

The rebellious son (rasha) represents the skeptic who asks, "What do these texts have to do with me? Why should we spend time rehashing this old material, when there is pressing temple business that needs our attention?" The innocent son (tam) might signify the spiritual seeker. Rather than being interested in the particularities of the text, he may be grappling with tough questions. "How can these texts help me to understand myself as a Jew and help me to find greater meaning in my life?"

The son who does not know even what to ask (she-aino yodei-a lish-ol) might be a congregant who was raised in a totally secular household, a woman discouraged from receiving a Jewish education, a man who suffered a humiliating experience with text study when preparing for his bar mitzvah, or perhaps a person who was raised to believe that only scholars and rabbis are qualified to be "at the table."

Lessons from Literature

Adult learners tend to be highly initiatory, self-directing volunteers who want their learning to be applicable to life situations. When they discover such connections, they become excited about the content and are often eager to take on new learning challenges. At the same time, many adults do not trust their ability to retain new information or ideas and need encouragement, reinforcement, and support. Once past the initial awkwardness of new learning, most prefer active, experiential learning activities that move them beyond lectures and a fixed curriculum. As they gain a sense of mastery, they wish to design their own learning agendas and share their knowledge with others.

To remain engaged in learning activities, adults expect to be afforded a number of courtesies. They tend to be very self-protective about their time commitments and expect efficiency, convenience, flexibility and physical comfort in the learning setting. Many want to be provided with an overview of material or ideas that will sustain them if they cannot study on a regular basis. Some insist upon individualized learning programs.

Lessons from Research

The lessons of the "four sons" paradigm were echoed in a survey of fourteen Reform synagogue lay leaders after they had studied Jewish text for the first time. At first, many of the respondents felt hesitant and anxious about being "exposed" as Jewishly illiterate. A synagogue board member who owned her own business reported: "I felt total fear, like I was a little kid. You don't want to look stupid. And you look around and you wonder who's confident and who's maybe as ill-equipped as you are."

Our research, conducted as part of the Experiment in Congregational Education, revealed that collaborative study techniques, such as working in hevruta (with a partner) and using well-structured questions, helped these adults to overcome their initial discomfort. Through structured text-study exercises, the leaders came to relish the challenge of unpacking the text and translating its precepts in contemporary terms. They were intrigued that the issues they were studying had been important to earlier generations of Jews, and surprised by the wide range of accessible Jewish sources. They valued the atmosphere of candor that evolved among group

members and appreciated their rabbis' willingness to disclose how various texts had affected their own lives. Some of the men and women indicated that they were on a personal quest for meaning and were amazed at how text study could be tied to spiritual reflection and growth. Others commented that text study helped them to clarify their Jewish values, connect them to previous generations, and bring Torah into their lives.

Almost everyone we interviewed noted that the process of text study seemed to lead to an enriched sense of community. The unifying nature of text study inspired one synagogue president to envision a genuine transformation of synagogue life: "When you bring a group of people together, the discussion is led properly and everybody starts airing their feelings, already you have a new bond. And then you go a step further and start to delve into some history and text, and there's another bond. Soon the chain starts to link together, and then you can build a beautiful fence!"

Getting Started

In thinking about introducing more text study into your congregation, it is important to help learners set realistic goals, both for themselves and for the community of learners. Recognize that these goals will evolve as more congregants become engaged in learning activities.

Setting Goals

A learning congregation needs to be cultivated. The following five goals should become part of every congregation's learning agenda:

1. Textual literacy is a foundation for all that comes afterward. At its most basic, it involves having some familiarity with the foundational Jewish texts, the key historical figures, and the most important narratives and legal precepts.
2. Finding personal meaning in the text is what keeps most learners coming back for more. Textual literacy, in and of itself, is inert, unless we know why we should care about these personalities, events, and laws. Studying text should give us insight into our own lives; conversely, a lifetime of knowledge and experience can be brought to bear on interpreting the text.
3. Reflection on personal belief and practice in light of what has been studied is what the prayer book refers to as *torat hayim*, the Torah applied to life. This type of reflection becomes an essential ingredient in how we think about ourselves.
4. Learning how to study text is no simple matter. There are a range of interpretive lenses which allow the student to explain seeming contradictions, appreciate historical and cultural contexts, fill in missing pieces of information, and understand the full import of recurrent literary motifs. Learning how to learn allows us to "own" the text.
5. Creating a community of learners combines all of these goals. The end point is not to become an educated Jew, but a continually learning one, and to go on to teach others.

Bringing text study into synagogue life is like opening our doors to all who wish to come and share the Passover seder. Through systematic planning and goal setting, each of us, regardless of our level of knowledge, can find a place at the table and begin.

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