

## Shavuot

### **How Do We Teach and How Do We Learn?: Three Pedagogical Models** **Dr. Sarit Kattan Gribetz - Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination, Class of 2023**

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Shavuot, the holiday that commemorates the wheat harvest, revelation at Sinai, and Israel's commitment to the observance and study of Torah, will be celebrated this weekend.

What do we learn about the study of Torah - about how we learn and how we teach - from the portions of Torah, Haftarah, and Megillah that are read on the holiday?

#### **Revelation at Sinai**

The Torah reading for the first day of Shavuot describes Moses transmitting God's commandments to the Israelites assembled at the foot of Mount Sinai. The Israelites, Exodus 19 recounts, arrive at the desert of Sinai and encamp opposite the mountain. God instructs Moses to remind "the house of Jacob and the children of Israel" that God redeemed them from Egypt on "eagles' wings," and to encourage them to keep their covenant with God. The people enthusiastically agree - "all that God has said, we will do!" Moses then instructs the people to prepare themselves for revelation. In a scene accompanied by fire, smoke, earthquakes, and the sound of the shofar, the people learn the ten commandments. "The entire nation" witnesses the scene and trembles in fear. They beseech Moses to serve as the messenger between them and God because they find it too intimidating to learn directly from God; they request instead that God speak only to Moses and that Moses, in turn, share God's words with them.

This scene of revelation at Sinai presents the transmission of Torah as an awesome event, one that involves loud sounds and sights, and that instills fear and wonder. It is a frightening affair; so scary, in fact, that the people cannot withstand it, and beg for a different model through which they can learn God's words and commandments indirectly. Moses steps in to fill the gap between heaven and earth, transmitting God's teachings to the people. Moses, in this role, exists in the intermediary position, not as intimidating as God, but still a prophet - a teacher - of enormous stature, despite his humility and self-effacement. The pedagogical model is hierarchical, frontal, performative, and unidirectional.

#### **Ezekiel's Heavenly Visions**

Ezekiel 1, the haftarah for the first day of Shavuot, recounts a similarly awe-inspiring revelation. In exile, at the banks of a river, the prophet Ezekiel has "visions of God." He witnesses a great tempest of clouds, fire, and lightning. Through the smoke, he sees four winged heavenly beasts. He witnesses their wings flapping noisily. And then he sees God's heavenly throne - with God upon it. At the conclusion of the heavenly vision, Ezekiel hears a great uproar blessing God's glory. The prophet describes all of these sights in great detail to the people.

In this scene, Ezekiel learns experientially - through a vision of the heavens and its sounds. He goes on a tour, so to speak, of a realm that is previously unknown to him. Through this

vision, he learns about the inhabitants of the heavens and eventually about God, and also about fear and worship of the divine. By the end, the voices of the heavenly beings teach Ezekiel how to praise God in prayer. Recounting his vision to the people entails a secondary learning experience, in which Ezekiel shares his experience - his tour and vision - with the people, who hear his words and who, through Ezekiel's vivid descriptions, can likewise visualize the divine realm, the inhabitants of the heavens, and even God. Even more than standing at Sinai, the model of Ezekiel's learning and his instruction of the people is based on visual and auditory pedagogy.

### *Ruth and Naomi's Conversations*

The liturgy of Shavuot includes the book of Ruth. One scene in the first chapter of Ruth stands out. When Naomi encourages her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, to return to their families' homes following the death of their spouses, Ruth insists on staying with her mother-in-law Naomi, "for wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you will reside, I will reside, your nation is my nation, your God is my God, and wherever you will die, I will die, and I will be buried there... only death will separate me from you" (Ruth 1:16-17). When Naomi hears Ruth's words, Naomi realizes that she will not win this battle and stops trying to convince her daughter-in-law to leave. The two travel together back to Bethlehem, to begin a new life together.

Even though this scene in which Ruth refuses to leave Naomi is not obviously about pedagogy, rabbinic compositions about the book of Ruth interpret it as a model for instruction. In a discussion about what a convert to Judaism needs to learn in the process of conversion, the Babylonian Talmud in tractate Yevamot uses Ruth's words to explain what rabbinic law means when it requires that a convert, on the one hand, be informed of all commandments and commitments that Judaism entails, but, on the other hand, only be instructed briefly, without elongating the process or going into too many details:

וּמוֹדִיעִים אוֹתוֹ עַל שִׁכְחָה וּפָאָה וְאִין מְרַבִּים עָלָיו וְאִין מְדַקְדְּקִים עָלָיו

And they inform him of the sin of neglecting the mitzvah to allow the poor to take gleanings, forgotten sheaves, and produce in the corner of one's field. And they do not overwhelm him, and they are not exacting with him. (Yevamot 47b)

Even though Ruth 1:16-17, in the megillah, is a monologue, the Talmudic text interprets it as a conversation between Ruth and Naomi, in which Naomi instructs Ruth in her conversion journey. The text explains that when Ruth says "wherever you go, I will go," it represents Naomi's explanation of the *techum* Shabbat (the law that dictates how far one may travel on the Sabbath), to which Ruth responds that she will always go where Naomi goes, never violating Sabbath laws about travel. Ruth's declaration "wherever you will reside, I will reside" suggests that Naomi taught her the laws of *yichud* (about the circumstances in which people cannot be together), and Ruth commits to always lodging with Naomi and not with others so that she never violates these laws. Ruth's insistence that "your nation is my nation" means that Naomi told Ruth that there are 613 commandments - and that Ruth accepts them all, declaring that she will be a full member of the people of Israel. Ruth's statement "your God is my God," refers to Naomi's explanation of the prohibitions of

idolatrous worship, in response to which Ruth declares her sole devotion to Naomi's God. When Ruth enumerates that "wherever you will die, I will die," it is because Naomi taught her the four types of capital punishments used by the courts, and Ruth understands that she will be subject to that system of justice. When Ruth declares "I will be buried there," it is in response to Naomi's explanation of the burial grounds handed over to the court for the burial of criminals. Once Naomi relays all of these laws and norms to Ruth and is assured of Ruth's commitment to them all, she stops speaking, convinced that Ruth knows enough about Judaism to be a full member of the community and to accompany her back home to Bethlehem.

In the history of halakhah, if not in the biblical text itself, Naomi's conversation with Ruth becomes one of the models for how to teach converts about Judaism during the conversion process. Ruth learns from her proximity to Naomi, from Naomi's example, and from Naomi's careful instruction. Naomi teaches, but she is not overbearing. Despite the multiple power imbalances that structure their relationship - Naomi is Ruth's mother-in-law, Naomi is Jewish while Ruth seeks to become Jewish - the Bavli suggests that in this conversation Naomi balances breadth with depth, coverage with care, and knows when to allow Ruth to speak and when she (Naomi) ought to remain silent. This model of pedagogy is conversational and reciprocal.

### **Models of Pedagogy**

These narratives - the first set at Mount Sinai; the second set between the river of exile and the heavens; the third set in the fields of Moav - present us with three different pedagogical models. All three seek to connect the people with the divine through different routes.

The first story, of revelation at Sinai, presents God as the ultimate source of knowledge and wisdom, and Moses as the most able leader tasked with teaching it to the people. The pedagogical model is hierarchical: God exists on top and in the position of greatest authority, Moses stands in the middle as the messenger, and the people remain at the bottom. It is also frontal and unidirectional: God and then Moses relay laws and commandments to the people. And it is performative: God performs miraculous feats to display divine power, and these acts of nature are a part of the method of instruction.

The scene of Ezekiel's vision offers a different model for the transmission of divine wisdom, one that relies on an individual's visual and auditory experience and on the recounting of that experience. Moreover, it is not God who instructs Ezekiel. Ezekiel learns on his own, through what he sees and experiences, and then through hearing the heavenly beings' praise of God. The people participate in the vision vicariously - textually - through the words (and writings) of Ezekiel's vision, and they thus learn experientially as well.

The book of Ruth, as it is interpreted in rabbinic sources, encourages a conversational and incremental model of pedagogy, a pedagogy that is dialogical. Naomi teaches Ruth each dimension of Jewish law and waits to hear Ruth's response. This is the only scene in which the student has a voice and speaks (in the book of Ezekiel, Ezekiel only speaks when he recounts his vision to the people, in his role as teacher). In fact, Ruth's speech is preserved

in the biblical text, while Naomi's instruction recedes into the background of the text's gaps, present only in the midrash. Ruth's words and commitments take center stage, and hers is the voice worth preserving. Naomi only proceeds to the next subject when Ruth is ready. Once Naomi senses that Ruth knows enough, she stops, assuming that there will be further opportunities for continued learning as her journey continues.

The different landscapes of these three scenes reflect these distinctions. Exodus 19, set around a high mountain, imagines God to inhabit the heavens above, while Moses, the one closest to God, descends from atop the mountain. The people of Israel are assembled at the foot of the mountain, warned (on pain of death) not to ascend it or even to touch its edge. When they have properly readied themselves, Moses escorts them towards the mountain - "towards God" (לְקִרְאָת הָאֱלֹהִים) - in order to hear God's commandments. The hierarchical basis of this scene is hard to miss in the description of everyone's placement above and below the mountain.

Ezekiel exists in two realms, on the one hand on earth and on the other hand in the heavens, bridging the expanse between them. That the prophet stands at the bank of a river in exile emphasizes his place of liminality, of in-betweenness. He is on earth, but not at home - he is in exile. He stands on land - but at the edge of a river, under which there is no stable land because of the current. In order to learn, he needs to travel. His vision transports him between both realms. The learner, in other words, does the traveling, whether actually (as Ezekiel does through his vision) or vicariously (when the people join Ezekiel's vision through his recollection of it).

In the book of Ruth, Naomi teaches Ruth God's commandments in the open fields of Moav (שְׂדֵי מוֹאָב). There is no mountain that highlights hierarchical difference, nor a visionary journey to the heavens; Ruth and Naomi engage one another as equals or near equals, in a horizontal and reciprocal relationship that is mirrored by the flat lands on which they stand. This is the case even though generational and other differences distinguish between them and despite Naomi's role as teacher and Ruth's role as student.

Though these stories also contain many shared dimensions, they offer us three different yet compelling approaches to teaching and learning - transmission, experience, and dialogue - that can be applied based on context, content, and student.

*I dedicate this dvar torah to my mother, Esther, who was born on the first day of Shavuot in the Jewish calendar and June 3 in the secular calendar.*



*Sarit Kattan Gribetz is an associate professor in the Theology Department at Fordham University.*

*Her first book, *Time and Difference in Rabbinic Judaism* (Princeton University Press, 2020), received a National Jewish Book Award in Scholarship.*