13 “Torah Talk”: Teaching *Parashat Ha-shavua* to Young Children

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Introduction: Listening to children’s voices and “Torah Talk”

Young children have so much to say about the world. Listening to their comments and observations fascinates me; listening to their questions challenges me and reminds me that children are filled with wonder and wondering, and that I need to continually find ways to provide opportunities for their questions, which are at the heart of their learning.

In my classroom, I teach *Parashat Ha-shavua*, the weekly Torah portion, to kindergartners and first graders in a way that shares my passion for reading and studying the Torah¹ and also allows me to hear my students’ voices. We take stories in the Torah and make them come alive as I guide children through a process of connecting to biblical text as they begin to see themselves as part of the Jewish people’s textual tradition. It is a text that I love reading and studying, part of a tradition that I care about deeply and want to share in an authentic way, but I feel an equally strong responsibility to listen to my students, to help them find their own connections and their own voices with which to respond to the Torah text.

My students’ comments and questions during Torah study reinforce my belief that young children are capable of thinking about big ideas, and give me insight into their spiritual development and into how they think about God and the Jewish people. Their interactions with each other allow me to create a community of learners with shared language

¹ This chapter is entirely about my teaching of *Parashat Ha-shavua*, the weekly portion of the Torah. When I speak about “teaching Torah” or just “Torah” without a definite article, I am locating my teaching—and my students’ learning—in the entire body of Jewish learning. When I refer to “the Torah,” with the definite article, I am specifically referring to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible and its weekly Torah-reading cycle.

and experiences discussing Torah together. Each fall, I begin again with a group of students who are relatively new to talking about Torah. As the year goes on, they build content knowledge as well as skills for listening and responding to the Torah text; as we create a culture of shared Torah learning, the students change as a class, learning to listen to each other and respond in respectful ways. "Talking Torah," listening to each other's ideas, and reflecting together all become part of our classroom culture.

This does not all happen magically at the beginning. But every year, a time comes when I step back and listen to the conversation and find the change has occurred: children are sharing ideas, reflecting, questioning and challenging each other, and referring back to other sections of Torah. Suddenly, I think, this is what sophisticated Torah discussions sound like. These students know how to study Torah. This is a community of Torah learners.

In this chapter, I will explore the context in which my particular approach to teaching *Parashat Ha-shavua* to young children has developed, and then focus on my goals in teaching Torah in this context. At the core of my method is its consistent, predictable structure and schedule. Like a writing or reading workshop in which children come to expect certain beginnings, time to do certain kinds of work, and certain kinds of endings, "Torah Talk" is based on a particular structure with four major components. I will explain each of them in detail, and illustrate one lesson from planning through implementation.

Background and Assumptions

When I began teaching *Parashat Ha-shavua* to kindergartners and first graders at the South Area Solomon Schechter Day School,² there were very few resources for teaching it to young children (*First Steps in Learning Torah with Young Children*, published by the BJE of Greater New York,³ was a notable exception). Most early childhood resources seemed

² The school is now located in Norwood, MA, and has been renamed Kehillah Schechter Academy (KSA).

³ Rivka Behar, Floreva Cohen, and Ruth Musnikow, *First Steps in Learning Torah with Young Children* (New York: Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater New York, 1993).

to suggest that we could use the Torah only as a source for “Bible stories,” emphasizing creation and Noah’s ark while skipping non-narrative sections entirely. I had come to teaching with a strong background in early literacy as well as a personal interest in and connection to learning and teaching Torah. With the support of our Head of School at the time, Jane Taubenfeld Cohen, I decided to take all that I knew about good early literacy teaching and apply it to teaching Torah. I never imagined at the time that the routines I was introducing to that group of kindergartners would develop into a structure for teaching Torah that I would continue to use for 15 years.

I started with several assumptions about literacy. First, oral language is an important skill for young children. Long before they can express their ideas through writing, children have much to say aloud. As teachers, we need to make sure that children have the opportunity to express themselves through talk, both for the sake of oral language development and as a rehearsal for their writing.

The second assumption is that children need to learn to respond to texts that they hear or read. Reading (or listening to a story) is a process of making meaning, in which the reader (or listener) interacts with the text. When children hear or read a text, they should be able to retell it, to respond to parts they like, to make a personal connection. They should be able to ask questions of the text. These kinds of responses can happen in oral discussions or in response journals. Both talk and writing are useful tools for making sense of the text.

Third, children just learning to write can begin to learn to use written expression as a way to record their ideas. When we offer them a journal, we broaden our ideas about their “writing” to include talk, drawing, and writing. Often this writing can offer us a window into children’s thinking beyond what they might tell us orally or directly.

Finally, speaking, listening, reading and writing are all important literacy skills that children can use across the curriculum. If children spend time writing in a Torah journal, they will practice important writing skills that will transfer to other times of the day. If children practice responding to stories in the context of Torah, this will enhance their ability to understand and respond to other books. Therefore, a literacy-based Torah curriculum would not “take away” from time spent on other areas; in fact, it would enhance it.

In addition to these assumptions about literacy, I also began with some assumptions about children and Torah. Children wonder about their world and often think about big, difficult ideas. Given the opportunity, children will ask questions that are often deep and philosophical. The Torah is filled with stories and ideas about many of the same questions that children wonder about: How was the world created? What is a family? What are right and wrong ways to act with other people? What do we know about God? I also brought to this project the assumption that, given the right support and structures, Torah learning at the earliest ages can be the beginning of lifelong learning.

Context: My School, My Students, My Classroom

I began teaching Torah to kindergartners and first graders at the South Area Solomon Schechter Day School in 1995. SASSDS (now KSA) is a Conservative Jewish day school in the greater Boston area with an integrated curriculum. As the classroom teacher, I am responsible for teaching both the Judaic and the secular curricula. Whenever possible, I try to find ways to connect the two, through either content or skills. A unit on the moon, for example, includes observations and discussions of its phases, as well as an introduction to the Jewish calendar. Although my schedule does include self-contained lessons in Torah, reading, writing, and math, the lines between subjects are often blurred, as we illustrate Torah stories we have read, or compare a character from literature to a biblical character.

The students in my first grade classes are 6 and 7 years old. Some can read English quite well, while others are just learning. All are just beginning to read and write in Hebrew. Some come from homes where *Parashat Ha-shavua* is a common, familiar topic of discussion, while others come with little or no familiarity with Torah study. Students also come with a variety of abilities and learning styles: some learn well by listening, while others need to move, or need visual cues; some are able to express their ideas easily, while others need additional support to succeed. Any methods I choose to teach Torah must have room for all of these different kinds of learners.

Well before we begin to study *Parashat Ha-shavua*, we look at the *Sefer Torah*, stored inside the *aron kodesh* (ark), which holds a central place

in our classroom. We notice how beautifully it is decorated and discuss why the Torah would be stored in such a special place, and we open up the Torah scroll so students can look inside and observe what they see. All of this is done in an atmosphere of seriousness and awe. From the beginning, I establish the fact that if the *Sefer Torah* is out, we must pay attention to it, not start talking with our friends about their clothes or arguing about who was first in line. Similarly, holding a *Sefer Torah* is a privilege in my classroom, one that carries with it the responsibility to behave appropriately.

We begin each day with a morning service. Each Monday and Thursday, during first grade *Tefillot*, we take the Torah out of the *aron* and have a small Torah service. A student walks around with the Torah as we sing “*Torah tziva lanu Moshe*,” and everyone has a chance to kiss it. We then open up the Torah and I chant one or two lines from the week’s *parashah* in Hebrew. We do not have our full study of Torah at that moment, but we name the week’s *parashah* and we make very explicit links to the Torah discussion we will have later.

As the students get used to hearing the words of Torah chanted aloud each week, they begin to notice familiar names and words. At first I might call their attention to a specific word (“See if you can hear a name of someone you recognize...”), and later, they begin to do this on their own. As their spoken Hebrew vocabulary develops, they often notice words that they know, linking their modern Hebrew learning with their study of the ancient words of the Torah. After I am done reading from the Torah, we usually go around the room so that everyone can say a word they heard and recognized. All of this teaches students to listen closely to the Torah reading, to focus and notice that there are words they know and may even be able to understand long before they are fluent in Hebrew.

Every Monday and Thursday, when it is time for “Torah Talk”, the routine is this: (1) I tell the story of the weekly *parashah*, (2) students act it out or do some other interactive activity, and (3) we sit in a circle and each student has a chance to share a comment or question that they are thinking about (something they like, something that confuses them, or something they wonder about). On Thursdays we repeat this routine and add one step, (4) the students write and draw a page in their Torah journals.

Choices and Challenges

The text of the Torah is challenging for children at this age. The written text itself is not yet accessible to them because of their reading level. Even when read aloud, whether in Hebrew or in translation, the language is often above their comprehension level. Beyond the difficult language, the themes and concepts are also sometimes quite challenging for young children. The text deals with difficult questions involving personal relationships, abstract ideas about time and history, and complicated concepts such as an understanding of God. Children who are still at an age where they understand things quite literally may struggle to understand these aspects.

Another challenge to teachers of *Parashat Ha-shavua* is that there are many places in the Torah where the text moves very quickly—for example, during the many powerful stories packed into the first few *parashiot* of *Bereishit*. By studying *Parashat Ha-shavua*, we are forced to choose selections from each *parashah*, inevitably rushing through or skipping sections on which, in another context, we might have chosen to spend more time. Yet other weeks it can feel challenging to find something appropriate for or relevant to young children—for examples, in the *parashiot* devoted to the laws of sacrifices or sexual purity.

The school calendar also presents its difficulties. When holidays, vacations, and other events interrupt our schedule, we can put our studies of math and science on hold and return to them when we next meet. But the cycle of *Parashat Ha-shavua* marches on whether we are there or not. When we “miss” a *parashah*, do we try to catch up or just skip it? In theory, since we are focusing on the portion for each week during that week, there is no need to “catch up” and fill in, but we sometimes need to fill in the story line of a missed *parashah* or *parashiot* so that the subsequent story makes sense, or occasionally to make sure that we don’t miss an important component of early Jewish literacy such as, for example, the Ten Commandments.

What we gain by staying linked to the reading for any given week (rather than focusing on certain texts for longer periods of times) is the ability to convey a sense of continuity, a commitment to the wider Jewish community, and an attachment to the place of Torah within the Jewish world. Just as students learn about holidays and come to realize that Jews all over the world are celebrating the same holiday at the same

time, they learn that this week's *parashah* in our classroom is the same as this week's *parashah* throughout our school, in their synagogues, in Israel, and throughout the world. Those who come from families where the *parashah* is discussed at home can bring in information they learn there. Those who go to synagogue on Shabbat can carry with them the information they learn at school and find it echoed there. When they cycle back through these *parashiot* for a second and third time in successive grades, the students learn to place themselves in a cycle of time that is marked by stories as much as by holidays, and by revisiting these stories each year, remembering the pieces we've learned before and looking for new details and new meanings.

Torah as Both a Literary and a Religious Text

I have many goals for my kindergarten and first-grade students in our Torah curriculum. I want them to: appreciate that for Jews, learning Torah is not just like reading or studying any other book; understand the sense of *kedusha* (sanctity) with which Jews approach the Torah; hear it as a special story about our people and land, a text that connects them to the Jewish people throughout time; and regard it with a sense of ownership and pride. At the same time, I want them to learn to approach and interact with the Torah text like they would any text: to be able to listen to the stories and the non-narrative sections and retell the plot or other details, summarize what is important, and talk about a character's motivations or surprising plot twists.

In many ways, the literacy skills that children develop as they study Torah each week are the same as the reading comprehension strategies they learn to use when reading picture books or hearing fairy tales, such as retelling, summarizing, inferring characters' feelings, and visualizing images to match the words. They learn to make connections between their own experiences and those in the text, as well as between different stories or different parts of text. They learn to make characters "come alive" as they place themselves in the shoes of the characters and imagine what they might say or how they might act. They learn to use speech and writing to make sense of their reading. In choosing a favorite part of the story to talk or write about, they learn to respond to the text in a very personal way and interact with it, asking questions of the text

and even challenging it at times when it doesn't make sense to them. Developing all of these skills in Torah study helps them not only in their study of Torah, but as they encounter any literature.

While I encourage children to respond in many different ways to each *parashah*, I particularly encourage them to ask questions of the text, to find parts of the text that they do not understand or that they wonder about. They can and do use the Torah text as a context for asking many of their big questions, including many of the things they wonder about God. So it goes both ways: challenging the text and asking questions of it are not only good generic reading skills, but traditional ways for Jews to respond to Torah. For both reasons, I want children to know that questions are worth asking even when they don't have simple answers, and to value the very process of wondering and thinking about difficult questions.

However, when I am teaching *Parashat Ha-shavua*, I am not only helping children build the basic foundations of reading literacy both generally and with respect to the Torah but also building Jewish cultural literacy as they get to know the Torah text as both narrative and law, learning the plot and characters of key stories and exploring passages that contain rules and directions relevant to contemporary behavior. Additionally, I want children to connect to the Torah text at a more personal level than they would to any other single piece of literature. I want the Torah's stories to come alive for them as they think about the people in Torah as real people with emotions, thoughts, and interactions. By asking my students to put themselves into Avraham's shoes as they act out moving to a new land, or imagine what Noah was thinking when God asked him to build an ark, I encourage them to take these stories and make them their own, and to see these characters—especially the *avot* and *imahot*, the original matriarchs and patriarchs—as part of their family. We spend a lot of time understanding the family relationships between Avraham and Sarah; Yitzchak and Rivkah; and Yaakov, Rachel, and Leah. When Yaakov's name is changed to Yisrael, we talk about the term *b'nei yisrael* (the children of Israel) and its use today. I encourage my students to see themselves as the children's children's children, placing themselves on the larger Jewish family tree. Similarly, I make many explicit connections between the land of Israel as the place of Torah stories and the modern state of Israel.

Beyond developing literary skills (both general and Jewish) and engaging with the content of the Torah text, I want my students to develop a love and respect for the Torah itself, and to place it in the greater communal context outside of our classroom. The sections of Torah we talk about are not just the chapter we happen to be up to, but are for the most part being read by Jews all over the world that day or week. I encourage my students to look at this ongoing return to the Torah text as a privilege. I want them to feel emotionally connected to the Torah itself, to be excited when they hear a piece of the Torah that they've heard before, to love hearing Torah stories and discussing ideas from Torah—and to share this love of Torah with each other, with their families, and with others in the school.

Finally, it is also important that the students make connections between Torah and their own lives. When we study creation, we relate it to the practices of Shabbat. Biblical characters become models for teaching values (e.g. Rivkah is a model for the value of kindness to animals when she offers water to the camels). When we study laws given to Moshe at Sinai, I focus particularly on those that my students can follow in their own lives. When the connections are less obvious, I make them more explicit (e.g., relating sacrifices to the ways we pray to God today).

Components of “Torah Talk”

The depth of conversation, the connections my students are able to make, and the ways in which they are able to respond to the Torah text by the end of the year are all supported by the structure that we build and use throughout the year. As Lucy Calkins says about writing workshops:

It is significant to realize that the most creative environments in our society are not the ever-changing ones. The artist's studio, the researcher's laboratory, the scholar's library are each deliberately kept simple so as to support the complexities of the work-in-progress. They are deliberately kept predictable so the unpredictable can happen.⁴

⁴ Lucy M. Calkins, *Lessons From a Child: On the Teaching and Learning of Writing* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1983).

"Torah Talk" has four main components:

1. Telling/retelling
2. Acting out
3. "Torah Talk" (after which the larger framework is named): sharing comments and questions
4. Torah Journals

Telling/Retelling

Each Monday and Thursday, I begin by telling and retelling the story or parts of the *parashah*. I present the story orally, though I often have a text in front of me. I usually have the *Humash* open so that I can refer to specific phrases in Hebrew, and so that the children make the connection that this story is in the written text, even though they are hearing it orally.

Clearly, any oral retelling involves making choices about what to tell and what to focus on. I usually prepare by reading through the whole *parashah* myself so that I have the overall context. Often I choose the most familiar stories in the *parashah*, the key narrative parts, or a part that I think has a relevant lesson that my students can apply to their own lives. As I make each of these choices, I focus on my larger goals for teaching Torah: teaching general and Jewish textual literacy skills; fostering Jewish cultural literacy; developing in my students a love of and respect for the Torah as a whole; and encouraging a sense of Torah's relevance for contemporary behavior. (I explore this in greater detail in the section of this chapter entitled "Choosing Which Parts to Tell," below.)

Acting and Role-Playing

Either during the retelling or after I am done, when the *parashah* is primarily narrative, I have the students act out parts of the story they have just heard. I quickly assign parts, set the scene, and then let them re-enact the scene as they imagine it. When necessary, I even suggest what each character should say.

Part of the reason for doing this is simply to get students up and moving after a long time of sitting still and listening. For some students, this movement and active involvement is essential to being able to take

in the story and remember it. While oral storytelling and referring to the written text are essential to Torah study, they are not the ideal modes of learning for all students. For some students, this activity allows them to put themselves in the shoes of the character and bring the story alive. While they often re-enact just what they heard from the text, there are many times when the “actor” elaborates on the story. They fill in lines that they think the character might have said, or show with their movements and facial expressions how they think the character might have felt. At some level, they are interpreting the text, making their own *midrash*.

Because this active engagement is so important, there are times when I have everyone stand up and act out a certain part of the *parashah* together. For example, when learning about *b’nei yisrael* being slaves in Egypt, I might have everyone act out working hard as slaves and not being able to take a break. When we learn about the special clothes that the *kohanim* (priests) wore, I often assign half the class to be *kohanim* and the other half to make the special clothes and dress the *kohanim*. This activity takes only about two minutes, but everyone is actively involved and the text is made more real.

Acting out these stories also helps the children to imagine and understand the world of the past, keeping the text in its historical context. When they act out “walking through the desert with the camels,” the activity helps them to understand that people in the times of the Torah used different forms of transportation than we use today. At the same time, re-enacting the stories may help the child bring the text into the present in some way. When they act out Avraham inviting guests into his tent, they can, for example, connect that experience to their own experiences welcoming guests into their homes or our classroom.

“Torah Talk” (Comments and Questions)

After we are done retelling the story and acting it out, my students know to return to the rug, sitting in a circle, to get ready for “Torah Talk.” We then go around the circle, and each person has a chance to give a personal response by making a comment about the *parashah*, mentioning something they remember or especially liked about the *parashah*, or asking a question. Often we use a “talking stick” to mark whose turn it is and to remind each other that only the person holding the stick should

be talking while others are listening. I go around and give each person a turn. I find that this takes away some of the pressure that children often feel when they are wondering when they will be called on and trying to remember what they want to say. It also helps them to be able to listen to others' comments and questions as they build their discussion skills.

At first, particularly with the youngest children, this activity can be challenging. Some children have trouble thinking of anything to say. Some need to be prompted with sentence starters ("I remember when ..." or "I liked the part when ..."). Some children will only repeat what students before them have said. Still, each child has a chance to say something aloud, and this often helps them to rehearse what they will later write or draw in their Torah journals. At this early stage, when most children do not say more than one line, I find it helpful to write down what each child says so that we can refer back to it. Sometimes I type up these responses at the end of each week and send them home to share with families.

Over time, these very structured routines develop into sophisticated discussions about the *parashah*. Students begin to ask questions and wonder aloud about things they hear. They question each other and challenge each other's comments, or offer their own answers to their friends' questions. As they get better at listening to each other and responding appropriately, we can often let go of the "one turn each" structure, and they begin to talk to each other in a more natural way. By the end of a year of practice "talking Torah" with each other, they can sound like a group of much older students, having deep, thoughtful discussions.

"Torah Talk" is another critical way in which the students develop a relationship with the text. They learn that the way to listen to Torah stories is not only to listen passively, but also to interact and respond. Even a child's simple retelling of a part that they remember helps that child to make the text personal, as the words come from his or her mouth. By choosing one part of the story that they like, students learn to bring their attention to different parts of the text or story and select a detail. They also learn that it is okay, even encouraged, to have an opinion about the text.

As they learn to give reasons for why they like a certain part of the story, some students are interested in sections that feel familiar (like stories about people getting married or having babies), others are excited by characters who do extraordinary things (such as the brothers

throwing Yosef in the pit), and still others are fascinated by learning about God's power (creating the world, for example, or making the flood). By sharing these out loud in a group, they also get to hear what other people choose as "favorite" parts, which can stretch children to think about something they might not have thought of on their own.

The structure of "Torah Talk" allows everyone to participate from the beginning, while allowing for responses to become more varied and sophisticated as the year progresses. At first, most of what the students do during "Torah Talk" is either retelling parts of the *parashah* or choosing parts that they like:

"I liked it when Avraham moved to a different place."

"I liked it when Avraham listened to God."

"I liked when God promised them that they would have children."

Throughout the year, children continue to retell parts of the *parashah* and choose their favorite sections. But they also begin to think about characters' feelings and wonder why people act in certain ways in these stories:

"I like when his [Yosef's] dad chose him for his favorite son."

"I don't like it when they took the coat and put animal blood on it, because that made their dad really sad."

"Why did the brothers lie to their own father?"

"Why did they throw him in a pit?"

When learning non-narrative sections of Torah, children focus on a variety of aspects of the text and respond in a variety of ways. After learning about some of the rules presented in *Parashat Mishpatim*, some students restate the rules they have learned. Some wonder why there are so many rules. Others use this *parashah* to add to their growing understandings of God:

"Don't steal."

"If you dig a hole, you should bury it up so nobody falls in."

"The rules are to keep people safe."

"Without rules, we wouldn't know that there would be a God, that there would be a thing called Shabbat or the Jewish religion. We wouldn't know anything about being Jewish."

Sometimes they challenge the text or challenge God with their questions:

"Why did Yaakov give Yosef a colorful jacket if that wasn't fair to the other brothers?"

"Why did the brothers want to trick the father that he was dead?"

"Why did Par'oh keep changing his mind?"

"Why did God make all the plagues?"

"If God said don't murder, why did God kill Par'oh's son?"

"How could God have made all those people die if God is supposed to be good?!"

Their questions can be literary, about the text itself, or theological, about the view of God raised by the text. Once they begin to ask questions, the children are not only responding to the text but interacting with it. They are practicing a good general literacy skill—asking questions as you read (or hear) a text—as well as engaging in a very Jewish way of reading Torah.

From the beginning, I encourage children to ask questions and give a lot of positive feedback each time they ask a question rather than just saying, "I like the part when...." Some years, when these "big" questions seem to come up throughout the week and not just during "Torah Talk", I keep a notebook labeled "Questions about God and Torah" near the *aron kodesh* in our classroom, in which children can write (or dictate) their questions as they arise.

Other teachers often ask me how I answer the harder questions, whether they are questions about God or about whether the stories in the Torah are "real." In fact, I rarely answer any of the questions at all, unless they are basic factual ones from the story that can be easily explained. I often respond with, "That's a great question." Sometimes, I turn it back to the child who asked, saying "What do you think?," or ask if another student would like to try to answer. When it is a question that often comes up in traditional commentaries or other Jewish thought, I might say, "Many adults ask that question, too." Depending on our time constraints, we may or may not have a discussion about the question, or we may return to the question at another time. Or I may simply say, "Great question. Let's not answer that right now.... Keep thinking about it."

The time constraints of our classroom setting combined with the limits on children's ability to sit through long discussions make it impossible to return to every child's question. However, a consistent message to the students is: questions are worth asking even when we don't get an answer right away. Asking questions is a valid way of thinking in its own right. Not all questions have easy answers; some are the kind that we keep thinking about for a long time.

Torah Journals:

Dictating, Drawing, Writing

If we conceive of young children's "writing" as their talk, drawings, and print combined, even those who are not yet proficient readers and writers can "write" and express their thoughts. In my classroom, as in most, children write from the very first day of school, in an ongoing writing workshop as well as in particular subject areas like Torah. They quickly get used to the idea that they can use the sounds they hear to write before they know conventional spellings, and learn to copy unusual words like people's names from lists posted around the room.

In this context, Torah journals have flowed very naturally. From the opening weeks of school, students have a place where they record what they learn from each *parashah* and their personal responses to them. Children who are not yet independent writers often draw or have teachers act as their scribes. For those who are beginning to write, Torah journals can be a place for them to experiment with new words and ideas. As with reading comprehension strategies, the integration of these literacy skills and Judaic content comes naturally, with each providing support for the other.

After each Thursday's "Torah Talk" discussion, students work on their Torah journals. This sequence is important because in many ways the oral talk works as a rehearsal before the children do the more challenging task of writing. I encourage them to draw a picture, to write, or to dictate something from the *parashah*: a part they particularly liked, something they wondered about, a question they had. Although reading response logs are often used in classrooms with older children, this is an adaptation that works even with kindergartners. (I use blank white paper for their journal pages.)

I use similar techniques with first graders, except that I provide paper with some lines and expect them to write more independently along with their illustrations. In addition, I try to stretch the first graders' thinking about the *parashah* by providing pages with specific questions for them to answer, often questions which link the *parashah* to their own lives explicitly.

Choosing Which Parts to Tell

Most *parashiot* in the Torah are complex, long, and filled with far more than I could possibly teach in one or two lessons. How do I decide what to tell and what to emphasize each week?

I begin by reading the original Torah text myself. If it is chiefly a narrative section, I sketch out the main narrative points. Sometimes these fall easily into a short outline of several important events. Other weeks, there are too many different parts of the story with many important details, and I have to make decisions about which parts I will include.

Some stories I identify as basic to Jewish cultural literacy even for children—for example, Avraham welcoming the guests to his tent, and Moshe at the burning bush. Others involve narrative details without which the larger story does not flow. I cannot skip the section about Yosef being thrown into the pit if I want the later stories about his reunification with his brothers to make sense. Finally, some sections in the Torah reflect larger themes that I want to emphasize as part of the students' Jewish education, because the themes are connected to Jewish identity and/or because they teach values or practices that I want to encourage students to incorporate into their own lives.

After I read the *parashah* itself, one of my favorite resources to use is *First Steps in Learning Torah with Young Children*, which was mentioned briefly above. For each *parashah*, the authors choose a few passages and suggest a way to present the narrative. They usually connect the passages to a Jewish concept that relates to children's lives, and also provide suggested activities for early childhood classrooms. While I often choose to include more details from a given *parashah*, I find that this series' authors provide an excellent starting point as well as wonderful extension activities.

Planning: Organizing for Me and for My Students

Just as I need this outline of the main narrative points I want to tell, to help me organize the information I have chosen in a given *parashah*, my students also benefit from organizers that help them pay attention to the most important information. As I plan my telling, I know that some children will listen and remember every detail while others would not possibly be able to hold onto all the information. I need to decide ahead of time which are the most basic elements that I want to be sure every child will remember. This might include, for example, the names and places I want them to remember, as well as the two or three main points. As I tell the story, I try to emphasize these key elements through repetition, and highlight them so the students know they are important to remember. Sometimes I list them on a chart, stop and ask review questions as I come to these parts, and/or stop and say, “This part is *really* important,” before continuing with the story. With my own list of narrative points to highlight, as well as basic names, facts and important “big ideas,” I am better able to teach in a way that conveys to every student the essence of the lesson on that *parashah*.

As I plan, I also look for points of connection that I want to emphasize. If I notice that a character in the *parashah* has the same name as a child in my class, I know from experience that this will generate excitement. If a child in the class has a new baby sibling, the appearance in the *parashah* of a child being born will also be very exciting. Sometimes their general experience and background knowledge serves as a connection that helps children understand a story—for example, thinking about their own experiences with brothers and sisters can help them connect to the jealousy among siblings that comes through in so many of the stories in *Bereishit*.

While I want children to connect the stories of the Torah to their own lives and use that information to help them understand what they’re learning, I also want them to be able to think about the ways in which these stories are unfamiliar and take place in another time and context. In my planning, I look for places in the text that will not make sense to the children without some clarification. People lived in tents, not modern houses. They got water from a well, not a faucet in the sink.

They were traveling in a desert, not through a forest or city. Emphasizing these points over and over helps young children understand how life was different "back in the Torah times" and to visualize the narrative in a different way.

While I want my students to relate to the Torah as a narrative text filled with wonderful, exciting, and interesting stories, I also consider the elements of Jewish identity and values I plan to emphasize over the course of the year, and which if any are found in a particular *parashah*. For example, our connection to the land of Israel is rooted in the Torah. When I teach sections of Torah in which this idea comes up, I plan an explicit connection to what they are also learning about the modern state of Israel. First-graders in my class also learn about prayer as a way of communicating our thanks, our wants, and our needs to God. When I identify an example in *Parashat Ha-shavua* of someone using prayer in one of these ways, I plan to emphasize it and connect it explicitly with our own experiences during *tefillot*. Later in the year, when we arrive at *parashiot* that are filled not with stories but with rules and laws, I look for examples that my students can relate to and apply to their own lives. Thus, the study of Torah is about both "far away and long ago" and our lives as Jews in the here and now.

I also do my planning with an eye toward which parts will make sense for students to act out. I may include the larger narrative or focus on a small section. Sometimes there will be only three or four actors, and everyone else will be the audience. Other times, I assign several individual roles but ask everyone else to play a group part (e.g., the Egyptians suffering from the plagues, while Moshe goes to talk to Pharaoh). Occasionally, I will pair everyone up and everyone acts out a scene simultaneously as I narrate—for example, the situation I described above, in which one person in the pair is the *kohen* and the other dresses him in the appropriate clothing.

I rarely plan the exact dialogue or casting. I expect the acting out to be rough improvisation, not a polished performance. Ideally, I want students to think about the story and imagine the words a character might have said, or use the words that I have told them from the text. If a child cannot think of what to say, however, I do not hesitate to suggest ideas or even give them the specific words to say. By the end of the year, most students are able to improvise successfully without much prompting.

Implementation: *Parashat Lech Lecha*

What does each of these components look like in practice? To provide a more complete picture, I will describe in detail one lesson on *Parashat Lech Lecha* that I taught on a Monday in the fall of 2004, from planning through implementation.⁵

Like many of the *parashiot* in *Sefer Bereishit*, *Lech Lecha* is full of stories and details and is in many ways a foundational section for children to learn. The first of our Jewish ancestors, Avraham and Sarah, are introduced in this *parashah*, and the rest of this biblical book will tell the stories of their family. Children must become familiar with them for the purposes of the narrative and as part of their basic Jewish cultural literacy. This *parashah* also introduces the idea of the *brit*, the covenant between God and Avraham. With its two focal points, an emphasis on children and on the land of Israel, the *brit* becomes a central theme throughout the rest of *Bereishit*.

Because this lesson took place early in the year, I needed to limit how many narrative points I included; the more details I told the children, the less likely it was that they would remember the ones I thought were the most important. I knew I would be most successful if I identified parts of the story to which the children could relate. Finally, I knew that I was still establishing their connection to the people and families in the Torah. Avraham and Sarah were not characters that my students already knew well, cared about, or whose actions they were able to predict, but they would be hearing about them and “living with them” for a number of weeks. The choices I made for this *parashah* would carry over into the following several lessons.

The way the *parashah* starts out, with God telling Avram “*lech lecha*”—to leave his home and go to a new place—is essential to understanding the *parashah*. After that, the children would need to know that Avraham did what God told him to do and went to this new place, and to understand the idea of the *brit*, the promise that God made to Avraham, and the components of that promise. The only other plot line that I chose to include was the argument between Avraham and Lot’s herdsmen over the land, so the children would begin to understand the importance of

⁵ My intern videotaped this lesson while I was teaching.

land in that time and place. In addition, I felt that Avraham's behavior in choosing not to fight with his nephew, instead allowing Lot to choose which direction to go, provided a model that my students could consider emulating in their own conflicts. "You could act like Avraham," I imagined, might become part of the language of the classroom in coming weeks when I wanted to suggest the value of avoiding conflict when possible by offering a compromise.

I chose not to include the story of Avraham going to Egypt during the famine and pretending Sarah was his sister rather than his wife, the episode in chapter 14 about the war between the kings, or chapter 15's covenant. While these will be interesting texts for these children to learn later in their Torah study, I need to make reasonable choices based on time constraints and the students' developmental abilities. The stories of Hagar and Yishmael being sent away, and even of Avraham's circumcision, are texts that would be difficult but interesting to teach, and if there were more time I could imagine including them at this age, but knowing that the narrative could move forward without these plot points I reserved these, too, for later study.

Telling

The first thing I want my students to know is the name of the *parashah*. Since they are introduced to it when we take out the Torah and read from it first thing Monday morning during *tefillot*, I usually begin our "Torah Talk" session with two review questions: Does anyone remember the name of last week's *parashah* (implicitly reminding them that we are reading a section of a continuous text that links from one week to the next, much like a new chapter of a long book)? Does anyone remember the name of this week's *parashah* from this morning?

I then introduce two important people who I want the children to recognize: Avram and Sarai.

This *parashah* tells us about two very important people. One is named Avram, and the other is his wife named Sarai. You might have heard about Avraham and Sarah. They're the same people, but their names are going to be changed.

I emphasize these names several times, asking the children to repeat them and making sure they say the names correctly. Many of them rec-

ognize the names Avraham and Sarah from their previous exposure to Torah. I introduce them this way to connect to what the children already know.

When this *parashah* starts out, the *parashah* tells us that God is talking. God comes to Avram and says, “*lech lecha*.” What does that mean?”

Since we went over the name of the *parashah* earlier that morning during the Torah service, I want to see how many children remember what the words mean. Several respond right away: “Go.”

Right, go. God says, I want you to go to a new place. I want you to leave here, leave your land, leave your family’s house, and go to a new place that I will show you. And when you go to that new place, I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you.

This idea of leaving a familiar place and going to a new place is central to this *parashah*, and will be repeated several times.

For the first time that day, I ask the children to predict what Avram would do. Most of them expect that Avram would do whatever God asked, and I confirm for them that in fact that was what happened. At this point I stop to emphasize a connection that many of the children will be able to make between their own experiences and this story.

Has anybody here ever moved before? Does anybody remember what it felt like when you had to move? I want you to think about Avram and Sarai, and what they might have felt like when God said, I want you to move to a new place that I will show you.

But I also want to emphasize how different the context was. As they began to visualize Torah stories and make pictures in their minds, they needed to imagine people walking rather than driving, moving through a hot and dry desert rather than along a modern highway.

They had to walk and travel with their camels, because they were going through the desert. What’s it like in the desert?

After a short discussion about the desert, I returned to the story, intentionally emphasizing the connection to the land of Israel.

... They started going to the place that God showed them. Do you know the name of that place? In the times of the Torah, it was called *Cana'an*. And *Cana'an* is an old name for what we call today, Israel.

As I describe the argument between Avram's and Lot's shepherds, I emphasize Avram's willingness to compromise in order to avoid a fight.

When they got to *Cana'an*, they had a little problem. Avram had his own sheep, and his nephew Lot had his own sheep. In the area where they were, there wasn't enough food for the animals. The people helping them started to fight. Avram said, "You know what, I don't want to have a fight, Lot. You're part of my family. So you choose where you want to go. Whichever way you choose, I'll go in the other direction."

Next, I describe for the students the encounter that Avram had with God, in which God made the promise that would be known as the *brit*, which is central to understanding this *parashah* and all the subsequent stories in *Bereishit*. I give them non-verbal cues—my voice gets very quiet and I pause before telling them that this part is very important. Before I add the third element of the promise, I review the first two:

God starts to talk to Avram. He's in *Cana'an*, which is going to become *Eretz Yisrael*. God starts to talk to Avram—and this is *really, really* important:

God makes a promise to Avram. A really big promise. God says to Avram, Look around you. All the land that you can see is going to be yours and your family's forever and ever. Your family is going to get so big, you'll have children, and they'll have children, and they'll have children ... and Avram, your family is going to be so big—Look at the dust in the earth. Can you count it? As many pieces as the dust of the earth, that's how many children there will be. And then a little while later, God said, look up at the stars. If you can count how many stars are in the sky, that's how big your family is going to get. And this land, *Eretz Yisrael*, is going to be your family's land forever and ever and ever.

At this point, I am explicit about our own connection to this *brit*; I want my students to see themselves as part of Avram's family, part of God's promise, connected to Avram and Sarai and the children they will

have, and connected to the land of Israel. This *parashah* establishes that connection, and we will come back to it throughout our study of Torah all year.

Does anybody know, if Avram had children, and they had children, and they had children, and they had children ... and it went on and on and on, does anybody know who ends up being in Avram's family?

Different children offer some answers: Yitzchak, Leah, Rachel, Yosef.

What about their children and their children and their children? ("Us.")

Right, us! Because every person in the Jewish family is part of that promise that God is talking about. So, if the Jewish people are all part of this promise, if we're all part of this family, then which land is part of this promise too? ("Israel.")

So God makes this promise forever and ever, about Avram's family and about the land. And this promise is such an important promise, that it has a special name. A promise that lasts forever and ever like that is called a *brit*.

One girl recognizes the word *brit* from *brit milah* and starts to ask, "Oh, like when babies..." This is a wonderful connection, and I am pleased that she made that association. I acknowledge her comment, but choose to move on quickly rather than open up a conversation about *brit milah* at this point.

Right, when babies have a *brit*, they are becoming part of the Jewish family and becoming part of God's promise.

One more thing, because this is an important part of this story. There's one more part of this *brit*. First tell me the two parts we learned already. God promised what? What's #1? As many children as the stars, and the dust. And what's part two of the promise? You'll have this land of *Eretz Yisrael*. And God will bless you.

And then God says, I'm going to change your name. From now on, Avram, you will be called Avraham. And Sarai, from now on you will be called Sarah. Avraham and Sarah will be your names forever and ever.

After this long telling, I quickly ask everyone to stand up and join in a group stretch before we begin acting out the story.

Acting

I assign four main roles to begin the acting. Knowing that the Hebrew name of one of my students is Avram, I choose him for that role. I extrapolate from the text and include a role for Sarai as well. (I often choose to expand the female roles in our acting, when the women are present in the story but the text does not tell us what they said.) I quickly assign another child to play Lot, and one more to play God's voice. I let the children know that I will have a part for everyone else, but it will not come at the beginning.

I started the acting by coaching the child playing God. "What are you going to say?" When the child begins in a quiet, shy voice, I remind her to speak in a loud, strong voice: "*Lech lecha!*" She does not seem confident about what her part entails. When that happens, I often prompt children with questions or even give them the specific words to say. "What are you going to tell Avram? And then what's going to happen? 'I will bless you....'"

I then turn to the children playing Avram and Sarai:

Avram, the Torah doesn't tell us this: What do you think might happen next? Who do you think you might talk to about the plan?

Sarai, what are you going to say? The Torah doesn't tell us this part, what do you think she said?

Each child has a chance to vocalize what his character might do and say.

OK, and then go get your nephew, Avram—your nephew Lot—and tell him the plan.

Avram walks over to Lot, tells him the plan, and Lot agrees to go.

Just as I provide them with the words they can say when necessary, I also direct the action and let them know where to go and how to transition. When I ask the three students playing Avram, Sarai, and Lot to walk over to the "new place," I assign half the remaining students to be the people taking care of Avram's animals and the other half to be the people taking care of Lot's animals.

I remind them often of the context they are in, such as the hot desert, and ask them to act in the way they think would be appropriate: "You're walking through the desert—do you think you're running?"

Now that all the students are participating in the acting, they need even more stage directions. I direct the shepherds to stand with either Avram or Lot and to start arguing with each other because there is not enough room here for all of the animals. Needless to say, the children love the chance to have a fake argument and they exaggerate beautifully. After a few moments, I stop the scene and let Avram take over: "I don't want to argue. You can go anywhere you want, and I'll take the other."

Then I have everyone except Avram and Sarai sit down. I remind them that God is about to talk to them. They listen attentively, but the child playing God does not know what to say. I look for other students who can help her out, and I stand next to her to help as well. The goal of this acting is, of course, not to test her memory; I want each child to feel successful and to experience the role-playing, even if I have to feed the lines to her directly.

Let's listen really closely because God's going to talk to you. What are you going to say? (Kathy, playing God, says, "I don't know.") Does anybody remember what God's promise was? Aviva, come help Kathy.

I sit down next to Kathy while Aviva whispers in her ear, and then Kathy says:

Look all around you. Everywhere you can see will be yours. You will have as many children as there are dust and stars. I promise you that this land will be yours and your family's forever and ever.

I remind Kathy that there was one more part of the promise: "Tell them their new names." "Avraham and Sarah."

We end as I ask all the students to give themselves a big hand. I count down 5-4-3-2-1, as an already familiar cue for everyone to return to their seats in the circle.

Responding: "Torah Talk" and Torah Journals

After the students finish acting out the story, I called them back together for "Torah Talk." As they sit down, I remind them of their options for responding: "You can say something you like, something you remember, maybe something you wonder about or a question you have." While I

held the Torah, the children passed around a pretend microphone. This microphone establishes whose turn it is and reminds them to talk one at a time. One by one, we go around the circle. Here are some examples of the children's comments:

- David wants to know whether God had lied. Were there really as many Jews as the dust and the stars?
- Natan wonders, "Why did God want Lot, Avram, and Sarai to move to a new place?"
- Anat first says, "I like the part when they had the baby." When I remind her that no one had actually had a baby in this *parashah*, she clarifies that she liked it when God promised that Avraham and Sarah would have children.
- Aviva wonders, "Why did God have to change Avraham and Sarah's names?"
- Naomi questions, "Why did God say they would have children and then they didn't?"
- Ayelet comments on her role in the acting rather than the story itself, saying, "I liked being one of the helpers."

The range of comments and responses on this particular day is fairly typical of the early part of the year. Some students relate to the *parashah* through the particular role they acted out. Others find connections, however tenuous, to familiar elements from their own lives. Some begin to wonder aloud and ask questions about why things happened in certain ways.

At this point in the year, I rely heavily on the structure to support students' participation. Just as a graphic organizer can help students succeed in a written task, the organizing structure of a partially scripted discussion, in which each child says what he or she likes or asks a question, helps students succeed in this oral task. (Later, they will be more likely to respond to other children's questions or comments, and our discussion will often be less structured and more natural.)

The students' Torah journals reflect their visions of what they imagined when they heard the *parashah*, as well as a particular piece that they choose to write about. Aviva's picture emphasizes the hot sun and the sand of the desert, with a man and a woman standing side by side.

Her words refer to the *brit*: “I like when God made all of the promises to Avraham and Sarai.”

Naomi’s picture is similar, but it is also filled with stars in the sky, and her words emphasize the connection to Israel: “I liked the part that was my favorite part from this time when we went to Israel.”

Unlike these other two, Kathy’s picture clearly shows Avraham and Sarah looking very unhappy. She, too, drew a desert sun and sand, but her picture shows hills in the desert and people traveling over this distance. Her picture is labeled, “Avram, Sarai, and Lot walking in the desert with their animals.”

The students’ responses relate to many of the themes I emphasized, including those that I expected they would connect to in a personal way. They thought about moving, about the desert, about having babies. They were interested in God’s promise to Avraham and Sarah and wondered about why God had to change their names. They wondered why God would ask them to move to a new place, and thought about the connection to Israel. In my planning and teaching, I shape their receiving of the Torah text; by listening to their comments, encouraging their questions, reading their journals, and looking closely at their drawings, I then in turn see the Torah through their eyes. In future weeks, I will build on their ideas, clarify their misconceptions, and watch their responses develop and their love of Torah grow. Most of all, I watch them become a community of Torah learners who think and talk about Torah with each other in increasingly sophisticated ways.

Conclusion

Given the right structures, young children can learn *Parashat Ha-shavua* in a way that is developmentally appropriate yet still takes the text—and the children—seriously. When we approach the Torah text each week as both a literary and a religious text, we help students develop their general literacy skills and their basic Jewish literacy while engaging them in the age-old Jewish enterprise of engaged textual interpretation. Children can make connections with their own lives, bringing the Torah text off the page and into their world, and learn to love studying Torah, a love they share with classmates and others in their families and communities.

In the time since I first wrote the working paper that was the basis for this chapter, I have continued to teach *Parashat Ha-shavua* to first graders using this approach. Just as I find something new each time I return to a familiar section of Torah text, I continue to hear new ideas and new questions each time I teach Torah to a new group of students.

My thinking about my teaching has continued to evolve. I continue to see evidence that a predictable structure like "Torah Talk" helps to scaffold children's success. I remain committed to teaching Torah text in an authentic way that also honors my students' developmental needs. I still find that integrating oral language skills, reading comprehension skills, and early writing skills into my teaching of Torah enhances both my literacy teaching and my Torah teaching.

At the same time, I have developed new questions about my pedagogy. I find myself wondering how I can use more visual cues, including pictures, props, and charts, to tap into the visual learners in my class—how I can use physical props and pictures to hook children's attention without detracting from their ability to create their own mental images. I also wonder about ways to make the children's thinking more public—for example, charting their responses and questions and posting them on a bulletin board. This could allow us to return to the "Torah Talk" comments in future discussions, or to expand on them, though I worry that this might detract from the more interactive discussions that often evolve as the year goes on. I wonder about which other discussion practices I could explicitly teach and then encourage among the students: ways of challenging each other when they disagree, for example, or ways of referring back to previous conversations.

When we finish a cycle of *Parashat Ha-shavua* each year, completing the entire Torah, we return to the beginning and start all over again. The text is the same, but we may read it differently because we are different people this year than last. As I go forward in my teaching of Torah to young children, the essential goals and structure remain the same, but the details inevitably change. My students are different this year than last, and so am I, and my experiences over the years cumulatively influence the choices I make in each subsequent year.