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

“...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

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

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

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


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.
A hedge of roses (Shir haShirim 7:4). That even a hedge like roses is not breached. And this is what a heretic said to R. Kahana: "You say that a husband can be secluded with his wife when she is a nida. Is it possible that fire will be with flax and it will not be kindled?"

R. Kahana answered: "The Torah testified about us when it employs the phrase a hedge of roses. Even if the hedge is like roses, it will not be breached."