INVESTIGATING PROSPECTIVE JEWISH TEACHERS’ KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEFS ABOUT TORAH: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

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The Initiative on Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy in Jewish Studies

Working Paper No. 10
May 2007

This is a preprint of an article whose final and definitive form has been published in Religious Education © 2010 Taylor and Francis, and is available online at http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00344080903472733

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Gail Zaiman Dorph

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how prospective Jewish educators in liberal settings think about the Bible. Specifically, it examines the ways in which several groups of future teachers articulate their understandings of the Torah’s authorship, how the biblical text came to be, and what sense is to be made of apparent difficulties in the text itself and of the encounter between biblical and scientific understandings of creation. The author’s analysis yields a picture in which prospective Jewish educators often have unsophisticated approaches to the Torah, leaving them ill-equipped for the classroom and its own inevitable questions and challenges. The author suggests a number of essential strategies for teacher education.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching Torah in liberal settings demands a set of skills and a sophisticated knowledge of Bible. It presupposes an open approach to the text that posits multiple interpretations, and demands close reading and explication of the text as in a literary-critical approach. Examining the work of the recent Standards and Benchmarks project, one gets some sense of the depth of knowledge that is or should be required of teachers by examining standards for student learning in school settings associated with the liberal movements within Judaism. The document includes eight different standards, with benchmarks for student learning according to grade.

One standard states: “Students will appreciate the TaNaKH as a multi-vocal text with a complex history of development.” This assumes that the biblical text is not monolithic and has a complex literary history. To meet this standard, students will need to entertain the idea that texts are not necessarily written at the time they claim to be nor by the people they claim to be, and that there are

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1 Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the seminar on Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy in the Teaching of Bible in 2004, and at the Mandel Center conference in 2005. The author wishes to thank Susan P. Fendrick for her careful and thoughtful suggestions, which greatly improved the clarity of this paper, and Jon A. Levisohn and Sharon Feiman-Nemser for their help in the development of this work.

2 The Standards and Benchmarks project is part of a cross-denominational initiative of the Melton Research Center of the Jewish Theological Seminary and funded by a grant from the AVI CHAI Foundation.
biases in the text. The standard compels teachers to raise questions about the authorship of the text, and to point out and study stories that repeat or that seem to contradict each other. During junior high and high school years, it involves asking students to examine the premise that the Torah is a product of different writers. It also requires that students critically assess Jewish scholarly writings dealing with complex theological and philosophical issues.

If students are to attain such a standard, then teachers of Bible must themselves possess this same knowledge and appreciation. Thus, teachers need the knowledge and skills to negotiate the complex issues and challenging questions that the standard raises. Certainly, they need to be able to address two very specific questions: (1) Who wrote the Torah? (a question asked by even very young students) and (2) How do we read, interpret, and make meaning of Torah texts? (In children’s words: Is the Torah true?) Knowing a variety of “authentic” Jewish responses to such questions and integrating these responses into their own worldviews is critical in shaping teachers’ ability to teach Bible in a sophisticated manner. The way teachers think about these questions has an impact on how they understand and articulate their purposes in teaching Torah, shapes the way they frame lessons and activities, and plays a role in how they understand and respond to students’ questions.

In this paper, I explore the knowledge and beliefs of more than 60 prospective Jewish educators, analyzing their responses to the two questions above. I then describe some of my efforts to address the issues raised by the gap between what these prospective Jewish educators know and believe and what kinds of knowledge they need to be able to teach. Finally, I suggest some challenges and questions for those teacher educators interested in helping novices (as well as more experienced teachers) learn to teach Torah effectively in liberal settings.

**Genesis of This Project**

My first foray into learning about prospective Jewish educators’ (PJE’s) ideas and beliefs about Torah goes back at least 20 years. I was one member of a team interviewing Ilana³, a prospective graduate student in an MA program in Jewish education⁴. The following is an excerpt from about halfway through her interview:

> Interviewer A: So who do you think wrote the Torah?

> Ilana: Oh my God!

> Interviewer B: Some people say that.

> Ilana: (laughing nervously) I mean, I know. I mean, I don’t know.

> Interviewer A: Well, what do you think?

³Like all the names of PJE’s in this paper, “Ilana” is a pseudonym.

Ilana: I don’t know.

Interviewer C: Well, what was the point of view of the Bible course that you took at the University of ______ [large state university in the Midwest]?

Ilana: I don’t think we ever talked about that.

Interviewer A: What was the course about?

Ilana: Well, it was reading different books about different criticisms that people used of the Old Testament. We read excerpts from the text. We had a book on forms of criticism. We did some analysis of certain texts.

Interviewer C: Did you like the course?

Ilana: Oh yes, it was one of the best courses that I took at the University.

Interviewer B: What made it such a good course?

Ilana: The professor was interesting. We did very close analysis of the text. It was exciting. I mean, he took things from different places and showed different things...

Interviewer B: Did he ever talk about the notion that possibly the text was written by several different human authors?

Ilana: Yes.

Interviewer B: Can you tell me more about that idea?

Ilana: Not really. I mean, I remember learning it and memorizing it for the test, but I don’t really remember it.

Interviewer A: Well, what do you think about the idea as an idea?

Ilana: Well, I just don’t believe it. I guess maybe that’s why I can’t remember more about it.

Interviewer C: So what do you believe?

Ilana: (in a whisper) I guess I believe that God wrote it.

This experience left me curious. How representative was Ilana of other PJEs entering graduate programs in Jewish education? She had taken a college level course in Bible and had apparently not grappled with—or even remembered very clearly—the important ideas that it introduced. She
seemed to walk out of her college class thinking the very same things about Bible that she probably thought when she was a child.

**THE DISSERTATION STUDY**

I decided to pursue my question in the context of my Ph.D. dissertation research. At that time, I was particularly interested in designing a course of study that would help novices in Jewish education programs learn to teach Torah. Because recent educational research has emphasized the impact of teachers’ own prior conceptions about subject matter on their learning to teach, I reasoned that it would be important for me to learn more about MA students’ prior knowledge and beliefs about Torah before I decided how to organize such a course.

Fifteen PJE students who were entering MA programs in Jewish education at the Jewish Theological Seminary and the University of Judaism (two graduate schools affiliated with the Conservative Movement) took part in the study. Respondents filled out written questionnaires that included extensive background information. I also interviewed each student twice and transcribed the interviews. There were five types of items in the interview protocol:

a. questions about the subject’s background (Jewish and demographic)

b. questions that focused on the subject’s ideas about the Torah itself and about teaching and learning Torah

c. questions about the contents of several narratives from the book of Genesis

d. scenarios that required the subject to respond to common questions learners ask about the contents and authority of the text

e. an extended scenario designed to raise issues about a particular narrative, the biblical account of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9), and how and when the subject might use a variety of curricular materials designed to teach this narrative.

In addition, I interviewed four expert Torah teachers using the same interview protocol, so that I might have a set of responses that were indeed sophisticated and responsive to issues of teaching Torah in liberal settings.

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6Ibid.

6Two large-scale research studies were being carried out at this time, one at Michigan State University, the Teacher Education and Learning to Teach (TELT) Study, and one at Stanford University, Knowledge Growth in a Profession. The idea of developing an interview with this structure, and in particular developing scenarios to learn about interviewees’ ideas and beliefs, came from studying interviews and papers from these projects.

7The variety of types of questions (e.g. factual questions, card sort exercise) allowed me to triangulate my data, comparing responses to these scenarios with responses to related questions.

8Joel Grishaver, Barry Holtz, Vicky Kelman, and Ruth Zielenziger.
As I analyzed students’ responses to these interview questions, the responses to three particular questions seemed particularly rich. They shed light on whether each PJEs’ ideas about the Torah were textured, well developed, and applicable to a variety of texts—or were underdeveloped, attempting merely to “solve” the problem raised by a given question but reflecting no consistent stance toward reading and making meaning of the Torah text.

The questions themselves relate directly to the issues raised in the introduction to this paper. One question, “Who wrote the Torah?”, was asked directly in the interview protocol. The other, “How do we read, interpret, and make meaning of the Torah?”, was presented indirectly via two questions that children often raise with their teachers. These real-life classroom scenarios raised the issue of the “truth” of the Torah and how it is to be understood without asking subjects directly, “Is/How is the Torah true?”

Scenario #1: After studying the first chapter in Genesis, the creation of the world, a student in a seventh-grade class asked the teacher: “Am I really supposed to believe that God created the world in six days? I mean, give me a break, what about science?”

Scenario #2: A class of eleven-year-olds was studying the story of Cain and Abel at the beginning of the book of Genesis. They read that Cain killed Abel and that Cain was punished. Then the text goes on to say that Cain married. One of the students asked: “If God only created Adam and Eve and if Adam and Eve only had two children, Cain and Abel, who did Cain marry?”

Scenario #1 (creation in seven days versus evolution) raises the question of how are we to understand the biblical account of creation. If Genesis is read literally, it seems to conflict with the scientific theory of evolution. Scenario #2 (whom did Cain marry?) raises the question of how we are to read a biblical account in which the narrative perspective of the Bible differs from what we usually think about as the “logic” of narratives; in this case, there is information missing. If read literally and only based on the information we have, the biblical text is contradictory; Adam and Eve, the only people on earth, have had only two children, Cain and Abel—yet Cain marries someone. Thus, the larger issue of how to read, interpret, and make meaning of the Torah is presented indirectly through these two implicit questions: How do we reconcile biblical and scientific accounts of the origins of the natural world (including humanity)? And how do we make sense of a biblical narrative when there is a perplexing gap in that narrative?

In responding to all three questions—about (1) who wrote the Torah, (2) how the world came into being, and (3) whom Cain married—the 15 graduate students in the dissertation group (see Table 1) tended to read the Torah quite literally. We might compare their mode of reading the Torah to a rather unsophisticated way of reading a history book, a science book or a newspaper, in which one assumes that the information presented is in some fashion “factually” accurate and not necessarily open to multiple interpretations.

To question (1) about the Torah’s authorship, the PJEs gave four types of responses, which I have
characterized as Direct Transmission (DT), Indirect Transmission (IT), Vacillation (V) between direct and indirect transmission, and Analytic/Reflective (A/R).

Direct Transmission: These respondents indicated their belief that there was some kind of direct transmission between God and Moses, and the Torah emerged at one time in one place. God (via Moses) was the author of Torah.

Indirect Transmission: These respondents indicated their belief that the Torah came from God, but the process of writing it down may have happened over time. They did not suggest any interpretive process in the recording of the Torah.

Vacillation: These respondents were uncertain about whether God or human beings, in particular Moses, wrote the Torah. As they responded, they switched back and forth between the DT and IT responses, often contradicting themselves.

Analytic/Reflective Approach: These respondents gave more analytic responses. Rather than saying what they believed personally, they answered the question from a perspective outside of their own beliefs. In general, they were aware of several possible answers to the question and shared some of these answers in their responses to the interview questions.

In response to question (2) about the relationship between creation and science, the group was nearly unanimous. All PJE’s in the dissertation group attempted to harmonize the creation account with science—even those who explicitly said, “We shouldn’t read this account literally.” They all suggested that at least one possible way to read the biblical account is that each “day” in the creation narrative was different than the 24-hour day that we know. As many put it, “A day could be a million years.” This response is labeled H (harmonize) in Table 1 below. In general, respondents felt that because they were not understanding “day” as equivalent to 24 hours, they were not reading the text literally.

As a group, they gave more varied responses to question (3) concerning whom Cain married. In spite of the variety, however, their responses had one feature in common: they all try to solve the problem. Two main answers emerge: (a) He was involved in an incestuous relationship with his mother or a sister (who is unmentioned in the text) or (b) There were other people in the world that the text does not mention. Although different, these responses solve the problem in the same way: they fill in the narrative gap by positing the existence of people or relationships that the Torah does not mention. These responses coupled with their explanations (given in the interviews) suggested that these PJE’s believed that the Torah should be understood as a kind of historical record, and were they to be more knowledgeable about the biblical text, they would be able to supply better answers to the question.
I grouped these PJsEs into three categories. The majority (n=9) read the text as a “true story”; they tried to rationalize difficulties in understanding the text so that their reading fit with their twentieth-century sensibilities. A smaller number were vacillators (n=4); on any given issue they went back and forth in their responses, and were often confused about how to make sense of their own responses. A still smaller group (n=2) might be labeled emergent analytic and reflective readers. This last pair seemed to be aware not only that the questions had multiple possible answers, but also that sharing a variety of answers with their own students could be a reasonable way to address such complicated problems.

Thus, the dissertation study suggested that Ilana might be not be unique at all, but rather represen-
tative of a larger group of PJEs—a group that, as children, received a significant Jewish education; as young adults, took university Jewish study courses (the number of courses is indicated in the chart in the University column); but remained, to my mind, unsophisticated readers of the biblical text. I wanted to learn whether these 15 PJEs, attending Conservative institutions of higher learning, were like or different from other graduate students in Jewish education attending graduate programs under other auspices. I was also curious about what kinds of interventions might influence their thinking and enable them to become more analytic and reflective students and teachers of Torah. I felt (given both my own ideas as well as those reflected in earlier documents similar to the more recent Standards and Benchmarks) that they would need more nuanced, sophisticated and varied approaches to understanding the biblical text if they were to become good teachers of Torah in liberal settings. Such approaches would allow them a “view from the balcony,” which would allow them to internalize the idea that there is not only one way to read and make sense of the biblical text, while at the same time encouraging them over time to develop and clarify their own approaches.

The Current Study

In the decade following that study, my work has proceeded along two parallel paths: research into the thinking of other PJEs (asking them to respond to the three questions described above), and experimenting with various pedagogic ideas in my teaching of PJEs (geared toward scaffolding more analytic and reflective approaches to reading and understanding the Torah). The remainder of this paper will be devoted to sharing what I have learned on each of these paths.

Responses to the three questions

I asked 49 graduate students preparing to be Jewish educators (all of whom were enrolled in courses that I was teaching) to respond in writing to the same three questions (again, one question was asked directly, two via classroom scenarios) described above. These students were in five different classes at four different institutions of higher learning. They included 3 groups of DeLeT\(^9\) fellows (n=30), 1 group studying towards masters’ degrees in Jewish communal service in the Hornstein Program at Brandeis University (n=13), and 1 group in the HUC-JIR master’s degree program in New York (n=6).

Who wrote the Torah?

Of these 49 PJEs, 16 responded with some version of Direct Transmission, 4 with some version of Indirect Transmission, 8 with a Vacillating response and 3 with the more Analytic and Reflective stance. (Tables 2 through 4 include data on the dissertation group as well as these five more recent groups.) Two new categories emerged in this group: Divinely Inspired and People. Six students emphasized that although people had written the Torah, their writing was divinely inspired. Eleven students claimed that people had written the Torah; in these responses, there was no mention of the Divine. Thus 20 out of 49 students in the current study did not claim that God authored the Torah.

\(^9\)DeLeT (Day School Leadership through Teaching) was a 13-month pilot fellowship program preparing post-BA candidates to teach in liberal day schools in North America. The program has since been institutionalized at its two pilot sites: Brandeis University and Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles.
It is interesting to note that although a majority of the 64 total respondents (in the dissertation group and the current groups) had taken at least one university-level Bible courses, only two out of 64 mentioned the documentary hypothesis directly in their responses to this question.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>DT</th>
<th>IT</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>A/R</th>
<th>DI</th>
<th>People</th>
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<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hornstein*</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeLeT @ HUC</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeLeT @ Brandeis (1)</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeLeT @ Brandeis (2)</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*— No response to this question from one Hornstein candidate

Table 2 — Who Wrote the Torah?

Analysis
Forty-one of the total PJE’s (DT+ IT+V) either believe that the Torah was given to Moses at Sinai or equivocate about whether or not that is the case. Twenty-two of these 41 responses (DT) comport with a literal stance toward the authorship of the Bible that can be summarized in this way: The entire Torah is literally the word of God; it is a unified document and was revealed on one occasion. Six respondents (IT) also believe that the entire Torah (of divine origin) was not entirely revealed or recorded on that one occasion, but none of them have developed an understanding of how what we call the Torah came to be recorded. The remaining 13 in this group (V), while equivocating about whether or not the entire Torah was revealed at Sinai, still posit divine authorship.

One might classify this third group as holding an inconsistent position (if one views it as a negative), or searching (if one thinks about the stance in a more positive light). In either case, neither they nor the second group have yet developed a coherent way of thinking about this issue. This is problematic, given that children ask questions all the time about the Torah’s authorship. These prospective teachers need to develop ways to articulate their personal response to the question “Who wrote the Torah?” and to be aware that there are a range of possible responses. In addition, they need help clarifying their own ideas, as well as tools for exploring the ideological and theological underpinnings of responses other than their own.

Science and Creation
Twenty-nine of the 49 respondents in the non-dissertation group harmonized the Torah’s depic-

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10 Both students were enrolled in the DeLeT program at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles.
tion of creation with the scientific theory of evolution (as did all 15 in the dissertation group). Once again, the overwhelming response was that a day could mean an era or a million years. There were, however, two new responses that had not emerged in the dissertation group, parallel to the new responses to the first question in Table 2: one that could be considered analogous with the vacillation category above (“science is an act of God”), and the other that correlates with the more analytic and reflective response above. The latter response (given by 12 of this group) suggests that the Bible and science are two different realms of discourse that do not need to be harmonized. These PJE's believe that, in the words of one respondent, “The Torah is not coming to give a scientific explanation for the creation of the world.” They do not try to harmonize the Torah and science. For them, the Torah is a different kind of book with a status different from a scientific account.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Harmonize</th>
<th>Science an act of God</th>
<th>Two different realms</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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</tr>
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<td>44</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
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</table>

Table 3—Science vs. Creation

Analysis

Once again we see that the majority of PJE's are quite literal in their understanding of Torah, taking it as a factual account; 44 out of the total group of 64 suggest that we ought to harmonize the biblical account of creation with science. While the interviews of the PJE's in the dissertation group and the responses of the 29 members in the current group indicate that they were, in fact, taught that one ought not read the text literally, they seem to have no model for reading it any other way. That so many of the PJE's claim that “a day could be a million years” is particularly interesting. Every one of the 44 PJE's who harmonizes mentions the same explanation. While we cannot say for sure where this explanation originates, it is clearly present in the culture. One prominent example is in the Hertz Humash\(^{11}\), a standard volume of the Torah in Hebrew and English, found in the pews of most synagogues until relatively recently. (The Plaut and Etz Chaim editions of the Humash were not yet in synagogue pews in 1991 when the dissertation interviews were conducted, although they certainly were there by the time of the written responses of other groups.) The Hertz commentary to the first chapter of Genesis reads: “Not an ordinary day but a Day of God, an age.”

Did the PJE's read this explanation themselves in the synagogue on a Saturday morning? Is it something they were taught in religious school when they were children? When asked about the origin of the explanation, it seemed to them that they had known it for a long time. They also found it a

\(^{11}\) Hertz (second edition, 1973), p. 3.
satisfying response to the question. It “solved” the problem. The responses of the five expert Torah teachers interviewed using the dissertation protocol, as well as the writings of biblical scholars, interpret this impulse to harmonize as an extension of understanding the Torah in a literal or factual way.\(^\text{12}\)

**Whom did Cain marry?**

The most popular response among the more recent respondents to the question “whom did Cain marry?” is that there must have been other people on earth besides those mentioned in the early chapters of Genesis. As with the dissertation group, they seem to be reading the text as an actual account of something that happened.

Two other interesting responses that do not appear in the dissertation group’s responses are also suggested: “I don’t know” (n=13) and “the Bible is not history” (n=10). It is interesting to note that, while the response: “I don’t know” could be a reasonable response to all three questions in this study, the only one that generated this answer is the question about whom Cain married. There are many possible interpretations of this response. In the interviews of members of the dissertation group, “I don’t know” was usually followed by “if I knew the text better, I probably could tell you.” This suggests that one possible interpretation of “I don’t know” is that there may indeed be a “correct” response to the question—and were the respondent to know the text better, they would be able to supply it.

“The Bible is not history” seems in line with the more critical analytic, reflective reading of the text noted in response to the two previous questions. PJE\(^s\) who offer this response suggest that they are not reading the Bible for historical accuracy, similar to the way that PJE\(^s\) suggest in response to Question 2 that they are not reading the Bible for scientific corroboration of the theory of evolution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Incest</th>
<th>Other people</th>
<th>?</th>
<th>Bible not = history</th>
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<td>Brandeis (1)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Brandeis (2)</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>13</td>
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</table>

\(^{12}\) Sarna (1966) discredits the attempt to harmonize scientific theories of the origin of the world and the biblical account. His sense is that such harmonization actually diminishes the power and intent of the biblical account “…[I]t is a naive and futile exercise to attempt to reconcile the biblical accounts of creation with the findings of modern science. Any correspondence that can be discovered or ingeniously established between the two must surely be nothing more than mere coincidence. Even more serious than the inherent fundamental misconception of the psychology of biblical man is the unwholesome effect upon the understanding of the Bible itself. For the net result is self-defeating.” (p. 3)
Table 4—Whom Did Cain Marry?

Analysis
Most of the PJEIs seem to still be struggling with what kind of document the Torah is and how it ought to be read. They claim that they are not reading the Torah literally—suggesting that there might be something wrong with that—and yet, as I read their responses and listen to their words, it seems to me that they are in fact doing just that. The opposite might be to say that they are reading it interpretively, using some canon of interpretation, whether literary, historical, or traditional/rabbinic. In the case of Cain, they seem uncomfortable with the narrative discontinuity between the information provided by the text and what seems to be missing. The suggestion that other people existed seems sensible and is suggested by most of them—but their suggestion makes them uneasy, as though this explanation somehow puts the whole Torah’s truthfulness at risk.

Helping PJEIs Become Analytical and Reflective Readers and Teachers of Torah
Three interconnected challenges for teacher educators emerge from examining these PJEIs’ responses. Those involved in helping PJEIs learn to teach must enable them to:

• become aware of their own ideas and beliefs about the Torah
• develop a variety of responses to issues of authorship and sacredness
• learn and integrate a range of ways to read and interpret the Torah.

This is not a matter of teaching them to substitute new pat answers for old ones, but of helping them to develop more sophisticated ways of thinking and reading, realize that there is a range of answers and approaches, and explore the implications of holding multiple opinions. Put another way, the findings of this study set the educational challenge of teaching Torah to PJEIs in ways that will help them become teachers of Torah. One could argue that it would be important, as a matter of good pedagogy, to help them integrate new and challenging ideas and approaches to the Torah even if they were not planning to teach others\(^13\)—how much the more so given that they are not just students but prospective teachers of this material!

Two questions emerge out of this challenge, one generic and one specific. The generic teacher education question is: What does it take to become a teacher who can teach in ways in which that teacher was not (originally) taught? The more specific question relates to teaching Torah: How will these PJEIs develop the kinds of subject matter knowledge and pedagogic content knowledge needed to teach Torah in liberal settings?

Based on the understandings I have developed while listening to the varied responses in class and in interviews, I have experimented with a range of pedagogic strategies designed to help PJEIs develop more sophisticated approaches to studying, thinking about and teaching Torah. Conceptual change

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\(^{13}\) We might then rely on a developmental understanding of their responses and hope that as they mature, they would become more ready to deal with “grey” explanations. See Perry’s (1970) developmental scheme.

\(^{14}\) See Posner et al, 1982.
theory\textsuperscript{14} suggests that for significant change to take place, teachers need not only to become aware of their prior beliefs but also to be exposed to alternative beliefs and approaches. Teaching for conceptual change begins with the understanding that learning involves an interaction between new and existing conceptions. All of the strategies suggested below build on this understanding.

**Learning Alternative Approaches**

It is hard to imagine new ways to do things with no appropriate models. Presenting alternative approaches is an essential prerequisite to effecting conceptual change. At the very least, PJEs would need to “meet” a variety of answers to the question “Who wrote the Torah?” and have the opportunity to see a teacher in a classroom give a multiplicity of responses. In addition, they need alternative visions for how the text can be read.

I have given PJEs examples of a variety of answers to “Who wrote the Torah?” and also had them watch a videotape of veteran teacher Marcia Kaunfer responding to this question in a class of eleven-year-olds\textsuperscript{15}. In this tape, Kaunfer suggests that answers to this question lie on a continuum from “God gave the Torah to Moses at Mount Sinai” to “people wrote the Torah”, and offers some examples of “way stations” in between. When children ask her what she believes, she tells them that she is closer to the end of the spectrum represented by the belief that people wrote the Torah.

In classes where we viewed this tape, there were several different responses. Some PJEs were relieved to actually see a teacher tell children that there were different beliefs about this question, and to acknowledge her own belief that people wrote the Torah. Others felt that teachers should never tell students what they actually believed about such issues: “It would be wrong.” Still others felt that Kaunfer’s particular response was inappropriate, and that they could never offer it.

**Learning to Use Secondary Sources**

To expand their thinking about multiple approaches to reading and interpreting the text, I introduce students to my own writing\textsuperscript{16} and to the work of Barry Holtz\textsuperscript{17}, both of which describe alternative strategies for reading and interpreting Torah. In addition, I have created a variety of learning experiences to immerse them in reading and interpreting the Torah from different perspectives (specifically, literary critical, rabbinic, historical/contextual and source critical). We study a number of challenging passages with which they could use these reading skills (especially literary criticism) to analyze and interpret the text. In some classes, I introduce them to several different secondary sources on a given text, showing how each interpreter asked different questions and gave different kinds of answers based on the lens that each was using. In other classes, I experiment with students using different 	extit{humashim} with commentaries (e.g. Plaut, Etz Chaim, Stone, Hertz, JPS) as

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\textsuperscript{15} This tape was part of The Genesis Project, a three-way partnership among the Bureau of Jewish Education of Rhode Island, the Melton Research Center, and the Dimension Cable Television of Rhode Island. The videotaped lessons and Kaunfer’s lesson plans are available through the Melton Research Center of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

\textsuperscript{16} The chapter “What do teachers need to know to teach Torah?” in Burton I. Cohen and Adina Ofek, eds., Essay in Education in Honor of Joseph S. Lukinsky (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2002)

\textsuperscript{17} Chapter 3 of Barry Holtz’s, Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and in Practice (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2005), which deals with different orientations to teaching Torah.
we study, to help them experience how the commentaries to the *humashim* used in synagogues use a variety of lenses to interpret the Torah text.

Teaching students to use secondary sources has proven more difficult than I anticipated, in part because of their lack of knowledge of the biblical text itself. They need basic help to do a serious reading of the commentaries in the various *humashim*. Over the course of a semester, they are able to get a sense of the kinds of questions each *humash* would ask and the kinds of answers that each could provide. They find it even more difficult to read a book like *The Art of Biblical Narrative* by Robert Alter. When there is time, one thing that helps them understand Alter’s overall method of interpretation (and any given individual interpretation) is first studying together a particular passage (e.g., chapter 38 of Genesis) and afterwards reading Alter’s commentary. But we do not ever have the time to read his entire book together in this way, and the PJEs do not usually have the skills, patience, or time to read the book that way themselves.

**Analyzing Records of Practice**

In order to develop PJEs’ pedagogic content knowledge, I have developed strategies to help them get closer to the real work of teaching Torah by analyzing videotapes of live classrooms and examining existing curricular materials. These strategies help PJEs think more about goals for teaching Torah, the questions that real students have, and the opportunities and constraints of published curriculum materials.

In watching videotapes, we often try to figure out what the teacher was doing to help students learn, as well as what issues students were working on, what was hard for them, and what questions they had. We try to learn more about student engagement, and how teachers and students work together to make meaning of the text.

In examining curricular materials, PJEs compare the curriculum developers’ stated goals with the materials themselves. They study the lessons to learn more about how the developers imagined the role of the teacher and student in making meaning of the text. They also come to see that curriculum developers have a stance (often implicit) on issues of authorship and interpretation of text, and they learn to identify those stances. They are asked to decide whether or not they would feel comfortable using the materials that they study, and why. In commenting on which materials they would choose to use and why, they deepen their own understandings of Torah.

**Analyzing Their Own Responses**

In order to change one’s mind, one must also become aware of one’s own preconceptions. Although each of the strategies above does illuminate PJEs prior knowledge and beliefs, I have also experimented with having students study their own responses to the three questions (about the Torah’s authorship, science vs. creation, and whom Cain married). Sometimes, we examine all of the responses to a single question (e.g., ten responses to whom Cain married). At other times, we examined the responses of three to four students to all three scenarios.

This exercise has mixed results. Some groups find it interesting and instructive, a building block
in the process of actually unpacking the underlying issues and grappling with the challenges of inconsistency. Others find the exercise irritating, arguing that one cannot actually analyze the responses in any systematic way because each response expressed the idiosyncratic beliefs of a given individual and was not open to interpretation or analysis. The challenge is to help them read these statements as objectively as possible, as a set of data from which one can learn.

Two strategies might be helpful here: One would be to ask PJE’s to read their own responses several months after they write them. This would allow some temporal (and thus psychological) space between their writing and their reading. The writings would not feel quite as personal. In addition, they would have learned more and thus would have a greater number of conceptual categories to use as analytic tools for understanding the writing. Another would be to have them read responses written by students in other programs (that is, not themselves and their colleagues in class). This could also create some distance from the responses and allow for the development of a more reflective and analytic perspective towards them.

**Personalizing New Knowledge**

In order to help PJE’s develop and deepen their own approaches, I also ask them to write personal statements about their ideas on the nature of the truth and sacredness of the biblical text. In one class, where students seemed to have little personal connection to the Torah, I asked them to respond to the question: “Can a book change your life?” My expectation was that they would each have had at least one experience of reading a book that had transformed their thinking in some way—and would thus be willing and able to imagine that the Torah could function as good literature in this fashion. This exercise facilitated a substantive discussion about the potential impact Torah could have on the life of a student of Torah.

I have also asked students to prepare lessons of their own which reflected their “take” on what children should be learning. At the University of Judaism (and in one other setting not included in this study), students learned enough about the various interpretive lenses and orientations to develop lessons from the vantage point of each of them. This allowed them an inside understanding of the ways in which studying the text from different perspectives built on different sets of questions, and could promote different interpretations of the text itself. They were also able to better understand what children might learn (or not learn) were they to study the text from one perspective versus studying it more eclectically.

**Reflections**

Throughout this process, I have tried to understand how we can explain the unsophisticated, simplistic responses of many of these graduate students, and what we might do about it. The interventions described above are based on my observation and analysis of the problem at hand. At its core, my diagnosis of the cause begins with poor and inadequate early educational experiences. These young people develop unsophisticated notions about the biblical text, and their subsequent Jewish

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18 Barry Holtz suggested this assignment when I described the resistance I was encountering connecting students to the biblical texts we were reading. He said that he heard the question first from Seymour Fox who attributed it to Joseph Schwab.
Prospective Teachers’ Beliefs About Torah (Bridging Initiative Working Paper No. 10) • 16

education never works directly to change their minds.

Many of the strategies that I have used try to effect conceptual change, assuming that it is difficult to teach someone something new when their prior knowledge contradicts the new knowledge. But learning new concepts takes time. Entertaining new ideas, playing around with them, figuring out whether and how they make sense, rearranging the filing cabinet of one’s mind to make room in the right drawer and folder—none of this can be accomplished quickly. One has to study and learn enough in order to experiment with and integrate new ways of thinking. To learn something well enough to teach it, an individual must not simple acquire surface knowledge, but instead needs to gradually and cumulatively develop deeper understandings of the material.19

Also, changing one’s ideas is uncomfortable. The answers given by these PJE s are answers that are most comfortable to them; consequently, they are very hard to change. For example, in those classes where we had studied the documentary hypothesis, most students ignored that information when I later interviewed them about biblical authorship and interpretation. I did not want or expect them to simply say or believe, “JEPD wrote the Torah,” but I did expect to see the documentary hypothesis reflected in the range of responses they might offer in response to a student’s question.

Finally, the pressure to produce is not necessarily conducive to intellectual and spiritual development. One of the challenges, particularly for the DeLeT students, was the pressure for PJE s to use their knowledge of Torah (almost immediately) in the production of lessons for their students. This pressure caused them to revert to the familiar frameworks they had when they entered the class. While they added some surface ideas and strategies, it was difficult to revisit foundational beliefs working in this fashion. In addition, the contexts in which they were each teaching shaped their ideas about what constitutes an appropriate Torah lesson. In general, students had little mental space or time to consider a variety of ideas about the purposes of teaching Torah or alternative strategies of interpretation with which they might ask children to engage.

In addition, two other factors may be contributing to the tenacious grip of early ideas, to which I will now briefly turn.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL EXPLANATION

Perhaps the grip of what I consider to be a problematic unreflective stance is in fact attributable to a developmental explanation. In the 1970s, William Perry Jr. did extensive research on ethical and intellectual development in the college years. He proposed that even at the university level, there is within learners a staged development (a la Piaget’s notions of development through discrete stages) that encompasses not only their view of knowledge, but also their views on the role of the teacher and learner. The following excerpts from a table, developed by Cornfeld and Knefelkamp20, give a

19 In fact, my biggest successes have been with groups of students that I have taught for at least a year (the PJE s at the University of Judaism, and the first cohort of DeLeT fellows at Brandeis).

20 Perry, Jr. (1999), p. xxxi. Minor changes have been made in the table’s punctuation and capitalization due to style considerations.
sense of the learners’ characteristics vis à vis “view of knowledge” implied by the Perry scheme:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dualism (position 2)</th>
<th>Early Multiplicity (position 3)</th>
<th>Late Multiplicity (position 4)</th>
<th>Contextual Relativism (position 5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All knowledge is known: There is a certainty that right and wrong answers exist for everything. Knowledge is collection of information.</td>
<td>Most knowledge is known: All is knowable (first view of learning a process that the student can learn). Certainty that there exists a right way to find the right answers. Realization that some knowledge domains are “fuzzy.”</td>
<td>In some areas we still have certainty about knowledge; in most areas we really don’t know anything for sure: Certainty that there is no certainty (except in a few specialized areas). Hence “do your own thing”—all opinions can be just as valid or invalid as all others.</td>
<td>All knowledge is contextual: All knowledge is disconnected from any concept of absolute truth. However, right and wrong, adequate and inadequate, appropriate and inappropriate can exist within a specific context and are judged by “rules of adequacy” that are determined by expertise and good thought processes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If one accepts Perry’s hypothesis, one could imagine that the “problem” could be construed as a developmental one. Perhaps, with the proper scaffolding, all learners could develop a “higher order” of thinking, suggested by contextual relativism, which would allow for what I am calling a more analytic/reflective mode of reading and interpreting Torah texts.

Although the developmental explanation seems reasonable, I do not ultimately find it compelling for at least two reasons. First, there were in fact interviewees who had developed an analytic/reflective mode (and one could not account for this development by any difference in their early education experiences). Secondly, if it were only a developmental issue, why would the interventions described above not be sufficient scaffolding to move more of them to a “higher” developmental level? I began to wonder if making meaning of Torah is a special case of cognitive development because of its “pull” on foundational beliefs, beliefs that people are taught or absorb as youngsters, beliefs that signify membership in a particular faith community.

**The Sociological Explanation**

As Eliade and others have noted, beliefs about the past—and God’s intercession in it—are central pillars in Western faith traditions. Indeed, many religious communities include subscription to historical beliefs among their basic criteria for membership. Consider, for example, the belief that Jesus lived, died, and rose again; or that God revealed the Torah to Moses at Mount Sinai. These are, of course beliefs about past events. But they are also creeds to which ones allegiance is presume when one identifies, respectively as a Roman Catholic or Orthodox Jew… In short, how do people think about history that matters?21
How do people think about history that matters? What if these PJE's assume that membership in their community is contingent on maintaining these beliefs? Indeed, if they were part of some circles of the Orthodox community, they might be correct. But what if they believe that being part of even the liberal Jewish interpretive community means adherence to this somewhat literal/apologetic stance? The incorrectness of this belief is not the issue. The very fact that they hold this belief might explain the strength of their commitments and their adherence to these ideas in the face of new information from scientific and scholarly sources. If this is so, then any development of the conceptual capacities of PJE's around Torah will also require a parallel development in their conceptual capacity around contemporary Jewish theology.

**Conclusion**

One thing seems clear: helping new teachers develop sophisticated, nuanced modes of thinking about the Torah is not easy. Establishing a set of benchmarks may be a step in the right direction, but it alone will not address the challenges raised by this paper. This exploration suggests that examining foundational beliefs requires time, strategy, and rigor.

I am convinced that helping people develop into thoughtful, sophisticated teachers of Bible is possible. The approach to their education must be multi-faceted. It requires time—time to teach, time for future teachers to study, and time for them to experiment with what they are learning. None of the groups with whom I worked were in programs that met all of these criteria, but developing a sophisticated approach to the teaching of Bible will require all of them. It is not just that there is a lot to learn, but also that each future teacher needs to grapple in an ongoing way with the implications of the ideas that she holds.

In two different settings, I asked students to raise their hands if they thought that God wrote the Torah. Many students raised their hands. Then I asked, “Who observes Shabbat?” Few raised their hands. “Well,” I asked, “how can that be? If God wrote the Torah, how can you not do what God commanded?” Most students just got irritated or confused.

What does a teacher do when faced with such dissonance? What does a student do when experiencing such disequilibrium? In this case, we did nothing (in class, that is—I do not know what further reflection this exercise might have provoked). But if these future teachers are to grow, then such dissonance must be used to tease out the implications of their various beliefs and practices, and to give birth to more nuanced and complex points of view that will allow them to explain themselves, and ultimately to teach. They must also learn and understand more of the range of alternative beliefs about revelation and interpretation of Torah—including reading philosophical texts about revelation from a liberal point of view. This knowledge will give them scholarly support for embracing new ideas—and new ways to put their own ideas together.

Our problem with producing good teachers of Torah is not unlike the problem of producing good

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21 Gottlieb et al., p. 6.
teachers of math. Our vision of how Torah should be taught is not the approach to Torah study that many future teachers themselves learned when they were young. They need better experiences in college and graduate school, but they also need to unpack and process these experiences, so that they can come to understand them more deeply than our friend Ilana whom we met at the beginning of the paper. They need models of good teachers teaching real children whom they can observe (either live or on video recordings) with time and structure to process and reflect upon their observations. They need to practice teaching with quality mentoring, so that they can get assistance with not only responding to but thinking through for themselves the tough questions that students inevitably ask. All these strategies are necessary if we are to produce a generation of young people who will become sophisticated, and thus successful, teachers of Torah.

REFERENCES


Prospective Teachers’ Beliefs About Torah (Bridging Initiative Working Paper No. 10) • 20


This paper is one of a series of working papers on the teaching of Jewish studies, available for free download from the website of the Initiative on Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy in Jewish Studies, a project of the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University.

http://www.brandeis.edu/centers/mandel/bridginginitiative.html