

Moving Torah

Think with your body. Move with your mind.

Creating Moving Torah

These are exercises to help you and your students explore ideas and generate material to make Moving Torah – (movement commentary, movement d'var torah, movement midrash, dance midrash-whatever you may want to call it). I have adapted many of these exercises from those taught by Liz Lerman Dance Exchange. You can go to the Dance Exchange website and click on "Toolbox" There are many ways to interpret them. Variations and innovations are encouraged!

The following is the outline of one example of a five-step process for creating movement commentary:

A) Learning Torah Text

1. Read/Skim entire story with a study partner
2. If questions are presented to you, select one and read closely the parts of the story which are relevant to your question.
3. If questions are not presented to you, as you study, draw up a list of questions from grammatical to philosophical which arise for you; you choose one on which to focus.

(In working with your students, depending on their Hebrew level and textual sophistication, you may also want to bring in classical commentary to see what questions the rabbis asked.)

B) Writing

1. Working independently, fold blank sheet of paper in half and on one side write "answer" and on the other write "details"
2. Write your "answer" to your selected question. This is free writing; it doesn't have to be the ultimate answer; it is whatever comes to you after the learning in which you have just engaged. Don't lift your pen from the paper—if you get stuck, repeat what you just wrote until something new comes.
3. In the "details" column, imagine you are in the Biblical scene. What do you see, hear, taste, feel (in a tactile sense, not so much in an emotional sense). The more concrete and detailed, the better. The images do not need to have any direct connection to the part of the story from which you drew your question. They also do not need to have any direct emotional content - that will come out in the movement. (Share your writing with your partner).

C) Generating Movement

1. Walk around the room. Change speed; change focus (keep your focus wide; now narrow your focus. Notice specific patterns and objects in the room).
2. Move directly toward one of those things in the room (repeat). Point to one – trace it with your finger; trace it in the air; trace it big, small, with a different body part, etc. Think back to one of your “details” – trace it in the air; trace it with variations.
3. Take a “detail” from what you wrote when thinking about the biblical story and turn it into movement. Find a way to express it with your body. Important: this is only a way of coming up with interesting movement – no one needs to be able to know what your original details is in order for your movement to be “successful” – if the movement interests you, it will be “successful”. Experiment with variations.
4. Pick two more “details” and repeat. (OR – pick the same detail and create several different variations that you can remember and repeat.
5. You should have three distinct movements or a phrase of three movements which can repeat. (Share with a partner).

D) Combining Movement and Writing

1. Find any way to combine some or all of your movement with some or all of your “answer”.
 - Do them at the same time
 - Don't do them at the same time
 - Collaborate with your partner, or work independently
 - Your finished phrase works well if it is short and repeatable.

2. Rehearse

E) Sharing Movement Commentary

1. Share your finished movement commentary with the group.
2. Share your thoughts on the process with the group. What did you learn about the story from your own work, and from watching others? What common themes arose? What did you learn from the juxtaposition? How did using words and movements together help you achieve these new insights? How did it feel to move in new ways?

The following are some other exercises which can be used in the framework outlined above:

Written/Spoken Material

- a) “Question & Answer” – ask questions of the text and after studying, write your “answers” to the questions using free writing.
- b) Retell the story in your own words using free writing.

- c) Pick a character in the story and retell it from his or her perspective.

Movement Variations

Large/small	fast/slow	low/medium/high
Different body parts	focus wide/narrow	different movement qualities
	Focus high/low	

Movement Warm-ups

- a) "Painting the globe"- Imagine yourself inside a globe. Paint the inside of the globe with broad strokes with an imaginary paintbrush; make sure to cover all areas. Change the quality of the brush strokes (try impressionism, pointillism – even Jackson Pollock). Paint with different parts of your body. Now, imagine you are Michelangelo painting a scene (from the story we are studying) on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.
- b) "Tracing" – Walk around the room, try to see as much of the room at once as you can (focus wide). Notice things you haven't noticed before: on the ceiling (focus high); on the floor (focus low). Focus on one thing in the room and walk directly toward it; point at it; trace it with your finger (in the air). Trace it using different variations above. Imagine one of the objects from your postcard/floor plan/details (see below); trace it using different variations.
- c) "Word Pairs" – Pick a key word from the story. Look up the meaning of its Hebrew root in a Briggs, Driver & Brown Dictionary. Make up a movement to go with the word. Say the word (English and/or Hebrew) while performing the movement. Try variations of both the movement and the sound. Have a "conversation" with a partner using only variation of each partner's work and movement.
- d) Thematic – Use a theme from the passage for the movement warm-up itself. For example, in Genesis, showing the rising and setting of the sun with your body; in Exodus, having each student represent a different part of the sea splitting. *Torah in Motion* by Joanne Tucker and Susan Freeman (ARE, 1990) is a good resource for these types of exercises.

Movement Material

- a) "Details" – Put yourself in the scene of the story. What do you see, smell, taste, hear? Be as detailed and descriptive as possible. "Ripped threads of a colored coat" is more suggestive than "colored coat". Find a way to turn your detail into movement (no one needs to be able to tell what it is).
- b) "Floor plans/set design"- Sketch or draw a floor plan or a set design for the story as if you were going to stage it. Imagine the sketch you just drew is blown up on the floor.

Walk the pattern of one of the objects. Trace one of the objects as you drew it (using any of the variations). Turn one of the objects into movement.

- c) "Postcards/photo album" – Imagine you are flipping through a photo album or a rack of post cards with scenes from the story. Turn some of the details in the pictures into movements; use some of the variations listed above.
- d) Pantomime – act out different movement of the story; use variations.

Participants create their interpretations by finding a way to combine some of their written work with some of their choreography. They can work independently, but paired with a person with whom they will share their work all the way through the process. The pair may find that they naturally begin to put their pieces together – or they may later be encouraged to do so. (When working with children, you will probably find that they choose to create their piece together from the outset.) Eventually, all the pieces can be combined to create a tapestry which is like a living *Mikraot G'dolot* (a collection of biblical commentary which offers many interpretations on the same page).

The most important thing to remember is that these are all exercises meant to stimulate interesting words and movement. There's no way to do it right or wrong. As long as you give yourself the freedom to experiment, interpret and vary these exercises as your interest and circumstances change, they will yield satisfying and interesting material – for participants, audience members and you.

Good luck and have fun! Please don't hesitate to call me with questions, or let me know of useful variations. I offer workshops in a variety of settings for children, adults, and professional educations. Please contact me for more information in any of the following ways:

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