

BEYOND PREPARED MATERIALS:
FOSTERING TEACHER LEARNING IN
THE SERVICE OF CHILDREN'S LEARNING

Gail Zaiman Dorph
Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education

Sharon Feiman-Nemser
Michigan State University

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in
Religious Education, vol. 92 no. 4 (1997)
available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0034408970920404>

Abstract

This paper illuminates the beginning steps in learning to teach – gaining new knowledge and transforming it for purposes of teaching. The authors, while working with people who were not experts in Jewish content or pedagogy, tried to foster substantive understandings and a stance toward teaching that favors engagement of students with texts and serious ideas. The extended examples illustrate some of the understandings, skills, and dispositions avocational teachers needed to develop and the kind of on-site support and guidance they received.

INTRODUCTION

What do teachers need to know and be able to do to teach in a synagogue school setting? How could people with minimal formal training as teachers and/or background in Judaica become reasonably effective teachers in this setting? What kinds of structures, resources, and learning opportunities would enable congregants to teach rich content to young children in meaningful and authentic ways? Questions about teacher knowledge and teacher learning are at the heart of any effort to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools. What teachers know and believe about their subject influences not only what they teach, but how they approach their teaching. Many teachers do not have the kind of subject matter knowledge required to represent their subject in authentic ways and connect it to students' lives and experiences. Moreover most teachers teach as they were taught, unless they have a compelling alternative. Since many adults in our culture were schooled on images of teaching as telling and learning as listening, there is need for "unlearning" as well as new learning.

These questions about teacher knowledge and teacher learning took on special meaning in the context of the Avocational Teacher Project, a unique experiment in

Jewish education carried out at Congregation Kehillat Israel in Lansing, Michigan (Feiman-Nemser, this issue). The purpose of the project was to recruit and prepare a group of volunteer teachers from the membership in the congregation to teach in the religious school. The project provided a laboratory to explore ways of supporting teacher learning in a synagogue school setting.

Because we were working with busy adults willing to teach one hour a week in a four and a half hour a week religious school, we could not make extensive demands on their time. Still we wanted to see whether these "avocational" teachers could hold on to a substantive curriculum that introduced children to big ideas in Judaism and helped them see meaningful connections between their Jewish heritage and their own lives. The combination of time constraints on teachers and high expectations for student learning framed the teacher development task. Having recruited willing volunteers, we had to provide the resources, structures, and support to help them learn in and around their teaching. The distinction between preservice and inservice teacher education made no sense in this context. Rather, we opted for an approach that situated teachers' learning in the context of their ongoing work with students.

Prepared curricular materials were an essential resource, providing teachers with both subject matter and pedagogical knowledge. Teachers relied on these materials for information and guidance in both what and how to teach. But the materials on their own did not offer adequate scaffolding. Teachers still needed help in understanding and using the materials appropriately. Sometimes this meant clarifying the content and its meaning for themselves and their students. Sometimes this meant fleshing out the pedagogical suggestions in the teacher's guide and developing a teachable lesson plan.

This paper focuses on two components in the system of teacher support and development for which we had direct responsibility.¹ As the outside consultant to the project, Gail visited the synagogue 2-3 times a year between 1991-1994. Besides conferring with the project leadership and doing some demonstration lessons, Gail met separately with each grade level teaching team to discuss teachers' questions about content and pedagogy. We audiotaped many of the consultations so that we could study the kinds of issues teachers raised, the way Gail responded, and the impact these interactions seemed to have on teachers' thinking.

As the local leader of the project and a teacher educator by profession, Sharon focused on on-site assistance. Attaching herself to the seventh grade Torah team for two years, she participated as coplanner and co-teacher, sharing the teaching and trying to offer support and guidance from inside the action. Sharon's memos to the

¹ Both forms of support and guidance—consultations with an outside expert and on-site collaboration and coaching—took place in the context of grade level teaching teams, an important feature of the KI approach to avocational teaching. For a discussion of the significance of teams and the KI model, see Feiman-Nemser, this issue.

teams, written feedback on lesson plans, and observational records shed light on some of the problems novice avocational teachers encountered in trying to teach from prepared materials and the ways that Sharon tried to help them.

This paper provides a window on our thinking as teacher educators, as we helped avocational teachers place their content in a larger framework of ideas and turn curricular suggestions into workable plans for teaching. In the first section we explore two examples of Gail's interactions with different teams of avocational teachers. In the second, we look at Sharon's written exchange with one avocational teacher about his lesson plan. These examples illustrate the kind of understandings, skills, and dispositions avocational teachers needed to develop and the kind of on-site support and guidance they received. Finally all three examples provide evidence of teacher learning.

CONSULTATIONS ON CONTENT AND CURRICULUM

In recruiting avocational teachers from the membership of the congregation, we had a delicate rhetorical task. On the one hand, we were saying to people with limited Judaica background and teaching experience that they could be teachers in the religious school. At the same time we were saying that in order to become teachers, people would have to become learners. But what exactly did avocational teachers need to learn?

Since teachers cannot teach what they themselves do not know and understand, it made sense to start with subject matter knowledge. Still, figuring out how much or what kind of subject matter knowledge teachers need is not as straightforward as it might seem. In the past decade, educational researchers have been studying subject matter knowledge for teaching—what it includes, how it develops, and how its presence or absence affects the learning opportunities teachers provide to their students (Shulman 1986, 1987). This work provided a useful starting point.

To teach for understanding, teachers must know more than the facts, concepts, topics and terminology that make up a field of study. They must understand how ideas fit together and how new knowledge develops. Since teachers are supposed to help students learn worthwhile content, they need to know what students are likely to find difficult or confusing and be able to give clear explanations, pose good questions, design authentic problems and learning activities, and assess student understanding. These tasks of teaching depend on what researchers call "pedagogical content knowledge" (see, for example, Grossman, Wilson and Shulman 1989; McDiarmid, Ball and Anderson 1989).

In her consultations, Gail concentrated mostly on helping avocational teachers develop overarching concepts that tie discrete ideas and facts together in a meaningful way. The examples that follow illustrate a pattern we call "what's the big idea." In each case, teachers get bogged down in the details of what they are supposed to teach. As they imagine themselves trying to explain the subject to students in their classes,

they recognize dilemmas that they cannot address. Thinking about parental expectations and student learning, they realize that their own understanding is flawed or incomplete. Gail helps the teachers anchor the "facts" of the lesson in a larger conceptual framework of Jewish ideas that they find meaningful. Only then can they imagine creating bridges between the content and their students.

In the first consultation, Gail works with three teachers on the second grade team on the meaning of Shabbat (the Sabbath). In the second consultation, Gail helps the sixth grade teaching team see the value of teaching a legalistic portion of the book of Exodus, which deals with the ways in which the Passover will be celebrated. In both cases, we see evidence that teachers are clarifying their beliefs about what is important to teach and gaining new subject matter knowledge and understanding.

TEACHING SHABBAT: IT'S MORE THAN THE WEEKEND

This hour-long consultation took place on Sunday morning in the hour preceding the teachers' class. This was the first year of teaching for the team, and people were spending quite a bit of time just figuring out what to teach. In fact, they were surprised by how much work they had to do. They had expected to pick up their curricular materials and teach. Instead, as one teacher pointed out, "we actually do a lot of work developing what to teach the kids."

The conversation mainly focused on a new unit that the teachers were beginning, a unit on Shabbat, but other issues were also opened up. What is the mission of the school? Does the school have a position about "authentic" Jewish practice? Where does Shabbat fit into the lives of the teachers and their families? As we analyzed the talk, it seemed to fall into three parts. First, the teachers describe their goals for teaching Shabbat and raise questions about how to teach about celebrating the holiday in a way that does not exclude anyone. In the process, they discover their own ambivalence or confusion. Next, Gail introduces a conceptual framework for understanding the Shabbat ritual that she thinks can help teachers frame goals for the unit and also help them develop a deeper understanding of the role of ritual in religious life. In the third segment of the conversation, the teachers have an "aha" experience as they work with this new way of thinking about Shabbat and its surrounding rituals. By the end of the consultation, they have a new understanding of Shabbat and are ready to begin thinking about how to teach it to their students.

Getting the problem on the table. Because the team is just beginning their Shabbat unit, Gail invites them to talk about their goals. Barbara² explains: "These are the objectives of this unit. This is what I want the kids to come away with. They need to know all three prayers and they need to realize that everyone celebrates Shabbat differently."

² All names are fictitious.

Gail finds these goals both too specific ("all three prayers") and too vague. In addition, the goal of teaching all three prayers seems to conflict with the ideas that "everyone celebrates Shabbat differently." When she asks for some elaboration, Barbara adds that "Shabbat is a day of rest. It's a special day and families celebrate it in different ways. In traditional Judaism, this is how it's done." Except for the idea of rest, Barbara's ways of describing Shabbat could apply to a vacation or family time on the weekend. By themselves, her ideas hold no religious value or meaning. Gail wonders how to help these teachers expand their understanding of Shabbat beyond notions of "specialness" and "rest," which are not powerful enough to carry the unit.

Another member of the team, Jan, joins the conversation at this point. Her comments shed light on the problems the team is facing and help explain why their goals seem too vague. Jan asks about the appropriateness of teachers taking a stand on the traditional observance of Shabbat.

Something that came up with Shabbat once, with what people do on Friday night. One child said they did a dinner every Friday night and they had candles and blessings and a couple of other children reacted with, "We don't do nearly that much." And someone said something about our family should do more or I'm going to talk to my mother. And I'm thinking, "Gee, what are the parents' expectations for the kind of tone we're setting in the room?" ...Am I going to say something that one family reacts to us, "That was the appropriate response," whereas another family might say, "I wanted you to tell my daughter that not every family has to have Shabbat dinner." She should be told that some families do and some families don't. There is not a right or wrong. I just don't know.

In order to help clarify this issue – a classic in religious education – Gail asks Barbara what she thinks they should say. Barbara replies with her "favorite answer": "Families do things in different ways, and they are all appropriate ways of dealing with Shabbat." Wondering whether all three teachers agree, Gail asks: "Are all ways of celebrating Shabbat equally appropriate?" Barbara's reply raises yet another complication – the confusion between the teachers' personal ideas and attitudes toward Shabbat and the appropriate position to take as teachers in the religious school.

I guess I want them all to be celebrating in a way that's appropriate, which they are not necessarily doing. I was recently trying to explain this to my own children. We don't remember to light candles every week. One week we did. I know the older children understand this is Shabbat, and that's why we're doing it. The younger children think this is Hanukkah, and I need to point out to them why we're doing it. So I was trying to point out that the reason we are doing it tonight is to show the difference between what we do during the week and what we do on the weekend. That it's different from the week and we do relax and we do more fun things. We don't go to school. And I'm assuming that in other families, although they don't practice traditional Judaism necessarily, that there's

a difference from what goes on during the week and what goes on during the weekend. So that's appropriate because there's a separation.

These teachers are grappling with three separate but related issues: (a) the meaning of Shabbat; (b) the position a school should take with regard to traditional practice in a community where practice varies from none to more traditional observance; and, (c) the relationship between teachers' personal observance of Shabbat and what they should teach children in their class. These complex issues weave back and forth through the teachers' comments as they try to clarify their difficulty in crafting a stance toward teaching about Shabbat and Shabbat observance. As Barbara eloquently states: "I guess the way I've looked at it is, I've put together this unit and read about it and everything and I struggled with this because I have realized that we need to be sensitive to each individual family. On the other hand, we don't hesitate to teach about Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) or Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), realizing that some families don't observe them."

A conceptual framework. Gail is satisfied that the team members understand the limitations of saying "Everyone celebrates Shabbat differently," because it avoids saying anything substantively about Shabbat itself. On the other hand, it does not avoid the pitfall that concerned teachers from the start, that one family might feel they were teaching something appropriate and another might not. She suggests a conceptual framework that offers a Jewishly authentic and substantive way of thinking about Shabbat that she believes will be meaningful to the team members and consonant with the school community. It's an idea she learned from Fromm's *The Forgotten Language* (1951) in which he interprets the law code associated with Shabbat, its do's and don'ts. According to Fromm, the concepts of work and rest connected to Shabbat are different from our modern concepts. "'Work' is any interference by man, be it constructive or destructive, with the physical world. 'Rest' is a state of peace between man and nature" (244). These ideas about work and rest still impose a challenge. This is not an interpretation of Shabbat that permits ignoring the day and making no decision about how it should be noted and celebrated. But it does explain the strictures in a way that might be more understandable and relevant to the members of this community.

Gail: We all seem to feel that Shabbat is a good thing, the notion of a day that's different from the rest of the week. It seems like recess except better. The ritual practice was developed in order to give concrete form to the idea. That is, ideas by themselves can be talked about but can't be lived...These practices were our tradition's way of taking ideas and giving them a concrete form so that they could live. If you don't have rules, then the difference doesn't get felt because our natural inclination would be to just keep doing things. So if there's nothing that sort of stops you and says, "This is a time set aside to be doing something different," it gets lost in the shuffle...The big idea about Shabbat is letting ourselves and the natural world rest. So all the rules about what we do and don't do have to do with not making changes in the natural world and really allowing

a space for ourselves and for the physical world to get a day off. It's a great idea, a really big idea...I think of the rituals at the beginning and end of Shabbat as a way of setting the day apart and making the distinction between this day and the rest of time...There's a difference between saying that and saying "anything goes." But we are hoping, from the school's point of view and from Judaism's point of view, that the family will set aside some time for its life. What the ritual does is help contain something of real value that we feel inside. That's the draw of Shabbat, the wisdom of it, that human things inside our soul have to have that kind of spiritual space, family space.

Aha. Gail can see from the reaction of the team members that these ideas make sense. Barbara is the first to respond: "If we don't appreciate the idea, then Shabbat is doing these things that are either too strange or too confusing or too hard to remember. This puts the rituals in a different place. It's a way of marking a boundary. It's Shabbat." Pleased that Barbara is rethinking her ideas about the meaning of ritual, Gail still wonders if she is equating the ritual (for example, lighting candles, saying blessings over wine and bread) with the holiday. So she pushes her by saying, "It's not Shabbat." Barbara tries again to explain what she means.

Barbara: It's a way to mark the beginning and the ending of a time that has a purpose and a meaning.

Gail: That's a hard idea.

Barbara: The more I understand it, it's a different way of talking about Shabbat that I think would be meaningful to all of the adults, however comfortable or uncomfortable they are with the ritual.

Finally Gail feels that Barbara has a new understanding of Shabbat. She has moved from a vague notion of Shabbat as a special day, sort of like the weekend, to a personal understanding of Shabbat as a day of rest in which the rituals serve as symbols of that rest. She has clarified the place of ritual and begun to figure out what is important to teach children about Shabbat.

In this example, the teachers realize the limits of their original conceptual framework as they grapple with the potential discomfort of children and their families. Although they thought their original ideas about Shabbat were "safe," they faced real problems. If a family does not celebrate Shabbat in a traditional manner, the idea of "making Shabbat special and the three *berakot* (blessings)" becomes problematic. What should they do? They are not comfortable "washing out" Shabbat and equating it with the weekend.

In trying to understand their dilemma, they struggle with their own attitudes toward Shabbat compared with their attitudes toward two other Jewish holidays, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This struggle uncovers inconsistencies in their stance toward teaching religious practices. Although Gail does not delve into this "double

standard," she assumes it relates to the teachers honesty. They do observe the Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement but they do not have a way to explain or justify their personal Shabbat observances. She therefore decides to introduce Fromm's conceptual framework for understanding the Shabbat ritual, for she thinks it will have resonance for them and suggest ways to create meaningful learning opportunities for their students.

TEACHING EXODUS: LAWS CAN ALSO HOLD MEANING

The second consultation focuses on teaching the book of *Exodus*. The team – two women and a man—have taught together for a year. Now in the middle of their second year of teaching, they are accustomed to reading prepared curricular materials and making decisions about what to teach and what to leave out. This conversation moves through the same phases as the previous consultation with the second grade team. First, the team presents a curricular choice they are about to make – skipping the last two-thirds of Chapter 12 of Exodus, for they think it is too legalistic and not relevant to their students. Gail is concerned about a decision that curtails the chance to teach children about the role of memory. So she decides to introduce a meta-idea to help the team. As a result, the teachers come to see that skipping the section could mean losing a very powerful educational moment. Just as we saw Barbara change her mind in the second grade consultation above, so here we see Leslie change her mind as she learns a new idea that is powerful to her and that could be meaningful to her students.

Getting the problem on the table. When Gail asks the team how things are going and what issues they are facing in their teaching, Leslie announces that they have decided to skip the last two thirds of Exodus 12, for the section is too legalistic and confusing for children. On the one hand, Gail is pleased about the team's level of pedagogic maturity. They understand that teaching involves making decisions about what to teach, and they are responsible for making those decisions. On the other hand, she is concerned about the wisdom of this particular decision. She thinks that the teachers do not understand the big ideas embedded in the section they are about to leave out.

We're going to suspend that Pesach Mitzrayim (the Passover in Egypt) because that lesson is very confusing. It was a bunch of prescriptions like how to do Pesach, and then our teacher's guide confuses it more by explaining that there's the Dorot Pesach (the Passover of future generations) and the Mitzrayim Pesach, and these two traditions get very confusing. It's almost historical in a way that our kids do not get at all.

Gail asks Leslie to point out the section in the teacher's guide. Searching for the section, Leslie continues to elaborate on her discomfort with the text. In the process, she suggests that it is not just the children who will have difficulty here.

Let me find it. I just feel a lot of this historical stuff has no meaning to our particular kids. It's a lot more rabbinical. I don't know what to call it...It has a

lot more to do with laws of kashrut or the absolute observance of Pesach than I am interested in. And it has almost no resonance for me and even for our kids who are more converted than we are, who are more half Jewish than we are.

Looking at the curricular materials, Gail sees for herself what the problem is. The guide contains only background information presented in the form of verses and lists. It gives few teaching suggestions. Nor does it develop the ideas she thinks are important.

A conceptual framework. Gail wants to introduce the teachers to two ideas that emanate from the problematic passage – one about memory and one about the ethical basis of Judaism. By making a distinction between how Passover is to be celebrated by the generation of people leaving Egypt (Pesach Mitzrayim – the Passover in Egypt) versus how Passover will be celebrated in future generations (Pesach Dorot – the Passover of future generations), the Torah is teaching us something important about what it takes to institutionalize memory.

The act of remembering a powerful experience is not difficult for those who have firsthand experience. It requires an act of the will and the creation of powerful strategies for future generations – those with no firsthand memory – to remember. Thus learning about Pesach Mitzrayim and Pesach Dorot is a way to introduce children to these ideas. Remembering Egypt also plays an important role in the formation of the entire Jewish code of ethics. "Treat the stranger kindly for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" is only one of multiple examples of the role that remembering Egypt has played in the life of the Jewish people. Here's how she starts to put these ideas on the table:

I want to make a suggestion about an idea to consider. Already in the Torah we have the notion that there is a difference between the celebration of an event for those who experience it and the celebration of an event for those who are remembering it. It's the basis of memory and history...They wanted this experience that was so important to them to live on after them...Pesach Dorot, Pesach for the generations. So I think there is something about this idea of Pesach Mitzrayim and Pesach Dorot that is more powerful than going through the verses. You could skip it, but I think you have an opportunity to give the kids a really big idea to hold on to that could percolate with them for a long time. What I'm saying is that part of the genius of the Jewish people that we see right here is the idea of institutionalization of a practice, the realization that the way for those who haven't experienced it is not going to be the same as for those who experienced it themselves.

Now Gail makes a shift from talking about the big ideas to talking about how to teach them, suggesting that this is where the real challenge might come. To help teachers begin to think about this challenge, she poses a question:

Gail: Have you ever had something happen to you that you want to tell somebody else? What happened when you told them? Was that a satisfying experience? I don't know if that will work or something else, but it's a beginning of a way to think about it.

Hal: Or I could imagine a group of kids acting out how Pesach Mitzrayim was celebrated.

Leslie: That has a lot of resonance, the idea of what it was like to be a slave and giving them examples from our time and from our current culture.

Aha. Leslie explains that they were going to move quickly through these lessons and then return to some of the ideas later in the year when they would actually be closer to celebrating Pesach. Now that she understands the distinction between Pesach Mitzrayim and Pesach Dorot, she sees how the text can be a springboard to some very important ideas.

We thought to get through this lesson in a quick time because we were going to come back to it around Pesach...But you're talking about these big things like slavery, that's big enough that they could keep it and remember it. When we were just talking about the leavened bread and so forth, we thought we should save that for Pesach...There are times when we need to leave the text to get to the bigger idea. Here the text can be a springboard to the big idea. I agree that this lesson, when you have the big idea right behind it, could work. But this lesson in the teacher's guide does not in and of itself expose even the teacher to the big idea.

In this example, teachers directly question what they are supposed to be teaching, and Gail hears confusion and misunderstanding in their representation of the text in Exodus. When she herself looks at the prepared curricular materials, she understands why they are confused and what kind of help they need. In this case the materials do not adequately explain or reflect the big ideas embedded in the Torah text.

Gail again introduces a meta-idea to help the team better understand their content. The team members come to realize that if they skip this section of the Torah, they will lose a powerful teaching opportunity. Because the team thought there were no particular values in these rather legalistic sections, they saw no problem with skipping them. By helping them clarify their understanding of the text and find personal meaning in it, they can see a reason to teach it to their students. Only after they understand the import of the selection are they willing to consider how to help children connect to it.

CONSULTATIONS ON PLANNING AND TEACHING

One might assume that once teachers have a personal understanding of their content, they are ready to teach it to children. This is rarely the case. Besides finding their own meaning, teachers must find ways to make the content important and meaningful to

students. They cannot simply tell students what they have figured out for themselves. Even when teachers work with prepared materials, they still have to clarify what they want students to learn, anticipate how students are likely to respond, and adapt teaching suggestions to fit their own situation.

How do teachers learn to consider content from the standpoint of their students? How do they make a shift from thinking about what they know and care about to thinking about what students need to learn and what they are likely to find interesting, puzzling, or significant? How do they learn to frame questions that invite multiple possibilities rather than one right answer and to build discussions around students' ideas? How do they develop the habit and skills to monitor their practice and its impact on students?

These questions expand the agenda for teacher learning from considerations of subject matter to considerations of pedagogy. They focus on how teachers transform what they know and believe about their subject into learning opportunities for students, how they design, adapt, and implement lesson plans, and how they work with colleagues to improve their teaching over time. Since these are central tasks of teaching, it makes sense to work on them in the context of teaching through some form of on-site assistance and support.

To learn about the pedagogical problems that avocational teachers faced and to explore the lands of on-site assistance that might be needed, Sharon attached herself to the seventh grade Torah team. For two years she participated in planning and teaching lessons on the weekly Torah portion³ and assisted her teammates in carrying out these activities. She initially chose the seventh grade team because the three teachers, all men, were novices to teaching and the students were challenging. She continued for a second year with a newly constituted team consisting of one man from the previous year and two newcomers, both women, because she enjoyed the teaching and wanted to continue learning about the possibilities of face-to-face, close-to-the-classroom work on teaching with part-time teachers.

As Sharon got to know the curriculum, the teachers, and the students, an agenda for teacher development emerged. Studying the written record of her work with the seventh grade team (for example, the annotated lesson plans, memos, classroom observations, and personal reflections), we identified three related issues. First, the teacher's guide did not provide enough detailed guidance for novice teachers to imagine what to say and do and how students might respond. Second, some teachers did not understand what planning entails. They were willing to spend time preparing for class, but they did not always know how to approach the task. Third, some teachers were more disposed to telling students what they found interesting than to asking them for their own ideas. One of Sharon's goals was to help these teachers

³ The Torah is divided into fifty-four sections, which are read in the synagogue on Sabbath morning consecutively so that in the course of each year the public reading of the entire Pentateuch is completed.

learn to think about teaching in terms of student engagement and learning, and develop the habit of asking rather than telling.

Sharon's approach combined modeling, coaching, and assisted performance. To help people plan lessons, Sharon wrote detailed plans herself and provided written feedback on other's plans. She circulated her plans to team members for suggestions, and encouraged them to share their draft lessons, her written comments, and their revisions. To support people in teaching, Sharon sometimes provided direct assistance, stepping into a lesson to ask a question or write students' ideas on the board. More often she observed, keeping track of teacher and student talk in the hopes that this record would assist teachers in "seeing" their practice and its effects. To help people conceptualize planning and teaching in new ways, Sharon wrote memos to the team outlining the issues they were working on.

HELPING TEACHERS GET INSIDE PLANNING AND TEACHING

In teaching the weekly Torah portion, the seventh grade team used a multi-media curriculum. For each portion, the curriculum provides a written and videotaped summary, a short passage that raises a problem or question, usually about a character's motivations, feelings, or actions, and several *midrashim* or teaching stories that address the same question.⁴ After working with these materials, students are supposed to "generalize the message" by applying it to their lives.

While the summaries, selection of texts, and central questions offer invaluable assistance to teachers, the teacher's guide says very little about how to deal with these materials. The curriculum developer seems to assume that teachers will know how to explain particular concepts, generate good discussion questions, and make transitions from one segment of the lesson to another. The following directions taken from different lessons in the teacher's guide show just how much the guide takes for granted about teachers' subject matter and pedagogical knowledge:

The central idea in this passage is that of "free will." You should talk over and explain this concept.

As you read this text you should have two levels of discussion. One level will reflect the meaning of the passage...the other level will concern itself with stylistic concerns.

The basic idea here is continuity between generations. This is a good topic for discussion.

⁴ The term "midrash" signifies study and interpretation. For the most part, the purpose of midrashic literature is to explain the Biblical text from the ethical and devotional point of view.

Some avocational teachers had difficulty filling in the details to construct a picture of an actual lesson. Planning requires imaginative and strategic thinking. Teachers have to clarify what they want students to learn (ends) and then figure out specific tasks or activities to help students learn that (means). They have to imagine what they and the students will be doing, anticipate what problems may arise, and consider how they could respond. Partly they must do this in order to prepare for the unexpected. For some avocational teachers, this was unfamiliar territory, as Sharon wrote in her journal: "Some teachers think about teaching more in terms of telling than getting students engaged. They do not visualize a lesson as an event with a beginning, middle, and end. They do not yet see the value of having one central issue or question that gets explored in a number of ways." (1/3/94)

To help teachers understand what planning entails, Sharon wrote memos describing the kind of work they would have to do in planning lessons. The first year she wrote: "We've discovered that the teacher's guide does not offer a complete lesson plan. When it says "Discuss the Torah text," it doesn't tell us what questions to ask or how to structure the discussion...We need to figure that out." The second year she elaborated a stance toward planning:⁵

I think it's helpful to do two things in planning: (1) clarify the "big idea" you want students to get out of the lesson; and (2) think about what students are going to do during the lesson. Even though the teacher's guide gives us a question to focus on, it's still good to say it to ourselves so we are clear about the main focus of the lesson. I try to imagine what kind of discussion I want to have, what sorts of comments students might make, and what kind of follow up questions I could ask. (10/12/94)

To model the intellectual work of planning, Sharon developed detailed lesson plans that let teachers in on her thinking. For instance, in her lesson plan on the weekly portion "Vayerah" in which Abraham welcomes the three strangers, she wrote about "What do I want kids to think about?" To make visible the structure of the lesson, she labeled the different parts—"recap from last week," "transition to today's portion," "Torah discussion questions," "*midrash* (teaching story) questions," and "link to our lives." She also wrote out what she intended to say (for example, "If you were directing this scene in a movie, what would you want the scene to look like? What would be the opening shot?") For the central question, "What do we know about Abraham from this test?", she listed "possible things kids might say."

Besides sharing her own plans, Sharon gave people written feedback on their lesson plans. Often this took the form of asking questions to clarify the central goal of the lesson, figure out how much time teachers intended to spend on different parts of their lesson, encourage them to think about how students might respond to particular tasks

⁵ Avocational teachers taught for fifty minutes on Sunday morning. Since they only saw students once a week, we tried to plan one lesson around each Torah portion, leaving students with a question to think about during the week.

or questions, and what students might find difficult. Sometimes she suggested ways to reframe questions so that the questions invited multiple interpretations rather than "right answers" and pat moral lessons. The first year the teachers mostly sent their lesson plans to Sharon for comments and suggestions. The second year people circulated draft plans by fax or e-mail to everyone on the team and usually got back suggestions not only from Sharon but from their teammates as well.

A CLOSE LOOK AT A LESSON PLAN

To illustrate how Sharon worked on planning with teachers and what she worked on, we will examine a typical written exchange with David, a member of the first team, about a lesson for the Torah portion *Toledot*, which tells about Abraham's son Isaac and his family. David came to the avocational teacher project with no prior classroom experience. Because David's team did not function as a collegial group, Sharon did more individual work with the teachers. Usually David would drop off his lesson plan at the beginning of the week, and she would send back written comments that pushed him to think about teaching from the perspective of student engagement and learning.

Toledot contains the story about Jacob stealing his brother Esau's blessing from Isaac, their blind and aging father. The teacher's guide proposes a central question ("Did Jacob really fool Isaac?") and outlines two possible answers. "If Isaac did know, then Jacob didn't fool him, and he really deserved the blessing. If Isaac was fooled, then the continuity of the Jewish people was assured by a lie" (15). Students are supposed to think about the character of Jacob and Esau and analyze the dialogue between Isaac and Jacob to answer the question.

David's lesson plan began with notes about how to introduce the portion: "This portion skims over the adult life of Isaac and focuses on the third generation in the line of Abraham, where we find two more brothers in conflict." David planned to have students read the four paragraph summary in the student workbook, and he had listed questions to ask about each paragraph. For example, after the first paragraph, he planned to ask: "What do we know about the relationship of Esau and Jacob from the very beginning of their lives?" After the third paragraph, he planned to say: "We'll read this portion in detail in a few minutes, but think about how this story fits with our understanding of Rebecca's character from last week." After the fourth paragraph, "Who else was told not to marry a Canaanite woman?"

Next David planned to analyze one section of the Torah portion. "Before we read the selection," David wrote, "I'll point out that this is a detailed exchange...but there's still a big question left to answer: 'Did Jacob fool Isaac?' "David had broken the text into sections (for example, "Read aloud until 'God granted me good fortune' ") and listed questions to ask ("What parts of the text indicate that Isaac didn't know whether it was Jacob or Esau? What parts of the text indicate that he did know?"). At the end of the guided reading, he planned to discuss the question: "Was Isaac deceived?"

After that, David planned to have students read and discuss one or two *midrashim* to see what the rabbis thought about Jacob's actions and answer the questions in their workbooks. Finally, students would write in their notebooks about the following question: "Were Jacob and Rebecca right to deceive Isaac? Give reasons for your answers. Look at the facts presented in the text, in our understanding of the characters of Jacob, Esau, and Rebecca, and in the *midrash*."

The overall plan showed that David knew the content, had an overall structure for the lesson, and had thought about what he was going to ask. Sharon predicted that students would be quite engaged by the problem of figuring out whether Isaac was duped. Her main concerns centered on the timing of the lesson and the possibilities for deepening student involvement. If David tried to do everything he had outlined at exactly the same pace, he would never get through the lesson in fifty minutes. Sharon thought it was more important for students to dig into the Torah selection and the *midrashim* then to spend time drawing inferences from a summary of the Torah portion. She wondered exactly how David planned to orchestrate the reading and interpretation tasks.

In her written feedback, Sharon focused on the lesson as an event, raising questions and offering suggestions to help David visualize how he wanted the lesson to unfold. She suggested that he think about how much time to spend on different parts of the lesson (introduction, overview of Torah portion, analysis of Torah text, and so on). She encouraged him to move quickly to the heart of the lesson – analyzing the interaction between Isaac and Jacob – and not get bogged down discussing the summary of the portion. ("I think it's more appropriate *to ask* inferential questions about the Torah text where we're trying to develop the skills of close reading and analysis than of the summary.") Mostly she tried to help David think about the interpretive task from the students' vantage point. She suggested that, in order to decide whether Isaac was fooled, students would have to figure out what he was thinking at different points in the dialogue. She also suggested some different ways to approach the reading. Here is what she wrote:

You have some decisions to make here about (a) how to read the passage; and (b) how to do the analysis (for example, with the whole class, in pairs). Are you planning to read the selection through once and then go back and analyze it or are you planning to analyze it section by section? Which would serve your purposes best?...It might be fun to read the passage as a dialogue with a narrator. Maybe you could be the narrator and have two students play the parts of Isaac and Jacob. Students could try to show what the characters were feeling and thinking by their speech and gestures. It's another way to get them involved in interpreting the text and answering your question.

Sharon asked David why he was looking for consensus. "An alternative might be to have each student decide where s/he stands on the central question and why. You

could even have them write in their notebooks: 'I think (or don't think) Isaac was fooled because...or I think Isaac knew (didn't know) it was really Jacob because...'

*"Uncovering" the curriculum.*⁶ Through his interactions with Sharon, his own classroom experience, and his work with other avocational teachers over several years, David changed his approach to planning and teaching. Instead of telling students what he had learned about the Torah text, he learned to focus on what they were thinking. Instead of seeing his responsibility in terms of covering the curriculum, he began to think more about how to get students to grapple with Torah texts and the ideas and questions they raise. In short, he learned to think like a teacher, to weave together knowledge of students and knowledge of subject matter in pedagogically appropriate ways.

David discussed these changes in an interview with a local researcher who was studying the project.⁷ In the beginning, he explained, "it was a lot more acceptable to give our reading and tell the kids, This is an interpretation of the text." David acknowledged that "it was difficult not to lead them (the students) to answers." Then he reflected on his work with Sharon:

Sharon was very thorough and responsive to questions, and especially to lesson plans. She'd give examples of how to do things, and sometimes I'd say, "Well, I don't want to do it that way." But very often when I look back on it, I think she was closer to the mark than I was. She was really saying, "If you want to accomplish what you ought to accomplish here, you need to take your time." She would say, *"It's better to uncover the material than to cover the material, to have the kids sink their teeth into whatever you are doing than to make sure you get from point A to point Z"* (emphasis added).

CONCLUSION

This paper illuminates the beginning steps in learning to teach – gaining new knowledge and transforming it for purposes of teaching. The authors, while working with people who were not experts in Jewish content or pedagogy, tried to foster substantive understandings and a stance toward teaching that favors encounters with serious ideas and attention to student thinking. In the process, we ourselves learned about the value and limits of prepared curricular materials as a resource in teaching and teacher development and the need for on-site support and guidance.

⁶ Many teachers think their job is to "cover" the material. Sharon was fond of quoting David Hawkins, a philosopher of science and education, who used to say that teachers should "uncover the curriculum" for their students.

⁷ To learn more about avocational teachers' experiences in the project, we identified a sample of ten teachers and designed an interview study. Researchers from the College of Education at Michigan State, who were members of the congregation but not connected with the project, volunteered to conduct most of the interviews. David was one of the people interviewed for this study. To learn more about what the project meant to him, see Wohl, this issue.

The paper also illustrates an approach to teacher development situated in teachers' ongoing work with students but connected to big ideas. Grounded in emergent questions and problems, the work had an immediacy and relevancy not always associated with teacher education courses and inservice workshops. It also led to new understandings of subject matter concepts and pedagogical principles.

Gail offered teachers frameworks that gave meaning to discrete ideas and rituals. Sharon coached teachers in the application of pedagogical principles. Thus, teacher learning began in practice but led to theoretical understandings.

The paper also demonstrates the difference between adult Jewish education and Jewish teacher learning. In both cases Jewish adults deepen their substantive knowledge and understanding and may strengthen their Jewish identity. The difference lies not only in the motivation for learning, but in the nature of the learning itself. When adults engage in learning, the fact that the material is interesting suffices. When teachers engage in learning, they must consider whether ideas make sense. Because teachers must be able to explain ideas to others, they cannot be satisfied with "interesting" content. All the examples in this paper show adults stretching to new understandings and images precisely because they must find ways to make subject matter meaningful to their students.

Gail Zaiman Dorph is Senior Education Officer at
the Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education in New York, New York.

Sharon Feiman-Nemser is a Professor of Teacher Education at
Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan,
and a former Director of the Avocational Teacher Project at
Congregation Kehillat Israel in Lansing, Michigan.

REFERENCES

- Fromm, E. 1951. *The forgotten language: An introduction to the understanding of dreams, fairy tales, and myths*. New York: Grove Press.
- Grossman, P., S. Wilson, and L. Shulman. 1989. Teachers of substance: Subject matter knowledge for teaching. In *Knowledge base for the beginning teacher*. Ed. M. C. Reynolds. Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press.
- McDiarmid, G. W., D. L. Ball, and C. Anderson. 1989. Why staying one chapter ahead doesn't work: Subject-specific pedagogy. In *Knowledge base for the beginning teacher*. Ed. M. C. Reynolds. Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press.
- Shulman, L. 1986. Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Researcher* 15 (2): 4-14.
- _____.1987. Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard Educational Review* 57 (1): 1-22.