



Focus on the conversation

High school grants a unique opportunity for personal development by allowing students to begin discovering their life’s trajectory. Throughout the four years, students explore a variety of classes and ideas that allow them to build their life philosophy.

In a Jewish day school there is an additional element of development. Along with exploring political and educational philosophies, students study religious ideals and their integration into the modern world. Students must decide how they wish to advance their Judaism educationally and socially. As such, building a strong foundation and developing passion remain the pillars to an impactful Jewish education.

I vividly remember learning the *halachot* of building a Sukkah from when I was in middle school. The class began with a lesson on the requirements of a Sukkah, and once everyone understood, we were able to ask questions beyond the text. Can an elephant be a wall? Can it be two stories tall? And, once the learning inside the classroom was done, we all paired up and built our own model Sukkahs which were graded on *halachic* accuracy and creativity.

Allowing students to have a conversation with a text provides this foundation. In this path, a teacher supplies a text – be it a passage from the Torah, a philosophical paper or a historical document – and the class reads and interprets the text and then discusses how it relates to their lives and contemporary culture.

This method creates an atmosphere for learning about Judaism and connecting with important sources and figures. The discussions are used as tools for understanding the material and engaging the class. The information learned is thus moved from the page to the minds and ears of class participants.

However, in order for this outcome to unfold, the class must function with an established goal. Above all else, it is crucial that the text itself be understood and discussed, at least on a basic level. Only after the class understands the text should discussion ensue. With the teacher leading and guiding the conversation, each student can add their personal thoughts on the subject. While staying on topic, the class as a whole moves from unit to unit with a constant understanding and connection to the text and Judaism.

When the material becomes something integrated into the students’ thoughts and emotions, it becomes real and everlasting. Though this approach can lead to off topic discussion, sometimes this can be a benefit. Judaics can be fun, they can be real, they can soar off the page into the souls of students.

by Benji Zoller



“Judaics should be taught in a discussion-based format because it allows people to understand the ideas easier. The idea of a Judaics class is to learn the Judaic concept, not the Hebrew.”
-Eli Minsky [9]

HOW SHOULD JUDAICS BE TAUGHT?

Focus on the text

When creating a Judaics curriculum, the faculty of any Jewish day school have a difficult question to answer: How should we teach Judaics? In the end, it comes down to two options. There’s, discussion-based Judaics, implemented in efforts to interest students and prompt

enlightening debates. And then there’s rigorous, text-based Judaics, implemented with the goal of challenging students and guiding them on a path to future learning.

High school presents a crucial time for the development of adolescents, and certainly all educators hope that a student will take their knowledge and apply it to the next stage of life.

Since Judaism is a way of life, it would be tragic if day school students abandoned their religion the moment they graduate. But discussion-based Judaics veer students toward that path. While conversations on philosophical and controversial topics can be had with little scholarship, how can adults later in life continue their Judaic studies on their own without ever learning how to learn? This foundation comes from analyzing texts.

Furthermore, there is nothing like the feeling of struggling through a complicated text, be it an excerpt from Tanach, a classic commentary or a *Masechet* in Gemara. The pride and accomplishment that follows a difficult learning session is unparalleled. Moreover, if one were to have a Judaic question later in life or the desire to pick up a book and learn, is it not the duty of their educators early on to give him the tools to do so? This can only be accomplished through rigorous, textual Judaics. Ideas have value, but the true gain comes with the ability to reach those ideas independently.

Ideas and opinions change constantly throughout life, and it is important to have a solid foundation in textual analysis to support those opinions. Students can’t intelligently discuss their stances and thoughts without a strong foundation in dealing directly with texts.

Furthermore, learning classical texts in Hebrew, the language in which the Torah was originally written and has been passed down for thousands of years, adds an invaluable dimension to the learning process. Through learning Judaics in Hebrew, students become active participants in passing Judaism from generation to generation.

Struggling through a text is hard, especially for novice students. But the benefits are worth the struggle, and the lessons one gains from working through the texts will remain with that person forever.

by Rosie Bernstein



“I think it’s important that we see the origins of what we know and where we come from, and the only way to do that is by analyzing the texts themselves.”
-Rachel Rapps [11]



“Being able to take apart a text is a wonderful skill and core to Jewish literacy. The best curriculum would balance text skills with deeper discussions about core Jewish values.”
-Rabbi Maury Grebenau



“I prefer discussion because with text-based, there’s no open interpretation and I believe Judaism is all about your interpretation and how you want to be Jewish.”
-Pierce Bell [10]