

I taught the Mishnah in Berakhot about Rabbi Nechuniah ben HaKaneh, primarily because preparing that lesson plan was what we spoke about at the end of the last seminar. I convened a text study for the full staff of Sefaria (approximately ten people), and focused on questions around the Rabbi Nechuniah's space – how he felt when he entered and left, and what that implies about the space itself. Everyone on our team works in some way to build a space – our website – and we all think about the feel and tone, the content, how long people stay, what they do there, and why or when they leave.

Here's the source sheet: <http://www.sefaria.org/sheets/18196>

I had two goals for this study:

- 1) To have a shared experience of studying and making meaning from a Jewish text. Although we all work on this website together, we are a very diverse group. Some people have studied Jewish texts only in traditional yeshivot, others have studied in more pluralistic settings, and some have rarely or never studied Jewish texts at all. I think it is important for everyone building Sefaria to have a taste of the ways that Jewish texts can inspire and provoke deep thought about all areas of life, even the work of shaping our site.
- 2) To inspire everyone to think about these questions of space: How is Sefaria like a traditional Beit Midrash, and how is it different? What is the ideal “space” that we envision when we think about our site?

In order to teach this text, I presented it to the staff as a source sheet to which anyone can add. I had a few questions on the sheet, and encouraged everyone to add responses (in the form of text or other media). Several days later, we spent twenty minutes learning it together at the beginning of one of our biweekly team meetings. We discussed the question and their responses, and then I asked them follow up questions (which I later added to the sheet). We primarily focused on the question: What do you want people to feel upon entering our virtual “Beit Midrash,” and what do you want them to feel as they exit? Our discussion also included aspects of what we want people to feel while they are on our site. The conversation was lively and I enjoyed hearing everyone's reflections. My primary role was as a facilitator; asking people to speak and putting their ideas in conversation with one another.

The main challenge that I experienced was the distance learning component; it was sometimes hard to include everyone's voice. In addition, it was a short session. However, I found that it worked well overall. In particular, my follow up question about what we want people to feel when entering and exiting Sefaria drew a lot of interesting comments. One of the engineers even remarked, “what a fascinating thing to think about.” I think that challenging people to extrapolate from what Rabbi Nechuniah said and draw conclusions about the tone, feel, and appearance of the space was the right direction to take this material. Everyone instinctively had some kind of sense about that space, and everyone had an opinion about how our space should be the same as or different from that space. I loved how wholeheartedly everyone entered into this part of the conversation – it felt like it worked for everyone. Those who have spent time learning in a Beit Midrash reflected on what that space was like, as compared to that which may be indicated by this text, and those who haven't were able to be guided by or react to this text in imagining what a learning space should be like.

I received positive feedback overall. The best comment came from our designer, who has absolutely no experience learning Jewish texts. He said something to the effect of, “wow, this is a great new lens for thinking about the big design questions!” I was happy that he got something meaningful

from the experience.

Our engineers often use the expression “eating your own dogfood,” which is how they describe actually using the product one has been building (a good thing to do on a regular basis). I think that having the Sefaria team learn Jewish texts together is an example of this as well, and I will be incorporating it into team meetings regularly throughout the year.