

## **HOT TOPIC: Should there be limits on the way we interpret text? Can open discussion lead to better understanding?**

### **THE DESIRE TO PROTECT JUDAISM**

**by Tamara Beliak**

What makes a person a good teacher? In professional development, I came across the following book, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*,<sup>1</sup> by Parker Palmer. In it, Dr Palmer argues that the essence of teaching is being true to oneself: *Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and the integrity of the teacher.*<sup>2</sup>

As a teacher, I struggle with what it means to teach with identity and with integrity. I want my students to develop their own relationship with the Jewish community, with a personal conception of God. I struggle with how much I should guide their journey. I wonder when I should engage my students in the tensions of thousands of years of tradition in literature and perspective and when I should omit information. I want to open their minds to the fluidity and vastness of Jewish opinion and text and am simultaneously frightened that I will repel students with some of the more complicated and less-politically correct parts of our tradition.

During the process of writing a dissertation, I came to the conclusion that many teachers struggle with the same issue of desiring to protect the tradition from students and protecting students from tradition. Many teachers hoped that I could validate their method of teaching by saying that I had heard of others using the same method of teaching as their own or that their method will lead their students to remain Jewish. It is the love that religious education teachers have for their subject, their pupils, and their community that intensifies this desire for harmony and creates anxiety.

This year, I tried a new approach in my high school classroom. I chose the text of the "sin of the Golden Calf," and had students develop their own explanation of the story and then read the philosophy of three medieval commentators and one modern commentator. We discussed both the problems in the text and the reasons that various commentators chose their personal approaches to "defend" the character of Aaron, Moses's brother, the High Priest of Israel and the Children of Israel. I helped the students understand both the complexity and theological implications of the story. Some of the students in the class became angry with Aaron and with the Rabbis of the tradition who protected Aaron. Others rose in defense. At times, I was terrified by the discussions. I wondered about whether my students would lose faith in some part of Judaism because of something I taught them. At least one student said that she or he could not believe in a God and a Rabbi who would defend such blatant disregard for human life

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and allow for slaughter after the incident. Another student in the same class countered that exploring the diversity of Jewish thought offered an opening to start believing in God and trusting the Rabbis more. I wondered if there were an algorithm that could help determine which students could be helped by this method and who would grow up a more committed Jew by opting out of my classes.

Right now, I am trying to use Parker Palmer's words as a guide. I remind myself that I identify strongly with the idea of *Bnei Yisrael* (the Children of Israel) being the people who "wrestle with God." I share with my students that I wrestle with many texts of the Bible and with many ideas within Judaism. I let them know that I am constantly changing my views in regard with how to understand Jewish texts and that as my understanding evolves, it informs my teaching. Through meta-education, my students are reminded that I teach through a lens that is uniquely mine, but is grounded in tradition. I share with them that I am on a journey and hope that they will join me on this journey that is less focused on the specific destination and more on the experience of exploration. I hope that if my students can ascertain that I am teaching from the beliefs of my authentic self it will be enough.

**Endnotes:**

1. Palmer, Parker. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007.
2. Ibid.

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