Blog Post: Interpretive Experience: The Core of Meaningful Tanakh Education

By Orit Kent
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This blog post, by Mandel Center researchers Allison Cook and Orit Kent, is based on an article recently published in HaYidion: The RAVSAK Journal. The full article is available here.

Through the Mandel Center’s Beit Midrash Research Project, we have been visiting early childhood to high school classes for years. We have seen that Tanakh learning tends to fall into two major types of student activity: language and/or translation exercises, 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. In personalization exercises, students explore pre-determined themes in the text and apply them to their own lives, such as discussing their relationships with siblings when studying the Jacob and Esau narrative, or answering the question “what would I do in this situation?”

There are many good reasons why teachers use translation and personalization in Tanakh study, but when they are the main or only approaches they can limit the extent to which students can meaningfully engage with the text. Translation tasks can be overly technical, detracting from students’ exploration of the text’s deeper significance. This is a bit like a music student practicing scales or transposing compositions on paper while seldom getting to play a piece. Personalization, on the other hand, can lead students to focus on self-exploration, talking about their own lives with little reference to the text. In these cases, rather than helping students develop connections to the text, personalization exercises leave the text behind. Ironically, the personalization exercise may teach students that in order to discuss something relevant, they must leave the Tanakh altogether and simply focus on their own experiences.

In our view, a core task of Torah learners is to be engaged in the process of interpreting texts, of trying to understand not simply words or events, but the text’s meanings. This requires careful study of the text itself, involving close reading and a focused discussion that continually returns to the passage being studied.

We therefore propose that a third type of instructional activity—the interpretive experience—become the centerpiece of meaningful student work on Tanakh. This is an experience that holds both the reader and the text in conversation 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, while the human partner needs the text to invite him or her into new horizons of understanding and growth, intellectually, ethically and spiritually. Through the interpretive exercise, students deeply engage with the Torah in its particularity of language and form to discover insights, instruction and connection.
One example of an interpretive exercise is the following: “Based on the Jacob and Esau narrative from birth to blessings, 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 to support your design.” The prompt cannot be satisfied with either purely rote or personal responses. Further, the prompt requires that the student pay attention to the details of the text in order to contribute to a bigger picture understanding of it. An important extension to this task would be to help students become aware of their decision points in the drawing process and encourage them to reflect on the origins, development and expression of their ideas in relationship to the text.

It is interpretive work that emerges from and draws upon language and translation skills and gives them meaning and purpose. And, it is interpretive work that also enables personalization questions and responses to be rooted in deeper understanding of text. When the time comes to make those personal connections, the student has spent time steeped in and grappling with the nuances, tensions, and wisdom that the Torah has to teach. This can result in real insight for every age student.

Translation and personalization exercises have value, but only when balanced across an interpretive core which is the locus of the relationship between text and learner. If we truly engage learners in the process of interpretation, we will be better able to reach our highest ideals of Torah learning.

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