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Session: Attracting Students to the Jewish Studies Classroom: Reports from the Field

**Expanding the Jewish Studies Classroom:
Citizenship, Vulnerability, and the Trinity**

In this session, we've been asked to reflect on the following question: *what strategies have proven effective in drawing non-traditional students—i.e. those who are not Jewish or not Jewishly engaged—to Jewish Studies courses?* In my remarks, I would like to discuss two ways in which I've approached this issue at the University of Colorado – Boulder. First, I've attempted to create classroom environments in which students see their diverse backgrounds not as problems to be overcome, but rather as crucial to the learning we do. Second, I've attempted to provide students with the tools to recognize and articulate why Jewish Studies courses might be valuable, both intellectually and practically, independently of a personal commitment to the Jewish tradition. Let me take each point in turn, beginning with an example.

Most semesters, I offer a 90-person survey course entitled “Judaism.” Early each term, I devote part of a session to exploring the extent to which the Hebrew Bible is (or is not) a monotheistic document. We examine verses such as Genesis 3:22 (“the man has become like one of us”) and Exodus 15:11 (“who is like you, O Lord, among the celestials”), and every time we read Genesis 1:26 (the moment in the creation narrative when God declares “let us make man in our image”),¹ a student raises her hand and asks some version of the following question: “I don't see why there's an issue here, Professor Sacks. Isn't this just a reference to the Trinity? Isn't the plural just a reference to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit?” I hadn't anticipated this question the first time I taught the course, but the issue has come up every semester (at almost the same time, 11:20 AM, in the same session), and I always respond in the same way. I begin by offering a two-and-a-half minute, enthusiastic account of why it might make *perfect*

¹ I follow the New JPS Translation.

sense for an interpreter to read this verse in trinitarian terms, and I then offer a two-and-a-half minute, equally enthusiastic account of why it might make *no* sense to adopt such a reading.

On one level, I respond in this way because the question is an opportunity to raise a variety of crucial issues—for instance, to show that the Hebrew Bible is not a self-interpreting text, to illustrate how this document is embedded in multiple interpretive communities, and to reflect more broadly on the relationship between canonical texts and the theological categories employed by religious traditions. On another level, however, I respond in this manner because I want students to see that their diverse backgrounds contribute to the success of the course. I've had many students come to my office and tell me that they're not Jewish, that they might be interested in enrolling in a Jewish Studies course (or that they've enrolled in a such a course and are trying to decide whether to remain), but that they're hesitant to do so because they're worried about how they'll be perceived by other participants. For instance, some students worry that they'll inadvertently make a comment about Jews or Judaism that will offend Jewish peers, or that their lack of familiarity with the Jewish tradition will impede the learning of others. If we want such students to enroll and remain in our courses, it seems to me that we need to create a learning environment in which they no longer see their backgrounds as liabilities. That is, if we wish to assure students who are not Jewish or Jewishly engaged that they belong in Jewish Studies courses, it is important to show these students that their presence enhances, rather than impedes, the learning that we do—that the more backgrounds present, and the more perspectives expressed, the richer the experience that ensues. One reason that I respond so enthusiastically to the question about the Trinity, then, is that I want to communicate to the class that such questions are not only appropriate, but also productive—that the diverse backgrounds which students bring to the classroom generate important discussions, creating opportunities to wrestle with issues

central to the course as a whole. To be sure, I also want students to recognize that just as their backgrounds can produce worthwhile conversations, so too might these backgrounds involve contestable assumptions: in the case of the question regarding the Trinity, I hope that my answer raises questions both for students who accept this doctrine and for students who reject it, spurring the former to wonder whether the Bible speaks as clearly in favor of a trinitarian posture as some of them initially believed, and leading the latter to ask whether a trinitarian position can be as easily excluded as some of them initially assumed. Nevertheless, even as I seek to create opportunities for students to critically assess the assumptions arising from their diverse backgrounds, I attempt to make it clear that the presence of this diversity is itself tremendously valuable. I seek to foster an environment in which each student sees her background, whatever it may be, as contributing to the learning we do.

Let me now turn to a second issue. If some students are interested in Jewish Studies but worry that they do not belong in such a setting, other students (at least in Boulder) cannot understand or explain why such belonging might be desirable in the first place—either because they cannot see why a Jewish Studies course might be valuable to someone who is not committed to the Jewish tradition, or because they find such classes vaguely appealing but cannot justify participating to friends and (tuition-paying) parents. Part of what I aim to do, then, is to provide students with the tools to recognize and articulate why Jewish Studies courses might matter, both intellectually and practically, independently of a personal commitment to the Jewish tradition. For example, on the first day of “Judaism,” I tell students that the class will be focused not only on exploring the development of the Jewish tradition, but also on cultivating skills crucial to engaged citizenship. In today’s world, I suggest in this opening lecture, being a responsible member of society demands that we engage other individuals and perspectives

charitably yet critically—that we strive to take seriously and understand sympathetically views very different from our own, and that we then assess the strengths and weaknesses of these views on the basis of that understanding. This type of posture, I continue, is precisely what we as a class will cultivate as we explore material drawn from the Jewish tradition—as we attempt to understand why claims advanced in ancient, medieval, and modern sources made sense to their authors, and as we explore reasons why these claims were affirmed or rejected by other individuals. Similarly, I devote at least 10-15 minutes of most class sessions—both in a lecture course such as “Judaism,” and in seminars such as “God and Politics in Jewish and Christian Thought,” “The Bible in Judaism and Christianity,” and “Love and Desire”—to the practice of *hevruta* or paired learning (studying in groups of two), and when I introduce this approach during the first meeting of a course, I suggest that much more is at stake in this method than an understanding of the semester’s readings. Adopting this approach, I suggest to students, isn’t simply a way of achieving the best possible interpretation of difficult material through collaboration with others (although this is one reason for employing this method). Moreover, I continue, adopting this approach isn’t simply a way to enact a practice associated with the study of Jewish sources, and to thereby inhabit the world of the tradition that we’re exploring (although this is another reason to engage texts in this manner). Adopting this approach, I argue, is *also* a way to form ourselves into specific sorts of individuals—individuals who are able to be intellectually vulnerable, who are able to take the risky step of being genuinely open to the voices of others. After all, I ask students, what better way to cultivate openness to the voices of others than to be in regular conversation with another individual? What better way to become accustomed to intellectual vulnerability than to regularly share views with a peer—with someone who is willing to challenge what we have to say and have her own claims challenged in return?

By discussing the material we study and the methods we adopt in these terms, then, I seek to help students identify and explain the relevance of Jewish Studies courses. I seek to provide language and concepts that allow students to see for themselves, and describe to others, why such courses might matter even in the absence of a personal commitment to the Jewish tradition.