

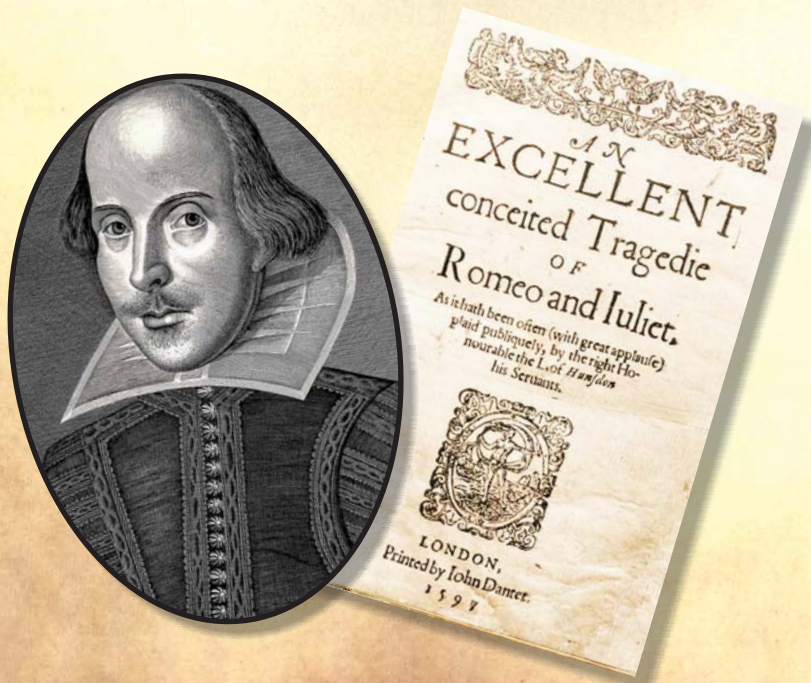
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Notes from ATID:

The Literature Curriculum in the Twenty-First Century Jewish Day School

by William Kolbrener





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Academy for Torah Initiatives and Directions
עתיד - עמותה לתורה יוזמה ודרכים בחינוך יהודי (ע"ר)

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Introduction

Why Ray Bradbury Matters for Jewish Education

by Rabbi Jeffrey Saks

The news that science fiction author Ray Bradbury died as we were preparing this monograph for publication was a moment of pause and reflection for me. Not that I was such a huge Bradbury fan, or even a reader of sci-fi in general (despite having been a bookish kid, and a devoted Trekkie). In fact, aside from a few short stories I don't otherwise recall, the only thing I had ever seriously read of Bradbury's was *Fahrenheit 451* - and that as a ninth grader in 1984. Perhaps some curriculum planner noting the year decided freshman lit should cover the dystopian novels, starting with Orwell's foreboding prophecy about the year we were living through. Perhaps it was because the Cold War was not yet over, and the cautionary tales of *Animal Farm* and the like were part of our indoctrination against anti-American worldviews.

Last year I had occasion to revisit my high school reading lists through my work at ATID with Prof. William Kolbrener on this research project on the English literature curriculum, and how it can and should be a vehicle to advance the larger goals of Jewish education. I had remembered *Fahrenheit 451* as a dark tale of a future in which books had become outlawed, and firemen no longer extinguish fires, but confiscate contraband books and burn them (451° F being the temperature at which paper ignites). But, because I conflated the novel with the larger dystopian genre, I completely misremembered the essence of the plot, mistakenly thinking that it depicts a totalitarian regime, whose Thought Police suppress the imaginative powers of literature as a tool of propaganda and thought control.

So last year, on revisiting Bradbury's 1953 novel I was surprised to discover that's not the plot of *Fahrenheit 451* at all (how many of you similarly misremembered?). Unlike 1984's surveillance in each home allowing Big Brother to keep an eye on everyone, the homes in *Fahrenheit 451* are covered with parlor screens on each wall, a kind of interactive chat room (think Facebook) and

delivery system for incessant bursts of short entertaining nuggets (YouTube?). When away from the screen people have "audio seashells" or "thimble radios" (ear buds?) that fit snugly in the ear to pipe-in entertainment. With society's collective brain atrophied, books become viewed with great suspicion in an increasingly anti-intellectual world. The Fire Chief Beatty explains to the novel's hero, Montag, "There you have it. It didn't come from the government down. There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship, to start with, no! Technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick, thank God. Today, thanks to them you can stay happy all the time... [Firemen, i.e. book burners, are] custodians of our peace of mind... People want to be happy, isn't that right? Haven't you heard it all your life? I want to be happy, people say. Well, aren't they? Don't we keep them moving, don't we give them fun? That's all we live for, isn't it? For pleasure, for titillation? And you must admit our culture provides plenty of these."

Montag meets Faber, a former English professor who suffers under the guilty weight of not having defended books before it was too late. In explaining the virtues of reading he suggests that it is the best access to leisure. "Oh, but we've plenty of off-hours," counters Montag, to which the professor responds:

Off-hours, yes. But time to think? If you're not driving a hundred miles an hour, at a clip where you can't think of anything else but the danger, then you're playing some game or sitting in some room where you can't argue with the four-wall televisor. Why? The televisor is 'real.' It is immediate, it has dimension it tells you what to think and blasts it in, it must be right. It seems so right. It rushes you on so quickly to its own conclusions your mind hasn't time to protest, 'What nonsense!'

Bradbury is asking us why anyone would want to read - really read widely and deeply, not just the comic books the novel's firemen still allow - when

we might rather watch a clip of cats playing with pieces of string or see Charlie bite a finger a half billion times.

But reading is a crucially important component of an engaged life, and especially so for those aspiring to be thinking *religious* people. I recall entering the Yeshiva University library for the first time and being stopped in my tracks by the quote from R. Yehuda Ibn-Tibon that once graced the old entrance foyer: "*Sim Sefarim Haverekha*" - "Make books thy companions. Let thy cases and shelves be thy pleasure grounds and gardens." Towards the novel's end Montag encounters the book underground - exiled book lovers who have committed whole libraries to memory, this one Jonathan Swift, that one Plato's *Republic*, etc. (Montag himself ultimately takes on *Ecclesiastes*), like so many *Tannaim* and *Amoraim* they are the "*ba'alei mesora*" of a *literature she-ba'al peh*. Isn't that what reading is? Don't our books become part of us?

In education, as in life, we have to emphasize that the simple act of reading is the best exercise to develop that essential characteristic of an engaged religious life: inwardness and reflectivity leading to spiritual maturity. The formula Prof. Faber suggests is that the right kind of reading leads to the interaction of "quality of information" gained through books, the leisure to digest it, and "the right to carry out actions based on what we learn from the interaction of the first two." Thoreau, in that most passionate celebration of reading, promised that on a pile of worthy books "we may hope to scale heaven at last."

Finally, I would add a word of thanks to my colleague and friend, William Kolbrener, who served as an ATID Senior Fellow in 2010-2011, for generating such a stimulating dialogue, and for keeping these issues on the communal agenda. We hope and expect that his work here, as well as his larger body of commentary, writing, and scholarship, will help clarify positions, point us in proper directions, suggest strategies, and aid us in our holy work.

The publication of Professor Kolbrener's work allows ATID to disseminate some of our ideas to the community of Jewish educators. We hope that it will serve as a springboard for further deliberation and planning in your schools and communities, in order to elevate the levels of rigor, professionalism, and success in our important endeavor.

If this publication has served as a catalyst for your school or synagogue, we ask that you share your experiences with us by writing to atid@atid.org. We will use our website to collect and disseminate your contributions to what we hope will be an ongoing inquiry and dialogue, leading collaborative efforts which will truly add meaning to the education of our students and ourselves.

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Prologue: Mind the Gap

Living in Israel, and traveling often to the United States, I am sometimes a scholar-in-residence at synagogues where I am fortunate to enjoy the hospitality of a variety of Jewish communities. Years ago, in a modern orthodox community, I sat with the Rabbi, a Yeshiva University graduate and student of Rabbi Solovetichik, with his family around the Sabbath-afternoon table. A great – loving and engaged – father, he surveyed the table, asking each child about their week in school – from early grade school to university. When he got to his sixteen-year old daughter, in a centrist Yeshiva high school, his eyes widened, as he asked: "so tell me Shira, what are you reading in your English class?" It may have just been the age, but Shira rolled her eyes, mumbled something about Shakespeare, then changing the subject, asked her younger brother to pass the potato *kugel*. I had seen versions of this before, though perhaps not so writ-large, an older parent expressing great enthusiasm about the works of Western literature or philosophy, and the decidedly not-so-interest teen failing to show a similar enthusiasm. As it turns out, the father at the table had never read the literary works for which he was expressing his enthusiasm – which may show the gap between an older ideal and the current culture.

In some ways, the story reflects a gap that the current work attempt to address – between the ideals of secular education – especially what goes under the rubric of English Literature – and the reality of that education in Jewish Day

Schools today. Of course, there are great and inspirational teachers teaching at high schools across the spectrum of orthodox schools that have an English Curriculum. But the Sabbath-table discussion was for me the occasion when I began to think about the way in which our broader enthusiasm and ideals can be transmitted to future generations, and further to think about the larger goals of Jewish education and how we can put them into practice in the contemporary world. How do we take our general sense of the values of the culture and literary tradition of the West, and transmit that enthusiasm – while integrating it into a Torah life – for our young people today? More generally – and this is one of the great challenges of education, but especially for Modern Orthodoxy today – how do we bring together the ideal of our desire to expose our children to Torah and Western culture and the real life challenges – cultural and institutionally – which we face? Even more – and the various parts of this document attempt to address this issue – how can we implement an English Day School curriculum while being both fully present to the opportunities it affords, while also being conscious of the challenges it poses as well?

Can we make students like Shira enthusiastic about literature and Western culture in a way which will both open her mind, and not compromise – maybe even strengthen – her Jewish perspective?

Part I: Introduction: From “Integration” to Encounter

Put in more formal terms, this set of guidelines provides an opportunity to revisit a topic that has been central to Modern Orthodoxy since its beginnings – the relationship between our religious commitments and our interests in secular Western culture. But while rabbis, scholars and academics continue to consider this issue on theoretical and speculative level, the practice of integrating secular studies into the Day School High School classroom is a *de facto* reality, and has been now for decades. The curricular decisions about the role of literature in the classroom take place within the general framework of the kinds of discussions that place within our community from time to time, and against a more general backdrop of publications and conversations among rabbinic, educational and communal leadership. But there has never been a dedicated effort to take the more theoretical conceptions about the relationship between Torah and literary studies, and discuss the way in which they are implemented within high school curricula. This document represents a step in that direction, the beginning of a new discussion about our goals for Day School education, and the possibility for their implementation.

The ATID Project aims to shift emphasis – to change metaphors – to those that are on the front lines, school leaders and the teachers of literature in the high school classroom. The ultimate aim of this ATID initiative is to produce a set of pedagogic guidelines that will be of use to school administrators and literature teachers in the Modern Orthodox classroom. The guidelines by definition are flexible, and will be read with different eyes – with different curricular and academic goals in mind – by educators in various communities. But we aim to provide a new voice, which will be helpful to administrators, but especially teachers, in negotiating the Day School Classroom.

The current work consists of three parts: 1. This introductory section that articulates some of the major aspirations for the enterprise of “integration” as expressed by some of the major thinkers who have addressed the issue, as well as the problems and challenges they have noted, and directions towards a new emphasis; 2. A section that elaborates some general practical goals and guidelines – along a spectrum of possibilities – for the actual teaching of literature in the Jewish classroom; and finally 3. An extended section that provides extended models for the close reading and teaching two selected texts, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. We are of course aware that literary programs are already in place, refined and made better through years of trial and error, and the painstaking work and diligent commitment of instructors already in the field. Having been in contact with Day School Teachers across the spectrum, we have tried to take stock of their experience, and offer a fresh voice, and perhaps some new perspectives on high school English programs within the Jewish Day School Context.

1. Goals and Aspirations

The elaboration of the aspirations and challenges to our own conception of the relationship between religion and culture is not to enter into the realm of theoretical speculation for its own sake, but aims to better facilitate the move from the theoretical to the practical, to address the needs of current teachers. With that said, foregrounding current agendas and assumptions should be of some value. We will not be concerned with the works of Rabbi Soloveitchik, though arguably those works as well as the Rav's life stand as the inspiration for future generations and our discussions today; nor do we concern ourselves with the various theoretical models for the bringing together of Torah and Literature, the ‘six models of integrations,’ for example, elaborated so

comprehensively and beautifully by Rabbi Norman Lamm in his *Torah U'madda*. Without providing a systematic survey, we turn to some of the major themes expressed by some of the most compelling advocates of the integration of Torah and literary studies, as well as calling attention to some of the challenges. The latter is especially important to the current focus. For without awareness of the challenges that Western literary texts may impose, the difficulties of the practical implementation will only be made greater. Indeed, the current approach may lack some of the lofty ideals of those who first made the study of literary studies in the Day School classroom possible, though it does provide a new emphasis on the practical. Some of the new directions articulated here grow out of our sense that the older vision of *Torah u'madda* (as it was once called) is no longer entirely relevant, and that we need a new emphasis reflecting the demands of current pedagogical realities.

But before articulating those new directions, we begin with the older foundations. We start with Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein – who has provided the inspiration for many of us who want to see the study of literature in the Jewish classroom. Among the extraordinary aspects of Rabbi Lichtenstein's arguments is that he not only justifies secular wisdoms that offers scientific or practical knowledge, but Rabbi Lichtenstein opens the way up for the teaching of literature. This is a position which has not been embraced by earlier Jewish authorities: indeed, this makes sense, since not until the turn of the last century were there English Departments within universities (the first at Oxford and Cambridge): that is, only in the past hundred years or so, has English Literature been acknowledged as an independent field of study. Rabbi Lichtenstein thus takes the arguments of earlier Torah authorities about culture and learning and extends them to the realm about which we care most – the specific province of literature. That is to say, when he asks, “How well can Torah and secular wisdom

meld within a single personality or institution?” he is not talking about those fields with clear practical or career implications like chemistry or biology or law, dental school or business school, but the role of literature, philosophy and art. He is speaking to people like us, and making room for the literature we love in the framework of Torah.¹

Rabbi Lichtenstein's arguments are extensive (and many of them are familiar), but some of the salient points of his argument stressing the goals of a literary education are important to emphasize. Science, Rabbi Lichtenstein writes “deals with God's handiwork,” but the humanities deals with what is properly human, that is man: “with his existence and experience, his responses and reflections, the insights of his rational faculties and the progenies of his creative power.”² Since the rabbis of the Talmud themselves were what he calls “religious humanists,” the exploration of literature allows for pursuing a set of goals that were of value to the sages themselves. Rabbi Lichtenstein's emphasis is an important one: namely, that there is a direct continuity between the humanism of the sages and the humanism we demonstrate for our students in the Day School English classroom. On this attitude, Rabbi Lichtenstein emphasizes two focuses which are both important to us: on the individual student and how that student relates to the world around him.

To start with the first: Secular wisdom helps to cultivate and develop the religious personality, and further helps to mold him as a spiritual being. As Shalom Carmy writes, echoing Rabbi Lichtenstein, the process of engaging with literature can be “an integral part of the self-knowledge that paves the way to truth.”³ By engaging with literary culture, such a person not only develops his imaginative capacities in relationship to the here and now, but in relationship to the future as well: “the humanities significantly enhance our ability,” writes Rabbi Lichtenstein, “to cope with the two primary

challenges of the moral and spiritual life: *tikkun* of the self within this antechamber to the world to come; and *tikkun* of the antechamber proper.”⁴ These are very high claims indeed, providing an image of an ideal of the potentials inherent in Western literature and philosophy: through our reading in the Western tradition, we take a path that can complement our studies of Jewish texts, also leading to *tikkun*, knowledge and elevation of the self. Carmy makes the argument more simply, but not less powerfully, when he writes that the wisdom of the humanities shares with Torah in affecting the way a person “thinks and lives.”⁵

This spiritual development and cultivation of creative powers comes through an appreciation of the world which the humanities allow us to cultivate. Literature can “sharpen our apprehension of the power and beauty of resonant revelation,” and therefore enhance our spiritual existence. The notion of enhancing the appreciation of revelation is a perspective Rabbi Lichtenstein shares with Rabbi Lamm. So the latter writes, “a new appreciation of a Beethoven symphony or a Cezanne painting or the poetry can move us to a greater sensitivity to the infinite possibilities of the creative imagination with which the Creator endowed his human creation.”⁶ By having knowledge of the creation – not just nature, but the products of great minds and thinkers – we can further enhance ourselves. Rabbi Lamm writes of a pluralism which includes not everything, but those endeavors which are conducive to spiritual growth and the perfection of the human personality. Not only Cezanne and Beethoven, but more relevantly to us, Shakespeare and Jane Austen. So Rabbi Lichtenstein invites us, through the reading of literature to “expand our spiritual and intellectual horizons through exposure to other areas of religious import.”⁷ As Shalom Carmy writes, “every component of the curriculum should fortify the cause of religion and religious reading.”⁸ For all of these thinkers, the appreciation of the world, and the attitude of openness then only reinforce

the first and primary goal of the study of literature: the deepening and cultivating of a growing self. Though always combined with practical concerns, these aspirations helped provide the inspiration and impetus for which the contemporary Day School English Curriculum was founded.

2. Obstacles and Challenges

Rabbi Lamm and Rabbi Lichtenstein have been the spiritual and intellectual inspiration for a literature curriculum in the Jewish classroom. But their enthusiasm for models of integration on the personal and institutional level is also qualified by their own weighing of obstacles and challenges. In the classroom, teachers receive the mandate to bring literature to their students, but knowing the dangers of such a project, as expressed by those who have most strongly advocated the ideal, should be important to our practice. Though as our discussions have revealed, classroom teachers are likely even more familiar with those dangers than the theoreticians. Certainly we need not express our interest in those who have rejected literary studies altogether, like a commentator who writes “in our age of pernicious relativism, we have all wanted to say, at one time or another, “no more contact – our devotion will be only to our holy Torah.”⁹ But we will want to pay heed to the hesitations of those who advocate study of literature most vigorously. Rabbi Lamm writes that if neither the world of Torah or world culture is to be relinquished, then “one must accept fear and the sense of crisis and all the neurotic tensions that come with them.” Even in the last generation, Rabbi Lamm was alive to the risks involved in teaching secular studies: his aims to put the breaks on pluralism sometimes seeming out of control – to study only those words which are suitable – would be an even more urgent mandate for our generation (Yet, it should be said, the curriculum has expanded in ways that might surprise early theoreticians like Rabbi Lamm). Rabbi Lichtenstein, also aware of the profound risks entailed by literary studies in a Torah framework, even the “deleterious potential of exposure to

general culture,” adds a series of conditions: “If the license to pursue general culture is predicated upon its being approached through the prism of Torah, it should presumably be restricted to those who are suitably equipped to effect such an approach.”¹⁰ Rabbi Lamm underlines a sense of crisis which we probably know all too well, and Rabbi Lichtenstein introduces a set of criteria, for example, which are increasingly difficult to implement. In concluding the brief survey of the challenges which we face, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes that the practitioners of integration are mostly like to understand the challenges, and are most likely, further, to sense the incompatibility between those two worlds.¹¹

3. To Integrate or not to Integrate, that is the Question!

Based on discussions with contemporary teachers, we have found that the hesitations of the early writers on Torah and secular studies is well-founded, and that in our generation especially some of their aspirations for may be overly idealistic for the contemporary classroom. For as much as these leading scholars of the previous generation have provided a sense of ideals to which we can turn for inspiration in the twenty-first century, there have been changes in many areas which make those ideals more difficult to realize – in three areas: the nature of our students, the nature of our curriculum, and the nature, perhaps most importantly, in the culture at large. Rabbis Soloveitchik, Lichtenstein et al represent not only an ideal of integration, but they themselves in their lives, teaching and scholarship, embodied that ideal. It is not just an admission of humility to suggest that not only our students, but we are different. The sensitivity, grounding in Judaism and Jewish Law that some of our teachers have brought to literary texts and traditions may be very different from what we ourselves bring – because of ability and background – certainly from that which our students bring.

The world of the scholar-humanist has gone, in large part due to the way in which the culture at large has also changed. What for generations was called *Torah u'madda* was born in a world where there seemed to be two possible sets of reference – Judaism and Western Literature. But with the change in our culture, the expanding changes in technology, the diversity of experience and reference points, the older opposition no longer really maintains, making the goal of integration something even more of a distant ideal. There is no longer – if there ever was – a split between Torah and Western humanities, but our students, and we ourselves, have many different forms of affiliation.

The change in culture has also meant necessarily a change in curriculum: the humanities curriculum which, for example, Rav Lichtenstein encountered when he was at Harvard in the fifties is very different from the curriculum that is now available on university curriculums and which makes itself present even in our high school classrooms. For the literary canon has expanded to include works which ask different questions from the ones which older literary classics raise – taking a position more outside of the culture than inside of it (for this reason the current focuses on two disparate examples Shakespeare as well as the less canonical – or more recently canonized novel of Zora Neale Hurston).

As much as we understand the dangers of exposure to influences that are contrary to some of our values, we also acknowledge with all the more urgency the need to engage, for our students to have the skills to negotiate a modern world in which they are already living. But because of the changes in the nature of the student, the nature of the culture and the subsequent nature of the curriculum, we emphasize here not only integration, as an ideal, but also, as a precedent for the possibility, the *engagement* with different texts and traditions. In a world overwhelmed by texts of

every kind – status updates, tweets and sms messages – the Day School English Classroom may be the best place to instill the values of close and careful readings, and the belief that words can communicate in more than just bytes. This may be more a minimal goal than the lofty aspiration of integration, but it may be more suitable for us in which we are trying to maintain our Jewish commitments in a realm of overwhelming diversity. As one eleventh-grade school teacher confided, “the teaching of literature is a messy business.” It may be so, not only because the curriculum has become more complicated, but because our lives, and especially the lives of our students, have become more so. In a generation with so many influences, being aware of those influences, and learning how to engage them may be the more appropriate goal. When one teacher says, “we teach the conflicts,” she not only refers to conflicts between cultures to which we are exposed, but often to the corresponding conflicts that play out internally in our students. Of course, we aim to help students negotiate these conflicts, and help them find a way to use their Jewish identities to ground their other interests and affiliations, but being aware of the new reality seems essential for us as educators in the twenty-first century.

As a Jewish – Talmudic – inspiration for this approach, we turn to Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai who the Talmud says, studied “constellations and calculations, the sayings of launderers and the sayings of fox-keepers, the conversation of demons and the conversation of palm-trees, the conversation of the ministering angels, the great things and the little things” (Sukka 28a). The sage not only studies Torah, and science – constellations and calculations, but he is also aware of the mysteries of nature – the whispers among the palm trees, as well as those beyond nature, the conversation of ministering angels. There are all sorts of conversations going on in the universe, and the sage wants to participate in them. We do not have to think that Rabbi

Yohanan ben Zakkai only wanted practical “know-how” – imagining him getting laundry tips or instructions on how to trap animals. That is, engagement with the world does not always have to be practical: not all knowledge is just for the purpose of making a living. Rather, the Talmudic sage is interested in the encounters with others; he is fascinated by their conversations, their worlds, and wants to listen and learn. Of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, the Talmud says, “he never engaged in frivolous conversations.” No matter what the subject, he was always engaged and he was always present. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai's message is simple: be present to what is around you.

This is what underlies the current approach – an emphasis on engaging with texts and traditions different from our own – and learning how to be attentive to the words of others. To be sure, the old ideals of integration may be present on the horizon, and certainly something for our students to discuss, but the prior step is learning something more basic: to encounter various texts and traditions, with intelligence, judgment and discernment. One of the biggest problems teachers say their students face is that they are just disengaged, they don't care; they inhabit the culture which is defined by that one word reply of indifference: “whatever.” But one of the ironies of our generation, and an opportunities of which we can take advantage, is that our classroom can be the place for students to learn to engage, a skill that can be transferred to their Torah studies. But beyond their Torah studies, learning how to read is a life-lesson. Indeed, the current Regius Professor of History at Cambridge University, Sir Keith Thomas, laments the transformation of students into ‘mere consumers’: our classrooms can be the privileged and protected place where our students learn how to do more than just consume texts, but to read them.¹² This ability has value for religious life, but also every facet of our lives – that is, being sensitive to the manifold texts with which we are surrounded – in the Beit Midrash, in the

workplace, with our families – and learning how to read them with sensitivity and care.

The greatest proponents of the values of Western Literature, like Rabbi Lamm, have not shut their eyes to the dangers that it may entail. We know that modernity is complicated, that relativism not only threatens the university campus, but is the dominant ideology there. But we also understand: there is no alternative to modernity and its challenges, and we look at the Day School Classroom as a special place – a city of refuge, or safe haven – where our students can encounter some of the great texts of Western literature under our supervision, and with our guidance. Here they begin to ask some of the questions – which any exposure to the modern world will yield – but without the pressures and difficulties entailed in a foreign university environment. “Tenured Radicals,” as they have been called, may lead the discussion on university campuses, but in the Day School setting, we can nurture the questions of our students in a more protected environment. Exposure is the norm: how to negotiate the various influences of that exposure should be the highest priority.

That is, we can't participate in *every* conversation, and mentioning Yochanan ben Zakkai is not for the purpose of saying that our students should engage with everything. Part of the educational program we want to emphasize is the developing of a “discerning openness” – an open minded attitude, but not one without limits. This means attuning to the conversations that matter, teaching our students to learn to make priorities between the kinds of affiliations that are available (and without opening the huge topic of technology, teaching our students that books can be engaging and as satisfying as Facebook feeds and twitter streams). The attitude of discerning openness is not an easy one to sustain, but it is where the path to integration begins.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai's example moves away from an ideal of engagement with culture

based solely on content, that is finding works of art or literature which reinforce Jewish ideas. That is, for a personal example, I may read Milton not for the inspiring description of his blindness (as Rabbi Lichtenstein does among other motives), or for the representations of faith that fit within my own Jewish worldview, but for the way he opens up many new conversations, and helps think about questions: how to read, how to first encounter and then balance different worldviews, how to be religious in a world of competing interests and affiliations. Milton is just one example: the many different works on the Day School English Syllabus can be resources not only for Jewish themes, but for teaching the value of engagement, of opening up new questions, learning very simply what it means to read, and through our reading, connect and participate in new conversations.

In this sense, the model is not only Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, but also Ben Zoma of the Mishnah, for whom the wise man is one who learns from all people. Ben Zoma does not advocate a form of knowledge which is based upon quantity of knowledge – what we might call information – but a willingness to experience and explore different perspectives. Our younger people – by the nature of their experience – have the potential to be part of many different conversations: their identities will be nurtured by many different experiences and affiliations. Our goal, as teachers, will be to allow them to recognize the conversations that matter to them as professionals, as family members, as citizens, as they sustain and nurture their own identities as committed Jews. That is, one of our challenges is to recognize that identities are more diverse, sometimes hybrid, than they have ever been: and even as we encourage students to be part of different conversations that matter, we affirm the possibility that this can be done from a place of religious commitment and service.

Part II: “Not in Heaven”: The Jewish Day School Classroom

To be involved in Jewish life is to always be aware of context, connections and affiliations, whether as a parent, community-member, or and perhaps especially a teacher. Instructors in the Jewish Day School classroom do not have to be told of the web of affiliations in which they work. Before they even enter the classroom, they are no doubt aware of the expectations – even perhaps mandates – that parents, administrators and school principals will have about curriculum and pedagogy. Every community is different: for some the Day School English curriculum will represent more of an ideal and opportunity; for others, more of an accommodation and a risk. With all of this, though there is often a long set of negotiations between the various ‘shareholders’ present to the discussions about curriculum, with administrators often carrying the day, once the teacher closes the classroom door behind her, her own attitudes and inclinations come to the forefront. So the guidelines that follow are for the teacher after she has negotiated the various networks that will influence her pedagogical practice, that is, once the classroom door is closed.

The South American educator, Paolo Freire in his work in his work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, described the difficulty of teaching students who had lived under totalitarian regimes, and were habituated to what he called a “banking model of education,” where the the instructor “deposits funds” into student “accounts” and then makes a withdrawal at the end of term. Freire found that political repression led to this teaching model, where the student is merely a passive agent, to use another metaphor, merely ‘spitting back’ the material that the teacher had passed over. Though political cultures are obviously different, sometimes our students have internalized this implicit model, while the approach to be articulated here, and in the readings of the two works that follow in section three, are more process-oriented, more interested in raising

question than providing answers. Such a pedagogical approach, paralleling in some sense the methodology of the sages of the Talmud, and the traditions that follow them, refines questions before providing answers, and emphasizes the role of students as engaged participants in the educational process.

Those who see literature as a way of fortifying values may express hesitations, even hostility towards such an approach, because literary studies, experienced as process, are indeed full of risk. So the approach here is so emphasize skills of reading and not to provide pre-fabricated readings of texts that simply come to reinforce concepts or principles that we already know to be true (or perhaps think we know to be true). This is not to say that texts cannot be used to demonstrate Jewish themes. One skilled teacher, now a high school principal, writes that in his high school classes he taught “a sonnet of John Donne as a model of the mind of the *ba'al teshuvah*” and that he taught “Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* as an object lesson in *aveira goreret aveira*, one sin leads to another.” Similarly, he writes, “in my school classes we read Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* and discussed the concepts of *arevut* – responsibility – and acquiring for oneself a friend, and read Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* to discuss issues of moral responsibility for the proverbial widow and orphan, the less fortunate in the community.”¹³ Such approaches – and we will employ them ourselves in the readings that follows below – will allow our students to see ways in which Jewish concepts and perspectives will be helpful in understanding literary texts, as well as to see that sometimes literary texts resonate with messages consistent with a Jewish worldview.

But that same instructor – so successful in seeing possibilities for common themes between Judaism and English literature – also acknowledges that reading texts carefully, in *their*

own terms, must come first, and not function as merely placeholders for Jewish ideas. Sometimes our readings will lead to clear moral messages that resonate with our own values, but as often literary texts, when read carefully, will confront us with new and sometimes challenging perspectives. So we may be inspired by the explicit messages of literary works, note their parallels with Jewish concepts and ideas; we may also note – the flip side of the same coin – how the values of certain literary works *depart* from our ideals. One teacher, for example, observes that James MacBride's *Color of Water*, about an orthodox woman who leaves her faith and marries a black Christian, can be used to highlight the importance of environment, and how MacBride's mother and protagonist had “negative Jewish role models,” while our educational system attempts to provide positive ones. Of course, one can choose not to teach MacBride, raising what some might call the ‘triage question’ – that is the question of making the right kinds of curricular choices to serve the purposes of a particular classroom context, school, or curriculum. Different teachers will want to foreground different approaches – teachers should almost always follow their best instincts – and for some, texts which seem to echo clear Jewish messages may be preferable.

The “Jewish-theme” based approach – has its value, but literary texts, like life itself, do not often provide clear and simple messages. Further, our students may find, for example, resonances in a work like MacBride's, and may actually in some ways relate to the protagonist, even empathize with her – which will make them skeptical, even distrustful of a moralistic approach to literary texts. Our students will not be satisfied with overly-simple readings: we should train them to see the complexities in the literary texts they read, and emphasize that identifying with certain aspects of literary texts, while questioning some of their values or assumptions are *not* mutually exclusive activities.

The current approach acknowledges the value of the kinds of readings where literary texts can be employed to affirm Jewish values, but primarily cultivates the possibility of reading literary texts which are more complicated – going beyond interpretations that merely reinforce what we already believe or think that we already know. The kind of engaged connection which Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai cultivates means listening and attending to people, in our case literary works, which may have different perspectives from our own. Again, we can be inspired by such works, even as we disagree with some of their perspectives. As I once explained to a student after I questioned a point of view elaborated in a passage under study from *Paradise Lost*: “Milton is not my Rebbe.” But Milton, even as I disagree with some of his assumptions, can raise questions that challenge, motivate, even inspire me. Part of what I call “discerning openness” means being able to find value in texts with priorities, even worldviews, which may on the surface, seem antithetical to my own. Instead of trying to integrate worldviews that really are different, we encourage students to encounter texts which in their difference allow for the expanding of horizons.

This is to say that the works which our student will encounter are probably not always equivalent to the Beethoven symphony or the Cezanne painting about which Rabbi Lamm wrote in the last generation. Such works, in this case because of their genre, do not raise issues that explicitly challenge Jewish values. By contrast, the literary texts on the Day School syllabus – even the classic Shakespeare, as we will see with *Romeo and Juliet* in Part III – may challenge our values, because they are complex literary works, not reducible to simple meanings. To embrace a curricular approach which only emphasizes “Jewish themes” or which seeks to find moral messages is to do our students a double disservice: for one, it will likely either bore or turn them off; secondly, it

will deprive them of the skills of encounter: of learning to read. This is not to say that we will not look for interesting pairings between Jewish and non-Jewish texts – between say, as one instructor suggests the story of Cain and Abel and Steinbeck's *East of Eden* or excerpts from Exodus and Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. We may also look for passages in the works of Rabbi Soloveitchik or Maimonides, on “loneliness” or repentance respectively, to compare to literary works which also deal with such themes. But we will only do so only after providing close careful readings of texts *in their own terms*.

Some will say that this approach compounds the dangers and exposure that our students already face. Why should we, as educators, emphasize questions when our students already have so many? What good is there in turning to texts which question, for example, gender hierarchy, as we see in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and that may lead to questioning of gender roles within the Jewish world? To be sure, there are risks in such an approach, but the conviction that governs the pedagogy here is that our students will likely *already have* such questions, and that it is better to have them refined and articulated under our guidance, and with our support, and in a context where parents, supportive friends and teachers and rabbis can help provide answers. To be sure, manpower issues will sometimes make realizing such a goal more difficult. Not all English school teachers have the same level of background, nor will they have the same level of commitment to Jewish ideals. That some very fine teachers of English Literature in Day Schools have been non-Jewish emphasizes the extent to which raising awareness of curricular goals and sensitivity to student perspectives is central to the undertaking described here. Even without teachers who are Torah scholars, our students should have the advantage of being able to ask questions in the protected environment of the Jewish Day School classroom, as opposed to later in life, in the college classroom where Jewish

points of view on such issues will be looked at with less sympathy, if not outright hostility.

Before turning to some possibilities for specific approaches in the classroom, it is worth, again, invoking Shalom Carmy, though slightly revising his approach, given the perspective elaborated here. Carmy emphasizes the importance of teachers “who have mastered the art of integration.”¹⁴ For us, it will not be so much integration which matters, but the ability to engage with different texts and traditions – to be able to participate in a number of different conversations – while maintaining Jewish commitments, and *without* feeling threatened by questions. Our students will look for role-models who are able to participate in different conversations without fear, though not recklessly, who are willing to take risks, but not foolishly, and who look to literature and the processes of reading and interpretation as a way of cultivating and strengthening a Jewish self, with the reference points of Jewish learning and life always in the foreground.

The current section, taking seriously both the goals and obstacles set out above, tries to suggest some approaches for literature in a Jewish Day School framework. What follows are a list of suggested emphases and approached. There are no normative approaches for syllabi, nor guidelines for teaching the languages of literary forms and rhetoric, but instead the emphasis is on opportunities for – and problems of – encountering different literary works.

Some Selected Emphases and Approaches

1. Conversations about Integration

Given the sophistication of students about the world that they live in – already infused with values of both Torah and Western culture, to what extent should students be encouraged to think about the process in which they are engaging? Is “integration” and the study of literature part of their natural vocabulary? Or: should they be

encouraged to think about what such a project entails? Does religious thought and secular wisdom go together – in the Jewish tradition? in other religious traditions which also try to include literature? Certainly, the high school literature classroom is no place for the readings of long philosophical essays by the most influential Modern Orthodox thinkers, but there may be a place for excerpts.

Or there may be more literary ways of framing the question: how, for example, do figures in the English literary tradition think about the relationship between religion and culture? Rabbi Lichtenstein mentions writers from the nineteenth century like Mathew Arnold and William Carlyle and Cardinal Newman. Are their values of humanism still relevant to us? Is T.S. Eliot's essay "Religion and Literature" helpful, in particular his assertion that reading literature "affects our moral and religious beings"? In another essay, "Metaphysical Poets," Eliot writes that the poet brings many different kinds of experiences and forms new wholes from them. Is this a model that we can follow? Does the Modern Orthodox Jew also follow this path in bringing diverse strands of experience into new wholes? Students themselves can be asked to think about the undertaking – the risks as well as benefits involved. Indeed, students may be more candid about their relationship to Western culture than we might imagine. One student, in the audience for a lecture that I gave, corrected me when I discussed "Torah u'madda," asking "do you mean Torah and Entertainment?" Of course, most students will not be so cynical – at least publicly – about the value of Western literature. An essay like Eliot's can help students to think seriously about the relationship between religious and literary texts, and the ways of pursuing the different and diverse parts of a modern life.

Further questions which emerge from such a discussion: Are literary works ethical? Do they have a moral value? Do they have to be moral in

order to be good? (These questions may have been easier to answer in an earlier generation where the ethical nature of literature was assumed.) Further, how – and here we ask them to foreground skills that will lead to discernment – do we distinguish between the values of our tradition and the values of literature? Finally, students may be encouraged to ask – or may more likely volunteer on their own – on the subject of whether models of "integration" available to older literary traditions and former generation are still relevant to us today. Will students be able to develop models or metaphors that would be more suitable for how we relate to texts and traditions different from our own?

The more ambitious, given the necessary resources, may want to take the step of bringing rabbis into the conversation, and to think of programs through which a real dialogue can be created between different parts of the curriculum, indeed different parts of the school. The conversation which results would not be one-way as it has been in the past – with rabbinic thinkers and administrators providing models to teachers. But rabbis could see what happens in our English classrooms, perhaps getting a better understanding of our curriculum, but also how our students relate to it. Together, rabbis, teachers and students might think about the models that are being developed in practice about the relationship between Jewish and secular texts. Rabbis may find themselves with unexpected opportunities – through better understanding the concerns of their students – that arise from such conversations.

2. Ways of Reading

Many of my contemporaries admit that they never fully understood what it meant to read until their most advanced studies, that is until late in their graduate school educations. This may in some sense be to acknowledge problems in pedagogy throughout high school and even undergraduate education, but more than that, it is a recognition of the *difficulty* of reading. Though our syllabi in

many cases have become longer and our course requirements more ambitious, the situation may be similar in our classrooms. That is, with all of our efforts, reading is still a skill of underappreciated difficulty: an activity that requires encountering a world outside of our own. Teachers should have the patience and courage to encourage this skill: to train students to be conscious of reading as an activity, and to overcome the very real fears – for reading in some sense does entail putting the self at risk.

Other questions about the nature of reading will be in the background and can sometimes be elaborated and articulated. For example, in a secular world that insists that meanings are subjective, and opinions are relative, how can we train our students in the art of reading as a disciplined activity where some meanings are given more weight than others? What are the works which allow us to show students best that though literature may have many different kinds of resonances, there are “right” and “wrong” readings of the books that they read? These are huge questions which may take years to develop, but the disciplines of close reading and reading in context discussed below may well contribute to such goals

2a. Close Readings

One of the greatest challenges on a university level is to teach students that there are different kinds of texts and different kinds of attention necessary to read those texts: that there is a difference between literary texts and, let's say, the sports sections of a newspaper. The German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche noted that even in his day, people were not interested in what he called “slow reading.” Every teacher knows best her strengths and weaknesses, and what will best allow students to explore reading as process. This may entail a form of reading which is not for an immediate “right interpretation,” but one that takes time, even risks misreading in favor of *process*. Generosity to students and their perspectives, and encouraging

them to commit to readings of poems may help distance them from a “Wired” culture where answers and interpretations – Wikipedia is a great example – are already available in pre-packaged forms. So instructors may focus on some of the following questions in thinking about their pedagogical agendas: how do we encourage slow close readings of literary texts as ways of reinforcing some of the more general insights about the nature of reading? What are the best kinds of texts – short poems, short stories? – to sensitize students to the importance of reading slowly and carefully?

2b. Literary Tradition and History

Our focus should not only be on close reading, but also on giving students a sense of literary history, and how seeing works in relationship to one another will help the process of close reading and interpretation. Introducing works in their historical contexts may also help us to show students the way the books we read have particular meanings, and not just “anything goes.” Such an approach also can be made to complement studies in the Jewish curriculum where there are specific rules of interpretation and assumptions about the possibility of meanings of texts. Providing close readings of works within historical contexts allows students to see how texts resonate and signify in ways that are controlled by the author. We need not provide extensive historical contexts, but enough to show our students that great writers are often in conversation with other writers, and that meaning sometimes depend on understanding the nature of the conversation. Cultivating such a sensitivity allows our students to become active participants in those conversations.

Looking at conversations of poets across generations – to use the classic examples, Dante's reading of Virgil; Virgil's reading of Homer – helps show the ways in which poets use literary traditions at their disposal in order to do new things. To give this conversation a modern twist – some high school syllabi don't explore all the older

classics – *Oedipus* or selections of it, can be paired with Frank O'Connor's "My Oedipus Complex." Every teacher has their own range of experience and preferences: my favorites for such an exercise are poems that answer earlier ones, like the conversation between Marlowe, Raleigh and Donne about the pastoral life and pastoral poetry (a good way also to introduce genre), or Katherine Phillips and Adrienne Rich's rewritings of Donne's earlier poem, or Tom Stoppard's re-writing of Shakespeare. More contemporarily, there are re-workings of novels, Jean Rhys *Wide Sargasso Sea* for example as a re-writing of *Jane Eyre*; or even film adaptations of plays (like Branagh's *Henry V* or several versions of *Romeo and Juliet*). Instructors will have other creative ideas about what works well in showing how authors and texts interact with each other across generations. A sense of history is not foreign to our students from their Jewish studies: we should cultivate that sense in their study of literature.

Finally, moving to more general questions: are the ways we talk about literary tradition perhaps useful to students in helping them to think about the way the Jewish tradition works? Specifically, does thinking about the relationship between originality and tradition in literature create bridges to a similar dynamic in discussions of Jewish texts, in particular – for those instructors who have the inclination and knowledge – to the dynamics of the Oral Tradition? Many students will naturally think, absorbing the perspective of general culture, that to be an original means to throw off the limitations of the past. But teaching literature and literary history allows our students to see that sometimes creativity and originality are enabled through a relationship to the past. That is, tradition does not mean (in literature or religion), a blind acceptance of the past, but an engagement with the past and a movement into the future. Talking about such an attitude in terms of what I call "appropriation and transformation" can allow students to see how some of the best literary works engage with the past (appropriation) and then

change the models inherited from the past (transformation) to create genuinely new and original works. Again, such concepts can be taught in relationship to a variety of different texts: whether sonnets or epic poems. But one possible emphasis in our classroom may be showing that through traditions, participating in conversations over time, new possibilities of meaning are created.

2c. Ways of Reading and Knowing

Many works of literature themselves show the problems of reading. To start with two ancient texts, *Oedipus*' tragic flaw may be explained as his inability to read properly (what does the oracle at Delphi mean?); Homer's *Odyssey* comes to its climax when the protagonist fails to read the signs of his wife, Penelope. A modern classic: Austen's *Emma* shows the protagonist constantly misreading her environment. In the two texts explored in Part III of these guidelines, reading and failures of reading (misreadings) are foregrounded. Is it possible, and on what level, to show students that often great literary works are themselves involved with questions of reading – protagonists trying to reading other people, their environment, history or even God – and what it takes to be a good reader? Further, how can such an approach into discussions of this theme be applied to our own lives? That is, do works within the Jewish tradition also want us to be good readers? Does the Torah assume, like the literary texts mentioned, that the ability to read and know are activities which are not simple, but rather take skill and practice? These are high stake questions, but they can emerge from well-directed discussions. So we may also ask: what does it mean when we say we "know something" as readers of literary texts, as Jews?

3. What do We Study?

The Renaissance essayist and philosopher, Francis Bacon, wrote that there are two kinds of people in the world, those who see similarities, and those who see differences. In our Day School

classrooms, we may aspire to teach our students to do *both* activities: to find the connections and relationships between the knowledge they bring from their Jewish education to the books they study in our classrooms, while also being able to see differences. Our students, in fact, often bring amazing credentials (which we should acknowledge) with knowledge about the Judeo-Christian tradition upon which so much of English Literature is based. Our challenge is to allow them to find connections between the literature they are reading and the other parts of their lives. Not only do they often have the ability to see the way in which literary texts are structured from their experiences in reading *Tanakh*, but they also, and perhaps more importantly, can see the ways in which Biblical references suffuse literature. That is, our students probably already have a habit of mind that makes connections: our job is to cultivate this habit of mind, and refine it.

Using Bacon's categories and for broad schematic purposes, I will distinguish in this section between literary works that have a direct and obviously accessible relationship to Judaism in which similarities are evident, and those that are less accessible to such an approach, where differences are more obvious. In the first category, works that can be construed as having an intrinsic connection to Judaism; in the second, works in which that connection is less apparent, or perhaps, at first glance, even contrary to normative Jewish values.

To explain the first category, Rabbi Kook, after a trip to London and the National Gallery, commented to a reporter that in the paintings of Rembrandt one "can see the very light that God created on Genesis day."¹⁵ This is like Rabbi Lamm's example of the Cezanne painting or the Beethoven symphony, and perhaps there are equivalent poems – certainly among romantic poets like Wordsworth or Blake – which give a sense of the divine in the every day. These are the kinds of works that on some level are easy to teach

in a Day School framework, in that they provide no overt or even hidden challenge to Jewish values. Though, of course, "conveying the light of Genesis," or even just reinforcing the notion of the divine presence in the day-to-day, may be equally challenging pedagogical tasks.

But, as already discussed, we are challenged by other kinds of texts, even those which have an apparently intrinsic connection to the concerns through dealing with issues that are central to Jewish religious concerns: ideas of repentance, divine providence, evil, free will, history and memory (in the latter category will fall anything about the *Shoah* or anti-Semitism). Turning to works which emphasize themes or ideas that are common to both Jewish and non-Jewish traditions – passages from Milton, or works by Melville or Hawthorne – may provide points of reference and lead easily into class discussions. But they raise the challenge of how to deal with alternate traditions while maintaining a sense of the priority of a Jewish perspective. On the one hand, as we start exposing our students to literature, we may want to tell our students to look for similarities, and *to not* say "*l'hadvil*." But as their studies progress, after we have taught them that literary readings are often predicated on seeing similarities, we will want to emphasize the fine art of distinction, part of the process of cultivating the discerning openness discussed above, even in those works which seem to show similar concerns to our own.

To be sure, the kinds of texts which may make up the majority of our curricula, and of which many of the proponents of integration from an older generation make little mention, are those texts which deal with rebellion and identity (issues explored in the texts below, in Shakespeare, and especially Hurston's novel). Teaching narratives of adolescent rebellion in Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* or "Franny and Zooey" may demand both of Bacon's skills – to identify characters, even relate to them, and only then provide ways of

distinguishing our values from theirs. Works like “Bartleby,” *The Invisible Man*, *The Autobiography of Frederick Douglass*, *Beloved* and many other works on Day School syllabi deal with questions of “otherness,” of not-fitting in, of being outsiders.

The experience of the self as an outsider to society, or even opposed to society, for most of our students is not the exception, but the norm. A new curriculum for the Jewish Day School classroom must show its commitment to reading such texts in their own terms, and to show students how to learn from these works, even while being

discerning – even critical, about the values that they represent. With the value of the humanities under attack, not only sometimes in our communities, but in the culture at large, we offer our student a skill which will serve them throughout their lives: to be able to recognize and hear voices different than their own, and even more, to learn from perspectives acknowledged as fundamentally different from our own. As instructors, train our students to participate, though critically, in many conversations, to encounter otherness and difference, though foregrounding the conversations that are most important to our identity as Jews.

Part III: Encountering Literary Texts

We conclude with readings of two literary works: one a classic, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the other a more modern work, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Very different works, they both provide opportunities to open up questions for our students: to see, following the approach outline above, similarities and differences between Jewish and Western traditions. In the approach to both texts, a set of literary readings come first, and from those readings emerge more general questions relevant to Jewish values and Jewish life. To reiterate the perspective articulated in Part II, the approach here is not to find in literary texts messages that are

amenable to our religious perspective. Rather, we model for our students an openness to literary texts, their concerns and questions, and only then place them in dialogue with those concerns which emerge from our own tradition and experience. Again: we are not disappointed by texts that don't follow our religious viewpoint, or depart from our idea of an ethical norm, but we use texts as ways of opening up new perspectives and asking questions. Because of the emphasis on questions, much is left to the instructor: once literary readings are in place, the instructor herself can decide which questions to emphasize, and where the discussion, in response to these questions, will go.

Encountering the Classic: William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

Romeo and Juliet provides a way of introducing students, especially adolescents, to some of the great themes of Shakespearean tragedy, while exploring issues that resonate in the twenty-first century. The play also provides a great resource for developing reading skills, looking at Shakespeare's use of genre, the development of character, the cultivation of metaphor and foreshadowing. Below are three thematic areas of approach that are interrelated and should serve as a way of opening up the play – on time, love and language – and allowing us to ask questions about the relationship between a great literary text and our own tradition. There are other areas that instructors will explore – independently or in conjunction with these – but these are some ideas for making accessible and relevant to our students today.

1. Genre and Time

Reading *Romeo and Juliet* is a great way to get students to think about genre, and to understand why it was important for Shakespeare, and why it is important for us. Awareness of genre is an awareness of what kind of speech – including tone, diction and content – are appropriate to different situations. Literary figures use genre as a way of connecting to literary tradition and audience; we can become aware of genres of discourse in our own lives – what kind of talk is appropriate for school, for friends, for family; for diary entries, for written assignments, for college essays.

Shakespeare, in the early part of his career wrote both comedies and tragedies. Shakespearean comedies always end in weddings: at the end of *As You Like It* one character says that there “must be another flood, with so many couples on their way to Noah's Ark.” With this in mind, students can be encouraged to think about the message of comedy as a genre. Not only does comedy ask us to laugh, but the genre itself has a more profound

meaning: comedy asserts continuity and the affirmation of social cohesion. Marriage is the means by which society connects together, cementing social relations, and moves into a future of social and civic peace. Marriage is the happy ending that seals Shakespearean comedies because it takes the love of the present and brings it forward into the future.

While comedy is always about the affirmation of the social world and continuity, tragedy is about the death of the individual. So the tragedies are named after *people*: Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear, *Romeo and Juliet*. Instead of coherence and cohesion, there is isolation. Not continuity, but death. So both comedy and tragedy imply notions of time – the way things will work out in the end. A great literary critic [Frank Kermode in his *Sense of an Ending*] writes that comedies are always structured like the sound of an old clock: “tick-tock.” The tick marks the beginning of the play, and the anticipated “tock” its ending. When one attends a comedy by William Shakespeare, one knows from the very beginning of the play that there will be a happy ending. It is almost as if the playwright upon my entering the theatre, shakes my hand and says to me: “we have a contract” – but not a financial one, a generic one. This play, we can imagine him saying to me – as a comedy, for example – will fulfill all your expectations, and there will be a happy ending, with at least one marriage at the end. It's, in a way, not so far from our own experiences at the movies: we go to a film with Richard Gere and Julia Roberts, and we know – no matter what the tension in between – that there will be a happy ending. In fact, if it does not end happily, if Richard and Julia don't get together by the end, we might, in some hypothetical scenario, go to the box office, and demand our money back. True, there is that time of dramatic tension – of not knowing – between the tick and the tock, but once we know we are in a comedy, we know for sure that there will be a

happy ending. In Shakespearean comedies, characters, “knowing” as it were that they are in comedies, will encourage patience, for, as they will also from time to time say, truth always comes to light in the end, the good guys win, the plays end “as we like it” for “all’s well that ends well.” So again, comedy is the genre of the affirmation of society; tragedy, by contrast focuses on the death of the individual.

Shakespeare’s comedies, however, sometimes even as they move towards their comic ending – the happy social reconciliation – entertain the possibility of different endings. Even as the play moves towards the expected closure, characters sometimes get hurt, or almost die, only, in the end, to emerge from that experience to the already anticipated happy ending. So Shakespeare, we can tell our students, sometimes includes of tragedy in comedy. But in Shakespeare’s tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*, there are also aspects of comedy. On the one hand, the prologue of the play, tell us that we are in tragedy, and gives us a notion of time where we know things will end badly: where “ancient grudge” breaks to “new mutiny” that will end in the ‘star-crossed lovers taking their life.’ No surprises here: the lovers’ fate is sealed from the beginning. The Prologue is echoed throughout the play, even in the first two acts, with foreshadowing of death, where Romeo tells of his mind’s misgiving and his thoughts of “untimely death” (1.4.106-113), or Juliet’s exclamation at the masque, “If he be married/ my grave is like to be my wedding bed (1.5.135). (A great exercise for students is to trace the passages of the play that foreshadow the ending.) But, the first few acts of the play are full of the themes of love and comedy as well – of Romeo’s over-the-top infatuation, first with Rosaline and then with Juliet, of the friendly scoffing and banter of his friends Mercutio and Benvolio, of the party at the Capulet house, the festive masque and dancing, staple parts of the comic genre.

Instructors can ask students to find places where

Shakespeare signals that the play may turn out otherwise than the prologue suggests, that the play seems to be moving in the direction of reconciliation. They will inevitably point to the themes of comic love throughout the first two acts, or the benevolent older Capulet, who looks at Romeo as a “virtuous and well-governed youth,” urging the fiery Tybald who is angry at Romeo’s presence “at the feast” to “be patient” (1.5.68-71). Even when Romeo confronts Tybald in the square, he wants reconciliation – and if it were not for the miscues and miscommunication that are so much part of the play (demonstrating the problem of reading the environment properly to which we referred in the introductory material above), there might have been such reconciliation. When Mercutio is finally wounded, he claims at first that it is only a “scratch” (3.1.94). Only at 3.1.120, after two acts of confusing signals, does the play turn clearly into tragedy, and then rush, headway to its tragic end.

So a question to get students thinking: why does Shakespeare mix generic signals? Does he not know that he’s writing tragedy and not comedy? Did he fall asleep on the job? (Students can be told of one of the very first literary critics Longinus who wrote about the great epic author Homer that he sometimes “nods”). Why is it that on the one hand the play shows itself to be rushing to its tragic end from the very first lines of the play, but on the other hand contains elements of comedy which seem to reassure us as an audience that things might, if we are patient, happily? Does this make *Romeo and Juliet* an inferior play?

One approach to answering this question may lie in the way that Shakespeare wants to structure our responses, by giving the viewer (or reader) the sense that *Romeo and Juliet* really is a comic world. After all, the play’s title tells that what ensues is about a *couple*, not an individual. And perhaps in reading the play, we find ourselves invested, wanting to align ourselves with those forces of reconciliation, whether it be Capulet

early on, or the spirit of love that permeates the festive masque, or even the Friar further on in the play (for example, 3.3.147-154). And believing in comedy – this is an important thing to teach high school students about Shakespeare and comedy in general – is belief in a vision of a world, and a conception of time where all things end as we thought they would, *happily*. But of course, in *Romeo and Juliet*, the couple die separately, as individuals, and the faith that we had in the comic world, and the forces of social continuity are not able to stop the fast course of events that lead to their death. Knowing this, we hear more profoundly Capulet's words towards the end of the play:

*All things that we ordained festival
Turned from their office to black funeral.
Our instruments to melancholy bells;
Our wedding cheer to a sad burial feast;
Our solemn hymns to sullen dirges change;
Our bridal flowers serve for a buried corse;
And all things change them to the contrary
(4.5.84-90).*

Capulet's speech here accommodates our expectation of comedy and its reversal: the “ordained festival,” the “wedding cheer,” the “bridal flowers.” And as he concludes: “All things change them to the contrary.” The tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*, their fast and tragic death is made all the more powerful at the end, because Shakespeare, in raising our expectations by allowing us to think about a comic resolution, makes us feel how far we are from the ideals of love and reconciliation we thought might come to pass. Time as Lady Capulet says is “woeful,” and as her husband says, “uncomfortable,” only bringing grief and despair (4.5.30, 60). And perhaps even further – and we will explore this more in the second part – if we thought the forces of society could help prevent the tragedy of the two lovers, we were dreadfully wrong. Even towards the end of the play, Capulet thanks the Friar for helping in the hoped-for marriage of

Juliet and Paris, telling him that the “whole city” of Verona is indebted to him, and that “all things shall be well” (4.2.39-40). But by that point, as an audience, we no longer share that delusion, for the fate of the two lovers has long been sealed. For in *Romeo and Juliet*, it's not the power of society that is emphasized, but the tragic love of individuals.

Putting such a set of readings on the table prepares for other questions – questions that are particular to the Jewish Day School class. For one, more generally, if comedy and tragedy are not only different emotional modes, but provide different conceptions about the shape of time, then, what can we see about our own relationship to the world: is our own conception of time essentially comic or tragic? That famous literary critic says that the tick-tock structure of comedy originates in *Tanakh*, with Genesis – *bereishit bara* – the first tick, and the End of Days (the coming of *Mashiach*), the tock at the end. Is he right? Is there a Jewish sense of time? And if so, is it comic in this sense, with an anticipated happy ending? Or are there tragic elements as well? That is does the Jewish conception of time accommodate tragedy as well as comedy? Do we also have a sense of anticipation for an ending that is already pre-ordained and known? The twelfth of the Rambam's “Thirteen Principles of Faith” – “I believe in the coming of the Messiah” – may be a meaningful reference point, to think about in this light. For through Shakespeare's play – the comedies and the tragedies – he is implicitly thinking, and inviting us to think about the shape of time, and the question of whether certain things are ordained from the beginning, and how we may live (or not) with a sense of and ending.

To go back to the play, but continuing on the theme of time, *Romeo and Juliet* are “star-crossed lovers,” and they are victims of “fate” and “fortune,” as well as of the “ancient grudge” of the city into which they are born. (Another fruitful exercise is to ask student to catalog the various

events that contribute to the tragic end, from letters that don't get to their destination to misunderstandings that seal the fate of the protagonists). What does it mean to say that the tragic end of *Romeo and Juliet* is fated from the beginning? Following this question, one can explore: does the conception of fate in Shakespeare's play allow for any notion of choice? In an active class, this will inevitably lead students to raise questions about the relationship between Shakespearean fate and providence. Is fate like providence? Or are they different?

Students who are beginning to think about these issues in relationship to Jewish texts can move out of the Shakespearean text to think about how knowing the way things are going to end – whether a play from the playwright's point of view, or the life of an individual or a community from God's perspective – effects free choice. The Rambam's *Laws of Repentance* may provide an important frame of reference for our students. In chapter five through seven of that work, the Rambam asserts that God foresees everything, but free choice is still possible. That a knowing God for whom all history is already known and foreseen allows for free-choice is, the Rambam writes, a paradox. Trying to understand that paradox may be useful in a reading of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Indeed, the movement between Shakespeare and Jewish frames is not one-way: once students have brought to light Jewish ideas about Providence and free-will, they can go back to the play with new questions and perspectives, and ask, for example: 'even if the lovers are fated to die, is there any room for free-will in the play? Juliet bemoans (3.5.210): "Alack, alack that heaven should practice stratagems/ Upon so soft a subject as myself." Does Juliet – the 'soft subject,' as she sees herself – have any power of her own in the face of the 'stratagems' of "Heaven"? Is there a possibility of free-will even though the Heavens – the pagan version of Providence – conspires

against her? Of course, suicide is not something entertained in a Jewish world, but is there a way in which the choices of the two protagonists as they make them, within the play world of Shakespeare, heroic? Meaning, is the choice that the heroes make, as tragically misguided as they may be from our perspective, count as taking responsibility, as having *bechira*, that is free-will? Can students make a case for the "rightness" within Shakespeare's world of course of the choices that get made? Do they have any other possibilities? Or is there end just necessitated by fate, and the fact that they are in the wrong genre for happy endings, not comedy, but tragedy? Are *Romeo and Juliet* finally able to assert their individuality against the forces of fate? Or is perhaps the author Shakespeare suggesting that in the pagan world which *Romeo and Juliet* inhabit, such free-will really is not possible? These questions do not necessarily have any "right" answer. But once the text is opened – again, in our approach, literary readings come first – students can see ways in which Shakespeare speaks to them, and allows them to engage with a different set of beliefs, and perhaps begin to see their own beliefs and commitments more clearly. Indeed, the Rambam's categories may be useful for opening up the text, and they themselves will likely be clearer to our students after having confronted Shakespeare's tragedy. For through Shakespeare, seeing both similarities and differences, students can see what is unique about their own tradition.

2. The Anatomy of Love

No discussion or *Romeo and Juliet* would be complete without turning to the play's central theme: love. The love of *Romeo and Juliet* gets replayed in Western culture again and again: from Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* to film after film, the couple and their love have been immortalized. But to understand the play means not only giving a chance to contemporary Hollywood versions of the story (some may want to show Baz Luhrmann's 1996 version), but know the reality in which Shakespeare wrote. Knowing

a text, as we suggested in part two, means knowing its contexts as well. Shakespeare's play came at a time when there was an obsession with love, showing itself during his era most obviously in the growing phenomenon of writing sonnets. If Shakespearean youth were alive today, they would be texting sonnets to each other – and a particular kind, known as the Petrarchan sonnet (and of course sonnets are often a staple on the Day School curriculum, so another good time to emphasize how different texts and literary genres can be related). Teaching *Romeo and Juliet* brings the advantage of teaching students about this genre of poems, about its artificial character, its idealized depiction of the woman beloved, as well as the male lover, madly in love. So the play can begin with reading typical examples of the genre often collected in anthology in the works of Phillip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, or Shakespeare himself.

Romeo and Juliet has long been known as one of Shakespeare's more artificial plays: the characters speak in rhymed verse, they sometimes even converse in sonnets, the language is often what our students might consider “flowery,” very distant from the rhythms of spoken speech. Romeo utters many of the clichés that were associated with the Petrarchan type. That is he reflects the conventions and expectations of contemporary Elizabethan theater goes about a certain kind of love. Shakespeare takes as his starting point this conventional love of the Petrarchan lover, and throughout the play develops it, changes it, transforms it. Indeed, the play provides images of many different attitudes towards love, and students can be made to anticipate the ways in which Shakespeare transforms the ideas of love which he inherited. This might also be a place to suggest to students that the idea of originality in Shakespeare is one that is usually tied to his predecessors. We usually will not ask what stories Shakespeare invented, but how Shakespeare took older stories or ideas and transformed them to make them new.

One could also, following these lines, talk about the relationship between this Shakespearean kind of “originality” and what we sometimes call, in our context, the *hiddush*. What does it mean for something to be new and original in learning? Can something be both traditional and original? Teachers for whom the question of poetic originality and creativity is of interest as a point of digression may want to consider passages from Rabbi Soloveitchik's *Halakhic Man*. To be sure, any such discussion would have to take care to make distinctions between genres: the difference between the legal innovations about which Rabbi Soloveitchik writes in his philosophical work *Halakhic Man* and the creativity of Shakespeare in transforming a literary story in *Romeo and Juliet*. But with that said, one might think about the statements of the Rabbi Soloveitchik in relationship to questions of literature: “*Halakhic man*,” is not only a “simple recipient” of the Torah, he writes, but the “power” of what the Rabbi Soloveitchik calls “creative interpretation” becomes the “very foundation of the received tradition.” In both Jewish and Shakespearean contexts, originality is achieved, not as in many modern versions, through rejection of the past, but through a creative relationship to the past. With the Rabbi Soloveitchik arguments about “creativity” placed at the fore, one might be able to show students more clearly how Shakespeare uses Petrarchan stereotypes – contemporary clichés about love – and an older story in order to create something new. [Further discussions on this topic might be had in relationship to different literary works from different periods that assume different ideas about poetic originality, in Wordsworth or Blake, for example, where the individual himself is seen as the origin of originality.]

Students might also be encouraged to think from the outset about Shakespeare's attitude towards the love of *Romeo and Juliet*. That is, how does the dramatist represent their love? Does he approve of it? Does he structure his play in such a

way to make us, as readers, approve of their love? And how can these questions be answered through thinking about how Shakespeare represents and relates conventional Petrarchan love. Again, Shakespeare was never an original: in *Romeo and Juliet*, he not only takes contemporary ideas about love and changes them, but he bases his play on an earlier one, *The Tragical History of Romeo and Juliet* by Arthur Brooke. In Brooke's play, the playwright is outspoken about what he thinks of the lovers. Of course, for our students, we don't need to be literary historians studying Brooke, but knowledge of his prologue is helpful. In it, Brooke writes "to this end is this tragical matter written, to describe unto thee a couple of unfortunate lovers, thrilling themselves to dishonest desire, neglecting the advice and authority of parents and friends." Students can see that Brooke makes an opposition between the social world of "parents and friends" and the "desire" of the couple. Brooke clearly condemns the lovers who seek their "thrills" (a word which may be especially resonant for our students) upholding instead the dictates and rules of the social world. In thinking about how this opposition works out in Shakespeare's play, students can be encouraged to list the social forces in Verona (the different networks of friends, the Prince, the parents, the religious authority of the two Friars) and in what way they come to either enable or oppose the lovers. Further, they can think about how Shakespeare's play depicts the relationship between the forces of social cohesion and the two protagonists. We can encourage our students to ask: does Shakespeare, like Brooke, write a play in which he harshly judges the excessive desire of the lovers? How do we as readers react to the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*?

When we are introduced to the city of Verona, Shakespeare focuses us on the social: we find a city of conformity, of gangs, and hierarchical politics and religion. The opening scene of the play also shows a city in which a very masculine and "bawdy" sexuality rules the day; depending

upon the maturity of the students, time can be spent exploring the role of this in a reading of the play. Luhrmann's updated postmodern film version of the play, a good reference for students, highlights the masculine gang violence of Verona, where guys are interested only in women, cars, and violence (the first scene, though seemingly just a comic aside, can be used as a means of showing students how Shakespeare starts the play with images of male violence and the wished-for submission of women). Students may be asked to consider why Shakespeare's Romeo is not present in the first violent encounter between the Capulets and Montagus, and why the playwright further calls attention to this absence when Lady Montague asks, "Where is Romeo?" (1.1.116).

Romeo, as it turns out, is an outsider to the Veronan culture of masculine violence, he has other things on his mind, his beloved Rosaline. Romeo is off composing poems to her, and is depicted as the idealized conventional Petrarchan lover: "he pens himself an artificial night," oblivious to his surroundings (1.1.138-140). On the one hand, Romeo is an outsider to Verona, on the other, his own verse is as structured along artificial Petrarchan lines; everything about Romeo early on in the play is artificial. Romeo starts out as the poet/lover, the dim-witted Petrarchan, but again, this fact does get him out of the conventional social life of Verona. But when we first meet him in the play, he himself is a man of convention, playing the sick-at-heart lover in relationship to his idealized beloved. From Romeo's very first appearance, he speaks in the language of Petrarchan sonnets, using the paradoxical exclamations that had become a staple in the circle of Renaissance lover:

...O brawling lover, O loving hate,
O anything, of nothing first create!
O heavy lightness, serious vanity,
Misshapen chaos of well seeking forms,
Father of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health,
Still waking sleep (1.1.176-181).

Romeo continues in this vein (1.1.184-195), speaking of himself as a “madman,” and his lover, using conventional Petrarchan exaggeration as “an all-seeing sun.”

Before considering Romeo's transformation, it makes sense to see the other kinds of love that Shakespeare catalogues throughout the play: the Nurse's earthy pragmatism, the skepticism of Benvolio, the lewd mocking of Mercutio, and Capulet's very paternalistic attitude towards his daughter at the end of Act 3. Shakespeare, students can come to understand, gives us not only characters, but the conceptions of love which they represent. In anticipation of some of the questions to be asked particular to the Jewish Day School classroom, we might ask: are there equivalents in the Jewish world of Capulet and his attitude towards Juliet, as he exclaims: “Disobedient wretch!...get thee to church a”Thursday/ Or never look after in my face” (3.5.161). That is, are there corollaries in the Jewish world where fathers and sometimes mother force their children into marriage? And how do we relate today towards the kind of paternalist attitude that Capulet represents? The play – made easily relevant for a current generation – can open up questions about the role of parents in choosing a mate for their child.

More subtly, students can be asked to think about the debate between Mercutio and Romeo, and the conceptions of love they represent. Mercutio is the realist, Romeo, the dreamer. Mercutio argues that “dreamers often lie”; while Romeo counters: “In bed asleep, while they do dreams things true” (1.4.52-3). Students can be asked to consider Mercutio's long set of speeches (in 1.4) which ends with his dismissal of love and dreams as “begot of nothing but vain fantasy” (1.4.98; see also 2.4.37-46 and how Romeo is associated with “Petrarchan numbers”). Following this, students can be asked to position themselves – do they agree more with Mercutio or more with Romeo? (very often, and usefully, classes break down on gender lines with

girls in favor of Romeo, and guys in favor of Mercutio). But this question really leads to a much more important one in dramatic terms: how are both the ideas of love of Mercutio and Romeo both supplanted in *Romeo and Juliet*? That is, in other terms, is there an alternative to Romeo's artificial Petrarchan love and the bawdy skepticism of Mercutio?

I have found it a useful pedagogical move to ask students (especially the girls) if they would like, one day, to be courted by a “Romeo.” Though some will initially assent in the positive, they will qualify usually that Romeo, for all his romance, is not only exaggerated, but wrapped up in himself. Petrarchan lovers, for all their passions, never give much sense of really being aware of the women they love. This provides an opening to consider how Romeo, during the course of the play transforms, and particularly how Juliet functions in that transformation. To be sure, even Juliet, at the outset, is caught up in the same Petrarchan conventions as Romeo, and in one of their first interludes (another great exercise for students to think about the relationship between form and meaning), they have a conversation in the sonnet form (1.5.95-109), at the end of which Juliet chides Romeo: “you kiss by the book” (15.110). As if to say, “you are just uttering clichés, I want something real!” Though by the book, Juliet does make something happen which has never happened before, not only in the world of the play, but in the world of Renaissance theatre: the woman speaks (we can point out to students that Rosaline never shows up on stage for a reason: she is only important as the fantasy woman of Romeo). But Juliet is not only the idealized beloved: she loves, and in the process shows Romeo how to love. This is not the love of the one-sided Petrarchan lover, but a reciprocal love. The sonnet they speak may be artificial, but *it is* mutual.

In the earlier section above, we spoke about the possible heroism of the couple: students can

consider the possibility that in masculine patriarchal Verona it is Juliet who is the real hero. After all, when Romeo is beside himself after killing Tybald, it is Juliet who is even-tempered; she has the courage to refuse her father's wishes for her to marry Paris (we can't underestimate Juliet's will to stand up against the male powers that be); further, at the end of the play she does not flee with the Friar, but faces death alone: is then Juliet Shakespeare's first feminist character? Do we perhaps, as an audience, even admire her for the way she stands up to masculine authority?

In a play which is otherwise defined by masculine authority and masculine versions of love, it is Juliet who gives a new voice to love. Juliet, in the balcony scene – of which more in section 3 – does not “dwell on form” (2.2.88). She knows of the artificial temperaments of love, and so asks Romeo to love “faithfully.” In contrast to what we have seen before in the play, Juliet tells of her “true-love passion” (2.2.104). And it is through her voice, that Romeo becomes other than a mere stereotype; through Juliet the pair discover each other, and themselves. So we see Juliet's internal world when responding to the death of Tybald, and have a further glance at that world, when she plays along with the courting Paris. Where the world of Verona is based upon externality, Juliet and Romeo (through her), begin to discover and develop their internal worlds. So when the figure of religious authority, the Friar begins to lecture Romeo about his new found love Juliet, Romeo responds simply: “thou canst not speak of that thou dost not feel” (3.3.65). Romeo feels something about which the representative of social and religious order has no conception. In this way, we might want to say that Shakespeare invents (or perhaps discovers) modern love, which is secret, private, even forbidden. We started with the world of externals, but Shakespeare introduces us to a world of private passion and love. There may be political and social orders in Verona, and they may want to control the destinies of the two lovers, but what

Romeo and Juliet *feel* is their own.

These approaches allow us to prepare to ask questions – again – that provide cross-references to our contexts. Why is there such a disconnection between the older generation and the younger? Does the gap that exists between these generations always have to exist? Why is there so much miscommunication? (again, one can focus on all the undelivered letters in the play). How come all of the efforts of reconciliation – of the Prince and the Friar – fail? Why, I ask my students, are the lover so isolated by the end of the play? In *Romeo and Juliet*, the lovers may discover themselves but at the expense of society (for mature students, again, the connection between sex and death throughout the play, can be explored: why is true love associated with death? Can true love really never be brought into the life of society?). Why is Shakespeare's most romantic play also tragic?

These questions lead to questions of greater relevance to our students. In our culture, what conception of “love” is most prominent? Does Judaism have a view of love? Is it closer to Capulet's or Romeo's or Juliet's? Does Judaism allow for something more than just loving “by the book.” Might it be suggested that when it comes down to it – a question to provoke further thought – Judaism is on the side of Capulet, meaning, that marriage fulfills a certain social function and cannot be the vehicle for just seeking out “thrills”? Put less forcefully, should love be more responsive to the needs of society (of parents, family and friends) or of the lovers themselves? Or to raise the stakes even further, is there always necessarily a conflict between society and the individual? Is there in our contemporary Jewish society, and if there is, how do we resolve that conflict when it arises? Is there a way of integrating true love into society? Does the tragic vision that Shakespeare represents of a love that cannot be appreciated or integrated into society have any parallel in the Jewish world? Can true love and “civil bonds”

come together? If so, why don't they in Shakespeare's play? And how might they for us?

Again, these more general questions bring us back into the play world with renewed questions. The two fathers at the end of the play find a way – after seeing that all “are punished” – want to renew social harmony (5.3.295). They do so by building golden statues s memorials to their children. Does memorializing the couple love provide any satisfaction at the end of the play? Does it represent a gesture that shows that the families finally do understand and accept the love of the two protagonists? Do we feel that Verona is any closer to bringing the demands of the individual and society together? Or perhaps does the ending suggest, that all society can do is make sculptures to the memory of the two lovers, but has no way of understanding how lovers “feel,” and no way of bringing true love into society?

Brooke, we remember, cast judgment on the lovers. As readers of Shakespeare, do we render a similar judgment? Or do our condemnations lie elsewhere? Is there such a thing as true love? In Shakespeare? for us? And if so, what is the price of achieving it? Do we as the people who gave the world the Bible and the stories of the love between, among so many others, Yehudah and Tamar, as well as the Song of Songs, have a conception of romantic love? If so, is romantic love a value onto itself?

Does reading Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* make us any less sure about our answers?

3. A Rose by Any Other Name

Instructors will want to follow their own instincts in the play, and develop readings (including some mentioned here) around clusters of images – on day and night, on dreaming and awakening for example. These latter clusters, for example, can be integrated into the approaches already mapped out here: Romeo and Juliet invert day

into night, and their love is often compared by themselves (not only Mercutio) as a dream – emphasizing the extent to which whatever their love represents, for Shakespeare, it cannot be integrated into the waking everyday reality of Verona.

A further exercise – again important for Jewish Day School students for whom models of reading are always important – is to develop a way of reading Shakespeare that shows the importance of particular parts of a literary work in relationship to the whole. As an example, we turn to the famous balcony scene in which Romeo overhears Juliet. Juliet begins with her famous words:

*O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet (2.2.33-36).*

Here, as the lovers begin on their path to reciprocal love, as well as eventual destruction, Juliet at the same time calls out to Romeo using his *name*, but then denies his name, as well as that of his father, as well as her own: “I’ll no longer be a Capulet.” In this speech, Juliet seems to be searching for a form of identity which is not dependent on names or society.

As Shakespeare continues to develop the drama of the scene, we can show our students that the playwright is not only dealing with literary questions, but that literary and more philosophical questions come together:

*“Tis but thy name that is my enemy;
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What's Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
What's in a name? that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes*

*Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
And for that name which is no part of thee
Take all myself (2.2.38-48).*

Juliet claims that Romeo's name is irrelevant to his identity – “what's Montagu?” And then she goes on: “that which we call a rose/ By any other name smell as sweet.” Juliet is not just giving a soliloquy, but she is expressing a theory of language. This is an important point to make to students: through literary dramatizations, philosophical perspectives can be elaborate. That is, playwrights also deal with philosophical issues. Here, that the names we use and the essence of things are somehow *not* related. So Romeo, in Juliet's eyes, would be just as perfect without his name.

The passage raises many pedagogical opportunities, first in relationship to the speech itself, and then as a way of using it to provide an opening into the play. To start: is Juliet right in her conception of language? One might ask, are there other conceptions of language - perhaps which we know from our own tradition which assert a more direct relationship between word and thing? Shakespeare may not have known Jewish conceptions of language where there is an assumed identity between word and thing—for the word *davar* encompasses them both – but he certainly knew conceptions of language based upon the Jewish idea. How is the scene in *Romeo and Juliet* undermining that conception of language? That is, would a rose by any other name *really* smell as sweet? Teachers can be creative here with examples, but here are a couple of questions to help students to start thinking: “would a Mont Blanc pen by any other name write as well?” “would a Porsche by any other name drive as well?” Such questions lead to other more general questions – do the words which we use affect our perception of things? And on a more personal level, how is identity connected with names? Can we think of our own identities independent of the networks in which we live – families, friends, teachers, the community at

large?

Shakespeare continues the scene with Romeo responding:

I take thee at thy word:

*Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized;
Henceforth I never will be Romeo (2.2.49-51).*

Juliet says: “doff thy name”; Romeo renounces his name, as well. By claiming that he will be “new baptized,” Romeo seems to suggest that in relationship to Juliet, he will now have a new identity, become a totally new person. But are Romeo and Juliet right? Is there a possibility of experience without language? Identity without names? Can we think of the identity of things, or selves for that matter, independent of names? Independent of the society in which one lives?

These questions resonate with issues already discussed in the play – the relationship between the social and personal world, the inability for Romeo and Juliet to find places for themselves within Verona. That is the scene, not just one of the great romantic interludes in dramatic history, provides an opening into the meanings of the play as a whole. As we have suggested, Juliet wants to create a world of her own with Romeo, based upon their own very private framework. This opens to a consideration of how Juliet's idealism in this scene allows for a consideration of the play as a whole. Students can be asked to consider: is it possible to suggest that Juliet's belief in the private love between her and Romeo brings on the tragedy? One can never escape, it might be argued, the roles and identities that society has cast, and to believe one can is really only, as Mercutio says, a self-indulgent dream? [Does Shakespeare perhaps show the impracticality of Juliet's perception by having her call out: “What man art thou that thus bescreen'd in night?” For how else can Romeo identify himself – say who he is – other than answering and using his name, Romeo?]

For us, as we think again beyond the play-world:

where does our true sense of identity come from? Do we think more like the Capulets who think that identity is based upon family and society? Or more like Romeo and Juliet who believe that their identity is of their own creation, based more on their feelings? That is, do we owe who we are to social worlds, or are we individuals who come up with our own sense of self? Alternatively: do we ever experience a conflict, and if so, do we in the same way that Romeo and Juliet experience it in the play? Are there different strands or resources within the Jewish tradition that might make us think of emphasizing one or the other? Is there way of resolving the demands of the self and the demands that our society makes upon us?

Rabbi Soloveitchik, again as a familiar reference point, writes about Torah as providing a grid over reality, the blueprint through which Jews experience the world. Isn't he saying that the conceptions of the world that we inherit from our parents, teachers and traditions come first, and that we just have to fit in? And further, that things that do not fit within the grid of *halakha* or Jewish law don't necessarily have importance or reality? If so, what happens to the kind of private self which Juliet and Romeo develop together? Can we be both true to our tradition and true to ourselves?

Does a rose by any other name really smell as sweet?

Encountering Otherness: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

With *Romeo and Juliet*, we entered the world of the Shakespearean classic to explore issues of love, power and language. Zora Neale Hurston's modern classic provides difference opportunities for the Jewish Day School student, exploring issues of identity, difference and relationship. Hurston's book, though first published in 1937, was re-discovered at a conference of American scholars in 1979, and since then it has been re-published, and become a mainstay in high school and university classrooms. Though the issues of Shakespeare's play have been said to be timeless, Hurston's novel raises issues central to the experience of a contemporary world often defined, at least at first, by values which seem antithetical to Jewish life.

Hurston's book has become a centerpiece of the modern multi-cultural classroom – in its exploration of difference (otherness), voice and relationships. In so far that our students inhabit that multi-cultural world – if not in their day-to-day experiences, then through the media and in their virtual social media worlds – Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* serves as a resource for teachers wanting to tap into the experiences of students. Indeed, as will be discussed below, Janie, the protagonist of the novel, is the consummate outsider, a perspective to which many of our students will relate. After providing a set of readings of Hurston's novel, students can be encouraged, as the approach outlined here describes, to consider ways in which the Jewish tradition and contemporary Jewish society provide resources for thinking about relating to difference, cultivating a personal voice, and nurturing relationships. Indeed, as foreign as the reference points of *Their Eyes* may seem to be from Jewish life, Hurston's representation of the outsider has its sources in the Bible: Jews are the original strangers, “strangers in a strange land,” and commanded time and again to learn to live

with the stranger that is among us. One of the reasons that Hurston's book may be so important to read in a modern classroom is to evaluate the way in which a Western text has taken one of the primary metaphors of Jewish identity for its own purposes. For in Hurston's book, the black slave and not the Jew is the stranger, or the slave that needs to be redeemed. In this sense, *Their Eyes* resonates as a work that relates to Jewish traditions and definitions of otherness, but also contemporary adolescent experiences of being 'another.' More than that, Hurston's book is one of the many modern works that turns the idea of being a stranger or outsider into a normative part of lived experience.

In addition, *Their Eyes* is also a deeply traditional book, and meditates on deeply theological issues, for example, what it means to live in a world characterized by tragedy and catastrophe, and maintaining faith in such a world.

Of course, the questions raised below are specific to Hurston's novel, but the approach here may be helpful to open up other texts as well which may, on the surface, seem distant, both in terms of their values and reference points, from Judaism and the Jewish tradition, and to find ways to make them relevant for our students.

1. Marriage and Relationships: Logan Killicks and “Protection”

Set in Florida in the first of the twentieth century, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, recounts the story of Janie Crawford, an African American woman in her early forties, abandoned by her mother and brought up by her grandmother. With her life still bearing the impact of the culture of slavery of the previous century, Janie undergoes a series of transformations, related through extended flashback to her best friend, Pheoby. Janie's story is told, and her

odyssey to adulthood is recounted primarily in relationship to her three marriages to three very different men.

One way of getting students attention at the outset of the discussion is to introduce *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a guide to good marriage. Of course, further analysis and discussion will reveal that it is much more than that, and that the question of Janie's marriages is subordinate to another more central issue in the book – Janie's own sense of personal identity and its development. Marriage and identity – and the relationship between the two – are two important themes to emphasize in reading through Hurston's novel. For those teachers who want to relate *Their Eyes* to earlier literary traditions – again it's always good to put texts in relationship to their antecedents – the novel can be seen as a quest narrative, but not with a traditional Odysseus or Lancelot at the center, but the granddaughter of a slave, the disenfranchised, Janie Crawford. This fact itself signifies the distance between *Their Eyes* and more conventional “canonical” literary texts: for the protagonist of *Their Eyes*, as noted, is an outsider. Part of Janie's “odyssey” of personal discovery involves working with the challenges that her outsider-status entails in order to cultivate an inner voice which is at first unavailable to her.

The three men that Janie marries are: Logan Killicks, a farmer, years older than his bride; Jody Starks, the entrepreneurial politician; and finally, Tea Cake, a drifter and gambler and ten years Janie's junior. Janie recollects her life – culminating in the death of Tea Cake – to her friend Pheoby in the story-telling that frames the novel. Each one of the relationships that Janie pursues allows for her personal development, but in each one, both Janie and the reader are confronted with questions: What is a good marriage? What is the relationship between love and marriage? And perhaps most importantly, how do both marriage and love nurture personal identity?

Janie's story starts with the beginnings of her experiences of womanhood, her thoughts and fantasies under a “blossoming pear tree” – ending with a kiss stolen with a vagabond, who the narrator describes as the “shiftless Johnny Taylor.” In the novel, Janie's experience of the onset of womanhood comes before the kiss, as Hurston describes a pear tree as a means of rendering Janie's coming of age:

She had been spending every minute that she could steal from her chores under that tree for the last three days. That was to say, ever since the first tiny bloom had opened it. It had called to her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously. How? Why? It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? The singing she heard that had nothing to do with her ears. The rose of the world was breathing out smell. It followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep (10).

The beautiful passage, ripe for close analysis on the parallels between the tree's blooming – “the tiny bloom” and Janie's own coming of age, shows Janie ready for “revelation” (11) as she longingly dreams: “Oh to be a pear tree – any tree in bloom.” When she finally experiences the forbidden kiss, it is for her an “awakening,” an experience she shares with a “glorious being” (11). Nanny, however, her protective grandmother, sees the kiss differently, as a violation. To her grandmother, the kiss causes Janie to be “lacerated.” (11). The voice of the older generation that calls out to Janie to come back into the protective boundary of the house is a call that leads Janie to forfeit her “dream,” and by heeding that call, and going into her re-entering the house, Janie ends her “childhood” (12). Thus Janie's hopes for romance are dashed, as Nanny proclaims, “I want to see you married right away.” The novel in some ways begins as a coming of age novel, with the heroine looking for new

opportunities for growth and personal development: but her aspirations are thwarted by the concerns of her over-protective grandmother.

We learn later about Nanny's own hardships as a former slave (17-19), her possible rape by her plantation owner, the drunken dysfunction of her own daughter (Janie's mother). Nanny tells about her inability to fulfill her own dreams (15), and she confides that she wanted to "preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me." Nanny may share with Janie her dreams for wanting to put black woman on the top of a social hierarchy, but what she really wants for Janie is more pragmatic and realistic: "protection": "Ah don't want yo' feathers always crumpled by folks throwin' up things" (14, 22). With the memories of her own suffering and exploitation, Nanny wants to assure Janie's safety. But such assurances come at the expense of Janie's own desires for new experiences.

With Janie's protection in mind, Nanny marries off Janie to her first husband, Lincoln Killicks. Even at the outset of their relationship, Janie describes Killicks as "desecrating the pear tree," betraying the hopeful images of fertility and love with which her "awakening" began. Janie despondently takes refuge in clichés, even as she faces the harsh reality of her marriage – "Husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant" (20), though secretly she waits "for love to begin" (21). By the end of the first section of the book, and Janie's eventual decision to abandon Killicks for another man, Janie acknowledges to herself: 'she knew now that marriage did not make love. "Janie's first dreams was dead," the narrator observes, "so she became a woman" (24).

Before continuing to the next stage in Janie's narrative, Janie's path to womanhood, there are some questions that emerge from the Janie's early history. The long and thematically central quotation about the pear tree provides an

opportunity for students to think about the ways in which great writers use metaphors: why does Hurston spend so much time on the pear tree at the outset of her novel? How does the metaphor – the vehicle of the pear tree – help Hurston provide a window into Janie's inner state? Further – this is something that students in class or on their own can keep track of as they read the novel – how does Hurston develop the metaphor of the "pear-tree" and other images of growth throughout the book? Why in this section, for example, is Nanny's head and face compared to "the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by the storm?" (12). Put in other terms, what is the relationship between the image of youthful vibrancy and potency associated with Janie and the images of death and infertility associated with Nanny?

Like any great work of literature the questions about the formal aspects of the work (structure or image for example) will lead to more general thematic questions: so here the image of the pear tree can be used as a way of tracing Janie's development, especially at this point in the novel, in contrast to Nanny, as the merely 'standing roots' of a tree destroyed in a storm. Janie's confession later in the novel, to hating her grandmother "who had twisted her so in the name of love" (85) can provide an opening for a first set of more general questions: Is Janie really right for hating her grandmother? Are there ways in which Nanny's concerns for protection are ones to which we can relate? Janie talks about love, but can we sympathize with a sensibility that chooses protection over love? Here, as throughout the discussion of *Their Eyes* questions can broaden to include the personal. In what way is Janie's experience – despite the extremity of her particular circumstances – normal? In other words, to what extent do young people, by necessity, disappoint the expectations of an older generation, seeking to escape what they experience as their constricting expectations? From a different perspective: What are the right

reasons for marriage? Might parents or grandparents, especially those who have suffered – as in the case of Nanny – know better than the dreamy younger generation? Can we relate to a generation or even a current perspective which chooses protection – or some other pragmatic value – over love? True, Janie is a romantic figure, but can we, from a Jewish perspective, endorse or embrace her dreams?

2. Marriage and Relationship: Jody Starks’ “Big Voice”

Jody Starks the aspiring politician represents the next stage in Janie’s odyssey. Hurston returns to the metaphor from the early part of the book, but Starks does not represent ‘sun up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon’ (28). Students can be encouraged to think – upon meeting Jody – what the change in metaphor means, and why the expansion of Janie’s “horizons” is important for her becoming a woman, for her own personal development. An initial approach might emphasize that Lincoln is a farmer, a man of the past, while Jody is a man of the future, using his political acumen and who, driven by his ambition, becomes the mayor of the new town, Eatonville. Hurston introduces Starks to his readers as someone who “meant to buy in big,” and whose long time wish and desire had been to “be a big voice” (27). Upon being introduced to Starks, students can be asked how his ambitions either enable or thwart Janie’s development.

The contrasts between Janie’s first and second husband are many. Lincoln buys Janie a new mule, while Jody purchases a street lamp for the new town, lighting it in a ceremonial occasion, calling out, “let it shine, let it shine” (43). One of the women of the town bursts out in what looks like a traditional prayer poem: ‘shine all around us by day and by night/ Jesus the light of the world’ (43). Students can be asked to think about Hurston’s portrayal of character, and how Jody’s own sense of himself as an ambitious creator,

bringing light to the new town, is rendered even more dramatically by the religious hymn that accompanies his ceremonial lighting of the lamp. Further: how does Jody’s use of technology suggest that he is in some sense supplanting the ‘shine’ represented in the Christian “Jesus, the light of the world” (43). Students might be encouraged to think forward to the end of the section where Janie confesses that up until that point in her life, she “had tried to show her shine” (86). Even before the relationship reaches its crisis, students can see how the ‘shine’ of Starks as mayor and entrepreneur may interfere with Janie showing her own ‘shine.’

But at the outset, Janie fits into her husband’s plans. Running the general store, Janie becomes a kind of show-wife, as he dresses her lavishly, giving her a specific role to play:

She must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang. So she put on one of her bought dresses and went up the new-cut road all dressed in wine-colored red. Her silken ruffles rustled and muttered about her (39).

As well as dressing her – and students can already at this stage be asked to think about the function of dress in the novel – Starks purchases “a little lady-size spitting pot for Janie” with “little sprigs of flowers painted around the sides” (45). Though Jody, unlike her former husband pampers her, Janie soon tires of this treatment, and her new husband. Starks may expand horizons, but they are *his own*, and do not often include Janie. At the opening of the new store, Janie is asked to speak to the gathered crowds, but her husband quickly protests:

mah wife don’t know nothin’ “bout no speech-makin’”. Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She’s uh woman and her place is in de home (40-41)

Starks refuses to give his wife a public voice. Janie cannot speak but Hurston does allow us to become privy to her internal voice: “It must have

been the way Joe spoke out without giving her a chance to say anything one way or another that took the bloom off things” (41). As Hurston returns to images of flowers and blooming, we see Janie closing herself off to him. While an adolescent, Janie's dreams of blooming are tied to romance; here they are tied to the ability to speak, and the experience of the mutuality of love. “The bed,” she thinks to herself, “was no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in” (67). And she goes on, as the image of fertility again die out:

She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be. She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where could he never find them (68).

During this section of the novel, Hurston shows Janie's internal voice more assured, but which when she strives to express it finds no legitimate outlet.

In this framework, students might be asked to try to consider chapter six (48-71) and its role in the narrative which, at first glance, may seem to be irrelevant to the development of the story. The chapter includes “the mule talkers” to which Hurston devotes many pages; the mock-philosophical debate between Sam Watson and Lige Moss (61); the checkers games to which Janie looks on longingly; the mock funeral for the mule to which Janie is forbidden to attend. True, these elements of the novel provide a rich sense of local color, a texture to life in Eatonville, but they also emphasize important themes in the novel, and help make sense of the narrative that follows. Indeed, sometimes seemingly irrelevant or insignificant scenes are central to theme and development in literary works. Close examination shows that all of these episodes in this long seemingly digressive chapter provide opportunities for play, conversation and discourse

– for which Janie so much longs – but in every instance she is forbidden from participating. She also “wants to laugh and play” (59), but Starks, in one representative instance, prevents his wife from partaking with the “other big picture talkers,” instead hustling her off inside the store to resume her duties (51).

Perhaps Janie's internal voice – a point students can be asked to consider – becomes stronger because she is not allowed to have a public voice; Starks again and again silences her: ‘somebody got to think for women and chillum and cows. I know they sho don't think none themselves’ (67). Janie wants reciprocity, but Starks, though conventionally powerful, is unable to be in conversation or dialogue, least of all with his wife. So one of the townspeople says of Jody: “Ah often wonder how dat lil wife uh his makes out wid him, ‘cause he's a man dat changes everything, but nothin’ don't change him” (46). Jody himself wonders why his wife is not appreciative of him: “Here he was just pouring honor all over her, building a high chair for her to sit and overlook the world and she there pouting over it” (58). Janie was attracted to Starks for the promise that he might expand her horizons, but at the end she admits: “all disobedience under yo’ voice – dat aint whut Ah rushed down de road tuh find out about you.” Janie had wanted to broaden horizons – that is why she had first pursued him – but Starks had ended up stifling her voice.

Here is a good opportunity to think again – through the lens that Hurston makes available – the possibility and promise of relationships. Why does the relationship between Jody and Janie fail? Doesn't Jody's idealizing of his new wife represent an improvement over the elder and abusive Lincoln? Is it ok for men to put women on a pedestal, as Jody does? Or is there a way in which Jody's own attitude towards Janie – and women – is equally problematic (students will probably point out that Jody's frustration [59] leads him to strike his wife). If the marriage fails because only

Jody is “too busy listening tuh [his] own big voice” (82) what are the solutions for a good marriage?

Further, here is where the issues of the text can move out to questions that our students will experience as relevant to their own lives: In our own tradition, are there different voices assigned to men and women? Is there a possibility of reciprocity and equality between them? Do women – should they – have equal access to the games, entertainment and speech-making that make up the public sphere? Can a good marriage survive without giving women such access? Or, from another perspective: can a good marriage survive *with* giving women full access to the public sphere? Does Jewish tradition encourage real reciprocity in marriage? The ideal of love is present through Jewish literature, life, history, and law: Ecclesiastes (9:9): “Enjoy life with the wife whom thou lovest.” The Song of Songs (6:3): “I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me,” and (8:7) “Many waters cannot quench love; neither can the floods drown it.” Are these ideals, which Janie seems to internalize and emulate, present in Jewish life? Should they be?

Through her failed marriage to her husband, Janie realizes a greater and greater need for her own voice. For our students: we may ask the question: is that a universal need? God creates the world through three things, in a work attributed by the Talmudic sages to Abraham, two books and a story. The first two are the “books” of the world through which God reveals himself, the book of the natural world, and the book of the Torah. But the third is the means of self-revelation, the story that each person writes for himself. So according to this oft-cited work, every Jew has to tell his or her own “story.” But as Jews, and this is one of the central questions which Hurston may raise in the Day School framework, in what contexts should we look for our own voices – as men and women – to be cultivated? Janie finds it an existential need to tell her own story; is that a similar need which

we share? What does it mean to tell such personal stories?

Further, as we have suggested, Janie's inner sense of self is strengthened, and her ability to tell her own story, but at the expense of her alienation from the world in which she lives. In this sense, *Their Eyes* is a typical modern novel (and typical of many of the books on Day School syllabi) – focusing on the outsider's alienation from the social world. Of course, Janie is an outsider in many senses – as a black and a woman. How do Janie's experiences resonate with our own students: what gives people outsider status today? Is it gender? social class? Do such social markers – are there others as well? – lead to outsider-status in the Jewish community? Is it inevitable that people nurture a strong inner sense of self as a result of their perceived sense of social alienation?

As we saw in relationship to *Romeo*, extra-literary questions lead back to literary questions. Janie, as we have seen, is dressed by Jody, and later when she is mourning for her husband, she complains that it is not only the expectations of her husband that determines how she dresses, but social norms: “de world picked out black and white for mournin” ... Ah was wearin’ it for the rest of ya'all” (108). Expectations of others not only affect Janie's dress, but how she wears, and covers, her hair. So we recall that Jody always wants Janie's hair tied and covered with a “rag” (47). Following his demands, Janie admits to herself that “she had an inside and outside now,” acknowledging an outer world of show, and an inner secret world. Janie's outward comportment in what she wears and how she ties her hair attest to a split between inner and outer worlds: so later, she put on a “fresh dress and a kerchief” as a “bow to the outside of things.”

Again, this provides an opportunity to raise questions within the novel which may be especially resonant for our students as well: what

does it mean for men to insist upon social standards of dress? Should one group – class or gender – in a society determine what others wear? Should one person in a family or relationship determine the dress of others? These are sensitive questions for our students in which questions of modesty and dress and gender are prevalent – so they must be treated with care.

Such care should be extended to the discussion of the way in which hair functions in the novel. At the conclusion of chapter eight, with the death of Jody, Janie looks at herself in the mirror:

The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place. She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there. She took careful stock of herself, then combed her hair and tied it back again. Then she starched and ironed her face, forming it into just what people wanted to see... (83).

For Janie, hair is the most personal expression of who she is, an expression of her own “glory,” though she keeps it covered so people will see what they expect, what they want to see. Students can be asked: how is Janie’s covering her hair of her own volition different from following the instructions of her former husband’s? Is Janie showing her conformity to social roles in not letting her “hair down”? Or is Janie’s refusal to cover her hair – again teachers have to be conscious of the particular resonance these passages will have for our students – show her acknowledging that the split between external and internal cannot be overcome? Is there some context in which Janie will be able to overcome this split? Is there a way in which Janie – and in Hurston’s book this is more than just a metaphor “let her hair down”? For those willing to take risks in the classroom, these further questions can be asked: is a woman covering her hair in the Jewish world the same as it is for Janie, an expression of conformity, of control? Does the choice for a woman to cover her hair in a Jewish framework

mean giving into the split between internal and external, as in the case of Janie? For Janie, this represents a compromise. But does it always necessarily have to be so, or is the split between inside and outside perhaps not as Hurston describes it in her novel?

Again, these are sensitive questions: but we are not afraid to ask them, because in many cases, our students will already have such questions in a non-articulated form. The approach, to reiterate, is informed by the sense that modernity is the place where our students are already located. That is some literary texts will not echo or reinforce Jewish ideas but seem to openly question them. As our students are formed by both Torah values and the Western values that produce such literary texts, they will likely have questions about the disjunction between them. We give them the opportunity to refine their questions in the protected environment of our classrooms, and to think them through, with our guidance, and with the resources of the rest of the Day School environment at their disposal.

3. Playing with Tea Cake and Gaining a Voice

The third stage in the odyssey of Janie’s personal development is her relationship with Tea Cake. The question that naturally arises of *Their Eyes*: why Tea Cake? How does he serve in the development of Janie’s personality and inner voice?

Although the characters in the novel see Tea Cake as unsuitable – young and frivolous and irresponsible – he comes as the answer to many of the questions left in the wake of Janie’s earlier marriages. Logan Killicks was old, tied to the land; Tea Cake drifts from place to place. Jody Starks is a person of the establishment; Tea Cake embraces the role of willful outsider. Here again, *Their Eyes* provides a great opportunity for students to see how metaphors and themes develop throughout a literary work. Without much cue, given the focus

on the earlier relationships in the novel, students can speculate on their own on why Tea Cake is introduced laughing, telling a story, and asking Janie for a game of checkers (90-91). Unlike her previous husbands, the somber Kilicks and the stern Starks, Tea Cake loves to play. “Somebody,” Janie thinks to herself, reflecting on her first meeting with Tea Cake “thought it natural for her to play” (92). Their “play; continues as their relationship develops: “they played away the evening again” (97); “they made a lot of laughter out of nothing” (97). Students can be asked to think about why Tea Cake and his “box” (his guitar) are inseparable; why the couple “act out” stories together (116) and why Tea Cake refers to what transpires between him and Janie as the “love game” (108). Together the two of them go to “the muck” a place Tea Cake describes “where folks don’t do nothin”...but make money and fun and foolishness” (122). At their home people would come to “hear Tea Cake pick the box” or “to talk and tell stories,” but more than anything “to get into whatever game was going on or might go on” (127).

Janie had wanted to be part of “the game” whatever it may have been – she wanted to be a player, but had always been refused. Tea Cake allows her not only that sense of play, but also the reciprocity of playing and participating in a shared game. As Janie thinks to herself, on the muck ‘she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted” (128). Where Starks had looked at Janie as incompetent and unable to learn, Tea Cake takes Janie to the muck and teaches her to be a better shooter than he is himself (125). Tea Cake fulfills Janie’s earlier dreams, and students will easily see him as fulfilling the novel’s expectations of what a man should be not only on the level of the development of the story, but also through the development of metaphor:

He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom – a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing

scent out of the world with his footsteps.

Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took (101-102).

Tea Cake fulfills Janie’s childhood imaginations about romance, sexuality and manhood: the pear tree finally blossoming – “a blossom in the spring” – the culmination not only of Janie’s dreams, but of metaphors that had been used by the author since the outset of the novel. As Tea Cake reminds Janie, even as the novel turns to its darker climax, Tea Cake himself proclaims: “Ah want yuh tuh know it’s uh man heah” (159). Tea Cake, compared to his predecessors is a man, allowing Janie to become a woman in partnership.

Hurston, always conscious of the development of images, returns to Janie’s hair as a way to elaborate themes of the novel, and to allow for further development of the story. As the relationship develops, Tea Cake admits to wanting to touch and comb Janie’s hair. Janie responds, surprised to see him with a comb in his hand: “Whut good does combin” mah hair *do you?*” To which Tea Cake answers: “It’s mine too. Ah ain’t been sleepin” so good for more” n uh week cause Ah been wishin” so bad tuh git mah hands yo” hair” (99). Not turning Janie into an object, nor trying to control her, Tea Cake revels in Janie’s hair. To the question, what allows Janie to “let hair down” (or for that matter to where the kind of clothing that she wants), Hurston provides the answer: Tea Cake and the promise of play, conversation and mutuality that he represents.

But more than that, in Hurston’s novel, Tea Cake helps Janie to develop her sense of identity and a personal voice. Like many novels about slaves or coming of age, the development of a personal voice is the hallmark of adulthood. Looking back retrospectively, the novel can be seen throughout as focusing on the question of language, what it means to have a voice, or as in the case of some of the characters, to lack it. For the older generation,

there are things to say, but no words, nor a voice to express them. So in relation to Nanny, Hurston writes:

There is a basin in the mind where words float around on thought and thought on sound and sight. Then there is a depth of thought untouched by words, and deeper still a gulf of formless feelings untouched by thought (23).

Reading this passage, the novel becomes a story of Janie's development, but the record of a people (black Americans) trying to find a language for their experience, the "depth of thought" which is as yet "untouched by words." Janie's inability to speak results from many causes: her abusive, aggressive and silencing husbands, but also the lack of a fully developed language. As Janie realizes with Killicks' death: "her old thoughts were going to come in handy now, but new words would have to be made and said to fit them" (31). Janie needs to develop a new language, and Tea Cake helps her finally develop that voice. Advanced students may be asked to think how the novel itself, moving through various black dialect forms and coming together finally in the narrator's voice, the classic literary voice of the Harlem Renaissance, is a record of Hurston's own development of a literary voice.

The novel itself charts Janie's development, one made possible by learning to speak. So Janie confides to Pheoby about Tea Cake, and her concerns about the difference in their age:

But he done showed me where it's de thought dat makes de difference in ages. So in the beginnin' new thoughts had to be thought and new words said.... He done taught me de maiden language all over (109).

Through the "love game," reciprocity, partnership and mutual acknowledgment, Janie finds a new "language" and a voice to express it.

These readings allow for a set of new questions to emerge from the novel. For example, what is the

relationship between the play that Tea Cake represents and Janie's discovery of a new voice? If "play" for Janie means going to the uncivilized edges of society – the "muck" – what might it mean in other contexts? For those classes that have the resources of Shakespearean comedy under their belts, the "muck" can be seen as an American version of the Forest in *Midsummer Night's Dream* or *As You Like It* where the normal rules of court and society don't apply. In order for Janie to find her voice, she needs to leave the conventional restraints of her society – for the muck is really a non-place of play. So as we allow the novel to speak to our framework, we can ask our students: is there an equivalent for those of us trying to find our own voices? Do our thoughts as a generation or as individuals need to find new words? Do we ever experience societal or cultural forces which seem to make it difficult to find these new thoughts and words? Can they – if we are to discover them – find their place within the traditional Jewish framework in which we live? That is, can playing – discovering our voices in relationship to new things – fit within a Jewish way of life? Does perhaps experiencing the works of art and literature of different cultures counts, for us, as such playing? And if it does: how do we come back from the "muck"? Janie is forced back to society through the catastrophe of the hurricane and the aftermath. Is our playing, stepping out of the bounds of traditional culture and expectations, something that is worth the risk? How do we – can we? – find our way back? Such questions, students will realize, are exactly the kinds of questions that many of their teachers and community-leaders consider when discussing the relationship between Judaism and other traditions: they have the opportunity to discuss similar questions in relationship to Hurston's novel.

2. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

One of the problems that readers of *Their Eyes* face is why Hurston introduces the hurricane, and why the book ends not with the continued relationship between Janie and Tea Cake, but

with Tea Cake's death, and Janie's return by herself home. Students might be asked to think about those literary critics – and they are many – who find the addition of the episode of the hurricane a failure in literary terms. What might such critics be missing? Would the book be better if Tea Cake survived and the couple lived “happily ever after”? What does Hurston gain by constructing the novel in the way that she does, ending as it does with tragedy and death?

But the centrality of death at the end of the story, and the role of God may be something to which our students are attuned (and literary critics, it might be suggested miss these issues because they are not always alive to questions having to do with God). For even as the fateful storm threatens, Janie asserts her faith in God and her gratitude that she had finally found Tea Cake:

...if you kin see de light at daybreak, you don't keer if you die at dusk. It's so many people never seen de light at all. Ah was fumblin' round and God opened the door (151).

Janie articulates her faith, and even in the face of loss, she becomes aware of the presence of God, as she puts it, that “God opened the door.” But Hurston's relationship of Janie's faith is not without complexity. For her assertion of faith is immediately followed by the coming of the storm: *They sat in company with others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God (151).*

Here, God seems inscrutable, unknowable, “dark,” and the actions of man, “puny” as he is, unable to act in a way that has any consequences; so they stare in the dark, waiting for a meaningful divine intervention that never arrives.

To further explore this point, students might be asked what the effect is of the character Motor

Boat's survival – he sleeps through the storm – when Tea Cake and Janie have to work and suffer to have the same fate: “Heah we nelly kill our fool selves runnin' way from danger and him lay up dere and sleep and float on off!” (165). So students can ask questions which may relate to their own beliefs: what are the effects of belief in God when human actions seem indifferent, and when God himself seems to act in ways which are not always rational? Of course, this theme may resonate with our students, and their own thoughts about a world in which tragedy hits and God's providence seems to be absent.

As the story continues, and Tea Cake's fate is sealed, Janie again contemplates the divine:

She looked hard at the sky for a long time. Somewhere up there beyond blue ether's bosom sat He. Was He noticing what was going around here? He must be because He knew everything. Did he mean to do this thing to Tea Cake and her? It wasn't anything she could fight. She could only ache and wait. Maybe it was some big tease and when He saw it had gone far enough He'd give her a sign. She looked hard for something up there to move for a sign. A star in the daytime, maybe, or the sun to shout, or even a mutter of thunder. Her arms went up in a desperate supplication for a minute. It wasn't exactly pleading, it was asking questions. The sky looked hard looking and quiet so she went inside the house. God would do less than He had in His heart (169).

Janie remains steadfast in her faith of God, even in his apparent absence. Janie is resigned, accuses of God of being a “big tease,” though not giving up the hope for a ‘sign.’ Students can be asked, in relation to their personal experiences, in relationship to the liturgical calendar (in particular the ninth of Av where God's absence is felt through the commemoration of the destruction of the Temple), what kind of theology does Janie express when she concludes: “God would do less than he had in His heart.” Is it a statement of faith? Is

Janie heroic for maintaining her belief in God? Or is that faith an expression of naiveté? If as suggested, many great literary texts, focus on acts of reading, what does the way Janie reads in this episode God's absence, tell us about her character? Or about the world she inhabits?

If, in the terms of the book's title, "their eyes were watching God," what do the characters see? And if they, especially during the storm, see only a God who seems absent, what is left for men (and women) in the world in the absence of signs from God? The God of Exodus, and Janie knows this, is a God of "signs." *Their Eyes* asks readers to consider the question of belief in the absence of such signs, when the Heavens are mute. What keeps Janie from despair? And how is that escape from despair related to the way in which Janie relates to others. If the book can be said to trace Janie's finding of her own personal voice, are there effects that her voice – her stories – have on others? We note, in this regard, that Pheoby after listening to Janie's story says: "Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you" (182). Can we find lessons in Janie's response in the face of tragedy? Is there a role for stories that we can we tell to inspire ourselves? to inspire others?

Are her solutions to the perception of an absent God – memory and story-telling – responses which we can emulate? Scholars, as we have seen, describe Janie's stories as an "odyssey," but it is also in some sense an "exodus" from slavery on both personal and national levels. As Jews, we are enjoined to tell the story of both our personal and national exodus on Passover, in *Their Eyes* Janie develops a story about her own personal redemption. That is Hurston takes the Jewish conception of story-telling – commemorating and transforming the past – and makes it personal. Does the telling of personal stories and refining of a personal voice, cultivating an inner world, provide comfort? How does this voice provide a consolation for Janie? How does moving out of a

national story of redemption to a particularly personal one resonate with our students? Can this personal story sit well with the other stories that we, as Jews, tell? Again, in this question, does Hurston's book offer lessons we can follow?

Hurston's conceptions of faith and story-telling come together through the lens of a Jewish concept, with its origins in the Talmud – that of "*gam zu l'tovah*" – everything that "God does is for the good." The Talmudic principle is really a principle of story-telling, or retrospective story-telling, how to relate to past and present events in relationship to the future. Janie's own story – the story told in *Their Eyes* – shows an active attempt to transform death and grief into life and hope. So at the end of the novel, when Janie is left alone, after the storm and the death of Tea Cake, she does not allow her grief to become overwhelming. In some sense, this may have been the most natural response, for Janie's relationships were a history of losses, culminating in the death of the only man she truly loves. But Janie chooses not to dwell on the past, but to move into the future. So Janie declares, towards the end of the novel, that there are two things that a person must try to do: "to go tuh God" and to 'find about livin' fuy theyselves" (183). Janie accepts divine providence, the death of Tea Cake which she calls "the meanest moment of eternity," but then she moves on, determined to go on living for herself. This includes using the events of the past to move forward. And so story-telling for Janie means going back to the past but also looking towards the future with hope. So at the end of the novel, she remembers Tea Cake through the one thing that she had saved after the storm, a "package of garden seed." "The seeds," Hurston writes, "reminded Janie of Tea Cake more than anything else because he was always planting things" (182). The vitality of life shown in all of the blossoming images throughout the book is preserved at the end: Janie determines to plant the seeds "for remembrance." So the story-telling

model of *gam ze l'tovah* – transforming suffering into hope, loss into possibility – may be for our students a way of opening up Hurston's text.

3. “Othering” in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

As discussed above, as a black woman, granddaughter of a slave, Janie is a figure of the consummate “other” or outsider. The dominant culture is white; Janie is black. Though the days of slavery are over, blacks still suffer at the hands of the whites. Hurston dramatizes this throughout the novel, but most starkly when, after the storm, Tea Cake is forced to distinguish between black and white corpses, as he readies them for burial. For the white guards want to make sure that the white corpses have coffins and are not thrown into the ground like their black counterparts (163). To this Tea Cake observes: “They's mighty particular how dese dead folks goes tuh judgment” (163). But this black culture is also a patriarchal one. Janie herself suffers racism and sexism: even Tea Cake admits to whipping Janie, slapping her around to “show who was boss” (140). So Janie is the outsider from more than one perspective: in Hurston's world, she is the wrong race, the wrong class, the wrong gender.

“Othering” – looking at the other as different and inferior is a common feature in contemporary culture. As Jews, we may be especially aware of this tendency because for centuries, we have been victims of anti-Semitism, transformed into the “evil other” by the cultures around us. Hurston not only provides the opportunity to think about this phenomenon – how the general culture finds minorities to repress and exploit – but also to think about how the repressed culture sometimes mirrors the “othering” practices of the dominant one. So amidst all of the racism in the book, the prejudice of whites against blacks, Hurston introduces Janie to Mrs. Turner. Though black herself, the latter has lighter skin, and confides to Janie that dark skin negroes are in fact the real

problem: “It's too many black folks already. We oughta lighten up de race” (135). So Mrs. Turner had built, Hurston writes, “an altar to the unattainable – Caucasian characteristics for all” (139).

Being the victim of “othering” does not make Mrs. Turner more tolerant, but only makes her repeat the prejudice of which she is a victim in different form. So she thinks:

Anyone who looked more whitish than herself was better than she was in her criteria, therefore it was right that they should be cruel to her at times, just as she was cruel to those more negroid than herself in direct ratio to their negroness (138).

Students can be asked to consider the dynamics of such a response, which may at first seem foreign to them: if Mrs. Turner is the victim of prejudice, why does she perpetuate prejudice herself?

The Jewish tradition may provide further insights into the practices of ‘othering’ ancient and modern. For example, the Torah enjoins, “love the neighbor as yourself,” and in the same chapter of Leviticus, “you shall love the stranger” (19.34). The Torah commands that one love the person with whom one relates, as well as the one who seems different. Rashi, the eleventh-century commentator, explains that the Torah assumes one may come to hate the stranger because he has a “blemish.” His apparent defect – whatever it may be – arouses a desire to turn against him, or at least distance him, to turn him into a stranger or other. But the verse continues: “you yourselves were once strangers in the land of Egypt.” The stranger's so-called defect, Rashi says, is one's own. That characteristic which we don't like about ourselves, we externalize in a hatred for others. This may providing an interesting opening into Hurston's novel where the stranger, who has been turned into a stranger by another sees that same blemish which he has in others. Mrs. Turner, a

“negroid” to the white man hates the likes of Tea Cake for being too black.

Finally, to make the issue of 'othering' more relevant, students can be asked if there are any parallels in the Jewish world: unfortunately, stories in Israel about discrimination of Ashkenazim against Sephardim, as well as stories

of discrimination and prejudice within Jewish Day Schools provide ample material for discussion. Jews have been strangers for centuries, victims of anti-Semitism. Hurston's work, the narrative of Janie's story as an outsider is both elucidated by the texts of the Jewish tradition, and may also provide a lens into the complexities of Jewish life today.

Conclusion

Much has been written about the relationship between Judaism and Western culture in the last decades. This study, born out of conversations with educators, administrators and students, aims to better enable the move from the theoretical discussions which have been prevalent in the past to the present, and the practical framework of the Jewish Day school classroom. We emphasize conversations between traditions and texts, and aims to provide a set of guidelines, helping Day School teachers nurture today's students to recognize the conversations that matter to them as professionals, as family members, as citizens, while they sustain and nurture their own identities as committed Jews.

We acknowledge the value of the kinds of readings where Western literary works are employed to affirm Jewish values, but also cultivates the possibility of readings which are more complicated – going beyond interpretations that merely reinforce what we already believe or think that we already know. For us, it will not be so much "integration" which matters, but the ability to engage with different texts and traditions – to be able to participate in a number of different conversations – while maintaining Jewish commitments, and *without* feeling threatened by questions.

This work provides various resources, starting with a section surveying the older classic writings on the subject, and how the new practical emphasis both extends and departs from earlier approaches. It then goes on, in the second part, to articulate specific approaches for reading English Literature – including sections on broad (non-prescriptive) curricular guidelines, close reading, and reading works within different historical and generic contexts, always with an eye on how approaches 'fit' in with the other demands of the Jewish Day School. The final section – part III – consists of extended readings of two literary texts: one classic, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and one more contemporary, modern: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God*. In this last section, we model an approach that emphasizes an openness to literary texts, as well as to student concerns and questions, and only then place our readings in dialogue with the concerns which emerge from Jewish tradition.

This work takes risks, but is based upon the belief that an honest appraisal of our students and attention to their questions is the best way of nurturing a committed Jewish identity in the modern world.

NOTES

¹ Rabbi Lichtenstein has written extensively on the topic, but his most compelling and extensive work is "Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict" in *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures*, ed. Jacob J. Schacter (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1997), pp. 220-292.

² Lichtenstein, p. 242.

³ Shalom, Carmy, "The Manufacture of Sulphurous Acid: On Wisdom as a Catalyst in Torah Study" in *Wisdom from All My Teachers*, ed. Jeffrey Saks and Susan Handelman (Jerusalem: ATID, 2003), p. 77.

⁴ Lichtenstein, p. 225.

⁵ Carmy, p. 76.

⁶ Norman Lamm, *Torah u'Madda* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2010), p. 120.

⁷ Lichtenstein, p. 235.

⁸ Carmy, p. 91.

⁹ For a more nuanced set of objections, see my exchange with R. Lichtenstein in *Jewish Action* (Spring 2004). See also Yitzchak Blau, "Contemporary Fads and Torah uMadda: A Response to Alan Brill," *Edah Journal* 4:2 (2004), pp. 1-10.

¹⁰ Lichtenstein, p. 286.

¹¹ Jonathan Sacks, "Afterword" to Norman Lamm, *Torah u'Madda* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2010).

¹² Keith Thomas, "Universities Under Attack," *London Review of Books* 33:24 (December 15, 2011), pp. 9-10.

¹³ I am grateful to R. Jeffrey Kobrin for these examples and many other insights about literature in the Day School classroom.

¹⁴ Carmy, p. 89.

¹⁵ Sacks, p. 207.



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