

# My Students Make Me a Better Scholar

By S. Tamar Kamionkowski, Ph.D.

I was one of those nerdy kids who always knew exactly what she wanted to do. As a teenager, I imagined myself as a college professor of Jewish studies. Of course, in my fantasy, I had an arrangement that allowed me to spend each fall at a university in Israel and each spring here in the United States. So after college, I immersed myself in two years of coursework with some of the greatest biblicists of our age, at Harvard Divinity School. This was followed by three years of coursework at Brandeis University, then two years of comprehensive examinations and several years of research and writing—all of which culminated in a monograph on the Book of Ezekiel. I studied Ugaritic, Akkadian and a range of Aramaic dialects.

I worked my way through theories regarding Proto-Semitic and the development of the Hebrew language. I translated inscriptions in Phoenician, Moabite, Aramaic and Hebrew. I cultivated a love for the rules and mysteries of Semitic languages, for the humor and irony of Mesopotamian mythology, for the symbolism of Akkadian ritual texts and especially for the textual nuances embedded in the Hebrew Bible. My teachers were brilliant and passionate about their research. They were generous with their time and encouraged me to engross myself fully in my studies. They continue to serve as mentors and models of inspiration.

Fast-forward to my first year of teaching at RRC, almost a decade ago. Imagine my surprise when my students were not terribly



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excited about reading four different studies that compared accounts of the Assyrian ruler Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem during the reign of King Hezekiah. I noticed their eyes glazing over during my hour-long lecture on theories regarding the composition of the Book of Jeremiah. Their body language communicated: "So what?"

## The "so what" question is implicit in everything I do.



And so I set myself to the task of answering that question. And in my attempt to answer it in every aspect of my teaching, I found that the question spilled over into my scholarship as well. This question is now so implicit in everything I do that I often experience culture shock when I find myself at academic conferences or visiting other institutions of higher learning.

The "so what" question compels me to build meaningful bridges from the past to the present. In my training as a biblicalist, I had been taught that objective

evaluation of evidence is the centerpiece of our enterprise. We gain new knowledge by correctly applying methodologies, rigorous research and good argumentation. In this training, so many of us forget that what is most important is the questions that we ask. My students have reminded me to think about the questions that underlie the research and to ask questions that not only speak to my own curiosities but serve the Jewish people. I had relegated the past to an object of study; my students forced me to bring the past into the present, to open conversations among what was, what is and what might be.

For example, I have long been interested in the exposition of the dietary laws (*kashrut*) in Leviticus Chapter 11 and Deuteronomy Chapter 14. I learned about the various theories concerning the origins and purpose of the dietary laws, from the perspective of Philo of Alexandria in the Roman period to the theories of anthropologist Mary Douglas. I engaged in close textual readings of both versions—carefully comparing, noticing word changes and different arrangements of the materials. (Most of the scholarly literature on these texts attempts to determine whether the writers of the Leviticus text were working off of a version of Deuteronomy or visa versa. The possibility that both were based on another version, now lost, also is a viable hypothesis.)

When I began teaching this material, I would have students spend hours on close textual analysis, attempting to make their

own determinations about literary dependence. In the end, we always would decide that the evidence was inconclusive, but that the delving into textual detail was an important skill to cultivate. Yet the class seemed to end on an empty note. I had not addressed the "so what" question.

When I teach these texts now, I expect students to read summaries of the various theories of the dietary laws' origins. Then we engage in a close textual analysis of a short excerpt of the material, comparing just a few verses from Leviticus with a few from Deuteronomy. Ultimately, we move into a study and discussion of material that is rarely addressed by biblicalists: the theological debate embedded in the two different versions. My students learn that in Leviticus, the dietary laws function to bring more of God's holiness into the community of Israel. The laws of *kashrut* imitate and remind us of God's creation of the world. Each time we eat, we bring the holy into our community. By contrast, Deuteronomy legislates *kashrut*, because Deuteronomy takes the view that the people of Israel became a holy people at Sinai and that the dietary laws are one of the stipulations of the covenant.

What begins in close textual analysis ends with a conversation about contemporary issues for Reconstructionist Jews. In our communities, we have Jews who keep kosher for various reasons. Each congregation makes informed decisions about communal practices, based on a serious study of our traditions and

on the community's values. Highlighting the differences between the attitudes in Leviticus and Deuteronomy not only brings additional voices to the discussion but also demonstrates that our ancestors debated many of the same issues we do today. Within our communities, some of us choose to keep kosher because we want to infuse each moment of eating with a sense of holiness and gratitude; this is a Leviticus-like perspective. There are those of us who choose to keep kosher because we believe that it is a marker of our people-hood; this is a Deuteronomy-like perspective.

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As our students progress through the program, they will encounter the rabbinic, medieval, modern and contemporary discussions and traditions regarding *kashrut*.

Certainly my appreciation of the different opinions in Torah is reflected in my appreciation of different modalities of contemporary Jewish expression and belief. The diversity of my students—in their religious and economic characteristics, their life stages and their social backgrounds—reflects the diversity of voices in Torah. Some of the greatest contributions to biblical studies in the past couple of decades have been made by

scholars who were not trained as biblicists (for example, Mieke Bal, James Kugel and Israel Knohl). These scholars have brought fresh perspectives to the field.

My students bring a range of perspectives to reading biblical texts, and as we engage in study together, the symbiosis between their unique backgrounds and my training as a biblicist results in fascinating conversations and insights. Reading the Genesis family stories with trained psychologists, studying the origins of ancient Israel with an Israeli who knows the country's agricultural landscape not just

intellectually but with all her senses, reading selections from Amos (the prophet who condemned socioeconomic inequality in ancient Israel) with a student who worked with labor unions for years, reading Kohelet (reflections on life written by a man in his final years) with a group of students ranging in age from mid-20s to early 60s, and teaching the lament psalms to students who have just come off all-night shifts as student chaplains in urban emergency rooms . . . I could never read enough or engage in research that would lead me to the insights that these students have.

Teaching at RRC has taught me that the details of close textual analysis—the proper application of historical and literary methodologies and fair evaluation of evidence from antiquity—are not an end in themselves. I am obligated to use these tools and skills to serve *klal* Israel, to teach the teachers of our people so that we all can have access to the riches of our heritage.

The questions that I now ask of the texts I study are more interesting, because they emerge from a complex interweaving of traditional academic training as a biblicist, my relationship with Torah as a living document of the Jewish people and my personal identity as a Jewish woman. My students have taught me that it is not only acceptable but essential that we bring our full selves to the study of our ancient traditions. Academic integrity, professionalism and objectivity in scholarship may seem to stand in contrast to love of text and personal attachment to Torah. Some scholars separate their academic work from their personal relationship to the text. But I have found that my scholarship is enhanced, not compromised, by my love for our traditions. What emerges is not apologetics, not a reifying of the traditional modes of interpretation, but an honest and meaningful engagement with the text. I get angry at the text, demand more of the text and embrace the text as one would a lover. I have learned this in large measure from my students, who have modeled love and critique in a beautiful balance.

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