

Blog Post: Seeing Jewish Studies Through Christian Students' Writing

By Shaul Kelner
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This blog post, by [Shaul Kelner](#) of Vanderbilt University, is part of our series from the [Pedagogies of Engagement in Jewish Studies](#) seminar.

Shaul adds: This blog post is written in memory of my teacher, Alan Nuccio a"b, whose Western Civ curriculum inspired and informed my thinking about teaching Jewish Civ.



The Zohar may seem an unlikely text to use for the first session of a 100-level Introduction to Jewish Studies class. I chose to open with it, however, for three reasons. First, it is a great equalizer—as foreign to students with K-12 Jewish day schooling as to those who never met a Jew before in their lives.

Second, for students comfortable that they know “what Judaism says,” encountering the Zohar helps them realize that pat answers won’t serve them well in a college class. Chances are, their prior experience has not introduced them to a Judaism that conceives of humans affecting the balance of spiritual flows in a ten-part Godhead. Better to keep an open mind and focus on understanding the text.

Third, it is a great text for teaching writing.

At Vanderbilt, where I teach, Intro to Jewish Studies is a special writing-intensive course that fulfills a college-wide liberal arts writing requirement. My charge is not only to teach content, but to help students develop the “[writing skills \[that\] are essential for students to succeed at University](#).” The Zohar may not teach writing skills, *per se*, but it can teach a lot about the power of words to create worlds. This is valuable in a class whose introduction to Jewish Studies is framed as an extended meditation on the myriad ways that reverence for language, writing and text have shaped Jewish culture across the centuries.

Over the semester, we would be considering biblical and rabbinic hermeneutics, the concept of *geniza*, the revival of vernacular Hebrew, and more. With [Izzy Pludwinski's beautiful book](#) as our guide, our exploration of the diversity of Jewish cultures would also proceed through an encounter with the different Hebrew calligraphies associated with each. As students practice their letterforms, stroke by stroke, they should eventually recognize that their diligent scribing is an extended metaphor:

You are studying a culture that treats the word as sacred. Treat your own writing just as seriously, and with just as much attention to detail. Your words have power, and you, too, are creating worlds.

Leaving Strunk and White on the bookshelf, I opened the Fall 2013 iteration of the class with a story from the Zohar in which the letters of the alef-bet parade before God, each one in turn asking for the right to be used as the first letter in the utterance of Creation. (Not only words create worlds, letters do, too.) God considers each of the letters' merits and deficiencies, even weighing the meanings conveyed in the shapes of the letterforms. Zayin ז is rejected not only because its name means "weapon," but also because it looks like a sword.

After we studied the story, I asked students to create their own version of the Parade of Letters, using the English alphabet. I had a clear idea of what I was trying to teach. I had no expectation, however, of what I might learn.

As I was reading the papers, I was captivated by the Christological riffs on the Zohar's creation tale produced by several devout, Biblically literate Christian students. Intellectually, I understood constructivist theories of education, which suggest that we learn by integrating new information into our preexisting frameworks of knowledge. Reading the papers drove the point home in a visceral way, and it raised a question for me:

If "heritage" students in Jewish Studies include not only Jews but also Christians whose interest is tied to exploration of their own faith, what responsibilities does a pedagogy of engagement in Jewish Studies have to these students?

I came away from the class convinced that I needed to learn more about Christian religious life on campus, including student organizations like Baptist Collegiate Ministries, which I later visited as the guest of one of the students in my Intro to Jewish Studies class. In addition to her Zohar paper, she had also written a story about BCM using the conventions of [the biblical betrothal type scene, per Robert Alter](#).

She was writing what was meaningful to her, engaging with the course material in a way that made it uniquely her own. But writers have readers, who can read texts in ways that writers may not expect. My students might be surprised to learn that their writings led me to think in new ways about Jewish Studies pedagogy. But, then again, maybe they wouldn't. After all, this was a class about the power of writing.