May the Study of Torah Be As Sweet As Honey: A Critical Review of *MaToK*, the New Bible Curriculum for Solomon Schechter Day Schools

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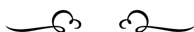

More than fifty years have passed since the first Conservative day school opened its doors at Congregation Beth El in Rockaway Park, New York, in 1951. With the proliferation of Schechter schools in recent years, growing numbers of students appear to be joyously occupied in daily Jewish study. To acknowledge this achievement, however, is not to demonstrate the schools' success in initiating those students into the thought process of the Conservative movement. One may make a reasonable, though not thoroughly documented, assumption that day school students are likely to develop a stronger sense of Jewish identity than others. But that assumption itself raises the question of the type of Jewish identity being fostered, a question whose significance is heightened by the realization that precious little curriculum material used in Schechter school in these fifty years has been developed under Conservative auspices. The new *MaToK* Bible Curriculum, now being published after seven years of curriculum development under Conservative auspices, was designed in part to address this compelling omission.[1]

The situation in Schechter classrooms has been more acute than that of the sanctuary. Outdated though the Hertz Ḥumash was, at least there was

a ḥumash with commentary in the pews. In the Conservative day school classroom there was no parallel text. *Etz Chaim* filled a gap; *MaToK* fills a void. Its publication therefore symbolizes and in some ways embodies the coming-of-age of the Conservative day school movement.[2]

But to say that *MaToK* fills a void is not to claim total success. What I propose to do in this article is briefly to describe the context of Bible instruction into which *MaToK* makes an entrance and suggest criteria by which a successful Conservative Bible curriculum might be evaluated. A description of one unit of the *MaToK* curriculum will then serve to illustrate the curriculum's strengths. These strengths, in turn, will expose areas in which further development might address problems that *MaToK,* as successful an endeavor as it is, does not fully unravel.

The Problem

Professor Aryeh Wohl, an educator respected for his expertise in both general and Judaic educational practice, and chairperson of the Division of Humanities at Talpiot Teachers College, bemoaning the state of Bible curriculum in Orthodox schools, noted that "each school determines its own Jewish Studies curriculum. . . . Most te[x]ts are the original Holy Text . . . used with old-fashioned workbooks. . . . Schools still use some materials that were written thirty or fifty years ago."[3] Until recently, the formal state of Bible instruction in Schechter schools did not fall far from this description. The absence of theologically and educationally sophisticated published materials designed for teacher or student use put each Schechter school on its own.

A review of Schechter schools' mission statements identifies common goals of developing students' critical thinking skills as well as commitment to Jewish values as expressed in Jewish texts. A typical Schechter school mission statement summarizes this aspect of its goals as follows: "We are guided by the tenets of Conservative Judaism . . . in the interpretive approach to classic Jewish texts, and in the embrace of both tradition and modernity."[4] In my own role as head of a Schechter school, I typically explain to teachers and parents that we want students' comprehension of the text to go beyond the surface. Critical thinking, I tell them, is as important in studying Judaism as it is in studying a novel or doing a science experiment. Far from shying away from the hard questions students may ask, I say, we value them. If older students don't

see the problems in a text, we need to bring them to the students' attention. We want students to learn how traditional commentators, as well as scholars and teachers today, have addressed those problems. We try to give students both the tools and desire to study Torah so that they may find in it guidance for their own lives. Most Schechter heads would choose similar language.

However, most of us worry about whether we can deliver on the promise, whether our compelling vision of Conservative religious education will end at the classroom door. Only the efforts of Schechter schools acting as individual schools have made the picture of Bible instruction in our schools different from Wohl's description, and these efforts have required administrators and teachers to assume a burden unheard of in the teaching of secular subjects. Given the most sacred of texts, Jewish day school educators are told to teach it in its original language, with all of its linguistic, conceptual and theological challenges, to children starting at about eight years of age—and to do so with little or no prepared curriculum material other than the text itself, and with only whatever local guidance is available to develop instructional approaches that support the Conservative views of the school. Whatever individual schools achieved, their efforts stayed home, at the schools where they were developed.

It is a well-accepted phenomenon of general schooling that teachers arrive at their classrooms, close their doors and often, even with the best intentions, depart radically from the printed curriculum or the mandated instructional approach. Proceeding on their own, teachers often mime the way they themselves were taught.[5] This observation, a staple of the literature on educational change, most often emerges from studies of teaching methods. But in a Conservative day school, this tendency of teachers can translate into more than poor pedagogy. If teachers teach Bible as they were taught, our students will likely be initiated to Bible study through views at odds with those of the Conservative movement, with midrash presented as fact, avoidance of serious issues, simplistic answers to students' profound questions, and the missed opportunity to expose students to a rich and personal but authentic reading of the sacred text.

Late-Blooming Maturity

What *MaToK* gives us is a carefully articulated curriculum for teaching *Ḥumash* in Conservative day schools in grades three through six. Consisting of twenty-five volumes for the teacher with accompanying student

workbooks/texbooks, *MaToK* results from a seven-year development process originally funded by the Jim Joseph Foundation. Steeped in Conservative thought, the curriculum adopts and instructs the teacher in sophisticated but child-friendly instructional approaches.

An argument can easily be made that we are decades late. Already in the mid-1980s, Tova Shimon's visionary Tal Sela project gave American Jewish day schools their first full-scale curriculum—this one for Hebrew. Tal Sela set a high standard for all subsequent Jewish day school curriculum development by thoughtfully identifying its place in curriculum and instructional theory (choosing, specifically, a communicative approach to foreign language instruction), by firmly grounding itself in that theory through carefully developed lessons based on high-interest student activities, and by providing extensively detailed teacher guides, student books, individual readers and a multiplicity of supplementary materials. With stunning attention to detail always in service of its overarching instructional philosophy, and with students' varied learning styles in mind, Tal Sela would win high marks in any comparison of curriculum projects in general education. In Jewish day school education it was a hapax legomenon.

Twenty years after Tal Sela, Bible instruction continued to be from hand to mouth. It is not that the Conservative movement has not produced curricula previously. In the 1960s, the Melton Research Center developed a thoughtful Bible curriculum through a highly sophisticated, deliberate curriculum development process. Many at that time felt that the Melton project, as it was commonly known, carried Conservative education into its maturity. Its rich discussion guides brought Bible instruction for elementary-age children within the tent of twentieth century pedagogy and biblical scholarship. Designed for afternoon Hebrew schools, and therefore mostly in English (other than the Biblical text itself), Melton's extensive teaching materials for Genesis were followed by materials for Exodus, but not beyond. These limitations meant that it could not serve as the backbone of a Schechter Day School curriculum. In addition, thirty to forty years of experience have exposed inadequacies in a then-revolutionary (and still highly illuminative) approach to teaching the Bible to elementary-age students.[6]

During the 1996–97 school years, the Solomon Schechter Day School Principals Council asked its members to prioritize among a number of potential projects. At the top of the priorities were the development of a Conservative

Bible curriculum, financial concerns ("ever-increasing tuition" and "non-competitive teaching salaries") and a perceived need for enhanced communication among school heads.[7] Although it had never previously undertaken a project of dramatic scope, the Council decided to pick up the challenge.

After developing a set of guiding principles, Rabbi Bob Abramson, head of the Department of Education of the United Synagogue, and Dr. Steve Brown, then associate dean of the Davidson School of Jewish Education and director of the Melton Research Center for Jewish Education, submitted a grant proposal to the Jim Joseph Foundation. In the spring of 1998, when the grant proposal was accepted, Debby Miller had already submitted her resignation from her position as principal of a Schechter school in New Jersey to accept the appointment as project director, and Marcia Lapidus Kaunfer, then Jewish studies coordinator at another Schechter school, was chosen as head writer.[8] Steve Brown chose the name *Mivtza Tanakhi Konservativi,*[9] yielding the felicitous acronym *MaToK*. The Jim Joseph grant was to run for five years, and provide a total of $650,000.

The resulting curriculum covers the following *parshiyot:*

Third grade	Genesis	*B'reishit, Noaḥ, Lekh L'kha, Vayeira* and *Toldot.* (*Hayyei Sarah* is skipped.)
Fourth grade	Genesis	*Vayeitzei, Vayishlaḥ, Vayeishev, Mikeitz,Vayigash, Vayeḥi.*
Fifth grade	Exodus	*Sh'mot, Va'era, Bo, B'shalaḥ,Yitro* and *Ki Tissa* (the Golden Calf episode only).
Sixth grade	*B'midbar*	Selections from *Mishpatim, K'doshim, Ki Tissa* and *Ki Teitzei.*
	Halakhah (one unit, "The Protection for the Vulnerable in Society," completed; more planned)	Selections from *B'midbar and Naso,* and *Be-ha-alotekha, Sh'laḥ Lekha, Koraḥ, Ḥukat* and *Balak.*
Seventh grade	*D'varim* (planned)	
Eighth grade	*B'reishit* (planned, as in-depth study, with extensive use of parshanut)	

Each year's instruction covers about five *parshiyot,* divided into lessons that were designed for four periods of Bible instruction per week. In reality, the curriculum guides overfill a typical instructional year, as teachers would be hard-pressed to complete many of the lessons in the designated single block of instructional time.

For each unit of instruction, the authors provide a teachers' guide, student booklets and a set of additional materials for classroom use. A small number of activities are available online, with the intention of adding more. While the curriculum was in development and revision, the materials were produced in a black and white format, but 2005 saw the first publication of beautiful student books for several *parshiyot* in a brightly-colored, contemporary design.

As kid-friendly as the design of the student books is, so are the teachers' guides, which are available in Hebrew and English versions. Production in both languages, undoubtedly exacting a serious toll on time, emblemizes the commitment of the authors to teacher development as an essential step in influencing children, and their knowledge of the realities of day-school teaching: Israeli teachers would have a tough time working through the extensive ideational and pedagogical guidance contained in the guides had they been written in English, as would non-native Hebrew-speaking teachers if the language of publication had been exclusively Hebrew.

Criteria for Assessing a Conservative Bible Curriculum

Reading Penny Shine Gold's *Making the Bible Modern: Children's Bibles and Jewish Education in Twentieth Century America* is humbling. While the expansiveness of the book's title is misleading to the edge of misnomer (since its subject is Reform Bible textbooks through the early twentieth century), it documents well-intended attempts to teach the Bible to young children under the influence of modern biblical scholarship. Not wanting to declare as fact anything they themselves disbelieved, the authors of these textbooks nevertheless worried about the effect on children of admitting to them too early in their development that the Bible might not be entirely "true." Some believed that it was best to teach the Bible as "truth" to young children, only to return later on and teach it from a critical perspec-

tive when they were older. Others believed that this practice would engender skepticism when children, as they grew older, discovered that they had not originally been told the truth.

As if theology were not challenge enough, the authors of these texts wanted their young readers not to have to choose between American and Jewish identities. The times called for alignment between the two. Just as the Hertz Bible commentary often stressed the congeniality of Judaism and contemporary Western values, so did these books stress "universal" or democratic values, thus making Bible instruction one means of introducing children to a middle class American ethos of fairness, hard work and civility.

The modal solution to challenging biblical passages adopted by these texts was to side-step, deleting awkward material (even if this meant minimizing or altogether skipping supernatural events); interpolating explanations not found in the Biblical text; avoiding less easily interpreted aspects of God's nature; and modifying stories in which the Bible failed to present women as sweet, kind and compliant.[10] Most of the authors of these children's books were highly trained educators who had given sustained thought to the education of Jewish children. It is bracing to realize that serious educators, setting out to introduce children to our biblical heritage, unwittingly wound up mimicking the larger society even at the risk of distorting the Jewish past.

In his book *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and Practice,* Barry Holtz quotes Eugene Goodheart's notion that a classic, rather than portraying to us that which is familiar, challenges us with its "strangeness."[11] This is a fascinating way of thinking about the existential confrontation with tradition that lies at the core of the Conservative mentality. The authors of the Bible texts described by Shine Gold avoided "strangeness" at all costs. Recognizing how easy it is to allow our thought patterns to be dictated by contemporary modes of thought, we need to apply a self-conscious screen to our own educational efforts. While instruction needs to be informed by contemporary thinking and Western values, we need to do our best to allow the biblical text to introduce students to the ways in which our tradition challenges contemporary values.

With the above as background, I suggest five criteria by which we can judge the success of materials intended for use in a Bible curriculum for

Conservative day schools:

1. The extent to which it appears to be free of a mimetic attitude to contemporary culture. Sometimes contemporary culture and tradition inform one another; at other times, one challenges the other. Since, at least from the time of Schechter, we have recognized that the line between "inform" and "challenge" moves over time, a Conservative approach to Bible instruction would also need to be judged by:
2. The extent to which we make clear to students that we reinterpret the Bible—carefully, in accordance with certain principles, and with respect for the insights of our ancestors—but we do reinterpret it. Making this acknowledgement with children is not an easy task, and therefore, another criterion would be:
3. The extent to which the curriculum suits the developmental levels of students without stooping to simplistic or dishonest answers to difficult questions. Contemporary research suggests that children may be more capable of complex thinking and spiritual awareness than previously has been assumed.[12] Curriculum materials need to provide sensitive teachers with tools to elicit students' questions and thoughts, while probing and responding to their readiness for more complex answers.
4. The extent to which the curriculum promotes a non-simplistic theology in its approach to such issues as miracles, revelation and reward and punishment. Without turning into a course in contemporary biblical scholarship and interpretation, the curriculum would be informed by the fruits of this work, including feminist readings of the text.
5. The extent to which the materials promote good pedagogy. This category encompasses a broad collection of issues: clarity and feasibility of teaching objectives, level of difficulty, activities that promote inquiry or other active learning strategies, provision for students' varied learning styles, and the richness of teacher materials, including background information and training materials for teachers.
6. The extent to which the curriculum enables students to learn Bible in Hebrew, using Hebrew as the primary language of the classroom. Even in day schools with strong Hebrew language commitments, elementary-age students find biblical language highly challenging, yet the day school is our opportunity to teach Bible authentically, and that means in Hebrew.

A Sample of the Text and How It Works—
The Burning Bush Episode

Rather than work though through these criteria one by one, I provide, as an example of *MaToK's* approach, a brief description of three lessons dealing with the Burning Bush episode (*Parashat Shmot, Teachers' Guide,* pp. 1–63). My summaries are indented, followed by my commentary.

> As all of the lessons in *MaToK,* the first lesson in this unit begins with the recitation of the blessing *la'asok b'divrei torah*.

The introduction to the first volume describes this practice as one of several efforts to help create "a sense of *k'dushah* and wonder." (*Parashat B'reishit, Teachers' Guide,* p. 5)

> The lesson starts by asking students to skim the chapter in their workbooks, circling each occurrence of either YHVH or the word Elohim in any form.

The student books are in fact workbooks that include the full text that the students will study. This fact makes possible activities that would be considered sacriligious were they using a *Tanakh*.

The words YHVH and Elohim recur about twenty-two times (depending on how you count) in this selection. The counting exercise, perhaps trivial at first sight, turns out to be a very clever move, for two reasons. First, looking for repeating words is an effective initial method of piecing together comprehension of any difficult reading material, especially Bible. But of equal importance is the fact that this chapter revolves around one of the best-known supernatural events in the Bible. *MaToK* neither avoids it nor diminishes it, but rather—from this opening gambit and consistently throughout the lesson sequence—shifts the students' attention to something deeper than the supernatural event. That attention shift, as we will see, begins with the counting exercise.

> The teacher's next question is: "Who are we going to learn about in this chapter?"

Students will indeed read the Burning Bush episode, but right off at the beginning, they come to understand that this chapter is going to tell them something about God.

I proceed out of sequence. The third lesson of this series will bring this initial orientation to the text to fruition:

> Students are asked to draw double-facing arrows to connect God and the Israelites whenever the text suggests a relationship between the two (e.g., *ra'oh ra'iti et 'oni 'ami*).

The activities and discussion of the three lessons culminate in this activity, by which time the students will have drawn important conclusions: that God cares about the Israelites; that God is a caring God; that God cares about those who suffer. In the meantime, students have read the burning bush story. Neither denying nor excusing the supernatural, *MaToK* here encourages students to see what is beneath the text. While the text *includes* a supernatural element, the *MaToK* lesson guides students to realize that it is not *about* the supernatural event but about something even more significant—the relationship of God and the Jewish people.

Immediately after the counting activity that opened the first lesson, students will have had some fun in a "kinesthetic" activity that hammers home part of this theme:

> After circling all of the mentions of God at the beginning of the first lesson, the whole class reads the entire chapter out loud, clapping or banging once on their desks with each mention of God.

In the above steps, *MaToK* meets the last four of the six criteria listed above. With carefully defined instructional objectives and vivid activities, it enables students to draw conclusions about the text. Without pulling students into theological discussions about the supernatural for which they are not ready, it masterfully prepares them to see the deeper message of the text.

> Back in the first lesson of the Burning Bush sequence, after the initial overview of chapter three accomplished by the counting exercise, the curriculum tightens its focus onto the first three verses, in which Moses encounters the bush and turns aside to see it. The students will work through these three verses so that they fully understand them, unlike most of the rest of the chapter, which will have been read for general understanding only.

There is an inherent conflict between what teachers often refer to as "coverage" (the desire to cover a lot of material), on the one hand, and the time it takes to use Hebrew and discuss ideas. *MaToK* attempts to resolve the conflict through strategies, such as focusing on key words that facilitate students' attempts to find and gather the threads of a story using the Hebrew text. The curriculum then focuses on a smaller number of verses for direct understanding of the Hebrew and deeper understanding of the content, always avoiding direct translation. In this three-lesson sequence covering one biblical chapter of twenty-two verses, the students will have learned six to eight verses with full comprehension, and they will have contended closely with several others.

> Students are then introduced to modified Hebrew versions of two midrashim (*Midrash Rabbah, Shmot* 2:5). One midrash uses the burning bush to symbolize the Israelites' refusal to be destroyed; in the second, the bush symbolizes the harshness of Egyptian slavery. Students are asked to choose which explanation they think is more relevant. Students create side-by-side pictures of the burning bush itself and the midrash of their preference, drawing arrows to connect parts of the bush connect with what they symbolize.
>
> Lesson two introduces a third midrash, in which God speaks to the Israelites from among the thorns, where God experiences the suffering of the Israelites. In their workbook-texts students are asked to draw a picture of an eye next to each use of the root *ra'ah;* the goal is for students to realize that the repetition of these words emphasizes God's seeing the suffering of the Israelites. As they re-read the verse *ra'oh ra'iti et 'oni 'ami asher b'mitzrayim v'et za'akatam shamah mipnei nogsav ki yadati et makhovav*, the students are asked to make hand-motions demonstrating *shama, ra'ah,* and *yada* (for the latter of which the textbook uses a heart symbol). Then follows the arrows activity described above.

This summary illustrates several common practices in *MaToK:* the use of key words to help students derive meaning from a difficult text; activities that enable students to search the text in relatively easy fashion; the use of midrash, not as definitive but as suggestive; the ways in which students are encouraged students to draw their own conclusions; and the use of clever and appropriate visual techniques.

> The third lesson turns to Moses' reluctance to undertake the mission assigned him by God, and also dwells on God's name and Moses' character. This lesson emphasizes the phrase, *ki eh'yeh 'imakh*, thus sustaining the theme of God's caring. With this theme firmly established in students' minds, the lesson ends with the teacher asking the students to respond to the prompt, "When I hear the name *eh'yeh*, I feel . . ."

This question, "When I hear the name *eh'yeh*, I feel . . ." is a pedagogically jarring note on which to conclude these three lessons which have led students on an engaging, but largely cognitive, analysis of the episode. While the lessons enable students to infer from the text the *idea* of God's care for the Israelites, at no point have students been encouraged to reflect on the episode's personal significance to them. It is an abrupt shift, then, to turn to the students and ask them, without preparatory activity, what they *feel* upon reading God's name. To ask such a question about personal *feelings* in the wake of a *cognitive* discussion is tantamount to telling the student what we want them to say, something like: "When I read the name *eh'yeh*, I feel confident and good. . . ."

It is not the probing into students' feelings that bothers me. Quite the contrary. The dichotomy between the affective and the cognitive is a false one, something we instinctively know but typically ignore, in Jewish education as in general education. Elsewhere, I have suggested ways in which Jewish educators might planfully engage both emotion and cognition.[13] *MaToK* involves students actively and even joyfully in learning, but it is highly cognitive in approach. To be sure, many lessons may evoke emotional response in students, but *MaToK* does not often stop to point out such responses, explore and develop them, or help students recognize their value. Working with this affective territory requires care. It is all too easy to put words into children's mouths, something *MaToK* usually avoids doing with ideas. In the above instance, it makes just this mistake when venturing into feelings.

A more effective prompt would have asked students to assume Moses' role: "You are Moses. You've just been through an ordeal. You were startled and curious about the burning bush, then suddenly you heard God speaking to you. You've heard God's concern and plans for the Israelites. God has told you that you are to lead the Israelites, and, when you objected, God reassured you that you will succeed. You are on your way home

and you have the words *eh'yeh asher eh'yeh* in your mind. When you hear the name *eh'yeh* in the future, how do you think you will feel?"

Alternatively (or additionally), the lesson could have turned personal by asking students to describe their feelings at times when they have been challenged or threatened and someone has stood by them. Activities such as these can be suggestive and evocative both cognitively and emotionally, and, one hopes, spiritually.

> Two more lessons complete this unit. These cover God's prediction of how the Egyptians will respond to the Israelites' demand to be released, and Moses' attempted refusal of the assignment.

A few additional comments:

There are many fine things to say about this lesson sequence. Impressive above all is the way in which it addresses the supernatural, neither apologizing, nor avoiding, nor fabricating a naturalistic explanation. Instead of suggesting simplistic answers to difficult questions, the lesson sequence takes students beneath the surface, to the deeper significance of the text, and it does so with care for the age and development of the students (criterion three). Whatever students come away thinking about the bush, they know that this chapter makes important statements about God's nature, about Israel, about God's relationship and concern for Israel and about human responsibility. This approach clearly satisfies the fourth of my criteria above (non-simplistic theology), and, one might argue, the first as well (by openly accepting a particularistic and caring God). It places students directly into the process of interpreting the text with due respect for the insights of earlier generations (criterion two). The suggested strategies in the Teachers' Guide promote thinking and employ a variety of learning modalities. The vividness of the activities captures students' attention and should help ensure retention. And, Hebrew remains at the core of instruction (criterion six).

On the other hand, the lesson sequence is not perfect. While the learning objectives are generally realistic, lesson three seems to get a bit jumbled in ways that the brief summary above does not reveal. The lesson introduces so

much material that one wonders if a teacher can get through it all, and whether the essential message may be lost as a result. Considering the richness of Biblical interpretation, it is perhaps no surprise that this issue recurs elsewhere in the curriculum. Teachers using *MaToK* will therefore still need to make choices as to what to include and what not, what objectives to strive for and which to ignore.[14] The danger is that, used improperly, a teacher might play it safe by choosing activities that reach fact-level objectives only, and not take on the challenge of developing deeper understandings.

Weaknesses

Before summarizing the strengths of the curriculum, I note several general areas in which *MaToK* can be faulted. I categorize these under the headings of personalization, conceptual difficulty and Hebrew.

Personalization: With all of *MaToK's* strengths, it is somewhat weak in what Barry Holtz calls the "personalization orientation." Of the nine orientations for teaching Bible that Holtz describes, *MaToK* draws heavily and effectively on literary criticism, *parshanut* and decoding-translating-comprehension, all perfectly appropriate for a Conservative approach.[15] Lessons are carefully developed so that students analyze, synthesize, evaluate, compare and draw their own considered conclusions. But not often are students asked to search their personal experiences as a way of making connections with the text. When, in the Garden of Eden episode, students are asked to reflect on times when "they wanted to do something that was forbidden and they had to decide which to follow: their conscience, a friend who is encouraging them to do what is forbidden, and the attraction of the forbidden action or item" (*Parashat B'reishit, English Teachers' Guide,* p. 65), one can't help but wonder why there have not been questions such as this before (this is already the seventh lesson in Genesis), and why there are so few such questions later. The reason is that the curriculum has been creatively and conscientiously concentrating on something else that is vitally important, and, in my experience, generally and unfortunately lacking in other curriculum materials: serious talk about God.

To be sure, there are examples of personalization throughout the curriculum, but they are surprisingly scattered and usually not central to the

lesson. For example, the fifth lesson of *Parshat Bo* asks students to talk about a time they have seen someone being mistreated: "The goal here is for students to discuss how the Torah teaches us that we need to treat others equally and fairly."[16] But this is almost a passing note in the context of a lesson whose instructions for teaching procedures stretches on for seven pages. The authors have made a considered judgment about what, at least at this stage in day school curriculum making, is most important. Nevertheless, one wonders if there could not have been more opportunities for students to make connections between the text and their own lives or to reflect on the emotions stirred by the objects of study.[17]

What's more, by failing to engage students in attempts to project the text into their own lives, or their own lives into the text, the curriculum misses opportunities to build on the commendable and unique foundation of God-talk that is so carefully constructed in the curriculum. For example, the Mt. Sinai unit, covering Exodus 19–20, introduces students to the text in a fresh and interesting way, asking them to assess the mood of the Israelites throughout the story. The students have used a "wet paper" painting activity that is designed to convey to students how imprecise is the biblical description of the Sinai experience. Developing a picture—however imprecise—of chapter 19's description of the gathering at Sinai is the goal. But at no point does the teacher stop to talk with students about what it might feel like to stand in the "presence" of God. How might the Israelites have felt? How might *we* feel being in God's presence? Are there times when we have felt that way, even a bit? By omitting such questions, the lesson relegates God-experience to the past. In fact, I suspect that by not stimulating students to draw a personal connection with the experience of Sinai, the lesson runs the risk of leaving them mostly with a vision of lightning, thunder and smoke instead of the sense of mystery the curriculum explicitly desires to convey.

Conceptual difficulty: It is hard to fault the authors, rather than the Author(s), on this score. Nonetheless, it is the job of the curriculum to open the text to young children. Usually *MaToK* succeeds, but not always.

For example, in an early lesson on the creation story, students are asked to use what they have learned so far to indicate that they agree or disagree with the statement *'elohim yodei'a mah yihyeh be'atid*. The forgoing lessons have, commendably, guided students to see the first chapter of Genesis in

accordance with a non-deterministic perspective, yet it is hard to imagine third graders even approximating the hoped-for response that is written into the teachers version of the student book. "*Lo barur min hamilim shel perek 'aleph 'aval 'anu margishim sheyeish leilohim tokhnit m'suderet meirosh v'hakol nivra b'ofen hegioni—l'mashal, yeish t'lut: hay'tzirot t'luyot b'mah shenivra lifneihem*" (*Parahat B'reishit, Teachers' Guide,* p. 12).

Similarly, in *Parshat Yitro, MaToK* uses Rashi's comment *ki ekhad b'lev ekhad* on the phrase *va yiḥan sham yisrael* in a fashion wholly authentic to traditional forms of Torah study. One wonders, however, how many fifth graders are able to integrate the concept, the interpretive method and the Hebrew in order to master what this lesson is attempting to teach. The same can be said of the discussion of children suffering for the sins of the parents in the lessons for chapter 20 of Exodus, which grapples with a challenging theological concept in the Exodus text by comparing verses from Lamentations, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, all at a fairly high level of abstraction. Quite the opposite of the nineteenth century texts described by Shine Gold, *MaToK* does not hide this passage, however it may trouble us theologically. Here, however, is a case in which elision might have been the better part of pedagogy.[18]

Hebrew difficulty: In this last example as in others, students may find themselves lost in a thicket of tricky Hebrew. The material for *Parshat Ki Tissa* offers examples. True, this unit does many things skillfully: it is structured around a set of clear, focused, in-depth learning objectives; it requires students to think about the *p'shat* and to analyze both the text and midrash; it employs vivid techniques, asking students, for example, to imagine Aaron's facial expression when the Israelites demanded that he make them a god, and adopting a "split screen" technique to help students visualize the locus of action as it shifts from Mt. Sinai to the Israelites' camp and back. These techniques elevate key words and the structure of the text to a level of visibility, enabling students to understand the story without resorting to word for word translation. Yet by lessons three and four, unfamiliar vocabulary words are flying thick and fast, until for several verses in lesson three, the authors suggest that the teacher abandon allowing students to attempt constructing comprehension for themselves, and that students should "join you in a frontal discussion to examine its meaning" (*Parashat Ki Tissa, Shmot, Teachers' Guide,* p. 46). Perhaps only Jewish educators fully appreciate how the word

"frontal" can denote more than one situation that might shock the sensibilities. In going for "frontal discussion," the authors are throwing up their hands, acknowledging, as Debby Miller does candidly in the denouement of her doctoral dissertation, the tremendous difficulty of maintaining Hebrew as the language of instruction for Bible. In this case and in others, even the pshat is beyond the grasp of students to achieve on their own.

Similarly, in a lesson summarizing what has been learned from the first chapter of Genesis, the student worksheet asks students the following:

> *B'vakashah likhtov + al yad kol mishpat shenakhon l'fi mah shelamadnu b'ferek 'aleph:*

One item in the list that follows is:

> *lo ḥashuv leilohim mah koreih ba'olam*

A hoped-for student response is written into the Teachers Guide:

> *Lo nakhon. Ḥashuv leilohim. Vayar ki tov.* (*Parashat B'reishit, Teachers' Guide,* p. 12)

This is asking a lot of third graders, both by way of Hebrew and, possibly, by way of concept.

Far from resolving the tension between teaching Hebrew and teaching ideas, *MaToK* only seems to sharpen it. In her dissertation, Miller questions whether it is possible to accomplish both the language and "existential" goals of the school without sacrificing one to the other.[19] While the context of this remark is a reflection on the shortage of Hebrew-speaking teachers who are schooled in Conservative thought, Miller also seems to suggest more. Indeed, she writes that "at every *MaToK* orientation workshop, at least one, but usually several, Israeli teachers approach me and, almost guiltily, admit that they cannot teach Torah completely (or at all) in Hebrew, because it is too difficult for the students."[20] Few in Conservative day schools advocate Bible instruction in English. On the other hand, teaching Bible richly and teaching it in Hebrew stretch the abilities of most teachers—and their students—beyond the breaking point. When something needs to give, it probably needs to be Hebrew.

Strengths

Active learning and pedagogy: MaToK has moved significantly, and effectively, away from the traditional model of pouring information into little minds, in favor of enabling children to ferret out information to create meaning. In doing so, it relies heavily on methods of literary criticism as tools for comprehension, as illustrated above. It is creative in its instructional strategies, providing vivid activities that stimulate and hold interest. The curriculum consciously attempts to develop "access skills," in the hope of students learning not only the text, but how to approach it in the future. While the text is still the center, the student is elevated so that his or her engagement with the text becomes the forum for learning. If *MaToK* succeeds in getting teachers to use such approaches, for this alone it will have made a major contribution to the maturation of Bible instruction in our day schools. The above criticism about the excess of material notwithstanding, *MaToK* is a pedagogical tour-de-force (criterion 5).

Moving beneath the surface of texts: While the curriculum liberally and richly supports a Conservative approach to the Bible and theology, the writers deliberately avoided the "big ideas" approach that was central to the Melton Bible curriculum of the 1960s (Holtz's "ideational" orientation). Rather than attempting to organize the curriculum around major ideas, the authors instead chose to involve students in an authentic reading of the text, teasing out ideas as they grow organically.

Throughout the Teachers Guide, contemporary scholars are quoted alongside midrash, serving both accurate understanding of the pshat as well as deeper comprehension of the text. For example, in the information for the teacher in one unit alone, the guide quotes Rashi, Tanhuma, Ramban, Cassuto, Sarna, Everett Fox and Avivah Zornberg, all for the purpose of supporting Zornberg's reading of the text. (As always, aware of students' needs, the guide immediately cautions that the "confusing information" presented through these commentaries is not intended directly for the student.) One reads within the Guide's explanations a commitment to gender egalitarianism, both in its language and interpretations (for example, the teacher is informed that *'ezer* means not "helpmate" but one who is equal but different (criterion 4).)

Without contradicting the literal understanding that might more easily

fit students' developmental level, the curriculum typically leads students to a deeper level of understanding that, one can hope, will remain with them when they can see beyond a concrete understanding of the text. The encouragement for students either to develop their own understandings or, as in the burning bush unit, to choose among preferred interpretations, naturally initiates students into an ongoing process of interpretation without entering into theoretical discussion (criteria 2 and 3).

Hebrew: Notwithstanding the above-noted unresolved tension between teaching in Hebrew and teaching ideas, it would be an omission not also to cite as a strength *MaToK's* commitment to the vision of Bible instruction as idea-rich *and* taught in Hebrew. More often than not *MaToK* succeeds in its use of Hebrew, even if, as suggested above, it has not put the problem to rest (criterion 6).

Recognizing the role of the teacher: Much ink has been spilled in education literature on why the great curriculum changes of the 1950s and 1960s, and, in the last twenty years, the much sought-after change from traditional to more constructivist instructional methods have had so little impact on the typical classroom. In her dissertation, Debby Miller makes clear that in creating *MaToK,* the project organizers were keenly aware that the curriculum would call on teachers to give up materials they had created on their own, to adopt theological views with which they were not entirely familiar, and to implement instructional strategies with which they were uncomfortable. They recognized that changing teacher beliefs would be essential to *MaToK's* success. They worked from the belief that a carefully written curriculum, including ample background material for the teacher coupled with teacher training, would help teachers grow. They recognized the need for extensive teacher training, starting with schools that agreed to serve as pilot schools.

At critical points in the materials, it is evident that the authors, taking seriously their role as teachers of teachers, are able to call on what Lee Shulman calls pedagogical content knowledge, "the ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others . . . [and] what makes the learning of specific concepts easy or difficult: the conceptions and preconceptions that students of different ages and backgrounds bring with them.[21] So when, in *MaToK's* very first unit, a comparison is made between creation of light on the first day and the creation of the lumi-

naries on the fourth, and the Teachers' Guide cautions that the midrashic explanation of *'or ganuz l'tzadikim* would not be relevant to the curriculum's objective of demonstrating the orderliness of creation, we know that the authors are fully aware of potential snares (*Parashat B'reishit, Teachers' Guide,* p.81).

Nevertheless, one cannot but note significant sections of the curriculum that cry out for more concrete theological guidance to the teacher. When in the unit on the Ten Commandments the curriculum, somewhat surprisingly, dwells on reward and punishment, with the extensive treatment noted above of the question of children being punished for parents' sins, surprisingly little guidance is given to the teacher on what to make of the text's view that God so punishes, other than that this view was superseded by prophetic views. Similarly, the binding of Isaac is, commendably, presented in an unexpurgated version, and makes the explicit assumption that the text's use of the word *nissah* is sufficient evidence that God had no intention of Abraham killing his son. While this is a perfectly acceptable view, no guidance is given the teacher on how to answer the obvious question of Abraham's readiness to carry out the shocking order. Instead, a central conceptual learning that emerges from *MaToK's* handling of the story is that unquestioned obedience is commendable.

Cultural or Counter-Cultural

Whether or not we accept this attitude toward obedience, one must say that *MaToK* allows the text to stand on its own merits. Perhaps the authors believed that moderating the message of unquestioned obedience would have been a facile solution to a complex problem. One must weigh the authors' decision not to do so in the context of the first of the criteria I suggested for evaluating the curriculum—allowing the biblical text to challenge contemporary life rather than imitating it. This is the most difficult criterion to employ, if only because it requires much self-awareness on our part: to what extent are our own, adult conceptions shaped by Jewish tradition or by contemporary ideologies and pressures, within a framework of (Conservative) thought that ascribes potential legitimacy to both? In the *Akedah* episode, *MaToK* opted for strangeness.

A significant way in which *MaToK* is healthily out-of-step with contem-

porary trends is the seriousness with which it takes God-talk. The Burning Bush episode as presented in *MaToK* conveys, above all, the message that God is present, that God's presence is a caring one, and that God in some mysterious way intervenes in human history. Similarly, the entire sequence of lessons on the creation story in *MaToK* is impressive for promoting active classroom dialogue about who God is and how we can understand God. I have seen little day school curriculum that takes upon itself the responsibility to engage students in discussion of this kind in a sustained fashion (indeed, each student is to maintain and update "My Journal About God"). One also notes in the curriculum an emphasis on collective responsibility, as opposed to individual freedom. The themes of God-talk and collective responsibility, which reappear throughout *MaToK,* suggest a counter-cultural quality.

A complete analysis of the curriculum along the dimension of contemporary culture vs. tradition will only be possible at a distance of time. But there is ample evidence that the curriculum has placed itself squarely in the Conservative tradition of attempting an honest engagement of tradition with contemporary thought.

Impact on Schools

It would be valuable to assess the impact of the curriculum, seeking to know not only to what extent students' basic knowledge of ḥumash has increased as a result of the curriculum but also to determine whether students are developing a deeper conception of what the Bible means. It is hard to imagine, given the clarity and comprehensiveness of the written materials, that *MaToK* has not already had a positive impact. But this is not a simple matter.

As Debby Miller points out in a particularly fascinating passage in her dissertation, contemporary literature on schooling, on the one hand, stresses "teacher authority and autonomy . . . [which] credit the teacher with the intelligence, knowledge and talent to make appropriate decisions for his or her class." On the other hand, schools have missions. A Conservative day school has a specific mission that can easily be subverted, even with all good intentions on the teacher's part. The solution, she later suggests, is moving from "individual autonomy" to "collective autonomy," which

requires much interaction within the staff—opportunities for dialogue about beliefs and practices and opportunities for teachers to collaborate in creating materials and instructional approaches. These suggestions echo current best practices in staff development, which stress teacher collaboration and critical reflection. For better or worse, these require time. In practical terms, this means that Schechter schools, to be effective in fulfilling their mission, need to allocate liberal funds for staff development, as well as ample time in which teachers can be free to study and collaborate. Independent school organizations recommend that .5 percent to 2 percent of a school's budget be allocated to staff development.[22] Anecdotal information suggests that most Jewish schools are far off the mark. Perhaps a utopian idea is for Schechter day school teaching to become not a ten-month job, but a full-year job. One full month in the summer could then be devoted to study and collaborative work on curriculum and instructional development. Teachers' salaries would increase accordingly, helping make Schechter day school teaching a more attractive career option. But, of course, where would the money come from?

Twenty-five to fifty years from now, Schechter schools will want a new Bible curriculum that will respond to new ideational issues, new pedagogical concepts and new needs induced by the continued evolution of the day school movement. Such a curriculum will see beyond *MaToK,* but in order to do so it will need to stand on *MaToK's* shoulders. The Solomon Schechter Day School Principals Council, the United Synagogue's Department of Education and the Melton Center of the Jewish Theological Seminary have performed a service to the Conservative movement every bit as significant as the more publicly noted and legitimately lauded *Etz Chaim,* and has created a model for day school curriculum development that will be imitated by others.

NOTES

1. *MaToK, Meizam Tanaḥi Konservati* (New York: United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and the Jewish Theological Seminary), hereinafter referred to as "*MaToK.*"

2. At about the same time that *MaToK* was being created, Tova Shimon began the Tal Am project, a comprehensive day school curriculum that incorporates Bible

instruction integrally into Hebrew language instruction. Many Schechter schools currently are torn between using the integrated Tal Am curriculum or determining how to disentangle the Tal Am Bible component from its Hebrew language curriculum so they can use *MaToK*. In general, the Tal Am Bible component dwells at the plain meaning of the text, avoiding ideology and critical thinking. Never before in day school education have we been able to luxuriate in making such choices.

3. "Double, Double Toil and Trouble . . . ?" The Unbalance of Our 'Dual Curriculum,' Mifgashim List of the Rabbi Joseph Lookstein Center for Jewish Education in the Diaspora of Bar Ilan University, mifgashim@listserv.biu.ac.il (December 25, 2005).

4. "Excellence in Education," Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Hartford (www.ssds-hartford.org). While many of the mission statements are not equally explicit, frequent references to Conservative "philosophy," "ideology," "principles," or "tenets" can be understood as shorthand references to the core stance of Conservative Judaism toward traditional texts.

5. See, for example, John Goodlad, *A Place Called School* (New York: McGraw Hill, second edition, 2004), p. 298.

6. In subsequent decades, the Melton Center also produced lively curricula for the teaching of holidays and prayer, again designed for religious schools. The Solomon Schechter Day School Association produced for day schools several curriculum manuals, none of which seems to have had a significant impact on the schools.

7. Deborah Uchill Miller, "What is the Impact of a New Bible Curriculum on Four Teachers Who Use It?" (Ed. D. dissertation, William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education, 2005), Appendix B, p. 401.

8. Miller, pp. 31 and 34.

9. Subsequently re-named *Meizam Tanaḥi Konservati*.

10. Penny Shine Gold, *Making the Bible Modern: Children's Bibles and Jewish Education in Twentieth-Century America* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 100–159.

11. Eugene Goodheart, *Does Literary Studies Have a Future?*, p. 50. Quoted in Barry Holtz, *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and Practice* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2003) p. 144.

12. See, for example, Margaret Donaldson, *Children's Minds* (London: W W Norton, 1979) and David Hay and Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child* (London: Zondervan, 1998).

13. Laurence Scheindlin, "Emotional Perception and Spiritual Development," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, vol. 8: n. 2, pp. 179–193; and "Emotions in Jewish Education," *Courtyard* (1999/2000) pp. 121–141.

14. The current Standards and Benchmarks for the Teaching of TaNaKH in Jewish Day Schools project, being carried out under the aegis of the Melton Research

Center, is therefore a valuable next step in the maturation of Bible instruction in our day schools.

15. Holtz, pp. 92–102.

16. *MaToK, Parshat Bo, English Teacher's Guide,* lesson 5, p. 76.

17. The latest editions of the student book currently being published seem to include more opportunities for personalization.

18. Debby Miller (personal correspondence) explains that a "meta-goal" of this lesson was that students understand that *parshanut* began already in the Bible itself, but this explanation does not negate the pedagogical criticism.

19. Miller, p. 359.

20. Miller, p. 360.

21. Shulman, Lee. S. "Those Who Understand: Knowledge Growth In Teaching," *Educational Researcher,* 15 (1986), pp. 4–14.

22. Crystal Gay, "NAIS Sample Source: Professional Development," November 19, 2003 (National Association of Independent Schools), www.nais.org. "Stability Markers Revisited: A New Emphasis," *Ideas & Perspectives,* Independent School Management, vol. 26, no.10 (2001).

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