

“... When I Have Leisure I Shall Study ...” by Barbara Rosoff

Throughout Jewish history we find a reverence for learning. There are many admonishments in Jewish literature and tradition to study and to learn Torah.¹ In a tractate of the Mishnah, Pirke Avot (Chapters of the Fathers), we are constantly reminded of the necessity to learn, e.g., to provide oneself a teacher²; to listen to Rabbi Simeon who declared that there are “three crowns,” with the crown of learning mentioned first³; and to take to heart what Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai said, “If you have learned much Torah, ascribe not any merit to yourself, for thereunto were you created.”⁴ In fact, he who neglects the study of Torah in the end will inherit Gehinom (the opposite of Gan Eden or Paradise).⁵ And, most disastrous of all, “He who does not study deserves to die,” states Rabbi Hillel.⁶ It is considered such an honor to teach Torah that the Talmud states: “Whoever teaches Torah in this world will be privileged to teach it in the next.”⁷ The following sentence leaves no doubt in one’s mind as to the importance of learning in Judaism: “Talmud Torah K’neged Kulam” – “The Study of Torah Above All Else.”⁸

It is most interesting that we are even advised as to the proper attitude we should assume when we approach the study of Torah. Rabbi Elazar tells us to “Be eager to learn Torah.”⁹

Type Aleph Students

At this point, I shall turn from focusing on the wisdom in Pirke Avot to relate the story of why I am writing this article. During the spring semester in 2004, I taught two sixth grade classes at the supplementary school where I had been the principal before retiring. My husband and I were back in New Jersey for the year 2003/2004 because he was serving as a congregation’s interim rabbi. I was writing curriculum, teaching at a Hebrew high school, and enjoying my children and grandchildren. I received a phone call asking me if I was available to teach two sixth grade classes, on two separate days of the week; their teacher was moving out of town and the distance was too far to commute. I replied that I would love to.

I entered my classroom on the first day with my lesson plan and usual enthusiasm, tempered with some apprehension, knowing the challenges presented by pre-adolescent young ladies and gentlemen. I need not have given it a thought. The classes were composed of happy, motivated, and intelligent students. They chanted loudly and clearly the b’rachot before and after Torah and Haftarah reading; they asked if they could go to the sanctuary to do it “for real” up on the bima. They read tefillot and translated most – not always word-for-word, but with the general meaning. We reviewed what they had learned previously in Hebrew School about the holidays and they responded with interest to the more detailed information I offered to supplement their excellent textbook. They asked if they could create portfolios about each of the holidays in which they could write their feelings about the holiday, write poems or plays, perhaps add illustrations, and look for material at home on their computers. Of course I responded in the affirmative. Creating holiday portfolios was integrated into my lesson plans from then on.

Class discussions were lively, very lively! They asked questions, excellent questions – good, thought-provoking questions -- concerning almost everything we learned about each holiday. This was the only time that there were discipline problems – if you could term them as such – because everyone wanted to talk at

that there were discipline problems – if you could term them as such – because everyone wanted to talk at once. They worked individually, in dyads and in small groups. The material I brought to present to them was regarded as challenge. In my mind I termed them young “workaholics,” Type Aleph! They had a “break” of ten minutes every time class met, during which they were free to go to the gym to play basketball or go out in the hall and spend time with friends from other classes. More often than not, at least some of the students stayed in the room and continued working on whatever they had been doing in class.

At each holiday (and, as you know, the spring is full of them), after we had read and discussed it, their assignment was as follows: working in dyads or triads, each group was to choose a grade level (anywhere from early childhood through sixth grade) and create a lesson plan to teach that particular holiday to the students in that grade. Obviously, this project required that they know two important facts: solid information about the holiday, including its history and the traditions associated with it, and the general abilities and characteristics of the age group that they had chosen. While they were working in their groups, I walked around the classroom, stopping at each group and offering information that they requested, making suggestions, and responding when they asked if I thought the material they were going to teach was appropriate for the grade level. They were very involved in these lesson plans and had serious discussions, often almost bordering on arguments, about what methods or techniques to include.

They had few problems with the match of the material to the age group. Most of them had younger siblings and/or younger cousins in their families; they also remembered what their abilities and interests had been when they were in the younger grades; and several were teaching assistants in the younger grades in the supplementary school.

After they had finished their plans, it was then their task to present the lesson to the class, whose job it was to pretend to be students in that age group. They absolutely loved this part of the assignment! At each holiday, their creativity in writing lesson plans would have been the envy of experienced teachers (including myself). They incorporated modern dance, role-playing, song writing, and finger-painting into their teaching. They had quiz shows and played hopscotch. They incorporated basketball into reciting the ten plagues. I was consistently amazed - and I took notes. And as educationally sound and motivating their presentations and lesson plan formats were at the beginning, they showed definite improvement from Purim to Shavuot.

Constructing a Supplementary School Curriculum

Sometime around Yom Ha'atzmaut the idea came to me to expand the horizons of this project. The idea was based on the psychological theory that when someone is involved in the building of something, there is a sense of commitment and ownership. By my empowering the students, they had empowered themselves to learn. The next time class met, I asked them if they would like to construct the curriculum of a supplementary school for their “final exam.” The response was a resounding “yes.”

They had all kinds of ideas relating to what should be taught (cooking, yes; study of history, no, etc.) This presented the opportunity for me to explain why I felt certain subjects belonged in the curriculum of a supplementary school and others did not. I talked to them about Judaism's emphasis on the importance of learning and study, with examples from Pirke Avot (see the first paragraph of this article).

We discussed the necessity of structuring time in one's life - time for learning, and time for study and

homework, and time for exercise and sports, and other examples. The quote “When I have leisure I will study; perchance you will not have leisure”¹⁰ was at first not accepted by most of the students in each class. However, after talking about it, the basic premise on which this statement was based was accepted overwhelmingly by each class because, to quote one young man who was studying for his Bar Mitzvah, “When I have free time I’d probably want to shoot basketballs – and then leave my Haftarah practice until afterwards, and then I’d never do it.” So, structure of time was approved.

One of the boys brought up the question: Why should Jewish boys and girls even go to Hebrew School? This came up towards the beginning of the discussion. “Because you’re Jewish and you’ve gotta know what that means – you’ve gotta know who you are!” sums up the general feeling expressed by the majority of the students.

What Should be Taught

The subject of WHAT should be taught came up all through our discussions. This aspect was a most interesting one for me. The students adamantly stated that there was not enough time to teach all the subjects that should be learned, and most of them agreed that there should be more hours of Hebrew School. BUT – not one was willing to come another afternoon to Hebrew School. When I told them that when I was their age I went to Hebrew School two and a half hours, four afternoons a week, and then Sunday morning for three hours, they were amazed. Their response was that it would be okay to come more hours on Sunday mornings, since they were there already anyway. They felt that what should be taught was what was already in the curriculum but they wanted to add things such as having more people should come to class to talk to them about Israel, anti-Semitism, etc. They said it became boring having the same teacher. (I did not make any comment on that!)

They wanted to add more ways to learn what they were taught; they liked working together, as they done at each holiday. One student raised her hand and explained that they did not waste time when they worked in groups and that she knew I would agree. I said I did She said that usually someone in the group knew the answer to a question that another group member asked, so you didn’t have to waste time then waiting for the teacher to be free. One of the boys added that it was more fun to work together than to be in competition with each other. That is more Jewish, he said: work together in class and compete on the soccer field. They liked the fact that they had had choices in learning this semester. I was glad to hear this being articulated, because I strongly believe in giving students a choice of alternative tasks and alternative ways to meet curricular requirements.¹¹

Somehow, the subject of “teacher” was brought up. In addition to what would have been expected at this point (teacher should be fair, should smile, should like the students, etc.), they were all adamant that the teacher definitely had to be Jewish: How could someone who is not Jewish teach Rosh Hashanah or Passover or Shabbat? If you’re teaching math or science in a middle school, you can be any religion but “if you’re going to teach in a Jewish school, you have to be Jewish!”

The “Final Exam”

For what I termed their “final exam,” I created a form, and, on the last day of class, they completed the forms

(individually, no dyads or groups this time). The last questions on the “final exam” were meant to encourage divergent thinking:

- What do you think you should study next year in 7th grade – the year that most of you will celebrate your Bar or Bat Mitzvah?
- The rabbi and your teachers encourage you to continue your Jewish studies in a Judaic high school. Why do you think they want you to do this?

For the most part, their answers were well-thought-out. They wanted to talk about what it really meant to be a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. What do you mean – “Now you are a man”?

What does it mean to be an adult in Jewish terms? A few of them wanted to study Pirke Avot (because the teacher – me! - is always quoting from it). I read all of their papers; there was very little new written as compared with our discussions in class. Sentimentally, I am keeping their papers in my Box of Teaching Treasures.

What do I feel can be generalized to other schools from this experience? It is my belief that students should have an opportunity to participate in curriculum building and how they should be taught. Obviously, this does not mean that they dictate the subjects or methodology. However, empowering them in some important way can lead to positive outcomes.

Encouraging students to have a sense of ownership in the curriculum and the school can only encourage positive outcomes. I present three observations that are important:

- This class was an unusual class composed of bright and fairly well-motivated students.
- Each school has its own particular style: How one school would involve students in working with the curriculum committee would differ from how a second school would do so.
- In order for this to be successful, the support of the principal, faculty, and education board must be in place. What a beautiful vision for the future in Jewish education!

Time has been structured for our students in the Jewish school to study. The study of Judaism has not been left to chance. We do not say “When I have leisure, I will study; perchance you will have no leisure.”¹² Time for learning is scheduled. Now we must encourage our students to be involved, to be dedicated along with their teachers, and to take upon themselves the commitment to the mission of Jewish education.

Dr. Barbara Rosoff has taught in Grades Pre-K through Graduate School, served as principal at both Solomon Schechter and supplemental schools, presented at CAJE Conferences, and led workshops for teachers and principals. She was the Chair of the Jewish Education News Editorial Board for four years.

Endnotes:

1. “Torah” is meant here to include other studies in Judaica, in addition to the Five Books of Moses.
2. *Pirke Avot*, 1:6.

3. *Pirke Avot*, 4:17.
4. *Pirke Avot*, 2:9.
5. *Pirke Avot*, 1:5.
6. *Pirke Avot*, 1:13.
7. *Sandedrin*, 92a.
8. *Mishnah Peah*, Perek Aleph.
9. *Pirke Avot*, 2:19.
10. *Pirke Avot*, 2:5.
11. Rosoff, B. *Socializing Students' Motivation to Learn: A Handbook For Teachers In The Jewish Religious School*, 1990, p. 17 and appendix. Available from author.
12. *Pirke Avot*, 2:5.