Doing the Work: Interpretative Experience as the Fulcrum of Tanakh Education

by Allison Cook and Orit Kent | Issue: Teaching Tanakh

The tasks of translation and personalization, finding relevance, should not be confused with interpretation, a true engagement with the text’s meaning.

The pioneering work in recent years on teaching Tanakh—including the Standards and Benchmarks project and Barry Holtz’s book *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and in Practice*—has helped teachers and schools articulate their vision for what teaching Tanakh could mean. These ideals and objectives, however, are not always evident in the reality of what students are asked to do. We would like to share our observations of trends of student activity in Torah learning and urge educators to fine-tune their practice so as to emphasize and create authentic interpretive learning experiences of Tanakh for students.

In our visits to early childhood through high school classes, we have seen that student work and experience of Tanakh lean toward two major kinds of student activity: language/translation and personalization. Language exercises range from picking out patterns of suffixes and roots in the original text to doing full written translations of Tanakh passages. Personalization exercises include exploring a pre-determined theme from Torah and applying it to students’ own lives. Classic examples of this kind of activity are discussion of students’ relationship with their siblings as prompted by the Jacob and Esau narrative, or answering the “what would I do in this situation” question.

Teachers employ both translation and personalization exercises for thoughtful and inspired reasons, such as wanting to provide students with practice and skills that can give them access and “mastery” over the text and wanting to help them connect to the Torah in a real way. But when these instructional tasks dominate student engagement with Tanakh, we see the limits of these exercises in achieving teachers’ worthy objectives and aspirations.
The experience of students working on translation tasks is often technical and disengaged from the meaning of the text. An analogy for this might be a music student practicing scales or transposing a composition while rarely playing a piece. While some students enjoy the technical aspects of “breaking the code” and may experience rigor and satisfaction in their work, others experience tedium and frustration—or the common experience of feeling dependent on a more language-minded study partner. When these tasks make up most of Tanakh study, students are not guided to understand or experience the deeper significance of the text.

Personalization activities for students risk eclipsing the Tanakh altogether, instead giving students an opportunity to talk about themselves with little or tenuous connection to the actual text. Students may enjoy (or not) thinking or talking about their own lives and sharing experiences with their peers, but when this dominates student activity, the Torah disappears. The text becomes a springboard for self-exploration, and ironically, students will likely not see the Tanakh as relevant to their lives.

We believe that a core task of Torah learners is not to translate texts or to apply them to one’s own life but to be engaged in interpreting texts, to come to understand them and make meaning of them. Ultimately, students make meaning of texts based on a combination of what they read in the text itself and the mental schema (preconceptions, experiences, etc.), which they bring to the reading. The application of their schema must be rooted in close and careful study of the text itself. They need to read the passages in full, understand what the details contribute and notice the questions that the gaps in the text call forth. Interpretation and meaning-making necessitate engagement in discussion or other activity in which multiple potential meanings can be explored, negotiated and drawn on to develop compelling interpretations.

We therefore propose that a third type of instructional task, the interpretive exercise and the interpretive experience, become the centerpiece of student work on Tanakh. In the interpretive exercise, students do the work of discovering meaning from the Torah to apply to their own lives. Students are required to examine the Torah, in its particularity of language and form, to arrive at insights, instruction and connection. The use of the interpretive exercise applies to classrooms that study Tanakh both with and without classical commentaries, since one must also interpret the commentaries. An authentic interpretive experience is one in which both the text and the student work in partnership in order to make meaning. It is what transpires when the Tanakh and the learner need each other. The text needs a human partner to notice it, wonder about it, grapple with it, and appreciate it in order to convert fixed words into living ideas, expression into meaning. The human partner needs the text to invite the student, through its complexity, beauty, difficulties and sacredness, into new horizons of understanding and growth, intellectually, ethically as well as spiritually.

Many of the tasks that effectively operate as rote translation or personalization experiences have the potential to become interpretive exercises but stop short. Take, for example, the common practice of having students read or hear part of a Torah narrative and then illustrate a scene of the story.
When students are drawing a picture based on Torah text they are of course interpreting the text through their drawing; however, they are not necessarily having an interpretive experience or becoming skillful interpreters. Why? Because students may not be conscious that they are engaged in an interpretive act at all. Students may not be aware of the interplay or relationship between the text and their own schema in forming this new work or interpretive rendering. Students might well assume that they just drew “the facts,” and might experience the task as a technical (rather than interpretive) exercise. They might not appreciate that their drawing has filled in a gap in the text, answered a question begged by the text, or wonderfully reflected a rabbinic interpretation of the text. It is when students become aware of the dialogue between text and self—either by having the opportunity to reflect on this process or by studying the completed drawing in light of the text—that a relationship between text and learner is formed and felt, because it requires the student to maintain an attentiveness both to the particularities of the text as well as to their own ideas and imagination.

Teachers can bring students to awareness of their meaning-making process by building in mechanisms for attentiveness, such as asking students to keep going back to the details of the text, keeping the text available to the students throughout the work, and perhaps reading the text multiple times throughout the task period. Teachers can help students become aware of their decision points in the process of their drawing, encouraging students—through private conversation or a structured protocol—to reflect on the origins, development and expression of their own ideas in relation to the text.

For young children, teachers can initiate students into the interpretive process by gathering them around their drawings of a scene from Torah. They can ask students to notice the details of their drawings, similarities and differences among them, and to consider how those comparisons illuminate details, themes and questions in the text, which they then can explore further.

For older students, teachers can further refine illustration exercises to be interpretive experiences by asking students to respond specifically to an interpretive question—one that does not have an explicit answer in the “facts” of the text but requires an amassing of evidence from the text to form a plausible and cogent answer. An “interpretive question” is one for which there can be multiple answers. The answers must be formulated through details in the text and thus can be more or less compelling depending on the strength of textual evidence. Notably, interpretive answers are rooted in the text, which includes the text under study as well as other related Jewish texts, rather than solely in the learner’s own experience or opinion. (For further discussion of interpretive questions, see the Great Books Foundation and books by Sophie Haroutunian Gordon.)

An example of a drawing exercise crafted around an interpretive question might be: “Based on the Jacob and Esau narrative from birth to birthright, draw character portraits of Jacob and Esau and try to express through your drawing the relationship between them. You should be able to point to details in the text that support your design.” In this way, the prompt for drawing cannot be satisfied with either a rote or purely personal response.
Another common kind of task, particularly among older students, involves pairing students into chavruta to work with the Hebrew text. Teachers may assume that since individual students with different perspectives, skills and knowledge are working together on translation and questions about the text, the discussion will naturally produce interpretations and an interpretive experience. We see in our work that this is often not the case. Instead, these instructional tasks typically channel students through a well worn pattern of moving from a translation activity to a personalization activity with very little real interpretation activity. Such chavruta work can turn into task-completion experiences for students, a division of labor for translation paired with a launch into a personal conversation ultimately disconnected from the text. Designing a chavruta task that requires students to be in conversation with the text as well as with each other requires explicit scaffolding and instruction.

Teachers can create and examine their own tasks according to the following considerations in order to design for an interpretive learning experience for their students:

Is the task asking students to generate and/or answer interpretive questions as a central feature of the exercise?

Are questions open-ended and do they require responses to be grounded in the text?

In tasks that have language and translation components, do those components also contribute to a big picture understanding of the text as part of the task?

Does the task ask learners to keep going back to the text?

Does the task ask learners to revisit their ideas?

The work of translation and personalization are no doubt worthy of attention in Tanakh learning, but vital to the enterprise as a whole are both the skill and experience of interpretation. Translation and personalization exercises must balance across the fulcrum of an interpretive core which is the locus of the relationship between text and learner and the mutual awakening of each. If we truly engage learners in the work of interpretation, which is well within our capacity as educators to do, we will better be able to reach our highest ideals of Torah learning.

Allison Cook is a research associate and Orit Kent is a senior research associate at the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis, where they work on the Beit Midrash Research Project researching, developing, and teaching a “Havruta Inspired Pedagogy.” Both are long-time teachers and teacher-educators. They can be reached at alltcook@earthlink.net and okent@brandeis.edu.
Teaching Tanakh

Tanakh (the Jewish Bible, Prophets and Writings) is the cornerstone of Jewish tradition; but how do we take our most ancient text and make it come alive for contemporary Jews? Read how educators deploy an array of methodologies and pedagogies to unlock the treasures of the Tanakh for today’s students.