

The Importance of Text Study

For centuries, text-based study has been a central hallmark of Jewish learning. It is through texts that we learn about and engage with our heritage. Through Torah study, we explore the relationship between the people of Israel and God. Through the study of later texts, like the Talmud, Biblical commentaries, and the stories and teachings of rabbinic Judaism, we learn about the ideas, values, interpretations, and disagreements that have been voiced in our long and rich tradition. These studies allow us to engage in the existential questions of human meaning as understood by our tradition.

Traditional Jewish learning reflects the following three characteristics:

- a. Jewish learning is text-based; it happens through and with the study of texts.
- b. Jewish learning is a social activity; it takes place in community.
- c. Jewish learning is multi-vocal; it recognizes the possibility of multiple interpretations and voices, both contemporary and historical, and often invites the expression of those differences.

In many ways, it is through the study and discussion of Jewish texts that we become Jewish. We also hope that we will become better human beings and educators through the engagement with the ideas of these texts, as well as through learning with colleagues. And so we are committed to involving both adults and youth in this cultural and educational endeavor. We believe that by learning authentic texts, they, too, become active members of both today's Jewish community and the virtual Jewish community stretching beyond time and space.

During the years students are in school, one of our educational goals is to help them become sensitive to encountering the text not as a static "It," but also as a "Thou" (Buber). We believe that the potential for creating personal meaning is opened by the engagement of the reader with the text, the sense of the text, and the worldview that the text presents. In other words, the text is an autonomous source of meaning that is constantly open to new engagements, new interpretations, and new appropriations of meaning. But this notion of textual autonomy does not give the learner license to bend interpretation in any direction s/he wishes. Rather, the text has structure and substance that guides interpretation and thus imposes its own limits on the scope of legitimate interpretations. The structure and the details of the text itself allow one to argue the merits of more or less responsible, adequate, and convincing interpretations.

One of the traditional ways in which we conduct this practice is *b'hevruta*, with a study partner, a friend. (*Hevruta* has the same root as the word, *haver*, meaning friend or colleague.) We use this traditional learning format as a way to study text. By learning together and by hearing each other's voices, we begin also to hear the potential multiple voices of the text. We unpack and enter into a conversation with the text and with one another by asking each other questions, such as: "How do you understand these words?" "Can you show me where in the text you see this meaning?" "I see something different. What do you think about that?" "What is your personal take on what the text seems to be saying?" Reading the text becomes an I-Thou-Thou experience. One "Thou" is the Text; the Other is one's *hevruta* partner. Because studying in *hevruta* is such an essential element of text study, we devote the next essay in this DVD to the architecture of *hevruta*-based text lessons.