

From Dr. Deborah Schein:

Originally, this poem was written after I had completed a workshop in Florida for early childhood Jewish educators. The workshop was called “What’s Jewish about Rocks?” This title and the workshop’s content came directly from a book titled: *What’s Jewish about Butterflies* (Handelman & Schein, 2004). Each chapter in this book shares perspective on a big important topic common to the early childhood classroom, Jewish values for both children and educators to internalize, and includes a story or poem, songs, Hebrew, and connects authentically to Israel in some appropriate way.

During the workshop, all of these qualities were explored by the participants in this workshop. . .and when I walked out of the workshop, the poem literally came into my head. Thank goodness I took the time to capture it and Jeff, my husband helped me to find the words for the last line. We have since used the poem as a stimulus for some of our best work together, especially our work where we wed the Hundred Languages of Children with the Seventy Faces of Torah.

The first word in the poem is love... Love starts the learning. Love is what Maria Montessori described as that which awakens each individual child’s spiritual embryo (Montessori, 1965). Montessori described the embryo as housing the home, or force that pushes a child forward to know, to become, to learn (Schein, 2018). I am always struck with how competent and capable children are. When you stop and think about it, they actually teach themselves to walk and talk before they reach the young age of two. Yet, infants are still often seen as empty vessels. We now know from research, observation, and neuroscience that so much is occurring within the body and mind of the infant.

Love has proven to be necessary for healthy human development. Most are familiar with the term attachment theory; where children need to develop trust and security with a caregiver or parent. This is just the beginning of the story. From my own research in spiritual development I have witnessed that love bestowed upon an infant also begins the growth of the child’s sense of awareness or self in relationship to the rest of the world. This sense of self, when positive and healthy leads to more relationships – I/thou relations, deep meaningful relationships with animate and inanimate objects, things, people, the world. This is where learning begins and because young children have absorbent minds, everything and anything offers new knowledge. And, while an infant is taking in the love

as reflected and captured in the baby stare – when an infant stares intently at the loving adult who they have learned to trust and love, the infant’s self is being strengthened for further self-strengthening and the adult’s wonder and joy in life and the world is also being renewed. A powerful process is awakened all around when love is offered to an infant.

Commentary from Rabbi Sandy Sasso:

As we move into adulthood, we have the privilege of sustaining patterns of God, prayer, and spirituality that anchor our Jewish communities. The sources of knowledge and inspiration that make us part of meaningful circles of prayer and commitment need constant renewal with new learning.

What we think about God and prayer changes, depending on our age and our experience. What is satisfying and meaningful at age 8 is not at 16 or 25 or 50. We read different kinds of books, we understand the world differently, why should we expect our understanding of God to remain the same? Ultimately, what people say about God says less about God and more about them.

Often when people say to me that they do not believe in God any longer, I say, "The God you do not believe in, I don't believe in either." We need to know more about the God they are rejecting.

Faith development suggests that one of the stages of belief is doubt. If you do not question your faith, it is never really your own. You need to take your experience, the wisdom of your community and then add yourself. Faith is never static, it evolves and renews.

Children have spiritual experiences. They are naturally curious and have a profound sense of wonder at the world around them. What they lack is the language to express those feelings. It is our responsibility to give them the language, not to speak for them, but to give them the ability to speak for themselves. The best language and the one closest to the religious experience is story. Religion begins with an encounter which is then expressed in story. Story often turns into ritual which then becomes theology.

Children's first encounter with religion is through their experiences.

Emunah often translated as belief, is more accurately understood as faithfulness. This faith begins the very moment children are born. As infants are fed, cleaned, cuddled, as their distress brings the loving response of parents, they learn trust. It is the foundation of belief.

Commentary from Rabbi Erin Hirsh:

Values give us lenses.

As we grow, we find ourselves living in an ever-increasing number of civilizations.

Values are the points of reference that allow us to navigate new terrain and look to the horizon with interest rather than fear.

Relationships make us whole.

There are Sparks of the Divine in each person.

When we seek Divine Sparks in those we encounter on life's journey, each relationship becomes a prayer.

When we successfully discern Divine Sparks in others, we become part of something greater than ourselves.

Commentary by Rabbi Isaac Saposnik:

Many years ago, we based our summer education curriculum around “believing.” Our goal was to share various viewpoints, experiences, traditions, and ideas with our campers so they could make up their own minds about what they believe. Almost immediately, we got the inevitable question: “What if I don’t believe in God?” Even as we tried to answer that this was not only okay – it was welcomed, we got significant pushback that all the talk about God and about believing was making campers feel as though they were required to think or feel or believe a certain thing. Nothing could have been further from the truth, but they simply couldn’t see it.

Looking back on it, what becomes clear is that focusing so heavily on belief isn’t age-appropriate for most kids. It’s not that there aren’t opportunities to explore and experience belief in deep and meaningful ways (especially in the camp setting!), but using it as an educational focus is premature. I often share with campers and staff that there’s a reason Mordecai Kaplan started with the concepts of “belonging” and “behaving:” he knew that not everyone would get to “believing.” And with that in mind, we realize that expecting our kids to do what so many of us adults can’t is like tilting at windmills.

Especially in the camp setting (although, frankly, I think the same is true in virtually all kid-centered spaces), the focus on belonging (“relationships make us whole”) and behaving (“values give us lenses”) should be at the core. God and spirituality are about connection with each other, with nature, and with something bigger than ourselves that we can’t quite explain. For kids who struggle with – or against – belief in “God,” a turn to predicate theology is often helpful; it’s not about believing that God is doing something but about experiences the ways we humans do things that are godly. Knowing and living by our values helps us act in ways that are godly. Being part of a community can be godly. And being fully ourselves, our *whole* selves, is godly.

It turns out that our mistake that summer so many years ago was simple: kids don’t need to learn about God – they need to experience godliness. And if they can do that in meaningful ways in their youth, they’ll be set to live lives of meaning, purpose, and connection as adults. What more could we ask for?

Commentary from Rabbi Ilyse Kramer:

“... ALL GUIDING US TO LIVE OUR LIVES, INTEGRATING LEARNING WITH OUR SOULS.”

In my years of experience working with adult learners, there is a “special sauce” to be savored when Jewish learning comes from the heart: genuine lifelong learning combines a curiosity to learn with one’s life experiences; and by doing so, our adult learners begin to experience study as a living process—one that moves us from life to text and from text back into our lives. As a favorite teacher of mine (Franz Rosenzweig, 19th c. German Jewish philosopher, and student of Martin Buber, in his book, *On Jewish Learning*, p. 98) reminds us:

[T]he old form of maintaining the relationship between life and the Book will no longer work. . . . [W]e must discover a new way of learning... It is a learning in reverse order. A learning that no longer starts from the Torah and leads into life, but the other way around: from life, from a world (that knows nothing of Law . . .) back to the Torah. That is the sign of the time.

Additionally, I have found that adult lifelong learners often are searching for more than simply the content or topics to learn from a given course or situation. For sure there is a desire to “know more” (basic literacy) and to be exposed to aspects of Jewish learning and tradition that they may never have experienced before earlier on in life. Or, it can be described as a renewed learning (when the old becomes new) and seemingly fresh in one’s eyes and soul that touches most deeply. I say, seemingly, because for some adult learners, this process is one of remembering or recovering something precious that might feel as though it were lost—or right there, in some way, but no longer accessible. Viewed in this light, Jewish tradition and text study/learning functions as a vessel (or, like a cup): it contains the wisdom that many adult learners seek, but is not itself the wisdom they seek. It holds the place for all of the questions, feelings, doubts, and fears (accumulated over the years, perhaps); while allowing for a seeking (a hide and seek moment): for example, an experience to feel as fresh as a child feels when discovering something new and of utmost importance. As adults we may no longer feel as though we are in touch with such wide-eye moments of our childhood discoveries, and yet, Jewish learning with adults can in fact be just that. Moments of intersection, where meaning and relevance seamlessly blend into acts of deep knowing—either as whispers (a small voice in our soul) or as momentary flashes in front of our eyes (as a light turning on bright, or, a smile across our face), as if to say, I know this... or, I know this to be true... or, simply, I know. Such moments are what many would label an integration of knowledge into an even deeper level of authentic and personal connection to the mystery of life, and even for some, to the divine, the sacred, or Holy One of blessing. It’s the place where one’s Jewish learning and

living meet, and a new relationship is born. Even for a fleeting moment, such connections illicit change and a desire for more integrated learning-living Jewish experiences.

As premier adult educator, Barry Holtz, in *Finding Our Way*, (Introduction, pages 5-14) explains:

This kind of teaching happens in two ways: 1. To read a text and discover new ideas or insights that we never thought about before; finding a personal connection that is new or well-known to us; or a brand, new discovery. 2. Serves as a reminder of that which we knew but had forgotten or put aside.

As Martin Buber teaches as a response to the demands of the hour... “the task before us: to see in what ways those words on the page can come alive, listening to the voice behind the text as it speaks to us, indeed, as it aims to move us towards change...”

Or, to describe the same process in the language of the Jewish mystics: there are thousands of aspects and meanings in the Torah and that *each individual soul* has *its own particular way of understanding* the sacred words. Each individual *hears new understandings* into being. Moreover, having a wise instructor as one’s guide along this journey, enables each adult learner to develop their unique *Torah voice* along with its myriad of interpretations.

As a rabbi-educator, I have spent a great deal of time teaching and modeling a constructive way for majority and minority voices to be heard and respected, as each voice plays an important role in civil disagreement. When executed well these multiple perspectives create an opportunity for mature and sustaining growth, and offer a model for religious communities to embody as an impulse for good—as a light, found within each person—in this seemingly fractured world that too often narrates a very different and dark worldview. Our religious and spiritual traditions, however, have the potential to offer a compelling, alternative narrative of hope and of light in a world badly in need of both.

This is a challenging and counter-intuitive teaching for adult learners, in particular: that we can learn even more about ourselves and our own religious traditions when we do so in the presence of others—once we begin to develop our unique Torah voice and one’s teachings in order to share with others along the journey.

Some educational experiences with Jewish learning/living are a result of a linear path carved out over the years by placing many stepping stones down along the way. Other experiences might better be described (as in the poem above by Deb Schein, *A Learning Poem: When and How the Quest Begins*) as a learning in reverse order: where there has been no access to language or sacred text or conversation to open or begin a conversation. Instead, it might be better described as a flash of insight from an experience: an act of “love” or “care” which touches deeply—and spurs the desire to find a way to enable growth and change.

To learn and live, more fully, more genuinely with one's self and others.

For many adult learners, getting or gaining access to the building-block foundation of Jewish learning and living (i.e., how one “does” or “expresses” one's Jewish life and self) strengthens his/her confidence; and in turn, such confidence, enables the learner to become the meaning-maker (or, midrash-maker) of Torah that most resonates to their lives as Jews today. Many of these adult learners may in fact register for a course on a hunch or an unspecified instinct; or even, because their friend encouraged them to do so. But on the other hand, for many other adult learners, a potent or challenging life experience (i.e., divorce, an untimely death, illness, etc.) propels them to register for a class, without, perhaps, even knowing “why,” but only—that what they are searching for may be uncovered/discovered. In these cases, the learning itself is in reverse order: life experiences amplify the questions for which they are seeking answers; and, or, *new ways to live* into their own answers. Whether by life experience or a desire to learn more, it is on account of this “life-to-text, text-to-life dance” which is the gift adult learners receive. The synergy created in such an environment, deepens one's connection not only to being Jewish—but in addition—deepens one's confidence “to do” Jewish not only in class or in the synagogue, but to live out one's learning at home. However, it's been my experience more often than not, that for so many adult learners, a type of spiritual-seeking is the only way to experience our poem's final line: “... All guiding us to live our lives, integrating learning with our souls.” For in such rare and sweet moments of our lives, Jewish learning opens us up to the paths of peace to our souls. It is a place where Jewish learning and living (the Torah of our lives) transforms into a “Tree of Life” that sustains our life, to which, “we only desire to hold fast...”

Commentary from Rabbi James Greene:

Language is symbolic and learned. Language comes from experiences in the world, and reverberates through the generations as a legacy.

I love watching children use the language of their parents and grandparents. In that moment, we see the potential of their experience and the ways in which their learning has been sparked by people who love them. As a rabbi who has worked in the JCC and Jewish camping movements for most of my career, I have seen first-hand how the experiences of families and immersive Jewish experiences shape the Jewish identity of adults. It comes out when my daughter sings a Camp song around the Shabbat table, and just as readily when my mother reads the same poem at her *seder* table that my grandmother read 60 years ago. And, I see it in the ways in which my Camp staff integrate their own camper experiences as they cultivate lifelong Jewish journeys that are meaningful, inspiring, and relevant.

The critical task of Jewish adulthood is integrating these experiences. Our interactions with God, *tefillah*, spirituality, and values as young people shape the patterns we take on as adults. The language we learn and the symbols we use as young people are a link between the generations that came before us and those that will come in the future. That is true whether the generations are familial, or whether they are connected to a place, like Jewish Camps. As we share those commonplaces and experiences with the young people in our generation, we are planting a tree that, if rooted strong, will outlast us. It is a gift, given with love, that allows us to articulate meaning to our experiences. The critical work of parents, educators, and Jewish professionals is to think creatively and strategically about how and what we teach with our youth, so that they are well-equipped to integrate those experiences and that language into a lifelong pattern of Jewish living, connection, and celebration.