

**"Find(ing) Yourself A Teacher:"
Opening the Discussion on
Pedagogy at the AJS Conference**

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AT LAST DECEMBER'S AJS conference, Marc Bregman (Hebrew Union College-Jerusalem), Michael Signer (University of Notre Dame) and I tried to do something different. We organized a session entitled "*Aseh Lekhka Rav u-Qneh Lekha Haver*—Teaching Traditional Texts: An Open Discussion on Pedagogy." The title reflected our aim: we wanted to initiate discourse on the subject of teaching and we wanted an open discussion rather than another block of paper readings. We did not expect a large turnout, but, much to our surprise, the room filled up with around 80 people from the broad spectrum of graduate students and senior scholars who make up the AJS.

We had many reasons for proposing a session on teaching. First, this subject has been conspicuously absent from AJS programming. It is a commonplace that with rise of the post-war modern university, teaching became a kind of poor step-sister to research. In recent years, however, that trend has begun to be reversed. Some of this interest has come from transformations in methodology, new questions about what constitutes knowledge and its modes of transmission, and issues surrounding politics in the classroom. Some of it has arisen in reaction to attacks on the university and its ethos. But there is also an independent desire to take teaching more seriously by a new generation of scholars who are questioning the conventions on which our professional lives as academics have been based.

We also believed that the AJS conference itself needed some alternative formats. What we ourselves do in these conferences implicitly reflects much about what we think teaching and learning are, and how we construct academic community. The fixed structure of most sessions—three or four separate papers read to the audience with relatively little time for questions or dialogue—reflects an underlying assumption about how we think knowledge is best communicated. There have been radical changes in our postmodern view of knowledge, and in the kinds of stu-

dents who now make up the university (and seminary) population. But we still seem to be employing a mode of scholarly discourse appropriate for pre-print culture, some aspects of which may even harken back to medieval scholasticism.

II

So our plan for our session was simply for each of us to talk informally and personally for only ten minutes each, on a very practical level, about what techniques we have found particularly useful in teaching traditional Jewish texts to a variety of non-specialists, and to use these remarks as a springboard for an open discussion with the entire audience.

We first decided to break the "ascetic tradition" of having only ice water on hand at AJS sessions and replace it with a more Jewish mode—serving food. The Passover Seder and Hasidic "tish" aside, there is indeed a deep connection between "opening the mouth" and "opening the mind"—a kind of receptiveness created by the communal sharing of food that is a great facilitator of learning. Since our session was scheduled for 9 PM on Tuesday evening, we passed around after dinner liqueurs and chocolates.

To further foster interchange with the audience, we abandoned the dais and re-arranged the large room ahead of time by putting as many of the chairs as we could in a large circle. Many of us do this routinely in our classrooms—why not at a conference? What indeed physically constitutes a good "scene of instruction"? Why is it that often the most instructive and interesting intellectual interchanges at conferences take place in the hallways, lounges, and bars rather than at the sessions themselves? How can we integrate that lively exchange of ideas into the sessions? Is there any reason why we must only lecture frontally at colleagues sitting silently before us in straight rows of chairs?

The common thread in all our informal remarks was based on a key point made by Michael Signer, that, "in good teaching, form should follow function, ... i.e., the students should do something that imitates the life of the text they are studying." In what sense, one might ask, do traditional Jewish texts themselves contain an implicit

pedagogy? How does any text teach us how to teach it? As Marc Bregman said in his comments, his goal was not only to teach his students how to decipher rabbinic texts to his satisfaction as their teacher ... but also to demand that they think constantly about how they would communicate these texts to their future students and congregants who know less than they. "I like to think that this recaptures something of the traditional transmission of rabbinic learning." In teaching, he said, he has learned not only that "the best way to learn is to teach," but also that "the best way to teach is to teach to teach."

Marc and I also have a special interest in midrash and share a sense of the "performative" nature of these texts. Marc described a course he has designed on "Interpreting Scripture" that focuses on the Aqedah, telling how he begins by having students elaborate and concretize the brief biblical text as if they were making it into a film. My comments were based on a handout I gave illustrating methods I have found successful in teaching "The Bible as Literature" in an English Department to a mix of Jewish and non-Jewish undergraduates, many of them with little background, at a large state university. Among the examples were: techniques for "putting a text into play," i.e., seeing it as a "script" to be "performed" by its readers; samples of student re-writes of biblical stories in contemporary style (Joseph and Potiphar's wife as a "Silhouette Romance"); role plays; and letters of students to each other, to biblical personae and to me. Instead of journals, which have no real audience, I now have my students write letters that are "published" by their bringing copies for the entire class and reading them aloud.

III

After the three of us had spoken for the first half-hour, we decided to take a risk. Rather than just open the floor to discussion, we actually employed some techniques from what is now known in educational circles as "collaborative learning," a mode of restructuring the classroom for more interactive and interdependent learning and teaching. (Many collaborative learning techniques are surprisingly similar to the venerable *hevruta* method of *yeshiva* learning.) We announced that we would like to divide the audience into small groups of four

persons each, in which they would introduce themselves and discuss in each group for ten minutes or so the following two questions: "What is the biggest problem you are having in your teaching? What's the most successful teaching technique you have discovered?" Then we would solicit comments from the small groups and open it to a whole group discussion.

At this point, not surprisingly, a mini-walk-out occurred. About one-quarter of the audience got up and made haste for the doors. Some were probably already tired by the long day, but my hunch is that others left out of resistance to the idea of having to talk in a small group. Perhaps we teachers are so used to the controlled rhetoric of solitary performance in front of a passive class or audience that the idea of turning to the person sitting in the next seat and talking more personally about one's own teaching made some people uneasy.

We were, however, pleasantly surprised by the intensity of the reactions of those who stayed. One especially noteworthy theme was the *Angst* several audience members expressed about the conflicts of teaching "sacred texts in profane settings," of how to balance spiritual commitment with critical dispassion.

We then allowed a free non-directed discussion with the microphone being passed from one audience member to the next, and little commentary from us. In retrospect, this discussion, like any good classroom discussion, could have been moderated more, but an interesting weave of voices and concerns was heard. Moshe Greenberg (Hebrew University), for example, put it simply and eloquently by saying that "the teacher is a model of inquiry. He displays how he inquires into the text and creates a paradigm and standard by which the student can judge what he doing." The good teacher, then, does not go into the classroom fully knowing in advance what the text means, but tries to find out together with the students. This reminded Marc Bregman of the saying in the Talmud Bavli, "Teach your tongue to say, I do not know" (Ber. 4a; Derekh Eretz Zuta 3:30), for that is what enables true "inquiry" (also the meaning of the Hebrew root *darash* for the word *midrash*).

Joseph Lukinsky (Jewish Theological Seminary) noted that, "aside from

some technical imperatives, in much of our teaching there is no absolutely necessary reason why students are learning any given specific material. Ultimately, what the teacher is trying to do is to imbue students with your vision. ... We are artists. The job of art is to make you see the world in a way you never saw it before. ... [In our case, it is] to get them to see not just the surface of this text we are teaching, but to see that it is deeper. I think it is deeper this way, and four-fifths of them will see that it's deeper in a totally other way, which may be interesting to me or totally boring. But they see it as deeper, and they are excited and I did my job."

IV

Was the session successful? Yes and no. The problems of a professor at a large state university with a mix of Jewish and non-Jewish undergraduates are different from those of a scholar in an advanced graduate program at a rabbinical seminary or Ph.D. program. Teaching Talmud is different from teaching Italian Jewish history or Saul Bellow. And yet, at least a discussion was begun, and pedagogy was given a place and a name at the AJS.

We would urge that discussions and sessions on teaching become an integral part of every AJS conference. There should be a regular division devoted to it, just as there is to Kabbalah, or Chasidism, or Rabbinic Literature. Our hope is also that, as a collective body, the AJS begin to experiment with different formats for the conference itself. Other academic conferences have begun to include many options including: roundtable seminars where the papers are distributed in advance; workshops that are designed for maximum interchange among leaders and participants; sessions where "great teachers" illustrate how they teach "great texts"; idea-exchange tables, where participants leave copies of teaching ideas and exercises that have worked well for them and pick up those of others, and so forth.

Certainly, chairs of conventional panels could help make sure that there is ample time for audience questions, and even for one speaker on a panel to actually engage with another! Studies have shown that the maximum average adult attention span in listening to oral discourse is no more than twenty minutes. It is mind-numbing rather than mind-

enriching to try to listen to three or four 20-minute-plus papers often read hurriedly one after another. Speakers could also help by not writing up their talks as if they were journal articles, i.e., in the complex language adapted to the printed text, but rather than in the simpler more recursive language needed by the listening ear. Yet many speakers are loath to do this. Why? What drives the writing and delivery of some of these highly difficult-to-absorb papers, I think, is as much performance anxiety as a desire to communicate, i.e., a fear of being exposed as ignorant, or a need to prove mastery of the field so as to forestall attack.

In sum, the principles for good communication are the same for both a conference session and classroom. For what, in the end, is the purpose of an academic conference, and of scholarship in general? Parker Palmer, an educational theorist, has written eloquently in his book *To Know as We Are Known* (Harper San Francisco, 1983) about some of the negative effects of the "hidden curriculum," of cruel competition within the university, of how "the whole culture of the academic community with its systems of rewards and punishments works to shape our views of self and world." It is that "hidden curriculum" that students absorb as their lessons as much as if not more than the actual "content" of the material (19). But "to teach," continues Palmer, "is to create a space in which the community of truth is practised."

And truth he defines as a kind of "troth"—a covenant with another, a pledge to engage in a mutually accountable and transforming relationship, a relationship forged of trust and faith in the face of unknowable risks. To know something or someone in truth is to enter troth with the known, to rejoin with new knowing what our minds have put asunder (31).

"The true work of the mind," then, "is to reconnect us with that which would otherwise be out of reach, to reweave the great community of our lives" (xvi). That, too, may be the deeper meaning of the line from Pirke Avot (1:6) that we chose for the title of our session: the relation between *Aseh Lekhka Rav u-Qneh Lekha Haver*—"finding and making" oneself a teacher, and the acquiring of a friend.