

Observing and Talking with a Teacher
MTEI Cohort #7 - Post-Session #3 Assignment
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1. Whom did you observe and why did you choose this teacher?

I observed Oudi Singer, who teaches our T'fillah and TaNaCh classes (grades 6-7) as well as our Post-B'nai Mitzvah class (grades 7-9). He is a veteran teacher and a native Israeli, who also teaches in a local Day School. I chose to observe Oudi because he is deeply beloved by his students, and well-regarded by parents and other faculty members, and I was looking forward to the opportunity to see for myself in more detail what goes on in his classroom (especially since he is resistant about submitting lesson plans, reflections, or other "assignments"). I knew from general observations, and conversations with parents and students, that he was connecting with his students on a very deep level emotionally, and had created an amazing "family of learners" (his term) within his classroom. I wanted to see whether the connections he was creating with the texts and other Judaic content were as strong. Because he was creating his own curriculum, I also wanted to ensure that his lessons were cohesive enough with each other to encourage deeper learning in his students – to create a "mosaic" of learning for the year as opposed to just "fragments."

2. What was the lesson about? (brief description)

I observed a TaNaCh lesson. There were four students in class that session. Oudi began with a warm-up exercise, using two Israeli songs: "Yesh Li Yorn Yorn Chag" and "Mitzvah G'dolah Liyot B'Simcha" (class sang along to recordings on his computer~ the kids knew the lyrics, and it was apparent that this was not the first time they had heard the songs). Everyone moved and sang and clapped: the joy and energy in the room were palpable. Oudi then transitioned to the "main course" [his phrase – in our discussion, he referred to his lessons as having an "appetizer" (the songs, which vary, and sometimes include discussion about lyrics/themes), a "main course" (the central text study), and a "dessert" (a game or art/writing piece, generally led by his *madrish*, who was not there that day)] of the lesson. That day's class was supposed to be about the prophet Jeremiah (according to the lesson plan which Oudi had grudgingly produced when I nudged him for it ahead of the scheduled observation). Except that one of the students reminded Oudi that he had "promised" them that today's lesson (the last of the year) would be about Navot's vineyard, which they had referenced previously, but not had time to study fully. So Oudi **SCRAPPED HIS PLANNED LESSON ON THE SPOT, EVEN THOUGH HE WAS BEING OBSERVED** to say YES to the request for learning that was in front of him.

While Oudi searched in his book for the new text, he asked a student to pass out Hebrew/English TaNaCh books to the class. He also asked for a volunteer to tell what they remembered about the story of Navot. He let the student talk for several minutes, and even though he was focused primarily on his own book, he asked supporting/challenging questions of the student, such as "based on what you just said, why do you think they needed to do that?" He also made some wry self-deprecating comments about his prolonged search for the new text, such as "see, this situation helps us remember that we need to be well-versed in what we are doing." The class remained orderly during this time, even though it took several minutes.

Once he found the passage, he had the class open to it, and proceeded in the following manner: one child would read a verse in Hebrew, the next child would "translate for

him/her" by reading the English, and then Oudi would give a little commentary or explanation about that section. Sometimes, but not always, there was class discussion during this time, and sometimes Oudi wrote Hebrew words on the board for emphasis (such as to point out a shared *shoresh*). Over the course of the 40-minute lesson, every child read in Hebrew (students who were not reading were looking at their book, and following along with their fingers, although Oudi did not prompt them to do so), every child read in English, and every child participated in the discussion. They rotated reading through I Kings 21:1-10, then skipped to verse 19. At the end, Oudi asked the class what the moral teaching of the story was, and wrote the students' answers on the board, sometimes asking clarifying questions first. He then asked them what they knew about Elijah, and what they remembered about him from other stories they had studied – and had them refer back to the text they just read to justify their statements. When a student pointed out that they hadn't yet learned what happened to Jezebel, Oudi challenged the students to find the passage on their own, then asked the student who found it to read it aloud. At the end of the class, Oudi again asked the students to refer back to previous lessons, to tell him which stories from the year were their favorites and why. He then THANKED his students for their participation, and rewarded them with candy, joking: "this was hand-wrapped by Elijah himself, and made from the grapes of Navot's vineyard." (The candy in question was Jolly Ranchers, and not even grape flavored, at that.) His parting words were: "sweeten your study with a little bit of candy," and then the class was off to music.

3. What question(s) did you ask? Why did you decide to go with these questions?

I asked very few questions in our conversation (which lasted almost two hours). I had two pages of questions prepared ahead of time, but found that once I had laid out the purpose of our meeting and the framework for what I wanted to talk about and why, that the conversation flowed quite naturally. I began by asking "tell me the story of this lesson," and then guided the discussion with a few supporting/challenging/clarifying questions along the way. I also kept my list of questions handy, to make sure that Oudi covered all of the topics in which I was interested. But mostly I got out of Oudi's way and let him talk about his work: he is a passionate and engaged teacher and learner, and appreciated my interest.

Some of the questions I had written down were:

Please tell me more about the opening songs. (How did you choose these songs? How did opening with songs become a ritual for your class? Do you teach the students the lyrics to the songs? How do the songs relate to your overall themes for the year?)

Talk with me about your approach to studying the text. (Do you always have the kids rotate reading/translating? Do you ever use different formats for studying? Do you always pause for "drash" during the reading? Do the kids ever ask/answer questions of each other in addition to your interpreting for them? How do you decide when to pause and focus on the Hebrew – is this a common practice for you? When Micah asked the question about stoning (that threatened to derail the class's conversation), what was your thought process on how to respond?) When you ask the students to "find...in the text," or to explain "how do we know..." how do you think it affects their understanding of the material?

I understand that this class was not what you planned, but how do you normally decide which texts to study? I know that you didn't read the stories "in order" (either by how they

are written in the TaNaCh or by haftorah portion) – how did you connect one lesson to another?

Do you keep a written record of your lessons, either beforehand (lesson plans) or afterwards (reflections)? Do you think that there might be a technique that would be helpful to you in communicating and documenting your work, and value in doing so?

The physical arrangement of your classroom seems both awkward and like a bit of a visual metaphor – you are physically between the kids and the learning material – is that intentional? And is Randy's desk like that for a reason? (The kids' desks are lined up along one wall, facing the center, except for one child's, which is turned perpendicular to the others; the computer and books are on desks pushed against the opposite wall. The whiteboard is on the connecting wall, and Oudi stands in the open space between the two rows of desks.) *Note: I did actually ask this question, and was pleased to learn that the answer was no: the desks were arranged that way one day when they came in (the classroom had been used to store tables during a big event), and they just never changed them. The one child who physically separated himself from the others, on the other hand, was a conscious choice by that child, of which Oudi was aware. He mentioned being very careful to ensure that that child (who in previous years had spent a lot of time in my office because of disruptive class behavior; but had not been referred even once this year) participated in every discussion, even if he needed to be drawn out.*

4. Which questions worked well? What's your hunch about why?

As mentioned above, I began by asking Oudi to "tell me the story of this lesson." I wanted to see what he thought was important about the class, and thought that letting him choose where to start in his narration would give me some insight. He began by talking about the moment when he decided to change his lesson plan on the fly: about it having taken great courage on his part to say yes to his students, even though he knew it would mean making up a lesson on the spot while being observed, and about his embarrassment about how long it took him to find the new passage and get the class on track. I told him my honest opinion – that if I had not witnessed the part of the class when he was looking for the new passage, I would not have guessed that the lesson was improvised – which put him at ease, and enabled us to talk more deeply about other parts of the lesson, and about his approach to teaching and learning in general.

5. How did you use your observational record?

I used my observational record as the "text" which we studied together. When I practiced supporting and challenging, the "evidence" to which I referred was my notes. Oudi appreciated that I had my notes with me, and that I was able to use them to refresh his memory about the details of the lesson, particularly since it had varied from his plan for the day. He was glad to be able to supplement his general thoughts and impressions of the overall lesson with specific details about the reactions and comments of particular students, and with a detailed timeline. He also said that he felt validated in his work by my having taken the time and effort to document and study it.

6. What did you learn about this teacher's thinking and practice?

I learned that, despite being resistant to paperwork, Oudi is an extremely thoughtful and insightful teacher, who is constantly reflecting on his own practice, and is very receptive to collaboration. I was also reminded that there are non-linear approaches to curriculum development that are equally valid and useful. We talked at length about

Oudi's thematic approach to the year. He said that he finds linear curricula constraining, and prefers a spiral approach, connected by theme. I found evidence in the "text" of my observational record to support his claim: every one of his students referred to a previous lesson at one point or another in my transcript, using what they had learned earlier to support a statement regarding the current text. He said that he thinks of his TaNaCh lessons for the year as a book of short stories, connected by style and theme, not a novel to be read "in order." "What makes the difference," he said, "is if there is going to be MEANING at the center." His theme for this year was "*emunah*," of which his students were able to both find examples in the current text, and to use as a reference point back to prior lessons, as evidenced by the class transcript. His description of this phenomenon was "I plant seeds in the classroom and see how they sprout. They might be in the same class, or it might not be until 2-3 classes in the future when they refer back to the MEANING." He also stressed the importance of ritual – such as his use of the songs – in building his classroom community (which led to an interesting side discussion about his T'fillah class, about which he was feeling less positive, and how we might collaborate to strengthen both that class and our school-wide T'fillah sessions).

7. Did you have a chance to practice supporting and challenging? What did you learn about that?

Not only did I practice supporting and challenging (as mentioned above), we talked about it as well. I pointed out instances in the transcript where Oudi had asked supporting and challenging questions of his students, and asked him what it might look like if he taught them to ask these types of questions of each other, instead of his always being the "moderator."

8. What did you learn about observing teaching? Taking notes?

I learned that observing teaching, and talking about it afterwards, can be a powerful way to build relationships with teachers. Oudi was pleased to have been observed, and surprised that I had stayed for the entire lesson, and had taken notes. He expressed that he appreciated being "seen" and having his work taken seriously in this way, and said that he felt validated by my following up with the conversation (which was a couple of weeks later, over coffee).

I am still struggling with my note-taking ability (or lack thereof). This was the third lesson (and third teacher) on which I took observation notes this year, and I felt that my notes have improved each time. I have tried some different techniques, and am getting more comfortable with looking/listening/observing/writing simultaneously. However, I found taking notes about a conversation in which I was actively participating to be extremely difficult. My notes are quite sketchy, and I am glad that I also recorded the conversation.

9. What did you learn about talking about teaching in a non-evaluative way?

I learned that I can learn a lot if I just shut up and listen. I came into this observation and conversation with a lot of assumptions: that since Oudi doesn't turn in lesson plans unless I nudge him (and then grudgingly), he must not do them; that since his lessons are non-linear, they must not be connected into a curriculum; that since his students are having fun and building community, their classroom time must not be content-rich; that since he doesn't write much down, he must not reflect on his practice... I was proved wrong on every count. And I'm so glad I was.