What Is the Meaning of Meaning in Jewish Education?

“I want this learning experience to be meaningful” and “I want my learners to find meaning through Jewish practice” are two comments we hear a lot in the field of Jewish education. All educators must consider the role that meaning plays in their work with learners. The term is one that is often used in a variety of contexts in contemporary discourse about Jewish education and identity. However, it is a term that is loosely defined and often used differently among various people who invoke it. In this issue we look at the concept of “meaning”—how people use it, what it might denote, and what the implications of these ideas are for our work in Jewish education.

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Meaning, Authenticity, and Recognition

DR. STUART CHARMÉ

The meaning of meaning emerges out of the interaction of three crucially important concepts that I would like to outline here. They are meaning, authenticity, and recognition.

My interest in the issue of meaning goes back to the beginning of my career when I was trying to reconcile two very different approaches to the ways we interpret systems of meaning in people’s lives. First, there was psychoanalysis, which taught me that meaning is often disguised, hidden, or not what we think it is; there is a cognitive, rational dimension to it, but there is also an emotional or affective one. Psychoanalysis also showed me that meanings in my adult life—including my values, philosophical ideas, and cultural identity—are built upon layers of childhood experiences and family dynamics that I only partially understand.

The second approach to the question of meaning was existentialism, which taught me that meaning is something we create as a way of coping with the chaos of human existence; that meaning is not a pre-determined ingredient of our experiences and lives, but rather something that we superimpose on it.

I came to several important conclusions.

The overarching sense of meaning in people’s lives is not necessarily a thing that can be clearly stipulated or articulated. Rather, it is often an unarticulated by-product of a process of fitting the fragmentary details of our experiences into a kind of personal myth. I use the term “personal myth” in the sense that every one of us has constructs about ourselves through which we express our understanding of how we fit into the world, how we got here and where we are going, the values and ideas that guide us, and how our own story fits into larger family, cultural, and religious narratives. It is a myth, not because it is false or illusory, but rather because it embodies the organizing ideas through which we understand reality at a deeper level.

The meanings embodied in our autobiographical narratives are provisional, under construction and subject to change. The older we get, the more complicated some parts of the story become; some aspects lose their meaning and are deleted, while in other cases, the layers of meaning, like rings of a tree, thicken and become stronger. It’s easy to refer to organic metaphors when describing meaning. It grows, ripens, develops deeper roots, and sends new branches, though it also can wither, decay, and die.
I also believe that the question of meaning must be considered in connection to the issue of authenticity, since the experience or creation of meaning is an indispensable ingredient in feeling that my life is authentic, not merely following a script or playing a role that was imposed by other people or groups. I will doubtless discover meaning in my life in connection with other people, but that meaning is authentic only when it feels like it truly belongs to me and is connected to who I really am.

I’d like to outline two different models for meaning that I think are directly relevant to Jewish meaning or the meaning of Jewishness.

In the first model, which I will call Meaning1, meaning represents the inherent truth, essence, or reality of particular religious and cultural experiences, practices, and beliefs. A member of the group automatically gains access to this meaning by aligning him/herself with traditions attributed to sacred times, sacred places, or sacred models from real or imagined ancestors. This is not a kind of meaning that we just make up or invent for ourselves. Rather, we only have to acknowledge it, affirm it, and enact it in our lives. When the Rabbis described the Torah as not merely a humanly produced Hebrew text but a divine template, or blueprint, for understanding the entire meaning of the universe, they were making two claims about meaning. First, there is a preexisting meaning that is part of the structure of the reality of the universe. Second, this meaning can be discovered or experienced through a prescribed model for living and for studying our sacred texts. There is no possibility for meaninglessness, since if any aspect of a life of Torah ever seems void of meaning, it is only a sign that a person has simply not been looking hard enough. Paraphrasing a line from the Talmud, if a part of Torah ever seems empty of meaning, then the problem is not in Torah, but in you. The meaning is there to be found, even if it has to be pieced together like fragments unearthed at an archeological site.

In this model, meaning is closely connected to a sense of primal authenticity. To be a real human being and a real member of the group is to see one’s life as the fulfillment of a group model whose meaning is grounded in some transcendent dimension of reality. It is what today would be called an “essentialist” model of meaning and authenticity. To live an authentic life is to find meaning in a preexisting transcendent model that defines the essence of what it means to be a Jew.

The second kind of meaning, which I call Meaning2, reflects the modern idea that meaning is not inherent in reality but something that we make, imagine, and construct. The question is not “What does this mean?” but rather, “What does this mean to me?” At times, we may feel that these two forms of meanings may overlap, but they are by no means identical. The premise of Meaning2, or existential meaning, is that meaning is not something that we find buried or hidden, revealed on mountaintops or in sacred scriptures, nor is it permanent or unchanging.

The two kinds of meaning just described are not really compatible with each other. From the perspective of Meaning1, Meaning2 can seem self-centered, indulgent, and narcissistic, while from the perspective of Meaning2, Meaning1 may seem inflexible, antiquated, and authoritarian. One of the critical challenges for Jewish educators is to balance this tension between Meaning1 and Meaning2. For some it will involve trying to uphold and embody Meaning1 as a role model for students, while for others it will focus more on empowering students to discover their own deeply felt Meaning2, regardless of whether or not it conforms in some way to Meaning1. Still others may feel that the goal is to bring Meaning1 and Meaning2 into some kind of dialogue.

Some of the earliest empirical research I did involved exploring how children understood certain religious stories and ideas. I wanted to find out which religious characters they most identified with and why. I found that the meaning of stories, and many other things, is refracted through multiple lenses.
One of the most important lenses was gender. I wasn’t that surprised to find that gender has a big impact on experiences of meaning. Girls and boys identified with characters differently and understood the meaning of various traditions and stories through different lenses.

The fact that there are multiple lenses through which we perceive meaning suggests the need for an intersectional approach to meaning, to borrow a concept from feminist sociology and critical social theory. Jewish meaning is embedded in other kinds of meaning and does not exist separately from them.

The unique intersections of meaning that emerge from our specific cultural, historical, political, economic, racial, and gender situation brings me to the third important category. This is the idea that meaning emerges in connection with particular forms of recognition related to these different aspects of our identities.

In the early days of the women’s spirituality movement, Jewish feminist Judith Plaskow described the powerful experience that occurred when a group of women were sharing their personal stories at a retreat on women and theology. She described what happened there as a transformative experience of the importance of recognition. The participants found that in listening to other women’s stories and ideas, they recognized themselves in what they heard from each other and arrived at a new awareness of themselves and new levels of meaning. We all have had those “yeah, yeah” experiences when something we hear or read resonates deeply within us as something personally meaningful and authentic, and we nod our heads and think “yeah, yeah.” So recognition is also related to the different groups or communities where people find meaning in the same ways we do. For meaning to be authentic, we need to recognize ourselves in it.

And finally, there is another important dimension of recognition, when we also experience the recognition and validation from others of the authenticity of our own experiences and life story. Jewish educators need to be especially sensitive to all of the intersectional dimensions of their students’ identities that need this kind of recognition as they engage in the process of constructing Jewish meaning.

In the recent Pew study on the religious involvement of Americans, there were several examples of Jewish meaning intersecting with other aspects of people’s lives. These are examples of some of the things that need to be considered by Jewish educators as they help different people negotiate issues of Jewish meaning.

1. One in six Jews were raised in a different religion. A crucial part of the meaning of being Jewish is the idea of Jewish peoplehood, something that gives us a sense of belonging, of origins, and of a connection to ancestors. For people who began in a different religion, with different origins and other ancestors, the meaning of their original religious roots will need to be transformed and reconceived in light of a new commitment of being Jewish.

2. One out of ten American Jews interviewed identify as non-white or mixed race. The experience of being racially different from the majority of American Jews creates intersecting meanings that will have to be recognized, confronted, and analyzed. The unmarked whiteness of most American Jews makes racial diversity a complex issue that will require exploring what belonging and authenticity for those who may “look Jewish” in new ways.

3. An estimated seven to ten percent of the American Jewish population identify as LGBT. Over 40 percent of LGBT people, according to Pew, are religiously unaffiliated, suggesting that many in this community find it hard to recognize themselves in the existing religious narratives or feel recognized by the mainstream communities. This issue goes beyond the mere acceptance of LGBT people in Jewish communities. It will require a more serious wrestling with an intersectional
appreciation of queer Jewish meaning. It will include a critique of the heteronormativity of Jewish history, ritual, and theology comparable to the feminist critique of Judaism a generation ago.

4. One out of four people who were raised as Jews no longer identify as such. Jewish educators need to think about the implications of defection and loss of meaning as inevitable aspects of what philosopher Charles Taylor has called “the fragility of meaning.” We live in a time when all our constructions of meaning are fragile. A moment may come when our path or values no longer feel justifiable and we can no longer recognize ourselves in or through them. What is the process by which ideas, practices, or even a simple sense of belonging lose their meaning and begin to feel inessential or inauthentic? Once a sense of authentic Jewish meaning has faded, people may no longer recognize the people who still are committed to it as “their people.”

The Pew study on religion in America found that one of the fastest growing categories is people who list their religious affiliation as “none.” Those with no religious affiliation now account for about a third of all adults under the age of 30. These are people who often describe themselves as spiritual rather than religious, who don’t find religious services meaningful to them but may feel a deep connection to nature and the earth, who may be agnostics and atheists. They, too, are concerned about the meaning of meaning, even if their sense of meaning and authenticity is defined outside of the mainstream institutional options and traditional models of meaning.

Doubting, questioning, and abandoning traditional Jewish structures of meaning will naturally seem like a bad thing for those who still support those approaches and practices, though some might argue that the quest for meaning is itself an intrinsic Jewish value, regardless of the outcome of that quest in terms of theology or observance. Jewish educators can greatly benefit from exploring not only why Jewish ideas, practices, places, and texts that once had meaning for some people no longer do, but also what new forms of Jewish meaning may yet be possibilities for a new generation. Doing so has always been the key to the vitality of Jewish tradition and the secret of Jewish survival.

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Exploring Jewish Meaning Through Authenticity, Lived Experience, and Reflective Practice
( Strategies in an Informal Education Structure )

BELINDA KESHEN

As we explore the meaning of meaning in Jewish education, I believe we will need to update the measures of success for living a meaningful Jewish life. Meaning for the next generation will be defined by the degree to which Judaism can speak to the challenges of the decades ahead. Meaningful Jewish life will need to answer what Judaism brings to bear on the issues of the day: poverty, war, prejudice, and gender barriers. Can I be gay and Jewish? Can I marry whom I like? Can I afford to be Jewish and poor? Meaning is answering the critical question: why does it matter if I am Jewish or not?

Over the last 25 years of work in informal education, the primary question I ask is how can I infuse into a few hours on the margins of a person’s life the joy and meaning of being Jewish? How do I share the value a Jewish identity brings, as a prism to refract the light of today and add goodness to the rainbow of tomorrow? In the scope of a few hours of learning in supplementary schools, camps, and youth movement environments, the search for meaning is less about knowing the sources, the texts, and the content and more about finding your place in the context of the Jewish peoplehood; it is not mastery but belonging.

As we look to the future of Jewish educational practice, we will need to refine our understanding of a good Jewish education away from the technical and content-specific and toward the ability to reflect and engage in the world by adding Jewish flavor to life’s Cholent—or for us Sephardim, la dafina. When we stop running chidon hatanach (bible contest) and start praising the tikkun olam challenge, when we (the Jewish community) worry less about what is covering our heads and more about what going on inside our heads, we will be adding meaning to Jewish education.

In reflecting on my practice, I have identified three pedagogic principles that have helped me, the educators on my staff, and my learners to construct meaning in Judaism. The first is authenticity. We need to be honest and real about who we are and create a consistency between our personal and professional lives. The second is substantive Jewish experiences: living the content. Third is the use of reflective practice to support the integration of content and practice. We need to take the time to learn from and evaluate our informal educators and understand the power of their techniques. I am hopeful that if consistently and creatively applied, these practices will support a generation of new learners. We will need to review, analyze, and improve our reflective pedagogic practices to support the learners of tomorrow and invest in listening to the next generation. We need to take a moment to look at our educational practices and seek ways of engagement that are beyond content.

As we think about meaning we should think about it in Hebrew where meaning can be defined as:

- **Mashmaut or shimushi**: something useful, from the root shimush.
- **Kavanah**: a direction, from the root kivun.
- **Hora’ah**: teaching or enlightened, from the root raeh (to see).
A combination of these terms teaches us that a meaningful experience is useful, has direction, and is enlightening.

I recently conducted some research with focus groups of young adults, ages 22–30, on what they want for their children and themselves from Judaism and Jewish education. It was fascinating to listen to the vast array of experiences that came from the group—some had experienced day school education through to grade 12, some had attended Jewish camp, while others had supplementary school and youth movement experiences. One message became clear: much of their formal Jewish learning felt insincere: Many were angry at what they saw as narrow, stifling content, behavioral expectations, and norms. They were sad that after 13 years of Jewish education, they did not have the tools to reflect on and respond to world issues Jewishly, and they were concerned that there would be no place for them in the Jewish future. However, when they experienced authenticity, it resonated with them and they were able to learn. The educators who impacted these young adults as youths were those who lived what they taught, whether as parents, teachers, counselors, or rabbis. A true attachment to Judaism can only come from concrete experiences, delivered authentically and with purpose and direction.

Authenticity refers to educational experiences that are led by educators who are connected personally with what they are teaching. Substantive Jewish experiences such as oneg Shabbatot and Shabbatonim are frameworks that allow for authentic Jewish experiences—participants are a part of the actual activity and practice.

To enhance these experiences, reflective practice strategies and techniques enable students to have a high level of engagement and personalization in their Judaism. Reflective practices are activities and techniques that enable learners to be teachers; they support creative and personal engagement not only in the content but in the meaning and purpose of the learning. These strategies are sophisticated teaching tools that create an environment where teaching is optimal and learning is experienced. Part of finding meaning in Jewish education is also ensuring that there are properly trained professionals with content knowledge and the ability to facilitate continual reflection. Techniques in reflective practice support teachers in their instruction of complex topics by researching extensively and allowing students to teach one another and add their own expertise. This differs from the lecture-type style where the onus for knowledge-relaying is solely on the professional, or teacher, speaking. Reflective practice techniques create a different balance in the learning environment. The techniques take the frontal educator format and allow more participants to be active, engaged, and reflective.

CONCLUSION

Meaning is ultimately about providing a personal authentic Jewish prism to bring new patterns of light on the lives we lead and will lead. As educators, it begins with authenticity, meaning that the teachers, rabbis, educators, and parents need to model and practice what they believe in. It means we need to honestly reflect on our values and practices, and share them passionately with our children, students and peers. Children, teens, and adults can identify when someone is authentic.

Some would argue we are defeated by a dilution of Jewish practice and the rapid change of family dynamics. I disagree. The message from our generation of young adults is actually very positive: they want to feel part of a larger Jewish community. I call on fellow educators and members of the Jewish community to support the next generation in accessing their authentic connection to Judaism.

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What Is the Meaning of Meaning in Jewish Education?

RABBI DOV LOREA

My work in Jewish education focuses exclusively on teaching texts to students of all ages. Recently, at a presentation made to rabbinical students by a practitioner in the field of experiential education, the presenter remarked, “So often courses in experiential education are not taught experientially.” I liked the playfulness of that remark because it captured the notion for me that learning a text is a primary experience of Jewish learning and therefore should be taught experientially. That implies that the involvement with a text, one’s engagement with it along with the engagement between students of that text in havruta, or in a facilitated discussion, should involve an exchange of ideas and feelings that penetrate students deeply as they are learning. To appropriate a term coined by Professor Israel Sheffler, the learning of a text should evoke cognitive emotions. Ideas should be felt and experienced.

This is the way I conceptualize meaning. Meaning, in my teaching, suggests that in the process of learning and teaching a text, learners feel the ideas they construct in response to and through the engagement with that text. What I have found to be of lasting value in my teaching for students is the pedagogic centrality of challenging them to stay with all of the dimensions of a text they come to see—its language, grammar, rhetorical structure, context, conceptual implications—while taking their own thinking about that text seriously. “What are the many meanings this text conveys?” and “What are the many meanings this text holds for me?” are the two questions that my pedagogic decisions intend to balance and hold in tension with each other. The textual basis for pedagogically balancing the external, transmitted integrity of a text with as full a range of meanings deeply felt by the learner at the same time is found in two different traditions that conceptualize revelation. In one tradition, Torah is transmitted to Moses from the outside: Moses received Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua. In the other tradition, the Sages wonder how it was that Avraham had Torah knowledge if he lived before the revelation at Sinai. They answered that his source of Torah knowledge flowed, literally, from the inside out:

Each of the generations before Avraham disappointed God, since none walked in God’s pathways until Avraham, as the Torah says, “Since Avraham heard My voice and kept My ordinances, My commandments, My laws and My Torot” (Gen. 26:5). The verse does not say, “torah,” but rather, “torot.” How did Avraham know these torot (i.e., the written and the oral torot)? God created two kidneys, which functioned like two Sages. They stimulated his understanding and counseled him and taught him wisdom all night long, as Scripture says, “I will bless God who has counseled me, as well as steered me through the night through the wisdom flowing through me [literally “through my kidneys”]. (Psalms 16:6) (Abot d’Rabbi Natan version A, chapter 33)

These two traditions provide pedagogic guideposts in this work: Moshe Rabbenu insists that learners stay true to the demands the text makes of them, while the tradition I am calling “Avraham the Wise” encourages
flow, imagination, and the constructing of personal meaning as a pathway to understanding, or making sense of, the text for one’s self.

The two most prominent ways I encourage students to engage with texts for meaning is through constant conversation and processes of visualization. Teaching conversationally as a way of constant engagement with text includes several pedagogic principles. Perhaps the most important has to do with clarifying my task as the teacher. My task, as Eleanor Duckworth has described in several places, is to keep my students interested and engaged so that they come to increasingly satisfying and meaningful ways of understanding the material. In order to achieve this goal, I teach more by listening than by talking, and certainly almost never by telling. I listen as carefully and as closely as I can to how the students are thinking and how they understand the material, and then constantly make decisions about how to challenge them next. The students do not always notice what I think they should consider in the text, and then I have to decide how to get them to pay attention to something they have missed in a way that they will find challenging to their own thinking. I have often found, in these situations, that the most difficult thing for a student to do is to reevaluate her own thinking, abandon a theory, and start to think differently about something she had thought she understood in a certain way. I will bring some examples of these moments, along with examples of the pedagogic decisions I made. Of course, such an approach to meaning—the teacher facilitating ways for the students to remain engaged with the text—requires constant reevaluation of those pedagogic decisions in thinking about planning for the coming lessons.

A second pedagogic commitment I have made in teaching texts so that students form meaningful ways of understanding the material for themselves is by including the goal of visualizing the text in some way. By asking students to visualize the text—by facilitating the disciplined habit of mind to do so—challenges the learner to imagine a meaning, a way of understanding it, in a very specific, vivid way. By asking the learner to then produce that vision and then describe it by composing an “artist’s statement,” the student effectively retranslates his non-verbal view back into a linguistic, conceptual form. I begin this process by reading the text with students. Then I spend considerable time thinking about how to frame the right questions to stimulate interest in what students notice about the text. Then I ask students to imagine how they see some dimension of the text—either a concrete dimension or a conceptual understanding. At some point, I ask students to show their understanding visually through some medium: water color, chalk, paper, three-dimensional materials. Finally, I ask students to compose an artist’s statement describing what they did and explaining why and how what they did relates to the ways in which they read the text. That process provides a way for entering a text, stepping back from it, and capturing an interpretation of personal meaning. Here, by “personal meaning,” I mean how the student has come to make sense of the text.

Lessons learned. The motivation to learn Torah is a foundational goal of learning Torah. Motivation depends upon the student feeling that the learning was intrinsically worth her time and effort. Meaning, in this sense, has to do with how the student came to make sense of the text, which requires that my pedagogic decisions must take seriously how learners are thinking about the text. I do not know how to teach a text without teaching the students directly and primarily. Similarly, whenever I learn a text myself, I am ultimately learning and investigating myself at least as much as the text in front of me, as reflected by the image of Avraham acquiring Torah knowledge.

I have two pressing concerns in this work. One is the alienation and discomfort many learners have with visual art. Usually, the older the learner, the greater the discomfort. Adults sometimes say to me, “Oh, we are going to color today?” The second concern I have is about the imbalances of privileging the text over personal meanings or privileging personal meaning-making over the demands of the text and the integrity of an inherited tradition. Both must be held in balance with each other. These days, I often find that this demand is a bit too nuanced for some teachers, as well as for some learners. This research—and
this conference—seems to me to be extremely important because the more we share and expand visions of meaning, the deeper the engagement with the knowledge and wisdom of our culture, and the lives we lead and the world we inhabit need these processes of learning for meaning. Such processes acknowledge value and cherish diversity of thought and experience, and the commonalities often shared by people who learn with each other.

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A Conference on The Meaning of Meaning in Jewish Education, June 2015

DR. JUDITH HAUPTMAN

The Davidson School recently invited three Judaica scholars from the JTS faculty to teach a piece of text to a group of learners for the purpose of exploring meaning and meaningfulness generally as a part of Jewish life and particularly through Jewish education. After the study sessions, the entire conference gathered together and the three scholars discussed their pedagogic decision-making. We are happy to publish the reflections of one of the scholars, Dr. Judith Hauptman, E. Billi Ivry Professor of Talmud and Rabbinic Culture, JTS.

Pondering the meaning of meaning in Jewish education is not easy. To do so, I will examine why I chose a particular passage for my session at the conference, how I choose texts in general, and how I understand the meaning of meaning in Talmudic texts. I think it axiomatic that in life most people are looking for meaning and community. Studying great Jewish texts together with others is one way to find both.

WHY I CHOSE THIS PASSAGE TO TEACH AT THE CONFERENCE

Of all the possible passages I could have chosen to teach at this conference, I selected Bavli Shabbat 54b-55a. The mishnah contains a seemingly extraneous comment about a rabbi who, in the eyes of his colleagues, violated the Sabbath. The Gemara claims that the concluding sentence of the mishnah, which is also the concluding sentence of the chapter, teaches the principle that if one does not protest the immoral behavior of the members of one’s household, one’s neighbors, and even one’s countrymen, the one who is silent is as guilty as the perpetrator of the wrongdoing. After presenting a number of anecdotes in which people either did or did not protest the behavior of others, the unit continues with an interpretation of several verses of the book of Ezekiel in which God is reprimanded by the Attribute of Justice for not acknowledging that silence in the face of wrongdoing is also wrongdoing and is punishable. My reasons are as follows:
The passage will show the participant an example of how the Talmud intertwines detailed description of Jewish law with presentation of Jewish values. Many people are not aware of this other aspect of the Talmud, imagining it principally as a repository of rules of Jewish practice, which it is, but it is also much more.

The passage under discussion presents a core moral principle and then illustrates it with several anecdotes. The anecdotes help one grasp how to apply the principle to life situations. The passage also contains a fanciful midrash that will engage the student and be easily understood and remembered.

The principle in question is the obligation to speak out in the face of wrongdoing. It is addressed to everyone, but in particular to those who work for either religious or secular authorities and have knowledge of internal corruption.

This passage is so clear in its moral demands and so inspirational that I think it an excellent choice to teach to people who are looking to understand Judaism and to grasp why the Talmud is a foundational Jewish document. I am not attempting to dismiss or downplay the numerous discussions of the fine points of Jewish practice and ritual that abound in the Talmud, but when given a one-time opportunity to talk about meaning in Jewish education, I would sooner deal with a broad moral demand than with a rule of Sabbath observance. This passage, by the way, includes both.

Another reason I chose this particular passage to present at this conference is that I taught it last March in Israel at the Knesset library, during the weekly Talmud class that takes place there (presenters are either in-house staffers or invited guests). Speaking truth to power, to paraphrase the Talmud, seemed to me like an important lesson for legislators and senior staff. The people who attended “got it.”

This Talmudic passage, more than many others, speaks to people in their contemporary lives. It is one I can easily relate to issues we face today. When I do so in class—and when I did so at the Knesset—people immediately internalized the lesson. They proceeded to give me instances of applying the moral principle in their own lives. This passage also generates good questions, such as: Are we also expected to speak out about ritual failings of others or only about immoral behavior? If both, is it not obnoxious to do the former? What impact can I have as just one individual?

HOW I CHOOSE TALMUDIC PASSAGES FOR THE CLASSES I TEACH AT JTS AND ELSEWHERE

I often teach classes at JTS on the topics of family relations and how the Talmud views and treats women. I don’t shy away from “troubling” texts. I bring the “insufficiencies” of the text, as viewed from a contemporary perspective, out into the open. My goal in text selection for these JTS classes, which are intended to give future rabbis necessary knowledge for addressing contemporary issues, is to show students the continuum, or arc, of legal statements. A teacher could opt to only cite statements about “purchasing a wife for money” as we find in the Torah (Exod. 22:16) and the Mishnah (Kiddushin 1:1), and view marriage as the sale of a woman by her father for money. But, such an approach may lead people away from the Talmud and even away from Judaism.

A more intellectually honest way of analyzing those two texts (and others like them) is to compare them to most other Talmudic statements on the subject of marriage and note that the verb “to purchase” is replaced by the verb “to sanctify.” The Rabbis of the Talmud created a new term for marriage, kiddushin (from the root Q.D.SH), which means “to sanctify,” and employed it consistently. In this way the Rabbis distance themselves from the Torah model of wife as chattel.
The message students get is clear: Although marriage in the Torah was considered a purchase, the Rabbis, over time, transformed it into a negotiated relationship between husband and wife—each with obligations and privileges. This is a far better social arrangement than that prescribed by the Torah, but still not sufficiently egalitarian to satisfy a contemporary individual.

I think that pointing out this evolution in Jewish marriage is an instance of “making meaning.” We examine the passage in wider and wider concentric circles, first Torah, then Mishnah, then Gemara, then Shulhan Arukh (Code of Jewish Law, 1565), and finally in contemporary society. Patriarchy reigns in Jewish texts but has been gradually reduced and totally eliminated today. One can either condemn rabbinic thinking by examining individual passages on their own or grasp what the Rabbis were trying to accomplish on a grand scale by examining passages along a timeline. Each time I choose a text for my students, be it on marriage, the ketubbah, the wedding ceremony, procreation, divorce, or conversion to Judaism, I keep these considerations in mind.

An even larger goal of mine is to get students to love the text, to become as addicted to Talmud study as I am. One way of doing this is as described above: reading texts in a wide context. Another, of course, is the way I model my attitude toward the text. It is not my mode of operation to say to students, as I hear is done in some yeshiva settings, “Isn’t this amazing?! Aren’t these rabbis holy men?!” To me, making such statements is an attempt at indoctrination. Rather, by laying out the various texts for the students, I make it possible for them to come to similar conclusions on their own. What pleases me is when a student exclaims, “isn’t this a great text?!”

To bring students to the point at which they see the enduring meaning in the text, it is necessary to help them acquire the skills of reading texts in the language in which they were composed. Every translation, as we know, is an interpretation. Therefore, to have students find meaning in the text, it is important that they discover it by reading the words of the text as they were formulated. That is, they first need to understand the text word by word as well as understand the structure of the argument or the flow of logic of the sugya (discursive unit). After which they jump to the next level, which is figuring out why the Rabbis decided law as they did, what were their animating principles, to what extent can we relate to these principles today, and so on. And then I ask students to consider more general questions: What ongoing Jewish values are present in the text? Why is Talmud considered to be the basis of rabbinic education?

Another text that can be used to explore meaning is Bavli Shabbat 119a. It gives 15 examples (an unusually large number) of Rabbis who personally prepared for the Sabbath—engaging in such activities as chopping beets, stoking the fire, grilling fish. The takeaway message is that the Talmud is speaking loud and clear about the need not just for household staff but also for the head of household to regard the Sabbath as a royal guest for whom one makes lavish preparations with one’s own hands. Honoring the Sabbath means to be personally involved in welcoming the Sabbath, not just delegating all tasks to others.

This text does not speak about Sabbath restrictions, which occupy so much space elsewhere in the Talmud, but about the principle of oneg Shabbat (Sabbath pleasure), which means to view the Sabbath as a day of delight and not limitation. This message is not conveyed by statute or by requiring Sabbath preparation, but by giving anecdotal evidence of Rabbis who chose to prepare to welcome the Sabbath queen on their own. The hope of the text is that the reader will seek to emulate the actions of these rabbis. Therefore, one way to put students in touch with the meaning of texts is to analyze the goal of the editor of the texts with them.

The meaning of meaning is grasping the meta-message of the text after first working it through word by word. To see the forest after identifying every tree. And hopefully, to realize how beautiful the forest is and how wonderful it smells.
Dr. Hauptman received a degree in Talmud from the Seminary College of Jewish Studies of JTS ('67, now Albert A. List College of Jewish Studies) and a degree in Economics from Barnard College, and earned an MA and a PhD in Talmud from JTS (GS '82). In May 2003, she was ordained as a rabbi by the Academy for Jewish Religion.

In addition to her full-time post at JTS, Dr. Hauptman is a frequent instructor in the adult-education program at the 92nd Street Y in New York City, and has served on the faculties of many prestigious education institutions. She has also authored many influential articles. Among them are “Women and Prayer: An Attempt to Dispel Some Fallacies” (Judaism, Winter 1993); “A Time to Mourn, A Time to Heal” (Celebration and Renewal, Jewish Publication Society, 1993); and “Judaism and a Just Economy” (Tikkun, January/February 1994).

The Sociology and Psychology of Meaning: a Mental Health Perspective

JONATHAN COHEN, PHD

I work as a mental health clinician (clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst) and as an educator who works with K-12 schools nationally and internationally around a range of pro-social educational, violence-prevention, and mental health–informed issues and goals. Here I will focus on the meaning of “meaning” from a clinical mental health perspective.

Human beings are meaning-making creatures. From a psychological and social perspective, this is what we do: thoughtfully, based on current experience, logically and/or not. We are always creating narratives—making meaning—about experience. Our narratives can be conscious or unconscious. A few evocative examples:

- Fear: Some fear death; some do not. Why? Clearly, different people attribute different meanings to death and these shape expectations and behavior.

- How are we feeling right now? Who am I? What do we fear and want? What does it mean to . . . ? The answers to these profound questions rest on the meanings that the person attributes to self, other, and/or experience.

- Here is an example that, I think, will strike us in very challenging ways from Mary Anne Weaver’s April 19, 2015, story in the New York Times Magazine: “Her Majesty’s Jihadists: Why are so many British Muslims joining ISIS?” More Muslims in Britain have joined ISIS than the British Armed Services! Why does ISIS have the appeal it does for the hundreds of Britons who have gone off to fight with it? In a word, legitimacy. The growing territory they have seized, the declaration of a Caliphate (a person considered a political and religious successor to the prophet Muhammad and a leader of the entire Muslim community), the sense that they alone were fighting an enemy which was not just Assad and the West, but the corrupt regimes in the Middle East. Different worldviews. How can this come to be?
A CLINICAL PERSPECTIVE

Psychotherapy is a process in which one person (or family) with some kind of problem talks with another person: a psychiatrist, psychologist, counselor, clinical social worker, or member of the clergy. From a clinical perspective, understanding what the patient considers meaningful—consciously and unconsciously—is the foundation for all learning and psychotherapeutic work. Our narratives about self, other, and the world are based on what is meaningful. And, psychotherapy is the process of understanding our narratives about life, learning about how we developed these understandings, and collaboratively—client and therapy—retelling a life1.

There are many ways in which the meaning of “meaning” provides the foundation for learning and improvement in psychotherapy. Understandings (meanings) shape goals. Goals drive behavior. And, goals suggest methods, interventions, strategies, and pedagogies that we use to actualize our goals. Hopefully, we then use metrics to understand to what extent our strategies have and/or have not helped.

All schools of psychotherapy are based on a set of understandings/theories or sets of meanings about the nature of the person, psychopathology, and health on the one hand, and what will be psycho-therapeutically useful on the other hand (e.g., modes of therapeutic action). For example:

- A psychoanalytical understanding of the person suggests that we need to pay attention to past experience and understand how this has colored and shaped current experience and expectations. A psychoanalytical perspective is also grounded in the notion that life is inherently anxiety-provoking and how we cope, defend ourselves, and solve problems shapes our lives over time2.

- With a cognitive-behavioral perspective, we attribute primary meanings to the thoughts/cognitions that color and shape memory, current experience and our expectations.

- And, with a family or systems perspective, we are focused on understanding how people in a family or larger system interact, connect, and manage anxiety, and/or conflict. These patterns are—in part—grounded in the meanings people attribute to self, to others, and to “us.”

One of the most—if not the most—profound question that mental health clinicians need to struggle with is “What works?” With people or groups who present with given struggles as well as strengths, why is a given intervention or form of psychotherapy helpful? There is clearly not one thing that clinicians do that is always helpful or most helpful. But, here are a few modes of therapeutic action that are typically powerful. And, as I will suggest, all of these modes of therapeutic action are grounded in meaning.

- **Fostering a Climate of Safety:** People are always giving each other tests. Are you going to like me? Are you going to hurt me? These concerns and tests certainly color and shape the beginning of every psychotherapy session. The patient gives the therapists a series of tests: sometimes consciously and always—to a great or lesser extent—in unconscious ways. Therapists (hopefully) take steps to promote a sense of safety: being understanding and empathic, recognizing the patient’s experiences in ways that foster a sense of connection, understanding, and acceptance. This is (hopefully and typically) a part of all therapies, regardless of the school. And it helps! Feeling safer typically allows us to let go and/or be present in ways that foster social emotional learning about our fears, ourselves, the helpful and/or unhelpful ways that we cope, and more!

- **Enhancing Reflective Capacity:** Being able to think about our thinking or to understand the

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1 This understanding was first articulated by Roy Schafer (1994). *Retelling a Life*. Basic Books.

meanings we are attributing to experiences now, I suggest, is truly the “first R.” This is an aspect of learning that occurs, more or less, in all forms of psychotherapy. It is an explicit focus and goal in most psychoanalytic therapies.

- **Buttressing a Defense**: Therapists—sometimes intentionally and sometimes not—buttress a client’s defense, saying statements such as, “You don’t need to worry about that.” “That is very common, even normal.” This can provide relief that in turn can open a person to himself and/or others in new and helpful ways.

- **Re-telling a Life**: From a psychosocial perspective, one way of thinking about people and the therapeutic process is that we all tell ourselves stories—consciously and unconsciously—about who we are, what has happened to us, what the world holds in store for us, what is dangerous, what is exciting, and more. From a reductionist perspective, many psychotherapies are initially a process of patient and therapist “telling a life.” From the patients perspective: Who am I? What are my problems? What are my strengths? What are my dreams and goals? What is derailing me? And then, collaboratively understanding how the person came to develop these conscious and unconscious narratives. Then, finally, re-telling a life.

There are many other modes of therapeutic action. De-sensitization, for example is a process of our gradually becoming more familiar with and accustomed to a given fearful experience. Although this is a primary and explicit focus for cognitive behavioral clinicians, it is a helpful process that characterizes and colors all forms of psychotherapy.

Finally, I want to underscore the meaning of how we cope or defend ourselves and/or solve problems: psychotically, immaturesly, neurotically, or maturely.

We know that one of, if not the most, important psychosocial factor that shapes life satisfaction and success is how we cope: what cognitive behavioral clinicians and psychoanalytical clinicians would describe as how we solve problems or defend ourselves respectively. The meaning of what is fearful and what we—consciously and unconsciously—feel we need to do to protect ourselves shapes our lives over time.

**Jonathan Cohen** is an educator and a clinician who has worked with children, parents and educators for over 40 years in a variety of roles: a middle school teacher, school psychologist and program developer. He is a practicing child and adult clinical psychologist/psychoanalyst and Adjunct Professor of Psychology and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. He is also the cofounder and president of the National School Climate Center: Educating Minds and Hearts Because the Three Rs Are Not Enough. He is the author of many papers and award-winning books including Educating Minds and Hearts: Social Emotional Learning and the Passage into Adolescence; and The Psychoanalytic Study of Lives Over Time: Clinical and Research Perspectives on Children Who Return to Treatment as Adults.

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Meaning-Making in the K–7 Supplemental School Context

RABBI EVE RUDIN

Meaning-making is an inherently Jewish act. In addition to the enumerated physical creations stated in our creation text, one of God’s first creations was also the act of ascribing meaning to those very creations:

> When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good. (Gen. 1:1–4)

Through the power of words, God both created the world and deemed the meaning of the world as “good.” This set the stage for us as humans to engage in the act of ascribing meaning to our world. The search for meaning, however, is not intended to be an intellectual quest of lishma for its own sake because Judaism is a religion of action. The goal of meaning-making for a Jew, therefore, is the eventual completion of Jewish actions and obligations as we are taught in our daily Eilu Devarim prayer: “and the study of Torah leads to them all [Jewish obligations].” The endeavor of meaning-making in Jewish education therefore entails the end goal of creating and retaining lifelong Jewish participants and “act-ors.” As a director of a K–7 congregational school, my task is to communicate compelling Jewish messages that will have meaning for our learners with the end result of inspiring young people to continue living, being, and acting Jewish. The meaning of meaning, therefore, is core of what we do as Jewish educators.

How do we achieve this? Think of the letter H. The first vertical line we draw is the content and message we produce and offer to our learners. The content must be compelling, engaging, and contemporary in both its message and delivery medium—no easy feat for today’s North American Jews. Because we are a religion of words, we, thankfully, have tremendous resources to draw upon in creating a captivating message.

The second vertical line of the H represents our learners, our recipients. The drive to search for meaning is not just a Jewish trait but an innate human one. Young Ellie in Carl Sagan’s movie Contact asks her dad: “Dad, do you think there’s people on other planets?” Her father replies: “I don’t know, Sparks. But I guess I’d say if it is just us . . . seems like an awful waste of space.” While many of our learners most likely have this innate drive to search for meaning, there also needs to be a willingness to consider and adopt Judaism as one’s meaning-making system. The latest Pew study denotes that while many young people (older than today’s K–7 learners) are on spiritual quests, their affiliation and identification with organized religion is lower than in previous decades. It is obvious that in order for one to engage in meaning-making, one needs intent to do so. This concept of intentionality is a Jewish one. We are instructed with regard to Yom Teruah—Rosh Hashanah, the day of Shofar sounding—that the real obligation is to hear the shofar (lishmoa kol shofar). In Rambam Hilchot Shofar 1:1, Maimonides explains that it is a biblical commandment to hear the sound of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. How does one hear it? “One must have intent to hear it.”

One of our challenges in K–7 Jewish education today is that our learners do not always come with intrinsic intent. We therefore often need to “pull in” the second vertical line towards the H. We do so completing the H horizontally through educators, facilitators, and role models who are engaging. It’s these guides who

5 New JPS Translation.
6 As summarized by Dr. Steven Windmueller in Just the Facts! Ten Key Indicators of American Jewish Behavior. EJewishPhilanthropy, May 13, 2015.
can pull in and inspire our learners so that they can hear the compelling Jewish messages and thereby complete the H. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that the teacher is the “text that students never forget . . . What we need more than anything else,” he wrote, “is not textbooks but text people. It is the personality of the teacher, which is the text that the pupils read; the text that they will never forget. The teacher . . . is the creator of the future of our people.”

**HOW DOES MEANING-MAKING MANIFEST IN THE WORK I DO?**

Enabling the H—compelling and engaging Jewish meaning making for K–7 learners—requires a commitment to four strategies:

1. **Engage, train, and support compelling and knowledgeable Jewish educators, facilitators, and role models.**

2. **Survey and get to know our learners as whole people, as well as their cultural references** (movies, books, music, the news, etc.), so that meaningful connections can be made to their real lives.

3. **Commit to serious Jewish content;** the broader one’s Jewish knowledge, the greater the ability to draw upon Jewish sources in the meaning-making process. Our learners can also sense and will likely reject mediocrity.

4. **Deliver the content in an engaging and experiential way.**

**HOW DO I KNOW WHEN MY LEARNERS ARE EXPERIENCING IT?**

In the short term, there are a number of anecdotal methods of knowing that a meaning-making moment has occurred. A learner will clearly show excitement and enthusiasm and articulate that a connection has been made. In the medium term, educators can measure anticipated outcomes (discussion, skits, art, etc.) to evaluate and assess whether meaningful connections have been made. In the long term, articulate, enduring understandings, such as attitudes and behaviors, can be measured over time through the use of evaluation.

**WHAT ARE SOME LESSONS I HAVE LEARNED FROM MY WORK (WITH PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHERS)?**

1. **Meet every learner where he or she is.** This is sometimes easier said than done in the K–7 supplemental setting. At most, our older learners are with us four to five hours a week and there are often 12 to 14 learners in one group or class. Truly knowing each learner and meeting each where he or she is in such limited time is very challenging, but nonetheless should still be a goal and principle.

2. **Approach learners in a whole people way.** The Jewish Education Project began to use this language a few years ago to teach the field that young people come to the synagogue as whole people. If they are with us in the afternoon, they have already had a whole day: they are part of a whole social network and a part of a family system. Approaching learners in a whole way means that we have more opportunity and chance of creating meaning in their lives as opposed to presenting only a compartmentalized Judaism.

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3. **Recognize that teachers, facilitators, and role models are also learners.** Rabbi Ron Klotz, the now-retired director of the URJ’s Goldman Union Camp Institute, taught me during my research on Reform Jewish camps that in many ways, the campers are at camp simply for the sake of the college-age staff to have a Jewish and leadership experience. Therefore, the time and effort to train and support the staff is the most important work. If the staff is part of an engaged, vibrant, and meaning-making Jewish community, then so will the K–7 learners (or campers). Such training and community support takes time, effort, and intentionality.

4. **Train and support the role models to be intentional.** Educators, facilitators, and role models should be trained to “use their super powers for good” and harness their enthusiasm so that it is indeed contagious and used strategically. The Foundation for Jewish Camp’s Cornerstone Fellowship, for example, harnesses the energy and positive power of third-year bunk counselors to leverage their knowledge and appeal as camp role models to deliver more Jewish moments and content in all areas of camp.

5. **Keep up with what’s popular or engage those who do.** One needs to know the latest movies, books, games, fashions, videos, and music that our children—particularly middle school–aged children—are interested in. Nothing is worse in the K–7 Jewish meaning-making business than talking about Hannah Montana when she is **SO 2009**.

6. **Understand the trends taking place.** We need to keep up with the latest demographic and attitudinal trends so that we understand our families and their children.

**WHAT BURNING QUESTIONS REMAIN AND WHAT ARE SOME OF MY CONCERNS WHEN I THINK ABOUT THIS TOPIC?**

I suppose my burning question is: At what point is there a risk of Jewish integrity and authenticity becoming compromised? Judaism cannot be all things to all people and therefore it should not be assumed that we have The Meaning to offer everyone. Whenever I am preparing a story for Shabbat **tefillah** or a **devar Torah**, I am keenly aware of whether I am engaging in the process of exegesis (the traditional exposition of a text), versus the process of eisegesis (interpreting a text by reading into it one’s own ideas). While it is not wrong to approach our texts and tradition with what is occurring in our modern world, Judaism should never be compromised. As stated above, this is why having educators with deep and broad Jewish knowledge is so important—because the repertoire of what to draw upon is greater.

My other burning question is what many K–7 supplemental educators refer to as “burn out.” So many families come to supplemental Jewish education with baggage such as Jewish-guilt-based drop-off Judaism (“We are here because my parents want their grandchildren to have a bar or bat mitzvah.”) or negative memories of their own supplemental school experience (“I hated Hebrew school and you will hate it too; you have to go until your bar mitzvah and then you don’t ever have to go back.”). With so much working against supplemental Jewish education, at what point do we throw the towel in and just give up our much more challenging and loftier goals of producing engaging, positive and meaning-making Jewish education?
HOW MIGHT RESEARCH ON THIS TOPIC HELP IN MY WORK? WHAT WOULD I LIKE TO LEARN?

There is a great deal of research about children's cognitive and moral development and some work done in the Jewish community on faith and spiritual development based upon James Fowler's Stages of Faith Development. It would be interesting to learn more about which methods and approaches to meaning-making work at each stage of a child's development so that we in the field can be more intentional with regard to the methodology and Jewish content utilized in the meaning-making process.

Rabbi Eve Rudin is the director of Education, Youth and Families at the Larchmont Temple in Westchester. Previously she served in a similar capacity at Park Avenue Synagogue, during which time she participated in the pilot cohort of the ReFrame initiative at The Davidson School. Rabbi Rudin served as the director of the Department of Camp Excellence and Advancement for the Foundation for Jewish Camp, as well as the director of the URJ Kutz Campus for Reform Jewish Teens and the North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) for the Union for Reform Judaism. A product of the Reform Jewish movement, Rabbi Rudin graduated with a BA in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies from Brandeis University. She was awarded a Wexner Graduate Fellowship for her rabbinic studies at HUC-JIR.

Finding Meaning in Jewish Studies at College

LAUREN KURLAND

Lauren Kurland serves as the director of Student Engagement at the Stroum Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Washington (UW), and has also served as a curriculum writer for The Davidson School’s Etgar Yesodi. She received an MA in Jewish Education from the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education (DS ’05) and rabbinic ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary (RS’05).

At institutions of higher learning around the country, enrollment in the humanities is down, in some disciplines precipitously; Jewish studies has not been spared from this trend. Under the direction of Chair Noam Pianko, the Stroum Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Washington (UW) sought to address declining enrollment by creating a new staff position: director of Student Engagement, a position that I am honored to hold.

In this role, I meet with students coming from different backgrounds and heading toward different futures to learn about their experience with Jewish studies. Some of the students I meet are committed Jewish studies majors or minors—students who came to college interested in learning more about Jewish history, culture and thought. Others are taking their first—and possibly only—Jewish studies course because they heard something good about the professor, because it fulfills a general education requirement, or because it falls at a convenient time in their schedule. Over coffee or a walk around campus, I learn about these students’ backgrounds, why they enrolled in a Jewish studies course, what they have found inspiring about the course they are taking, and where we could do better.

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In other words, I have the privilege of asking students where they find meaning in their academic pursuits and discovering where Jewish studies can be present in supporting or providing that meaning.

The students I interact with are not all Jewish. Approximately 900 students enroll in Jewish studies courses at UW per year, and while data about the percentage of those students who are Jewish is not available (nor significant to the Stroum Center’s mission and work), it is notable that half of our majors in 2015 were not Jewish, and one of the two co-chairs of our Jewish Studies Student Committee is not Jewish. Moreover, the conversations I have with both Jewish and non-Jewish students are not all that different, reflecting that regardless of one’s religious background, emerging adults are searching for meaning, identity, and connection.

It is also worth noting that while there are certainly many students—Jewish and non-Jewish—who take advantage of the many resources that the thriving and pluralistic UW Hillel provides, many students are attracted to Jewish studies precisely because it is not Hillel. These students deliberately look toward academia as the place to nurture personal meaning-making because in the classroom, there is no requirement—perceived or otherwise—for any student to have a certain type of pre-existing personal familiarity with Judaism. There is no ritual practice, no expectation of a certain heritage, no requirement to eat, dress, or commemorate time in certain ways. In the classroom, students must think critically, even about things they thought they already understood. In the Jewish studies classroom, there are therefore no outsiders or insiders; each individual has equal right and value in the conversation.

That said, not every one of the thousand students who takes a Jewish studies course finds it meaningful. Meaning is personal; meaning is found where the self connects. That place can be mysterious, unpredictable, and serendipitous—hence while some of us are passionate about applied physics, others can’t get enough of architecture and still others are fascinated by 15th-century English history. Yet in that place of meaning, wherever it is found, something inside the learner is stirred and inspired; something inside the learner hums and craves to learn more, to engage more, to hang on to every word. On the college campus, this is manifest in the decisions students make as newly independent adults: they never skip class, they attend the professor’s office hours, they do the optional reading, they write a compelling final paper.

Yet, while where we find meaning can be as varied and unique as each individual, there are some common patterns in students’ reports about what makes a particular course or topic meaningful. Relationships—with the topic, with the professor, and with other students—are key and commonly expressed factors in a student’s sense of a course’s personal meaning. Thus, meaning is often found in a college classroom when the following elements exist:

- A student connects with a topic, even if (or sometimes especially when!) they didn’t think they would, often (although not always) because of one’s identity or family history.
- The material and the way in which it is presented compels students to question previously held assumptions about what they think they know or who they think they are;
- The professor is passionate about (not just an expert in) the topic they teach, and even more so if the professor shares with the students why he or she feels passionately about the topic.
- The professor learns and uses students’ names (even in large classes), and finds a way to connect with each student personally. If a student is upset or absent frequently, the professor notices and checks in with the student in a nonjudgmental way.
- The professor gives students opportunities to interact with and get to know other students in the class (e.g., through small group discussion, jigsaw activities, or havruta study).
Two composite examples of students who have taken Jewish studies courses that illustrate these observations:

✧ Simone, a sophomore biology major who grew up in an observant Jewish home in a wealthy suburb of Seattle and went to day school K–12, confessed that she enrolled in Introduction to Jewish Cultural History at UW because she thought it would be an easy class to fulfill her general education requirements. Simone said she figured she knew everything about Jewish history already and would “basically be able to teach the class myself.” However, to her surprise, by the end of the first lecture she realized that the history she had studied in day school was nothing like what she was learning about in her Jewish studies class. While at first she was disappointed with her elementary Jewish education, asking “Why did my parents spend all that money if I never really learned Jewish history at all?” her growing passion for the course eclipsed that disappointment. She described herself as being in “awe,” saying that she “didn’t speak basically the whole quarter because she was soaking it all in.” In particular, a lecture in which the professor cried while talking about a particularly harrowing story related to the Holocaust moved her. The professor’s ability to be vulnerable while teaching—belying the stereotype of the cold, dispassionate college professor—connected deeply with Simone. Learning about Jewish history as an emerging adult from a professor who taught with nuance and integrity and showed human emotions hooked her. She found the class inspiring and deeply meaningful, eventually writing a paper on her own family’s immigrant experience in which she interviewed her grandmother about emigrating from Iraq and opened up previously undisclosed chapters of her family’s history. Now she describes herself as a Jewish studies “groupie” who will likely declare a Jewish Studies minor and has begun to attend Stroum Center for Jewish Studies events as a way to connect further with the community.

✧ Joanna, a nursing student from Seattle, took Introduction to Judaism to learn more about Judaism and to complete her graduation requirements. She was surprised to find out how much she “could learn about [her]self and about the community” through the topic; the integration of traditional havruta study in the course, rather than just frontal lecture, was transformative for her. She reflected that “having conversations with my neighbors about the texts and how we related to them” was a very powerful experience. As they studied, the professor roamed around the classroom, answering questions, encouraging students to think about the material in new ways and getting to know them better. Joanna indicated that, “as academics, we are raised to be in competition with each other . . . those groups really broke those walls down.” For Joanna, Introduction to Judaism was “far more than the description written in the course catalog.” Although graduating this year and unlikely to take another formal Jewish Studies course at UW in the future, the personal connection that Joanna felt to the material by dint of her being able to engage with it personally and in conversation with other students made a lasting impression and was incredibly meaningful to her.

Emerging adulthood is an especially exciting time in the world of meaning-making. Students come to college with permission to explore, to try on new identities, to make decisions, and to make mistakes. In this environment of experimentation and searching, Jewish studies offers a remarkable opportunity for students to consider universal questions through the lens of the Jewish experience. They are encouraged by faculty—often the adults who interact with them at the most intense level for four or more years—to question their assumptions and to find different ways among myriad to connect to the culture that surrounds them, as, indeed, Jews themselves have done for millennia.
REMAINING QUESTIONS

As I continue to meet students and learn about their experiences, many questions still remain. Among them:

- Many students who take Jewish studies courses find them meaningful. Many more do not, at least as evidenced by the relatively low number of students who take multiple Jewish studies courses in sequence. **How can we change the style, structure or content of Jewish studies courses to help more students connect?** One way to tackle this might be to allow more autonomy to students in developing a “so what?” final project. One UW Jewish Studies professor, for example, allows each student to write their final paper on something related to Jewish culture that speaks to them personally. This has resulted in papers as diverse as “Jews in Egypt,” “A History of the Bagel,” and “Jews and The Simpsons.” The professor reflects that the papers are generally better written because they answer a question that the student proposed—one that was meaningful to that student and that allowed the student to apply knowledge and critical thinking—rather than one that the professor assigned that required only regurgitation of facts.

- In an academic setting, faculty, in their desire to be a neutral party, can inadvertently be cast as dispassionate or aloof. Yet students repeatedly indicate that when a professor “notices” students, it makes a huge difference in how they personally experience the class and therefore in how much meaning they ascribe it. Thus, **how can we train college professors (and, even earlier in the process, graduate students) to consider being more present in students’ lives without being overbearing or intrusive?** How vulnerable should professors be and how can they connect with students in real ways, aware of necessary academic boundaries?

- **How do we help students who are looking for meaning find their way into Jewish studies courses?** Though Jewish studies courses are open to all and have no prerequisites, is there something about the word “Jewish” that automatically alienates a broad section of potential students and stymies enrollment? Indeed, this question might be asked about queer studies, Chicano studies, and disability studies as well; do students think they need to be of a group to take a course about a group? If so, how do we push students to think more critically about why they take the courses that they take (beyond having a diversity requirement in the curriculum, which UW has), so that they take advantage of the opportunity in college to take courses about different cultures and from different perspectives?

TAKEAWAYS FOR JEWISH EDUCATORS

Although half of the students I meet with are not Jewish, there are some practical implications for Jewish educators based on my observations:

- Many Jewish students have indicated disappointment that their Hebrew or day school did not offer the broader perspective that Jewish studies courses in college provide. How might Hebrew and day schools broaden the cultural and historical perspective of their courses so that this rude awakening does not happen so often in college? Additionally, how might middle and high schools partner with Jewish studies professors or graduate students to expose younger learners to the richness of Jewish studies in college (such as Makor of Hebrew College in Boston, which is already experimenting with such a model)?

- The same factors that inspire meaning-making in college students also inspire younger learners. To that end, how can we find, train and hire elementary and secondary school teachers who are
not only pedagogically qualified but also genuinely passionate about what they teach; encourage younger students to question their assumptions about who they are and what they know; create intentional and authentic connections between students in the classroom; and grant students autonomy over their learning?

Rabbi Lauren Kurland serves as the director of student engagement at the Stroum Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Washington (UW). In this position, she works with students and faculty to create more meaningful relationships and helps develop further opportunities for the interdisciplinary study of Judaism at UW. She has also written curriculum for The Davidson School’s Etgar Yesodi. Rabbi Kurland received a BA in Education and Social Policy from Northwestern University, an MA in Jewish Education from the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education (DS ’05), and rabbinic ordination from The Jewish Theological Seminary (RS ’05).

The Search for Meaning on College Campuses

GWYNN KESSLER

The Davidson School recently invited three professionals who work in the areas of Jewish Studies and Jewish life on college campuses to reflect on how they think emerging adults explore meaning and meaningfulness through Judaism. This is a paper shared by Dr. Gwynn Kessler of Swarthmore College.

Open Hillel, sexual misconduct, divestment—be it from fossil fuel companies or the contemporary state of Israel/Palestine—all join the list that includes, among other things I am sure, questions about race, ethnicity, gender identity, sex and sexuality, the search for purpose, meaning, justice, and profit that emerging adults currently face throughout their time on college campuses across the nation.

In my brief talk I draw from my more recent experiences as a professor and my past experiences as an undergraduate Jewish studies major in order to reflect on the interconnectedness between issues of politics, identities, and religion and spirituality.

I would like to begin by offering some brief vignettes drawn from my experiences at Swarthmore College over the past six years I’ve been teaching there. I will then put them in the broader context of the meaning of meaning for college students as they search out their own identities and make sense of the world and their places in it. In short, to anticipate what I will say in slightly more detail during these remarks, I think that emerging adults in higher education continue to search out meaning in both profound acts and everyday occurrences, both inside college classes where they—at their best—are expected to critically examine both their intellectual and embodied selves, as well as outside the classrooms in their activism that is imbued with Jewish spirit. Now, as ever, college students seek to make meaning of their lives and construct the course of history, Jewish and non-Jewish, with the lives they lead.

I offer an opening frame by citing an overly famous statement attributed to Hillel the Elder that appears in Mishnah Avot 1:14: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?”
The meanings of this framing, in this context, will become apparent by the end of my remarks, if not sooner.

In the fall of 2013, a handful of students at Swarthmore College declared what was then the campus Hillel an “open Hillel.” I learned about this from a friend of mine in Israel, who texted me, “Kol hakavod Hillel Swarthmore. You advising them?” I then Googled my institution to discover what had transpired. In fact, I was not advising them, I was teaching them. I soon discovered that the two leaders of this move—one, the brains behind it and the other, its public face—and others on the Hillel Board active in the decision and its aftermath were in my Intro to the Hebrew Bible class that semester. Many of those same students often remarked about how what they had been learning in the class surfaced in their drashot and conversations at Shabbat services and dinners. And many of these same students are pre-enrolled for my upcoming class on the Talmud for the fall of 2015. The student I am referring to as the brains behind declaring Swarthmore Hillel an open Hillel went on to spend a semester in Israel and Palestine. When she returned to Swarthmore she continued studying in our beit midrash, taking Hebrew for text study classes. She also did an independent study with me on the Talmud, and she wrote her honors performance piece for the Drama Department on the rabbinic tradition about the four who entered pardes.

One of my first students at Swarthmore in told me in 2009, “You don’t come to Swarthmore to be Jewish.” This student recently texted me a picture of Facebook post from another Swarthmore alum. The post was written by a woman who was sexually assaulted on campus before she graduated a couple of years ago; she was writing on the eve of her alleged rapist’s graduation. My student wanted to pass this information on; he wanted me to know about it; he wanted to do something about it as well as know something was being done about it. Knowing that I had served on the campus’s Sexual Misconduct Task Force the previous year and a half, he wanted me to do something.

During the past semester, students at Swarthmore staged a sit-in—one of the earliest, if not the first, US colleges to do so to convince the boards of their institutions to divest from the fossil fuel industry. Rabbi Arthur Waskow came to the sit-in one afternoon to meet with the students. One of my students, a transgender son of a Reconstructionist rabbi, came to meet Arthur and show his support of the divestment campaign.

Perhaps none of these students decided to spend four years of their early adult lives at Swarthmore College “to be Jewish,” but their Judaism meant something to them, and that meaning, those meanings, developed and flourished there. Their answers to Hillel ha-Zaken’s challenge (“If I am only for myself, what am I?”) are of course quite varied, but they are alive and well in their activism for Palestinian rights, in their support for survivors of sexual abuse, and in their concern about the health of the planet, as well as in their efforts to remake and re-envision gender and sexuality or to stand up against racial injustices. Indeed, I am sure they often ask themselves, “If not now, when?”

I don’t often reflect on my students’ experiences as similar to mine as an undergraduate. How the formation of my Jewishness as an integral part of my identity took shape on a college campus in Jewish studies courses, as I sought to make sense of my own heritage. I, too, arrived on a college campus with an inherited sense of my Jewishness, handed down and fostered by my parents and my upbringing, but what that meant, as well as the details of Jewish history and rabbinic and philosophical text study, were more opaque. When I look back on what led me to the academic study of Judaism I see it as a search for meaning and understanding—my early grappling of and with my Jewish identity.

At the same time, as a college professor, I am uneasy with the notion that my students take courses simply to buttress their Jewish identities for the sake of an amorphous concept of Jewish continuity, anxious at the very thought that I continue the work of Jewish day schools that instill somewhat more simplified notions
of Judaism, Jewish history, and Jewish identity than I want my students and my children to engage with as emerging adults. (Don’t worry, I say this with one child enrolled in my local Philly Jewish Day School and the expectation that my six month old will one day attend the same school.)

This brings me to the meaning of meaning for my own work—both in research and teaching. What is it that I seek to convey to my students about identity? About history? About the future?

I spend a great deal of time searching out the meaning of things for the Rabbis of late antiquity to address contemporary issues with fetuses or what might now be called genderqueer bodies. I think that often one of the differences between a more seasoned scholar and a younger one is the realization that the access I have to the meaning for another group of people across time and space is at best fraught, fractured, muddled, and messy. It is my responsibility as a scholar to find plausible meanings for ancient contexts, within their own settings. It is also my responsibility to realize the meaning I make is not entirely divorced from the meaning I wish to make. That meaning is always filtered through experience. It is my responsibility to teach that to my students as well. As a college professor, the meaning I try to make for students is also mediated by the meanings they are making and will make of this information for themselves. Meaning and meaning-making are messy endeavors.

One of the things I’m attempting to do here is make meaning of my students’ political activism. To see and set their activism around Israel/Palestine, sexual misconduct, the environment, and other injustices as part of a broader process of searching out identities and meaning for themselves, especially as it is connected to their Jewishness and the meaning of Judaism for them.

In closing, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” is for many emerging Jewish adults of this generation a question that brings about inquiries into the meaning of their privilege. My students are far more aware of their privilege than I was at their age. The meanings of this privilege and what they make of those meanings, will, I have no doubt, set the stage for their own quests for meaningful lives. It will also expand, even stretch and test the meanings of Judaism and Jewishness for the foreseeable future, or maybe more accurately, the future that is unforeseeable. I, for one, am excited for this future, these prospects, and these expansions of Jewish meaning for generations to come.

Dr. Gwynn Kessler received her PhD in Rabbinics from The Jewish Theological Seminary (GS ’01). She has taught at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and the University of Florida in Gainesville, and she currently teaches in the Department of Religion and serves as the coordinator for the Gender and Sexuality Studies Program at Swarthmore College. Dr. Kessler is the author of Conceiving Israel: the Fetus in Rabbinic Narratives, published by UPenn Press.
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