



The Ziegler School
of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

Walking with the Jewish Calendar

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דרכיה דרכי נעם

SESSION SUGGESTIONS

UNIT 1: JEWISH HOLY DAYS & FESTIVALS

This essay on the Jewish calendar explains the way in which the Jewish calendar combines an awareness of the natural/agricultural world with issues of history and theology. It also draws attention to the ways in which our contemporary calendar and the observances and practices associated with it have emerged and evolved over time.

Unlike most other units, this material is not linked to a specific calendrical event and, as such, you may wish to defer it until a place in the schedule (spring/summer) when there a longer gap between the holidays. You might also choose to combine it with Unit 2, making selections from among the study texts, as appropriate.

If this is your first session, you should set aside some time for introductions and should also lay out some general guidelines and ground rules for group discussions.

HAVRUTA AND GROUP STUDY

The study texts include both Biblical and rabbinic sources related to the establishment of the calendar and the interpretation of customs and practices linked to it. The questions are intended to both clarify the material and invite the readers to place themselves within the framework of the discussion as to how time is or should be reckoned. You should encourage participants to move beyond a simple, literal interpretation of the texts in order to explore their underlying rationale and deeper implications. It is through such a process that they will come to take ownership of the process of text study and of the tradition itself.

UNIT 2: SHABBAT AND THE POSSIBILITY OF TRANSFORMATION

The unit on Shabbat combines a conceptual/theological perspective on the concept of “rest” with a more practical/halachic discussion of the ways in which the themes of Shabbat have been interpreted by the rabbis over time.

In your discussion of the essay it might be useful to separate these two components to ensure that there is ample time and space to discuss them both. Should you do so, however, it may be necessary to make selections among the study texts.

HAVRUTA AND GROUP STUDY

Should you make selections from among the study texts you should bear in mind that the first two texts (especially the second) are classical sources which underlie the rabbinic interpretation of Shabbat and its observance. Text Three, while rabbinic, is of a more conceptual nature, while the fourth text, like the group study text examines Shabbat through a more contemporary, conceptual lens.

MOVING BEYOND THE TEXTS

The material in this unit very much lends itself to a less structured discussion of the relationship between our broader understanding of Shabbat as a concept or ideal and the concrete rules and rituals linked to Shabbat observance. You might wish to set aside a meaningful block of time (20-30 mins.) at the end of the session to invite participants to expound upon these linkages. You may also (or alternatively) wish to invite them to reflect – either individually or as a group -- on how they might adapt their Shabbat observance to better integrate the themes and ideas which they find meaningful.



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UNIT 3: ROSH HASHANAH

The unit on Rosh Hashanah actually includes information on the preparatory period of Elul, as well, and as such you may wish to discuss it some weeks in advance of the holiday itself.

The essay opens with a discussion of Rosh Hashanah's place within the larger cycle of teshuvah and then goes on to discuss Jewish notions of repentance and the liturgy and rituals associated with it.

HAVRUTA

The study texts range from rabbinic and Biblical sources (the latter chosen because of their associations with the Rosh Hashanah liturgy) to a Hassidic text (Source Four). Should you choose to make selections from among the texts, keep in mind that the first two sources (especially the second) contain more classical sources with which participants may already have a passing familiarity. The third text, while taken from the Tashlich liturgy, is less likely to be known to participants and they might benefit from some contextualizing comments. Finally, the final text – a Hassidic parable in the form of a midrash – is best appreciated when introduced with some framing comments about the midrashic form.

GROUP STUDY

The text for group study is drawn from the liturgy (the Unetaneh Tokef) and it is strongly advised that you have some copies of the machzor on hand as you discuss this text, as it will enhance participants' appreciation of where this text falls in the prayer cycle and how it fits into the progression of themes.

UNIT 4: YOM KIPPUR

The unit on Yom Kippur in many ways picks up where the preceding unit (Rosh Hashanah) leaves off, examining the process of atonement both with respect to our relationship with our fellow human beings and to God. Discussions of fasting and self-affliction as means to an end rather than an end unto themselves are a prominent theme of the essay, which invites participants to think about what they would like to achieve through their fast.

HAVRUTA

Texts One and Four place the practices associated with self-affliction and atonement within a larger theological or philosophical context, while Texts Two and Three deal more with the Biblical and rabbinic basis for fasting and other prohibitions linked to Yom Kippur. You might want to sequence your discussion of the texts to reflect this pairing.

GROUP STUDY

The group study text is excerpted from a contemporary essay by Rabbi David Hartman. Like the first and fourth of the havruta text, this source links the work of teshuvah performed on Yom Kippur itself to broader goals of personal and social transformation. He also challenges the reader to overcome their (potential) internal resistance to performing this work effectively.

MOVING BEYOND THE TEXTS

Since the discussion of this material will in many cases fall either in the midst of the Yamim Noraim or in close proximity to them, it might be worthwhile to set aside some time (20-30 mins.) towards the end of the session to allow the participants to discuss or reflect privately on the ways in which they might enhance their holiday experience and also steps they might take (such as journaling) to see the work they do during this interval bear fruit throughout the year.



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UNIT 5: SUKKOT, SHEMINI ATZERET, HOSHANA RABBAH, SIMCHAT TORAH

Some participants may find the unit on Sukkot a bit dense or confusing, since in addition to discussing the interpretations of and rituals associated with Sukkot itself, it also extends into a discussion of the affiliated holidays (Hoshanah Rabbah, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah). For participants unfamiliar with these holidays, it might be useful to begin the session by clarifying the sequence of these dates and the distinct themes, liturgies and ritual practices associated with each.

HAVRUTA

The study texts for this unit contain several well known rabbinic texts and midrashim associated with the observance of Sukkot (among the best known – in their essence if not their original form – are Texts One and Three). There are also some lesser known texts which provide an alternative explanation of the lulav (Text Two) and the meaning of Shemini Atzeret (Text Four).

Several of the texts (Two, Three, Four) are midrashic in origin and it may be useful to provide a brief explanation of the midrashic form before sending the groups off to explore the texts themselves.

GROUP STUDY

The group study “text” actually pairs two texts – one better known and the other more obscure – which together illustrate the way in which the Jewish literary tradition builds on itself. While it is not an explicit focus of the study questions, it might be worthwhile to draw participants’ attention to this.

UNIT 6: CHANUKAH

Participants are probably quite familiar with the ritual aspects of the holiday, which in any case comprise a small portion of the essay. It may, however, be fruitful to use the opening discussion to examine aspects of the history and interpretation of the festival with which they are less conversant.

HAVRUTA AND GROUP STUDY

Text One, while quite long, is easily digested and provides the textual background to the historical events. It is taken from the Book of Maccabees, which what treated as canonical by Christians is not included in the Tanakh – a point which should be made (and, perhaps, if time allows, discussed) in the session. Text Two relates the classic debate between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai as to how to fulfill the mitzvah of Chanukah. Text Four, which is drawn from Masechet Avodah Zarah, suggests that the roots of the midwinter festival may actually lie in non-Jewish sources – a fascinating idea to ponder, particularly with textual support, though you should be aware of the potential of this discussion to stray far from its starting point.

Texts Three and the Text for Group Study comprise alternative versions of the text of Maoz Tzur – the original Hebrew (along with a fairly literal English translation) and a more interpretive version by Jastrow and Gottheil which is the version with which participants are probably familiar. It would be worthwhile to give participants time to read through the more literal text in conjunction with their discussion of the Group Study text.



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UNIT 7: TU B'SHEVAT

The unit on Tu B'Shevat draws primarily on more contemporary sources – in particular the works of Heschel and Buber. Participants unfamiliar with these seminal thinkers would likely benefit if the discussion were prefaced by a short discussion of each man's contributions. You might even wish to bring a brief article on each to share or ask certain participants to research this in advance.

HAVRUTA AND GROUP STUDY

The first three study texts in this unit pick up on themes in the writing of Heschel and Buber, discussed in the essay. The titles at the top of the page (“Awe”, “Wonder”) provide thematic linkages. By contrast, Text Four is a rabbinic text which situates Tu B'Shevat relative to the other “new years” and the traditional calendar of observance. The text for Group Study is excerpted from a Tu B'Shevat seder by Yitzhak Buxbaum and provides fodder for discussion of our relationship to the natural world.

MOVING BEYOND THE TEXTS

The group discussion text provides a natural segue into a discussion of the Tu B'Shevat seder tradition and the various rituals and liturgies developed for use in this context (several of these are listed in the “Resources for Further Study”). You might consider making copies of some of these materials available to participants during the session.

Alternatively (or, in addition) you might want to open the final block of time to a more far-ranging discussion of Jewish attitudes towards nature and the environment, incorporating additional supporting materials to ground the discussion in Jewish sources.

UNIT 8: PURIM: MEGILLAT ESTHER, HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OR DIASPORA PARODY?

As a curriculum for adult learners, this unit assumes a basic familiarity with the Purim story and so eschews a retelling of the story in favor of a more sophisticated examination of its themes. That said, both the discussion of the introductory essay and the havruta study would likely benefit by having copies of Megillat Esther available for participants to reference during the discussion.

HAVRUTA AND GROUP STUDY

The first two study texts provide opportunities to explore and examine specific thematic elements of Megillat Esther from which the study texts are derived. The third text provides a rabbinic exegesis of the megillah. As such, it not only encourages participants to read the text more closely, but also illustrates the way in which the rabbinic literature is composed of successive strata, each building on those preceding it.

The fourth text, taken from Rambam's Mishneh Torah, puts forth the notion that the seemingly inconsequential holiday of Purim will persist into messianic times, even as the Biblical holidays are abolished. Given how wide ranging a discussion of this concept could go, this text could be used as the group study text in place of the material designated for this purpose.

The designated Group Study text is taken from a contemporary essay exploring feminist aspects of the Purim story and, in particular, the development of Esther as a character. Its interest and implications are farther reaching than simply “reading women into the text” and it would be a meaningful starting point for discussion even amongst an all-male audience.



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MOVING BEYOND THE TEXTS

The essay and study texts for this unit invite a broader discussion of gender issues both within the Jewish canon and the Jewish tradition. You should consider devoting a substantial portion of the session (30-40 mins.) to an exploration of these themes, perhaps commencing with a discussion of the ways in which gender has figured into the observance of Purim itself.

UNIT 9: PESACH

Like the materials on Purim, the Pesach unit is intended to supplement rather than supplant a basic introduction to the holiday and its central texts. It assumes a basic familiarity with the Passover story, the seder ritual and the haggadah text. Participants should nevertheless be encouraged to bring to the discussion a copy of the haggadot they intend to (commonly) use at the seder so that they can pinpoint the relevant themes within the text.

Note, in this unit the study texts are more closely integrated with the introductory essay than is the case in other units. You may, therefore, choose to defer a discussion of the four motifs around which the essay is structured with the havruta study.

HAVRUTA

Each of the four havruta texts refers to one of the overarching themes of Pesach discussed in the essay (and referenced through a heading at the top of the page). Each consists of a rabbinic commentary or expansion on a Biblical, rabbinic or liturgical “base text,” and it would likely facilitate discussion to have participants identify and distinguish between these elements before embarking on the Study Questions. It might also be useful to provide a few words of contextual and biographical information on the Ritba (Text One) and Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura (Text Two) to help situate these thinkers for participants.

GROUP STUDY

The group study text looks at the Pesach story and the Pesach observance through a much broader and more contemporary lens. It can serve as an accessible entree point to a broader, more thematic discussion or can be eliminated entirely if you wish to maintain a tighter focus on the festival's core text and rituals.

UNIT 10: THE ISRAELI NATIONAL HOLIDAYS

The Israeli national holidays – Yom HaZikaron, Yom Ha'Atzmaut and Yom Yerushalim – are too often marginalized in the consciousness of Jews living outside of Eretz Yisrael, a problem which is particularly acute among the North American Diaspora. As such this unit plays the dual role of both introducing the holidays and the customs associated with them and making a case as to why these holidays matter to Jews living outside Eretz Yisrael.

HAVRUTA AND GROUP STUDY

The study texts for this unit include both contemporary sources (an excerpt from Israel's Declaration of Independence in Text One) and classical (Biblical and rabbinic) texts which explore Jews' historic ties to the Land as well the theological underpinnings of this relationship. The questions which accompany the texts encourage participants to reflect upon their own relationship to Israel and time should be allocated to allow these dimensions of the conversation to develop.

The Text for Group Study pairs a Biblical text with a more modern explication of the text, reflective of the experience of actually inhabiting the land. The latter text may be a bit difficult for less experienced students to follow and so you should walk them through the text in a stepwise fashion.



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UNIT 11: SHAVOUT

Although explicitly focused on the festival of Shavuot itself, this unit also includes a fairly extensive treatment of the Omer period, a topic too often glossed over in discussions of the holiday. Be sure to make time in your opening discussion to do justice to this aspect of this material.

HAVRUTA AND GROUP STUDY

The study texts for this unit are fairly disparate and, as such, you may wish to make selections from among them. Should you do so, there are ample opportunities to expand themes raised by the various texts into more far-reaching discussions, as described below.

The first of the havruta texts contains parts: the first an excerpt from the Book of Ruth and the second a midrash linking that book to Shavuot.

Text Two, taken from the Zohar, appears to be attempting to counter the then-prevalent perception that Shavuot was in some way a “less important” holiday. Given persistence of this perception, you may want to encourage the extension of the discussion to modern times.

Text Three relates a famous midrash on the giving of the Torah from Masechet Shabbat. You may wish to use this text as the basis for the Group Study discussion and, if so, to then expand the discussion to a broader exploration of the concept of free will.

Text Four actually pairs two texts, both of which discuss the relationship between Shavuot and the Omer period. Should you decide to make these texts the sole focus of your discussion, you might also want to bring in supplemental materials related to the Counting of the Omer and the various traditions and interpretations associated with it.

The Group Study text (actually a pairing of two texts) invites participants to ponder the nature of revelation, both in terms of our relationship to God and with respect to the place of the individual within the kahal. Either or both of these topics could certainly be the basis of a 30 to 45 minute discussion.

UNIT 12: TISHA B'AV

The unit on Tisha B'Av and its associated minor fasts gives explicit treatment to the question of why – or whether – any of these observances still hold relevance in the modern era. While interrogations of this nature are often frowned upon in a synagogue context, where the persistent relevance of the tradition is assumed, the group's discussion would be enhanced by allowing for an earnest exchange on this topic, bolstered by the study texts which illustrate the way this debate has been handled in the successive eras over which it has arisen.

Given scheduling considerations, as well as the on-going debate within the Jewish world (including within the Conservative Movement) concerning the incorporation of a remembrance of the Holocaust into our Tisha B'Av commemorations, you might consider discussing this unit in conjunction with the unit that follows (Unit 13: Yom Hashoah). Should you do so you should bring in additional supporting materials explaining the rationale behind this connection.

HAVRUTA

The first of the study texts explores God's role in the destruction of the Temple (and by extension, other tragedies). Should you wish to make this theological question a more central focus of your discussion, you might select this as the sole text for discussion or use it as the group study text. Text Two, taken from the Bavli, provides the rabbinical basis on which discussions of the observance or non-observance of the minor fast days is founded. It is not only an



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accessible and (to many) familiar example of early rabbinic debates, but also illustrates how far back in Jewish history such debates extend.

Text Three (from Baba Batra) and Text Four (excerpted from a contemporary work by Fein) both ask the question “What are (or should be) the limits on our grief and mourning rituals?” The two texts are probably most effectively studied in tandem.

GROUP STUDY AND MOVING BEYOND THE TEXTS

The text for group study takes the discussion in a somewhat different direction, drawing comparisons between our relationship to our collective destiny (reflected in Tisha B'Av) and our contemplation of our individual trajectories, which is the focus of the Yamim Noraim. As such this text provides a nice launching point for a reprise of material covered over the course of the year.

UNIT 13: YOM HASHOAH

The unit on Yom Hashoah provides not only a history of and rationale for an institutionalized, public commemoration of this great tragedy, but also a plea for the development of more private, home-based rituals to reinforce the communal events. You may wish to allocate time at the end of the session to take up this question, engaging participants in a discussion of what could or should be done to extend awareness of Yom Hashoah into the home. You may also want to share with them examples of the seders and liturgies which have been developed to commemorate Yom Hashoah in a communal context. Examples of these are listed in the essay and under “Resources for Further Study”.

HAVRUTA

The first two havruta texts are in the form of modern midrashim, which not only connect our interpretation and commemoration of the Holocaust to classical texts but also illustrate the way in which this traditional exegetical approach has been appropriated and perpetuated by modern writers. You might, therefore, want to devote some attention to the form as well as substance of these pieces.

The third text, while not explicitly linked to Yom Hashoah, explores the place of silence – a central component of contemporary commemorative activities – in our response to grief and to those who are grieving. It contrasts well and can be paired with Text Four, a contemporary work by Elie Wiesel, which interprets silence in a very different vein.

GROUP STUDY

The Group Study text explores the theological ramifications of the Holocaust, employing the metaphor of God “turning God’s back” as tragedy unfolded. This text can both serve as a meaningful entree point to a broader discussion of the Holocaust and its implications for faith and as a bridge to the unit on Tisha B'Av (Unit 12) should you choose to combine them.





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