Making Choices: Teachers’ Beliefs and Teachers’ Reasons

Barry W. Holtz

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Brandeis University
Mandel Center
for Studies in Jewish Education

MS 049
P.O. Box 549110
Waltham, MA 02454-9110
www.brandeis.edu/mandel
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ABSTRACT
In this response to Edward Greenstein’s paper, “A Pragmatic Pedagogy of Bible”, the author highlights a number of contributions that Greenstein, a scholar of Bible, makes to the way that educators conceptualize their work. Among them are a nuanced discussion of the relationship between the methodology of interpretation and the outcomes of interpretation, and a reminder that any particular interpretation of a text is by definition incomplete, which can be helpful to teachers in responding to and valuing the variety of students’ own encounters with texts. The author also questions the extent to which Greenstein’s description of the teacher rationally selecting a given interpretive approach (towards particular pedagogic ends) masks the complex range of factors that shapes the approaches the teacher uses, which includes not only deliberately-chosen methods and tools but powerful (and sometimes unconscious) beliefs about the subject matter and the larger enterprise of teaching.

Edward Greenstein’s paper, “A Pragmatic Pedagogy of Bible,” is an excellent example of how scholars of subject matter can contribute to the ways that educators conceptualize their work. Let me highlight a few significant dimensions of Greenstein’s contribution.

First, his paper offers a very nuanced discussion of the relationship between the methodology of interpretation and the outcomes of interpretation. Greenstein reminds us that as much as our interpretations of Bible flow out of our approaches, any choice of approach will determine—or perhaps even pre-determine—the interpretations that we get. This is something that we tend to forget—perhaps even choose to forget—both as readers of the Bible and as teachers.

Greenstein’s discussion of this dynamic makes a wonderful contribution, and he demonstrates it in a very practical way by exploring the Tower of Babel story in Genesis. By taking us through multiple readings of this familiar story, he opens up both the specific implications of bringing to bear a given methodology upon a text, and the ways in which the methodology we employ has a profound impact on the type of results our analysis will generate.

We also find in this paper a deep lesson about the nature of pedagogy. The meta-lesson of Greenstein’s paper, again particularly in the section in which he walks us through each reading of the Babel...
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text, is that any specific reading of a text is always and essentially incomplete. Rather than saying that this should bother us, Greenstein urges us to accept the inevitable incompleteness of our readings, and to see the reading of the text as a kind of multi-valent opportunity to enter into the Bible, and to understand from the outset that we are never going to have the one “right” reading. Such a perspective can be helpful to us as teachers when we think about the various responses that students give in their encounters with texts and our inevitable desire to see them get the “right” answer. Greenstein would have us develop our tolerance for the notion that there may be many right answers.

While it is not surprising to see a scholar in a particular content field focus in on the “commonplace”1 of subject matter when he addresses educational issues, Greenstein also raises in this paper matters of concern from the perspective of the learner. Certainly concern for students and how they think about the subject matter is one of the primary things that teachers need to have. Teachers have to translate subject matter in light of their sense of their own particular students. Looking at Greenstein’s paper from the point of view of the learner, we might consider that offering a wide range of readings of the text is not only about representing the subject matter in all its multiplicity and depth, but also about allowing students to come to the text with their own interests, their own abilities and their own inclinations.

In other words, as teachers presenting a range of approaches to the biblical text, we are also implicitly responding to the fact that some students will never be excited by any given reading, but may be energized by a different reading or approach to the same text. We can’t always anticipate what our students are going to find meaningful, and offering alternatives can be a way of being responsive to students, with results that we may find surprising. Ultimately, we should always be aware of the fact that we have a variety of students in our classrooms, and we are not always able to predict what will strike them most powerfully.

One final issue raised by Greenstein’s paper merits exploration. Greenstein discusses the results when a teacher “chooses” or “selects” a given interpretive approach to the biblical text or a particular passage. This language may mask or underestimate the complexity of the real-life situation of teachers, and of what influences the decisions that they make and approaches they use. In discussing these choices, Greenstein uses a term from my book Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and Practice2: “orientation.” It is not a term I invented, but is borrowed from the work of the influential educational researcher Lee Shulman and some of his former students, in particular Pamela Grossman.3 An “orientation” represents a kind of methodological approach to any given subject matter.

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1 Commonplaces, a technical term associated with the education scholar Joseph Schwab, are “those foci of attention within an area of interest which fulfill two conditions: a) They demand the attention of serious investigators; b) their scrutiny generates diverse investigations and consequent diversities of definitions, doctrines, and emphases.” Joseph Schwab, “Problems, Topics, and Issues,” in Education and the Structure of Knowledge, ed. Stanley Elam (Chicago: Rand, McNally, 1964), pp. 5–6.


In Greenstein’s paper, we see examples of different orientations in each of the particular readings that he offers. A person like the late Bible scholar Nahum Sarna⁴ who wants to set the Bible in the context of the ancient Near East is different from, for example, Nechama Leibowitz⁵ in her reading of the text through the eyes of traditional Jewish commentators, or Robert Alter⁶ (or for that matter, Ed Greenstein) utilizing a more literary reading of the text.

I want to emphasize here something that Greenstein mentions briefly which deserves more attention. That is, there is an element in the concept of orientations that is not just about the deliberate application of the teacher’s particular subject matter knowledge, but also about the teacher’s beliefs about the subject matter. In a certain sense, one might say that the important innovation in the notion of “orientations” was a revision of Schwab’s old distinction between the “syntactic” and “substantive” elements of the subject matter⁷.

In looking at the nature of academic disciplines, Schwab adduced two important elements of one’s approach to a subject: the lenses a person brings to the subject matter (the “substantive” structures in Schwab’s language) and the tools the person brings to exploring the subject matter (“syntactic” structures). Hence, a scholar of history might study his or her discipline through the lens of intellectual history or through the lens of social history. The results would be very different depending on the substantive structures chosen. In addition, various substantive structures call for different tools to be applied. A social historian would be interested in the diaries and letters of ordinary people; an intellectual historian would be interested in the writings of major thinkers. A biblical scholar using the substantive structure that viewed the Bible as a product of the Ancient Near East would use tools such as archeology or comparative Semitics, while a scholar using the structure of literary criticism would likely be less interested in those tools.

But the focus on orientations, while still accepting Schwab’s categories, adds an important new element: the discovery that teachers have powerful beliefs about subject matter and the enterprise of teaching. Those beliefs are in a certain sense not entirely in the realm of the rational and the conscious. They include, among other things, beliefs about children (or adults) and how they learn. Those beliefs may come from years of experience, but they may also come from how the teachers themselves best learn. They are often held very deeply by teachers, beyond rational consideration.

I knew a teacher several years ago who was teaching Hebrew to fourth graders in a day school setting. She would give the students a list of words to memorize before they encountered the story that they were going to read. I said to her, “Maybe that’s not the best way to do it; those words are

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⁵ For example, Nehama Leibowitz, Studies in Bereshit (Genesis) in the Context of Ancient and Modern Jewish Bible Commentary (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1974).
completely without context for these kids. Maybe it would work better to learn the words in the context of the story.” She rejected my suggestion, saying that her way was the way that children learn best.

At the time, I was actually not sure of what the “correct” answer to this question was. I know a little bit about research on learning a second-language, and I thought that my contextual approach was more in line with current thinking, but I don’t know the field terribly well and I wasn’t sure what to say back to her after she rejected my suggestion. But it did strike me at the time that this was a teacher with a belief about the way children learned languages. Maybe she herself learns this way; maybe some children have learned this way in her classes. But it felt clear that this was an example of teachers having very deeply held beliefs that may not be expressions of either substantive or syntactic knowledge, including beliefs about the way their students best learn.

Teachers also hold beliefs (again, often very deeply) about the nature of the subject matter and why it is worth learning a particular subject matter. Greenstein presents a somewhat idealized notion of the way teachers plan: rational decisions are made resulting in the use of a particular approach, and good teachers will ideally have alternative approaches ready and available. In the picture that Greenstein paints, when teachers are thinking about a particular text, they should say to themselves: This is the approach that most fits this text, or this is the approach that best fits these students, and I’ll just pull the particular methodological arrow out of the quiver and use it. While I am fully in support of Greenstein’s viewpoint prescriptively, in practice it does not always work this way, because of the inhibiting (or at least influential) power of teachers’ beliefs—beliefs that they may not be fully aware of either having or actualizing in their teaching.

“Belief” is a very loaded term beyond the realm of pedagogic orientations. In the realm of Jewish education, the word “belief” has another connotation entirely. I first started thinking about this some years ago, thanks to Gail Dorph’s doctoral dissertation. Her work, looking at students as they were preparing for careers in Jewish education, showed how certain foundational beliefs went beyond views about the best way to learn and teach any particular subject matter. We might, in fact, distinguish between beliefs with a small “b” and Beliefs with a capital “B”; in the field of Jewish education, people are walking around with some really big capital-B Beliefs. These include matters such as the nature and authority of Torah, the authorship of the Bible, and the nature of revelation.

This is a different kind of belief from that of the teacher who said that it is better to learn the Hebrew word list before the text of the story. In that case, we might say, “What if I brought you 16 studies from empirical research that show that good language learning does not work like that?” In such a situation, she might very well change her mind about her practice. But if I came to a teacher and said, “You know, you should set the Torah in the context of the ancient Near East” or, “You should use source criticism to explain problematic passages in the Torah,” the teacher might well say, “No, I reject such approaches as religiously wrong, as damaging the sacred nature of our relationship with the Torah.”

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In such a case, we are entering into a realm of formative beliefs about religion that complicates Greenstein’s clear, rational model of choice. This is one of the things that those of us who work with teachers have to think about as we help them continue to grow in their teaching practice: in what sense is any belief a capital-B Belief, and how do we approach those beliefs—and people with those beliefs?

I am tempted to say that the situation regarding beliefs is different in Jewish education from what we would find in general education. There, we might like to imagine, we wouldn’t have to confront such deeply held, nonrational commitments that inform the practice of teaching. Some years ago, I made this distinction between Jewish and general education to my friend and colleague Deborah Ball, the dean of the school of education at University of Michigan, who is well known for her work with mathematics teachers. When I finished making my point, Deborah looked at me dryly and said, “I guess you haven’t met many math teachers!” Whether our situation in Jewish education is unique or whether (and to what extent) we share the problem of “belief” with those in general education, becoming more aware of the powerful influence of beliefs in our own teaching and in that of others will help us take fullest advantage of the approach to interpretive and pedagogic strategies that Greenstein has laid out for us.

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. 

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