HOW TO USE TEXTBOOKS CREATIVELY

Think of your favorite Jewish textbook. What makes it your favorite? Is it the information it provides your students? The pleasing look and design? The way it challenges your students to think?

Throughout our history, Jewish teachers have relied on textbooks and printed materials to help their students grow in Jewish practice and knowledge. Today’s Jewish educators continue that tradition. Using textbooks in creative ways, educators open up Jewish life and learning to a broad spectrum of students with different learning styles and abilities.

The following ideas can help your teachers enrich the use of textbooks in their classrooms. The first section, Why We Use Textbooks, outlines the importance of textbook learning. The second section, How to Use Textbooks, offers six ways your teachers can use textbooks as tools to engage students, create lively classroom activities, and plan family programming. Together, these ideas will help your teachers build exciting and informative lesson plans that energize their classrooms and encourage their students to live the Jewish life and values that the textbooks explore.

Why We Use Textbooks

Judaim is often referred to as a text-based religion. Jewish people throughout history have drawn on a vast library of Jewish texts—from the Tanach to the Talmud to modern Jewish works—to establish customs, understand Jewish law, and seek spiritual guidance.

In modern times, Jewish teachers have translated traditional methods of text study into the use of textbooks. Students today, like generations of Jewish students before them, look to textbooks as repositories of Jewish knowledge and as essential sources of information. Textbooks remain primary, effective, and fundamental tools for educators, students, and parents for many reasons, including:

- **Textbooks offer a coherent and well-outlined approach to a subject area.** Just like an organized lesson plan, a good textbook takes students on an educational journey that is thematically sound, that moves students forward while reinforcing previous lessons, and that establishes among students a common background knowledge of the topic at hand.

- **Textbooks give students the language with which to explore a subject.** This task is especially important in a Jewish educational environment, where Jewish and Hebrew words, phrases, and prayers are often unfamiliar. The Jewish educational textbook acts as a springboard for classroom discussions by giving students the linguistic tools and confidence they need to formulate ideas and questions.

- **Textbooks serve as reference works.** A textbook is an established and respected source of information. Educators turn to textbooks when they are teaching new material or when students ask them for more information about a subject. Students and parents also look to textbooks for concrete, documented answers to their questions. Textbooks lend seriousness and authenticity to a subject area.
• **Textbooks are a Jewish tradition.** The Jewish community is known as the “People of the Book”—and for good reason! Judaism is a text-based religion. Studying Jewish texts, such as the Torah, the Talmud, and their commentaries, is one of Judaism’s highest values. By using textbooks, educators allow students to participate in the age-old tradition of Jewish text study.

**How to Use Textbooks**
The practice of using textbooks in a Jewish educational setting has remained consistent for centuries. However, the educational model with which educators implement textbooks has evolved. Today, textbooks are not simply read to or by students; instead, they are enlivened by teachers, who help students construct their own meaning from the content. Creative textbook-based lessons teach students how to live Jewish lives and develop their Jewish identities.

**Best-Kept Secret!**
Almost every textbook has an accompanying Teacher’s Guide containing set inductions, games, visual, musical, and creative writing ideas, active learning techniques, and ways to engage families in their children’s education. Give your teachers the guides to their books—then encourage your teachers to use them!

Below are six ideas that can help teachers create a positive, exciting, and informative learning environment using textbooks. Teachers will find numerous other examples in their Teacher’s Guide.

1. **Create a Culture of Inquiry**
   Involve students in the Jewish tradition of asking questions. Let the textbook be your guide. For each textbook lesson, create a list of five questions, each of which begins with one of the “5W’s”—who, what, where, when, and why. Base your questions on material in the textbook that you will cover in that lesson. Be sure to include both questions with concrete answers (for example, what blessing do we say over the Hanukkah candles?) and open-ended questions (for example, what does the light of the Hanukkah candles represent to you?).

   Have students answer the questions on a sheet of paper either individually or with a partner. Then, write the 5W’s on poster board or on the chalkboard. Have students share their answers with the class. Having prepared on their own, students now have the background knowledge to think about the material critically and discuss their opinions with their peers.

2. **Encourage Dramatic Expression**
   Use the textbook as a script and have students take turns reading the text out loud. You might distribute different parts to students. For example, let one student read the main text; a second, the sidebars and call-out material; a third, the photo captions. Give students different roles for each section or chapter.

   Bring the content to life before reading by introducing the topic and asking students to “set the scene.” For example, before reading the Hanukkah story, ask students what they think ancient Israel looked like. What did people wear? What did people eat? Then,
dramatically read aloud a selection from the textbook. To further involve students in the lesson, consider asking them to call out certain words or phrases after you have read them. For example, you might say, “When you hear me read one of the names for Rosh Hashanah, call out the name.”

Help students practice or act out the material in a textbook. For example, after reading the story of Jacob stealing Esau’s birthright, assign roles (Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Esau) and instruct students to act out the drama. In Hebrew studies, you can animate the text by giving students the opportunity to practice reciting the blessings, perhaps at snacktime or at a school-wide Shabbat celebration, or to run prayer services in the class or sanctuary.

3. **Transform Words into Art**
   Transform the words of the textbook into classroom decorations. For example, in a textbook lesson on the holiday of Tu B’Shevat, have students find and write the key words of the holiday (such as: “Israeli fruit,” “tikkun olam,” and “birthday of the trees”) on a large piece of butcher paper or poster board. Then, let students draw Tu B’Shevat-themed decorations around the words. Hang the posters in the classroom or in the hallways.

In addition to decorated word signs, you might also instruct students to draw the scenes that the textbook describes. For example, after reading the biblical story of Creation, divide students into groups. Assign each group one day of Creation and have the group draw God’s creation that day.

Appeal to a variety of learning styles and abilities by allowing students to express through art their understanding of the material they are learning. For example, when teaching the *alef bet*, encourage students to write the letters, draw them, or form them out of string or wool. Or, when students are learning a prayer such as the G’vurot, have them use key words or phrases from the prayer in Hebrew or English (for example, “mighty,” “powerful,” “give life,” “save,” “who is like You?”) in a poem, haiku, or drawing.

4. **Plan Cooperative Learning**
   Divide the students into groups. Give each group a research question or assignment based on textbook material. For example, during a lesson on Havdalah, you might ask: how many wicks does a Havdalah candle have? Or, instruct students to describe how we use all of our senses during Havdalah. Challenge groups to work together to find the answer. Encourage older children to use the book’s Table of Contents and Index to discover the answers. Then, instruct each group to read its question or assignment to the class and present what it has learned. Allow students to teach each other and share their learning with their peers.

Consider asking students to find a picture or photograph in the textbook that demonstrates their answer. This will reinforce the answer as well as engage the visual learners in the class. This also allows students to be actively engaged in their learning.

5. **Explore Digital and Online Learning Opportunities**
   Create a lesson plan based on a topic in the textbook that has multiple layers of meaning. For example, many Jewish textbooks, especially those that teach prayer, include lessons on the Hebrew word “shalom.” Today, shalom is used for “hello,” “goodbye,” and
“peace,” but the root on which it is built relates to “completeness” and “wholeness.” In another example, “Yisrael” may mean the people of Israel, the nation of Israel, the land of Israel, or the state of Israel.

Such cultural terms lend themselves well to multi-level inquiry. If you have a computer in the classroom, place students in groups and instruct each group to conduct an Internet search for images related to these multi-layered words. For example, conduct an Internet search for the word “shalom.” Ask students to describe what images they found. How did these images compare with those in the textbook?

If students do not have access to the Internet during religious school hours, help them conduct a verbal “Internet search.” For example, ask students how they would search for the word “shalom.” What words would they add to the search? How might they know which sites to visit? How might they know which sites are trustworthy? How might they recognize the political or religious viewpoint of the website? Give students the Internet research tools they need to look up Jewish topics that interest them!

You can also send home interactive software such as Shalom Uvrachah Interactive and Hineni Interactive to extend students’ instructional time from the classroom into the home and to reinforce the content of the textbook interactively.

6. Involve the Entire Family
Create family programming using the textbook as your guide. For example, organize a family learning session. Use the student’s textbook for a mini-session of “text study.” Provide families with questions and ask them to work together to find the answers using the textbook. Remember that the textbook contains valuable information for Jewish learners of all ages and levels.

You can also build a family program around the content in a Let’s Discover or Let’s Explore folder in grades K–2. For example, for a family Shabbat program, you might create eight stations based on the content of each of the eight folders in Let’s Discover Shabbat. Such stations might include: “Time to Be Joyful,” in which families learn Shabbat songs and games; “Time to Pray,” in which families learn easy Shabbat prayers and blessings; and a “Saying Goodbye” station, in which families learn about the Havdalah ceremony and make Havdalah ritual objects, such as a spice box. In addition to the folder on which their station is based, parents can take home the Family Shabbat Blessings folder to enhance their own erev Shabbat celebration.

We hope that your teachers will use these ideas to unlock their textbooks’ potential, to design an engaging, imaginative course of study, and to fine-tune lessons for the multiple needs of the students in their classes.