

**MANAGING
THE
JEWISH
CLASSROOM**

**HOW TO TRANSFORM YOURSELF
INTO A MASTER TEACHER**

Seymour Rossel

TORAH AURA PRODUCTIONS

*To my teachers who are my friends, my friends who are my teachers,
and those rare few who are both—**Jacob Behrman, Manuel Gold,
Kenneth Shields, Marshall Terry**—with thanks to **Sharon L. Wechter**
and the good folks of **Torah Aura**.*

—S. R.

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TORAH AURA PRODUCTIONS • 4423 FRUITLAND AVENUE, LOS ANGELES, CA 90058

(800) BE-TORAH • (800) 238-6724 • (323) 585-7312 • FAX (323) 585-0327

E-MAIL <MISRAD@TORAHAURA.COM> • VISIT THE TORAH AURA WEBSITE AT WWW.TORAHAURA.COM

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Preface

The Second Revised Edition

When the idea of writing *Managing the Jewish Classroom*—recording in book form my workshop on Master Teaching—was first put to me, I was both hesitant and intrigued. I was hesitant because, by its very nature, the workshop is a dynamic atmosphere. In my Master Teaching class, I can demonstrate techniques and ideas even as I am describing them. Could a book replicate this dynamic quality? Could I capture on paper some of the enthusiasm and depth of feeling that I have been blessed to be able to convey in person?

To overcome the difficulties, I toyed with many formats until a partial solution suggested itself. Using the margins of the book for notes, humor, and elucidation, I found I could distract the reader. The marginal notes kept the reader from charging through the pages of the book as if it were a computer program manual. This had the effect of making the book diverse, complex, “human”—and “Jewish,” if you will. At the very least, the book became more of a discussion—as if there were the kind of interruptions which add to the richness of an actual workshop.

I also left the more active aspects of the workshop out. This was inevitable. I could hardly demonstrate the best ways to use the whole body in teaching in verbal form. Some things must be seen to be fully appreciated. Yet, some things can only be accomplished in a book. By their very nature, books are dialogues—very intimate dialogues—between the author and the reader. I realized that if I did my work well as an author, if I could hold the reader’s attention, I could achieve much of the rapport which I struggle so hard to achieve as a workshop leader.

Of course, to reach real dialogue, the reader must actively seek my “voice” in the words. To make this possible, I followed a bit of advice which I found in *Alice in Wonderland*, to wit, “Take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves.” I hope that I have done this, especially in this newly revised edition. I have added some material, including an entire chapter on computers in the Jewish classroom, but I have also gone back to ensure that I have taken care of the sense of things properly—making clear many passages which I think needed clarification, expanding many sections which I think needed expansion. I hope that, as a result, my “voice” will be even easier for you to follow this time around.

I wish I could deliver every copy of this book personally so that I could thank each and every one of you who feels as I do that teaching Judaism is a paramount calling. Why else would you pick up this book and join in this dialogue with me? What we are speaking of here is the future—our future and the future of our people. If we are enjoined to “build a fence around the Torah,” let it not be a fence that keeps us away from Torah, but let it be a fence of Jews—young and old—joining hands together in a circle and dancing. And let our teaching of Torah be a celebration so enticing that all will wish to come and join our dance.

SEYMOUR ROSSEL

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Unit One

A Classroom Management Primer

IN THIS UNIT

Learning and teaching are two sides of the same coin. Teaching is, by its nature, a profession of self-development. I have been blessed by my colleagues in this respect. Nearly two thousand teachers have participated in my workshops over the past fifteen years. And I have managed to learn much from them. Most importantly, I learned that teachers respect and value those techniques which they can immediately translate into action. I incorporate this valuable piece of learning into every workshop I plan. Today my teacher workshops are made up entirely of things teachers can use the very next time they stand before a class. In this first unit you will find a distillation of basic techniques: how to get the most out of this book, how to keep from going stale, how to keep a lesson from bogging down, how to insure that students are motivated, how to head off discipline problems, and how to set the proper atmosphere for learning. And, because it is of primary significance, you will also find a brief chapter on the meaning of Jewish education.

Chapter One

How to Use This Book to Gain a Personal Teaching Style

IN THIS CHAPTER

This is a book about teaching and learning. It could be used by any teacher. But it is designed specifically for the Jewish teacher. The inherent philosophy is Jewish. And the examples throughout are drawn from Jewish contexts. If you wish, you can skip this chapter and go directly to the second chapter. In Chapter Two, I deal only with things that will be useful in your classroom. But you might be interested in the rules which I used as I was writing; and I believe that knowing them can help you get the most out of using this book.

My Rules for This Book

In writing this book, I have used several simple rules to guide me. You have already encountered Rule #1—**practicality**, the same rule which I apply to my workshops. If a technique or idea cannot be used by teachers the very next time they stand before a class, it is not included.

Rule #2—**brevery**. If I can abbreviate a thing clearly, I do so. Teachers have a tendency to become pedantic (a rather nice word for “long-winded”). Readers—and students—seem to prefer to receive material at a quick pace rather than bear with lengthy verbiage. As an avid reader, I could not agree more.

Rule #3—**repetition**. If something is important, it bears repetition. Even after a subject has been mastered, review keeps it alive and vibrant. Examine language learning, for

A study of textbooks done in the 70s observed that any material presented as “caption” text—notes accompanying a drawing or illustration, main and subheads, boxed text, and marginal material—stands a better-than-average chance of being read. In other words, the percentages say you will read these marginal notes. If you do, here’s what you will find:

- a) some of my favorite quotations, b) ideas that somehow did not quite fit the flow of the text, c) stray observations or anecdotes, and d) a challenge or two that has sparked an idea for me and that might spark an idea for you. (Most citations are given in full in the bibliography.)

All over the world people are spending their lives either on doing jobs where the mind must be kept numb all day, or else on highly rewarded activities which are tedious or frivolous. One can get accustomed to operating an adding-machine for five and a half days a week, or to writing advertisements to persuade the public that one brand of cigarettes is better than another. Yet no one would do either of these things for its own sake. Only the money makes them tolerable. But if you really understand [and study] important and interesting subject[s]... it is a genuine happiness to explain them to others, to feel your mind grappling with their difficulties, to welcome every new book on them, and to learn as you teach.

—Gilbert Highet,
The Art of Teaching

example: No matter how fluent the student of a language becomes, a lack of opportunity to use and review the language and its rules causes knowledge to wither and, eventually, to die. Of course, even in repetition, I obey Rule #2—brevity. (Notice how I used repetition and brevity in one and the same sentence? That leads me to Rule #4.)

Rule #4—replication. No technique is worth studying if a teacher cannot easily replicate it in the classroom. In schools of education students spend innumerable hours devouring hierarchies and taxonomies. When they actually face students, they suddenly discover that human beings are not easily pigeonholed into categories. Human beings are too complex for facile classifications. When I describe a hierarchy or a taxonomy, I turn it into a model for usage. If it cannot be modeled for usage, it does not belong in this book. (It would not make it into one of my workshops, either.)

Rule #5—simplicity of terminology. I describe many teaching models. Some of these models were developed by great teachers and deduced by great researchers. Some were developed by teachers, students, and researchers who have taken part in my classes and workshops. The former usually come replete with a great deal of “intellectualese”—language intended to render them scholarly or erudite. I believe we can, for the most part, dispense with that language. The ideas are important, not the proprietary terms used to introduce them. Babies are often born with a great deal of hair, known as *vellus* hair. Most of this early growth disappears soon after birth, to be replaced later by a healthy growth of normal (what scientists call “terminal”) hair. In presenting ideas and models, I have opted to present terminal hair rather than the newborn decoration.

These are my simple rules:

- Ideas must be practical.

- They must be presented briefly and clearly.
- They must be periodically reviewed and reiterated for emphasis.
- They must be replicable in any classroom.
- They must be presented in ordinary terms to make them accessible.

In line with these rules, I have a few suggestions for you, the reader. Whether you are a veteran or a new recruit, I believe that following these few guidelines can be extremely helpful to you.

In the Lab

Approach this book as you would a laboratory course. As you read each chapter, try out some of the ideas and techniques in your classroom. Like trial runs, some of these will immediately work, while others will require some personalization or modification. Keep experimenting with a technique until you have mastered it and made it your own. There is no need to master it all at once.

The classroom is your laboratory. Since every child is unique, education is essentially experimental. You will find the ideas and techniques most useful if you will adapt them to your own teaching style. Always feel free to change them in ways that make them your own. If something doesn't work when you first try it, alter it a little and try it again.

One must learn by doing the thing; for though you think you know it, you have no certainty, until you try.

—Sophocles, *Trachiniae*

Be a Student

Use this book like a tutorial. You shouldn't try to master it all at once. Read a chapter, try out one or two new things in your classroom, then come back for another chapter. If you do read the book cover to cover, go back and reread it a chapter at a time. This will probably be the most beneficial way to absorb the material. Remember that repetition is one of the chief attributes of a good

Every day I learn so
much. I hope the children
are learning some, too,
but they couldn't
possibly learn more than
a fraction of what I have. I
think there is hope for
me yet.

—Jean Morris, "Diary of a
Beginning Teacher,"
NASSP Bulletin 52
(October 1968)

learning style. You provide for it with your students, you must also provide for it in your own learning.

Take Notes

Jot down (in your own words) the things that make sense to you right away. The best way to know when real learning has taken place is to ask a student to rephrase the learning in his or her own words. Making notes is the closest you and I can come to this dialogue in a book (by their nature, books tend to be monologues). If you make notes, you will know whether something is completely clear or if it is still elusive. You will recall what you need to look at again. And, you will realize when you have learned something new or recalled something useful that you already knew.

This last point bears further consideration. The purpose of the book is not just to provide you with new techniques and new concepts. It is also to remind you of what you already have achieved as a teacher. By making notes about things that feel entirely familiar and techniques which you already approach with confidence, you will begin to get a sense of your present mastery of teaching. This can be exciting in and of itself, but it can also serve to jog your memory of techniques you have mastered but neglected to use. These notes will therefore serve as a reminder to yourself of things you already know are useful.

Memory Makes It All Available

Don't store your memory on paper. Many students take copious notes and forget to learn anything. They are merely storing memory on paper. They believe that they will go back some time and refer to these notes. But the truth of the matter is that they use notebook upon notebook to fill bookshelves and filing cabinets (and drawers and desktops). If something seems really useful, commit it to memory. (Memorization is a Jewish tradition. For

hundreds of years at a time, Jewish knowledge was passed from generation to generation by mastery and memorization.) To help you in memorizing important ideas, I present them in threes, fours, and fives, and sometimes in tens. (Grouping ideas this way is also a Jewish tradition.) You will be pleasantly surprised, I think, how easily these groupings penetrate and how long they remain firmly implanted once they are memorized.

The best ideas are
common property.

—Seneca, *The Epistles*

Place Your Trust in Yourself

If memorizing seems daunting, don't bother doing it consciously. Trust your unconscious. Neuropsychologists tell us that our unconscious minds work twenty-four hours a day. We unconsciously record everything we read, everything we do, everything said to us, and everything we say, see, and feel. For some people, getting the "feel" of this book will be more important than reading every word. For others, seeing the techniques in tabular or graphic form will be more important than the verbiage. Still others will hang on every word. No matter which of these is your learning style, you will be surprised when you learn to trust your unconscious as much as your memory. When an appropriate situation arises, you will see the right technique or recall reading the right method or feel yourself handling the situation as the book indicated. You can rely on that, even when you feel that you cannot rely on your ability to memorize. (Actually, you will be relying on both these innate talents, and, in time, you may learn to trust them both, too.)

Some say that what was
really given at Mount
Sinai was style.

—Hayyim N. Bialik,
Writings

It's Been Good to Me

Always remember that what I am saying is true *for me*—it is not necessarily true for you. You have to make it your own in order to make it true for you. The secret to transforming yourself into a master teacher is that you must transform *yourself*. No one can do this for you.

A group of Hasidim once came to study with their rebbe and found him sitting and weeping. They tried to console him.

“Why are you crying?” they asked.

“When I was a young man,” he said, “I thought I could change the world, so I set out to try. That’s how I learned that the world is a very difficult thing to change.

“When I turned thirty, I decided that it was just as important for me to perfect my small corner of the world, so I placed all my energies in trying to improve my community and my students.

“That’s how I learned that communities and classes cannot be made perfect.

“So, at the age of forty, I set about to change just my family. I spent hours and hours with my wife and my children, trying to make my family perfect. But I learned that even families cannot be perfected.

“When I reached my maturity, I realized that there was only one who would listen to the lessons I had been placed in the world to teach, so I set out to perfect myself. But now I know that even that is beyond my powers.”

The students were afraid. If even the rebbe could not perfect himself what chance had they? They turned to consoling him even more. “Rebbe, you have become a *tzadik*—what you do is right and just. You should not cry because you are not perfect. Only God can be perfect.”

“No,” said the rebbe, “you misunderstand. I am not weeping because I am sad. I am weeping because of the great blessing which God has granted me.”

“What blessing?” the students demanded.

“All through my life,” the rebbe answered, “God has given me the strength to try.”

Chapter Two

Remaining Relevant

IN THIS CHAPTER

Capturing the students' attention is essential. Even the work of motivation cannot begin if the student and teacher are not on the same wavelength. The transition of teaching into learning depends on teachers and parents working cooperatively. This chapter contains a series of simple and tested activities which help teachers, students, and parents interact in useful ways.

Like most things, remaining relevant seems deceptively easy when you are successful at it. Master teachers approach relevance with inimitable style. Their techniques set a pattern which can therefore be replicated. For practicality, I have divided this pattern into things which can be done at the beginning of the class year, things which should be done throughout the class year, and things which are most effective at the end of the year.

First Day and Early in the Year

TAKING INVENTORY

The self-inventory is one of many activities developed by the values clarification movement. This model can be applied by teachers to gain a working inventory of individual student interests.

Give each student a large index card. Draw the outline of a card on the chalkboard. Number from one to six along the left hand side of the outline card on the chalkboard, and ask students to do the same on their individual cards. As you call for various items, indicate on the chalkboard

While you are taking inventories, consider taking a self-inventory. This is generally a more difficult process. Inside, your psychological barriers are sturdily built and well defended. You will need to break them down a bit to learn more about who you really are.

Here's a simple way to take a personal inventory: Imagine a newspaper devoted exclusively to reporting you. You are its star reporter. Give it a masthead and motto. Write your news of the day. Add the features—sports, drama, society news, comics, cooking, art, travel, letters to the editor, and so on. Then, add classifieds and advertisements (touting you, of course). Do this in writing or on a typewriter, or even on a large sheet of oak tag. Set it aside for a day or two. Then, come back to it as if you were the city editor. Be hypercritical about everything. Is it truthful? Is it believable? Does it answer who, what, when, where, why, and how? If not, fix it. Set it aside again. When you come back, be the subscriber. Read it.

If this works for you, try doing a family newspaper with your immediate family. Let each family member pick and choose the areas most interesting to him or her personally.

the relative placement of the items and give a brief general description (a single word, if possible).

In the upper left corner, ask students to print their names (*Note: You may vary any placements to suit your own taste*).

In the upper right corner, you may wish to ask students for class name and room number (especially if you are teaching more than one class simultaneously).

Ask for the following six items:

1. A book read recently (or over the summer). Ask students to list a book they themselves have chosen, or one presently in their room at home. If they have not recently read a book, ask them to fill in the name of a book they read and enjoyed in the past.
2. A favorite recent movie.
3. A favorite music group or song.
4. A favorite hobby or interest.
5. A favorite television series.
6. A brief sentence telling what they would most like to learn in your class this year.

Please note: Teachers of young children must modify this technique slightly. Provide a large manila sheet with the child's name and the numbers already recorded. Instead of words, use pictures. For each category, discuss choices aloud with the class. Ask students to draw an "X" for choice A, an "O" for choice B, a "+" for choice C, and so on. By keeping a record of the choices, the teacher can easily tabulate the results.

Collect the index cards. It is not necessary to discuss them in class. These index cards, when arranged and tabulated, can provide you with many valuable insights regarding the students in your classroom. They provide a picture of the students' world—what students on their own choose to see, hear, and feel. To properly utilize this