

HOW RELEVANT IS IT?

Public elementary school teachers encounter ancient Jewish texts

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Abstract

This study deals with a learning encounter of public elementary school teachers in Israel with an ancient legend (*Aggadah*) drawn from sixth century Jewish culture. The objective is to examine the teachers' attitude to the text through a study of the dialogue created in the encounter with the text in a *havruta* (study pair) setting. Participants included two groups of teachers of Hebrew as L1: 15 teachers in Group 1, and 14 in Group 2. The groups came from two large and demographically different cities. The teachers were asked to study the legend in pairs and consider its suitability for teaching in their class. After the legend was studied, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with the teachers. The findings point to different attitudes to the teaching of the text in class between the groups and to differences in the perception of the relevance of the text for the teachers and for their students. The discussion is based on the definition of relevance (Dascal, 1977; Sperber & Wilson, 1995) as a relative function of efficiency.

Keywords: ancient texts, *havruta* (study pair) learning, relevance, effects & efforts, linguistic/reading difficulties

1. INTRODUCTION

Culture is defined as the set of values, behaviors, beliefs, symbols, language norms and objects that together form a people's life (Macionis, 1997). The encounter with texts from Jewish sources is a significant component in the constitution of a Jewish individual's cultural-linguistic reservoir (Sagi, 2006, 2016). This article will present the encounter between teachers in public elementary schools in Israel with a legend from the ancient Jewish sources and will examine the dialogue created between the teachers and the text. The objectives of this study are to understand what happens in the teachers' initial encounter with the ancient Jewish text and what knowledge resources, emotional and didactic challenges are reflected in that encounter.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND – PRESPECTIVES AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

2.1 *Teaching texts from Jewish sources*

In Israel, the teaching of Jewish sources (Bible, legends, holiday texts) is mandatory in both religious and nonreligious public schools of the Jewish education system. Texts from Jewish sources, mainly legends, represent 10% of all the texts studied in class as part of the Hebrew Language L1 curriculum for Jewish elementary schools (Ministry of Education, 2003). Teachers may select texts to teach from a list of suggested readings. The rationale for this is a comprehensive cultural-linguistic approach that views the reading of the sources as contributing to the students' linguistic education and cultural capital. At the same time, there is hardly any reference in the Hebrew Language L1 curriculum for public schools to the contribution made by these texts to the students' cultural capital and to the teaching methods of texts from Jewish sources.

Various studies have addressed teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward teaching texts from Jewish sources (Galili Schechter, 2011, 2014; Katzin, 2011, 2018; Shkedi & Nissan, 2009). According to Shkedi and Nissan (2009), teachers who teach Jewish sources (Bible) are called upon to address value-driven sociocultural questions and to examine their own value-driven pedagogical belief system. They found that the teachers' personal cultural ideological perceptions influenced how they taught, concluding that giving teachers an opportunity to clarify their beliefs, values and attitudes would help them cope with the task of teaching value-driven cultural texts. In Shkedi and Nissan's study, all participants were teachers trained in Bible instruction who had considerable experience in Bible teaching. In the present study, the teachers had training in language and literacy (Hebrew L1), with some having no previous experience in teaching texts from Jewish sources.

The teaching of texts is an activity that involves interpretation. Dilemmas in relation to interpretation within a context that involves teaching differ in nature from interpretive theories that relate to suitable interpretation of other contexts (Galili-Schachter, 2011). Teachers are involved in interpretive activities by means of

asking particular questions, marking keywords, focusing on topics implied by the text and more, and consequently, it is important to be cognizant that there is a clear connection between interpretation and teaching (Gallagher, 1992).

In this study, teachers encountered a legend from Jewish sources that they studied in a *havruta* (study pair) setting, in light of previous studies that pointed to the benefits of *havruta* learning (see the Method section below) and the approach to the text from a discourse created in peer-group encounters with a text (Elkad-Lehman & Poyas, 2020; Poyas & Elkad-Lehman, 2016).

2.2 *Teaching ancient texts elsewhere in the world*

In the global context, different approaches to teaching ancient texts can be found. In China for example, great importance is attached to the teaching of ancient Chinese literature, with the goal being to preserve culture, language and national identity, despite the challenges involved (Huizhen, 2014; Ni, 2019). This approach is similar to that of the Israeli education system as described above. Another approach examines whether it is relevant to teach classic or ancient literature, written by white European men, to students that come from a different cultural, historical, ethnic and/or linguistic background. For example, is a writer such as Shakespeare still relevant to British students today? Conversely, it may be argued that classical works of literature contain timeless universal truths that cut across boundaries of race, gender and class, and that these works are still relevant today (Pike, 2003; Purewal, 2017; Youssef, 2009). Scholars have put forward pragmatic proposals for pedagogical solutions to mediate classical or ancient literature (Dunford, 2021; Youssef, 2009) or for the pedagogical and intertextual use of ancient literature (the Bible, Ovid) in literature studies (Malo-Juvera, 2014).

Recent years have seen a debate between those who oppose the teaching of classic and/or ancient literature because it contains examples of racism or misogyny and those who favor teaching the classics from a critical perspective (Brugman, 2016). In the United States, for example, the literature classroom has become politicized, with far-reaching implications for the selection of teaching corpora for schools and institutions of higher education. Some demand that the classics be removed with the claim that they are racist or offensive (call-out culture), while others believe that literary works that are representative of marginalized communities and can be identified with and taught (see Thomas et al., 2019, in *Research in the Teaching of English* that devoted its Issue 54 to this discussion). This debate raises the questions: Are ancient or classical texts relevant to students? And how do we determine what is relevant? In order to answer these questions, we will apply relevance theory, which presents an explanation of the principle of relevance as a whole in discourse.

2.3 *Relevance or irrelevance*

In the category of relevance in an exchange, Grice put forward the demand: “Be relevant” (Grice, 1975, p. 27), meaning that in order for there to be conversational cooperation between interlocutors, the exchange needs to be relevant to the participants. Grice admitted that he did not adequately explain the concept of relevance in this theory and that it should be further clarified. Dascal (1977) was more precise in his clarification of the concept, arguing that relevance is a dyadic predicate and that it is not self-determined, but is determined rather in relation to something else. Relevance does not stand alone; it is the completion of the missing context. According to Dascal, when relevance is maximal, there is no need for implicatures. However, when no component of the reaction matches any component of the demand, the former is totally irrelevant to the latter, in which case no implicature can be generated. Only if some components are irrelevant while others are relevant can an implicature arise (Dascal, p. 321). Sperber and Wilson (1995) assumed that the speaker did not interact or expend effort in a conversation for no reason. They defined optimal relevance as a relative function of efficiency: *the maximum effect that the addressee can achieve with minimum effort*. According to them, relevance is a relative property that is a function of the combination between the linguistic code component (encoding and decoding) and a conceptual component mutually manifest to the communicator and addressee (Wilson & Sperber, 1993). The present study will examine how relevant it is to teach an ancient Jewish legend in an Israeli public school in the eyes of teachers of Hebrew language (L1) in nonreligious schools.

3. METHOD

3.1 *Participants*

Two groups of senior teachers who are also teacher instructors in the areas of language and literacy (Hebrew L1) participated in the study. The session took place in the context of their professional development. The researcher met with the groups as a guest lecturer and in no way influenced the course grade. Group 1 (15 teachers) was composed of teachers who teach Hebrew L1 in public schools in a large city in Israel. It is a mixed city in which 62% of the population is Jewish, of whom 56% define themselves as religious, 20% as secular, and the rest traditional (traditionalism is dialogic position in regard to tradition, which maintains a favorable attitude towards faith but is selective in observance of the commandments; Yadgar, 2012). Group 2 (14 teachers) was made up of teachers who teach Hebrew L1 in public schools in a city with a different demographic composition: 90.2% of the residents of the city are Jews, of whom 70% define themselves as secular, 14% as religious and the rest as traditional (Korach & Choshen, 2020).

The groups of teachers were similar in age, education (academic, most with a master's degree) and teaching seniority (20 years of experience on average). Their mother tongue is Hebrew, and according to their self-assessment in the questionnaire, their mastery of spoken and written Hebrew (reading) is excellent or very good. All teach in nonreligious public schools.

As seen in Table 1, the teachers vary in terms of how their self-defined religiosity.

Table 1. Participants' religiosity (N=29)

	Group 1	Group 2
Religious	7	1
Traditional	2	2
Secular	5	11
No religious definition	1	–

According to their self-reporting, all participants read Hebrew for professional purposes as well as for enjoyment and information. The only ones who read Jewish sources (prayers, sayings of the Sages, Jewish law and the Bible) regularly (“all the time,” “every week”) were the religious and traditional teachers, six in Group 1 and two in Group 2. In Group 2, eight teachers said they read Jewish sources “very rarely” and two teachers said they never did so. On the other hand, Group 1 only had one teacher who said she did not read Jewish sources at all, one “very rarely” and four “neither rarely nor often.” The data point to the constant exposure of the religious teachers to Jewish texts, compared to the very sparse exposure to these texts among the nonreligious teachers.

3.2 The text studied

The text (see Appendix A) was originally written in Aramaic and is dated approximately to sixth century CE (Hirshman, 2016). The participants read it in its early 20th century Hebrew translation from the *Sefer HaAggadah* website, as well as the abridged adaptation for children from the Ministry of Education's Israeli Jewish Culture Teaching Website, drafted in the early 21st century.¹ The adapted texts retained many of the characteristics of the somewhat archaic Mishnaic Hebrew. The text selected for the study was the legend (*Aggadah*) about Rabbi Eleazar ben Shammua and the survivor.² The legend narrates an event that occurred during the period when the Roman Empire ruled the land of Israel. A Roman, a survivor of a ship that went down at sea, came ashore naked and destitute and asked for help from

¹ To the text that appears on the website of the subject of Israeli Jewish Culture is appended a teacher's guide with explanations of the lexical items, various ways of illustrating the meaning, teaching aids (a video) and student activity sheets. Link to the text in the Israeli Jewish Culture curriculum: <https://www.tarbuty.org.il/unit/246>

² https://agadastories.org.il/node/272_

Jews who happened to be making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for a festival at that time. The pilgrims refused to help him. The survivor turned to one of the pilgrims, who according to his dress appears the most distinguished among them—Rabbi Eleazar—who agreed to help him. At the end of the story, the Roman survivor, who was eventually appointed emperor, sought to take revenge on the Jews for refusing to help him, but remembered Rabbi Eleazar's kindness and rescinded the decree thanks to him. The legend calls for a discussion of the value of helping a stranger in distress and raises a dilemma: whether one should give succor to an enemy.

The *Aggadah* is unfamiliar to most teachers of language education because it is not included in the Hebrew language curriculum. The text in this study was selected by five of the six education experts who were asked to review three texts in light of the following questions: Are the values presented in the text relevant to our time? Does the text consciously reflect classic ways of Jewish thinking (Rosenak, 1986, 2015)? Does the text present a conflict between values that could stimulate a discourse or even disagreement? Does the text call for linguistic, structural and/or conceptual analysis?

3.3 *Studying in a havruta*

In this study the teachers encounter the text in the *Havruta'* setting. *Havruta* refers to dialogic learning in pairs: two students engaged in debating the meaning of a text before them. The source of the word *havruta* in Hebrew is the word *haver*, which means "friend," and it hints at the reciprocal relationship between the learners. Learning in a *havruta* setting is perceived as part of the features of study in Jewish culture. When a person studies in *havruta*, three axes connect: self, other and text (Raider-Roth & Holzer, 2009). During *havruta* study, interactions between the self and other and between each of the learners and the text occur. The *havruta* study method emphasizes the presence of the text in the discourse, compared to study or discourse in pairs that does not by definition require the presence of a text. The *havruta* text is a third partner to the discourse and therefore has a voice of its own. Scholars of *havruta* view the text as a third interlocutor.

Studies that have investigated *havruta* study (Kent, 2006, 2008; Holzer & Kent, 2013; Teomim-Ben Menachem, 2013; Teomim-Ben Menachem & Livnat, 2018, 2021) point to academic, social and emotional benefits of this type of learning for the development of discourse and argumentative skills. In light of the advantages offered by *havruta* study, we decided to hold the teachers' initial encounter with the legend using this particular method. It should be emphasized that in earlier studies, the *havruta* study partners had previous background in the study of Jewish texts, which they studied out of a desire and choice to do so, which is not the case in the current study.

3.4 Research questions

The research questions are: What happens in the initial encounter of teachers (who are studying in a *havruta* setting) with the Jewish text? What knowledge resources and difficulties are reflected in the encounter with the text in the context of the *havruta* setting? What cognitive, emotional and didactic challenges do the teachers face in their encounter with the text?

3.5 Research tools

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the data were collected vis Zoom. Prior to conducting the study, the participants' informed consent was obtained, and they were assured anonymity. At the first stage, a general discussion was held in the plenary moderated by the first researcher, who presented the objective of the study, and the following question was raised: How do you relate to the teaching of the text from the Jewish sources in public schools? The 25-minute plenary discussions were recorded and served as a kind of focus group. At the second stage, the participants were divided into Zoom breakout rooms for the *havruta* study itself. The teachers' discussions were recorded. The division into *havruta* study pairs was mostly random. At the conclusion of this process, six *havruta* recordings from each group were obtained. At the third stage, the teachers were asked to write a lesson plan, teach the text in class and write a reflection on the lesson they taught. Eleven lesson plans were obtained from Group 1, which included teaching objectives, a breakdown of the lesson in the classroom and reflection, and no lesson plans at all were obtained from Group 2. At the conclusion of the process, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine of the teachers who participated in the study: five from Group 1 and four from Group 2.

Thus, the research tools included:

- 1) A personal questionnaire for the teachers
- 2) The transcribed two plenary discussions (about 25 minutes long, similar to focus groups)
- 3) Twelve transcribed recordings of the *havruta* study sessions, each 20-30 minutes long
- 4) Nine transcribed interviews of 60-90 minutes with five teachers from Group 1 and four from Group 2
- 5) Eleven lesson plans from Group 1

The research tools complemented each other, thus allowing a triangulation of the findings.

3.6 Data analysis

The analysis of the conversations and interviews was based on the principles of the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), using the constant comparative method to analyze the data, according to which the parts of the text are encoded into categories by comparing a single piece of data to another piece to look for similarities in meaning and repeated patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

At the first stage, a division into categories was carried out, and 24 categories were found. At the second stage, the categories were divided into main themes (such as connection and relevance of the text for teachers and students, intertextuality, religious coercion, and text processing). This paper will focus on the relevance of the text in the eyes of the teachers and on the cognitive, emotional and didactic challenges among the teachers in the encounter with the text.

4. RESULTS

In the focus groups and questionnaires, a position favoring the teaching of texts from Jewish sources in public schools was evident. In the personal questionnaire, in response to the question, what is your opinion regarding reading texts from Jewish sources, 89% of the teachers responded that reading texts from Jewish sources was important to them. In both the focus groups and individual interviews, all but two of the participants (one from each group) said that they considered it important to teach texts from Jewish sources. Here are two examples:

I think that it is very, very important [...] *They are relevant today*, beyond the fact that they enrich the language [...] and all the values. [...] It broadens children's horizons (Natalie, secular, Group 2, focus group) (all italics by the authors).

I think there is a very fundamental value here for us as a people, and that is the matter of belonging. That's what unites us as a people. It is very important so that the children know where they came from and where they are going (Khen, secular, Group 2, focus group).

Natalie and Khen said that they considered it important to teach texts from the sources for various historical, value-based, conceptual and national reasons—to encourage language enrichment, broaden horizons, create a sense of belonging to the nation and an affinity with the past. They perceive the texts as part of Jewish culture, and they view their role as that of cultural agents (Geertz, 1973; Macionis, 1997; Sagi, 2006, 2016). Contrary to these declarations, during the *havruta* study itself, the approaches to the text ranged from expressions of interest in the text and affinity for its content to expressions of opposition to the text and claims that it is irrelevant for the students. Below we will present the utterances that indicate the attitude towards the text as reflected in the conversations, interviews and lesson plans received from the teachers.

A favorable attitude to the text was evident in five out of six discussions recorded in Group 1, while in the sixth, objections to the text were voiced by only one of the

teachers, while her study partner showed interest and demonstrated a favorable approach. In Group 2, on the other hand, opposition to the text was expressed in five out of six discussions, with a favorable attitude expressed in only one. None of the teachers in Group 2 taught the text in class. Below, we will examine both the favorable and negative attitudes to the text. We will also try to explore the various reasons for resisting the text as reflected in the conversations and interviews.

4.1 Affinity for the text

Orna (secular, Group 1) wrote a reflection after the lesson she had taught:

The text is particularly *relevant* because of the multiplicity of cultures and religions in my class. I chose mainly to delve into the subject of giving to a stranger, an enemy, and to expand on what Jewish law says about giving and helping.

Revital (traditional, Group 1) also chose to teach the text in her class, although she did not think it was easy. She wrote a reflection after the lesson:

Personally, I *connected* very strongly to the text, and I think that my *connection* caused the students to also *connect* very much. And that is one of the messages, that it's important for teachers to feel *connected*, and then they can motivate the students in turn.

In her words, Revital emphasized her connection as a teacher to the text. In her opinion, her connection roused the students into a discussion about whether one should help an enemy.

Expressions of affinity for the text that were the result of its “relevance,” “connection to the text” and “interest” emerged mainly in Group 1. Expressions of opposition to the text, on the other hand, emerged mainly in Group 2.

4.2 Opposition to the text and to teaching it

In five of the six recordings in Group 2, opposition to the text came up in the conversation, with the claim that the text was irrelevant to the students. In the interviews after the conversations, the teachers mentioned various reasons for their reservations with the text. We will start with two quotes from the interviews with two teachers from Group 2:

I ask myself [...] if the goal is to teach the value, why choose a text like this that is unclear and *unconnected* to their world? [...] What does this text serve? What do I want to achieve through it? It's *not relevant* to the population I work with. (Rotem, secular)

I did not connect to the text. It's very archaic, it's very, you know, we're constantly talking about texts that come from the child's world, that they come with *relevant* content and things that are suitable. And here I didn't feel that. (Natalie, secular)

The teachers who opposed the text mainly claimed that they felt no connection to it and that it was not relevant. Rotem maintained that the text was unclear, that it was not connected to their world, that she could not find any added value in teaching it,

concluding that she thought it was not relevant. Natalie also maintained that the text was old fashioned and not relevant to children. The words “unconnected” and “not relevant” came up repeatedly in the discussions and interviews in the same context of having reservations with the text. While analyzing the data, we tried to explore the reasons for the perceived lack of connection and irrelevance. Below are four main reasons raised by teachers in conversations and interviews to explain their claim regarding the irrelevance of the text: irrelevance due to linguistic difficulties (lexical, semantic and syntactic), irrelevance due to structural difficulties, irrelevance due to a lack of prior knowledge and irrelevance due to a lack of a "connection" to the characters. Another argument for irrelevance was fear of religious coercion. However, because the concern related to religious coercion is broad and has different social contexts, we have decided to address the subject in a separate article.

4.2.1 *Lack of relevance due to linguistic difficulties*

The selected text was originally written in Aramaic and translated into Mishnaic Hebrew, used approximately between the 1st and 5th century CE. It differs from the Hebrew we use today in terms of grammar, syntax as well as lexical items and meanings. The translated and adapted text that the teachers read preserves the text's archaic nature, and the opposition to the text arose primarily due to linguistic difficulty. The difficulty in dealing with the language had already come up during the reading of the text in *havruta*, when the teachers felt that there were many unfamiliar words and that they needed to look up word definitions (which were hyperlinked). In the interviews, teachers in both groups used metaphorical expressions to describe the language difficulty, for example: “to crack the code” (Rotem, Group 2), “to crack nuts” (Nili, Group 1) “Chinese” (Ora, Group 2), and gerunds that described dealing with the language: “suffering greatly from the language” (Natalie, Group 2), “contending with the language” and “translating language” (Nurit, Group 2). The archaic language posed a challenge to the reader, to the point of characterizing it using metaphors relating to it as if it were a foreign language that required translation and decoding, as seen in two examples from the conversations in the *havruta* setting the first time the text was encountered:

- 1) Maayan (secular, Group 2) (reading): “Give me a little clothing wherewith to cover my nakedness because the sea stri, strip, stripped³ me bare and nothing was saved with me”. “So may all your people be stripped bare!” So, did you understand what that is?
- 2) Khen (secular, Group 2): Wow, it's a bit brutal, isn't it?

³ In the original Hebrew, the reader had difficulty reading with the correct pronunciation of the word *tradani* and tried twice before she succeeded: תָּנִינוּ לִי כִסוּת כִּל נִשְׁהִיָּא לְכַסּוֹת בְּשָׂרֵי נֶשְׁל מְטָה, שְׂטָרְדָּ, שְׂטָרְדָּ, שְׂטָרְדָּנִי הֵיִם וְלֹא נִצַּל בְּיָדֵי קְלוּם. In English the word שְׂטָרְדָּנִי is translated as “stripped me bare.”

- 3) Maayan: I didn't understand what it says.
- 4) Khen: No, he says, "The sea harassed me," the sea harassed me, in other words, the sea caused my ship to sink, to go down at sea, nothing was salvaged.

Maayan's reading is hesitant, non-fluent and imprecise ("stri, strip, stripped") (Turn 1); and she explicitly states that she does not understand what it says (Turn 2). In response, Khen deconstructs the Hebrew suffixed pronoun *tradani* and even changes the syntactical order of the words to give the sentence the meaning of "The sea harassed me" (Turn 4) instead of the original order.

Similarly, in the *havruta* study of Ora (religious) and Moran (secular) both from Group 2, Ora read aloud, indicating the difficulty in words such as *metarefet*, (Hebrew) "ship which was tossed about in the water," "a garment," the word "pilgrim" (referring to pilgrimage to the Holy Temple on Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot, which she said "is a word that only religious children are familiar with" and more. She also noted linguistic phenomena typical of Aramaic compared to contemporary Hebrew, and during her reading, Ora expressed the difficulty she faced by crying out, "Oy" or "Oy oy oy" and twice said, "Poor kids, how will they read this?"

4.2.2 *Lack of relevance due to structural difficulties*

The text that was studied was not simple in terms of structure. Mishnaic Hebrew does not always mention the personal pronoun, the subject of the verb, saying for example "said to them," or "said to him" without telling us who said what to whom (the survivor to the pilgrims or the pilgrims to the survivor). This feature causes speakers of Modern Hebrew some difficulty in processing because it is not always clear who is saying what, and a rereading of the text may be necessary to identify the speakers. While reading the text, Rotem and Lilach (both secular from Group 2) spoke quite often about the structural difficulty that required rereading:

- 1) Rotem: Even on the level of "He said to him and he said to him" – who is this he who said it?
- 2) Lilach: Right.

In her interview, Nurit (Group 2) also mentions the difficulty with the structure of the text and noted that the text has more than one initiating event:

Precisely here, the narrative, because of the different language and syntactic structure, and because there is more than one initiating event, even the simplest, it's difficult.

4.2.3 *Lack of relevance due to a lack of prior knowledge*

In order to understand the text, the reader needs various types of prior knowledge. We will look now at three types of required prior knowledge: historical, biblical and geographical.

Historical and Biblical Knowledge. It is important to understand the complex relationship between the Romans and the Jews during this period in order to comprehend the text. The survivor was a Roman, and the Romans had destroyed the Second Temple as they violently and brutally suppressed the Great Revolt of the Jews against them (66–70 CE)—information that is provided on the website. In the story, however, the power relationship is reversed: the Jews are in a position of strength and the Roman is in an inferior position. The full text does not state at the beginning that the survivor is a Roman (in the adaptation for the students, this is noted in the title: “Rabbi Eleazar Ben Shammua and the Roman Survivor”) and one needs to draw inferences regarding the implied knowledge.

When the survivor turns to the Jews and identifies himself as a descendent of Esau (son of Isaac and Jacob’s twin brother), he uses the familial relationship to elicit compassion and a garment from them so that he will no longer be naked. This information is presented on the website in the teacher’s guide. Without it, processing the text is difficult, perhaps even impossible.

- 1) Maayan: Why does he tell them that he is a son of Esau?
- 2) Khen: (Silence) Perhaps he’s not Jewish.

Maayan rightly wonders why the text notes that the survivor is a descendent of Esau. She understands that this is important information, although she does not immediately identify what it implies. Khen, who is studying with her, assumes that it means that he is not Jewish. Only later in the text, with the help of the website or other sources, is the information revealed.

- 1) Khen: And then the Jews say to him: “Wow, may this happen to all of them.”
- 2) Maayan: May all your people be stripped bare. Look, there are interpretations here where I’m pointing, and it says here: “May this happen to all your people, the Romans,” ahh... he’s Roman.

Understanding the implied information that the survivor is a Roman comes only after several turns and is based on the text adapted for children, the heading and the teacher’s guide.

Geographic Knowledge. Another area of prior information that is needed is geographic knowledge. The pilgrims are on the shores of the Mediterranean, where they see a sinking ship, while they themselves are on the way to Jerusalem. In the following quote, Maayan wonders at the contradiction in terms of the geographic location where the story takes place and the geographic distance of the sea from Jerusalem.

- 1) Maayan: Okay. And how could he have been washed away to Jerusalem, I mean, there’s no sea there at all.
- 2) Khen: They are pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem.
- 3) Maayan: So, where are they?
- 4) Khen: So, it could mean that they come from the coastal area and now they are turning east towards Jerusalem.

The question of their location is based on familiarity with the geographic distance between the seashore and Jerusalem. In Turn 4, Khen tries to bridge the great

distance and suggests that they are now turning eastward to Jerusalem. This bridging of geographic distances also warrants an explanation.

4.2.4 *Lack of relevance due to a lack of “connection” to the characters*

The attitude towards the characters in the text and the connection to them or a lack thereof differed among the conversations and influenced the perception of the text’s relevance. Some of the teachers felt the text was irrelevant to them due to a lack of connection on their part to the characters. Others, on the other hand (mainly the religious teachers in Group 1), felt respect and appreciation for the characters. The lack of connection with the characters could be seen on two levels. One was a lack of connection due to unfamiliarity with and prior knowledge about them, and the second was a lack of connection due to the manner in which the characters’ behavior was understood. In the following we will distinguish between these two levels.

Lack of Knowledge about the Characters. Lilach (traditional) and Rotem (secular) from Group 2 noted in the conversation that the characters were not relevant, and that no connection was created with the reader.

- 1) Lilach: Who are these characters? [...] In the stories that the children are accustomed to reading [...] so they are characters that they can
- 2) Rotem: Can identify with.
- 3) Lilach: *Connect* to them, that they [...] Characters that they understand, that they can really... That they can relate too, right? *And here are {silence} characters that aren’t...*
- 4) Rotem: *Aren’t connected to them.*

The verbs “identify with,” “connect,” “know” and “relate to” represent an expectation for a certain kind of character, one that the story not only does not fulfill but in fact foils. In her interview, Maayan also notes a lack of connection with the text and characters, and even expresses resistance to them:

What do I need Rabbi Eleazar for? [...] I’m not convinced. Not convinced that... That I should bring this story now to show that even a Jew would help an Arab. What does it matter? I can discuss this article in the news, I don’t need to bring this case, as if for comparison of the added value that should come from the story, from the characters, *from the connection. There’s no connection. It’s just another case.*

And later in the interview, she refers to the fact that the connection to the characters can be made on the basis of prior knowledge and familiarity.

I can read now about this Rabbi Eleazar and for me *it doesn’t connect to anything.* It’s really disconnected... And I’m an educated person, I have a master’s degree, I study, I take courses. So when you give me this thing... And I’m unable to do it, I’ll just turn the page forward in the booklet and I’ll read about Martin Luther King. Just like that.

“There’s no connection,” “Rabbi Eleazar doesn’t connect to me to anything,” says Maayan, “And I’m an educated person.” The names are unfamiliar and do not mean anything to her, unlike other familiar names about which she has prior knowledge, such as Martin Luther King. Maayan’s opposition could also stem from the fact that

the story involves a character that she perceives in terms of today's rabbinate, a religious institution of which she is critical.

On the other hand, in conversations in Group 1, and especially among the religious participants, there was empathy with the characters and desire to learn more about them. An example of a conversation in Group 1:

- 1) Rinat: Let's take a look for a moment at the story [...]. Rabbi Eleazar Ben Shammua was among the students of Rabbi Akiva and the teacher of Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi.
- 2) Efrat: Wow, the teacher of Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi!

In this conversation, Rinat (who has no religious definition) reads information about Rabbi Eleazar from the teacher's guide (Turn 1), Efrat (religious) in response expresses admiration, based on prior knowledge: Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi (2nd century CE), the president of the Sanhedrin and the redactor of the Mishna, is a revered figure in Jewish culture. In the *havruta* setting, she shares this knowledge with her study partner, and she too recognizes him as an important figure.

Lack of Connection Due to Interpretation of the Characters' Behavior. Criticism of another kind in the context of the characters came up in discussions about the pilgrims who refused to help the survivor. Merav (Group 1, secular) had a background in Judaism— "These texts are not foreign to me", she explained in the interview. Nevertheless, she expressed opposition to the characters in the text and said in the interview:

The message in it, in my opinion, is terrible and I don't think it's a good text. An entire group of Jews see someone miserable who's about to drown and they don't help him. Why? Because he's from... Not one of us. And then the rabbi, despite a number of requests, finally helps him. I don't know if that's the Israeli value that I want to promote.

The pilgrims' disregard for the entreaties of the survivor causes opposition in another discussion, but many literary texts present characters who do not behave properly in the reader's eyes, thus revealing the didactic power of the text (Rinon, 2014). The text invites critical thinking and discourse. The reader can criticize the behavior of the characters and think about whether it is admirable or appropriate to behave like them. But in contrast to such "legitimate" criticism, in the following example, Maayan criticizes the fact that it was the rabbinic character of all people who helps the survivor. She rails against what she considers an implied message in the text, that only exalted rabbis have morals and values:

- 1) Maayan: What are we supposed to learn from this?
- 2) Khen: What do we learn from this? (Silence) What do we learn from this?
- 3) Maayan: That only... That only the distinguished rabbis know how to treat people and that simple people who don't learn the Torah have no morals or values. That's what we learn from this. What do you learn from this?
- 4) Khen: That in order to... to be a human being... umm...
- 5) Maayan: You need to learn the Torah.
- 6) Khen: Treat a person humanely and not as a person, umm... because he comes from somewhere. For example, if you see a Palestinian who is

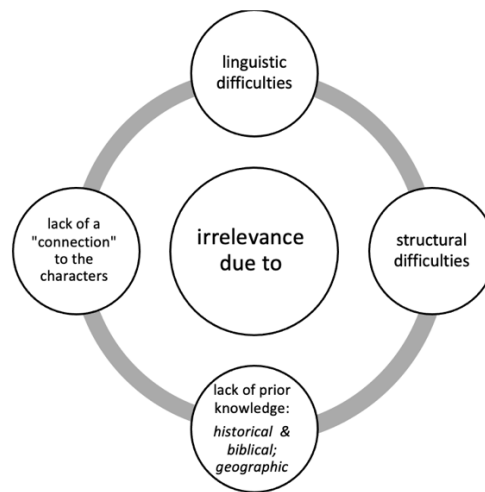
hungry, then give him something to eat, maybe, send him vaccinations maybe. The fact that he's from among the descendants of Esau doesn't mean anything. [silence]

- 7) Maayan: Yes, but why is it only the rabbi who always... ahh... I don't know if always, but why is it the rabbi who represents this supreme value?

Maayan claims that the implied message of the text is that "only the distinguished rabbis know how to treat people" (Turn 3), that simple people who do not study the Torah "have no morals or values" and that only the righteous and the Torahic scholars help others, whereas simple people (Jews) do not. With these words, she resists the hegemonic power of the rabbi (as such). In Turn 6, Khen tries to mitigate this resolute position and formulates a general message according to which a person should help another human being no matter who he is, regardless of their position, and even offers contemporary examples. Perhaps the connotation of the title "rabbi" evokes opposition to the text among 21st century secular readers.

The following chart sums up the claims that arose regarding irrelevance:

Figure 1. Claims of irrelevance



We saw that the text evoked conflicting feelings of interest and empathy or opposition and resistance. In both types of reaction, the explanation involved the expressions "connection," "interesting" and "relevant."

5. DISCUSSION

Throughout the conversations and interviews, a claim was repeated regarding the relevance of the text to the learner today. This came in contrast to the declaration made by most of the teachers (89%) about the importance of learning and teaching texts from the Jewish sources. This disparity between the ideological position and the actual behavior calls for an explanation. Below, we will explain the teachers' reactions by addressing two interrelated issues: (1) the demographic differences between the two cities and research groups as well as their effect on the teachers' reading; and (2) the relevance or irrelevance of the text in light of its challenges.

5.1 *The differences between the two cities*

The groups differ in terms of the geographic area in which they teach: the cities are different as is the population in each city. The majority of the population in the city in which the teachers from Group 1 teach and live is religious. The life of the religious Jew is filled with daily encounters with ancient Jewish texts, both at home and in the synagogue, and the language of these texts is not foreign to them. A fundamental difference between the groups lies in the religious background of the participants and the degree to which they are exposed to Jewish texts.

In Group 1, there were nine teachers who were religious or traditional, compared to Group 2 in which only three teachers defined themselves as religious or traditional (i.e., three times as many). The religious teachers reported that they regularly read Jewish texts of various types, whereas the secular teachers did not. Accordingly, the composition of the *havruta* pairs was different. In Group 1, the *havruta* pairs were mixed, with at least one participant who was religious in each pair. In Group 2, only three teachers had some religious background. It seems then that a religious background and prior knowledge in reading texts of this kind influenced the perception of the text's relevance for the teachers.

In addition, it is possible that teachers who did not have a religious background or previous experience in reading texts of this type (especially in Group 2) considered the text irrelevant because of its religious context, similar to the call-out culture, which disqualifies classical works of literature due to seeming cultural incompatibility between the writers of the text and readers in the present (Thomas et al., 2019).

This is how, for example, the attitude to the characters in the text of the teachers from Group 2 can be explained. Perhaps the teachers felt a lack of connection to the characters, or even resistance to some of them because of the enormous distance between them and the characters. The characters in no way represent the teachers' identity and the claims of call-out culture reverberate here.

The question remains, however, as to how to explain the disparity between the teachers' opposition to the text and the fact that 89% of the participants in the

questionnaires and focus groups stated that they considered the studying of ancient religious texts to be important. At this point, we need to refer to relevance theory.

5.2 *The effects and effort of reading ancient texts*

The text underlying the study elicits a personal and authentic reader response and creates an opportunity to learn about and observe the world from perspectives that are different from those of the reader (Morson, 2015). In the context of our study, the relevance of the text for the readers depends on their ability to bridge the gaps between the text and their knowledge and ability as readers. When significant contexts are lacking between the text and reader, the reader cannot create implicature in order to understand the text, and the text will be irrelevant to the reader (Dascal, 1977; Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

In presenting the findings, we brought examples of the difficulty in understanding lexical, syntactical, historical, biblical and other meanings. Based on this, the claim of relevance or irrelevance that the teachers raised in relation to the text is associated with the connections they needed and effort they had to invest in order to create meaning. The larger absence of connections in the teachers' encounter with the text and the more effort needed to decode the words, understand the syntax and gain familiarity with the characters and the historical cultural sources—as was the case for most of the *havruta* teams in Group 2—the more strongly they raised the claim of irrelevance in these cases. Gaps in terms of lexical items, structure and prior knowledge were difficult to bridge: no implicature could be generated among the readers, or alternatively, an erroneous implicature was created with the claim of irrelevance being raised. In cases in which the teachers were able to find connections between the knowledge, perceptions and emotions familiar to them and the implicit information that arose fairly easily from the text, or were assisted by their *havruta* partner to that end, relevance was generated, as was the case for most of the *havruta* partners in Group 1.

Due to their religious identity, most of the participants in Group 1 considered the very study of a text taken from a sacred source to be beneficial. In addition, the leader of the in-service training course (who was not one of the researchers) suggested the possibility of teaching the text in class as part of the course requirements. Furthermore, teaching the text in class provided benefits because of the content that emerged from it. These benefits could be considered effects. Also, the effort required to achieve optimal processing of the text was small because of the presence of at least one teacher with prior background and experience in the study of texts from the Jewish sources in each of the *havruta* pairs. An examination of the conversations held in Group 1 demonstrates the existence of prior linguistic knowledge that enabled the encoding and decoding of the text, as well as prior conceptual (historical, biblical, geographic, halakhic, etc.) knowledge on the part of at least one of the teachers in each *havruta* pair.

Neither of these conditions was met for most teachers in Group 2. The first condition was not met because the teachers did not see any effect in studying the text or teaching it in class; nor was any such effect explained or demonstrated to them before the study. And the second condition was not met because the effort needed to process the text was great. Accordingly, no desire to put in an effort to teach the text was created and it was defined as irrelevant. The question of the relevance of teaching texts that belong to the cultural world of the mother tongue is a universal issue in the teaching of L1. The main finding of our study concerns the claim of the relevance of the text. This difficulty is very likely also encountered by teachers and students in the teaching of other mother tongues when learning ancient texts.

The contribution of this study lies in the insight that in order for teachers to study a text from the ancient sources and consider relevant, two things should be done: to diminish the effort required to process the text by means of mediation of an instructor or another teacher in a *havruta* setting, and to take some action through which the teachers will see some effects in the teaching of the text. Evoking the effect when it comes to mother tongue (L1) teachers can be achieved in different ways, such as emphasizing the benefit of learning words and phrases from the language (e.g., learning the proverb "Cast thy bread upon the waters"), practicing the skill of text processing, learning texts in multicultural groups with different religious backgrounds and connecting to a cultural heritage that views the reading of texts from the sources as a contribution to students' language education and cultural capital.

This study's limitations:

- 1) This study examined conversations related to a single selected text. As noted above, the text, as a third partner, has an impact on the discourse, and consequently, it will be worthwhile in the future to examine a teacher discourse with additional texts.
- 2) Although we based ourselves on the teachers' lesson plans, we did not observe the actual teaching of the lessons; in a further study, it would be a good idea to include observations of the teaching of the text in the classroom.

In wake of this study, which was conducted between two different population groups in Israel, further studies should be carried out in different places in the world to examine the issue of relevance in the teaching of ancient texts in elementary schools.

Future studies that examine the study of texts from the sources in a manner that mitigates the effort and presents the effect for the teachers and students will be able to examine whether the text is indeed perceived as more relevant. The connection to the text and its perception as relevant in the teachers' eyes will help in the teaching of texts from ancient sources as part of L1 studies and create an opportunity for teachers and students to get to know the richness, beauty and complexity of their culture and language.

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APPENDIX A

Ecclesiastes Rabbah Chapter XI:1

Midrash Rabbah, Ecclesiastes, Translated by A. Cohen, London: The Soncino Press, 1983, with slight adaptations for readability.

Rabbi Eleazar ben Shammua was walking by the sea, when he saw a ship, which was tossed about in the water, suddenly sink with all on board. He noticed a man sitting on a plank of the ship [carried] from wave to wave until he stepped ashore.

Being naked, he hid himself by the sea.

It happened to be the time for the Israelites to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the festival. He said to them, "I belong to the descendants of Esau, your brother; give me a little clothing wherewith to cover my nakedness because the sea stripped me bare and nothing was saved with me."

They retorted, "So may all your people be stripped bare!"

He raised his eyes and saw Rabbi Eleazar who was walking among them; he exclaimed, "I observe that you are an old and respected man of your people, and you know the respect due to your fellow creatures. So help me, and give me a garment wherewith to cover my nakedness because the sea stripped me bare."

Rabbi Eleazar ben Shammua was wearing seven robes; he took one off and gave it to him. He also led him to his house, provided him with food and drink, gave him two hundred dinars, drove him fourteen leagues, and treated him with great honor until he brought him to his home.

Sometime later the wicked emperor died, and this man was appointed king in his stead, and he decreed concerning that province that all the men were to be killed and all the women taken as spoil.

They said to Rabbi Eleazar ben Shammua, "Go and intercede for us."

He told them "You know that this government does nothing without being paid."

They said to him, "Here are four thousand dinars; take them and go and intercede for us."

He took them and went and stood by the gate of the royal palace. He said to [the guards] "Go, tell the king that a Jew is standing at the gate, and wishes to greet the king."

The king ordered him to be brought in. On beholding him the king descended from his throne and prostrated himself before him.

He asked him, "What is my master's business here, and why has my master troubled to come here?"

He replied, "That you should have mercy upon this province and annul this decree."

The king asked him, "Is there any falsehood written in the Torah?"

"No," was the reply; and he said to him, "Is it not written in your Torah, 'An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord (Deut. 23:4)?"

What is the reason? Because they met you not with bread and with water in the way" (Deut. 23:5).

It is also written, 'Thou shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is thy brother' (Deut. 23:8); and am I not a descendant of Esau, your brother, but they did not show me compassion! And whoever transgresses the Torah incurs the penalty of death."

Rabbi Eleazar ben Shammua replied to him, "Although they are guilty towards you, forgive them and have mercy upon them."

He said to him, "You know that this government does nothing without being paid."

He told him, "I have with me four thousand dinars; take them and have mercy upon the people."

He said to him, "These four thousand dinars are presented to you in exchange for the two hundred which you gave me, and the whole province will be spared for your sake in return for the food and drink with which you provided me.

Go also into my treasury and take seventy robes of honor in return for the robe you gave me, and go in peace to your people whom I forgive for your sake."

They applied to him the text, "Cast thy bread upon the waters, for thou shalt find it after many days" (Ecclesiastes 11:1).