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image in her students, and (c) model a passion for learning and moral relationships in the classroom — the best texts remain wooden.

Third: Schools need a communal interpretive learning process for faculty, department chairs, administrators, parents, students, and office and technology staff based upon the theme of *tochechah* — the art of caring criticism. Combining Jewish text learning with contemporary case studies, the Milken Community High School, where Brous and I work, has developed a common vocabulary and set of guiding values that serve to transform the nature of communication in our school.

For example, as we deliberate sources of conflict within the institution, we consider the conditions under which a person can hear criti-

cism. The Talmud, in *Yebamoth* 65b, teaches: “Just as one is required to say that which can/will be heard/understood, so too is one required not to say that which can/will not be heard/understood.” If a goal of *tochechah* is *teshuvah*, transformation, then some guiding principles might be avoiding public embarrassment (Rashi on *Leviticus* 19:16), or separating the “sin” from the “sinner” (*Brachot* 10a).

Tochechah assumes a common value system, a shared understanding of what constitutes indignity or injustice. By framing and engaging in a process of text learning, dialogue, and introspection, we support and challenge each other in the hope of fostering renewed personal and communal discernment and commitment. 

Tough Questions

Judy Elkin

THE FIFTH GRADER who hears the Cain and Abel story for at least the fifth time suddenly realizes for the first time that shortly after Cain is sent wandering he marries. “But wait,” the student asks, “whom does he marry?” All we know about is Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel. Abel is dead and there are no women. Whom could he marry? The young teacher, filled with great energy, enthusiasm, and passion also carries with her a great responsibility — to the child, school, and, she feels, the entire Jewish people. Without batting an eye, she answers, “Well, there were other people created. They just aren’t named in the text.” Later, the teacher realizes that she really doesn’t know the answer and, admitting this to her students, says she’ll try to find out.

Both responses are predicated on the belief that if teachers don’t know the answers to students’ questions, they aren’t worthy of being teachers. Whether the teacher scrambles to conjure an answer or promises to find one, the message is the same: every question has an answer and the teacher either knows it or can find it. Sadly, many of us — teachers, students, and parents — believe that the purpose of education is to give children answers, lead them to *the truth*, that is *answers*, however big or small.

When our teaching always provides answers, we present students with a world view that is clean, neat, and understandable. This deludes us and them into believing that we control knowledge. With the answers to

almost any question only a “google” second away, we perpetuate a myth that to be educated is to know the correct answer and, by extension, that everything worth knowing can be known if one looks in the right place.

In truth, many of us realize that the world eludes clear answers. The question about Cain’s wife is only part of what’s troubling the student; the deeper question is about the authenticity of the Bible: Is the story *true*? Did it really happen? These are the sorts of questions that send teachers into a panic. Other types of questions — like those famously posed by Harold Kushner — ask about the moral order of the world: Why do bad things happen to good people? These questions challenge us to consider alternative responses and additional questions. For example: Why did Cain kill his brother in the first place? Why does a mother in her prime die?

Could teachers liberate themselves from the burden of supplying *the answer*? Could we simply respond: “You’ve asked a great question, one that adults struggle with as well and here are some ways that other people with your curiosity have tried to answer your question.”

Deborah Meier, in her book *The Power of Their Ideas*, suggests that schools be places where students cultivate intellectual “habits of mind” that can lead to curiosity and long-term learning both in and out of the classroom. Central to her educational philosophy and practice is teaching students to struggle with

conflicting evidence, multiple viewpoints, and to ask questions.

Jews know about asking questions. Our tradition is filled with debates growing out of great questions. We need to cultivate in teachers the courage to ask tough questions — questions that don't lend themselves to easy answers. We need to help teachers become comfortable with awkward silences and, worse yet, frustration. Israel Scheffler, the preeminent philosopher of education, writes that the fear of not knowing paralyzes teachers, forcing them to reduce big and complex ideas into simplistic questions for which an answer can be given — even if it shortchanges the learning. Other educators, like Parker Palmer, also discuss the fear of not knowing that permeates the souls of teachers. So, what's the answer? Actually, that's a great question.

Certainly teachers should be knowledgeable about the subjects they teach. According to Lee Shulman, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, successful teachers should have “flexible content knowledge” so they can teach beyond what was prepared for the day's lesson. While teachers cannot be prepared for every question a curious student poses, it shouldn't stop them from cultivating curiosity and exposing students to the mysteries of the world. And

what about the teacher's fear? Acknowledging fear for what it is rather than letting it dictate teaching strategies might be a better path.

We need to retrain children so that they do not always expect easy answers. Sometimes it's more appropriate to leave students with their questions, which, after all, stimulate thought. Isn't that what teachers — with their awesome responsibility — are trying to do? It means telling our students we cohabitate in a world filled with complex and sometimes ambiguous ideas, and it takes all of us to search for answers. We must encourage our students to revisit what we thought we knew and ask ourselves if we still know it in the same way. When we show students that some of our beliefs and ideas change over time, we illustrate the miracle of growth and development.

Teaching comfort with ambiguity lets children in on the greatest, most profound truth of all — that things really worth knowing are complicated. As they struggle with ideas, though, they simultaneously sharpen their analytic skills, learn to entertain alternative explanations, and realize they needn't despair when they don't find an easy answer — in the classroom or in the big tough questions about life. Perhaps, although they may feel uncomfortable, they will realize that they've asked a really great question. 

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On Role Models and Mentoring

Sara Paasche-Orlow

A YOUNG PERSON, raised in a strong and vibrant Conservative Jewish community, with the advantages of twelve years of day school, a semester in Israel, and many summers as a Ramah camper and counselor, complained to me: “I don't have any Jewish role models.” What did he mean? What is a role model? What was he searching for?

Role models are figures who transmit values and a way of being such that a person aspires to emulate these attributes in his or her own behavior. One facet of Jewish education is to help children adopt as models historical and contemporary figures that will help guide and shape their moral lives.

The teenager, who confided his lack of a role model, was surrounded by many admirable Jewish leaders. He had benefited from innumerable history and Torah study classes, and summer camp games and activities all

designed to promote symbols and models of Jewish strength and wisdom. He did not lack exposure to role models. What he did lack was Jewish mentorship, a *haver* or *rav* who knew him well, who was a wellspring of Jewish life knowledge and experience, and who could lovingly help him put together his Jewish reality.

While Jewish tradition is wary of creating pedestals for heroes, mentorship and the deep personal bonds that transmit values and wisdom from generation to generation is a crucial Jewish concept. *Pirkei Avot* is essentially a lesson in learning from beloved teachers and friends how to be a *mensch* in the world. *Avot de Rabbi Natan*, a commentary on *Pirkei Avot*, teaches that a person should only have one guiding teacher at a time. “If you have learned from one teacher everything he has to teach you, do not sit back and say, ‘it is enough for