

Beit Midrash in Motion

BEIT MIDRASH IN MOTION'S approach to Jewish learning was inspired by the phrase from the Friday night prayer, *Lekhah Dodi*, "*Rav Lakh Shevet*," "for too long have you been sitting." Perhaps we have been sitting while studying for too long and it is now time to arise within our batei midrashot, and move.



"That is precisely my dream!" exclaimed Rachel. "How were you able to discern and depict it so clearly for me?"

Rachel was in the midst of an alternative Jewish learning experience, a *Beit Midrash in Motion* workshop. This particular session was designed to invite participants to reflect deeply on their personal dreams and aspirations, hopes and fears, all through the clarifying lens of Jewish text study. Guided by the process, Rachel had experienced an epiphany about her innermost self—about her dreams that had been present all along but had never been understood or expressed.

What happened during that ninety-minute workshop?

Following a free-flowing warm up, Rachel and her fellow participants experienced a guided-meditation that challenged them to reflect upon their deepest desires without the distractions of any practical impediments. Initially, Rachel struggled. Getting in touch with herself proved vastly more challenging than she had anticipated. Rachel was subsequently asked to share her thoughts with a partner who would translate them into a series of movements to express the dream. Rachel was stumped and could barely complete the activity.

DALIA DAVIS is the founder of Beit Midrash in Motion (www.BeitMidrashInMotion.com), and the Artistic Director of La'ad Dance. Dalia was a Meorot Fellow and during the program she met her husband Rabbi Max Davis (YCT '08). Dalia also teaches for the Florence Melton Adult Mini School, is a NYC Presentense Fellow, serves as the Jewish Educator at the Springfield JCC, and is the dance educator for the Cornerstone Program for the Foundation for Jewish Summer Camp.

However, as the workshop continued with movement, meditation, and text study, the pair developed a unique bond. This connection enabled Rachel's partner to perceive her dream and create a dance that resonated deeply with Rachel, bringing her to a place of raw emotion and self-awareness. Ultimately, Rachel would add her 'dream dance' to her morning routine as a reminder to recognize and pursue her dreams.

Although this experience may resemble something from a dance therapy studio, it actually occurred in a Beit Midrash, albeit an alternative Beit Midrash. There were no tables, no chairs, and little time engaged in the traditional posture of a yeshiva—sitting. *Yeshiva*—*place of sitting*, is a word used to connote a place of Jewish learning. Sitting with heads bowed over texts, interpreting and analyzing with our minds, are integral aspects of traditional Jewish learning. By calling our places of learning "sitting," we express a belief that the ideal way to learn is to put one's body to rest and to activate one's mind. Although this form of learning has been the mainstay of Jewish learning for centuries, it does not always achieve the goal of creating an emotional connection between the learner and the text. Alternative approaches are necessary for those who struggle to sit and focus for extended periods of time. Even those who are able to thrive in highly cerebral yeshiva environments are subject to inadvertently becoming emotionally detached from the texts they study. The challenges and thrills of *chopping a sugyah* (comprehending a text) may overwhelm other sentiments that ought to accompany such studies.

Beit midrash, like 'yeshiva,' connotes a place of Jewish study. However, its meaning, *house of interpretation*, leaves itself open to precisely that—interpretation. Beit Midrash in Motion is a house of interpretation that engages many of the same talmudic, midrashic, and biblical texts that one finds in a traditional yeshiva, but does so through movement and meditation alongside text study. The goal of approaching Jewish learning in this non-traditional way is to create a deeper connection with text by means of a fully embodied experience.

How does movement connect people with text? Movement allows us to muster latent feelings and ideas less prone to surfacing when our bodies are at rest. Our adrenaline flows, our heart pumps, our walls come down, and our soul opens as we express ourselves through movement. In the *Aish Kodesh*, which was written while in the Warsaw Ghetto, Rav Kalonymus Kalman Shapira discusses a similar phenomenon about the power of vocalization. He posits that the "the voice (is) more capable of arousing the soul than the intellect."¹ Beit Midrash in Motion is based on the premise that this is true not only of speech and song, but also of movement; that movement too can

arouse the soul in ways not necessarily possible by means of the intellect alone. With this goal of inviting the soul into one's learning, Beit Midrash in Motion creates movement explorations to express the specific themes of each text. These 'explorations' invite participants to create, play, express, or explore, placing them in particular situations that evoke emotions similar to those present in the text.

To illustrate, consider Rachel's discovery of a deeper personal connection with the workshop text, Sanhedrin 98a. The text features Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi inquiring hopefully, though not expectantly, of Elijah if he could ever meet the Messiah. Rabbi Yehoshua seems surprised when he is immediately granted the opportunity to fulfill his dream. Rachel was taken aback when given the opportunity to see her dream in movement. Rav Yehoshua then discovers the Messiah in a most unexpected place, among the lepers. Similarly, through study and movement, Rachel found her dream revealed in a most unexpected place—the interpretive movements of her workshop companion whom she had never met before. At the close of the workshop, Rachel remarked that she had learned this text before, but had never understood its relevance to her life. Now, however, the movement explorations and personal reflection opportunities afforded her a deeper connection with the text and a clearer understanding of herself.

In addition to Rachel's improved understanding of herself and ability to relate to the text, research indicates that Rachel's intellectual abilities were also stimulated by her movements. Current research in the field of education supports the notion that movement enhances the intellectual learning process. According to educator Eric Jensen:

For decades, the educational and scientific communities seemed to believe that thinking was thinking and movement was movement, and each was as separate as could be. Maverick scientists envisioned links between thinking and movement. . . . [There are] strong connections between physical education, movement, breaks, recess, energizing activities, and improved cognition. It demonstrates that movement can be an effective cognitive strategy to (1) strengthen learning, (2) improve memory and retrieval, and (3) enhance learner motivation and morale.²

By including movement in the Torah learning process we have the opportunity to improve the quality of our information absorption and retention.

Although any type of movement can help stimulate the brain, Beit Midrash in Motion's approach to movement is quite intentional. It is not an exercise class. Rather, its movement explorations incorporate meditation and guided imagery. During these opportunities for personal reflection, par-

ticipants are invited to envision particular situations in their past, present or future lives pertinent to the text. These visions are the bases for the movement sequences they create. The sequences developed in the beit midrash are honest, thoughtful, and deeply personal interpretations of Jewish text. They are, essentially, visual commentaries on ancient texts.

Regardless of whether the movement created in such workshops becomes performance art or never leaves the beit midrash, the creative process can be a form of revelation. The movements function as a commentary on text in conversation with other traditional and alternative commentaries. As Rabbi Avi Katz Orlow writes in an article about experiential education:

Revelation is not limited to something that might or might not have happened long ago at Sinai; it is something that is happening in the learning experience itself today. Textual learning is integrated in and is a manifestation of the relationships in our lives. In this context, all learners can access and feel ownership over Jewish Text.³

By allowing participants to create and interpret, they are integrated into the dynamic discussion of the text. Rachel had such a revelation during her workshop. She realized that Rabbi Yehoshua's experience need not seem foreign or antiquated. Rather, he was a teacher whose message was directly relevant to her life and from whom she could glean insight.

One final essential aspect of Beit Midrash in Motion is its communal nature. Workshops create bonds between participants who move, think, and bare their souls together. This experience can bring healing and comfort that is enhanced by the community of participants. One participant commented that she had come seeking an opportunity to learn Torah and exercise, but left with the addition of some wonderful parenting advice gleaned from other participants. Yeshivot and batei midrash are typically communal and noisy places, suffused with the din of discussion, debate, and communal study. The Beit Midrash in Motion din is one of clapping and stomping, music and breathing, bodies in motion and heartfelt discussions that build and nourish essential interpersonal bonds.

Rav lakh shevet b'emek habakhah—We sit too much. We sit for too long in the valley of tears—and the sitting does not seem to help. Perhaps if we can arise, if we could learn to move—to engage Torah with mind, body, and soul—perhaps we might achieve the *hemlah*, the merciful healing, that is mentioned in the conclusion of the sentence. *Rav Lach Shevet be'emek ha'backhah V'Hu yahamol alayikh hemlah*. For too long have you been sitting in the valley of tears, and He will mercifully bring you compassionate healing.

NOTES

1. HaGaon Rav Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, *Chovas HaTalmidim (The Students' Obligation)* (New York: Feldheim, 2010), 163-164 (found in *Ayeka* Facilitator Training resource guide).
2. Eric Jensen, *Teaching with the Brain in Mind* (2nd ed.), Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/104013/chapters/Movement-and-Learning.aspx>.
3. Rabbi Avi Katz Orlow, "Excellence in Experiential Jewish Education," Foundation for Jewish Camp, 2, <http://blog.jtsa.edu/reframe/2013/05/21/excellence-in-experiential-jewish-education/>