

BIBLICAL TEXT THROUGH ART: AN EXPLORATION OF SECONDARY  
SCHOOL STUDENTS' BIBLE-BASED ARTWORK AND ITS  
REPRESENTATIONS OF JEWISHNESS

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## Abstract

I conducted a practitioner research study at a Jewish high school in Toronto in order to understand how teaching and learning through arts can help facilitate more meaningful understandings of and connections to the Bible. I wanted to better understand why students' best recollections of learned material at the end of the year were arts-based projects, especially given the existing research in arts-based Jewish education, which suggests that the arts are not emphasized in high school curricula. Students worked in groups of two or three and created arts-based interpretations of Numbers Chapter 12, and wrote explanatory paragraphs of their work. Following the completion of their projects, I interviewed students. In the interviews, students explained what they created, what motivated their work, and what they thought about learning through the arts. Drawing upon the projects and the interviews, three distinct themes emerged about what the arts offered students that conventional forms of teaching and assignments did not. The first theme that emerged was that the arts offered students the opportunity to take on the persona of a biblical commentator, and through this opportunity, students formed their own opinions and insights into the text, which resulted in the text becoming more meaningful. The second theme that emerged was that through the creative process students formed personal associations and connections with the narrative and its characters. As a result of these associations, students began to see the text as directly relevant to their lives, and therefore the text itself became more valuable to them. The third theme that emerged was that students felt that the arts offered them valuable educational experiences, including the opportunity to express creativity and to experience genuine collaboration. Considering the three themes as a collective grouping, it is evident that the arts offer students specific and tangible benefits in relation to textual knowledge, meaning-making, personal connections to text, and abilities to think critically and passionately about text. The study demonstrated that the arts offer teachers a powerful tool to help students develop their love of Jewish texts and deepen their relationship with their Jewishness.

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my Grade Ten *Tanakh* classes of 2012-2013, HRE20T-02 and -03. Without you, this project could never have happened.

ועתה, כתבו לכם את-השירה הזאת, ולמדו את-בני-ישראל, שימיה בפיהם: למען תהיה-לי השירה הזאת, לעד--בבני ישראל.

דברים – לא:יט

And now write for yourselves this song, and teach it to the Children of Israel. Place it into their mouths, in order that this song will be for Me as a witness for the children of Israel. – Deuteronomy 31:19

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A dissertation is not the work of just one researcher but is the composite work of many people.

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

During the academic year of 2009-2010, my Grade Ten students were producing a comic book adaptation of sections from chapters 11 and 12 of the biblical book of Numbers. A group of three students called me over and asked for help. They explained that they were struggling with what to do with the character of God. When reading text, they said that it was easy to ignore God's physical place in the narrative, but when faced with the demands of visual representation and a decision about whether or how to represent God, they were at a loss. I asked what the problem was and what they thought their options were. They explained that some of them wanted to draw God while others wanted to have just a caption bubble in the sky. I prodded further and asked them to explain what meanings each representation would yield. The students expressed a hesitancy to draw God, in addition to worries that the school or the teacher would disapprove<sup>1</sup>. After I reassured them that I did not mind how they chose to depict and represent God, the students ultimately chose to draw God as a very large human figure.

What strikes me as fascinating about this incident, reflecting on it many years later, is how this group of students had never considered the problem of describing God in the text until confronted by this creative challenge. The finished drawing was less important than the dialogue that took place about how they understand God, what God is to them, and how to grapple with cultural, *halakhik*<sup>2</sup>, and societal pressures about representing God. It is these types of experiences that I wanted to

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 20:4 commands Jews to not make graven images or likenesses of God. This prohibition has been understood by some Jews to include any physical or visual representations of God.

<sup>2</sup> Jewish legal

study and analyze by thinking about what the arts offer students that other kinds of classroom learning and assignments do not. I believe that the arts provide an impetus and an opportunity for students to think about Jewish text and their relationship with Jewishness in new ways.

My interest in arts-based Jewish education stems from observations from my classrooms at Tanenbaum Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto (CHAT). There, I have had the opportunity to teach in the English, Bible and Jewish History departments and to design and implement different types of lessons and assessment strategies. These forms of assessment include tests, essays, quizzes, presentations, and arts-based learning projects. In my classes, each arts-based project revolves around a set topic and a series of curricular goals which students are required to meet. These goals include working with Hebrew, making use of biblical commentaries, and composing an artistic statement that explains the students' creative products. In most cases, the students work collaboratively in teams of two to four. In my classes, I define arts-based projects loosely and allow the students to produce text-based interpretive works of art using the medium of their choice including visual arts, cyber arts, performance arts and music.

Based on conversations throughout the year and reflective exercises at the end of the year, it has become evident that the learning experiences and assignments that were most memorable to the students were those that involved interaction with the arts. Not only did students better remember those projects and exhibit more excitement when talking about the creative process, they also positively reflected on the opportunity to engage with Biblical texts in a new way. This

dissertation reflects my attempt to more deeply explore and understand the value of using arts-based learning in secondary Jewish education by conducting an inquiry into the significance of these anecdotal observations.

Ofra Backenroth (2011) notes that within Jewish secondary schools, there is a hesitancy to use art as a substantive component of the curriculum. This hesitancy is evident in the paucity of available studies about Jewish education and arts-based learning. I believe that the arts should play a role in the formal Jewish studies curriculum because they offer students the opportunity to explore the religious and emotional contours of their lives in ways that cannot be explored through traditional pedagogical vehicles of instruction. The question that frames this dissertation is: what are the cognitive, emotional, and educational benefits of arts-based learning for students in Bible studies classrooms? Through my study I aim to better understand:

1. Whether the arts can facilitate greater understanding of the biblical text itself and if so, how.
2. How the arts can help students form positive associations with Jewish text.

I have explored these questions by conducting a modified approach to practitioner-based qualitative research (further detailed in the methodology section) with the students in my Grade Ten Bible classes at CHAT. Interviews were conducted as students fashioned interpretive art projects based on chapter 12 of the book of Numbers.

In the analysis of the interviews and student products, the data paints a clear, yet nuanced, picture of what the arts offer bible students that traditional forms of

assignments and learning do not offer. The results suggest that learning through the arts, while frequently not employed as a tool in secondary Jewish education, has the potential to be a valuable and formative pedagogical approach towards facilitating meaningful relationships between text and self. This conclusion is founded on three key findings that emerged from the analysis of the projects and the interviews.

1. That for a select group of students, the use of the arts provided the opportunity to craft their own original commentaries on the text.
2. That for nearly every student, the opportunity to work artistically with text fostered personal connections to the text that did not exist prior to having completing the project.
3. Last, while not the initial focus of the research, many student comments expressed appreciation for other positive educational values they saw in the project, such as collaboration and creative thinking

Considered together, these findings demonstrate that learning through the arts offers students the opportunity to think about, interact with, connect to, and learn biblical text in ways that are personally meaningful, dynamic, and relevant.

### **Description of School and Curricular Requirements**

CHAT is a Jewish high school located on two campuses in Toronto and Richmond Hill, Ontario with a student population of over 1300. Students come to CHAT from a range of feeder schools that represent the diverse Jewish backgrounds of the families. Ideologically oriented as a community school, CHAT's student demographic is comprised of students and parents whose identities might be

described as solely or as a combination of Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Zionist, secular, and secular-humanist. These Jewish denominations and political affiliations all hold different understandings of Judaism and its practice. The groups differ in their understanding of the nature and function of Jewish law and practice, the origins of the Bible, the existence of God, the role of women in society, the State of Israel and many other topics. While there is often disagreement and minimal interaction between these different religious groups, community day schools see the differences as importantly reflective of the diversity within Jewish society. By bringing the groups together, community day schools hope to contribute to greater cohesion in the North American Jewish community.

CHAT offers a mainstream academic Jewish education program, as well a special education program and a New Stream program for students who did not previously attend Jewish day school. In order to meet the needs of this diverse student body, CHAT streams students in the Jewish Studies curriculum into Special Education (smaller classes taught in English, except for Hebrew language class), New Stream (introductory texts taught at an advanced level in English, except for Hebrew language class), Intermediate, (content taught at a lower level in English except for Hebrew language class), and Academic (all content taught in Hebrew at an advanced level). All courses, to varying degrees, include both skills and knowledge components in order to ensure that students receive a solid grounding in Judaism, that the differences between their prior educational paths are respected yet bridged, and that all students leave the school with comparable levels of knowledge while maintaining connections (if they so choose) with their own Jewish

denomination.

Students study Jewish subjects for all four years of their time at CHAT. Each year, students take courses in Bible, Jewish Law, Hebrew Language, and Jewish History. In Grade Twelve, students have the opportunity to take courses in Jewish Ethics and Philosophy. In the General Studies program, students follow the Ministry of Ontario curriculum and take required courses in English, Math, History, Science, Social Studies, Languages, and Physical Education. Additionally, the school has visual arts, music, and drama programs for all grades, which is something that is unique to CHAT among Ontario Jewish high schools.

### **Description of Researcher's Pedagogical Approach**

In my Intermediate *Tanakh* classroom, the arts are one of many strategies used to engage students in Jewish text and make the Bible relevant and interesting. The typical model of instruction in the classroom involves students learning the Hebrew text with partners, known in Jewish school systems as the *hevrotah* model. Each pair is given a glossary of Hebrew words, and is then asked to design questions about the plot, characters, or concepts they read about. The purpose of having students ask questions is to help them begin to think critically about the text, and to encourage them to learn more about it. Next, either in small groups or as a class, students compose their own answers to the questions and then share them with the class, regardless of how subversive or challenging they are towards traditional readings. My role in this process is to ask further questions about their answers and to help students clarify their own understandings. At times, when the answer conflicts with

the text or with commentaries on the text that the students will learn, I highlight the counterpoint and inquire whether they still believe their answer is viable. Through this Socratic process, students begin to feel a sense of autonomy in interpreting biblical passages and see themselves as relevant commentators in the conversation about the Bible. My goal is that students should feel that their voices matter, and that they can ultimately form their own understandings of the text. Lastly, the class will study and analyze traditional commentaries, which sometimes correspond to student-generated responses and often provoke more student responses.

The approach taken in my class is similar to the one described by Devra Lehmann (2007), which adapts a common English literature teaching method to Bible studies<sup>3</sup>. Lehmann suggests that the ways in which English literature teachers approach the study of text, literacy practices, and classroom language are fundamentally different in nature and orientation from those used by many Bible teachers. In English literature classrooms, “the reader is assumed to be capable of deriving the message from the text through careful and thoughtful analysis, and the reader can legitimately bring his or her own reactions to bear on the work of interpretation” (p. 12). The role of the teacher in this environment is as a facilitator of interpretation who “praises original interpretations that are sufficiently grounded in the text” (p. 13). In this model, students are encouraged to become “empowered individuals”. This approach to teaching English literature stands in contrast to common approaches to Bible study, in which students often have less freedom to arrive at their own conclusions about the text, and in which emphasis is placed on

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<sup>3</sup> While Lehmann’s study focused on Orthodox institutions, the majority of CHAT’s Bible teachers subscribe to the way of teaching Bible outlined in Lehmann’s study.



the historical tradition of biblical commentaries. In the traditional Bible classroom, according to Lehmann, the voice of the teacher carries the most weight, and the teacher's goal is to teach not only content but also a specific message for how to properly live in the Jewish community.

It is important to identify a school of thought within Bible education that developed in both the United States and Israel in the 1970s and 1980s that makes use of the tools of literary studies and applies them to the Bible. Led by academics like Robert Alter (1981) and Meir Sternberg (1987), and then transposed into religious environments by individuals like Amnon Bazak (2005) and Judy Klitsner (2011), this method employed literary techniques to better understand the biblical narrative and its complexity. Responding to criticism that the use of literary techniques ignores the purpose of the text and misses the intended meaning of the original composer, Alter writes:

To scrutinize biblical personages as fictional characters is to see them more sharply in the multifaceted, contradictory aspects of their human individuality, which is the biblical God's chosen medium for His experiment with Israel and history. (p. 12)

In order to achieve this understanding, the above-mentioned scholars focused on "artful use of language, shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units" (Alter, 1981, p. 12).

That my classroom more closely models the English classroom than the Orthodox Bible classroom is the product of my own understanding of the nature of Jewish education, as well as my background as a teacher and student of English

literature and my decision to adopt the literary analysis approach conducted by Alter (1981) and his intellectual followers. This approach encourages students to construct their own analysis of the text using familiar tools, and arrive at an understanding of the text that reflects its complexity and its relevance to them.

My classroom is purposefully designed to be more similar to an English classroom, or a classroom that uses the modern biblical-literary approach than an Orthodox Bible classroom, because I believe that through the creative interpretive process, students will be more inclined to take an interest in the text and develop their own personal associations to it. Additionally, when I choose which commentaries to introduce to the students, I am mindful to include classical biblical commentaries by people like Rashi (1040-1105), Rashbam (1085-1158), Ramban (1194-c.1270), and Ibn Ezra (1089-1167), mixed with modern commentaries by Robert Alter (2004), Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg (2001), Judy Klitsner (2011), and Jonathan Sacks (2012), as well as psychologists like Martin Seligman (2006). I do this to show students that there are still people today who compose original interpretations of the Bible, and that non-Jewish texts can also help us understand the Bible.

My decision to research the use of the arts in Bible classes was not accidental. Jewish schools regularly make use of commentaries and interpretive works in order to teach the nuances and subtleties of the Bible. The thrust of the project I am exploring in this paper encouraged to students to, through the use of art, become commentators themselves. Furthermore, making use of the arts and crafting original insights on the Bible are two of the items included in the document on Standards

and Benchmarks for Jewish high schools developed by the Melton Research Center for Jewish Education in 2003. That document contains guidelines for educators and schools to the teaching of the Bible at all grade levels. The text is comprehensive and addresses content, pedagogical approaches, and the ways in which students should think about learning the Bible as Jews. Standard 2 Benchmark 30 for grade levels 9-12 advises that students should “explore various art media as biblical interpretation,” and includes student-created work as an example. Directly following the use of art, Standard 2 Benchmark 31 for grade levels 9-12 says that students should “develop [their] own interpretation of text”. The inclusion of these elements in the Melton Center’s prescriptions for high-quality Jewish education clearly supports the use of the arts in Bible education as I have described it thus far. The goal of my study is to understand why this approach is effective and what it offers students that is not accomplished by other types of learning strategies.

### **Numbers 12 and the Classroom**

For the projects assigned in this study, students learned the text of Numbers Chapter 12 in pairs. While they studied chapters 11-14 over the course of the year, I chose Chapter 12 to use for the creative projects because it offers a short, self-contained narrative that is rich in content and often interesting to student readers.

Chapter 12 begins with Miriam and Aaron talking about their brother Moses’ *’isha kushit*, his Cushite wife. Cushite is a descriptive word for referring to either a member of the ancient people of Cush, or more generally to a dark skinned person. From this seemingly innocuous introduction, the two begin to question what makes

Moses so much greater than them, given that God speaks to them. The biblical narrator interjects with the statement that Moses is the most humble man in the world. This statement suggests that Moses does not respond to his siblings' statements. Instead, God intervenes and notifies Miriam and Aaron that while God speaks with other prophets through images, dreams, and opaque messages, he speaks to Moses directly. Unlike other prophets, Moses has the ability to initiate conversation with God, as opposed to waiting for God to communicate with him. As a punishment for her speech against Moses, Miriam is punished with *zara'at*, a biblical skin affliction that renders her skin white, and is sent outside of the community camp until she heals. Aaron asks Moses to intercede on her behalf with God, and Moses offers a short prayer for her. God listens to Moses' prayer but chooses to not heal Miriam. God does instruct Moses to not depart with the community until Miriam has healed fully and is brought back into the community.

After learning the text, the students posed numerous questions about the chapter. These questions, organized here chronologically based on the narrative, included the following: Who is Moses' black wife? Does he have a second wife? Why do we need to learn that Moses is so humble? How is it possible that Miriam and Aaron do not understand the difference between themselves and Moses? Why was Miriam's name first as opposed to Aaron's name? What is *zara'at*? Why does only Miriam get punished? Why does Moses agree to help his sister? Why is his prayer so short? Is not leaving really helping Miriam?

After being provided with some time to come up with their own answers to the questions, students were exposed to a series of classical and modern

commentaries to help them unpack the pieces of the narrative. Beginning with the second word of the narrative, Rashi (on Numbers 12:1, lemma *vatedaber Miriam veAharon*) notes that even though Miriam is older, Aaron's name should have been written first given the Bible's tendency to list males prior to females. Rashi explains that since Miriam's name preceded Aaron's, the author of the text must be using this uncommon positioning to imply something to the reader. In this case, Rashi argues that Miriam's name is mentioned first because she initiated the conversation with Aaron. Throughout Rashi's commentaries on the opening verses of the chapter, Rashi's approach to the *'isha kushit* is that she was not, as others suggest, a separate wife whom Moses had married (see entries for lemma *kushit*, *ha'isha hakushit*, & *ki 'isha kushit lakah*). Rashi forcefully argues that Moses only married one woman, whose name is Zipporah. This reading leaves Rashi with the textual mystery of what Miriam and Aaron are saying about the wife and why the text identifies her as a black woman. Rashi argues that here, too, Miriam and Aaron were complaining about why Moses shouldn't be different from them. According to Rashi, Miriam was gossiping about Moses because he had ceased having sexual relations with his wife Zipporah, while she and Aaron had not refrained from sexual relations with their respective spouses. According to Rashi, Miriam's puzzlement resulted from her believing that she was on the same spiritual level as Moses.

To explain why the text refers to her as an *'isha kushit*, a black woman, Rashi provides three explanations that all revolve around the notion that Zipporah was objectively beautiful and not black. He first suggests (lemma *ha'isha hakushit*) that the phrase *'isha kushit* is a term that can be read figuratively. Rashi argues that just

as everyone can objectively state that a person from Kush has black skin, so too did everyone who saw Zīporah state that she was beautiful. Rashi's second reading (lemma *kushit*) uses *gematriyah*<sup>4</sup> to support his first reading. The numerical value of *kushit* is 736, which is the same as the numerical value of the Hebrew term for beautiful in appearance. His final argument for the notion that she was a beautiful woman is that the word *kushi* was in biblical times a sort of "reverse euphemism." (lemma *ha'isha hakushit*). Rashi claims that people would say that beautiful people looked *kushi* (black, ugly) to avoid calling attention to the person's beauty, and in order to ward off the 'evil eye'.

Many students did not like what they saw as a very non-literal reading of the text by Rashi and preferred the second commentary that was presented to them. Yosef Ibn Kaspi (1279-1340, cited in HaQoton, 2007) argues that Moses had married a black wife in addition to his first wife, Zīporah. Miriam's original complaint was that Moses should not have married a second wife, and leading her to the assumption that Moses had behaved inappropriately. Students tended to like this interpretation better because it was more consistent with the narrative and did not require specialized knowledge of biblical phraseology.

To help students better understand the biblical disease of *zara'at*, we read sections of the comprehensive Wikipedia article on the subject (2013), which provides an excellent overview. We read about its causes, symptoms, and

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<sup>4</sup> *Gematriyah* is an exegetical system based on the calculation of the numerical values of Hebrew letters. Each letter of the Hebrew alphabet is assigned a number, and the values of each letter in a word or phrase are summed. Commentators create links between words and phrases by finding others with the same numerical values and suggesting connections between the two.

treatments. That it is considered to be a divine punishment for *lashon hara*, slanderous speech, made sense to the students in light of the way that Miriam was speaking against Moses. Students enjoyed Robert Alter's (2004, p. 743) observation that as a punishment for commenting on someone's blackness, Miriam was stricken with blanched whiteness, suggestive of a sense of divine irony and humour.

Regarding the punishment of Miriam, students were bothered by Rashi's suggestions about why Moses decided to shorten his prayer for his sister, and were generally not satisfied with either of his explanations. His first explanation (lemma *El na' refa' na' lah*) is that Moses didn't want the Israelites to say that he prayed at length for his sister but not for them. In his second explanation, Rashi (lemma *El na' refa' na' lah*) says that Moses didn't want the Israelites to say that his sister was suffering and that he was spending all of his time praying. Students argued that both explanations are rationalizations that Moses, as a leader and as the greatest prophet of Israel, should not have needed to make.

The final commentary learned in class was one with which students positively identified. Rashi (lemma *veha'am lo' nasa'*) notes that the Israelite community waited for Miriam while she served out her punishment as a reward for her earlier decision to wait and watch over Moses as he floated down the Nile River as an infant. Even though this event had happened decades earlier, Rashi argues, Miriam's act of good will was being repaid now. Just as she waited for Moses to ensure that he survive, so too the people waited for Miriam in her time of distress to make sure she was fine.

## **Description of Study**

Based on this text and its commentaries, my students were challenged with creating an arts-based project in small groups that demonstrated their own understanding of the material. Their reading was to draw from the bible text and both classical and modern commentators, and they were given the liberty to arrive at their own contemporary and new understandings of the narrative through the use of any type of medium. Additionally, students were to include a written statement accompanying their project, which would explain in their own words what they made, what their rationale was, and how they understood the text. The purpose of the project was to see how the products (visual and verbal) contributed to the students' nuanced understandings of the texts and to the development of their relationships with Jewishness. The project counted towards their grades as a test, and students therefore took the assignment seriously.

There were three forms of data collected in the study: 1) students' arts-based projects and written statements, 2) audio-recorded and transcribed interviews with students, and 3) participant-observer field notes. These primary data sets were augmented by additional documentary sources, including my course syllabus, assignment descriptions, and teaching notes.

I viewed dialogue with students as essential for understanding all of the facets of the creative work and its meaning for the student who had produced it. To that end, following the completion of their projects, I conducted thirty-minute interviews with students during their lunch periods to discuss their work. In these sessions, I asked the students a series of questions including the following:



1. What do you value about your Judaism?
2. What have you created in your project?
3. Where do you see yourself in this project? In what ways does it represent you?
4. What challenges did you have in creating your work?
5. How do you think learning through the arts is different than other ways of learning in class (instruction and assessment)?
6. What did you learn about the text based on the project?
7. What did you learn that is important to you Jewishly / that is important to the way you see your Jewishness / that is important to your Jewish identity?

During the creation, assessment, and interview phases of the study, I kept detailed field notes on my experience of teaching these units of study, facilitating the arts-based components, and observing the students and their work.

### **Dissertation Road Map**

Chapter two will be an overview of the literature that frames my study. In particular, I draw upon research into community Jewish education to situate my research site in its proper context. Additionally, I present materials about arts-based learning in general and Jewish education, and explain how the field has developed. The literature is used to ground my own observations and shape my interpretations of the students' work. Lastly, a section on *Tanakh* pedagogy and a section on Numbers 12 and classical commentaries on the chapter are included in order to demonstrate the *Tanakh* material that serves as a foundation for the research study.

Chapter three describes the research methodology and the research study in detail. Specifically, I outline the type of research I conduct as a teacher-researcher and how I analyze the results of the study.

Chapter four will provide examples of the original insights that students arrived at which resulted from being invited to think about the text in a creative way. I will present five different projects in which students assumed the role of a biblical commentator and introduced new readings of the text based on their understanding of the narrative. Based on the projects and the interviews, it will become evident that this opportunity facilitated a creative thought process that enabled the students to think about the narratives in a new way.

Chapter five will present seven arts-based projects that demonstrate newfound personal associations and connections with text that students formed as a result of the projects. The chapter revolves around two core themes that emerged based on the students' projects: racism and God. Students struggled with both the text's seeming racism and the way that God resolved the conflict between Moses and his siblings. The projects provided students an opportunity to respond to the text and reframe the narrative in a way that integrated with their own understandings of the world.

Chapter six will look at the value of using the arts as a pedagogical tool that can facilitate increased creative thinking, retention of text, and collaboration and team building. While not an initial goal of the study, the interviews revealed that students strongly believed that there were positive pedagogical effects associated with the arts-based projects. This chapter will present the students' opinions of arts-based learning and make a strong case for educators to consider making use of the arts.

Chapter seven will synthesize the data and analysis chapters into a complete portrait of what arts-based learning can offer educators of Jewish studies, and consider the implications and limitations of the study. The practitioner-based research study that follows offers a clear and compelling portrait of the potential that learning through the arts can hold for students. The arts have the power to forge meaningful and lasting connections to text, challenge the assumptions that students have about learning the Bible, produce innovative and radical readings of text, and lead students to want to continue to learn about Judaism.

## **Chapter 2: Discussion of Relevant Literature**

As noted in the introductory chapter, there is scant material on the impact of the arts on secondary Jewish education; however, by drawing on existing literature that focuses on community Jewish education, approaches to teaching the Bible, Jewish identity formation, learning through the arts, and the arts in Jewish education, it is possible to form a composite sketch of material that supports and frames this research project. Clarifying the nature of community Jewish education will allow me to better explain the nature of the work that is being analyzed from my classrooms. Additionally, an overview of the goals of Bible education and the ways that teachers frame and teach text will provide a contextual overview of the methodologies I employ. A thorough treatment of the biblical texts that are relevant to the study will also be included. I will examine the existing knowledge about the development of teenagers' Jewish identities in order to shed light on the types of questions that I ask the students, as well as the analysis of their responses. I will also look at important research that has been done on the use of arts in the classroom in both general education settings and specifically within Jewish education. Understanding the ways that other educators in Jewish education use the arts and understand its significance will help situate my research within the broader field of Jewish education studies.

### **Community Jewish Education**

In a survey of the history of American Jewish education, Jonathan Sarna (1998) notes that “[Jewish] schools serve as a primary setting, along with the home, where

American Jews confront the most fundamental question of American Jewish life: how to live in two worlds at once, how to be both American and Jewish, part of the larger American society and apart from it” (p. 9). He adds: *“Jewish education serves as the vehicle through which we train successive generations of Jews to negotiate their own way, as Jews, in the American arena”* (emphasis in original, p. 10). Despite the fact that he was writing about the American Jewish community, Sarna’s thesis holds true for the Canadian Jewish community as well. Jewish schools, wherever they are, provide the educational grounds for teaching students about Judaism, Jewishness and integration into the larger non-Jewish society.

The nature and function of this integration varies depending on the Jewish community in question. In Orthodox schools, the emphasis on integration can be minimal; or instead, insularity within the Jewish community might be emphasized. Conversely, in more liberal schools, appreciation and recognition of the values of the surrounding society are typically more important. Alongside his observation that the nature and function of the school is to prepare Jewish students for life as Jews, Sarna notes that since Jewish education began in North America in the 1800s, a transition has occurred in relation to the goals and pedagogies in Jewish education. He posits that Jewish schools well into the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in America focused primarily on developing skills like reading Hebrew as opposed to learning about how to perform Jewish rituals, based on the assumption that rituals would have been taught at home. Today, many Jewish schools still place an emphasis on skills development, yet teachers are also expected to teach how to perform rituals as religious observance in Jewish homes increasingly diminishes.

At my community day school, I have also been regularly called upon to engage with students in conversations about their Jewish lives. I believe that this increased reliance on teachers to facilitate discussions about Jewishness is particularly relevant to this study. It can no longer be taken for granted that all parents are initiating these conversations with their children; this means that the teacher serves a more pivotal role in helping students develop their understanding of Jewishness. Teachers who do not provide opportunities for Jewish self-reflection should be aware that students are not necessarily having those conversations elsewhere. I view the arts as a critical tool in fostering this type of Jewish identity development in community Jewish education.

Brian Conyer (2009) defines Jewish community schools as schools that “do not officially affiliate with, identify with, or educate their students exclusively according to the values and behaviours associated with any of the historically established denominations” (p. 160). He notes that Jewish community schools make up the third largest segment of Jewish Day School sectors and have the second fastest growth rate of all Jewish schools in North America<sup>5</sup>. Conyer explains that there are at least four reasons that explain the proliferation of Jewish community schools. First, he suggests that post-denominationalism has led to a breakdown of the borders that have historically divided Jewish communities, and led to a greater comfort with collaborating with Jews of different backgrounds. Second, results from the 1990 U.S.A. National Jewish Population Survey showed that graduates from Jewish schools, regardless of school affiliation, demonstrated the greatest likelihood of

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that this growth exists within an overall pattern of shrinking in Jewish day schools.

participation in Jewish life, in addition to being less likely to marry non-Jews<sup>6</sup>, and therefore more parents have elected to send their children to Jewish day schools. Third, in communities that can support only one Jewish day school, a Jewish community school is the one that is most likely to attract a large population of Jewish students. Finally, through the inclusion of different segments of the Jewish community, the Jewish community school models the Jewish value of unity and teaches students about the centrality of community within Judaism.

Three of Conyer's (2009) four reasons for the proliferation of Jewish Community schools, are applicable to CHAT (the exception being his third reason, since Orthodox high schools do exist in Toronto). By defining itself as a community school, CHAT appeals to a wide demographic of parents and students. Through its emphasis on integrating students of diverse backgrounds, CHAT's students are regularly introduced to ideas that differ from their own, and the school functions as a fertile ground for idea-sharing and personal growth. The school administration would argue that the emphasis on creating a cultural mosaic of various forms of Judaism within the same building allows for students to be able to express their personal Jewish vision and to be able to critically self-reflect within a safe space. Additionally, the school's success at cultivating students who are involved and invested in their Judaism reflects Conyer's second explanation for why Jewish

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<sup>6</sup> Jewish denominations vary in their approach to the significance of marriage for Jewish identity. Orthodox and Conservative Judaism define Jewishness through the lens of matrilineal descent and do not consider offspring of an exogamous relationship of Jewish male and non-Jewish female as Jewish. Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism consider children Jewish so long as one parent is Jewish. Despite these differences, marriage between Jews is seen as preferable by all denominations as it is associated with greater likelihood of Jewish continuity.

community schools have proliferated. The school proudly reports on its website that 72% of graduates continue their Jewish education beyond high school, that graduates place a strong importance on marrying someone Jewish (and do so 96% of the time), that they are twice as likely as other Jews on campus to get involved in Jewish groups, and that 80% of graduates belong to a synagogue, with half reporting that they attend regularly ([www.TanenbaumCHAT.org](http://www.TanenbaumCHAT.org)).

Susan Shevitz and Rahel Wasserfall (2009) identify the central dilemma in the nature of community education as follows: “when is loyalty to one’s own ideas and actions paramount, and when are the needs of others in the community taken into account when religious belief is at stake?” (p. 376-377). Through this question, the authors examine how pluralism can be both a dividing and unifying force within a school. Based on their research at a community school, the authors suggest that in order for pluralism to thrive in a school culture, an environment in which “participants can risk the differentiation, debate, discussion, and openness to cooperation and change” (p. 377) is essential. Difference itself, they argue, is central to the definition of community. In order to sustain such difference, all student voices must be respected and an environment that is “safe enough” must be created, in which students and staff regularly interact with each other outside of the classroom setting.

The art project I designed and studied constitutes a good example of this kind of approach. Within the environment of the CHAT classroom, the type of artwork that students produce can, at times, be seen as controversial and offensive by other students. For instance, the idea of illustrating God and providing a physical



representation of God is offensive to some Jews, yet within the classroom, I create a safe space for students who want to represent God this way to do so. As a non-monolithic school, CHAT permits students to hold a wide range of values and beliefs, which can at times be contradictory. An excellent example that illustrates this point revolves around belief about the authorship of Torah<sup>7</sup>. For Orthodox students, that the Torah is God-given and recorded by Moses in writing is an accepted and important tenet of faith; however, for Reform students, the authorship of Torah is often a question, some believing that the Torah was divinely inspired, others that it was simply written by people as an ethical guide. This diversity in belief is respected in a community Jewish school setting that provides safe space for disagreement and discussion, and uses controversy as a springboard for meaningful dialogue between students. In support of this idea, Spitzer (2009) notes that at Gann Academy, a pluralistic school in Boston, what holds the school together is not that all agree on *halakhic* (legal) norms or Jewish philosophy. Rather: “What brings us together is a commitment to argue passionately and respectfully about the great ideas and with the great ideas that come out of our classical texts” (p. 12).

### ***Tanakh*<sup>8</sup> Education**

Published in 2003, Barry Holtz’s *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and in Practice* is an analysis of methodologies and rationales for teaching the Bible. Before identifying the different approaches that teachers take when

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<sup>7</sup> Hebrew name for the Pentateuch or Five Books of Moses.

<sup>8</sup> Hebrew acronym which stands for Torah, *neviim* (Prophetic books) and *ktuvim* (later writings). At CHAT, all take a course on *Tanakh* for at least three years and some study it as an elective in grade twelve.

teaching the text, he provides clarification for a series of assumptions that exist about the people written about in the Bible, which he feels must be acknowledged when teaching the Bible. Many of these assumptions contrast with the worldviews and ideas of students in Jewish schools today, and therefore make *Tanakh* education more challenging. First, Holtz notes the text assumes that God is not only real, but is directly involved in the lives of the people in the stories. Second, God has crafted a series of rules that the people are to follow. Third, the people of Israel are identified as different and unique *vis a vis* their relation with God. Fourth is the fact that the text views itself as the ultimate source of wisdom, and fifth, there is an overwhelming emphasis on the needs and development of the community as opposed to the individual.

These textual observations are not footnotes to the narratives and laws contained in the Bible. According to Holtz (2003), they are the linchpins and foundations of the entire text. Yet each individual assumption may very well contrast with the *weltanschauung* of a given student, given the decline of religious practice across North America, the deemphasizing of relationship-building with God, and the contemporary focus on individuality and uniqueness as opposed to conformity within the community.

Holtz (2003) identifies one further challenge faced by teachers of *Tanakh* and Jewish educators in general. This challenge subsumes all facets of Jewish education and bears directly on the question of the essential pedagogical goal of Jewish education. He outlines the challenge as being “caught between two different and powerful goals ... I live in the mimetic mode: I wish to make sure that students know

what is to be known – whether that be how to light the Hanukkah candles, how the medieval commentators understood a verse from the Bible, or what the conflicts between Herzl and the other early Zionists were. At the same time, if mimetic mastery of information were the end result of my teaching – wouldn't I have failed? Isn't the Jewish teacher's task to help students engage in their own personal encounter with text, deed, tradition, and history?" (p. 42).

In order to facilitate ways of thinking and teaching that integrate both of these conflicting positions, Holtz (2003) formulates nine orientations to teaching the Bible. He bases these on the work of Pamela Grossman (1991) of Stanford University. Grossman sought to understand the different ways that teachers of a variety of disciplines like math, social science, English, and science, think about teaching their subjects, and what motivates their choices in the classroom. Grossman interviewed over twenty prospective teachers before the school year, and then again part of the way into their first year of teaching. Additionally, two literature teachers were observed in the classroom. As part of the research, Grossman looked closely at orientations, which she argues are more than just an understanding of a discipline. In addition to subject-specific knowledge, an orientation encompasses the teachers' beliefs about the subject matter. According to Grossman, an orientation represents "the goals for instruction, the choice of activities, and the emphasis in classroom discussions" (p. 257). Additionally, Grossman argues that an orientation represents a pedagogical philosophy towards how teachers conceptualize their practice. She writes: "subject-matter knowledge is multidimensional, encompassing not only the content of a discipline but the theories

which frame investigations by posing questions for study, and the analytic tools and rules of evidence used in the production of new knowledge” (p. 259). Based on her observations of the literature teachers, Grossman identifies three primary orientations to teaching text in English literature. Each approach seeks to foster a deep appreciation and reverence for the text, but the process and the type of appreciation differs depending on the approach taken. The first orientation is the reader-orientation, which considers the reaction of the reader to the text and builds understanding through personal inquiry. The second is text-orientation, which offers a very close reading of the text, and finds deeper meaning in understanding the precise craft of the author. Last, the context-orientation suggests that in order for students to best understand and appreciate the text, they require a strong foundation in the author’s contextual framework, so that they can read the text through the lens of the authors particular set of conditions and assumptions<sup>9</sup>

Building on Grossman’s identification of orientations for literature teachers, Holtz (2003) suggests nine different orientations that *Tanakh* teachers possess when they approach teaching the Bible.

Orientation	Explanation
Contextual Approach	“...aims at the meaning of the biblical texts <i>within its own times</i> ,” and wants to frame the Bible as a product of a specific time period; in order to best understand it, an understanding of the surrounding climate is necessary
Literary Criticism Approach	teachers employ English literature strategies like paying attention to style, themes and language in order to understand the text.

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<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that teachers can make use of different orientations at different times but all teachers, based on their own schooling and personal valuations of text have a ‘go-to’ orientation that underlies their foundational understanding of pedagogy.

Reader-Response Approach	focuses on how the reader encounters the text
Jewish Interpretive Orientation	employs classical and modern commentaries to help explain the text
Moralistic-Didactic Orientation	teachers seek to help students uncover the moral messages in the text
Personalization Orientation	teachers will try to demonstrate the relevance of the text to life today by considering political, psychological, or personal dimensions
Decoding, Translation, and Comprehension Orientation	focuses on skills building
Ideational Orientation	asks students to consider how the text addresses the 'big ideas' in life and how has the Bible addressed "enduring and relevant" issues in the world
Action Orientation	focuses on the specific behaviours that result from Bible study, whether in the form of commandments or character education

*Table 1 – Holtz's Nine Orientations to Teaching the Bible*

Holtz argues that the more comfortable teachers are with the different orientations, the better they are able to tailor their lessons to specific student needs and be able to diversify their classroom approach. Additionally, the knowledge of multiple pedagogical approaches allows teachers to consider texts from a variety of angles and be able to select the orientation that best suits each text. Last, and perhaps most important, having an understanding of the orientations encourages teachers to be thoughtful not only about the subject matter, but also about their own pedagogy. If teachers can recognize what their own dominant orientation is, they can become aware of what goals they unconsciously set for their lessons, and whether those are truly the most desired outcomes for a given group of students. Essentially, thinking critically about one's underlying pedagogical philosophy is a way to help a teacher become a more self-aware and effective educator.

A final important document that underpins the pedagogical framework for my study is the Jewish Day School Standards and Benchmarks Project (2003) that was developed by the Davidson School at the Jewish Theological Seminary. The document contains a series of Standards and Benchmarks that teachers and schools should strive to attain in their *Tanakh* education. Each year the Project works closely with schools that have been accepted into its program and mentors its teachers, in order to ensure successful integration of the program into the school. Schools accepted into the program come from cities across North America and span grade levels and denominational orientations<sup>10</sup>. In Toronto and other cities with large Jewish communities, where a variety of Jewish schools (and in turn, a variety of textual orientations) exist, schools that subscribe to the Standards and Benchmarks Project are recognized by parents as harboring a commitment to a pedagogical approach towards *Tanakh* education that is both grounded in traditional textual approaches but is also committed to the continuing evolution of *Tanakh* pedagogy; for example, making use of modern and contemporary literature on *Tanakh* and education.

The Project's authors identified eight different Standards and dozens of Benchmarks. A Standard is defined as "an overarching learning outcome exhibiting a synthesis of knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours". Standards apply across grades and are therefore independent of ages and stages of life. It is within each Standard that different Benchmarks, or learning outcomes, are identified, and these are tailored to different grade levels and student abilities. The eight Standards are:

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<sup>10</sup> TanenbaumCHAT has been accepted into the program for the 2014-2015 academic year

1. Students will become independent and literarily astute readers of the biblical text in Hebrew
2. Students will be engaged in the learning of ancient, rabbinic, and modern modes of interpretation of the biblical text and will see themselves as a link in this ongoing chain of interpretation
3. Students will appreciate *Tanakh* as a multivocal text with a complex history of development
4. Students will view the *Tanakh* as the formative narrative of the Jewish people – past, present, and future
5. Students will, through the study of *Tanakh*, understand and value that the Land of Israel informs and shapes the historical, theological, and sociological experiences of the Jewish people
6. Students will develop an appreciation for the sacredness of *Tanakh* as the primary record of the meeting between God and the people of Israel and as an essential text through which Jews continue to grapple with theological, spiritual, and existential questions
7. Students will understand through the study of *Tanakh* and its interpretations, the role of *mitzvot* in the shaping of the ethical character and religious practices of the individual and the Jewish people
8. Students will develop a love of Torah study for its own sake and embrace it as an inspiring resource, informing their values, moral commitments, and ways of experiencing the world.

These Standards and benchmarks directly relate to Holtz's (2003) work, in that Holtz provides a skeleton structure for how teachers can approach *Tanakh* pedagogy from a philosophical and ideological place. Similarly, the Standards and Benchmarks outlined by the Davidson School specify what teachers should do with their ideologies, and provide guidelines to help teachers think in different ways. Additionally, the project draws upon the textual approaches of both classical and modern commentators. The significance of the Standards and Benchmarks document is that it provides a comprehensive and structured guideline for defining and evaluating effective pedagogy. Instead of teachers arbitrarily determining what to expect from students or arriving at their own definition of successful *Tanakh* education, the document provides a rigorous common approach to the teaching of *Tanakh*. The document also demonstrates the complexity of *Tanakh* education, in that it highlights the multiplicity of considerations that teachers need to be aware of in their classrooms. While not every lesson will touch on every standard, throughout the year teachers must be mindful of when guidelines standards become relevant.

In the introduction, I described my classroom and how it functions more as a literature class than a yeshiva Bible class. Now, I would like to flesh this out further and consider my own classroom style in light of both Grossman's and Holtz's orientations and the Standards and Benchmarks Project. I believe that the primary orientation identified by Grossman that I make use of is the reader orientation, given my interest in the personal narratives that readers bring to the text and how students are able to connect the text to themselves. Of Holtz's orientations, the one that I most employ in the classroom is the personalization orientation, as I seek to



foster and develop for the students a sense of appreciation of the text by looking for parallels between text, world, and self. As Holtz predicts, however, I, like most teachers do make use of other orientations. In the classroom, I invoke the text-skills and commentaries orientations regularly to help make text relevant to students. When learning commentaries, I introduce students to both classical commentaries and modern commentaries that make use of the kind of modern literary techniques employed by Robert Alter. Contextual and character education approaches are employed periodically throughout the year in order to shed light on difficult passages and to help students think about how the text can be relevant to their lives.

In considering the primary and secondary methodologies used in my classrooms, it becomes evident that my pedagogical goal is to encourage students to build bridges between text and self, in order to impress upon them that classical text study does have relevance to their lives today. In order to accomplish this, contemporary and classical commentaries are used to help inform their studies. Additionally, non-Jewish texts and media are used to reflect and refract students' understanding of text so that they may arrive at their own understanding of the material.

The Standards that most directly relate to my *Tanakh* classroom's arts-based projects are items two and eight. These speak to the importance of *Tanakh* and commentaries to students' lives and the continued relevance of *Tanakh* as a text that can inform the decisions made by Jews in the modern world and enrich their Jewish experiences. Within these Standards, there are many Benchmarks for high school students that directly address the goals of my classroom and the importance of

using the arts in education. Standard Two, for example, contains several Benchmarks for high school students relating to understanding rabbinic and modern commentators and others that emphasize the use of the arts (30) and seeing the student herself as a commentator on text (31). Standard Eight contains Benchmarks for high school students that includes identifying, understanding, and wrestling with social justice issues in *Tanakh* and applying those lessons in the modern world (18 & 20), and one that identifies biblical influences and themes in art, literature and music (22).

Given the primary orientation and goal of my *Tanakh* pedagogy, I believe that arts-based projects, with their creativity, openness, and opportunity for reflection and connection to text, are extensions of my curricular goals and desired outcomes. Furthermore, they directly reflect two of Holtz's (2003) textual orientations and tie in neatly with issues outlined in the Melton Center's standards.

### **Jewish Identity**

As noted above, the Jewish school now plays a formative role in helping students develop their Jewish identities, and different approaches to Jewish education determine the extent and quality of this exploration. Similarly, the literature reveals a range of approaches for thinking about what exactly Jewish identity is and how it can be understood. In the following paragraphs, I will describe some of the recent literature and explain its significance to the study.

Stuart Charmé's writings provided a very useful theoretical framework for understanding Jewish identity. In an article by Charmé and Tali Zelkowicz (2011),

the authors note that teachers must “let go of the urge to control the *outcomes* of their students’ Jewish futures” (p. 176) and instead focus on helping students navigate the process of developing their Jewish identity. In order to do this in practice, an environment must be created that makes it “safe and inviting” for students to take “risks and participate willingly and genuinely in the meaning-making conversations that ultimately contribute to productive, durable, identity building” (p. 176). The authors’ suggestions were useful to me, in helping me develop open-ended questions on *Tanakh* interpretation for my study. The questions allowed the students to describe their own Jewishness and what has helped shape it. Framing the assignment as an art project allowed for the kind of risk-taking and meaning-making that Charmé prescribes since the projects were designed to be open-ended and non-prescriptive. They required students to arrive at their own conclusions about the text and construct their own understanding of it and how it can relate to their lives.

Susan Glenn and Naomi Sokoloff (2010) accurately describe the challenges in assessing what counts as Jewish identity.

Studies in many disciplines and Jews from many walks of life have asked, does being a Jew require religious belief, practice, and formal institutional affiliation? One of these? Or all? Do political behaviours or social associations make someone Jewish? What is the status of the convert to another religion? Is there a biological or physical aspect of Jewish identity? And how do these issues play out in different geographic and historical settings? What is the

historical and contemporary relationship between ideal and lived experience?  
(p. 3-4)

Steven Cohen and Ari Kelman (2005) add cultural affiliation as an additional form of Jewish belonging. Religious, political, cultural, ethnic, and geographical identities, associations can be present in any classroom, and understanding how students self-define is important to assessing how the curriculum, and more specifically the arts, allow opportunities to explore identity. Furthermore, by expanding the definition of Jewishness and considering all of its facets, allows for a more inclusive and diverse data set, which can better reflect the Jewish diversity of my community-oriented classroom.

### **Arts-Based Education**

I now move from consideration of the research on Jewish community education and Jewish identity, to discuss the literature and research that has helped shape my understanding of arts-based learning. The following paragraphs outline four dimensions of the arts-based education that are relevant to the study. Specifically, these dimensions draw on the works of arts-based thinkers in relation to the purposes of learning through the arts and fostering creativity, imagination, and identity.

**Purpose of Arts-Based Learning.** In the late 1990s and early 2000s, scholars and policy makers began debating the benefits of the arts in education based on the notion of transference of skills. Some scholars and policy makers argued that the

value of learning with and through the arts is based on the notion that students learn specific skills through the arts that can result in higher academic achievement in other subjects. Scholars in favour of this understanding include Brian Caldwell and Tanya Vaughan (2012), both of whom argue that there is a strong correlation between the arts and student success. Judith Burton, Robert Horowitz & Hal Abeles (1999) acknowledge that there is a relationship between arts education and academic success. Additionally, James Catterall (2005) suggests that arts-based learning changes the brain in ways that lead to greater success in non-arts tasks. Conversely, others like Winner & Cooper (2000) and a later piece by Burton, Horowitz & Abeles (2000) argue that no study has yet successfully and effectively demonstrated a correlation between studying the arts and success in other subject domains.

Among the group that is skeptical about the notion of transference of skills, (Burton, Horowitz & Abeles (2000) and Winner & Cooper (2000)), many note that even if learning through the arts has a positive correlation with academic success, this is not its primary purpose. In the paragraphs that follow, I will present recent research that demonstrates the benefits of learning through the arts beyond the transference of academic skills. Chapters four and five will make direct connections with the research studies highlighted below, as many of the findings directly relate to the findings of the study carried out in this dissertation.

***Experiencing Texts.*** At the 1999 American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Victoria R. Jacobs, Merryl R. Goldberg and Tom R. Bennett delivered

a paper on teaching through the arts. The key argument put forth in their presentation is that the arts provide students with the opportunity to “*experience* concepts rather than simply discussing or reading about them” (p. 2). The authors suggest that the arts provide a student with the opportunity to engage with and make personal a text in a way that reading and talking about a text do not. Through this engagement, a new type of understanding may be formed. The findings from this study helped explain the ways in which students in my classroom related to text and saw, for the first time for some, that text had something to say to them.

***Skills Not Learned Elsewhere.*** Ellen Winner and Lois Hetland’s (2008) article “Art for Our Sake” presents a compelling argument for why learning through the arts should be considered essential for all students. Specifically, the authors argue, based on a qualitative study of schools in Boston, that the arts teach students specific thinking and processing skills, which are not taught in other classes. These skills include: “visual-spatial abilities, reflection, self-criticism, and the willingness to experiment and learn from mistakes” (p. 29). Additionally, they noted that arts students were consistently told to work past preconceived notions and look carefully at what they were doing. The authors note that these skills, while not testable or easy to quantify into grades, are extremely valuable for many fields including medicine and law, which rely on close and careful observation and being able to view a problem from a variety of angles. The authors also discovered that a core feature of arts classes was an emphasis on innovation. The authors conclude their piece as follows:

In contrast to the reputation of the arts as mainly about expressive craft, we found that teachers talked about decisions, choices, and understanding far more than they talked about feelings...We need the arts because in addition to introducing students to aesthetic appreciation, they teach other modes of thinking we value. (p. 31)

Following the publication of their article in *The Boston Globe*, Winner and Hetland along with Shirley Veenema and Kimberly Sheridan (2013) published the results of their study in a book that blends research with hands-on strategies for teachers implementing the arts in their teaching. The authors' conclusion of what the arts offer students is encapsulated in their 'Eight Studio Habits of Mind'. The eight habits include: understanding art worlds and communities, stretching and exploring by learning from mistakes and reaching beyond one's capacities, reflecting on the art process, observing visual contexts and analyzing them, expressing ideas, envisioning mentally before making something concrete, engaging and embracing problems in the world/personal life and using art to convey understanding, and honing artistic craft (p. 6). The authors argue that these are essential skills for life that non-arts classes do not exercise. By the same reasoning, one can make a strong case for including arts-based learning projects in curricula that are not primarily about art.

The results of Winner and Hetland's initial study and subsequently published book provide a foundation for understanding and interpreting the data I provide in chapter six. In their interviews, students identified many of the same purposes for learning through the arts but also contributed new ideas that were not addressed in

these works.

***Decision-Making.*** Following a qualitative study revolving around the arts and learning disabilities, Christine Mason, Kathlyn Steedly and Mary Thormann (2008) argue that the arts provide students with the opportunity to make choices as active agents, as opposed to having their academic choices determined for them. Through these choices, learning the subject matter “becomes more participatory, enhancing understanding” (p. 38). Directly connected to the idea of choice and engagement, the authors note that the arts provided students with opportunities to build self-confidence, thanks to the positive attention they received for their work and the chance to convey their own understandings of the world (p. 41). A further result of providing students with agency over their learning was that “the arts made learning fun and exciting” for both teacher and students (p. 45), which correlated to students wanting to take part in the learning process. While this study does involve students with special needs, the fact that the students in the study felt that their schooling does not provide opportunities for personal choice parallels feelings expressed by students in my study, who felt limited by the requirements of the government and the CHAT curriculum. Chapter six will revisit the results of Mason, Steedly, and Thormann’s study and show links between their findings and mine relating to the importance and value of choice in shaping the educational experience of students, as well as how the arts help facilitate this.



***The Qualities of Quality.*** “The Qualities of Quality” (2009) is a research study conducted by Project Zero at Harvard University designed to understand what qualities made up successful and excellent arts-education programs. Following the completion of their qualitative study, researchers identified a series of traits or beliefs that were common among arts practitioners, teachers, researchers, and policy makers. First, they discovered that good arts education fosters the ability for students to make connections between different texts, cultures, histories, and experiences. Doing this “allows students a ‘way in’ so that their learning is accessible and relevant” (p. 19). Many of the interviewees in that study noted that connection-building cannot be taken for granted, and that educators must help students build bridges between lived experience and art (p. 20).

A second finding of the Harvard study is that for the arts to be successful, they should lead one to a greater understanding of the world. By this, the authors mean that the arts are a tool to help students engage with the world around them. One of the interviewees explained: “Art makes worlds; it is a way that human beings most understand things. The arts help us ask questions, explore ideas, and make meaning in ways that other disciplines do not” (p. 23).

Directly related to the idea that the arts should lead to a deeper understanding of the world is the third finding of the study. According to many interviewees, the arts let students “engage with community, civic, and social issues” (p. 23). While different scholars explain the nature of this engagement differently, the authors of the paper note that one “conception of civic engagement...emphasizes helping students understand that they each have the power and responsibility to affect the

community and society at large through the arts” (p. 23).

Like the study of agency and students with disabilities by Mason, Steedly, and Thormann (2008), the researchers at Harvard also concluded that learning through the arts provided a powerful opportunity for students to express themselves and develop as individuals. The authors write of arts education: “it makes personal development possible by providing individual students with multiple ways to ‘be themselves’” (p. 25). This finding is significant as it shows that the arts allow for students to express their uniqueness and individuality. It is directly relevant for teachers who want to find opportunities for self-exploration in the classroom, as the arts can be vehicles for this type of learning experience. Additionally, the arts can play a role in “helping students see that they have something to offer – that they have voice and the ability and credibility to contribute to society” (p. 26). As well, the arts can help students grow as individuals. The researchers write: “From developing students’ imagination and self esteem to encouraging their self-awareness, engaging with the arts can affect how youth see themselves” (p. 26). A further important point, which echoes the study of Winner and Cooper (2008), was that interviewees commented that the arts build “students’ intrinsic motivation, that engaging in arts experiences develops students’ capacity for reflection and self-assessment and increases their motivation to pursue excellence – both in and outside of the arts” (p. 26).

The importance of “The Qualities of Quality” for my dissertation cannot be understated. Its explanation as to what should take place in arts-based education was formative in helping shape the project and in analyzing student responses.

References to and extensions of the results of the study will be seen in chapters four, five, and six.

***Neuroeducation.*** In 2009, Jerome Kagan delivered the keynote address at a summit hosted by Johns Hopkins University for researchers interested in neuroscience, education, and the arts. In addition to asserting that the arts allow for confidence building in students who might be weak in other subjects (p. 29) and cultivate the skill of collaboration (p. 34), Kagan argues that the arts provide opportunities for students to use their brains in a way that is different than in other classroom learning processes. Specifically, art and music “require the use of both schematic and procedural understanding of self and world” (p. 33). Schematic and procedural learning processes are, Kagan notes, processes that take place in different parts of the brain, and make for a more holistic and all-encompassing experience. Kagan explains the idea as follows:

Verbal products rely mainly on sites in the temporal cortex in the left hemisphere. Schematic knowledge relies more heavily on the parietal cortex in the right hemisphere, and procedural knowledge requires neuronal cluster in the premotor cortex, cerebellum, and the structures called the basal ganglia. All three sources of knowledge contribute to the healthy development of a brain. (41)

Kagan’s research provides a completely different approach from the other studies to understanding the value of teaching through the arts. Kagan demonstrates that the arts facilitate cognitive development in a way that is not present in non-arts

environments. This is an important consideration as it demonstrates a science-based consideration for the importance of the arts in the classroom. Neurologically, the arts provide students with the ability to develop new pathways to thinking.

**Creativity.** Howard Gardner (1989) developed his theory of multiple intelligences as a way to understand the different ways that people can learn, interact with the world, and create. The theory posits that humans have at least seven different “forms of knowing” (p. 74), which include verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical-rhythmic and harmonic, spatial orientation, bodily-kinesthetic information, interpersonal, and intrapersonal ways of learning and knowing. Gardner writes that **all** humans possess the seven intelligences to varying degrees, and that they can be improved upon through formal and informal schooling and training. Building on the multiple intelligences framework and the importance of learning through various modalities, Gardner argues that to ensure successful arts-based learning, several conditions should be met: Student work should be framed in relation to that of other artists; the teacher must be able to think in an artistic way; the lesson should revolve around meaningful tasks; the work must be evaluated and assessed; students should be given the opportunity for reflection; and all teachers, regardless of subject area, should reinforce the value of learning through the arts.

Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences underpins many elements of my research study. Many of the students in the Grade Ten Bible classes have individualized education plans (IEPs) based on different types of mild or moderate

learning difficulties that do not require placement in special education classes. There are many students who have been identified as needing extra time on tests, having ADD/ADHD, and struggling with written communication on tests and essays. Arts-based projects provide these students with an alternate way of expressing themselves and demonstrating creativity and understanding. Additionally, even for students who do not have special learning needs, the arts provide a way into creativity, and in turn toward self-discovery.

Elliot Eisner (2002) writes that through the act of creation, students are encouraged to concretize and make real their abstract ideas, which are often difficult to maintain for extended periods. He suggests that the arts “help us discover the contours of our emotional selves” (p. 11) and through this, provide an opportunity for students to “recognize what is personal, distinctive, and even unique about themselves” (p. 44). The arts also provide students opportunities to use language and other modes of representation to describe experiences, both seen and felt, and as a result give students a sense of freedom in describing their experiences and a chance to “liberate their emotions and imagination” (p. 89).

Eisner’s (2002) description of the arts as a creative tool that provides a vehicle for self-discovery is particularly relevant for thinking about how the arts can help students in Jewish schools better understand and clarify their own Jewishness. Many of the students struggled to explain what Judaism means to them and, through the arts, they were able to explore and express their ideas and conceptualizations of Judaism, tapping into the “contours of their emotional selves” in relation to their Jewishness. In line with Gardner and Eisner, creativity can be understood as a

quality of expression which all humans can access through arts-based experiences, and which can allow us to discover and represent, in new ways, ideas about the self and the world. In the context of my study, creativity is a conduit for thinking about text and self vis-à-vis Judaism and Jewishness.

Howard Gruber (1992) argues that in order to understand creativity, it is essential to understand the individual's process that led to the unique creative discovery, which will be different in each individual. Alongside his emphasis on the individual, he explains that there are also similarities that transcend individual creative efforts. Specifically, he identifies that all creative works involve originality, purposefulness, and compatibility with human purposes and need.

While Gruber's paper focuses on what he calls world-changing efforts, such as those of Piaget, Einstein, Darwin, Wordsworth and others, it still has relevance to this study. Gruber's argument is that the creative approach is made pluralistic and interactive by drawing on existing frameworks and building on them. This parallels my approach to facilitating creativity in the classroom in that I provide students with an existing text to work on and allow them to develop their own process of creative discovery.

Further evidence on the importance of creativity has been observed by Ronald Beghetto (2009), who has conducted a series of research studies about finding and nurturing creativity in the classroom. His study revolved around micromoments, the small incidents in class that are often overlooked and forgotten, but which are in fact important opportunities for students to exercise their creativity and determine whether creativity is encouraged or discouraged in the classroom. Based on a series

of interviews and observations of classroom teaching, Beghetto argues:

when teachers have the confidence to explore (rather than dismiss) students' unexpected ideas, they stand a good chance of identifying and nurturing the creative insights that underlay those ideas. However, if teachers continually dismiss such ideas – even if done gently – students learn that sharing their ideas is not worth the risk. (p. 4)

Beghetto's work on micromoments is relevant to arts-based learning as it serves as a cautionary warning for teachers about how to respond to students' suggestions and insights into text. Teachers should ask clarifying questions and push students to think more deeply and critically, but the level of openness with which they respond will influence students' attitudes toward taking risks, something that is essential in arts-based learning. The way a teacher responds to the initial creative idea or spark that a student has can directly impact whether the student pursues the idea or abandons it. This does not mean that the teacher must accept the idea. Rather, the way that follow-up questions are asked, and even facial expressions, can help students sharpen their ideas or deter them from developing those ideas. Many thinkers, including Ken Robinson (2011) argue that a fear of failure in school has led students to focus more on right/wrong answers and become risk-averse. The arts have the potential to lead students to think problems through anew and in a culture of aversion to risk, the teacher must be vigilant to how they encourage creativity in the classroom even in the micromoments.

Robert Sternberg's (2010) research has revealed that creativity is a habit of mind, as opposed to an innate skill or trait. He argues that the three main

requirements that promote creativity are opportunities to engage in it, encouragement to pursue it, and positive reinforcement and reward for creative efforts. Additionally, students need to have creativity modeled for them in order to learn the habits and behaviours of creative activity, along with time provided to think about the process and what they want to produce. With Todd Lubart, Sternberg designed a system called 'Investment Theory of Creativity'. The theory states that creative people are willing to pursue ideas that are counter-cultural and innovative, and that these people are able to persist despite resistance from the general population. In line with this, as part of my study design, I showed students examples of creative arts interpretations of the Bible.

**Imagination.** In a recent work, Gardner (2008), writes that young children, “even in the absence of encouragement, let alone material rewards, persist in exploring” (p. 84) the world around them. The challenge, he notes, is for “the educator to keep alive the mind and sensibility of the young child” (p. 84) in the older student. In order to maintain the creative spark, Gardner advises teachers to expose students to challenging tasks with multiple answers. As students enter high school, “the mind of the adolescent is overly critical – of self and of other. Such hypercriticism can thwart creative efforts” (p. 87). To combat this, he suggests that educators should craft tasks that encourage thinking about “instances and systems that operate according to different rules – utopias, dystopias, alternate numerical systems” (p. 87). While not explicitly mentioned, arts-based tasks can certainly provide such opportunities.



Echoing Gardner's emphasis on the importance of speculating about multiple possibilities, Maxine Greene (2001) argues that the arts present students with an opportunity to explore using their imaginations. Unlike Gardner, who writes from psychology and science backgrounds, Greene writes as a philosopher of education on the educational value of aesthetic and arts-based experience. The value of using one's imagination, she notes, is that "to enter a created world, an invented world, is to find new perspectives opening on our lived worlds, the often taken-for-granted realities of everyday" (p. 82). Engaging the imagination will allow students to "expand visions...challenge the taken-for-granted...break with confinement, look from an increasing number of vantage points – realizing that the world is always incomplete" (p. 84).

Not unlike Eisner's emphasis on creativity as a mode of self-discovery, Greene (2000) writes that the arts allow us "to recapture the processes of our becoming. Reflecting on our life histories, our projects... [we are] made aware of ourselves as questioners" (p. 130). By engaging with the arts in their classrooms, Greene suggests that teachers

may communicate to students the notion that reality is multiple perspectives and that the construction is never complete... If the significance of the arts for growth and inventiveness and problem solving is recognized at last, a desperate stasis may be overcome and hopes may be raised. (p. 130-132)

Greene's approach to the arts suggests, like Gardner's, that the arts provide an opportunity for students to imagine and consider different vantage points, and to envision alternate worlds and futures; and hopefully, through this visioning, to be

transformed. Greene's emphasis on the socio-political dimensions of imagination and the cultivation of a diversity of perspectives has been taken up by other scholars, such as Freedman (2003) who argues that students "use artistic practices as cultural and personal responses to experience, including in their search for identity [given that] students now have multiple and overlapping identities (for example, ethnic, socioeconomic, and sexual identities) and live within complex social environments" (p. 40).

Greene's (2000, 2001) philosophical approach to arts-based education is relevant and applicable to my work because of her emphasis on the transformative power of the imagination. While not targeted at Jewish education specifically, I believe that Greene's writings are applicable to Jewish settings. Her belief that the arts provide an opportunity through the imagination to engage with what is known and what is yet to be known, and that the arts are uniquely suited to carve out space for self-discovery, discovery of multiple perspectives, and growth within an evolving social context, resonate with my approach to Jewish identity as an evolving construct that requires exploration and self-reflection in order to develop.

**Identity-building.** Jodie Pellish (2012) writes that "artmaking with students can be more than just self-expression" (p. 19). Bringing to life the philosophies of Eisner and Greene, she writes that art produced in the classroom can serve as an opportunity to process one's past experiences and bridge them to present and future experiences. Pellish bases her understanding of the value of art on an exercise she conducted with her elementary-school students, in which they

produced visual timelines of their lives and then shared the most important events with peers. Through this process, students had the opportunity to reflect on what was most important to them, what events had shaped who they had become, and who they hoped to become in the future. Reflecting on the unit as a whole, Pellish writes: “developing teaching strategies that address cultural identity as changing and flexible could lead to empowering students as they construct their own multi-layered identity” (p. 24), and that through the process of creating, the students were “claiming an identity that is fluid, dynamic, and changing from past, to present, to our future” (p. 24).

**Learning Through the Arts.** There is a growing body of research, based on empirical studies, that argues that learning through the arts in non-arts classes benefits student learning. This research is particularly appropriate for this dissertation given that the classes where the research study took place are not arts classes.

In 1999, the Royal Conservatory of Music began a program entitled ‘Learning Through the Arts’ that was designed to introduce the arts to students in grades 1 through 6 in non-arts classrooms in schools across Canada. Schools that joined the program agreed to involve all of their students in the program during a three-year commitment. The core feature of the program is that professional artists develop curriculum together with the classroom teacher and work directly with students.

Katharine Smithrim and Rena Upitis (2005) studied the effectiveness of the Royal Conservatory’s program by surveying student achievement and interest in

school by students in the program and comparing the results to a control group of students in schools that are similar to those in the test group save for the inclusion of the arts program. The study showed that students who were in a school that participated in the program scored significantly higher in math than those who did not participate in the program. Of greater importance to my study, however, was the finding that “involvement in the arts went hand-in-hand with engagement in learning at school” (p. 120). Teachers, students, parents and administrators all identified how learning through the arts engaged students in cognitive, physical, emotional, and social ways that benefited their learning experiences.

The finding that students in the arts cohort clearly identified that they enjoyed learning and being in school is significant for teachers in all disciplines, but especially in courses that teachers want students to have an intrinsic interest in. As noted above, teachers of Jewish studies classes want their students to become life-long learners and enjoy Jewish studies. Smithrim and Upitis (2005) have demonstrated that the Royal Conservatory’s ‘Learning Through the Arts’ program successfully creates motivated learners and the program is certainly replicable or adaptable for teachers of Jewish content if they make the arts a feature of their courses.

Upitis (2011) used the data from her study on ‘Learning Through the Arts’ to create a practical guide for how best to integrate the arts into non-arts classes. In a guide for teachers, she suggests teachers find ways to make use of the arts on a daily basis so that students get accustomed to learning through the arts as part of habitual and routine practice. As well, teachers need to think creatively and broadly about the types of arts students are exposed to so that the arts remain a constant

part of the class but do not become boring or rote as a result of repetition. Doing this will lead to both intrinsic benefits like overall experience and expression in addition to bonus benefits in thinking and problem-solving skills.

### **Jewish Arts-Based Education**

Within the field of arts-based education exists a small group of scholars who research the arts within Jewish day schools. Their articles touch on both philosophical and descriptive research topics. In the following paragraphs, I will outline their major contributions to the field and explain how their contributions are applicable to my work within arts-based Jewish education.

Backenroth (2011) notes that Jewish day schools do not traditionally place the arts in a prominent position due to the time constraints of the dual curriculum and the costs associated with having a full arts program (p. 356). She notes that a shift is taking place in some schools, CHAT among them, in which the inclusion of the arts is gradually increasing. To support including the arts in the Jewish studies classroom, Backenroth cites several studies which demonstrate that the arts make Jewish text study more meaningful by facilitating students' personal connections with the text, which leads to greater understanding of the text (Miller, 1999a, Milgrom, 1992, Hascal, 2001). Additionally, Backenroth cites her own research about arts-based Jewish schools, which suggests that the arts provide a creative outlet for teachers and give them an opportunity to teach in new ways (Backenroth, 2001, p. 360-361). Most important, Backenroth, citing Helena Miller, (1999b, 2000) notes that teaching Biblical text through the arts "emphasizes the importance of students making their

own meaning while searching for their own discoveries. The teachers in this case are not the experts who recite the content of the lesson, rather mediators who facilitate the act of discovery of relevant issues” (Backenroth, 2011, p. 368).

Jo Milgrom (1992) makes extensive use of the idea that the teacher is a facilitator who helps students in self-discovery. In her minimalist “handmade *midrash*”<sup>11</sup> sessions, Milgrom leads participants through text study, reflection, and artistic creation involving scraps of construction paper and basic drawing tools. She asserts that through the simple creative process, the text study “ceases to be only cognitive and academic. It becomes personal, sometimes even intimate” (p. 7). As a result, Milgrom suggests, the participant “returns to the text with a new and deeper knowledge of both text and self” (p. 10). While Milgrom’s art exercises are very different from those that occur in my classrooms, her observations about the power of art, and how the individual gains new knowledge of self and text mirror my goals of arts-based learning in relation to Jewish identity formation.

Backenroth (2011) provides a useful distinction for thinking about the ways that the arts are integrated in schools. She distinguishes between ‘arts-based’ and ‘arts-infused’ schools. She defines arts-based schools as schools that integrate the arts into all aspects of the curriculum in all disciplines. She defines arts-infused schools as those that infuse the arts into Jewish studies classes as an important element of the curriculum, according to the individual teacher’s discretion (p. 362-

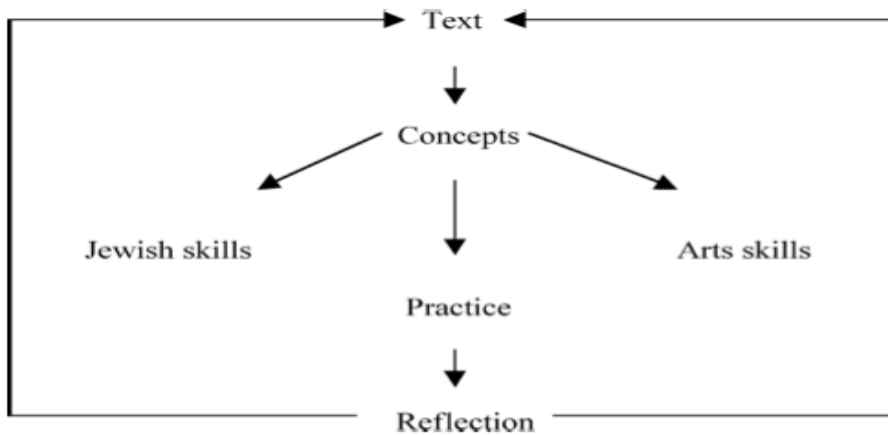
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<sup>11</sup> Milgrom explains *Midrash* as “a method and a genre of literature in which imaginative interpretation discovers biblical meanings that are continually contemporary. Its classical period extended from the third to the twelfth centuries, but midrash is found even within the Bible and... it continues to flourish creatively today” (p. 3).

364). CHAT does not meet either of Backenroth's criteria since most teachers do not teach through the arts at all. Even so, within CHAT, there is a small group of Jewish studies teachers, of which I am a part, who do infuse the arts into Jewish studies curricula.

Backenroth, Epstein, and Miller (2006) suggest that some Jewish schools and teachers eschew the arts because of a traditional focus on fact retention, often borne of a desire to build Jewish identity through the transmission of knowledge. The authors suggest that identity formation is a personal endeavour and cannot only be taught in only one way. Based on ethnographic studies conducted in different schools, the authors conclude that learning through the arts allows "the student [to] bring the text *to* life, and [that] he or she can bring the text *into* his or her life" (468). The authors later argue that learning through the arts can be both a cognitive *and* affective learning experience, and if done correctly, can create a "deep and personal relationship to, and understanding of" the text (p. 476)

Backenroth, Epstein, and Miller (2006) provide a useful model for considering how best to use the arts in the Jewish studies classroom. The following chart is from their article (p. 477):



*Figure 1: Model for how to use the arts in Jewish education. This model shows that text acts as a framework for the types of lessons and skills that are developed in lessons.*

In this model, text<sup>12</sup> is always the beginning and the end of the learning journey. By reflection, the authors mean an “interactive process through which the learner synthesizes his or her experiences and makes links with the text” (p. 477). The model on the whole is useful because it helps frame the arts within the learning process and provides a framework for students to use text as an opportunity for creation and reflection. The authors suggest that at the completion of the learning process, the students will have a better understanding both of the text and of themselves. When considering various types of arts-based assignments, teachers can use the model to help design opportunities for students to both strengthen their Jewish identity and develop greater understanding of text.

One of the earliest writers about the arts in Jewish education, Temima Gezari, (1952) suggests that since Jewish life is a fully immersive experience, so too Jewish education should also be a fully immersive experience. Gezari suggests that when

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<sup>12</sup> In Jewish education, the term ‘text’ usually refers to classical Jewish texts such as biblical, talmudic and liturgical texts. It can also apply broadly to newer literature.



the student fashions with his/her hands, “he is proving that we were all born with more than two senses – the sense of sight and hearing – and that he can learn not only through the reading of books...but also he can learn even more eloquently about Jewish life through his sense of taste, his sense of smell and above all his sense of touch” (p. 55). Writing over fifty years later, Backenroth states that when teachers use the visual arts, which potentially engage all the senses in the study of the Bible, they

demonstrate that the effective and affective domains are equally important factors in education and that imagination, creativity, and creation are genuine stages in the learning process ... Using imagination, creation, and the arts in teaching helps students to give form and shape to the subject matter since only when something new is fashioned, true learning takes place. (Backenroth, 2004, p. 153)

Gezari’s and Backenroth’s writings about arts-based Jewish education share similar characteristics with Greene in that they all place an emphasis on the idea that the arts provide an opportunity for students to exercise their creativity, and that through the creative process, genuine learning takes place. This idea is important for my study, as I am interested in understanding what students learn about text and about themselves through the creative process, and how the arts facilitate this learning and development.

A challenge that I have faced in my teaching practice is to help the students work with the text and generate something new in relation to it, a creative interpretation rather than a literal imitation of the text in visual form. Robbie

Gringras (2011), who teaches by first presenting finished art to students, suggests that teachers need to find ways to model for students “skillful encoding.” Of teachers, but equally applicable to students who are creating, he writes: “too often we are tempted to work with art that is literal, explanatory, mono-dimensional” (p. 343-344). In order to model another approach, teachers, he argues, must “take care to choose a piece of art that has skillfully encoded its meaning, displaying talent, craftsmanship, and concision” (p. 344).

While I am not expecting masterpieces from the students, I do believe that with prompting and modeling, they can produce a work that demonstrates “skillful encoding” and that makes references to ideas, words, concepts, and topics within and beyond the work itself. From there, they can begin to formulate their own visions of Judaism. Gringras notes that artwork of this nature allows students to “create meaning from a piece of art [which] is what allows the student to feel ‘ownership’ – another way of saying that the story emerging from the piece of art has become part of the student’s own story” (p. 344).

Following Gringras, the teacher who wants to model skillful encoding needs to provide examples and strategies to help their students develop this mode of thinking. This can be done in several different ways. For example, the teacher can show students existing Jewish art and explain the types of encoding that exist within these works. Good resources for this kind of discussion can be found in Epstein’s (2011) analysis of Medieval Jewish illuminated manuscripts, in which he provides copies of the images and his analysis of the representations they offer. Additional resources appear in Waldman’s (2005) graphic novel of the book of *Esther*, which

illustrates the biblical text while weaving in classical and contemporary commentaries. In addition, the teacher can craft assignments in which students have the flexibility to utilize contemporary and personal readings of the text, and through which students can be exposed to a wide range sources.

The literature surveyed in this chapter has helped me design and implement my research project, and has provided a lens through which I can understand and interpret the data that has been collected. The material on community Jewish education situates CHAT as a school that would be classified in that category; this suggests that the data could be replicable in other schools in North America. Researchers and philosophers like Maxine Greene, Howard Gardner, Ofra Backenroth and Howard Gruber have helped me better understand what I saw in the classroom and in the interviews. Their works have allowed me to connect my research to a larger network of scholarship and practice, and be able to better notice trends and patterns that connect my findings to prior work on the arts on Jewish and general education.

### **Numbers 12 and Relevant Commentaries**

In the paragraphs below, the *Tanakh* literature that was used in my project is presented. First, the verses from Numbers Chapter 12 will be presented and explained. Following that, four biblical commentators' views will be presented - Rashi (1040-1105), Rashbam (1085-1158), Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) and Ramban (1194-c.1270). These four commentators were selected because they are four of the most important classical writers on the Bible, are the ones most often studied at

TanenbaumCHAT. Each of them embodies a different methodological approach to understanding the text.

**Numbers 12.** Numbers Chapter 12 is a short chapter, containing 16 verses. The previous chapter contains stories that describe Moses' frustration with the Israelite community through various events: God's anger at the Israelites for not being satisfied with manna and wanting meat instead; the delivery of and subsequent punishment of the nation through thousands of quail; and the incident of two men, Eldad and Meidad, giving prophecy in the centre of the community. The subsequent chapter begins one of the most important narratives of the Bible, the failed spy mission into Israel that results in the Israelites being punished with forty years in the desert before entering the Promised Land.

Unlike the grand national narratives that sandwich it, Numbers 12 focuses on the family dynamic that exists between Moses and his siblings Miriam and Aaron. The chapter begins with a dialogue between Miriam and Aaron about Moses' "Cushite" wife and his prophetic relationship with God. Moses, the reader is informed, is the paradigm of humility. The text (NJPS) reads:

(א) וַתִּדְבֹר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמֹשֶׁה עַל־אִדֹּת הָאִשָּׁה הַכַּשִּׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי־אִשָּׁה כַּשִּׁית לָקַח:  
1. Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the **Cushite** woman he had married: "He married a **Cushite** woman!"

(ב) וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֲרִק אֲךָ־בְּמֹשֶׁה דְבַר ה' הֲלֹא גַם־בָּנוּ דְבַר וַיִּשְׁמַע ה':  
2. They said, "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?" The Lord heard it.

(ג) וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עֲנוּ עָנְיוֹ מְאֹד מִכָּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה:  
3. Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth.

Following the conversation, God summons Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to the Tent of Meeting, where he rebukes Miriam and Aaron for speaking out against his brother and clarifies the differences between His relationship with them and with Moses.

(ד) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' פְּתַח אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל־מִרְיָם צֵאוּ שְׁלֹשְׁתֵּיכֶם אֶל־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיֵּצְאוּ שְׁלֹשְׁתָּם

4. Suddenly the Lord called to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, "Come out, you three, to the Tent of Meeting." So the three of them went out.

(ה) וַיֵּרֶד ה' בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן וַיַּעֲמֹד פֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וַיִּקְרָא אֶהֱרֹן וּמִרְיָם וַיֵּצְאוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם:

5. The Lord came down in a pillar of cloud, stopped at the entrance of the Tent, and called out, "Aaron and Miriam!" The two of them came forward;

(ו) וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמַעוּ נְאֻם דְּבָרֵי אִם־יְהִיֶה נְבִיאֵיכֶם ה' בְּמַרְאֵה אֱלֹוֹ אֶתְדַע בְּחִלּוֹם אֲדַבְּרֶבּוּ: 6. and He said, "Hear these My words: When a prophet of the Lord arises among you, I make Myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream.

(ז) לֹא־כֵן עֲבָדֵי מֹשֶׁה בְּכָל־בֵּיתִי נֶאֱמָן הוּא:

7. Not so with My servant Moses; he is trusted throughout My household.

(ח) פֶּה אֶל־פֶּה אֲדַבְּרֶבּוּ וּמַרְאֵה וְלֹא בְחִידָת וּתְמִנָּת ה' יְבִיט וּמְדוּעַ לֹא יִרְאֶתֶם לְדַבֵּר בְּעֲבָדֵי בְּמֹשֶׁה

8. With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord. How then did you not shrink from speaking against My servant Moses!"

(ט) וַיַּחֲרֵאֵהוּ בָם וַיֵּלֶךְ:

9. Still incensed with them, the Lord departed.

In these verses, God makes it clear that despite the fact that all three are prophets, the nature and quality of their prophecies is different; God has a closer and more personal relationship with Moses than he does with Miriam and Aaron.

Following the verbal chastisement, God punishes Miriam with a skin affliction that results in her skin whitening and requiring her to be sequestered from the rest of the Israelites until she has healed. Aaron beseeches Moses to intercede with God on her behalf.

(י) וְהֶעֱנָן סָר מֵעַל הָאֹהֶל וְהָיָה מִרְיָם מְצֹרַעַת כַּשָּׁלֵג וַיִּפֹּן אַהֲרֹן אֶל־מִרְיָם וְהָיָה מְצֹרַעַת:  
10. As the cloud withdrew from the Tent, there was Miriam stricken with snow-white scales! When Aaron turned toward Miriam, he saw that she was stricken with scales.

(יא) וַיֹּאמֶר אַהֲרֹן אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בִּי אֲדֹנָי אֵל־נָא תִשֶׁת עָלֵינוּ חַטָּאת אֲשֶׁר נֹאֲלָנוּ וְאֲשֶׁר חָטָאנוּ:  
11. And Aaron said to Moses, "O my lord, account not to us the sin which we committed in our folly.

(יב) אֵל־נָא תְהִי כַמֵּת אֲשֶׁר בְּצֵאתוֹ מִרְחֹם אִמּוֹ וַיֵּאָכֵל חֲצִי בְשָׂרוֹ:  
12. Let her not be as one dead, who emerges from his mother's womb with half his flesh eaten away."

Following Aaron's request that Moses pray for the health of his sister, God explains that Miriam's punishment is necessary and will last for seven days, after which she will be permitted to reenter the camp. The text notes that the people did not travel without her. Upon Miriam's return, the community moved from Hazeroth to Paran. The text reads:

(יג) וַיִּצְעַק מֹשֶׁה אֶל־ה' לֵאמֹר אֵל נָא רַפֵּא נָא לָהּ:  
13. So Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, "O God, pray heal her!"

(יד) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאָבִיּוֹתָ יֶרֶק יֶרֶק בְּפָנֶיהָ הֲלֹא תִכְלֹם שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תִּסָּגֵר שִׁבְעַת יָמִים מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה וְאַחֵר תֵּאָסֵף:  
14. But the Lord said to Moses, "If her father spat in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of camp for seven days, and then let her be readmitted."

(טו) וַתִּסָּגֵר מִרְיָם מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וְהָעָם לֹא נָסַע עַד־הָאָסֵף מִרְיָם:  
15. So Miriam was shut out of camp seven days; and the people did not march on until Miriam was readmitted.

(טז) וְאַחֵר נָסְעוּ הָעָם מִחֲצֹרוֹת וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּמִדְבַר פָּאָרָן:  
16. After that the people set out from Hazeroth and encamped in the wilderness of Paran.

## Commentaries on Numbers 12

*isha Kushit (12:1)*. The first issues that the commentators directly address are: to whom are Miriam and Aaron referring when they discuss the Cushite woman, and what do they actually say in their conversation? The difficulty revolves around the traditional understanding that Moses' wife Zīporah is from Midian and not Cush, and so the commentators attempt to parse out whether Miriam and Aaron are referring to Zīporah or another woman entirely.

*Rashi*. Rashi (trans. Ben Isaiah & Sharfman, 1977, p. 118-126) provides a series of explanations arguing that the woman in question was Zīporah, and explaining why she was referred to as a Cushite woman:

Tangential to the topic of the identity of the woman and why she was called a Cushite, Rashi also grapples with what exactly Miriam and Aaron said about her and why Miriam's name was listed before Aaron's in the text. He explains:

**ותדבר מרים ואהרן (יב:א)** - היא פתחה בדבור תחילה, לפיכך הקדימה הכתוב תחלה, ומנין היתה יודעת מרים שפרש משה מן האשה, רבי נתן אומר, מרים היתה בצד צפורה בשעה שנאמר למשה אלדד ומידד מתנבאים במחנה, כיון ששמעה צפורה, אמרה או לנשותיהן של אלו אם הם נזקקים לנבואה שיהיו פורשין מנשותיהן כדרך שפרש בעלי ממני, ומשם ידעה מרים והגידה לאהרן. ומה מרים שלא נתכוונה לגנותו, כך נענשה, קל וחומר למספר בגנותו של חברו

**Miriam and Aaron spoke (12:1)** - She began speaking first, therefore Scripture places her first. Now whence did Miriam know that Moses had separated himself from his wife? Rabbi Nathan says: Miriam was at the side of Zīporah at the time when it was told to Moses (Numbers 11:27) "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." When Zīporah heard (this), she said: "Woe unto the wives of these men, if they (the husbands) are required to prophesy, for they will separate themselves from their wives just as my husband separated himself from me." Hence Miriam knew and she told (it) to Aaron. Now if Miriam, who did not intend to put him to shame, was punished thus, how much more (is punished) one who tells of the shame of his fellowman.

*Ibn Ezra.* The common strand throughout Rashi's explanations is that the woman in question is Moses' wife Zipporah, and that he did not marry a second woman. Ibn Ezra (Carasik, 2011, p. 84-89) concurs with Rashi's explanation about the woman's identity, but he provides a different rationale for how he knows this to be true. Ibn Ezra also agrees with Rashi that the subject of the conversation revolves around Moses' sexual relations with his wife. Unlike Rashi, who believes that Miriam and Aaron were confused as to why Moses was required to stop sleeping with his wife because of prophecy when they were not required to do the same, Ibn Ezra suggests that perhaps Moses' separation from his wife was because he was no longer attracted to her.

**ותדבר מרים (יב:א) - היא דברה, גם אהרן הסכים או החריש, על כן נענשו. וטעם ותדבר עם בי"ת דרך גנאי, כמו וידבר העם באלהים (במדבר כא, ה). גם ימצא לשבת, גם בדרך נבואה. יש אומרים, כי משה מלך על כוש ולקח כושית, והמתרגם אמר, שפירתא. וטעמו - לשון כבוד, כאשר יקראו הישמעאלים לזפת הלבן. גם אנחנו נקרא העור סגי נהור, והנה לא יתכן שנקרא שם, שהוא לשבת, להפכו לגנאי. וי"א, כי כוש בן ימיני הוא שאול, וכנהלא כבני כושיים (עמוס ט, ז), וכבר פירשתיו. והישר בעיני שזו הכושית היא צפורה, כי היא מדינית, ומדינים הם ישמעאלים, והם דרים באהלים, וככתוב ירגזון יריעות ארץ מדין (חבקוק ג, ז). ובעבור חום השמש אין להם לבן כלל, וצפורה היתה שחורה ודומה לכושית. וטעם כי אשה כושית לקח - זה הדבור שדברה מרים. ומה נכבד דברי קדמונינו שאמרו על הזקנים: אשריהם ואוי לנשיהם. והנה חשדו משה כי לא נמנע לשכב עם צפורה רק בעבור שאיננה יפה**

**Miriam spoke (12:1)** - Literally, "Miriam spoke, and Aaron, against Moses." She spoke and Aaron agreed - whether vocally or by silent consent. (That is why both of them were punished). The verb "speak" must be followed by the preposition *b-* as it is here, for it to mean "speak *against*". Compare "the people spoke *against* God" (21:5). But even this idiom can sometimes be used positively, or in speaking with a prophet. Some say Moses had been king of Cush and married a Cushite woman at that time. The Aramaic translation gives it as "a beautiful woman," assuming "Cushite" is meant to convey its opposite. But while you can use a positive expression instead of a negative one, as when the Arabs call pitch "white" or when we call a blind man "full of light" you cannot use a negative expression in place of a positive one. Yet some insist this phenomenon is found in Psalm 7, written by David "concerning Cush, a Benjaminite" - which they regard as a reference to Saul, a tall



handsome man. Some even see a reference to good looks in “To Me, O Israelites, you are just like the Ethiopians,” that is, the Cushites (Amos 9:7); but see my comment to Amos 9:8. What seems right to me is that “the Cushite woman” is Zīporah. For she was a Midianite, and the Midianites are Ishmaelites and dwell in tents like the Cushites: “The tents of Cushan...the pavilions of the land of Midian” (Hab. 3:7). There is no whiteness in them at all, because of the intense heat of the sun. Zīporah was therefore black, resembling a Cushite woman. This [Moses married a Cushite woman] is exactly what Miriam said. How estimable are the words of the Sages, who said, “Happy are the elders, but woe to their wives!” What Miriam and Aaron suspected was that Moses had stopped sleeping with Zīporah not for the sake not for the sake of prophecy, but because she was *not* beautiful.

**ויאמרו הרק אך במשה (יב:ב) - הביאה ראייה, כי לא עשה זה לקדושת השם, כי הם היו נביאים, ואין המשכב אסור להם. הרק אך - והאחד יספיק, רק הוא דרך צחות, כמו המבלי אין קברים**

**And they said “only with Moses” (12:2)** - By saying this, Miriam was bringing proof that Moses had not separated from Zīporah for the sake of God’s holiness. For she and Aaron were also prophets, and sex was not forbidden to them. The Hebrew text says not “only,” but “just only”; this is merely a stylistic feature. Compare Exodus 14:1 “Was it for *want of not enough* graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness?”

**ענו מאד (יב:ג) - במשקל 'שלו'. והטעם, שלא בקש גדולה על אחיו**  
**Very humble (12:3)** - He never sought superiority over his siblings.

*Rashbam*. In direct opposition to the opinion of Rashi and Ibn Ezra, Rashbam (Lockshin, 2001, p. 199-202), Rashi’s grandson, disagrees about the identity of the woman. He explains that she is in fact a different woman, and that Moses had married two women.

**[ה] כושית (יב:א) - שהיא ממשפחת חם**

## The Cushite (12:1) - From the descendants of Ham

כי אשה כושית לקח (יב:א) - כדכת' בדברי הימים דמשה רבנו שמלך בארץ כוש ארבעים שנה ולקח מלכה אחת ולא שכב עמה כמו שכתוב שם, והם לאידעו כשדיברו בו שלא נזקק לה. זהו עיקר פשוטו. שאם בשביל צפורה דיברו, מה צורך לפרש כי אשה כושית לקח? וכי [עד] עתה לא ידענו כי צפורה מדיינית היא? ועד תשובה כי לא היתה כושית כי כוש מבני חם הוא, ומדיין מבני קטורה אשר ילדה לאברהם

**Because he married a Cushite (12:1)** - As it is written in *Divre ha-yamim de-Moshe rabbenu*. Moses reigned in the land of Cush for forty years and married a certain queen [from there]. He never had intercourse with her. So it is written there [in that *midrashic* work]. When they [Miriam and Aaron] spoke against him, they did not realize that he had never had intercourse with her. This is the true plain meaning of Scripture.

For if they slandered Moses concerning [his marrying] *Ziporah*, why would the text have to add "for he had married a *Cushite* woman"? Did we not know already that *Ziporah* was a *Midianite*? And another argument [against seeing a reference to *Ziporah* here]: *Ziporah* was *not* a *Cushite*. or Cush was a descendant of Ham (Genesis 10:6) while *Midian* was [not a *Hamite* but a *Semite*], a descendant of *Keturah* who had borne him to Abraham.

ויאמרו הרק אך במשה [וגו'] (יב:ב) - כלומר עוד זאת אמרו על משה במה יכול להתפאר עלינו הלא גם בנו דבר [י"י] לישראל

**And they said "only with Moses" (12:2)** In other words, they voice [a] further [complaint] about Moses. "Why should he lord it over us? God has spoken to the Israelites through us, too [not just through him].

*Ramban*. *Ramban* (Chavel, 1975, p. 113-114) does not address the nature of the woman's identity; he does however comment on the juxtaposition of the comment on Moses' humility next to Miriam and Aaron's conversation. Specifically, he wonders why the text would introduce what seems to be a non sequitur following the revelation that Miriam and Aaron were speaking about their brother. Unlike Ibn Ezra, who wrote that Moses never sought to make himself better than his siblings, *Ramban* believes that Moses heard what was said, but chose to not respond, and therefore God chose to respond for him.

וטעם והאיש משה ענו מאד (יב:ג) - להגיד כי השם קנא לו בעבור ענותנותו, כי הוא לא יענה על ריב לעולם אף אם ידע. ור"א מפרש ואמר כי הוא לא היה מבקש גדולה על שום אדם, ולא יתגאה במעלתו כלל אף כי על אחיו, והם חוטאים שמדברים עליו חנם. אבל בספרי (בהעלתך ק) רבי נתן אומר אף בפניו של משה דברו בו שנאמר וישמע ה' והאיש משה עניו מאד, אלא שכבש משה על הדבר. יזכיר ענותנותו שסבל ולא ענם, והשם קנא לו

**The man Moses was very humble (12:3)** - This [is stated] to tell us that God Himself was zealous for Moses' sake on account of his [great] humility, since he would never pay attention to injustice [meted out to him] even if he were to consider it such [and therefore God vindicated his innocence]. And Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra explained [the meaning of this phrase] by saying that Moses never sought superiority over any person, nor did he ever pride himself at all about his high position, and certainly not in relation to his brother; thus they [Miriam and Aaron] sinned by speaking against him for no reason. But in the *Sifre* [it is said]: "Rabbi Nathan says: They spoke against Moses even in his presence, as it is said, 'And the Eternal heard it. Now the man Moses was very humble', and he restrained himself about the matter." [According to the *Sifre*, therefore, Scripture] mentions Moses' meekness in that he endured [their insult] and did not answer them back, and that God was [therefore] zealous for his sake.

**God summons Moses, Miriam & Aaron.** Another topic that the commentators grapple with is how God summoned the three siblings, and what God's intention was in describing the different ways that He communicates with different prophets.

*Rashi.* Rashi's explanation ties in with his previous statements that the locus of the issue revolves around Moses' sexual relationship with his wife. This is expressed in a series of comments that demonstrate how Moses was always prepared for communication with God, while Miriam and Aaron, as a result of their continued sexual contact with their spouses, were not. In addition to the difference in preparedness, we are informed that God chooses to communicate transparently with Moses while God's manner of communication with others is more opaque.

**פתאום (יב:ד)** - נגלה עליהם פתאום, והם טמאים בדרך ארץ, והיו צועקים מים מים, להודיעם שיפה עשה משה שפרש מן האשה, מאחר שנגלית עליושכינה תדיר ואין עת קבועה לדבור

**Suddenly (12:4)** - He revealed Himself to them suddenly while they were unclear through marital relations and were crying, "Water, Water;" to inform them that Moses had acted properly in separating himself from his wife, since the Divine Presence was revealed to him continually and there was no set time for the Divine Communication.

**צאו שלשתכם (יב:ד)** - מגיד ששלשתן נקראו בדבור אחד, מה שאי אפשר לפה לומר ולאזן לשמוע

**The three of you go out (12:4)** - (This) teaches that the three of them were called by one Word, something which is impossible for the (human) mouth to utter and the ear to hear.

**ויקרא אהרן ומרים (יב:ה)** - שיהיו נמשכין ויוצאין מן החצר לקראת הדבור  
**He called Aaron and Miriam (12:5)** - that they should leave and go forth from the court towards the Divine Communication

**ויצאו שניהם (יב:ה)** - ומפני מה משכן והפרידן ממשה, לפי שאומרים מקצת שבחו של אדם בפניו וכולו שלא בפניו, וכן מצינו בנח, שלא בפניו נאמר (בראשית ו, ט) איש צדיק תמים, ובפניו נאמר (בראשית ז, א) כי אותך ראיתי צדיק לפני. דבר אחר שלא ישמע בניזיפתו של אהרן

**The two went out - (12:5)** - And why did He withdraw them, and separate from Moses? Because (people should) utter part of a man's praise in his presence, and all of it not in his presence. And thus we find concerning Noah, that not in his presence was it stated (Genesis 6:9): "A man righteous and perfect;" but in his presence it is stated (Genesis 7:1): "For thee have I seen righteous before me." Another explanation: That (Moses) should not hear the reproach of Aaron.

**שמעו נא דברי (יב:ו)** - אין נא אלא לשון בקשה

**Listen to my words (12: 6)** נא denotes only "a request"

**אם יהיה נביאכם (יב:ו)** - אם יהיו לכם נביאים

**If you are prophets (12: 6)** (This is to be explained:) if there be prophets among you.

ה' במראה אליו אתודע (יב:ו) - שכינת שמי אין נגלית עליו באספקלריא המאירה אלא בחלום וחזיון

**In a vision I make Myself known to him (12:6)** - The presence of My name (i.e. this Divine Presence) will not appear to him in a bright mirror but in a dream and a vision.

פה אל פה (יב:ח) - אמרתי לו לפרוש מן האשה. והיכן אמרתי לו, בסיני (דברים ה, כז) לך אמור להם שובו לכם לאהליכם, ואתה פה עמוד עמדי

**Face to face (12:8)** - I told him to abstain from his wife. Now where did I say (it) to him? At Sinai (Deuteronomy 5:27-28): "Go say to them: 'Return ye to your tents.' But as for thee, stand thou here by Me."

ומראה ולא בחידות (יב:ח) - מראה זה מראה דבור, שאני מפרש לו דבורי במראת פנים שבו ואיני סותמו לו בחידות, כענין שנאמר ליחזקאל (יחזקאל יז, ב) חוד חידה וגו', יכול מראה שכינה, תלמד לומר (שמות לג, כ) לא תוכל לראות את פני

**Visions and not riddles (12:8)** - And this "Manifestation" is the clearness of the Divine communication, for I shall explain to him My word in the clearest manner that is possible, and I shall not conceal it for him in riddles, as it is stated to Ezekiel (Ezekiel 17:2), "Put forth a riddle". I might think that (this refers to) the appearance of the Divine Presence; (therefore) Scripture states (Exodus 33:20), "Thou canst not see My face".

ותמנת ה' יביט (יב:ח) - זה מראה אחורים, כענין שנאמר (שמות לג, כג) וראית את אחורי

**The image of God He sees (12:8)** - This is the appearance of the back, as it is stated (Exodus 33:23).

בעבדי במשה (יב:ח) - אינו אומר בעבדי משה, אלא בעבדי במשה, בעבדי אף על פי שאינו משה, במשה אפילו אינו עבדי, כדאי הייתם לירא מפניו, וכל שכונשהוא עבדי ועבד מלך מלך, היה לכם לומר אין המלך אוהבו חנם. ואם תאמרו איני מכיר במעשיו, זו קשה מן הראשונה

**My servant Moses (12:8)** - It does not state "against My servant Moses," but "against My servant, against Moses (במשה);" (i.e.,) "against My servant", even though he be not Moses, "against Moses" even though he were not My servant. You should have been afraid of him (as Moses), and all the more so since he is "My servant." And the servant of a king (is like) a king. You should have said, "The King does not love him for nought" (Siphre; Tanhuma). And if you say, "I do not know his deeds," that is worse than the first.

ויחר אף ה' בם וילך (יב:ט) - מאחר שהדיעם סרחונם גזר עליהם נדוי, קל וחומר לבשר דם שלא יכעוס על חברו עד שידיענו סרחונו

**God's anger burned and He went (12:9)** - After He had made known to them their misdeed, He decreed upon them banishment; how much more so should (a human of) flesh and blood not be angry with his fellowman until he has made known to him his misdeed.

*Rashbam.* Rashbam agrees with Rashi that God chose to communicate with Miriam and Aaron at a time when they were not ready, but not because of sexual contact. Instead, their unpreparedness was a result of the conversation being initiated at an unexpected time.

**פתאום (יב:ד) - בשעה** שהיו מדברים במשה ולא היתה שעה רגילה לדבר עמהם אלא לגעור בהם מפני משה ולחלוק לו כבוד

**Suddenly (12:4)** - I.e. right when they were speaking against Moses, [immediately God spoke to them,] even though that was not a usual time for God to be addressing them. Rather [God spoke to them at such an unusual time] because He wanted to rebuke them on account of [their insult] to Moses, and because He wanted to honour Moses

*Ibn Ezra.* Ibn Ezra explains the conversation similarly to Rashbam, in that Miriam and Aaron were caught off guard by God's decision to communicate with them at that moment in time. Unlike Rashi, who describes the type of communication that went on between God and Moses as being transparent, Ibn Ezra suggests that unlike other prophets who must wait for God to initiate dialogue, Moses can approach God whenever he wants, and it is this that makes him unique.

**פתאום (יב:ד) - המ"ם נוסף כמ"ם שלשום (ברא' לא, ב), והוא מגזרת פתי (משלי ט, ד), דבר שלא עלה על לב**

**Suddenly (12:4)** - The final *-om* of the Hebrew word makes it an adverb based on the noun *peti*, "a fool". Something that happens "suddenly" is something that had never come to the person's mind until the instant it occurs, something that catches him unawares.

**צאו שלשתכם ויצאו שלשתם (יב:ד) - כל אחדמאהלו, והנה דרך כלל, ואחר כן פרט**  
**The three of you go out (12:4)** - The repetition of "three" tells us that they were called and came forth individually.

**שמעו נא כמו עתה. (יב:ו) נביאכם - מי שיהיה מכם נביא ה'. במראה פירושו, אם היה נביאכם שהוא נביא ה', כמו והנבואה עוהד הנביא (דה"ב טו, ח), האהלה שרה אמו (ברא' כד, סז), כסאך אלהים עולם**

**Listen (12:6)** - Rather, "Hear now My words". See my comment to 10:31. Note that

Moses was there listening. Literally "If your prophet is of the Lord" - i.e., whichever of your prophets is a prophet of the Lord. You will find other verses in the Bible where a word that should occur once is found only once: "prophecy" in 2 Chronicles 15:8, "tent" in Genesis 24:67 and "throne" in Psalms 45:7.

**במראה (יב:ו) - במראות הלילה**

**Vision (12:6) - A night vision.**

**בחלום אדבר בו (יב:ו) - כפול כדרך הנבואות**

**In a dream I speak to him (12:6) -** Repeating the thought of the previous phrase, as is common in prophetic literature.

**בכל ביתי נאמן הוא (יב:ז) - טעמו כבן בית, שיכנס בלא רשות, ואם יצטרך ידבר צרכיו. ואתם כאשר אתדע לכם בחלום תדעו, ואם לא אין לכם רשות לשאול**

**In all my house he is most trusted (12:7) -** He is a member of the family. He can come in whenever he likes without asking permission. If he needs to know something, he just asks for whatever he needs. But you - if I tell you something in a dream, then you will know it. If I do not, you do not have permission to ask.

**פה אל פה אדבר בו (יב:ח) - הטעם, בלא אמצעי**

**Face to face (12:8) - With no intermediary**

**במראה ולא בחידת (יב:ח) - הטעם, שאראה לו הדבור כאשר הוא כצורת המשכן**

**In visions and not riddles (12:8) -** Literally, "with vision". I show him exactly what is meant by each utterance - as I showed him what the Tabernacle should look like.

**ותמונת ה' יביט (יב:ח) - כטעם הראני נא את כבודך (שמות לג, יח), או שהוא בהקיץ**

**The face of God he sees (12:8) -** As he indeed did when he asked, "Oh, let me behold Your Presence!" (Exodus 33:18) Or perhaps it means that he actually does behold the likeness that the Lord shows him, in a waking state rather than a dream.

**וילך (יב:ט) - הכבוד. והעד, והענן סר**

**He went (12:9) -** The Presence departed, as verse 10 proves.

*Ramban.* Ramban separates the conversation into two parts: The first involves Moses, Miriam and Aaron, and in this part of the dialogue, Moses grants them forgiveness for speaking against him. In the second part of the dialogue, God explains to Miriam and Aaron how God communicates differently with Moses. Moses is not a part of the conversation, because God would not want to embarrass Moses by speaking so highly of him in front of his siblings.

אל משה ואל אהרן ואל מרים (יב:ד) - הנה משה לא היה עמהם אבל הנבואה באה לשלשתן כאחד. וטעם פתאם - שלא היו בעת ההיא נותנים לבסומתכונים לנבואה, ולכבוד משה באה להם מבלי הזמנה לדבר, כי "פתאום" על דעת המפרשים דבר שלא עלה על לב מגזרת פתי. ואמר הכתוב זהבעבור אהרן ומרים, כי משה רבינו ראוי לנבואה בכל עת ודעתו נכונה לדבקה בשם הנכבד בכל שעה, כמו שפירשו רבותינו (שבת פז א) בטעם פרישתו מןהאשה

אבל אונקלוס אמר "בתכיף", והטעם, כי כאשר היו נדברים במשה עוד הדבר בפיהם נאמר להם צאו שלשתכם לא איחר להם כלל, "ופתאום" עניןמהירות הוא, וכן ואקוב נוח פתאום (איוב ה ג), אשר פתאום לפתע (ישעיה ל יג), בפתע פתאום (לעיל ו ט), כפולי הטעם להפלגה, כמו כמעט קט(יחזקאל טז מז), הרבה מאד (בראשית טו א), וכן במאד מאד (שם יז ב), וכיוצא בהם. "ופתאים" הם הנמהרים ביותר שאין להם עיון בדבר ולא עצה כלל, כמו ועצת נפתלים נמהרה (איוב ה יג). וכן פתע ישבר (משלי ו טו), ואם בפתע בלא איבה (להלן לה כב), בתכיף, והוא כמו פתי מלשון פתאום

וטעם צאו שלשתכם, ויקרא אהרן ומרים - כי רצה שיהיה משה שם ויראה בקנאת השם לכבודו, ויהיה מצוי להם, שלא ימחול השם להם רק על ידוכאשר יתחננו אליו ויתרצה להם. ויקרא אהרן ומרים - שיאמר שבחו שלא בפניו

**To Moses, to Aaron and to Miriam (12:4)** - Now Moses was not with them, but [they are mentioned together because] the Divine communication came to the three of them simultaneously. The sense of the word "suddenly" is that they did not direct their minds towards or intend to receive a Divine communication at that time, it being in honour of Moses that it came to them without and preparation for it; for the word פתאם in the opinion of the commentators [as explained in Ibn Ezra] applies to something which one did not think of, from the root *pethi* (simple minded). Therefore Scripture uses the term *pith'om* [only] on account of Aaron and Miriam, for Moses our teacher was fit for a Divine communication at any time, and his mind was prepared to cleave to the Glorious Name at every moment, as our Rabbis have explained in connection with the reason why he [Moses] separated himself from his wife. Onkelos, however, rendered [the word *pith'om*] as *bithkeiph* (in a hurry), the sense being that whilst Miriam and Aaron were still speaking about Moses, and the words were still in their mouths, they were told: "Come out ye three unto the Tent of Meeting", and He did not delay [the rebuke] to them at all. The word *pith'om* is thus a term indicating hurry.

The reason [why He said at first] "Come out ye three" and [then in the following verse it says] "and He called Aaron and Miriam" [excluding Moses] is that God wanted him to be present [in the Tent of Meeting] and to see how He is zealous for Moses' honour; and so that he would be available [to forgive them], for God would not forgive them unless he did, after they would beg him and he agrees to [forgive] them. "And He called Aaron and Miriam", in order to tell Moses' praise when he was not present.



***Miriam's Punishment.*** The commentators discuss the nature of Miriam's punishment, Moses' request from God to cancel the punishment, and God's response.

*Rashi's* commentary focuses on the relationships that exist between the different characters and how they interact with each other. Specifically, *Rashi* highlights the idea that Moses cares greatly for his sister and suffers when she is suffering from God's punishment. As a result, *Rashi* notes that Moses' request that God heal Miriam is one of only four places in the entire Bible in which Moses demands to know whether God will accede to his request. *Rashi* draws further attention to Moses' relationship with Miriam when he explains that the reason why the Israelite camp waited for Miriam is because once, many years previous, Miriam waited for her brother to ensure his safety as he travelled down the Nile.

**והענן סר (יב:י) -** ואחר כך והנה מרים מצורעת כשלג, משל למלך שאמר לפדגוג, רדה את בני, אבל לא תרדנו עד שאלך מאצלך, שרחמי עליו

**The cloud went (12:10)** - And afterwards, "behold, Miriam was leprous as white as snow." This may be likened to a king who said to the teacher, "Punish my son; but do not punish him until I have departed from you, for I have pity on him".

**נואלנו (יב:יא) -** כתרגומו לשון אויל

**Foolishness (12:11)** - Understand נואלנו as the Targum renders it, dementing "foolishness" (i.e. we have done foolishly).

**כמת (יב:יב) -** שהמצורע חשוב כמת, מה מת מטמא בביאה, אף מצורע מטמא בביאה  
**Like dead (12:12)** - For a leper is considered as one dead; just as a dead person renders unclean by "entering" (into a house) so a leper renders unclean by "entering"

אשר בצאתו מרחם אמו (יב:יב) - אמנו היה לו לומר, אלא שכינה הכתוב. וכן חצי בשרו, חצי בשרנו היה לו לומר, אלא שכינה הכתוב. מאחר שיצאה מרחם אמנו היא לנו כאילו נאכל חצי בשרנו, כענין שנאמר (בראשית לז, כז) כי אחינו בשרנו הוא. ולפי משמעו אף הוא נראה כן, אין ראוי לאח להניח את אחותו להיות כמת

**When he comes out of the womb of his mother (12:12)** "Our mother" he should have said; but Scripture modified it. And likewise, "half of his flesh;" "half of our flesh" he should have said, but Scripture modified it: Since she has come out of the womb of our mother, it is for us as though there were consumed half of our flesh; just as it is stated (Genesis 37:27) "for he is our brother, our flesh." And (even) according to its plain meaning, it appears thus: it is not fitting for a brother to permit his sister to become "as one dead, who, when he cometh out,"

אשר בצאתו (יב:יב) - מאחר שיצא זה מרחם אמו של זה שיש כח בידו לעזור ואינו עוזר, הרי נאכל חצי בשרו, שאחיו בשרו הוא. דבר אחר אל נא תהי כמת, אם אינך רופאה בתפלה, מי מסגירה ומי מטהרה, אני אי אפשר לראותה, שאני קרוב ואין קרוב רואה את הנגעים, וכהן אחר אין בעולם, וזהו אשר בצאתו מרחם אמו

**Comes out (12:12)** - (i.e.,) since this person came out of the womb of the mother of this man, who has it in his power to aid and he does not aid him, it is as though there were consumed half of his flesh, for his brother is his flesh. Another interpretation of "Let her not, I pray, be as one dead;" If you do not heal her by prayer, who will shut her away, who will declare her clean? As for me, it is impossible to "see" her for I am a relative, and no relative can see plagues, and there is no other priest in the world; And that is (the significance of) "Who when he (the only person who could declare her clear) cometh out of his mother's womb."

אל נא רפא נא לה (יב:יג) - בא הכתוב ללמדך דרך ארץ, שהשואל דבר מחבירו צריך לומר: שנים או שלשה דברי תחנונים ואחר כן יבקש שאלותיו

**Please God heal her (12:13)** - Scripture comes to teach you proper conduct, that one who asks something of his fellowman, should say two or three words of supplication, and afterwards make his requests.

לאמר (יב:יג) - מה תלמוד לומר, אמר לו השיבני אם אתה מרפא אותה אם לאו, עד שהשיבו ואביה ירק ירק וגו'. רבי אלעזר בן עזריה אומר בארבעה מקומותבקש משה מלפני הקב"ה להשיבו אם יעשה שאלותיו אם לאו, כיוצא בו (שמות ו, יב) וידבר משה לפני ה' לאמר וגו', מה תלמוד לומר לאמר, השיבני אם אתה מרפא אותה אם לאו, עד שהשיבו עתה תראה וגו'. כיוצא בו (במדבר כז טו - טז) וידבר משה אל ה' לאמר יפקד ה' אלהי הרוחות לכל בשר, השיבו קח לך (במד' כז יח). כיוצא בו (דברים ג, כג) ואתחנן אל ה' בעת ההיא לאמר, השיבו רב לך

**To say (12:13)** What does Scripture teach (here)? (Moses) said to Him: "Answer me whether Thou wilt heal her or not," until He answered him, "If her father had but spit," etc. Rabbi Eleazar son of Azariah says: In four places Moses requested before the Holy One Blessed Be He to answer him whether He will do what he asks or not. Similar to this is (Exodus 6:12): "And Moses spoke before the Lord saying," etc.; what does Scripture teach (with the word) "saying?" (Moses said:) Answer me

whether Thou wilt redeem them or not, until He answered him, "Now shalt thou see," etc. Similar to this is (Numbers 27:15-16) "And Moses spoke unto the Lord, saying: 'Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh appoint.'" (Then the Lord) answered him (Numbers 27:18) "Take thee." Similar to it is (Deuteronomy 3:23): "And I besought the Lord at that time, saying;" (Then the Lord) answered him (Deuteronomy 3:26) "Let it suffice the"

**רפא נא לה (יב:יג) - מפני מה לא האריך משה בתפלה, שלא יהיו ישראל אומרים אחותו נתונה בצרה והוא עומד ומרבה בתפלה. דבר אחר שלא יאמרו ישראל בשביל אחותו הוא מאריך בתפלה, אבל בשבילנו אינו מאריך בתפלה**

**Heal her (12:13)** - Why did not Moses pray at length? So that the Israelites should not say: His sister stands in distress, and he stands and prays at length. (Another interpretation: so that the Israelites should not say: On behalf of his sister he prays at length, but on our behalf he does not pray at length).

**ואביה ירק ירק בפניה (יב:יד) - ואם אביה הראה לה פנים זועפות הלא תכלם שבעת ימים, קל וחומר לשכינה י"ד יום, אלא דיו לבא מן הדין להיות כנדון, לפיכך אף בניזיפתו תסגר שבעת ימים**

**If her father spat in her face (12:14)** - (I.e.,) if her father had shown her an angry face, "should she not hide in shame seven days?" hen certainly for the Divine Presence (she hold retire) fourteen days. But it is sufficient for (the law) which is derived by conclusion a fortiori to be (as strict) as the law from which it is derived; therefore even for My anger, "Let her be shut up seven days"

**ואחר תאסף (יב:יד) - אומר אני כל האסיפות האמורות במצורעים על שם שהוא משולח מחוץ למחנה, וכשהוא נרפא נאסף אל המחנה לכך כתוב בו אסיפה לשון הכנסה**  
**Afterwards she is gathered (12:14)** - I say that all the "gatherings" which are mentioned in reference to lepers, (are termed so) because the person is sent forth outside of the camp, and when he is healed he is "gathered" into the camp; therefore there is written regarding him "gathering" denoting "bringing in".

**והעם לא נסע (יב:טו) - זה הכבוד חלק לה המקום בשביל שעה אחת שנתעכבה למשה כשהושלך ליאור, שנאמר (שמות ב, ד) ותצב אחותו מרחוק וגו'**  
**The nation did not travel (12:15)** - This honour the Omnipresent gave her because of one hour which she waited for Moses when he was cast into the river (Nile), as it is stated (Exodus 2:4): "And his sister stood afar off".

*Ibn Ezra.* Ibn Ezra offers a different perspective which revolves around Moses acknowledging God's power. Ibn Ezra's commentaries on this section suggest a dichotomy in which God, who is all-powerful, approaches the situation from the perspective of justice, while Moses, the one slighted, approaches the situation from a place of mercy and sympathy towards his sister.

ויצעק משה (יב:יג) - זה יורה שהיה בצער על אחותו

**Moses screamed (12:13)** - This teaches that he was in pain for his sister.

אל (יב:יג) - אתה שיש הגבורה בידך, עתה, רפא עתה לה. על כן השיב השם

**God (12:13)** - "Pray" is again really our word that means "now"; and "God" is not the standard *elohim* but *el*, a word that also translates as "power". What Moses was saying is this: "You who have this great power in Your hand, now, heal her, now!"

ואביה (יב:יד) - ואילו אביה כעס עליה וירק בפניה, הלא תכלם לראות פניו שבעת ימים

**Her father (12:14)** - God responds to Moses' request that He heal her "now" by saying: If her father was so angry with her that he spat in her face, would she not be ashamed to show her face for seven days?

תסגר (יב:יד) - כמו המצורעים שלא יזיקו אחרים

**Closed off (12:14)** - Quarantined, as lepers are to prevent contagion.

ואחר תאסף (יב:יד) - תחשב מהישוב, וכן ואספתו מצרעתו (מ"ב ה, ו). ואחר שבאה אל

המחנה

**Gathered afterwards (12:14)** - Let her be "gathered" - let her once again be considered a member of the community after Miriam returned to the camp.

Numbers 12 is the textual backbone of the dissertation and the research study as it is the starting point from which every student began their arts-based project. The narrative arc, the relevant commentaries, and the main themes of Numbers 12 will be referred to in later chapters when the specific projects and interviews are presented and analyzed.

### **Chapter 3: Description of the Research Design and Methodology**

#### **Methodology**

There are three key qualitative methodologies that underpin this research study. In the following paragraphs, I will describe how practitioner research, case study methodology and arts-based research have informed how I undertook the study.

The first approach that I am making use of in the research study is practitioner research (Freebody, 2003). In practitioner research studies, the researcher is studying their own classroom practice. In addition to evaluating my own practice, this dissertation study involved students from my classes who reflected on the nature of my teaching methods and the learning experience. The students reflected on what they learned about their Jewishness and the texts through the creative learning process. In my research I distinguish between these two sources of data: Evaluations of me as a teacher, and subjective reports about the experiences of learning through the arts. Practitioner research methodology became important due to my interests in high school pedagogy, the arts, and Jewish studies. While Toronto does have a Jewish elementary school that learns through the arts, I wanted to maintain my focus on high school students. I was then left with considering classes at CHAT, and after consultation with the administration and colleagues, I concluded that there were no *Tanakh* teachers in the school other than myself committed to making significant use of the arts in the classroom. Aside from this practical need for the practitioner research model, there were other positive aspects of practitioner

research that drew me to it. I believe that the practitioner-researcher is uniquely positioned to understand the dynamic of a classroom which has formed over time, and as a result, is better able to determine whom to interview in order to gain a range of perspectives. Additionally, as a practitioner-researcher, I know the interviewees' personalities and some of their personal histories, and was able to tailor follow-up questions accordingly for maximum effect. Finally, I value the opportunity to investigate my own teaching style, doing research that is not just for the benefit of other teachers and academics, but also for my own pedagogical growth. This personal involvement was an important factor motivating and maintaining my interest in the project.

In order to shape the practitioner study, I began researching methodologies that make use of approaches similar to what I hoped to capture in the classroom. Based on this search I was led to case study methodology. Case studies, according to Peter Freebody (2003), focus on "particular instance of educational experience and attempt to gain theoretical and professional insights from a full documentation of that instance" (p. 81). Freebody argues that the goal of a case study is to create an opportunity for researchers and educators to consider best practices in teaching. Case study methodology focuses on documenting the story of the experiment in action and the consequences of the actions taken. A central idea within case study methodology is the value of the narrative. Furthermore, research that "privileges" narrative has a greater chance of having an impact on the practice of other teachers (Freebody).

Case study methodology is appealing to me because it values the personal narrative and the way that narrative can be used to effect change. Additionally, as both a researcher and an educator, I value the fusion of research with practice and the case study's emphasis on thorough understanding of a particular instance of educational experience. Case study methodology provided me with an approach for understanding the value of narratives and experiences, and extrapolating from the specific to the general.

I also wanted to ground my understanding of the students' arts-based projects in an art-specific methodology (Leavy, 2009). Thinking through the arts led me to the third methodology that informed the research study: arts-based research methodology. Arts-based research is difficult to narrowly define because of the myriad forms of art that can be used in data collection. Patricia Leavy (2009) defines arts-based research practices as "a set of methodological tools used by qualitative researchers...These tools adapt the tenets of the creative arts in order to address social research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined" (p. 3).

Melissa Cahnmann-Taylor (2011) identifies two strands in contemporary arts-based research methodology: Hybrid forms of artistic and scientific scholarship, and art for scholarship's sake. Researchers who do art for scholarship's sake use art to "capture the essence of their findings in emotionally penetrating ways" (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2011, p. 10). Cahnmann-Taylor notes that what makes these artists' works scholarly as opposed to merely artistic is the fact that their content is based on data collection and analysis. Leavy (2009) and Rita Irwin & Stephanie Springgay (2008)

label this type of research “a/r/tographical” work, where “a/r/t” stands for artist/researcher/teacher. Irwin and Springgay add that “a/r/tographers are concerned with creating the circumstances that produce knowledge and understanding through *artistic and educational* inquiry-laden processes” (2008, p. 113, emphasis in original).

My study more closely reflects hybrid forms of artistic and scientific scholarship than art for scholarship’s sake. Cahnmann-Taylor (2011) explains that hybrid forms blur the lines between the arts and sciences through the inclusion of the literary arts in educational research. Hybrid forms also recognize the unique voice of the researcher given the researcher’s “empathetic participation in the lives of a study’s participants” (p. 8). Hybrid forms of arts-based research involve both academics and practicing teachers and have something to offer both groups. My study is similar to this type of research approach due to its applicability to both practical pedagogy and education theory. A more significant indicator of why my study more closely mirrors hybrid arts-based research is that way in which the analysis of the arts is blended with theory, traditional texts and interviews and the inclusion of my voice in the project and dissertation.

Within the study, arts-based research provides a useful methodological framework for data collection. Drawing on both case study and arts-based approaches, and making use of practitioner research allowed me to think carefully about both the narrative and artistic aspects of the data. The approaches are very compatible with each other, given their common emphasis on the importance of narrative in understanding data, and the high value placed on the researcher’s



observations and role in the study.

### **Research Design/Data Collection**

As a part of my classroom curriculum, students were assigned arts-based projects based on biblical texts. The purpose of the assignment was to see how the experience of producing artworks (visual and verbal) might contribute to the students' understanding of the texts, and to their development of their personal sense of Jewishness. Three forms of data have been collected: 1) students' art-based projects and written statements, 2) audio-recorded and transcribed interviews with students, and 3) participant-observer field notes. These primary data sets are augmented by additional documentary sources, including the course syllabi, assignment descriptions, and teaching notes.

The projects were completed in January 2013. In order to establish a baseline of how the students were thinking about *Tanakh* education prior to this assignment, I used their class blogs as a forum for students to explain themselves and their beliefs surrounding *Tanakh* class. I gave them the following question to reply to via the class blog:

In a half-page to a page respond to the following prompts:

- explain how and in what ways Torah and *Tanakh* class relate to your life.
- Consider whether previous *Tanakh* classes and our class have given you an opportunity to think about how *Tanakh* connects to your life.
- Have the ways that you have been assigned marks given you an opportunity to think about *Tanakh* and your connection to it?

- What should the ideal classroom look like that you would most want to be in? Describe it.

Responses to this prompt were useful in tracking students based on their work and identifying who were the best candidates to select for the interview phase. My intention was to select students who represented a broad range of opinions on the value of *Tanakh* and the purpose of learning *Tanakh*.

Prior to assigning the projects, I modeled for the students Gringras's (2011) idea of "skillful encoding." I also explained Backenroth, Epstein and Miller's (2006, see *Figure 1* in Chapter Two) diagram which depicts the pedagogical process of beginning with the text, then using the arts as an entry to the text, and then returning to the text to see how the creation shaped the new understanding of the text. These concepts were taught through frontal teaching and in-class exercises. Students were first shown images from popular-culture that make reference to non-Jewish pop-culture iconography. By first using texts with which students were familiar, it was easier convey to them the notion of "skillful encoding". Next, I showed them images from Medieval Jewish illuminated manuscripts and guided them through the decoding of the artistic messages.

The specific arts-based projects were assigned (see Appendix B) to revolve around Chapter 12 of the book of Numbers. Students worked in groups of two to four and selected a verse or series of verses on which to base their arts-based interpretations. The students had the creative license to work in a medium of their choosing, but needed to meet a series of requirements. These included use of Hebrew, reference (overtly or discreetly) to commentaries studied in class, and

references to external Jewish and/or non-Jewish texts. Following Backenroth, Epstein, and Miller's (2006) suggestion, students composed a written statement on their arts-based work. I provided a model of an appropriate written statement for a Grade Ten student in order to demonstrate the expectations for this statement. Specifically, I outlined an expectation that they move beyond a literal description of their art and instead explain the motivation and inspiration behind their product, as well as how they have arrived at their understandings of text, and how they utilized the commentaries. Students were graded using a rubric designed to gauge whether they had fulfilled the requirements and demonstrated insight into their chosen topic.

In order to fully understand all of the facets of each work and the artist who had produced it, dialogue with students was essential. To that end, following the completion of their projects, I conducted thirty-minute interviews with students during their lunch periods to discuss their work. In these sessions, I asked the students a series of questions (see Appendix C) about *how* they think about their Jewish identity, how the arts-based assignments offered new ways for thinking about the texts they encountered, and how these assignments gave them an opportunity to think differently about their personal approaches to Judaism.

During the creation, assessment, and interview phases of the study, I kept detailed field notes on my experience teaching these units of study, facilitating the arts-based components, and observing the students and their work.

In designing the study, I also paid attention to issues of reliability and validity. Reliability is the idea that results are able to be replicated over time, and accurately

represent the population being studied (Golafshani, 2003). Validity involves identifying whether the data directly addresses the research questions and the intended topic (Golafshani, 2003). Nahid Golafshani (2003) acknowledges the difficulty in using the terms reliability and validity in qualitative studies since the two terms are normally associated with quantitative studies; nevertheless, he argues that the two are important considerations in qualitative research and that it is important that the researcher can show that the data has “credibility, neutrality... consistency... applicability or transferability” (p. 601). The three different data sources that I collected allow for triangulation and identification of common themes and concepts that cross the boundaries of the individual data sources. This comparison among data sets has been used to support the conclusions I draw in the dissertation and their applicability for additional Jewish community school settings. Concerns involving reliability and validity are important to consider within the study. Most importantly, I needed to ensure that the students whom I chose to interview are not outliers within the classroom and that their answers truly represent the overall themes that are expressed by the students’ written statements. I accomplished this by interviewing students from two classes and by choosing different types of artistic projects.

### **Data Analysis**

Following the completion of the study, I conducted an analysis of the students’ work (both creative and written) and made sketches and hypotheses about how the work demonstrates a particular type of artistic and creative thinking.

Gery Ryan and H. Russel Bernard (2003) suggest a few strategies for analyzing free-flowing text, like interview transcripts, that were helpful for me. First, they suggest the strategy of identifying key-words-in-context, which produces a concordance of words in phrasal units. By this they mean identifying groups of words that repeat often throughout the data set. By identifying these words and noticing what topics surround them, and what questions prompted them, the researcher can have a better understanding of some of the repetitive themes raised by the interviewees. Second, they suggest that word counts can be used for discovering patterns of ideas in interviews, and that by identifying repeated words, the researcher can begin to formulate appropriate themes that reflect the interviews.

This method was a useful starting point to help identify trends, however, I found that the authors were correct in warning that “these techniques remove words from the contexts in which they occur” (p. 273), the danger being the loss of a bigger picture view. As such, I made use of coding techniques that kept the data in context. In order to effectively code, I looked for setting/context (Bogdan & Knopp Biklen, 2007) codes by first identifying themes in the data that revolve around the following concepts: feelings and associations towards Judaism; aspects of Judaism that the arts helped students think about; thoughts on the text; and thoughts about the arts. Ryan and Bernard encourage the researcher to be flexible and willing to make changes to the codes as the analysis proceeds and to even consider subthemes. By considering what words and themes were repeated, as well as the types of Jewish concept words used, I was able hypothesize about what students

were communicating regarding the texts and their Jewishness.

Given that the study revolves around student-created art, it is important that I had a system for analyzing and understanding the artwork that the students produced. Terry Barrett's (1994) article about principles for interpreting art was useful as it provided a framework for what factors to keep in mind when examining the students' products. Barrett argues that there is no single interpretation of a work, and that two contradictory interpretations can both be legitimate. This approach leaves space for students to relate to each other's works in different ways as well as for me to interpret their work differently than they intended. Barrett also suggests that the better the interpretation, the less of the interpreter. He writes: "All interpretations reveal the critic, but the critic's primary challenge is to direct the reader to better perceive and understand the art object in question" (p. 10). Most importantly for my research study, Barrett validates as important the emotional response that a work of art produces, as those feelings can be helpful guides in the interpretive process. This is an important distinction as many of the students' products and understandings of text came from emotional places and I, as both the teacher and researcher, was also often struck first by the beauty of the works and then I sought to understand why I was affected as I was.

Richard Hickman (1994) has proposed a four-step student-centred model for interpreting and appreciating student-created artwork. The four steps in Hickman's model are: reacting, researching, responding, and reflecting. In the reacting stage, the viewer identifies their initial thoughts about the work of art. Prompts for this stage would include "how do you feel about it" or "what does it remind you of" (p.

50). Following the personal response to the work, the viewer should next research the work by conducting a

systematic inquiry a) *within* the art work: examining the art work's content and the processes which the artist went through in order to arrive at the product under scrutiny; and inquiry b) *without* the art work: investigating the artist's intention; looking at the relationships between the content and the process and the social/historical/cultural and technological contexts in which it was produced; considering the theoretical and philosophical issues which may have influenced it. (p. 50-51)

The third stage involves responding to the text, based on what is discovered in the research phase and whether the initial emotional response is still valid and correct. Last, in the reflecting section of the process, the viewer should consider the "meaning and nature of the art work" (p. 51) in relation to everything that has been learned since first viewing the work. Questions that might be asked during this phase are "what does it mean to you?" and "how does it relate to issues which concern you" (p. 51)

Hickman argues that the value and usefulness of his framework is that it focuses on the unique contributions of each student and encourages the viewer to consider the student-as-artist and understand the choices the student has made. Additionally, he notes that the system links the artwork to the artist to the viewer in relationship with each other and that each can inform the interpretive process. Last, he writes:

undoubtedly, there is a place for contemplation and reflection in schools,

particularly for adolescents, who may be struggling to find their identity and to come to terms with their place in the world... [the model] refers to what could be seen as one of the principal aims of art and art education: to present alternative ways of viewing the world; to inspire and elevate, and to challenge assumptions. (p. 51)

Hickman's model provides a valuable approach for viewing and interpreting the students' products. Viewing the works through the framework provided by Hickman allowed me to validate the students' artistic while also acknowledging the interpretive nature of viewing art, taking into account the ways in which a viewer can also contribute to the process of understanding a work of art.



#### **Chapter 4: Becoming a Biblical Commentator**

After I finished grading and analyzing the projects and interviewing the students, I began thinking about broad themes that emerged. The first theme that I identified was that learning through the arts provided students the opportunity to arrive at new readings of the text that would not have otherwise been learned in class. The second theme was that as a result of the arts-based projects, students formed personal associations with the text that did not exist previously. The third theme that emerged was that learning through the arts provided valuable academic and social benefits for students. Regarding the first theme, some of the readings built on class conversation and material, while others arose out of trying to fill in details given the text's paucity of description. When students have the opportunity to act as commentators on the text, they become active agents in developing their own understanding of text. A further observation was that these students grounded their readings in text but considered the narrative in a new, and often contemporary, way.

Five of the groups produced projects that demonstrated original insights into the text. In order to distinguish between projects that offered an original reading and those that showed a personal connection to the text, I used the students' written statements, interviews, and my own observations of the narrative. I needed to build a system that would help me distinguish projects that showed this type of reading. The first criterion I used was to pay attention to projects that used phrases that suggested something about the text, as opposed to the reader, as this often

suggested insights as opposed to personal explanations of what the narrative meant to the students. Although there was blending of these two elements at times, for the sake of clarity I categorized projects based on which element seemed more prominent. I felt that this was important in order to have a better understanding of the nuances in the types of experiences that students had. Some students had very personal and visceral reactions and connected with Jewish text in a new way, while others engaged in more critical thinking that resulted in new understandings of the text itself. Being able to understand and categorize student experiences allows teachers to be able to ask better prompting questions and more fully understand what has happened through the creative process. In many instances, students who composed original commentaries on the text often began their work by thinking about what the text signifies to them, but unlike the groups that explained what the text meant to them, these students then returned to the text and filled in the gaps that they perceived in the text.

A helpful strategy that I used to distinguish between commentaries on the text and personal connections with the text was considering the direction of the statements that students made. In projects that demonstrated a personal connection to the text, students often demonstrated a linear text-to-self connection in which they explained what the text meant to them or how it applied to their understanding of the world. In projects that demonstrated a commentary, the relationship was more circular: text led to commentary, which led back to text, as the commentary encouraged the reader to conceptualize the text anew. In this bi-directional model, the students' commentaries encourage a re-reading of the text that offers a new

approach to understanding the text. In projects of this nature, the students tended to have a stronger grasp of the material and worked towards synthesizing their interpretations with the text. It is important to note that this is a fluid process and there is often overlap between the two groupings. Some projects grouped in Chapter 5 do offer new readings of text, but I argue there that those projects' primary goal is to reflect personal connections to text, while those in this chapter focus primarily on new interpretations of text.

In this chapter, I will closely analyze the five projects that demonstrated the circular model of textual interpretation. The five projects to be examined are different in topic and medium, and include a mosaic, a musical mash-up, a video game, a brochure, and a movie. Several important ideas will emerge here. First is the idea that students, when given license to make creative choices, will choose very differently from one another. Next is that the commentaries often touched on contemporary debates and issues, and were rooted in contemporary experiences and understandings of the world. Last, the commentaries present a positively-framed reading of text that, despite describing conflict, were optimistic and solution-oriented.

### **'Isha Kushit**

Chapter 12 of Numbers begins with the curious statement that Moses has married an *"isha Kushit"*, a black wife. The text reads:

(א) וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמִשְׁהָ עַל־אִדֹּת הָאִשָּׁה הַכַּשִּׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי־אִשָּׁה כַּשִּׁית לָקַח:

"Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had

married: 'He married a Cushite woman!'" (NJPS, 12:1). In this passage, Moses' sister Miriam and brother Aaron give the reader new information, as they were speaking about a previously unknown and unnamed woman. The identity of this woman has perplexed biblical commentators for hundreds of years given that the text had previously only spoken of Moses' wife Zipporah and had not made any mention of her skin colour being black. Commentators are also drawn to the subsequent punishment of Moses' siblings and deduce that the conversation was negative and critical of Moses and his wife.

Medieval commentators like Rashbam (Numbers 12:1, lemma *ki'isha kushit lakakh*), Ibn Caspi (Numbers 12:1, cited by HaQoton, 2007) and Jacob of Vienna (Numbers 12:1, cited by HaQoton, 2007) argue that Moses had a second wife who was black and was never mentioned in the text, as her inclusion was not seen to be sufficiently important to be mentioned previously<sup>13</sup>. They disagree on the chronology of events - Ibn Caspi suggests that Moses was simultaneously married to two women and Jacob of Vienna argues that Moses married a black woman following the unmentioned death of his first wife. It is evident that there exists in the exegetical tradition an approach that accepts that Moses married a black woman. These three commentators are critical of Miriam and Aaron, interpreting the episode as Miriam and Aaron rebuking Moses for marrying a second wife.

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<sup>13</sup> In it is relevant to the larger narrative of the story of the Jewish people, but not necessarily important in the personal lives of the characters. Ironically, based on the reading that the woman in question is a second wife, it is only as a result of Miriam and Aaron gossiping about her that the reader learns about her, as the text suggests that she is irrelevant to the larger narrative.

In contrast to the idea that Moses had a second wife that was black, Rashi (Numbers 12:1) provides three insights into why the Torah describes her as black when, in fact, she is actually Moses' non-black wife Zipporah. Rashi (lemma *kushit*) notes that the numerical value<sup>14</sup> of the word *kushit* is equal to the numerical value of the word "beautiful". Building on this, Rashi (lemma *ha'isha hakushit*) says that everyone acknowledged this woman's beauty in the same way that everyone would acknowledge the blackness of a black person. Rashi's (lemma *ha'isha hakushit*) second point is that the word black is a negative word and she was called this to ward off the evil eye and something negative happening to her, as she was so beautiful. Additionally, Rashi (lemma *ki'isha kushit lakakh*) notes that she was beautiful on both the inside and the outside.

In class, students were taught the contrasting perspectives of Rashi and Ibn Caspi and were asked to consider the text's ambiguity surrounding Moses' wife. Throughout the entire chapter, and this plot point in particular, students were engaged in the classroom conversation. Learning that Moses might have had a second wife was surprising to all students, and prompted a lot of discussion about the ethics of polygamy and the Torah's perspective on it. Regarding the explanations of Rashi and Ibn Caspi, the students understood what Rashi was doing with his commentary but felt that the mental gymnastics involved merely constituted a convoluted way to defend Moses against the charge of polygamy. The students

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<sup>14</sup> This exegetical approach is known as *gematriyah* and it assigns a numerical value to each letter of the alphabet. The letters of a word are added up to arrive at a numerical value for the word. Subsequently, commentators seek to find words with identical numerical values and present thematic links between the two words or concepts.

preferred Ibn Caspi's more literal reading of the narrative because they found more evidence within the text itself to support it. Two groups chose to use this part of the chapter as a springboard for their creative projects.

**Mosaic of the woman's face.** The first group was comprised of three Caucasian female students. Two of the three students are high academic achievers who consistently strive for success in class and often score well on assignments and tests. The third member of the group struggles academically and is distracted and disengaged in many of her classes. At the time of the assignment, she was in danger of failing the course. Working with two strong students forced her to challenge herself more than usual, even if they did the majority of the intellectual work while she did more of the manual creative work like gluing and cutting. The students



*Figure 2. Artistic representation of the 'isha Kushit.*

crafted a mosaic of a woman's face made of magazine-paper pieces, in which her face was bisected through the middle lengthwise (see Figure 2). The left side of her face was white with straight blond hair and blue eyes. The right side of her face was black with curly black hair and green eyes. The mosaic was constructed on a bright pink Bristol-board.

In their explanation, the group wrote: "After looking at Rashi's and Ibn Caspi's commentaries we created our commentary to state that she [Moses' wife] can be either black or white. She is a beautiful woman either way... [and] race doesn't matter to Moses". This group's original reading of the text is that the text itself is deliberately ambiguous about the woman's identity. Since Moses, God, and the narrator do not clarify anything about the woman, the group concluded that the text was suggesting that her skin colour is not what is important to Moses. Instead of attempting to resolve the issue in the manner of Rashi or Ibn Caspi, the group chose to take a third path and arrived at an approach not discussed in class. However, it is important to note that their reading could not exist without the previously learned commentaries, Rashi's in particular. Had the students not learned the commentaries and used only the text, they might have been perplexed to learn that Moses had a black wife, but might not have thought to question whether she was a different woman than Zipporah, and whether Moses was a polygamist. The reading offered by the students ignores the question about whether Moses had one wife or two and instead solely addressed the question about her racial identity<sup>15</sup>. For these students,

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<sup>15</sup> This reading does introduce further complications to the narrative, as the woman's blackness for Ibn Caspi is dependent on Moses having a second wife and for Rashi she cannot be black, as, indicated above, there are schools of thought that

the issue in the text is not one of polygamy but one of race. While this reflects the above contention that polygamy is not a familiar concept for the students, more fundamentally, polygamy is a non-issue for this group even after being introduced to the topic in class. Far more interesting and relevant to the students is the issue of interracial relationships and the ways in which individuals navigate these tensions in love and family, and judge each other for the choices that they make. What makes this project a commentary in its own right rather than just a personal reflection is the group's assertion that by leaving the identity of Moses' wife unresolved, even when God punishes Miriam, the text is suggesting that gossip and racism, regardless of the reason, is not justified.

***Interview with Tess.*** One group member named Tess was interviewed about the mosaic. Tess echoed her group's written statement regarding the deliberate ambiguity of the woman's identity in the text. She noted: "the message is just about equality and how the colour of your skin doesn't make a difference if a person is more beautiful. [Beauty] is on the inside". This is an interesting reversal of Rashi's explanation about the woman's skin colour and the nature of beauty. Whereas Rashi's reading of blackness seems to equate blackness with ugliness, Tess suggests that beauty is independent of skin colour. When prompted to consider what she thinks God would think about Moses marrying a black woman, Tess at first seemed hesitant to answer, but subsequently felt comfortable saying that she "hopes that God would think the same thing" as Moses.

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consider the woman to be a new wife who is black following the unmentioned death of Zipporah.



I wanted to better understand what the origins of the project were given the creative reading of the text and the ways in which the group grappled with the commentaries learned in class. When prompted to explain the origin of the project's idea, Tess struggled to explain where the idea for the project came from, saying she remembered learning it in class. When I informed her that this particular approach had not been formulated in class, Tess said, "I kind of had this idea all along that Moses wasn't racist". This explanation suggests that Tess looked for ways to tie her own beliefs and understandings into the narrative framework. Not being able to accept the writings of either commentator that sought to characterize Moses' actions, Tess wanted to keep open the possibility that he loved her for who she is, not because of her skin colour. As a viewer, I believe that the statement made by the group is that skin colour should not be a determining factor in relationships.

**Mash-up of songs addressing interracial relationships.** The second group that worked with the *'isha kushit* was comprised of two females and one male. The two females are very interested in issues relating to human rights and equality, and often connect text to self in ways that reflect these interests. They help drive classroom conversations and are very involved in the learning process. The male student is less motivated by concerns of this nature, but when asked, is comfortable sharing his opinions with others and engages often in intellectual discourse. Based on conversations with the group, it was evident that he partnered with the girls because they are his friends and that they work well together, and all are similarly motivated to do well. The idea of tackling a social justice issue in the project came

from the girls, but he was more than willing to be an active member of the group. For their creative project, this group pieced together ten different contemporary songs that address themes of interracial dating. Examples of lyrics include Stevie Wonder's "we've got jungle fever/we're in love", Kevin Michael's "love ain't got no colour/it don't make any difference to me", Gwen Stefani's "beauty is beauty whether it's black or white/what if Picasso only used one colour/there shouldn't be a rule how to choose your lover", and Paul McCartney's "ebony and ivory/live together in perfect harmony". The group also created an album cover that depicted Moses in a passionate embrace with a black woman, with Miriam and Aaron looking at them from afar.

Unlike the group that designed the mosaic of the female face, these students chose to accept one of the exegetical approaches taught in class, making use of Ibn Caspi's reading. The group's original commentary makes use of Ibn Caspi's basic premise of Moses being married to a black woman, but through their descriptive lyrics and their written statement, turns Moses into a contemporary supporter of racial equality who embodies acceptance and tolerance through his choice of spouse. In their reading, Moses' decision to marry a black woman is not just a matter of love or attraction, but an active choice that reflects a clear opinion on relationships and race<sup>16</sup>. Their Moses is one who willingly engages with the problem of racism head on.

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<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to consider whether the notion that Moses' marriage is a testament to his fighting against racism can mesh with the idea that Moses has married someone who is best for him regardless of skin colour as was evident in the first project. This will be addressed later in the chapter.

As I discuss in the following chapter, the students who designed this project formed a very personal association with their work. However, it is important to acknowledge that what has been made is more than just a product that demonstrates a new connection with the text. These students have crafted a personal and contemporary commentary in which Moses is identified with 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century individuals who have attempted to tackle racial prejudice, thereby taking the position that skin colour should not be the basis for marginalization, persecution, and or discrimination.

In their written statement, the group provides an additional insight into the text that was not evident in their creative project. Making use of Rashi's commentary on the woman's beauty, they suggest that Miriam was jealous of the woman because of her beauty<sup>17</sup> and was driven by racist motives. They write:

It seems as though Miriam felt the need to bring up Moses and his wife because she was a racist and had a problem with Moses being with an African woman... We think that this prejudice is a product of jealousy. Rashi makes it clear to us in his commentary that Moses' wife was a beautiful woman. Connecting the pieces together could lead to the conclusion that Miriam was jealous of Moses' wife's beauty but had too much pride to show this weakness in herself, especially when she considered herself one of God's prophets, so instead she converted this feeling of envy into hatred and went after Moses wife for being black. This immature behaviour displayed by Miriam answers Aaron and

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<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that Rashi's commentary revolved around the woman being beautiful, not black. Despite this misunderstanding of Rashi, the insight can still work within the text following Ibn Caspi's understanding of the woman being black.

Miriam's later question of why God treats Moses as a superior prophet to them. If Moses is unprejudiced enough to judge people based on the content of their character and not their race, then he definitely fits the role of being a leader more than his siblings, particularly his sister.

In this explanation, the group has taken a decidedly modern approach to understanding the nature of leadership. There is no evidence in the text that Miriam has been punished for being racist, but there is equally no explanation of the specific sin that provoked God's wrath and subsequent punishment. By focusing on God's assessment of the nature of the relationship that He has with Moses and how it differs from His relationship with Miriam, it is evident that God Himself believes that Moses is different from every other prophet. The creative and literal reading of the text by the group fills in the gap in the narrative and locates the source of God's displeasure with the undisclosed conversation between Miriam and Aaron. In their commentary, the group displays sensitivity to silences and absences in the text while drawing on their own personal experiences of today's social issues.

***Interviews with Summer and Charlotte.*** Two group members, Charlotte and Summer, were separately interviewed to discuss their project. Both students are very vocal in class and are often opposed towards organized Judaism, but nonetheless are very interested in learning. Additionally, they see themselves as citizens of the world, and are interested in the contributions that Judaism makes to universal ethics, especially how the Jewish experience of persecution serves as a model for understanding and approaching persecuted groups today. Summer

pointed this out at the beginning of her interview when she noted: “I think there are a lot of Jewish values that I used to think were human values that were just expected amongst people. But I’ve grown to realize that a lot of them have come out of Judaism ...like the Ten Commandments... and that makes me value my religion for being a religion that’s based on good and helpful things for different people... and I relate to Judaism a lot to making the world a better place”.

When describing why her group read into Moses the role of someone who doesn’t care about race, Summer said: “Moses obviously has flaws. He’s not a godly figure. He’s a person. He’s a human. So I’ve always thought of him like he was chosen by God. He clearly must be more accepting, more understanding, just have a better mind than the rest of the Israel nation because he has such a good relationship with God and such a distinctive role in the community.” The genesis of Summer’s insight into Moses can perhaps be located in the opening chapters of the book of Exodus when Moses first protects an Israelite being assaulted by an Egyptian taskmaster (2:11-12), then an Israelite being bullied by a fellow Israelite (2: 13-14), and later when Moses defends his future wife from assailants by a well (2: 15-17). Summer could be drawing on material she learned in grade nine that suggested that Moses was committed to justice regardless of who was suffering, as is evident from the different people whom he saves. I believe that Summer has extrapolated from her grade nine course material that Moses is equally concerned about racism, and that in order to demonstrate his commitment to fighting intolerance, has married someone different to him in appearance but who models the same values that he does.

Like Summer, Charlotte is also motivated by the way that Judaism responds to the needs of the vulnerable. She traces her interest in championing the rights of minorities and people who are discriminated against including women and gay individuals to the fact that Jews are a minority. She believes that the topic of Moses' interracial relationship is especially relevant to her given her interest in the coexistence movement, which Charlotte explains as a movement that is predicated on the idea that "all people should coexist as one because at the end of the day, we're all the same". This movement has led Charlotte to set aside time to consider the plight of others and how she can make the world a better place.

Charlotte's explanation for why her group conceptualized Moses the way they did echoes Summer's explanation. Charlotte's understanding of the depiction of Moses' black wife was that "Moses seemed to think nothing of it. God doesn't mention it. God was mad at Miriam for gossiping. The text is pro the relationship of Moses and his wife because they had a problem with Miriam and Aaron who were talking about it".

It is important to identify two distinct versions of Moses that have been composed by this group even though this distinction went unacknowledged by the group members themselves. The first Moses, as identified above based on written statements and the creative component, was in an interracial relationship and he is depicted as a champion for contemporary anti-racism politics. This reading suggests that his marriage is primarily a tool to make a public statement. However, in the interviews, the girls suggested that Moses married for love, unconcerned with his wife's race or with making a statement. I am unsure whether these two distinct and

different depictions of Moses – the in-your-face Moses and the humble lead-by-example Moses – can be synthesized. However, these two depictions represent different elements of Charlotte and Summer’s personalities. Charlotte identified black people as minorities because of their social status so she relished the idea of Moses championing the cause of anti-racism. At the same time, she equally identified women as minorities in society because of their social status. The girls themselves did not address the challenge of gender, or attempt to resolve the contradiction presented by their reading and interview.

When considering the two projects about Moses’ *'isha kushit*, it is evident that despite their differences in form and understanding, the Moses that these students see is a moral hero, and that he demonstrates through actions, not words, the most powerful of truths – that what matters is not the colour of one’s skin but the quality of their character.

### **The Relationship between Moses & his Siblings**

Immediately following the statement that Miriam and Aaron spoke about Moses’ *'isha kushit*, the two then articulate their belief that Moses is not more special or unique than they are since God speaks to them as well.

וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָרֹק אַךְ־בְּמֹשֶׁה דִּבֶּר ה' הֲלֹא גַם־בָּנוּ דִּבֶּר וַיִּשְׁמַע ה': וְהֲאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עֲנֹו עֲנִיו מֵאֵד  
מִכָּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עָלִי־פְנֵי הָאָדָמָה

The New Jewish Publication Society (NJPS) translates the passage as follows: “They said: ‘Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?’ The Lord heard it. Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any

other man on earth” (Numbers 12: 2-3). This passage suggests feelings of jealousy that the siblings have towards their brother, but the reader is informed that Moses was humble and so was not perturbed that his siblings were speaking about him, if he even knew it at all. Next, God delineates the differences in his relationship between Moses and all other prophets.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' פְּתָאם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל־מִרְיָם צְאוּ שְׁלֹשְׁתֶּכֶם אֶל־אֱהֹל מוֹעֵד וַיֵּצְאוּ  
 שְׁלֹשָׁתָם  
 וַיֵּרָד ה' בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן וַיַּעֲמֵד פֶּתַח הָאֱהֹל וַיִּקְרָא אֶהֱרֹן וּמִרְיָם וַיֵּצְאוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם:  
 וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמַעְרָנָא דְבָרֵי אִם־יְהִיֶּה נְבִיאֲכֶם ה' בְּמַרְאֵה אֱלֹוֹ אֲתִדַּע בְּחִלּוֹם אֲדַבֵּר־בוֹ:  
 לֹא־כֵן עֲבָדִי מֹשֶׁה בְּכָל־בַּיִתִּי נֶאֱמָן הוּא:  
 פֹּה אֶל־פִּה אֲדַבֵּר־בוֹ וּמַרְאֵה וְלֹא בְּחִידֹת וּתְמִנֹת ה' יִבִּיט וּמִדּוּעַ לֹא יֵרְאֶתֶם לְדַבֵּר בְּעַבְדִּי  
 בְּמֹשֶׁה.

He says: “When a prophet of the Lord arises among you, I make Myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; he is trusted throughout My household. With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord. How then did you not shrink from speaking against My servant Moses!” (NJPS, Numbers, 12:6-8), after which God is angry, and leaves the scene.

**Counseling Session Movie.** In this project, a group of four girls wrote and acted in a short film of a therapy session between Moses, Miriam, Aaron and a therapist. The four girls were very nervous about the idea of being required to offer their own interpretation of text and being forced out of their comfort zones. Additionally, all four students are high achievers, and were hesitant to take risks because they were concerned about being wrong. As a result, they needed a lot of



reassurance that their reading of the narrative was legitimate and that they had the license to explore the text and express their own understanding without fear of being marked down. Once they moved past their nervousness, the choices that they made, both in terms of their understanding of the text and the medium of the therapy session, were very creative. The students used the text as a springboard to discuss sibling rivalry and the dynamics between the three siblings. In the film, each one of the girls plays one of the siblings or the therapist and all are dressed in costume. The video was filmed in one of their homes after school, as they felt that they could not get the privacy they needed at school. The video was minimalist in nature and involved few props or set pieces, and the emphasis was very much on the dialogue as opposed to any creative software editing.

The video begins with a statement informing the viewer that what follows is a scene from a confidential therapy session and that anything said in the space does not leave the space. Next the reader sees four females on screen. One of the females is dressed in professional work attire and another is dressed in a green toga. Two of the females are wearing cloaks with moustaches, which would suggest that they are playing the roles of men. A fifth character appears in the background wearing a sheet draped over her entire body, including their face. Presumably, this character is God. The therapist begins the session by asking Moses how he feels about his siblings gossiping about him. Moses indicates that he doesn't care, but the therapist pushes him to explore his feelings, at which time Moses say he is disappointed because he would never do that to Miriam and he "thought she loved" him. Aaron and Miriam explain that even as children Moses was the most favoured by their

mother, and that all they wanted was equal affection. Miriam elaborates further by saying that she is really jealous that Moses has such a great relationship with God, and that this is what she wants too. Aaron adds to Miriam's comment by telling God that He ignores him and focuses all of his attention on Moses. Like the biblical text, God interjects on behalf of Moses, but in the video, Moses also defends himself and says he is capable of responding to his siblings. Moses says that he isn't mad at his siblings and that he knows they love him, and that he hopes they can fix their relationship. God clarifies the dynamic between Himself and Moses and the siblings agree to stop gossiping about him and his wife. Additionally, Miriam agrees to a "cooling-out period" in which she will stay away from Moses. The film ends with the therapist informing them that their session has ended and that she hopes they have made progress today, to which the siblings agree.

In their written statement, the girls write:

We think that Miriam and Aaron were always jealous. We said that they felt that Moses always got the most attention. We feel that Miriam and Aaron still love Moses but they are jealous that he gets a lot of attention from the nation and from God. They think that Moses is hogging all of the prophetic powers. They just want to be as great as him. We said that Miriam and Aaron gossiped about Moses because they are jealous that his wife is objectively beautiful and he isn't having sex with her. They feel like he has everything and he is taking it for granted.

In this brief passage the girls have offered at least three distinct readings of the text. The first, and most grounded in the original narrative, is that the siblings want to be

as great as Moses but feel that he is taking all of the attention. This understanding can be gleaned from Miriam and Aaron's assertion that God speaks with them as well and that therefore they should be as highly regarded as Moses. It is in their second and third readings, however, that the group interjects their own interpretation of the narrative that is seemingly not as grounded in the Torah text. First, they suggest that Miriam and Aaron love their sibling despite their jealous feelings towards him. Next they argue that the siblings are jealous that Moses has everything, including a beautiful wife, but that he is ignoring her by not sleeping with her, and is remiss in seeing himself as above earthly concerns. The group's interpretation is based on Rashi's (lemma: *vatedaber Miryam ve'Aharon*) statement that the piece of gossip that Miriam shared with Aaron was that Moses had stopped sleeping with his wife Zipporah, because as a prophet of God, he needs to be in a constant state of purity. Rashi locates in this the source of Miriam's subsequent statement that she, too, is a prophetess of God, yet she has not stopped sleeping with her husband. God's involvement is a chastisement of Miriam for thinking that her prophetic powers are equal to her brother's. The creative license afforded the group, however, allowed them to take part of Rashi's statement and turn it into an exploration of sibling jealousy, as opposed to closeness to God. In this reading, the siblings envy Moses for what he has been given, are jealous that they do not have what he has, and are angry at how he is not appreciative of what he has.

The commentary crafted by this group involves approaching the narrative as a whole, as opposed to focusing on one specific word or phrase. By stepping back and identifying opportunities for jealousy in both the narrative and the commentaries

studied in class, they have offered a commentary that spans the entire narrative and that reflects their own understanding of the world. The theme of sibling rivalry is one that is evident between the first children in the Bible narrative and is still present to this very day. By seeing the narrative unit of Numbers 12 as a whole as opposed to focusing on the individual story components like other groups did, the group is able to consider how jealousy and hurt feelings are complex features in the relationship between the siblings. Through their reading of the entire narrative, the group suggests that Miriam's feelings are specific to this incident but go back into her relationship with Moses. Located within their commentary is also the very real and complex issue of being conflicted about one's feelings towards another. Their creative project does not assert that Miriam has abandoned Moses or that she feels abandoned by him; rather, there is a yearning for relationship with him and feelings of love towards him despite the conflict. This modern, psychologically-infused understanding of the narrative brings the characters to life and encourages the viewer to question their own complex relationships, and how we undertake to navigate the perils of being jealous of the people we love most.

### **Miriam's Punishment**

God punishes Miriam with *zara'at*, a biblical skin affliction that requires the individual to temporarily leave the Jewish community and be sequestered from those not affected by the disease. The reader is informed of this as the text reads:

וְהָעֶנָן שָׁרַח מֵעַל הָאֹהֶל וְהָיָה מִרְיָם מְצֻרֶת כַּשֵּׁלֶג וַיִּפּוּ אֶהָרֹן אֶל־מִרְיָם וְהָיָה מִצְרַעַת:

“As the cloud withdrew from the Tent, there was Miriam stricken with snow-white

scales!” (NJPS, Numbers 12:10). Aaron asks for Moses to intercede on Miriam’s behalf, but even Moses is unable to convince God to annul Miriam’s punishment.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאַבְיֵה יָרֵק יָרֵק בְּפָנֶיהָ הֲלֹא תִכְלֵם שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תִּסָּגֵר שִׁבְעַת יָמִים  
מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה וְאַחֵר תֵּאָסֵף

God’s justification is that “If her father spat in her face<sup>18</sup>, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp for seven days, and then let her be readmitted” (NJPS, Numbers 12:14). Despite being unwilling to change His mind, God does encourage Moses and the community to wait for Miriam to recover (Numbers, 12:15).

וְתִסָּגֵר מִרְיָם מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וְהָעָם לֹא נָסַע עַד־הָאָסֵף מִרְיָם:

Students were taught Rashi’s explanation for why the community waited for Miriam when they would normally not wait for individuals. Rashi (lemma *ve’ha’am lo nasa*) explains that because Miriam waited for Moses when he was placed in the Nile in the book of Exodus (2:3-4), the community waited for her as a reward for how she had taken care of Moses.

In class, the students considered the punishment of *zara’at* and its isolation and humiliation as a reflection of the sin previously committed: speaking negatively about someone, and thus isolating and humiliating that person. In the case of Numbers 12, Miriam’s gossip about Moses would have embarrassed him and forced him to be more acutely aware of what people around him were saying, and therefore Miriam’s divine punishment was to have to be uncomfortable around others and be isolated from the community.

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<sup>18</sup> God is likening the embarrassment, physical manifestation and public shame of being spat at on to the punishment ministered to Miriam.

**Animated Movie of Miriam's Banishment.** An animated movie submitted by four male students took up Miriam's banishment but took a different angle on the topic from the one presented in class. Three of the four students consistently worked hard in class, participated in class conversations, and worked well during lesson time. They regularly submitted assignments on time and tended to do well on assignments and tests. The fourth member of the group did not often submit assignments on time and, while very capable, did not put in much effort in class. In this group, all four worked well together on the creative component of the project. Their written statement was incomplete and did not answer the required questions, and so could not be included as a data source.

The group's animated movie showed Miriam being punished and being forced to leave the camp. The dialogue throughout follows an English translation of the text very closely, and is recorded by different members of the group. The video begins with a tour of a digital world that has been fashioned for the purpose of this project. There are tents and animals and pyramid-like structures in the Israelite camp. In the background, a very lively and upbeat song plays as the viewer sees Moses walking around the Israelite community. The music ends and a close-up is shown of Miriam and Aaron sitting around a table. They are discussing Moses' new wife, who is black and ugly. Aaron mentions that Moses has stopped sleeping with Zipporah in order to be with this woman. The siblings decide that God likes Moses more than them and that He favours Moses. God, surrounded by bright light and clouds, summons the three siblings outside where He explains that Moses is His most favourite. As a punishment, Miriam is stricken with *zara'at* and is banished from the camp and

forced to be alone in a deserted campsite. Playing throughout the montage of Miriam's banishment was Celine Dion's song "All by Myself". The video ends with the viewer learning that the Jewish people wait for Miriam to rejoin them once she has healed.

The new insight presented by the group is in how they challenge the text's assumption that Miriam's punishment was justified for how she spoke out against her brother. Through the emotional tenor of the music and the feeling of alienation they portrayed in Miriam, the viewer comes to question whether Miriam's sin merited the punishment meted out by God, and whether it was perhaps too cruel. As someone who was educated in a traditional understanding of God's pure justice, I appreciated the experience of being challenged by the notion that Miriam's punishment might have been too extreme and was not justified.

***Interview with Hector.*** In his interview, Hector noted:

we did want to make it sad with all of the things that were happening to her because we wanted to make it like it was a bad thing. What she did was bad, so she got punished, and even though Aaron didn't want it to happen, we kind of wanted people to feel bad for Miriam. I think she did deserve a punishment, but I don't think it should have been that severe.

This reading presents a radical departure from the commentaries and conversations offered in class, none of which considered the 'human element' in Miriam's suffering. In conversation with Hector, it was evident that he struggled with his conception of Miriam. On the one hand he believed that she deserved to be

punished, as her criticisms of Moses were not justified. Yet, he was uncomfortable with the method of punishment, and saw it as extreme given the way that Miriam was publicly shamed. In the interview, he was unable to articulate what a more appropriate punishment would have been, and that he was unsure how to resolve the dilemma that his group had presented. I believe that his inability to arrive at a resolution to the problem stems from the fact that throughout the creative process, the group members discussed how gossip is so pervasive today but does not typically get punished. It is possible that Hector is unable to offer a more appropriate punishment for Miriam because of his own feelings associated with gossip. Namely, that he and his friends do, at times, speak out against other people, and while intuitively he knows that this is wrong, he equally knows that he wouldn't want to be punished the way that Miriam was as a result of her sin. As a result of being able to relate to Miriam's choices, the group arrived at a new way of approaching the story of Miriam's punishment and saw the narrative through her eyes. Through their reading, they reaffirm that gossiping is immoral, but they also recognize that everyone, at one time or another, can be guilty of the sin of gossip. This is evident through their focus on Miriam, not Moses. Their insight suggests that gossipers need understanding and compassion from society, as opposed to public shaming, so that rehabilitation can take place. The project and Hector's comments provide good evidence of the type of project that we have looked at in this chapter. While the group does identify a personal connection with the narrative and its characters, they also rethink the narrative and offer an insight into Miriam's feelings that encourages the viewer to return to the text and consider it in a new way.



**Zara'at Recuperation Resort.** A fifth example of a project that offered an original reading of the narrative was made by another group of four male students who typically are not active members of the classroom community. They tend to talk throughout lessons and do not demonstrate much interest in participating in classroom activities and discussions. For their project, they responded to a gap in the text as they noticed that Miriam was going to be banished from the community for a period of time because of her *zara'at*, but that there was no description of what she would be doing while ostracized. The group chose to fill in this absence by designing a brochure for a spa resort advertising amenities that would be available to individuals who are afflicted with *zara'at*. At the spa, guests will be “treated to comfy tent houses ... that overlook a beautiful desert scene”. The features include therapy that will “help you overcome your *zara'at* by spiritually and mentally healing your mind.” Moreover, the staff “will educate you on why gossip is wrong and how to control it”. Additionally, the spa features a ritual bath that will spiritually cleanse the individual and provide recreation time with water activities like water polo, water volleyball, and swimming races. Last, the spa has developed a “patented *zara'at* cream...to keep your body as beautiful as ever”.

The creative approach to understanding the life of an individual afflicted with *zara'at* was not brought up in the original lesson nor can it be found in later biblical sections, and represents a wholly original approach to understanding the experience of Miriam. Sylvester, a member of the group, explained their original angle as a result of recognizing a noticeable absence in the text. In his interview, he said:

In the text it just says that people who do *lashon hara* (gossip) get leprosy or *zara'at* and go to the camp. And we just hear that they stay there for however long they need to, and then they move on or move back to the [communal] camp once they're done with the disease. But we thought, well, they're not just staying there; they're not just sitting there doing nothing. There would have to be stuff to help them along, maybe get them better, and maybe help them cope with it and stuff like that.

It is evident from the biblical text that *zara'at* is not an illness that afflicts someone without just cause, nor is it only a physical illness. It is a spiritual illness that manifests itself with physical symptoms. Based on their understanding of physical ailments and the proactive measures that can be taken to heal and reduce the chances of a recurrence of the illness, the group's reading of the text and *zara'at* is that afflicted individuals need help in order to successfully reintegrate into society. Given that *zara'at* is a physical illness that results from spiritual causes, the group has taken a particularly creative approach to understanding that isolation and traditional incarceration is not enough to create long-lasting and effective change. To achieve successful spiritual healing, introspection must occur which can be facilitated by trained counselors and support-staff. Their spa seems to be modeled on a fusion of holistic treatment centres, which focus on healing both the body and the soul, and modern alternative-to-incarceration programs, which focus on rehabilitation, education and behaviour correction. At their camp, recreational activities fill the time, creams manage the physical blemishes, and therapy tackles the underlying personality defects. Combined, they offer a complete package

designed to successfully reintegrate the individual back into society in a way that isolation on its own could never achieve.

## **Conclusion**

Five of the twelve projects involved in the study presented an original reading of the text. The commentaries addressed different aspects of the narrative and used different media in order to communicate the students' understanding. Moreover, the objects of interest in the text were different for the groups, as some focused on individual words, others approached larger thematic concepts, and others addressed gaps in the storyline and sought to fill them in.

Arriving at their interpretations was difficult for some of the groups, in particular the groups that wrestled with racism. The mosaic group had a very difficult time beginning their project and struggled with how to conceptualize their understanding of the narrative. As the teacher, I tried to get them to talk through their ideas and asked them to consider a medium that would match up with their ideas. When doing this, I was mindful of Beghetto's (2009) work on micromoments and creativity and carefully considered the way that I listened and responded to their ideas as they developed. I knew that the way that I facilitated and listened to the conversation could be very important for how their creativity expressed itself in the project. For other groups, like the digital video group, the idea for the medium came very easily as they knew right away they wanted to make use of video. In all five of the groups, the arts provided an opportunity to express their ideas in a way that they would not have been able to otherwise. Thinking through the arts

facilitated a complex thought process that helped the groups comment on the text in new ways. A good example of this is the use of background music in the animated video of Miriam's banishment, which not only complimented the images on screen, but provided an emotionally evocative interpretive framework for considering the text in new ways.

A prominent theme of all five of the commentaries is the resonance of the text with personal struggles within the family and community. In the following chapter I will address personal connections to the text formed through the arts, but here, it is important to acknowledge how the five groups' commentaries all directly wrestled with the text and forged new meaning as a result of that difficulty. For some, the difficulty was with a perceived racism, and for others, the challenges of gossiping and speaking about others. The students used the text as a springboard to wrestle with the "contours of their own emotional selves" (Eisner, p. 11) and as a result were able to write themselves into the conversation of commentaries on the text as they became empowered to arrive at their own interpretations.

By having the opportunity to use their imaginations to think about text in a creative and new way, students had the opportunity "to enter a created world, an invented world, ... to find new perspectives opening on our lived worlds, the often taken-for-granted realities of everyday" (Greene, 2001, p. 82). The topics covered – racism, family conflict, and gossip - are heavy topics, yet despite their difficult nature, the students' experiences mirrored Greene's notion that the arts provide an opportunity to "expand visions...challenge the taken-for-granted...break with confinement, look from an increasing number of vantage points – realizing that the

world is always incomplete” (p. 84). The students recognized that the world of the Torah and the world of today are incomplete and in need of interpretation and mending in order to construct cohesive and complete narratives. Through the visions of their art projects, the students began the process of conceptualizing the meanings, challenges, and solutions proposed by the text in new ways. The students’ work directly addressed controversial topics that are present in society, and through their use of art, attempted to solve the problems based on their understanding of the text. This process of textual and artistic discovery is similar to the results of Harvard University’s Project Zero study *The Qualities of Qualities* (2009), in which the authors found that two criteria for effective arts learning are that students should be encouraged to directly grapple with real-world issues, and that the arts should allow them to form a new understanding of the world. For students who crafted original interpretations of the text, their projects extended the text into their own lives and attempted to connect what they discovered to the challenges of modern society.

With the teacher acting as a facilitator, rather than an instructor, the students were able to form their own understanding of the text, which also led to student-empowerment in relation to biblical interpretation and commentary. This significant move is explained by Charmé and Zelkowitz as an opportunity for the individual to take “risks and participate willingly and genuinely in the meaning-making conversations that ultimately contribute to productive, durable, identity building” (2011, p. 176). Within the classroom, Backenroth, citing Helena Miller (1999b, 2000) notes that teaching Biblical text through the arts “emphasizes the

importance of students making their own meaning while searching for their own discoveries.” (Backenroth, 2011, p. 368). This independence afforded students the chance to form their own nuanced and sophisticated understandings of the text. The act of crafting one’s own commentary on text is more than just writing an insight *about* the text; it is the opportunity to write oneself *into* the text.

## **Chapter 5: Personal Connections to Text**

Chapter four analyzed the work of groups that developed new and original insights into the text. This chapter focuses on how the arts-based projects led every group to form some type of personal attachment with the text. While the projects in the last chapter focused on new readings of the text that emerged from students' creative processes, the projects presented in this chapter focus more heavily on what the text meant to the students personally and how the arts have led them to this new appreciation. While some of these projects do provide new insights into the text, their primary focus was the personal element. The seven projects selected have been divided into two separate groups based on topic. The smaller first section of this chapter focuses on two projects, both previously addressed in chapter three, that were motivated by considering the racial undertones of the opening verses of Numbers chapter 12. While the projects have been analyzed in chapter three, there the emphasis was on how the groups understood the ambiguity in the text surrounding the identity of Moses' wife. Here, I will analyze how the projects also wrestled with the students understandings of racism. The second group of projects is comprised of five groups that directly addressed the way God was depicted in the narrative. These projects demonstrated serious attention towards the way that God comported Himself in the chapter and, relatedly, the students' understanding of their relationships with God.

### **Race and the Unknown Woman**

In chapter four, I argued that two projects composed original commentaries on the identity of Moses' black wife. There, the students wrestled with the text and tried to understand its seemingly deliberate ambiguity. Given the racial elements of the narrative and the commentaries on it, it is not surprising that the students also wrote about their own understandings of racism. Here, I will return to Tess, Charlotte, and Summer and analyze how these three female students thought about the text and what it meant to them as students in 2013. Though there were fewer projects focusing on race than on other issues like theological belief, I believe that it is important to consider those projects in their own right and look at how this aspect of the text was personally meaningful for some of the students.

**Tess and the Mosaic.** In chapter four, I introduced Tess and her group's mosaic of the racially bifurcated face. There, the reader was presented with the group's commentary on the text: the text was deliberately ambiguous about the woman's identity in order to de-emphasize the importance of skin colour in relation to marriage. In her interview, Tess reaffirmed this reading but she also wanted to address one of the larger values that is present in the narrative.

A question that prompted Tess to speak at length was whether the narrative represented values that are important to her. She noted: "I think that this story is very relatable to our day and age now, because back then, Moses didn't seem to care [about skin colour]. Then there was a time when blacks didn't have any rights and now they do and I think that it is important to keep that going". Tess's



understanding of the narrative is deeply rooted in the world she sees around her as well as the one she knows existed before she was born. Tess is aware that throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in North America, people of colour were not given equal rights, and how even today there is still racial inequality. She equally knows that the world around her is still unjust and she hopes that it continues to improve. What is important for Tess is the realization that racism and prejudice based on skin colour is as socially unacceptable today as it was at the time of Moses as the *Tanakh* emphatically rejects Miriam's comments about Moses' wife. Tess finds within the narrative and the character of Moses the notion that racism is unacceptable. Finding within classical Jewish scripture a value that resonates with her today strengthens her conviction that Judaism has something constructive to add to the modern conversation.

**Charlotte, Summer & the Musical Mash up.** Unlike the mosaic group, whose members did not comment on their personal reactions to the text and Moses' marriage in their written statement, the group who made the musical mash-up on interracial relationships was far more explicit in their written statement about the significance of the lessons they have learned from the text. They write:

Often in Torah the messages are incredibly outdated and irrelevant to modern times. However, this particular story sheds some light on the issue of racism. This resonates with society currently because racism and prejudice are big problems all over the world right now. Having the content we are working with in Torah connect to our current lives and to elements of the

world around us makes the learning more enjoyable and requires much less effort.

Summer was explicit about how she felt that the ideas contained in her project transgressed the norms of her Jewish school and community, but she was comforted that those ideas are part of an ancient Jewish tradition: “We go to a Jewish school but I find that a lot of people are kind of sheltered in a way and aren’t really as accepting towards different things or things that are weird for them and I think that it just shows that [interracial relationships] happened back then”.

Additionally, Summer believes that her own philosophy of life does not fit comfortably within the mould of the school, and that the school does not provide her enough space to explore her ideas, which leaves her frustrated and bored. She noted that, “a lot of the time I just find [school] doesn’t really relate to me at all, so I’m not particularly interested in it.” The creative project, however, gave her the opportunity to delve deeper, and she noted that when “something you’re passionate about just appears anywhere in your life, it’s always nice.” More importantly, for Summer, was the fact that the creative project allowed her to find a Jewish text that gave her the confidence in her convictions to marry whoever she chooses, regardless of skin colour. She said: “You don’t marry someone because of the colour of their skin. You marry them for the content of their character. If I fall in love with someone of another race, I’m always made to feel like I would be betraying my people. This text has made me feel a little less worried about that, which is nice. I feel a little more accepted based on the path that I take.”

During the interview, Summer addressed a tangential topic to the interracial relationship that had been troubling her. While she was pleased that Moses was nonplussed by marrying someone of a different skin colour, she was troubled with the realization that gossip existed even in biblical times. At the same time, this realization forged a stronger connection with Moses and God through His rejection of Miriam and Aaron. She noted that, “the fact that just from gossiping, which might not be the biggest crime ever, was such a big deal to God. It just shows that Jewish people value how people feel about each other and their emotions and making sure that they don’t hurt each other and do bad things”. Summer’s initial surprise that gossip, something she is very sensitive to, is as old as the Bible, was tempered by the equally important realization that God, and in turn the Jewish tradition, has stood against for thousands of years. Considering the entire creative experience in hindsight allowed Summer to notice a development in her thinking in relation to gossip and racism, and led to new personal understandings of the ways that Jewish texts can prove relevant in her life.

Summer was very explicit about how she believes that the creative project helped her appreciate the Bible in a new way. In response to a question about the value of learning through the arts, she explained:

[The creative project] brought [racism] closer to my life, which showed me that the whole thing about acceptance is like a developing thing. People are still the same then that they are now. People still gossip. I used to think that they were just people in the desert, that I had no relation to them. How could I relate to them? And learning *Tanakh* was dumb because how could I relate to it

at all. Why do I care? But when you think about it, they sort of do deal with the same things that we deal with today, like gossiping about someone's wife, like why is that necessary? So I don't know. It gave me a closer relation to it and it will help me in the future to relate different parts of the *Tanakh* to my life all the time.

Summer's experience with learning through the arts built a bridge between what she had thought were two disparate elements of her life. *Tanakh* class, which she had thought was disconnected from her life, turned out to be more relevant than she had previously thought. The arts-based project formed a new understanding of how *Tanakh* stories can be relevant for understanding her current experience.

Furthermore, Summer now perceives herself as belonging to a continuum of Jewish tradition that objects to gossiping and fights against injustice. She is able to locate within her Jewish heritage a source for those values, which ultimately makes her feel more a part of the Jewish community.

Similarly, Charlotte acknowledged that she normally does not relate to the Biblical text at all, but she was pleasantly surprised to find that the chapter we studied did relate to her. She liked finding out that the Torah directly addressed interracial relationships, and this is why her group chose the topic. In her own words, "out of the majority of the things we read, [this story] is the most real. Racism and discrimination are so apparent today". Additionally, Charlotte believes that her project is a social commentary and that it is therefore important for her to address the important themes of discrimination and racism. She said: "even though [racism] is getting better, like in modern times, it's better than before, it's still not

perfect. And so we thought it was a good cause to talk about.” Throughout class observations and conversations, it was clear that Charlotte is deeply interested in effecting change in the world through written and oral communication, and by going out and doing good in the world. I left her interview with the distinct impression that she saw her social commentary as an opportunity to take a stand against racism, and that by raising the topic in class, she would be able to make others aware of the issue.

While appreciating that the text seemed to condone interracial relationships, Charlotte was not prepared to say that her overall appreciation of Torah has changed much. She believes that this was “only one incidence – and it wasn’t even that pro interracial relationships” because elsewhere the text is “so ancient and sexist against women and against gay relationships and it’s so anti all of these different things that are part of the humanity movement”. Despite this, the condemnation of Miriam and Aaron by God was “nice to see”. It is interesting to note that despite Charlotte’s pessimism towards the text, she admitted that reading this story and thinking about it in new ways has made her feel “less worried and a little more accepted based on the path she takes” should she find herself in an interracial relationship one day.

### **Relationships with God**

The 2002-2003 National Survey of Youth and Religion revealed some interesting data about teenagers and their beliefs about God (see Smith and Lundquist Denton, 2005, p. 40-41). 84% of American teenagers believe in God, while

only 72% of Jewish American teenagers believe in God. 65% of those surveyed believe that God is involved in the world today but only 44% of the Jews surveyed agreed. 33% of Jews believe that God is impersonal and more like a “cosmic force”. Of all of the religions polled, Jews represented those who least believed in a personal God. Additionally, Jews were the least likely to say that their religious faith shapes their daily life and is a factor for making decisions, and are the least likely to feel close to God.

While the researchers do acknowledge that their sample size for Jewish youth was small, and while it is likely that many of the Jews interviewed are not representative of the students at CHAT because they do not go to a private Jewish school, my own anecdotal observations pair similarly with what I see as the most relevant conclusion of the study. Specifically, many Jewish youth believe in God (albeit not as much as their Christian peers, but still a significant majority) but they do not feel that they have a personal relationship with Him, nor that He is involved in world affairs.

I have heard many students talk openly about their belief in God, but qualifying it by saying that they do not have a relationship with Him and that they do not believe that such a thing is possible. The phraseology used in the study of God as a “cosmic force” is one that would resonate with many CHAT students’ conceptions of God as a foreign deity who might have created the world but has since abandoned it. Many cite examples like the Holocaust as evidence that God is no longer an active presence in the world today.

It therefore came as a surprise to me that many of the student projects directly

engaged with God and His involvement in the narrative, and in turn, the world. What did not surprise me about the projects was the general condemnation of God as a negative force within Numbers 12. Five projects directly wrestled with God as a character and also God as a personal deity. Not one student interviewed said that they do not believe that God exists, and only one expressed doubt. Yet many struggled to define their relationship with Him and could not provide examples of when they might have had a meaningful encounter with God. Many put the responsibility for this discord squarely on God as He has not 'shown Himself' to them. This feeling of abandonment or disappointment in God for His behaviour is reflected in many of the projects that were made, where the students often took a very critical stance on how God comported himself within the narrative, by not treating Miriam fairly or compassionately. I believe that this emphasis in many of the projects and interviews suggests that the students saw their own feelings of distance from God reflected in the narrative and in Miriam's plight. Seeing how God punished Miriam by sending her away without communicating with her, they see similarities to how God does not openly communicate with them. What they have failed to realize, which Miriam definitely does realize, is that within the narrative of the Bible, God's punishment of Miriam *is* a form of communication, even if it is not the type of communication that she would have wanted. The students' projects demonstrated that they are interested in thinking about God, even if they have mixed or negative feelings on the subject. The lesson here is that educators should find ways to make space in the classroom for creative exploration of personal feelings about God.

**Therapy Session & Interview with Jocelyn.** In chapter four, the reader was introduced to Jocelyn and the video her group made, which showed a therapist providing counseling services for Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and God. There, I explained how the group approached the narrative from the vantage point of sibling dynamics and how they provided a new interpretation of the ways that Miriam and Aaron struggle to establish their own distinct identities while in the shadow of their baby brother. The group's written statement focused primarily on their understanding of the narrative, and did not evidence a personal connection with the characters. In the interview with Jocelyn, she admitted feeling detached from her group's interpretation of the narrative because of the positive relationship that she has with her siblings.

The one question that prompted Jocelyn to address whether the project led to a new association with the text was whether she could relate to the God of Numbers 12. I asked her this question because she said that she believes in God and that she has a personal relationship with Him. She explained that the creative project led her to think about her relationship with God in a new way, and that she considered God's feelings for the first time. She said:

I kind of thought about my relationship with God and how it's really different with Moses because Moses speaks to God on a daily basis and they see each other face to face. I just thought how I never really had any interaction or knowledge of God. I got more insight to what He was feeling. Nowadays, we don't really hear anything about God and people speaking to God. It's different to go back and see how people interacted with Him and how His personality –



like how He's really protective of the people but sometimes I guess He can get annoyed with them in some of the situations where sometimes He wants to kill them all.

Jocelyn delineates several differences between herself and Moses: Moses communicates with God on a daily basis, he sees God, he lives in a society in which people regularly talk to God and in which God displays His emotions publicly. Despite all of these differences, Jocelyn still sees herself as more similar to Moses than not because she both believes in and has a relationship with God. Through the creative project, Jocelyn gained new insights into her understanding of her relationship with God. She became more attuned to how she felt that God can be protective over certain individuals and how God can become disappointed and even hurt. Placing herself in the position of writing lines for God and crafting a personality for Him based on the original source led Jocelyn to consider God's feelings and the attendant responsibilities that she has with regards to her relationship with God.

**Gossip God.** *Gossip Girl* (Schwartz & Savage, 2007-2012) is a television program based on a series of books of the same name that follows a cast of high school characters and the drama of their socialite lifestyle. The title character, Gossip Girl, is an anonymous blogger who posts all of the juicy gossip that takes place within the group. Gossip Girl has caused many scandals within the group, and her presence affects the characters' choices. They do not appreciate Gossip Girl

airing their gossip and making her interpretations of their choices available for anyone to read.

For their creative project, a group of four girls designed a website modeled on the titular *Gossip Girl* blog. The girls in this group are students who regularly make use of technology in class by bringing their laptops. The idea for the group project was spearheaded by one student named Louise: she was the one who first saw the connection between *Gossip Girl* and God's role in the text. The group chose to title their blog *Gossip God*. On the site, God vents his frustrations with the Jewish people. The first blog post reveals the news that Miriam has gossiped about her brother's marriage. In their written explanation, the group notes that this is a revelation because until Chapter 12, the biblical reader had no knowledge of Miriam being a gossip. To supplement their blog, the group made use of quotations from the television program that thematically tie in with their understanding of the narrative. One quote is "In life, there are many ways to unmask a villain. Sometimes you know who the bad guy is from the start, but most times you find out they've been right in front of you the whole time".

In their written statement, the group explained their project as follows:

We think *Gossip Girl* represents the text very well. On our site, the writer behind *Gossip Girl* is God. The decisions and actions of Miriam reflect the actions of many of the characters on this show. There is also irony in our project; the site talks about Miriam being shunned and punished for gossip yet gossip girl is the ultimate gossip. We realize that gossip was an issue then and still remains an issue today. It is something that is hard to stop especially

because in today's society you aren't punished so seriously. In the long run however there are punishments like karma and a lack of future trust.

The group makes their understanding of the narrative very clear in both their creative content and their written explanation: The people whom you trust can often be the people who hurt you the most. In their understanding of the narrative, Miriam is not the only villain. While Miriam is the one who gossips about Moses, it is God who reveals this to Moses and punishes Miriam for what she has said, yet God is left unscathed as a result of the encounter.

The group presents a highly critical reading of both God and Miriam's actions. In conversation with many groups, and the ones who wrestled with God in particular, there was a consensus that though they had always seen God as a positive force in the Bible and Jewish history, the stories in Numbers challenged this concept. Here, the group acknowledges the problem of gossip but also consider how God seems to become part of the problem by punishing Miriam, even though Moses was not upset by what has been said. The text suggests that God entered the conversation because speaking badly about someone is objectively wrong, while the group suggests that gossip and other crimes must be examined on a case-by-case basis. In this reading, the viewer feels some sympathy towards Miriam and what has happened to her, even if they judge her actions. Additionally, the group posits that God's decision to draw greater attention to what was said by speaking in front of Moses actually turns God into a gossip. This reading inverts the notion that God is wholly righteous, and instead, God becomes equally guilty through the manner in which He communicates. I understand the group to be suggesting that the repeating

of information, regardless of purpose, must be undertaken with sensitivity. In order to ensure that unnecessary shame and embarrassment not take place in our efforts to punish those responsible, we must work hard to not draw further attention to the issue.

***Interview with Louise.*** The picture I got from this project was further complicated in my interview with Louise, the student who had the original idea for the blog. She explained the origins and rationale of the project as follows: “I’m obsessed with *Gossip Girl* so when one of the themes was gossip, I thought of that... If I just read the story, I wouldn’t connect it to my life. But putting it into *Gossip Girl*, I really thought about the lesson in it and about gossiping.” Later in her interview, Louise acknowledged “it’s important not to gossip; [therefore the story] is good because it’s relatable with teenage girls”. Louise’s group has turned God into a gossip alongside Miriam. In her interview, I asked her where she sees God’s role as a gossip in the text, and whether His act of repeating Miriam and Aaron’s statements constitutes an act of gossip. Furthermore, I wanted to understand whether she saw a difference in the ways that her peers gossip, and whether there are degrees to which people can be considered to have gossiped, or whether God and Miriam have committed the same level of wrongdoing. Louise was not able to clearly articulate an understanding of the different roles that people can take in the act of gossip, nor whether she thought Miriam or God she behaved more inappropriately.

Despite being unable to fully articulate her group’s intention in critiquing of God’s actions, Louise did know that gossiping is inherently something that is wrong.

Importantly, it was the creative project that helped facilitate the association between her interests, her daily life, and Jewish text. In addition to helping her feel more connected to tradition, the project will hopefully lead Louise towards a greater sensitivity towards gossip and how she treats those around her.

**The Burn Book.** One of the most creative and well thought out projects was designed by a group of three female students. These students are all high academic achievers. At times their behaviour in class is out of control, and they need regular reminders about proper classroom comportment. The group chose to design a 'burn book' modeled off of the 'burn book' composed by Regina George in the film *Mean Girls* (Waters, 2004). George is the leader of a clique of girls called the Plastics. The Plastics are exclusive and do not sit with any student who they think is not as cool as they are. George records all of the gossip that she hears about her fellow Plastics, peers and teachers in her burn book, which is used to maintain her power over the group and the student body. The book ultimately comes to symbolize the pettiness and insecurity that is prevalent in the Plastics and George in particular, given the film's concluding message about avoiding "cliqueiness" and accepting people for who they are despite their differences. In their written statement, the students explained their choice as follows: "in the film *Mean Girls*, the burn book is used to demonstrate Regina George's authority and immense anger. We chose this idea for our assignment to portray God's superiority and anger during the story. This is a side of God we as readers have never seen before, and we thought it would be interesting to focus on."

In order to build their burn book, the students actually began their project in Numbers 11 and told the entire narrative of the two chapters from God's perspective, focusing on what He thought about the Jewish people, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. Throughout their project they made use of images and text to convey meaning, while also trying to find modern parallels for some of the events that took place in the biblical narrative. As well, the group made use of the film's reference to the main mean girl as a Queen B, calling God 'Queen G' in His role as author of the burn book.

Examples of their modern reinterpretation of the narrative can be found throughout the burn book. On the page that explains that Moses is God's most trusted servant, God's cellphone is shown listing Miriam and Aaron as contacts with hearts beside their names. This is a good example of using contemporary imagery to illustrate a point about the text (see Figure 3). On the same page, Moses' full body is shown with an "xo" beside his name and a key that is labeled 'God's house'. The symbol of a key represents the sense of trust and favoritism that is evident in the text. In their written statement, the students explain the page as follows:

this page portrays the idea that God speaks about when he confronts Miriam and Aaron in the *Tanakh*. Ibn Ezra provides a commentary that explains that Moses was so trusted he could just walk into God's house without asking. Therefore, the phone with Miriam and Aaron represents God's communication with them indirectly, and Moses and the key represents the fact that he can just walk into God's home.

In the passage, the girls demonstrate a clear understanding of the narrative and commentaries while working to make it understandable and relatable to the modern reader.

In the burn book itself, God repeatedly expresses His anger and frustration at the Jewish people. In a page that harkens back to Chapter 11, the girls created a visualization of the plague of quail with which God punished the Israelites because they no longer wanted to eat manna and instead demanded meat. On the page (see Figure 4), Chicken McNuggets are used in place of the quail as a modern parallel. The text on the page reads: “Uh oh! Watch out, this is what happens when Queen G is MAD. What’s next?” On this page, the group portrays God as angry, but also capture the playful and juvenile tone of a teenager in the way that He writes in His diary.



Figure 3: Burn Book image #1. This depicts Moses being God’s most trusted prophet.

The emotional tenor of God's writing suggests a different kind of involvement with the Jewish people than is typical in the Bible. In the text, God is angry at what the people have done, but in the burn book, there is a sense of plotting towards future punishments and a sense of mischief that is not present in the text. This reading reflects the group's understanding of God's anger and their desire to show a side of God's personality that is less than obvious in the Torah. The lens through which they view God is that God is not merciful or benevolent, rather He uses His power over others and delights in it. This reading reflects the group's choice to

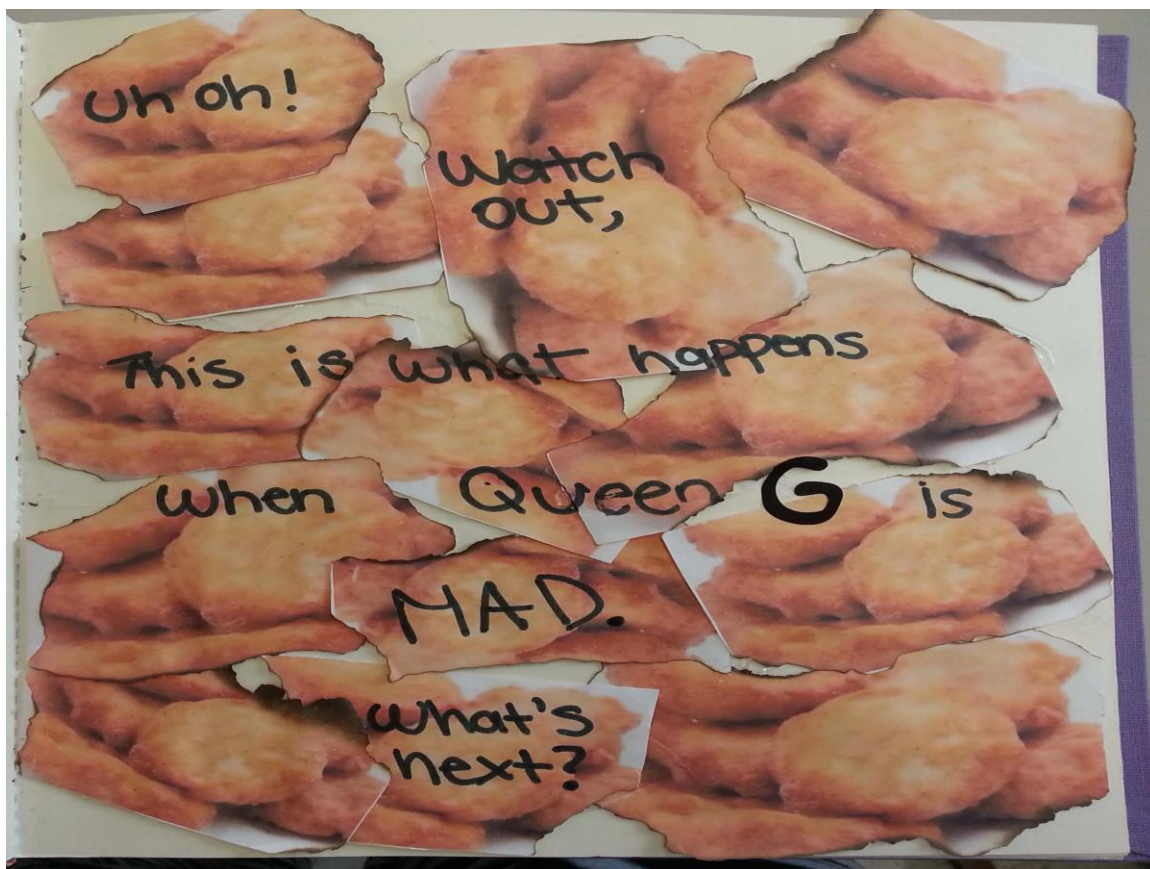


Figure 4: Burn Book image #2. It depicts God punishing the Jewish people with quail



cast God as an insecure adolescent girl who lords her power over others as a result of her vulnerability. While God seems to be in control in the text as a result of being the most powerful, the group suggests that God's use of power is unnecessary, and reflects a degree of immaturity. Their project wonders if God could have found a more mature and sensible way to educate Miriam about gossip, instead of aggressively attacking Miriam in the way that a teenager would lash out at those around her.

***Interview with Juliet.*** Juliet spoke at length about how her group understands God's involvement in the narrative and what prompted their reading of God as an angry and vengeful deity. She spoke very clearly about how the arts-based project led to their understanding of God. She said:

When we were learning it in class we were just reading it, learning it, whatever and we didn't really take notice of how angry God was. When we were trying to make the book more creative and not just about content, it was something that we could tie the Burn Book to, and then that's how we explored God's anger. We thought about it in a more challenging way, not just the content.

Juliet's statement suggests that the arts provided the impetus to think beyond the text, what she calls trying to be more creative. Her understanding of creativity demonstrates that the group took the task of interpretation seriously. Her use of the word "challenging" suggests uncovering and digging through layers within the text to arrive at an understanding that is beyond, but within reach of, the content.

The group's act of thinking about the material through a deeper and less surface-oriented reading led them to think about God in a way that they had not previously. As Juliet noted in the passage quoted above, the group had been fairly oblivious of God's anger upon first learning the passage, and had instead focused on other elements of the narrative. As a consequence of pausing, taking a step back, and considering the entire narrative that had been learned throughout the year, a reading of an angry and vengeful God emerged.

Juliet's interview revealed a sense of disquiet and disappointment with her new understanding of the text. The God that came through her reading is a God that troubles her very much. While not entirely certain about whether she believes in God or not, she does not relate to the image of an angry God nor understand why He was so vengeful. On the subject of whether she agreed with Miriam's punishment, Juliet refocused the question on how God relates to Miriam. She said:

I can relate to Miriam because from my perspective all she really did was gossip about her brother and it was taken so far. God thought of it as the worst thing ever. But when that happens to me, things like that don't happen. He doesn't come and do all these things. And that's what kind of makes me not believe in it. Why did He do such bad things to her, but not such bad things to me when I gossip?

Juliet disagreed with the punishment meted out to Miriam but because she does not receive a similar punishment when she gossips, she doubts God's existence. Juliet's statement is fascinating because her struggles with God revolve around how she does not feel His presence in her life today, even when she does things that she

knows, retroactively, she should not have done. Furthermore, her choice of the words “all she really did” to describe Miriam’s gossiping diminish and minimize the seriousness of Miriam’s actions and once again portray God as excessively angry and as acting wrongly.

I wanted to confirm my understanding of her reading of God and so I asked her whether she felt that God’s response was entirely unwarranted. She explained:

In this story He was completely, obviously, really frustrated and really mad the whole time because people are basically going behind His back and doing bad things. But I think that He took it too far in a way, but that’s just from my perspective.

Juliet’s understanding of the narrative suggests a discomfort with what she has come to realize in the text. The God in the text is not always going to be munificent, especially when the Israelites disobey His commands. In fact, God can be downright violent when He so chooses. Juliet’s explanation of being unsure of God’s existence because He does not punish her suggests to me that she wants to believe in God, but is unsure if she has ever experienced Him in her life. Juliet’s new conception of a God who is not always happy represents a potentially transformative moment of growth for Juliet, even if she does not know it yet. Finding within scripture examples of God demonstrating His anger is an important step towards reconceptualizing her understanding of God, even if she does not agree with His behaviour. Coming to believe that God has expectations of humanity may lead her to an understanding that a relationship can exist between people and God in which both parties have obligations towards each other. Knowing this can make

Juliet more attuned to what she does and what God expects of her, while also making her more conscious of God's existence.

**Miriam's (Digital) Banishment and Interview with Hector.** In chapter four, I presented an analysis of a digital movie project that was produced by a group of four male students. There, I explained that the group's video evoked feelings of compassion towards Miriam that are not evident in the text. In the interview with Hector, he acknowledged that his group's understanding of the text was based on thinking about the narrative, and whether what happened to Miriam was justified.

Hector revealed that his new understanding of the narrative also had an impact on how he thought about gossip and the story's relevance to him. He said, "I still sometimes will [gossip]. But it's not like I'm going around to everyone saying it. Nowadays, since everyone does it so much, I think I'm a little desensitized to how bad it is." When I asked what his reaction was to Miriam's punishment, he said: "it's such an extreme punishment, and because we do it so much without consequence, when you have a punishment that's so extreme, it's a little too much for me because when people do it, they don't get punishments." Like Juliet, Hector draws a correlation between Miriam's punishment and the way that people are punished today for gossiping. He is bothered by how God has chosen to punish Miriam when people today seemingly do not get punished in the same way. Significantly, he notes that gossip does not bother him as much as it should because he is desensitized to it. Instead of drawing the conclusion that his desensitization is a bad thing, he instead has a visceral reaction to the text and rejects outright the way that Miriam was

punished, calling it extreme.

Hector's implicit critique of God raises questions about what should happen when students arrive at moral conclusions about a biblical narrative that differs from the texts over meaning. As an educator, I had hoped that Hector would reflect on how his desensitization is problematic and has caused him to be less aware of a troubling behaviour. However, a teacher has to be able to tolerate differences in interpretation when students have been given license to read a text their own way. In this instance, it is important to note that Hector has not completely rejected the Bible's lesson. Instead, his perception of who the hero of the narrative is has shifted from the conventional understanding. In Hector's reading, Miriam is a tragic character whose flaw is being an occasional gossip, but God, the harsh critic, responds excessively. As a result of the creative project, Hector has a new appreciation for the complexity of biblical characters and their humanity. While his understanding diverges from the normative reading, by having the opportunity to think creatively about the narrative, he was able to find a locus point within the narrative that resonated and stayed with him.

**The Cereal Canvas.** Two creative submissions used food to communicate ideas. One of the projects made use of two canvases and arranged Cheerios and Froot Loops on them in order to demonstrate the different perspectives that Miriam and God have about Moses' leadership and his role in the community. The group was comprised of four very hardworking female students who, while on the quieter

side, are active participants in classroom learning and often come to speak with me after lessons to discuss the material.

Each canvas presents a different character's understanding of how leadership in the Jewish community functions. In one of the canvases (see Figure 5), there is an equal amount of surface space devoted to Cheerios and Froot Loops. The students explained that this canvas represents Miriam's understanding of the community, in which the Cheerios represent the Jewish community while the



*Figure 5* Cereal canvas image #1. It depicts Miriam's understanding of her role in the community

Froot Loops represent the shared leadership of Miriam, Aaron, Moses and other prophets. If this is in fact Miriam's understanding, as misguided as it may be, her negative reaction to finding out that Moses has a special relationship with God is understandable.

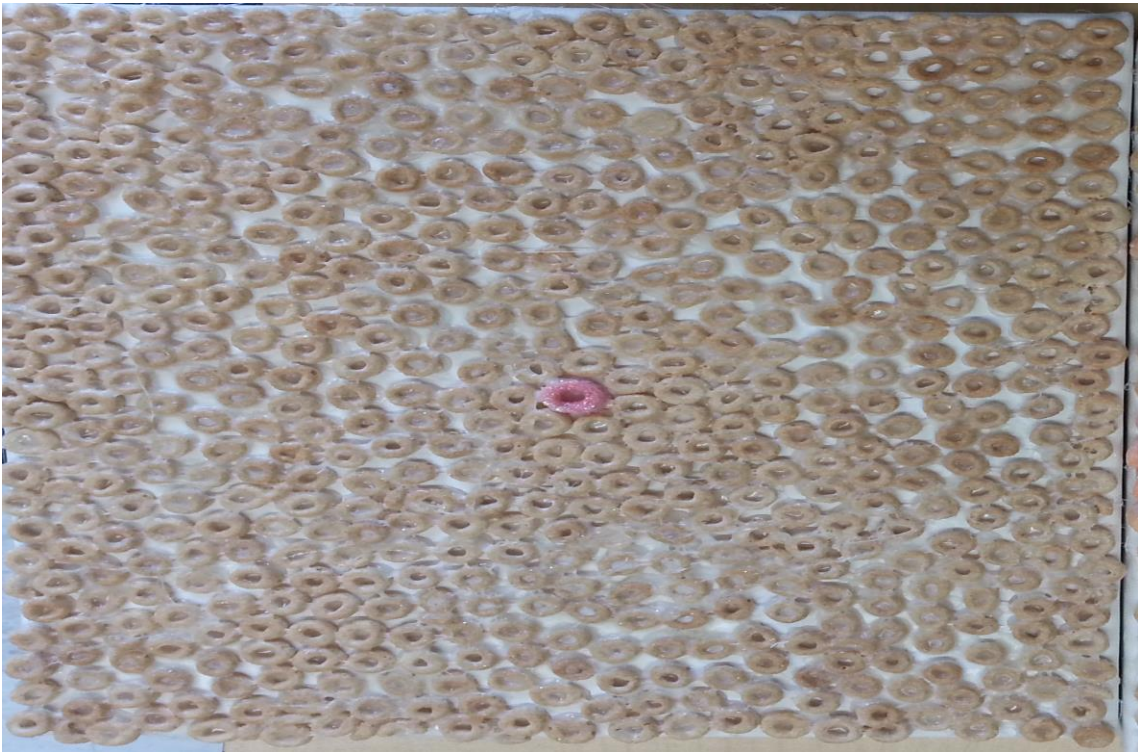
The second canvas (see Figure 6) presents God's understanding of the family dynamic and the differences between Moses and his siblings. In this piece, the entire canvas is covered in Cheerios save for one Froot Loop in the middle, which represents Moses. In their written statement, the students explained their project as follows:

As any cereal lover would know, Cheerios are bland, dry, and natural looking, whereas Froot Loops are exciting, colourful, and tasty. In the eyes of God, Bnei Israel is looked upon as equals to one another, and Moses is looked upon as a unique individual and leader that stands above the rest. Relative to our design, the Froot Loops stand out amongst the Cheerios, just as Moses stands out amongst Bnei Israel and the other prophets.

In this quotation, the group makes clear that the choice of cereal was not accidental; the appearance and flavor of Cheerios are uniform and therefore representative of the way that God sees the personalities of the members of the Jewish people. Froot Loops, on the other hand, are sugary and bright and different in appearance from each other. For this reason, Moses was chosen to be a Froot Loop because he is distinct and different from the rest of the Jewish community, as designated by God.

The group explained that their project is about more than just considering the different ways that individual characters understand their roles in the community. Rather, "we could apply Miriam, and the rest of the nation's feelings with our own, as it is common to feel unfairly treated by someone with higher authority or to not understand why someone else has more privileges than us." The creative project allowed the students to see Miriam differently: she is no longer just

Moses' sister, some fictional character upset about being treated unequally. Instead, Miriam is just like these students when they feel that a peer is being favoured and given additional privileges that they would want. From the students' perspective, Miriam's reaction resulted from her perception that all people are equal and should have the same things, something that is not true in every situation.



*Figure 6: Cereal canvas image #2. It depicts Moses' leadership role in the community according to God*

As with many of the other groups, there is a critique of God inherent in their understanding of the narrative. While their negative association with God is not as pronounced as some of the other groups', it is evident that in the dynamic between Miriam and God, they have chosen to see Miriam's gossip as the result of a misunderstanding. Building on this understanding of the text, the students can see themselves in Miriam's shoes and see within the text a lesson on communicating



clearly and honestly. As a reader of the explanation I am left wondering why the blame solely rests with God for this miscommunication, and how Miriam's misunderstanding of the situation moved her to speak badly about Moses rather than find out more. Opening up the reading in this way implies that an individual who is feeling marginalized must accept a degree of responsibility to clarify whether their feelings are justified, and be willing to take a risk in order to understand why they are being treated differently.

***Interview with Aleeza.*** Aleeza echoed her group's written statement regarding why they chose to use food and how its usage held a double connotation for them. She said: "I don't want to take the credit but it was my idea to use food... I really like food. I've never really seen any projects using food. But I thought it was a cool connection because Cheerios are actually plain and equal and look the same and Froot Loops are special and colourful and they taste better".

Aleeza introduced a reading of Miriam's personality that was slightly different from what her group explained. She inverts the challenge that Miriam faces and instead considers how sibling rivalry and jealousy affects Miriam. Aleeza explains her understanding of Miriam this way:

I kind of feel bad for Miriam. Imagine having a sibling who God favors, and he has all the power, but you're his sibling. So you kind of feel like you should be special too, as special as him.

Based on her comment about God choosing a favourite, I asked Aleeza to consider the role of God in her understanding of the narrative and to think about to what

extent she holds God responsible for what has befallen Miriam. First, Aleeza clarified her understanding of why Miriam might have thought of herself as different from the rest of the Jewish people. "Since Miriam's related to Moses, she could think that she has a little bit higher of a status because they're siblings, and someone who just has no relation to Moses could think of themselves as lesser." From there, Aleeza explained: "I think it's sad that God doesn't understand why she would be thinking that she has power like Moses. I'm not upset with God but if I was God, I'd kind of, be a little more empathetic to her."

Like many of the interviewees, Aleeza has a difficult time wrestling with God's apparent insensitivity in the text. Unlike other individuals, Aleeza softened her criticism by trying to first defend God, yet at the same time acknowledging that if she were God, she would have done things differently. This type of defensive wordplay is indicative of feelings of discomfort with openly admitting disappointment with God, while still trying to find a way to express that disappointment by arguing what she would do if she were God.

As noted above when analyzing the group's written statement and artwork, Aleeza's comments mirror her group's written statement that criticized God but not Miriam. Aleeza demonstrates tremendous sensitivity towards Miriam in attempting to understand why she acted the way she did. While not exculpating Miriam from her wrongdoing, Aleeza and her group frame Miriam's behaviour in a different way than the text initially indicated. The lens through which they view the narrative is based on sibling rivalry, reflective of their own family lives. By making text-to-self

connections, Aleeza sees Miriam in a new way that, while not justifying gossip, suggests that God too could have shown more sensitivity when disciplining Miriam.

## **Conclusion**

The opportunity to think through the arts facilitated a chance for students to think about the text, and themselves, in new ways. In addition to the groups mentioned here, other groups composed songs, did food art, and made videos that demonstrated a good understanding of the narrative, but had weaker, less concrete connections to text. Many students explained that it was the creative license that afforded them the opportunity to reconceptualize the narrative in a way that was both personal and affective. The works themselves were original and interesting, and showed a tremendous amount of thought, effort, and understanding.

The seven works analyzed in this chapter went beyond just showing that the creators understood the text. These projects modeled a particular type of approach to the text that showed that students thought about themselves in relation to the text. They showed that students made text-to-self connections based on topics and themes in the text that they found personally relevant.

The first theme that was addressed was racism. Drawing on the text's ambiguity about the identity of Moses' wife, students struggled with Miriam's criticism of her brother for marrying a black woman, and with Rashi's denial that the woman was a person of colour. The students used the text and Rashi's interpretation as a springboard to clarify their own understanding of racism and

their feeling of solidarity with Moses for his choice to disregard race as a criterion for marriage.

The second theme that emerged from the projects was that students wrestled with their relationship with God. The opportunity to create through the arts and the freedom associated with that type of thinking led students to talk about God, which is an uncommon occurrence. The students' conceptions and perceptions of God varied. For some, like the students who produced 'Gossip God' and the 'Burn Book', God is a distant presence that might comment on the world but is not actively involved with its participants. For others, like the therapy session, God is directly involved in the lives of the people. These differences reflect different understandings of the ways in which God interacts with the world and, in turn, the different relationships that students have with God. Another way that students expressed their approach to God revolved around the way they understood God's behaviour. Throughout the projects, a common theme that was expressed was that God did not behave correctly in relation to Miriam. While the students did not support Miriam's behaviour towards Moses, students did feel that God should have been kinder and more sympathetic towards Miriam. This view suggests that students struggle with the idea of a God who punishes, and instead more closely identify with a God who demonstrates loving kindness. That the students directly engaged with this presentation of God and, on some level, protested against what they saw as injustice, suggests that they are thinking critically about what God means to them on a personal and moral level.

## **Chapter 6: Added Value of the Arts in Jewish Education**

Chapter six revolves around the third theme that emerged during the interviews. The interviews revealed that the students found the arts-based experiences to be valuable, and that they offer learning opportunities that do not take place in more conventional classroom lessons. Of note is that every participant interviewed, including respondents in larger class interviews, noted that the arts facilitated a valuable learning opportunity.

In this chapter, I will identify and discuss the different skills and experiences that students felt were made available as a result of learning through the arts. What emerges from this analysis is that in addition to the opportunity provided to think in a new way about the Torah and to form personal associations with the text, students found that learning through the arts lets students think, process, and collaborate in an important way that more conventional assessment tools do not allow. While previous studies (cited in Backenroth, 2004), have shown that teachers in Jewish schools did not feel that arts-based learning was important enough to make it a priority, this study makes a compelling case that students recognize the importance and value of arts-based thinking. Additionally, some teachers believe that the arts shifted the focus away from text-based learning and content retention, two important goals of Jewish education which they believe lead to greater knowledge and ritual observance. However, this study revealed that this may not be accurate. Five distinct themes emerged based on the students' responses to questions about whether they enjoyed learning through the arts and what they felt the arts offered.

The trends are: learning through the arts provides the opportunity to express creativity; learning through the arts leads to better recall of text; learning through the arts provides an opportunity to feel successful; learning through the arts led to collaboration which resulted in deeper thinking about the material; and that learning through the arts provided the opportunity to be challenged in a new way.

The trends that will be addressed below show that previous studies that have found merit in using the arts in education support my findings. The importance of the data here is that it is student-generated, without overt prompting by the teacher-researcher. The question to the students asked them to consider what the benefits there were to learning through the arts. From this open-ended question, students demonstrated an astute understanding of their own educational experiences and self-awareness about how they learn and what is missing in their schooling.

### **Opportunity to Express Creativity**

Not surprisingly, the most commonly identified benefit of learning through the arts was the opportunity to express creativity. Many students at CHAT work very hard to manage the heavy course-load of eleven non-semestered classes, in addition to extra-curricular activities. Additionally, the high academic standards and expectations of university attendance following graduation place a tremendous amount of pressure on students. Most courses in the school allocate grades based on tests, assignments, essays, presentations, and classwork. Exceptions to these are the fine arts, physical education and computer courses, which are more heavily

weighted toward projects, often of a creative nature. Most general studies classes utilize some type of creative element, whether through poster-boards or other proscribed format. In the Jewish studies department, there are no grades given for creative work, much less arts-based assignments to begin with. When creative projects are assigned, they are done so with a pre-selected medium. There are very few opportunities for open-ended assignments that allow for the student to determine how their project will be designed and implemented. Given the traditional nature of assessment in the school, many students were not only excited to have the opportunity to express their creativity, but felt that it should be a more prominent feature of their schooling.

Students identified two different advantages to having the opportunity to express their creativity. The first advantage was that students felt that they were able to express a side of themselves that is otherwise absent in the classroom.

Miranda noted

when you learn through the arts, you get to show a different side of yourself... instead of doing a project where you just write something, like writing an essay -- I feel like I got to get in touch with my creative side, which I liked. I like kinesthetics, so I thought it was better than just writing something out or writing a test.

Summer explained "this project and using the arts, it just gives you a different opportunity to use your strengths to show your understanding and things. Using art is a unique way to display things, like different types of drawings and different things."

Miranda and Summer were able to identify, without using Howard Gardner's (1989) terminology, aspects of his theory of multiple intelligences. Gardner's research has identified at least seven different "forms of knowing" (p. 74), which include language, logic and mathematics, music, spatial orientation, bodily-kinesthetic information, interpersonal and intrapersonal ways of learning and knowing. These intelligences are an approach to understanding the different ways that people can learn, interact with the world, and create in it. Miranda and Summer valued what the arts offered them that was absent in their other classes – an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge in a way that was representative of their strengths.

In addition to the opportunity afforded by creativity to demonstrate one's strengths, some students specifically noted that the arts and creativity mirrored their understanding of how youth approach and understand society. Specifically, the emphasis on pop-culture and media that pervades society played into the students' use of creativity in the classroom. Summer believes that "[her] generation is more into being yourself and expressing yourself and who you are" and that the creative projects allowed for that sense of freedom of expression. Hank "feels like learning in the arts is more effective because the arts is something that teenagers like to do and it's easier to focus and pick up on what's happening. It's more meaningful to us because that's what we're into." Education should not solely revolve around student interests, and curriculum should not be shaped by what students want to learn, as a core goal of education is to expand a student's horizon beyond what they know. However, if the process that is used to arrive at the message is not essential and core



to the curriculum, then teachers should consider what would best work with students, as this will lead to greater student engagement. In the instance reported here, the curricular goal was to think critically about the text, and art was the conduit to developing insights. Giving students the opportunity to select how they would create and present their interpretations led to greater interest and engagement, and unique opportunities to think about the material.

### **Memory Recall**

Throughout every interview conducted, it was evident that students demonstrated a strong recall of their projects and the contents of the biblical text, which had been learned over a month earlier<sup>19</sup>. While there was not consensus on the cause for this solid retention, five students specifically mentioned that they remembered the content of their projects better than they remembered the content from tests. Louise attributes her retention to the fact that she “worked with it so closely”, as opposed to test material, which might only be covered in a single lesson. Tess suggests that she has “more memory on this because it was something that actually meant something to [her]”; because she made personal connections through the project, she was better able to remember it. A third student, Jocelyn, was surprised with the relationship that exists between fun and memory. She noted, “with tests, I just want to get the marks just so my grade average is up. But this is just a fun way of learning things and I actually understand it a lot more.”

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<sup>19</sup> Anecdotally, it is interesting to note that students from previous years, including some from over four years ago, still fondly remember their projects and want to talk about them.

One student used science tests to illustrate how she routinely studies. She identified a flaw in her studying – namely, that she studies and memorizes for a brief period of time, and then the material fades from memory. She believes that the arts offer an alternative that results in greater retention. Miranda said:

When you're taking a science test or something, you're doing a lot of it off of memory. Personally, I don't like that. I don't mind science, but I don't like doing things off of memory because I find I'll learn it and then it just goes away. You don't remember it anymore. But when you do something with the arts, it allows you to not only see a new creative side to yourself, but you also don't forget it as much.

Tests and many high school essays are teacher-centric exercises, in which the teacher determines the questions and has an ideal answer in mind when the assignment is composed. In order to succeed, students must correctly answer the teacher's questions. In the projects completed for the study, the open-ended questions let students make their own choices, assume a position of authority and feel a sense of autonomy in shaping the way they demonstrated comprehension and understanding. As a result of being given the opportunity to dictate the terms of the projects, students needed to take an active role in the learning and assessment process. This involvement, they suggest, led to greater understanding and greater retention of the content.

The recollection of both storyline and opinions about the topic directly challenges the assumptions made by teachers that learning through the arts is frivolous and takes away from 'meaningful' class learning. The ability for students to

remember their projects well after completion suggests that teachers should find ways to include the arts in their classroom so long as students have the ability to make choices about their projects. If harnessed correctly, the arts can become a powerful tool for helping high school students develop lasting memories of Jewish texts.

### **Feeling Successful in School**

The third theme that emerged was that the arts facilitated the opportunity for students to feel success in a way that they do not feel in other classes. Louise correctly noted that “there are so many people who don’t test well and if you’re not given the opportunity to do any other type of testing you won’t [succeed].” Echoing Gardner’s (1989) research about different types of learners, Louise’s assertion does not come from surveys and studies but from her own struggles in the classroom. The arts, however, “make you feel better about yourself if you’re given opportunities to succeed. If you’re really challenged by tests and that’s all you have, [the creative work] builds your confidence.” Similarly, when asked whether she preferred the creative project to traditional testing, Tess said “God it’s so much better because I think that there’s a lot of people, including myself, that on tests, get nervous, freeze up, can’t display all their knowledge, and it’s a lot easier when you’re doing something that’s more in your element to express yourself “.

Both Louise and Tess highlight one of the challenges that comes with high academic demands. Namely, there can be tremendous amounts of pressure for success, especially for students who struggle in the classroom. Lack of success can

lead to a loss of confidence and a feeling that the student does not belong in the school. Richard Stiggins (1999) explains that “if students are to come to believe in themselves, they must first experience some believable form of academic success as reflected in a real classroom assessment... Even a small success can rekindle a small spark of confidence that, in turn, encourages more trying...” (n.p). For these students, the opportunity to be assessed based on an alternative learning modality is important. Not only does it allow them to feel successful, it can build up a student’s confidence and foster a greater sense of perceived self-worth in the classroom. Research in classroom confidence (cited in Stiggins, 1999) suggests that there is a direct correlation between student success, confidence, and classroom attitude. Evidence from the arts-based projects shows that learning through the arts can provide opportunities for confidence.

Related to the topic of developing confidence and feeling success, Georgia specifically appreciated the opportunity to be assessed based on the way that she wanted to express herself, as opposed to through a proscribed medium. An important distinction she made between her creative project from the study and creative projects she has done for other classes is that in other classes, the teacher will choose a specific medium. The danger for Georgia in this is that “it can be something that you're even weaker at”. Conversely, she says,

in this project where we could do whatever we want; whether it was arts, something on the computer -- audio, music -- whatever, it's just whatever we want. And the fact that you get to take something that we're learning and apply it to something you like, you like doing it way more.

When overly prescriptive, even a creative assignment may become a further stumbling block for the student and an obstacle to feeling successful and demonstrating comprehension. Mason, Steedly and Thormann (2008) argue that the arts allow for students to have greater agency over their choices, which in turn leads to greater success and contentment in the classroom. Georgia's statement suggests that teachers should consider what their goals are and where in the project there can be room for student individuality and freedom of expression. As the variation in student projects suggests, what is a desired medium for one student might not be a desired medium for another. By prescribing the medium that the teacher thinks best for the students, the teacher misses an opportunity for student choice, potentially sacrificing greater engagement with the material. As noted above, teachers need to carefully consider where in the creative projects they can allow for maximum student-centred learning and choice.

### **The Importance of Collaboration**

The fourth theme that emerged in relation to the secondary value of the arts was the importance of collaboration. Two different students put forth the idea that their group's understanding of the topic was deepened as a result of the collaborative process. Hank noted that "you can discuss it, your ideas may be different than someone else's, then you come up with one idea". Hank's keen observation into the nature of positive group work suggests that for some students, group work is an opportunity to collaborate and build together. By piecing different ideas together and building something, two or more students are able to arrive at

something new together. Hank's group experienced an example of 'creating', the highest order of the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001)<sup>20</sup>. In this step on the taxonomy, students arrive at new ideas and ways of thinking and act as designers and inventors. While Hank was the only student to directly link his group's success in creating something new to its collaborative nature, many other groups worked very well together and achieved success as a result of collaboration.

Juliet identified both challenges and opportunities when working in a group. She noticed how "in terms of working in a group, we liked each other's ideas and it was good that we were all really different because we could balance off of each other's ideas and opinions. But also being really different caused conflicts in terms of how things were going to be designed". Like Hank, Juliet valued the opportunity to learn together with someone, and also noticed that there can also be challenges inherent in group work. Learning to work positively with others can lead to rewarding educational and workplace experiences, and the creative projects provided the opportunity to develop those skills.

### **Challenged to Think in New Ways**

The fifth theme that was identified was that students appreciated how the arts challenged them to think in new ways. Aleeza, a very strong student, commented how she is "someone who tests well." She said:

I just do because memorizing is just easy for me. But I'm not creative, so to switch to the creative aspect and play around with it and try and be creative

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<sup>20</sup> This was formerly called synthesis, which was the second highest order in the taxonomy.

is just better for me than just doing what I always do. And there are people who don't test well but who are actually really smart.

As part of his research into multiple intelligences and the way that students learn, Gardner argues that while individuals might be stronger in one particular domain over another, every individual possesses all of the intelligences that have been identified. More importantly, however, is that it is possible to improve or strengthen an intelligence. Being repeatedly exposed to one type of assessment can be difficult for those who are not strong in a given area, but it is equally problematic for those who are strong in that discipline, as they will not have the opportunity to strengthen and hone other, more latent aspects of themselves. Furthermore, Aleeza's comments reflect Kagan's (2009) observation about neuroeducation, where he argued that learning through the arts is not just a different pedagogical approach that challenges students, but that it can in fact build new neural pathways, changing the makeup of students' brains and leading them to think in new ways.

Summer was also appreciative of the fact that the arts pushed her to think differently. She commented,

It was good to have a different way to learn things instead of just sitting in a class and reading off something and to be able to put our own opinions into things. I don't really like it when things are just set square. I like to be able to talk about things and express my opinion and explain why I think a certain way. This gave me a big opportunity to do that.

For students like Summer, tests can at times be boring and do not challenge her to think in new ways. Open-ended assignments like the one completed in class gave

her the chance to consider the text differently and think through material in a new way. Both Summer and Aleeza's comments extend Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sherian's (2013) research on the value of arts-based learning. There, the authors identify specific skills and tools that students gain by being exposed to the arts as those skills that are not practiced in traditional classrooms. This study confirms that the arts offer something different from other learning strategies, while demonstrating that students are aware that the arts offer them the opportunity to develop new skills.

There is another important element to the idea of thinking creatively, which relates to the three goals of education identified by Sir Ken Robinson (2011) as individual, cultural, and economic. Individual goals refer to developing individual talents, cultural goals involve learning about the world, and economic goals revolve around teaching students skills so that they can become financially independent (p. 67). Earlier in his work, Robinson cites IBM's 2010 study of global CEOs. In the report, the interviewed CEOs "overwhelmingly" stated that the "single most important leadership competency for organizations to deal with...is creativity" (p. 12). Creativity, as Robinson points out throughout his book, is not just doing art. Rather it is a complex thought process that can be facilitated by thinking in new ways, and the arts help lead to that type of thinking. Teaching students to think about problems in the world creatively is what future employers want to see in their employees and, more importantly, is a skill that can be used to correct inequalities. This parallels Greene's (2001) belief that creativity allows us "to find new perspectives opening on our lived worlds, the often taken-for-granted realities of



everyday” (p. 82). Creative assignments can afford students more than just opportunities for fun; they can also open up potential to begin thinking in new ways. As Eisner (2002) notes, the arts lead students to “[recognizing] what is personal, distinctive, and even unique about themselves” (p. 44). Teachers have the ability to help students reconceptualize themselves and in turn the world, and the arts are a powerful tool that can aid in this process.

Throughout the interviews and observation phases of the research project, these psychosocial benefits were evident to students. Students were having fun while engaged in higher level thinking tasks. Students learned how to better work with others, be challenged in new ways, retain information for longer spans, and regain confidence. The contents of this chapter represent what the students themselves believe they gained from the arts. While not empirical or quantitative in nature, the qualitative material contained in this chapter shows that students bought into the idea of using the arts and were able to recognize that there are strong academic, creative, and social benefits to this kind of learning. From a pedagogical perspective, having student ‘buy-in’ makes learning easier for the student and teaching easier for the teacher, as the students are more willing to engage in activities and projects. Without being specifically prompted to talk about any of these issues, students were able to comprehend that engaging in the arts was both different and valuable to them in specific and concrete ways.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

This research study began with a desire to understand the cognitive, emotional, and educational benefits offered by arts-based learning for students in Bible studies classrooms. More specifically, through this study I wanted to better understand how the arts facilitate the formation of students' personal associations with biblical text. In order to explore these questions, I conducted practitioner research with two groups of Grade Ten *Tanakh* students during the academic year of 2012-2013. Students completed arts-based projects in groups based on Chapter 12 of the book of Numbers. Students produced a variety of digital, musical, and visual representations and interpretations of the text. Additionally, students were expected to compose a written statement that explained their understanding of the text and described their interpretation. Following the completion of the project, students were interviewed in order to gain insight into their personal motivations and interests about their projects.

Based on the arts-based projects and the interviews, I concluded that students benefited in three ways as a result of learning through the arts. First, the arts facilitated the opportunity for students to craft original insights on the text for a few groups. Second, many students formed personal associations with the text and began thinking about how the text related to their own lives. Third, students expressed that due to creative and collaborative natures of the projects, they gained and honed academic skills that were often not developed in more traditional classroom environments.

## **Significance of the Study and Implications for the Field**

Looking at the data as separate units of information allowed me to identify three distinct themes. When the three themes are viewed as a collective, a deeper understanding of the importance of the study emerges. In the following section, I will address four distinct concepts that demonstrate the significance of the study and the importance of my findings.

**The Value of Emotional Learning.** I have observed in my own school, and in schools that I have visited, that the arts do not play a prominent role in the Jewish studies curriculum. Occasionally, students will have the opportunity to demonstrate some creativity, but rarely will they receive academic credit for their work, nor will the creative work be a substantive part of the learning process. I have been told by some colleagues that they do not know how to properly make use of the arts, while others have said that students in high school won't seriously engage with a creative project. More often, though, I am told that there is no place in high school for creative work because teachers expect a depth of thinking from students that they do not believe could come out of an art project.

One of the major implications of this study, and its significance for Jewish education as a whole, is its emphatic demonstration of how the arts facilitate a different type of learning experience as a direct result of the opportunity to be creative. By learning through the arts, students formed personal and emotional connections to the text, which were not present in their previous *Tanakh* classroom experiences and which makes them a valuable anchor for classroom pedagogy.

In chapter two, I identified an observation by Barry Holtz (2003) where he argued that a fundamental challenge of *Tanakh* education is resolving the tension that exists between the dichotomy of mimetic learning – the formal and prescribed content that students are expected to know - and personal learning – the personal connections that students form with the text based on their own interpretations of the text. The projects that emerged as part of this study demonstrate that the arts can be used as a tool which leads students to both deepen their knowledge of specific texts and competence in Jewish literacy and deepen their personal encounter with Judaism, allowing them to consider the relevance of Jewish texts for their lives.

Like Eisner (2002) who wrote about the arts in general studies and Milgrom (2002) who wrote about the arts and *Tanakh*, I too found that the arts allowed students to concretize their thinking about Jewishness and Jewish texts. I also observed that the arts facilitated the fashioning of new ideas that were directly relatable to students' own lives, and that the emotional learning inherent in the arts was important in facilitating this type of learning. Many of the projects in the study were fashioned from an emotional place, and through the exploration of emotions and feelings in relation to Jewish texts, new insights were born. This study strongly suggests that welcoming the emotions into learning through engagement with the arts can lead to strong knowledge of material and connections with the text.

**Opportunity to Constructively Grapple with Belief in God.** In spite of recent research showing a decline in religious belief among Jews, this study revealed

the serious way in which the participants were open and interested in directly addressing God and God's role in their lives. Holtz (2003) argues that a challenge that students face when learning the Torah is that God means different things to different students, some of whom might not believe in God or the power that God has in the text. The arts offer students an opportunity to formulate or clarify their own conceptions of God without the teacher directing them towards a particular opinion. In a classroom where there is freedom for students to create without fear of reprimand or scorn, the arts can be a powerful vehicle for exploring God's role in the world and how students wrestle with His presence in their lives.

**Finding a place in Jewish textual tradition.** Learning through the arts allowed students to become biblical commentators and to craft their own insights about ancient text. This allowed students to place themselves on a continuum of Jewish textual tradition, and to see that their ideas were not always so different from Jews who studied the same texts and predated them by hundreds of years. This led students to gain new appreciation for traditional text, while also interacting with the text in a way that encouraged them to think about the world in a new way. Jewish studies teachers, even in schools that do not want their students to challenge the authority of the text, can make use of the arts as a vehicle for helping students think about their place in the transmission of Torah from one generation to another. Through this, the students can act as contemporary biblical commentators, extending and applying their insights to address problems they identify in the world today.

**The student's voice in the educational experience.** As part of the interview process, students reflected on the educational value of learning through the arts. With minimal prompting and no specific suggestions provided, students identified specific skills and learning values that they found when using arts in the classroom. This suggests that students have an understanding of different pedagogical methodologies and also understand what type of learning environment can be conducive to their development. Students were able to clearly express how the arts enhanced their learning experience and why the arts should be a regular occurrence in their schooling because of the different skills and thinking patterns the arts offered.

### **Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Studies**

I believe that the results in the study are replicable in other environments. In particular, my results should speak to teachers who are of the belief that the arts are valuable and offer students something unique in the classroom. The role of the teacher in the classroom must be an important consideration when evaluating the study. One area for further investigation, which was not adequately discussed in this paper, is to what extent the teacher's commitment to the arts and pedagogical approach to learning in general affect the way that students approached the idea of arts-based learning. My starting assumption as the teacher in this study was that using the arts is a valuable and important pedagogical tool in the classroom. It is unlikely that teachers who are negative or dismissive of the arts would be able to create an atmosphere in which creative expression is valued. Researchers would be

wise to consider ways to evaluate a cohort of various teachers who make use of the arts in order to fully determine the role that an educator, and a supportive administrative team, plays in determining student buy-in.

A second important limitation of the study is my role as a researcher-practitioner. While I did my best to ensure that students evaluated the learning process and their own understanding of the text, it is impossible to know for sure whether their responses were shaped by their relationship to me, as my students. I cannot know whether their answers were exaggerated by a desire to make the study more successful or to please me, and future studies should keep this in mind as a limitation on qualitative practitioner studies. One indication that their answers were genuine, however, is three data samples (projects, written responses, and interviews) all independently showed similar results. The fact that the interviews were fairly consistent in their validation of the importance of the arts and what they offered in relation to thinking about text suggests to me that the students did not simply answer the way they thought I wanted them to.

A third limitation to the study is its lack of information on the lasting impact of the project on Jewish learning and text appreciation. The study covered a relatively short period in the life of the students, and learning through the arts may or may not be done again in their future schooling. In the classroom, the arts certainly were important and transformative in the way that students understood text, but it is impossible to know whether their insights will fade or whether they will influence future decision making. Longitudinal studies that track how students retain information differently when learning through the arts would be useful for

investigating this issue. In terms of whether students will remember their projects, I am struck by how many of the students, now in grade twelve, and students from previous years, still talk to me about their projects unsolicited, and how many others, are able to remember their work when prompted. This suggests that at least some students do remember their work, and that the learning endures.

### **Lasting Impressions**

When I began the study, I was unsure about what the results would indicate. I felt fairly confident that the study would find that the arts are valuable to students, but I was unsure in what ways. Similarly, I did not know whether students themselves felt that the arts were valuable, or whether this would simply feel like another assignment to complete for another teacher. Now that the study is finished, and over a year has passed, I am more confident than I was when the project began about the transformative value that the arts can play in Jewish education. The arts offer students something unique and different from the standard high school curriculum. Through the arts, students in Jewish studies have the opportunity to explore invented worlds and tackle issues that are relevant and personal to their own Jewish selves. The arts let students envision solutions to the problems that they see in the world around them, like racism or gossiping, and lead them to hopefully take the next steps towards solving them. When learning through the arts, students are able to consider what Jewish texts mean to them, and how to synthesize them with their own lives. The arts promote creative thinking, collaboration and discussion about Judaism and Jewish life. The arts vary the curricular instruction



and allow motivated and interested students to creatively engage with Jewish text study. The arts facilitate new interpretations of text that are relevant and pertinent to Jewish life today. The arts can release students from inhibitions and mental blocks and allow them to see problems and solutions in new ways. In sum, the arts offer students a gateway to explore the emotional sides of their Jewish selves and of Judaism in vibrant and rich ways. Creative arts should be integrated into curricula by teachers who want their students to critically engage with text-to-self, text-to-text and text-to-world models of pedagogy in order to consider the world in a wholly new way.

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## Appendix A - Course Syllabus

### **HRE2 – Grade Ten Tanakh**

**Teacher** – Mr. Reingold – [mreingold@tanenbaumchat.org](mailto:mreingold@tanenbaumchat.org)

**Course description** – Together we will be studying the fourth book of the Torah, *Bamidbar*. There are three main goals for the course (which will be intersecting together all of the time). They are:

1. Learning the material in-depth and appreciating the nuances and subtleties in the text
  2. Asking questions about what we can learn from the text and how it can impact our lives today
  3. Continuing to build our vocabulary and reading skills of Biblical Hebrew
- We will also be learning about what the Torah is and the ‘big picture’ of what takes place in the Torah. The class will be very interactive with a lot of discussion opportunities for you to reflect on the material.

**Course Book:** *Mikraot Gedolot Sefer Bamidbar* (bring this every day)

#### **Evaluation:**

1. Tests (30%) – 3 tests (one will be a creative project)
2. Final Summative Task (30%) – Year end project that will reflect on everything learned over the year
3. *Tanakh* blog (15%) – You will be placed in a blog-group with students from your class and the other class using our class website and blogger. At the beginning of the month I will post a question to your blog group. You will respond to the question by the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month. You will also respond to **at least** one other person from your blog groups post on the topic and comment on it. The idea of this assignment is to create cross-class dialogue, extend classroom conversations, and discuss *Tanakh*. You are encouraged to respond more to each other.
4. Performance Tasks (15%) – Small assessments based on material learned over the course of the year – lowest will be dropped
5. Observation/Conversation (10% (5/5)) – Contributions to in-class discussion and homework as assigned.

#### **Classroom Expectations**

For each lesson (unless otherwise told) you are to bring your notebook/binder, our course reader, pens/pencils and boys will have their heads covered

It is not my goal to lecture for three hours a week (that would be boring); you are expected to contribute to the classroom discussion regularly as it will make it more interesting for you and you will learn more. 10% doesn’t seem like much now, but it can be the difference between the grade you want and the grade you have.

You are expected to raise your hand when you want to contribute to the classroom discussion



Insults and disrespect towards myself or your peers will not be tolerated at any point during a lesson

You are expected to be in class on time; if you are late, you will need to sign in to the office. If the door is closed, that is your clue that you are late. **Do not enter to put your bag down.**

Much of the learning in our class will be based on spontaneous discussions and therefore it is very important that you attend class as you **will** miss material if you are away. Should you need to be away for any reason, speak with a friend about what was missed and have your attendance sheet signed before class and show it to me when class begins

Quizzes will not be a regular occurrence but when they do happen they will assess material based on the previous two classes. When homework is assigned, expect for it to be checked

I am extremely quick at responding to emails, it is the best way to get in touch with me

Tests and assignments will be returned promptly. I will **not** discuss mark changes with you in class (aside from addition errors). If you feel an error has taken place, you are to submit in **writing** explaining your reasoning for additional marks with your original assignment

If I see you use your cell phone, I will take it away and you will need to claim it from the attendance and discipline office. There will be no discussion on the matter so please do not use your phone in class. At the same time, I am not a tyrant. If a matter is urgent, please speak to me at the beginning of class and inform me that “something is going on” and that you will need to answer your phone. I do not need to know the details as you are entitled to your privacy.

As maturing Grade Ten students, you are all capable of making correct decisions about going to the bathroom and leaving the room. If you need to go to the bathroom, discreetly walk out of the room. I trust you to make good choices and to become aware when it is appropriate to leave the class and when it is not. If I see that you are misusing this privilege, you will need to ask permission to leave the room.

You will get out of the course what you invest; I am looking forward to having a fun year of good learning with all of you and getting to know you throughout the year!

## **Appendix B – Creative Test Assignment**

### **Task:**

You and a maximum of three partners will work closely Chapter 12 and all of the commentaries studied. Choosing a pasuk or a series of psukim and at least one commentary studied (more may be used!), you are to create an artistic interpretation of the text. Your work must include some Hebrew and some type of inclusion of contemporary society (i.e. bring yourselves, in some way, into your work). You are also to include an artists' statement explaining a) what you have created, b) how you understand the text (motivations of the characters, the visualizations, etc.) and what your commentary is. You will also submit a project outline describing your project and the materials you will need to successfully complete the project.

I am not interested in limiting your creative abilities. I am open to any type of creative project including (but not limited to): comic book, paintings, song, video, digital product, poems, statues of lego, movie poster, video games etc. I will make available to you paper, pencil crayons, crayons, glue, scissors, markers. Anything else you are on your own for. I encourage you to work to your strengths and to take this seriously. Your product does not even need to be 'handed in' if that is limiting but I will need in some way a copy of it.

### **In-Class Time and Pacing:**

Each class will have at 5 classes to work on this in-class. This is *not* an assignment that should be completed in one day. It requires planning and implementation and some out of class work. It is the equivalent of a test. Following the submission of all of the assignments, we will have a share day where we can view each other's work.

### **Potential topics include, but are not limited to:**

Tzaraat  
 Waiting for Miriam  
 God's anger  
 'Isha Kushit  
 Prophecy hogging  
 Gossip  
 Aaron acknowledging responsibility

### **Appendix C - Qualitative Interview Questions**

1. What do you value about your Judaism?
2. What have you created in your project?
3. Where do you see yourself in this project? In what ways does it represent you?
4. What challenges did you have in creating your work?
5. How do you think learning through the arts is different than other ways of learning in class (instruction and assessment)?
6. What did you learn about the text based on the project?
7. What did you learn that is important to you Jewishly / that is important to the way you see your Jewishness / that is important to your Jewish identity?

Appendix D - Additional Pages from the 'Burn Book'

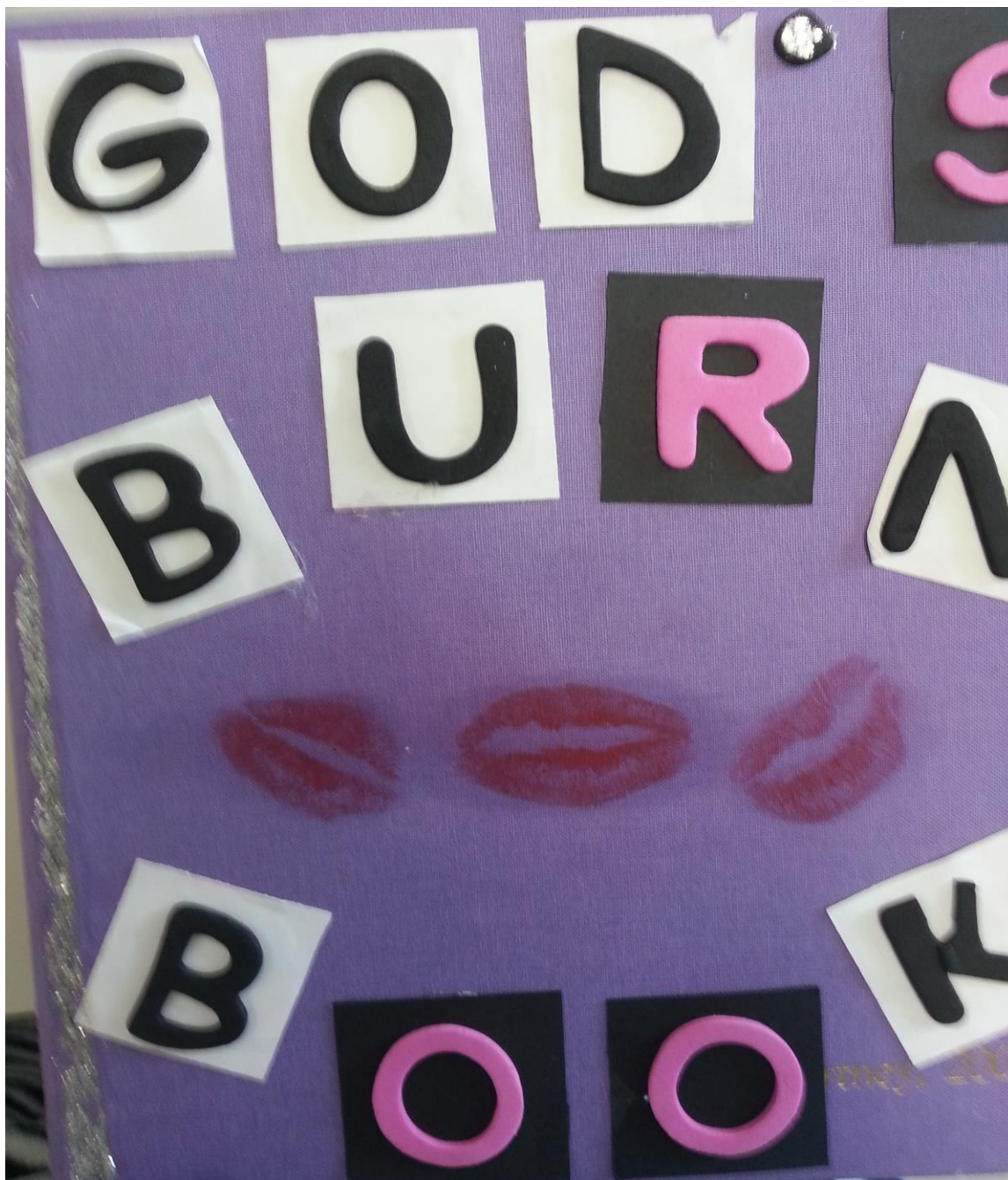


Figure 7 – Cover page of 'Burn Book'

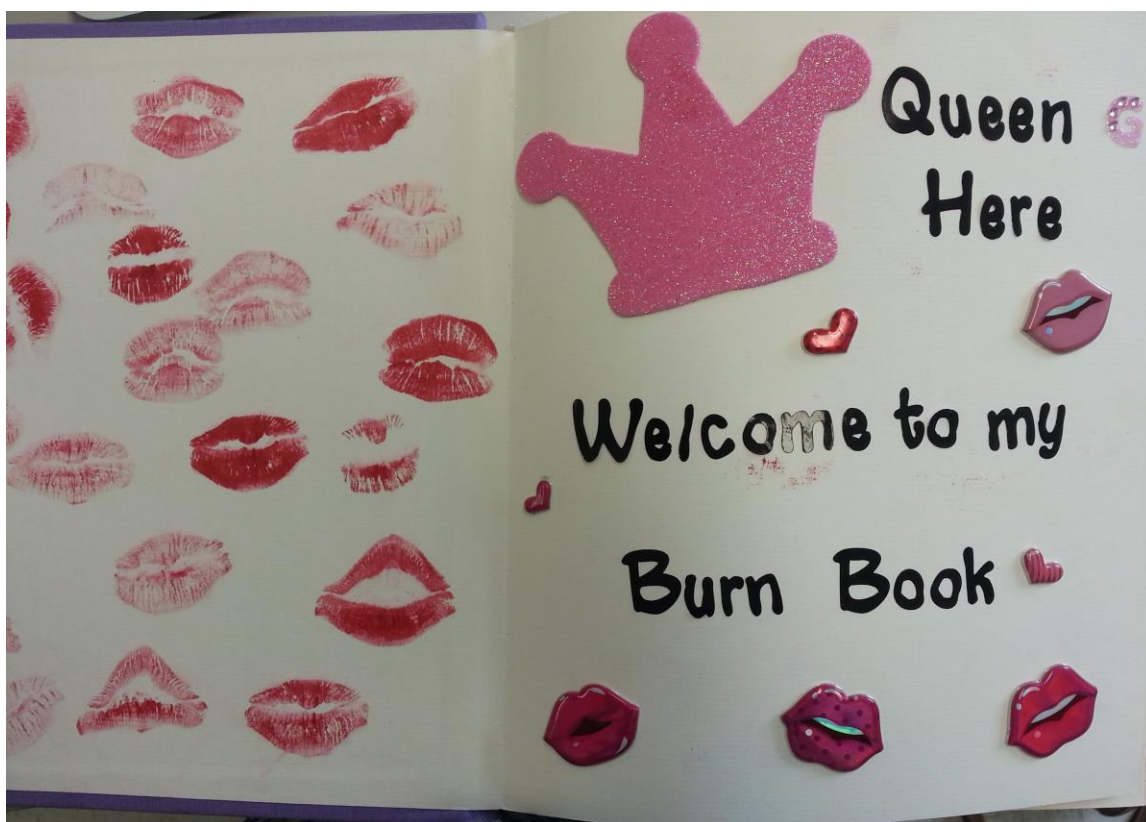


Figure 8 – First pages of 'Burn Book'

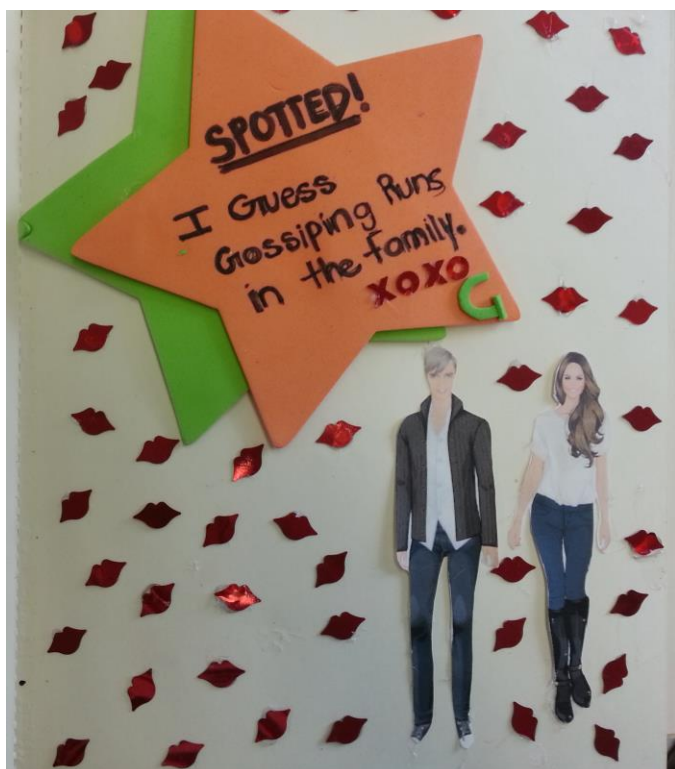


Figure 9 – Aaron and Miriam talking



Figure 10 – Miriam talking about Moses and his wife

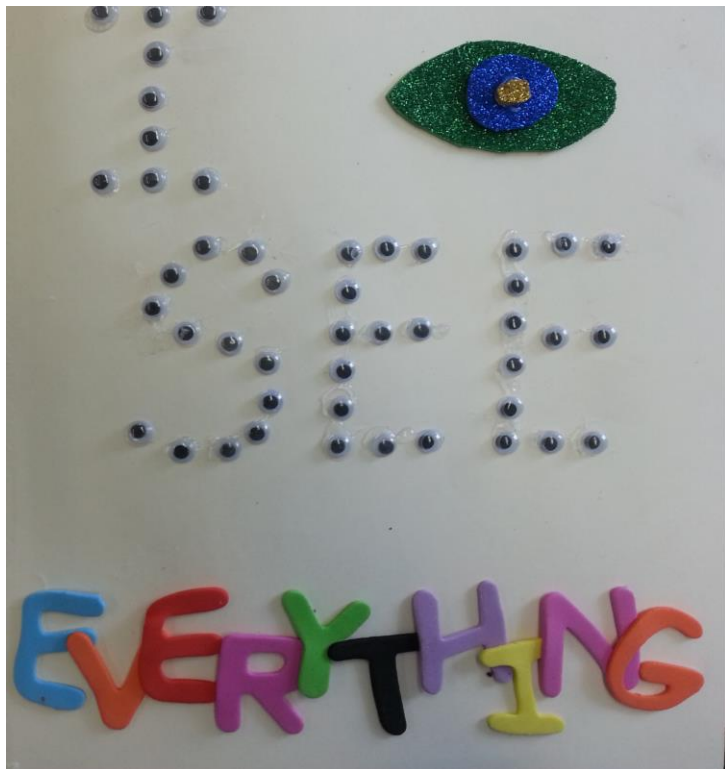


Figure 11 – God’s power. Note the use of googly-eyes



Figure 12 – Depiction of Moses' wife.



Figure 13- God challenging Miriam. The broken crown is an image taken from the film *Mean Girls*.

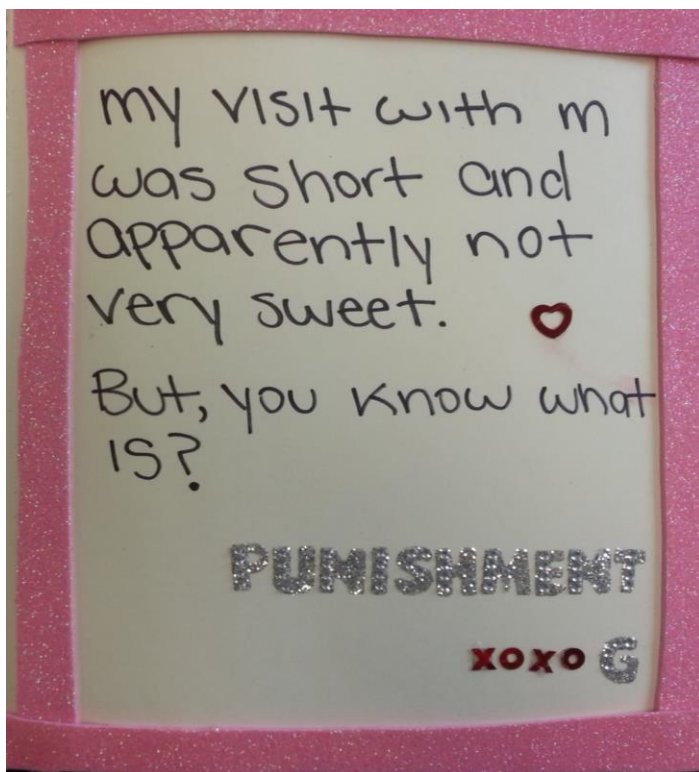


Figure 14 – God acting vindictively

Figure 15 – Miriam's punishment and God gloating. Note the use of the broken mirror that brings the reader into the narrative.

