

Philosophical Inquiry with Tanakh

■ by **JEN GLASER**

Glaser has developed a method for students to engage with philosophic concerns such as truth, meaning and justice through engagement with stories in Tanakh.

Sometimes innovation in Jewish education doesn't come by way of a totally new invention, but from taking an idea or practice that has proven itself in general education and applying it to our work as Jewish educators. Multiple intelligences, Understanding by Design, service learning, summer camp and blended learning are not Jewish inventions, but they have found their way into Jewish education because they provide us with tools that enhance our ability to respond to the challenges and realities of contemporary Jewish life.

Philosophical inquiry with Bible is just this kind of innovation. It embodies a particular approach to introducing young people to philosophy that emerged in North America in the 1970s called Philosophy for Children, which has today an educational presence in over 80 countries.

In recent years, experiments at integrating the approach of Philosophy for Children within Jewish education have taken place in America, Australia and Israel, resulting in the Bible curriculum "Moving On: Journeys that Matter." Focusing on journeys in Torah (journeys *towards* and journeys *away*; existential journeys; individual and collective journeys; planned and unplanned journeys; journeys of maturation; journeys of heritage, and more), the curriculum explores themes relevant to the journey into adulthood of 7th-9th grade students.

This year, through the generous support

of a Covenant Foundation Signature Grant, I am working together with Jeffrey Schein and Howard Deitcher on a project based within the JECC in Cleveland to train educators in this innovative approach through a project centered on philosophical inquiry with parashat hashavuah (in collaboration with the Israel Center for Philosophy in Education and the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children at Montclair State University). This cohort of educators is both cross-contextual, consisting of educators in day and synagogue schools, and cross-communal, spanning Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist institutions.

PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN

PHILOSOPHY AS A PRACTICE

When you think of doing philosophy in the Jewish studies classroom, what picture does this conjure up? If it brings forth an image of studying the Great Philosophers (Plato, Maimonides, Kant or Levinas), think again! While there is a long and rich tradition of teaching philosophy as a "history of ideas" in schools, *doing* philosophy—philosophizing—is the practice of making sense of our experience and developing a worldview. Philosophy begins with a stance of curiosity and wonder—we need to be *puzzled* by, or *curious* about, something that grabs our attention and invites us to think, to try to make sense of it, to understand the meaning and

significance of it. Heschel suggested that philosophy is "the art of asking the right questions." The kind of questions philosophy deals with are open-ended, an invitation for ongoing engagement and response. Examples of philosophical questions include:



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What is friendship?

Are there different kinds of truth?

What do we mean when we say something is a miracle?

How can a slave imagine (and thus come to desire) freedom?

What kind of life is worth living?

Inducting children into philosophical thinking opens a space where students can engage in this kind of meaning making. Philosophical questions, like the ones listed above, might sound abstract, but they are played out in the context of our lives, and our interest in them is awakened through everyday experiences with our family, friends and tradition.

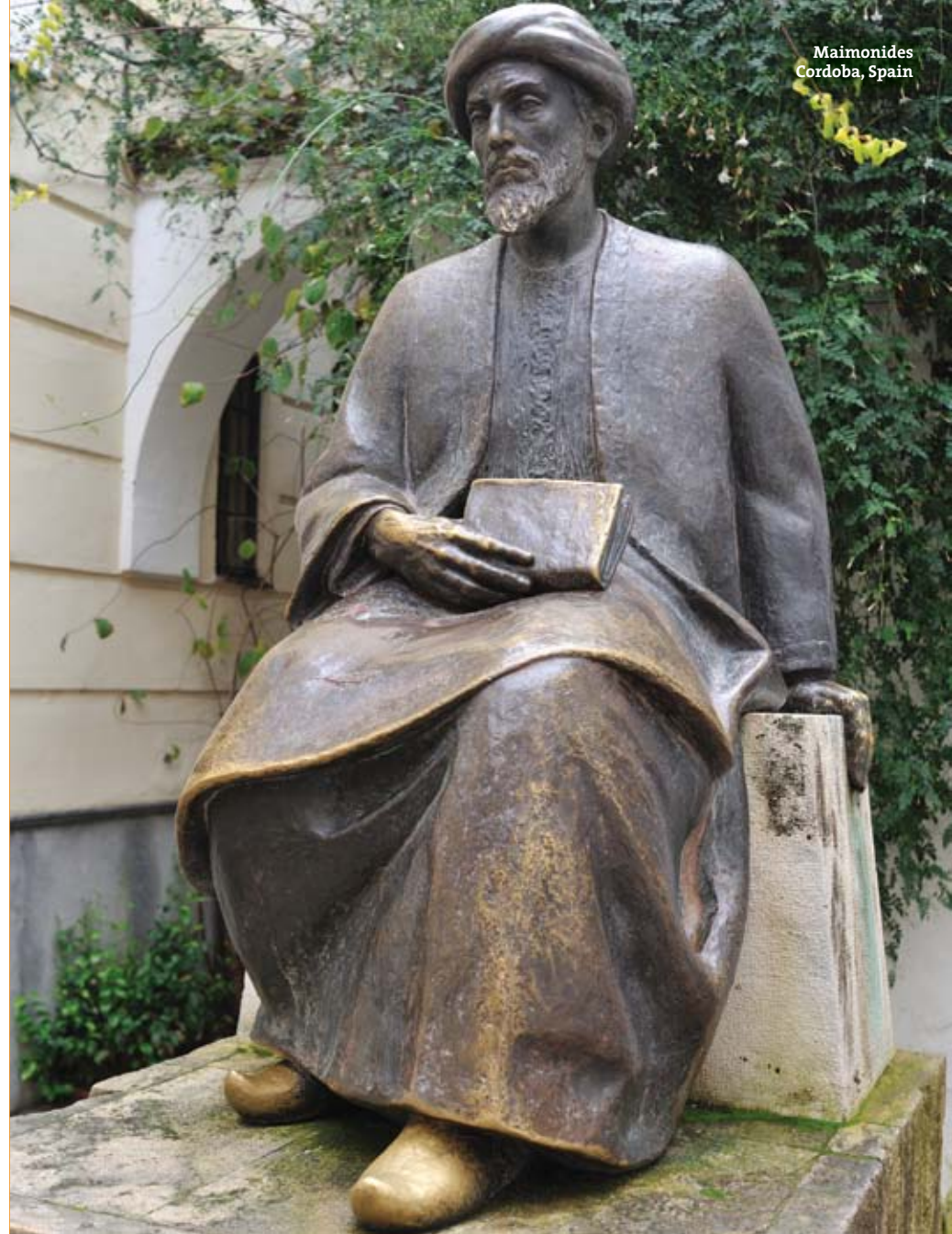
For example, children from a very young age use the word *friend* and have their own ideas and theories about what this means. This meaning changes as they grow, but as long as they are using the word, we can reflect with them on the meaning it has for them in their lives. Young children might say "a friend is someone I enjoy playing with," for older

children it might be “someone I can talk to about things that matter” or “someone I know will look out for me,” or “someone for whom I am responsible” (and of course these are not mutually exclusive). Reflecting on concepts in use in this way enables children to form a worldview and gain mastery and nuance over their lives, to grow as a person.

Exploring the meaning of philosophical concepts and ideas in Tanakh offers students new interpretative possibilities for the text—for instance, when thinking about the relationship between Jonathan and David, or Naomi and Ruth. By exploring the way friendship is enacted in the Bible between different characters, the students come to interpret themselves within the categories of their canon. In this way it brings together two semantic fields—the world of the child and the world of the tradition.

I came across a good example of this when walking down a primary school corridor—the 4th grade was getting ready for a field trip and the teacher was rushing the children to grab their bags and water bottles and get to the bus. One child turned to another and exclaimed “What is this? An exodus?” The child had internalized the meaning of exodus as an interpretive structure for their own life. This is one of the reasons that Tanakh is such a rich text for philosophical investigation, for it gives expression to the full tapestry of life: family, leavings and homecomings, births, deaths, trickery, bravery, enemies, law and lawlessness, freedom, destiny, longings and regrets, topics that are both deeply human and beyond the human. Focused on life, it is a text infused with philosophical potentiality.

In Philosophy for Children, discussion typically takes place in a circle with the students maintaining openness to interpretative possibilities. It is a space where, after a good discussion, students may not have come to have their question answered but leave satisfied that they have made progress with it, perhaps by realizing more fully what is implicated in the question they were exploring, or by becoming more sophisticated and nuanced regarding the meaning of a concept they were exploring,



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or by seeing connections that hadn't had previously occurred to them.

COMMUNITIES OF INQUIRY

The community of inquiry is a collaborative space where students put forward and

test out ideas with one another as they delve into the issue at hand. It is a space where thinking is guided by four Cs—collaboration, care, creativity and critique—and where *thinking for oneself* happens by participating *as a member* of a thinking

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community. It is based on the underlying idea that we develop our autonomy (and our identity) through our relationships with others. As such, in a community of inquiry the emphasis is not only on developing good reasoning skills, but also on developing social skills and moral virtues that enable us to participate productively with others (especially others with whom we disagree).

Students develop attentive listening and an ethos of responsibility where, even if they are not personally interested in a question, they bring themselves fully to it because it matters to another person in their community.

Practices within a community of philosophical inquiry will involve such moves as giving reasons for one’s opinions, exploring consequences, active listening, making distinctions, and looking for alternate points of view. As a community it also means helping others in the community make progress with their thinking—for instance, by helping another member of the group find the right words to express their idea, or by suggesting an alternative, or helping to frame a question—and this means developing attentive listening and an ethos of responsibility where, even if you are not personally interested in a question, you bring yourself fully to it because it matters to another person in your community.

In an age of individualism that privileges self-sufficiency, one of the tasks of Jewish education is to educate students into community participation, both as active participants and as people who will assume responsibility for the communities of which they are part. In secular education, the pedagogical practice in communities of inquiry is seen as a form of citizenship education, and has been one of the strongest motivational forces behind the spread of Philosophy for Children.

One of the reasons why Philosophy for

Children is such a powerful mechanism for inquiry into Tanakh is that it employs a distinct “community of inquiry” pedagogy that combines four foci:

The child: making sure the inquiry is owned by the students.

Procedures of inquiry: wherein students learn how to identify and make progress with big questions.

Systems of meaning: in philosophical inquiry we have to figure things out for ourselves, but we do so in dialogue with other voices (present and past) who have engaged with these questions before us. Here specific attention is given to three meaning systems: that of the Jewish textual tradition, of the Western philosophical tradition and the meaning system of the child’s own world.

Social inquiry: participating in a *community* of thinkers who are figuring things out together, rather than philosophy as requiring withdrawal from others, as captured in Rodin’s *Thinker*.

In sum, philosophical inquiry with Tanakh responds to the following challenges of contemporary Jewish life:

Building vibrant communities engaged in the Big Questions concerning how we ought to live, both as individuals and communities.

Connecting Jewish learning to the development of Jewish identity.

Developing in students the capacity to make reasonable judgments as they negotiate their lives as Jewish Americans.

Empowering students to live as active engaged members of a Jewish

community for which they assume responsibility.

WHAT IS A TYPICAL LESSON LOOK LIKE?

A typical session consists of a group of students sitting in a circle reading a biblical text together, with each child reading a line (thus turning a written text back into shared speech event). Then students raise questions of what they found puzzling or interesting in the text, which form the agenda for discussion. In the inquiry students draw upon carefully constructed plans and exercises which help maintain focus and encourage depth of discussion. These open up the field of meaning around concepts—both within the child’s world and from within the tradition. Additional written material, Jewish sources, images and recordings are also used to stimulate or further inform the inquiry. Drawing and drama can also be used as a vehicle for extending the discussion.

An example of a child’s question that might be raised and explored with parashat Bereishit: “What does it mean when it says “and God says that this was good”?”

This could then lead to a discussion of the concept of *good*.

Sample Discussion Plan (3rd grade): What does the word *good* mean in the following situations?

Your mom says, “Our car is a good car”

You finish painting a picture, stand back and say, “This is a good painting”

You take a bite of an apple and say, “Mmm, what a good apple”

Your teacher says, “You are such a good girl”

You get good grades

Sarah says, “You are such a good friend”

You consider a particular toy good to play with

These questions open up different possible meanings of the term good (reliable, “just as I wanted it to be,” “just as it should be,” morally good, compliant, achieving a high standard, “brings out the best in me,” loyal, interesting, to name but a few). The students return to the text and ask themselves how each of these meanings changes their understanding of the world God created and the relationship between God and what God created. The students might then turn to other biblical passages where the term *tov* appears and discuss which of these offer insight into the Bereishit text.

They might then discuss what it would take to care for the world, to look after it in light of these meanings, and finish the class with an activity where student draw one of the days of creation according to their own interpretation of *good* in the

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text. While the examples in the discussion plan would change depending on the age of the child, the meanings they put forth will not change, since the various kinds of good are interesting to people at all ages. The question “What is good?” is one we can keep going back to because it is a philosophical question that remains with us throughout our lives. ■

TO LEARN MORE

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on Philosophy for Children: plato.stanford.edu/entries/children

The Israel Center for Philosophy in Education: philosophy4life.org

“Thinking Together: Developing Communities of Philosophical Inquiry around Parshat Hashavua”: covenantfn.org/grants/grants-past-recipients/grants-2011

The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children: cehs.montclair.edu/academic/iapc

For a sample curriculum unit: tinyurl.com/6pun52v

JCAT Welcomes Four New Schools into the Program!

RAVSAK is pleased to welcome four new schools into JCAT, the Jewish Court of All Time.

Adelson Educational Campus (Las Vegas, Nevada)

Chicago Jewish Day School (Chicago, Illinois)

Ronald C. Wornick Jewish Day School (Foster City, California)

Samuel Scheck Hillel Day School (North Miami Beach, Florida)

These schools join the twelve that have already taken part in the program, for a cohort of sixteen RAVSAK schools connecting through JCAT!

Teachers from these schools will travel



to Ann Arbor for a teacher training seminar in using JCAT, run by professors from the Universities of Michigan and Cincinnati. They will learn about the goals, steps, methods and educational resources of JCAT, become familiar with the multifaceted online

platform where students participate and interact, discover the roles that graduate students play in mentoring their students, and plan how to integrate this program within the pre-existent classes within which the program will take place. They will also learn about the professional development that takes place through JCAT, thanks to the conversations facilitated by faculty at the University of Cincinnati.

JCAT is RAVSAK’s dynamic, cutting-edge program for the teaching of Jewish history in RAVSAK middle schools. The program is funded through the support of a Signature Grant from the Covenant Foundation. To learn more about the program, contact Dr. Elliott Rabin, RAVSAK’s director of educational programs, at erabin@ravsak.org. ■