

The Role of Adolescent Questions in Jewish Education:  
Maintaining Student Engagement Within and Beyond the  
Religious Classroom

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Sarah Bodek

Mentor: Dr. Miriam Hirsch, Education

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**Introduction**

“Why could the rabbis not trust me to simply not squeeze a grape. Why did they create a prohibition against squeezing a lemon as well?”, said I, Sarah Bodek, an innocent 6th-grader. Asking a seemingly innocent question, I was confused as to why this *halacha* was in place. I was not trying to “stir the pot” or “stump” my teacher. Yet her response was unsatisfactory, “Interesting question, but we do not have time to answer it” (Mrs. S, 2010). I thought that was the end of this encounter between my teacher and me. Little did I know that the next day, my parents were called to the principal’s office. Mrs. S said, “Your daughter is clearly bright and insightful, made clear by her poignant questions in class. However, it would serve the class, teacher and school best if she were to keep them to herself. They are on the cusp of controversy, and the students will only be aware of her question, and not the teacher’s answer”.

Being the age I was, I did not realize the magnitude of both my question, but even more importantly, my teacher’s response (or lack thereof). I was asking to know, to grow and to understand a simple *halacha*. Looking back, I now understand that my question was indeed a fundamental one, questioning rabbinic authority and their ability to impose safeguards- *gedarim*- around the Torah given by God. The magnitude of this question, however, should not have shaken or silenced my teacher. It should have motivated, propelled and compelled her to devote more time to my question- whether that would be in the classroom, or outside of it. Simply stating “There isn't time to answer it” did not do me- the student- or my question justice.

Thank God this saga did not have negative implications on my life. I found mentors and teachers later on in life that gave me the time and attention to flesh out any questions, for they

were not fazed by them. Unlike my principal, they did not think they were controversial. They saw my deep desire to understand and helped me do so.

On a bigger scale, however, herein lies a fundamental problem in the teaching of adolescents. My topic of study researches the cause of rebellion in right-wing sects of mainstream Judaism. I myself was raised in a right-wing community and saw first-hand the negative consequences of students not feeling a sense of belonging and being deemed as the “problem child” in elementary school. My teacher’s response was an isolated incident in my life, but indicative of a misguided and broader pedagogical approach that yielded negative outcomes which I have unfortunately witnessed. Shutting students down, stifling their questions and inquiries and retracting from a true desire to engage with them meaningfully, can have grave implications down the line. The cost-benefit of addressing a student’s question, whether controversial or not, can be the difference between life and death, between engagement or disenfranchisement for eternity. After attending a Modern-Orthodox high school, this sense of rebelliousness and anger towards the system did not exist, albeit other challenges arising. By nature, students in middle through high school are inquisitive. Intentionally or not, teachers will happen upon lighter questions, as well as more serious ones. Teachers can take these questions as opportunities for deep connection and explanation to their students, and should not shirk this great responsibility. This paper begins with characteristics of the stage of adolescence, and how they impact teaching in the classroom. It will discuss related research that explains the difference between pedagogical approaches, their pros and cons, the Jewish approach to asking questions and recommendations for navigating questions in the classroom.

## **Psychological Context - Adolescence**

Research explains how the particular stage of adolescent development contributes to different characteristics of students which are expressed in the classroom. It is well known that teachers teach to “the whole student”. This includes their familial backgrounds, heritage, beliefs, interests, preferences and abilities. In addition, teachers are interfacing with student cohorts based on their stage of adolescent development. As research done by Deborah Christie (2005, p. 303) explains, there are three main stages to adolescent development- early, middle and late. These different stages provide insight into how a student is thinking and processing. In the early stage, students engage mostly in concrete thinking. In the middle stage, they develop “Abstract thinking, identification of law with morality and start of fervent ideology (religious, political)”. In the late stage, students develop “Complex abstract thinking; identification of the difference between law and morality; increased impulse control; further development of personal identity; further development or rejection of religious ideology” (Christie 2005, p. 301). Teaching an adolescent at his/her respective age requires teachers to curtail and customize their lessons, standards and methods of response to that specific stage.

In general, adolescence prompts children to engage in curiosity, defiance, motivation and problems with authority. Next, the paper explains how these categories impact the mind of an adolescent and subsequently should impact how teachers react, respond and ultimately teach to students at their respective stage.

### **Curiosity**

A defining feature of the adolescent stage is a curious nature (Christie, 2005, p. 304). At this stage, children begin to think deeper into the world around them. They can fathom

something deeper than the reality in front of them. This leads to a surge of curiosity. Students are more aware of the world around them and will be more likely to inquire about it. This manifests in the form of questioning the physical world around them, their relationships, their teacher's rules and their religious practices. It is important to note that a spark of curiosity can lead to a difference in opinion. This phenomenon is not something to be negatively looked upon. Rather, teachers can use the curious nature of students to promote a sense of respect for all opinions without needing to come to one consensus. As Juan Galavis writes, "Different people have different opinions and it's okay to respect all of them" (2021, BrainyQuote).

Teachers can proactively prepare for their students' curious natures and use them to their own advantage, in addition to their students'. Research posits that cultivating this innate curiosity will not disturb the learning in progress, but rather will facilitate it, as it says, "Students who are enrolled in a curriculum which requires rote learning, need external motivation in the form of reward and punishment rather than intrinsic motivation, which stems from the curiosity of learning something meaningful (Just & Carpenter, 1992, p. 122). Educators, students and parents alike seem to believe that the more one can memorize and recall, the more one knows. However, as evidenced by this research, sparking student's curiosity within the content being learned can help pique their interest to the point that they will develop intrinsic motivation and affinity to perform well and participate in class. It is clear that the curiosity facet of adolescence can benefit the students and teacher in a classroom if cultivated properly.

### **Motivation**

As stated above by Just & Carpenter (1992, p. 123), developing a sense of intrinsic motivation in students works in tandem with the development of their curiosity. If students are

propelled to work, study and discover on their own, no teacher's prompting would be necessary.

At the adolescent stage of development, students are developing personal motivations in different areas of their lives. They are devoting time to friends, family and start to realize that achievement requires effort. Matching a student's engagement in the classroom to their engagement in video games is a daunting task. However, it is possible. Connecting the classroom material to that of a student's interest can help convey to them that learning is purposeful and meaningful to their lives. Ideally, the motivation developed in areas of interest can propel the students even when they are not particularly interested in the topic at hand.

Developing a sense of intrinsic motivation in another person is quite difficult. The results mentioned above suggest that when students feel that their teacher is involved, supportive and compassionate to their needs, they will be more engaged inside the classroom which leads to better attendance and grades (Fall & Roberts, 2012, pg. 788).

### **Defiance**

Another characteristic of the stage of adolescence is defiance. According to Merriam-Webster's dictionary, the act of defying is defined as "to confront with assured power of resistance" ("Defy", Merriam Webster 1993). Stereotypically, the schema of a schoolhouse evokes an evil headteacher with defiant schoolchildren. A student's goal is to defy his/her teacher's every last word, no matter what it may be. Research states, "Adolescents' tendency to bluntly reject parental rules and autonomy would depend upon the specific conceptualization of autonomy" (Beerthuisen, Brugman & Basinger, 2013, p. 465). Accordingly, the way students perceive the concept of defiance in general impacts the way they feel they must resist or comply with a teacher's rules and procedures. Forming the conceptualization of defiance in a student's

mind can impact how they view a teacher in his/her role and form their association with a school as a whole.

In another study done, research reported, “The preliminary results indicated that more oppositional defiance was related to more self-reports of delinquent behavior” (Beerthuijze 2013, p. 468). It is interesting to note that students themselves were able to report on their defiant behavior. The research posits that there was a degree of correlation between delinquent behavior and the defiance exhibited by those students. Perhaps it may be suggested that addressing the delinquent behavior can help tame the defiance.

Per Maslow's hierarchy of needs, students' most important goal is to have their primal needs met. They will do whatever it takes to ensure this is accomplished, starting with physical safety and finishing with self-fulfillment (Maslow, 2012). This concept is heavily prevalent in the classroom. Usually, when a student acts out, s/he is signaling to the teacher that a need isn't being met. For example, when a student calls out, he/she is clearly stating to the teacher that he/she has something to share with the class. A more serious example would consist of a student thrashing and kicking in his/her seat. A teacher may find this very disruptive and would perhaps react by punishing the student harshly. However, perhaps the student is hungry or tired and is expressing it in a characteristically adolescent manner. If the teacher can tend to the need, perhaps there would be no need for the student's reaction.

As delineated above, research explains the three key features of adolescent psychology- curiosity, motivation and defiance. With this knowledge, teachers can understand that these are typical facets of the adolescent student. They can thereby prepare and be ready to navigate these

facets without taking them personally. This awareness allows teachers to respond to these situations in an objective manner.

### **Teacher-Student Relationship**

To help teachers better understand and connect with adolescents, this paper will now explain other facets of the teacher-student relationship that can be beneficial to addressing the teacher-student dynamic. When this dynamic is improved, the adolescent student can find comfort, safety and a sense of belonging in the classroom, thereby making him/her more receptive to the teacher and lesson being taught. The areas of authenticity, authority, atmosphere and communication provide the forum for teachers to greatly improve on this dynamic.

#### **Authenticity**

The role of a teacher is all-encompassing, far beyond conveying information. A teacher is meant to be a role model who leads by example. S/he is charged to impart not only knowledge to his/her students, but morality, personality traits and ideals. Evidently, religious classes are focused more on morality and character traits, ascribing greater importance to the connection between the teacher's persona and his/her teachings. Nonetheless, classes seemingly disconnected from any sort of morale or inspiration are still impacted by a teacher's persona. An overarching goal of a teacher is to impart life-long skills to students. Such skills include interpersonal skills, manners and morale building.

Research describes the attitudes and ideals discussed in a classroom. In describing the environment a teacher can facilitate, it states, "Students with strong efficacy beliefs set challenging goals for themselves; approach difficult situations as challenges to be mastered, not avoided; and persevere in the face of obstacles" (Stiffler, 2018, p. 120). At first, it would seem



that educators are not responsible for imparting these ideals to students. These skills are not as easily measurable as grades but are the true purpose in teaching. A teacher is charged to live up to the moral standards expected of him/her. This is teacher authenticity; an educator who wills to impart more than knowledge to his/her students and does so by acting as an example.

In actuality, these skills are most easily perceived by adolescent students, making teachers the prime role models to impart them. Research states, “When students see us being respectful, they begin to understand what respect really looks like, sounds like, and how they can show respect for themselves and others” (Holloman, 2013, p. 124). Seemingly, teachers have the ability to instill these values into their students thereby enabling their students to implement them in their own lives. These attributes are not taught from a textbook or memorized for a test. For students to recognize these traits, teachers must exude them. Students can perceive how their teachers react to real-life challenges. Subconsciously, students crave a role model that can prepare them for these life situations. Studies on students’ perception of their teachers state, regarding the question, “What is one thing you like about your teacher?”... This was a straightforward way to explore how students perceived their teachers in terms of their interpersonal behaviors... beyond the realm of normal pedagogical practices or curriculum delivery ” (J-F, Swabey, Pullen, Getenet, & Dowden, 2018, p. 30). Students are clearly receptive to their teachers’ personas. Processing these behaviors indicates far more about life than the facts included in their teachers’ lesson plans. Students do not only absorb the lessons taught but the actions demonstrated by their teachers.

## **Authority**

Fostering a healthy association with authority is a hallmark challenge of this stage of adolescence. Adolescents are beginning to think, feel and understand themselves (Christie, 2005, p. 303). While this is usually a positive force, it can lead to the development of an opposition to those who dissent, particularly authority. Therefore, some believe that the highest levels of academia can only be taught by the most heartless, ruthless and cold educators. To “keep children in line” and to produce results, students need to work hard and be treated harshly. This leaves no room for relationship development, individualized attention or life-skill building. Students need to feel a sense of intensity and pressure to perform well, and this thereby increases student achievement. Alternatively, research has proved otherwise. Regarding informal education, it has been stated, “Informal learning experiences provide novelty benefits insofar as they provide new learning environments that offer distinctive differences from school environments; they challenge students to work under unfamiliar circumstances that can level the playing field for all students” (Clarke & Vivier, 2018, p. 58). Clearly, informal learning opportunities do not detract from academic goals. Students are able to develop the critical skills needed in these more open environments, which will then be of beneficial use in the classroom. Reverting back to strict classroom procedures does not promote more learning, but stifles it.

Teachers tend to struggle between their authority and a student's will in the classroom. But research posits that allowing more creativity and structured freedom does not detract from the serious learning taking place. Rather, it facilitates it. Regarding the blending of both a controlled and more open classroom teaching style, research states, “However, the results showed that being student autonomy-supportive did not reduce teachers’ controlling behaviors.

Rather, controlling behaviors were still observed by students after training...evaluated the perceptions of instructors' interpersonal style as being autonomous and supportive vs controlling, which indicated that supervisors use both components of interpersonal styles (Inayat & Ali, 2020, p. 93). Evidently, relinquishing some control to students to allow for their autonomous learning does not detract from the respect students have toward their teachers. Rather, students still maintain reverence and an authoritative view of their teachers, yet without the negative implications that typically comes along with it. Being open with students allows them to feel safe. This creates more respect and compliance than strictly employing a controlling model of discipline in the classroom.

### **Classroom Atmosphere**

When students see consistent authenticity in their educators, they will be more susceptible to their knowledge as well as their insights and ideals in life. If a student can appreciate a teacher as a person, s/he can then more easily absorb the teacher's lessons. Ironically, authentic teaching has been proven to foster additional learning, contrary to the belief that a sole focus on academia achieves higher academic output. Students will gain something far more valuable than knowledge from the classroom. They will start defining themselves as people, regardless of their academic achievement. This, in turn, will build their confidence, promoting greater learning and consequently achievement. Research states, "In theory, teachers who embody a high-warmth and high-demand teaching style promote not only a culture of academic achievement by managing their classrooms very efficiently but also conveying to students that they care for their well-being and hold high expectations for academic achievement" (Sandilos, Rimm-Kaufman & Cohen, 2017, p. 367). Valuing a student for who s/he

is can yield greater results long-term if only teachers would realize the importance of this aspect of teaching. When students feel safe, they can better learn the material being presented to them. Research says. “Creating a safe haven for success begins when a teacher establishes a classroom where students feel safe— physically, mentally, emotionally, as well as academically. Your words and actions can create atmospheric conditions that foster an environment where students will be successful and get the support and respect they need” (Holloman, 2013, p. 89). Some may view this as an added bonus; a benefit, but not a necessity in teaching. However, research states that creating a sense of authenticity and openness in the classroom is crucial to increasing student achievement. Many factors are included in the process of imparting knowledge to students. Research states that, “Students’ views of classrooms reflect the actual characteristics of the classroom experience, as well as students’ expectations and past experiences” (Sandilos, Rimm-Kaufman & Cohen, 2017, p. 367). Research continues to prove, “The student perspective yields valuable information about pedagogical practices and facilitates understanding of the diversity of views students have about their schooling (Howard, 2001, p. 89)” (Sandilos, Rimm-Kaufman & Cohen, 2017, p. 366). It is clear that despite the various backgrounds of students, their perceptions of the pedagogical practices implemented in their classrooms reflect the classroom experience. Taking the students’ requests and feedback into account can help teachers cater their lessons to the specific class they have, and to the specific students in those classes. An emphasis needs to be placed on all the messages conveyed to students in the classroom. Educators must take note of the impact these perceptions have on student learning.

### **Safe Communication**

Learning occurs through communication. Therefore, students must be able to digest the words spoken by the teacher. Students need to feel safe and comfortable to merely participate in class. Adolescents, in particular, crave acceptance and love, even as they try and discover themselves in the new world they find themselves in. Research states, “If someone makes a mistake in our classroom, it is important to think about how you react to that mistake. In our classroom we will treat others the way we want to be treated” (Holloman, 2013, p. 59). A student's mistake provides the teacher with the forum to model a proper response to an incorrect answer. The academic abilities of students are largely out of the teacher's control. Yet creating a real and open environment is not only in a teacher's capability but a teacher's responsibility. To thrive intellectually, students need a feeling of security and stability. If a teacher ridicules a student's wrong response, students will lose their sense of security in the classroom, stifling their future participation. Responding compassionately to an incorrect answer conveys a strong message to the student about the teacher's character. This character- using kindness and compassion, even when a response is wrong- is the method to foster a safe environment. Without a sense of comfort, learning would cease. By being authentic and showing true concern for a student's well-being, even in the context of imparting content knowledge, a teacher can help create an environment conducive for future student achievement. When educators express a true interest in the student as a holistic person and do not determine value based solely on grades, the student can feel safe enough to foster more learning and success.

### **Beyond the Classroom Student-Teacher Relationships**

Ironically, teachers who engage with students positively outside of the classroom can positively impact their behavior within it. Traditionally, teachers are viewed by students as

overbearing, fear-instilling and rule-enforcing adults. Students tend to avoid their teacher's gaze at all costs (Montalvo 2007, p. 156). Presumably, it would create and instill respect in the student for the teacher. However, as research states, this dynamic is detrimental both to teacher and student. Students associate their teachers with fear and invest their best effort to avoid them. Minimal interaction is a goal. Sometimes, students who do find favor in their teachers' eyes are looked down upon, often called a "teacher's pet". Teachers do indeed fill the role of authority in the classroom. However, teachers that abuse their power and enact unreasonable rules and regulations in the classroom achieve the direct opposite of respect. They instill fear, not a healthy sense of reverence and love.

Research explains that this dynamic can be mended specifically outside of the classroom setting, as opposed to within it. As the result of a study that was done on the benefit of afterschool programming, researchers concluded, "Participants who characterized their relationships in terms of 'moderate' levels of activity and structure reported the largest number of benefits, including decreased alienation from parents, decreased conflict and inequality with friends, and an improved sense of self-worth and school competence relative to the controls. (English, 2020, p. 288). Interestingly, students do not only acquire the instructional skills from after-school programming alone. Rather, these forums allow for better development, improved association with authority and performance in school. By engaging with students, specifically outside of the classroom, teachers have a positive impact on them.

Why does an after-school activity have any impact on the way a student views and relates to his/her teacher? Research done provides an answer. It states that, "... proposed that after-school program relationships could best be divided into the categories of concrete, companionship,

emotional, esteem, and advice.... while not all relationships develop intense and personal depth, they can all be useful. Relationships based on concrete and companionship support are comparatively shallow but can encourage the youth to develop more positive interpersonal relationships outside the mentor/mentee relationship and can thus lead to positive youth outcomes" (English, 2020). As cited above, after-school programming helps develop the entire student- in the way he/she interacts with peers, one's self and most importantly for this discussion, with a mentor. Therefore, when a student is interested in the activity he/she is learning, specifically because it interests him/her and because it is outside the classroom, he/she develops a positive association to the activity and to the ideas associated with it. A student can then understand that the activity is being taught by a mentor, and can therefore develop a sense of positivity toward the adult. That positivity can be transferred to a teacher and mend the dynamic described above.

This dynamic can be further improved if the mentors at the after-school activities are the specific teachers of the participants. At first, it may seem perplexing and confusing as to why a teacher in school is the mentor out of school. Perhaps this is a lesson, in and of itself, to explain to students. Firstly, it will show them that their teachers are in fact real people, with interests and hobbies. This seems to be obvious, but due to the dynamic described above, this important note can be missed. Secondly, allowing adolescents to reap the benefits of after-school programming is compounded when the mentor is the same teacher they have in the classroom. This allows students to see their teachers in a new light- a light that is more sunshine than grey, a light that allows for more freedom and connection and most importantly a light that is more real<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> As a personal anecdote that highlights this research, I will share a conversation I had with a camper in 2019. I was both a Judaic Studies teacher as well a coach in a camp. In the

## **Piecing It Together**

As the literature explains, the stage of adolescence creates many new modes of thinking, feeling and expressing in the developing child. If a teacher were to understand that this is normal, as well as expected of students of this age, perhaps the response to manifestations of these characteristics would be different. When teachers mishandle the natural characteristics of the stage of adolescence, students can feel invalidated, isolated and shut down. This can yield negative outcomes, as a disenfranchised student might feel the only place for him/her is outside of the community. Creating a safe space in the classroom that promotes student interest can help foster a sense of belonging in the adolescent child.

## **Traditional Jewish Perspectives on Education and Questions**

The goal of this paper is to decipher, understand and suggest recommendations revolving around the area of questions that teachers can use to reduce the frequency of students becoming disenfranchised from religion. The focus of this paper is to determine how the research presented above especially pertains to the world of Judaism. Before that is accomplished, this paper will present Jewish sources that convey the Jewish view on education and the topic of inquiry in the classroom.

Rav Sampson Raphael Hirsch, a great Jewish thinker in the 1800s, frames the research discussed in this paper. He suggests an explanation for a perplexing phenomenon described in

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mornings, I would present myself as a teacher. In the afternoons, I would dress as a coach. When campers would see me outside of the usual realm I interfaced with them, they were confused as to when I started teaching/coaching. I explained to them that I do both. At the end of the summer, one camper relayed to me that having me as a relatable mentor both on and off the court was the biggest lesson she learned. She understood that a teacher of a holy subject can also convey and portray those ideals in a more mundane setting, such as a basketball court. As important as it was to her, this lesson highlighted the impact a teacher can have off the court, to me. Students at this stage are starting to connect and relate better to themselves and the world around them.



the Bible. He is bothered by the fact that Jacob, a righteous man, produced one righteous son and one wicked son. An article expounding on this idea quotes him saying, "Every child is born with a treasure of varying characteristics, talents, drives, tendencies, and aspirations unique to him (Hirsch, 1875, p. 11) According to the renowned Jewish educator, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Judaism teaches us that these innate characteristics are neither good nor evil but have the possibility of becoming either in the course of the individual's life. The critical question for effective child-rearing is, "What factor will tip the scales either way"?" (Hirsch, 1875, p. 12).

The factor that Rabbi Hirsch is referring to is that of the "*chinuch*"- teaching, that the child receives. He exhorts every Jewish parent, leader and educator to raise their respective children in a manner of "*lifi darcho*"- each child according to their own specific makeup and needs. Because Isaac treated both Jacob and Esau in the same manner- with similar expectations, rewards and punishments- only the one that the treatment favored was able to thrive. Jacob was being primed to lead the next generation of the Jewish people and his father expected much of him. Esau, conversely, had a different nature that needed different tending to. Perhaps, if Isaac and Rivka understood, accepted and adapted to Esau's needs, his own nature could have been cultivated for the good. Perhaps he could have contributed to the Jewish cause in his own particular way, using his own talents. It becomes clear that both parents and teachers must understand, accept and adapt to the specific needs of their children and students.

Teachers have visions and aspirations of how their students will think, respond and ultimately turn out after they are taught. They must be cognizant that this is a dream and not a reality. Rabbi Hirsch explains that all children have their own makeup that will guide their life. This nature must be tended to individually and with intent to ensure children receive exactly

what they need. Teachers can periodically offer different modalities of learning for their students to engage in. Following the research done on multiple intelligences, engaging the many different facets of students' brains and learning preferences can increase their performance in the classroom. Students have different strengths and weaknesses, and should be able to exhibit their proficiency as greatly as possible (Gardner, 2011, p. 78). A teacher must acknowledge this fact and adapt to it for personalized and attentive learning to take place.

The Talmud (Sotah 47A) provides further insight into the psychology of adolescence and how educators must respond in kind to it. It states, “לעולם תהא שמאל דוחה וימין מקרבת”- “Always have the left-hand drive away and the right draw them near”. In this context, the Talmud is referring to sinners. However, it has been extrapolated to the world of education and child-rearing in general, because of the word “always” that the Talmud’s advice begins with.

Perplexing as it is, the Talmud is teaching an ever-important lesson to its reader. The use of the words “right” and “left” have their own connotations- right being the moral, proper and just ideas in the world; left being the immoral, improper and unjust ideas. What does this have to do with a parent or teacher’s treatment of a child?

In this context, “right” represents a soft, gentle and understanding approach to the topic at hand, while the “left” represents a tougher one. When one is engaged in the daunting task of raising and teaching children, perhaps the authority will tend to activate the tougher approach to children. As mentioned above, teachers sometimes believe they must be the authoritative figure and convey that to their students through harshness, strict rules and lack of freedom in the classroom. However, says the Talmud, those in these positions should *always* use the softer approach when trying to keep students in the fold.

It is therefore clear that when trying to keep students or children within the fold, a soft, understanding and accepting approach must be used. If one acts harshly, it will *always* lead the child to become disenfranchised. The Talmud teaches the modern educator that engaging in acceptance in understanding is not a sign of weakness, but an emblem of strength and effort in keeping children close.

Jewish tradition provides an alternate piece of advice in raising children. In *Mishlei* (Proverbs, 13:24), King David exhorts the Jewish people saying, “חֹשֶׁךְ יִשְׁבֹּטוּ שׁוֹנֵא בְּגֹוֹ אֲהָבֹו יִשְׁתַּרְוּ”- מוֹסֵר מוֹסֵר - He who holds back his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him early”. This excerpt explains that a parent or teacher that loves his/her child will in fact rebuke that child. If the adult withholds rebuke from the child, that in fact is a form of neglect toward the child.

To understand this advice, two things must be understood. Firstly, why is withholding the metaphorical stick of rebuke negative? Secondly, if it is seemingly positive and suggested to rebuke one’s child, what qualities must this rebuke possess to qualify as being beneficial?

“The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference” (Wiesel, 2021). When one cares about someone or something, it is almost impossible to ignore it. Sometimes, society feels that “no news is good news”. Yet this, in fact, is far from the truth. When one truly cares, s/he will invest all possible efforts to ensure the most desirable outcome. According to *Mishlei*, parenting is included within this. To truly show care and love, students and children must receive constructive criticism and advice to perform to their best.

As stated earlier, a tough approach in the attempt to bring those who have strayed from the path will not work. Mistakenly, society believes that a firm hand or “tough love” is the way to rebuke and criticize children, all while having their best interest at heart. Clearly, this is

incorrect. No matter the intent, admonishment and criticism will not benefit the child. This will inflict more harm than good, as is not included in *Mishlei's* advice.

Indeed, rebuking a child for engaging in an improper activity such as stealing or disrespect, is not to be equated to rebuking a child for his/her question. Negative actions must be addressed to ensure they are ceased. Conversely, questioning is a positive avenue that children engage in to deepen their own understanding. However, the overall principle of addressing the needs and actions of children still applies.

### **Questions**

The Jewish tradition is one predicated on teaching and priming the next generation with ideas and values of old. This chain-link of tradition is called *mesorah*. In the Ethics of Fathers, the sages provide the reader with values and advice for living a rich, engaged and meaningful Jewish life. A central theme of these passages is that of education, questioning and the acquisition of knowledge.

The Talmud, a source for Jewish law and educational practices, explains “The embarrassed one does not learn” (Ethics of Fathers, 2:5). This statement is perplexing, for how do embarrassment and personality impact one’s acquisition of knowledge? Essentially, the Talmud is connecting a boldness in learning with the ability to truly process and retain that knowledge. This passage exhorts both Jewish educators and students to not be shy in their learning. How is this achieved? Specifically through questioning and engaging with the work. Only when one grapples, struggles and overturns one’s work does s/he ultimately prevail with a deep understanding of it. Clearly, questioning in learning is not only supported, but highly promoted by the Torah.

One of the hallmarks of the seder is the *Mah Nishtana* (Talmud, 115:B). Aside from the many tunes that have become synonymous with this passage, the true allure of the *Mah Nishtana* is that it is specifically geared toward children. Why is this so? As mentioned before, a characteristic of adolescence is questioning and discovery. The *Mah Nishtana* text provides children the opportunity to ask their parents the 4 Questions on the order of the night's events.

While these aspects may seem trivial, they in fact relate to a deeper meaning. The Seder night is not merely one on which Jews reminisce about slavery and ask questions to engage the children. Rather, as stated by the Abarbanel, (1990, p. 33) the questions of the *Mah Nishtana*, in particular, relate to the inherent contradictions of the night. For example, question number 3 pertains to dipping. However, the question is not merely “why do we dip twice on this night”. Rather, as explains the Abarbanel, the questions of the *Mah Nishtana* are inherently contradictory to one another. The reclining in question 4 symbolizes freedom, while the dipping in question 3 represents slavery. These contradictions underscore the entire Seder night. Particularly in the *Mah Nishtana*, the children are being exposed to and begin to explore the multitude of realities experienced by the Jew on Seder night.

The Abarbanel (1990, p. 34) explains that the Haggadah prompts the children’s involvement specifically at the time of heightened contradiction. Children are not to be ignorant of the difficulties, challenges and realities of life. Rather, they must grapple with apparent contradictions and learn how to navigate them. This is the goal of the Seder- to engage the children in Judaism and its multitude of complexities, but also for teachers and parents to learn how to navigate the apparent contradictions in the same children asking these questions.

Clearly, inquiry-based pedagogy in the general religious context is beneficial (as stated

above). However, how does it relate to religious questions? Do the benefits of question-based learning outweigh the potential risks? According to Hassenfeld (2018, p. 22), the research overwhelmingly states that they do. She says, "The findings of this research serve as a proof text. They suggest that any assumption that religious ideology maps onto pedagogy in a simple and straightforward way is wrong... inquiry-oriented pedagogy in the teaching of sacred texts is evidence that student-centered text instruction is not only for some Jewish contexts" (2018, p. 23). As she explains, a straightforward and frontal approach to teaching religious texts does not suffice in the goal of students developing a true understanding. Inquiry-based learning is optimal in achieving this goal.

In her research, Hassenfeld (2017, p. 26) states that students perform better in a classroom that is centered around them, as well as centered around their questions. She explains, "Research in general education has documented the variety of benefits that come from this alternative approach to text instruction that prioritizes students' textual inquiry in the classroom. They've shown that students in these types of classrooms advance more quickly than other students in reading comprehension skills, like recall, verified recall, inference, supporting inference. It was found that these students improve their traditional writing and argument skills: relevant arguments, counter-arguments, rebuttals, formal argument devices, and uses of text information. And, they've found that inquiry-oriented text instruction increases overall engagement and interest" (Aukerman, 2007, p. 23; Hassenfeld, 2018, p. 24).

Further research supports inquiry-based pedagogy in the religious classroom. Aukerman explains, "When reading instruction principally focuses on a teacher's interpretation and interpretive techniques, we misrepresent to children what reading actually is" (2007, p. 91). As

he explains, without room for inquiry, learning becomes stunted and confined to the interpretation provided solely by the teacher. When students ask questions, they approach the material from their own point of view. When they challenge a passage, they can emerge with a greater understanding than if they did not raise that challenge. As stated above, curiosity and inquiry deepen the learning of students and the religious classroom is not excluded from these benefits.

It is important to note that this exact point can be problematic in some religious classrooms. Tradition is of extreme reverence in Judaism, and a “no questions asked” approach is sometimes employed to prevent skepticism on religion. However, as the research provides, the benefits of allowing students to raise questions outweigh the risks. Research states that a teacher’s view becomes the authoritative one, “When the underlying goal of text instruction is to teach students the “right” answer concerning the meaning of the text, teachers send the message that reading means accepting authoritative interpretations. The reading and interpreting of texts in schools becomes cut off from the reading and interpreting of texts we do outside of school (Engeström, 1991, p. 248). This research takes on a different importance, depending on context. Some sects of Judaism prefer to defer to the leaders and authority figures in both the classroom and the community. Others are more open to the views held by those with lesser authority. Nevertheless, students need to be given the opportunity for exploration and for growth if they are to connect, understand and believe what they are being taught in the classroom.

### **Putting Theory to Practice**

When relating to the world of religiosity, the presented literature becomes ever more crucial. Judaism, in particular, strives to ensure the enduring commitment of those within the

Orthodox community. The main method of ensuring a continuation of the Jewish Tradition is that of education- an education that is predicated on the act of questioning.

The goal of this paper is to demonstrate the intersection between adolescent psychology and Jewish educational practices, converging at the use of questions in achieving religious commitment. As developed through this literature review, questioning, sparring with authority and developing a curious mind are all normal developments in the age of adolescence. Therefore, it is to be expected and normalized in the religious classroom.

Questioning is not against Judaism or the Jewish educational process, but rather integral to it. Firstly, Judaism is an experiential religion, one meant to permeate and encapsulate the entire human condition. Judaism would not obviate or avoid an essential part of human development. It does not ignore essential stages in the development of the adolescent child.

Secondly, Judaism is predicated on understanding through questioning, debate and argument. As the Ethics of Fathers (2:5) says, “Nor can a timid person learn”. Additionally, a sage of the Bible, Bachya ben Asher explains that a belief system without knowledge to back it up can easily be swayed by another system of logic (Bachya, 1998, p. 12). Therefore, questions, understanding and delving into are not only necessary but integral to the Jewish tradition.

Therefore, it is essential that Jewish educators be aware of both the psychological backings and Jewish tradition that promote the study, learning and asking of questions. If educators are aware of and understand how to navigate these questions, they can better succeed at helping their students navigate and resolve the personal questions.

### **Psychological Challenges of At - Risk Jewish Youth**



As portrayed by the literature above, the stage of adolescence creates many new opportunities and challenges within the mind of the adolescent. Whereas in the secular world, these inquiries may perhaps be met more openly and with more acceptance, the right-wing Jewish world tends to suppress any threat to the unwavering truth and endurance of the Bible. While a typically benign question will encounter minimal resistance, the problem of questioning, curiosity and defiance becomes more starkly highlighted when dealing with “at-risk youth”. In the Orthodox Jewish world, “at-risk” youth are teenagers who seem to be “at-risk” of leaving the mainstream fold of Judaism. Usually, these adolescents have the standard and typical faith-based questions. However, they usually encounter a teacher or authoritative figure that mishandles an inquiry or issue they have with religion. Instead of dealing with it head-on, they circumnavigate it, or worse, make the child feel isolated because of his/her inquiry. Subsequently, the child feels isolated and alone in his/her religious experience. Continuing with that isolation, the child further removes him/herself from the entire community.

As conveyed above, the stage of adolescence is fraught with difficulties and challenges in the developing teenager. The realm of religion is clearly impacted by this as well. Adolescents that don't receive a safe haven to express their concerns or questions about religion will react the same way an adolescent reacts when his/her expression is met with resistance- they will shut down and shut off, instead of engaging and thoughtfully navigating their qualms. In the Jewish world, this is called “off the *derech*”- “off the path”. Obviously, teenagers have different avenues to express and question their religious ideals. Both the home and the school settings are prime areas where this occurs. For practical purposes, this paper focuses on the school setting and how educators can help students navigate their questions in Judaism. However, it must be noted that

the at-home experience and upbringing of these adolescents is a large contributing factor as well. The same characteristics of authenticity, openness and attentiveness can help adolescents feel accepted no matter how they believe and can help encourage them to stay within the “fold”, all while having and asking their questions. When met with resistance, adolescents feel more isolated and alone than they did before.

### **Recommendations**

To address questioning in the classroom, teachers must be able to promote, navigate and address student questions. Teachers should be equipped with the relevant psychology of adolescence as described in the research above. To ensure this, teachers should have a Bachelor’s degree in education or social science, with a course requirement of Educational Psychology. This paper has conveyed the importance of the psychological background of adolescents and how that contributes to classroom and out-of-classroom learning, and can be a tool teachers use to navigate these scenarios. The relevant psychology will help teachers understand that the questions are not personal, and rather, characteristic of the adolescent stage.

Further, schools should provide sensitivity training and scenario-based workshops to help teachers navigate these interactions with students. Firstly, teachers can learn to never dismiss a question asked by a student, so long as it was asked respectfully and with proper intent. Depending on the particular sect of the school, the administration can provide protocols to dealing with questions that are deemed too “outside the box” for that school. Nevertheless, teachers should be trained to address and not invalidate a student’s question. As described in the research above, the simple act of shutting a student down can have far worse implications than a controversial question. If teachers feel uncomfortable expounding on a question in the classroom,

they can create a system where students can ask their questions with an understanding that the teacher will avail themselves to discuss it after class.

Teachers must promote deeper thinking and questioning in the classroom, in a safe space that allows for debate while respecting objective and subjective opinions. A teacher should initiate a feeling of openness and curiosity in the classroom. For example, a different sixth-grade teacher of mine instituted a “Friday Question Box”. Every Friday, we would take fifteen minutes out of our class time for this specialty. Throughout the week, students would submit questions to the box. These questions would be on a wide array of topics- related to ones discussed in class, or any that came up outside the classroom. Ms. H. would then pick three questions at random and do her utmost to answer them. This provided a forum for students to initiate their interest in the class, motivating them to pay attention and develop their curiosity. It also provided a forum for students to ask questions that are related to the class content, but were of deeper nature.

This suggestion harkens back to the research on authenticity stated above. Being ambivalent and uninterested in executing this recommendation will not foster a love of learning and desire to understand. Teachers must truly show a sincere interest in their students’ questions in order to make students comfortable enough to ask them. Teachers must promote inquiry within the classroom.

Modeling an authentically consistent life committed to Judaism will also benefit students' commitment to religion. As believers in God, Orthodox Jews understand that there are many aspects to being observant- both between man and man, as well as between man and God. When students observe authentic teachers practicing what they preach, both in front of students and when not in school, they will understand that Judaism is meant to be practiced with integrity. If

students witness hypocrisy in their teachers' actions, they will question not only the teacher's actions, but Judaism as a whole. This will cause more doubts and skepticism within the students' perception of religion on the whole- how can a teacher of tradition violate its laws and mistreat people? As Ralph Waldo Emerson says, "What you do speaks so loud that I can't hear what you say" (2021). Living with integrity is a simple yet pivotal recommendation to shed a positive light on religion on whole, as well as on the authoritative position of the teacher. When students are privy to integrity and consistency, they can feel comfortable enough to ask, investigate and ultimately resolve their questions with their authentic teachers.

Across the spectrum of Judaism, different sects have different approaches to essential and controversial questions. Some communities are more open to questions and religious inquiry. Others are not. Perhaps, all legitimate sects of Judaism should understand that there is room for individuality in observance that may not cohere exactly with a community's standards. Factions should be open and understand the notion that those within their certain sect may look outwards and combine many (acceptable) practices into one coherent religious life. The rigidity and polarity of the religious spectrum can lead to greater fallout than the "outsider" practice itself; a teenager that wishes to wear a different style or color skullcap should be allowed, and even encouraged to do so without being considered an outcast. If teachers and religious authoritative figures create space for differentiation within Orthodox Judaism, adolescents will not feel the need to isolate or veer from the Orthodox path, for simply wishing to serve God in an acceptable, albeit different, way.

## Conclusion

As the research has proven, promoting, addressing and grappling with students' questions is not merely required by teachers, but highly beneficial for them to do so. In truth, the personal scenario I described earlier, provided my teacher with a prime opportunity to engage my interests in the realm of Jewish law and to inculcate a love of learning within me. Instead, I was dismissed and not given proper attention; essentially ignored and deemed problematic. Based upon the literary review above, this paper has demonstrated the psychology of adolescence, relationships in the classroom, the Jewish view on educational practices and inquiry and subsequent recommendations for teachers to navigate inquiry in the classroom. The recommendations provided are intended to better the actions of Jewish educators that encounter a challenging question in the classroom and could have helped my 6th-grade teacher navigate my question. Indeed, the issue of a grape versus a lemon could have been a stepping stone to a broader discussion on the authority of the rabbis. I was willing to have it, and eager to do so, in order to deepen my grasp of my Tradition. Unfortunately, I was not afforded this "luxury". If only my teacher understood that questioning wasn't merely a necessary evil to avoid. Rather, it could have been used as an essential tool to ensure my deepest learning, understanding and interest in my heritage. Particularly in the realm of Judaism, questions are lauded as an essential tool to plunge the depths of traditional sources. Seemingly threatening, inquiry can bring one closer to Judaism, as opposed to distancing them from it. As Dr. Deena Rabinovich states, "Ask your questions, the Torah can handle it!" (Rabinovich, 2020). Jewish tradition has withstood generations of persecution and can similarly handle students' questions on it. That is exactly the way it is meant to be studied and understood.

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