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## **“You Shall Tell Your Sons!” Studying the Bible by an Ancient Method**

1. Orality versus Textuality in Teaching – 2. The Role of Narrating in the Construction of Cultural Memory – 3. Suggestion: Storytelling in the Classrooms

We hear time and again that teachers are increasingly facing challenges in the classroom. These challenges are manifold. First, the key issue is related to the content: What is important for the future of the young? Second, how to teach in order to attract the attention of students and to sustain it until the end of the lesson? Moreover, what and how to teach so to keep the students focused with the material, to convince them to open their notebooks at home, to prepare their homework and most importantly, to acquire the desired knowledge that “adults”, namely, teachers and parents assess essential for them. Next to these, the young ask frequently the question of why should one learn certain things (by heart) wasting precious time when everything is constantly available on the internet? To put it simply, what is the purpose of teaching and learning in the classrooms if all the information is always at hand thanks to the internet and smartphones? Without doubt, the classical school system which expects students to read and interpret text independently is not so attractive in the schools anymore. Even in higher education, first we need to help the eighteen year olds, i.e., the first year BA students to acquire the essential reading and learning techniques and only afterwards in the second semester, we can start the “real” academic work. Moreover, one might be surprised by the fact that some theology students are facing serious problems with the reading and comprehension of simple biblical text, not speaking about exegesis.

It should be added, however, that on the one hand, the biblical texts are products of the ancient world which is far from the contemporary reader and the faith in itself is not enough to bridge this historical, social and theological gap. Moreover, we should not forget that difficulties to understand ancient text can also be related to the changed education and the social influences the current generations are exposed to. For instance, current generations experience far more stimuli from numerous sources of information compared to ancient societies. Additionally, they are much more focused on images than words which inevitably leads to a lower ability to concentrate on verbal exposé. As regards being fully aware of the differences between the ancient and contemporary generations of students, I carefully address the problem of understanding biblical texts. Without running into a hasty comparison between the problems of reading biblical texts in ancient Israel and contemporary societies, I would like to highlight that the Bible required interpretations from the very beginning of production and transmission of the Holy Scriptures. It suffices to refer to the inner-biblical exegesis which highlights that later authors and scribes interpreted the older textual material for their contemporary audience (e.g., Ezekiel 20; 23)<sup>1</sup>. To this issue belongs the Septuagint, i.e., the famous Greek translation of the Bible which meant to transfer the Jewish cultural heritage to the Greek-speaking communities who did not have the sufficient Hebrew knowledge to understand the Bible<sup>2</sup>. The Aramaic Targums served the same purpose: reading, translating and interpreting the Scriptures for the Aramaic-speaking Jewish communities<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, the Qumran community should be highlighted who dedicated enormous effort to the collection, interpretation and transmission of the biblical

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the notion “inner-biblical interpretation” see further Michael A. Fishbane. 1985. *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*. Oxford: Clarendon. Michael A. Fishbane. 1996. Inner-Biblical Exegesis. In *Hebrew Bible, Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*. Ed. Magne Saebø, 33–48. Vol. 1. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. Michael A. Fishbane. 1986. Inner-Biblical Exegesis: Types and Strategies of Interpretation in Ancient Israel. In *Midrash and Literature*. Ed. Geoffrey Hartman, Sanford Budick, 19–37. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. Michael A. Fishbane. 1998. The Hebrew Bible and Exegetical Tradition. In *Intertextuality in Ugarit and Israel: Papers Read at the Tenth Joint Meeting of The Society for Old Testament Study and Het Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap in Nederland En België*. Ed. Johannes Cornelis de Moor, 15–30. Leiden – Boston – Köln: Brill. Dalit Rom-Shiloni. 2005. “Facing Destruction and Exile: Inner-Biblical Exegesis in Jeremiah and Ezekiel”. *Zeitschrift für Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 117 : 189–205. Ottília Lukács. 2020. *Sabbath in the Making: A Study of the Inner-Biblical Interpretation of the Sabbath Commandment*. Leuven – Paris – Bristol: Peeters, 35–39.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance: Martin Rösel. 2012. Translators as Interpreters: Scriptural Interpretation in the Septuagint. In *A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism*. Ed. Matthias Henze, 64–91. Grand Rapids, Michigan – Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance: Edward M. Cook. 2012. The Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in the Targums. In *A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism*. Ed. Matthias Henze, 92–117. Grand Rapids, Michigan – Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

materials<sup>4</sup>. The final example in this regard is the rabbinic interpretation of the Scriptures, e.g., the Midrash literature<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, the biblical courses do not belong to the easiest material of the theology. Hence, teaching and studying the Bible is not an easy task for anyone, especially not for the young who are growing up in a world of social media and high-technology.

## 1. Orality *versus* Textuality in Teaching

This paper does not intend to discuss the cliché that we are living in a rapidly changing and developing society. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile referring briefly to what actually this cliché means in the context of contemporary schooling. Students belong to the first generation to be born in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (2000–2010), namely Generation Alpha who are growing up with access to smart TVs, laptops, tablets, smartphones, and since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, almost entirely a daily routine spent in the virtual world: in online classrooms, meetings with friends and family members on well-known social media platforms. Therefore, instead of discussing the effects of COVID-19 on the schools, we offer an approach to teaching the Bible for the Alpha Generation in the real-classroom in the “post-COVID” era. Against this background, I attempt to describe the current situation with the so-called “needs” of the children in classrooms, considering with complete awareness the limits of the present paper, too.

As mentioned above, we spend a huge amount of time in the virtual world which has multiplied since the beginning of the corona-crisis to the detriment of a more profound joy of reading. Our electronic devices and the social media which is initially meant to serve the needs of humanity and contribute to development, makes us “users”. Although the term “user” does not sound negative at first sight, it is worth mentioning that in English, it is used either in the context of drug addiction or for the users of the internet, including social media<sup>6</sup>. A recent documentary on

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance: Bilhah Nitzan. 2012. The Continuity of Biblical Interpretation in the Qumran Scrolls and Rabbinic Literature. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Ed. Timothy H. Lim, John J. Collins, 337–350. Oxford: Oxford University Press. See also: Aharon Shemesh. 2012. Biblical Exegesis and Interpretation Form Qumran to the Rabbis. In *A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism*. Ed. Matthias Henze, 467–489. Grand Rapids, Michigan – Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

<sup>5</sup> In this regard see for instance: Jacob Neusner. 1998. *Invitation to Midrash: A Teaching Book*. Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 21ff. H.L. Strack, Günter Stemberger. 1991. *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*. Trans. Markus Bockmuehl. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 8–44; 233–246.

<sup>6</sup> To its synonyms belong the following terms: buyer, consumer, purchaser, client etc.

the Netflix streaming service, *The Social Dilemma*<sup>7</sup> highlights the dangers of sharing massive personal information on social media as well as exploring how quickly it can get the new generations, especially the Generation Alpha addicted. Searching for and sharing information in itself is not a problem. The real danger starts with the way and how these children do this without having a real experience of reading and learning or evaluating the different information they find online.

Moreover, it is a widely known fact that almost without exception, social media users tend to read less shared articles or longer texts, nor longer posts. They focus merely on short messages, on key words but they do not tend to read long texts with elaborated arguments. Facebook, Twitter and especially Instagram underlines this observation as well. This is even more visible from the growing popularity of vlogs which took over the place of blogs, because in the latter one does not need to read at all. Closely related to these, and similarly dangerous is the new career and/or vocation of “vlogger”, “youtuber” or simply “influencer”<sup>8</sup> whose main activity consists of collecting as many “followers” as possible. This again reflects the very essence of the new phenomenon the “old-school-people” are facing and almost unable to take seriously: an influencer usually runs a vlog sharing only short podcasts, videos or pictures with which one intends to influence one’s followers. Needless to say, in the large majority of the cases, influencers are not experts neither do they belong to the highly educated and intellectual people – with notable exceptions – nevertheless, they influence and shape their followers’ thoughts. Thus, they define the new generations’ way of thinking while teachers try to teach and give some values in the classroom.

Therefore, we can formulate our main question as follows: What and how can we teach those children socialised in the above-presented way? Despite such difficulties, I am of the opinion that teaching biblical text can still be achieved smoothly. This is due to the simple fact that before the written form of textual transmission, biblical texts worked with memory recall, namely, they were transmitted orally by the ancient “influencers” called prophets, teachers, masters. The scribal society who was responsible for the textual production and reception of ancient biblical text (i.e., written transmission), appeared somewhat later<sup>9</sup>. For instance, the ba-

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<sup>7</sup> *The Social Dilemma*: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11464826/> (2020.11.20).

<sup>8</sup> It is beyond our purpose to discuss separately the roles and characteristics of the listed new vocation, therefore, for the sake of simplicity we consider them as synonyms.

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed discussion about the appearance of writing in ancient Israel and the emergence of Hebrew as part of linguistic nationalism, see William M. Schniedewind. 2013. *A Social History of Hebrew Its Origins through the Rabbinic Period*. New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 62–97; 117–124; 126–138. William M. Schniedewind. 2005. *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel*. Cambridge: University Press, 91–138.

sic meanings of the Hebrew term *Torah*/תורה – “teaching”, “instruction” underline an oral collection behind the present form of the textual tradition. Moreover, the noun *torah* comes from the root *yrh*/ירה – “to instruct” which presupposes an orally transmitted teaching. In this regard, W.M. Schniedewind highlights that the noun *torah* is widely used in this way not only in the Pentateuch but also in the entire Hebrew Bible. He argues further that even the revelation at Sinai (Ex 19–31) as it is presented in the covenant making narrative, apparently, reflects an oral tradition. And only a later tradition introduced the notion of writing (cf. Ex 24)<sup>10</sup>. No doubt, the oral and written transmissions of the biblical text went hand-in-hand before the canonization and even afterwards<sup>11</sup>. Obviously in this regard, the large majority of the biblical texts bear signs of an ongoing process of widely oral recitations<sup>12</sup>, e.g., Psalm 24 is written in the form of a dialogue. At this point, it is important to mention D.M. Carr’s argument that there is a strong connection between the orality and writing:

The visual representation of such texts [i.e., irrespective of Sumero-Akkadian cuneiform system, hieratic/hieroglyph Egyptian texts or alphabetic systems like those found at Phoenicia, Ugarit and Israel, which requires already the master of “word image”] presupposed that the reader knew the given text and had probably memorized it to some extent. (...) such written copies were a subsidiary part of a much broader literate matrix, where the focus was as much or more on the transmission of texts from mind to mind as on transmission of texts in written form. Both writing and oral performance fed into the process of indoctrination/education/enculturation<sup>13</sup>.

Without entering the debates of biblical textuality’s and transmission’s origins or the beginnings of biblical text silent reading, I would like to focus on the question of what made the ancient storytelling successful? What did those texts mean for the ancient scribes, teachers so they put an enormous effort in sharing and later writing, copying them? We can simply ask: For what reason do we consider a story or a narrative “good”? By answering this question, we can get closer to the ancient authors, storytellers, prophets, and teachers.

<sup>10</sup> Schniedewind. 2005. *How the Bible Became a Book*, 119–134.

<sup>11</sup> Here, it suffices to refer to the translations of biblical books, e.g., the Greek Septuagint, the large number of apocryphal books, the collections of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other documents found in the Judean desert.

<sup>12</sup> David McLain Carr. 2009. *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature*. New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 4.

<sup>13</sup> McLain Carr. 2009. *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*, 5.

We can agree that those biblical stories can be assessed as “good” which are thought-provoking and enough to motivate and influence us. The biblical narratives, especially those that elaborate a dilemma are able to affect, impress and influence our way of thinking, shaping in this way our personality and way of life. It is enough to mention a couple of examples of dilemma-narratives to illustrate what we consider a “good” story, namely, a fine literary composition which despite its provocative character, it is unproblematic for contemporary readers: the narrative of Eden, the story of Job – the righteous one who was almost unbearably tested by God. Similarly, the New Testament, especially the parables of Jesus work with similar tensions and dilemmas, e.g., the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan. It might happen that the similarity between the Old and New Testament narratives are not obvious at first sight, nevertheless, the way of passing on these stories is undeniably similar: they were told and retold time and again obeying to the biblical command: “You shall tell your sons!”<sup>14</sup>

In the societies of ancient Israel, storytelling was not merely a nice way to spend time with the children. It was rather the key means of passing on the tradition, religious teaching in order to shape and form the cultural and religious identity of the community. We should not ascribe, however, this way of teaching and sharing of communal values simply to the large illiteracy of the ancient societies<sup>15</sup>. On the contrary, telling stories, especially the myths of origins, like the exodus narrative for the Jewish people belonged to the formation of the cultural and religious identity. As J. Assmann remarks:

Cultural memory refers to one of the exterior dimensions of the human memory, which initially we tend to think of as purely internal (...). However, the contents of this memory, the ways in which they are organized, and the length of time they last are for the most part not a matter of internal storage or control but of the external conditions imposed by society and cultural context<sup>16</sup>.

Assmann calls this type of remembering the “foundational memory”<sup>17</sup> because it builds on the shared past of a community in order to shape its present, i.e., the

<sup>14</sup> Ex 10,2; 12,26-28; 13,14; Dt 6,20-25

<sup>15</sup> The letter of a literate soldier from the early 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE can serve an example for the literacy present in the society of Judah. For a more detailed discussion of this letter and its relationship to the illiteracy/literacy see further Schniedewind. 2013. *A Social History of Hebrew Its Origins through the Rabbinic Period*, 105–110; 122ff. Schniedewind. 2005. *How the Bible Became a Book*, 102ff. Michael L. Satlow. 2015. *How the Bible Became Holy*. Bognor Regis: Yale University Press, 50.

<sup>16</sup> Jan Assmann. 2011. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge: University Press, 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

community’s actual socio-political and religious situation. By using the past to interpret and understand the present situation, the foundational memory forms the community’s future as well<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, foundational memory is inevitably selective. In other words, it selects several aspects or segments of the past that should be protected because they serve as bases for the community’s self-understanding. This process of “remembering” conserves those elements of the past that should not be forgotten under any circumstances. To put it simple, the foundational memory preserves the past as it is remembered and not how it happened. The selected and recalled events of the past reaffirm the group’s self-image and identity time and again. This remembrance, however, does not happen spontaneously within a community rather it is a matter of conscious distribution under the control of special carriers who takes the responsibility to transmit the collective and cultural memories, such as priests, teachers, scribes, scholars<sup>19</sup> or prophets. Here again, we should refer to Carr’s work who argues that “the mind” stood at the centre of oral-written tradition. That is to say, “the focus was on inscribing the culture’s most precious traditions on the inside of people”<sup>20</sup>.

## **2. The Role of Narrating in the Construction of Cultural Memory**

In what follows, we shall provide a few biblical and rabbinic examples in order to illustrate the function of narration or storytelling in the construction of cultural memory in the ancient Israelite community.

### **2.1. Biblical Commandments of Passing on the Tradition**

In the context of ten plagues (Ex 7–12), Israel receives the divine command to pass on their experience, tradition, actually the past to their children: “and that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I have made fools of the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them – so that you may know that I am the Lord” (Ex 10:2).

Connected to this passage, we should highlight the tenth plague and the commemorative ritual of Passover/Pesach:

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<sup>18</sup> Assmann. 2011. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 37.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 33–40.

<sup>20</sup> McLain Carr. 2009. *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*, 6.

And when your children ask you, “What do you mean by this observance?” – you shall say, “It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses” (Ex 12:26-27).

You shall tell your child on that day, “It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt”. It shall serve for you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of the Lord may be on your lips; for with a strong hand the Lord brought you out of Egypt. You shall keep this ordinance at its proper time from year to year. (...) When in the future your child asks you, “What does this mean?” you shall answer, “By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery” (Ex 13:8-10.14).

This biblical command became part of the ancient Israelite’s cultural memory which continues to be present even today in Jewish communities. The Pesach celebration evokes the deliverance from the Egyptian slavery when the eldest family member retells the story of exodus, the Pesach Haggadah<sup>21</sup> at the Seder table fulfilling this commandment: “Tell your son!” More importantly, during the Pesach night according to the remembrance (Hebr. *zikkaron*), each member of any Jewish community becomes part of the community to which the event happened, in this case, to those who were brought out from Egypt.

Immediately after the *Shema* prayer (Book of Deuteronomy) we find the similar command which reinforces the Israelite myth of origins and the essence of Torah as the tangible means of cultural memory:

When your children ask you in time to come, “What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?” Then you shall say to your children, “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. Then the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right” (Dt 6:20-25).

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<sup>21</sup> See further: Joseph Tabory. 2018. *The JPS Commentary on the Haggadah: Historical Introduction, Translation and Commentary*. Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, n.d. Cf. Dave Barry, Alan Zweibel, Adam Mansbach. 2017. *For This We Left Egypt? A Passover Haggadah for Jews and Those Who Love Them*. New York, NY: Flatiron Books.



As it transpires from the above-quoted biblical passages, the commandment of narrating the past has a recurrent scenario as it is underlined by the Pesach seder defined by the rabbinic Judaism in late antiquity as well. First, the three (today: four) questions from the youngest child are raised which ask the explanation of certain elements of the seder<sup>22</sup>. As an answer, the father or the eldest member of the community retells the story behind the practice (the Haggadah), i.e., the foundational memory (the remembered past) in order to explain the present and shape the future of the community. In other words, the protection and passing on of the community’s cultural memory are secured in this way.

It is a consensus among scholars that the history of Pesach seder begins with the Mishnah. For instance, Israel J. Yuval argues that the Haggadah, the obligation to tell the Pesach tale, belongs to the rabbinic approach of the seder which represents a new definition of identity<sup>23</sup>. Furthermore, B.M. Bokser in his thorough research highlights the rabbis’ endeavor to the reinvention of foundational rites, such as the Pesach rite as a religious ritual after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (70 CE):

The Mishnah (ed. ca. 200 C.E.), which sets out the rite’s basic framework, transforms a biblical sacrificial meal that had centered on the Passover offering and that, at least since Second Temple days, was a pilgrimage festival celebrating the national redemption from Egypt as a national day of independence. In response to the Temple’s loss, Mishnaic rabbis made the seder independent of the sacrifice and, by reaching back to biblical accounts that predate the centralization of the cult, turned the celebration into a kinship gathering in the home instead of in the capitol city<sup>24</sup>.

Bokser rightly points out that by creating the Pesach seder with new symbolic gestures and objects – called a set of actions of remembrance of the past – implies

<sup>22</sup> Pesachim 10:5. [https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah\\_Pesachim.10?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Pesachim.10?lang=bi) (2021.05.15).

<sup>23</sup> Israel Yuval discusses the history of the Pesach Seder and the Haggadah from a very interesting point of view. He explores how the different Haggadah of the same Pesach sacrifice developed parallel among early Christians and rabbinic writers as establishment of communal identities. See further: Israel J. Yuval. 1999. Easter and Passover as Early Jewish-Christian Dialogue. In *Passover and Easter. Origin and History to Modern Times*. Ed. Paul F. Bradshaw, Lawrence A. Hoffman, 99 ff. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

<sup>24</sup> Baruch M. Bokser. 1988 “Ritualizing the Seder”. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56 (3) : 443. For a more detailed elaboration see Bokser’s earlier work: Baruch M. Bokser. 1986. *The Origins of the Seder. The Passover Rite and Early Rabbinic Judaism*. Berkley, CA – Los Angeles: University of California Press. In this regard, see also the following works: Joseph Tabory. 1999. Towards a History of the Paschal Meal. In *Passover and Easter. Origin and History to Modern Times*. Ed. Paul F. Bradshaw, Lawrence A. Hoffman, 62–80. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. Yuval. 1999. Easter and Passover as Early Jewish-Christian Dialogue.

the newly established ritual process with new significance and meaning disconnected from the Temple sacrifice<sup>25</sup>. To these belongs the introduction of the three (four) questions of the children that according to Bokser, serves to orchestrate communication or verbalize the ritual. This verbalization recalls the biblical pedagogic device of instructing children, family members and transmitting traditions without sacrifice based on Ex 12:25-27 as “the questions are not real questions; they are stepping stones to begin the seder’s narration”<sup>26</sup>. Bokser concludes that “Since the Questions have thus become a formal device and framework for the narration of the Haggadah, their significance lies not in their cognitive content but in the ritual act of asking them at the beginning of the seder”<sup>27</sup>. Therefore, the seder functions as an act of remembrance to maintain the foundational memory of the community in the new socio-political circumstances.

## 2.2. The Importance of Passing on the History

The notion of telling or hearing the history of Israel appears in the Psalms as well. Without going into a detailed discussion, we shall mention a couple of examples in this regard. We will not hide them from their children but will declare to the next generation the praises of the Lord and His might, and the wonders He has performed (Ps 78:4). We have heard with our ears, O God; our fathers have told us the work You did in their days, in days of long ago (Ps 44:1).

## 2.3. Passing on History in the Rabbinic Tradition

Passing on the history as well as religious and cultural memory do not remain within the boundaries of the Bible. It is present in the period of the rabbinic Judaism, too. The famous tractate of the Mishnah, the *Pirke Avot* (Chapters of the Fathers) speaks about the idea of oral transmission of the very essential works of Judaism, i.e., the Torah and the Mishnah:

Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly.

<sup>25</sup> Bokser. 1988. “Ritualizing the Seder”, 446ff.

<sup>26</sup> Bokser. 1988. “Ritualizing the Seder”, 463–464. Cf. Mishnah Pesachim 10 ([https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah\\_Pesachim.10?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Pesachim.10?lang=bi) (2021.05.15)).

<sup>27</sup> Bokser. 1988. “Ritualizing the Seder”, 465.

They said three things: Be patient in [the administration of] justice, raise many disciples and make a fence round the Torah<sup>28</sup>.

According to the Mishnaic tradition, Moses received actually two Torahs at Sinai. On the one hand, the “Written Torah” (*Torah she bi-khtav*), the first five books of the Bible which was transmitted through writing. On the other hand, he also received the “Oral Torah” (*Tora she be-’al-pe*) which was transmitted orally from master to master until it was recorded. From that moment on, it was transmitted in written form highlighting Yohanan ben Zakkai as the primary contributor and Judah haNasi as the editor of the Mishnah (200 CE)<sup>29</sup>.

### 3. Suggestion: Storytelling in the Classrooms

After having a closer look at the purpose and function of orality in the case of biblical texts, we return to our initial question: How to teach and study biblical texts? In my opinion, the return to the ancient methods of teaching and transmitting biblical narratives could be a wise solution. On the one hand, the biblical narratives were designed primarily for oral transmission and, on the other hand, this ancient means of transmission obviously worked throughout centuries. Hence, it is important to reintroduce in the classroom the art of storytelling which presupposes a set of skills on the side of the teachers as well:

1. It is not sufficient to read out loud the biblical narrative, but it is important to narrate, to tell the story first without giving immediately an interpretation. We have to acknowledge the fact that in teaching biblical texts, Christian religious education imposes the interpretation of the story on those who listen to it. This approach reduces the biblical text to a single “correct” interpretation to the detriment of experiencing the richness of ancient texts.
2. Since the Bible has its message to every person regardless of life-period, we should let them discover the message of a story and avoid giving them pre-prepared explanations. In other words, teachers should allow the students to discover the message according to their capacities. This attitude avoids generalizing and accepts that students have different competences

<sup>28</sup> Pirkei Avot 1,1 ([https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei\\_Avot.1.1?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.1.1?lang=bi) (2020.11.17)).

<sup>29</sup> On the various stages of rabbinic Judaism see further: Jacob Neusner. 1999. *The Four Stages of Rabbinic Judaism*. London – New York, NY: Routledge.

to read and interpret texts defined by their social, intellectual and family background.

3. Similarly to the practice of the rabbinic school, it is important to provide the experience of reading, debating, interpreting the biblical texts. For this, it is important to allow the students to discuss and enter into debate about the text in small groups. Such a group should include two or three children who can discuss and explore together a biblical narrative. At the end of these discussions, the group(s) should be allowed to share the results of their mini-research with the other groups. By this reading method of the Bible, teachers could divide the tasks equally among the members depending on their capacities. In this way, J. Dewey's philosophy of pedagogy, i.e., "learning by doing" is realized<sup>30</sup>. This pedagogy is meant to underline that performant education relies on experience and practice by which the acquired knowledge becomes part of our personality and way of thinking. This idea, however, reminds us that the rabbinic idea of life-long learning is one of the cornerstones of rabbinic education. This means that the teaching involves an active experience of studying, teaching and practicing as it is highlighted by the quotation below from the Pirke Avoth: "Rabbi Ishmael his son said: He who learns in order to teach, it is granted to him to study and to teach; but he who learns in order to practice, it is granted to him to learn and to teach and to practice"<sup>31</sup>.
4. Finally, we return to the idea of the inseparable connection between orality and writing behind the biblical tradition. A written commentary on a biblical narrative always presupposes the oral interpretation which points towards a complex reproduction of ancient narratives: oral interpretation, learning the stories, interpreting, understanding, actualizing and incorporating into the life of a person and indirectly, into the life of the community to which the interpreter or receiver belongs to<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> For a more detailed discussion see: John Dewey. 2001. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University; John Dewey. 2015. *Experience and Education*. New York, NY: Touchstone.

<sup>31</sup> Pirke Avoth 4:5 ([https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei\\_Avot.4.5?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.4.5?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en), (2002. 12.3).

<sup>32</sup> Géza Komoróczy. 2019. *Történelem a Próféták Kezében: A Bibliáról*. Budapest: Ab Ovo, 467–469.

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To sum up, it is important to let the young experience the ancient way of familiarizing with narratives, interpreting, sharing and in this way, thinking critically and taking part into the formation of their religious and cultural identity. Thus, the young receive the possibility to experience the ancient way of creating commentaries. By this experience, they can acquire a method of reading, reflecting and telling stories. This practice can become a competence to approach and deal with biblical stories which, in the long run, is “an intellectual behaviour” as G. Komoróczy puts it<sup>33</sup>. By using this expression, Komoróczy intends to highlight the special characteristics of the rabbinic – and later on, the Jewish way of creating commentaries – that it is not authoritative but on the contrary, it works with the practice of debating regardless of oral or written debate. It underlines that manifold approaches are possible in certain questions depending on the persons and their background involved in the debate. In other words, a biblical narrative can have various messages and understanding depending on the children who sit together to discuss it. By allowing them to give voice to their opinion or understanding – and not simply “teaching” them the “correct” interpretation of a story – they can experience the art of reading and interpreting the biblical texts. Furthermore, this would give them the feeling of being part of a millennia-long tradition of thinking, belonging and actualizing together.

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<sup>33</sup> Komoróczy. 2019. *Történelem a Próféták Kezében*, 470: the original expression is *szellemi magatartás*.

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**Abstract:** Teachers and schools are facing constantly challenges in teaching biblical narratives for the young. The source of these challenges can be ascribed to many different things. First, there are historical and cultural gaps between the ancient texts and the modern audience. Second, there is a cultural gap between the schools, teachers and the new generation of students who belong to the first generation to be born in the 21st century. Third, it seems difficult to reach students growing up in a world shaped by the virtual reality and by the so-called “influencers”. Both the described situation and the mentioned cultural gap are getting even worse since the beginning of corona-crisis: the whole world is found in lockdown, many are obliged to use social media and virtual reality for a long period. Against this background, the present paper suggests a teaching attitude or approach which could enable the teachers to be more effective in teaching and more importantly, to bring the world of biblical narratives closer to students, providing alternative means of shaping their way of thinking and forming their identity.

**Keywords:** orality, textuality, Hebrew Bible, teaching, storytelling, cultural memory.

**Streszczenie:** „Powiedz swoim synom!” **Studiowanie Biblii za pomocą antycznej metody.** Nauczyciele i szkoły stale konfrontują się z wyzwaniem nauczania młodzieży narracji biblijnej. Źródło tych wyzwań może być przypisane wielu różnym czynnikom. Najpierw są nimi luki historyczne i kulturowe między tekstem antycznym i nowoczesnym audytorium. Po drugie, jest nim luka kulturowa między szkołami, nauczycielami i nową generacją uczniów, która należy do pierwszego pokolenia urodzonego w XXI w. Po trzecie, trudne wydaje się dotarcie do uczniów dorastających w świecie kształtowanym przez rze-

czywistość wirtualną i przez tzw. influencerów. Zarówno opisana sytuacja, jak i wspomniana luka kulturowa ulegają pogorszeniu przez kryzys pandemii koronawirusa: cały świat znajduje się w *lockdownie*, wiele ludzi na długi czas zostało zmuszonych do używania mediów społecznościowych i wirtualnej rzeczywistości. Na tym tle niniejszy artykuł proponuje metodę nauczania albo ujęcie, które może umożliwić nauczycielom większą skuteczność w nauczaniu i mieć większe znaczenie, aby przybliżyć uczniom świat narracji biblijnej, dostarczając alternatywnych znaczeń w modelowaniu ich sposobów myślenia i kształtowania ich tożsamości.

**Słowa kluczowe:** oralność, tekstualność, Biblia hebrajska, nauczanie, opowiadanie historii, pamięć kulturowa.