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BRINGING THE TEXT TO LIFE AND INTO OUR LIVES: JEWISH EDUCATION AND THE ARTS

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Abstract

This article explores how arts-based learning can facilitate understandings of Jewish religious texts. Through practical examples drawn from our own research, from the worlds of dance, drama, and the visual arts in education, we demonstrate the ways in which arts can allow for the transmission of information and knowledge, as well as offer a “transformative” learning experience; a student can bring the text to life while bringing the text *into* his or her life. We stress the primary importance and centrality of sacred text within Jewish tradition and assert that the written text should serve in Jewish education as the starting point. The ultimate goal, however, is to enable learners’ personal connection with texts. We argue that learning *through* the arts opens up opportunities for multiple shared interpretations of text, as well as accentuation of the “affective” dimensions of Jewish textual learning. By becoming more aware of the varied possible paths for generating learning activities, educators might choose learning strategies that enable an integration of both the cognitive and affective domains. The examples of Arts Reflective learning demonstrate possibilities for the structuring of “teaching towards transformation.”

Monday morning is a special day at the Blossom Jewish day school. Instead of praying in their classrooms, the students walk to the adjacent synagogue to participate in *t'filah* (prayer) with the whole school. Everyone sits quietly as the fourth graders walk up to the *bima* (pulpit) to lead *shacharit* (the Morning Prayer service). The students start with

the first blessing of the *shema*, (Hear O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord is One! Deuteronomy 6:4) clapping their hands, extending their arms, stretching their bodies. The sanctuary is packed with students, staff, and parents, praying and moving throughout the service. An on-looker might label this as an "active" experience, in which participants are filled with deep concentration. The students appear to be fully engaged, absorbed in synthesizing the words of the prayers with the movement of their bodies. This scene might well be described as a true moment of holiness (Backenroth 2005).

As schools set out to teach Jewish knowledge to students, they often focus on the individual's ability to retain facts about ritual, practice, history, and textual stories. This perspective, which may indeed be borne out of a genuine anxiety to help students gain a strong Jewish identity, embodies a time-honored approach to literacy and learning, in which teachers "hand over" knowledge to their students (Freire 1993). Within this conventional framework, literacy is positioned as a universal skill-set that can be imparted to others (Street 1984, 1995). 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" (1995, 116). However, this approach to knowledge acquisition can be repositioned by turning to the traditional Jewish model of learning text, through which participants explore both what the text means to say and also what the text means to the individual. Through that act of experiential interpretation, critical analysis blends with imaginations in order to unravel the mystery of a central religious text. All interpretation requires imagination that goes beyond understanding, and imagination possesses the unique function of opening up awareness of what lies beyond the informational.

This article explores how arts-based learning can help to develop emerging understandings of Jewish texts. Through examples drawn from research undertaken in the worlds of dance, drama, and the visual arts in teaching, the authors reflect how arts can allow for both transmission of information and knowledge, as well as a transformative experience. We will consider both how the student can bring the text *to* life, and how he or she can bring the text *into* his or her life.

A SHIFT TO LEARNING THROUGH THE ARTS

In advocating for arts education, several theorists have framed arts and aesthetics as pathways toward cognitive learning, that is, as

vehicles for the heightening of intellect. Gardner (1989) argues that students should learn to "read" and to "write" the symbols systems" (72) to heighten what he labels as isolated "cognitions" (74). Gardner states that because there is little evidence of students' ability to transfer skills from one art form to another, students should work within discrete art forms. Trained artists, rather than classroom teachers, should teach students how to think within these distinct symbol systems. Eisner (1994) concurs with Gardner and explains how their perspectives on arts education raise several implications for conceptualizing reading and literacy. Like Gardner, Eisner points out that a key element of reading is decoding the symbols within art forms, accessing the meanings within artistic representations, and creating meanings through artistic forms. Both Gardner and Eisner place emphasis on literacy within the artistic forms themselves. Eisner lays out the ways in which through arts students rely on symbols for "reading" the world. Rather than regarding aesthetic experience as a higher state of consciousness, Gardner views them as paths to greater intellect.

In contrast to Gardner (1989, 1990) and Eisner's (1994, 1998) conception of learning within art forms, Read (1974) emerged in the early twentieth century as one of the first educators to espouse the notion of learning *through* the arts. Read envisioned arts education not as merely "visual or plastic education" (7) in isolated art techniques as Gardner or Eisner might, but as an integration of children's natural "aesthetic sensibility" (7) within the entire school experience.

Read (1974) encourages students' art to spring forth from their natural inclination to play, and he invited educators to aid children in utilizing images as mediums for communication. Read's definition of arts education allows visual imagery to become central to skills of interpretation of personal experience, as he asserted that schools should help children learn to organize their experiences through aesthetic feeling. According to Read, the purpose of aesthetic education is to "develop in the child an integrated mode of experience" (105). Although Greene (1995) does not explicitly draw on Read's theories, she expresses a similar perspective regarding the view that interactions with art lead to fuller understanding of one's own reality, to the highest attainable level of consciousness. Read's views lay the groundwork for interactions within a classroom community, as he allowed the two fields of arts and education to become integrated, mutually dependent entities. The leap he makes from learning *about* and *within* arts to learning *through* the arts lays the groundwork for others to develop this perspective on arts education.

In addition, Dewey (1915/1990) offered a strong basis for positioning the arts as indispensable pedagogical techniques within schools. He drew attention to the significance of the arts as an integral part of the way that children express themselves. Dewey objected to education that “appeals for the most part simply to the intellectual aspect of our natures” (26). He believed that children’s natural tendency to learn is to learn *through* artistic activities. Children naturally like to draw, to dance, to act, and therefore education should appeal to students’ “impulses and tendencies to make, to do, to create, to produce, whether in the form of utility or of art” (26). Others (Greene 1995; Smith 1994) claim that utilizing the arts in education stimulates imagination and creativity. Moreover, they argue that using the arts within the school curriculum facilitates child-centered approaches to education and offers opportunities for experiential and authentic education. Greene further asserts that the arts are essential to education in general and to pluralistic education in particular. She suggests that the arts “offer opportunities for perspective, for perceiving alternative ways of transcending and being in the world, for refusing that automatism that overwhelms choices” (142). In this way, learning through the arts allows for a higher state of consciousness, as well as for the possibility of shared multiple interpretations.

EMBRACING THE “AFFECTIVE” DOMAIN IN JEWISH EDUCATION

Several research projects (Backenroth 2004, 2005; Epstein 2004; Miller 1999) have explored the ways in which arts have traditionally been used in Jewish education to expand on cognitive learning; a text is studied intellectually before any aspect of arts education is employed. However, they maintain that this desire to isolate “affective” dimensions from Jewish textual learning dilutes the opportunities for higher consciousness to which Greene (1995) refers. Psychologists have long explored the possibilities of cognition and affect in terms of which of the two hemispheres of the brain have responsibility for different kinds of learning. The hemispheres are not exclusive and as Edwards (1986) suggests, all tasks are divided between them, each handling a part suited to their style. The two domains of learning, the cognitive and the affective, align to the brain as follows: the cognitive domain includes teaching and learning based on intellectual activity, perception,

and reasoning, whereas the affective domain includes teaching and learning based on creative and emotional activity.

The affective has long had a place in the educational world. Much current educational practice today is based on the principles of Benjamin Bloom (1964) and others, who state that the affect and the cognitive are separate. Beane (1990), however, states that the affect is "not simply an isolated and differentiated aspect of nature" (7). He describes the affect as the crucial component that integrates with the cognitive component of learning. Milgrom (1987) echoes this view, suggesting that a true understanding of religious concepts can only develop through a synthesis of both the cognitive and the affective. This article demonstrates how this can work in practice.

Although Eisner's primary thesis was that learning in schools is mainly cognitive and that insufficient time and attention is given to the arts, in 1986, he published material that suggested that the arts themselves are indeed cognitive activities, guided by human intelligence, making unique forms of meaning possible. Education in the arts cultivates sensitive perception and fosters the imagination. The interaction of the senses enriches meaning; the arts are repositioned as diversions from the important business of education to essential resources for deep learning. Eisner's definition of cognition as the "mental activity rooted in the sensory forms of life" (1986, 57-67) suggests that any conception of intelligence that omits the ordering of qualities through direct experience is neglecting a central feature of intellectual functioning. By stating that the arts fall in the cognitive domain, Eisner raises their credibility in terms of curricular potential in schools. In his approach, the arts grow from within the cognitive. This is particularly significant as we look at Jewish education, a cognitive-based body of knowledge. The challenge for the educator is to explore ways of integrating the affective and the cognitive that employ appropriate learning strategies, and it is to these approaches to learning that this article will now turn.

By becoming more aware of the varied possible paths for generating learning activities, educators might choose learning strategies that enable an integration of both the cognitive and affective domains, specifically through arts education. Kincaid (1991) identifies four ways in which people learn:

1. By receiving information and explanation from others, verbally, visually, or in writing.
2. By co-operating with others to clarify ideas or argue out an issue.

3. By working on one's own to find out information or solve a problem.
4. By direct experience of things to be learned. (1991, 44)

These strategies are not mutually exclusive, nor would all of them necessarily be present in one learning experience. Jewish education commonly uses the first three strategies, whereas this article argues for inclusion of the fourth strategy, through arts-in-education pedagogy and methods.

INTEGRATION OF THE ARTS INTO JEWISH EDUCATION

There are many different models of integration, ranging from when ideas within each content area are related to each other, to units of study within which overlapping concepts and ideas are taught in common teaching time. Kysilka (1998) suggests that an important factor is the relationship between what is being taught and how it is being taught, in order to achieve meaningful learning within integrated subject matter. Consider the following scenario:

As one enters the classroom, the students are clearing a space, pushing tables to the walls. Despite the researcher's inquiries of the students, she is unsuccessful in finding out the subject matter or the class theme. One says it is going to be a dance class, another says it is a maths class and a third claims it is a Hebrew lesson. They all reassure the onlooker: "you'll get it." It turns out that the students are participating in a quiz on geometry vocabulary taught in Hebrew and expressed through movement. The grading rubric for this assignment included knowledge of the terms in Hebrew, correct representation of geometric shapes and a clear and organized performance. (Backenroth 2005)

As this scenario suggests, teaching through the arts implies teaching in an integrated method, in which a connection is forged between previously separated subject areas. In this particular classroom, the teacher has seamlessly synthesized together learning of geometry, Hebrew, and movement in order to assess content and skills-based learning, as well as to honor the role of the "affective" in learning. Varied findings from our research in the areas of Jewish learning through dance, visual arts, and drama emphasize the significance of the relationship between exploring integrated subject areas *through* arts-based methodologies.

The issue of integration in Jewish education is further complicated because it involves not only integration of the arts and the content disciplines, but also integration of Jewish and secular subjects. There are several issues concerning integration of secular and Jewish studies; among them are ideological issues of presenting a picture of a holistic world to one's students (Lukinsky 1978; Zeldin 1992) or alternatively, representing the tension between Judaism and secularism (Zeldin 1998), of educating the whole child (Holtz 1980; Dewey 1902/1990) issues of better and efficient teaching (Beane 1997; Drake 1993; Jacobs 1989), of better use of time (Malkus 2001), and of creating a better school culture by having teachers work together (Fishman 2002).

Zeldin (1992) maintains that schools sometimes are not clear about what they integrate and why. In his research on integration, he defines "integration" as the relationship between Jewish studies and the "curriculum of modernity" (1992, 13). Zeldin proposes four alternatives for designing an integrated curriculum: parallel studies of similar subjects from similar disciplines, contextualization of knowledge or skills from one area into another area of studies, explicit integration by the teacher, and implicit integration where the teacher lets the student discover connections among the various disciplines. In a later study, however, Zeldin, striving to maintain the uniqueness of Judaism, supports looking at the modern world through a Jewish lens while challenging some of the assumptions of the modern world (1998). Zeldin suggests that interaction with the secular world rather than total integration that only looks at similarities and points of intersections among the various subjects is more appropriate in examining the secular world through a Jewish lens. He maintains that "the exploration of contrasts encourages significant intellectual development" (1998, 586). Because the issue of the integration of Jewish studies and general studies is tightly connected to teaching with and through the arts, it is crucial to consider these points of view while researching the integration of the arts within Jewish education.

WHY RELIGIOUS EDUCATION THROUGH THE ARTS?

Abramson (1985) evokes Heschel (1955/1999) in deploring the lack of *kedushah* (holiness) in the Jewish day school. He suggests that schools nurture the sense of wonder and awe by looking for appropriate content like psalms, and teaching them in new and daring ways. He

recommends using art and music in creative ways that enhance spirituality, ways of finding God in our lives. Scheindlin (1999/2000) argues that students' presentations of content-rich Judaic studies curriculum act as prerequisites for later spiritual activity: "these prerequisites, delighting in one's emotions, developing a vocabulary to express it, are necessary, though not sufficient, conditions for a rich spiritual life" (1999, 131).

Both arts-based learning and religious education facilitate consideration of existential questions and enable exploration of what it means to live in a world filled with mystery and awe. Two examples of how this has been explored in schools have been recorded in what follows. Both schools were non-denominational high schools in the U.K., where religious education and the arts are both compulsory aspects of the U.K. National curriculum. They both started from the premise that all religions begin with some kind of awesome experience, some of the original emotion being repeated in organized religions at different times. The original response is not replicated exactly, but a similar response is evoked in others. The emotional response, evidence of awe and wonder, can be found all around us, as it was for our ancestors, in the form of the arts and artifacts. Children have an innate capacity for awe and wonder, but it is hard to develop in the classroom as it requires a sense of creative imagination from both the teacher and the pupil.

The first project, undertaken by Minney and Potter (1984) in Durham, England, required for its first task that the emotions of the pupils were awakened and developed. Religious stories and themes were the starting point, after which responses to different forms of stimuli were recorded: posters, film, photography, dance, and drama. The researchers concluded that the arts can prompt a response and receptivity in the realm of emotion and awe in relation to religious education.

Brenda Wall, working in the U.K. in the late 1980s, also explored a method of working in schools with children that aimed to develop pupils' personal development in relation to both art and religion (Starkings 1993). Her work included encounters with the arts and objects of different cultures and religions to include "the essential processes of making and doing" (1993, 184). She worked directly with clay, paper, and paint developed out of the process of class discussion. The success of the project in deepening the pupils' connection to the themes was evident when the pupils expressed their feelings of "things falling into place and becoming meaningful" (1993, 184). The aims of both these

projects were similar, and have resonances with our own work, namely to use the arts to illumine what could not be taught or known in other ways.

ARTS-BASED LEARNING AS A MODEL FOR JEWISH EDUCATION

Argument, debate, and interpretation are all specifically Jewish modes of learning. The link, therefore, between the arts and Jewish education is appropriate, as the use of the imagination and creative ways of looking at text have been features of Jewish learning since the first Talmud was written. The role of the teacher has been significant since earliest times, to guide the learner, to encourage debate, argument, interpretation, and the development of *midrash*, a creative interpretation of the text. The four traditional modes of study as described in what follows demonstrate how this essentially creative method of teaching can be made personal to the pupil and lead to greater insight and meaning:

1. The *p'shat*: the plain meaning and an interpretation of the plain meaning for the reader.
2. The *remez*: the connection to other texts. The allusions to other places and other times. The personal links to the students' own lives and experiences.
3. The *drash*: the mythological aspect. What are the stories that develop in between the words and phrases as they are written (the *midrash*)? Investigations into the rabbinic interpretations of the text, creative personal interpretations of the text.
4. The *sod*: the hidden meaning. The ultimate personal meaning for the individual (Holtz 1984).

Through these modes of Jewish study, text, and experience, rabbinic and personal are joined, guided by a teacher, but in the control of the learner. For religious and historical reasons, this traditional method of learning has become lost in our schools to a great extent, in favor of more cognitive, secular methods of learning, emphasizing facts and a predominantly cognitive approach to education and in Jewish study specifically, almost entirely text based. Research (Backenroth 2005; Epstein 2004; Miller 1999, 2001) demonstrates that almost all the Jewish education in schools not only favors cognitive approaches to

text study, but also predominantly focuses on the *p'shat* stage (explanation of the text) of learning and do not spend time or effort on wrestling with the big ideas that are at the core of Jewish text study.

Milgrom (1992) demonstrates the possibility of integrating a response through the arts with a traditional model of Jewish learning. In her workshops, participants are encouraged to work from an intellectual cognitive framework through succeeding stages that develop an understanding of the text through creative and affective responses. Milgrom asks her students to return to the text following the creative activity and re-visit and re-test their interpretations. This approach eliminates a detached and unlikely interpretation of the text and keeps the students accountable for true understanding of the texts and of the issues raised within them.

In one exploration of learning bible through drama (Epstein 2003), students were asked "Is learning Bible this way different from the way you usually study Bible?" All interviewees stated that participating in drama tableaux was "fun." Concerned to discover whether the "fun" element took the place of learning, further probing questions were asked. Comments ranged from "I think I understand it better maybe, because I had tried, like to be like in those people's places and stuff," to "if someone's talking and you're like just sitting there listening, but this way you actually do something and it makes more sense." The creative response helps the students to engage with the text and to develop an understanding of the concepts. Although engagement in drama does not adhere to the norms of cognitive-based learning, it is clear that a deep and personal relationship to, and understanding of, the text does take place.

BRINGING THE TEXT TO LIFE AND INTO OUR LIVES

We have argued that the starting point in Jewish education should be the text. Throughout time, the primary importance of the text within Jewish learning has been examined and stressed. Therefore, one must look at textual imagery before developing a response through imagery within the arts. This reflects the importance and centrality of Torah to Judaism, and the ultimate goal, which is to enrich our Judaism and make a personal connection with Torah. This is the transformative moment and the framework becomes the structure for teaching toward transformation (see Figure 1)

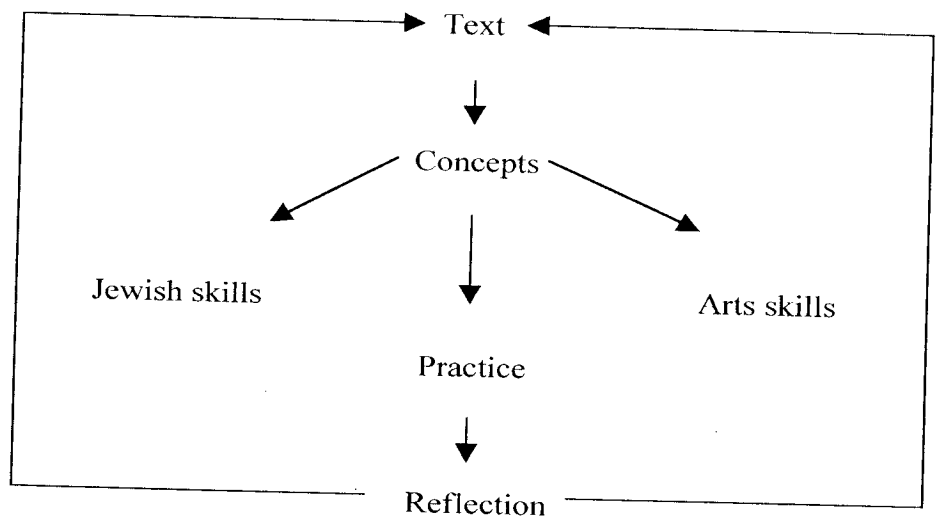


FIGURE 1. Framework for Arts Reflective Learning.

“The arts” is used to indicate the centrality of the “arts-making” and “doing” as a response to the text, because it is through these media that the response is made personal. “Reflective” emphasizes the interactive process through which the learner synthesizes his or her experiences and makes links with the text. “Learning” suggests the relationship of the framework to the education process: the four traditional modes of Jewish text learning (the *p’shat*, *remez*, *drash* and *sod*) are employed to facilitate understanding and personal exploration in particular ways through use of the framework. It is when all of the aforementioned comes together that transformative learning takes place; learning that enables the student to develop a relationship with, and an understanding of, themselves and the text.

The following comments, from both teachers and pupils, show how the text, perhaps for the first time, was able to enter their lives and their hearts.

After studying the *sedra Haye Sarah*, (weekly portion read in Synagogue, taken from Genesis 23:1–25:15) and responding with collage, the teacher of a class of nine year olds responded in the following ways:

I’ll never forget this sedra, for the first time I really understood the point about what is important to look for in a person. (Interview with a teacher)

An eleven-year-old girl, having learnt about the story of the Maccabean in preparation for Hanukkah, and having worked through some of the concepts and themes with clay, remarked:

When it [the question] asked you about your own life, I thought for the first time, well, it is about my life: I never fought for the Maccabean, but I do stand up for my causes, and I could see the meaning of that for me. It's what makes a point for everything. (Interview with a student)

Another example offers further evidence of transformation in understanding of text. During one teachers' workshop that focused on the text from Numbers 13:30–33, participants explored movements that were tightly related to the concepts in the text. Participants spoke about feeling insignificant and small. They highlighted human nature and the fear of the unknown.

We were not limited by the metaphors in the text. We were encouraged to explore our reactions to the concepts in the text. Our strengths and weaknesses change our points of view. (Interview with a student)

The quotations offered throughout this article emphasize the effect that this kind of learning can have on the emotional and imaginative development of our students, whatever age. Through personal interpretation of the text through pedagogy of the arts, the students work toward an insight into some aspect of their lives, of the text, and at times, a combination of both. By drawing arts-based learning, teachers allow participants to re-imagine texts and to consider connections to their own lived realities. Exploration of the text through varied arts-based mediums grants an opportunity to understand a complex, relational issue through the use of imagination and interpretation. Although the quality of the arts aspect of the process is important, as Nancy Katz, modern Jewish artist stated:

The symbolic value attached to a finished piece of work far surpasses the aesthetic value of the piece, though often synergistic creativity results in brilliant work. (in conversation 1996)

The work of these pupils, whether through dance, drama, visual art, or through the evocative prayer experiences at a Jewish Day School, with which this article began, demonstrates the value of an exploration of human emotions, the affective, embedded in an intellectual and cognitive tool—the text. The student brings the text to life, as well as into his or her life. This is transformation.

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