14 Using the Contextual Orientation to Facilitate the Study of Bible with Generation X

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Introduction

Barry Holtz suggests a map of “orientations” for the teaching of Bible in Jewish settings.¹ Holtz establishes an orientation as:

... a description not of a teacher’s “method” in some technical meaning of the word, but in a deeper sense, of a teacher’s most powerful conceptions and beliefs about the field he or she is teaching. It is the living expression of the philosophical questions.... What is my view of the aims of education, and how as a teacher do I attain those aims?²

For Holtz, then, an orientation to the Bible is an often-unconscious set of ideas shaping the approach to the biblical text that a teacher takes in his instruction.

Among his orientations, Holtz describes the “contextual orientation,” a historical approach informed by biblical scholarship, understanding the component texts of the Hebrew Bible in their own time; he describes it as used primarily in university settings.³ Below, we will demonstrate that the contextual orientation can, in fact, be used productively in set-

¹ See chapter 3 in Barry W. Holtz, *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and in Practice* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2003), revised as chapter 2 of this volume.

² *Ibid.*, 48-49

³ *Ibid.*, 92, and see pages 33-4 above.

tings in addition to the university, and for purposes other than scholarly exploration.

This chapter investigates the expression of one teacher's "powerful conceptions and beliefs" about the teaching of Bible in a liberal synagogue, examining how the contextual orientation can consciously be used in this setting as a deliberate part of a teacher's overall approach to reaching a particular population. We explore how this approach affects the learning and engagement process for adults in their twenties and thirties, and how the contextual orientation can help young adults develop a deeper and more complex attachment to and understanding of the Bible—and can facilitate that attachment in the first place. We offer an examination of the contextual orientation in use, beginning with the development of the pedagogic orientation of the teacher (one of the authors of this chapter). We focus in particular on one session of a bi-monthly class and present interview data from three participants in this class. Their reactions to the class session illustrate that historical approaches to the biblical text as part of an overall teaching strategy can effectively and meaningfully connect young Jewish adults to the ongoing study of the Bible.

Background

Torah and Tonics on Tuesdays (Tx3) is a bimonthly class for Jews in their twenties and thirties held at Temple Israel of Boston. Now in its fourth year as an ongoing, year-round, adult education offering, Tx3 is a component of a large-scale outreach and engagement initiative for adults called The Riverway Project: Connecting Twenties and Thirties to Judaism (RWP) through Temple Israel. The director of the project, and the teacher of Torah and Tonics, is Jeremy Morrison, a rabbi in his 30s and a member of the synagogue's clergy team who spends 70% of his time working with this demographic group.

RWP, which began in the spring of 2001, is comprised of worship, learning, and social justice activities, and is conducted in a variety of settings both within the Temple Israel building and in various locations throughout the Boston metropolitan area. In an attempt to engage unaffiliated Jews in the creation of Jewish community in both informal and institutional settings, RWP provides a panoply of connecting points,

including casual Shabbat experiences in participants' homes, low-cost opportunities to formally join this urban congregation, and the Torah study through Tx3.

A general understanding of RWP's goals and the characteristics of its participants is important background for an examination of the curricular and pedagogic choices that Morrison makes when leading Tx3. Approximately 1000 people have, to varying degrees, connected with RWP programming. Several hundred of them have formally affiliated with Temple Israel. The population of RWP participants is heterogeneous. The majority of them are over the age of 25. The range of professions represented is vast, and includes artists, graduate students, entrepreneurs, architects, teachers, doctors, and lawyers. Approximately 50% of participants are married or in ongoing relationships; about 25% of the participants are in interfaith relationships. Several participants have infants or toddlers.

For many, RWP is either their first encounter with organized Jewish activity or marks a return to Jewish communal life after a hiatus that began when the participant left home for college. If a participant's family was affiliated with a synagogue during his childhood, it was most likely Reform. Roughly 15% of participants describe their Jewish background as Conservative, Reconstructionist, Humanistic, or secular, and an estimated 2% of RWP participants report that they are from Orthodox homes. What unifies most RWP participants is a low level of Jewish knowledge and a beginner's experience of Jewish ritual. Few have engaged in the study of Jewish texts before coming to Tx3; most have only the most rudimentary or no understanding of Hebrew.

Tx3 is designed to fit easily into the life of a busy young adult. The program, supported by a donor, is free for participants. Each session includes dinner along with beer, wine, and soft drinks. It begins at 6:30 p.m., with an initial unstructured 30 minutes of eating and socializing. The instructor arrives at approximately 6:50 and an hour of text study begins at 7:00. On average, there are 25-30 students, although as many as 50 have come for a single session. There is a core group of approximately 40 students who each attend at least once a month.

The setting is casual, with students sitting at circular tables of six to eight people; eating and drinking continue throughout the hour of study. The instructor stands in front of the group with a flip chart and colored markers, leading the group in reading out loud from the Plaut edition of

the *Humash*⁴ and in an interactive conversation about the Torah portion of the week. Often the instructor brings a handout for students that includes several text-related commentaries from traditional and modern Jewish sources. A given handout might include texts as diverse as a piece of Talmud, a passage from the Hasidic writings of the *S'fas Emes*, a reading from Martin Buber, and an article from an Israeli newspaper.⁵ The amount that students speak is usually as much as or more than the instructor speaks. Questions and debate are common.

Methodology

This chapter draws on qualitative research methods to explore its central questions.⁶ A close analysis of the interactions among teacher, participants, and subject matter during one evening of text study will illustrate how Morrison employs the contextual orientation and point toward some other characteristics of his pedagogical approach. To

⁴ Gunther Plaut, ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), produced by the Reform movement.

⁵ While this chapter investigates Morrison's utilization of the contextual orientation, his teaching reflects aspects of several of Holtz's orientations, including *parshanut*; decoding, translation, and comprehension; literary criticism; reader-response; and personalization. (See Holtz, *Textual Knowledge*, 92-95.) Most often, about 75% of the class period attends to direct exploration of the biblical text; Morrison then directs students to one or more commentaries, traditional and/or modern. In this way, he exposes students to multiple types of Jewish texts as well as multiple ways of approaching the Bible.

⁶ This chapter's first author, Beth Cousens, has completed an empirical case study of the Riverway Project. Her academic interests focus on the Jewish growth of adults in their twenties and thirties. In studying the Riverway Project, she explored how the various strategies that Morrison uses enable participants to develop strengthened connections to Judaism and new understandings of the role that Jewish traditions and ideas can play in their lives. She relied on a variety of qualitative research methods to construct her study, including participant observation in all Riverway Project-related activities and semi-structured interviews with Morrison and frequent and semi-frequent Riverway Project participants. This work on the contextual orientation was part of her larger study, "Shifting Social Networks: Studying the Jewish Growth of Adults in Their Twenties and Thirties" (Brandeis University, doctoral dissertation, 2008).

investigate how participants experience Morrison's teaching and especially the contextual approach, Cousens conducted a semi-structured interview with three frequent participants in Tx3, who each participated actively in the specific Tx3 session under analysis. Among other demographic factors, the subjects vary in their childhood experiences with Judaism, their levels of education, and the areas of the country in which they were raised.

Each interview focused on the participant's Jewish background and previous ideas about Bible, motivation for participating in Tx3, overall experience in Tx3 and with The Riverway Project, and experience that evening during the class. To help the participants recall their reactions to the class, during each interview Cousens and the subject together examined segments from the class transcript. In each case, the subject was able to bring to mind his general feelings during the class and his response to the ideas that Morrison introduced. As is traditional in qualitative research, we present this dense analysis of one evening's study and three participants' reactions in order to demonstrate and further develop our theory about working with this population—that is, that the contextual approach will draw members of Generation X into the study of Bible—with the assumption that this theory should and will be further tested through additional research with this age group, as well as in various settings and with different populations.⁷

Building An Orientation: A Teacher's "Powerful Conceptions and Beliefs"

As we stated at the outset of this chapter, our starting point is Holtz's conception of orientations to teaching Bible—the idea that a teacher has an overriding teaching philosophy that encompasses his deepest convictions about the field in which he is engaging and that shapes his goals, teaching and learning activities, responses to questions, and interactions with students. An understanding of how and why Morrison uses the contextual orientation in Tx3, then, benefits from a brief exploration of the evolution of his deepest convictions about the study

⁷ For a full discussion of the use of cases in education research, see Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

of Bible and the role that such study can play in one's connection to Judaism.⁸

Born and raised in Brookline, Massachusetts, Morrison grew up in a home in which a liberal arts, secular education was valued. Both of his parents have doctoral degrees. Literature, art, and music were mainstays in his childhood home; striving for academic excellence was prized.

Morrison and his brother were the fifth generation of his family to be affiliated with Temple Israel, the locus of his involvement in Judaism. His family attended Friday night services about once a month, and celebrated Shabbat (with Friday night dinners), Passover, and the High Holy Days. From kindergarten through twelfth grade, he attended the synagogue's religious school, confirmation classes, and post-confirmation program. In high school, he was involved with the synagogue's youth group, served as its president, and developed close relationships with his rabbis, experiencing the synagogue as his "second home." Yet, during college, he was only nominally connected to organized religious activity.

Morrison does not recall having any textual connection to Judaism in the first two decades of his life; his religious school transmitted a sense of permissiveness in asking critical questions about Judaism and its traditions, but not the Jewish value of text study per se. A substantive exploration of Jewish texts and their applicability to his life began for Morrison only after college—in his case, when he entered rabbinical school at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC) at age twenty-four. For the first time, he engaged in studying biblical and rabbinic texts in their original languages and began learning interpretive skills. His own adult search for religious authenticity, then, has from the beginning been rooted in the study of Jewish texts, the activity with which he and his students engage at Tx3.

The study of Bible was the largest component of the core curriculum in Morrison's program. This emphasis on biblical studies is a reflection of the Reform movement's historic connection to the Bible as its central, defining text.⁹ Moreover, as a pre-professional school, HUC seeks to

⁸ While it is beyond the scope of this chapter, a serious investigation of the development of a teacher's own orientation(s) can help bring those orientation(s) to consciousness for the purpose of the teacher's critical examination of his teaching.

⁹ See Michael Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 45, 172-3, 268, 362.

emphasize tools relevant to the teaching of Bible over those relevant to teaching rabbinic texts, as Bible remains the primary Jewish text taught in Reform educational settings.

For Morrison, exposure to the contextual orientation in particular (during the first time he undertook serious study of the Bible) was revelatory. He became more engaged with the subject matter as he sought to understand the ideological goals of the writers, their theologies, and the complex web of relationships between the Bible's components. As he learned more about biblical history and life in the ancient Near East, narratives that Morrison had learned in his childhood acquired new meaning and greater complexity.

Morrison describes his pedagogic goal in Tx3 as helping his students, too, to see the biblical text as complex and interesting, and develop a reverence for the text that grows out of understanding its complexity. He sees many adults who enter his community feeling a great gap separating them from Jewish texts and their interpretation. They are eager to learn, yet lack the basic skills and knowledge through which to access Jewish texts on their own. They seek ownership of their heritage, but frequently know neither where to begin nor how to incorporate Jewish learning (and living) into their often hectic lives.

The Use of the Contextual Orientation with Adults in Their Twenties and Thirties

The questions that Morrison encounters in his classroom conversations with Riverway Project participants often include fundamental questions about the Bible: Why was the Bible written? When? Who wrote it? His students' questions begin as a search for information, and the answers they receive generate more complicated queries that express a deep desire to make a coherent framework out of the many fragments of their Jewish knowledge and experiences. How can I believe in something that might not have occurred? How do I find and make meaning for myself in this complex text?

Morrison at first used the contextual orientation in his teaching at Tx3 because it is how he naturally approaches the biblical text—that is, it is a pedagogic approach that he did not initially consciously choose for this setting. As he interacted with students in their twenties and

thirties, his reflexive approach was reinforced and made more deliberate as he found that the contextual orientation effectively drew his students into study of the Hebrew Bible and engaged with and responded to their questions.

The contextual orientation to the Bible is appropriate for and potentially highly effective with adults in this age cohort for several reasons. An early 1990s novel named the children of baby boomers “Generation X” for their cynicism and doubt about their futures.¹⁰ Generation X came to look skeptically at society’s traditional institutions, to believe and trust what they discover for themselves, and to crave authenticity in relationships.¹¹ For them, “subjective knowing,” or what they know personally, carries greater import than “propositional truth,” ideas that others give them as certainties.¹²

Also, more highly educated than any American generation before them,¹³ today’s adults in their twenties and thirties demand a similar level of intensive, complicated intellectual exploration in their extracurricular learning. In addition, individuals coming of age today can construct their identities from a multiplicity of concepts and beliefs, piecing together attitudes if they wish from any systems they choose.¹⁴ In doing so, they combine their skepticism and distrust of inherited ideologies

¹⁰ Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1991). Writers about Generation X do not agree regarding the birth years that mark this population, each using different cultural events to note the beginning and end of the cohort. Following the birthrate, which decreased significantly in the mid-1960s and then increased in the late 1970s, we understand baby boomers to have been born from 1946 to 1964, and the next generation, Generation X, to have been born 1965 to 1980. Generation X, then, includes 46 million Americans, compared to 80 million baby boomers and 76 million millennials, those who come after Generation X. See Lynne C. Lancaster and David Stillman, *When Generations Collide* (New York: Harper Business, 1972), 20-32.

¹¹ Douglas Rushkoff, *The GenX Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1994), 5.

¹² Richard W. Flory and Donald E. Miller, eds., *Gen X Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 9.

¹³ Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁴ Richard R. Osmer and Freidrich Schweitzer, *Religious Education Between Modernization and Globalization: New Perspectives on the United States and Germany* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 20.

with a respect for information and a desire for guides who can inspire them personally.

The contextual orientation exposes the biblical text as multifaceted and layered, making it easier for students to develop their own textured and varied understandings of the Bible. Rather than inheriting a particular unified reading, with a contextual understanding students can examine the many different biblical ideas available to them, and have the potential to construct their own Jewish identities—and establish what will be emphasized in their own Jewish lives—shaped by this range of ideas. In addition, to the extent to which they bring experience with historical or other scholarly study of other, non-Jewish texts, the contextual orientation makes a connection between their previous studies and their Jewish studies. Use of the contextual orientation in this setting frames as Jewish a scholarly, critical approach to the biblical text, instead of requiring students to give up what they have already learned in other settings,

Portraits of Three Tx3 Students

Brian Ehrlich¹⁵ is thirty and works in a psychiatry fellowship at a local university. Raised on Long Island, his parents are small business owners who created a warm Jewish environment for him and his brother. They spent the High Holidays and Passover with family in New York City and on Long Island, and had an annual Hanukkah party with cousins at their grandparents' home; when they attended synagogue services, they did so at the Conservative congregation that his grandfather helped to establish. "My family has made it—sort of culturally it's a very important aspect of our lives," he explains. At a small liberal arts university in the Northeast, Brian sought out his campus Hillel organization, a "good social scene," where students helped to cook Friday night Shabbat dinners and campus Jews congregated in a tight-knit community. A musician, Brian came together with another student, a "jack of all trades when it came to music," to create a klezmer band, and they played at the campus Hanukkah party every year.

¹⁵ Students' names have been changed and certain aspects of their portraits have been altered to mask their identities.

During medical school in Boston, Brian continued to look for a Jewish network. He became friends with several other Jewish students who hosted Shabbat dinners in their homes and gave him a Jewish community in Boston. For Brian, Judaism is about “the value of education, hard work, the sense of family that’s involved.... Growing up it wasn’t a ... religious household but ... there was this sort of togetherness of family, and all the families we were friends with.... They all seemed—we’re all so very different but at the same time we’re all so very much the same.” In medical school, this feeling was reinforced when he spent time with his Jewish friends and their families—it was all “familiar.”

When his community of medical school friends graduated and moved to residencies around the country, Brian found himself without a Jewish community and connection in his life. In New York, it had seemed, “everything is Jewish even when it’s not.” But Boston came to seem like a “funny Jewish town” where it takes “work to be Jewish.” Brian began to feel “lost in everything else,” as though he wasn’t “connecting with everything here.... I think that comes from lack of Judaism.” At the same time that he started to regret his lack of a Jewish connection, Brian began a serious relationship with a non-Jewish woman. As they discussed her learning about Judaism, building a Jewish home together, and her possible conversion, Brian sought out Temple Israel at the recommendation of a college friend who had become a rabbi. He and his fiancée appreciate that they will be welcomed into Temple Israel; they will be married there, and they will rely on Temple Israel and the Riverway Project to orient them to the rhythms and purposes of a Jewish life.

Torah study with the Riverway Project contributes significantly to the sense of Jewish community and connection that Brian craved. He recalls feeling some kind of relationship with Torah at his bar mitzvah: “I remember being thirteen years old and incredibly nervous and I had to have a little extra stand so I could be seen from the bimah.... And I remember thinking, this is really neat. Here’s this text that has no vowels and I’m reading from it.... And I think that that ‘this is really neat’ idea stuck with me.” He appreciates that Tx3 allows him to return to the connection to Torah that he began in childhood, and that Morrison’s teaching helps the text become “relevant to today.” He doesn’t remember ever considering the question of authorship of Torah prior to Tx3, but speculates that had anyone asked, he would have answered that

it is not the “word of God,” but rather the recording of some “fables” by “three Jewish guys with long beards.”

Daniel Schwartz is in his early thirties and is a comedy writer. He was raised in the Boston area by his father, a professor of religion at a Boston university, and his mother, a teacher. When he was a child, his family lived for a time in Israel. He spent his elementary school years in Orthodox Jewish schools in Boston and in Israel, went to a public high school, and attended Yeshiva University as an undergraduate. One night in his senior year, he saw a flyer recruiting counselors for a Jewish overnight camp in Russia. He signed up, “became very enamored with Russia [and] with Russian Jews,” and stayed for two years working with Jewish communities in Russia. This experience led him to Israel, to a master’s degree in diaspora Jewish education at Hebrew University, and to work with diaspora students in Israel. When he came back to the US, he held a variety of jobs in finance and media in New York before he decided to work full-time on his comedic work.

Raised as an Orthodox Jew, Daniel continued to practice traditional Judaism until returning to Boston from New York. Explaining his move away from Jewish ritual observance, he describes how his father’s Jewish practice existed alongside his simultaneous lack of belief in God and Torah’s divine authorship. His father is a “non-believer,” and also a “practicing Jew. Pretty strictly a practicing Jew.... So we grew up with that, [and] I think on the one hand it opens your eyes to different perspectives, on the other hand ... in our home—there were no taboos.”

Friday night dinner in the Schwartz home would begin with traditional Shabbat rituals and liturgy. They would sing “Shalom Aleichem,” make *kiddush* over the wine and *motzi* over their meal—and then discuss why the Bible “was a man-made ... set of books” or “how *not* wrong homosexuality is.” As Daniel reports, “It was all open” in his family. As a result, Daniel felt free to choose his career over Jewish ritual observance, although he continues to understand traditional Judaism as the “right” way to be Jewish. (He does continue to seek out and create communal meals on Shabbat.)

His most significant Jewish communal involvement is Tx3. He began participating in Tx3 in order to meet people when he first returned to Boston, but continued because he appreciates the way that it is taught. While he considers traditional Jewish rituals and approaches to be more authentic than newer rituals and interpretations, he also understands

and values Morrison's "critical" approach to the biblical text. It feeds Daniel's "rational side" and his questions about the divine authorship of the Bible. As he puts it, "I was raised in America—man and snake don't talk." He has both a "Jewish perspective on life" and a "western perspective on life," and expresses uncertainty that he ever will—or can—pick just one. He participates in Tx3 exactly because this setting allows him to express uncertainty, and to discuss the encounter between his two perspectives.

Sari Schein is in her late twenties, a doctoral candidate at a prestigious university in the Boston area. She was raised outside of a medium-sized city in the Midwest, her father a professor at a large university and her mother a kindergarten teacher. The second of two children, she was enrolled in the closest non-Catholic private school to their house after her brother's unhappy experience with public school. Because her school had very few Jewish students and her family had no Jewish institutional involvement, Sari came to know very few Jews. Yet, she says, "we definitely felt Jewish—sort of a secular Judaism." She always felt somewhat different than her classmates. Her family celebrated some holidays, with grandparents visiting from their different East Coast locations. She fondly remembers her maternal grandmother, who would "cook all sorts of food like bulkies and homemade soup and knaidlach," and she has "lots of good memories and feelings" from these experiences.

As she continues to describe her own Jewish childhood, she emphasizes her father's upbringing and tells a story that shows how in some sense his memories of his own New York Orthodox Jewish upbringing became her own memories and shaped the core of her attitudes toward Judaism. Her father's father had studied philosophy in college and easily slipped away from his Orthodox beliefs, although not his Orthodox lifestyle. Her father inherited his father's atheism and, while he appreciated the family Jewish experiences of his own childhood and shared those stories with his daughter, he chose to raise his family without active Jewish involvement and without any Jewish learning. Sari remembers "being told as a kid that this [Sunday school] is a waste of time." She remembers thinking "it's so strange" that she had such a "rich educational background growing up," but no Jewish learning. Once handed a Bible by a Christian friend, she remembers how foreign it felt to her, and how confusing religion in general was.

In college, Sari tried to connect to Jewish life through Hillel, participating in meals and some Jewish learning. Her college community, however, felt filled with people who “knew the songs” and had “been to summer camp.” Instead of studying at Hillel, Sari learned about Judaism through the religious studies department, taking classes with a renowned historian of American Judaism. She feels “committed” to marrying someone Jewish, and since college has been deliberately spending time in Jewish communities, to learn and also to meet other Jews. In graduate school in Boston, she returned to Hillel, more determined to stick it out despite her discomfort, and this time looked for a class to help her learn more. Her Hillel rabbi helped her find Tx3, and since then she has tried to participate in every class.

A historian, Sari values Judaism deeply because it is her “family’s history.” Before Tx3, however, she did not think about the Bible itself at all—she laughs even when asked the question—and had read it (the Oxford Study Bible version) only for a college course. She never believed that God wrote the Bible: “If you don’t believe there’s a God, then a God can’t write the Torah.”

Teaching and Learning Jewish Texts

Each of these three students participated actively in the Tx3 class on Tuesday evening, April 27, 2004. The session focused on the double Torah portion *Acharei Mot-Kedoshim* (Leviticus 16:1-20:27), specifically on the sacrifices that God directs Aaron to make after the death of his sons. Morrison frames the session by raising the question of the relationship between the two Torah portions and the definition of holiness that they present. He introduces the lesson by asking students to define the word and concept *kadosh* (holy). During the conversation, he also introduces a translation of *hol* as “the mundane.” To explore these issues, Morrison asks students to read together and out loud Leviticus 16: 1-22, which describes the scapegoat ritual that Aaron conducts. In the rest of the lesson, Morrison directs students to different biblical texts that expound on the concepts of *kadosh* and *hol*; the delineations of sacred space; the relationship between God, man, and sin; and the roles of the priest. Students raise questions about the texts and these concepts, and discuss their ideas with each other as well as with Morrison.

By reviewing several of the tools that Morrison employs as part of that night's teaching and learning, we can begin to understand the contextual orientation as part of an overall effective teaching strategy. For Morrison, a primary aspect of the contextual orientation is examining how the biblical writers conceived of their world. During this session, a student observes that different books of the Bible present different notions of God. Commenting on Moses' relationship with God, this student (Brian) says:

This might almost be a leap, but it's almost as if God is sitting here talking face to face with Moses in Exodus, and then here in Leviticus the sin happens and God is this kind of misty, fiery thing.

To respond, Morrison draws directly on the ways in which the texts' writer(s) understood God's presence in their world:

Right. I mean there's this notion that in Genesis you can fight, you can physically engage with—I mean anytime you see an angel in the Bible, in the Torah in particular, it's God, as another version, another aspect. They believed, and I think we've spoken of this here, in the Ancient Near East it was like you could turn the corner and bump into God. And they're never surprised. I mean Jacob encounters this angel, and they wrestle, and he's never like, "What the heck are you doing here?!" There's never shock. But Brian is absolutely right. In Leviticus, all of a sudden, if you touch God, you die. There's a whole different notion of what God is.... The priestly writers of Leviticus have a very different conception of what you can do with God and the access you can have. The writers of the earlier stories of, say, Jacob encountering an angel—there's a much different understanding in which you and me and anyone else can bump into God and even, hug Him and not get singed.

Here, the student makes a literary observation: different texts offer different points of view. Morrison validates and expands on this idea, suggesting that different passages or even books represent different writers' understandings of God. Morrison then goes on to suggest that these understandings may have developed over time, introducing a historical perspective, and goes a bit further into what the writers may have actually believed or understood about God. Brian points to

a discrepancy that he sees in the text; Morrison offers an explanation for that discrepancy based on his ability to situate the biblical text as a historical document comprised of multiple sources (although without making direct reference to the documentary hypothesis or other hallmarks of critical biblical scholarship). The contextual orientation is reflected in Morrison's identification of different stances towards God that develop over time, creating for his students a sense of the text's complexity.

In another example, Morrison and the students explore the text again from the writers' perspectives, this time examining how they made sense of phenomena that were seemingly incomprehensible. A conversation about *tzara'at*, a set of afflictions and impurities that can occur on the body and also within the walls of a house, raises these questions.

Morrison: ... So as with the skin, if your home broke out with this thing called *tzara'at*, there's a process, you actually deconstruct your house and you throw the stones ... into the area outside the camp, and that helps purify your house. It also deals with the same thing with clothes. Why do you think with something like a skin ailment, you create all of these processes of purification?

Brian: From a public health perspective though, open sores are bad, are contagious. And so, to maintain health, in this camp here, you need to do something. So these are the instructions for how to get rid of the problem.

Morrison: Good. So that could be said, as a good reason for why or how to deal with the skin ailment. What about the house?

Daniel: You mean why does your house get it?

Morrison: Yes. Why does your house get it? Is that what you just said Daniel? ...

Brian: But even if they didn't understand about germs. Germs don't just live on your skin; they could be elsewhere in the house.

Morrison: But you just said, I think, a telling thing: "If you don't understand about germs." I mean, at some level, I think that all of this ritual, and this applies to what we are about to deal with

tonight, deals with ... about how do you create a kind of control over something you don't have any control over? How in their world, and it's true in our world as well, to a degree, in which so much cannot be explained, how do you create systems that help explain it? Especially when things are not of your doing.

Sari: I was just thinking that cleaning of a house strikes me as being a very psychological response to purification. So you may be able to rid yourself of it, but you're not going to feel like you've eradicated the problem until you've removed every stone, literally, in your house.

In this exchange, we see another way that the contextual orientation answers students' questions and expands interpretive possibilities for them. Morrison raises a question about the writers' intent, located in the writers' own time: Why would they have created these means of purification? A student, Brian, responds with a pragmatic explanation, thinking about the actual world in which the writers lived and the phenomena they needed to address. Morrison pushes the question: What about the house? Brian again offers a pragmatic explanation—or more specifically, a scientific perspective—bringing in his own professional framework. Sari gives another understanding of the writers' motivations, this time from a psychological perspective. Both students are exploring an idea that Morrison emphasized during their exchange: the writers were trying to comprehend and control a mysterious element of their lives.

Here, the contextual orientation encourages students to think about the extent to which the biblical writers in their time might have reflected some of the same concerns that we have today—about contagion, and more generally about whatever plagues us, physically or psychologically. In other words, it invites them to read the text as reflecting a particularly ancient way of grappling with a timeless problem. This view of the text, while it does not directly engage with biblical scholarship, nevertheless grounds the text in its time by exploring its religious and psychological themes, inviting students to mentally step into the world of the text in order to understand the ancient writers and their context.

In a third example, Morrison focuses on the ideological aspect of the text, using the contextual orientation to demonstrate that the biblical writers might have been making a particular point about their society.

Morrison returns to the subject of Aaron's sons being killed in the previous week's Torah portion, and links this earlier event to the present conversation about impurity and holiness:

Morrison: Now returning to our piece for today: ... There's a sin on the part of [Aaron's sons]; did that somehow affect the space? These guys make this offering, fire comes out, and zaps them.... They did something wrong and something toasts them. What happens next with Aaron? ... Vis á vis Aaron and this space [the tabernacle]? What does the text say? [Here, a student reads out loud Leviticus 16:2-3: "The Lord said to Moses: Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come at will into the shrine behind the curtain in front of the cover that is upon the ark lest he die.... Thus only shall Aaron enter the shrine with a bull of the herd for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering."]

Brian: Is this an instruction as to who can go in and out of that space?

Morrison: Definitely. We're dealing with priests—meaning the priests can go in and out but you can't ... And there is also, of course, a hierarchy here. God's "contained" in some sort of "box." Certain people in this hierarchy are allowed to go towards that God and others are not.

At first in this interchange, Morrison asks about what the text says. Together, he and the student elucidate the religious hierarchy suggested by the text: only certain individuals can enter the tabernacle, the holy space. The student implies in his question that the instruction is meant not just for Aaron, but also for this entire religious society. Morrison answers the question by alluding to the text's ideological bias in support of the hierarchy that existed at the time this text was likely written and edited—reflecting a positive view of the specialized role of priests not just in the Tabernacle in the wilderness, but also in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem.

Through all of these exchanges, several important aspects of Morrison's approach emerge. First, students' freedom to ask questions should be noted. Brian says about this, "I, sort of tend to try to start at the very ... let's just try to get an idea as to what we're talking about." He "feel[s] comfortable" with Morrison as a teacher, and has noticed that

Morrison's teaching encourages questions. Indeed, Morrison almost always asks immediately and repeatedly after the first reading aloud of text during the session, "Questions? More! Come on, guys," he says, and students respond with probes about various contextual details of the text—setting, objects, words—that seem foreign and complex. They demand information, in part because Morrison has created an environment that allows and encourages them to do so.

Second, we see that the process of the creation of the text is itself an area of focus. Part of complicating the text for students involves demonstrating to them the long evolution of the canonical biblical text, and imbuing them with an appreciation of that process. As Morrison repeatedly refers to the writers, their intent, when and where in time and history they were writing, the text appears not as a monolithic entity emerging in one voice, but as a multi-faceted, layered, and deliberate product of multiple religious voices.

Finally, as should be evident, the contextual orientation operates on the assumption that the text is not simply God's communication to human beings, but was written by human hands and reflects human involvement in its creation. God is often a character in the discussions during Tx3, and the possibility of divine involvement in the authorship of the text is not excluded from conversations, but human composition of the Torah is consistently assumed. At the very least, a human contribution to the text is certain. Perhaps paradoxically, it is precisely Morrison's assumption that the received biblical text is human and not exclusively or even primarily divine that allows him to engage students in Torah study as an emerging sacred activity.

Students and the Contextual Orientation in Use

Interviewing Brian, Daniel, and Sari, and reviewing with them selections from the transcript of this Tx3 session, allowed us to gather their general reactions to Tx3 and their specific reactions to the uses of the contextual orientation reviewed above. All three participants indicated that the way that Morrison approaches and investigates sacred texts allows them to appreciate the issues with which the texts engage, and to begin to understand a place for the study of sacred texts in their lives. In fact, the students' reactions reveal what Morrison found to be true in his own

experience: the use of the contextual orientation toward the Bible leads not to a distancing from it, but to a personal connection to the text.

Brian, Daniel, and Sari each reported that they came to Tx3 already believing the Bible to be of human origin. Brian, for example, explains, "I figured it was a bunch of stories that were told ... I never sort of thought that this was a divine piece of work. It's pretty neat, and it's well put together, but ... I never thought like, this is the word of God." He stresses as well that he could already see discrepancies in the text; for example, he saw that "Genesis was so very different from Deuteronomy, just sort of the tone and everything." He appreciates, then, what he calls the "practical level" at which Morrison creates discussion—that is, that he raises issues of the text's writing and context, and questions about the society and environment in which the narratives take place.

Similarly, Sari loves studying with Morrison because "his whole approach to the Bible, to the Torah, is that it's a text that's meant to be torn apart and rearranged—and that's our tradition." She understands this relationship to the text—what some might loosely call deconstructing the text—as part of approaching it as a historical document, and a human one. In one session, she recalls, Morrison "basically was explaining that it's a historical text, that it's pieced together, it's about what people believe God wanted, it wasn't necessarily the word of God." For her, that was "a really interesting moment," in which she identified at a fundamental level with Morrison's description of his approach to the text. Tx3 helped her begin to study sacred Jewish texts because Morrison's approach allowed her to relate to and study them in the same way that she studies other texts.

Both Brian and Sari stress that this approach keeps them "going back" to Tx3. "I've never even approached Judaism this way," Brian says, in a confident, excited tone. The approach to which he refers involves Morrison's uncovering the layers of the text's origins alongside the text's deep relevance. Reading the text as they would any other piece of literature, but one that is both ancient and relevant to his life, has helped him to see the text as "clever"—and to see Judaism as complex and of value for more than just a bar mitzvah boy. Morrison's approach has kept Brian engaged in Tx3 and therefore in Torah study, helping him develop a connection to the Bible and to Judaism.

Similarly, Sari has found the biblical text to be as complicated and rich as those that she studies in her profession. About finding Tx3 and

Morrison's approach to study, she explains, "I think I felt in some sense like I'd arrived." She has come to develop a relationship with Judaism and the Bible that makes sense to her as an adult. She summarizes her newly developed understanding as: "So you have this tradition, and this explains why it influences Jewish beliefs, and Jewish beliefs evolve and change as they're brought into different contexts, different historical time periods. That makes sense to me...." She is developing a stance towards Jewish sacred texts that fits into her understanding of the development of religion: the texts are historical documents, and human understandings of them shift throughout history. Seeing Judaism in its entirety (including its central texts) within a historical context has helped her develop a more comfortable relationship with Judaism.

For Daniel, Morrison's use of the contextual orientation is more complicated, but as important as it is for Brian and Sari. He describes Morrison as a "gifted teacher":

He tries to get you to think.... You know, use your brain. He tries to get people to think critically.... He tries to get us to analyze. To dig deep, and to, you know, well, here's one thing that five sentences or two chapters here earlier we read x, and this here says y, and it's speaking about a similar thing; why do we have two different perspectives, what do we learn from that.... Also, I think, he tries to get us to take a kind of biblical criticism approach.

Daniel appreciates that Tx3 is intellectually challenging, in that it invites students to examine the text closely and try to understand its discrepancies. Daniel recognizes that, in Tx3, he reads the Torah not only as a traditional commentator might, looking for answers and resolutions in the text itself, but also as a student of biblical criticism, open to the possibility of multiple authors and historical layers in the biblical text.

As described earlier, Daniel understands religion in two ways: he appreciates both the critical approach and the traditional approach that considers the text divine and perfect. He explains, "I appreciate them both for what they are, I've studied them both to some extent or another, and ... I'm not afraid of either one." Moreover, he says, biblical criticism will not "shake" his "faith." He is comfortable with traditional Judaism, but he is also comfortable with an approach to the Bible that understands it as human in origin and rooted in a historical context—

the traditional perspective does not satisfy him. “I mean, I’ll be honest with you, it’s like, if I were to sit in a class ... any, you know, strictly Orthodox class, and they’re teaching me Torah from a Rashi-oriented perspective, I’d come back with [biblical criticism]”—that is, with an academic or analytic approach to the text like Morrison’s.

Unlike Brian and Sari, Daniel values studying the Bible with an assumption that it is divinely inspired. Yet, like his peers, he also values approaching the text assuming human authorship. He does not want or need to pick one perspective over the other: “I forever will be somewhere bouncing in the middle,” he explains, and has chosen to spend time in Tx3 rather than pursuing Torah study with a more traditional (or more secular, strictly academic) approach. In class, he does sometimes raise the rabbinic understanding of the text when Morrison offers a contextual understanding, but he returns to Tx3, and implicitly to Morrison’s historical understanding, again and again.

Daniel spent much of his twenties trying to accept that he would not be able to integrate his American and traditional Jewish identities. He came to believe that he had to choose one or the other, or vacillate between the two, but that they could not be combined into a viable Jewish identity. Morrison’s approach works for Daniel because he can incorporate it into the burgeoning American Jewish identity he is developing as an adult. In Morrison’s class, he can engage in the study of sacred Jewish texts, a religious activity, from a Western/academic perspective. Daniel has lived both traditional and non-observant Jewish lifestyles. In Tx3, he is testing involvement with a non-traditional Jewish community; his experience in Tx3 gives him a laboratory in which to continue experimentation with developing an adult Jewish identity.

Brian points toward another impact of Tx3. Because it brings him into a closer relationship with the biblical text in all its complexity, Tx3 addresses questions Brian confronts with his patients in psychiatry, “figuring out, how does one live a life.” His learning helps him think through these issues when he sees those same questions in a very ancient text. Moreover, he says, “even, for me, sort of figuring out, how do I make the choices in my life, what’s a good choice/what’s not a good choice, how do I make things work,” he says, “I think it’s helpful to think about things in this way.” Viewing the biblical text in a historical perspective, with all its diverse strands and voices, helps him to reflect on his own life, and to reflect with his patients on theirs.

The contextual orientation also speaks to Sari's professional identity. She approaches texts and intellectual life "as a historian." Morrison's approach to the biblical text is, for her, "very similar to the way I think about text as a historian and someone who studies literature, and it really fascinates me," she says. It helps her practice a way of thinking that she loves and is familiar with, in a Jewish context. Moreover, it speaks to how she understands her personal Jewish identity: "To me, it's my family's history, you know, generations and generations." Approaching the text from within its historical context helps her connect the way she views the Bible not only to her professional studies, but also to the way she understands her family, which sits at the root of her Jewishness.

For all three of these individuals, the contextual orientation in Morrison's teaching supports their emerging Jewish identities. It is arguably the single most important pedagogic element that keeps them coming back to this Jewish learning environment.

Conclusion

Our interviews with Brian, Sari, and Daniel have uncovered examples of how the contextual orientation can have a significant impact on and appeal to students in their twenties and thirties. These individuals have had different levels of Jewish education, different involvement in Jewish ritual, and different amounts of exposure to and immersion in Jewish texts as children, but for all three, the contextual approach became crucial to their participation in and enjoyment of Tx3, and thus in Torah study.

As we described earlier, for Morrison the contextual orientation not only stimulated in him a deep interest in and commitment to the study of Bible, but also served as a way into Judaism more generally; it connected him more deeply to many of the ideas embodied in Jewish ritual and life. His own experience drew him to use the contextual orientation in the classroom, especially as he saw how it helped students develop a connection to the Bible and its study, and also to Jewish communal life. While the reader might be concerned that the contextual orientation contradicts long-held Jewish ideas about the divine authorship of the Bible and therefore would serve to turn students away from Jewish

practice and Jewish connections—that is, to promote a scholarly interest in Bible, but not a Jewish interest—our interviews, however, yield evidence of a contrary tendency.

For example, at the time of her interview for this study, Sari indicated an interest in learning Hebrew and reading from the Torah publicly; she had not had a bat mitzvah as a child and wanted to participate in that kind of celebration. In the eighteen months after her interview, she learned to chant Torah and studied biblical Hebrew, and recently celebrated being a bat mitzvah with friends from the Riverway Project. Without the Riverway Project, Sari would not have become interested in or able to pursue this intellectual and spiritual exploration of Jewish tradition. While an investigation of students' Jewish journeys is outside the scope of this chapter, there is evidence of similar change on the part of many additional participants in Torah and Tonics.¹⁶

The approach to the Bible in Tx3—what Sari called “rearranging the pieces”—and its similarity to the way that students have learned to approach other texts in their lives helps students see both the contextual orientation as a “Jewish” approach and studying the Bible as a comfortable part of their “secular” (or at least, non-traditional) lives. The conversations that they have in Tx3 help open questions about the roles of community and the sacred in their lives. The contextual orientation should be seen, then, as useful in more than academic environments—and not only as a tool with which to study Bible for its own sake, but as a way of investigating sacred Jewish texts that can be personally meaningful and relevant.

Another aspect of this project's contribution lies in a teacher's own reflection. This project required Morrison to ask himself deep questions about his teaching that otherwise would have remained hidden in his work. As Holtz reminds us, an orientation and its particular practices are often largely unconscious—even for someone like Morrison, who has thought a great deal about his pedagogy. It is reflected not just in

¹⁶ For example, their participation in Torah and Tonics and in additional learning opportunities that Morrison leads has helped other participants to reformulate their families' holiday celebration (adding to them the study of traditional Jewish texts), to engage in further learning opportunities at the synagogue and elsewhere, and even to consider sending their children to Jewish day school. In sum, a number of participants have become regular students of Judaism.

the active process of choosing texts, teaching strategies, and responses to students according to consciously held assumptions about how to approach the Bible, but through innumerable instinctive choices and approaches. In this project, we considered the particular pedagogic choices Morrison made only after this Tx3 session took place. But what would happen if each educator considered these choices before each class, if teachers consciously explored the orientations that influence the presentation of subject matter and the many choices they makes as educators? What would be the impact of this kind of reflection on students' learning, and on teachers' ongoing practice?

Since Morrison's involvement in this study, he reports becoming more cognizant of the particular nature of his commitment to, and motivation to use, the contextual orientation. He can now be more deliberate with the introduction of contextual information, and can identify his less intentional uses of the contextual orientation and consider mobilizing them toward specific ends. He can also consciously choose when to use another orientation instead, moving to other areas of his subject-matter knowledge and other approaches to the Bible when he determines it is appropriate.

This study, then, has significance for researchers in their work on Jewish learners in their twenties and thirties, and for practitioners as they consider their own orientations and practices, as well as for one specific practitioner in his ongoing work.

As we constructed and executed this research study, we were aware that a serious examination of pedagogy that uses the contextual orientation would ultimately involve far more than documenting and analyzing students' reactions. However, the notion of orientations in teaching Bible in Jewish settings is still very new, and so far we have little data on how teachers develop their orientations about Jewish subject matter, and how orientations are used in various learning environments and with different populations. This study's additional value, beyond its focus on a successful Jewish educational approach with a relatively disengaged population, then, has been its presentation of an orientation in use, and of a teacher's examination of his own orientation and its expressions. We hope that, among other things, this initial study can provoke other educators to identify the evolution of their own orientations, examine how their orientations influence their teaching practices, and evaluate the effectiveness of those practices.

There are still many basic and essential questions to be explored in research on the use of orientations in the teaching of Jewish texts. What do the various orientations actually look like in different learning environments, as executed by different teachers? Do Holtz's different orientations actually look as distinct in practice as they do in his taxonomy? Empirical studies of Holtz's orientations within Jewish education (similar to Grossman's in general education),¹⁷ looking at the actual use of such orientations in the teaching of Bible, are few and far between. More work is required for us to understand what it means in practice to teach from a given orientation.¹⁸ In terms of the contextual orientation specifically, more research is needed with learners of various ages and backgrounds and in different settings to understand more about their experience of the contextual orientation and the understanding of Bible that emerges from it.

In this study, however, we have seen that three major elements in Morrison's teaching form the beginning of a framework for a contextual orientation to the Bible. The three elements are (a) identifying authorial strands and distinct textual perspectives, (b) considering the writers' intentions and concerns in their own time, and (c) analysis of the ideology reflected in a given passage. These three—in conjunction with learning about the Bible's historical context and the history of its emergence as a finished text—serve not to undermine the positive Jewish identities of the Generation X students that we observed, but to strengthen them.

¹⁷ Pamela Grossman, *The Making of a Teacher: Teacher Knowledge and Teacher Education* (New York: Teachers' College Press, 1990).

¹⁸ It is worth noting here that a teaching orientation is not the same as one's personal beliefs, theological or otherwise. That is, teachers may feel more comfortable with some orientations than with others, but in principle, any teacher with the requisite knowledge can employ any orientation. At the same time, teachers can be more coherent, conscientious, and deliberate in their work when they examine their deepest beliefs about their subject matter, when they understand the orientations to which they are naturally inclined (or which they might wish to adopt) and how they teach from these orientations. See Gail Zaiman Dorph, "What Do Teachers Need to Know to Teach Torah?" in *Essays in Education and Judaism in Honor of Joseph S. Lukinsky*, ed. Burton I. Cohen and Adina A. Ofek (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2002).