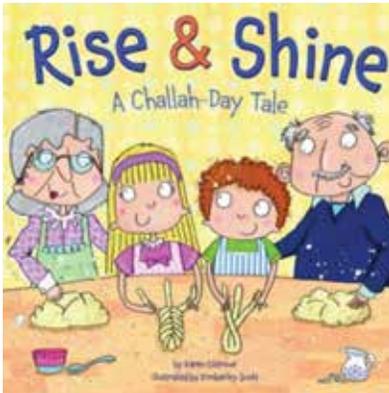


Global Day of Jewish Learning

Curriculum: Creating Together



NOV. 17. 13

www.theglobalday.com

A Project of the Aleph Society



Written by: Rabbi Yitzchak Blau

Introduction

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning. This lesson will focus on the place of individuality and creativity in the world of Jewish practice, in general and regarding Torah study in particular.

Part One: Structure and Creativity (18 minutes)

➤ Ask:

1. Does commitment to a tradition curtail individuality? Do you have a recipe that you make exactly how your grandmother made it? Do you ever adapt it or add a personal touch?
2. Do rules and structure inhibit or facilitate individual expression? What's an example of this in your life?

People often think that tradition contradicts creativity and that fixed structures impinge upon individuality. Such a perspective may see religion with its rules and customs as the enemy of innovation. The many laws and regulations of Judaism seem to exacerbate the problem. This lesson helps illuminate the fallacy of the assumed clash between tradition and personalization. Tradition leaves plenty of room for individuality and rules can actually encourage creativity.

In other areas of life, we appreciate how structure still allows room for personal expression. The rules of Basketball do not prevent individual players from developing their own style. Even activities which confine people to certain words or to a particular musical score do not stop participants from finding ways to place their personal stamp on the endeavor. Note how different actors portray Hamlet in varying ways, or how different musicians play the same song.

➤ Ask:

1. Can you think of a song you like that you have heard performed by different artists? What was the same and what was different? What is "fixed" and what can be personalized? What happens when you sing that song?

Text #1: Leon Wieseltier: *Kaddish*

A contemporary author musing about reciting *Kaddish* (the mourner's prayer) for a year says it well, while using the imagery of practicing dance moves:

I watch the dancers in class and it strikes me that I can learn something about the shul from the studio. What these men and women are doing is not rote; it is practice, and there is nothing stultifying about practice. The purpose of practice is to repeat the elements of movement over and over until they are absorbed into the body, until they precede reflection, so that they may be combined and recombined, as the result of reflection, into the dance. The formal and spiritual breakthroughs of the dance are these combinations and recombinations. Might this also be the case with study and prayer? Day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, the same words, the same symbols, the same themes. It is often objected, against the view, that creation cannot take place without tradition, that tradition frequently usurps creation, and so the diligent souls fail to fly. In the studio, however, I observe the diligent movements of these turning dancers, and yet they fly. I see that tradition must be an absorption, a second nature, for creation to occur.

► Ask:

1. What does Wieseltier notice about practicing dance moves? How does practice encourage creativity or self-expression? Does his insight apply to prayer?
2. Do you agree with Wieseltier? If you were watching the dancers, would you see it in the same way?
3. Can you think of an example in which rules or structure helped spur your creativity? When it comes to religion, how can we express ourselves while remaining confined within certain rules? Which aspects of Jewish life encourage such self-expression?

Text #2: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz: *Teshuvah*

A whole romantic world subsists on the supposition that one should cultivate spontaneity of feeling and reject all rigid or clearly defined anticipation of spiritual or emotional experience. This attitude is not restricted to the religious life and is applied to other realms of feeling as well, such as romantic emotion and artistic creativity. It informs such concepts as “love at first sight” or “artistic inspiration.” In fact, it is precisely in these other realms that one can see the illusory quality of this romantic approach. Inspiration as the primary source of artistic creativity is no more than an attractive fiction, for spontaneity plays as relatively minor a role in art as it does in philosophical and scientific thinking. Creative action generally results from a combination of many factors, including subjective preparation, professional training, and a considerable amount of hard work.

► Ask:

1. Weiseltier spoke of the practice of dancers. This text speaks of “a considerable amount of hard work.” Are you a romantic about things like “artistic inspiration”? Or are you more practical in your outlook? Which approach do you think best fosters creativity?
2. Is there any context where hard work could be considered romantic?

Part Two: Individuality and Torah Study (25 minutes)

The ability to express oneself within a structured system applies to the entire Jewish tradition but it may find its most powerful expression in the world of Torah study. Many have stressed how Judaism calls on each individual to study Torah rather than restricting the pursuit of religious knowledge to a priestly class. We encourage all Jews to study certain basic texts. Everyone can choose a specialty, be it Bible, Talmud, Jewish Law, Jewish History, or Kabbala. Furthermore, a myriad of approaches exist within each discipline. For example, those studying Bible can utilize various techniques, from rabbinic stories and literal readings to modern literary interpretation.

Text #3: Babylonian Talmud Avoda Zara 19a

The following Talmudic text highlights the need for finding one's place in the world of Torah study. The second verse in the book of Psalms speaks of Torah and of personal desire. This leads to two explanations regarding success in Torah, which is only possible when stemming “from his heart's desire” (ממקום שלבו הפיץ), and in correlation “with his heart's desire” (שלבּו הפיץ במקום).

עבודה זרה דף יט עמוד א

כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו – א"ר: אין אדם לומד תורה אלא ממקום שלבו חפץ, שנאמר: (תהלים א) כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו.... אמר רבא: לעולם ילמוד אדם תורה במקום שלבו חפץ, שנאמר: כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו. ואמר רבא: בתחילה נקראת על שמו של הקדוש ברוך הוא ולבסוף נקראת על שמו, שנאמר: בתורת ה' חפצו ובתורתו יהגה יומם ולילה.

“But whose desire is in the law of the Lord” (Tehillim 1:2). Said Rabi (Rabbi Judah the Prince): A man can learn [well] only that part of the Torah which is his heart’s desire, for it is said: “But whose desire is in the law of the Lord”....

Rava likewise said: One should always study that part of the Torah which is his heart’s desire, as it is said, But whose desire is in the law of the Lord. Rava also said: At the beginning [of this verse] the Torah is assigned to the Holy One, blessed be He, but at the end it is assigned to him [who studies it], for it is said, “Whose desire is in the Law of the Lord and in his [own] Law doth he meditate day and night.”

► Ask:

1. This source says that study works best when the student chooses the subject. Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. What limitations could apply to this principle?

Text #4: Maharsha, Avoda Zara 19a

The Maharsha (Rabbi Shmuel Edels), a 16th Century Rabbi and Talmudist from Poland, comments on the passage from Avoda Zara. He explains that one phrase (m'makom vs be'makom) refers to the subject or work a student is interested in and the other to the teacher and institution the student wants to learn from. He alters the choice of words, reflecting the importance in both the choice of subject and the choice of the teacher. In both cases, we see the significance of following one's inclination in the world of educational choices. Apparently, academic flourishing depends upon excitement and enthusiasm for the material in question.

מהרש"א חידושי אגדות עבודה זרה דף יט עמוד א

במקום שלבו חפץ כו'. כבר אמר רבי לעיל ממקום שלבו חפץ דהיינו מאיזה מסכת וספר כדמסיק אבל הכא אמר במקום בבי"ת היינו אצל איזה רב שלבו חפץ וכן הוא בילקוט בדברי רבא ממי שלבו חפץ ויהיה המכוון דחפצו לרבי על המקום ולרבא על הרב וק"ל:

Rabi already said above “from a place where his heart desires,” meaning which tractate and work but here it says “*be'makom*” with a *bet*, meaning with the teacher his heart desires.

According to the Maharsha, the personalization of Torah relates to students selecting both a teacher they connect to and subject matter that speaks to them.

► Ask:

1. How does choosing your teacher affect how you learn?

Text #5: Babylonian Talmud Avoda Zara 19a

עבודה זרה יט

לוי ור"ש ברבי יתבי קמיה דרבי וקא פסקי סידרא, סליק ספרא, לוי אמר: לייתו [לן] משלי, ר"ש ברבי אמר: לייתו [לן] תילים, כפייה ללוי ואייתו תילים, כי מטו הכא כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו, פריש רבי ואמר: אין אדם לומד תורה אלא ממקום שלבו חפץ, אמר לוי: רבי, נתת לנו רשות לעמוד.

Levi and Rabbi Simeon the son of Rabi were once sitting before Rabi and were expounding a part of Scripture. When the book was concluded, Levi said: "Let the book of Proverbs now be brought in." Rabbi Simeon the son of Rabi however said: "Let the Psalms be brought"; and, Levi having been overruled, the Psalms were brought. When they came to this verse, 'But whose desire is in the Law of the Lord', Rabbi offered his comment: "One can only learn well that part of the Torah which is his heart's desire." Whereupon Levi remarked: "Rabi, You have given me the right to rise.

Levi, having lost out on the choice of text, cleverly points out to Rabi that the teacher's explanation of the second verse in the entire book justifies Levi leaving the class. After all, Rabi says that study works best when a student focuses on the subject matter of his desire and here Levi sits in a lesson about Psalms when he wants to study Proverbs. The story does not say what happened next and I imagine that Levi did not actually storm out of the room; rather, they all chuckled and continued on to the third verse in Psalms. However, the story does reiterate the need to connect learning and personal desire by finding one's own place in the world of Torah study.

► Ask:

1. Have you ever been in a situation where you were asked to study something that did not interest you? Once you studied that material, did you wish you had spent your time on something else or where you happy to have learned it?

Part Three: Torah Study, Creativity, and Novel Insights (7 minutes)

Until now, we have discussed finding one's place in Torah study in terms of subject matter, interpretative approaches, and teachers. Another prominent way to personalize Torah is to strive towards creative interpretations and novel insights. Indeed, much of Jewish traditional learning culture highly values the *hiddush*, the innovative idea. In the following story, R Elazar ben Hasma refuses to accept the idea that his disciples could only listen to him and could not tell him some new idea that emerged in the academy's study.

Text #6: Babylonian Talmud Hagiga 3a

חגיגה דף ג עמוד א

תנו רבנן: מעשה ברבי יוחנן בן ברוקה ורבי אלעזר (בן) חסמא שהלכו להקביל פני רבי יהושע בפקיעין, אמר להם: מה חידוש היה בבית המדרש היום? אמרו לו: תלמידך אנו, ומימך אנו שותין. אמר להם: אף על פי כן, אי אפשר לבית המדרש בלא חידוש, שבת של מי היתה? שבת של רבי אלעזר בן עזריה היתה. ובמה היתה הגדה היום? אמרו לו: בפרשת הקהל.

The rabbis taught: Once Rabbi Johanan son of Broka and Rabbi Elazar son of Hasma went to visit Rabbi Jehoshua in the city of Pekiin, and he asked them: What is new today in the house of learning? They answered him: We are your disciples, and we drink your waters. He rejoined: Nevertheless, it is impossible for a college session to pass without some novel teaching; tell me whose Sabbath was it? And they said: Rabbi Elazar son of Azariah's. And on what theme did he lecture? On the portion of the Assembly.

➤ **Ask:**

1. Why did the students think they have nothing to offer? Why does Rabbi Elazar disagree?

Part Four: The Difference between Creativity and Originality (7 minutes)

This celebration of creativity need not refer only to ideas never said before. Even serious thinkers rarely come up with an idea with no precedent whatsoever. Yet this does not mean that they lack the chance for creativity. Firstly, we can often add a new perspective to an older idea. More importantly, the creative gesture does not depend on unprecedented novelty. Rabbi Shalom Carmy outlines a helpful distinction between creativity and originality.

Text #7: Shalom Carmy, *Tradition* (Winter 2000)

Being original means saying something never said before. Originality is essential when patenting an invention; it must be exhibited, or feigned, for academic advancement; and it is, of course, useful in attracting attention to oneself. Creativity, by contrast, reflects the inner experience of the individual overcoming a challenge. Creativity is not diminished when one achieves, "by strength and submission," what has already been discovered, "by men whom one cannot hope to emulate." To contend with a *sugya* [Talmudic passage] or a passage of Tanakh [Bible] and forge in the smithy of one's consciousness the same understanding that animated Ramban or Seforno or Rabbi Shimon Shkop, is a triumph of human creativity.

➤ **Ask:**

1. Think of someone whose creativity you admire. In what ways is s/he creative? Is s/he also original?
2. Are there ways in which you are creative in your approaches to Jewish tradition? Ways in which your approaches are original?

Conclusion (3 minutes)

The Talmud in Avoda Zara spoke of taking God's Torah and making it yours. Some of us may do so by suggesting a novel insight. Others will deepen their own understanding and internalize significant ideas. Both reflect authentic creativity and the personalizing of religious experience. Though many Jews share the identical *mitzvah* (commandment) of Torah study, each Jew can find a place for individuality and creativity within this commandment.

Part One: Structure and Creativity

Text #1: Leon Wieseltier: *Kaddish*

I watch the dancers in class and it strikes me that I can learn something about the shul from the studio. What these men and women are doing is not rote; it is practice, and there is nothing stultifying about practice. The purpose of practice is to repeat the elements of movement over and over until they are absorbed into the body, until they precede reflection, so that they may be combined and recombined, as the result of reflection, into the dance. The formal and spiritual breakthroughs of the dance are these combinations and recombinations. Might this also be the case with study and prayer? Day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, the same words, the same symbols, the same themes. It is often objected, against the view, that creation cannot take place without tradition, that tradition frequently usurps creation, and so the diligent souls fail to fly. In the studio, however, I observe the diligent movements of these turning dancers, and yet they fly. I see that tradition must be an absorption, a second nature, for creation to occur.

Text #2: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz: *Teshuvah*

A whole romantic world subsists on the supposition that one should cultivate spontaneity of feeling and reject all rigid or clearly defined anticipation of spiritual or emotional experience. This attitude is not restricted to the religious life and is applied to other realms of feeling as well, such as romantic emotion and artistic creativity. It informs such concepts as “love at first sight” or “artistic inspiration.” In fact, it is precisely in these other realms that one can see the illusory quality of this romantic approach. Inspiration as the primary source of artistic creativity is no more than an attractive fiction, for spontaneity plays as relatively minor a role in art as it does in philosophical and scientific thinking. Creative action generally results from a combination of many factors, including subjective preparation, professional training, and a considerable amount of hard work.

Part Two: Individuality and Torah Study

Text #3: Babylonian Talmud Avoda Zara 19a

עבודה זרה דף יט עמוד א

כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו... אמר רבא: לעולם ילמוד אדם תורה במקום שלבו חפץ, שנאמר: כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו. ואמר רבא: בתחילה נקראת על שמו של הקדוש ברוך הוא ולבסוף נקראת על שמו, שנאמר: בתורת ה' חפצו ובתורתו יהגה יומם ולילה.

“But whose desire is in the law of the Lord” (Tehillim 1:2). Said Rabi (Rabbi Judah the Prince): A man can learn [well] only that part of the Torah which is his heart’s desire, for it is said: “But whose desire is in the law of the Lord”....

Rava likewise said: One should always study that part of the Torah which is his heart’s desire, as it is said, But whose desire is in the law of the Lord. Rava also said: At the beginning [of this verse] the Torah is assigned to the Holy One, blessed be He, but at the end it is assigned to him [who studies it], for it is said, Whose desire is in the Law of the Lord and in his [own] Law doth he meditate day and night.

Text #4: Maharsha, Avoda Zara 19a

מהרש"א חידושי אגדות עבודה זרה דף יט עמוד א

במקום שלבו חפץ כו'. כבר אמר רבי לעיל ממקום שלבו חפץ דהיינו מאיזה מסכת וספר כדמסיק אבל הכא אמר במקום בבי"ת היינו אצל איזה רב שלבו חפץ וכן הוא בילקוט בדברי רבא ממי שלבו חפץ ויהיה המכוון דחפצו לרבי על המקום ולרבא על הרב וק"ל:

Rabi already said above "from a place where his heart desires," meaning which tractate and work but here it says "be'makom" with a *bet*, meaning with the teacher his heart desires.

Text #5: Babylonian Talmud Avoda Zara 19a

עבודה זרה יט

לוי ור"ש ברבי יתבי קמיה דרבי וקא פסקי סידרא, סליק ספרא, לוי אמר: לייתו [לן] משלי, ר"ש ברבי אמר: לייתו [לן] תילים, כפייה ללוי ואייתו תילים, כי מטו הכא כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו, פריש רבי ואמר: אין אדם לומד תורה אלא ממקום שלבו חפץ, אמר לוי: רבי, נתת לנו רשות לעמוד.

Levi and Rabbi Simeon the son of Rabi were once sitting before Rabi and were expounding a part of Scripture. When the book was concluded, Levi said: "Let the book of Proverbs now be brought in." Rabbi Simeon the son of Rabi however said: "Let the Psalms be brought"; and, Levi having been overruled, the Psalms were brought. When they came to this verse, 'But whose desire is in the Law of the Lord', Rabi offered his comment: "One can only learn well that part of the Torah which is his heart's desire." Whereupon Levi remarked: "Rabi, You have given me the right to rise."

Part Three: Torah Study, Creativity, and Novel Insights

Text #6: Babylonian Talmud Hagiga 3a

חגיגה דף ג עמוד א

תנו רבנן: מעשה ברבי יוחנן בן ברוקה ורבי אלעזר (בן) חסמא שהלכו להקביל פני רבי יהושע בפקיעין, אמר להם: מה חידוש היה בבית המדרש היום? אמרו לו: תלמידך אנו, ומימך אנו שותין. אמר להם: אף על פי כן, אי אפשר לבית המדרש בלא חידוש, שבת של מי היתה? שבת של רבי אלעזר בן עזריה היתה. ובמה היתה הגדה היום? אמרו לו: בפרשת הקהל.

The rabbis taught: Once Rabbi Johanan son of Broka and Rabbi Elazar son of Hasma went to visit Rabbi Jehoshua in the city of Pekiin, and he asked them: What is new today in the house of learning? They answered him: We are your disciples, and we drink your waters. He rejoined: Nevertheless, it is impossible for a college session to pass without some novel teaching; tell me whose Sabbath was it? And they said: Rabbi Elazar son of Azariah's. And on what theme did he lecture? On the portion of the Assembly.



Part Four: The Difference between Creativity and Originality

Text #7: Shalom Carmy, *Tradition* (Winter 2000)

Being original means saying something never said before. Originality is essential when patenting an invention; it must be exhibited, or feigned, for academic advancement; and it is, of course, useful in attracting attention to oneself. Creativity, by contrast, reflects the inner experience of the individual overcoming a challenge. Creativity is not diminished when one achieves, “by strength and submission,” what has already been discovered, “by men whom one cannot hope to emulate.” To contend with a *sugya* [Talmudic passage] or a passage of *Tanakh* [Bible] and forge in the smithy of one’s consciousness the same understanding that animated Ramban or Seforno or Rabbi Shimon Shkop, is a triumph of human creativity.



NOV·17·13

www.theglobalday.com

A Project of the Aleph Society