

Dr. Jeff Kress

Jewish Theological Seminary

NURTURING CHARACTER,  
COMMUNITY, & MEANING-MAKING  
THROUGH JEWISH EDUCATION

Jeffrey S. Kress, Dr. Bernard Heller Chair in Jewish Education, is Director of Research at the Leadership Commons of the Davidson School.

Dr. Kress's interests include social, emotional, and spiritual development and education. He has written about experiential Jewish education, particularly as it takes place in formal settings. He is also conducting research and professional development on inclusion of learners with disabilities in camp settings. His most recent book is *Nurturing Students' Character: Everyday Teaching Activities for Social Emotional Learning* (Routledge Press, 2019), which he coauthored with Dr. Maurcie Elias. His book *Development, Learning, and Community: Educating for Identity in Pluralistic Jewish High Schools* (Academic Studies Press, 2012) won a National Jewish Book Award. In addition, he is the editor of a volume titled *Growing Jewish Minds, Growing Jewish Souls: Promoting Spiritual, Social, and Emotional Growth in Jewish Education* (URJ Press, 2013). Dr. Kress is also the coauthor, with Drs. Bernard Novick and Maurice Elias, of *Building Learning Communities with Character: How to Integrate Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning* (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2002). He has published numerous journal articles and book chapters. Dr. Kress has also served as the chair of the Network for Research in Jewish Education.

Prior to coming to JTS, Dr. Kress worked as a program-development specialist and school-based trainer for the Social Decision Making/Social Problem Solving program of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey's Community Mental Health Center. He completed an internship in clinical/community psychology there after receiving his doctorate in clinical psychology from Rutgers University.

# JEWISH EDUCATION



# THREE LAYERS OF “MEANING”

- Factual/descriptive: Denotation. For example: *The meaning of the Hebrew word soos is “horse.”*
- Relevance: The ability to relate an object or idea to one’s life in a way that has some emotional investment. *Horses are meaningful animals to me because I grew up on a farm. Iguanas? Not meaningful to me in any way.*
  - Narrative connection can be automatic.
- Life-Purpose: Meaning with a capital “M;” what is referred to in the literature as existential meaning. *My work rehabilitating abused horses provides meaning to my life.*



# EXISTENTIAL MEANING

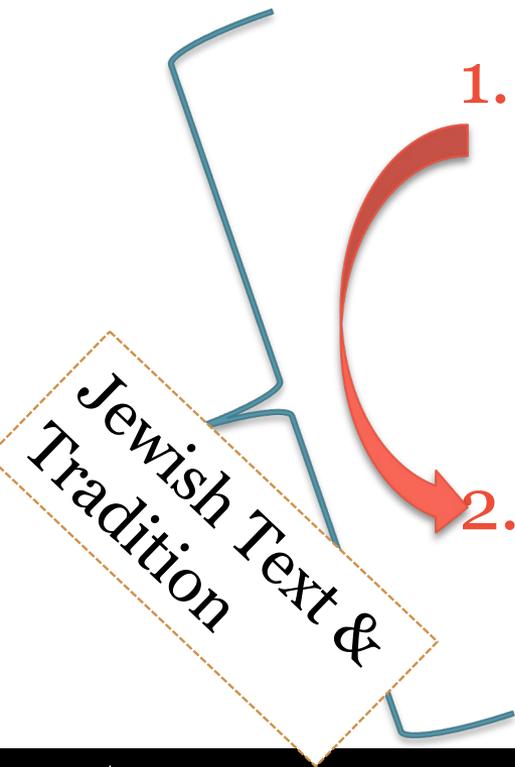
...the cognizance of order, coherence, and purpose in one's existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment. A person with a high degree of existential meaning has a clear life purpose, a sense of directedness, strives for goals consistent with life purpose, feels satisfied with past achievements, and is determined to make the future meaningful. [Reker & Chamberlain(2000)]

BUT...

Can we teach meaning, or even a process for meaning making!?!?



# PROMOTING MEANING-MAKING READINESS



1. Helping learners develop the skills and dispositions that can serve as precursors to meaning making.
2. Creating environments that are conducive to meaning-making.

# BUBER

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For the inmost growth of the self is not accomplished, as people like to suppose today, in man's relation to himself, but in the relation between the one and the other, between men, that is, pre-eminently in the mutuality of the making present—in the making present of another self and in the knowledge that one is made present in his own self by the other—together with the mutuality of acceptance, of affirmation and confirmation. (1965, 71)

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...there are ways to help kids really be able to see the image of God in the other kids in their classroom. They may not even have to like them but to see that this is there, so they really can develop empathy and kindness. And to have experiences in nature—I just think it's so important to really sense where we are in this universe, to have this kind of humility that it isn't all about us; it's not all about my story.

- Rabbi Rachel Cowen

# READINESS SKILLS

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Abilities such as empathy, reflectiveness, self-awareness, self-regulation, communication, and attention can help one to achieve a sense of meaning and purpose.



# CREATING MEANING-MAKING ENVIRONMENTS

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Jewish educators and educational institutions have a vital role to play in helping learners develop the capacity for a sense of meaning and purpose and in providing opportunities for youth to experience **moments of deep connectedness, wonder, and awe.**



# CONNECTION TO TEXT & TRADITION

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... meaning gets made mostly *affectively* by feeling connected to something bigger—the “biggerness” of Jewish history, the literature and values, [and] the struggles and triumphs of the Jewish people. I think that is made for the most part affectively, not cognitively.

Rabbi Nancy Flam



# Q AND A #1

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# MEANING-MAKING ENVIRONMENTS

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- Safe for experimentation, questioning, and risk taking;
- Opportunities for learners to contribute to and help shape the community.
- Allow learners to connect with community on multiple levels (within and beyond the classroom);
- Situate learning within the experience of the learners, and vice versa.



# A FOCUS ON THE LEARNING SPACE AS A COMMUNITY

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- Safety
- Relationships
  - Care
  - Belonging
- Active Membership (Agency)
  - Opportunity to Contribute



# GREETINGS AND TRANSITIONS

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# MEANINGFUL LEARNING “BRITOT”

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- Generated *with* learners
- Link values and actions
- Are reviewed and amended regularly.



# BUILDING READINESS SKILLS

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## SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING...

Moves the discussion of social skills and emotional intelligence out of the background (e.g., only relevant to class management) and into the spotlight, along with “content” learning.



# ADDRESS VALUES AND SKILLS.



- Self-awareness
- Social awareness/  
Empathy
- Self-regulation
- Communication  
and Friendship  
Skills
- Problem solving  
Skills



What skills are needed “to do” derech  
eretz? Bikur cholim?

What does derech eretz look like?



# PROVIDE PRACTICE OPPORTUNITIES

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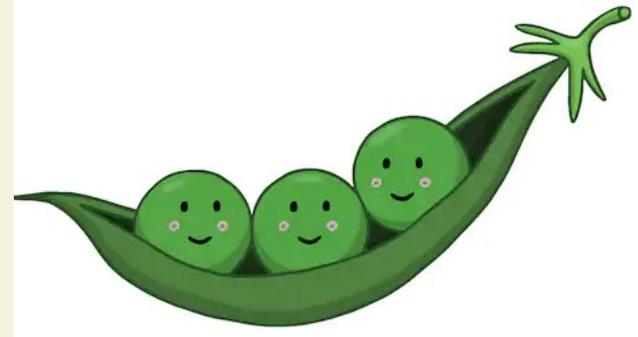
- In the curriculum, role plays [“How might Moses have been feeling...?” “What else could Joseph done?” “Let’s role play how Jacob could use Assertive Communication...”]
- In co-curricular activities [“We’re going to present our findings at an assembly. Let’s talk about how we’ll use our voices. What can we do if we get very nervous?”]



# THINK AHEAD

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- **Plan** – What should we do when... [we feel that we are getting upset]?
- **Process** – reflection on action and learning [“What emotions did you experience while we visited the ...”].
- **Proactive** - Behavior management as opportunity to grow skills and values.



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EMBRACE SPIRIT...IN BOTH OF ITS  
SENSES.





*...and darkness was upon the face  
of the deep; and the ruach/spirit of  
God hovered over the face of the  
waters. [Genesis 1:2]*



*We've got spirit yes we do! We've  
got ruach/spirit, how 'bout you!?!  
[Popular Camp Cheer]*

# BOTH-AND

*...and  
darkness was  
upon the face  
of the deep;  
and the **spirit**  
[ruach] of  
God hovered  
over the face  
of the waters.  
[Genesis 1:2]*

Moments of  
quiet reflection  
& focus

Moments for  
exuberance

*We've got  
**spirit [ruach]**  
yes we do!  
We've got  
**spirit**  
[ruach], how  
'bout you!?!  
[Popular  
Camp Cheer]*



# BRING TOGETHER LEARNING AND SELF-REFLECTION

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**Ben Zoma would say: ...Who is strong? One who overpowers his inclinations. As is stated (Proverbs 16:32), "Better one who is slow to anger than one with might, one who rules his spirit than the captor of a city."**

But how? When it is easier for us to do this? When it is more difficult? What can we do when it is difficult? Can we try that and then check back in?

## MIDDAH MONITOR

- What middah are you working on?
- Describe a recent situation that you felt challenged your work with this middah/value (what happened, where you were, etc.):
- How did you feel?
- How well do you think that you used the middah in this situation?
- What is something that you *liked* about how you handled the situation?
- What is something that you *did not like* about how you handled the situation?
- If a similar situation happens again, how might you handle it differently? What would help you do that?



# SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL ELEMENTS IN CURRICULAR MATERIALS:

## PARSHA PROBLEM SOLVING DIARY

1. Who in the parsha is/are experiencing a problem?
2. Describe the problem they encounter.
3. What are their feelings?
4. Describe the ways they solve their problem.
5. What was the outcome of their solutions?
6. Identify and describe other ways the problem could have been solved.
7. Describe what might have been the outcomes if these other solutions had been chosen.
8. Describe a similar problem which you personally encountered, observed, or heard about and the ways in which the solutions you identified could be successfully applied (use back of page).

Alternate version:

Write or draw :

- What happened?
- How did each person feel?
- What else could they have done?



# DON'T FORGET ABOUT EDUCATORS & PARENTS!!

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Try to expose children to as many spiritually evolved, human models as we can find and hope that the spark will jump the gap. What did you do today? I went to study with my *rebbe*. Oh, you study Talmud? No. Oh, you study Torah? No. Oh you study Midrash? No? Then what did you do? I watched him tying his shoe. In other words, the living presence of the teacher is all that we can hope to give kids in spiritual education.

-Rabbi Lawrence Kushner

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JEWISH EDUCATION: NURTURING  
MEANING-MAKING THROUGH  
CHARACTER & COMMUNITY

# Q AND A #2

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# THANK YOU!



## NURTURING STUDENTS' CHARACTER

Everyday Teaching Activities for  
Social-Emotional Learning

JEFFREY S. KRESS AND MAURICE J. ELIAS

An Eye On Education Book

