

Chapter Two

Using Guided Imagery in Jewish Education

“The Torah has seventy faces. Each student envisions it differently.”

—Midrash, Bemidbar Rabbah 13:15



Many renowned educators such as Abraham Maslow, Virginia Satir, and Jack Canfield, and others who work in education, psychology, and spirituality, have pointed out that the most important lesson one can impart in any educational setting is to give the learner the requisite tools to continue to learn. More than anything else, educators offer the most precious gift when they help a learner to develop the personal practice of being his or her own teacher beyond the classroom. Guided imagery exercises are an excellent tool with which to do this. They are remarkably powerful in a wide range of formal and informal educational settings such as classrooms, youth groups, adult education, worship, personal growth, and human resource development. Their benefits can be grouped into three main areas—enhancing a student’s motivation to learn, increasing his or her ability to master new material, and deepening spirituality and creativity. In this chapter I will provide ideas on how to apply these techniques specifically to Jewish learning.

Enhance Motivation

We all know that student interest must be earned and never taken for granted. One of the central challenges of presenting any lesson or workshop is *motivation*. Students must have the motivation to learn, so that we can teach. And so “hooking” the learner into the subject is the first task that an educator must tackle.

In our modern frenzied society, people are often too busy and have too much on their minds to provide the level of attention and concentration that learning demands. Facilitators can introduce relaxation methods to advance a student’s sense of being more fully present in the classroom, and also to enhance his or her capacity to focus more clearly and fully. In most cases, this is all that is needed to proceed to the next step in the lesson plan. What follows are just some of the ways in which guided imagery can be used to this purpose.

In an instance where a student has walked into the room psychologically far away, still distracted by a hurt from a peer that occurred a few minutes earlier, or by a problem at home, you might do the following: Ask your students or participants to imagine the activity from which they just came, and then to watch themselves walk

away from it, leaving it completely behind. This will ease the transition to their new place. Another way to help them let go of the immediate past and bring them into the present is to have them choose a metaphor that relates to some part of the new activity that is about to begin, and play with it on the screen of their minds. Or, one might simply get them into a relaxed place with some deep breathing, and then tell them to pay complete attention to the process of their body—their posture or heartbeat, for example—or to the colors in the room and people they are with. This will bring their attention into the immediate situation.

Perhaps one of your students feels distant from the subject matter. This is a common obstacle to full engagement. Sometimes I present material that is of enormous personal importance to me, but I am unable to engage a learner's interest. When this happens, my favorite strategy is to personalize the material. Guided imagery is particularly well suited for this use because it draws from inner experience and therefore gives a student the sense of having much greater control over how and what is learned. An imagery exercise can help the learner to take abstract subject material, screen it in his or her imagination, and adapt it to his or her own specific needs and interests.

For instance, instead of a lesson on Israel being merely a lecture or reading of a chapter about a foreign country, a student might imagine him or herself walking around in that land, smelling its agricultural products, picking its fruit, or interviewing its government officials. A history lesson can be introduced by having the students imagine themselves conducting a person-to-person chat with some historical personality. To motivate a language lesson, the teacher might ask the students to see themselves walking on the streets of Jerusalem, and comfortably conversing in Hebrew with passersby. A lesson on myths and legends can be opened by asking the students to read a short story from the rich treasury of past tradition, and to envision an entirely different ending.

All of these brief openers are effective techniques for drawing the student into the precincts of the classroom or workshop study arena, and away from his or her own dreams and thoughts. The learner can now “own” the material, feeling it in heart and soul.

Increase Understanding

The greater a student's grasp and absorption of the material, his or her mastery of a subject, the farther he or she can take that knowledge and apply it to life. For a teacher to achieve this, it is essential to tap into students' diverse learning styles. While some students are auditory-oriented, and learn and remember best through *listening*, others learn best by *seeing* or reading. The guided imagery process is perfectly suited for this, as teachers or facilitators can easily design exercises that engage each of the senses in turn.

Every learner's capacity to grasp new material increases greatly when conventional methods of learning are supplemented with the use of imagery. Guided imagery increases students' affective learning, helping them connect with the material on an emotional level. Through its techniques, we can engage the emotions so that learners of all ages are able to feel more strongly—to care more deeply, to be in touch with their joy, sadness, excitement, appropriate anxiety, or fear. Guided imagery also anchors memory, and therefore enhances students' ability to retain information.

For example, there may be four or five different kings and queens to learn about in one history lesson. Many students may find it difficult to distinguish between them. Using guided imagery can help. Sometimes evoking sensory elements, such as visualizing each monarch holding a different symbol, or imagining how their voices sound when they speak, can help students clarify which monarch is which.

Studies have shown that the more fully the senses are employed in the learning process, the better the chances are that the learner will retain the material and the experience. Thus, using guided imagery before, during, or after a lesson will help learners *remember* the material far better than they otherwise might. For example, in a social studies lesson about the watershed period of the French Revolution and the attendant emancipation of France's Jews, guided imagery exercises enable students to identify much more fully with the powerful forces of modernity that these events set off. By imagining they are there, experiencing the sights, sounds, and smells of this exciting moment in history, students will discover that liberty, fraternity, and equality are more than abstract ideas; they are also moods—feelings of personal relief, the joyfulness of anticipation, and the pride of accomplishment. The newfound freedom of Jews who are being allowed for the first time ever to live in mixed neighborhoods, to study in secular universities, and to have a role in society, can be understood with much greater clarity.

Similarly, the experience of a national or religious festival is “caught” as well as “taught” when sensory learning is included in a lesson. All the color, pageantry, music, poetry, ritual symbolism, and communal celebration can be extraordinarily powerful. When we transcend book learning and factual memorization, we are able to make a deep connection that lasts.

Yitzhak Buxbaum, in his book *Storytelling and Spirituality in Judaism*, points out that visualization has been a long-standing and integral part of the Ḥasidic art of storytelling. Extremely effective over the years as a teaching technique, it is also well suited for use by modern educators from all traditions. Buxbaum advises that the storyteller “try to visualize the people and events, imagining himself as actually present in the action. When meditating on a story in solitude, he should visualize its scenes one after another, going slowly and not leaving any scene until it has taken on a luminous form in his mind.”

Guided imagery can also serve to help learners develop priorities in values and ethics. As a technique, it fits together very effectively with the methodologies of Values Clarification and Values Realization, as spelled out in the book *Values Clarification* by Sidney B. Simon, Leland W. Howe, and Howard Kirschenbaum. For instance, in a lesson on the environment, a student picturing himself polluting the environment may develop a personal feeling of revulsion as he learns about the negative effects of pollution on the community and the environment. The more imaginative the exercise, the greater is the chance that the learner will seek to change his future actions. In a current events lesson, imagining an encounter with the effects of hunger, destruction, and homelessness can have a long-lasting impact on the student, encouraging him or her to develop a personal commitment to work for peace.

Deepen Spirituality and Creativity

Guided imagery can also deepen spirituality. In today's world, people of all affiliations and denominations—those who are formally religious, those who prefer to live by non-institutional faith, and those who choose no faith all—seem to be searching for a more enriching spiritual life. Whether theirs is a desire to embrace a life filled with the kind of higher aspirations that are defined today by the phrase “spiritual values,” or the hope to enrich their spiritual life through ritual tradition or through a specific belief in a Deity concept, a wide range of imagery exercises exist that can help to accomplish these goals.

For this purpose, those imagery exercises that deal with a general sense of spiritual well-being, comfort, protection, guidance, a nurturing community, and ethical and moral sensitization are the best. I have found them particularly useful in helping others who are seeking to enter the life of authentic prayer experiences in stronger and more mystical ways. With these methods of guided imagery, religious educators have a significant tool to combine conventional technical prayer skills with the development of authentic personal spirituality in prayer, as well as the ability to take advantage of the many rich benefits of a life of regular prayer.

Prayer is by nature a right-brain activity which is enhanced by entering a quiet, receptive state of consciousness, and slowly reaching into the deeper recesses of our mind. These recesses are the places within us where we are more capable of actualizing the prayer experience. Nonverbal approaches to help us find such spaces can be much more effective than conventional, verbal methods.

To create this mood, your first steps as a facilitator are the preparatory experiences. Participants must begin to feel physically relaxed, able to quiet and slow down the ever-racing mind. This is the way to enter all guided imagery exercises. Once we quiet our frenetic mind we may be more open to what could be a new experience.

To deepen the prayer experience, you might have students adopt prayerful body postures with their hands, eyes, and feet. I like to play spiritually oriented music for accompaniment to set the mood. In my language, I use prayer metaphors, rituals, and symbols. The goal is to have your students imagine themselves communicating with God, or feeling supported in the presence of a Higher Power. When this occurs, the normal tensions, anxieties, and fears of daily life are replaced by the sense of security that spiritual traditions afford their adherents.

If you are working with Jewish texts, whether they are ancient, medieval, or modern, you will find that combining guided imagery with prayer and meditation can lead to greater appreciation for and spiritual involvement in the texts. When dealing with religious literature, such as the Bible, the Talmud, and various liturgies, guided imagery has unique power and adaptability to achieve the goals of the lesson.

Guided imagery can infuse any educational milieu with tremendous vitality, joy in creativity, and deep learning. In chapter three, I will show how you can bring these benefits to your own group settings by conducting guided imagery exercises.