

VALUE TENSIONS in EDUCATION ACCESS

Rav Kook taught...“The greatest obstruction to achieving truth is the failure to recognize the need for different opinions, narratives, and identities to interact with one another in order to realize something greater than anything could be understood on its own. This is the path to both peace and truth...”

Introduction to commentary on Brachot, Ein Aya

Framing

There is a fundamental value in Jewish tradition that multiple truths exist in the world. We are encouraged to engage in civil discourse, to strive to live in a space of *elu v'elu*, literally these and these or “yes/and”, and to see other’s perspectives. We reflect and grapple with complexity, creating space to hear ideas that are different than our own, with kindness and compassion. This value of multiple perspectives and opinions, even when they are in tension, is essential in our pursuit of a more just and equitable society. This is especially true in our modern education system where differing opinions and methodologies are present.

Based on data gathered in the 2020 census, more than 40% of children live in households struggling to afford basic necessities, including school supplies, which are not provided by local, state or federal agencies. And yet funding alone is not enough to deconstruct this Opportunity Gap in American education – the circumstances that impact a student’s equitable chance to reach their full potential. Race, ethnicity, your zip code, fluency in English and many other factors and systemic oppressions impact a student’s trajectory in our country’s education system.

This guide offers a series of quotes, texts and questions framed around different values that relate to education, and that can emerge during your service experience. As you discuss and navigate the inherent tensions and conflicts that these values ignite, informed by Jewish tradition, we hope they will not only explore your own perspective and voice, but make informed individual choices about how these values can guide you in your life.

We encourage you to pick a tension that resonates with you and your service, reading through both quotes, to challenge your existing perceptions and desire to take action in pursuit of a just world.

Guiding Questions

Consider these when reflecting on the topics below

- In what ways do these opinions stand in opposition to one another? Can you identify ways in which both can be true, even if they offer different standpoints?
- What might we gain from our ability to hold multiple perspectives? Are there boundaries to when we might feel capable of doing so? If yes, what are they?
- Jewish tradition stands strongly in favor of creating and supporting education systems. How can an individual impact the existing system? When it is the responsibility of a community to be involved?

ACTION & REFLECTION:

HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHEN TO ACT, BASED ON EXPERIENCE OR INSTINCT?

TEACHING & LEARNING:

IN EVERY SITUATION WE CAN BE BOTH A TEACHER AND LEARNER

PRIVILEGE & ACCESS:

ARE WE OBLIGATED TO PROVIDE THE SAME EDUCATION TO EVERYONE?

RESOURCES & KNOWLEDGE:

COMPARE THE VALUE OF EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES AND QUALIFIED TEACHERS

CLASSROOMS & COMMUNITIES:

HOW CAN WE ENSURE QUALITY EDUCATION IS ACCESSIBLE TO ALL?

ACTION & REFLECTION

HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHEN TO ACT, BASED ON EXPERIENCE OR INSTINCT?

Rabbi Tarfon and the Elders were once reclining...when this question was raised before them: Is reflection greater, or action? Rabbi Tarfon answered, saying: "Action is greater." Rabbi Akiva answered saying: "Reflection is great, for it leads to action." Then they all answered and said: "Reflection is greater, for it leads to action."

– Babylonian Talmud; Kiddushin 40b:8

[We must] integrate social justice into the life of the institution. Too often, service or tzedakah experiences stand apart from the curriculum of a school, or from the life of the synagogue. As a result, students internalize the idea that social justice is an optional extra. Instead, we can connect the social justice work to other parts of the curriculum, and highlight the connections between social justice work and ritual practice.

– Rabbi Jill Jacobs, The Forward

QUESTION 1

Does your service and reflection have a greater impact for you or your community?

QUESTION 2

Do you seek out opportunities to serve or prefer for them to intersect with your life or work?

TEACHING & LEARNING

IN EVERY SITUATION WE CAN BE
BOTH A TEACHER AND A LEARNER

"To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students."

– bell hooks; Teaching to Transgress

"I have learned much from my teachers and even more from my friends, but from my students I have learned more than from all of them."

– Rabbi Chanina, Babylonian

QUESTION 1

What kind of learner are you, visual, auditory, kinesthetic? If you try to process information another way what happens?

QUESTION 2

How can we more consciously create learning and teaching environments that are accessible to everyone?

PRIVILEGE & ACCESS

ARE WE OBLIGATED TO PROVIDE THE SAME EDUCATION TO EVERYONE?

"Whoever had a father would have his father teach him Torah, and whoever did not have a father would not learn Torah at all."

– Babylonian Talmud;
Bava Batra 21a

"From where do we know she doesn't have to teach herself [Torah]? As it is written: "you shall teach" "you shall study", anyone who is commanded to teach is likewise commanded to teach oneself. Anyone that is not commanded to teach is not obligated to teach oneself. How do we know others are not obligated to teach her? Because it says in the verse: "And you should teach your sons", [sons] and not daughters."

– Susan Handelman;
Women and the Study of Torah

QUESTION 1

Is there any form of education that should be restricted?

QUESTION 2

How does the existence of private and public education institutions affect the learning experience for students in either/ both settings?

RESOURCES & KNOWLEDGE

COMPARE THE VALUE OF EDUCATIONAL SUPPLIES AND QUALIFIED TEACHERS

QUESTION 1

How can we provide resources in a way that makes the recipient feel deserving and seen?

"When supplies are lacking, the quality of education is in jeopardy, and that affects future opportunities for children. Providing resources will allow schools, students, and teachers to thrive."

– Antwi Akom, Ph.D., Executive Director Institute for Sustainable Economic Educational and Environmental Design

QUESTION 2

Is it the responsibility of our teachers, schools or communities to provide the necessary resources for students to succeed?

"Everything depends on the person who stands in front of the classroom. To guide a pupil into the promised land, the teacher must have been there themselves. When asking themselves: Do I stand for what I teach? Do I believe what I say? The teacher must be able to answer in the affirmative. What we need more than anything else is not textbooks, but textpeople. It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read: the text that they will never forget."

– Abraham Joshua Heschel,
I asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology

CLASSROOMS & COMMUNITIES

HOW CAN WE ENSURE QUALITY EDUCATION IS ACCESSIBLE TO ALL?

QUESTION 1

Classrooms are traditionally divided by age, does this framework challenge students to grow or restrict learning based on assumptions and biases?

QUESTION 2

To what extent should students determine their own educational path vs. following the expectations of their family or community?

"Schools are about more than what we know and what we can do. They are about who we are and what we must do to help others become what they might be. The world our children will inherit tomorrow is born in the schools we build today."

– Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

"Those who swing the gates open wide for one group but close them when others wish to enter ultimately lose, because they injudiciously decide the worth of peoples."

– Rebecca Shapiro, Ph.D. Invisible Disability Project – Gatekeeping and Marginalization in a Time of Crisis

Local Data and Partners

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates program designs and develops information resources to help understand the social and spatial context of education in the U.S. It uses data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey to create custom indicators of social, economic, and housing conditions for school-age children and their parents. Please use this link to find statistical information about your local school district to learn more about your community.