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**Reimagining Literacy Practices:  
Creating Living *Midrash* From Ancient Texts Through Tableau**

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Within supplementary schooling, the quest for Jewish knowledge is often viewed as an accrual of amassed skills in the areas of Hebrew vocabulary and general knowledge of Bible stories. A pervasive focus on surface understanding of Bible has led to lessons in which students might decode the literal meaning of Hebrew-written texts or gain general knowledge of the content of the narratives. However, it is necessary to question the pervasive view of content as translated into a curricular collage of facts about stories, as emphasis on understanding of narrative alone leads to treatment of Jewish literacy as a technical exercise; through this viewpoint critical thinking can become an overlooked proficiency. While most Jewish educators recognize the distinction between technical decoding of texts and studying for deeper meaning, supplementary school curricula often do not support the latter practice.

A great irony exists within supplementary schooling, namely that experts struggling to create a sturdy model for Jewish literacy turned to public schools for their pedagogical frame, rather than restoring the social practices of text study that constitute Jewish learning. In doing so, Jewish educators have allowed themselves to resort to models that posit supplementary school learning as a quick-fix inoculation (Woocher, 1997), appearing to prepare students to participate in the Jewish community. This one-dimensional view leads to one simple solution, which is to cover as much ground as possible during the limited hours allotted to formal instruction, leaving little room for student interaction and interpretation of texts.

Aron (2000) argues that the unique nature of Jewish text study, which traditionally takes place in a communal context, has not been infused into the learning of most supplementary schools. She expresses the elements of this unique quality as “*Torah Lishmah*, study for its own sake.... In the Jewish tradition, learning is considered an end in itself, an essential part of being Jewish” (p. 21). In their abandonment of interactive practices derived from *chevruta*, which are the hallmark of Jewish study, educators have forsaken methods that engage students in meaningful encounters with Bible, and as well have overlooked an opportunity to reinvigorate text study within supplementary schooling.

Jewish educators need to provide alternatives to a narrow view of Jewish literacy by revisiting social practices that are characteristic of Jewish study, drawing from rich traditions of engagement in critical questioning of narratives and reanimating them so that students are able to push the boundaries of texts. By enabling students to partake in an active form of communal text study, granting them the opportunity to create their own “stories-beyond-the-story” (Wolf et al, 1996), or *midrashim*, students might place themselves within what Aron (2000) refers to as a “grand conversation” (p. 176) of textual interpretation. While the construct of *chevruta* is not necessarily driven by an ideology of creating *midrash*, it serves as a model for the essential practice of asking questions of texts, which is often absent from supplementary school learning.

This practitioner research<sup>1</sup> was designed to explore how participatory drama enabled students to actively question Bible and to grapple with texts’ complexities within one supplementary school classroom. As a teacher-researcher, I drew upon the technique of “tableau-building,” in which students create still (no movement) visual images with their bodies. By attending to the overarching research question—How and what do students negotiate as they build

<sup>1</sup> I drew upon Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen’s (1994) definition of practitioner research as “‘insider’ research done by practitioners....using their own site (classroom, institution, school, district, community) as the focus of their study” (p. 2).

tableaus based upon biblical texts?—I considered how students constructed *midrash* as they drew upon the multiple-symbol systems of verbal dialogue and nonverbal gesture, as well as the resource of printed text. Drawing upon Gee’s framework of Discourse analysis, this article explores the social practices of collaborative dramatic explication as students worked “at the edge of text” (Wolf, Edmiston, & Enciso, 1996, p. 494). I describe the student-generated questions that arose from learning through drama, as well as the ways in which students repositioned themselves as interpreters of biblical texts.

### **Tableau: A Pedagogical Technique for Creating Interpretations**

Tableau was used as an alternative pedagogical technique for communal study in which text is transmutable and dynamic. Students utilized tableau to help them create visual interpretations of biblical texts. The work of several practitioners shaped my definition of tableau. Wilson (1999) defines tableau as

frozen slices of action...[that] are still (no movement, no sound, no props) interpretations of literature.... Through the tableau, the children create a visual, dimensional text. The tableau depicts relationships between characters and attitudes of characters.... Tableau freezes the interpretations for analysis (pp. 1-2).

Bolton (1992) adds that the process of building tableau usually involves small-group work, after which students share their frozen images with the larger group.

I drew upon my expertise and knowledge as a drama educator, adopting the role of teacher-researcher to introduce this new practice into the curriculum of one supplementary school. My gravitation toward using tableau as a way of exploring interpretation of biblical texts arose in part from use of the technique as a theatre director, helping young actors during rehearsals to express what they considered the pivotal action at a particular moment in the script. However, what most drew me to this technique was my experience as a day school drama specialist. I recognized that tableau serves as a way to introduce Bible study as a social practice, involving interaction and discussion. As students utilized both verbal and nonverbal dialogue, gesture, and image to communicate and represent their interpretations of texts, tableau allowed for an expansion beyond frontal, teacher-directed discussion as a way of making meaning of texts.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In setting out to define literacy as a social practice, several theorists have critiqued the widely accepted definition of reading as an individual, cognitive-based act that until recently has dominated the field of literacy theory. To frame their argument, these theorists have described what they perceive as a highly individualized conception of reading as functional or autonomous literacy. According to Scribner (1988), those who embrace the autonomous view presume that educators can agree upon a universal set of competencies that students must master, irrespective of the specifics of particular settings. Literacy becomes an individual act of skill application and, as students utilize technical skills to understand what has been laid before them, “the final objective is to achieve mastery and authority over the text, whose meanings are not negotiable” (p. 116).

Street (1984, 1995) offers the ideological model of literacy, to reframe literacy as a series of interactions rather than as cognitions residing within people’s heads. The ideological model recognizes that the context of any literacy event<sup>2</sup> is not a “container,” but is constructed through social interactions involving politics and power relations. Street explains that the ideological model does not overlook that reading and writing require mastery of particular technical skills, but does recognize that the skills cannot be detached from the settings within which they are being

<sup>2</sup> To frame this study, I drew upon Heath’s (1982, 1983, 1984) definition of literacy events as talk, gesture, and social processes around written text.

learned and practiced. This widened lens for literacy allows educators to extend their focus beyond skill building to recognize and consider the social practices involved in literacy as well as the social environment in which these practices occur. From this viewpoint, no text can be read or written from a neutral position. In order to study a literacy event, one must also examine the interactions and resources involved in this ideological act.

Gee's work (1990, 1998, 1999, 2000a, 2000b) has been instrumental in developing the idea of literacy as an ideological act. Like Street (1984, 1995), Gee challenges the traditional definition of literacy, explaining that while the "'normal' meaning of the word 'literacy' ('the ability to read and write') seems to be 'innocent' and 'obvious'...[it] situates literacy in the individual person, rather than in the society of which that person is a member" (1990, p. 27). Gee explains that people draw upon Discourses, which he defines as "a sort of 'identity kit' which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize" (Gee, 2000, p. 142).

Gee (1998) argues that because reading takes place within communities of practice, knowledge does not reside solely in individual heads but is distributed across social interactions. By applying Gee's theory one is able to talk about the groups that hold these practices and to understand that literacy practices are connected to specific settings, as opposed to conceptualizing them as individual cognitive processes. As people engage in literacy events, they make sense of situated meanings of the text so that a word or phrase does not have a single, definitive meaning, but is culturally situated and explicated by a group. Context is further expanded to include the ways people draw upon their Discourses, or "identity kits," to inform the way they talk and act within literacy events. In this way, the examination of literacy events and their supporting practices may reveal how students make meaning of texts within particular social contexts.

Gee's (1990, 1998, 1999, 2000a, 2000b) work lends to a redefinition of Jewish literacy. Through Gee's lens of Discourses, the literacy event expands to include examination of participants' shared and individual identity kits, upon which students draw in order to understand texts. Through Gee's theory, it becomes clear that Jewish literacy is not a skill set that can be inculcated into students; it is a process of engaging in a shared practice of the literacy events of negotiating and interpreting texts within a learning community. Because situated meanings are not static, in this widened conception of literacy I am able to examine the social interplay that encircles the study of texts as a literacy event.

### **Overview of Research and Data Collection Methods**

Research was conducted within River Heights Congregational School, a Reconstructionist congregational school located in the Metropolitan New York area, over the course of four months (February-May 2002). Twelve students within a mixed grade-five and grade-six classroom participated in facilitated drama-oriented text study during Tuesday and Thursday two-hour sessions. Data collection focused on three distinct curricular text units: *Megillat Esther*, biblical texts surrounding Passover, and the Genesis narratives.

All sessions were videotaped in their entirety, and review of the videotape enabled an understanding of how students utilized the varied resources of gesture, talk, and images to produce interpretations of the text. I kept field notes throughout the data collection that were descriptive in nature and based upon my own observations. I also kept a journal, in which I reflected on my own practice, separate from the documented observations of my field notes. Additionally, I used digital stills of tableaus as springboards for audiotaped group interviews following the sessions. The purpose of these interviews was to gain students' perspectives on the experience of working within a group to create tableaus of biblical texts.

### **The Literacy Events of Tableau**

This practitioner research study was designed with the intent to explore the literacy events in which tableau was used to interpret biblical texts. I asked students to engage in the

creation of tableaus as we encountered significant moments within narratives. I will focus below on one type of literacy event that occurred as an outgrowth of the curricular design: literacy events in which small groups negotiated the creation of tableaus surrounding verses from biblical texts (including examination of how students used multiple symbol systems to interpret texts).

Throughout data collection, I set a precedent for how we created tableaus, establishing a routine and repeating instructions to students in each session. In most cases, following an introduction to the verses or the story, I would break the students into small groups and assign each group some verses (sometimes I would give each group a set of different verses) from the narrative. I usually allocated approximately ten minutes for students to create a tableau or a series of tableaus (sometimes students created a series of freeze frames) that would offer their interpretation of the verses. As we reconvened, groups would take turns performing, or sharing, their tableaus for other groups. I usually directed the group that was sharing to remain “frozen” in their tableau as the other students would comment on what they thought was happening in the image, and how the image served as a visual interpretation of the narrative.

### Discourse Analysis

I drew upon Gee’s (1998) methods of Discourse analysis to closely examine language use and building of situated meanings within literacy events. It aided me in understanding how, as students engaged in literacy events, they made sense of situated meanings of the text so that the words of the Bible became culturally situated and explicated by the group. As Gee states, situated meanings are not just found within individuals, but “very often they are *negotiated* between people in and through communicative social interaction” (Gee, 1998, p. 52). Discourse analysis made visible how students participated in the shared construction and negotiation of meanings of biblical texts, assembling tableau-as-*midrash* “on the spot” (p. 47) within the social context. I analyzed the language and gestures students used to engage in literacy events in order to understand the varied resources students brought to their interpretations.

### Utilizing Gee’s (1998) Building Tasks and Tools To Analyze Interactions

Upon completion of data collection, I systematically reviewed the data: I repeatedly watched videotaped sessions, creating narrative descriptions of the literacy events; I developed broad categories for the range of social interactions; I described what I viewed as ordinary social practices (patterns) and disruptive practices (ruptures) within the literacy events, and I then selected for Discourse analysis events that were representative of these patterns and ruptures. The example below focuses on the broad category of talking about the text and the rupture of utilizing conventions of drama to ask questions (see table one).

<b>Table One: Identification of Patterns and Ruptures Within Interactions</b>	
<b>Talking About the Text</b>	
Student made transmedia references.	Pattern
I asked them to bring their own experiences into the interpretation.	Pattern
We talked about the verses before the students created the images.	Pattern
I asked them, “What do you want to know more about?”	Pattern
Drawing upon other conventions of drama (e.g. “hotseating”) aside from tableau to ask questions about the text.	Rupture
I continuously pointed out the difference between biblical texts and <i>midrash</i> .	Pattern
Students used biblical texts as “proof” for their <i>midrashim</i> .	Pattern

Gee (1998) explains that Discourse analysis involves asking questions how, in a given context, language defines the social activity and how the social activity and its participants give meaning to the language. To help researchers focus on what he calls the “cues or clues” (p. 85) within language use, Gee offers six building tasks (see figure one, next page) that highlight various aspects of meaning making built within a social context. Through these building tasks he poses questions that guide analysis. The building tasks allow the researcher to consider how participants use language as well as other semiotic systems in making meaning within literacy events, and how they do so “with due regard for other related oral and written texts and situations [they] have encountered before” (p. 85). He posits that through consideration of the building tasks one can consider how people negotiate the meaning of texts by drawing upon “related texts we have read, sociocultural knowledge we bring to the text, and discussions we have had with other people. That is, these building tasks can be seen simultaneously as cognitive achievements, interactional achievements, and inter-textual achievements” (p. 85). Gee explains that, while for heuristic purposes he presents distinct building tasks, it is crucial to adopt a holistic view of the analysis and to make connections between the building tasks.

**Figure One:** Questions for Analyzing Building Tasks (Gee, 1998)**Semiotic Building**

1. What sign systems are relevant (and irrelevant) in the situation (e.g. speech, writing, images, and gestures)? How are they made relevant (and irrelevant) and in what ways?
2. What systems of knowledge and ways of knowing are relevant (and irrelevant) in the situation? How are they made relevant (and irrelevant) and in what ways?
3. What social languages are relevant (and irrelevant) in the situation? How are they made relevant (and irrelevant) and in what ways?

**World Building**

4. What are the situated meanings of some of the words and phrases that seem important in the situation?
5. What situated meanings and values seem to be attached to places, times, bodies, objects, artifacts, and institutions relevant in this situation?
6. What cultural models and networks of models (master models) seem to be at play in connecting and integrating these situated meanings to each other?
7. What institutions and/or Discourses are being (re)produced in this situation and how are they being stabilized or transformed in the act?

**Activity Building**

8. What is the larger or main activity (or set of activities) going on in the situation?
9. What sub-activities compose this activity (or these activities)?
10. What actions (down to the level of things like “requests for reasons”) compose these sub-activities and activities?

**Socioculturally Situated Identity and Relationship Building**

11. What relationships and identities (roles, positions)—with their concomitant personal, social, and cultural knowledge and beliefs (cognition), feelings (affect), and values—seem to be relevant to the situation?
12. How are these relationships and identities stabilized or transformed in the situation?
13. In terms of identities, activities, and relationships, what Discourses are relevant (and irrelevant) in the situation? How are they made relevant (and irrelevant) and in what ways?

**Political Building**

14. What social goods (e.g. status; power; aspects of gender, race, and class; or more narrowly defined social networks and identities) are relevant (and irrelevant) in this situation? How are they made relevant (and irrelevant) and in what ways?
15. How are these social goods connected to the cultural models and Discourses operative in the situation?

**Connection Building**

16. What sorts of connections—looking backward and/or forward—are made within and across utterances and large stretches of the interaction?
17. What sorts of connections are made to previous or future interactions—to other people, ideas, texts, things, institutions, and Discourses outside the current situation (this has to do with intertextuality and “inter-Discursivity”)?
18. How do connections of both [previous questions] help (together with situated meanings and cultural models) to constitute coherence, and what sort of coherence, in the situation?

Use of Gee’s (1998) building tasks supported analysis of how students created interpretations through collaborative dramatic activity. In addition to the building tasks, Gee (1998) outlines a series of “tools of inquiry” that the researcher must draw upon in order to

conduct Discourse analysis (see table two). I utilized these tools of inquiry to facilitate exploration of the building tasks that Gee proposes, as well as to further examine details of the language and to consider how students made meaning through their social interactions. The tools of inquiry enabled me to deeply probe students' use of language and the ways in which they constructed meaning within their negotiation of the events of tableau.

<b>Table Two: Gee's (1998) Tools of Inquiry</b>	
<b>Discourses</b>	"With a Capital 'D', that is, different ways in which we humans integrate language with non-language 'stuff', such as different ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, believing, and using symbols, tools, and objects in the right places and at the right times so as to enact and recognize different identities and activities, give the material world certain meanings, distribute social goods in a certain way, make certain sorts of meaningful connections in our experience, and privilege certain symbol systems and ways of knowing over others (i.e. carry out all the building tasks above)." (p. 13)
<b>Situated Meanings</b>	"A situated meaning is an image or pattern that we assemble 'on the spot' as we communicate in a given context, based upon our construal of that context and on our past experiences." (p. 47) "Situated meanings don't just reside in individual minds; very often they are <i>negotiated</i> between people in and through communicative social interaction." (p. 52)
<b>Cultural Models</b>	"A cultural model is usually a totally or partially unconscious explanatory theory or 'storyline' connected to a word—bits and pieces of which are distributed across different people in a social group—that helps to explain why the word has the different situated meanings and possibilities for the specific social and cultural groups of people that it does." (p. 44) They are theories rooted in the practices of socioculturally defined groups of people.
<b>Situated Identities</b>	"Different identities or social positions we enact and recognize in different settings." (p. 12)
<b>Social Languages</b>	"Different styles of language that we use to enact and recognize different identities in different settings; different social languages also allow us to engage in all the other building tasks above." (pp. 12-13)
<b>Conversations</b>	"With a capital 'C', that is, long-running important themes or motifs that have been the focus of a variety of different texts and interactions (in different languages and Discourses) through a significant stretch of time and across an array of institutions." (p. 13) They involve "sides" that we can identify with as constituting a debate, and values and ways of thinking connected with the debate.

The example below illustrates how one group of students participated in the literacy event of negotiating the creation of tableau. I draw upon Discourse analysis to highlight the ways in which students engaged in connection building by making intertextual links to previous drama-driven interpretations in order to inform the negotiated gestures within their tableau.

### Using Drama To Explore Student-Generated Questions About the Narrative

Throughout the sessions I attempted to have students generate and discuss questions they had about the text before they created the tableaux, as I considered this step to be an integral part

of biblical interpretation. This attempt to have students pose questions took on various forms, ranging from having students write questions in advance of tableau creation to requesting preliminary small-group conversations regarding “What questions do you have?” However, despite my persistence, these conversations did not occur, as students operated from a deeply held belief that they were to learn Bible in order to gain knowledge of the story lines. Students continuously expressed a Discourse of Bible learning as examining a complete, detailed narrative that they emphasized was to be heard but not necessarily questioned or discussed. As soon as students convened in their small groups, they claimed their parts in the tableau (e.g. “I am Cain; you are Abel” and “I am Hagar; you are Sarah”) and then began to negotiate the visual action of the tableau. The following example represents a shift in students’ tableau building, as they incorporated into their tableaus interpretations that were gained from asking questions through the dramatic convention of “hotseating,” described below. I first present a description of hotseating, and follow with analysis of tableau building.

### *Setting the Stage: The Narrative*

In the first hour of the session, students and I considered the verses that explain that Sarah had asked Abraham to have a son with her maidservant, Hagar. We created images that showed Sarah’s reaction and the changes in status between Hagar and Sarah once Hagar had conceived. When we reconvened for the second hour of the session, I explained that Sarah had given birth to Isaac.

#### Genesis 21:9-11

Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing. She said to Abraham, “Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.” The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his.

### *Description of Hotseating*

I introduced the dramatic technique of hotseating to aid students in adopting a Discourse of Bible study as a practice of questioning silences and “holes” within texts. I framed hotseating as an information-gathering technique, telling the students that we would gather information and find out more about a particular character. Attempting to introduce their potential role as interpreters, I suggested that they could use this tool to go back in time, asking the students, “What would you want to know more about?” Students volunteered to sit in a special chair and become a character from the narrative, and the class posed questions to the hotseated student, who answered in role. I asked the students, “Is there someone who can come up and tell us what’s going on here?” and “Who are you going to be?”—allowing them to enter the action of the narrative as the characters.

### *Literacy Practices of Generating Questions and Interpretations*

The technique of hotseating guided students in adopting a role of interpreter. As students took on the perspective of Sarah, they generated multiple possible answers to the question of why Sarah became so upset that she wanted to cast out Hagar and Ishmael, if all Ishmael was doing was playing as the verses suggest. The students drew upon various cultural models of motherhood that we had previously encountered within the Bible to guide their interpretations of Sarah’s behavior—including mother as protective, competitive, and vindictive. Avi, playing the role of Sarah, responded that he saw Ishmael having fun with Isaac and that he did not want them to have fun, because they were supposed to be rivals. He expressed that Sarah’s actions were motivated by jealousy over Abraham’s relationship with Hagar, “cause it’s like I didn’t really like when the son was made, because it’s kind of my son.” He added that he didn’t want Ishmael, son of a person he didn’t like, playing with Isaac, “because [Isaac and Ishmael] could end up to be friends; and it would be kind of weird if [Hagar and I] were rivals and our sons were like friends, it would be weird.” Evan then asked Abby, who took on the part of Sarah, why she stopped Ishmael from

playing, and she responded that he had hit Isaac. She stated, "He said that Isaac was a bad boy and then he hit him." She then added, "Isaac said that Hagar was a mean person, and Ishmael hit Isaac," and, "Ishmael is a bad boy," and that she didn't want him playing with Isaac because he was violent. When Eli next took on the role as Sarah, he built upon Abby's interpretation:

They started fighting, and I mean, I like fighting and everything, but Ishmael was winning and I didn't like that; so I like stopped the fight since my son was getting hurt.... I took Ishmael's collar [stretches out hands] and gave him to my husband, who cheated on me [laughs], and I told him to cast him and his mother away; and he did, I think.

Evan was the last student to hotseat as Sarah, and he added, "I wanted to stop them fighting because I thought it was a bad influence for Isaac."

After we had finished hotseating Sarah's character, I asked the students to create tableaux as well as a "moving *midrash*," (in which they could move and speak) around the verses, considering what they thought happened that made Sarah so upset that she would send Hagar and Ishmael away:

#### Why Did Sarah Become so Upset?

**Abby:** No, I have an idea, shhh. I have an idea.

**Tamar:** No, my idea is better.

**Abby:** We can be playing, but you can interpret like we're—shhh—you can interpret it like we're fighting like—stop fighting [hands out to sides] and Isaac can be like—but [hands out] we're not fighting, or something like that.

**Tamar:** It's like, I'll be like—but mommy, we're not fighting [says it in baby voice].

**Evan:** Stop fighting. No, it's like this—stop fighting [left hand on hip] now, you two kids.

**Tamar:** No you're supposed to be like—Ishmael, stop hitting Isaac.

**Evan:** Oh yeah, Ishmael, [left hand on hip, right hand pointing] stop!

(May 2, 2002)

Analysis demonstrated that, in the above interaction, students engaged in semiotic building, political building, and connection building as intertwined activities—as they negotiated whose ideas would be heard, accepted, and represented in their interpretation of why Sarah sent Ishmael away. As they maneuvered between the semiotic systems of gesture and verbal language, they navigated questions about Sarah that had been raised through the construct of hotseating. Immediately preceding the above interaction, the students considered how to gesture what they interpreted as Sarah's interference in Isaac and Ishmael's playing. Tamar had suggested earlier in the negotiation, "Since Sarah doesn't like Hagar because of her own decision, then we can make it like they're having fun together with toys." Abby and Tamar had been negotiating how to show Isaac and Ishmael having fun by gesturing the playing of hand games. In reaction, Evan, playing Sarah, said that he would be wondering why they were playing together. He gestured placing his hand to his chin, signaling contemplation; but Tamar disagreed, instructing him to instead stare straight ahead. As Evan continued to gesture his hand to his chin, Tamar disputed his use of gesture, stating, "It's supposed to be a fight between Sarah and Ishmael."

Students arrived at an impasse as they disagreed as to how Evan, as Sarah, should signal through gesture that Sarah was angry and wanted to stop what she perceived as a fight. It was at this point that Abby said, "No, I have an idea." Because Tamar was unwilling to listen, Abby needed to strategically decide how to have her ideas heard and taken up by the other members of the group. It was at this point that Abby made an intertextual link to hotseating in order to lend validity to her interpretation of Sarah's behavior.

*Making Intertextual Links To Give Ideas Validity*

Gee's building tasks help make visible how students developed their interpretation of Sarah's actions through connection building to the situated meanings of the text that had been negotiated during hotseating. To support her idea in being heard, Abby made an intertextual link to the verbal interpretations that she, Eli, and Evan had offered within the preceding dramatic activity. Abby said, "We can be playing, but you can interpret it like we're fighting." According to Abby's suggestion, Sarah's perspective on the boys' relationship might have been tied to her anger toward Hagar, enabling her to interpret the playing as fighting. Through her suggestion, Abby positioned Sarah as a fallible person, who made choices based upon identifiable feelings. This perspective was a direct outgrowth of hotseating that reinforced Sarah's discomfort with Isaac and Ishmael's close relationship and her animosity toward Hagar, her rival. To support her idea, Abby demonstrated what it would be like as she said, "stop fighting," gesturing with her hands out to the sides. She then showed that Isaac would tell Sarah that he and Ishmael were not fighting.

Abby's brief enactment of her idea, through verbal and nonverbal language, allowed her to illustrate her intertextual link to Tamar and Evan. After she shared the words and gestures, Tamar and Evan took up her idea. As Abby, Tamar, and Evan engaged in semiotic building, they negotiated gesture in conjunction with their verbal suggestions to back the intertextual links they made to hotseating. Tamar signaled that she had taken up Abby's suggestion by enacting her role as Isaac, showing that Isaac would "be like—but mommy we're not fighting," while holding her hands out to her sides. Evan then took up Abby's positioning for Sarah as well, as he said aloud, "Stop fighting. No, it's like this—stop fighting now, you two kids," placing his hand on his hip to accentuate his role as an authority figure. Both his verbal and nonverbal language signaled that he adopted the interpretation that Sarah wanted to intervene in the fighting. Tamar then added to Abby's idea, saying, "You're supposed to be like—Ishmael, stop hitting Isaac." With this utterance, she referred to Abby's comment in hotseating that Sarah saw Ishmael hitting Isaac. Again, Evan took this up, saying, "Oh yeah, Ishmael, stop!" As he reenacted the role, he again placed his left hand on his hip and pointed with his right hand. His gestures reinforced Sarah's status both as an adult and as Hagar and Ishmael's master.

This example demonstrates that students drew upon various resources to consider generated questions about texts; the intertextual links that students made were not limited to printed texts and images, but extended to conversations that were made possible through dramatic techniques such as hotseating. In students' creation of the tableau, they connected to the viewpoints suggested during hotseating dealing with why Sarah would act unjustly and send Ishmael away. Through their *midrash*, they created a portrayal of Sarah that situated her as contemptuous of Ishmael and protective of Isaac. The meaning they took from this into their tableau was that Sarah was wrong in her perception of Ishmael as a bad, violent boy. Their engagement in hotseating enabled this depiction, as they were able to bring the character of Sarah to life, develop a story that informed her actions, and consider potential emotions that she experienced. Then, in the negotiation of the tableau, the students were able to create gestures and suggest words that animated the range of Sarah's emotions in the narrative.

While not included in the above transcript, the students eventually decided that, after Sarah prohibited the boys from playing together, they covertly crawled toward one another and resumed their play when Sarah was not looking. With this interpretation they further positioned Sarah's actions as a result of her jealousy, rather than as a reality of Ishmael and Isaac fighting. In doing so, their *midrash* explained that Sarah sent Ishmael away because of her own feelings of inadequacy. They drew upon hotseating to define Sarah as the outsider, rather than Ishmael, and to position Ishmael as unjustly treated. It was the pedagogy of drama that enabled students to create a *midrash* on the text.

### Implications

This study was conceived to reposition Jewish literacy as practices distributed across social events, rather than as neutral skills or facts for individuals to master or as a commodity to be handed to students. I discuss below the findings in relation to this ideological model of literacy (Street, 1984, 1995).

#### *Adoption of a Discourse of Bible as a Living Text*

The difficulty that students initially confronted in our work together, generating questions about the text, reflected their shared dominant Discourse regarding Bible study as reading the stories to find out what happened. Students repeatedly expressed a Discourse of Bible as a complete, detailed narrative that they emphasized was to be heard but not necessarily questioned, reflecting ways of studying Bible that had been ingrained throughout their schooling at River Heights. However, as the example above demonstrates, the pedagogy of drama enabled students to take up the practice of questioning what they did not understand in the text. In their creation of the tableau, Abby, Tamar, and Even drew upon interpretations suggested in hotseating, making intertextual links to comments that were made as students were “in role” to create their *midrash* on the text. In this way, students took up the Discourse of Bible as a living text that could be reinterpreted within their classroom community.

Students’ participation in hotseating enabled their adeptness at questioning what I continuously pointed out as holes within the text, confirming O’Neill and Lambert’s (1982) belief that dramatic activity can promote inquiry and critical thought about texts. This example highlights the way in which students recognized a gap in the narrative, and their ability to consider the question of why Sarah made Hagar leave, through the tableau-as-*midrash*. As students generated the above questions, the process of tableau building repositioned Jewish literacy beyond the decoding of words and phrases, and students had freedom to express disagreement with the text and to name portions of the narrative as problematic (Boler, 1999).

#### *Implications of an Ideological Model of Literacy for Biblical Interpretation*

This study positioned students as bringing their knowledge to the text—acting upon, and interacting with, the text through their discussions. Placing literacy within an ideological model exploded the notion of Bible study as the natural act of receiving stories; interpretation was reliant upon the participants and what they brought with them to the meaning making. Several implications follow from a conceptualization of literacy that recognizes knowledge as constructed and situated within groups. In contrast to the autonomous model in operation in many congregational schools, in which teachers supplement students’ knowledge by “giving over” knowledge of Bible stories, students can become active and critical learners of biblical texts.

As I exposed students to the practice of asking questions about narratives, students developed a Discourse of biblical interpreters who could act on, and interact with, the texts. Implications arise for the curricular design of supplementary schools, reorienting biblical study to the social practices that circumscribe Jewish tradition (Aron, 1995). Educators might imagine ways to integrate learning that encourages students to verbalize intertextual links to other written texts or previous verbal conversations during biblical interpretation. Students need opportunities for understanding that biblical interpretations are not static entities, but have been generated by people who have drawn upon their own “ways of being and doing.”

#### *Implications of Transmediation as Meaning Making*

Analysis of students’ use of gestures in conjunction with language facilitated an understanding of how students experienced transmediation, “the act of translating meanings from one sign system to another” (Siegel, 1995, p. 455), as they participated in the literacy events of tableau. However, in contrast to other research on tableau (Wilson, 1999), the findings demonstrate that transmediation surpassed a simple translation of the verses into a visual image, and their tableaus were not simplistic translations of the literal verses into an abstract visual form

(Bolton, 1992). Instead, as the students shifted back and forth between the image and the verses, they together produced new meanings of the biblical text.

The pedagogy of both hotseating and tableau enabled students to continuously maneuver between the semiotic systems of gesture and verbal language, making meaning of the text through integration of these symbol systems (Carroll, 1996; Wagner, 1998). Within the example presented above, students verbally discussed how they would represent the narrative, drawing on the symbolic function of drama (Neelands, 1990) as they used gesture to show what they would be like within the image. Abby, Tamar, and Evan defined how Sarah would be; they showed through gesture that she was angry with Ishmael. The gesture became a nonverbal language for them to communicate Sarah's role in the *midrash*, to explain her behavior and why she might have acted in a particular way. Students' generation of the tableaux within a group enabled reflective thinking and discussion about the meaning of the verses. As students moved between the symbol systems, generating meanings of the text, Jewish literacy was expanded beyond a technical exercise of learning the literal content of the stories.

#### *Implications for Drama in Jewish Education*

This study implies the possibilities of shifting to learning through drama, by integrating dramatic methods and techniques into existing curricula as a method for study. As part of this pursuit, Jewish educators might question the ways they might be narrowly defining the parameters of what counts as a text within the classroom. Are they solely emphasizing written texts to be read? Can a visual image such as a painting or a student-generated tableau also be read as textual commentary upon the Bible? How might exposure to alternate symbol systems enable students to dialogue and make meaning of biblical texts? As teachers and administrators explore these questions, they might expand the pedagogy within their school. Furthermore, data corroborate Heath's (1999; 2001) findings that participation in drama-related activities enables students to engage in open-ended talk that is otherwise less encouraged within classrooms. This finding suggests the utility of classroom drama to allow for a space in which talk allows for negotiated meaning. Further expansion of this type of pedagogy and integration into supplementary schools can enable space for open-ended exploration of biblical texts.

#### **Concluding Thoughts**

A pronounced division between theory and practice often exists within education. This schism is even further pronounced within Jewish education—where at times new pedagogy is suggested based upon a commonsense view of what might work and what is perceived as its creative merits alone, rather than its grounding in theory or research. As research is continually elevated and given more of a priority and space for presentation and discussion within Jewish education, attempts are being made to bridge this disconnect between creative pedagogical practice and theory; this study is such an attempt. The research suggests the possibilities of elevating practitioner research within Jewish education. Only by framing studies within supporting theory can Jewish educators do justice to the label of practitioner-researcher as “transformative intellectual” (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993), seeking to initiate change within our schools.

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