

Weekly Teaching

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This week's teaching is provided by Rabbi Chaya Bender.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Mitch
rabbimitch@templesholom.com

For those of you who I have not yet had the privilege of meeting, I am Rabbi Chaya, Youth Director and Senior Rabbinic Fellow. This is my second year being a part of the Temple Sholom Family. My wife Emily, and our very friendly but larger than life dog, Isaiah, officially moved to Greenwich in June and we are so happy to learn and grow with all of you this year.

The following is a poem that may be very familiar to many people, "maggie and milly and molly and may," written by E.E. Cummings in 1958.

This charming poem, when read through the lens of education and the themes of the high holiday season, highlights the reason I chose to become a rabbi, and above all, a Jewish educator.

*maggie and milly and molly and may
went down to the beach (to play one day)*

*and maggie discovered a shell that sang
so sweetly she couldn't remember her troubles, and*

*milly befriended a stranded star
whose rays five languid fingers were;*

*and molly was chased by a horrible thing
which raced sideways while blowing bubbles: and*

*may came home with a smooth round stone
as small as a world and as large as alone.*

For whatever we lose (like a you or a me)
it's always ourselves we find in the sea

The future and trajectory of Jewish education for children and teens is captured by the essence of this poem, along with the varied themes and lessons of the high holiday season.

When four children look at one object together, that object immediately multiplies.

In this poem, four little girls go to the beach together and discover four completely different worlds. Maggie listened to the sweet sounds of a shell. Milly saw the lazy arms of a star fish. Molly played tag with a crab. And May contemplated the meaning of a stone.

In educator terms, these experiences can be defined as differentiated learning styles. Maggie is an auditory-musical learner who prefers using sound and music. Milly is a spatial learner who prefers using pictures and images to understand. Molly is a kinesthetic learner who prefers using her body, hands and sense of touch. May is a mathematical learner who prefers using logic, reasoning and systems.

I would like to present two different teaching scenarios for these four children:

Imagine a world where a teacher took these four girls to the beach, put them in four desks that were rooted to the ground and lectured them about the importance of sand dunes. At least two of these kids would have learned practically nothing because Molly needs to experience the world with her body moving and Milly needs to use her eyes more than her ears.

The second scenario is the one presented in this poem where one teacher devises a lesson where each child could explore the world in front of them.

They could actually learn.

A few weeks ago, we celebrated Rosh Hashanah.

Rosh Hashanah literally means the head of the year. Other names for the holiday are *Yom Hazikaron*, *Yom Truah*, *Yom Harat Olam* and *Yom Din*.

Yom Hazikaron means, most literally, the day of the remembrance of...no direct object. Meaning, it is a day where we remember God and beseech God to remember us and our families, to grant us all a year of fulfillment

Yom Truah is a cheering call of the shofar. This aspect of Rosh Hashanah is a day of listening to the sound of the shofar and rallying together as a community in joy.

Yom Harat Olam, the day of the world's creation, refers to God's creation of humanity, our role as protectors of the world.

Yom Din, the day of judgment, refers to God's accounting of our deeds over the last year, both personally and communally, and holding off forgiveness until Yom Kippur, and by some accounts, until the holiday of Sukkot.

As you can see, there are four holidays, and the entire High Holiday season itself, that are contained within the various meanings of Rosh Hashanah.

For some of us, the season is all about starting over again and setting new resolutions for next year. For others it is a time to reflect on our relationship with God. It could also be a time to celebrate with community or a time to feel the yoke of responsibility that comes with being a protector of the world. And of course, some use this time to go through the cleansing process of judgment and final forgiveness.

One beach allows four different worlds for four girls.

One holiday allows four different holidays, and possibly more, for the entire community.

The job of the educator is to make space for personal exploration and not present the world as if through a microscope.

The job of the educator is to present the world through a kaleidoscope.

I learned how to read Hebrew when I was 19 years old.

Let me explain:

I went to a Jewish Day School for pre-school, Hebrew school for a total of seven hours a week on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday through my bat mitzvah, and Hebrew high school two hours a week through confirmation in 11th

grade. I went through countless books and charts of the letters. I couldn't quite get it. It was like I was starting from scratch every single year.

All I have to say is thank God for those cassette tapes that my cantor made for my Torah and *Haftorah* portions.

When I was 19, I sat down in my beginner's Hebrew class at Brandeis University, and my teacher, Esther Schorr, started singing and dancing.

Every class she would sing and dance through songs with us, first explaining the concepts she wanted us to learn from the song, whether it was the question words or case endings, and then we would sing and dance.

And I would learn. Really learn.

You see, my style of learning is one of the hardest cases for the classroom.

I am an auditory-musical-kinesthetic learner.

Meaning I need to move and experience while simultaneously listening. My ideal classroom would probably be me in a hamster wheel while someone played guitar and sang to me.

I can't really learn in a desk. Yet in over 20 years in the education system, I have spent most of that time in a desk.

While experiential education is starting to really make its way into the school systems, I do admit that it is harder there. In the Hebrew school system, and most particularly in the after school extra-curricular programs, there is a lot more flexibility to cater to each learner.

That is one of my goals as Temple Sholom's new youth director.

In *pirkei avot*, the ethics of our fathers, we learn about the ancient curriculum according to a rabbi with the most hilarious name of Ben Hei Hei.

According to Ben Hei Hei: Five years is the age for the study of Scripture — the Bible. Ten, for the study of Mishnah. Thirteen, for the obligation to observe the mitzvot — the commandments, Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Fifteen, for the study of Talmud. Eighteen, for marriage. Twenty, to pursue a livelihood. And the list goes on, but for our purposes let's stop there.

This list shows both a hierarchy of texts as well as benchmark ages to learn them. The ultimate goal, it seems, is to master certain texts at a certain age, like a cosmic checklist so you can fulfill the dream of settling down at 18 with a steady job at 20, which most of us sitting here know has become less and less the case as people pursue advanced degrees.

What this list doesn't capture is the dynamic world of experiencing the bible, and how that world isn't sealed at age five.

I for one, am learning the book of Isaiah every Saturday morning at 9:00 am here in the Temple Sholom library with some folks only slightly older than five and how each week my own preconceived notions about theology are questioned and challenged through the deep learning and conversations that take place in that class.

The danger of the checklist approach to Jewish education laid out in *pirkei avot*, the ethics of our fathers, is that it can stifle the world of curiosity that lives within each person.

This year, I am trying to open new avenues for our learners to be able to connect to our shared tradition in a way that is meaningful for them.

Temple Sholom Learning Center music specialist Adam Feder, Ezra Hurvitz and I are running a Creative Arts Lab for 3rd through 6th graders on Sundays where we are making a music video to engage participants to connect to Judaism through singing, moving their bodies, skit writing, set designing, video editing and other creative outlets.

Just a few weeks ago, I held two pizza parties for our 5th and 6th graders to pick their brains about what things excite them so that I can connect them to Judaism through activities like bowling or scavenger hunts.

As a 7th grade teacher in the Learning Center and Bnai Mitzvah tutor, I work with the teens to craft lessons and conversations that both reaches them where they are and pushes them just beyond their comfort zone to both keep them engaged and prove to them that there is more to learn and it is within reach.

With our BBYO-ers, that is our Temple Sholom based 8th-12th grade youth group, I am helping them craft creative programming that connects teens to their Judaism through leadership and Brotherhood and Sisterhood bonding.

We have amazing children here at Temple Sholom, and more than that, we have an amazing community — an amazing family.

Elie Weisel, may his memory be for a blessing, once said: “There is divine beauty in learning...To learn means to accept the postulate that life did not begin at my birth. Others have been here before me, and I walk in their footsteps. The books I have read were composed by generations of fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, teachers and disciples. I am the sum total of their experiences, their quests. And so are you.”

According to Elie Weisel, to learn is to be in community with those alive now and those who came many generations before. My job as an educator is to help a learner find their niche and then to help them see themselves as an exit on the google map of Jewish tradition that extends many generations back.

In Creative Arts Labs, we are making a music video for the song “The Rock.” The beginning of the song, written by Adam Feder, goes like this:

*“We walked the road,
the road my Bubbie walked
and thousand years before her
and a thousand more before
they walked and walked.”*

Meaning, I as an individual find my footing on the path, but I walk that path with my generation, on the same path that my Bubbie and my Bubbie’s Bubbies walked. On the path that Moses walked.

As we finished the Torah last week and immediately restarted it as part of our Simchat Torah celebration, we committed symbolically to that unbroken chain of Jewish tradition.

Like maggie and milly and molly and may, from the poem by E.E. Cummings, we all connect to different things, but we are in it together.

That, I believe, is the future trajectory of Jewish education, which in some ways is as old as the Bible with its varied stories and interpretations. Every child given the opportunity to grow in a way that is unique to them, and doing so with the support of the community. With a community that models life-long learning and connecting to Judaism.