

# Where Meaning Happens: The Task of Teaching Torah

BY TOBA SPITZER

**T**hose of us who are rabbis and Jewish educators spend much of our time teaching and discussing Torah and other foundational Jewish texts. A variety of motives drive these efforts: a desire to increase our students' Jewish literacy, a hope that we can help make connections between contemporary Jews and Jewish tradition and culture, and a commitment to infusing our students' lives with the values and obligations that can flow from the study of Jewish texts.

Yet, while we may be aware of our goals in teaching Torah, we are not always as clear on what it exactly means to teach and to learn Torah. As a teacher of Jewish sacred texts, I need to be able to articulate what it is that I think is happening when a Jew engages with words of Torah and finds meaning in that moment of engagement. This is especially important if I intend such experiences to have some kind of powerful or even transformative effect on my students' lives.

## Reading In, Reading Out

There are many approaches to

what it means to read any kind of text. To speak in broad and somewhat simplistic categories, one approach might be called "reading out of," and another "reading into." If we assume that a text has implicit meaning or meanings, then our job as readers — and as teachers of text — is to enable ourselves and others to uncover or decipher that inherent meaning. Meaning resides in the text, and we as learners extract that meaning.

This approach is often implicit when we read Torah, for, as a holy document, it is assumed to be a repository of sacred meaning, and we are charged to uncover and discern the intent of its divine Author (to the best of our limited human ability). Even for those of us who do not believe that the Torah was literally written by God, there is still a powerful assumption that the Torah and other Jewish sacred texts hold authoritative teachings that we must work to uncover and understand.

At the opposite end, the "reading into" approach assumes that meaning does not lie primarily within the text but within the reader. We essen-

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tially “read into” a text meanings that reflect our own experiences and assumptions. Those who do the “reading into” might firmly believe that their understanding of the text reflects its true meaning. A more critical stance would suggest that the various ways in which Torah has been understood over the past few millennia can be assumed to have more to do with the social and political proclivities of its readers than with any authorial intention, human or divine.

### Seeking a New Paradigm

We see examples of “reading into” in traditional Jewish models of Torah learning — for example, in the many *midrashim* in which the biblical characters live lives remarkably like their rabbinic readers. We also see examples in more modern readings, where biblical texts become the pretext for any number of religious-political agendas, from support for environmental justice to opposition to gay-lesbian marriage.

Yet, both “reading into” and “reading out of” do not do justice to my goals as a teacher of Jewish sacred texts. In the first approach, the reader is largely inert, passively absorbing or at best attempting to “make sense of” a text that itself is understood as eternal and unchanging in its meaning. In the second, the text loses its force and autonomy and becomes a tool in the hands of the reader, who uses it for his/her own purposes.

Neither approach understands learning as a dynamic process, and in

neither is transformation understood as an integral part of the process of Torah study. As Reconstructionist educators, we need another paradigm with which to frame our understanding of teaching and learning.

What hermeneutic, a way of understanding our engagement with words of Torah, suggests the possibility for a truly meaningful encounter, in which the reader — and perhaps the text itself — is somehow transformed? How can I, a progressive rabbi in the 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching Torah to American Jews from a wide variety of backgrounds, create learning situations in which ancient Torah text and contemporary Torah learner interact vividly in this moment?

### The Hidden Princess

A Jewish text that offers one interesting model of what it means to study Torah is found in the *Zohar*, a central work of Jewish mysticism. In this 13<sup>th</sup> century text, Torah study is described as a mysterious, romantic encounter between a man and a woman. The *Zohar* employs a parable in which Torah is portrayed as “a lovely princess, beautiful in every way and hidden deep within her palace.” The student of Torah is her lover, who “passes by her gate constantly, lifting his eyes to every side.”<sup>1</sup> In a kind of provocative tease, the princess reveals herself in stages to her persistent par amour:

Torah knows that he who is wise

of heart hovers about her gate every day. What does she do? She reveals her face to him from the palace and beckons him with a hint, then swiftly withdraws to her hiding place. No one who is there knows or reflects; he alone does, and his heart and his soul and everything within him flows out to her. That is why Torah reveals and conceals herself. With love she approaches her lover to arouse love within him . . . At first, when she begins to reveal herself to a human she beckons him with a hint . . . He approaches. She begins to speak with him from behind a curtain she has drawn, words he can follow, until he reflects a little at a time . . . Then she converses with him through a veil, words riddled with allegory . . . Once he has grown accustomed to her, she reveals herself face to face and tells him all her hidden secrets, all the hidden ways, since primordial days secreted in her heart. Now he is a perfect human being, husband of Torah, master of the house. All her secrets she has revealed to him, withholding nothing, concealing nothing.

The Zoharic parable teaches about levels of interpretation that move from *peshat*, literal meaning, to *sod*, the esoteric. I am interested in the model it presents of what it means to be a student of Torah, in a way that is quite different from either reading “into” or “out of.” This mod-

el describes Torah study as a kind of passionate encounter, a highly charged back-and-forth between the lover hovering at the gate and the text that reveals and beckons.

### Relationship As Model

The Torah-student relationship is described as exclusive — the princess reveals herself only to her one lover — or perhaps it is simply his perception that all of her attention is focused upon him. It is a relationship that demands intense and total devotion from the lover/learner, with a powerful reward promised for his efforts. And finally, the encounter culminates in a moment of transformation. The Torah is laid bare, all of her secrets revealed, and the student of Torah becomes a “perfect human being, husband of Torah, master of the house.” He is transformed from outsider to insider, from one who is relatively powerless in his desire to the “master” of lover and domain.

The power of this model lies in its understanding of Torah learning as essentially relational and dynamic. There is a sense of wholeness here, as the student of Torah is drawn into the encounter through all of his [sic] senses, and with all of his passion and heart. In the parable of the *Zohar*, studying Torah is exciting, engaging and transformative — just what a good Jewish educator would dream of!

And yet this model also comes with some serious limitations. Based on an archaic and problematic model of



male-female relationship, it is by extension problematic when applied to the study of Torah. The movement here is essentially in one direction — Torah is powerful, yet essentially immobile, trapped within a house, behind curtains and veils. She can drop hints and send messengers, but she is ultimately passive and even submissive to her “master” and “husband.” It is he, the lover/student, who is autonomous, moving closer until he has entered the domain of Torah.

### Partners in Movement

If we are going to base our understanding of what it means to engage with Torah on a model of human relationship, then we have to question a model in which only one partner can “move.” A relationship in which one partner wields power only insofar as she is hidden is also disturbing. And finally, this model posits an odd finality to the process of Torah learning, in which secrets are uncovered and wholeness is achieved and the game is somehow won.

In thinking about any hermeneutic, we need to ask the question, “where does meaning happen?” In both the “reading out of” and “reading into” approaches, I suggested that meaning is static, residing in either the text or the reader and then transferred to the other during the learning encounter.

While the *Zohar*'s model does suggest a greater amount of dynamism and at least the possibility of transformation, meaning is still largely

located in one place — hidden within the palace, held by the “princess.” Like the “reading out” model, meaning is uncovered (quite literally) and made accessible, but is also presented as eternal and unchanging. The lover/learner opens up the secret and comes to own it. Power is dynamic in this model, shifting from Torah/princess to student/lover, but meaning is not.

### Hagar and the *Malakh*

There is another Jewish text, one that ostensibly has little to do with studying Torah, that suggests a dynamic and transformative model of Torah teaching and learning. The text is Genesis 16:7-14, which describes the first encounter of Hagar — the handmaid of Sarai and second wife of Avram — with a *malakh-YHWH*, a messenger of God.

The first six verses of chapter 16 succinctly describe Sarai's suggestion to Avram that he take Hagar as a second wife in order to provide the son that they have longed for. Avram goes along with the plan, which soon goes awry. Sarai, feeling insulted at Hagar's mocking attitude once she becomes pregnant, abuses Hagar, and the Egyptian maidservant flees into the wilderness.

It is there in the wilderness, by a spring of water, that Hagar's encounter begins. She is the first person in the Torah to be met by a *malakh-YHWH*, who greets her with the words: “Hagar, handmaid of Sarai, *ay-mizeh vat v'anah telekhi*, from where have you come and where are

you going?" (Genesis 16:8)

The *malakh* is the first character in the story to speak to Hagar directly and to call her by her name. (Both Avram and Sarai refer to her solely as "maidservant" and speak about her, never to her.) Hagar responds by telling the mysterious emissary that she is fleeing from her mistress, and the *malakh* goes on to deliver three messages:

And the *malakh-YHWH* said to her: "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself beneath her hand." And the *malakh-YHWH* said to her: "I will make your seed many, yes many; it will be too many to count." And the *malakh-YHWH* said to her: "Here, you are pregnant, and you will bear a son; and you will call his name Yishmael [God-will-hear], for *YHWH* heard your affliction." (Genesis 16:9-11)

## Hearing and Naming

Hagar hears her name for the first time, and goes on to hear far more. She hears that she must return to a difficult situation in order to fulfill her destiny, and that she is to become the matriarch of a great tribe, a progenitor of "seed," like Avram. She hears that she will have the power of naming her unborn son, and that his name will carry the meaning of her own encounter with the Source of All.

After she has heard, Hagar does something that no one else in the Torah does before or after: She gives a

name to God:

And she called the name of *YHWH*, the one who spoke to her, "*Atah El-Roi*/You [are] the God of seeing/the God who sees me." For she said: "Have I gone on seeing here after his seeing me?" (Genesis 16:13)<sup>2</sup>

As in many of the Torah's scenes of revelation that involve a *malakh*, the messenger disappears at this moment of true encounter, and Hagar faces the Ineffable without intermediary: "You are *El-Roi*." Hagar has heard her name and God has received a new name. Both have seen and have been seen. This moment in the wilderness, at a spot that is "on the way," is one not only of true encounter, but of mutual transformation, as well.

## The Power of Mutual Encounter

What can we learn from this text about the process of teaching and learning Torah? What would happen if we recast this entire scene as an encounter between student and sacred text?

In looking at the initial moments of the encounter, we see that Hagar hears her name and is then both challenged and given a promise. The *malakh* finds Hagar where she is, but does not allow her to stay in that place. If we think of ourselves as teachers facilitating an encounter between student and text, we can ask ourselves a similar question. How

does this “meeting” occur? What kind of a setting do we have to create so that each student hears his/her name being called? How do we, with the text, meet our students where they are, challenge them and also in some way begin to reveal to them something they have not yet known — about themselves, about the world — up to this moment?

### Where Meaning Happens

This text also poses an interesting way of thinking about where meaning happens. From both being seen and performing her own act of seeing, Hagar receives a new destiny and God receives a new name. Both Hagar and the *malakh*/God have been transformed in some way. This suggests that, in the meeting of learner(s) and text, meaning happens in the encounter itself. Similar to Buber’s description of the I-Thou encounter, Godliness resides in the connective space “in-between.” It is in this space between learner(s) and text that meaning emerges when true encounter occurs.

This text also reminds us that the work of learning and teaching Torah involves God/liness in some mysterious, direct way. Mordecai Kaplan taught that God does not reveal Godself to us, but rather it is we who discover God. As teachers of Jewish text, we are helping to facilitate encounters between student(s) and text that allow us to discover some aspect of Godliness. We might also say that the experience of such an encounter

is in itself a Godly, transformative process, one that helps move the learner(s) along a path to wholeness.

### “From Where Have You Come?”

What is the path to this type of mutually transformative encounter, and how do we, as Jewish educators, facilitate such moments? In thinking about the encounter between Jewish text and Jewish learner, I would suggest that we understand both parties as on a journey, and their encounter as the momentary intersection of those separate journeys. The two-part question that the *malakh* first poses to Hagar is a helpful frame for this inquiry. It is a question that we need to ask of both text and learner: “*Aymizeh vat*/From where have you come?”

When applied to words of Torah, this question affirms that the text has its own history and a context from which it emerged. We need to understand where it has come from and where it has been if we are fully to grapple with it. An awareness of the historical context and development of a Jewish text does not provide the sum total of its meaning, but it does vastly enrich our ability to appreciate it in all of its complexity. While the words of the text may be static, its journey through time and Jewish civilization is not.

It is also imperative that we ask of ourselves and our students, “From where have you come?” What do we bring to this moment of encounter from our own personal journeys —



what life experiences, biases, assumptions, needs and desires? Where are we in our journeys as Jews, as men or women, as children or parents? The answers to this question will greatly inform any individual's reaction to a text in the moment of encounter.

We may or may not want to make this question explicit in our teaching, but an awareness of the importance of each of our journeys in the context of the learning encounter can be of enormous help to us as teachers of Jewish text. This includes both a mindfulness of the biases, proclivities and assumptions that we as teachers bring to the study encounter, as well as an openness to the task of creating learning spaces in which each learner's personal journey is somehow acknowledged, implicitly if not explicitly.

### “Where Are You Going?”

This question alludes to the potentiality of meaning in any text, the ways it has been understood and could possibly be understood by a wide variety of readers. In an encounter with Torah, this piece of the process might include studying other understandings of the text, from early *midrash* through contemporary readings, and then asking the question, “How do you understand it?” “Where are you going?” when applied to Torah points to the fact that there is no one fixed meaning of the text, but rather a potentiality of meaning that inheres within it and that is revealed only in the learning encounter.

When applied to learners, this question asks: What do we take from this text? How does it challenge us, teach us, change us? The question implies that our personal journey might be transformed as a result of this encounter, and that in fact studying this text has now become part of that journey.

As helpful as the *malakh's* question can be, the goal is not to get stuck in either where we have been or where we are going, but to attend fully to the present moment of the learning encounter. The awareness of both text and student(s) as being on a journey with a past and a future is intended to frame the transformative possibility of the present moment.

It is with an openness and receptivity to the “teachable moments” that open themselves to us that we are successful as teachers. If we remain in the realm of history, digging into what a text once might have meant, or if we are unbending in our attempt to steer a class in some direction that we are determined to go, we may very well miss the power of what can happen in the magic of now.

### The Teacher as *Malakh-YHWH*

I have had the experience of a mutually transformative encounter with Jewish texts in a variety of settings — as a teacher, in *hevrutah* as a learner and in solitary interaction with words of prayer. In each case, powerful moments of meaning-creation arose in ways that brought something new to me and to those with whom I stud-

ied. There is something magical in such moments. No amount of theorizing can capture exactly what happens when human beings and sacred text interact in such a way.

My most recent experience of such a moment came in the context of group study of the texts I have dealt with in this article, at a seminar for students of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and Reconstructionist rabbis. As we looked closely at the Hagar text, exploring its potential as a model for Torah teaching and learning, I came to a new understanding of the role of the teacher. In many ways we function as a *malakh-YHWH*.

Like the *malakh*, we are conduits for something Godly, facilitators of sacred encounter. Like the *malakh*, we set the scene and then magically “disappear” in the moment when connection is made, at the moment when student and text interact in such a way as to give rise to new understanding. Perhaps paradoxically, our moment of success as teachers is the moment in which we become transparent and the power of direct encounter arises to take our place.

In our journeys as teachers of Jewish sacred texts, our awareness of where and how meaning arises in the process of Torah study can play a key role in our success. Reflective practice, by which I mean really paying attention to all aspects of our teaching — our assumptions, our goals, the moves we make as we navigate our way through a session of teaching — is a powerful tool whereby we can make our teaching more satisfy-

ing and effective, for ourselves and for our students.

There will always be those moments when something seems just to “happen,” when our own role in helping to create a powerful moment of meaning-making is difficult to pinpoint. Yet just as the *malakh* chose a propitious moment for his encounter, asked the right question, gave some powerful answers and understood his role as a messenger of Something beyond himself, so we as teachers in Israel can bring an awareness to our task that will guide us in our journeys of sacred teaching and learning.<sup>3</sup>

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1. All quotations from the *Zohar* are from *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment*, edited and translated by Daniel Matt (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1983), 123-125.

2. Both of Hagar’s statements are difficult to translate, especially the second half of verse 13. Yet both clearly involve sight, both seeing and being seen, and seem to reflect Hagar’s experience both of being seen, in some profound way, by the Godly messenger, and having “seen” God in a powerful way.

3. Many of the thoughts expressed in this article developed in the course of study and discussion with my colleagues. Many thanks to Rabbi Jeffrey Schein for first posing the question to me, “What might a Reconstructionist hermeneutic look like?” and for his ongoing feedback; to rabbis Gary Ellison and Steve Segar, partners in the experience of the Teacher Educator Institute of the Mandel Foundation; and to those with whom I studied at the “Teaching Jewish Texts” seminar, sponsored by the RRC, RRA and JRF in March, 2002.