and become less engaging compared to sessions when similar texts were studied with framing. Palmer suggested that effective learning environments should be both "bounded and open" (see expanded discussion under *Framing Reflection — Orienting the Encounter* page 46). Generally, unless the explicit goal is to explore the text freely, it's better to frame the learning experience.

The Essential Questions and The Warm-up Prompt

Essential questions guide the learning process by framing inquiry contexts and direction with open-ended, complex queries that engage learners, stimulate inquiry, and are placed within the intended context. Presented at the start and revisited, they shape the learning process. Haroutunian-Gordon (1998) described a similar concept of the *Basic Question*, defined as "a question about the meaning of the text that cannot be resolved definitively but can be explored given what the text presents. It is a question about whose answer there is genuine doubt" (p. 38).

An effective tool for initiating learning activities is a *warm-up question*, which encourages early participation and engagement from all learners. The warm-up question should

align with the session's theme and prompt reflective thought, ideally by asking to share a personal experience, assumption, or belief related to a situation. Warm-up questions should avoid responses that require lengthy explanations and should be relevant to the target audience.

An example of essential and warm-up questions is the story of Mar Ukva, his wife and the oven (BT Ketubot 67b), used to initiate a discussion on performing acts of kindness anonymously versus engaging directly and personally with those in need. I presented the following essential questions:

"Is it appropriate to seek visibility in acts of kindness—or does anonymity serve the giver and recipient's interests best? What are the merits of direct connection with those in need? Is there an ideal model of doing acts of kindness? What would be your considerations for the best model of helping others?"

This approach introduces learners to two distinct modalities for offering help, encouraging them to evaluate the advantages and limitations of each while considering their own viewpoints. Inquiring about an ideal model is a foundational question that fosters open dialogue rather than promoting strict adherence to a single framework, such as Maimonides' hierarchical model (Mishna Torah, Gifts to the Poor 10:7-14).

The warm-up question I presented was:

"Share of a time when your helping someone was embarrassing for them."

Introducing learners to the context of the relationship between the helper and the person in need, and making it personal.

Another example of essential questions is related to the story of Ulla and Yalta (BT Berakhot 51b), where I framed the learning around responses to marginalization, and offered the following essential questions:

"When rigid authority and prejudice clash with voices demanding equity, how can you respond? How can you turn it into a constructive encounter?"

This framed the discussion both personally and constructively, opening a space for learners to consider how they presently respond to such situations, recognizing that some responses are not very constructive, and contemplating other possible ways to respond.

The warm-up question I chose for this session was

"How do you typically react when you feel marginalized or dismissed?"

The group's round-robin responses enabled each learner to approach the subject personally, fostering an emotional bond with the material through reflection and participation.

Selecting Texts

We should select texts that relate to our objectives, themes, and what we aim to explore.

Yet, there are additional considerations when selecting texts and materials for learning, as previously reviewed (see *The Evocative Text — Encounter and Provocation* page 45). The text is going to be our partner in this learning session, and a group participant we are going to converse with[23], and we want to work with a partner that will support the group in the exploration. We want to choose evocative texts, which are ambiguous and complex enough to invite questioning, carry seeds of emotional and moral charge that are related to the framing, and texts that are not too foreign and remote from us that we would not be able to relate to the portrayed situations[24].

Some examples for such texts are the stories of Martha daughter of Boethus (BT Gittin 56a), Rabbi Yehoshua learns (BT Eruvin 53b), Rabbi Yehoshua and the Emperor's daughter (BT Taanit 7a-b), the Reed and the Cedar (BT Taanit 20a-b), Ulla and Yalta (BT Berakhot 51b), Rav Rachumi not coming home (BT Ketubot 62b), Rav Yossef returns home (BT Ketubot 63b), Rabbi Akiva and his daughter's wedding (BT Shabbat 156b), Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanus (Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer chapters 1-2), the teacher and the fishpond (BT Taanit 24a), Rav Shimi bar Ashi and Rav Pappa (BT Taanit 9b), Rabbi Chiyya and Cheruta (BT Kiddushin 81b).

Although rabbinic literature contains numerous stories (*aggadah*), it also includes an even greater quantity of non-narrative texts. I have considered whether this teaching method can be effectively applied to such material. My findings are detailed in *Using Non-narrative Texts* (page 88). I recommend focusing on narrative-based texts, as they are generally more effective for reflective learning. When using non-narrative texts, it is helpful to craft questions that intentionally encourage personal reflection.

Another consideration is the length and complexity of the text; I discuss my conclusions after experimenting with teaching a long story in *Balancing Depth vs. Coverage* (page 102).

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[23] As discussed in sections *Listening to the Text* (page 31), *Interpretation as a Conversation* (page 35), and *Triadic Models: Encounter and the Centered "It"* (page 62).
[24] Though Lev's *Talmud that Works your Heart* (2020) shows there are ways to effectively engage with very challenging situations and texts.

Conversely, even brief stories can be valuable texts for exploration if they capture an evocative moment. For instance, the very short story about Abaye's nanny's lesson (BT Yoma 78b) encourages reflection on how breaking things contributes to our learning, while the two-line story of Rabbi Abba bar Shumni and Rav Menashya bar Yirmeya's departure on the Yofti river (BT Eruvin 64a) offers insight into creating meaningful farewells. Both examples served as foundations for deep and thoughtful conversations.

Translating

Lev's work (2020) demonstrates the importance of using a translation that reduces interpretative layers in texts, allowing ambiguity and obscurity to foster deeper discussions.

This is one of the reasons I chose to use my own translation instead of the original Hebrew or English versions of Steinzaltz's translations; these include interpretative layers (usually representing Rashi and other commentaries), explanations, clarifications, or halakhic background to clarify what happens. For example, Steinzaltz's translation adds explanations to the bare text of the story of Rav Rachumi not coming home for Yom Kippur (BT Ketubot 62b), and similarly in the story of Ulla and Yalta (BT Berakhot 51bv). Creating my own translation gave me greater control over the interpretation, enhancing the reflective discussion.

There were cases where the original wording carried multiple layers of meaning that served the narrative, and presenting only a translation would miss the nuances embedded in the story's language. Lev (2020, pp. 186-187) suggests addressing this challenge by presenting multiple translation options side by side when learning ambiguous texts. I did not experiment with this approach yet, but I chose to leave certain words in the original and explain their layered meaning and use in this context. For example, the use of the word ריקא for worthless in the story of Rabbi Elazar (BT Taanit 20a), or the use of יונתך-זונתך, or the term איפסיק in the story of Rav Yossef (BT Ketubot 63a). Presenting the original terms with their embedded ambiguity or multi-layered meanings offered additional directions for learners.

One of the learners provided the following feedback:

"I would like more opportunity to see Hebrew, which would bring me hopefully closer to the original text--plus giving me an opportunity to exercise and thus improve my Hebrew. I think there are often set phrases that have certain connotations due to stories in Tanach

as well as in the Talmud--and the English translations sometimes suggest these--but also present an additional locus for slippage/veiling."

This perspective comes from a learner interested in exploring rabbinic texts who is familiar with Biblical Hebrew but not with Aramaic. Several challenges arose in addressing this learner's requests. First, much of rabbinic literature is written in Aramaic, and the original texts lack punctuation and vowel marks (ניקוד), which further complicates reading. Another challenge occurs when using oral-performative traditions, where reading the text in Aramaic might not necessarily serve this learner or the group well, and I was hesitant to incorporate written text[25]. Given that a primary concern for this learner is to get as close as possible to the original text, other pedagogies—such as *Svara*'s—are probably more aligned with this goal.

Preparing the Text: Divide into Sections and Formulate Questions

The next step is to break the text into small segments and create reflective questions.

The goals of the text segmentation is to 1) slow down the reading and the unfolding of the story, and to 2) introduce reflective pauses using questions; such pauses could also be used to provide a brief explanation of context (such as halakhic, historical, characters in the story, use of literary construct or of language) to assist in the learning.

The structure and flow of the narrative act as the main guide for identifying proper segmentation points within the text, while also considering suitable pauses to ask questions or give explanations. Gaining practice and experience in preparing and leading learning sessions helped me develop a more intuitive sense of how to prepare the material most effectively.

Breaks are used to introduce questions; the BINA[26] reflective methodology was instrumental in developing effective questions.

Typically, discussions begin with questions focused on the *interpretive view*, directly examining the text "as is"—the *pshat*. For example, "What is taking place in this part of the story?" and follow up with "In what ways can we make sense of the events that just occurred?"

We can then move to the emotional aspect with questions relating to the *reflective view*, such as "how do you think the person feels? What may be their intention?" or "how do you think

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[25] See an extended discussion of my experience of presenting written text in the section *Auditory and Visual Learning, or "What do we lose without written text?"*, page 88.
[26] See section *Asking Questions — Driving Reflective Thinking*, page 49.

they will respond?" which makes it easier to follow with a personal reflection "how would you have felt in a similar situation? How would you react?" relating it to personal experience "are you familiar with this situation? Did it happen to you? How did you respond?"

The last step is to shift to a *transformative view*, looking beyond the text and asking what it is calling us to do or be. For example, "What do you think the message the Rabbis wanted to convey in this story?", "Is this message resonating with you or not?", "Is it applicable to us today? In what ways?"

These types of questions can and will interleave; not all lenses will engage us in every reflective pause, and it is the teacher's responsibility to be sensitive and determine which questions to use and when, responding to the group's needs in the moment.

It is beneficial to prepare more questions, as my experience has clearly demonstrated that not all prepared questions are utilized. It is common for additional questions to arise in the group - either from the learners or the teacher - as the learning process progresses.

It's essential to balance breaks in a session: too many breaks disrupt the flow, while too few prevent learners from pausing to understand and reflect on the story, which may lead to rushing through the text, missing details and nuances, and to shortcutting reflective contemplations.

One of the learners provided the following feedback

"It might be interesting to experiment with the issue of what chunks to present ... I do totally respect the idea of ensuring that we don't read ahead, but I also sometimes think that the actual chunking might benefit from slightly different breaks at times."

This feedback both recognizes the importance of a slow reveal of the story and reflective pauses, but also questions my segmentation choices in that specific text. Remaining flexible during the session is crucial, adapting as needed to optimize learning. A plan that seems solid during preparation might not work for all audiences and in all situations. As the learner suggested, teachers can try different structures and questions. Gathering feedback, new questions, and reflecting afterward will improve session plans and develop reflective teaching skills.

Finally, these breaks can also be used to share explanations with the group. For example, clarifying the use of a specific phrase (e.g., חלשה דעתו), a related halakha or practice may help explain what happens in the story, or provide background on characters and historical context.

An enriching aspect of looking at the texts is paying attention to the way the literary structure of the story supports its narrative and message, encouraging "listening to the text", what Ricoeur called *explanation* (as described in the section *Ricoeur's Interpretation as a Personal Encounter*, page 36). For example, noticing the literary structuring of three distinct scenes in stories like Rava and Homa (BT Ketubot 65a), Rabbi Hiyyah and Heruta (BT Kidushin 81b), and the story of Rav Shimi and Rav Papa (BT Taanit 9a), or the role of repetition in the story of Martha bat Boethus (BT Gittin 56a). Highlighting the literary structure of these stories offered an opportunity to discuss the meaning conveyed by the rabbinic narrative.

Here is an example using the story about the reed and the cedar with Rabbi Elazar (BT Taanit 20a). The framing and essential question of the learning was:

In what ways might arrogance, pride, rigidity, and righteousness prevent one from apologizing, accepting an apology, and granting forgiveness?

And here is a possible breakdown of the first few sentences of the story; the original translated text is in **bold**, and questions are prefixed with ##:

Once, Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, was coming from Migdal Gedor, from the house of his teacher, riding leisurely on his donkey by the riverside, and was feeling happy and elated because he had studied much Torah.
Provide context on who is Rabbi Elazar, possibly connect to other stories of Rabbi Elazar the group previously explored; geographically situate the scene
What do we see here? Describe the scene, as if it were a scene in a movie
What do you think was Rabbi Elazar's state of mind?
Can you relate to it? Share about a time you may have felt this way
There chanced to meet him an exceedingly ugly man who greeted him, 'Peace be upon you, Sir.'
What do we know about this person? (unnamed, very ugly, polite, probably recognizes the famous Rabbi)
How would you respond to such a greeting?

Rabbi Elazar, however, did not return his greeting but instead said to him, 'Reika (Worthless!), how ugly you are! Are all your fellow citizens as ugly as you are?'

What happened here? (shaming, being rude, personal, and group insult)

Explain the use of Reika, empty vessel

Why do you think Rabbi Elazar responded this way?

How do you think it made the person feel?

Did it happen to you? (either side; maybe not to that extent)

How would you respond if you were that person?

The man replied: 'I do not know, but go and tell the craftsman who made me, "How Ugly is the vessel which you have made".'

What was the man's response?

What was the person really saying? (shifting a personal insulting question to a theological question, going vertically even higher)

When Rabbi Elazar realized that he had done wrong, he dismounted from the donkey and prostrated himself before the man and said to him, 'I submit myself to you, forgive me'.

What is happening here? Describe the scene as if you've seen it in a movie (signifies a vertical transition from a higher position than the person to a lower position)

How does the physical, external transition help us understand the inner transition in Rabbi Elazar?

How do you think the person would respond to Rabbi Elazar's apology?

How would you have responded?

…

After preparing the texts, I reviewed the entire session flow, including the framing and key questions, to ensure that the materials and sequence support our goals.

I always have a hard copy of the prepared session material for my use, even when I conduct an online session, because it is easier to handwrite notes and markup the text during the session for later review, reflection, and refinement, as needed.

An essential insight about reflection as the teacher's own practice is presented by Grossman and Shulman (1994), offering:

During the processes of curriculum analysis and planning (comprehension and transformation), the teacher engages in reflection *for* action. The teacher rehearses and anticipates what might go on in the minds of the students and how different representations might relate both to the potential of the texts and the constructions of the readers. During active instruction, the teacher engages in reflection *in* action, processing experience, weighing alternatives, and shifting grounds as the teaching and learning unfold. After the active teaching, the teacher reviews and evaluates, playing back the experiences, examining pieces of student work, now reflecting *on* both action and thought. (p. 10; italics in the original)

I found this insight extremely powerful, showing how my use of reflection before, during, and after every learning session (for/in/on action) better prepares me to model a reflective approach to learners: it is not just a theoretical notion but a practical method that shapes how I approach the learning session itself.

6.5.   Experience: Telling the Story

A distinguishing aspect of this pedagogical approach is the oral, performative delivery of the story, rather than distributing and using written texts for learners to read from.

Making the Text more Accessible

Reading rabbinic texts in their original form is challenging due to terse language, lack of punctuation, and missing reading cues. Ong highlighted the difficulty for authors to express themselves clearly and for readers to understand (see *Philosophical Grounding of Orality and Writing*, page 12). Oral-performative tradition helps bridge these gaps by making the text more accessible, aligning with my goal. Learners listen to re-enactments, reducing obscurity and ambiguity.

A counterargument is that reenacting the text imposes a particular interpretation. Even breaking sentences or adding question and exclamation marks adds an interpretive layer to texts that lack punctuation, like rabbinic texts. As with translation, there's a balance between making the text engaging and accessible for learners while preserving ambiguity, allowing for diverse interpretations and meanings.

Creating Emotional and Communal Connections

There is a clear emotional aspect to the oral-performative tradition, in which the text is re-enacted. In their feedback, learners expressed "*being inspired*", "*feeling evoked*", "*intrigued*", "*challenged*", "*puzzled*", and "*struck by the strangeness of the stories*." This feedback aligns with what Levisohn (2016) described as "building on and cultivating a set of emotional connections" (p. 2), and as noted by Ong and Copeland, too (see *Re-enlivening the Written Text*, page 18). My goal in fostering this emotional experience for learners and the story was to create a more inviting space for personal reflections

Oral performance removes the intermediate step of written text, allowing learners to interpret and create meaning directly from listening. This method fosters immediate engagement, placing learners within a community—referred to as "*circle of trust*" or "*circle of disciples*" by Palmer and Stern, "*community of truth*" by Palmer, or "*community of practice*" and by Lave and Wenger—where they collaboratively explore the subject, be it a text or narrative, alongside the teacher, much like gathering around the proverbial communal fire.

When learners don't have to switch their attention between papers or screens, they engage more directly with the experience. Ong (2012) observed that "When a speaker is addressing an audience, the members of the audience normally become a unity, with themselves and with the speaker" (p. 73) while when the audience is reading "a handout provided for them, as each reader enters into his or her own private reading world, the unity of the audience is shattered" (p. 73).

In our learning sessions, instead of individual or pair study of the text, the circle stays together throughout the session, creating a communal experience that is further enhanced by the group sharing, solicited and continuously synthesized by the teacher. The shared experience unites a group and builds "*a community of learners*", as one of the learners observed.

Auditory and Visual Learning, or "What do we lose without written text?"

One of my initial concerns when starting to work with oral-performative practice was that some learners might miss written text, which could significantly impact their experience. I recognize that learners differ in their learning styles, with some preferring visual and others auditory learning. I was wondering whether delivering the story solely through oral segments

would suffice, or if it would be beneficial to provide corresponding written material, possibly revealed incrementally.

It is challenging to implement slow reveal with hard copies of the text, as Holzer and Kent (2014, p. 113) did. I decided to experiment in a few learning sessions using slides with animation, revealing the text as we progressed. Some sessions were virtual only, and some were hybrid. In both modalities, the switch between being fully present as a group (either in-person or as video squares on the screen) and reading a line of text, then returning to group contemplation and reflection, was jarring. It was challenging to realign oneself when being attentive to the group, switch to reading a line on the screen while listening to the text being read, and then switch back to the group. This was even more challenging for me as the teacher, as it required switching between mediums and attention. The overall feedback was that it was "a nice addition", but not necessary, and I did not continue this practice. There were a few cases where I was asked to go back and reread a story segment because a learner did not fully hear it or was unsure what they had heard, but this did not disrupt the session flow.

During the first session with a particular group, I conducted a virtual session utilizing animated slides to reveal the text slowly. Upon returning to study with the same group a year later, I delivered a learning session without any written material. My post-session notes reflected the experience: *Text is not missing! Storytelling is working great; no distractions."*

Using Non-narrative Texts

I knew that stories (*aggadah*) are suitable for oral performance because they tell narratives of people interacting in various situations and offer a storyline that invites identification and response. I was wondering whether this pedagogy would work for other types of rabbinic texts, specifically halakhic texts, rabbinic *sugyot* (debates), or series of rabbinic aphorisms or statements that rely heavily on *midrashim* of biblical verses. Some stories include references to biblical verses as prooftexts, midrashim, or parts of the story, and I was wondering how these references would fit into this pedagogy.

I experimented in a couple of sessions, as part of a series about Talmudic approaches to teaching and learning, focusing on rabbinic texts that included a series of statements relying on

midrashic interpretations of biblical verses[27]. While the group shares and discussions were deep and rich, I captured some reflections in my personal notes after one of the sessions:

"The subject was good, and the learners participated lively

1) They really tried to understand the point of prooftext and midrashim

2) Y is more knowledgeable, and more used to study Talmud so they felt more comfortable with this format

3) The Hebrew / translations were challenging, as one can translate in so many ways depending on context, and the midrash is heavily relaying on it

4) I think the lack of written material in front of them was more felt, this time. It is much more difficult to follow than a story line which is engaging

5) I was concerned we will not have enough material, but we ended seeing we had too much! I did not cover the last section from BT Shabbat

6) I felt a little less energetic and more hesitant this time, maybe because it was not only more challenging to learn, but also to teach this type of material. The personal reflection was lacking

7) I am not sure if there was something I could change much if I stick to the oral-performative tradition ... some things are really more difficult, and there are multiple barriers -

1) Hard to follow without written text

2) The language / translation is challenging

3) Background - in material, as well as in ways of working with it"

It is very evident there were multiple challenges, from varying levels of knowledge and comfort with this literary form and how it "works", to translation challenges with midrashic use of biblical verses, and the less engaging material.

In many ways, this reflects the nature of such material, which is less engaging than a good story with its own developing drama, and therefore does not foster emotional connections or encourage reflective inquiry; *"The personal reflection was lacking."* This observation is not unique to rabbinic texts and can be compared to studying legal code versus learning a legal case.

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[27] BT Eruvin 54b "אשר תשים לפניהם ... כי נטל עליו" Avot 3:2, "מכאן אמר רבי אליעזר ... כי נטל עליו" Taanit 7a, "רבי חנינא בן תרדיון ... כי נטל עליו" "אמר רבי חמא ... ומתלמידי יותר מכולם"

One may recall Shulman's (1986, 2005) suggestions to use cases and case studies as an effective teaching method in professions.

Upon further analysis, these texts are primarily intellectual rather than emotional. When the text describes Rabbis asking and explaining "how verse X relates to situation Y?[28]", it emphasizes logical reasoning and deduction based on text and a midrashic interpretation. This approach can prompt a reflective inquiry through questions such as "where do you see learning together as sharpening the other or yourself?" or "where does it feel like a battle?" However, these texts are not as evocative as an engaging story and will require more effort from teachers to encourage and deepen participant reflection.

As mentioned, some stories include supporting biblical verses and midrashim as prooftexts within their narrative. I was wondering how these embedded verses would work with oral-performative practice. One such story is the story of Ulla who is visiting Rav Nachman and is insulting his wife Yalta (BT Berakhot 51b), where Ulla justifies his actions with a biblical verse. Reading the referenced verse in the context of Ulla's response to Rav Nachman's request might not flow as smoothly as the narrative itself; however, it is crucial to understand the mansplaining dynamic leading to Yalta's aggressive reaction. In this case, it is important to read not just the verse segment that appears in the rabbinic text (three words in the Talmudic text), but a longer portion of the verse, if not the entire verse, to clarify the context in which it appears. Doing so provides a more comprehensive background and highlights the verse's role in the story. Additionally, it's essential to explain the Hebrew, especially since Ulla used the gender-specific Hebrew wording in the verse, to justify overriding Yalta. My experience was that once we read the complete verse and clarified the language, the learners were fully engaged in a meaningful discussion and reflection.

My overall conclusion is that texts primarily focused on midrashic interpretations, with little narrative, are challenging to use in oral-performative practice and require special attention when planning the session to emphasize reflective questions. On the other hand, a narrative that includes a midrashic reference, especially if essential to understanding the story's progression, may work well, provided there is sufficient attention to explain its role in the narrative.

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[28] For example, BT Taanit 7a: " אָמַר רַבִּי חָמָא בְּרַבִּי חֲנִינָא, מַאי דִּכְתִיב — אֶחָד מְחַדֵּד אֶת זֶה בַּרְזֶל בְּבַרְזֶל יָחַד", לוֹמַר לָךְ: מָה בַּרְזֶל זֶה, "בַּרְזֶל
חֲבֵירוֹ, אַף שְׁנֵי תַּלְמִידֵי חֲכָמִים — מְחַדְּדִין זֶה אֶת זֶה בַּהֲלָכָה"

6.6. Experience: Slowing Down

As described in the teaching protocol section, this teaching pedagogy revolved around the teacher reading the text very slowly, usually a sentence or two at a time, and sometimes just a few words or a phrase.

Holzer and Kent (2014, p. 113) outline a line-by-line teaching technique that involves having students cover the text and reveal specific lines for reading when directed (see *Practices of Slowing Down*, page 27). For Holzer and Kent, this is a preparatory stage for new learners unfamiliar with havruta study, helping them grasp the process before paired study. In my teaching, this isn't just preparatory but the core learning method.

Instead of using printed texts and strict guidance, I employ oral-performative strategies to control the pace of the study and the progressive reveal of the text. One advantage of using oral-performative practice is greater control over the session's tempo.

Other strategies I used to slow down the session pace included presenting questions that prompted reflective discussion, allowing ample time for reflection and response, and weaving and synthesizing shared reflections in real-time. The pauses also help provide relevant context related to the text; for example, background information on certain personalities, historical, or halakhic contexts, and the use of specific terms or phrases.

I was surprised and intrigued to receive a lot of written feedback related to the line-by-line pedagogy, for example:

> *"I enjoyed the 'reveal' aspect of learning and the exploration that every word mattered."*
> *"[what was unique was] Only viewing one new line at a time."*
> *"Line-by-line presentation keeps up suspense."*
> *"Novel approach to Talmud Story"*
> *"The line-by-line evolution of the story was a new experience for me. It was fascinating to hear how other people would read the line and to hear how much meaning could be found in one line. Then by the time we got to the end the first line might have a very different meaning."*
> *"[I felt] intrigued after each line. Challenged to think beyond the line."*
> *"[I felt] engaged, curious, grateful"*
> *"I felt insightful ideas flood my thoughts and thinking"*

"It really helps to spend enough time exploring each story"

"I really appreciated how we read a small chunk of the text, then discussed, and then read a small chunk of text, then discussed, etc. ... creates a space where spontaneous insights or contributions were made possible."

A first clear insight is that many learners commented on the line-by-line methodology as an innovative approach for them, one they had not encountered in other learning experiences, and one they appreciated.

Another insight coming up from the feedback was that the slow story reveal evoked emotions and interest in these learners: enjoyment, suspense, fascination, appreciation, feeling intrigued, and challenged. It kept them engaged, within the circle, wanting to stay engaged and participate. It created an emotional rhythm of anticipation, combining the study process with a sense of discovery, transforming it from an intellectual process into an experience.

The feedback shows learners felt a sense of attention and consideration for every detail, as "*every word mattered.*" Beyond attentive reading, the process allowed time for meanings to develop, even within a single line, creating "*a space where spontaneous insights or contributions were made possible.*" Learners began to appreciate the richness and complexity of rabbinic language and texts. Slowing down with this practice disrupted the habitual scanning of text for surface meaning, inviting contemplation of nuances, gaps, and ambiguities. The learners began to experience interpretation as a process, not a product, with meaning evolving with every revealed segment and even within it. Learners were attentive not only to the content but also to the process and methodology.

Slowing down provided time. It is interesting to note that slowing down did not lead to learners' boredom, but rather to increased engagement and interest in the story, by enhancing their emotional connection to it, leading to reflective contemplation.

The learners' feedback also suggested a recognition of the value of group learning:

"so valuable to do in a group"

"the process of discovering the lessons in a shared setting ... is inspiring"

"I love the brain stimulation and sharing ideas with colleagues."

"Hearing other people's perspectives."

"It was fascinating to hear how other people would read the line"

Multiple learners saw the group process as a significant aspect of the learning. They acknowledged and appreciated the value of group process, the contribution of others, and recognized their own participation and being part of "*sharing ideas with colleagues*". This feedback suggests a shift in pedagogical attitude from focusing on individual experience to emphasizing group experience, whose value is recognized.

This resembles Kanarek's (2013) observation, "Slowing down not only contributed to the students becoming more attentive readers but also to stronger class dynamics" (p. 273). Learning became a shared discovery, a collective inquiry, a sense that insights are uncovered together in an emerging process, where every share contributed and enriched the discussion. Learners were attentive to both meanings emerging from multiple voices in the text, and meanings emerging from multiple voices of their classmates. The learning experience became an exchange of ideas and meanings, a dialogue within the group, together with the text. The learners appreciated this.

Learners felt empowered to contribute, and to contribute even without background –

"My old brain awakens, and I feel excited and safe thinking about and contributing to the discussion."

"I was impressed how people could contribute without having to have deep backgrounds or understanding of traditional Halacha."

The pedagogy created a safe space for learners to share and to contribute. Learners felt that every share, every contribution is valued, even if they do not have the (presumed) prerequisite experience or knowledge, it was enough for them to be attentive and curious. In a way, it democratized learning, where authority in this process does not require scholarly knowledge, only participation in the interpretive process.

Furthermore, the learners demonstrated a sincere motivation to share, doing so with enthusiasm and joy, as evidenced by remarks such as "*I feel excited.*"

When there is enough time to listen, digest, and contemplate, learners find their own voice and are willing to contribute it to the communal fire.

There was feedback from a learner providing a different viewpoint on the pedagogy:

"I haven't ever studied Talmud. The primary difference from other text studying experiences is the tightly leader controlled encounter with the text and the lack of Hebrew. I do totally respect the idea of ensuring that we don't read ahead, but I also sometimes think that the actual chunking might benefit from slightly different breaks at

times. Possibly in the Talmudic text, there are obviously places that are suggested as breaks--perhaps due to the locations of comments, but in some sessions one or more of the passages revealed didn't have that much to say about it."

This feedback is from a seasoned Bible learner (primarily English with reasonable Hebrew proficiency), having a first experience studying rabbinic texts.

This feedback highlights the subjective nature of the teacher's choices in translating, segmenting the text, presenting questions, and managing the session flow; for example, what questions to ask, when, and how much time to wait for a response from learners before moving to the next segment.

For this learner, the way the story was presented made it accessible, and at the same time, being used to direct access to the Hebrew biblical text, they felt distanced and dependent on the teacher's mediation and choices, which led them to think that something may have been veiled. I felt that it also shows an inclination and desire on the learner's side to have greater interpretive freedom (which they exercise when having direct access to the text) in how to read and analyze its structure and rhythm.

This points to the inherent tension in this pedagogy: the act of slowing down, controlling the textual reveal, oral-performative delivery embedding a particular interpretation – all are the teacher's pedagogical act reflecting choices to serve the session's goals - enhancing attentiveness and communal rhythm and fostering reflective inquiry, and at the same time is encouraging specific interpretive directions and may limit others. Some learners will feel this tension and perceive its restriction on their interpretative freedom, while others will appreciate this approach.

As we can see, the deliberate slowing down of the learning process proved to be far more than a pacing choice—it was an essential component of the pedagogical approach. It changed the engagement in the group, creating a different experience where learners feel empowered and want to participate and engage. It created a space where we could pay attention and develop meaning, and learners could experience the text rather than merely advance through it. The rhythm of slow reading, integrated with reflection, listening, and dialogue, turned the study process into a shared experience of discovery. The pedagogical value is not only in comprehension, but in forming practices of slowing down, patience, listening, and presence.

6.7.   Experience: Facilitating Sessions

Creating a Reflective Space

Reflective learning is a communal endeavor, happening in a safe space, as Palmer called it "bounded and open." Full presence of all participants is essential, whether in a circle with the teacher or on Zoom with cameras open.

It is important to make the space personal. Having name tags for all in-person participants and legible names for all online participants is a good practice.

Starting with a warm-up question is also making the space personal by inviting all participants to share their name, and respond to a short prompt in a way that would have them contemplate, participate, and contribute from the outset (see more details and examples in the section *Choosing a Theme and Framing*, page 77). It also fosters stronger connections among learners when they hear others' personal perspectives.

Based on my experience, several challenges and factors need to be considered when implementing the warm-up question.

First, there is a risk that personal shares responding to the warm-up prompt will be lengthy, and the round-robin of shares could take up a significant part of the session. This is especially a concern when there are more than 10-15 participants. One can prevent this by asking for short responses and being proactive if shares become too long. When the group is large, a possible solution is to ask participants to split into small groups of 2-3 people to share among themselves, or to skip the warm-up prompt entirely on Zoom.

Second, it is important that the teacher, also a participant in the reflective learning (see section *Teacher As Part of The Learning Community*, page 62), shares their response to the warm-up prompt. I found that starting the round-robin with my own personal share helps model vulnerability and sets the tone (and brevity) so that other participants feel more comfortable sharing from a personal perspective.

Third, while there was a clear intention for all to participate and contribute from the outset, I always presented the warm-up response as optional, allowing participants to "pass".

Lastly, the responses to the warm-up prompts can later be woven together by the teacher, connecting them to what emerges throughout the learning session and further integrating what we learn from the text and our lives, here and now.

An interesting feedback I received regarding the warm-up prompt was

"I don't personally usually benefit much from the initial going around asking about 'a time that'--it is often obscure to me from is being sought by the prompt and based on the diversity of responses, I suspect it is not necessarily clear to others--From my perspective, it seems that this aspect is better evoked more organically during the exploration of the texts."

The feedback suggests that the prompt needs clearer guidance and that the warm-up prompt should be brief and well-defined. It also highlights the importance of modeling to give participants an example. Presenting the warm-up prompt before introducing the essential question or framing the learning poses a challenge, as it might create too much openness and result in what the learner called "*the diversity of responses.*" Although I haven't yet tried reversing the order of the framing and the warm-up prompt, but it would be interesting to observe how this change might impact group experiences. Additionally, the feedback shows a preference for integrating personal reflections directly into the text rather than sharing them beforehand, when participants have less context to shape their responses.

I did find that skipping the warm-up prompt was sometimes challenging later when soliciting shares and active participation by learners; after experimenting with learning a longer story (see section *Balancing Depth vs.* Coverage, page 102), I wrote in my notes:

"Because the story is long and I wanted to have enough time, I decided not to start with personal sharing, present EQ and delve right into the story ... I felt I did not put enough time for personal reflection and connection, possibly affecting personal shares in the session"

In this session, I clearly felt that skipping the warm-up prompt and not allocating enough time for personal reflection negatively impacted the learning experience.

During a different learning session with a larger online group of about 20 learners, I skipped the warm-up prompt altogether, and I found that it did not impact the personal shares and participation in the session; my reflection notes after this session: "*Learners came up with personal reflections, extended to our life today with personal stories.*"

My key insight is that one must adapt and be flexible about when and how to use the warm-up prompt, depending on the situation. Generally, I believe in the importance of warm-up

prompts to start a learning session; however, my experience shows that some sessions have gone very well without them.

The last step in creating the reflective space is to bound it by sharing the context of our learning, using the essential questions that we posed at the beginning of our exploration of the text. I found that it is important to repeat and remind learners of the essential questions throughout the session.

Fostering Listening and Reflection

The sections *Guiding and Sustaining Inquiry* (page 52), *Awareness and Attunement* (page 54), and *The Dynamic Nature of Reflection* (page 55) review the theory of reflective facilitation, outlining methods such as pacing the session progress, prompting reflective conversations with questions, paying attention to evolving dynamics, and creating continuity by weaving and linking emerging themes to the framing and essential questions. This chapter and the following one describe my experience and key takeaways from facilitating.

Slowing down and Listening

As we explored in the section *Listening as a Relational Posture* (page 30), listening is foundational in encouraging a reflective inquiry, whether it is listening to the text, to ourselves, and to others. Slowing down and using reflective questions are essential tools to foster listening.

The interpretive questions facilitate listening to the text: "What is the text saying?", where reflective questions facilitate the personal aspect: "How do I relate to this situation?" Listening to others is manifested organically by learners when they explicitly relate their shares to those of others, or when the teacher weaves and connects shares to the emerging themes throughout the learning process.

Learners appreciate this way of group learning. One of the learners provided the following feedback:

> *"I really appreciated how we read a small chunk of the text, then discussed, and then read a small chunk of text, then discussed, etc. This style of discussion worked really well, as it allowed us to touch on the layers of the text and think about different approaches to the text. It also creates a space where spontaneous insights or contributions were made possible"*

This learner's feedback highlights the essence of the experience of slowing down, iteratively focusing on smaller segments of the story as it unfolds, and having a group discussion before moving to the following segment. This type of learning allowed access to layers of text and considering different interpretations we might otherwise skip or miss. Slowing down, with attentive listening to the text, to ourselves ("*spontaneous insights*") or to others ("*spontaneous contributions*"), becoming aware of additional voices or approaches, created a space for a reflective group inquiry.

Facilitating while Participating

The teacher's role in facilitating the conversation is crucial and involves many responsibilities: pacing the session by reading and reenacting the text, explaining and providing background context when needed, soliciting shares through reflective questions, calling on participants interested in sharing, organizing the order of shares, ensuring everyone has an equal chance to contribute, responding to shares, acknowledging participants' contributions, weaving together emerging themes, and connecting them to other shares.

The teacher is also a participant, and their voice is important too, as a model for others in sharing personally and vulnerably, while making sure they do not overshadow other voices. I have learned that it's better not to share first, but to wait and share afterward, after others have spoken, to give room for any additional voices that may emerge in the group. Sharing first by responding directly to the prompt might not foster the open-mindedness I want to promote.

One approach I've found helpful for promoting open discussion is to remind learners, when I ask a question, that "This is not a quiz—there is no textbook answer." With this reminder, participants felt less pressure to guess what (they may think) I want them to say and could explore their own ideas as the story developed.

A related practice was to honor and value every share, before moving to another share; for example, responding "This is an interesting insight, thank you for offering it", and potentially connecting it to other shares or to the emerging understanding (more in the next chapter, *Weaving and Synthesizing*, page 100). Palmer (2017) offered that our goal is to "invite students to find their authentic voices, whether or not they speak in ways approved by others" (p. 77).

Both practices, opening the space and valuing every voice, encouraged learners to offer their authentic voices to the conversation.

Pacing the Session

One of the challenges I faced was setting the session's pace so that there was ample space for sharing through reflective questions while maintaining the session's progress. It is a delicate balance between going too fast or too slow, which can disrupt the natural rhythm of the session and the story. A feedback I received explicitly referred to this delicate balance, stating

> *"It might be interesting to experiment with the issue of what chunks to present. And also to soften up the elicitation process—sometimes we don't see much when we read a specific chunk. Is it necessary that we have responses to each—or might we sometimes be allowed to wait for the next to try to make sense of the story."*

This feedback criticizes over-structuring participation and using too many small chunks that prompt shares at every pause. It calls for greater sensitivity and flexibility in timing pauses, tailored to the group. While eliciting responses encourages active engagement, learners may feel forced if meaning isn't fully developed. This reflects Dewey's idea of reflective thought as "exercising suspended judgment" (1933, p. 102)—an openness to evolving meaning over time, not on demand. It suggests balancing elicitation with receptivity, recognizing not every moment needs articulation, and using adaptivity when pausing for reflection, based on the learners' current state, not just the preplanned segmentation and questions.

Working Through Challenges

When facilitating an open discussion soliciting insights and personal shares from participants, I've encountered several challenges around how to address sharing dynamics, which could be manifested through 1) participants who "over-share", 2) shares that are too long, and 3) shares that I feel veer off and deviate to very different directions from the presented framing.

Managing instances of oversharing requires careful regulation of the sharing process. While I generally follow the sequence in which participants indicate their desire to contribute, I also strive to ensure equitable participation by inviting input from individuals who have spoken less or not at all. On certain occasions, I have explicitly noted, "Let's hear more voices," to encourage broader engagement. When multiple participants wish to speak simultaneously, it is effective to establish a speaking order starting with the first individual to express interest. This approach facilitates an orderly exchange, minimizes interruptions from concurrent requests, and ensures that all participants are given the opportunity to share their perspectives.

It may be more challenging to manage long shares. There is no clear, definite way to respond, as it depends on who is sharing (is it someone who shares a lot or not), what is the content and context of what is shared (is it a moving personal story? Is it a recommendation of a new movie or a great podcast?), in what ways the share is related or contributing to the framing of the discussion (does it seem like completely veering off the "subject matter"?). Ultimately, it is the teacher's call how to respond. There will be times when someone shares a very personal experience that moves and touches everyone. There will be other times when the share is completely out-of-context; I've used multiple ways to address, for example, responding with "I would love to hear more about it! Let's meet later and you can tell me all about it"; interrupting the share at some point with "this sounds very interesting, let's hear more voices", or "it sounds like a very interesting direction, please hold it for now, I think we will relate to this direction a bit later." As said, every situation is different and will call for a different response.

Another kind of challenging shares occurs when learners offer what seems to stray far from the primary themes and framing. Again, it is up to the teacher to choose how to proceed— either by acknowledging the learner's input and steering the conversation back on course, perhaps by restating the question we had been exploring, or by following the new opening introduced to explore other directions. Some examples from my own experience with these evolving directions can be found in the section *Experiencing the "Other It"* (page 106).

During one of the learning sessions, as we listened to a learner's share, I initially thought their comments were drifting far from our topic. I was ready to guide the group back on track, but as I kept listening, I realized they had actually made a very relevant point, and organically connected their contribution to our essential question, which ultimately enriched our discussion.

Weaving and Synthesizing

One of the most important roles of the teacher in this pedagogy is to facilitate a co-created understanding and meaning in the group by continuously weaving and connecting the learners' shares and insights into the group experience.

Dewey held the essentiality of continuity in reflective learning, as reviewed in *Reflection as a Driver in the Continuity of Learning* (page 39), to create what Rodgers (2002) called "the 'relationships and continuities' among the elements of an experience, between that experience and other experiences, between that experience and the knowledge that one carries, and between

that knowledge and the knowledge produced by thinkers other than oneself" (p. 848). Reflective group learning is not an accumulation of disparate thoughts, ideas and insights, but rather a process in which understanding and meaning evolve through reflection and creating these "relationships and continuities."

Making connections isn't a common learning habit for many students, and sometimes the links between seemingly very different ideas are not immediately clear. That's when the teacher's role in highlighting these connections becomes crucial.

By the teacher attentively listening to these voices, offering connections to other shares, sometimes going back to the personal share of that learner responding to the warm-up prompt, a sense of continuity is being created. The continuity could be relating to a learner's share with "what you just offered reminds us what you shared earlier …", to other participants shares with "this related to the theme offered by …", to the framing of the learning offering "we can see how your share now responds to the essential question …", or to the emerging meaning "what you shared connects to the theme of … we start to see in this story." As Palmer (2017) expressed, the act of weaving is

> … the ability to turn a question - and - answer session between the teacher and individual students into a complex communal dialogue that bounces all around the room. My students will learn much more when I turn their eyes from always looking at me and help them look at one another. (p. 137)

Weaving allows learners to see the continuity that exists in the live conversation - continuity of dialogue with themselves, with each other, and with whatever is emerging in the room, and this continuity is at the heart of reflective learning.

Weaving and connecting help create a group experience of exploring together whatever comes up in this story, in us and in others, and lead to deeper and more meaningful learning.

The weaving itself is an act of honoring everyone's voice, by not only graciously accepting their input but adding it to the "communal fire." We are co-creating something together.

It's important to note that weaving and synthesizing are different from harmonizing. The intention is not to blend voices into a single conclusion; instead, it aims to highlight ongoing shared perspectives and dynamic discussions. Sometimes, contributions will challenge the majority view and, by doing so, enrich our collective learning and progress. In fact, differing

opinions enhance our reflection and help broaden a shared understanding of key issues and challenges we face together. Our purpose is to explore as a group, not necessarily to agree on a single outcome or answer.

In my experience, some learners begin to weave as they share, especially after watching the teacher demonstrate the process and then connecting their share to others or to the essential questions. Others are encouraged to share more personally or with new insights as they experience the communal process. For example, "what ... just shared reminds me of a similar experience, but for me ..." I was excited to see learners start weaving because it showed they are developing the habit of seeking and finding continuity on their own, aligning with my third intention and goal for this approach.

There is a delicate balance and a "dance" between facilitating dynamic conversations, leading, and letting learners redirect the learning. I have described my experience working with what may seem disconnected shares in the previous chapter *Fostering Listening and Reflection* (page 97). There is no set practice for leading the weaving process, other than being very attentive to what is happening in the group and balancing the group experience as it unfolds with the learning objectives: modeling a way of being, with humility, curiosity, and openness. My choices should serve these intentions. More on my experience in the following chapters *Experience: Co-Creating The "Other It"* (page 104), and *Experience: Modeling* (page 108).

Ultimately, weaving and connecting are among the primary tools for creating a sense of a group or community in a learning session. Learners reflected in their feedback that "*Hearing other people's perspectives*" helped in "*Building a community of learning.*" It was the experience of creating something together through a shared process, honoring everybody's perspective, which fostered that sense of community.

Balancing Depth vs. Coverage

Typical learning sessions are about 60 to 90 minutes (summer camp sessions are shorter, around 50 minutes). Slowing down and paying attention to "every word" means the teacher needs to be very cognizant of how much text can be covered in a session while still providing ample time for a deep, meaningful reflective conversation.

Rabbinic texts are typically very concise, and their terseness leaves ample room for multiple interpretations and rich exploration. For example, rich stories like Mar Ukva, his wife and the oven (BT Ketubot 67b), or Ulla and Yalta (BT Berakhot 51b) are quite short and can each comfortably be studied in a session.

On the other hand, longer or more layered stories are more challenging. In one case, as part of the series about teaching and learning, I wanted to explore the story of Rabbi Eliezer (Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, chapters 1-2), a much longer text. The story is beautiful, powerful, and a rich baseline for discussion on the relationships between students, their parents, and their teachers. I knew it would be challenging, and thus I decided to omit a few sections of the story while keeping the main storyline intact. From my personal notes reflecting on that session:

> *"We studied the long story of Rabbi Eliezer*
>
> *It is long, and very complicated, lots of things are happening*
>
> *Because it is long and I wanted to have enough time I decided not to start with personal sharing, present EQ and delve right into the story*
>
> *...*
>
> *I felt I did not put enough time for personal reflection and connection*
>
> *I did not share my own personal story, and I did not provide a lot of space for others to share theirs*
>
> *I was concerned about the lack of time - and it was true, we had 1:15 hours, and we still did not have enough time!!"*

Despite skipping parts of the story and session, time was still insufficient, and I felt rushed. The choices I made preferred coverage over depth and thoroughness (as I explored in *Why Are We Not Slowing Down?*, page 22) affecting the learning experience of the group. While it was a valuable experiment to see the effects of rushing, the session ultimately felt inadequate. It could have been conducted more thoughtfully and respectfully for both the text and the learners.

Reflecting on this experience, in the future I would either plan for a longer session (at least two hours), divide the story into two sessions even if it affects continuity and attendance, or avoid lengthy stories altogether.

However, more fundamentally, my main takeaway from this experience is that this pedagogy needs space and time to be effective, given its goals. Planning a learning session

without enough time to slow down, listen, share, and reflect doesn't align with its aims, doesn't honor the process, nor the text.

Tying Everything Together

Concluding the session by reviewing its progress, highlighting key insights and understandings as they emerged, and reconnecting them to our framing and essential questions was very important. This process helped the group ground the whole experience of our collective exploration, reflecting on where and how we began our journey. The session was not just about listening to a story and gathering insights and ideas, but it created something new; more on my experience with co-created meaning in the next chapter. When the learning session was part of a series centered around a common theme, the session's conclusion was an opportunity to link it to previous sessions and to give a teaser for upcoming ones.

> I always ended the session with a last round-robin of shares responding to the prompt: *"Share one thing you are taking away from this session: something new you learned, something you hadn't previously considered, or something a friend said that really resonated with you."*
>
> Like with the warm-up prompts, answering was always optional and participants could skip if they wanted—though this rarely happened, since sharing just **one** takeaway didn't feel difficult to most. This part of the session gave quieter members a chance to speak up and helped each learner reflect on what they gained and how their perspective had shifted by the end. Listening to others demonstrated how varied and valuable everyone's experiences were, sometimes sparking new insights or takeaways for the group to consider. Unlike the warm-up prompt, it is better for the teacher to go last, to provide a more open space for all voices.

The progression of the session reflected what one participant described as a "*whole-to-part, part-to-whole*" approach. The session began with contextual framing and tone-setting, continued with a systematic exploration of each segment accompanied by thoughtful discussion, and concluded by revisiting the overarching themes.

6.8. Experience: Co-Creating The "Other It"

In the chapter *About the Evolving Meaning* (page 57) and especially the section *Triadic Models: Encounter and the Centered "It"* (page 58), I reviewed the literature describing

meaning as co-created through the reflective group experience, and the triadic model termed first by Hawkins (1974, 2002) *I, Thou, and It*. The triadic model offers that in reflective learning there is an encounter between three participants: 1) *I* - the participant self, 2) *Thou* – the "other": other participants and the text and whatever comes through it, and 3) *It* –the subject matter, what Hawkins calls the *treasured direct object*, and Palmer (2017) relates to as the *third thing*, a *truth* that sits in the circle's center, something that "continually calls us deeper into its secret" (p. 107).

Encountering the "Other It"

I suggest that in our learning sessions, we experienced a different form of encounter comprising **four** participants, a *foursome* or a *quartet* of sorts, of an *I, Thou, It, and the Other It*. In my experience, we had a live conversation between 1) *I* - the participant self, 2) *Thou* – the other participants, 3) *It* – the rabbinic text we engaged with, and 4) *Other It* –the meaning and understanding evolving in the group learning, that "*third thing*".

I find this distinction significant, because the text participates in the encounter as a different kind of participant, one that the group holds in front of us, to which we relate, are inspired by, are challenged by, and continuously return to converse with. In Jewish contexts, texts can hold special theological and cultural significance, which we honor and often revere. Texts are the baseline to start conversing with, with ourselves and with others. Texts are the *It*.

Dekel and Baudo offered (see section *Reflective and Transformative Dimension*, page 61) that the text changes too for us through reflective learning, and we experienced this change throughout learning sessions. Learners reflected "*I am in awe of the imaginations of the rabbis*", "*[learning rabbinic text] expanded my notions of Jewish thoughts and concerns*", and "*I am amazed at how the Talmud helps its readers increase their empathy and practice perspective-taking*." These reflections suggest how the learning experience changed our perceptions and how we hold these texts, yet the change was in us, as we conversed with them. The text remains *It*, waiting for us to pick it up again for another encounter, possibly with a different attitude or from a different perspective.

As the reflective group process progresses, we slowly develop new meanings, insights, and understanding, co-creating a fourth participant, an evolving Other It. This is the "third thing", the "secret" Palmer relates to.

Experiencing the "Other It"

It was very evident that the *Other It* – the understanding and meaning - was evolving in the sessions as being co-created in the learning experience, shaped by weaving of shares and insights coming up in that specific group of learners and within that particular learning session.

While in many cases the evolving *Other It* was responding to the framing and essential questions, there were instances when it did not, and I want to share a few illuminating examples.

In a session we studied the story of Rabbi Eliezer (Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer chapters 1-2), framed around the relationships between a student, their teacher, and their parents. As we saw Rabbi Eliezer's responses to his father and his relationships with Rabbi Yochanan, a learner shared her experience of parenting a child with special needs. She saw Rabbi Eliezer's limited communication as possibly indicating he was on the spectrum—brilliant but lacking communication skills and facing emotional challenges. This sparked a meaningful group discussion on how parents and teachers can support individuals with special needs, honor their needs, and help them integrate into the community. Although this diverged from my original framing, the discussion was powerful—a different "Other It" emerged in that session.

At a Jewish summer camp, we explored the midrash of Miriam and Amram's response to Pharoah's decree (BT Sotah 12a), framed around leadership, resilience, and hope. We discussed Amram listening as his daughter scolded him for wanting to divorce his wife, Yocheved, her mother. A camper shared her painful experience of her parents' divorce and feeling unheard. The talk shifted to a different, much more present "Other It," highlighting how campers' voices and feelings can be marginalized and overlooked.

In a session on how arrogance and rigidity hinder apology and forgiveness, we discussed the story of the reed and cedar with Rabbi Elazar (BT Taanit 20a). When Rabbi Elazar prostrated before the man he insulted, a learner asked why he didn't stand on equal footing, suggesting his humility – including his full prostration - was still rooted in pride, keeping "the drama" still focused on him, as the esteemed Rabbi. The group resonated and noted that the insulted person might still have felt the Rabbi's arrogance and wanted to protect his townspeople from insult. This led to a powerful conversation about the pride of those in high positions and high regard, and protecting society. A very different and inspiring *Other It* emerged in that group exploration.

These examples demonstrate that there was something else – something else than what I envisioned, aimed for, and even set in front of us at first – something which was calling the learners in the text and in the group to come forth, it emerged and evolved from within. This called for attentiveness to what is happening in the group, and practicing humility.

Reflecting on the "Other It"

When a learner reflected on their experience, "*the process of discovering the lessons in a shared setting … is inspiring*", they recognized this sense of shared discovery as a collective inquiry where insights – the Other It – are uncovered together in an evolving process.

I could have led another session exploring the exact same text from one of the mentioned examples, but with other learners, and something completely different would emerge, sometimes more aligned with my "plan" and sometimes not. But whatever comes up is alive, and very present for the text, for us, in this specific instance of learning together. As Haroutunian-Gordon (1998) observed:

Interpretative conversations, if allowed to proceed according to the patterns discussants naturally seem to follow … in ways that illuminate its meaning for those participating. Furthermore, such discussions may be more meaningful than those in which the meaning of the text is dictated by the teacher. (p. 58)

The key is for the teacher to create and nurture the "patterns discussants naturally seem to follow" so the emerging understanding "will be more meaningful." Haroutunian-Gordon offers that our responsibility is to pay attention to those directions learners "naturally seem to follow", whether in teen campers focused on peer relationships, adult learners caring about people with special needs, or learners concerned about societal protection. Because these "great things", to use Palmer's term, are much more present and real for these learners, for this specific circle and moment. If I allow – and assist – the conversation to follow this group's natural patterns, the resulting discussion will be a more meaningful learning experience.

I like to think of this process as an exploration, where we are going on an expeditionary road trip. We have a general direction but remain open to detours and unexpected turns that arise from the unique mix of learners, experiences, and questions in each group. The journey is influenced not only by the teacher's initial framing but also by the insights and lived realities that emerge along the way, requiring ongoing attentiveness to where the group's curiosity leads. In

this way, learning becomes a collaborative effort, where each participant's contribution can change the direction and deepen the discovery. The teacher's role is to balance providing structure with embracing the unforeseen insights that come alive through shared engagement with the text.

What lasts from these learning experiences is less a conclusion and more a way of being: a readiness to notice what is unfolding and to make space for it.

6.9. Experience: Modeling

By reviewing the literature and theory about the teacher's role as a model (see chapter *About Role Modeling*, page 62), we identified two main points: first, teachers play a crucial part in reflective learning by serving as role models; second, they achieve this by engaging with the group, demonstrating reflective inquiry, displaying attitudes such as open-heartedness, open-mindedness, and responsibility (per Dewey), showing up authentically as fellow human beings.

Looking back on my experience teaching with this pedagogy, I see how modeling was key to achieving the objectives and aligning with my intentions in this pedagogy (see *Intentions and Objectives*, page 69), comprising of 1) fostering curiosity while approaching this unfamiliar material and trying to understand it, 2) learning to use these narratives as reflective mirrors for themselves and their lives, questioning assumptions and habitual understandings, and then 3) practicing a stance of curiosity and openness when approaching the unfamiliar in their life.

Modeling Slowing Down, Listening, and Questioning

From the outset, I positioned myself as one of the learners, sitting in a circle with them, fully participating in whatever we were working through, offering my voice, my own questions and challenges with the text, my insights, my feelings. The reflective questions raised in the group are not my questions but ours; they are not quiz questions with textbook answers but rather openings for all of us to work with. Other questions raised in the group are as interesting and as important. My voice is my voice, not a teacher's voice, and everybody's voice counts. We are all in "it", exploring together whatever comes up.

Some of the most powerful moments were when questions were raised and offered by learners, "*But why Rabbi Elazar even prostrate? Why didn't they both stand as equal human beings?*", "*Why didn't Rav Shimi bar Ashi just ask Rav Pappa his student to ease his questions? Why didn't they speak about what is happening?*", "*Why didn't Martha bar Boethus's servant do*

a more thorough job when going to buy food at the market?", "*Why Rabbi Yehoshua didn't ask for clarification from the young boy sitting at the junction?*", and other questions. What was modeled here was that every question matters, every voice and insight matters, we are exploring together, co-creating understandings and meanings. Moreover, I was modeling responding to such questions with uncertainty and curiosity, "*this is a great question, I am not sure, what do you think?*", opening them to the group to relate to and contemplate, "*what others think?*", "*How others feel reading this story and considering this contemplation?*" It is not the teacher who is being asked, but the questions are put in front of the group, another log being added to the communal fire.

> Learners embraced slowing down, and listening to others, modeled in this pedagogy:
> *"The line-by-line evolution of the story was a new experience for me. It was fascinating to hear how other people would read the line and to hear how much meaning could be found in one line. Then by the time we got to the end the first line might have a very different meaning."*
> *"It really helps to spend enough time exploring each story"*
> *"… creates a space where spontaneous insights or contributions were made possible"*

This pedagogy models for learners the creation of a reflective space, allowing them to hold suspense and curiosity to witness what may be coming, as one learner expressed, "*[I was] always curious and often surprised!*" It modeled a way to be challenged by questions and insights that might be very different from their habitual assumptions and perspectives, as one learner reflected, "*I felt challenged (in a good way) to look at things in a different way.*"

> Some learners could be challenged by this pedagogy, wanting more control,
> *"I do totally respect the idea of ensuring that we don't read ahead, but I also sometimes think that the actual chunking might benefit from slightly different breaks at times. … in some sessions one or more of the passages revealed didn't have that much to say about it."*

There will be cases where modelling may challenge a learner's usual approaches or habits. In such situations, the teacher should patiently guide and support every learner, while showing respect for both the individuals, the group, and the overall learning process.

Modeling Reflective Inquiry

A key part of modeling was reflective pedagogy, involving slow, attentive listening to texts, ourselves, and others, requiring practice. Sharing stories gradually, pausing to question, ponder, and understand the narrative and its impact, and listening to diverse voices, is uncommon in our fast-paced, box-checking modern life.

The exploratory method itself is a model of embracing a different kind of approaching and relating to the other, whether it be a story, a person, or a text. Cherishing the slow experience, with patience and curiosity as it unfolds in front of us and within us, employing a reflective lens, "*How does it feel for us?*", and then a transformative lens, "*What does it mean for us?*"

The pedagogy made the *invisible process visible* for the learners (as offered by Grossman & Shulman, 1994; Kanarek, 2013; and Holzer & Kent, 2014), modeling and demonstrating how the process takes place step by step in the group, practicing it in the group, time and again, and eventually, possibly having learners start to employ themselves. For example, offering questions such as, "*Where are you not communicating what you need?*", "*What is the impact on others?*", "*How do you feel when insulted this way?*", "*How would you respond?*". Asking these questions operates on two levels: first, they relate to the situation at hand, prompting one to reflect on their own worldview and possibly challenging one's assumptions and habitual responses. And second, employing and practicing such questions models a way of responding to a situation – any situation – with curiosity of the self, leading to a reflective habit and state-of-mind, a process in which, Mezirow offered (1997), "learners become more autonomous, self-directed" (p. 11).

Modeling Attitudes

In addition to the reflective process itself, learning and practicing the steps involved in its "mechanics," there was a modeling of a way of approaching what is happening in the process and in the group. Being curious, appreciative, relational, patient, wondering, open, thoughtful, authentic, generous in offering and in responding – and being excited, expressing passion to learn and meet new insights, ideas, and directions. With these attitudes, I modeled a way of being while engaging in reflective thinking.

For me, fully participating in the process was not only following and responding to whatever I was asking from learners, but it was also bringing myself to the encounter fully, me not as a teacher, but as a human being, vulnerable, feeling, hurting, being inspired, joyous, deeply moved. Sharing personal experiences and relating them to what is happening, vulnerably sharing how I feel at the moment, what I care about, what moved me, what hurts, and what inspires me was also modeling for learners a way of being. If I want learners to show up fully, I need to fully show up myself.

Reflecting on Modeling

Ultimately, I wanted this pedagogy to affect learners in a deeper way than just learning about a few Rabbis, weird or inspiring stories, and having a great experience with other learners. Additional research is needed to gauge attitudinal transformation among learners through reflective learning experiences. While this was not the focus of this research, I was grateful to receive some preliminary, indicative feedback.

One learner commented in their feedback, "*I liked the novel ideas that Aviv came up with. I liked in the last class how he related it to the movies.*" Following Lev's approach, I brought a few movie clips to frame and extend the discussion. This learner saw how the reflective method can be applied to other, newer content and media, which are much more common in our lives.

Another learner reflected, "*the process of discovering the lessons in a shared setting … is inspiring,*" seeing the value of such a process not only when applied to rabbinic texts, but beyond.

Ending a learning session, one participant shared their takeaway: "*Slowing down, paying attention to every detail and asking questions—many questions—pays off as it can surprise me.*" I especially valued this comment because the learner focused on the approach to learning itself, rather than just the session's topic.

7. Summary and Conclusions

This final chapter of the study begins by outlining the research's limitations and then presents insights and conclusions derived from the literature review. It subsequently discusses findings, insights, and conclusions based on my practical experience with this pedagogy, offers recommendations for future research, and concludes by evaluating the extent to which both the research and pedagogical practices align with and address their original objectives and intentions.

7.1. Limitations

This study is practitioner research, drawing primarily on my own teaching experience and point-in-time feedback from a small sample of learners collected during the development of the pedagogy.

As such, there are two primary limitations to note:

First, the data collection relied on my own experience through notes, recollections, and very few session recordings, combined with feedback from a small group of learners, rather than systematic, longitudinal, or large-scale methods, all of which affect the generalizability of the findings.

Second, there is potential researcher bias due to my dual role as both developer-practitioner and researcher of the methodology.

Therefore, this study should be viewed as a preliminary exploration of this pedagogical approach, intended to gauge its value and to encourage and direct further research, refinement, and application.

7.2. Takeaways from the Theoretical Review

The theoretical review examined several aspects of this pedagogy, including engaging with texts through oral-performative methods, intentionally slowing down the lesson pace, fostering deep reflective conversations, developing a shared understanding within the group experience, and the role of modeling in this teaching approach.

Oral-performative tradition fosters community and shared presence, transforming learning from an isolated activity to a collective experience through dialogue and embodied engagement. It adds interpretive richness through voice, sound, and gesture, making the study

more immersive and emotional, rather than just informational. In Jewish tradition, oral learning is a deliberate theological and communal practice. The Rabbis viewed learning as a dynamic exchange between teacher and learner, with oral transmission fostering and preserving meaningful communal bonds. The teacher, as bearer of tradition, guides access to sacred texts and learning, and shapes the circle of disciples, ensuring that the transmission remains anchored in presence and relationship.

The practice of *slowing down* in education challenges the usual focus on speed and coverage, which often dominates schools and society. When learning moves too quickly, both teachers and students tend to skim the surface, viewing quick answers as intelligent rather than taking the time to consider more options and reach a genuine understanding. By deliberately slowing the pace—through careful reading, open-ended questions, revealing texts in stages, and pausing for reflection—students can engage more deeply with what they are learning, through attentive listening, thoughtful inquiry, meaningful collaboration, and the exploration of new ideas, thereby strengthening their thinking habits.

While exploring the processes by which learners transition from passive reception of information to meaningful engagement and understanding, we observed that meaningful learning emerges through a disciplined combination of *listening*, *interpretation*, and *reflection*. Listening is framed as an active, relational posture of openness—not just hearing but being present with texts, oneself, and others. This openness enables learners to encounter new perspectives and challenge their assumptions, which is essential for genuine understanding to develop.

Another conclusion is that interpretation transforms listening into a *dialogic process*: interpretation is not about extracting fixed meanings from texts but about engaging in conversation—with the text as an "other"—where meaning is co-created. This process requires humility, curiosity, and a willingness to be changed by what is encountered. Learners are encouraged to approach the text and other voices with mutual respect, allowing for new insights to emerge through dialogue.

Additionally, we recognize reflection as both a *personal and communal practice* that brings continuity and depth to learning. Reflection is presented as *a rigorous and systematic inquiry* that enables learners to connect experiences, test assumptions, and integrate new understandings. This process is most effective in a community where ideas are articulated,

challenged, and expanded through shared inquiry. *Attitudes* such as open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility are identified as essential for sustaining reflective inquiry, fostering both intellectual and moral growth.

Ultimately, we recognize the teacher's role in designing and facilitating learning environments that foster these processes. The role entails crafting spaces—physically, conceptually, and emotionally—that balance safety with challenge, pacing with patience, and structure with openness. By facilitating, demonstrating attentive listening, posing insightful questions, and integrating varied viewpoints, teachers support learners in remaining within ambiguity long enough to foster deeper learning. This approach also models effective strategies for engaging with unfamiliar and challenging material.

We observed that the meaning of education is a living, evolving process. It is not something fixed or simply transmitted from teacher to learner; instead, meaning is co-created through dynamic relationships and ongoing collaborative dialogue among teacher, learners, and the subject matter, where curiosity, humility, and openness guide interactions. The triadic model—comprising teacher, learner, and the "It" (subject)—emphasizes that genuine learning arises from shared inquiry focused on a central, treasured topic. Authority in the classroom becomes a communal participation, with the teacher guiding and listening rather than dictating outcomes. Meaning develops not just through individual insight but through the collective, reflective work of the community, with each participant's perspective contributing to a deeper understanding.

Reflection is shown to be a transformative process that connects experience, perception, and understanding, impacting both individuals and the group as a whole. The act of engaging with diverse viewpoints and responding to the subject matter fosters personal and communal growth.

We recognized that *authentic role modeling* is central to effective teaching and learning. The teacher's influence arises not from authority or distance, but from genuine participation in the learning community—being "in it" alongside students. By engaging as co-learners, teachers model reflective inquiry, intellectual humility, and a willingness to confront uncertainty in a collaborative and evolving journey. Teachers' attitudes—such as open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness—are more powerfully conveyed through lived example

than mere explanation. When teachers demonstrate passion, vulnerability, and authenticity, they model personal involvement and investment in the learning process. Ultimately, we see that teaching and learning are reciprocal and interdependent, with both teachers and students shaping and relying on one another in the shared search for understanding. This dynamic of mutual modeling and engagement enables genuine transformation—in individuals, groups, and the subject of study.

7.3.   Takeaways from Experience and Practice

The pedagogical approach chosen for teaching rabbinic texts was shaped by the recognition that most adult learners were not very experienced in encountering these materials, often with little background in the languages, logic, halakhic, and historical contexts involved.

Drawing on Gadamer's interpretive framework as articulated by Levisohn, the teaching objectives were structured into three distinct stages. Initially, the goal was to spark curiosity and help learners comprehend the basic meaning of the texts—bridging linguistic and contextual gaps to clarify what the text communicates, aligning with BINA's "View" (*mabat*) methodology. Building on this foundation, the second objective focused on engaging learners in a reflective encounter with the material. Here, the intent was to challenge and transform personal assumptions through thoughtful exploration and self-reflection, mirroring BINA's "Mirror" (*re'i*) stage. Finally, the approach sought to foster lasting openness in learners—a disposition that encourages ongoing inquiry and receptivity not only to rabbinic texts but to new experiences in general. This transformative "Window" (*chalon*) stage, inspired by Gadamer's philosophy, positions reflective inquiry as a continual gateway to deeper understanding and personal growth.

The report and analysis of the real-world implementation of the pedagogical approach is provided through an account of my experiences over several years, including personal reflections, challenges encountered, interactions with learners, and feedback from participants. The report draws on a variety of sources, including session planning notes, post-session reflections, learner feedback, and a few recorded sessions, with direct quotations from written feedback from adult participants after completing a learning series.

Analysis of my experience *preparing for the sessions* underscores the crucial role of thorough preparation in successful reflective learning sessions. The teacher's ability to master the content, thoughtfully frame texts, and be ready to manage group dynamics is essential not

only for guiding the session but also for creating a space where meaningful reflection can occur. Effective preparation involves selecting evocative texts, establishing thematic framing, and formulating essential and warm-up questions that foster inquiry and personal engagement. My experience shows that when preparation is lacking—such as unclear text segmentation—the session's flow and learning outcomes can suffer, highlighting the importance of aligning materials and structure with learning objectives.

Another key conclusion is that framing and segmenting texts, along with preparing a range of reflective questions, enhances the depth and focus of group discussions. While open, unframed exploration can yield interesting insights, most learners benefit from a structured approach that maintains engagement and coherence. The deliberate use of breaks for interpretive, reflective, and transformative questions allows participants to connect personally with the material and reflect on its relevance.

The experience highlights the importance of paying attention to translation choices to preserve the original ambiguity and promote open conversation. My experience clearly prioritized narrative texts for reflective learning, inviting richer discussions. Overall, I found that ongoing review, real-time adaptation, and post-session reflection are essential practices for refining session design and enhancing the reflective learning experience.

The analysis of my experience in *teaching rabbinic texts through oral-performative pedagogy* has demonstrated both benefits and challenges. Moving away from written handouts and individual reading toward dynamic, oral text reenactment and direct interaction with the narrative and each other made challenging texts more accessible to learners. It not only bridged gaps in language and style but also fostered deeper engagement and emotional resonance in the group, encouraging participants to reflect personally and share insights.

However, my experience applying the pedagogy, which was highly effective with narrative texts, presented limitations and challenges when applied to non-narrative rabbinic material, such as halakhic debates, collections of aphorisms, and midrashic interpretations. These texts, with their emphasis on intellectual reasoning and less on story-driven plot, prove more challenging to teach and elicit less personal and emotional reflection from learners. The absence of written material can be particularly felt with complex or less engaging content. Overall, teaching more intellectually focused, non-narrative rabbinic texts requires teachers to carefully consider and employ additional strategies to sustain participant reflection and understanding.

The deliberate practice of *slowing down* the reading and study of texts, as outlined in the teaching protocol, proved to be a defining and innovative pedagogical approach. By revealing the story line-by-line, learners were encouraged to contemplate each segment, fostering a sense of suspense and discovery. This method transformed the study from a purely intellectual exercise into an engaging, communal experience where every word was valued and discussed. Participants responded positively, noting increased emotional connection, attentiveness, and spontaneous insights that emerged during group reflection. The slow pace supported deeper understanding and collective inquiry, allowing learners to experience the process of interpretation rather than rushing to conclusions.

However, the approach also revealed inherent tensions, particularly regarding the teacher's control over the pace and interpretation of the text. While most learners appreciated the structured, reflective environment and felt empowered to contribute regardless of prior background, some expressed a desire for more direct access and interpretive freedom. This underscores the need to balance guiding the session to promote attentiveness with allowing space for individual exploration. Overall, slowing down created a rich, reflective space that emphasized communal discovery, patience, listening, and presence as core pedagogical values.

The experience of *facilitating reflective learning sessions* underscores the importance of creating a safe and personal environment where participants feel valued and encouraged to share authentically. Deliberate practices—such as starting with thoughtful warm-up prompts, modeling vulnerability, and providing clear framing with essential questions—foster attentive listening, curiosity, and meaningful engagement. Flexibility and sensitivity are crucial, as the teacher must adapt to group size, group composition, dynamics, and individual contributions, ensuring balanced participation while maintaining the session's rhythm. Managing challenges like over-sharing or divergent shares requires skillful guidance, balancing openness with the session's objectives, and sometimes choosing to follow unexpected directions that enrich the collective inquiry.

Central to this approach is the teacher's role in weaving and synthesizing the diverse voices and insights into a coherent group experience. Rather than harmonizing all perspectives into a single conclusion, the teacher highlights connections among contributions, fostering a communal exploration that values differences and encourages deeper reflection. The session's progression moves from establishing context and framing, through iterative discussion of text

segments, to a concluding reflection that ties insights back to the original questions and themes. This process not only enhances comprehension and reflective inquiry but cultivates habits of patience, listening, and presence.

My observations show that *meaning in reflective group learning* is a dynamic, co-created process, that evolves through the interaction of individual perspectives, shared experiences, and engagement with the text itself. I drew on Hawkins' triadic model and expanded it to include a fourth participant—the "Other It," or the emergent understanding, separate from the text, the "It", which I perceive as an active participant in the conversation. As learners interact with one another and the text, new insights and interpretations arise, sometimes shifting away from the initial framing to address what is most present and meaningful for the group. This evolving "Other It" reflects the unique contributions and lived realities of each learning circle.

Ultimately, the section emphasizes the teacher's role as a facilitator who balances providing structure with embracing the spontaneous directions that emerge from the group's curiosity and needs. Meaningful learning, as I've demonstrated through various examples, is less about reaching a group conclusion and more about cultivating an openness to what unfolds in each session. I envision the process as an expedition, where the journey is shaped by collective exploration, unexpected detours, and the willingness to let new meanings arise organically. The lasting impact of these experiences is not a single answer but a stance of readiness to listen, reflect, and create space for evolving insights, ensuring that the learning remains relevant, authentic, and deeply connected to those involved.

Lastly, I examine the critical role of *teacher modeling* in fostering reflective learning. Teachers serve as role models by authentically participating in inquiry alongside their students—demonstrating open-mindedness, vulnerability, and genuine curiosity. Through this approach, teachers not only facilitate but actively embody the attitudes and habits they wish to cultivate in learners, such as patience, attentive listening, and willingness to question assumptions. Learner feedback and classroom observations indicate that this modeling approach fosters a reflective and inclusive environment where every question and perspective is valued. While some students may find this method challenging, preferring more structure or control, the overall effect is to nurture habits of reflective inquiry and adaptability that extend beyond the classroom.

The evidence presented, although primarily drawn from my anecdotal experience as a practitioner, suggests the transformative potential of modeling reflective inquiry. The approach's impact is seen not only in learners' engagement with specific content but also in the development of broader attitudes and skills, like curiosity, self-direction, reflective inquiry, and openness to new perspectives.

7.4.   Recommendations for Further Research

As a preliminary study of the suggested pedagogy, the findings invite further systematic exploration of its efficacy and application. Much of the evidence so far comes from my own teaching experience and point-in-time feedback from a small sample of learners. To enrich and expand this foundation, future studies should consider employing concrete research strategies—such as longitudinal surveys that track change over time, classroom observations, and detailed interviews with students and teachers—to gather more comprehensive data.

Within the realm of efficacy and impact, several distinct research questions arise. One primary area involves examining the influence of reflective learning on individual students: How does this approach affect learners' reflective attitudes and study habits over time? Research in this area would benefit from measuring changes before, during, and after a learning series, and following up later to see whether any shifts are lasting. A second avenue focuses on the group as a whole: Does engaging in this pedagogy shape the group's ethical awareness or sense of community? Observing group dynamics and discussions, as well as direct participant feedback, would offer valuable insight into these communal shifts.

Another research direction concerns the experience of teachers. Specifically, how does adopting reflective pedagogy shape the teacher's professional growth and instructional style over time? Following teachers as they implement this method, and learning from their reflections and experiences, can reveal both challenges and best practices. Closely related is the question of how best to support and prepare teachers so they are well-equipped to lead reflective learning.

The applicability of this approach across different subjects and educational environments also warrants attention; my study includes some preliminary findings and recommendations. However, one might wonder how such reflective pedagogy can be adapted to effectively teach other types of materials besides narrative, such as legal discussions, texts, and non-textual media. Another associated question is the applicability of this pedagogy in a more academically rigorous setting.

Of particular interest is the examination of the role of in-person synchronous group experiences and whether comparable outcomes can be achieved through digital platforms— potentially asynchronous and incorporating artificial intelligence. This inquiry involves assessing necessary adaptations and evaluating the associated trade-offs and benefits.

7.5. Conclusion

From the outset, my goals were to explore the pedagogy I was practicing over several years, to find out 1) the core pedagogical principles behind it, 2) how the methodology operates in practice, 3) why this approach benefits learners, and 4) ways other educators can apply it to similar materials.

The broad theoretical review of the relevant literature on key aspects of this pedagogy confirmed that there is strong theoretical support for the techniques and strategies I instinctively used, addressing my first research question.

Moreover, analyzing my own experiences with this pedagogy – through the lens of theory – provided preliminary evidence for the efficacy of the methods and approaches I am using, as well as revealed some of their limitations, thereby responding to the second and third research questions.

By describing the proposed pedagogy in detail, sharing positive and challenging experiences, lessons learned, best practices, and including lesson plan examples along with numerous useful resources, I aim to assist other teachers in adopting this approach or its variations, thereby addressing my final research question.

Most importantly, I believe that the evidence demonstrates the effectiveness of this pedagogy in achieving my teaching goals, as outlined in *Intentions and Objectives* (page 69). Regarding the first intention, this approach sparked learners' curiosity about rabbinic texts; they were eager to explore unfamiliar material and looked forward to future sessions. The pedagogy fostered thoughtful, respectful group discussions in which individuals questioned not only the texts but also their own beliefs and assumptions, aligning with my second intention. Ultimately, I believe it enabled students to develop new ways of engaging with other materials and situations, applying the reflective inquiry and attitudes cultivated during this learning process, thereby addressing my third intention.

As mentioned in the previous section, while this research is only a preliminary study of this pedagogy, I believe it already demonstrates not only its innovative aspects in reviving a Jewish study tradition but also its efficacy.

An insightful feedback received from a learner offered:

"I am reminded of something that a very good teacher once said: 'All good teaching occurs in a whole-to-part, part-to-whole fashion.' By that, he meant lessons should start with having students look at the whole of a work, such as a summary, before delving into the parts. Then, after reading or viewing a work, the student should return at the end to the whole (the big picture or key takeaways, general feelings evoked, etc.), relating the parts to the whole and seeing how our perceptions or understandings changed from our initial reaction. From a more analytical perspective, we are encouraged to consider how the constituent parts reflect, build, adhere, or represent the work as a whole. I feel like Aviv used this method really well, by giving us a general overview of what to expect or be thinking about, which set the mood or the tone, then working through the text piece-by-piece with room for discussion, and then returning us to broader takeaways at the end. This format worked well in so many ways."

I hope this research, pedagogy, and "format" will work well for many other teachers and many more learners of rabbinic texts and beyond.

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9. Appendices

9.1. Lesson Plan Examples

This chapter provides several lesson plans that illustrate the preparation process for these learning sessions. The lesson plans demonstrate formulating framing, choosing source texts and translating, developing essential questions and warm-up prompts, providing relevant background and context, segmenting the text into small parts, determining breakpoints for pauses, articulating possible reflective questions, capturing potential insights, and concluding each session. These examples are intended to help teachers understand the methodology used in preparing and teaching with this pedagogy.

The text to be read is in **bold**, where reflective questions and possible insights are prefixed by ##.

The Reed and the Cedar

The text is found in BT Ta'anit 20a-b.

Warm-up Prompt

Please share a time when someone's arrogance hurt you, or you may have hurt others with your arrogance.

Essential Questions

In what ways might arrogance, pride, rigidity, and righteousness prevent one from apologizing, accepting an apology, and granting forgiveness?

Context

Background on tractate Ta'anit

Context of sugya: Rabbis are wondering why God brings draught and other disasters on the people of Israel, and then how one should react to extreme situations and when things change.

Just quoted Ahijah the Shilonite, cursing Israel: "**For the Lord will smite Israel as a reed is shaken in the water**" (I Kings 14:15)

And Balaam who blessed them "**As cedars beside the waters**" (Numbers 24:6)

The Rabbis wonder what is better – to be a reed or a cedar?

The Story

Once, Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, was coming from Migdal Gedor, from the house of his teacher, and he was riding leisurely on his donkey by the riverside and was feeling happy and elated because he had studied much Torah.

Provide context about who Rabbi Elazar is, possibly link to other stories of Rabbi Elazar the group previously explored; geographically place the scene.

What do we see here? Describe the scene, as if it were a scene in a movie

What do you think was Rabbi Elazar's state of mind?

Can you relate to it? Share about a time you may have felt this way

There chanced to meet him an exceedingly ugly man who greeted him, 'Peace be upon you, Sir'.

What do we know about this person? (unnamed, very ugly, polite, probably recognizes the famous Rabbi)

How would you respond to such a greeting?

Rabbi Elazar, however, did not return his greeting but instead said to him, 'Reika (Worthless!), how ugly you are! Are all your fellow citizens as ugly as you are?'

What happened here? (shaming, being rude, personal, and group insult)

Explain the use of Reika, an empty vessel

Why do you think Rabbi Elazar responded this way?

How do you think it made the person feel?

Did it happen to you? (either side; maybe not to that extent)

How would you respond if you were that person?

The man replied: 'I do not know, but go and tell the craftsman who made me, "How Ugly is the vessel which you have made".'

What was the man's response?

What was the person really saying? (shifting a personal insulting question to a theological question, going vertically even higher)

When Rabbi Elazar realized that he had done wrong, he dismounted from the donkey and prostrated himself before the man and said to him, 'I submit myself to you, forgive me'.

What is happening here? Describe the scene as if you've seen it in a movie (signifies a vertical transition from a higher position than the person to a lower position)

> ## How does the physical, external transition help us understand the inner transition in Rabbi Elazar?

How do you think the person would respond to Rabbi Elazar's apology?

How would you have responded?

He [Rabbi Elazar] walked behind him until he reached his native city. When his fellow citizens came out to meet him, greeting him with the words, 'Peace be upon you, O Teacher, O Master,' the man asked them, 'Whom are you addressing thus?'

What Rabbi Elazar did? (possible going the opposite direction from his initial, making an effort; humbly walking behind) Why do you think he kept going with the man?

Who are the people greeting? And why is the man responding this way?

They replied, 'The man who is walking behind you.'

Thereupon he [the man] exclaimed: 'If this man is a teacher, may there not be any more like him in Israel'!

The people then asked him: 'Why'?

He replied: 'Such and such a thing has he done to me.'

What happens here?

What is he man saying to his fellow people? Why?

Notice who is telling the story: what is Rabbi Elazar's role here? What may it mean?

How would you respond, as the townspeople, to such a story?

They said to him: 'Nevertheless, forgive him, for he is a man greatly learned in the Torah.'

What are they asking him? Would they say it if it were a story of someone else and not such a great Rabbi? (free pass for Rabbis?)

> ## What may the Rabbis be saying here?

Can you relate to it? (where different people are treated differently)

The man replied: 'For your sakes, I will forgive him, but only on the condition that he would not become accustomed to behaving like this.'

What is the reason the man agrees to forgive?

What is the condition for his forgiveness?

    ## Why do you think this is so?

    ## Notice the exact language of the condition – it is not 'if the Rabbi would never do it' but rather 'would not become accustomed to it' – what may be the significance of using this language?

    ## Can you relate to this situation and process of repentance?

    ## (Maimonides: true repentance is when you change behavior in the same situation; never do it vs. not make it a habit)

Soon after this Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Shimon entered [the Beit Midrash] and expounded thus, 'A person should always be gentle as the reed and never hard like a cedar.'

What do you think the ultimate lesson Rabbi Elazar was teaching? (ethical re-awakening?)

Who do you think is the reed and who is the cedar in this story?

    ## Who Rabbi Elazar was referring to in this teaching - to himself or to other person?

    ## Do they change throughout the story?

    ## Can a cedar become a reed? Can a reed become a cedar?

What do you think the Rabbis' message is in this story?

    ## Is there more than one possible lesson here? What else could be their message?

    ## (Torah scholarship may grant someone privileges, yet may lead to arrogance and righteousness; humility, respect, willingness to see where one is wrong and hurting …)

And for this reason the reed was chosen to make quills for the writing of the Torah, Tefillin and Mezuzot.

What is the significance of using reed to write these sacred texts?

What kind of virtues are they promoting?

Additional Possible Discussion Questions

In what ways did Rabbi Elazar's status as a scholar lead him to treat the ugly man so poorly?

In what ways may you use your status as a "free pass"?

Who is full and who is empty in the story? Who's teaching whom?

What does it mean for you to be flexible like the reed rather than rigid like the cedar?

In what ways do we all forget that every human being was created in the image of God? What obstacles prevent us from recalling it in every encounter? What may help us embrace this stance?

Summary and Closing

Essential Questions: In what ways might arrogance, pride, rigidity, and righteousness prevent one from apologizing, accepting an apology, and granting forgiveness?

Possible primary takeaways: pride, arrogance, righteousness, and rigidity can take over human sensitivity and cause us to forget that everyone was created in God's image; these impact our ability to recognize when we hurt someone else, offer an apology, accept an apology, and forgive.

Final round

Share one thing you are taking away from this session: something new you learned, something you hadn't previously considered, or something a friend said that really resonated with you.

Mar Ukva, His wife, and the Oven

The text is found in [BT Ketubot 67b](#).

Warm-up Prompt

Share of a time when your helping someone was embarrassing for them?

Essential Questions

Is it appropriate to seek visibility in acts of kindness—or does anonymity serve the giver and recipient's interests best? What are the merits of direct connection with those in

need? Is there an ideal model of doing acts of kindness? What would be your considerations for a better model of helping others?

Context

Ketubot is a tractate about marriage; Ketuba is the "marriage contract"

The context of this sugya is the Rabbis discussing the financial commitment as part of the marriage, leading to a discussion on financial well-being and charity

Mar Ukva was the head of the community in Babylonia 3rd century CE, he was wealthy and a scholar

The Story

Mar Ukva had a poor person in his neighborhood, and was accustomed every day to toss four zuzzim for him into the [slot adjacent to the] hinge of the door.

(We know Mar Ukva was very wealthy, and learn that a poor person lives in his neighborhood, a mixed neighborhood)

   ## Do you know poor people? Do you know who in your neighborhood needs help?

How does he help the poor person?

   ## Four zuzzim every day … .is it a little or a lot? (Chad Gadya, a lamb costs zuzzim, probably a lot of money)

   ## What do we learn about Mar Ukva? (a habit, generous, humble)

   ## How would you feel as the poor person?

Anonymous giving of charity; why?

   ## What does anonymous giving enable / support? (no shaming, prevents embarrassment for both, no publicity, humility, not expecting a reward and recognition, possibly avoiding requests from others in need)

   ## Whose choice is it? (the giver – not responding ask from the needy?]

   ## (possibly connect to Maimonides' 8 levels of giving, this is level 3; level 2 is fully anonymous to both sides, and level 1 is helping to be self-sustainable "teach to fish")

   ## What is your custom? Do you prefer to give charity anonymously or not?

What does anonymous does not enable?

(No human connection, opportunity to express gratitude, not witnessing the good, it may become a disconnected transaction)

(Possible challenge of equity with anonymous giving: is everyone who is in need is supported in equal way, if at all)

(No visibility has social disadvantages, "democracy dies in darkness")

One day [the poor person] said: I will go and see who is doing this service for me.

Why do you think he wants to see who is giving him daily?

Would you want to know? Why? or Why not?

That day Mar Ukva was delayed in the study hall, and his wife came with him.

What happened here? (same day the poor man wanted to see who's his supporter)

He was delayed in the Beit Midrash, busy in high world of Torah: why do you think did she come for him? (no phone, or texting, call him home for dinner? Remind him there is a world outside? Help him?)

Can you relate to his experience? (delayed by an engaging activity, or waiting for someone who is delayed)

We do know his wife was with him when distributing the money to the poor person

When [the people in the poor man's house] saw that [someone was at the door], [the poor person] went out after them.

(Maybe the time now was much later, so the family was home)

How do you think the poor man feels when he sees someone at their door?

Why did the poor man go out after them? What do you think he wanted?

What do you think would happen?

[Mar Ukva and his wife] ran from before him.

Why did Mar Ukva and his wife run away?

… they entered a certain furnace whose fire was already raked.

(describe the scene: they are running in the street, the poor person is chasing them, they are taking turns in small alleys, when they see a small door, slightly open and they

run inside, only to realize they just entered a communal oven, where the coals were raked for the day but still very hot; explain what a communal oven is)

(we can imagine their feet are burning from the heat of the oven)

Mar Ukva's feet were being burnt, his wife said to him: Raise your feet and set them on my feet.

What is happening here?

    ## Can you explain? … were Mar Ukva's wife's feet not burnt, not burnt as badly, or was she not feeling the pain?

What is his wife offering him?

    ## Why do you think she is offering him this?

    ## (notice she is not offering to get out of the oven; why?)

Can you relate to a situation where a challenging experience affected you more or less severely than someone else?

Mar Ukva became distraught [חלשה דעתו, "his mind became weak"].

(explain the meaning and common use of the term in rabbinic texts)

Why do you think he became distressed?

    ## Because his wife was less affected? If that's the case, what might he think about himself and her?

    ## … that he needs her help? Where the most powerful person in the community who is used to help others is now in need of help from someone else – his wife (woman, weak, marginalized, …), it is a very vulnerable position

    ## Maybe he is concerned that his giving is not complete or fulfilling the mitzvah?

How would you feel, if you were Mar Ukva, with such an offer to help?

Can you share such a situation, and how did you feel?

She said to him: I am [typically] found inside the house, and my benefit is close.

(explain what the phrase may mean "my benefit is close": When I assist others, the benefit – help - I provide them is close, immediate, and direct. She is a housewife, typically home, and when she helps her friends and neighbors, it is not by money, but by

directly assisting them; for example, watching their kids, giving them food, helping with chores)

What do you think Mar Ukva's wife is saying to him? How does her help compare to the way he gives and helps those in need?

Two models of giving and help:

Her giving is direct and immediate, as needed: food items, ready to eat; she meets them and interacts with them; they are coming to her house/home; she knows what they need, maybe not food but talking, listening, and giving advice.

His giving is indirect and delayed, routine (recurring direct deposit): they still need to buy food with the money; he never directly meets and interacts with those in need; it is given in hiding when coming back from Beit Midrash; always the exact amount and at the same time, not really relating to their actual needs.

How can it explain why she is not as affected?

Ending Discussion

What is the message of the Rabbis in this story?

Do you think the Rabbis compare ways of giving? Do they have a preference?

Is there a significance for the Rabbis having the message come through the wife of a powerful and learned person?

A "power-giving couple" – both models are needed, not one or the other; sometimes her feet will be on his, and at other times his on hers

Women/wife's wisdom, God tells Avraham to listen to Sarah

Summary and Closing

Essential Questions: Is it appropriate to seek visibility in acts of kindness—or does anonymity serve the giver and recipient's interests best? What are the merits of direct connection with those in need? Is there an ideal model of doing acts of kindness? What would be your considerations for a better model of helping others?

Possible primary takeaways: there is not one way to help others, a combination of both; one may get help from anyone, including those who seem weaker; the importance of having direct relationships with those in need, even if that help is not anonymous, and there are many other advantages; the hierarchy of Maimonides is not absolute

Final round

Share one thing you are taking away from this session: something new you learned, something you hadn't previously considered, or something a friend said that really resonated with you.

Martha bat Boethus during the Famine

The text is found in BT Gittin 67b.

Warm-up Prompt

Share a case where you knew something had to be done, and yet you were reluctant to take action, being in denial.

Essential Questions

How do disconnection and denial of reality impact our responses to challenging situations, especially in times of crisis?

Context

Tractate Gittin on divorce, of the shattering and destruction of a home, a house; the place where Rabbis tell stories and learnings related to the destruction of the temple
Period of story: Jerusalem during a significant crisis, just before the destruction of the temple; civil war between violent Jewish factions, hatred, and corruption. City under Roman siege, a Jewish faction burnt the food stores, leading to severe famine.

The Story

With regard to this famine, it is related that Marta bat Baitos (Martha daughter of Boethus) was one of the wealthy women of Jerusalem.
Background of story:
   ## Martha was a daughter of a wealthy family; her father Boethus married her to Joshua ben Gamla, and the family paid to the Romans to make Joshua the High Priest
   ## She was both of the elite, and also "the first lady"
   ## So rich, there is another story that on Yom Kippur, when her husband was on duty in the temple, and as one is not to wear leather on Yom Kippur and has to

walk barefoot, they would place carpets for her from her house to the temple, so she would not need to walk barefoot in the streets

She sent out her agent [servant, butler] and said to him: Go bring me fine flour.

Background: city is under siege by Romans, Jewish factions fight each other in the city – everything is changing; think COVID - things are changing, your world is not what you are used to

    ## She needs food, sending her servant to get her what she is used to – fine flour

By the time he went, the fine flour was already sold.

He came back and said to her: There is no fine flour, but there is ordinary flour.

What happens here?

What do we learn about her servant?

How do you think the servant feels? Martha?

What do you think will happen next?

She said to him: Go bring me ordinary flour.

By the time he went, the ordinary flour was also sold.

He came and said to her: There is no ordinary flour, but there is coarse flour.

What happens now? What's not happening?

What is your understanding of the servant? Can you explain his behavior?

What is your understanding of Martha?

What would you do as the servant? As Martha?

What do you think would happen next?

She said to him: Go then and bring me coarse flour.

By the time he went, the coarse flour was already sold.

He came and said to her: There is no coarse flour, but there is barley flour.

She said to him: Go then and bring me barley flour.

But once again, by the time he went, the barley flour was also sold.

Why the repetition? The Talmud is very terse in words, what may be the message in the many details and repetition?

Why didn't Martha ask her servant to bring whatever he finds?

Even when she already realizing that the is scarcity and lack of basic food items? (spoiled? oblivious? Controlling? Else?)

And why didn't the servant show more initiative? (fear? Habit? "Stickler" to rules? Not his responsibility? Oblivion? else?)

What **was** his responsibility? (too purist? failing to take action?)

(they don't grasp the world has changed)

And what about us? How are we respond when the world is changing … COVID? Oct 7th? Other events?

What would you do as Martha at this point?

She was barefoot at that time, and said: I will go out myself and see if I can find something to eat.

What has changed here?

She is finally taking action – herself, not through a messenger, and not by commands

What do you think the significance of mentioning she was barefoot?

She stepped on some dung, which stuck to her foot, and she died.

Why do you think she died? (encountering the unknown, shock, fear and dread, else?)

How do you react when you encounter the unknown? When it is affecting your body, or close family? What dies in you?

Ending Discussion

What are the Rabbis telling us in the story?

Maybe the disconnect of the elite from the people – that the first time she needs to confront the world "as is" – she dies, it is the first time she needs to encounter something.

We need to meet the hardship and engage with the unfamiliar on an ongoing basis, our experience will protect us when things are challenging

(The Buddha, a prince who was protected by his father from the real world, and later he went on his journey to experience the world as it is)

Maybe failure to take action until it was too late, like Kamtza & Bar Kamtza leading to the destruction of the temple

Martha takes action at the end, similar to rabbinic phrase "go out and see" (פוק חזי), but it is too late

Also related to Kamtza & Bar Kamtza is the insistence on ritualistic purity when the world is burning

Summary and Closing

Essential Questions: How do disconnection and denial of reality impact our responses to challenging situations, especially in times of crisis?

Possible primary takeaways: Risk in disconnecting from reality, denial, lack of preparedness for challenging times, failure to take action until it is too late, insistence on ritual at all costs …

Final round

Share one thing you are taking away from this session: something new you learned, something you hadn't previously considered, or something a friend said that really resonated with you.

9.2. Rabbinic Texts Resources

The following sections provide lists of helpful resources— online, books, and articles— that I found valuable while researching materials for learning sessions focused on rabbinic texts. I hope these will be useful when teachers prepare to teach rabbinic texts.

Online Sites

Sefaria: A Living Library of Jewish Texts Online. (n.d.). Retrieved November 15, 2025, from https://www.sefaria.org/texts

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