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***Beit Midrash for Teachers: An Experiment in
Teacher Preparation***

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Beit Midrash Research Project

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Beit Midrash for Teachers: An Experiment in Teacher Preparation¹

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Twenty prospective Jewish day school teachers sit around a large, rectangular table in a classroom at Brandeis University on a summer afternoon with their instructors, Elie Holzer and Orit Kent. Elie strums a guitar. Soon everyone is quietly singing, “V’ha-er eyneynu b’Toratecha, v’dabek libeynu b’mitzvotachah... (Enlighten our eyes in your Torah, attach our hearts through your commandments)”² These words invite a certain stance towards Torah, towards learning, and towards others who contribute to our learning. Along with the melody and the act of singing, they help students make a transition from their other courses to this unique, multi-layered professional learning opportunity that we call a Beit Midrash for Teachers (BMT).

Beit Midrash or “house of study” refers to a place where Jews, traditionally men, gather to study classical texts, often in pairs or *hevruta*. We have appropriated this traditional learning structure and adapted it to fit the contemporary purposes of teacher education. In this Beit Midrash for Teachers, the selection of texts, the language of instruction and the purposes of learning differ from those in a traditional Beit Midrash where the study of Talmud is considered a religious activity and the goal is to enable students to become independent students of Talmud.

The Beit Midrash for Teachers is an integral part of the DeLeT (Day School Leadership Through Teaching) program at Brandeis, a thirteen month, post BA fellowship program designed to prepare teachers for the elementary grades in Jewish day schools.³ DeLeT involves two summers of professional and academic study and a year-long mentored internship in an area day school during the school year. For the past three years, the Beit Midrash has been a key component in the summer, meeting twice a week in three hour sessions over the five weeks. It also serves as the site for an ongoing research project sponsored by the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education. Conducted by Elie Holzer, Orit Kent and this author, the research agenda includes conceptual and empirical studies of the Beit Midrash as professional education and of the learning that takes place in *hevruta* (pairs).⁴

Why did we decide in a relatively short and intense teacher education program to devote significant time during both summers to this educational activity? How do we justify the Beit Midrash for Teachers as a *professional* learning opportunity? How do the purposes, design and enactment of the Beit Midrash contribute to the work of preparing elementary teachers for Jewish day schools as carried out in the DeLeT program at Brandeis?⁵ This paper draws on planning notes and memos, classroom videotapes and program and course documents to address these questions, grounding the description of the Beit Midrash in these artifacts of practice in teacher education. Part I introduces the setting, faculty, students and curriculum of

¹ An early version of this paper was presented at the Network for Research in Jewish Education, June, 2005. Thanks to Orit Kent, Elie Holzer, Gail Dorph and Dirck Roosevelt for suggestions and feedback.

² Elie Holzer and Orit Kent created this translation.

³ DeLeT, the Hebrew word for “door,” is designed to open a door on a career in day school teaching. The program was initiated in 2001 by venture philanthropist Laura Lauder with the help of Joshua Elkin, executive director of the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE) and Jewish Educational Services of North America (JESNA). Two academic sites, Brandeis University and the Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, were invited to create pilot programs. After two years, the program was turned over to the academic sites with the goal of institutionalizing the program in each site. The Beit Midrash for Teachers is a unique feature of the Brandeis program.

⁴ The papers by Holzer and Kent in this issue also grow out of this research agenda. The three papers constitute a set with this paper providing a descriptive context for the other two.

⁵ The Brandeis DeLeT program partners with Reform, Conservative, Modern Orthodox and community day schools to provide year-long, mentored internships for DeLeT fellows. Graduates of the program teach in Jewish day schools across the spectrum of Jewish life.

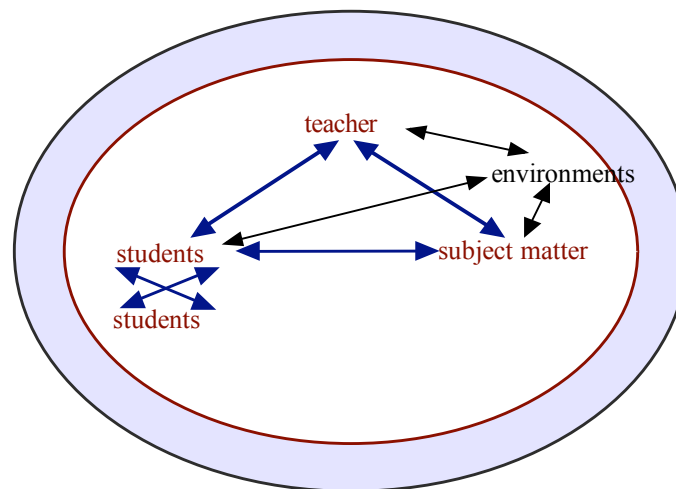
the Beit Midrash and shows how these elements come together in the design and enactment of one session. Part 2 situates the Beit Midrash in the DeLeT program and in the broader work of day school teacher education. Besides addressing these questions about the design and enactment of the Beit Midrash and its place in a program of Jewish teacher education, this paper serves as a descriptive context for papers by Holzer and Kent in this issue.

Designing a Beit Midrash for Teachers

In the DeLeT program, we think of teaching not as something teachers do to students but as something *teachers* do with *students* around particular *content* in a particular *context*. David Hawkins, philosopher of science and education, makes such an argument in his essay, “I, Thou, and It” where he claims that the relationship between teacher (I) and student (Thou) differs from the caring relationship between parent and child precisely because of the presence of the third element (It) – the curriculum or content, something outside both teacher and student that provides a shared and vital focus for their relationship and interaction: “Without a Thou, there is no I evolving. Without an It there is no content for the context, no figure and no heat, but only an affair of mirrors confronting each other” (Hawkins, 1974, p52).

The Beit Midrash for Teachers is an educational *environment* in which *teachers* engage with *students* around particular *content*. This interactive model of teaching, represented by the “instructional triangle” below (See Figure 1), provides a useful framework for introducing the elements that come together in the Beit Midrash for Teachers--two instructors and twenty students interacting with each other and with particular texts in a particular context. The bi-directional arrows in the diagram signal the fact that each element influences and is influenced by the other elements. The arrows in the student corner suggest that students construct their understandings not only through interactions with the teacher and the subject matter but also through interactions with each other.

Figure 1: Instructional Triangle⁶



⁶ This diagram appears in David Cohen, Stephen Raudenbush and Deborah Ball, Resources, Instruction and Research. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. Summer 2003, Vol. 25, No. 2, 119-142. The idea of the instructional triangle has been formulated and used by a variety of educators from John Dewey to Joseph McDonald. It is a central framework in the Mandel Teacher Educator Institute (MTEI) which prepares teacher educators for Jewish education and also in the DeLeT program where it helps teacher candidates organize their evolving understandings of classroom teaching.

The Classroom Context

The Beit Midrash for Teachers is situated in a set of nested contexts—the Beit Midrash classroom, the DeLeT program, Brandeis University, the Boston day school community and beyond. Here I focus on the most immediate context, describing the physical set-up and culture of learning in the Beit Midrash classroom. In Part II, I situate the Beit Midrash in the DeLeT program and connect it to broader purposes in teacher education.

The Beit Midrash for Teachers meets in a classroom on the Brandeis campus that can accommodate paired, small group and whole class learning formats.⁷ When working in small and whole groups, students sit in a circular formation. When studying in pairs, we encourage students to sit across from each other so that they can face one another and the text. We want everyone to study in the same space so that the sounds of partners learning together will create an audible surround and generate a certain level of energy. We wish the classroom had permanent bookshelves filled with Jewish texts and references to facilitate and encourage the use of these tools and to lend a particular visual character to the space.

In conventional classrooms, intellectual authority resides in the teacher and the textbook. Students may be expected to be good listeners, but they are rarely expected to play a substantive role in each other's learning. Social responsibility is generally developed outside intellectual activity. Not so in the Beit Midrash where the structure of participation and the culture of learning foster social, moral and intellectual qualities required for text study and *hevruta* learning and reinforce the value of learning with and from others.

As expert readers of texts, the instructors study alongside the students, demonstrating the practices of close reading and modeling openness and respect toward the text and one another. The tasks and assignments they design focus students' attention on the texts, on their own ideas, and on the ideas of their partner and colleagues. Mindful that revealing, challenging and revising ideas takes courage on the part of students, the instructors work to create a culture of learning that supports intellectual risk taking. Students are encouraged to take advantage of their colleagues and instructors as sources of learning on the grounds that knowledge does not reside in one person. Even the expectations regarding attendance reinforce the desired norms. If students have to miss a session or leave early, they are expected to make alternative study arrangements with their *hevruta*. As the syllabus states: "Please keep in mind that when you miss class, you leave your *hevruta* without a study partner."

The Teachers

Instructors Elie Holzer, Associate Professor of Education at Bar Ilan University in Israel, and Orit Kent, doctoral student in Jewish Studies and Jewish Education at Brandeis University, design and teach in the Beit Midrash for Teachers. Having studied classical Jewish texts from an early age, often in *hevruta*, both instructors see the Beit Midrash as a good place to investigate interpretive practices like text study and *hevruta* learning, to conceptualize the role of these practices in teacher education, and to think about the purposes of religious education in a post-modern world.

Two personal "discoveries" motivate Elie Holzer's interest in the Beit Midrash for Teachers. As part of his intellectual journey outside the Jewish world, Holzer discovered philosophical hermeneutics which offers a way to understand and justify the study of Jewish texts without requiring a leap of faith. Then, through his involvement in the Mandel Teacher Educator Institute (MTEI),⁸ he encountered a conception of teaching and teacher development

⁷ Our space requirements were dictated in part by the research requirements. Besides videotaping the group sessions, we video and audiotaped focal pairs of students. So we sought a large space with good acoustics and flexible seating close to a smaller room where the *hevruta* being taped could study.

⁸ Funded by the Mandel Foundation, the Teacher Educator Institute is a national program for senior educators responsible for professional development. The two-year seminar for "morei morim" (teachers of teachers) introduces participants to a conception of professional development in which the study of

which emphasizes teachers learning in and from practice (Dewey, 1904; Ball & Cohen, 1999). Soon he was drawing parallels between the interpretive work of text study and the interpretive work of “reading teaching” through the investigation of classroom videotapes and samples of student work (Holzer, 2002). Designing a Beit Midrash for the DeLeT program at Brandeis enables Holzer to bring together these lines of work.⁹

Fascinated by the process of meaning making, Orit Kent believes in the transformative potential of text study. As a participant and observer of this central Jewish activity since her childhood, she wonders about the meaning it holds for some and the challenges it poses for others. Influenced by Eleanor Duckworth’s careful studies of learning (Duckworth, 2001) and Patricia Carini’s descriptive review processes (Carini, 2000), Orit Kent is pioneering the close study of *hevruta* learning in the context of the Beit Midrash for Teachers. She sees the Beit Midrash as a place to learn more about the intellectual and interpersonal work that occurs when people study texts together and the potential of this activity to shape identity and influence practice.¹⁰

The Students

The DeLeT program is open to recent college graduates and mid-career professionals who love learning, enjoy working with children, and want to serve the Jewish community as day school teachers. The program accepts students who show evidence that they can succeed in an intense program of academic, professional and clinical study. Of the 40 fellows enrolled in the program at Brandeis since 2002, three-quarters were 21-24 years of age, entering DeLeT right after college or after a year or two of working; 6 fellows were 25-30 years of age, and 3 were in their 40’s, having pursued other careers (e.g. law). The first three cohorts were almost entirely female; the fourth cohort of ten is evenly divided between men and women.¹¹

DeLeT fellows at Brandeis come from 15 states and 3 countries (South Africa, Canada, Israel). They are graduates of private colleges and public universities, where they studied a wide range of subjects and did solid academic work. Fifteen of the 40 fellows majored (or had double majors) in humanities, 10 in Jewish studies, 12 in social sciences, 5 in natural sciences and 3 in professional studies (e.g. education, social work). 17 of the 40 fellows had a GPA of 3.5 or above; 19 had a GPA of 3.0-3.4 and 4 had a GPA of 2.5-2.9.

In terms of Jewish background and education, DeLeT students span the denominational spectrum and vary in their formal Jewish knowledge and facility with Hebrew. Almost half (18 out of 40) identify with the Conservative movement, a quarter (11 out of 40) with the Reform movement. 7 are Modern Orthodox, with 1 Reconstructionist, 1 Zionist and 1 fellow identified with no denomination. Eleven of the 40 fellows attended Jewish day schools for 5-12 years of study; 27 attended Hebrew School for 5 years. Almost all of the fellows read Hebrew and some speak fluently.¹² Most have participated in youth groups, spent time in Israel, attended and/or worked in Jewish summer camps, and taught in supplementary schools.

Clearly DeLeT fellows come to the Beit Midrash with varied experiences and expertise as students of Jewish texts. While a handful have studied in yeshivot in Israel and some have

teaching is a central activity. I met Elie at MTEI where he created a curriculum of Jewish text study to complement the professional development work which I and others are responsible for. I persuaded him to help us create a Beit Midrash for the DeLeT program at Brandeis which could also serve as a laboratory for conceptual and empirical studies of Jewish text study and *hevruta* learning.

⁹ See Elie Holzer’s article in this journal.

¹⁰ This is the focus of Orit Kent’s article in this journal as well as the basis for her doctoral dissertation.

¹¹ As of this writing, the program has recruited its 5th cohort of 10 fellows.

¹² One promising fellow could barely read Hebrew. After finishing the DeLeT program, she enrolled in a Masters in Jewish Education program at the Jewish Theological Seminary and spent the next 3 years strengthening her Judaic studies background and her knowledge of Hebrew. She currently teaches Jewish studies in Hebrew at a Conservative day school.

strong Jewish backgrounds, most have had limited exposure to the study of Bible and Talmud. Just as important as their formal background is their readiness to take the Beit Midrash seriously as a legitimate component in their preparation for day school teaching. Those in the second summer who have experienced the Beit Midrash before know the norms and expectations and help socialize the new cohort.

The Content

The curriculum of the Beit Midrash for Teachers reflects three purposes: (1) to explore ideas about teaching and learning in classical Jewish texts; (2) to explore *hevruta* as a form of Jewish learning; and (3) to explore elements of “good” text study. The first purpose highlights the substantive ideas in the texts under study; the second and third emerge from the activity of text study in pairs.

Text study, especially the study of classical Jewish texts, is a central activity in Jewish life. Important for its own sake, in the spirit of *Torah lishma*, text study in the Beit Midrash for Teachers also enables DeLeT fellows to encounter ideas from Jewish tradition that relate to their work as teachers. Texts are chosen to represent different genres, including Biblical narratives and legal and midrashic Rabbinic texts. Each summer the Beit Midrash is organized around a theme and the texts serve as resources for thinking about that theme. For two summers, the theme was teaching and learning and the texts dealt with such matters as the teacher-student relationship, the proper treatment of different kinds of students, the value of learning with another, and who is a good teacher. One summer the theme was *teshuvah*, often translated as repentance, but also referring to a process of introspection, learning and growth. This is a particularly appropriate theme for teachers to consider as they undergo their own personal and professional transformations and prepare themselves to support the learning and growth of their students.

A second aspect of the Beit Midrash curriculum focuses on the processes of interpretation. How do I make sense of texts? What do I bring as a reader? What does the text bring? The goal is to help students become aware of what they, as readers, “do” to the text and what the text “does” to them. Part of this involves realizing that the text itself speaks back, that is it an “other” – not merely a projection of oneself. The text sets boundaries for interpretation so the reader cannot simply project meaning onto the text without paying close attention to what the text is saying. A narrative text has a plot and characters, inviting questions about what happened and about the characters’ motivations. Discursive texts invite questions of meaning. For example, what does Maimonides mean when he says, in his “Laws of Torah Study,” “Instruction in Torah should not be given except to suitable, well-behaved pupils, and to the simple minded...?”¹³ Understanding the interpretive process also means becoming aware of how readers “fill in gaps” (Iser, 1978) by reading texts through the lens of their own knowledge base and experience and by becoming sensitive to the text’s cues. Various exercises and activities help students gain meta-cognitive awareness of their own interpretive processes.

Woven into the intellectual work of textual interpretation is the interpersonal work of *hevruta* learning. Study with a partner (*hevruta*) is one of the major characteristics of the Beit Midrash. It provides DeLeT fellows with an intensive learning opportunity in which they are called to take responsibility for each other’s learning.

While *hevruta* learning may seem straightforward, it can be difficult, even counter-cultural. It requires people to listen closely to their own ideas, their partner’s ideas and the ideas in the text, and to be open to revising their interpretations. It requires participants to help one another engage with and learn from the text. This means that when one person states an idea, the *hevruta* partner cannot simply ignore that idea. Rather he or she is responsible for asking questions of clarification, offering an alternative possibility, looking for confirming or

¹³ Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Sefer ha-Madda, Chapter 4:1

disconfirming evidence. Being able to challenge less convincing interpretations is fundamental to everyone's learning and a critical skill in "good" *hevruta* learning, but few people are comfortable and skilled at this practice.

One of the central research questions in the Beit Midrash research project is what constitutes "good" *hevruta* learning in this context. Before the start of the 2005 summer session, the instructors gave students a writing assignment based on a list of features of "good" *hevruta* study which the research team had generated. These practices, fostered in the Beit Midrash, represent our evolving ideas about what learning in this context entails.

Features of "Good" Hevruta Study: A Work in Progress

- Taking turns reading the text out loud;
- Articulating your interpretation of the text;
- Listening closely to your *Hevruta*;
- Asking for help and/or looking up what you don't know or understand;
- Probing your *Hevruta's* interpretation and/or statement;
- Helping your *Hevruta* better articulate what s/he is trying to say;
- Challenging your *Hevruta's* interpretation and/or statement;
- Weighing and articulating the pros and cons of various interpretations;
- Paying attention to what helps your *Hevruta* learn;
- Letting your *Hevruta* know what helps you learn;
- Developing some shared norms for how you will work together and strategies to improve working together;
- Developing strategies to negotiate disagreement;
- Revising your interpretation when faced with compelling information in the text and/or from your partner;
- Being willing to defend an interpretation that you find compelling.

Students were asked to write about two items in the list which were already part of their repertoire and two items on the list which they believed would be challenging for them to perform. After sharing this writing with their *hevruta*, students then wrote about what they had learned about their study partner as a learner and what *hevruta* practices they hoped to work on during the summer. Besides offering a window on students' perceptions of themselves as learners, the assignment alerted students to the importance of their role in the learning of others, named a set of "practices" that students could work on, and helped foster meta-cognitive awareness of the processes of *hevruta* learning.

The Beit Midrash in Action

To illustrate the Beit Midrash in action, I describe one session from the summer of 2005. I chose this session, which occurred in the third week of the five week summer program, because it represents a transition from the study of texts about teaching and learning to a focus on the interpretive process and *hevruta* learning. As such it provides a good example of how the three aspects of the Beit Midrash are enacted through particular learning activities, tasks and assignments. In reconstructing this session, I draw on fieldnotes, a videotape of the session, lesson plans and student work. My purpose is not to evaluate the effectiveness of the session or document its impact on student learning. Rather I want to describe the interaction of teachers, students and texts in the Beit Midrash for Teachers and show how the design and purposes discussed above play out in practice.¹⁴

The illustrative session had two main parts: (1) observation and analysis of a short videotape of *hevruta* learning and (2) an exercise in textual interpretation ("filling in gaps") based

¹⁴ As part of the Beit Midrash research project, we plan to undertake a systematic analysis of the curriculum and pedagogy as a case of text study as professional development.

on the reading of a brief Talmudic narrative. The session began with quiet singing of “V’ha-er ayneynu...” The agenda for the next three hours was posted on a flip chart:¹⁵

Agenda

1. Introduction
2. Video: watching, analysis with *hevruta*
3. Large group discussion
4. Break
5. Talmud text study in *hevruta*
6. Concluding discussion

Elie opens the session by connecting the activity of the previous weeks with the work of the coming weeks:

...We wanted you to see what the Jewish tradition has to say about teaching and learning not because we want you to embrace these ideas, but rather because we want you to think about these ideas, to criticize them, and to use them to discover your own beliefs. This is a Beit Midrash for Teachers. So we expect you not only to experience text study and *hevruta* learning, but also to begin to understand, to be aware of what this work entails and how people develop ideas while studying together.

He refers to the course on Teaching Reading which students in the new cohort were also taking that summer and asked what they were learning about “reading for meaning.” One student brings up the idea of using “schema” based on prior experience to make sense of written texts, and other students build on this connection.

Next Orit reviews the agenda and explains that the first activity is watching a short example of *hevruta* learning videotaped two summers ago.¹⁶ In the video clip, a five minute segment from a longer *hevruta* session, Susan and Judy (both pseudonyms) puzzle over Maimonides’ Second Law of Torah Study:

How does one teach? The rabbi sits at the head and the pupils surround him like a crown, in order that all may see him and hear his words. The teacher does not sit on a seat and the pupils on the ground, but either all sit on the ground or all on seats. Originally the teacher sat and the pupils stood. From before the destruction of the Second Temple it was customary to teach with the pupils seated.¹⁷

Before turning to the videotape, Orit asks students to re-read this text, which they had studied on the first day of the Beit Midrash. In that opening session, the instructors had given students a guide to frame their first experience of studying with their *hevruta*. The guide posed questions designed to keep students’ attention focused on the text rather than using the text as a springboard for talking about something else. For example, students were asked to “point to something in the text that resonates with you and explain why, and point to something in the text that appears strange or challenging to you and say why.” They were also asked to articulate the implicit principles and values about teacher, learner and classroom that seemed to be operating in the text and to discuss what they thought about these ideas. Now, two weeks later, Maimonides’ text serves as background for the analysis of the video “text.”

Orit distributes a page of transcript from Susan and Judy’s *hevruta* session and poses a question to frame the observation: “What are Susan and Judy doing with each other and with the text to help them develop their interpretations?” Students watch the videotape twice, following along in the transcript. Then they work with a neighbor to answer the focal question.

¹⁵ This session departs somewhat from the norm by starting with a large group discussion and by showing video clips of *hevruta* learning from the previous summer. The typical session begins with singing, followed by an introduction to the text to be studied. Then students and faculty spend about an hour in *hevruta* before they reconvene for a small or large group discussion.

¹⁶ For a close analysis of this videotape which features Susan and Judy, see “Interactive Text Study: A Case of *Hevruta* Learning” by Orit Kent in this issue.

¹⁷ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer ha-Madda*, Chapter 4:2

This is followed by a short but lively sharing and discussion. As students talk, Orit lists their ideas on a flipchart. She has come prepared with a set of practices which she wants to emphasize but students come up with most of the ideas. For example, they notice that Susan draws a picture of a seating arrangement to represent her interpretation of the text. She also brings in her personal experience, referring to the seating arrangement in a high school seminar. Judy asks questions about the meaning of the royal metaphor (king, crown). She tunes into Susan's feelings and keeps going back to the text. Together they "feed off each other." Orit asks students to point to the lines in the transcript which support their ideas.

At one point in the discussion, a student confesses that she and her partner "sometimes run out of ideas," to which her partner replies: "This is partially my fault. When reading this (text), the first thing I wanted to do is say what doesn't make a king. I wanted to jump on it, that it's not an apt metaphor...I think instead of harping on what one person said, they (Susan and Judy) kept each other going to see where it would lead." This public admission shows how studying the *hevruta* practices of others gives students a chance to reflect on their own learning in a non-threatening way.

Before wrapping up this part of the session, Orit emphasizes the importance of "getting to a big idea." If you read the text literally, you come away with an answer to the question of how the teacher and students should be sitting in class. Why would anyone care about that? Orit wants students to see that Judy and Susan are working toward a big idea--"what makes a rabbi a teacher, from where does he derive his authority?" She points out that Susan and Judy go into the text, then step back to ask, "What does this tell us about something bigger? What is the underlying message?" Getting to the underlying ideas which may be implied but not explicit takes time and patience. Finally Orit tells students to pick one of the practices from the list they had generated to focus on when they study with their *hevruta* today.

After a short break, Elie introduces the Talmudic text which students will next study in *hevruta*--a brief, well crafted story in a few lines:

R. Shimi b. Ashi used to attend (the lessons) of R. Papa and used to ask him many questions. One day he observed that R. Papa fell on his face (in prayer) and he heard him saying, 'May God preserve me from the insolence of Shimi.' The latter thereupon vowed silence and questioned him no more.¹⁸

Elie points out that the economy of words invites many readings so students should take the time to read and reread the story, to look for evidence, and to try out some of the "practices of text study in *hevruta*" derived from the video analysis. After they figure out what is going on and what the story means, students should compose and insert two lines into the text "that will make your interpretation of the story clearer to your readers." Then they should list "all the evidence from the text, written or implied, and anything else that brought them to write these two sentences."

This exercise makes concrete and visible the work of interpretation. It helps reveal the textual and personal sources that activate readers, encouraging them to "fill in the gaps," to use Wolfgang Iser's suggestive phrase for making inferences. It also orients students to think about what counts as an appropriate filling. In other words, what makes some interpretations more compelling than others?

For the next forty-five minutes, pairs of students huddle over the text, talking with animation about what it means and crafting their additions. With fifteen minutes left in the session, students and faculty divide into two groups to share the various interpretations of the story.¹⁹ After hearing five versions of the story, the leaders invite students to comment on what stood out to them. "Which interpretation surprised you the most and why?" They promise to type up all the stories and distribute them before the next session. They also ask students to

¹⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Taanith, 9a-9b.

¹⁹ For a sampling of interpretations, see Figure 2.

write about the following question for homework: “What am I wondering about in relation to what makes for a good interpretation?” This personal writing and the different versions of the story serve as the springboard for a discussion about the process and evaluation of interpretations which takes place in the next session.

This reconstruction of one session in the Beit Midrash provides a glimpse of what this unique learning opportunity is like and how instructors and students work together to foster skills of close reading and learning in *hevruta*. The 2005 syllabus frames the following goals for the Beit Midrash: (1) to create a community of learners; (2) to foster affective ties to Jewish texts; (3) to create a sense of ownership of the texts and the activity of study; (4) to provide images and ideas about text study that DeLeT fellows can bring to their teaching. While these goals give direction to the Beit Midrash, they also suggest how the Beit Midrash interacts with other components of DeLeT to advance particular and general aspects of learning to teach.

The Beit Midrash as Professional Education

Like all forms of professional education, teacher education must foster the understandings, skills and commitments required for professional practice. Teachers need a guiding vision of good teaching along with the knowledge, skills and dispositions to work toward that vision in practice. To develop and improve their teaching and the teaching of others, they also need a supportive professional learning community and the capacity to analyze and reflect on their practice and the practice of others. These elements of professional learning frame the work of the DeLeT program and the Beit Midrash in the preparation of day school teachers.

The DeLeT program is designed to prepare reflective teachers with a strong beginning practice, a commitment to integration, and an evolving identity as Jewish educators. We frame our vision of good teaching around a set of professional standards which outline what beginning day school teachers need to know, care about, and be able to do. We say that we are preparing beginning teachers for the elementary grades in Jewish day schools who...

- Take students and their ideas seriously;
- Create classroom learning communities infused with Jewish values and experiences;
- Teach for understanding;
- Make meaningful connections between general and Jewish studies;
- Welcome families as partners in children’s education;
- Value text study as a core Jewish activity;
- Learn well from experience;
- Work with colleagues to strengthen day school education.

We do not expect DeLeT graduates to be finished products at the end of the program. Rather we expect them to continue developing their teaching practice and their professional identity in the context of their ongoing work in Jewish day schools.

Where does the Beit Midrash fit into this agenda? How does the study of classical Jewish texts and reflection on the interpretive process and the practice of *hevruta* help forward the broad goals of teacher education for Jewish day schools? To make the case for the Beit Midrash as *professional* education, I situate the Beit Midrash in the overall structure of the DeLeT program and show how it contributes to more particular goals related to being and becoming a Jewish educator. Then I connect the work on *hevruta* learning to a general aspect of teacher learning, critical collegueship.

Situating the Beit Midrash in DeLeT

The Beit Midrash occupies a special place in the structure of DeLeT. It is the only component that fellows participate in twice and the only component in which the entering and the graduating cohorts study together (See Figure 3). Both conditions send a message about the importance of text study in the personal and professional lives of day school teachers. We want fellows to feel a personal attachment to Jewish texts and to see the study of these texts as a central part of their lives as teachers and as Jews. The Beit Midrash shares responsibility for

these outcomes with other components in the program, both Jewish and secular, that focus on text study, reading for meaning, and the formation of a personal/professional identity.

Figure 3: DeLeT@Brandeis

Summer 1	Fall	Winter/Spring	Summer 2
Studying Torah	Teaching Torah		Teaching holidays
Found. of teaching	Fundam/teaching	Fundam/teaching	Found. of teaching
Teaching reading	Child Develop.	Prof. Stance	Develop. as Jew.Ed.
Teaching math	Internship (4 da/wk)	Internship (4 da/wk)	Prayer/praying
Beit Midrash	Parshat hashavuah	Parshat hashavuah	Beit Midrash
Arts Workshop			Arts Workshop

In the summer and fall, for example, fellows take a two-course sequence, Studying Torah/Teaching Torah. In the former they learn about and practice different orientations or approaches to Torah study (e.g. literary, source criticism). In the latter, they compare the purposes for teaching *chumash* and *parshat hashavuah*, analyze different Torah curricula, and design and teach several Torah lessons. Along with the Beit Midrash, this sequence helps build knowledge and skills for text study and text teaching.

In the first summer we also make an explicit connection between the work in the Beit Midrash and in the course on Studying Torah with the course and practicum on Teaching Reading. In the latter, fellows learn how beginning readers come to associate written symbols with sounds and how they make meaning from texts. Twice during the summer we bring instructors from Studying Torah, Teaching Reading and the Beit Midrash together with students to compare what they are learning about “reading for meaning” in these different contexts and what that signifies for themselves as readers and teachers of sacred and secular texts.

The Beit Midrash also contributes to fellows’ evolving personal and professional identities, another theme and focus in the program. During their time in DeLeT, fellows read Jewish thinkers on the role of the teacher and the purposes of Jewish education and reflect on their Jewish journeys and evolving professional identities. We talk about what it means for day school teachers to see themselves as Jewish educators, whether they teach general subjects, Jewish subjects, or both. Across the program, fellows draft and revise a teaching philosophy. In their teaching portfolio which fellows present publicly at the end of their year-long internship, fellows must show evidence of their ability to create a classroom learning community infused with Jewish values, experiences and texts.²⁰

As these brief examples suggest, the DeLeT program is not a collection of discrete courses and field experiences. It is a coherent sequence of learning opportunities intentionally designed to reinforce and build on one another in order to help fellows reflect on and deepen their Jewish identity, construct a professional stance and a beginning teaching practice, and develop the conceptual tools to continue growing as teacher-leaders and Jewish educators. Having shown how the Beit Midrash contributes directly and indirectly to more particularistic ends-in-view related to being and becoming a Jewish educator, I turn now to a general aspect of teaching and learning to teach, collaborative learning.

Learning With and From Colleagues

In DeLeT we socialize fellows to learn not only as individuals but also as members of a professional learning community. We want fellows to know how to participate in serious professional conversation. We want them to feel responsible for their own learning and for assisting others in their learning. We want them to see that collegial discussion and debate

²⁰ The teaching portfolios have other required entries related to teaching for understanding and curricular integration.

about teaching and learning can be a valuable resource in developing and improving their practice. In locating teacher learning inside a professional learning community, we are persuaded by a growing body of research that teaching is improved through collaboration more than through independent trial and error.²¹

Brian Lord's concept of "critical collegueship" (Lord, 1994) captures the stance toward collaborative learning that we seek to foster. Critical collegueship implies that teachers can take collective responsibility for the ongoing study and improvement of teaching. Lord portrays critical collegueship as a local activity in which small groups of teachers form "communities of interest" around matters related to teaching. They develop curriculum, analyze student work, address pressing problems and work together to strengthen their teaching and their students' learning. This kind of professional work depends on teachers' openness and ability to surface questions and concerns, expose their classroom practices to others, and learn from constructive criticism.

Core elements of critical collegueship parallel the skills and dispositions of "good" *hevruta* learning introduced and cultivated in the Beit Midrash. For example, Lord associates critical collegueship with the following "intellectual virtues":

...openness to new ideas, a willingness to reject weak practices or flimsy reasoning when faced with countervailing evidence and sound arguments, accepting responsibility for acquiring and using relevant information in the construction of arguments, willingness to seek out the best ideas or the best knowledge from within the subject matter communities rather than learning by accident, and assuming collective responsibility for creating a professional record (Lord, 1994).

Lord also stresses the need for "empathetic understanding" of colleagues' dilemmas, skills for resolving competing interests, and increased comfort with ambiguity and uncertainty.

Recall the features of "good" *hevruta* learning which fellows explore and practice in the Beit Midrash—asking for help, paying close attention to what your *hevruta* is saying, probing and challenging your *hevruta's* interpretations, weighing the pros and cons of different interpretations, developing strategies to negotiate disagreements, being willing to revise your interpretation in the face of compelling information in the text or from your partner. By identifying these *hevruta* learning practices and inviting fellows to use and reflect on them, the Beit Midrash develops awareness of and capacity for critical collegueship and reflection. It makes explicit norms of discourse required for productive face-to-face interaction among teachers and for the joint construction of professional knowledge. It offers practice in empathic listening, attending to evidence, negotiating meaning. It helps shape the kind of "teacher learning through professional talk" that we value and promote across the program and that we believe is a condition for the ongoing study and improvement of classroom teaching.

Learning to "Read" Children

To underscore the importance of collaborative learning in the DeLeT program and to the parallels with *hevruta* learning in the Beit Midrash, I offer one final example. During the Fall semester, fellows conduct a Child Study, focusing on one student in the day school classroom where they are serving a year-long mentored internship. This investigation helps bridge the formal study of child development and the psychology of learning with first-hand observations of and interactions with children. It gives fellows practice seeing the world through another's eyes, gaining self knowledge, and learning with and from colleagues. It underscores the centrality of knowing students as a foundation for good teaching.

²¹ For recent discussions of professional community and its impact on teaching, see Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth, 2001; Little, 1990; Little & McLaughlin, 1993; McLaughlin & Talbert, J., 2001; Westheimer, 1998.

The rationale for the child study identifies three modes of learning -- observation, reflection and professional talk:

...In this investigation, you are trying to find out how one child experiences the world...Your basic task is to learn how to observe and think about children and their experience of school and the world outside school. This includes being reflective about yourself as an observer and discussing your thoughts and observations with others. Hopefully studying one student will help you develop the capacity to discern and appreciate the abilities, needs and potential contributions of all students and gain some new self awareness as well.²²

Based on the tradition of descriptive inquiry developed by Patricia Carini and colleagues at the Prospect School in Bennington, Vermont,²³ the child study is built around the “Descriptive Review of a Child” framework. The framework consists of a set of questions organized around the following headings: (1) physical presence and gesture; (2) disposition and temperament; (3) connections with children and adults; (4) strong interests and preferences; (5) modes of thinking and learning. The questions and headings help teachers generate a rounded portrait of the child, framed in descriptive language particular to that child.

On four occasions during the semester, fellows share their questions and developing insights in small study groups, what Carnini refers to as “pooling our knowledge.” Each session has a different focus--first impressions, the child as a cognitive learner, the child as a social learner, the spiritual life of children. Fellows are expected to push each other’s thinking and help each other decide whether they are asking the right questions, whether their evidence is compelling, how they might forward the child’s learning. At the end of the semester, fellows write a paper integrating what they have learned about their study child from observation, interaction and discussions with their peers and outlining how this will influence their planning and teaching.

Besides honing powers of close observation, child study helps fellows make their assumptions and ideas visible through talk and writing. By privileging understandings that are developed collaboratively in small child study groups, it reinforces norms of professional discourse that encourage rich description, provisional thinking, non-judgmental language and constructive critique. Like *hevruta* learning in the Beit Midrash, the child study groups enable fellows to experience the benefits of collaborative learning and strengthen their capacity to learn with and from colleagues as they construct knowledge together.

This example highlights important parallels between the stance toward children and the process of coming to know them fostered through child study and the stance toward text study in *hevruta* fostered in the Beit Midrash. In both contexts, interpretations arise from investigating particulars and voicing observations, insights and questions in the company of others who share responsibility for the quality of one’s learning. Making such parallels explicit underscores important continuities in the DeLeT program and increases the possibility that fellows will bring the same careful attention to reading texts that they bring to “reading” teaching and the students in their care. It also highlights the role of the DeLeT program as an

²² Outline of the Child Study Investigation, 2005-2006, DeLeT@Brandeis, p. 1.

²³ Patricia Carini founded the Prospect School in 1965 with two aims: (a) to tailor learning to the learner and (b) to generate knowledge of children, curriculum, learning and teaching by observing, recording and describing what happened in the classrooms and for children on a daily and continuing basis. The school developed a set of collaborative descriptive processes for coming to know individual children and their work and for reviewing curriculum and a teacher’s practice. Each week faculty met for an hour and a half to do a descriptive review of a child. After the school closed in 1991, its legacy was incorporated in the Prospect Archives and Center for Education and Research which continues to bring the ideas and processes pioneered at the school to other schools, teacher centers and universities through summer institutes, consultations and publications.

intellectual “homebase” for the fellows, anchoring their stance as day school teachers in coherent ideas and practices (Smarinsky, 2003).

Conclusion

This paper examines the Beit Midrash for Teachers as a rich learning opportunity in its own right and an important component in a coherent program of teacher education for Jewish day school teaching. It examines the mix of purposes fostered in the Beit Midrash and shows how these ends-in-view reinforce and are reinforced by the purposes and practices in other program components and in the overall program. It suggests that learning to “read” students and texts is a foundational element in learning to teach in Jewish day schools and that learning to do this well depends on opportunities for “critical collegueship.”

This investigation of the Beit Midrash for Teachers belongs to a growing field of research in teacher education that includes self study by teacher educators. For many years teacher education remained a “black box,” closed to the scrutiny of educational researchers. In recent years, however, teacher education has become an important focus of both policy and practice-oriented research. Besides studying the impact of teacher education on the quality of teaching and the retention of teachers, researchers have been studying what goes on in teacher education, how teacher educators justify their decisions about what and how to teach, and how different learning opportunities shape teachers’ knowledge, skills and dispositions.²⁴

In the field of Jewish education, the recent increase in the number of day schools has led to the creation of new programs to prepare day school teachers. While the practice of hiring teachers without professional preparation continues, the expansion of programs for day school teachers provides a unique opportunity to consider what the education of Jewish educators entails and to explore the character, quality and impact of different pathways to Jewish teaching. Such research would illuminate questions of policy and practice in Jewish professional education and contribute to a broader conversation about learning to teach in particular contexts.

²⁴ See, for example, Cochran-Smith, M. and Zeichner, K. (Eds.), (2005). *Studying Teacher Education: The report of the aera panel on research and teacher education*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Figure 2: Selected interpretations of Rav Papa and Rav Shimi text

R. Shimi b. Ashi used to attend (the lessons) of R. Papa and used to ask him many questions. **He would challenge his theories to the point of frustration.** One day he observed that R. Papa fell on his face [in prayer] and he heard him saying, "May G-d preserve me from the insolence of Shimi". R. Shimi **then departed, without hearing R. Papa's second prayer of hope to be a better teacher for Shimi.** The latter thereupon vowed silence and questioned him no more.

R. Shimi b. Ashi used to attend (the lessons) of R. Papa and used to ask him many questions. **R. Papa meditated "Don't let this kid get to me; don't let me have a short fuse".** One day Shimi observed that R. Papa fell on his face [in prayer] and he heard him saying, "May G-d preserve me from the insolence of Shimi. **May G-d give me the patience to be able to teach this child".** The latter thereupon vowed silence and questioned him no more.

R. Shimi b. Ashi used to attend (the lessons) of R. Papa and used to ask him many questions **which threatened R. Papa's beliefs.** One day he observed that R. Papa fell on his face [in prayer] and he heard him saying, "May G-d preserve me from the insolence of Shimi". The latter thereupon vowed silence and questioned him no more **in respect for R. Papa's authority and his views of Judaism.**

R. Shimi b. Ashi used to attend (the lessons) of R. Papa and used to ask him many questions. One day he observed that R. Papa fell on his face [in prayer] and he heard him saying, "May G-d preserve me from the insolence of Shimi. **Shimi keeps asking these questions like 'why does this happen?' and 'where did you find that?' and 'who is the source?', which prevents me from getting out all the information I need to in the lesson".** The latter thereupon vowed silence and questioned him no more. **From that day on he shut down and never had confidence in his inquiring mind.**

R. Shimi b. Ashi used to attend (the lessons) of R. Papa and used to ask him many questions **to satisfy his quest for knowledge.** One day he observed that R. Papa fell on his face [in prayer] and he heard him saying, "May G-d preserve me from the insolence of Shimi". The latter thereupon vowed silence and questioned him no **more thus demonstrating the power of a teacher in determining a student's desire to keep learning.**

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