

MTEI Cohort 7 Seminar 1 Follow Up Assignment- Text Study

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"You have to talk yourself into it."

How can Rabbi Nehunya inspire us to enter our classrooms with intention?

On September 10, 2015, I shared the Rabbi Nehunyah text at The Valley Temple Religious School's Opening Faculty Meeting to set the stage for weekly faculty meetings (something new this year!) during which we will study text together regularly. I hoped to be able to re-introduce havruta learning and debrief aspects of the process (choosing havruta, studying the text, debriefing the text). I also hoped that the text itself would foster a rich discussion about starting a new school year and more specifically, about how we intend to start each session of Religious School.

The teachers began by responding to the prompt: *When I enter my classroom, I am thinking... I am feeling...* When it was time to share, the normally gregarious group was a little tentative. Maybe it felt too personal.

The instructions for the actual text study advised participants to find a partner, read the text, and look carefully at the text using the learning guide. We formed pairs (I intentionally did not give them any guidance for how to form the pairs) and studied.

We returned to the large group and I intended to have participants share their responses to the text using the learning guide to organize the discussion. But when everyone was sitting around the table, I sensed that we should debrief the process first. I asked the teachers how getting into pairs and studying in pairs *felt*. What did they want to share about the process? When the first person shared his reaction to breaking into pairs, I asked the follow-up question, What are the implications for teaching? We went around the table and this may have been the best part of the discussion:

The process	and the implications for teaching
Every group wanted to do it a different way. We had to accommodate each other (reading aloud, reading silently, doing the questions in order)	Be flexible. Participants were grateful to be allowed to do what they wanted/needed to do.
At first it was stressful because I didn't have a partner	Assign partners. (Use numbers, stickers) If an even number, let the kids pair themselves.
Hebrew (without vowels) and English made the text accessible for some but intimidating for others	What is the point of including it if students cannot use it?
Translation was bothersome for some. (Someone	Translation is midrash. There are lessons in this.

even said, 'wrong!')	Anticipate issues that can come up with translation and allow for discussion. (I told the group that after the hearty discussion the translation provoked at MTEI, I gave them the exact MTEI text to see how they would react--- knowing there are rabbis, rabbinic students, and people with very little Hebrew knowledge.)
Parentheses made it hard to read	This must be how kids feel when they are following along in the prayerbook and we skip parenthetical words. (e.g.-revive the dead) What can we do to include every reader and make it meaningful to all of them? On the other hand, don't water it down so much that you lose the meaning.
Appreciated that they were given steps, but the discussion took on a life of its own	You create an environment that can empower the students. You can't control their conversations, but you can give direction. If they feel 'allowed' to go off track, sometimes that can lead somewhere.
Appreciated that facilitator did not 'stop by' and lurk over shoulders to listen.	Is there a way to notice how the conversations are going without making participants feel like they are on stage?
Should the more 'important' questions go first?	Does teacher have an agenda or questions that seem more essential? Time is always a factor and will the 'intended' lesson not be learned if students do not get through all the questions?

Then, we talked about the text itself. The teachers shared their insights and also asked questions. Here are some of the faculty's interpretations of the text and some questions they had:

- Rabbi Nehunyah is saying, "You shouldn't be asking me. It's my own personal prayer."
- What could he possibly do in the Beit Midrash that would cause something bad to happen?
- It is a responsibility, a privilege to be in front of the room. Anything can happen: you could say the wrong thing, a door can swing open and hit someone in the face.
- You are giving the class an experience.

- When we go to sleep, we say prayers and when we wake we say prayers (thanking God for returning our souls to our bodies). At the beginning (of the evening) we ask for help from God and at the end of that time (the morning) we thank God. So it's about help and gratitude.
- The prayer upon entering is his set induction. The students will learn to take responsibility for their actions.
- HaMakom- the place- reminds us of fixed prayer vs. spontaneous prayer. What does it mean to give people space to pray?
- Mishnah sometimes uses HaMakom to mean God. Students are asking... what is Godly about this prayer?
- If we think he is studying with colleagues (rather than as a teacher), what could it mean to stumble... to embarrass oneself?
- WHY THIS TRANSLATION? It is missing words...

Lastly, we returned to the original prompt... *With the experience of studying the text, think again about entering your classroom. What are you thinking and feeling as you enter?* This time, everyone wanted to share. Some of their takeaways from the text study include:

- I open class with a quiz game. The first year I used this as opening activity, and I led the game. Last year, I gave the madrich responsibility to lead the game and did not micromanage him. So, even if my inclination was to 'make sure no mishap took place,' I knew that it would be valuable for all. It changed the way students viewed the madrich (and probably how he viewed himself).
- I plan to come in with intentionality. Set tone for myself, for everyone else.
- Think of students' needs and levels. I struggle with differences. It is frustrating to feel that some students are held back by others in the room. The process of havruta made this occur to me.
- I am feeling privileged to be teaching. It's easy to say, "I'm exhausted." There's an easy way out. Give them busy work. But it's a responsibility, an opportunity.
- "You have to talk yourself into it."