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Gender and Cultural Differences in Teaching Bible

Chaya R. Gorsetman and Amy Golubtchik Ament

Chaya Gorsetman and Amy Ament developed a unique program that uses DI to address some social-cultural aspects of learning differences.

- If a girl doesn't have a *brit milah*, does she have to keep commandments?
- I don't think it's fair that I have to say "Amen" when the boys say "*Shelo Asani Isha*."
- If God isn't a boy or a girl, why do we always use the word "*vayomer*"?
- My mother doesn't stay in the kitchen when we have guests over [like Sarah], does that mean she is not modest?

These questions, all asked by third and fourth grade students in Jewish day schools in the New York metropolitan area, challenge educators to think about exclusion and inclusion, social expectations, and the role of culture and the learning experience. These kinds of questions bring attentive educators to awareness that different readers of Bible, even at young ages, experience, absorb, perceive and grapple with the text differently, each child according to his or her own cultural expectations that influence their understandings and approaches to Bible study.

One area that highlights the differences with which students experience learning is gender. Indeed, as these examples illustrate, young boys and girls in our communities are constantly negotiating the dichotomy between gender roles in the biblical text and gender roles in contemporary society. Students are often exposed to women in their environments who are active and engaged in public life in ways that starkly contrast with the lives of the highly domesticated biblical matriarchs. Moreover, biblical women, frequently described in relationship to other (i.e., wife, concubine, mother, daughter or sister), obfuscate the identity formation process for girls and young women working on developing an independent notion of self. Thus, the biblical text, studied against the backdrop of contemporary social settings, constructs complex and diverse learning experiences.

The questions brought above demonstrate students' struggle with these ambiguities from a very young age, and highlight the need for creating a classroom space for Bible study that allows for complex and autonomous encounters with the biblical text from early on. The educational vision that emerges from this is formulating textual interactions that construct multiple learning spaces, meet individual identity-development needs and allow for varied cultural encounters. We sought out a way to enable teachers to create good educational practice by incorporating differentiated instruction in a Bible classroom, specifically around the issue of gender. Over the past three years, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) has been raising these issues in a pilot curriculum program with third and fourth grade Bible teachers.

The Gender and Orthodoxy Curriculum

JOFA's Gender and Orthodoxy Curriculum Project, funded by a grant from the Covenant Foundation, with additional support from the Jewish Women's Foundation of New York, seeks to enable students to challenge gender stereotypes, to read critically and autonomously, and to connect to the text in an unmediated way. The program also promotes a complex process of gender identity formation through text, and individualized conceptions of self (e.g., what does circumcision and covenant [*brit*] mean to a girl; what does 'modesty' mean to a boy). The curriculum also uses portraits of biblical women to highlight this complexity. The program, then, aims at opening up a Bible class to make space for multiple learners, personalities, cultures, and social realities, in order to enable students to encounter the text in personal, individualized and meaningful ways.

Method

Our first set of questions was, how does a teacher create an environment where disparate ideas, experiences and approaches around the text are encouraged? How can we use students' questions and individualized experiences to help build a differentiated classroom that responds to the needs of all learners?

This three-year research project developed an approach to teaching Bible that uses the lens of gender as an entry point to give teachers the tools to encourage questions and include all learners in the study of Bible. We systematically observed a third grade Bible classroom for one year, and a team of educators, in collaboration with the classroom teacher who was observed, used the questions the students asked (including those above) as the basis for ten curricular modules on the study of Genesis. We then mentored eight teachers in three schools to implement the modules in their classrooms. The modules were revised based on feedback from the teachers.

The curriculum offers tools to:

- Enhance and supplement the existing Bible curricula in day schools by requiring the students to engage in careful and deliberate study of the text.
- Create an interactive environment that allows for all levels of questions, thereby helping the students feel connected to the text.
- Respond to questions in ways that are responsive to the students' questions, respectful of the biblical commentators, and leave open multiple possibilities for students to consider.

Based on the premise that "whatever route to the outcome works for a student is likely to be a help rather than a hindrance in constructing student success," we suggest a range of learning and assessment activities for students of all ages and learning styles (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).

Examples of Differentiation

"Education is a dialog between student and teacher. It is not a monolog – if it were, students could simply buy the textbook and read it themselves. Students attend classes so that two- way communication can occur. Questions are an important part of this dialogue" (Brain, 1998). Students thrive in an interactive learning environment where questions are not merely allowed, but encouraged. Enabling students to come up with their own questions based on their own social- cultural experiences is a vital part of differentiation. In an environment where students feel safe and comfortable taking risks, they are free to explore and grapple with issues that arise as they try to connect new information to their prior knowledge. These connections are made by each student according to her/his own experience.

How does one assist teachers in creating such an environment? Working with teachers we have learned the following:

Asking Questions

Researchers begin their studies by asking questions which set the stage for safe learning. As a result of this approach, the emphasis is placed on the inherent value of asking questions.

Teacher Non-Response

By avoiding an immediate response, teachers enable students to learn that there is an inherent value to their own questions and processes, which encourages them to ask more. Quick answers impede the students' ability and/or desire to ask additional questions.

Exploratory Probing

By probing the students about the question – e.g., "What specifically is bothering you about this text?", "Does this contradict something you already know?", "Did you expect something else?", "Why?" – students learn to articulate deeper processes and be more active in their cultural navigations.

Multiple Directions

Asking divergent and open-ended questions elicits independent thoughts and ideas from the students rather than an attempt at one correct answer owned by the teacher. Questions with many possible answers reinforce notions of multiple experiences and cultural approaches to learning.

Teachers report that creating this type of atmosphere encourages the students to ask more and deeper questions than they had in previous years, and enables the teacher to notice more questions. As long as a basic comprehension is established, students can then take time to reflect, ask questions and think more deeply about the text in larger social- cultural context.

Structure of Modules

Our modules each begin with a value or goal, followed by the text (with English translation) from which the goal or value is derived. An introductory discussion, learning activities, assessment activities and summary follows. These lessons have been carefully designed to engage all students in meaningful study, maximize student participation, and provide various means for assessing students' understanding of the material. Two versions of the handouts and worksheets are offered; one in Hebrew with English translation, and one in Hebrew only, as different students, even in the same class, may have different strengths and abilities when it comes to learning texts.

The teacher resource section gives the teacher background information that supports the lesson's objective and helps the teacher prepare for the lesson. Some of the resources relate directly to the subject at hand, but were not included in the lesson plan because they did not specifically relate to the lesson's objectives. Other resources relate indirectly, and might shed light on and help teachers prepare for questions students might raise in class. Still others are included to enhance the teacher's personal insight into the subject. In some units, specific texts were included because they are an important part of the literature, even though they may not directly support the stated goal. Not all information contained in this section is intended to share with students. Our experience shows that simply having the background knowledge impacts the way a teacher sees the characters or situations, which affects the way it is taught.

Each unit contains several different activities designed to assess how well the students have integrated the material. As different activities may appeal to different students, the teacher may present the list and offer

the students a choice. Because of the varied topics they address, and also because they are very much dependent on the students' questions, the units are also easily adaptable for use with older students (including high school and adult learners).

Sample Module

The goal of the module, *Hayye Sarah: The Life of Sarah*, states: An analysis of the death of Sarah will allow the learner to use the text to review Sarah's life, highlighting her actions as a female role model. The introduction is based on Genesis 23:1-2, which states: *Sarah's lifetime – the span of Sarah's life – came to one hundred and twenty seven years. Sarah died in Kiryat-Arba – now Hebron – in the land of Canaan; and Abraham came to mourn [or eulogize] Sarah, and to bewail her.*

To introduce the subject, the teacher is encouraged to elicit from students their thoughts and prior knowledge about the following questions:

- What is mourning?
- When do people cry – at what occasions or times?
- Why does the Torah say that Abraham mourned for Sarah and cried for her?
- Isn't it enough to say either "mourned" or "cried?"

After a short discussion on what a "eulogy" is, one possible explanation is offered (attributed to Rabbi Yosef Adler, who learned it from Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik): Crying signifies the personal mourning that Abraham felt, and the eulogy represents the public mourning. Sarah's loss was felt both on a communal level, as well as a personal one.

The suggested learning activity uses the "Think-Pair-Share" cooperative learning strategy. Cooperative learning allows for maximum student engagement and accountability, while sending the message that a team's ideas are more comprehensive than an individual's. It also taps into students' needs to interact with others, as some find the experience of learning is enhanced through social and verbal interchange.

Students are thus asked to think about and write down, on their own, all the events they remember in which Sarah played a role. We encourage them to use their texts to refresh their memories. After a few minutes of working independently, they can pair up with a partner and the two should compare notes and combine their lists. Worksheets that highlight some events in Sarah's life (i.e., her name change, her being introduced to Abimelech as Abraham's sister instead of his wife, her reaction upon hearing she would bear a son, and her sending Hagar and Ishmael from her home), can be distributed. Students are asked to reflect on these episodes and write which of Sarah's characteristics we can learn from each one. After bringing the class together, the teacher can generate a list of Sarah's roles and qualities that are revealed from each story.

As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch stated, "when your class is over, you must be able to tell yourself honestly that your students have indeed learned what you endeavored to teach them." (Feldheim edition, 1992: 140) The assessment activity is designed to determine how well the student can demonstrate their understanding of Sarah's characteristics as a role model. It asks the students to write a eulogy for Sarah, using the incidences they reflected on as the foundation. The eulogy should include possible answers to the following questions:

- What kind of person was Sarah (giving examples to support the traits she possessed)?
- How will she be missed on a personal level (by her husband and/or son)?
- How will she be missed on a communal level (by others around her)?
- What can future generations learn from her?

Alternative assessment activities are offered as well for those who would choose to demonstrate their understanding of Sarah in different ways.

Some of these include:

- Create a crossword puzzle or word search for your classmates to complete. The clues and answers should recount details of Sarah's life. Prepare an answer key, or have classmates return them to you to check.
- Write and illustrate a children's book about Sarah. Which stories would you tell? What would you want to make sure the children knew and remembered about Sarah?
- Collect, design or create 6-8 objects that would help you tell the story of Sarah's life. Arrange the items as they might be displayed in a museum. Attach a two sentence description of each one and describe why it was important in Sarah's life. Tell the story of Sarah's life to the class using the artifacts.
- Make up a song (or new words to a song they already know) that tells of events in Sarah's life and

what her reactions to these events says about her as a person.

Modeling Differentiation through Professional Development

As we learned while we were mentoring teachers, professional development is also a differentiated process. Though we had the same goals for all teachers, they, too, came with different experiences and cultural backgrounds. We met each teacher where they were, and engaged them in a process that enabled them to move individually toward our collective goals, which served to model the process of cultural differentiation.

We also encourage teachers to modify the activities and lessons to meet the needs of their students. Teachers shared ways that they used our suggested activities in other areas of their teaching. As L.M. Earl said so eloquently: "Differentiation doesn't mean a different program for each student in the class, and it doesn't mean ability grouping to reduce the differences. It means using what you know about learning and about each student to improve your teaching so that students all work in ways that have an optimal effect on their learning" (2003:42).

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