

**TORAH TALK: TEACHING PARSHAT HASHAVUA TO
YOUNG CHILDREN**

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ABSTRACT

Is it possible to study parshat hashavua—the weekly Torah portion—with young children? In this paper, the author provides an in-depth, detailed exploration of “Torah Talk”, a teaching method she has pioneered with kindergartners and first graders involving a consistent, predictable structure and approach. The Torah Talk method has four key components: (1) Telling/ retelling one or more aspects of the weekly parasha (2) Acting out those passages (3) The specific component also called “Torah Talk” (sharing comments and questions), and (4) writing and/or drawing in Torah Journals. The author demonstrates how this method creates a culture of shared learning and a community of learners even among the youngest students. She argues that, given the right structures, young children can learn parshat hashavua in a way that is developmentally appropriate yet still takes the text—and the children—seriously, helps them develop general literacy skills and Jewish literacy, and engages them in the age-old Jewish enterprise of engaged textual interpretation.

On a Thursday morning in March, my first graders are sitting in a circle on the rug discussing the weekly Torah portion. One classmate is sitting in a chair next to the teacher holding the small *sefer torah*, which has been taken out of the classroom ark for this lesson. They have been learning about Parshat Ki Tissa and have just heard and acted out the story of the Golden Calf.

D: Why did they want to make a statue of God, so they could see one? Why didn't they just believe in God?

Shira: Great question.

I: Why did they think that Adonai wasn't real?

Shira: Hm. Really good question

O: Why did Aharon let them make an idol? Why didn't he say, “No way. I can't do this”?

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C: Why did Aharon say make it out of gold? Why didn't he say make it out of something that was less expensive, less good?

Shira: That's an interesting question. Do you have an answer? Go ahead.

I: Because God was special

Shira: Do you have another answer?

O: Because that's the most valuable thing and God's really important.

Shira: Hm. What do you think?

C: I don't think it was any of those because it's not a real god.

Shira: Hm. Good point. So maybe Aharon could've said, "Let's make it out of whatever..."

C: Let's make it out of wood or something.

LISTENING TO CHILDREN'S VOICES

Young children have so much to say about the world. They notice details, they wonder aloud about things, and they have so many questions. One of my favorite things about teaching young children is having the opportunity to sit back and listen to their voices. Listening to their comments and discussions fascinates me; listening to their questions challenges me and reminds me that children are filled with wonder. As a teacher, I need to continually find ways to provide opportunities for these questions, which in the end are at the heart of learning.

In particular, I love teaching the Torah to young children. I am grateful for the opportunity to take the stories in the Torah and make them come alive for children, and to guide children through a process of connecting to the Torah as they begin to see themselves as part of the Jewish people, directly connected to the people in the Torah. It is a text that I love reading and studying, part of a tradition that I care about deeply. For me, teaching the Torah is about sharing that passion with my students, and hopefully engaging them in a personal way so that they too will come to love and care about Torah.

In my classroom, I have tried to teach Torah to kindergartners and first graders in a way that allows me to share my passion for the text and also hear my students' voices. I feel a tremendous, awesome responsibility to take this text seriously and share it in an authentic way. At the same time, I feel an equally strong responsibility to listen to my students, to highlight their connections to Torah, and to help them find their own voices with which to respond to the Torah text.

When I ask children to respond to what they hear in the Torah, I am captivated by what they have to say. The children's words and voices tell me so much about what is going on inside their heads.

Their comments and questions reinforce my beliefs that young children are capable of thinking about big ideas, and give me some insight into their spiritual development and how they think about God and the Jewish people. Their interactions with each other allow me to observe how important it is to create a community of learners with shared language and experiences discussing Torah¹ together.

“TORAH TALK”

Each fall, I begin again with a group of students who are relatively new to talking about Torah. As the year goes on, they build content knowledge as well as skills for listening and responding to the Torah text. As we create a culture of shared Torah learning, the students change as a class. Children learn to listen to their classmates and respond in respectful ways. “Talking Torah,” listening to each other’s ideas, and reflecting together become part of our classroom culture. This does not happen magically. It takes work and time to build to this point, and every fall I wonder if this new group of students will ever get to the place that last year’s students did. But every year, a time comes when I step back and listen to the conversation about the week’s parasha going on around me. Children are sharing ideas, reflecting, questioning and challenging each other, and referring back to other sections of Torah. Suddenly, I think, this is what sophisticated Torah discussions sound like. These students know how to study Torah. This is a community of Torah learners of which I am proud to be a part.

Like all teachers, I struggle with the issue of time in my classroom. When I began teaching *parshat hashavua* to kindergartners and first graders, I wondered how to fit in another subject, a new approach, a new piece of curriculum. But I have come to devote a tremendous amount of time to “Torah Talk” (which I will describe in detail below). When things get busy in my classroom, when special events threaten to overwhelm our curriculum, hard choices often must be made. I almost always choose to keep Torah in our schedule.

I believe that much of the power in the methods that I use to teach Torah lies in the consistent, predictable structure and schedule. Just like a writing workshop or a reading workshop in which children come to expect certain beginnings, time to do certain kinds of work, and certain kinds of endings, Torah time in my classroom is based on a particular structure with four major components. While the conversation, the acting, and the writing may all look different from the beginning of the year to the end, it is the very predictability of the structure that allows the students to evolve in this way.

Before I describe this structure and the set of methods that I use, I will first explore the context in which it has developed and then focus on my goals in teaching Torah. No curriculum or teaching method can exist in a vacuum; it must be adapted to work in a particular school and classroom. I have found it extremely helpful to explicitly keep in mind what my goals are in teaching Torah; the choices I make in planning and teaching are always related to these goals.

¹In this paper, when I speak about “teaching Torah” or just “Torah” without a definite article, while this paper is entirely about my teaching of parshat hashavua, I am also in some sense locating my teaching—and my students’ learning—in the entire body of Jewish learning. When I refer to “the Torah”, I am here specifically referring to the *chumash*, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, and even more, to its weekly Torah-reading cycle.

After describing the context and the goals, I will describe each of the four components of the structure of my Torah lessons. Finally, I will describe one lesson in detail, from planning through implementation.

BACKGROUND AND ASSUMPTIONS

Many years ago, when I began teaching parshat hashavua to kindergartners, I found that there were very few resources for teaching parshat hashavua to young children (*First Steps in Learning Torah with Young Children* published by the BJE of Greater New York was a notable example). Most early childhood resources seemed to suggest that we should use the Torah as a source for “Bible stories,” emphasizing Creation and Noah’s Ark while skipping non-narrative sections entirely. While I understood the reasons behind such choices, I wanted to find a way to teach each week’s parasha, thus linking my kindergarten students into a much bigger cycle practiced throughout the Jewish world. I wondered how this would work throughout the school year. How would I make time each week to fit this into an already crowded day with a very full curriculum? How could I teach the Torah text in an intellectually honest way, staying “true” to the text, while keeping my teaching developmentally appropriate?

I had come to teaching with a strong background in early literacy as well as a personal interest and connection to Torah learning and teaching. At the urging of our Head of School, Jane Cohen, I decided to take all that I knew about good early literacy teaching and apply it to teaching Torah. My goal was to create an integrated approach that would enhance both my teaching of Torah and my teaching of early literacy skills by teaching the two simultaneously. I never imagined at the time that the routines I was introducing to that group of kindergartners would develop into a structure for teaching Torah that I would still be using a decade later.

I started with several assumptions about literacy that I continue to hold today. First, oral language is an important skill for young children. Long before they can express their ideas through writing, children have so much to say out loud. As teachers, we need to make sure that children have the opportunity to express themselves through talk, both for the sake of oral language development and as a rehearsal for their writing.

Second, children need to learn to respond to texts that they hear or read. Reading (or listening to a story) is a process of making meaning, in which the reader (or listener) interacts with the text. When children hear or read a text, they should be able to retell it, to respond to parts they like, to make a personal connection. They should be able to ask questions of the text. These kinds of responses can happen in oral discussions, and they can also take place in response journals. Both the talk and the writing are useful tools for making sense of the text. When we allow children to share their ideas about big and important themes such as those found throughout the Torah, we find much to which is it worth listening.

Third, children just learning to write can begin to learn to use written expression as a way to record their ideas. When we offer them a journal, we broaden our ideas about their “writing” to include talk, drawing, and writing. Often this writing can offer us a window into children’s thinking beyond what they might tell us orally or directly.

Finally, speaking, listening, reading and writing are all important literacy skills that children can use across the curriculum. If children spend time writing in a Torah journal, they will practice important writing skills that will transfer to other times of the day. If children practice responding to stories in the context of Torah, this will enhance their ability to understand and respond to other books. Therefore, a literacy-based Torah curriculum would not “take away” from time spent on other areas; in fact, it would enhance it.

In addition to these assumptions about literacy, I also began with some assumptions about children and Torah. Children wonder about their world and often think about big, difficult ideas. Given the opportunity, children will ask questions that are often deep and philosophical, the type that adults often shy away from. While the Torah is certainly a difficult text for young children, it is one that is integral to our identity and education as Jews. It is also filled with stories and ideas about many of the same questions that children wonder about: How was the world created? What is a family? What are right and wrong ways to act with other people? What do we know about God? Given the right support and structures, Torah learning can truly be lifelong learning, beginning at the earliest ages of school.

With these assumptions in mind, I began to develop a routine that I called “Torah Talk and Torah journals.” While I have over time refined my teaching and broadened my methods, I continue to use the basic technique of allowing children to respond to Torah in talk and in writing through a structured approach.

CONTEXT: MY SCHOOL, MY STUDENTS, MY CLASSROOM

I have been teaching Torah to kindergartners and first graders at the South Area Solomon Schechter Day School now located in Norwood, MA since 1995. The school is a Conservative Jewish day school with an integrated curriculum. As the classroom teacher, I am responsible for teaching both the Judaic and the secular curriculum. Whenever possible, I try to find ways to connect the two, either through content or skills. A unit on the moon, for example, includes observations and discussions of the phases, as well as an introduction to the Jewish calendar. Although my schedule does include self-contained lessons in Torah, reading, writing, and math, the lines between these subjects are often blurred as we write about Torah, illustrate stories we have read and stories we have written, or compare a character from literature to a character from the Torah.

The students in my first grade classes are 6 and 7 years old. Some can read English quite well, while others are just learning. All the students are just beginning to read and write in Hebrew. Some come from homes where Torah and parshat hashavua are common, familiar topics of discussion, while others come with little or no familiarity with the topic. My students also come with a variety of abilities and learning styles; some learn well by listening, while others need to move and others need visual cues. Some are able to express their ideas easily, while others need additional support to succeed. Any methods I choose to teach Torah must have room for all these different kinds of learners.

My students' connection to Torah begins well before our formal Torah lessons. Before we even begin to study *parshat hashavua*, we look at the *sefer torah*, which is stored inside the *aron kodesh*, the ark, which holds a central place in our classroom. We notice how beautifully it is decorated and discuss why the Torah would be stored in such a special place. We open up the Torah scroll so the students can look inside and carefully observe what they see. All of this is done in an atmosphere of seriousness and awe. From the beginning, we establish the fact that if the *sefer torah* is out, we must pay attention to it. We can not put it down and start talking with our friends about their clothes, or worse, start arguing about who was first in line. The opportunity to hold the Torah is a privilege and an honor in my classroom, one that carries with it the responsibilities of behaving appropriately and respecting classmates.

In our school, we begin each day with a morning service. Each Monday and Thursday, during our first grade *tefillot*, we take the Torah out of the *aron* and have a small Torah service. A student walks around with the Torah as we sing "*Torah tziva lanu moshe*," and everyone has a chance to kiss it. We then open up the Torah and I chant one or two lines from the week's parasha in Hebrew. Although we do not have our full study of Torah at that moment, we do name the week's parasha and we make very explicit links to the Torah discussion we will have later. This is one important way to demonstrate *kedusha*, the holiness of the Torah text, and to link the stories they will learn to the Jewish practice of reading Torah during *tefillah*.

As the students get used to hearing the words of Torah chanted aloud each week, they begin to notice familiar names and words. At first I might call their attention to a specific word ("See if you can hear a name of someone you recognize..."), and later, they begin to do this on their own. As their spoken Hebrew vocabulary develops, they often notice words that they know, linking their modern Hebrew learning with their study of the ancient words of the Torah. After I am done reading from the Torah, we usually go around the room and everyone can say a word they heard and recognized. All of this teaches students to listen closely to the Torah reading, to focus and notice that there are words that they know and that they may even be able to understand long before they are fluent in Hebrew.

Every Monday and Thursday, when it is time for Torah Talk, the routine is this: I tell the story of the weekly parasha, and students act it out or do some other interactive activity. We then sit in a circle and each student has the chance to share a comment or a question that they are thinking about (something they like, something that confuses them, or something they wonder about). This structured discussion, which we call "Torah Talk," happens twice each week. On Thursdays, we repeat this routine and add one step, as students write and draw a page in their Torah journals.

CHOICES AND CHALLENGES

Developmentally, the text of the Torah is challenging for children at this age. The written text itself is not yet accessible to them because of their reading level. Even when read aloud, whether in Hebrew or in translation, the language is often above their comprehension level. Within that constraint, I am committed to the integrity of the text and to trying to represent it in an authentic way.

Of course, this commitment must always be in balance with my commitment to respond to my young students in developmentally appropriate ways.

Beyond the difficult language, the themes and concepts are also quite challenging for young children. The text deals with difficult questions around personal relationships, abstract ideas about time and history, and complicated concepts such as an understanding of God. Children who are still at an age where they understand things quite literally may struggle to understand these texts. Yet young children do wonder about big ideas and often have deep thoughts and questions about God and the world. When children are given the opportunity to express these thoughts, the depth of their thinking often amazes the adults around them.

Still, the decision to teach parshat hashavua brings with it many challenges. There are many places in the Torah where it feels like the text moves too quickly. There are so many great stories packed into the first few *parshiot* of *Bereshit*. Any classroom for young children could spend weeks studying creation, or the story of Noah's ark, and it is easy to feel rushed to move on to the next week's parasha. We cannot possibly teach everything in every parasha. By choosing to stick with *parshat hashavua*, we force ourselves to choose selections from each parasha, and inevitably rush through or skip over certain sections that, in another context, we might have chosen to spend more time on. Other weeks, it is incredibly challenging to find something at all relevant to young children. There are whole *parshiot* devoted to the laws of sacrifices, others to the details of the building of the *miškan*, and still others about laws of sexual purity. When combing through these *parshiot* trying—sometimes almost desperately—to find something we can teach our students, we might wonder why we didn't just spend more time back in *Bereshit* when we had exciting narratives to work with.

The school calendar also presents its challenges. When we have holidays, vacations, and other interruptions to our schedule, we can put our studies of math and science on hold and return to them when we get back, or when our special events are over. But the cycle of *parshat hashavua* marches on whether we are there or not. Teachers often ask me what I do when we “miss” a parasha. Do I try to catch up or just skip it? The answer has to depend on the week. In theory, since we are focusing on the portion for each week during that week, we do not need to feel a need to “catch up” and fill in. However, when we are in the midst of the narrative parts of the Torah, we often need to fill in the story line of the week(s) we missed, so that the subsequent story makes sense. And there are certain *parshiot*, like Parshat Yitro with the 10 commandments, that seem so essential that it is difficult to decide to skip them just because we have not been in school.

All of these challenges are real. But when we choose to study *parshat hashavua*, staying linked to the reading for any given week rather than focusing on certain texts for longer periods of times, I believe that we gain more than we lose. What we gain in the trade-off is the ability to convey a sense of continuity on a larger scale, a commitment to the wider Jewish community, and an attachment to the place of Torah within the Jewish world. Students learn the cycle of the Jewish year and become part of it. Just as they learn about holidays and come to realize that Jews all over the world are celebrating the same holiday at the same time, they learn that “this week's parasha” in our

classroom is the same as this week's parasha throughout our school, in their synagogues, in Israel, and throughout the world.

They begin to ask the question at the beginning of each week, "What parasha is it?" Those who come from families where the parasha is discussed at home can bring in information they have learned there. Those who go to synagogue on Shabbat can carry with them the information they learned at school and find it echoed there. When they cycle back through these *parshiot* for a second and third time in successive grades, they learn to place themselves in a cycle of time that is marked by stories as much as by holidays. At first they may challenge, "But we know that story already." But the message gradually becomes clear: These stories and texts are so important to us as a people that we read them over and over again. In fact, this is a lifelong Jewish practice. In "real Jewish life," we do not study Torah texts once and never revisit them. Instead, we cycle back through the same *parshiot* each year, remembering the pieces we've learned before and looking for new details and new meanings. Kindergarten or first grade is not too early to begin modeling this process.

TORAH AS BOTH A LITERARY AND A RELIGIOUS TEXT

I want my kindergarten and first-grade students to know that for Jews, learning Torah is not just like reading or studying any other book. I want them to understand the sense of *kedusha* with which Jews approach Torah. I want them to hear it as a special story about our people and land, a text that connects them to the Jewish people throughout time. I want them to know that this Torah text has a special status in our community, and I want them to love this text and feel a sense of ownership and pride in it. While we take care of all of our books, we do not dress them in beautiful covers, kiss them as we parade them around the room, and store them in an *aron kodesh*. When I explicitly connect the stories and the text my students hear with the Torah scroll itself, opening the scroll to find the words inside, I demonstrate in a visual and concrete way how differently we handle this text.

At the same time, I want my students to learn to approach and interact with the Torah text like they would with any text. I want them to be able to listen to the stories or the non-narrative sections and retell the plot or other details. I want them to be able to summarize what is important. I want them to be able to talk about what a character might have been feeling and question why something did not happen the way they expected.

In many ways, the literacy skills that children can develop as they study Torah each week are the same as the reading comprehension strategies they learn to use when reading picture books or hearing fairy tales. They learn comprehension strategies that include retelling, summarizing, inferring characters' feelings, and visualizing images to match the words. They learn to make connections between their own experiences and those in the text, as well as connections between different stories or different parts of text. They learn to make characters "come alive" as they place themselves in the shoes of the characters and imagine what they might say or how they might act. They learn to use talk and writing to make sense of their reading. In choosing a favorite part of the story to talk or write about, they learn to respond to the text in a very personal way and interact with it. They learn to ask questions of the text and even to challenge it at times when it doesn't make sense to them.

Developing all of these skills helps them not only in their study of Torah, but also as they encounter any literature.

While I encourage children to respond in many different ways to each parasha, I particularly encourage them to ask questions of the text, to find parts of the text that they do not understand or that they wonder about. They can and do use the Torah text as a context for asking many of their big questions, including many of the things they wonder about God. Challenging the text and asking questions of it are not only good generic reading skills; they are traditional ways for Jews to respond to Torah. For both reasons, I want children to know that questions are worth asking even when they don't have simple answers, and to value the very process of wondering and thinking about difficult questions, especially as they relate to Torah.

When I am teaching *parshat hashavua*, I am always aware that I am helping children to build the basic foundations not only of reading literacy but also of Jewish cultural literacy. As educated Jewish children, they should get to know the Torah text as a narrative and a set of rules. At this young age, they can learn the plot of many of the stories, the characters and their family relationships. By the end of first grade, I would expect students to recognize Avraham and Sarah, Moshe and Aharon, as familiar people and be able to retell stories about each of them. Of course, not all of the Torah is narrative. Because we begin with *Bereshit*, the students have a chance to get to know Torah first in the familiar and sometimes simpler territory of "story". Later in the cycle of the year, they learn that the Torah also contains many rules and directions. They learn that some of these rules teach us how to behave today, and as a part of their basic Jewish cultural literacy, I would also expect students to recognize some of these "rules" (e.g. the Ten Commandments).

While I'm aware of the relationship between general literacy and Torah reading skills, I want children to connect to the Torah text at a more personal level than they would to any other single piece of literature. I want the Torah's stories to come alive for them. I want them to think about the people in Torah as real people with emotions, thoughts, and interactions. By putting themselves into Avraham's shoes as they act out moving to a new land, or imagining what Noah was thinking when God asked him to build an ark, I want my students to take these stories and make them their own.

More than that, I want my students to see these characters – especially the *avot* and *imabot*, the matriarchs and patriarchs – as part of their family. This is not just any story - this is *our* story, connecting each of us to the greater Jewish community. We spend a lot of time understanding the family relationships between Avraham and Sarah, Yitzchak and Rivka, Yaakov, Rachel and Leah. When Yaakov's name is changed to Yisrael, we talk about the term *b'nei yisrael* and how that term is still used today. I encourage my students to see themselves as the children's children's children... placing themselves as part of this Jewish family. Similarly, I make many explicit connections between the land of Israel as the place of Torah stories and the modern land of Israel as our Jewish country. When we study the modern country of Israel later in the year, I want my students to realize that this is the same land we have learned about in the Torah.

Beyond learning about the content of the Torah text, I want my students to develop a love and respect for the Torah itself and to place it in the greater context outside of our classroom, the communal aspect to studying *parshat hashavua*. I want them to understand that the sections of Torah we talk about are not just "...the chapter we are up to as we read..." but are the sections that are being read by Jews all over the world at that moment. As I noted above, being part of the *parshat hashavua* cycle connects them not only to other students in our school and to their families, but also to the greater Jewish community. I want my students to look at this ongoing return to the Torah text as a privilege, to be excited when they hear a piece of the Torah they have heard before. I want them to feel emotionally connected to Torah, to love hearing Torah stories and discussing ideas from Torah—and share this love of Torah with each other, with their families, and with others in the school.

Finally, it is also important that the students make connections between Torah and their own lives. When we study creation, we relate it to the practices of Shabbat. I often use biblical characters as models for values that I want to teach, such as Rivka's kindness to the animals when she offered water to the camels. When we study laws given to Moshe at Har Sinai, I focus particularly on those that my students can follow in their own lives. When the connections are less obvious, I try to make them more explicit, such as relating sacrifices to the ways we pray to God today. I want students to come away from Torah study knowing the content, seeing it as the story of their extended Jewish family, loving Torah, and thinking of the Torah as a place to learn about how we should live today.

All of these aspects of the context in which I teach, and my goals as a teacher, form the backdrop for the structure for parshat hashavua that I return to each week.

COMPONENTS OF "TORAH TALK"

Although the details vary from week to week, the structure I use to teach parshat hashavua remains consistent. Over the years, I have become more and more convinced that this predictable structure is a powerful way to support children's deep learning. The depth of conversation, the connections they are able to make, the ways that my students are able to respond to the Torah text by the end of the year are all influenced by the foundation that we build throughout the year through this structure. As Lucy Calkins wrote about writing workshops, "It is significant to realize that the most creative environments in our society are not the ever-changing ones. The artist's studio, the researcher's laboratory, the scholar's library are each deliberately kept simple so as to support the complexities of the work-in-progress. They are deliberately kept predictable so the unpredictable can happen."²

Rather than being confining, as I once worried it might be, I have come to see the predictable structure of Torah lessons in my classroom as a scaffold to help students succeed, be creative, and enter into with the challenging work of Torah study.

²Calkins, L. M. (1983). *Lessons from a child: On the teaching and learning of writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

“Torah Talk,” as we call it in my classroom (after one of its significant parts) has four main components:

1. Telling/ retelling
2. Acting out
3. “Torah Talk” itself – sharing comments and questions
4. Torah Journals

Telling/ Retelling

Each Monday and Thursday, I begin by telling and retelling the story or parts of the parasha that I have chosen. I present the story orally, though I often have a text in front of me. I usually have the *bumash* open so that I can refer to specific phrases in Hebrew and also so that the children make the link that this is the story that is in the written text, even though they are hearing it orally.

Clearly, any oral retelling will involve making choices about what to tell and what to focus on. I usually prepare by reading through the whole parasha myself so that I have the overall context. Often I choose the most familiar stories in the parasha, or the key narrative parts, or the part that I think has a relevant lesson that the kids can apply to their own lives. As I make each of these choices, I try to stay focused on my big goals for teaching Torah. My choices need to support my literacy goals; my goals for Jewish identity and literacy, and my goal of having my students love Torah. (I explore this in greater detail in the section of this paper entitled “Choosing Which Parts to Tell”, beginning on p. 17.)

Acting and role-playing

Either during the retelling or after I am done, when the parasha is primarily narrative, I have the students act out parts of the story they have just heard. I quickly assign parts, set the scene, and then let them re-enact the scene as they imagine it. When necessary, I even suggest what each character should say.

Part of the reason for doing this is simply to get students up and moving after a long time of sitting still and listening. For some students, this movement and active involvement is essential to being able to take in the story and remember it. While oral storytelling and referring to the written text are essential to Torah study, they are not the ideal modes of learning for all students. Acting out the story is one alternative way to teach it. For other students, this piece allows them to put themselves in the shoes of the character and bring the story alive. While they often re-enact just what they heard from the text, there are many times when the “actor” elaborates on the story. They fill in lines that they think the character might have said, or show with their movements and facial expressions how they think the character might have felt. At some level, they are interpreting the text, perhaps even making their own midrash.

Because this active engagement is so important, there are times when I have everyone stand up and act out a certain part of the parasha together. For example, when learning about *b’nei yisrael* being slaves in Egypt, I might have everyone act out working hard as slaves and not being able to take a

break. When we learned about the special clothes that the *kohanim* wore, I assigned half the class to be kohanim and the other half to make the special clothes and dress the kohanim. This activity took only about two minutes, but everyone was actively involved and the text was made more real than it would have been just from listening.

Acting out these stories often helps the children to imagine and understand the world of the past, keeping the text in its historical context. When they act out “walking through the desert with the camels,” this helps them to understand that people in the times of the Torah used different forms of transportation than we do today. At the same time, re-enacting the stories may help the child bring the text into the present in some way. When they act out Avraham inviting guests into his tent, they can, for example, connect that experience to their own experiences welcoming guests into their homes or our classroom.

“Torah Talk” (comments and questions)

After we are done retelling the story and acting it out, my students know to return to the rug, sitting in a circle, and to get ready for “Torah Talk.” At this point, we go around the circle and each person has a chance to give a personal response by making a comment about the parasha, telling something they remember or especially liked about the parasha, or asking a question. Often, we use a “talking stick” to mark whose turn it is and to remind each other that only the person holding the stick should be talking while others are listening. Students do not need to raise their hands and wait to be called on. Instead, I go around and give each person a turn. I find that this takes away some of the pressure that children often feel when they are wondering when they will be called on and trying to remember what they want to say. It also helps them to be able to listen to others’ comments and questions as they build their discussion skills.

At first, particularly with the youngest children, this activity can be challenging. Some children have trouble thinking of anything to say. Some need to be prompted with sentence starters (“I remember when...” or “I liked the part when...”). Sometimes it seems that many children are only repeating what students before them have said. Still, each child has a chance to say something aloud, and this often helps them to rehearse what they will later write or draw in their Torah journals. At this early stage, when most children are not saying more than one line, I have also found it helpful to write down what each child says so that we can refer back to it. Some years I have typed up these responses at the end of each week and sent them home to share with families.

When we go around the room and every child says, “I like the part when...” it can at times feel like I have scripted the conversation to the point that we have kept it very superficial. However, over time I have seen these very structured routines develop into sophisticated discussions about the parasha. Students begin to ask questions and wonder aloud about things they hear. They begin to question each other and challenge each other’s comments, or offer their own answers to their friends’ questions. As the content of their comments become more sophisticated, their skills in having a discussion develop as well. As they get better at listening to each other and responding appropriately, we often let go of the “one turn each” structure and they begin to talk to each other in a more natural

way. By the end of a year of practice “talking Torah” with each other, they sometimes sound like a group of much older students having deep, thoughtful discussions.

“Torah Talk” is another critical way in which the students develop a relationship with the text. They learn that the way to listen to Torah stories is not only to listen passively, but also to interact and respond. Even a simple retelling of a part that the child remembers helps that child to make the text their own, as the words come from his or her mouth. By choosing one part of the story that they like, students learn to bring their attention to different parts of the text or story and select a detail. They also learn that it is okay, even encouraged, to have an opinion about the text.

As they learn to give reasons for why they like a certain part, it becomes clear that some students are interested in sections that feel familiar (stories of people getting married or having babies); others are excited by characters who do extraordinary things (the brothers throwing Yosef in the pit); and still others are fascinated by learning about God’s power (creating the world, making a flood). By sharing these out loud in a group, they also get to hear what other people choose as “favorite” parts, which sometimes stretches children to think about something they might not have thought about on their own.

One fascinating aspect of the students’ responses is the way they evolve over time. The structure of Torah Talk allows everyone to participate from the beginning, while allowing for responses to become more varied and sophisticated as the year progresses. At first, most of what the students say during Torah Talk is retelling a part of the parasha or choosing a part that they like:

“I liked it when Avraham moved to a different place.”

“I liked it when Avraham listened to God.”

“I liked when God promised them that they would have children.”

Even at the beginning of the year, some students already ask questions as they struggle to understand difficult concepts:

“How did they listen to God, and how did God talk to them?”

Throughout the year, children continue to retell parts of the parasha and to choose their favorite sections. But they also begin to think about characters’ feelings and to wonder why people act in certain ways in these stories:

“I like when his (Yosef’s) dad chose him for his favorite son.”

“I don’t like it when they took the coat and put animal blood on it, because that made their dad really sad.”

“Why did the brothers lie to their own father?”

“Why did they throw him in a pit?”

These parts of the story challenge the students' ideas about family relationships and appropriate behavior. They cannot imagine brothers doing such horrible things to their father or their brother.

Even when learning non-narrative sections of Torah, different children focus on different aspects of the text, and respond in different ways. After learning about some of the rules presented in Parshat Mishpatim, some students restate the rules they have learned. Some wonder why there are so many rules. Others use this parasha to add to their growing understandings about God:

“Don't steal.”

“If you dig a hole, you should bury it up so nobody falls in.”

“The rules are to keep people safe.”

“Without rules, we wouldn't know that there would be a God, that there would be a thing called Shabbat or the Jewish religion. We wouldn't know anything about being Jewish.”

Over time, the children's responses collectively become more sophisticated. They share more complex thoughts, and ask more questions. Often, it is the questions children ask that give us the most insight into their deep thinking as they try to make sense of these complex texts. They wonder why a character acted a certain way or how God was able to create the world. Sometimes they challenge the text or challenge God with their questions:

“Why did Yaakov give Yosef a colorful jacket if that wasn't fair to the other brothers?”

“Why did the brothers want to trick the father that he was dead?”

“Why did Par'oh keep changing his mind?”

“Why did God make all the plagues?”

“If God said don't murder, why did God kill Par'oh's son?”

Sometimes their questions are more than wondering; they are challenges (“How could God have made all those people die if God is supposed to be good?!”). These questions may be more literary, about the text itself, or more theological, about the view of God raised by the text. Once they begin to ask questions, the children are not only responding to the text but are interacting with it. They are practicing a good general literacy skill – asking questions as you read (or hear) a text – as well as engaging in a very Jewish way of reading Torah.

From the beginning, I encourage children to ask questions. They get a lot of positive feedback each time they ask a question rather than just saying, “I like the part when....” Some years, when these “big” questions seemed to come up throughout the week and not only during Torah Talk, I have even kept a notebook near the *aron kodesh* in our classroom labeled “Questions about God and Torah” where children could write (or dictate) their questions as they arose.

Other teachers often ask me about how I answer the harder questions, whether they are questions about God or about whether the stories in the Torah are “real.” In fact, I rarely answer any of the questions at all, unless they are basic factual ones from the story that could be easily explained. I

often respond with, “That’s a great question.” Sometimes, I turn it back to the child who asked, “What do you think?”, or ask if another student would like to try to answer. When it is a question that often comes up in traditional commentaries or other Jewish thought, I might say, “Many adults ask that question, too.” Depending on our time constraints, we may or may not have a discussion about the question, or we may return to the question at another time. I may say, “Great question. Let’s not answer that right now... keep thinking about it.”

I wish I could report that I am always able make time to return to each child’s question. Realistically, though, the time constraints of a classroom combined with the limits on children’s ability to sit through long discussions often make this impossible. However, a consistent part of my message to the students is: Questions are worth asking even when we don’t get an answer right away. Not all questions have easy answers. Some questions are the kind that we keep thinking about for a long time. Questions are valid ways of thinking in their own right. This, too, seems to me to be a very Jewish approach, consistent with Jewish textual approaches over the ages.

Torah journals: Dictating, drawing, writing

From the earliest weeks of kindergarten, children can keep a Torah journal as a place where they record what they learn and their personal responses to each parasha. When we think of young children’s writing as their talk, drawings, and print combined, even those who are not yet proficient readers and writers can “write” and express their thoughts.

In my classroom, as in many, children write from the very first day of school, in an ongoing writing workshop as well as in particular subject areas like Torah. They are used to the idea that they can use the sounds they hear to write before they know conventional spellings. They learn to copy unusual words like people’s names from lists posted around the room. They know that writing, using both words and pictures, is one of many ways they can express their ideas.

In this context, Torah journals have flowed very naturally. For children who are not yet independent writers, Torah journals have sometimes been places where they have teachers acting as their scribes. For those who are beginning to write, Torah journals may be a place for them to experiment with new words and ideas.

Like the reading comprehension strategies, the integration of these literacy skills and Judaic content come naturally and each provides further support and practice for the other.

In kindergarten, I used blank white paper for their journal pages. After each week’s Torah Talk discussion, the students worked on their Torah journals. This sequence is important because in many ways, the oral talk works as a rehearsal for them before they do the more challenging task of writing. They were then encouraged to draw a picture, to write, or to dictate something from the parasha: a part they particularly liked, something they wondered about, a question they had. Although reading response logs are often used in classrooms for older children, this is an adaptation of the idea that works with younger ones.

I use similar techniques with first graders, except that I provide paper with some lines and expect them to write more independently along with their illustrations. In addition, I have tried to stretch the first graders' thinking about the parasha by providing pages with specific questions for them to answer, often questions which link the parasha to their own lives explicitly.

In many ways, I consider "Torah talk" and "Torah journals" to be the heart of my approach to teaching Torah to young children. From the time when I first began to develop this approach, one of my goals was to integrate the teaching of Torah with the teaching of early literacy, which is so central to the early grades in school. I wanted students to learn Torah for Torah's sake, but at the same time to build their language skills in listening to stories, making sense of stories and responding to them, and using writing and drawing as ways to record their thoughts. I used what we know from literacy teaching, including reading response approaches and journal writing, to enhance the students' understanding as they learned Torah. My experience in the years since has shown me that this structure allows students not only to interact with the Torah text as literature, using techniques of literacy education, but also to "talk Torah" as learning and increasingly educated members of the Jewish community.

CHOOSING WHICH PARTS TO TELL: CULTURAL LITERACY, NARRATIVE FLOW, RELEVANT THEMES, APPLICABILITY

Most parshiot in the Torah are complex, long, and filled with far more than we could possibly teach in one or two lessons. How do I decide what to tell and what to emphasize each week?

Whenever I sit down to plan to teach a parasha, I begin by reading the original Torah text, keeping in mind my overall goals for teaching Torah. If this is a narrative section of Torah, then I try to sketch out the main narrative points. Sometimes, these fall easily into a short outline of several important events. Other weeks, there are many different parts of the story or too many details to tell. When this happens, I have to make decisions about which parts I will include.

Often, there are stories in a given parasha that seem basic to Jewish cultural literacy. The story of Avraham welcoming the guests to his tent and the story of Moshe at the burning bush are both stories that we would expect children who have studied Torah to know. Some parshiot involve narrative details without which the larger story does not flow. We cannot skip the section about Yosef being thrown into the pit if we want the later stories about his reunification with his brothers to make sense. Finally, some sections in the Torah reflect important themes that I want to emphasize as part of the students' Jewish education, either because the themes are connected to Jewish identity or because they may teach values or practices that we would like our students to incorporate into their own lives.

After I read the parasha itself, one of my favorite resources to use is the *First Steps in Learning Torah with Young Children* series published by BJE of Greater New York. For each parasha, the authors choose a few sections of text and suggest a way to present the narrative. They usually connect this text to a Jewish concept that relates to children's lives, and they also provide suggested activities for early childhood classrooms. While I often choose to include more details from a given parasha than

what these authors chose, I find that they provide an excellent starting point as well as wonderful extension activities.

PLANNING: ORGANIZING FOR ME AND FOR MY STUDENTS

Outlining the main narrative points that I plan to tell from each parasha is helpful to me as an outline while I tell the story in class. But just as I need this outline to help me organize all the information in a given parasha, my students also benefit from organizers that help them to pay attention to the most important information. As I plan my telling, I know that some children will listen and remember every detail, while others will not possibly be able to hold on to all the information. So I need to decide ahead of time what the most basic elements are that I want to be sure that every child will remember. Often, I make a list of any names and places that I want them to know, as well as the two or three main points. As I tell the story, I try to emphasize these through repetition and highlight them so the students know they are important to remember. Sometimes I list them on a chart, sometimes I stop and ask review questions as I come to these parts, and sometimes I stop and say, “This part is REALLY important” before going on with the story. I find that if I have made my list beforehand of key narrative points, basic names and facts, and most important “big ideas,” then I am better able to teach in a way that ensures that every student will get the essence of each parasha.

As I plan, I also look for points of connection that I want to emphasize. If I notice that a character in the parasha has the same name as a child in my class, I can predict from experience that this will generate excitement. The parasha may include a story of a child being born, and a child in the class may have just had a new baby sibling. Sometimes these connections will help children to understand a story by bringing their experience as background knowledge. If children can think about their own experiences with brothers and sisters, they may better understand the jealousy among siblings that comes through in so many of the stories in Bereshit.

While I want children to connect the stories of the Torah to their own lives and use that information to help them understand, I also want them to be able to think about the ways in which these stories take place in another time and context. As I plan, I look for places in the text that will not make sense to the children without some clarification. People lived in tents, not modern houses. They got water from a well, not a faucet in the sink. They were traveling in a desert, not through a forest or a city. Emphasizing these points over and over help young children to understand how life was different “back in the Torah times” and to visualize the narrative in a different way.

As much as I want my students to relate to the Torah as a narrative text filled with wonderful, exciting, and interesting stories—that is only one piece of what I want to accomplish. As I plan, I also need to think about what elements of Jewish identity and values I want to emphasize and whether they are found in a particular parasha. For example, our connection to the land of Israel is one that is rooted in the Torah. When I teach those sections of Torah, I plan an explicit connection to what we learn about the modern state of Israel. First graders in my class also learn about prayer as a way of communicating our thanks, our wants, and our needs to God. When I find an example in parshat hashavua of someone using prayer in this way, I plan to emphasize that and connect it explicitly with our own experiences during tefillot. Later in the year, when we arrive at parshiot that are no

longer filled with stories but instead filled with rules and laws, I look for particular examples that the students can relate to and can apply to their own lives today. Thus, the study of Torah is not only about “far away and long ago,” but also about our lives as Jews in the here and now.

As I plan my telling for a given parasha, I also plan which parts will make sense for students to act out. I may decide that I want to include the whole narrative section, or I may focus on one small section. Sometimes there will be only three or four actors, and everyone else will be the audience. Other times, I assign several main roles but ask everyone else to play a group part (e.g. the Egyptians suffering from the plagues, while Moshe goes to talk to Par’oh). Occasionally, I will pair everyone up and they will all act out a scene simultaneously as I narrate. (For example, one person in the pair is the Kohen, and the other dresses him in the appropriate clothing.)

I rarely plan the exact dialogue or casting. I expect this acting out to be rough improvisation, not a polished performance. Ideally, I want students to think about the story and imagine the words a character might have said, or use the words that I have told them from the text. If a child cannot think of what to say, however, I do not hesitate to suggest ideas or even give them the specific words to say. With practice, most students are able to improvise successfully by the end of the year.

There are no perfect choices, in the telling or in the acting. Some parts I include every year, and others vary from year to year depending on the students, the timing, or even my interests at the time. Each week, I try to keep in mind my overall goals. Which part of the parasha, which big ideas and which details, will help my students to make meaning of this text and know the basic content; which will help them to make connections to this text as Jews; and which will enhance their love of Torah? Although the answers are not always clear, these are the questions I believe I should always be asking.

TIME MANAGEMENT: TRANSITIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

As with any lesson, it is just as important to think about the transition to a Torah lesson as it is to plan the lesson itself. If students have already been sitting before this, whether for tefillot, morning meeting, or any other lesson, they will need a chance to stand up and stretch. I often take a moment to let them take a bathroom or water break, or even just to walk around the room a bit, before getting started. From experience, I know that my success in holding their attention through the Torah lesson will be directly connected to how fidgety they are and how long they have been sitting beforehand. Also, by giving them this break beforehand, I give them the message that it would be better not to interrupt in the middle of studying Torah. Naturally, this does not mean that my students never ask to go to the bathroom or get a drink of water in the middle of a lesson, but taking a few minutes before the formal lesson can minimize these interruptions.

Once students are done with this quick break, I call them to the rug where they sit in a circle on the floor. If it seems necessary, I guide them to seats where I think they are less likely to be distracted by a neighbor. We often review “good listening position,” which I break down for them into sitting with bottoms on the rug, looking at the person who is talking, and keeping quiet until it is your turn to speak. While this language and these expectations are used throughout the day in my classroom,

I also emphasize that Torah time comes with its own additional expectations. “When the Torah is out, we want to make sure we are paying attention to it,” I often remind my students.

Our love for the Torah demands an additional level of respect, and holding the *sefer torah* is in my classroom a privilege that comes with a certain responsibility. Early in the year, I hold the *sefer torah* myself while I tell about the parasha, in order to reinforce that although I am telling the story orally, the source of the text is the written Torah. After a few weeks, children take turns having the honor of holding the Torah. The Torah holder sits in a chair next to me throughout the Torah lesson, or until he or she asks to pass it on to a new Torah holder for the rest of the class. I continually emphasize the kind of behavior that is necessary for the person who is holding the Torah, as well as the appropriate behavior for everyone else while the Torah is out. I often hear students reminding each other to stop doing something because “...the Torah is out,” confirming for me that they have internalized this idea.

People often ask me how long I spend telling about each week’s parasha and how long it takes to have every student share a comment or a question. While the telling itself rarely lasts more than 20 minutes, the entire Torah lesson together can sometimes stretch to 45 minutes. The response I get to this answer is often, “But how can they sit for that long? *My* students would never be able to do that!”

First of all, it is important to realize that the children are not sitting for the whole time. They stand up to act out the story between the telling and the comments, which allows them time to move around. Still, they are sitting for a long time and I do expect them to listen to each other’s comments and questions. This certainly takes practice. But I also find that giving kids clear expectations and guidelines for behavior is helpful. I remind them before we start and several times along the way how I expect them to sit and what their responsibilities are as listeners. I often stop when we are almost finished to remind them that the last few children deserve the same respect during their turns as the children who have already had a turn. I try to be clear that these expectations and guidelines are not only for me, but are ways to show respect to the Torah and to each other. Constantly linking their behavior to the fact that we have the Torah scroll out reinforces this connection.

At the same time, I do not want to give the impression that each student in my class is always able to sit silently and remain engaged through the longest Torah lessons, or that this would be my utmost goal. While I do believe in clear, high expectations, I also believe in respecting these young children and their capacity for paying attention and for staying engaged in group instruction. Certainly, the lessons early in the year are shorter than those later in the year. Even when that means choosing not to include certain interesting parts of a parasha, that is a realistic choice that must be made. For some students, even later in the year, sitting for this long truly is not realistic. During Torah Talk, just like at other times of the day, I allow some students to draw and others to walk around or take a break. This, again, is part of the culture of my classroom where students are encouraged to recognize their own needs and all students know that the rules look different for each child, depending on his or her strengths and difficulties.

One could certainly make different choices which would shorten the process: have children turn to a partner and share their comments and questions rather than go around the whole group, ask only certain children to share comments each time. These are all useful teaching techniques that would probably work well in this context. However, I have made a conscious choice that the community building that happens in the classroom as children learn to listen to each other and even respond to each other is as important to me as the content. This process, though sometimes slow and laborious early in the year, is an important step towards forming a group that is able to have the kind of successful Torah conversations that I hope to see by the end of the year.

IMPLEMENTATION: PARSHAT LECH LECHA

What does each of these components look like in practice? To provide a more complete picture, I will describe in detail one lesson I taught in the fall of 2004, from planning through implementation. The parasha of the week was Lech Lecha, the third parasha of Bereshit. (My intern videotaped this lesson while I was teaching.)

Parshat Lech Lecha, like many of the parshiot in Sefer Bereshit, is full of many stories and details. It is in many ways a foundational section for children to learn. The first of our Jewish ancestors, the *avot* and *imabot*, are introduced in this parasha. The rest of this biblical book will tell the stories of this family. Children must become familiar with Avraham and Sarah for the purposes of the narrative, as part of their basic Jewish cultural literacy, and because Avraham and Sarah have a unique role as the first Jewish ancestors. This parasha also introduces the idea of the *brit*, the covenant between God and Avraham. With its two focal points, an emphasis on children and on the land of Israel, the *brit* becomes a central theme throughout Bereshit. Without understanding this relationship, many of the succeeding parshiot would not make sense.

Since I do not begin parshat hashavua with my students until Parshat Bereshit, Lech Lecha was also only the third week of their Torah studies. Many of the choices I made in teaching this particular parasha might have been different if it had been later in the year and the students had more practice listening and responding to text. Because it was early in the year, I felt that I needed to limit how many narrative points I included. The more details I told the children, the less likely that they would remember the ones I thought were the most important. I also knew that I would be more successful if I could find parts of the story that children could relate to in some way. Finally, I knew that I was still establishing the connection I wanted my students to feel to the people and families in the Torah. These were not yet necessarily characters that my students already cared about; they could not yet predict how these characters would act. Yet, they would be hearing about them and “living with them” for a number of weeks, so the choices I made for this parasha would carry over into the following several lessons.

Given all this, I knew it was most important for me to introduce the characters Avram and Sarai, who would become Avraham and Sarah. I decided that the way the parasha starts out, with God telling Avram “*lech lecha*,” —to leave his home and go to a new place—was essential to understanding the parasha. After that, the children would need to know that Avraham did what God told him to

do and went to this new place, and to understand the idea of the brit, the promise that God made to Avraham, and the components of that promise.

The only additional plot line that I decided to include was the argument between Avraham and Lot's herdsmen over the land. I chose to include this in part so the children would begin to understand the importance of land in that time and place. In addition, I felt that Avraham's behavior in choosing not to fight with his nephew and instead allowing Lot to choose which direction to go provided a model that my students could consider emulating in their own conflicts. "You could act like Avraham" might become part of the language of the classroom in coming weeks when I wanted to suggest the value of avoiding a conflict when possible by offering a compromise.

I chose not to include the story of Avraham going to Egypt during the famine and pretending Sarai was his sister rather than his wife, the episode in chapter 14 of the war between the kings, or chapter 15's covenant between the pieces. While these will be interesting texts for these children to learn later in their Torah studying career, I need to make reasonable choices based on time constraints and the students' developmental abilities. The stories of Hagar and Yishmael being sent away and of Avraham's circumcision are both texts that would be difficult but interesting to teach, and if there were time I could imagine choosing to include them, but knowing that the narrative could move forward without these sections I chose to simplify the parasha and save these for another time.

TELLING

The first thing I want my students to know is the name of the parasha. Since they were actually introduced to this when we took out the Torah and read from it first thing Monday morning during tefillot, I usually begin our Torah Talk session with two review questions: *Does anyone remember the name of last week's parasha? and Does anyone remember the name of this week's parasha from this morning?*

Besides reviewing the names of the parshiot, these questions serve several other purposes as well. By asking about last week's parasha, I am implicitly reminding the students that we are reading a section of a continuous text which links from one week to the next, much like a new chapter of a long book. By asking if they remember the name of this week's parasha from the morning Torah service, I am reminding them of the link between what we read from the Torah each Monday and Thursday morning and the parasha we are about to discuss.

I then introduce two important people who I wanted the children to recognize: Avram and Sarai.

This parasha tells us about two very important people. One is named Avram, and the other is his wife named Sarai. You might have heard about Avraham and Sarah. They're the same people, but their names are going to be changed.

I emphasize these names several times, asking the children to repeat them and making sure they say the names correctly. I also introduce them this way to connect to what the children already know. Many of them would recognize the names Avraham and Sarah from their previous exposure to To-

rah. From the beginning, I wanted to make sure that they knew that this story was going to be about the same people they already recognized.

When this parasha starts out, the parasha tells us that God is talking. God comes to Avram and says, “lech lecha.” What does that mean?”

Since we went over the name of the parasha earlier that morning during the Torah service, I wanted to see how many children would remember what the words meant. Several responded right away, “go.”

Right, go. God says, I want you to go to a new place. I want you to leave here, leave your land, leave your family’s house, and go to a new place that I will show you. And when you go to that new place, I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you.

This idea of leaving a familiar place and going to a new place is central to this parasha, and worth repeating several times.

For the first time that day, I ask the children to predict what Avram would do. Most of them expect that Avram would do whatever God asked, and I confirmed for them that in fact that was what happened. At this point I stop to emphasize a connection that many of the children would be able to make between their own experiences and this story. Sharing their own feelings about moving would help them as they began to fill in parts of the story beyond the text, as they imagined how the characters in the Torah felt.

Has anybody here ever moved before? Does anybody remember what it felt like when you had to move? I want you to think about Avram and Sarai, and what they might have felt like when God said, I want you to move to a new place that I will show you.

Although I want them to feel that the experience of moving to a new place is not so far from their own experiences, I also want to emphasize how different the context was. As they began to visualize Torah stories and make pictures in their minds, they needed to imagine people walking rather than driving, moving through a hot and dry desert rather than along a modern highway.

They had to walk and travel with their camels, because they were going through the desert. What’s it like in the desert?

After a short discussion about the desert, I returned to the story, intentionally emphasizing the connection to the land of Israel.

...They started going to the place that God showed them. Do you know the name of that place? In the times of the Torah, it was called Canaan. And Canaan is an old name for what we call today, Israel.”

As I describe the argument between Avram's and Lot's shepherds, I emphasize Avram's willingness to compromise in order to avoid a fight. (Again, this was a message I hoped to return to over the next few weeks when the children encountered their own conflicts over sharing resources in the classroom.)

When they got to Canaan, they had a little problem. Avram had his own sheep, and his nephew Lot had his own sheep. In the area where they were, there wasn't enough food for the animals. The people helping them started to fight. Avram said, "You know what, I don't want to have a fight, Lot. You're part of my family. So you choose where you want to go. Whichever way you choose, I'll go in the other direction."

Next, I describe for the students the encounter that Avram had with God, in which God made the promise that would be known as the brit, which is central to understanding this parasha and all the subsequent stories in Bereshit. I give them cues to let them know that this is the most important part, as my voice gets very quiet and I pause before telling them that this part was very important. Before I add the third element of the promise, I review the first two:

God starts to talk to Avram. He's in Canaan, which is going to become Eretz Yisrael. God starts to talk to Avram—and this is REALLY, REALLY important:

God makes a promise to Avram. A really big promise. God says to Avram, Look around you. All the land that you can see is going to be yours and your family's forever and ever. Your family is going to get so big, you'll have children, and they'll have children, and they'll have children... and Avram, your family is going to be so big—Look at the dust in the earth. Can you count it? As many pieces as the dust of the earth, that's how many children there will be. And then a little while later, God said, look up at the stars. If you can count how many stars are in the sky, that's how big your family is going to get. And this land, Eretz Yisrael, is going to be your family's land forever and ever and ever.

At this point, I am explicit about our own connection to this brit. I want my students to see themselves as part of Avram's family, part of God's promise, connected to Avram and Sarai and the children they will have and connected to the land of Israel. This parasha establishes the connection, and we will come back to it throughout our study of Torah all year.

Does anybody know, if Avram had children, and they had children, and they had children, and they had children... and it went on and on and on, does anybody know who ends up being in Avram's family?

Different children offer some answers: Yitzchak, Leah, Rachel, Yosef.

What about their children and their children and their children? ("Us.")
Right, us! Because every person in the Jewish family is part of that promise that God is talking about. So, if the Jewish people are all part of this promise, if we're all part of this family, then which land is part of this promise too? ("Israel.")

So God makes this promise forever and ever, about Avram's family and about the land. And this promise is such an important promise, that it has a special name. A promise that lasts forever and ever like that is called a brit.

One girl recognizes the word brit from brit milah and starts to ask, "Oh, like when babies..." This is a wonderful connection, and I am pleased that she made that association. I acknowledge her comment, but choose to move on quickly rather than open up a conversation about a brit milah at this point.

Right, when babies have a brit, they are becoming part of the Jewish family and becoming part of God's promise.

One more thing, because this is an important part of this story. There's one more part of this brit. First tell me the 2 parts we learned already. God promised what? What's #1? As many children as the stars, and the dust. And what's part 2 of the promise? You'll have this land of erez yisrael. And God will bless you.

And then God says, I'm going to change your name. From now on, Avram, you will be called Avraham. And Sarai, from now on you will be called Sarah. Avraham and Sarah will be your names forever and ever.

After this long telling, I quickly ask everyone to stand up and join in a group stretch before we began acting out the story.

ACTING

I assign four main roles to begin the acting. Knowing that one of my student's Hebrew names is Avram, I choose him for that role. I extrapolate from the text and include a role for Sarai as well. (I often choose to expand the female roles in our acting, when the women are present in the story but the text does not tell us what they said.) I quickly assign another child to play Lot, and one more to play God's voice. I let the children know that I will have a part for everyone else, but it will not come at the beginning.

I started the acting by coaching the child playing God. "What are you going to say?" When the child begins in a quiet, shy voice, I remind her to speak in a loud, strong voice: "*Lech lecha!*"

This child does not seem confident about what her part entails. When that happens, I often prompt children with questions or even give them the specific words to say. "*What are you going to tell Avram? And then what's going to happen? I will bless you...*"

I then turn to the children playing Avram and Sarai:

Avram, the Torah doesn't tell us this: What do you think might happen next? Who do you think you might talk to about the plan?

Sarai, what are you going to say? The Torah doesn't tell us this part, what do you think she said?

Each child has a chance to vocalize what his character might do and say.

OK, and then go get your nephew, Avram—your nephew Lot—and tell him the plan.

Avram walks over to Lot, tells him the plan, and Lot agrees to go.

During these improvised role plays, I do not expect my students to be able to make the transitions from one scene to the next. Just as I provide them with the words they can say when necessary, I also direct the action and let them know where to go. While I ask the three students playing Avram, Sarai, and Lot to walk over to the “new place,” I assign half the remaining students to be the people taking care of Avram’s animals and the other half to be the people taking care of Lot’s animals.

I remind them often of the context they are in, such as the hot desert, and ask them to act in the way they think would be appropriate: *“You’re walking through the desert—do you think you’re running?”*

Now that all the students are participating in the acting, they need even more stage directions. I direct the shepherds to stand with either Avram or Lot and to start arguing with each other because there is not enough room here for all of the animals. Needless to say, the children love the chance to have a fake argument and they exaggerate beautifully. After a few minutes, I stop the scene and let Avram take over: *“I don’t want to argue. You can go anywhere you want, and I’ll take the other.”*

After I have everyone except Avram and Sarai sit down, I remind them that God is about to talk to them. They listen attentively, but the child playing God does not know what to say. I look for other students who can help her out, and I stand next to her to help as well. The goal of this acting is certainly not to test her memory; I want each child to feel successful and to experience the role-playing, even if I have to feed the lines to her directly.

Let’s listen really closely because God’s going to talk to you. What are you going to say? (Kathy, playing God, says, “I don’t know.”) Does anybody remember what God’s promise was? Aviva, come help Kathy.

I sit down next to Kathy while Aviva whispers in her ear, and then Kathy says:

Look all around you. Everywhere you can see will be yours. You will have as many children as there are dust and stars. I promise you that this land will be yours and your family’s forever and ever.

I remind Kathy that there was one more part of the promise: *“Tell them their new names.” “Avraham and Sarah.”*

We end, as I ask all the students to give themselves a big hand. I count down 5-4-3-2-1 as a cue for everyone to return to their seats in the circle.

RESPONDING: TORAH TALK AND TORAH JOURNALS

After the students finished acting out the story, I called them back together for Torah Talk. As they sat down, I reminded them of their options for responding: “You can say something you like, something you remember, maybe something you wonder about or a question you have.” While I held the Torah, the children passed around a pretend microphone. This microphone established whose turn it was and reminded them to talk one at a time. One by one, we went around the circle as each child made a comment:

David wanted to know whether God had lied. Were there really as many Jews as the dust and the stars?

Natan wondered, “Why did God want Lot, Avram, and Sarai to move to a new place?”

Anat first said, “I like the part when they had the baby.” When I reminded her that no one had actually had a baby in this parasha, she clarified that she liked it when God promised that they *would* have children.

Aviva wondered, “Why did God have to change Avraham and Sarah’s names?”

Naomi questioned, “Why did God say they would have children and then they didn’t?”

Ayelet commented on her role in the acting rather than the story itself, saying, “I liked being one of the helpers.”

The range of comments and responses on this particular week was fairly typical of the early part of the year. Some students related to the parasha through the particular role they had acted out. Others found connections, however tenuous, to familiar elements from their own lives. Some began to wonder aloud and asked questions about why things happened in certain ways.

At this point in the year, I relied on the structure to support students’ participation. Just as a graphic organizer can help students succeed in a written task, the organizing structure of a partially scripted discussion, in which each child says what he or she likes or asks a question, can help students succeed in this oral task. Later, as the group becomes more skilled in responding and in listening to each other, the nature of the discussion will shift. Instead of children making comments completely independent of each other, they are likely to begin saying, “I have an answer for ___’s question.” After a while, we may even move to a less structured discussion in which we no longer move around the circle but instead take turns in a more natural way as students respond to each other without my intervention.

The students’ Torah journals reflect their vision of what they imagined when they heard the parasha, as well as a particular piece that they choose to write about. Aviva’s picture shows an emphasis on the hot sun and the sand of the desert, with a man and a woman standing side by side. Her words refer to the brit: “I like when God made all of the promises to Avraham and Sarai.”

Naomi's picture similarly shows a hot sun and the sand with a man and a woman, but her picture is also filled with stars in the sky and her words emphasize the connection to Israel: "I liked the part that was my favorite part from this time when we went to Israel."

Unlike the other two, Kathy's picture clearly shows Avraham and Sarah looking very unhappy. She, too, drew a desert sun and sand, but her picture shows hills in the desert and shows people traveling over this distance. Her picture is labeled, "Avram, Sarai, and Lot walking in the desert with their animals."

The students' responses to this particular parasha related to many of the themes I had emphasized, including those that I expected they would connect to in a personal way. They thought about moving, about the desert, about having babies. They were interested in God's promise to Avraham and Sarah and wondered about why God had to change their names. They wondered why God would ask them to move to a new place, and thought about the connection to Israel. By listening to their comments, encouraging their questions, reading their journals and looking closely at their drawings, I could begin to see the Torah text through my students' eyes. In future weeks, I would build on their ideas and try to clarify their misconceptions. I could watch their responses develop and their love of Torah grow. Most of all, I could watch them become a community of Torah learners who could think and talk about Torah with each other in an increasingly sophisticated way.

CONCLUSION

Given the right structures, young children can learn *parshat hashavua* in a way that is developmentally appropriate yet still takes the text—and the children—seriously. When we approach the Torah text each week as both a literary and a religious text, we help students develop their general literacy skills and their basic Jewish literacy while engaging them in the age-old Jewish enterprise of engaged textual interpretation. Children can make connections with their own lives, bringing the Torah text off the page and into their world, and learn to love studying Torah, a love they share with classmates and others in their families and communities.

Afterword

In the time since this paper was written, I have continued to teach *parshat hashavua* to first graders using this relatively structured approach. Just as I find something new each time I return to a familiar section of Torah text, I find that I continue to hear new ideas and new questions each time I teach Torah to a new group of students.

My thinking about my teaching has continued to evolve. I remain convinced that a predictable structure like "Torah Talk" helps to scaffold children's success. I remain committed to teaching Torah text in an authentic way that also honors my students' developmental needs. I still believe that integrating oral language skills, reading comprehension skills, and early writing skills into my teaching of Torah enhances both my literacy teaching and my Torah teaching.

At the same time, I have developed new questions about my pedagogy. I find myself wondering how I can use more visual cues, including pictures, props, and charts, to tap into the visual learners in my class. For example, how can I use physical props and pictures to hook children's attention without detracting from their ability to create their own mental images? I also wonder about ways to make the children's thinking more public, perhaps charting their responses and questions and posting them on a bulletin board. This might allow us to return to the "Torah Talk" comments in future discussions, or to expand on them. On the other hand, I worry that this might detract from the more interactive discussions that often evolve as the year goes on. I wonder about which other discussion practices I could explicitly teach and then encourage among the students: ways of challenging each other when they disagree, for example, or ways of referring back to previous conversations.

When we finish a cycle of *parshat hashavua* each year, completing the entire Torah, we return to the beginning and start all over again. The text is the same, but we may read it differently because we are different people this year than last. As I go forward in my teaching of Torah to young children, the essential goals and structure remain the same, but the details change because my students are different this year than last, and my experiences each year influence the choices I will make in subsequent years.

This paper is one of a series of working papers on the teaching of Jewish studies, available for free download from the website of the Initiative on Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy in Jewish Studies, a project of the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University.

<http://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/projects/bridginginitiative.html>