

'If not with others, how?'¹: Creating Rabbinic Activists Through Study

Robyn Ashworth-Steen and Deborah Kahn-Harris

rabbirobyn@jacksonsrow.org; deborah.kahn-harris@lbc.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Together we seek to model the redemptive, liberatory, activist, feminist approach to collaborative working to which both authors are committed as teachers, students, rabbis and activists. In our rabbinic chain of tradition (more particularly through other female rabbis) we explore, through the lenses of student and teacher, the 5-year rabbinic course at Leo Baeck College (LBC). We seek to demonstrate how, when working at its best, LBC trains rabbis as activists. Our contention is that the rabbinic education at LBC has the potential to be transformative in creating rabbis as activist leaders, an ideal which ought to transcend the rabbinic training seminary and be taken forward into community.

KEYWORDS

Activism; Feminism; Education; Megillot; Seminary

At the Outset

We begin with ourselves, setting the personal context for our study and thus model our reflective and holistic modes of study. We both provide our reflections and thoughts on a particular module at LBC – *Megillot* (i.e. the five scrolls from the Hebrew Bible) as taught by Rabbi Dr Deborah Kahn-Harris to now Rabbi Robyn Ashworth-Steen during her fifth year of study. In the final section, we provide case studies of how this module impacted upon our activism and work in the wider community.

Using most closely the work of bell hooks and Rabbi Sheila Shulman, and whilst grounding our work in our Jewish tradition, we focus on teaching that is founded on diverse hermeneutics, critical thinking, community, dialogue and learning, which always works towards and is interested in justice. We will seek to demonstrate that this form of transformative study is a form of activism in and of itself, bringing text and action into alignment and ensuring that learners and teachers make an impact on the world.

Through our relationship, and those relationships established in the rabbinic classroom and in community, we seek to de-colonize the texts and ourselves and work towards liberation for all. We attempt to answer Rabbi Sheila Shulman's call for women going out

¹ Adrienne Rich, "If Not with Others, How?" in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (London: Virago Press Limited, 1986), 202.

together as a band of prophets through our shared experiences, learning, relationships and commitment to activism.

'Can this be Naomi?' (Ruth 1:19): Situating ourselves at this moment in time

'If not with others, how?' is the starting point of this article and the foundation of how we understand what being/becoming a rabbi ought to be about. As two female rabbis, one the teacher, one the former student, and now happily rabbinic colleagues, we have come together to reflect on the process of teaching and learning that takes place at Europe's oldest progressive Jewish rabbinic training seminary, Leo Baeck College (LBC).

Labels and self-definitions are tricky things; they are too often limiting, masking the nuanced reality of our lived experiences. While we acknowledge this challenge, we are also cognizant that who we are is essential to understanding what we are about to write. In that vein, we want to begin not with ourselves alone, but within the wider context that we share and, in particular, the chain of rabbinic tradition and teaching within which we situate ourselves.

We both count ourselves the students of Rabbi Sheila Shulman z'l.² Rabbi Shulman was herself a student of a generation of LBC teachers who escaped the ravages of the Shoah, setting up LBC to ensure the future of the progressive Jewish world in Europe. But Rabbi Shulman was equally the inheritor of the radical Yiddish tradition of Eastern European Jewry transplanted to her native New York City and, perhaps most formatively, part of the radical feminist and lesbian activism of the transatlantic milieu of the 1970s and 1980s. Sat on the floor of her Ladbroke Grove rent-controlled flat as she smoked her perfectly rolled cigarettes, we learned not just the words of Adrienne Rich, but also fundamentally about how becoming rabbis meant becoming activists. For Rabbi Shulman politics and spirituality were inextricably interlinked.

Then who are we, the inheritors of her teaching? We are both teachers and students, both rabbis, both committed activists in different ways to the practice of repairing the world.³

Robyn: I would begin by describing myself as a seeker of justice. I fell in love with my Judaism at an early age, committing myself to the path of being a rabbi at the age of 11. I was drawn to community, to text, to questioning, to dialogue, to our stories, to the shared vision of working towards the Promised Land and to leading. This seeking and belonging led me, first, to being a human rights lawyer, before eventually stepping back into my vocation as a rabbi. Having a child whilst at LBC shaped me as a learner, an individual, and a rabbi. After my ordination in 2017, I returned to my community in Manchester and now co-lead Manchester

² z'l, *zichrona livracha*, may her memory be for a blessing.

³ Often in contemporary progressive Jewish circles known as *tikkun olam*, literally 'repairing the world.' See also note 7.

Reform Synagogue. It is teaching Torah, in community, as it interweaves with us and our worlds, inspiring us to build a better, more just world together, which continues to motivate me.

Deborah: Professionally, I see myself primarily as a teacher, a biblical scholar infusing my students with the dual love of the biblical text and the hermeneutics that shape our understandings of it. As principal of LBC, I also have a primary role in shaping the vision of the institution overall, ensuring that at the foundation of what we do is the creation of community, both between individual students, between students and faculty/staff, and between all of us and something divine, which we may choose to name as God. At a personal level I am both a mother and a heterosexual woman in a monogamous marriage. I share my living space with animals and the larger natural world, insofar as is possible in urban north London. The wholeness that is both my personal and professional life is, deep down, rooted in my commitment to enabling others and in doing so transforming myself as well.

If those are our individual, personal descriptions of ourselves at this moment, then the question remains as to why we choose to write this article together. We have taken Adrienne Rich's question to heart – who are we if we are not with others, or at least here with each other? We share much that overlaps in our identities – as middle-class, heterosexual, cis, Jewish women, as mothers, as progressive rabbis, as activists. Yet in order to fully inhabit our work in the rabbinate we recognise that though we may start from what we share in common, we must also face the other in each other, acknowledge that even what often feels similar, our experience of the world is not the same. Rabbi Shulman wrote, 'We (Jews) arrive at our understanding of how we (human beings) are all connected and the same through our understanding of how we (human beings) are each, all of us, distinct and unique.'⁴

Being in dialogue for this paper, as rabbis and learners together, is a microcosm of the approach to teaching taken at LBC, though it is not exclusive to it. Dialogic learning/teaching is an ancient approach to Jewish study. From antiquity Jews have studied in pairs, *chavruta* (literally friendship), a process which moved from real time experience to the recorded pages of rabbinic literature, increasing the dialogue across time and space. In the Mishnah we are commanded in *Pirkei Avot/Sayings of the Fathers* 1:6: 'Make for yourself a teacher and obtain for yourself a friend' Being in relationship is crucial to Jewish learning and that relationship is *avodah*, (sacred, hard) work. This article is a living embodiment of that ideal, informed by our own commitment to a feminist approach to collaborative working towards liberation. To write this article has involved not merely discussion and debate, but physical travel (back and forth between Manchester and London), virtual editing across the ether of the internet, as well as phone calls, chance encounters, and the memory of time spent learning together.

⁴ Sheila Shulman, 'A Beloved Unique in the World,' in *Watching for the Morning: Selected Sermons*, (London: BKY Liberal Jewish Community, 2007), 48.

During the course of the five-year, postgraduate rabbinic training programme at LBC, we spent one year as teacher and student together studying those books of the Hebrew Bible known collectively as the *Megillot*.⁵ This shared experience transformed us both and, hence, forms the starting point of our writing together for this article.

Our contention is that the rabbinic education at LBC has the potential to be transformative in creating rabbis as activist leaders, an ideal which ought to transcend the rabbinic training seminary. We write this article together as an act of continuing commitment to building that ideal. We will focus on giving our own perspectives, as teacher and learner, on the transformative study at LBC and end with a case study of the *Megillot* class as taught by Deborah to Robyn during the rabbinic training at LBC, particularly through queer readings of the Book of Ruth. Our focus will be on teaching that is founded on diverse hermeneutics, critical thinking, community, dialogue and learning, which always works towards and is interested in justice. We will seek to demonstrate that this form of transformative study is a form of activism in and of itself, bringing text and action into alignment and ensuring learners and teachers make an impact on the world.

'Daughter, I must seek a home for you where you will be happy' (Ruth 3: 1): The responsibilities of a teacher

Teacher-learner lens: Deborah

Taken out of the heavily patriarchal context in which this verse is voiced in the book of Ruth and with a word of caution about the pitfalls of seeing the teacher-student relationship in a parental framework, for me, as a teacher, finding a home for my students where they can be happy is a core part of the responsibility I feel towards them. In the case of the biblical studies classroom, I understand that home to be the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Bible, where it is my responsibility to ensure that every one of my students can find a way to approach our shared sacred text, which brings them a kind of happiness -- even when they are struggling with the text. Helping my students to be able to delight in the act of engaging with the text, even when doing so may be difficult, is an act of grounding my students in the text and forms the foundation of religious lives. I love studying the Hebrew Bible; little else connects me so deeply to what I experience as God. I want to ensure my students walk away from a year's study of the *Megillot* with me, able to transmit some small (or hopefully large) measure of the joy I experience in the deep engagement with our core text. I want them to understand that the Hebrew Bible matters profoundly, particularly to those of us who are taking on the mantle of the rabbinate.

With that in mind, the first class of the year in my biblical studies classroom always ends with the reading of the following quotation from Carleen Mandalfo:

⁵ These are: Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther.

The current social wars raging over biblical interpretations should make it clear that the choices we make about reading have political consequences as significant as those we make in the voting booth or with our checkbook. Our reading practices, in part, construct the symbolic world we inhabit and serve to motivate and justify our actions. Because words, particularly biblical words, possess the power to muster armies, we must approach the text with a certain ethical consciousness.⁶

For my (generally) socially liberal rabbinical students, this quotation often causes a moment of real pause and reflection. The phrase ‘mustering armies’ can lead my students to associations with violent and oppressive forms of religious intolerance. Students might associate biblical words in these other, less tolerant, more fundamentalist forms of Judaism or, indeed, Christianity as having the power to cause harm to people and the planet, but we view ourselves as part of a tolerant, open-minded, liberal form of religion. We believe that our interpretations of biblical words improve the world and change lives for the better. We feel confident that our interpretations are ethical and moral. I must often point out that, even should that turn out to be the case, our interpretations wield power, too, and that we must be careful to acknowledge that power and consider how we use it very carefully.⁷

From our first lesson onwards, I am continuously questioning my students about how what they learn in our classroom is translated into how they act, what they teach, how they behave and how they expect and advise others to behave when they enter congregational life. The biblical text and its interpretation become a vehicle for examining one’s own life and behaviour, for creating a lens through which to spur activism of many varieties. Although the subject matter for my class is the *Megillot*, at least as important are the hermeneutical approaches to text study that we apply to these biblical books. I, therefore, teach a wide variety of hermeneutical approaches, many of which focus on identity issues that enable

⁶ Carleen R. Mandolfo, *Daughter Zion Talks Back to the Prophets: A Dialogic Theology of the Book of Lamentations* (Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 27.

⁷ Particularly in progressive Jewish communities the originally kabbalistic concept of *tikkun olam*, ‘repair of the world’, has been adopted and adapted from its original rather more limited and esoteric meaning to create a whole theological underpinning for much of contemporary progressive Jewish practice. Repairing the world has come to mean a pervasive moral and ethical good, most often linked to a kind of lefty politics, which does not always have a clear relationship to traditional Jewish sources or biblical interpretation. But we, my students with each other and/or with me, do not always agree with each other on a wide variety of issues, even when our politics are similarly rooted in the desire to repair a broken world. When these disagreements occur, what becomes essential in the classroom is to create a space where we can genuinely listen to each other and engage civilly and respectfully. I strive to live by the words of the Talmud (b.Eruvin 13b) where, in discussing a debate between the houses of Hillel and Shammai, it is written that a Heavenly Voice descended and said, ‘אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים’ (‘these *and* these are the words of the Living God’). Hence, insofar as I can establish that all sides of any debate are brought with a true spirit of commitment to the text, then I hope to model for my students that all of our words are מחלוקת לשם שמים, a debate for the sake of heaven.

students to reflect inward on themselves – their prejudices and their presumptions, as well as their ability to be open-minded, tolerant, and accepting.

For example, we examine translation theory when studying the book of Ruth. We look at how far translation – whether our own or those of the standard translations used in our communities – influences how we understand and how we want our communities to understand the text.⁸ We look closely at Ruth 3:1-8 – the words that are printed in our Hebrew Bibles and the words that are traditionally spoken here in place of what is printed, known in Hebrew as a קרי כתיב.⁹ What do these words tell us about Ruth, about Naomi, about what sort of people we think they are? Is it ever possible to read the text neutrally – what assumptions are we bringing to our translations? In what sense is the Hebrew tradition of deliberately reading some of these words differently to how they are printed already a form of translation or interpretation? How do we convey this practice and what it might reveal about the text in our own translations into English or other languages? How do our own assumptions about the behaviour and characters of Ruth and Naomi influence our translations? Translation becomes the gateway to a deep examination of power, authority, morality, and much more in this text.

In other sessions on the book of Ruth, we examine post-colonial and minority readings of Ruth, cultural studies approaches to Ruth, and queer readings of Ruth. Together with the class on translation theory, we can begin to reflect on a wide range of ways of reading the story. Additionally, in some of these sessions I ask students as part of their preparation for class to write reflective pieces. For example, I ask students to consider how their own social location might influence their view of the text. As a teacher, the onus is on me to create a classroom space where students feel fully able to discuss such private and personal matters together. Creating boundaries from the outset is essential, particularly ensuring clarity around confidentiality. Crucially, my course is part of the fourth year curriculum for training for the rabbinate, so students should already know each other well.¹⁰ Even so, I have

⁸ LBC students come from a range of communities, mostly from the UK and continental Europe and classes are mixed in terms of gender and sexuality. In class, on the whole we use the NJPS bible when we look at translation, but in congregations a variety of translations are standard. Continental European students will have a range of different standard translations depending on the languages spoken in their home communities.

⁹ In Jewish practice a קרי כתיב, literally 'what is read' and 'what is written', is generally understood to be a way to deal with what are likely to have been scribal errors in the biblical text. To be clear, whole verses are not replaced, but rather a very small number of words are relexicalized, or syllables are pronounced differently to how they are written in a Torah scroll. Commonly, for example, we find a confusion between הוא and היא (i.e. a masculine or feminine pronoun, 'he' and 'she') in various verses throughout the Hebrew Bible. In such cases the scroll reader knows to chant the correct reading despite what might be written in the text. In the verses we study in class in Ruth 3 we look particularly at two words in Ruth 3:3 and one word in Ruth 3:4. Additionally, in Ruth 3:5 there is one word that is written that is not read nor is it replaced with any other word. In a printed version of the Hebrew Bible different editions have different ways of marking the קרי כתיב.

¹⁰ Rabbinic training at LBC, as is standard among most internationally recognised rabbinic training programmes in the progressive Jewish world, is a 5-year post-graduate programme that culminates in MA level study in Jewish studies in addition to placement work.

deliberately placed this class, which requires such delicate reflection and personal trust among students and myself, towards the end of the academic year, when bonds between students and between student and teacher are already well built, strong, and trusting.

Once we have begun the explorations from all of these sessions, we can begin to reflect on how we might use a text like the book of Ruth to motivate us to action beyond the classroom. Over the course of several weeks of study, reflection, reading, preparation and discussion, students come to see that the text contains any number of possible readings – a lesbian love story, a story promoting the value of *chesed* (lovingkindness); a story of sexual exploitation and human trafficking; a tale of climate refugees and poverty-induced economic migration; and/or a tale of acceptance of exogamous marriage. Importantly, as is consonant with traditional Jewish modes of reading the biblical text, I aim not to privilege any one of these readings over any of the others. Reading texts in my classroom is not about a right way and a wrong way to interpret the text, but about creating an abundance of meaning. Any one or more of these readings (and many more besides) can speak to us and spur us to action.

Moreover, the final assessment for the course requires students to go out into communities and teach on the *Megillot* employing one of the hermeneutics that we have studied. Students must take what they learn in the classroom and demonstrate how they can put it into practice in congregational life. Although this assessment is formulated as an educational activity, nevertheless it gives students the scope both to envisage and put into practice at least one way in which they want to take their learning from class out into the community. The assessment also requires a reflection piece, asking students to consider carefully and thoughtfully how the session went – was it successful and if so, what does success mean in this context? How might they consider altering the session if they were to repeat it? What did they enjoy about the session? What was challenging? So this assessment is more than simply a way for me to ascertain as a teacher whether my students have understood the material taught. Rather, it is an opportunity for students to put into practice the principles they have learned in class, to have something they can take away and use and use again, and to reflect on the process.

As a teacher, I hope that what I am giving them, therefore, is deep engagement with the text and a means to carry that engagement forward in their working lives. But more than that, my purpose is to engage them, through the model of our class together, in the millennia-old conversation of Jewish life, helping them find their own voices and, thus, places in our community.

In this respect Rabbi Sheila Shulman z'l acted as my inspiration. As my teacher, she modelled for me the ways in which teaching was not about the passing on of factual knowledge, but rather a very active pushing and prodding to get students to think for themselves. Moreover, she believed in dialogical relationships, between human beings as well as between human beings and God, for essentially that is how, in her understanding, we become a community:

That is one construction, one reading, of how the people become the people: by standing, speaking, hearing, and acting as unique (that is, integral) creatures in a dialogical relation to God and to each other. With each word and action that happens in the context of that relation, they together make revelation real; that is, they create meaning, thereby constituting themselves, again and again, as a community.¹¹

But Sheila also cautions against the assumptions implicit in this construction, as she goes on to say that ‘that is not a place women have occupied within Judaism. It is precisely the place from which we have been most rigorously excluded.’ She could easily have gone on to add the LGBTQiA+¹² and a host of others who do not fit the heterosexual, middle-aged male, married-with-children model of traditional Judaism. In my classroom, I endeavour to ensure that every student can bring who they are -- their lived experience, their hopes and aspirations, their messy and complex and still-in-progress thoughts, and more -- without any assumptions from me about how they wish to be defined.

This method of teaching is my gift to each of my students and myself. It is the home I have built for myself in relation to the Hebrew Bible that I open to them in true encounter with each of them. I seek to help all of my students find their own home in the text of the Hebrew Bible – personally, theologically, practically, and politically. As Sheila once wrote, ‘The overall goal of reading and teaching these texts is to enable those who will become Rabbis... to take their places fully and with total integrity as presumptive leading voices... in the present moment... of the unending millennial conversation that is Judaism.’¹³ To my mind, this way of working, this act of studying and teaching, becomes itself an act of activism. In this sense, then, I believe that I am enacting the rabbinic story told in *b.Kiddushin* 40b:

מתני'. כל שישנו במקרא ובמשנה ובדרך ארץ - לא במהרה הוא חוטא, שנאמר: (קהלת ד) והחוט המשולש לא במהרה ינתק וכל שאינו לא במקרא ולא במשנה ולא בדרך ארץ - אינו מן היישוב.

Mishnah: All who are engaged in the study of *Torah* and *Mishnah* and proper behaviour – they will not rush after sin, as it is written: ‘a threefold cord is not readily broken’ (Ecc 4:12). And all who are not [engaged in the study of] *Torah* and *Mishnah* and proper behaviour – they are not part of society/the civilised world.

... (*Gemara*)

¹¹ Sheila Shulman, ‘Worldly Jewish Women: A Possible Model,’ *European Judaism* 38:1 (2005): 91.

¹² LGBTQiA+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, ally, pansexual... The abbreviation has been criticised for excessive ‘initialism’, for being confusing, and for leaving groups or individuals out. Its intention here is inclusion and to point to the diversity of genderqueerness and sexuality.

¹³ Sheila Shulman, ‘Reading Whole’, June 2010, pg. 1, unpublished.

וכבר היה רבי טרפון זקנים מסובין בעלית בית נתזה בלוד נשאלה שאילה זו בפניהם תלמוד גדול או מעשה גדול נענה רבי טרפון ואמר מעשה גדול נענה ר"ע ואמר תלמוד גדול נענו כולם ואמרו תלמוד גדול שהתלמוד מביא לידי מעשה.

And already there was [an incident when] Rabbi Tarfon and the Elders were reclining in the loft of Nitza's house in Lod and a question was asked of them, 'Is study greater or deeds/action greater?' Rabbi Tarfon answered and said, 'Deeds/action is greater.' Rabbi Akiva answered and said, 'Study is greater.' They all replied and said, 'Study is greater as study leads to deeds/action.'

'How is it with you, daughter?' (Ruth 3:16): Learning and relationships

Learner-teacher lens: Robyn

In some ways this quotation from the Book of Ruth reflects both the experience and theory behind the teacher/learner dynamics at LBC. The intimate relationship between learner and teacher is fundamental to the transformative, engaged pedagogy that is at play both by design and as a result of the particular make-up of this seminary.¹⁴ Yet, in other ways, with the possibility of the pejorative use of the word 'daughter' (given the context of Ruth and Naomi's complicated power dynamic) this phrase does not do justice to the relationship between teacher and learner at the college, in certain classes. This is because in such classes the relationship is not a hierarchical, unilateral one, dependent on the teacher imparting wisdom for the learner to ingest, but a mutual relationship founded on a shared understanding of both our world and our role in it as progressive rabbis.

In contrast to the banking system of education, which the feminist theorist bell hooks characterises as learning 'obedience to authority' and where gaining knowledge is the primary aim,¹⁵ the engaged pedagogy, which hooks presents and LBC strives to practise, requires: critical thinking, as embedded in our Jewish tradition; a 'classroom community,'¹⁶ held together and challenged by a web of relationships both between the learners themselves and between individual learners and the teacher; a consideration for the well-being of learners and teachers; and a shared understanding that learning leads and is inextricably linked to action in the wider world.

¹⁴ 'Engaged pedagogy', a term used by bell hooks, is based on Pablo Freire's understanding and advocacy for education as the practice of freedom. I will be using bell hooks' work as a lens to understand transformative, critically-minded education in the setting of a seminary classroom at LBC. In particular I will be referring to bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994). We will be following bell hooks' custom of not using capital letters for her name.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.4. The 'banking system of education' is based, hooks writes, on the assumption that memorizing information and regurgitating it represents gaining knowledge that can be deposited, stored, and used at a later date. This system also 'merely strives to reinforce domination.'

¹⁶ Ibid, p.8.

Critical Thinking

‘The Bible is locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn’t steal it. It is an incendiary device: who knows what we’d make of it, if we ever got our hands on it.’¹⁷

It was during the intensive three-day interview period for the college that I first met Rabbi Sheila Shulman z’l. She, along with another rabbi, held my academic interview. Seeing Sheila smoking at the top of the stairs of the college building and following her inside to have a chat about a book she said ‘I must read’ was an indication that this educational institution was to be quite different to any I had been in before. In that interview Sheila asked me what I thought critical thinking was. Thinking back, and with some shame, I offered a bland answer. Despite my education at the University of Cambridge and my training and work as a human rights lawyer, I had never truly thought about, let alone experienced the type of radical, Jewish, feminist critical thinking to which Sheila would introduce me. It was only during and after my five years at the college that I realised why that question was so fundamental to what it means to not only be a learner, but a rabbi, a Jew, and a human being.

For the type of critical thinking which both Sheila Shulman and bell hooks teach and practise is one that ‘enables transgressions’ and is a ‘movement against and beyond boundaries’.¹⁸ hooks describes her initiation into this mode through her context in the United States of America as a black woman: ‘we learned early that our devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization’.¹⁹ This ‘practice of freedom’ as penned by Pablo Freire and built upon by scholars such as hooks, can be described as ‘the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of the world’²⁰ and sits in opposition to the ‘banking system of education’.²¹ The latter style of education means that boredom is often at play as teachers understand it to be their duty to impart their learnt knowledge to others through a formal lesson/lecture.²² One of the benefits of learning at LBC is the variety of teachers we learn with. Whilst some of the classes border and fully embrace the banking style of education, many, including our class with Deborah, demonstrated a type of education such as bell hooks urges us all to strive towards, that of engaged pedagogy.

For a number of reasons, the *Megillot* class with Deborah works as an example of engaged pedagogy at play. First, the very nature of our study gave us tools in critical thinking

¹⁷ Quotation by Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as quoted in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 3.

¹⁸ hooks, *Teaching*, 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Richard Shaull, “Foreword”, in Pablo Freire, *Pedagogy of The Oppressed* (trans. M. B. Ramos: London: Penguin Books, 1996), 34.

²¹ hooks, *Teaching*, 5

²² *Ibid.*

through the examination of diverse hermeneutics of Torah, providing us with ways of countering our sacred text and resisting it in order to de-colonize it, and us. As the Margaret Atwood quotation above suggests, the way in which we read the Torah (through the lens of critical Jewish thinking I would add) can fundamentally shift ourselves and the world around us. By studying through the lens of queer, feminist, post-colonial and art theory we were gifted tools in opening up our texts, each other and ourselves and seeing them all in a new light.

The mode of critical thinking which I am seeking to explore links me together with the ancient and current modes of Jewish learning. Our rabbinic texts (written and crafted by men we should note) record disputes and conversations of thorough examinations of the words and teachings before them. The tools we are gifted through Jewish study include *chavruta*, where we discuss and debate the texts in pairs, and *pardes*, a four-staged interpretation of texts, starting with literal translation, hints found in the text, lessons we can take from the text, and the secrets it holds.

One text from the *Talmud* embodies the critical thinking demanded of Jewish learners, which is to ask questions, always, and to hold the complexities and nuances in our readings (and our lives), not settling for binary thinking:

R. Abba stated in the name of Samuel: For three years there was a dispute between Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel, the former asserting, 'The *halachah* [Jewish law] is in agreement with our views' and the latter contending, 'The *halachah* is in agreement with our views'. Then a *bat kol* [God's voice] issued announcing, '[The utterances of] **both are the words of the living God**, but the *halachah* is in agreement with the rulings of Beth Hillel'.²³

Not only was the content of our study in the *Megillot* class fundamental to our quest for engaged pedagogy, the assignments and mode of teaching further enabled this practice. For instance, many of the assignments honour 'the authority of experience', in the words of hooks.²⁴ Whilst studying the Book of Ruth, to give one example, we were asked to reflect and write to the question, 'how does my own sexual identity impact on my reading of the Book of Ruth?' This constitutes an intimate question, which brings our own self-understanding into the classroom. Not only was the exploration of sexual identity and desire unusual in the classroom setting, as a woman learner, desire and sex is a topic that is largely denied to me in public spaces.²⁵ This assignment opened doors for me in terms of learning personally and

²³ *B.Eruvin 13b*, emphasis added.

²⁴ hooks, *Teaching*, 89.

²⁵ hooks states that 'neither Freire's work nor feminist pedagogy examined the notice of pleasure in the classroom', *Teaching*, 7. *Deborah* adds: Please note that no student is required to comment beyond what they feel comfortable. Although the question asks students to reflect on and write about how their sexual identity influences their reading, it is left up to individual students to consider what part of their own sexual identity they wish to disclose. No student is ever 'outed against their will', or anything comparable. Nevertheless, in general, the LBC community is a very open and tolerant one, particularly in regard to sexual identity as, more generally, is the case in the British (or US) progressive Jewish communities. Where we do

professionally, confirming the following: 'Education as the practice of freedom is not just about liberatory knowledge, it's about a liberatory practice in the classroom.'²⁶

A Classroom Community

If not with others, how?²⁷

Crucial to engaged pedagogy, Jewish learning and feminist theory is the prominence given to relationships and dialogue. This is in part because, in the context of community organising and social activism, 'to be affected by another in relationships is as true a sign of power as the capacity to affect others'.²⁸ Harnessing the power of relationships has the potential to apply 'power with', not 'power over', and thus affect meaningful and effective change. As the quotation from the feminist poet Adrienne Rich implies, creating change, apart from the organised money and titles afforded by patriarchy, is the only methodology which can be effective in bringing societal change. Deep relationships affect us personally, including in terms of our ongoing interaction with the world around us. The importance of naming the power in the classroom is thus fundamental: be that the power of the role of principal of the college who is teaching the class, or the lack of power of the students as the marks on their assessments are gateways between student life and rabbinic life. These power imbalances exist. Part of the power of the dynamic in the rabbinic classroom is our ability to name these powers and, indeed, the importance of us recognising power (such as in the title of rabbi) is fundamental to being skilful, safe and professional rabbis.

Relationships form the backbone of Jewish teaching and tradition, be that through *chevrutot*, where one Talmudic passage even proclaims '*chevruta o mituta*' meaning, 'friendship or death',²⁹ or in the formation of *minyamin*, which means that at critical moments individuals are brought together as a community, heeding Hillel's call to not separate ourselves from the community.³⁰ Our Torah and teachings are peppered with signs of deep relationships: from the patriarchs to the *zugyot* (pairings) in rabbinic times. As Ed Chambers, a social activist, writes, 'in the sacred texts of the Abrahamic religions, we find God holding relational meetings at critical moments.'³¹

have students from communities (either Jewish or in wider society) where disclosing one's sexual identity may be more fraught with difficulty, we reinforce confidentiality in the classroom and make no demands on students that may put them in danger of any sort.

²⁶ hooks, *Teaching*, 147.

²⁷ Rich, "If Not with Others," 202.

²⁸ Edward T. Chambers, *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action, and Justice* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 28.

²⁹ *B. Ta'anit 23a*.

³⁰ *M. Pirke Avot 2:4*.

³¹ Chambers, *Roots*, 44.

Shulman, from her Jewish, radical, lesbian and feminist standpoints, writes that the Jewish tradition is 'dialogical to its core.'³² Yet Shulman was the first to point out the absence of women, particularly collectively, in these dialogues, which form the core of Jewish teachings. Shulman critiques Judaism and the role of women within our texts and tradition: 'where within Judaism as it currently exists, do we situate women (women together, women in groups, women out of whose lives and conversations a "we" might emerge) who are neither embedded in nor dependent upon (except as we all are, civilly) hetero-relational reality?'³³ As Shulman states, 'Women in the Tanakh, or in rabbinic texts, certainly don't go out in the world together, with the memorable exception of Ruth and Naomi.'³⁴ We will explore the dynamic between Ruth and Naomi later but for now can explore the impact of studying as a classroom community, situated from my vantage point of a young woman, learning with a female rabbi, the principal of the rabbinic college.

As the rabbinic seminary class is formed of individuals who share the vision of becoming rabbis and teachers themselves in just a few years, there is a dynamic of collegiality and mutual supportiveness between students and instructors at LBC. The distinctions are often non-linear and overlap the categories of learner, teacher, future colleague, and, possibly, friend.³⁵ This dynamic lends itself to relational, engaged pedagogy. Thus, aligned with bell hooks' teaching, the rabbinic student cannot be a 'passive consumer' but is expected to be an 'active participant'³⁶ who will go on to lead religious communities. It is because of the deep relationships, formed during five years of intense learning, that trust was built and thus a community made. These were fostered through such safe spaces as therapy, which is strongly recommended by LBC, the *Megillot* class, as well as through spaces outside of college where we would dedicate time to facilitated conversations on personal and often difficult subjects. The classroom community and the effort it took to build it, through learning, was a model for us as trainee rabbis in how to lead and sustain communities. We learnt, as members of the community, to be responsible, alongside the teacher for the dynamics of the class. We valued everyone's presence and unique voice. We learnt from each other how 'to be' and how 'to do'.

³² Shulman, 'Wordly Jewish Women,' .2.

³³ Ibid, p.6.

³⁴ Ibid. p.4. Underlining original to the text, perhaps to highlight how unusual the concept of women going out together is in the *Tanakh*.

³⁵ The relationship between rabbis and their teachers is often a profound one. Many of Sheila's students visited and comforted her during her final months of illness and some were with her when she died in her home. We, along with members of her community, had become her friends, her carers and her family. It must also be noted, however, that rabbinic teachers who work in community are also involved with the interview process for a student rabbi's first job upon completion of their five years of training. This, too, must be named, otherwise, if power relations go unacknowledged, there is a potential for increased tension and difficulty.

³⁶ hooks, *Teaching*, 13.

Well-being

Understanding rabbinic training, and to some degree Jewish learning, as *avodah* (sacred, hard work) means acknowledging that it can be exhausting. Engaged, dialogic, critical thinking requires a great deal of both the teacher and the learner. It is holistic, reflective, questioning and challenging. Indeed, rabbinic life, as I am coming to realise, is equally demanding. I understand my work and my learning to be redemptive, leading us to co-create a more just world. This form of activism requires, as I am discovering, the activist and learner to be resilient and whole. Without this strength the work becomes overwhelming, impossible. This is why therapy and the group work my class undertook alongside classes and our vocational placements, was vital. We began a process of learning how to take care of ourselves, as people with full lives who were also rabbis. We began to learn to manage expectations, to pace, to do that which brings us life, so that we could do that which we felt called to do. Additionally, being part of a classroom community, in a space where relationships and dialogue were fundamental, our whole selves would be addressed. We would often come into class having spent an hour praying together, marking the anniversary of the death of loved ones (an important moment in every Jewish service) and would then learn together. There was, at times, little separation between our daily lives and our learning lives.

Prioritising well-being is a significant marker of this particular transformative learning and mirrored in the opening verse of this section, 'how is it with you?'³⁷ In the words of bell hooks, 'teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students.'³⁸ Prioritising well-being enables the richness of study and the transformative, activist nature of such learning.

Action

Propelled by our new paradigm, we turn and return to the world, to our families, communities and societies.³⁹

With the bedrock of this engaged, transformative pedagogy, with the tools of critical thinking, honed through a classroom community attending to well-being, it would be almost impossible for the teacher and learner to return, each to their world, unchanged. Both they and the worlds they inhabit are transformed. Study not only leads to action but is action in and of itself. Learning in this way helped me to hone my inner wisdom, insight and power (as ability to act). Learning together increased that relational power and provided a community that I

³⁷ Ruth 3:16.

³⁸ hooks, *Teaching*, 15.

³⁹ Bonna Devora Haberman, 'Women beyond the Wall: From Text to Praxis,' *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 13:1 (Spring, 1997), 8.

would take out into the world for continued support and as a reminder of the shared vision that took us to LBC all those years before.⁴⁰

Through the diverse hermeneutics of critical thinking and de-colonisation we are partaking in a form of activism in study and outside of it, which demands more of the world that we are living in. The pedagogy of the *Megillot* class enabled me to see my study as being a liberatory act which positioned me alongside other minorities and, furthermore, is enabling me as a community rabbi to understand my study, my work in community as working towards this greater goal.

'You are my witnesses today. All the people at the gate and the elders answered, "[We are] witnesses."' (Ruth 4: 10 – 11): Real life examples

Case studies: Deborah and Robyn

In quoting this verse from Ruth, we acknowledge that in its original context it is a quintessential manifestation of patriarchal authority. Boaz publicly asserts his intention to enact the right of levirate marriage to Ruth, who is not even present. The elders are male and the people possibly 'all the **men** at the gate'; they reply that they agree to witness this act situated as they are at the traditional seat of patriarchal power—the gates of the city. The women – Ruth, Naomi, the women of Bethlehem – are absent, their voices unheard. Having been active, autonomous agents together they are absent here. They fade out of the text altogether, as the book concludes with the genealogy of the line from Perez, via Ruth's son Obed, to David: ten men in a row without a single mother among them.

However, in choosing this verse for this section of our paper we are reclaiming the right to witnessing, to exclaiming our own collective power, to enacting our authority to read and interpret the text. Our choice of this verse witnesses Ruth and Naomi and all of the latent potential in their relationship and the models it offers us. Ruth and Naomi are 'the memorable exception', the women who 'go out into the world together' just as we, student and teacher, are now out in the world together as colleagues.⁴¹ We also witness the women of Bethlehem whose voices and presence embrace Ruth and Naomi by recognising them ('Can this be Naomi?'), giving a blessing that foreshadows that of the men at the gate ('[Ruth]...is better to you than seven sons'), and even naming the newborn son. Naming, after all, demonstrates relational power.⁴²

We, then, deliberately exclaim 'we are witnesses!' though not only the passive עדים [witnesses] of the men at the gate, but also the היינו, 'we are here', an echo of a much earlier

⁴⁰ Chambers summarises this well: 'As you become more powerful, so do those in relationship with you. As they become more powerful, so do you. This is power understood as relational, as power *with*, not *over*' (p.28).

⁴¹ Sheila Shulman, 'Worldly Jewish Women,' 83.

⁴² Ruth 1:19; 4:15,17 respectively.

biblical response to the call of the Divine.⁴³ For us this raising up of our collective voices is a sacred act, a call to action in response to our deep engagement with the biblical text. 'We are here' situates us in our current context and forces us to truly engage and align ourselves with 'the other'.

In this section of this paper, then, we want to present a case study of how our Jewish learning has led to activism. First, briefly, what do we mean by activism? The definition of power as the ability to act links it squarely with the word activism. To act is to have power, to be empowered. It perhaps hints at a process of self-realisation and self-actualisation (who am I? What drives me? What matters to me?) in order to fully step into that power. Maybe this step is harder for women, for those subordinated by the patriarchy and for minorities. 'Activism' is the process and the way in which we enact our power. It may be intentional or not, it may take the form of organising in community, protests, Parliament, or in individual conversations, a comment in a class, being one who stands up in, or to society. Activism, we suggest, works best when it is strategic and focused; when it focuses on the root problems and not on placing plasters on wounds; when it is relational and broad-based; and uses the stories and voices of those who are most affected, working alongside them not for them.

With that broad definition in mind, we turn ourselves and our combined voices towards the biblical text and the imperatives that flow from our study of it. This particular case study looks at LGBTQiA+ readings of the book of Ruth, as we read them together in our *Megillot* class and subsequently have taken those readings out into the world with us. Deborah will begin with a brief overview of the secondary literature studied during the course of the *Megillot* course and then both Deborah and Robyn will each explain different contexts in which these readings have led to activism outside the rabbinic training classroom.

The Secondary Literature on Queer Studies and Ruth as Studied in the LBC *Megillot* Classroom

Deborah

On the *Megillot* curriculum session 18 is entitled 'Queer Readings of Ruth'. In preparation for this class, I ask students to read seven articles all related to queer theory and its application to the book of Ruth.⁴⁴ Over a number of years of teaching this course, I have tried to find a

⁴³ Cf. Gen 22:1.

⁴⁴ The following is a complete list of the current readings on the *Megillot* course syllabus for the class on Queer Studies and the book of Ruth: Rebecca Alpert, 'Finding Our Past: A Lesbian Interpretation of the Book of Ruth,' in *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (eds. Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer: New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 91–96. Jennifer L. Koosed, *Gleaning Ruth: A Biblical Heroine and Her Afterlives*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 50–63. Celena M. Duncan, 'The Book of Ruth: On Boundaries, Love, and Truth,' in *Take Back the Word: a queer reading of the Bible* (eds. Robert E. Goss and Mona West: Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 92–102. Hugh Pyper, 'Boaz Reawakened: Modelling Masculinity in the Book of Ruth,' in *Interested Readers: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David*

balance of articles relating to a range of LGBTQIA+ identities. Many students come to class already having some knowledge of the ways in which Ruth and Naomi's relationship has been taken up by contemporary lesbians, though I still include a foundational article on the subject.⁴⁵ I do so because while many students may be knowledgeable about this interpretation, as a teacher I must never make assumptions about what students' prior knowledge may be, but I do so also as a means of rooting students in the history of this interpretation.

I also include a number of articles, which over the years have served as a kind of 'lightbulb' moment for me personally -- in particular, Celena Duncan's article which interweaves her own story of bisexuality with the possibilities of reading Ruth as a bisexual woman, and Hugh Pyper's article reading Boaz as a homosexual man.⁴⁶ Both these articles granted me new insights into the text -- the sorts of insights that I wish I had seen myself -- and so I share them with my students in the hope that they, too, will glean something new and exciting from these innovative articles. Conversely, Rabbi Steve Greenberg's piece demonstrates to students the limitations of our own imaginations. Greenberg, an openly gay male Orthodox rabbi, writes passionately about the homosexual implications of David and Jonathan's relationship for a number of pages, but remains unconvinced of the same potential in Ruth and Naomi's relationship, which he largely dismisses in a few paragraphs.⁴⁷

Many of the articles I assign students to read for this class have a personal narrative, which either openly forms part of the author's argument or more abstrusely underpins it. This personal narrative is important for the class to see. First, because like many of the hermeneutical approaches we study, the personal approach to queer studies helps us, teacher and students alike, to challenge the notion that some sort of objective form of reading exists, and also because it mirrors the approach to learning where the professional and personal are intertwined. Secondly, these articles help us to consider the role our own sexual identities play in the ways in which we approach the biblical text. These narratives actually do more than that, they also challenge us to reflect on the ways that wider social and cultural narratives influence our reading of biblical texts, even when those social and/or cultural narratives may be at odds with our own identities.

As a teacher, I want students to grasp the ways in which activism begins with ourselves. How does the comfort, or discomfort, or even ambivalence we feel when reading this secondary literature affect us? Are we challenged by these articles and if so, how and why? If we feel connected to these readings, how and why? If we feel unconnected, unconcerned, or

J. A. Clines (eds. James K Aitken, Jeremy M. S. Clines, and Christl Maier: Atlanta: SBL, 2013), 445–458. June Jordan, 'Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan One Love,' in *Some of Us Did Not Die: The Selected Essays of June Jordan*, (New York: Basic/Civitas Books, 2003), 86-91. Mona West, 'Ruth' in *The Queer Bible Commentary* (eds. Deryn Guest, Robert E Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache: London: SCM Press, 2006), 190–194. Steven Greenberg, *Wrestling with God & Men* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 99–105.

⁴⁵ Alpert, 'Finding Our Past.'

⁴⁶ Duncan, 'The Book of Ruth'; Pyper, 'Boaz Reawakened.'

⁴⁷ Steven Greenberg, *Wrestling with God & Men*, 99–105.

dislocated from these readings, again: how and why? I am not simply asking students to form an opinion about whether Ruth and Naomi were lesbians and whether that might be interesting for lesbian members of their communities. I am asking students to relate to their own inner lives, to see how these possible interpretations affect them personally and to reflect on what their own reactions might mean -- for them, for their fellow students, for the communities, and beyond. In a part of the Jewish world that has been openly ordaining LGBTQIA+ persons for thirty years, I am asking students to continue to confront sexuality and the need for activism around it as part of the biblical studies curriculum.

Case study 1: Reading Ruth for Inclusivity

Deborah

As part of my responsibilities as principal of Leo Baeck College, I am required to engage in a variety of public-facing work, particularly within the Jewish community. In this capacity I was asked to teach at a *tikkun leil* Shavuot, a traditional all-night study event for the festival of Shavuot. As the *megillah* reading associated with the festival is the book of Ruth, I developed a session that grew out of my teaching of queer readings of Ruth. The session was entitled, 'Towards a More Inclusive Reading of the Book of Ruth', and focused on the possible implications of a variety of queer readings of Ruth for inclusivity work in the Jewish community.

The session is devised as an interactive PowerPoint presentation.⁴⁸ None of the slides overtly mention any of the secondary literature discussed above, but it formed my thinking in the design of this session. When participants want to know more, I can direct them to that literature for further deepening of their learning. The presentation includes a review of the plot line of the book of Ruth in order to ground participants in the biblical text and to ensure that I have made no assumptions about prior knowledge in the group.

Next: I have a series of slides which work through the plot by showing a variety of images that might represent that section of the story and asking questions of the participants. The aim of this section of the session is to get participants to think about the lacunae in the text and the spaces where interpretation might be possible, so that they might expand for themselves the possibilities for meaning within the text. Each of these slides is designed primarily to assess what the nature of family might be -- what sorts of relationships potentially exist in Ruth and what that means for the ways in which family might be constructed. I posit these questions so that participants can discover for themselves what potential may exist in the text, as people are far more likely to remember and feel ownership of discoveries they make themselves. My responsibility is to shape the questions and help direct the conversation towards the sorts of interpretations I hope participants will find.

⁴⁸ The slides can be printed out as handouts for festivals and Shabbat in communities where the use of technology is prohibited on these days.

In the final part of the session I ask participants to begin to draw connections between the different types of family units that may be found in Ruth and the types of family units that are present in our communities. I ask participants to consider how, for example, viewing Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz as a polyamorous family raising a child together might open up space in participants' own communities to create a more open space for polyamorous families. I also ask participants to consider what the possibility of a biblical role model might mean for a wide array of families in their communities, who might not otherwise feel themselves to be represented in Jewish tradition. This last part of the session is where I hope participants can begin to make the leap from study for its own sake to study leading to action or activism.

I have now taught this session in a variety of settings -- in congregations, at various Limmud⁴⁹ events across Europe, and, most excitingly for me, to a group of 6th form religious education students at a Jewish secondary school. I would like to conclude my case study with this final example.

The 6th form group I taught attended voluntarily. The secondary school at which I taught has an active Gay Straight Alliance and students are generally well-educated about the value of inclusivity both in Judaism and in society at large. I did not expect, nor did I encounter any significant opposition to the ideas in my session, but that does not mean that the session was not impactful. Students were excited to find that expanding out the nature of family is an idea that is not merely a secular one imposed on Jewish practice by wider society, but a worldview that might also have a home in their own textual tradition. Although I was (and always when I teach this session in particular) at pains to point out that we are treading a very narrow line between exegesis and eisegesis, students were nevertheless intrigued to engage in a genuine conversation about the possibilities that may be in the text of Ruth as they begin the journey towards imagi(ni)ng what their adult Jewish lives may hold for them. These students were hungry for a way to read the biblical text that enabled them to embed their social values in their textual tradition, not merely from an ethical or moral position, but also from a narrative that at the very least hints at the possibility that today's 6th formers are not the first in human history to discover the full expanse of meaning in human relationships possible to them.

Case Study 2: Torah on Tap

Robyn

For my assessment for the *Megillot* class I produced an eight-page booklet entitled, 'The Book of Ruth: Deconstructed and Read Four Ways'. In teaching the session I explicitly named my hope that we are transformed by our study by having our perspectives altered. My specific

⁴⁹ Limmud is a UK-based, international Jewish learning organisation. Now almost forty years old, Limmud Festival, the oldest of the Limmud conferences, runs for five days at the end of December each year in the UK. A variety of shorter conferences are run, often annually, internationally. For more information see, <https://limmud.org/>

aims for this session (although they are broad enough to cover every session I teach) are to explore multi-vocal interpretations of texts, to experience how we read ourselves when we read text, to employ critical thinking as a practice for freedom, and to have fun.

I have taught this session in a number of contexts. Where it has worked best is when I have been able to teach it in a setting where I was either the community student rabbi or in my role now in Manchester. The benefit of working in community means that the relationships are, mostly, created before we enter the study space. For instance, in Manchester I run a night once a month called 'Torah on Tap'. Although the participants vary month on month, we have a core group of attendees and a set format for each session: half an hour of chat and drinks, a check-in (to create a personal, reflective space), a blessing (to frame our study as holy *avodah*), the study itself, and a moment for people to reflect on what they are taking away (to enable study leading to action).⁵⁰ Because the group has been going for over two years the 'classroom community' is becoming established. This has meant that we have had some very personal sessions where people's experiences interweave with the texts.

Additionally, being a community rabbi, I am keenly aware of the personal experiences and journeys of those members of the community I am learning with. I am aware of their joys, their pain and their struggles. As I give pastoral support to many of the people I study with, our learning is inevitably situated in those experiences and speaks to them. As hooks states, 'being a teacher is being with people'.⁵¹ In many ways the community that was established in LBC, and particularly in the *Megillot* class, is re-visited in this setting and developed. Its re-imagining is a form of activism.

Teaching this type of engaged pedagogy in community also means that I am able to make more explicit the links between study and action. When I have taught sessions such as this one through the lens of queer theory, we inescapably talk about the Pride parade we have marched on over the past two years and for which we plan future participations. Hopefully, the classroom community, and the wider community, understand that what we study means that we are duty-bound literally to march the streets as activists to enact our teachings.

As is traditional for the festival of Shavuot, I have offered learning sessions on Ruth. For me this is key, as the art of studying becomes part of how we practise our Judaism at this festival moment. Our learning of multi-vocal readings inevitably impacts on how we celebrate

⁵⁰ I intentionally ground the aims of this session in Jewish learning by using the Jewish tool of *pardes*. Through its four modes I bring four different readings of the Book of Ruth: *peshat* - the traditional image of the story of Ruth, *remez* - the relationship between Ruth and Naomi, *derash* - a post-colonial reading, and *sod* - queer theory. The booklet is arranged, following a conversation with Deborah, as a page of Talmud, with text in the middle and commentary and art around the edges of the page. The booklet is dedicated to Deborah in the rabbinic tradition of *b'shem omro* (in the name of the one who said it) where you name your teachers as you then teach. All of these formats ensure that the reader and learner understand the Jewishness of the dialogic and multi-vocal reading I introduce.

⁵¹ hooks, *Teaching*, 162.

the festival and come together—how we hear each other and how we are heard. Practice, action and study are bound together. Often I have found that, because of the strength of the classroom community and the diverse hermeneutics I apply as a result of my rabbinic training, conversations will emerge in other contexts in the community and refer back to our learning. We have a shared language of diversity, ‘authority of experience’,⁵² playfulness, critical thinking, reading ourselves through and out of the text and much more. This is a *textured* community which, lives and practises its study.

I believe that being the first female rabbi in Manchester also impacts upon my study and activism. I have learnt, over the past two years in this role, that my gender matters and is, in the context of Manchester, a statement. Many people have never encountered a female rabbi before. I am embodied in my teaching in a way that I never have been. We are embodied and emboldened as women in our study and in the communities we are tasked to lead.

I have learnt through my studies and work that finding my voice, as a woman and rabbi, is my life’s work. Teaching the book of Ruth in the way Deborah does, and I now do, enables me to re-discover Ruth, Orpah and Naomi’s voices as well as my own and those of my fellow learners. The four lenses (*pardes*) employed in this session and the diverse hermeneutics as unpacked by Deborah earlier, provide me with a mode of exploring and explaining my role as a rabbi and Jew - to de-construct, to uncover that which is hidden, and to, at all costs, reject binary thinking. As explored in our definition of activism, finding our voices and becoming empowered is integral to establishing our place in our communities and societies. As hooks writes, ‘Coming to voice is not just the act of telling one’s experience. It is using that telling strategically - to come to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects.’⁵³ We become in relation to the text and the text also becomes and it is a constant process of evolving.

Shulman, in ‘Worldly Jewish Women,’ ends by enjoining us as follows:

We have to look again for ourselves at each of these things: at how we are or can be connected to each other, at what prophecy might mean, and at what the connection between the two might be.⁵⁴

Teaching the Book of Ruth, by turning it over and over, in community, alongside action in the wider community, through an intentioned engaged, critical, dialogic pedagogy, in the chain of tradition with my rabbi, friend and colleague mean that we are doing sacred work which deeply transforms us and the world.

⁵² hooks, *Teaching*, 89.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p.148.

⁵⁴ Sheila, ‘Worldly Jewish Women,’ 10.

Conclusion

As women going out into the world together, through our shared experiences, ongoing relationship and study, we proclaim, 'we are here', and ensure our study leads to action. Through the dialogic, transformative study at LBC, embedded in a community of learners, struggle and critical thinking we recognise the abundance of meaning in our texts. The text becomes a mirror and a challenge for us to examine ourselves, our identities and our perceptions. We test ourselves out on the texts so that we are changed and our relationship with the world around us is shifted. The learning at LBC where we come together with a shared vision, however broad, and learn in this way demands that we leave the College with the experience of transformative, engaged study and a community so that we can replicate that in progressive communities across the globe.

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