Beyond the D’var Torah: How to Unleash the Potential of Rich Jewish Content

What does “rich Jewish content” mean? What is the value of engaging more deeply with Jewish text, tradition, and values?

Rabbis, educators, and other community experts respond.

February 1, 2018
New York
What does “rich Jewish content” mean? What is the value of engaging more deeply with Jewish text, tradition, and values?

Rabbis, educators, and other community experts respond:

**Rabbi Sharon Brous**
*Rabbi, IKAR*

Our work is to give people access to their own inheritance—to help them learn how to connect with Jewish ideas and traditions that have echoed throughout the generations and will live beyond any of us. While there’s an urge in this work to stimulate a connection by meeting people where they are, the danger is that we neglect to help them tap into something much bigger than any of us. Low-bar engagement that feeds immediate needs but doesn’t challenge ultimately won’t enrich. The content needs to awaken the Jewish heart and invite people into a multigenerational conversation—manifested through text and practice—that has been taking place over thousands of years.

*How does your work contribute to that goal?*

I always know that in the room at IKAR are rabbis, Talmud professors and Jewish educators, and also truly marginalized Jews. I’m trying to offer an experience of Torah and ritual that opens the hearts and minds of all of those folks at once. We don’t ultimately want people to become IKAR Jews, but Jews... to be able to feel comfortable/literate/at home in Jewish environments around the world.

**Dr. Erica Brown**
*Director & Associate Prof., Mayberg Center for Jewish Education & Leadership*

Sacred texts have a timeless quality to them. They beg for interpretation, inviting us into an inspiring history of conversation. In exploring their subtlety and complexity, we find ourselves making rich connections to our own lives. I don’t know the right formula to entice adults to a Jewish classroom, but I do know that when the teaching is powerful, people leave engaged, inspired and transformed. They have a new platform to think about themselves. They stretch to reach a higher moral bar. They build community together around the act of study. They find themselves at the nexus between those who come before them, those in the room with them and the generations to come, those they cannot even imagine. I feel that when I study. William James suggests that we are authentic when we feel fully alive. Give me one book and one student, and I am fully alive.

*How does your work contribute to that goal?*

The Mayberg Center at GWU has a three-fold goal: to raise the quality of teaching in Jewish schools and educational centers, to enhance nonprofit Jewish leadership through sophisticated professional development and to catalyze community-wide conversations on the important Jewish issues of the day. Every one of those activities is centered, in some way, on Jewish learning. We are the inheritors of a majestic body of Jewish literature. We must treasure it. At the Mayberg Center, we do.
Rabbis, educators, and other community experts respond.

Dr. David Bryfman
Chief Innovation Officer, The Jewish Education Project

“Rich Jewish content” is imbued with layers of history and tradition with an aim toward impacting the present and future of Jewish life. “Rich Jewish content” is that which allows people to make meaning from the often obscure forms of its origin. “Rich” means that it is significant without being dogmatic, allowing for conjecture and debate. “Jewish,” in this context, means all that it is to be Jewish in the world. This is not just the words of a holy canon, but the sources of millennia of a dynamic and diverse people. “Content” is the way in which thoughts and ideas are captured and transmitted whether that be on parchment, in books or in digital sound bytes. To be Jewishly engaged today is to come into relationship with “rich Jewish content”, so that the tradition, values, and wisdom of our people are not only remembered, but internalized with relevance and meaning for the Jewish people of today and tomorrow. Beyond all of this, “rich Jewish content” will not only help Jews to thrive and Jewish communities to be more vibrant, but be the basis for making the world in which we live so much better.

How does your work contribute to that goal?

Education has the power to transform lives. The world of tomorrow will not look like the Jewish world of today. I educate people to create experiences that access Jewish wisdom, tradition, and values so they become the best versions of themselves; enable communities to thrive; and make the world a better place.

Dr. Beth Cousens
Associate Vice President, Jewish Education & Engagement, The Jewish Federations of North America

Rav Avraham Kook’s “fourfold song” suggests that shlemut, wholeness, manifests when four songs intertwine: our own song and also that of our people, of all people, and of the whole natural world. The world is complete when we know ourselves and our tradition—because we make more sense, we can root ourselves firmly, we can be kinder and take more risks, when and because we have a safe and strong foundation.

We sing our own song when we live our lives in dialogue with the Jewish narrative: when we internalize and celebrate Jewish time, when we integrate Jewish ideas into our understanding of human relationships, when we grow as human beings while confronting ancient Jewish ideas through texts, when we are informed by and understand our place in our people’s memory. And when the pieces all come together, a mentor is leading a conversation informed by Jewish ideas about how Rav Kook’s broader world influences one’s own song. The Jewish narrative becomes the context, the holding container, for intertwining all four songs, for answering the challenges of living today with ideas from Jews throughout history who were facing the same challenges, helping all involved to find shlemut.

How does your work contribute to that goal?

We give Federation professionals leading Jew-
What does “rich Jewish content” mean? What is the value of engaging more deeply with Jewish text, tradition, and values?

ish education and engagement for their communities a sense of how to operationalize in their work the definition of Jewish education outlined here. We provide all kinds of professional development, coaching, and thought leadership, creating a culture and corps of leaders to enact this definition.

“Rich Jewish content” are texts, traditions, and values that enable the experience of being “pulled up short” (D. Kerdeman). This experience is one in which — in reading, experiencing, or learning — I discover something new and often surprising about myself or about the world. It’s an experience in which a previously held idea or ideal suddenly takes on new meaning or relevance. In other words, the goal of rich Jewish content is not just for the sake of gaining new “book” knowledge. It is, rather, for the sake of gaining new “self” or “world” knowledge. In order to continue to better ourselves and better the world — in order to live a meaningful life — we must continually have these moments of surprise, wonder, and deeper understanding. Jewish texts have been “pulling people up short” for generations, and have the power to do so for many years to come.

How does your work contribute to that goal?

At Hillel International my work is to provide opportunities for Hillel’s 1,200 professionals to gain Jewish knowledge and educational skills. Unlike other professional development, this work is not only focused on professional skills, but rather is also focused on our professionals’ personal Jewish interests and passions. Our Jewish professional development opportunities aim to have our own professionals experience being “pulled up short,” so that they can help their students experience the same.

“Rich Jewish content” seems like a less efficient way of saying “Torah.” So let’s call it Torah: a living, breathing reservoir of the ideas, stories, thoughts, laws, customs, and values of people who have called themselves children of Israel for the last 3,000 years. In my experience, the best Torah is that which responds to eternal human questions, or Big Questions: For whom are we responsible? Where do we feel at home? How do we use our power? When responding to questions like these, Torah—whether from Exodus, the Talmud, or Dara Horn’s latest novel—becomes a conversation that spans geographies, time, and even death: I can learn from people who continue to live, even though their bodies are not alive on the earth. That experience gives my own existence tremendous depth, richness, and vitality. If we can craft our questions as generous invitations to others—which is a real skill!—then our Torah can become what educator Parker Palmer defines as truth: “An eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with...
Rabbis, educators, and other community experts respond.

passion and discipline.”

How does your work contribute to that goal?

My work at Ask Big Questions has focused on that essential task of crafting questions as invitations, and teaching others to do so. My work now at the University of Chicago is helping me develop ways of conceptualizing this work as a 21st century American project.

Rabbi Jeffrey Fox
Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Maharat

Behind the warp and woof of Jewish life rests a tapestry of texts that provide the scaffolding upon which the community is built. Giving people access to these texts opens up a perspective on Judaism that is sometimes experienced like the back of a needlepoint. For those individuals who are seeking to appreciate the depth of Jewish communal and/or religious life, texts are one of the main portals of entry.

We live in the information age and there is an expectation that Alexa or “Rabbi Google” can answer all of my questions. The reality is that too many Jewish educators do not provide much more content than might be found from a quick internet search. The goal of “rich Jewish content” should be to offer the keys to help understand the complexity of the scaffolding itself.

It is from Jewish texts across the ages that a learner can extract Jewish values that have accrued over generations. The leading thinkers in every generation imbibe the best that their surrounding culture has to offer. Extracting those values gives a thickness to Jewish communal life that is all too often absent.

How does your work contribute to that goal?

The curriculum of Yeshivat Maharat is built on a four year long immersion in Jewish texts of every genre. The goal is for the students to integrate their traditional learning of Talmud and Halakha with the wisdom of the Jewish spiritual tradition as well as the insights of modern psychology.

David Green
Executive Director, Kevah

At Kevah, our vision of rich Jewish content is where core texts of Judaism, the meeting place for Jewish minds throughout our people’s history, help people inform their Jewish identity today.

This vision is twofold. First of all, the study of Jewish literature is an essential feature of Jewish life and an essential component of Jewish knowledge. Beginning with the Torah itself, and stretching on through centuries of rabbinic writings, these texts serve as the centerpiece of Jewish culture. It is imperative that modern practice and identity be built on familiarity with the classical body of text.

It is also true, however, that we must find and share the key texts that have enduring relevance for Jewish life. Not all of the Jewish canon will be equally accessible to the contemporary American Jewish mind. In both Biblical
What does “rich Jewish content” mean? What is the value of engaging more deeply with Jewish text, tradition, and values?

and Rabbinic literature, we encounter large sections of ritual law that are no longer applicable, or require significant cultural translation. We believe that one of the key functions of the Jewish educator is, having achieved some degree of mastery over the Jewish canon, to sift through this corpus and bring people personalized learning that enriches their lives where they are now.

How does your work contribute to that goal?

Our work at Kevah balances the assumption that regular Torah study is a central Jewish practice and the appreciation of participant driven Jewish community. Our educational model is straightforward and unapologetic: a raw, direct encounter with the vitality of the Jewish textual tradition has the potential to shape the world.

Rabbi Brad Greenstein
Senior Director of Jewish Learning, Moishe House

Rich Jewish content is a pathway for Jewish people to feel at home. As we wandered the globe through our history, often far away from our spiritual homeland, we always found home within our sacred texts. The mosaic of Jewish thought, history, culture, and art can all be traced to our canon of literature, the sacred texts that capture our prized ideas over the arc of Jewish experience. Rich Jewish content is:

1. Transportable across time and geography. Jewish Content with staying power

is applied as a template or equation rather than a variable, it has the ability to function with different people, contexts, and communities. Encountering rich Jewish content can include being angry with it, disagreeing with it, rewriting it, reinterpreting it, turning it into art or a catalyst for community building. The key factor is that it makes room for participants to bring their own lives into it.

2. A model of interpretation. At the turn of the 2nd century, Rabbi Ishmael, influenced by Greek rules of logic and his contemporary Rabbi Akiva, formalized 13 homiletical rules for interpreting Jewish text that are still used to this day. We are a tradition of interpretation, commentary upon commentary, ancient and modern, an epic conversation. Rich Jewish content portrays creative license while also deploying in some fashion a derivative of these ancient “tools of the trade”.

3. Includes a successful medium for delivery. The transmission of rich Jewish content has resonance with the participant or receiver’s reality. It may be experiential or immersive, it must be compelling. A successful medium of delivery is important because it gives permission for Jewish content to inspire transformation and be change driven, which is perhaps the ultimate goal. Rich Jewish content makes you do or see something differently.

How does your work contribute to that goal?

Moishe House has placed what we consider the most important characteristic of rich Jewish content (a successful medium for delivery) in
Rich Jewish content evokes an emotional response from both teacher and student. The content cannot perform on its own, it must be elevated by those who are learning as well as the environment in which it is offered. The value of people engaging with Jewish content is that it speaks to soulful places inside them that have yet to be explored. It touches on the most important things in life, the character building lessons that illuminate both path and potential. Ultimately, great Jewish content does more than deepen knowledge, change perspectives and influence behaviors. Evaluating this content cannot be done through the regurgitation of the content itself, but rather through the involuntary response of the audience — the quiet gasp when a connection is made and the “oohs and aahs” as new ideas unfold.

How does your work contribute to that goal?

BBYO puts thousands of teens in powerful environments where talented educators can offer rich Jewish content as a curriculum unfolds before their eyes. Educator and student partner equally in the act of learning and continually test their knowledge as they live their lives.

Dr. Miriam Heller Stern
National Director, School of Education, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

Any idea can be taught at any age in an intellectually honest form; so posited the famous educational psychologist, Jerome Bruner. Rich Jewish content begins with a core set of sensibilities (Ochs 2006, Moore and Woocher, Green 2014), derived from Jewish texts, heritage and civilization, and ripe for interpretation and application through a wide range of ancient and contemporary lenses. Some examples include: Shabbat, teshuva (self-improvement and repairing mistakes), “because you were strangers in Egypt,” (historical memory and responsibility) “Lecha Lecha,” (heed the call to leadership and bold risk-taking). These Jewish ways of seeing and being can be introduced as simple concepts and stories when we are young, and grow with us in sophistication and depth throughout the life span. They become a road map for living that is powered by learning, curiosity and care for others. A good educator can guide learners through the process of owning, interpreting and integrating those ideas into everyday life, creative problem solving, and boldly building a better society. The richness multiplies in
learning communities where norms of discourse are sacred, and hold debate and multiple interpretations with empathy, honor and dignity for all. With this animating definition, Jewish learning can be a catalyst not just for personal thriving, but as a lever for strengthening humanity and society.

How does your work contribute to that goal?

At HUC-JIR’s School of Education, we envision educators guiding the Jewish people in weaving Jewish wisdom into creative thinking that strengthens humanity and uplifts society. Our mission is to prepare a diverse cadre of leaders and educators who can design, lead and teach in the institutions and programs that make Judaism accessible, inspiring and usable for all.

Without content, without Torah, there is no beating heart to contemporary Jewish community. In 21st century America’s world of virtually limitless possibilities, a world in which ethnicity no longer meaningfully binds and in which Judaism competes in a marketplace of ideas, Judaism must offer a sense of mission and purpose in order for it to be compelling. People don’t choose a millennia-old religion because of its comfortable correspondence with the familiar and the conventional. They choose it because of its transcendent power and its ability to critique and direct one’s life. Judaism, anchored in Torah, beckons by imagining who you might be instead of simply reflecting back at you that which you already are.

When Torah—the treasure trove of Jewish wisdom accumulated by our people—stands at the heart of Jewish life, that sense of relevance and importance becomes palpable. Jewish individuals and communities are at their most compelling when on a path of self-discovery, when they are engaged in deep learning about what is demanded of them as human beings and Jews. Belonging for the sake of belonging alone is no longer enough. Our commitment to building Jewish community has thus always entailed a commitment to innovative, compelling and relevant Jewish content.

How does your work contribute to that goal?

At Hadar, we are committed to advancing and sharing Jewish content that is uncompromisingly honest, spiritually meaningful, and socially responsible. We engage in this work through our top-notch faculty, who curate (1) immersive experiences, (2) in-person classes and (3) online and written content. Annually our content reaches 20,000 people in person and hundreds of thousands online.

“Rich Jewish content” can be defined as the set of ideas, texts, competencies of thinking, and autonomous skills that enable the Jewish individual to act competently and confident-
Rabbis, educators, and other community experts respond.

ly in leading a Jewish life — or maybe, a good human life, Jewishly. I’m sometimes not sure whether the goal of Jewish education is “better Jewishly-equipped Jews” or “better human beings who happen to be Jewish,” and I suppose there is a big difference between the two. So let’s say we hope for both. I don’t think the value proposition of this work is esoteric or theological: I think that humans are responsible for the world, and that our communities of meaning and purpose — religious or otherwise — serve as instruments of refinement in our capacity to be change-agents. And I think if we want our tradition to continue to serve this purpose, we need people who not only know it but feel confident enough to update it for the people who succeed us, who will continue to come look to this tradition to change the world.

How does your work contribute to that goal?

Our commitment at SHI is to both deeply interrogate and challenge the tradition to ensure that it stands up to the intellectual and moral scrutiny brought about by the confrontation with the modernity; and then to try to bring the Torah that emerges out of that confrontation into the world.

Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie
Rabbi, Founding Spiritual Leader, Lab/Shul

Rich Jewish content should demonstrate that throughout our existence, Jewish cultural, political and religious history existed as a diverse ecosystem, negotiating multiple, co-existing narratives, practices and priorities. Torah’s seventy faces is not just a metaphor — it is a crucial ideological and historical reality, now needed more than ever.

Engagement with our traditional texts and rituals empowers individuals and communities to explore and deepen honest relationships with nourishing and sustained spiritual and intellectual practices that enrich and celebrate the human soul’s journey from birth to death and throughout life’s gifts and challenges. We are taught to self-care — and be there always for the other — cultivating a strong “me” rooted in tribal truths, in order to build and be part of a solid communal “we”.

The 21st century offers modern Jews the challenging gift of acceptance and integration, not at the expense of Jewish identity but as its organic complementary evolution. The bottom line of engagement with Jewish content should not be just more Jewish literacy — it should be a profound and committed humanistic and universal literacy, ethical, moral, responsible and radical — guided by one of the planet’s oldest, wisest, and still standing civilizations.

How does your work contribute to that goal?

The Lab/Shul congregation I co-created in NYC; the interpretive artistic methodology I created with Storahtelling; the recent JOY proposal and other ongoing experiments with making the Jewish legacy meaningful, relevant and engaging to modern generations all aim at the goal of radical relevance: Meeting modern generational needs and our translation of the past to a purposeful and passionate present.
What does “rich Jewish content” mean? What is the value of engaging more deeply with Jewish text, tradition, and values?

**Rabbi Dov Linzer**

*Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah*

The defining characteristic of Jewish learning is the concept of *Torah she’b’al peh*. The deep theological statement that this makes is that we as human beings partner with God in interpreting, applying, and creating the meaning of the Torah, that our voices are an equal part of Torah, and that what it means to learn is to be in ongoing conversation with sacred texts (writ large — texts, community, history, practice, etc.): listening and being heard, bringing all your questions, conflicts, struggles, and creativity to the process. It is about process, not result or specific content. “Rich Jewish content” is content that is challenging, relevant, deep and accessible, that makes someone feel a need to listen and to be heard, and that speaks to the process of bringing our tradition in conversation with our lives. This is ultimately what it means to be Jewish in the world, outside of ritual acts and ethical behavior — it is a life of ongoing Talmud Torah, bringing the fullness of our lives into ongoing conversation with our tradition.

How does your work contribute to that goal?

As the rosh yeshivah of a rabbinical school, I train students to be rabbis whose job is not to lecture and dictate to people, but to educate and educate their future students and communities in a non-dogmatic, open way, with a Torah that provokes, engages, inspires, and leaves people coming back for more. I also promote such Torah and engagement in my public teaching, my writings, and the podcast that I co-host (Joy of Text), which has had a huge impact in opening conversation in an area that touches deeply on people’s lives.

**Rabbi Jessica Minnen**

*Rabbi and Director of Program, OneTable*

Rich Jewish content is Torah: a text, canonical or modern; a tradition, ancient or re-imagined; a value that deepens our lives as Jews and can inspire other than-Jewish friends, family, and fellow citizens of the world. Rich Torah, whether text, tradition, or value, is not synonymous with the past. Torah is a part of the ongoing Jewish narrative, the story we tell ourselves about ourselves, the evolution of answers to the two foundational questions of Genesis: *Ayeka?* (Where are you?) and *Ani shomer achi?* (Am I my brother’s keeper?). At the intersection of the universal and particular, Torah shapes our understanding of who we are as a people and who we might be as individuals. At its best, Torah has the timeless quality whether encountered in the memories of our grandparents, the Beit Midrash, or academia: to feel in the sages’ holy disagreements our own successes and frustrations, to hear in ancient rituals a metronome for modern life, to see in Jewish values a blueprint for everyday action. Deep engagement with Jewish content is a sensory experience that results in enduring impact, valuable because it changes the way we perceive the world and our role in it.

How does your work contribute to that goal?

OneTable invites millennials to produce their
Rabbis, educators, and other community experts respond.

own Jewish experiences: Friday night dinners. With individual support, questions emerge; with tailored, rich Jewish content, answers evolve. Ayeka? Present, through rituals that sanctify time. Ani shomer achi? Yes, by welcoming guests. The participants’ perception shifts... it’s not just the weekend, it’s Shabbat.

American Jewish life is characterized by a commitment to pursuing justice and by boundless creativity. Both of these qualities need to be anchored in timeless ideas that emerge from classic Jewish texts. Contemporary Jewish life demands from us that we not simply “cherry-pick” pithy verses that provide window-dressing for our commitments, but rather that we foster a Jewish language of discourse emerging from meaningful encounters with our classic texts. Jews with radically different ways of expressing their Judaism can find themselves in our texts, and then apply ancient words and concepts to their lives and to the larger world.

Rich Jewish content must be both rigorous and relevant — to present Torah in ways that are sensitive and responsive, complex and nuanced. Torah must be able to address pain and confusion. Torah needs to be filled with self-critique, allowing room for doubt, and also providing hope.

The Beit Midrash is the paradigm for 21st-century Jewish life: where difference is celebrated because it brings additional perspectives to bear on the text; where every student continues to learn and grow and discover; and where Makhloket l’Shem Shamayim (constructive disagreement) is the antidote for growing fundamentalism and extremism.

How does your work contribute to that goal?

Pardes provides an open, inclusive, diverse and intellectually challenging learning environment for all Jews to study Jewish texts and ideas, enabling them to approach critical life questions from a Jewish perspective. Pardes cultivates in its students a lifelong love of Jewish learning, klal Yisrael (the entire Jewish people) and Israel.

To paraphrase Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, the gift of Torah echoes from Sinai each and every day. (Avot 6:2.) Whereas traditionally the course of study follows the text, today the reverse is true: text needs to play the role of reacting, commenting, and transforming the students’ narratives. As Franz Rosenzweig said, “It is learning in reverse order, a learning that no longer starts from the Torah and leads into life but the other way around: from life...back to the Torah.” Revelation is not limited to something that might have happened at Sinai; it is something that makes the learning experience relevant today. Ideally, Jewish learning is the act of creating an authentic dialogue between the depth of our human ex-

Rabbi Leon Morris
President, Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies

Rabbi Avi Orlow
Vice President of Program and Innovation, Foundation for Jewish Camp
What does “rich Jewish content” mean? What is the value of engaging more deeply with Jewish text, tradition, and values?

Experiences and the whole canon of text, stories, art, music, actions, and practices of the Jewish People. Optimally, it is an integrated manifestation of the relationships in our lives. In our new reality knowledge is ubiquitous, but wisdom is in short supply. We are inundated with data and we desperately need a lens to help us focus on what is important. Rich Jewish content helps us examine, reflect, and refine our lives and enables meaningful connections with others.

How does your work contribute to that goal?

Each Jewish camp is its own galaxy in which profound connections are formed and their unique Torah is revealed. In my work with camps I support their efforts to help their campers, staff members, and families make enduring commitments that are personally meaningful, universally relevant, and distinctively Jewish.

Authentic teachers and role models, intentional communal frameworks defined by shared values and religious expression, opportunities for joyful celebration, commitment to Jewish education with an articulation of learning goals and outcomes.

When we are successful, we produce new cohorts of authentic teachers and role models who in turn, create their own intentional communal frameworks.

Shuki Taylor
CEO, M²: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education

Jewish texts are documentations of the past that can inform the present and inspire the future.

Jewish traditions are Islands of particularism in the great ocean of universalism, and while on these Islands, these traditions remind us that we may have found them but we didn’t discover them.

Jewish values are a compass for when we’re lost or seeking direction. The gift of Judaism is not finite values. It’s the opportunity for valuing.

If “content” is the substance and matter held within a contained space, then Jewish content is the substance of the Jewish people. What makes this content rich is entirely subjective.

It is the role of educators to help learners sense that the substance of Judaism is indeed rich: that texts of the past can richly inform our future; that Jewish traditions are rich islands of self-expression and self-determina-
Rabbis, educators, and other community experts respond.

- How does your work contribute to that goal?

My work is focused on training educators to identify and explore Jewish values that can be infused into rich, memorable and immersive experiences. It is through these experiences that learners get to investigate their own Jewish identities, and integrate their newfound learnings into their lives.