AT THE TABLE IN THE BEIT MIDRASH:

THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF ADULT JEWISH LEARNING

Jennifer Clayman

Rabbinical Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Los Angeles Campus

February 27, 2003

Advisors:
Dr. Rachel Adler
Dr. Diane Tickton Schuster

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION
THE TABLE IN THE BEIT MIDRASH

> When I was a child, people sat around kitchen tables and told their stories. We don't do that so much anymore. Sitting around the table telling stories is not just a way of passing time. It is the way the wisdom gets passed along.[1]

A kitchen table is a place of comfort. If we are fortunate, it is the place where one of our most basic needs, the need for food, is met. Ideally, it is a place of nurturing, a place of safety. The psalmist expresses gratitude for God's love using the image of the table: "You spread a table before me in the presence of my enemies" (Ps. 23:5). Because it is a place of comfort and safety, the table can become a place for far more than eating. In the words of Rachel Naomi Remen, it can become a place where we tell our stories and give and receive wisdom.

Adult Jewish learning also takes place at tables. In the idealized *Beit Midrash*, or house of study, tables are the places where we spread out our books and enter into dialogue with our teachers, study partners, and Judaism itself. Like the table in the kitchen, the table in the *Beit Midrash* becomes a place for telling stories and sharing wisdom. Ideally, it is a place of comfort, safety, and sustenance, a place for the soul's nourishment. Like the table in the kitchen, the table in the *Beit Midrash* is where we hope to get that which we need to grow.

This thesis is about the adult Jewish learner at the idealized table in the proverbial *Beit Midrash*. While I focus on Reform synagogues, I acknowledge that adult Jewish learning happens in a variety of settings. The *Beit Midrash*, and the tables within it, can take many forms. The range of possibilities is as diverse as the life experiences of a diverse

---

[1] Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal*, with a forward by Dean Ornish (New York: Riverhead Books, 1994), pg. xxvii.

population of adult Jewish learners. But, for the purposes of this paper, I focus on Reform

congregations in part because this is where my work as a rabbinical student and educator

has led me. I have taught in several adult education programs, including Adult B'nai

Mitzvah and a parallel program for parents with children in a supplementary religious

school. I have also designed curriculum for, and taught in, an ongoing family education

program that has adult, family, and child-only components. I have taught "one-shot"

classes on a variety of topics, led *chavurah* study sessions, and led Shabbat Torah study

groups. These experiences have led me to want to know what happens to adults when they

walk into the synagogue *Beit Midrash* and take their seats at the table.

My personal experience aside, an inquiry that privileges the synagogue as a specific

locus of adult Jewish learning is not without warrant. Synagogues have the advantage that

they are communal institutions where members stay through many stages of their lives.

The role of this kind of community in lifelong learning cannot be overstated: while

temporary communities can be created at retreat centers, colleges and even Internet chat

rooms, "a congregation can be the center of an ongoing communal life that is rooted in

families and in neighborhoods. In a synagogue setting, discussions and debates that begin

in class can reverberate for weeks."[2] When learning takes place in congregations, it

becomes swept up in life; significantly, "Synagogue life provides multiple opportunities to

link what is studied to what is practiced—to translate abstract ideas into concrete actions,

we weave pieces of information into a tapestry of meaning and symbols."

---

[2] Isa Aron, *Becoming a Congregation of Learners: Learning as a Key to Revitalizing Congregational Life*, Revitalizing Congregational Life: A Synagogue 2000 Series (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2000), pg. 27.

Importantly, this kind of learning can take many forms. I have spoken so far of adult learners "sitting at the table" in the *Beit Midrash*, but it is important that the reader understand that I use this phrase metaphorically. Learning experiences can be—and, I believe, *should* be—formal and informal, individual and communal. Learners learn in classrooms, art rooms, and gardens, in the intimacy of the educator's office and in large lecture halls. Teachers too come in many forms: professional educators, clergy, song leaders, camp counselors, physicians who have become *mohalim* and *mohalot*. Learning need not consist of students literally sitting at a table with the teacher at the head. Yet the metaphor of the table in the *Beit Midrash* is a good one, because it makes us think about movement: from the outside in, from the threshold to the interior, to the center of the learning community. It gives us an embodied way of thinking about the encounter between learner and tradition: books opening, pages turning, eyes moving, mouths speaking, hands writing. If sitting at the table is a metaphor for learning, then we can envision the learner coming into new skills for reading texts, new lenses for interpretation of stories and ideas, new language for speaking to and about the tradition, and new thoughts for sharing with fellow learners, teachers, parents, and children. When learning is linked to life, the opportunities for growth are many.

The purpose of this thesis is to theorize about how we can create these opportunities. To do so, I first make an inquiry into the religious nature of Jewish learning, and then I explore some of the secular literature of adult learning. From there, I move into a discussion of how both of these theoretical frameworks can help educators to make adult learning richer, deeper, and more full of opportunities for growth.

Chapter one asks the question: *What is Jewish learning?* Specifically, what is the

relationship between Jewish learning and Jewish religiosity? In what ways does Jewish

learning have theological significance? This chapter attempts a very brief survey of Jewish

texts that deal with learning and its religious implications. I begin with the Torah in

Deuteronomy, move through the Mishnah in Pirke Avot, and examine a Talmudic text

that has become part of our liturgy. These texts all indicate that learning leads to divine

encounter; in effect, they amount to the beginnings of a Jewish "theology of learning."

While the different texts imagine the divine-human encounter differently, they clearly

demonstrate the trend. They help us to better understand that the proverbial *Beit Midrash*

has been conceived by certain voices in the tradition as a place where we meet God. This

traditional understanding is extended by certain modern and contemporary writings,

particularly those of Martin Buber and Rachel Adler. Buber's theology of relation, and

Adler's formulation of a marriage between subjects, both have implications for the

relationship between learner and tradition and the ways in which that relationship points

toward the divine. The language of self and other used by these theologians is particularly

helpful in imagining Judaism as an ongoing conversation that we hope our learners will

join.

Chapter two asks: *What happens to the learner who sits at the table?* What happens in

the mind of the adult engaged in learning, and how do adult learners grow? The literature

of adult learning, development, and growth is extensive, and it would be beyond the scope

of this project to do an even cursory survey. I have therefore chosen two works on adult

learning that I have found particularly salient, and I summarize the findings of their

authors. The works I have chosen are *Women's Ways of Knowing* by Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, and *In Over Our Heads* by Robert Kegan. Insights from these books may help us to think about what learners need when they come to the table in the *Beit Midrash*. They may also help us to think about how individual transformation actually occurs as a result of learning.

This last bit of insight will be particularly helpful in chapter three, which asks, *How can we use the insights of the literature of adult learning to make the Beit Midrash more conducive to development? And ultimately, how do we make sure that the Beit Midrash is a place where learners have the opportunity to encounter the divine?* To attempt to answer these questions, I begin with a case from my own experience as an educator. I relate an anecdote about Sarah, a religious school teacher in a program that I have been helping to administer. Using *Women's Ways of Knowing* and *In Over Our Heads*, I note specific implications for Jewish educational practice, for Sarah's case as well as more generally.

Ultimately, I make a plea for using the literature of adult learning to create a better *Beit Midrash*, one in which all learners have the opportunity to experience Jewish study as the religious act that our tradition imagines it can be.

CHAPTER ONE
THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF JEWISH LEARNING

In Judaism, learning has long been interwoven with religiosity. Texts old and new

claim that learning deepens the learner's relationship with God. In this chapter, we will

see how this idea is developed over time in a selection of texts. Ultimately, we will see that

learning can be framed as a conversation between covenantal partners in a deep and

committed relationship, a relationship in which echoes of the divine may be sensed.

Many of our classical texts convey the notion that closeness to God is dependent

upon obedience to the laws of Torah. Theoretically, one cannot obey the laws unless one

knows them, and one cannot know them unless one has learned them. Therefore, unless

one learns, one cannot be close to God. In order to explore the nature of the relationship

between learning and experiencing God in Judaism, we will now explore a series of texts.

Specifically, we will follow the root למד through Deuteronomy, Pirke Avot, and *Birkat Ha-*

Torah, a liturgical benediction that deals with Torah. As we trace its use in these texts, we

will see examples of how Judaism constructs a "theology of learning."

Goaded into Learning: למד in Deuteronomy

Words formed from the Hebrew root למד are generally translated as "learn" or "teach,"

depending on grammatical form. However, the root has an interesting etymological

history. In some of its ancient forms, it probably meant "prick, sting, incite, or goad."[1] In

---

[1] Earnest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English*, with a forward by Haim Rabin (New York: Macmillan, 1987), pg. 302. See also Laird Harris's *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Volume 1, pg. 1116.

Judges 3:31 the Hebrew phrase בְּמַלְמַד הַבָּקָר is translated as "with an ox-goad;"[2] one

imagines that, for a domesticated animal, learning meant responding to the crack of the

proverbial whip. In a sense, to learn was to be "whipped into shape." The word לָמַד itself,

for which the letter *lamed* is named, probably at one time meant the "rod of the teacher."[3]

If we think carefully about the shape of the letter "ל" we can even begin to see that it looks

a little like a whip. There are, unfortunately, times when learning can be a process

overshadowed by the threat of violence or hurt. As we move through a series of texts that

deal with learning and למד in particular, we must ask whether Jewish learning ever

transcends these etymological beginnings, and if so, in what ways.

While scholars debate the nature of the infrastructure that supported learning in

biblical times,[4] it is clear that some biblical texts call upon the Israelites to learn in order to

ensure a positive relationship between themselves and God. In these instances, we often

find למד. The root occurs 104 times in the Tanakh. Interestingly, the first five of these are

found in Deuteronomy chapter 4, whose first verse reads, "And now, O Israel, give heed to

the laws and rules that I am *instructing* you to do, so that you may live to enter and occupy

the land that Adonai, the God of your fathers, is giving you." Here, JPS uses the English

word *instructing* to serve as a translation of מְלַמֵּד. Later in the chapter, other occurrences of

למד in the *pi'el* are translated as *impart* (vv. 5 and 14) and *teach* (v. 10). The root also

appears once in the qal, where it is translated as *learn*.

---

[2] JPS and Koren (see BDB pg. 541a). In this passage, Shamgar ben Anat uses an ox-goad to kill "six hundred
Philistines with this iron-tipped instrument attached to a long shaft used to goad the ox as it plows" (Harris,
ibid.).

[3] Klien, ibid.

[4] Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 81, Martin
Hengel and Peter Schäfer, eds. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 2001), pp. 27-33.

It is significant to note that, structurally speaking, chapter 4 is part of an introduction to Deuteronomy's central law code (which, spanning chapters 5-28, comprises the bulk of the book).[5] Taking the form of a sermon, the chapter helps the reader to appreciate the seriousness and immediacy of the legal material to follow.[6] What is at stake? What will happen if the precepts of the code are not followed? Everything that matters will end:

> I call heaven and earth this day to witness against you that you shall soon perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, you shall not long endure in it, but shall be utterly wiped out. Adonai will scatter you among the peoples, and only a scant few of you shall be left among the nations to which Adonai will drive you. There you will serve man-made gods of wood and stone, that cannot see or hear or eat or smell. (4:26-28)

Disobey the code, says the text, and the people will lose everything that makes for meaningful physical and spiritual existence—the land and God. They will not endure upon the land, they will be scattered, and they will serve alien gods. *The purpose of learning is to prevent this.*

Significantly, למד here is used in conjunction with other key words such as the verbs לַעֲשׂוֹת (do) and לְיִרְאָה (fear), as well as the nouns חֻקִּים (laws) and מִשְׁפָּטִים (rules). These words help us to tease out the functional meaning of למד.

רְאֵה לִמַּדְתִּי אֶתְכֶם חֻקִּים וּמִשְׁפָּטִים כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוַּנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהָי לַעֲשׂוֹת כֵּן בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם בָּאִים שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ׃

See, I have imparted to you laws and rules, as Adonai my God has commanded me [Moses], for you to do in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. (v. 5)

יוֹם אֲשֶׁר עָמַדְתָּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּחֹרֵב בֶּאֱמֹר יְהוָה אֵלַי הַקְהֶל־לִי אֶת־הָעָם וְאַשְׁמִעֵם אֶת־דְּבָרַי אֲשֶׁר יִלְמְדוּן לְיִרְאָה אֹתִי כָּל־הַיָּמִים אֲשֶׁר הֵם חַיִּים עַל־הָאֲדָמָה וְאֶת־בְּנֵיהֶם יְלַמֵּדוּן׃

The day you stood before Adonai your God at Horeb, when Adonai said to me, "Gather the people to Me that I may let them hear My words, in order that they may learn to fear me as long as they live on earth, and may so teach their children. (v. 10)

---

[5] Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy*. Philadelphia: JPS, 1996, pg. xii.
[6] Ibid., pg. 40.

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהֹוָה אֲלֵיכֶם מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ קוֹל דְּבָרִים אַתֶּם שֹׁמְעִים וּתְמוּנָה אֵינְכֶם רֹאִים זוּלָתִי קוֹל׃
וַיַּגֵּד לָכֶם אֶת־בְּרִיתוֹ אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה אֶתְכֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים וַיִּכְתְּבֵם עַל־שְׁנֵי לֻחוֹת
אֲבָנִים׃ וְאֹתִי צִוָּה יְהֹוָה בָּעֵת הַהִוא לְלַמֵּד אֶתְכֶם חֻקִּים וּמִשְׁפָּטִים לַעֲשֹׂתְכֶם אֹתָם
בָּאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ׃

> Adonai spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of words but perceived no shape—
> nothing but a voice. He declared to you the covenant that He commanded you to do, the Ten
> Commandments; and He inscribed them on two tablets of stone. At the same time Adonai
> commanded me to impart to you laws and rules for you to do in the land that you are about to
> cross into and occupy. (vv. 12-14)

Expanding our scope to the entire book of Deuteronomy, we see that, of the seventeen

times that למד occurs, it is used in combination with these key words fourteen times. For

the book's authors, learning leads to doing—the doing of behaviors outlined in the laws

and rules of the code. This ensures continued prosperity in the land and proper

relationship with God.

But what exactly is meant by "proper relationship with God?" How did the

Deuteronomic authors define or characterize the encounter between humanity and the

divine?

In Deuteronomy, God is just and caring, a "giver of just laws" who "shows no favor

and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends

the stranger, providing him with food and clothing (10:18)."[7] God is also capable of anger

and jealousy, willing to deal out severe punishment when Israel falls into idolatry.

Overwhelmingly, God is a covenantal partner, one who expects both obedience and love in

return for prosperity and well-being. The obligation of the people to this covenant is, in a

manner of speaking, both horizontal and vertical. It is horizontal in that the laws of the

code apply to every Israelite, rich and poor, mighty and low, male and female, young and

---

[7] Ibid., pg. xiii.

9

old; no one is left out.[8] It is vertical in the sense that the code is binding not only on the

present generation, but also on all subsequent generations.[9] In fact, the covenant is meant

to transform Israel from a band of fugitive slaves into a proto-nation with God at its

center.[10]

In contrast with other books of the Torah, Deuteronomy's God is strikingly

transcendent—God does not dwell on earth, not even the Tabernacle. As Tigay points out,

God's *name* dwells there—but only the name, not the presence itself. In fact,

> In describing the theophany at Horeb where, according to Exodus, God came down on to the
> mountain (Exod. 19:11, 18, 19), Deuteronomy carefully emphasizes that God spoke from
> heaven; only His fire, from which His voice was heard, was present on earth (Deut. 4:36).[11]

In other words, God dwells far beyond the earth; humans do not experience the divine in a

physical or way, not even through a vague "sense of presence." There is no direct, personal

encounter. We see evidence for this in the fact that Deuteronomy "describes God in less

physical terms than do the earlier books of the Torah."[12] Whereas the Exodus version of

the Ten Commandments admonishes the people to rest on Shabbat because God rested

on the seventh day (Exod. 20:11), the Deuteronomy version wants us to observe Shabbat in

commemoration of our liberation from Egypt (Deut. 5:15).[13] [14]

---

[8] S. Dean McBride Jr., "The Polity of the Covenant People: The Book of Deuteronomy," *Interpretation* 41 (1987) pp. 236-244.

[9] See, for example, 6:2, 20-25; 29:13-14.

[10] McBride, pg. 236.

[11] Tigay, pg. xiii.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Obviously, the Tanakh contains many theologies, and different texts hint at different ways of encountering God. In the Priestly texts of the Torah, for example, God *does* dwell in the sanctuary, and individuals may encounter God through offering sacrifices. In focusing on Deuteronomy, I do not want to obscure this diversity. I merely point to one way in which a classic text suggests a theology of learning. Other texts with alternate theologies do this differently, as we shall see.

Given all of this, what is the nature of divine-human encounter? If God does not

dwell among us, and if we can't personally experience God's presence, how do we

experience our relationship with God? Deuteronomy's predominant answer to this is that

human beings experience God's love—and anger. Love Adonai, we are commanded,

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֵת יְהֹוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, with all of our hearts, our souls, our being. In Deuteronomy, this

love is reciprocated, and many times we learn that God loves us back. If we return to

chapter 4, we learn that

כִּי אָהַב אֶת־אֲבֹתֶיךָ וַיִּבְחַר בְּזַרְעוֹ אַחֲרָיו וַיּוֹצִאֲךָ בְּפָנָיו בְּכֹחוֹ הַגָּדֹל מִמִּצְרָיִם.

...because [God] *loved* your fathers, he chose their heirs after them; he himself, in his great
might, led you out of Egypt. (v. 37)

A little later, we learn that God shows "kindness [חֶסֶד] to the thousandth generation of

those who love me and keep my commandments" (5:10). To be loved by God is to be

shown *hesed*, kindness. God, in God's great love for Israel (especially the patriarchs), did

the ultimate act of *hesed* when God brought the people forth from Egyptian bondage.

Remarkably, the love didn't stop there; it is meant to continue as the people take

possession of the Promised Land. And so, the code of Deuteronomy says that, if the

people obey God's laws, they will once again know God's *hesed*, this time in the form of

health and prosperity in the land. This is all the result of God's love. Similarly, in chapter

23 vv. 4-7, in a discussion of why Ammonites and Moabites may not be admitted into the

kahal (congregation) of God, we learn that the God turned the curse of Balaam into a

blessing because of God's love for the people.

Ultimately, in Deuteronomy, encountering God means obeying the code and being

rewarded with God's *hesed*, primarily through prosperity. God is transcendent, but God

11

intervenes in history for the sake of God's love for Israel. The liberation from Egypt is the

primary example of this, but others—such as turning Balaam's curse into a blessing—

continue to unfold. Of course, if the people were to disobey the code, they would be

punished. Famine, disease, and defeat in war are among the promised consequences of

disobedience, listed perhaps most overwhelmingly in chapter 28. More than this, though,

the people's very relationship with God will be sundered:

> וְהָיָה כַּאֲשֶׁר־שָׂשׂ יְהֹוָה עֲלֵיכֶם לְהֵיטִיב אֶתְכֶם וּלְהַרְבּוֹת אֶתְכֶם כֵּן יָשִׂישׂ יְהֹוָה עֲלֵיכֶם לְהַאֲבִיד
> אֶתְכֶם וּלְהַשְׁמִיד אֶתְכֶם וְנִסַּחְתֶּם מֵעַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה בָא־שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ׃ וֶהֱפִיצְךָ יְהֹוָה
> בְּכָל־הָעַמִּים מִקְצֵה הָאָרֶץ וְעַד־קְצֵה הָאָרֶץ וְעָבַדְתָּ שָּׁם אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדַעְתָּ אַתָּה
> וַאֲבֹתֶיךָ עֵץ וָאָבֶן׃

And as Adonai once delighted in making you prosperous and many, so will Adonai no delight
in causing you to perish and in wiping you out; you shall be torn from the land that you are
about to enter and possess. Adonai will scatter you among the peoples from one end of the
earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods, wood and stone, whom neither you
nor your ancestors have experienced. (vv. 63-64)

Learning, then, means learning the code. Learning gives the Israelites the ability to merit

and sustain God's love. Without learning, the people risk not knowing the code—and not

knowing can lead to disaster. This is exactly what happens once the people begin to dwell

in the land after the deaths of Moses and Joshua. In the second chapter of Judges (another

Deuteronomic text), we read that

> וַיָּמָת יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בִּן־נוּן עֶבֶד יְהֹוָה בֶּן־מֵאָה וָעֶשֶׂר שָׁנִים׃ וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אוֹתוֹ בִּגְבוּל נַחֲלָתוֹ בְּתִמְנַת־חֶרֶס
> בְּהַר אֶפְרָיִם מִצְּפוֹן לְהַר־גָּעַשׁ׃ וְגַם כָּל־הַדּוֹר הַהוּא נֶאֶסְפוּ אֶל־אֲבוֹתָיו וַיָּקָם דּוֹר אַחֵר
> אַחֲרֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדְעוּ אֶת־יְהֹוָה וְגַם אֶת־הַמַּעֲשֶׂה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל׃ וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל
> אֶת־הָרַע בְּעֵינֵי יְהֹוָה וַיַּעַבְדוּ אֶת־הַבְּעָלִים׃

Joshua, son of Nun, died at the age of one hundred ten years, and was buried on his own
property at Timnat-heres in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. And all that
generation were likewise gathered to their fathers. Another generation arose after them, which
did not know Adonai or the deeds that he did for Israel. And the Israelites did what was evil
in the eyes of Adonai, and they worshipped the Ba'alim. (vv. 8-11)

Here, after the death of Joshua, a new generation arose that did not *know* (לֹא־יָדְעוּ) God.

While the text here does not refer specifically to the code, it is certainly possible that the

code is implied. After all, we find the root ידע in Deuteronomy even more often than we

find למד, 49 times in all, and 269 times in the Deuteronomic history! If we return to

Deuteronomy chapter 4, we find an admonition that the Israelites teach their children

about God's great deeds, God's revelation, at Horeb (vv. 9-10). Here the word used for

"teach" is וְהוֹדַעְתָּם, which is perhaps better translated as "cause them to know." And

knowing of the revelation means more than knowing merely that it happened. To *know* of

the revelation is to know its content, which means learning. Deuteronomy presents us

with a theology of learning in which knowledge of the code enables the people to

experience God's *hesed*, which ensures that they will prosper in their land.

Finding God in a Post-Temple World: למד in Pirke Avot

Things are somewhat different in Pirke Avot, which constructs a Jewish theology of

learning in its own way. By the time that the Mishnah was compiled, the Temple in

Jerusalem had been destroyed, many of the people had been exiled, and those who stayed

in Eretz Yisrael were subject to Roman authority. Because of these developments, the

Deuteronomic vision could not be sustained. Thus, the Mishnah "imagines a world of

regularity and order in the aftermath of the end of ancient certainties and patterns. It

designs laws after the old rules all were broken or had fallen into desuetude."[15] With the

---

[15] Jacob Neusner, *After the Catastrophe: The Religious World View of the Mishnah* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1983), pg. 17.

Temple gone, the people scattered, and the land controlled by a people who worshipped

alien gods, it became crucial that the people find new ways of experiencing God.

According to Max Kadushin, Jews of the rabbinic period developed the idea of

encountering God in "ordinary, familiar, everyday things and occurrences," thus creating a

system of "normal mysticism."[16] One could encounter God, for example, through eating in

a sanctified manner, or through prayer, the new *avodah* of the post-Temple world. For the

rabbis, Torah study became part of this system. To prove this, Kadushin draws our

attention to a famous line from Pirke Avot: "If two sit together and exchange no words of

Torah, then they are like an assembly of scoffers...but if two sit together and exchange

words of Torah, then the *shekhinah* dwells with them..." (3:2). In this text, he says, we have

an indication that, because study required the same *kavannah* as prayer, "[i]ntellectual

activity here is an aspect of the inward life, a direct means for mystical experience, and it is

just that quality which gives the study of Torah its special character."[17] In other words, the

rabbis envisioned study itself (and not just the behavior to which it led) as a way of

encountering God.

Elsewhere in Pirke Avot we see similar indications. If we follow למד out of the

Bible and into the rabbinic world, we find that, of the 232 times that the root is used in

the Mishnah, 55 of them are found in Pirke Avot. When we turn to the tractate's second

chapter, we find the word eight times, many of them in well-known sayings. For example,

Rabban Gamliel tells us that "It is good to join the study of Torah with *derekh eretz*, for the

effort required by both robs sin of its power" (2:2). *Derekh eretz* in this context is often

---

[16] Max Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind*, 3rd ed., with an appendix by Simon Greenberg (New York: Bloch
Publishing Company, 1972), pg. 203.
[17] Ibid., pp. 213-214.

translated as "work,"[18] so that it is the combination of study and work that drives sin away. Importantly, study (combined with work) has the power to remove that which separates God from humanity, namely, sin. Because of this, in time study itself came to be constructed as a *religious* act.[19] From the point of view of the rabbis, even "hierarchy in society was based on learning: teacher, associate, and student. Those outside the academy were deemed ignorant. Any observances of the *mitzvah* system outside of the academy system had no efficacy."[20] In other words, as the rabbis saw it, rejection of the system meant disconnection from God. We can see this concept at work in another famous line, this one from the fifth mishnah of the chapter:

הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, אֵין בּוּר יְרֵא חֵטְא, וְלֹא עַם הָאָרֶץ חָסִיד, וְלֹא הַבַּיְשָׁן לָמַד, וְלֹא הַקַּפְּדָן מְלַמֵּד, וְלֹא כָל הַמַּרְבֶּה בִסְחוֹרָה מַחְכִּים.

[Hillel] used to say: The brute will not fear sin. The ignoramus will not be a saintly person. The inhibited will not learn. The irate cannot teach. Nor can one given over to business grow wise. (2:5)

This is a complex passage; for our purposes the most important implication is that it is only the learned that have the ability to overcome sin and become saintly. There is an interesting word play here: the Hebrew word for "saintly person" is חָסִיד, which comes from the same root as חֶסֶד, the word for kindness. The similarity between the two words draws our attention to a thematic connection between our Mishnaic text and that of

---

[18] See Leonard Kravitz and Kerry M. Olitzky, ed. and trans., *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics*, foreword by W. Gunther Plaut (New York: UAHC, 1993), pg. 19; both Danby and the English version of Kehati translate *derekh eretz* as "a worldly occupation."

[19] See Israel M. Goldman, *Lifelong Learning among Jews: Adult Education in Judaism from Biblical Times to the Twentieth Century* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1975), pg. 31-32: "This unique attitude towards study...became especially entrenched in Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70...It was precisely at such a dire moment that the Jewish will to live and the undying spirit of Judaism gave new emphasis to the study of Torah as a substitute for the Temple sacrifices and as a means of worshipping God...when the Jew sat down to study the sacred writings and to meditate on their oral interpretations, he was creating for himself a veritable sanctuary at which he became both ministering priest and communicant with God. He was performing a divine service at the new alter of God."

[20] Ibid., pg. xii.

Deuteronomy: in Deuteronomy the people needed to learn in order to earn God's חֶסֶד; in

Pirke Avot, the individual must learn in order to become a חָסִיד. In both cases, divine-

human encounter is dependent on learning. The difference is that, in Deuteronomy, the

result of God's *hesed* is prosperity, whereas in Pirke Avot the result of *hasidut*, of

"saintliness," is that the individual may encounter God in a mystical way. This notion is

extended in the chapter's final statement:

הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לִגְמוֹר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶן חוֹרִין לִבָּטֵל מִמֶּנָּה. אִם לָמַדְתָּ
תוֹרָה הַרְבֵּה, נוֹתְנִים לָךְ שָׂכָר הַרְבֵּה. וְנֶאֱמָן הוּא בַּעַל מְלַאכְתָּךְ שֶׁיְשַׁלֵּם לָךְ שָׂכָר פְּעֻלָּתָךְ.
וְדַע, מַתַּן שְׂכָרָן שֶׁל צַדִּיקִים לֶעָתִיד לָבוֹא:

[Hillel] used to say: It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work; yet, you are not free to
desist from it. If you have studied much Torah, a great reward will be given to you, for your
Employer is trustworthy to reward you for your labor. And know that the reward of the
righteous is in the time to come. (2:16)

Here we have our first encounter with rabbinic ideas about the afterlife. *Atid lavo* (the time

to come) is similar in meaning to *olam haba* (the world to come), and both refer to the idea

that human life extended beyond *olam hazeh*, "this world" in which we live, work, love, and

die. The rabbis debated the nature and timing of reward and punishment in the afterlife,

some saying that "the righteous and the wicked would go to their respective places [Gan

Eden and Geihinnom] only after resurrection and final judgment;"[21] whereas others held that

"the departed would assume their assigned locations immediately following death."[22] For

our purposes, what is important is that our text says that those who study Torah will be

rewarded. While the text does not explicitly state that those who "study much Torah" will

be rewarded in *atid lavo*, it nevertheless places the rewards of learning in the context of a

statement about the rewards of the righteous in the time to come. And since the world to

[21] Rifat Soncino and Daniel B. Syme, *What Happens After I Die? Jewish Views of Life after Death* (New York, UAHC Press, 1990), pg. 25.
[22] Ibid.

come is by definition characterized by unencumbered divine-human intimacy,[23] we may

suppose that, as much as learning provides opportunities for us to experience the divine

while we yet live in *olam hazeh*, it will render even greater reward in the hereafter—

eventually we will have unrestricted encounter with the divine.

Blessings for Torah: למד in the Liturgy

We find this notion that learning leads to reward in the Gemara, in a text that has

subsequently been incorporated into the morning liturgy:

אֵלּוּ דְבָרִים שֶׁאָדָם אוֹכֵל פֵּרוֹתֵיהֶם בָּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וְהַקֶּרֶן קַיֶּמֶת לוֹ לָעוֹלָם הַבָּא, וְאֵלּוּ הֵן: כִּבּוּד אָב וָאֵם, וּגְמִילוּת חֲסָדִים, וְהַשְׁכָּמַת בֵּית הַמִּדְרָשׁ שַׁחֲרִית וְעַרְבִית, וְהַכְנָסַת אוֹרְחִים, וּבִקּוּר חוֹלִים, וְהַכְנָסַת כַּלָּה, וּלְוָיַת הַמֵּת, וְעִיּוּן תְּפִלָּה, וַהֲבָאַת שָׁלוֹם בֵּין אָדָם לַחֲבֵרוֹ, וְתַלְמוּד תּוֹרָה כְּנֶגֶד כֻּלָּם.

> These are the things whose fruits a person eats in this world, while the principle remains intact
> for him in the world to come: honoring one's father and mother, acts of kindness, early
> attendance at the bet Midrash, morning and evening, providing hospitality to guests, visiting
> the sick, providing for a bride, escorting the dead to their graves, devotion in prayer, creating
> peace between people; and the study of Torah is equal to them all. (Shabbat 127a) [24]

Not only can learning provide access to unrestricted encounter with God in the world to

come; תַּלְמוּד תּוֹרָה, *learning* of Torah, leads us to do all of the other things for which we will

be rewarded. Our root למד has appeared once again, intertwined what the rabbis

understood as our eternal relationship with God. This paragraph has become part of the

morning service in *Birkhot Ha-Shakhar*, the Morning Blessings.

---

[23] See, for example, Ber. 17a: "[Olam haba is not like *olam hazeh*.] In *olam haba* there is neither eating nor drinking nor procreation nor business nor jealousy nor hatred nor competition; rather the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads feasting on the brightness of the *shekhinah*, as it is written, 'They beheld God, and they ate and drank' (Exod. 24:11). In other words, the physical necessities of life such as eating, drinking, and sex—necessities that get in the way of human encounter with the divine in *olam hazeh* will no longer exist.

[24] This translation is based on the HUC-LA Provisional Siddur of the Walter Hilborn Synagogue, compiled and edited by John Fishman, pg. 11.

If we explore the liturgy a little further, we come to *Birkat Ha-Torah*, the second of the two benedictions that precede the Shema. In its liturgical context, this *b'rakhah* embraces a theological shift. It follows *Ma'ariv Aravim* (in the evening) or *Yotzer* (in the morning)—both of which praise God as the creator of the cosmic order. In these two versions of the first benediction before the Shema, God is transcendent, universal, awe-ful, high above the world and the affairs of humanity. In contrast, *Birkat ha-Torah* praises an immanent, particular, fatherly God who expresses his love for Israel by giving us Torah. There are two versions of this benediction too; being rabbinic in origin,[25] they both speak to the rabbinic theology of learning that we saw in Pirke Avot. What they add is the idea that God lovingly offers us the possibility of encounter through giving us the opportunity to study Torah.

The evening version of the benediction is called *Ahavat Olam*, "Eternal Love." Its text is, according to Reuven Hammer,

> ...a pure blessing, proclaiming God, His nature, and His deeds. The word that is repeated over and over—the leitmotif of the blessing—is "love"... God's love is everlasting; our joy in His gift to us of Torah and commandments is everlasting. Our only request is that this love indeed be with us everlastingly. Other key words are repeated here: Torah, laws, commandments, and the people Israel.[26]

It is a single paragraph, a brief meditation that prepares the pray-er for the recitation of the Shema by drawing our attention to the relationship between Torah and mitzvot, as well as God's motivation—love—for establishing the system. To learn, then, is to receive open-heartedly the great gift that God has given us.

---

[25] Berakhot 11b. See Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, trans. Raymond P. Scheindlin, based on the original 1913 German edition and the 1972 Hebrew edition, Joseph Heinemann, et al, eds. (Philadelphia: JPS, 1993), pp. 16-17.

[26] Reuven Hammer, *Entering Jewish Prayer: A Guide to Personal Devotion and the Worship Service* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), pp. 142-143.

A slightly longer version of *Birkat Ha-Torah* is read in the morning. Called *Ahavah Rabbah*, it consists of three sections. The first of these is thematically similar to *Ahavat Olam* in that it praises God for God's love, as evidenced by the giving of Torah. In the second, we find a plea:

וְהָאֵר עֵינֵינוּ בְּתוֹרָתֶךָ, וְדַבֵּק לִבֵּנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתֶיךָ, וְיַחֵד לְבָבֵנוּ לְאַהֲבָה וּלְיִרְאָה אֶת שְׁמֶךָ, וְלֹא נֵבוֹשׁ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד: כִּי בְשֵׁם קָדְשְׁךָ הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא בָּטָחְנוּ, נָגִילָה וְנִשְׂמְחָה בִּישׁוּעָתֶךָ.

Light up our eyes with your Torah, let our hearts embrace you through your mitzvot, and unite our hearts to love and revere your name, that we will never be shamed. Because we have trusted your great and awesome name, we will rejoice and celebrate with your salvation.[27]

The third section introduces the theme of exile and a prayer for the reunification of Israel from the four corners of the earth.

Like the biblical text of Deuteronomy, both versions of the *b'rakhah* use the root למד in conjunction with other key words such as "laws," "statutes," and "commandments." In Ahavah Rabbah, we also find "do," along with other verbs such as "understand" and "make sense of." Interestingly, we find a plea to God to enable us not only to learn, but also to teach (לִלְמֹד וּלְלַמֵּד). If we do these things, we may encounter God. And so, with *Birkat Ha-Torah*, we come full circle, for in its liturgical context it serves as an introduction to the Shema—which quotes some of the same passages from Deuteronomy that we have already cited. The Deuteronomic authors insist that we learn God's laws and teach them to our children; in the liturgy these verses are presented as proof of the fact that Torah is God's gift, given in love, to a people who yearn for the divine presence in a post-Temple world.

---

[27] HUC-LA siddur, pg. 27 (adapted).

As we emerge from the rabbinic period and consider later understandings of the relationship between learning and religiosity, we find an interesting contemporary rendering of a Chasidic interpretation of *Ahavah Rabbah*. The interpretation is based on the relationship between the words *dabek* (as it appears in the *b'rakhah*) and *d'vekut*, (which is, as Lawrence Kushner and Nehemia Polen put it, "arguably the goal and the fulfillment of Chasidic spirituality."[28]) In the Chasidic context that Kushner and Polen describe, *d'vekut* "is nothing less than a fusion with God, a loss of self in the enveloping waters of the divine, the *unio mystica*, a kind of amnesia in which we temporarily lose consciousness of where we end and begin, a merging with the Holy One(ness) of all being."[29] In *Ahavah Rabbah*, we pray that God will cause our hearts to cleave to mitzvot and unite our hearts in love and awe of the divine name.

Citing Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, Kushner and Polen take their interpretation a step further:

> Ze'ev Wolf...sugges[ts] that the main idea of having a "scattered soul" [as described by Bachya ibn Pakuda] goes beyond being "scattered," to the sadness of having a "broken heart." He teaches that the root of our depression is the "dis-unity" of our soul, our inability to be at one, our inability to serve the One God. Now if you direct your heart toward constantly cleaving to God, then surely your heart will no longer be scattered or fragmented. The power of the cleaving to the One God will necessarily re-unify your broken soul...we are invited to consider that the source of our alienation from God's commandments and even from God, lies in our personal dis-integration, our fragmentation. In the Sh'ma, which [Ahavah Rabbah] introduces, the reason we are unable to realize God's unity, and therefore the unity of all creation, is on account of our own brokenness. Before we can utter God's unity, then, we must recover our own. What more appropriate introduction to the Sh'ma, the declaration of God's unity, could we hope to find?[30]

---

[28] See Kushner and Polin's commentary to *Birkat Ha-Torah* in Lawrence Hoffman, ed., *The Shema and Its Blessings*, vol. 1 of *Minhag Ami: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1997), pp. 70, 73.

[29] Ibid., pg. 73. In fact, "Yechiel Michel of Zlotchov (1731-1786) explained that a person who experiences *d'vekut* loses all self-awareness and considers him or herself to be nothing (*ayin*), like a drop which has fallen into the sea and returned to its source, no one with the waters of the sea, no longer recognizable as a separate entity."

[30] Ibid., pg. 74.

In this interpretation, Torah and learning, as described in *Birkat Ha-Torah*, helps us to experience divine unity, the oneness of God, the obliteration of our fragmentation. This contemporary reading of Chasidic texts points to a theology of learning that not only incorporates the idea of intimacy with God, but also attempts to articulate the nature and impact of this intimacy: learning leads to nothing less than a mystical encounter God in which the fragmented self can be unified.

A Conversation between Subjects in Relationship:
Implications for Learning in the Works of Modern and Contemporary Theologians

When Judith Abrams describes her long journey into the study of Talmud, she uses the imagery of relationship. Over time her relationship with Talmud has changed and evolved, shifted and deepened. When the journey began, she found that the Talmud "repulsed" her; later, she began to get to know it better.[31] She spent time with it every day, studying with a rabbi, and over time she came to love it. When she began studying on her own, she "became infatuated," feeling that it "filled me up and suffused my spirit and being."[32] This phase passed, and she says that, now, "I feel like I form, with the Talmud, a long-married couple. I know it well but it can still delight and surprise me."[33] Studying Talmud has become, for her, much more than reading, much more than using the intellect alone. Though she says in no uncertain terms that intellect is essential to the endeavor of Talmud study, the endeavor has become nothing less than an ongoing return to an other she loves. The self and the other (in this case, the Talmud) have a relationship in which

---

[31] Judith Z. Abrams, *Learn Talmud: How to Use The Talmud, The Steinsaltz Edition* (Northvale, NJ: 1995), pg. 16.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.

both have a voice. In the dialogue that emerges, neither is suppressed, and both, in a sense, benefit.

At this point, I can't help but be reminded of Rachel Adler's critique of the language and symbols of *kinyan*, of acquisition and purchase, which infuse the traditional Jewish wedding. Despite the arguments of apologists who claim that these symbols are only echoes of a past social order that have no real contemporary meaning, Adler claims that "while the purchase of the bride may have dwindled to a mere formality in the rabbinic transformation of marriage, her *acquisition* is no formality. The language of acquisition still accurately reflects a relationship in which the woman has been subsumed and possessed."[34] Fortunately, Jewish weddings are not all bad. For Adler, the *Sheva B'rhakhot* undermine the symbols of acquisition in that what they celebrate "is not 'taking' but 'wedding,' a conjoining that, according to the prophets, supercedes the rules of acquisition-marriage. This, and not *kiddushin*, is the union from which redemption flows."[35] Importantly, the relationship from which redemption flows is the one in which neither partner is subsumed or possessed, but rather the one in which the encounter between bride and groom is "the first encounter of lover-equals,"[36] the one in which we abandon incorporation in favor of covenant.[37]

If we imagine study as an interaction between two selves in covenantal partnership, we can frame it in terms of Martin Buber's theology of relation. Buber idealizes what he calls *I-Thou* relationships and holds them up as something to strive for (or perhaps more

---

[34] Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), pg. 176.
[35] Ibid., pg. 181.
[36] Ibid., pg. 190.
[37] Ibid., pg. 192.

accurately, something to strive to be open *to*), something over and above the everyday world

of *I-It* interactions.   An *I-It* relationship is one of subject and object:

> I perceive something. I am sensible of something. I imagine something. I will something.
> I feel something. I think something. The life of human beings does not consist of all this and
> the like alone.
> This and the like together establish the realm of *It*.[38]

An *I-Thou* relationship, on the other hand, is a relationship between subjects:

> When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object. For where there is a thing
> there is another thing. Every *It* is bounded by others; *It* exists only through being bounded by
> others. But when *Thou* is spoken, there is no thing. *Thou* has no bounds.
> When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no *thing*; he has indeed nothing. But he takes his
> stand in relation.[39]

In an *I-Thou* encounter, there is no possession, there is no having. Instead, there is

becoming: "I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*. All real

living is meeting."[40] Instead of objectifying, there is "standing in relation," being open to

the possibility of encounter with an-other subject. This can be risky and requires tolerance

for vulnerability, for the encounter can be life-altering.

Importantly, for Buber, one of the "spheres in which the world of relation arises" is

that of "our life with men."[41] A meeting of subjects can emerge in the realm of human

interaction: like the "encounter between lover-equals" described by Adler, this is a coming

together of human beings who speak the "word" *Thou* to each other. And it is more than

this too—for when human beings meet and call each other *Thou*, God's presence is, in some

way, made manifest: "Every particular *Thou* is a glimpse through to the eternal *Thou*; by

means of every particular *Thou* the primary word addresses the eternal *Thou*." With every

---

[38] Martin Buber, "I and Thou," in *Contemporary Jewish Theology: A Reader*, ed. Elliot N. Dorff and Louis E. Newman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pg. 61.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., pg. 62.
[41] Ibid.

encounter between subjects, there is the possibility of encounter with the divine. And so, framing our discussion of the interaction between learner and text, or learner and tradition, in Buber's terms, we can see that it is possible for the learner to experience the "eternal *Thou*," the echo of the divine, in relation to tradition.

In fact, Buber himself applied his relational philosophy to the interpretation of texts. Whereas in his early work with Hasidic tales he took great interpretive license with his translations—to the point that they really weren't translations but were rather retellings—of stories such as those found in *Shivchei Ha-Besht*,[42] after *I and Thou*, he adopted the position that "the integrity, the otherness, the wholeness of the text [should] be respected and not violated by radical refashioning."[43] He began to see texts, likes works of art, as others whom human beings might meet in dialogue. This notion in particular anticipated the hermeneutical work of Hans-George Gadamer, for whom

> Interpreting a text...is not a matter of empathy with the lived experience of an author, nor is it a matter of jumping out of the reader's historical period into a past one through the springboard of historical criticism. Interpretation arises, rather, out of a process of "conversation" between readers firmly planted in their cultural moment and a text which speaks in an alternative cultural mode.[44]

For Gadamer, interpretation of texts happens in *conversation*; it cannot occur when only one party speaks.

Judith Abrams does not use the language of self and other, *I-Thou*, or incorporation versus covenant. However, when she recommends that her readers think of Talmud study

---

[42] Steven Kepnes, *The Text as Thou: Martin Buber's Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 10-18. In another example, this involving Buber's work with the *Tales of Rabbi Nahman (of Bratslav)*, the author notes that Buber was out to "'clean up' the tales, to do away with *halakhic*, kabbalistic, and Yiddish references and writing stile and to present a 'charming' tale suitable for the cultured European public" (13).
[43] Ibid., pg. 22.
[44] Ibid., pg. 26.

as a process of allowing life and text to meet in a "duet in your soul,"[45] I cannot help but compare this image of learner and text to Adler's lovers and Buber's *I and Thou*. Adler imagines *B'rit Ahuvim* as a "marriage between subjects," a covenantal relationship in which neither partner is subsumed; Buber pictures the *I-Thou* encounter as a dialogue pointing to the eternal *Thou*. For Abrams, the Talmud is not an object to be used for self-gratification; neither is the learner expected to repress his or her voice in blind deference to authority. To do either would amount to a diminishment the divine spark that resides in both. Texts and tradition, after all, are the creations of human beings. To study is to engage not a thing, but human beings past and the present. For Abrams, moments of discomfort and anger, moments in which the learner realizes that the Talmud rarely says what we want it to say, are precisely the moments when "you've hit the jackpot!"[46] Why? Because, like a loving relationship between equals, a covenantal relationship between learner and text has the power to transform *both* partners. Learners change and grow as they learn—this is not difficult to imagine (though, for our purposes, the specifics demand further exploration and we will turn to this in the next chapter); what is perhaps counter-intuitive is the reality that texts also "change" over time. They come to have a multiplicity of meanings depending on context, depending on the people who study them: for Gadamer, the "meaning of a text changes in accordance with the different temporal periods in which the interpreter stands."[47] The rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud certainly believed this when they proclaimed the centrality of the Oral Torah.[48] The true meaning of Scripture, they

---

[45] Abrams, pg. 6.
[46] Ibid., pg. 7.
[47] Kepnes, ibid.
[48] See, for example, Shabbat 31a, Pesikhta Rabbati 7b, and B'Midbar Rabbah 14:10.

said, had to be found through their systems of interpretation. In effect, they changed the meaning of the Written Torah, though they insisted that their system was revealed at Sinai and mandated by God from the beginning.

We don't have to love everything that the Talmud says in order to be in relation with it. When it repulses us, we draw upon sensibilities shaped by the world in which we live, and our values are not the values of the rabbis. When they and we disagree, we encounter a lively example of what Barry Holtz calls the "living process" of study, the intertwining of life and text in a "complex dance."[49] Abrams reminds us that, while these moments may not make us feel good, they are the moments in which we are very much "Jewishly alive."[50] In this idea, knowingly or not, she follows Gadamer, who "does not expect that the interpreter, once addressed, will remain silent. The interpreter responds by being taken up into the back and forth movement of the subject matter of the text."[51] It is in this movement—in the embodiment of the conversation between learner and tradition— that the learner is indeed "Jewishly alive."

Perhaps more than any other individual in modern Judaism, it is Franz Rosenzweig who best articulates what it means for modern Jews to be in dialogue with our sacred texts. Like Abrams, he does not use the language of self/other, incorporation versus covenant, or I and Thou. What he does speak about is the Jewish person who develops a sense of self in the world beyond the walls of the ghetto. Interaction between the world of the Jewish ghetto and the world outside are not new in Jewish life, but, he says, what is new about

---

[49] Barry W. Holtz, *Finding Our Way: Jewish Texts and the Lives We Lead Today* (New York: Schocken Books, 1990), pp. 3, 6.
[50] Abrams, ibid.
[51] Kepnes, pg. 28.

modernity is that "the wanderer no longer returns at dusk."[52] Our reality is that, as

modern persons, we are shaped as much by the "outside" as we are by Jewish tradition.

When it comes to learning, therefore, the move into the world of the tradition can be "a

turning away from life, a turning one's back on life."[53] Most learners in contemporary

liberal Jewish settings start, as Rosenzweig famously puts it, "from the periphery," and then

embark upon

> ...a learning in reverse order. A learning that no longer starts from the Torah and leads into
> life, but the other way round: from life, from a world that knows nothing of the Law, or
> pretends to know nothing, back to the Torah. That is the sign of the time. It is the sign of the
> time because it is the mark of the men of the time. There is no one today who is not
> alienated, or who does not contain within himself some small fraction of alienation...we all
> know that in being Jews we must not give up anything, not renounce anything, but lead
> everything back to Judaism. From the periphery back to the center; from the outside, in.[54]

To pursue knowledge of Torah without giving up or renouncing anything, we must bring

our whole selves to the table in the *Bet Midrash*. We must also bring with us our

willingness to encounter the tradition in its fullness, including the things that we like and

the things that we don't. Because just as loving partners in a covenantal relationship help

one another to grow, so may self and text interact in ways that produce growth: the texts

change us even as we change them.

Learners who come to see themselves as being in relationship with, in partnership

with, in conversation with, our textual tradition (and with contemporary authorities who

represent that tradition) clearly open themselves to the possibility of growth and change.

And more than this, as we have seen, they open themselves to the mystery and surprise of

divine encounter. Norman J. Cohen has written that, at some of the bitterest moments of

---

[52] Franz Rosenzweig, "Upon the Opening of the Jüdisches Lehrhaus: Draft of an Address," in *On Jewish
Learning*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, 1st Schocken paperback ed. (New York: Schocken, 1965), pg. 96.
[53] Ibid., pg. 97-8.
[54] Ibid., pg. 98.

his life, learning proved to be transformative. For him, "Talmud Torah is the path to sensing a closeness with the divine; with feeling the Shechinah's presence."[55] Lee Meyerhoff Hendler states that God "resides in Torah."[56] Describing the experience of study for adults who are new to Jewish learning, she speaks of "an undeniably profound pull toward some thing they did not know existed—some primitive yet irresistible force."[57] In fact, the experience of study is so moving that, "It is as if a slumbering giant awakened inside them and is now bellowing for his dinner."[58] In a book on Jewish spirituality for a popular audience, Rifat Sonsino (a self-described "rationalist look[ing] at spirituality") claims that

> Torah study is a major ingredient of personal spirituality...It nourishes our soul, gives us direction in life, and sharpens our mind. The sacred text, elucidated by past generations and students of our time, becomes a road map for us as we face daily challenges. It provides us with the means to make responsible moral decisions. It elevates our spirits and helps us enter into a dialogue with the Divine in life.[59]

Finally, Dvora Weisberg writes that "Torah is sometimes referred to in Jewish textual tradition as a path. Study of Torah is for me an attempt to follow that path, which I believe leads toward God...[study] leads me into a dialogue with God; if God is offering questions and answers, then I too am countering with my own concerns."[60]

---

[55] Norman J. Cohen, "Etz Chayim Hi: It is a Tree of Life," in *Jewish Spiritual Journeys: 20 Essays in Honor of the Occasion of the 70th Birthday of Eugene B. Borowitz*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman and Arnold Jacob Wolf (West Orange, New Jersey: Behrman House, Inc.: 1997), pg. 74.

[56] Lee Meyerhoff Hendler, *The Year Mom Got Religion: One Woman's Midlife Journey into Judaism* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 1998), pg. 90.

[57] Ibid., 89.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Rifat Sonsino, *6 Jewish Spiritual Paths: A Rationalist Looks at Spirituality* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2000), pg. 68.

[60] Dvora Weisberg, "The Study of Torah as a Religious Act," in *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Sprirituality: A Sourcebook*, ed. and with introductions by Ellen M. Umansky and Dianne Ashton (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pp. 276-7.

For these writers, as for the sages of old, learning is a path to spirituality: study

enables a person to encounter God's presence. For some, learning also leads to doing.

Reflecting the message of *Elu D'varim* (discussed above, from Shabbat 127a), some find that

learning shapes their deeds, which become expressions of religiosity: "Study, if it is to be

ultimately meaningful, must affect how we live."[61] Learning, then, is interwoven with

Jewish religiosity on many levels: by enabling us to encounter God and affecting our deeds,

it can be a transformative process. Our encounters with the textual other, with the

tradition that we study, are nothing less than opportunities for encounter with the divine,

encounters from which we may emerge more complete than when we began. This is the

potential of the *Beit Midrash*: it may be a place far, far removed from learning as a kind of

whipping or goading into submission.

But what actually happens to adult learners when they walk through the doors and,

hopefully, sit down at the proverbial table? It is to this question that we turn in the next

chapter, because it is only by paying serious attention to the literature of adult development

that we can come to address our ultimate question: *How do we help adult learners in*

congregational settings to experience the full potential of the Beit Midrash?

---

[61] Norman J. Cohen, *The Way Into Torah*, The Way Into...Series (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2000),
pg. 29. This comment is made in the context of a discussion of rabbinic texts about Torah and mitzvot. I
address the relationship between learning and mitzvot more specifically in chapter three, pp. 58-60.

For these writers, as for the sages of old, learning is a path to spirituality: study enables a person to encounter God's presence. For some, learning also leads to doing. Reflecting the message of *Elu D'varim* (discussed above, from Shabbat 127a), some find that learning shapes their deeds, which become expressions of religiosity: "Study, if it is to be ultimately meaningful, must affect how we live."[61] Learning, then, is interwoven with Jewish religiosity on many levels: by enabling us to encounter God and affecting our deeds, it can be a transformative process. Our encounters with the textual other, with the tradition that we study, are nothing less than opportunities for encounter with the divine, encounters from which we may emerge more complete than when we began. This is the potential of the *Beit Midrash*: it may be a place far, far removed from learning as a kind of whipping or goading into submission.

But what actually happens to adult learners when they walk through the doors and, hopefully, sit down at the proverbial table? It is to this question that we turn in the next chapter, because it is only by paying serious attention to the literature of adult development that we can come to address our ultimate question: *How do we help adult learners in congregational settings to experience the full potential of the Beit Midrash?*

---

[61] Norman J. Cohen, *The Way Into Torah*, The Way Into...Series (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2000), pg. 29. This comment is made in the context of a discussion of rabbinic texts about Torah and mitzvot. I address the relationship between learning and mitzvot more specifically in chapter three, pp. 58-60.

Chapter Two
The Learner at the Table:
Insights from the Literature of Adult Development

So far, we have seen that, in Judaism, learning and religiosity are intertwined. We have explored several texts that support the idea that learning in one way or another has the potential to lead the learner to encounter with God. Particularly when learning is done in such a way that learners see themselves in a kind of covenantal partnership with tradition, the dialogue that emerges has the power to transform both the learner and the tradition, to the lasting benefit of each. Learners may construct relationships with Judaism itself from which (to use Adler's terminology) "redemption flows...in which neither partner is subsumed or possessed," a relationship in which there is room for surprise and growth, vulnerability and mystery.

But the ability to construct and frame the process of learning in the covenantal, relational manner that we have described is not something that human beings are born with. Rather, this ability is something that we must develop over the course of our lives, particularly, as we shall see, in adulthood. It is time, therefore, to turn our attention to the literature of adult development and adult learning, which will provide us with deeper insight into what happens to learners when they enter the *Beit Midrash* and sit at the table. Of course no developmental scheme can ever account for every nuance of human growth; much happens in the course of learning that is surprising, and this, I believe, is as it should be. When we learn, things happen to us that often don't fit into the categories of developmental theorists. My purpose in turning to this literature is not to find a psychological explanation for every moment of our experiences as learners; rather, I seek

relevant information that can help educators of Jewish adults to be more effective. To this end, as I mentioned in my introduction, I will draw in particular upon the work of Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, and upon that of Robert Kegan. *Women's Ways of Knowing* and *In Over Our Heads* both outline different epistemological perspectives that learners inhabit as they develop and grow. They also hint at factors that contribute to this growth. I will examine these factors, augmenting the hints with the more concrete arguments of others, particularly Laurent Daloz.

Women's Ways of Knowing: The Emergence of Voice

Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule are interested in human growth, particularly women's growth, in the realm of learning. Their book *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* is the result analysis of interviews with 135 women in a variety of social and academic settings, from a variety of economic and racial backgrounds, and representing a wide range of ages.[1] From these interviews, the authors came to define five different epistemological perspectives that women adopt as they move through various phases of their adult lives:

---

[1] Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, 10th Anniversary ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1997). It is important to note that the authors envisioned their work in part as a response to the work of William Perry whose "influential book *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* (1970)...describes how students' conceptions of the nature and origins of knowledge evolve and how their understanding of themselves as knowers changes over time" (9). Perry's work is extremely important, they say, but is lacking specifically in that all of Perry's subjects were male. *Women's Ways of Knowing* responds to this void by focusing exclusively on female subjects, and exploring ways in which gender impacts women's development. *The authors are careful to point out that their work is most likely relevant to men's development too.*

silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge.[2] Importantly, each perspective entails a different way of thinking:

> each perspective we have described can be thought of as providing a new, unique training ground in which problems of self and other, inner and outer authority, voice and silence can be worked through. Within each perspective, although partial solutions are possible, new problems arise.[3]

An important theme in the description of each perspective is that of the relationship between the learner and authority in a variety of forms. The book's subtitle refers to the "development of self, voice, and mind," and for Belenky, et al. the issue of how this development occurs in relation to authority is extremely significant. For us, too, this issue is critical. In Chapter one, we established an ideal for learning in which learner and text are equal partners in a covenantal relationship. In this ideal partnership, the text is no mere object and the learner must not repress his or her voice in blind deference to authority. To do either, we said, is to diminish the divine spark that resides in both.[4] We will therefore do well to pay particular attention to the insights of Belenky and her colleagues regarding issues of authority.

The first epistemological perspective that Belenky and her colleagues describe is, in some ways, a non-perspective. The authors name it *Silence*, "a position in which women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority."[5] To illustrate the point, they provide the example of Cindy, who "depended almost completely on authorities for direction." She will not have an abortion

> ...because her mother doesn't approve of abortions. When asked why her mother doesn't approve, she said it's because her grandmother doesn't approve. When asked why her

---

[2] Ibid., pg. 15.
[3] Ibid., pp. 133-4.
[4] See above, pg. 25.
[5] Belenky, et al, ibid.

grandmother doesn't approve, she said, "I don't really know. She just says she doesn't believe in them." Cindy then went on to say that she, her mother, and her grandmother belonged to a very strict religion and "we, in our religion, don't believe in abortion." Asked why their religion opposes abortion, she said that no one had ever explained the reasons to her. "They didn't say; they just said we didn't believe in them."[6]

Women of silence, according to the authors, see themselves as incapable of learning. They generally have no confidence in their ability to think. They have "relatively underdeveloped representational thought," and therefore have limited ability to use language, especially when it comes to describing the self. The consequences of this are severe:

> Feeling cut off from all internal and external sources of intelligence, the women fail to develop their minds and see themselves as remarkably powerless and dependent on others for survival. Since they cannot trust their ability to understand and to remember...they rely on the continual presence of authorities to guide their actions, if they do not act on impulse.[7]

To be a woman of silence is to allow the self to be completely subsumed by anyone—or any thing—in a position of authority. When authorities speak, these women do not question; rather, they make themselves into what the authorities want them to be. Sometimes they do this out of fear (many of the women found to be in this position experienced debilitating abuse or trauma), knowing by instinct that the only way they can survive in the world is to obliterate their selves.[8] Sometimes they operate this way because the environments in which they live either tell them that women are not meant to have a voice, or simply provide no support for any kind of growth.[9]

The perspective in the authors' scheme is that of received knowledge. Like the women of silence, the women who operate from this epistemological position do not speak much, but there are some important differences. "Unlike the silent, who think of

---

[6] Ibid., pg. 28.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., pg. 159.
[9] Ibid., pp. 29, 34.

themselves as 'deaf and dumb' and are unaware of the power of words for transmitting

knowledge, women who rely on received knowledge think of words as *central* to the

knowing process. They learn by listening."[10] These women have a different relationship

with language than the women of silence: having developed the ability to think

representationally, they see words as tools and are able to absorb what authorities tell them.

Taking in the words of others becomes an active and engaging process.

Often the shift from silence to received knowing happens when young women

become mothers.[11] Citing the example of Ann, who enters a parenthood training program

at a children's health center, the authors note that this woman's shift into received

knowing entailed a realization that she could "hear, understand, and remember the things

that [the staff of the center] taught her." When this happened, she "began to think of

herself as a learner for the first time."[12] She found that she could retain information and

sometimes even pass that information on to others. Unlike the women of silence, Ann

began to be aware of her own intelligence.

This is a significant step, but the women of received knowing still look to

authorities as ultimate sources of knowledge. This means that, while they "conceive of

themselves as capable of receiving, even reproducing, knowledge from the all-knowing

external authorities," they are not yet able to envision themselves as sources of knowledge.[13]

While they are aware of their own intelligence, they see this intelligence as being good only

[10] Ibid., pp. 36-7.
[11] The authors note that "Being responsible for an dependent infant can easily bring into question a world view that assumes that one is 'deaf and dumb' and dependent on others for care. Although such a view might have been highly adaptive for surviving a demeaning childhood, it is inadequate as a basis for mothering" (35).
[12] Ibid., pg. 36.
[13] Ibid., pg. 15.

for processing that which they learn from external authorities; there is as yet no sense of the self as an equal partner in the learning process. An important characteristic of the thinking of received knowers is that it is extremely dualistic: "Things are right or wrong, true or false, good or bad, black or white. [Received knowers] assume that there is only one right answer to each question, and that all other answers and all contrary views are automatically wrong."[14] Typically, they assume that authorities are right, and that they themselves (as well as their peers) are wrong. They have difficulty with ambiguities, and with the notion of multiple interpretations of texts.

The third perspective described by Belenky, et al. is that of subjective knowing. It is at this stage that the authors identify women as discovering a sense of self and becoming aware of their own voices for the first time. They move "from passivity to action, from self as static to self as becoming, from silence to a protesting inner voice and infallible gut."[15] The authors share the story of Inez, who, as an adult, learned from her neighbors that her father was known as a child molester. Upon hearing this, she became enraged, reliving childhood memories of incest. It was at this point, when she realized that her trust in an external authority had been betrayed, that she began to think of herself as an authority.[16] Inez described her new feeling of self-reliance in raw terms: "'I can only know with my gut. I've got it tuned to a point where I can think and feel all at the same time and I know what is right. My gut is my best friend—the one thing in the world that won't let me down or lie to me or back away from me.'"[17] In short, subjective knowing is "a perspective from which

---

[14] Ibid., pg. 37.
[15] Ibid., pg. 54.
[16] Ibid., pg. 56.
[17] Ibid., pg. 53.

35

truth and knowledge are conceived of as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited."[18]

The ability to listen to oneself, and to conceive of oneself as a source of knowledge and authority is extremely important. It is the first step toward ending the obliteration of self that we have seen in women of silence and received knowledge. It is the first step toward enabling the learner to come to the table as an equal in a covenantal partnership. However, in some ways, subjective knowers are just as limited received knowers. They, too, think in "black and white," dualistic terms. They too are ill-equipped to deal with ambiguities. The difference is simply that "the fountain of truth simply has shifted locale. Truth now resides within the person and can negate answers that the outside world supplies."[19] The difference between received knowers and subjective knowers is that subjective knowers, rather than silencing themselves, often effectively silence others, listening exclusively to their own voices. When they come to the table, they feel threatened by external voices and, in a reversal from received knowing, pay external authorities no heed at all.

The fourth perspective in the authors' scheme is that of procedural knowing, "a position in which women are invested in learning and applying objective procedures for obtaining and communicating knowledge."[20] Practically speaking, this means learning the rules of discourse in a given field; learners have to familiarize themselves with the language of their chosen disciplines. It is significant to note that instruction in these procedures often happens in formal educational settings. For example, the authors tell the stories of

---

[18] Ibid., pg. 15.
[19] Ibid., pg. 54.
[20] Ibid., pg. 15.

several young undergraduates who are faced with the necessity of framing their opinions according to structures that their professors provide. One woman, Naomi, is pleasantly surprised to learn that her professors are less interested in telling her what to think than in helping her to formulate her arguments in specific ways. While it is sometimes a struggle to conform to her professors' procedures, it can be liberating too:

> She realizes that her teachers do not presume to judge her in terms of her opinions but only in terms of the procedures that she uses to substantiate her opinions. They do not insist that she agree with them but only that she use proper procedures, and they are willing—indeed eager—to teach her the procedures. They do not seek to silence her but to teach her a new language.[21]

Unlike received knowers, procedural knowers trust their own opinions. Unlike subjective knowers, they realize that dialogue with authorities need not lead to an obliteration of self. This enables them to be more thorough in their learning:

> [Procedural knowers] engage in conscious, deliberate, systematic analysis. They have learned that truth is not immediately accessible, that you cannot "just know." Things are not always what they seem to be. Truth lies hidden beneath the surface, and you must ferret it out. Knowing requires careful observation and analysis. You must "really look" and "listen hard."[22]

Having said this, the authors acknowledge that women at the position of procedural knowing often experience tremendous uncertainty. Because they place absolute authority neither in external sources nor in the self, they are left knowing that they may be wrong. They can't be *entirely* sure that their views are right, even if they *think* they are. Eventually, many of these women come to accept this ambiguity, but at the beginning, it can be quite unsettling. Another unsettling aspect of procedural knowing is the potential for "methodolatry," a tendency to become so hyper-focused on method that the meaning of

---

[21] Ibid., pg. 92.
[22] Ibid., pp. 93-4.

content becomes obscured.[23] For woman at the position of procedural knowing, there is sometimes an element of "find out what they want and give it to them." The advantage of procedural knowing is that it is a first step in really thinking about thinking. When we think about thinking, we can begin to tolerate the presence of both our own voices and those of external authorities.

The fifth and final perspective in Belenky, et al's scheme is that of constructed knowing. In this stage, learners have moved beyond procedure-focused learning. They use the language of discourse of their fields, but they move toward a complex integration of self and external sources of knowledge. At the stage of procedural knowledge, it is sometimes necessary to "weed out" the self in favor of seemingly objective and authoritative modes of discourse; at the position of constructed knowing, "there is an impetus to allow the self back into the process of knowing [and] to confront the pieces of the self that may be experienced as fragmented and contradictory."[24] Characteristic of constructed knowing is "...*a thoroughgoing self-examination [that] leads to the construction of a way of thinking about knowledge, truth, and self that guides the person's intellectual and moral life and personal commitments.*"[25] It is at this stage that women learn that all knowledge is constructed, and they better appreciate of the crucial role played by the self in negotiating competing voices, both external and internal. They realize that "*the knower is an intimate part of the known.*"[26]

---

[23] Ibid., pg. 95. In using the term "methodolatry," I am referring to Adler (28), who in turn "borrows" the term from Mary Daly in *Beyond God the Father*.
[24] Ibid., pg. 136.
[25] Ibid. Italics mine.
[26] Ibid., pg. 137. Italics authors'.

One interviewee described constructed knowing as a process in which "You let the inside out and the outside in."[27]

As we have noted, the issue of the relationship between self and authority—and the development of the self as a source of authority—is critical for Belenky, et al. In chapter three we will explore ways in which the different epistemological perspectives may manifest themselves in learners in congregational settings—and for us too this issue of authority will be particularly important in considering how Jewish learning has become more than obedience under the "cracking of the whip."

There are two final points about *Women's Ways of Knowing* that will prove useful when we move into the next chapter and discuss the implications of all of this for educators of Jewish adults. First, the women interviewed by Belenky and her colleagues ranged in age from their mid-teens to their sixties, and it is important to note that the authors placed interviewees of a variety of ages in each perspective of their scheme. From this it is possible to conclude that environmental factors influence adult development as much as (or more than) age. Second, the authors found that women can simultaneously hold different epistemological perspectives in different parts of their lives. They may be received knowers when it comes to formal schooling, but constructed knowers when it comes to mothering. Adult educators must give credit where credit is due: a learner who appears to be silent or subjective in the synagogue may be procedural or constructed at work. We can never assume that we are seeing the whole picture.

---

[27] Ibid., pg. 135. Obviously, there is a potential connection between this understanding of constructed knowing and Rosenzweig's understanding of Jewish learning as a move from "the periphery back to the center; from the outside, in." See above, pg. 27.

In Over Our Heads: Drowning Teens and the Troubled Waters of Adulthood

Robert Kegan describes his work in *The Evolving Self* and *In Over Our Heads* as a "theory of the development of consciousness."[28] He is interested in asking whether modern American adults are equipped with the right "tools of mind" to be able to cope with the demands of modern life, or whether we are, in fact, "in over our heads." Modernity, he insists, makes certain demands on adults, and our "society-as-school" doesn't always do everything that it should to help us meet these demands. This "lack of fit" between the demands of modernity and the capacity of our minds to meet these demands can have serious consequences.

Though Kegan's main focus is on adults, he demonstrates the seriousness of his claim by beginning with a story about adolescence. As the story opens, two middle-aged parents of a teenage boy find themselves awake very late one night as they wait for him to come home. They are frustrated and worried because he hasn't called. When he finally does arrive home, they become angry. His mother says,

> "*This isn't a hotel here, buddy!* You can't just come and go as you please! You're part of a family, you know! Your father and I have feelings, too! How do you think we feel when it's two in the morning and we haven't heard a thing from you? We're worried sick! For all we know you could be splattered all over the highway. How *would* we know? You don't call us! It's time you joined this family, buddy, and started *thinking about somebody other than just yourself!*"[29] [Italics author's.]

These words hardly seem surprising, given the circumstances. Of course Mom and Dad want their son to think about people other than himself. Of course they want him to "join the family." But what does this mean? What is it, exactly, that these exasperated parents want from their child? Kegan claims that we typically frame the answer to this question in

---

[28] Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), pg. 6.
[29] Ibid., pg. 16.

behavioral terms: the parents want their son "to stop doing certain things he does and start

doing others."[30] But is it really their son's *behavior* that the parents want to change? For

Kegan, the answer is no. What the parents really want to change is the way that their child

thinks: "They want him to *feel* differently about them, about his willingness to put his own

needs ahead of his agreements [with them], about his responsibility to his family."[31]

Moreover, for Kegan, these *feelings* of the son that his parents want to change are related to

how he understands the world around him, to *the ways in which he uses his mind to construct*

reality. Therefore, their demands upon him for certain kinds of feelings are in reality

demands upon his mind. His parents want to change "not just what he knows but the *way*

he knows."[32] They want "his mind to be different. They want him to alter his

consciousness, to change his mind."[33] And the demands don't stop with parents.

Prospective employers want to hire someone they can trust, someone who will honor

commitments and behave professionally. Fellow citizens want neighbors who will follow

the rule of law. Amazingly, we "expect teenagers to identify their inner motivations, to

acknowledge internal emotional conflict, to be to some extent psychologically self-reflective,

and to have some capacity for insight and productive self-consciousness."[34] Our society-as-

school, in other words, makes extensive demands upon the teenage mind. And Kegan

believes that all of these seemingly disparate demands have something important in

---

[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid., pg. 17. Italics mine.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid., pg. 18.

common: they demand that the teenager learn to live in community, balancing the needs of self and others.[35] The question is, can teenagers—and their minds—handle this?

In fact, it is during the teenage years that people *begin* to develop these capacities. But development is an ongoing process, and we don't all mature at the rate or in the same ways. And while teenagers may look more and more adult-like with each passing month of their young lives, Kegan suggests that it is shortsighted to expect teenagers to think like adults, just as it would be unfair to expect children to think like teenagers. This is because, at different stages of development, human beings possess what Kegan refers to as different "orders of consciousness." When, for example, children between the ages of five and ten develop the ability to "construct a mental set, class, or category to order the things of one's experience (physical objects, other people, oneself, desire) as property-containing phenomena,"[36] they have made a transition, in Kegan's terms, from first- to second-order consciousness. Unlike their younger selves, these children are capable of "categorical thinking;" they know, for example, that when liquid is poured from a large glass into a smaller glass, the amount of liquid does not change. When it comes to relationships, categorical thinking means the ability to recognize that other persons have intentions, agendas, and emotions that exist apart from the self.[37] Infants and toddlers are different from children, children are different from teenagers, and teenagers are different from adults. Teenagers emerging from childhood generally possess an advanced sort of second-order consciousness, or categorical thinking; their task over the course of adolescence and early adulthood is to develop *third*-order consciousness, what Kegan calls "cross-categorical

---

[35] Ibid., pg. 26.
[36] Ibid., pg. 21.
[37] Ibid.

thinking."[38] For Kegan, this is what the parents of the boy in our story really want of him.

He can get there, eventually, if he learns how to subsume the durable categories that he has

learned how to construct into a new, higher-order way of thinking. This is difficult, but it

can be done.

How so? Each of the different orders of consciousness that Kegan describes

> differs in terms of what is subject and what is object, but every principle is constituted by a subject-object relationship...One does not simply replace the other, nor is the relation merely additive or cumulative, an accretion of skills.   Rather, the relation is transformative, qualitative, and incorporative. Each successive principle subsumes or encompasses the prior principle. That which was subject becomes object to the next principle. The new principle is a higher order principle (more complex, more inclusive) that makes the prior principle into an element or tool of its system...*In fact, transforming our epistemologies, liberating ourselves from that in which we were embedded, making what was subject into object so that we can "have it" rather than "be had" by it—this is the most powerful way I know to conceptualize the growth of the mind.*[39]

If the boy in our story learns to make his durable categories object, he can move into third-

order consciousness. He can transform his epistemology, his way of knowing, his way of

constructing reality, because he, like all human beings, possesses potential for growth. But

he cannot get there all at once. It is absolutely crucial that adults realize this. In their

fatigue, frustration and exasperation, his parents could interpret his late-night behavior as

selfish, uncaring, and perhaps immoral. He has, after all failed to honor an agreement

with them. They have asked him to call if he is going to be late and he has not done so.

But what if, removed from fatigue, frustration, and exasperation, we ask ourselves whether

it is appropriate to assume that this boy already possess third-order consciousness? When

we do this, it becomes possible to interpret his behavior quite differently, and most likely

with very different practical consequences for his eventual growth:

> What we see as the disappointing adolescent's "misbehavior"...might reflect more on or erroneous attribution to that adolescent of this third-order, cross-categorical way of knowing.

---

[38] Ibid., pg. 28.
[39] Ibid, pp. 32-4. Italics mine.

> If the adolescent does not yet construct this way of knowing, the difficulty might be more of a matter of *not understanding the rules of the game* than one of an unwillingness to play, a refusal to play, or an inability to play a game he or she nonetheless *does* understand.[40]

In other words, stereotypically self-centered teens are not necessarily selfish; they are merely developmentally not yet able to balance their needs with those of others—they have not, in Kegan's terms, developed third-order consciousness. According to Kegan, this means that, instead of branding them as "bad," we might do better to think of them as "not there yet." No doubt this is a difficult task for parents and teachers, but it is nevertheless worth considering—because "not there yet" is empowering in its own way. It implies that "there" can eventually be "gotten to"—especially if we help.

The fact that teenagers may not be there yet should serve as no excuse for the adults who care for them not to push them. In order to grow eventually, teens need what Kegan calls "an ingenious blend of support and challenge." A balance of support and challenge leads to "vital engagement." Too much challenge with too little support promotes "defensiveness and constriction;" too much support and not enough challenge is "ultimately boring" and leads to "devitalization."[41] There is, of course, no formula for success, but adults have an obligation to try. Without support and challenge, teens founder.

For Kegan, all of this reflection on the mental demands that adults place on teens serves as an introduction to the real subject of *In Over Our Heads*, the mental demands placed on adults by modern life in America. Just as adults demand that teens develop an increasingly complex order of consciousness, so too does modernity itself demand that

---

[40] Ibid., pg. 38. Italics mine.
[41] Ibid., pg. 42.

adults develop an even more complex order of consciousness. Adults, Kegan says, must

move from third- to fourth-order consciousness, an epistemological shift that entails being

able to "subordinate, regulate, and indeed create (rather than be created by) our values and

ideals," to "take values and ideals as the object rather than the subject of our knowing."[42]

In the realms of "parenting and partnering," this means having relationships with our

relationships—being able to think of our relationships as constructions with which we

interact and over which we have some degree of control. We become the subjects of,

rather than subject to, our marriages, our relationships with our children and parents, and

our professional associations:

> Our self-conscious adherence to the responsibilities of our social roles and our identification
> with them are third order accomplishments. They betoken cross-categorical structures of
> mind...If "role" is a third order construction, we can be responsible *to* our roles with third
> order consciousness. But we cannot be responsible *for* our roles—for monitoring others' and
> our own responsibility to them—without a fourth order capacity to nest cross-categorical
> structures into a new organization of mind that subtends them.[43]

It is beyond the scope of this project to repeat Kegan's extensive list of examples of the ways

in which modernity demands fourth-order consciousness. One example, taken from a

literary source, will have to suffice.

The fourth chapter of *In Over Our Heads* is called "Partnering: Love and

Consciousness," and deals with the question, "Is third order consciousness adequate to

meet the demands of partnering?" After all, in our intimate relationships, we are called

upon to:

> (1) be psychologically independent of, but closely connected to, our spouses; (2) replace an
> idealized, romanticized approach to love and closeness with a new conception of love and
> closeness; (3) set limits on children, in-laws, ourselves, and extrafamilial involvements to

---

[42] Ibid., pg. 91.
[43] Ibid., pg. 96.

preserve the couple; (4) support our partner's development; (5) communicate directly and fairly; and (6) have an awareness of the way our personal histories incline or direct us.[44]

To demonstrate the inadequacy of third order consciousness to meet all of these demands, Kegan analyzes the final scene from Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, in which Nora explains to Torvald her reasons for leaving him. Torvald, of course, feels dismayed, confused, and betrayed by new ideas that Nora seems to have adopted concerning her role as a wife and mother. What's compelling in Kegan's analysis is his assertion that Nora has not only developed new ideas; she has developed "a new set of ideas *about* her ideas, about where ideas come from, about who authorizes them, or makes them true." For the first time in her life, Nora questions whether her assumptions about relationships, family, religion— even truth itself—are valid. Kegan claims that this scene is a literary demonstration of what happens when a person develops fourth order consciousness.[45] It is important to note that this particular scene happens to include a powerful example of the impact that this kind of growth can have on loved ones who do not understand, or feel betrayed by, what is happening. We will return to this later. For the present, what is important in all of this is that, for Kegan, greater complexity of mind has the *potential* to enable adults to better cope with the demands of modernity.[46]

Kegan's point, that the ability to think about how knowledge and identity are constructed helps adults to meet the demands of modernity, raises an important question for Jewish educators of adults. How important is it that we teach more than content, that we help our learners to develop the ability to reflect on how they know what they know?

---

[44] Ibid., pg. 107.

[45] Ibid., pp. 107-12.

[46] It is important to note the element of *potential* here, as Kegan insists that a person with fourth order consciousness does not necessarily lead a happier or more successful life than a person with third order consciousness. Nor is complexity of mind indicative of intelligence (184-5).

Belenky, et al. raise this question in relation to constructed knowing and indicate that constructed knowers are better able to negotiate the tension between self and authority than their peers at other epistemological perspectives. Kegan approaches the issue with a slightly different focus. He privileges forth order consciousness because, in his view, higher order mental complexity is necessary for coping with the demands of a complex modern world. The school-as-society therefore has a responsibility to educate citizens for development as well as content. We will discuss the implications of Kegan's work for adult Jewish education in more detail in chapter three.

Synthesis: What Makes Transformation Happen?

Belenky, et al. and Kegan describe different epistemological perspectives, but they do not reflect in a systemic way on how learners move between these positions. Nevertheless, they do provide examples of individuals who have been transformed by shifting from one perspective or order of consciousness to another, as do other writers in the field of adult learning. These anecdotes suggest that life change, the presence of certain factors in the learning environment, and positive relationships with fellow students cause shifting from one position to another. For our purposes, the issue of the learning environment warrants further discussion. Kegan, as we have seen, places great emphasis on the "ingenious balance of challenge and support." He suggests, for example, that depending on where learners are at developmentally, specific kinds of teaching may cause development to occur.[47] Belenky and her colleagues note that "pluralistic and intellectually

---

[47] Kegan, pg. 52. An example that Kegan gives is a teaching modality known as induction, which may help learners to develop their deductive reasoning.

challenging environments" help learners to move beyond received knowing.[48] They stress

the importance of affirming the intelligence of learners at every epistemological position:

> Most of the women we interviewed made it clear that they did not wish to be told merely that
> they had the capacity or the potential to *become* knowledgeable or wise. They needed to know
> that they already knew something (although by no means everything), that there was something
> good inside them.[49]

Like many educators of adults, the authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* remind us that it is

critical to meet learners where they are, and to enable them to integrate their life

experiences with their learning.[50] In some ways, this meshes very well with the philosophy

of Rosenzweig. For Laurent Daloz, this means

> providing a "*safe space*" where the student can contact her need for fundamental trust, the basis
> of growth. It means moving to confirm the student's sense of worth and helping her to see
> that she is both OK where she is and capable of moving ahead whenever she chooses.[51]

Good educational environments are established by teachers and mentors who can listen,

provide structure, express positive expectations and serve as advocates for their students.[52]

From these writers, we have gained some insight into what happens to adults who

engage in learning. We now turn our attention specifically to the Jewish adults. What

happens to these learners when they come and sit at the table in the *Beit Midrash*? What

are the implications of the findings of Belenky, et al. and Kegan for the educators who

teach them? How do we apply what we have learned here to our educational practice? It is

to these questions that we now turn.

---

[48] Belenky, et al., pg. 43.

[49] Ibid., pg. 195.

[50] Ibid., pg. 198.

[51] Laurent Daloz, *Mentor: Guiding the Journey of Adult Learners*, 2nd ed. of *Effective Teaching and Mentoring* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), pg. 209.

[52] Ibid. See pp. 210-223 for a detailed list of specific ways in which mentors and teachers can establish environments that are conducive to growth.

CHAPTER THREE
CONSTRUCTING THE BEIT MIDRASH:
IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Sarah the Subjectivist

Sarah is a religious school teacher, and for the past year I have been responsible for writing the curriculum that she and her fellow faculty members have been bringing to life in their classrooms. The congregational school in which she teaches happens to be in northern California, and I live in Los Angeles. For the last two years, I have been commuting up several weekends a year as part of an HUC internship focused on adult and family education. The program in which Sarah teaches is an alternative religious school for families, in which parents and children learn together. For a variety of reasons, it is important that all of the teachers teach the same subject matter during any given session. So, my curriculum suggests a variety of activities for each session, all based around a central theme. Ideally, the subject matter of each session is uniform, but the teachers have the freedom to shape their individual lessons according to their own expertise, experience, creativity, and preferred teaching styles.

The implementation of this curriculum has not been easy, and it is complicated by the fact that I am, in many ways, an outsider. My membership in the community is limited. Because I am not there every week, I do not have very deep relationships with most of the teachers. Knowing that this might make implementation of the curriculum awkward, the coordinators of the program decided that the least we could do was make sure that all of my visits this year coincided with faculty meetings, as these might provide

opportunities for all of us to get better acquainted. At each faculty meeting I have therefore done some sort of presentation on the curriculum, followed by discussion.

Early in the year, when presenting a piece of the curriculum that had to do with God, I decided to teach a mini-lesson on different Jewish perspectives on God, from antiquity to the present. My main goal was to demonstrate to the teachers that there is a range of acceptable theologies within Judaism; I hoped that they would then be able to communicate this concept to their students in age-appropriate ways. To begin, I wrote out six quotes from different Jewish sources on poster-sized pieces of paper and posted these around our meeting room. The first task that I assigned them was to go from quote to quote, reading each one and writing their reactions in the blank spaces left on the paper. I had then intended to pull the group back together and ask everyone which quotes they liked best and why, and where their own beliefs fit on the spectrum represented.

The activity fell apart almost immediately because Sarah adamantly refused to do the assigned task. She said that these quotes were too intellectual for her, and that she just couldn't think about God this way. She couldn't *intellectualize* when it came to God. There was agitation and something like panic in her voice. She literally turned her back on the quotes posted around the room and sat back down at our meeting table, refusing even to look up. I was shocked and dismayed, because I knew that she had previous experience teaching about God in her own classroom! I had thought that, of everyone there, surely she would be comfortable with the assigned task. Instead she refused to do it, and basically disrupted the activity for everyone else.

When I reflected afterwards on what had happened, I found the insights of Belenky and her colleagues to be extremely helpful. Thinking about this incident in relation to their terminology, I realized that Sarah was probably operating from the perspective of subjective knowing. She had most likely experienced the authoritative voices in the quotes around the room as extremely threatening to her sense of self. This would explain not only her inability to cope with the task, but also the agitation and panic that I sensed in her voice. It would explain her refusal even to look at the quotes as a symbolic act: using her body, she physically shut out external voices of authority. Remember that, for subjective knowers, knowledge is something that comes from the gut, and outside voices are viewed with a high degree of suspicion: these knowers "distrust logic, analysis, abstraction, and even language itself." They possess an "antirationalist attitude" and "value intuition a safer and more fruitful approach to truth."[1] The authors tell the story of Anna Jean, a thirty-three-year-old divorced mother of three who returns to college:

> ...to her surprise, she discovered new things about herself as a student. Her attitudes toward teaching and learning began to change and so did her willingness to take for granted the truth value in the words of professors and textbooks. "*Now I do my own thinking instead of reading someone else's theory and memorizing who said what. That doesn't interest me anymore...I think of theories as intellectualism. I think there's other ways of learning the same things. In more basic ways, like turning into yourself.*"[2]

In Anna Jean's comments I hear echoes of Sarah's: the disdainful reference to *intellectualism*, the elevation of that which is personal and private. If Sarah is a subjective knower, then all of this begins to make sense.

A few days after the incident, Sarah called me to apologize for her disruptive behavior. Seeing her reaching out as an opportunity to build trust, I asked her how she

---

[1] Belenky, et al., pg. 71.
[2] Ibid., pg. 73. Italics mine.

51

had felt during the activity. She had difficulty formulating an answer to this, but eventually

said that when she thinks about God in her own life, she does so in very personal terms.

She focuses on how she experiences God's presence, and when she teaches children about

God, she tries to help them get in touch with their personal feelings. I told her that this

must be very empowering for her students, and held myself back from pushing her any

further. A time may come when I will be able to encourage her to listen to the voices of

tradition, but I sense that she needs to trust me better first. Belenky, et al. confirm this: in

order to move past subjectivism, the learner must trust that the teacher is not out to

destroy the self that has finally emerged.[3]

In the first chapter, we saw that, in Judaism, learning can be a religious act, an act

of relation that can point toward the divine. In order for this potential to be fulfilled,

however, both the learner and the tradition must speak. Having discovered herself as a

source of knowledge—having learned to listen to her own voice—Sarah has taken a

significant step. Belenky and her colleagues help us to understand just how significant a

step this can be. For Sarah, the tradition can no longer be (if it ever was) an authoritarian

tyrant. It can no longer goad her or abuse her. But at this point, it cannot be a partner,

---

[3] Ibid., pp. 90-93. The authors suggest that "The presence of fairly benign authorities may be critical to the development of the voice of reason" (90). I interpret "benign authorities" to mean teachers who are attuned to their learners' developmental needs and are able to hold their need to assert their own power in check. In some ways, following Eugene Borowitz, this is a *tzimtzum* model of educational leadership. See Borowitz's article, "Tzimtzum: A Mystic Model for Contemporary Leadership," *Religious Education* 69 (November-December 1974). Daloz too stresses the importance of trust, noting that "Erikson has eloquently reminded us [that] the capacity to trust flows at the source of the entire developmental process, and we first learn to trust by being held well as infants. Trust is the well from which we draw the courage to let go of what we no longer need and receive that which we do...Mentors hang around through transitions, a foot on either side of the gulf; they offer a hand to help us swing across. By their very existence, mentors provide proof that the journey can be made, the leap taken" (206-7).

either. Sarah is not yet willing to meet it as *Thou*, as a fully realized other. She can search for God in many places, but the *Beit Midrash* is not yet one of them.

At this point, Kegan also has something important to teach us about Sarah's case. If we think back to his discussion of teenagers, we remember his insistence that adolescents who appear to misbehave should not automatically be labeled as willfully disrespectful, stubborn, or incompetent.[4] In the incident that I have described, Sarah appeared to be all of these things; in fact, when I told my supervisor what had happened, he grumbled that Sarah has a tendency to "get out of line." But if I keep Kegan in mind, I see that Sarah's apparent misbehavior was the result of none of these things. The problem during the faculty meeting was not that she is a willful or stubborn person. The problem was that, as a subjective knower, she constructs her reality in a certain way, and I was pushing her to construct her reality differently. Because she does not trust me, the method I proposed was threatening. Her behavior during the meeting was disruptive, but ultimately it is not her behavior that needs changing—it is her way of thinking, as we have already discussed. By framing the incident in developmental, rather than behavioral terms, I as the educator am left with possibilities rather than problems, and with a course of action rather than a wall to bang my head against.

The Ways of Knowing in Jewish Terms

In a 1997 article, Diane Tickton Schuster applies Belenky, et al.'s scheme directly to adult Jewish learning by imagining how Jews at each of the five epistemological positions might respond to approach of Passover. Her application is important for our purposes,

---

[4] Kegan, pp. 37-56.

because it enables us understand in concrete terms some of the things that happen to adults in the *Beit Midrash* once they have begun to learn Jewish content. Of course, this kind of application will have implications for our educational practice.

The silent knower says, "I'll attend the seder, but I won't feel comfortable asking what it all means."[5] I would push this even further and propose that, for the silent knower, the sentiment is, "I'll go, and will be what it will be, and I don't have the right to ask any questions about it. If I find myself with questions in my mind, I will assume that they are signs of my own stupidity or ignorance. If I were smarter, if I knew more—like the people leading the seder—then I wouldn't have any questions." Again, educators must do everything in our power to help these men and women to see that questions are welcome at the table.

The received knower says, "I will go to the lecture about Pesach and will do all the things the rabbi says so that I can do the seder the right way."[6] Here, the learner assumes that there is only one right way of doing the seder, and that the rabbi knows what this right way is. The learner may ask the rabbi for points of clarification but will generally accept that what the rabbi says is correct.

A subjective knower may say, "The only meaningful way to do seder is to go to my parents' home and do what we've always done. My gut tells me that that's what will work best for everyone."[7] Another possibility is that he/she will attend an unfamiliar seder and complain afterwards that "it just didn't feel right." For people like Sarah, who operate

[5] Diane Tickton Schuster, "Telling Jewish Stories/Listening to Jewish Lives," in *First Fruit: A Whizin Anthology of Jewish Family Education*, Adrianne Bank and Ron Wolfson, eds. (Los Angeles: Whizin, 1998), pg. 97.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

from this epistemological perspective, their gut is the only valid authority. The rabbi or seder-leader may have his or her opinion, but the subjective knower doesn't trust this outsiders' perspective.

The procedural knower says, "I'll learn Hebrew so I can participate more fully at the seder."[8] This is a particularly good example of procedural knowing because here the learner proposes literally to learn a new language, a language that will give him/her better access to the discourse in question—in this case, the text of the seder. Another example of what a procedural knower might say is, "I'll read a feminist commentary on the Hagaddah so I'll better understand how the traditional seder has been reinterpreted in contemporary times." Procedural knowers have an advantage that subjective knowers do not: they do not have to agree with everything that tradition says in order to find it valuable. If we think back to Judith Abrams, we remember her point that the goal of Talmud study is not to feel good but is rather to "feel alive, Jewishly alive." If this is true, then a subjective knower will not get much out of studying Talmud. As Abrams makes clear,

> Sometimes we have the misconception that something that is "religious" and "inspirational," such as the Talmud, is something that we're going to feel uniformly positively about. This is simply not the case with Talmud. You are going to read things...that you wish you hadn't read. Sometimes the sages seem to be permitting behavior that just doesn't seem right...When you read something like this it is often helpful to examine the nature of the statement you are reading. Is it theory or is it case law? Is it an academic discussion designed to teach students or is this going to be enforced in the general population?[9]

These last questions are, in the scheme of Belenky and her colleagues, procedural questions. They suggest that there are perspectives beyond our own personal ones that will help us to wrap our brains around the material that we study. There are intellectual tools that we can use to analyze tradition that we might not discover on our own. These, like

---

[8] Ibid.
[9] Abrams, pp. 6-7.

55

Hebrew, are part of the new language of discourse that procedural knowers learn to use. Learners need not suppress their own voices; on the contrary, they can begin to fit them into the framework of an already ongoing conversation.

The constructed knower says, "At the seder, I will present a creative interpretation of what each item on the seder plate symbolizes for Jews today."[10] I would add that a constructed knower might say, "I will do a presentation on the different items on the seder plate. I will describe a few possible interpretations of each item, and then I will say which of these interpretations I find the most valuable and why. I understand that different interpretations can be valuable for different reasons in different contexts." In this statement, the constructed knower demonstrates the ability to consider a number of interpretations and to evaluate these interpretations. The evaluation is based in part on personal feeing, but also acknowledges that context sometimes contributes to the determination of value. In effect, a multifaceted self is able to speak I-Thou to a multifaceted tradition. Text and learner meet as fully realized subjects, with the potential for covenantal partnership.

What are some of the implications of this application of *Women's Ways of Knowing* for Jewish educational practice? With the case of Sarah, we have already seen that there is a need for teachers to develop trusting relationships with students; we have also seen the potential dangers of calling on learners to change their *behavior* when what we really want them to change is *how they think*. From Schuster's examples of learners approaching

---

[10] Schuster, ibid.

Passover, we see a few more ways in which we can make the *Beit Midrash* more conducive to development.

First, we must look carefully for silent knowers, and tread lightly when we find them. According to Michael Wasserman, when it comes to "silent-type" knowers (he himself does not use Belenky et al.'s terminology) questions about environment and the tyranny of tradition can be critical. Paraphrasing the Rosenzweig material that we touched on in the first chapter, he points out that, whereas traditional Jewish students began the process of study steeped in a "fundamental closeness" with Jewish texts, today's learners begin with distance and doubt.[11] These men and women do not have the skills they need to study these texts, and so they feel incompetent, childish. *They often become collaborators in their own exclusion from the ongoing shaping of Jewish tradition because they dare not enter into dialogue with sources that they feel stupid or guilty for not knowing.* Beyond this, they dare not even ask for help in beginning the process of engagement, lest they expose their lack of knowledge. We must be on the lookout for these men and women of silence, so that we can welcome them to the table. Once they are there, we must be vigilant in the pursuit of justice in the learning environment, which in this case means listening for the emerging voice and encouraging it as much as possible. We cannot allow the tradition, or our presentation of it, to become an ox-goad. Instead, we must assure the learners that their life experiences are valuable, and that each of us has contributions to make.

Second, when we encounter received knowers, we must be wary of the authority that they invest in us. We may let them rely on us to a point but, as we develop trusting

[11] Michael Wasserman, "Jewish Identity and Adulthood: A Family-Systems Approach to Adult Jewish Education," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 64 (1987): 52-62.

relationships with them, we should start asking them to articulate their own views in response to given texts and arguments. In a way, certain classical texts, by their very format, model dialectical interaction between multiple views. It might be confusing at first for a received knower to look, for example, at a page of *Mikra'ot Gedolot*, with its multiple commentaries surrounding a central text from Tanakh. It might be confusing because received knowers often think in dualistic terms, believing that there is only one right answer to every question. But in time they may be open to the idea that, in Judaism, we welcome a variety of opinions. By letting texts themselves model a system in which there are no definitive right answers, we can challenge our learners, in a certain sense, to "place themselves on the page."

Third, for those learners who are able to deal with multiplicity, we must share our tools of analysis and teach the languages of (to name two examples) textual interpretation and religious reflection. If learners are to participate in the ongoing conversation of the Jewish textual tradition, then they should know about, and begin to apply, some hermeneutic principles. If they are to articulate their religious feelings in ways that draw upon the insights of other Jewish thinkers, then they must familiarize themselves with the terms and categories of Jewish philosophy and theology. Procedural knowers should be able to make use of these tools; we must not withhold them.

Finally, learners who operate from the position of constructed knowing (or, to use Kegan's terms, possess fourth order consciousness), have an opportunity to live a Reform Judaism that conforms to some of our highest ideals. In our 1999 Statement of Principles, the leaders of our movement say that we are "committed to the ongoing study of the whole

array of mitzvot and to the fulfillment of those that address us as individuals and as a community."[12] This is a departure from the past, when, according to Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, our forefathers claimed to "accept as binding only the moral laws...and such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization."[13] It is clear that an important difference between "Pittsburgh I" (1885) and "Pittsburgh II" (1999) lies in how the leaders of our movement propose to approach mitzvot. Pittsburgh I explicitly accepts some and rejects others on the basis of whether they conform to certain criteria. Effectively, it says that, if particular mitzvot do not appeal to our sensibilities, then we have the right to drop out of our conversation with them. They are no longer permitted to speak to us, so we may stop learning about them. Unfortunately, as we saw in chapter one, this can be risky, even dangerous, business. In a relationship such as the one that Pittsburgh I establishes between Jews and mitzvot, the voice of tradition is subsumed. The possibility for divine encounter that emerges in conversation between partners is lost. Pittsburgh II, therefore, entails a paradigm shift. We now say that we are "committed to the ongoing study of the whole array of mitzvot and to the fulfillment of those that address us as individuals and as a community." In other words, we take upon ourselves the obligation to *study* about mitzvot and to consider ways to incorporate them into our praxis. We promise to *study* and *do*, because we have placed ourselves back into the conversation. The tradition again has a voice: we commit ourselves to fulfill those mitzvot "that *address* us as individuals and as a community." We need not obey blindly, but neither shall we reject blindly. We shall

---

[12] Michael Meyer and W. Gunther Plaut, The Reform Judaism Reader: North American Documents," New York: UAHC Press, 2001, pg.210.
[13] Ibid., 198.

59

remain in conversation, and neither the learner nor the tradition will be left behind. Constructed knowers in particular will be able to approach tradition in this manner—they are the ones who will be able to live with the ambiguities and inconsistencies inherent in this sort of meeting. This demands much of us as educators: we too must learn to tolerate ambiguities and meet tradition as a fully realized other—tasks that will be no easier for us than they will be for our students.

When we follow Schuster's lead and imagine how the different epistemological perspectives outlined by Belenky and her colleagues play out in Jewish settings, we begin to see that there are many ways that Jewish educators can support adult learners in the proverbial *Beit Midrash*. These support mechanisms are at the core of the environmental factors that, as we mentioned in the previous chapter, enable epistemological shifting to occur.

A final word must be said about applying what we know about women's ways of knowing to Jewish educational practice. As we mentioned in the last chapter, it is important that we realize that our learners may operate from different epistemological perspectives in different aspects of their personal and professional lives. This means that they may be procedural or constructed knowers at work yet may be received or subjective knowers when it comes to Judaism. We must not underestimate our learners simply because they require more support at the table in the *Beit Midrash* than they do elsewhere.[14]

---

[14] See above, pg. 39.

The Beit Midrash: Adult Learning and Divine Encounter

In the *Beit Midrash*, we teach content, but ultimately we do more than this. The Beit *Midrash* should be a place of growth, a place where, learners can become participants in the ongoing conversation of Jewish tradition. Ultimately, we want learning to be everything that Judaism has made of it, from the Bible to the present: a guide toward right action and the possibility of *hesed*; the process by which we invite the *shekhinah* to dwell among us, the chance to meet tradition as a covenantal partner and fully realized other whom we call *Thou* in a dialogue that reaches toward the divine. But we cannot expect most learners simply to step off the street, enter the *Beit Midrash*, sit down at the table, and experience learning as a religious act. Most learners will need our help. In order to serve them well, we have much to learn about who they are and what they need. Fortunately, the literature of adult learning can help us. Belenky, et al. and Kegan are representatives of a field that is growing in both breadth and in sophistication, and while no developmental theorist can address every nuance of the adult learning process, their works can inform our practice and help us shape the *Beit Midrash* into what we want it to be. No theorist can give us a formula for spiritual growth or for encountering the divine—there is too much mystery involved for that—but works such as *Women's Ways of Knowing* and *In Over Our Heads* can help us to be better at what we do. In the end we want the table in the *Beit Midrash* to be a place where learners give and receive wisdom, find safety and nourishment, and develop relationships with both study partners and the tradition itself. In this way, the table of learning can be a table growth, for individuals and communities.

61

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abrams, Judith Z. *Learn Talmud: How to Use The Talmud, The Steinsaltz Edition.* Northvale, NJ: 1995.

Adler, Rachel. Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998.

Aron, Isa. *Becoming a Congregation of Learners: Learning as a Key to Revitalizing Congregational Life.* Revitalizing Congregational Life: A Synagogue 2000 Series. Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2000.

Belenky, Mary Field, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule. *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind.* 10th Anniversary ed. New York: Basic Books, 1997.

Borowitz, Eugene. "Tzimtzum: A Mystic Model for Contemporary Leadership" *Religious Education* 69 (November-December 1974).

Buber, Martin. "I and Thou." *Contemporary Jewish Theology: A Reader.* Edited by Elliot N. Dorff and Louis E. Newman. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999: 60-4.

Cohen, Norman J. "Etz Chayim Hi: It is a Tree of Life." *Jewish Spiritual Journeys: 20 Essays in Honor of the Occasion of the 70th Birthday of Eugene B. Borowitz.* Edited by Lawrence A. Hoffman and Arnold Jacob Wolf. West Orange, New Jersey: Behrman House, Inc.: 1997: 69-78.

----------. *The Way Into Torah.* The Way Into...Series. Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2000.

Cohen, Steven M., and Arnold M. Eisen. *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 2000.

Dirkx, John M. "Nurturing the Soul in Adult Learning." *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 74. The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 1997:79-88.

Daloz, Laurent. *Mentor: Guiding the Journey of Adult Learners.* 2nd ed. of *Effective Teaching and Mentoring.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.

Elbogen, Ismar. *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History.* Translated by Raymond P. Scheindlin, based on the original 1913 German edition and the 1972 Hebrew edition, Joseph Heinemann, et al., eds. Philadelphia: JPS, 1993.

Goldman, Israel M. *Lifelong Learning among Jews: Adult Education in Judaism from Biblical Times to the Twentieth Century*. New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1975.

Green, Arthur. "Jewish Studies and Jewish Faith." *Tikkun* 1 (1): 84-90.

Hammer, Reuven. *Entering Jewish Prayer: A Guide to Personal Devotion and the Worship Service*. New York: Schocken Books, 1994.

Harris, R. Laird, ed. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Vol. 1. Chicago: Moody Press, 1980.

Hendler, Lee Meyerhoff. *The Year Mom God Religion: One Woman's Midlife Journey into Judaism*. Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 1998.

Hezser, Catherine. *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*. Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism, ed. Martin Hengel and Peter Schäfer, no. 81. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 2001.

Hoffman, Lawrence, ed. *The Shema and Its Blessings*. Minhag Ami: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries. Vol. 1. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1997.

Holtz, Barry W. *Finding Our Way: Jewish Texts and the Lives We Lead Today*. New York: Schocken Books, 1990.

Kadushin, Max. *The Rabbinic Mind*, 3rd ed., with an appendix by Simon Greenberg. New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1972.

Kegan, Robert. *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Kepnes, Steven. *The Text as Thou: Martin Buber's Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

Klein, Earnest. *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English*. With a forward by Haim Rabin. New York: Macmillan, 1987.

Kravitz, Leonard, and Kerry M. Olitzky, ed. and trans. *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics*. With a foreword by W. Gunther Plaut. New York: UAHC, 1993.

McBride Jr., S. Dean. "The Polity of the Covenant People: The Book of Deuteronomy." *Interpretation* 41 (1987): 236-44.

Meyer, Michael and W. Gunther Plaut. *The Reform Judaism Reader: North American Documents*. New York: UAHC Press, 2001.

Mezirow, Jack. "Learning to Think Like an Adult: Core Concepts of Transformation Theory." *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress.* Edited by Jack Mezirow and Associates. The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000: 3-33.

Neusner, Jacob. *After the Catastrophe: The Religious World View of the Mishnah.* Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1983.

Remen, Rachel Naomi. *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal.* With a forward by Dean Ornish. New York: Riverhead Books, 1994.

Rosenak, Michael. *Roads to the Palace: Jewish Texts and Teaching.* Faith and Culture in Contemporary Education. Vol. 1. Providence: Berghahn Books, 1995.

Rosenzweig, Franz. "Upon the Opening of the Jüdisches Lehrhaus: Draft of an Address." *On Jewish Learning.* 1st Schocken paperback ed. Edited by Nahum N. Glatzer. New York: Schocken, 1965: 95-102.

Schuster, Diane Tickton. "Telling Jewish Stories/Listening to Jewish Lives." *First Fruit: A Whizin Anthology of Jewish Family Education.* Edited by Adrianne Bank and Ron Wolfson. Los Angeles: Whizin, 1998.

Siejk, Cate. "Learning to Love the Questions: Religious Education in an Age of Unbelief." *Religious Education* 94 (Spring 1999): 155-71.

Sonsino, Rifat. *6 Jewish Spiritual Paths: A Rationalist Looks at Spirituality.* Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2000.

Sonsino, Rifat, and Daniel B. Syme. *What Happens After I Die? Jewish Views of Life after Death.* New York, UAHC Press, 1990.

Taylor, Kathleen, Catherine Marienau, and Morris Fiddler. *Developing Adult Learners: Strategies for Teachers and Trainers.* The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

Tigay, Jeffrey H. *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy.* Philadelphia: JPS, 1996.

Wasserman, Michael. "Jewish Identity and Adulthood: A Family-Systems Approach to Adult Jewish Education." *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 64 (1987): 52-62.

Weisberg, Dvora. "The Study of Torah as a Religious Act." *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Sprirituality: A Sourcebook.* Edited and with introductions by Ellen M. Umansky and Dianne Ashton. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992: 276-9.