

In this Issue

Learning is the key to Jewish identity, and teachers are the key to learning. But what makes effective teachers? We asked four master teachers, recognized nationwide for their remarkable skills, to reflect on what makes them so good.

On teaching Lydia Kukoff

I am a teacher of Judaism; generally, I teach adults about Judaism and Jewish identity. That is my subject but, for me, it is not academic. What I teach is not separate from my life but rather it is central to my life. I have a passion for Judaism and that passion is what impels me to teach it. My purpose in teaching is that I want those I teach to love Judaism as much as I do (or, at least, to understand how someone could), to see in it the beauty, power and possibilities that I do, and to own it for themselves. I want them not just to learn about Judaism cognitively (they can do that by reading a book). I want them to want to live Jewish lives. Consequently, I believe that I am both teacher and positive Jewish role model. In order to be successful, I need to use myself fully. Learners need not only the factual information I can impart, but they need the "Rashi" to it: my enthusiasm and my experience.

Reading the Students

I, however, am only half of the encounter, for the teacher needs a learner and for me, the learner is central. By coming to this class, he or she has expressed a need to learn and grow. In preparing to teach, I ask practical questions. Who am I trying to reach? How can I engage them? What do I want them to own when they leave the classroom that they didn't own when they entered? Teaching is, at its heart, the encounter between teacher and learner. I try to understand where the learners are, begin there and take them to the next

place--step by step. In trying to be responsive, I have to ask myself who the learners are, what moment of their day they are in, what stage of their life they are in. Understanding where the learners are, though, has many dimensions. Since I often teach Basic Judaism, I deal with adult learners who have minimal knowledge of Judaism. At the same time, a class may be composed of learners who have varying levels of secular education. In teaching a class with learners as varied as these, I have to be responsive to the cues they give me, so that I can connect with them.

Context Creates Content

There are different modes of teaching which are appropriate to different subjects. Those different modes are also affected by the variables of teacher, learner, setting, mood and purpose. For instance, if I am teaching Basic Judaism, there is a certain amount of factual information that I have to convey. That will affect my teaching mode. In addition, the way in which I communicate that informa-

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tion will be affected. For instance, if I am teaching synagogue members, I may be able to make certain assumptions about common points of reference that I may not be able to make if I am teaching Basic Judaism to people who are not all Jews. In any case, there must ultimately be a connection between cognitive and affective if learners are to own Judaism.

The Centrality of the Text

If I teach poetry, it will not be a class in literature. We will not engage in intricate literary analysis (a fact which always comes as a relief to the poetry-shy!). Rather, we will read Jewish poetry as a way to connect with the Jewish experience and to enable learners to explore their own Jewish identity. In this kind of teaching situation, I will not be so concerned with factual information as with creating a connection between the learner and the text so that associations are made between the text and the learner's own experience.

Jewish texts are very important to my teaching because they are artifacts of the Jewish spirit. Our sources help us know who we are. They ground us and they center us. They link Jews through time and space. To be a Jew is to live in dialogue with the words, the texts. It is important for teachers of Judaism to bring Jews back to their wellsprings (which may be contemporary as well as classical). Texts have a yielding concreteness and I have found them to be powerful points of entry (or re-entry) into Judaism. It is thrilling to see the joy and sense of accomplishment and ownership that comes about when Jews reclaim their sources, when they begin their own dialogue with the text, and realize that (even though they may be absolute Jewish beginners) they have something to say.

Bringing the Self Into the Classroom

My teaching style is basically interactive, midrashic, and associative. I believe that it is stories and fortuitous digressions that often allow the subject matter to "stick" in the mind of the learner. It is possible to become so focused on "teaching" the subject that imparting information becomes an end in itself. It can become easy to lose sight of whether the learner is actually absorbing what is being imparted.

I have always loved the *mashal*, that classic rabbinic

LYDIA KUKOFF, through her work at the Avi Chal Foundation, works to strengthen personal commitment and mutual understanding among all Jews.

teaching device which brings the subject at hand close to the learner's own experience. I always think "to what can this be compared?" I use examples from my own life and draw from the memory bank which I've built over years of hearing the stories of others. I will sometimes remind them, through a story from my own experience, that I also started from a point of knowing nothing about Judaism. I want to give them the message that I connect with them--their questions, concerns--to establish a credibility which will empower them.

I believe that it is not possible to step into the same teaching river twice. Even if I've taught a subject before, I approach it as if I never have. The subject matter may be the same, but I am not the same person I was when I last taught it. I am teaching it to new people. Interactions, stories, questions will be different. Having prepared as fully as I can, I am nevertheless prepared to adjust my presentation to turn on a dime, as the situation may warrant. I have a plan in mind but, above all, I want to be responsive to the questions and concerns of the learners. Sometimes I have scrubbed most of my plan for a class because a wonderful question was asked and

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Administrator Betsy M. Landis

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Contributing Editors Michael Berenbaum, David Biale, Elliot N. Dorff, Arnold Eisen, David Ellenson, Leonard Fein, Rela M. Geffen, Neil Gillman, Joanne Greenberg, Lawrence Hoffman, Paula Hyman, Deborah Dash Moore, David Novak, Riv-Ellen Prell, Ellen Umansky, Elie Wiesel, Arnold Jacob Wolf, Walter Wurzbarger, Michael Wyschogrod.

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everyone resonated to it. If I am fortunate enough to be presented with a teachable moment, I go for it.

Successful teaching brings about growth, change, transformation. Transformation doesn't happen all at once, in a blinding flash of insight. It happens gradually, as a result of learners having heard, "gotten", the messages, concepts, texts, themes, feelings I came into the room wanting to give them. With enough of those encounters, bit by bit, time by time, soul by soul, transformation will occur.

In the end, teaching for me is poetry. Teaching, like poetry, is an interaction of soul with word, of soul with soul, a resulting recognition, then increased and heightened awareness--all in all, a transcending. □

My top ten teaching techniques

Ron Wolfson

I am a Jewish educator. I teach graduate students how to teach and I teach adults and families how to live Jewishly. I learned most of what I know about teaching from my own master teachers: my parents--Bernice and Alan Wolfson, my wife--Susie, and my rabbi-mentors--Bernard Lipnick, Harold Schulweis, and David Lieber. But, as the text teaches, I have learned most from my students, and that is where whatever success I have as a teacher begins.

So here are my Top Ten Strategies:

1. Introduce Yourself to Your Students

I begin every class, every workshop I have ever taught, well before the bell rings. I position myself outside the classroom door and greet my students by introducing myself (always by my first name), and begin some sort of conversation. When I am invited to be a Scholar-in-Residence at a synagogue, I ask the host Rabbi to excuse me while I stand at the door of the sanctuary or social hall and say "Shabbat Shalom" to people as they arrive.

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RON WOLFSON directs the work of the Whizin Institute for Jewish Family Life at the University of Judaism.

I will not remember everyone's name, but that brief moment of contact establishes the fact that there is a real person behind the teacher, a person who genuinely desires to establish a connection between teacher and student. Without that, how can I possibly teach anything?

2 Tell Your Own Story/Let Them Tell Theirs

I continue building this connection by sharing a story or two about my own experience with Jewish living. If I am teaching Shabbat, I will tell my by-now-oft-quoted story of how I wanted our baby daughter Havi to have a white dress to wear on her first Shabbat with us and ended up buying a christening outfit. If Passover is the subject, I will talk about my Zaidie Louis-the-grocery-man's Haggadah--Maxwell House, of course--and the rather abbreviated Seder I remember as a kid back in Omaha. If it is the December Dilemmas, I will admit to my nervousness the first time our son Michael asked if we could put up "those pretty lights" on our house. If it is my newest book, *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort*, I will share my own bereavement experiences as a way to enable the audience to identify with me.

Then, I ask them to tell their stories. Inevitably, the stories are similar as are their messages--"I'm searching," "I'm frustrated," "My kids know more than I do..." I want them to see that they are not alone and I want them to know that I am there to listen and respond to their needs and concerns. This is the essence of comforting a mourner--and it is the essence of good teaching.

3. Use Humor

My stories are almost always humorous, often down-right hysterical. I use humor not just as a way to "grab" an audience at the beginning of a class or lecture; I use it to make people feel comfortable.

One of the most difficult obstacles for laypeople to overcome is their fear of Judaism. Many people I see are intimidated by Jewish practice. Why? Because as smart as they are, as competent as they are in most things secular, put them in a Jewish environment and they turn to mush. They have little fluency, if any, in Hebrew language, their experience with ritual is spotty, and their knowledge of Judaism is Sunday School level, at best.

Yet, they are at that lecture or workshop because they are motivated to learn. They are courageous enough to admit "I don't know"; the ones who aren't there have said "I don't care." So, as their teacher, I want then to welcome them--with warmth, with humor, with a personal connection--because once they are relaxed, I can begin to teach.