

A NON-JUDGMENTAL SPACE FOR TEACHERS TO GROW

by Tamara Beliak Neumeier

Jewish education is now enjoying a renaissance that it has not experienced since Germany in the 1930s. There are many different models of education open to students, from *chavurot* to supplementary schools to *yeshivot*. The opportunities for men and women to study have opened up, with new Internet technologies that allow people to communicate across continents. Many schools are focusing on expanding opportunities for their students to learn through different modalities and focus on the Jewish text and technology skills that will prepare them for an ever-changing world. I believe that this is an exciting time to be a child in a Jewish day school, because teachers and schools are focused on the individual student and his needs.

However, the world of Jewish education is not perfect. Sometimes in the pursuit to create a better learning environment for students a school forgets that teachers also have an ability to learn and grow. Professional development for teachers has not kept pace with the requirements schools have for teachers. Most of the teachers I encounter are in a constant quest to continue as learners and find the best ways to reach their students. They do not always feel comfortable sharing that they perceive their teaching as less than perfect. Teachers in Jewish schools who have finished their formal instruction and training often turn to schools' in-service programs to continue their education. As a teacher, I have heard many of my colleagues complain about these in-service programs. The most common criticism is that the programs are in lecture format and teachers are treated as a monolithic group, without regard to individual needs.

Sometimes, teachers are sent out of school to curriculum based programs. In Judaic Studies curriculum programs are rare. However, when teachers do have an in-service meeting that directly relates to curriculum, it is often a curriculum demonstration with a specific number of lessons with set lesson plans that are of a pre-determined length. Returning from a set curriculum in-service can be frustrating because of other school specific curriculum concerns or the predetermined lesson length may be inappropriate given the school's schedule. The pre-developed lessons also do not allow for the creativity of the teacher-learner.

Many of the teachers I interviewed for my dissertation thanked me for giving them an opportunity to think aloud about their teaching and discuss the reasoning behind their teaching choices. They mentioned that this was their first opportunity to think aloud about their choices with an impartial party. Although transforming teachers was not part of my dissertation goals, some of the teachers changed their lessons or some of the wording of their lessons after our interviews.

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Those interviews confirmed a hypothesis: Many teachers feel isolated. Some have no colleagues with whom to share questions about the texts they are teaching. Other teachers have a person to talk to, but that person is an administrator who is also tasked with supervision. Teachers in Jewish schools are looking for a non-judgmental person with whom they can share their ideas about teaching and get feedback. This is true both for novice and veteran teachers.

One current resource for teachers is the web. Many sites offer curriculum and lessons uploaded by other teachers. Often, this can be a helpful resource, but what is missing is the personal touch of talking through lesson ideas.

What I believe teachers need is a regular venue to meet in a non-judgmental setting, in person, where they can talk to other teachers who teach the same topic. For example, one could bring together educators who all teach the story of Samson. Some teachers may come to the table as *Tanach* teachers, others as Jewish Studies teachers with a unit on leadership, and yet others as teachers of Jewish history teaching the period of the Judges. Orthodox and Conservative community schools might each have different approaches, but the teachers could come together as one group.

Each person would share how he or she is teaching the text of the Samson story. The goal of this meeting would not be to critique teacher work, but to listen to other teachers. A teacher might hear several different approaches to the text and could ask questions about the text and about approaches to it. This community of discourse would allow the teachers -- novice, experienced, and veteran -- to rethink the text from different angles and broaden their views. The teacher then could choose to rewrite her own curricula according to her own needs. A second time, the group could convene by webinar to ask further questions of each other and share what directions she has taken her work in the past few weeks or months. The group could vote to discuss other stories and maintain the community relationship, much like members of a book club or reading circle.

The non-judgmental nature of the meeting is crucial. Teachers will be able to speak and reflect on their own practice. Teachers could discuss both successes and frustrations in their classrooms and schools. A teacher may choose to change her own lessons based on the questions posed to her. For example, as part of my doctoral research, several teachers spoke of frustrations with the response students had to the character of King David. Each teacher was speaking aloud about the problem and responding to the questions I asked her. Several teachers self-diagnosed solutions to their own problems because they were able to discuss the issues in a non-judgmental environment.

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CAJE and now NewCAJE have been an excellent summer venue for non-judgmental meetings between teachers. However, the program does not have a specific goal of creating small communities of discourse for teachers who teach similar subjects. It is up to participants to make friends and communities and to keep in touch over the school year.

I believe that what day school teachers need is an organized, non-judgmental community of discourse that meets throughout the school year and crosses denominational boundaries. I hope that NewCAJE, or another organization, can help organize communities of schools who are geographically compatible, will pick up the NewCAJE spirit, and bring a collaborative discourse model out of the "camp atmosphere" of NewCAJE and into the school buildings as professional development "chavurot" to be implemented during the teaching year.

Tamara Beliak Neumeier has been teaching for ten years in high school supplemental and middle school day school programs. This is her third CAJE conference. She finished her dissertation "Teacher approaches to studying texts with sexual content in Middle School Tanach classrooms" at Yeshiva University's Azrieli program. As a researcher, Tamara interviewed teachers about teaching stories of King David and Samson.
t_beliak@yahoo.com