

## Article

# Kids Reading Tanakh: The Child as Interpreter

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**Abstract:** This essay examines two fourth-grade students' task-based read-aloud interviews on the biblical text of Numbers 13. Taking up the New London Group's call for a pedagogy of multiliteracies this article examines how educators and adults might sensitize themselves to the interpretive identities children bring to their reading of biblical texts. This work is intricately tied to child development, as we move religious education from a deficit model and perspective towards the child to a more welcoming asset model and perspective.

**Keywords:** Bible; children; Jewish education; sociocultural theory; multiliteracies; think aloud interviews

## 1. Introduction: Teaching towards Students' Sense-Making

In 1996, a group of literacy scholars interested in celebrating students' identities and experiences published, "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies." Known as the New London Group (NLG), they articulated a deep critique of then-current literacy pedagogy, arguing that it had been "a carefully restricted project—restricted to formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language" (Cazden et al. 1996, p. 61). In its place, they called for "a transformed pedagogy of access . . . [that does not] ignore and erase the different subjectivities—interests, intentions, commitments and purposes—students bring to learning." (Cazden et al. 1996, p. 72).

The dense jargon of these ideas hides a simple but powerful critique. For too long, school has dismissed too many student readings of texts as "misreadings" because they fail to fit with a particular conventional way of understanding a given text. Given the power structures in our society, this dynamic has disproportionately harmed students of color and other marginalized communities (Brown et al. 2016; De La Luz Reyes 1992; Gutierrez 2008).

The NLG encouraged educators to make room for the ways that different students might make sense of the texts they read in school. They pushed for greater cultural sensitivity and prioritizing student voices in interpreting texts. They also encouraged educators to broaden their conceptions of what counted as a text, taking a multimodal perspective in viewing dance, music, and even graffiti as part of what students might "read" in school. They thought these changes would broaden what literacy meant and as a result, address inequities in the educational system that perpetuated inequality across society.

The NLG and other researchers who have challenged teacher authority have pushed to give more power to students in order to make classrooms inclusive of the multiple legitimate ways to comprehend. They have advocated for providing a space where students can bring their ideas, texts, and perspectives; however, their research has almost exclusively addressed general elementary school teachers (see e.g., Aukerman 2017; Gee 2017; Juzwik et al. 2015; Langer [2010] 2011; Lewis 1993; Reznitskaya 2012). Although they champion a broad scope in terms of content and audience, to date, religious studies teachers in religious schools have been overlooked. This paper explores the importance of extending the NLG's message regarding "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies" specifically to Jewish classrooms in Jewish schools—not only on the basis of equity and access, but as a matter of religious and spiritual development.

I propose in this paper expanding the notion of underrepresented populations to include all students who are marginalized when their ways of reading and sense-making



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are consistently ignored or corrected in the classroom. Teachers in general have preferred ways of reading and interpreting texts, if not preferred interpretations. These interpretive preferences privilege certain students over others. When the teacher is not transparent about their interpretive rules, students whose ways of reading and interpretive communities outside of school misalign with the teacher's may feel alienated and excluded in that classroom. This conception of marginalization allows for students to move between inclusion and exclusion, privileged status and marginalized status, depending on the teacher. It represents a situated and sociocultural approach to literacy and literacy practice (Collins and Blot 2003).

Significant research has shown the harm this sort of interpretive marginalization can do to students (e.g., Aukerman et al. 2017; Hall 2010), but only scant studies look at interpretive marginalization in the context of Jewish classrooms and Jewish schooling (Bekerman and Kopelowitz 2008; Hassenfeld 2016). This gap in the research is particularly jarring, given the ample research that documents the prevalence of transmission pedagogy in Jewish education (Backenroth 2004; Katzin 2015; Lehmann 2008; Segal and Bekerman 2009). The interpretive marginalization, therefore, is perhaps even greater in Jewish schools than it is in public schools, even with religious or cultural homogeneity.

#### *How Do We Learn to Make Sense?*

In the last 150 years, three major schools of thought emerged about how people learn: behaviorism, cognitivism, and sociocultural theory. These schools of thought disagree on two basic questions: what is learning, and how does learning happen? For behaviorists, learning is conditioning. From the moment we are born, we are conditioned by certain stimuli to respond in certain ways. Most famously, Pavlov's dog learned to drool upon hearing a bell when Pavlov repeatedly fed him after ringing that bell. For behaviorists, even language is the result of very complex stimulus-response conditioning (Handsfield 2015).

Cognitivists pushed back against behaviorism, arguing (as their name suggests) that behaviorists ignored the processing that happens in the mind. Observing his own children over the course of years, Piaget—one of the most famous cognitivist learning theorists—noted that at certain moments, children seemed to leap forward, performing mental tasks previously beyond their reach. This observation suggested to him that the human mind grows and develops over time and becomes capable of new ways of thinking at particular moments. These leaps happen, not as conditioning to a stimulus, but in the form of an internal mental development. In his view, these developmental milestones can't be rushed, but they are also hard to slow down (Piaget 1954).

Sociocultural theorists rejected cognitivists' exclusive focus on internal development, arguing that an individual mind cannot be studied apart from the social and cultural context in which it is embedded. They stated that universal stages of cognitive development miss the situated nature of learning, development, and knowledge. The sociocultural tradition understands knowledge as "constructed in, and an inherent part of, activity," (Wells 1999, p. 90). There is no knowledge outside of context and real-life activity. Take, for example, arithmetic. In her famous work, *Cognition in Practice: Mind, Mathematics and Culture in Everyday Life*, anthropologist Jean Lave (1988) studied people's knowledge of arithmetic. She found that the same people who did not "know" arithmetic when solving arithmetic problems in classrooms and on tests, were nevertheless able to perform arithmetic computations and calculations correctly in real life situations, such as grocery shopping and cooking. Did these people have knowledge of arithmetic? The cognitivist tradition would have to answer either yes or no, discarding one or the other piece of conflicting evidence. The sociocultural tradition explains that yes, these people had knowledge of arithmetic within the activity of cooking and shopping, but no, they did not have knowledge of arithmetic within the activity of test-taking and math textbook worksheets (Lave 1988).

The most significant implication of a sociocultural understanding of knowledge is that knowledge is socially situated. We "know" only within the context of our social living. It is misleading to think that individual intellectual development is largely a matter

of accumulating a store of general objective knowledge through a process of reception and memorization.

Sociocultural theorists, following Lev Vygotsky, posed that our ability to think is not primarily a product of conditioning or the unfolding of innate mental capacities, but rather is shaped and reshaped by the social interactions we have. Vygotsky went so far as to assert that all patterns of thinking, including every mental process, begin as a social process. Instead of seeing development as something that happens inside a child's head, the socioculturalists argued that development cannot be examined apart from the social context in which it occurs. [Cole and Scribner \(1978\)](#), [Vygotsky \(1980, 2012\)](#), [Wertsch \(1993\)](#) and others emphasized the role caretakers play in helping children read the world.

Both cognitivists and socioculturalists see young children as intrinsically motivated to think about the world and their place in it. Vygotsky and Piaget also shared the belief that learning to operate symbolically (through language and other modes) is an enormously important step on the road to development. Symbolic thinking in that sense is really quite magical—the incredible ability to make something *into* something else. However, while Piaget saw the capacity to form and operate with symbols as something that children intrinsically know how to do on their own and only need triggering events to “unfold” that cognitive skill, Vygotsky saw children's interactions with their parents, caretakers, and teachers as an essential element in shaping how they learn to operate with symbols. That is, from a sociocultural perspective, all interpretation is a sociocultural activity.

This sociocultural perspective of development makes the NLG call for student sense-making particularly compelling. Children enter school as experienced interpreters. Their identities as interpreters, the funds of knowledge they pull from, the conventions of interpretation they follow, and the experiences they bring to the signs they read are unique to each of them and their lived experiences. Students, therefore, not only represent a variety of adult interpretive communities—given their wildly divergent backgrounds as individuals—but they are their own universes of meaning. As Gordon [Wells \(1999\)](#) explains:

When children come to school, they have already made considerable progress in constructing a practical theory of experience, based on commonsense knowledge . . . The specific content on this theory, including beliefs about the goals of action and interaction, and about the particular semiotic resources that are appropriately recruited in their achievement, varies from child to child depending on each child's unique experience, as this is mediated by the roles that he or she is called on to play by virtue of membership of a particular culture, ethnic group, social class, and gender. ([Wells 1999](#), p. 44)

Wells puts the sociocultural theory in direct conversation with the school classroom and pedagogy. Everything a child reads is refracted through their own experiences and cultures. This means that students in a single classroom will necessarily understand and interpret texts differently because they are each pulling from different, and sometimes idiosyncratic, semiotic resources.

Wells' argument is important for all educators. However, it is particularly important to Jewish educators. Jewish educators often take a strong position that their educational goal and purpose is cultural induction and that this happens through the transmission of static culture (see e.g., [Bullivant 1983](#); [Katzin 2015](#)). From a sociocultural perspective, if culture is pedagogically represented as a compartmentalized and static category, students will, paradoxically, receive the message that their Jewish identity is marginal and “not relevant for life in the wider world of which they are apart” ([Bekerman and Kopelowitz 2008](#), p. 335). When Jewish educators don't let students bring their interpretive identities to Jewish texts, these educators inadvertently message that the students' Jewish identities are disconnected from the rest of their identity. It becomes encapsulated in a particular classroom at a particular moment of the day ([Engeström 1991](#)). *Only* by allowing students' full interpretive selves to come to the table when reading Jewish texts can Jewish educators move Jewish content from the margins of experience to the center. This might mean

tolerating non-standard interpretive ideas around Jewish texts, but the price of not doing so for Jewish and cultural education may be higher.

The importance of making space for Jewish students' diverse and multifaceted identities in the study of Jewish texts is gaining traction in the world of Jewish education research. In 2008, two Jewish education scholars edited a volume titled, *Cultural Education-Cultural Sustainability* (Routledge). In their co-authored chapter of the book, they consider the implications of sociocultural theory for Jewish text learning. A new vision of culture and knowledge requires a new vision of teaching and learning. They list three needed changes:

Dismantling the conception of classroom as 'differentiated space.' Doing away with the 'recitation model' of teaching: instead of the teacher providing information and the student repeating that information back, a discursive environment within the classroom must promote student responsibility to think independently of the teacher. Finally, the 'truth value' of texts must be tackled in a critical fashion: Rather than encourage students to relate uncritically to the 'truth' value of canonical texts, students must be encouraged to grapple with the ambiguities of meaning that appear within text. (Bekerman and Kopelowitz 2008)

These three changes—integrating the Jewish text classroom with life, moving away from recitation and transmission, and allowing students to grapple with ambiguities in the text—is how Bekerman and Kopelowitz (2008) operationalized sociocultural pedagogy for Jewish text classrooms. Since the publication of their book, a more recent edited volume has come out, *Advancing the Learning Agenda in Jewish Education* (Levisohn and Kress 2018). This volume contains many chapters focused on the whole child in Jewish education, specifically, the religious and spiritual development of Jewish children. Kolodner's chapter explains that positive Jewish identity development will require making learning activities meaningful and giving students opportunities to develop and be recognized for their expertise, including their interpretive expertise. In the final chapter, the editors Levisohn and Kress articulate the value of Jewish developmental outcomes, which they contrast with content outcomes. They write: "We don't teach Talmud or Bible, we teach children. The key 'domain' of Jewish education is the developing learner, his or her set of dispositions, his or her ways of engaging with Judaism and the world at large," (p. 213). It is the child as developing interpreter, learner, reader, and spiritual person that they argue needs to be the focus of Jewish education. Similarly, Deborah Schein's work (Schein 2013) looked specifically at the spiritual development of young Jewish children. She found that "trust can lead children to moments of radical amazement" (p. 381). When students trust their teachers and the adults in their lives, they are able to open up to moments of wonder; Schein argues these moments of wonder can strengthen "children's dispositions of understanding of self and others in order to develop a belief system" (p. 381). Schein suggests that trust between teacher and student, built perhaps on mutual respect, leads not only to interpretive inclusion, but also spiritual development.

Taken together, this body of research in Jewish education emphasizes more focus on teacher-student relationships, authentic inquiry learning, and celebration of Jewish developmental outcomes. The role of text study, and biblical texts specifically, in this new sociocultural model recasts texts from a vehicle for transmission of static culture/knowledge into a canvas for students to explore their own Jewish identities and spiritualities. In other words, in the past decade, the insights of sociocultural theory and literacy and the priorities of Jewish education have begun to converge.

This essay sets out to explore the following question:

- How can we get better at identifying all students' interpretive worlds and identities from their readings and ideas about biblical texts?

If biblical texts are a canvas for student self-exploration and spiritual development, and children's interpretations and textual meanings will be a reflection of their own experiences and trajectories, then the teacher's job becomes to help students notice and articulate those reflections. In doing so, the teacher helps move students from interpretive marginalization

to interpretive inclusion. This essay looks at how researchers and practitioners can analyze students' interpretations closely to identify students' interpretive worlds and identities.

## 2. Methods

To investigate how Jewish elementary school children reflect their own identities and experiences when interpreting Tanakh, this essay focuses on two 10-year-old Jewish children I observed as they studied a variety of texts in the Hebrew Bible.

Jay and Meg, two fourth graders, attended a full-time Jewish day school on the west coast of the United States of America. They were both white and affluent, as were the majority of students in this Jewish elementary school (tuition at this school was over \$25k a year). This school espoused progressive educational and religious values, working to serve Jewish children regardless of their families' Jewish practice. Bible class met every school day with a different teacher than the one who taught general studies.

In this essay, I am drawing on data from a larger think-aloud study of the same population. In the larger study, I interviewed seven students separately on a regular basis over the course of several weeks. I conducted eight think-aloud interviews (see, e.g., Wineburg 1991) with these students on a variety of biblical texts from the Book of Numbers. Each text was selected because it was the text the students were about to study in their Jewish studies class.

I asked them to think-aloud as they read the biblical text. I conducted the think-alouds in a quiet room without distractions. I gave the students the biblical text in the same form which they used in class (photocopied on stock paper with the English on one side and the Hebrew on the other). I also provided pens, pencils, highlighters, and notebook paper.

As a form of task-based interview, the think-aloud interview has traditionally been used in the field of cognitive psychology in order to access people's pure cognitive processes (Pressley and Afflerbach 1995); I was not interested in isolating cognitive processes from social processes (nor was I interested in taking a stance in the debate over whether this is possible). Rather, the think-aloud method created a forum where students could interpret texts at length without interruption. The think-aloud method allowed me to observe, uninterrupted, the students' interpretive stances towards the biblical text. It was my main data source for understanding the students' interpretive insights. In using the think-aloud method for the purposes of capturing focused performance under controlled conditions, I followed Wineburg's (1991) procedures.

Before the first think-aloud began, I instructed each student to focus on the task of reading and interpreting the biblical text and instructed them to "just think-aloud" (Ericsson and Simon 1998). I explained that any thoughts, questions, and ideas they had did not have to be complete thoughts or fully articulated ideas (Pressley and Afflerbach 1995). Before the first think-aloud on the biblical text, we practiced a think-aloud with Shel Silverstein's poem "Early Bird." I then instructed the students to do the same with the biblical text (Ericsson and Simon 1998). Other than nodding encouragingly, I did not say anything during the students' think-alouds.<sup>1</sup>

This approach, while limited in its own ways, gave me access to a more immersive understanding of who the students were as interpreters than what I could see in the classroom. This essay focuses on two of those seven students—Jay and Meg—and their think-alouds on one biblical text: Numbers, Chapter 13. Before these think-aloud interviews, I had conducted a round of think-aloud interviews with them on Numbers 12.

### 2.1. The Researcher: Reflecting on Positionality

I am a former Tanakh teacher, a religious Jew, and a parent of children attending a full-time parochial Jewish school. Nothing about my area of research feels neutral. I am deeply committed to improving Tanakh education and Jewish education in line with child development and positive youth development. While this level of entrenchment in one's area of research can, at times, create blind spots in analysis and framing, here, in this particular work, my familiarity with the biblical material and educational and cultural



milieu served me. It allowed me to approach the students with ease and jump into the biblical and class material with comfort. It helped me build rapport and trust between the students and myself.

## 2.2. The Text: Numbers 13

In the text of Numbers 13, the children of Israel are poised to enter the Land of Canaan. God instructs Moses to send spies into the land to plan their next move. Table 1 below shows the text from which Meg and Jay read (the translation was the one used in their school).

**Table 1.** Numbers 13: 1–3, 17–20 (English).

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*God said to Moses, "Send the men to spy out the land of Canaan which I gave to the people of Israel. From each tribe send a man. Every man a leader." So Moses sent them from the desert of Paran as God had told him to. All of them leaders of the people of Israel. Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan and said to them, "Go out to the Negev and go into the hill country and see what the land is like and whether the people in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many and whether the land they live in is good or bad and whether the cities they live in are camps or fortresses and whether the land is rich or poor and whether there is water in it or not. Be brave and bring back the fruit of the land."*

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## 2.3. The Students

Both students lived in the surrounding area on the west coast of the United States of America. Both students were white and from upper middle class families. They had both attended this Jewish day school from kindergarten and were both from families that identified with liberal, progressive religious denominations of Judaism.

I spent months observing both Jay and Meg as fourth-grade students. I observed Jay as a shy student who was eager to please. He had a tendency to ask questions his teachers and classmates found idiosyncratic. He often made subtle references to cartoons and movies he loved, but that no one else in his class seemed to understand. The mismatch between his own interpretive priorities and those of his teachers' and classmates' made class something of a struggle for him. Sometimes, he would insist on asking the questions that mattered to him; at other times, he would parrot questions he understood to be the "right" ones.

Meg fit in to the interpretive milieu of their fourth-grade classroom much better. She was eager, outgoing, and good at "doing school" (Pope 2008). At age nine, she already embraced her identity as a deep thinker and serious student. When I asked the students to pick their own pseudonyms she said with a smile, "Call me Medusa," after the monstrous gorgon of Greek mythology. Meg was a student who counted Jewish studies, English, and gym as her equally favorite subjects. I share these impressions as I move towards mining these students' textual interpretations for insights into their interpretive identities.

## 3. Findings

The transcripts explored below come from the fifth round of think-aloud interviews. Both Jay and Meg shared these thoughts as they read this text and afterwards.

Both Meg and Jay were missing important background knowledge for understanding Numbers 13; for example, understanding how espionage works would resolve some of their questions. In their own ways, they were also missing certain widely held assumptions about how to read the biblical text. For example, Jay asks why Moses follows God's instructions. The answer for most readers is simply that God is an omnipotent character who directs Moses frequently. Whether this is historical fact could be debated, but it is certainly a fact within the world of the biblical text. One can no more question God's power within the world of the biblical text than one might question whether Superman wears a cape within the comic book world. It would be easy to read these think-alouds and conclude that what these students need is just to learn more information. However, there is more going on here. A sociocultural perspective asks that these student interpretations be read not from a deficit perspective, what these students don't know, but rather, to be read

with an eye for understanding what interpretive resources and conventions the students do have and are employing in their reading.

Jay	Meg
<p>I think it's kind of sneaky and why did they call it Canaan? Like I understand that they call it Israel when the Israelites get there but what's their reason? Like was there a leader that's last name was Canaan or something? And why does Moses do every single thing that God tells him to? Because it might just be his imagination playing with him. Just his imagination playing with him and it turns out his imagination is a good thing or something. Because when they were running away from Egypt the guys they could have maybe seen if one of them was friends with one or like that and see if they would let them go through. Like my mom says, "Don't run away from your problems." So if they had a problem they could go through—so if they had a problem why didn't they try to find a solution? Like why didn't they say, "Hi in Canaan." "Hi We're Israelites can we please join your blah blah blah..." (sigh)</p>	<p>How do they know which ones are leaders? [she highlights] Because technically Moses is the leader so how are there leaders in each of the tribes? <i>So Moses sent them from the desert of Paran as God had told him to. All of them leaders of the people of Israel. Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan.</i> Why does he say that again? He already said that he sent them out to spy on the land of Canaan, so why are you saying that again? <i>and he said to them, "Go out to the Negev and go into the hill country and see what the land is like"</i> Why do they keep on saying go to different places? They say go out to the land of Canaan and then they say they sent them from the desert of Paran and then Moses says go out to the Negev. Why are they saying so many different places? <i>"and whether the people in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many and whether the land they live in is good or bad and whether the cities they live in are camps or fortress and whether the land is rich or poor and whether there is water in it or not. Be brave and bring back the fruit of the land."</i> Why does Moses need to know all of these things? Why don't they all go there and check it out together? And some of the questions are impossible to answer because they are opinions! Half of the 12 people could say they're good and half of the 12 people could say they're bad! And half of the 12 people could say they're rich and half of the 12 people could say they're poor! And half of the 12 people could say they're strong and half of the people could say they're weak. They should do questions that are easy to answer and just go see for themselves... I think Moses should be more specific about what they should do. Because I think if I had to do that I would get very, very, very confused. And I think also he should be more specific because when they come back they might have different opinions and it might start a big fight—everyone will get mad at each other and start fighting with each other.</p>

### 3.1. Jay

As Jay reads, certain words and phrases stand out to him and he begins to work through what they might mean. His interpretations are shaped, as always, by his own experiences and by the interpretive rules he follows. What comes through most clearly are the words and phrases that jumped out at Jay and how he brought his own experience to bear on them.

Jay identified three moments in the text that stand out to him:

1. the name of the land (Canaan);
2. the fact that Moses follows God's commands without question;
3. the fact that spies are sent.

Each of these moments troubles Jay, and in his comments, he tries to make sense of them. I want to examine each in turn.

### 3.1.1. “Canaan”

The first textual feature that jumped out at Jay was a question about the name of the land the spies were investigating. However, Jay doesn’t just ask a question, but actually offers a hypothesis. He wonders whether “there was a leader with the last name Canaan,” drawing perhaps on his knowledge that in the contemporary world, places are sometimes named after famous people. He might know, for example, that Washington D.C. is named after George Washington. To him, it makes sense to apply that knowledge to a strange place name and to wonder whether that place, too, is named after a person.

To an adult reader, it might be funny to imagine John P. Canaan discovering the land that comes to be named after him, but whether or not Jay is right, it is clear that he is engaged in the activity of interpretation. He notices aspects of the text that raise questions, and then he relies on his experience and knowledge of interpretive norms to generate possible answers to those questions. A sociocultural perspective demands the Jewish educator to first celebrate and recognize the interpretive logic Jay applies and then pose the interpretive hypothesis and question to the class to debate: how do biblical places get their names?

### 3.1.2. “Send the Men to Spy Out the Land”

Jay focuses many of his comments on the word “spy.” He begins by saying it sounds “kind of sneaky” and continues to think it through. As a reader, he draws on his own life, sharing with me that his mother tells him, “Don’t run away from your problems.” He realizes that it’s a problem that the land in which the Israelites want to settle already has people living there, but Jay seems to see spying as a dishonest or dishonorable way of solving a problem. He goes on, “If they had a problem why didn’t they try to find a solution?”

Moreover, he even has a suggestion, “Like why didn’t they say, ‘Hi in Canaan.’ ‘Hi We’re Israelites, can we please join your blah blah blah. . .’” Perhaps Jay, throughout his childhood, has been taught that he should solve his problems by talking them through, rather than by spying or fighting. It’s disconcerting, therefore, to him to read about God commanding the Israelites to do something which he sees as bad. He concludes, “Like my mom says, ‘Don’t run away from your problems.’”

Again, it would be easy to focus on what Jay is missing here. His experience of conflict has largely been limited to sibling rivalry or perhaps playground conflict. He seems to be lacking some knowledge about the nature of geopolitical conflict in the ancient near east and knowledge about the purpose of espionage in conquest. Because he can’t think of any reason why the Canaanites would be reluctant to share the land if asked, the meaning of the text seems opaque.

Jay is working through the text and striving to find meaning in it in the context of his own experience and knowledge of the world. Jay has a practice of offering his own advice to characters in the text. Here, he has a different idea about how they should have made their first contact with the Canaanites. Later on in Numbers 13, when he read about the spies’ report back to Moses and their reflection that the land of Canaan was indeed fortified, Jay began to wonder why this particular detail was so important. He offered his own strategy for overcoming fortifications:

Their cities are fortified. So like what does it matter if it’s fortified? They can just . . . fortified doesn’t always mean that they have weapons and guns to kill you, things like that. It can just mean like very thick. So what? Bring something to smash the walls! Like they do in movies, a really big log with a ram’s head with its horn.

Again, Jay is missing particular background knowledge, perhaps about the intricacies of siege warfare in the ancient world, but he nonetheless forges forward, confident that he can make sense of the text. He doesn’t think the land being fortified should be so important because he thinks there is an easy way for the people of Israel to get in, even if



it is. His confusion does not lead him to disengage, but rather to carefully articulate his alternative plan.

### 3.1.3. “God Said to Moses, ‘Send. . .’ So Moses Sent”

Above all, Jay was concerned with the character of God in the text. Not a single mention of God would go by without Jay raising theological questions. Jay noticed that God commanded Moses to do something and Moses immediately did it. As a reader, Jay would not take for granted that Moses follows God’s instructions. He instead asked the question: “And why does Moses do every single thing that God tells him to? Because it might just be his imagination playing with him? Just his imagination playing with him and it turns out his imagination is a good thing or something?” The ideas Jay touches on here are theological questions that Jewish thinkers have engaged in for centuries. What is the relationship between divine command and human agency? What exactly is prophecy and how does it work? For Jay, these questions are evoked even in the most mundane moment of plot development when God tells Moses something and Moses tells the people.

Jay brought up questions about God frequently in his think-aloud interviews. When studying Numbers Chapter 12, Jay read about when God explains to Miriam and Aaron why Moses is a superior prophet to all others. Verses 7–8 read: *“That is not the case with my servant Moses; in my entire house he is most trusted. Mouth to mouth I speak to him, in a vision and not riddles; he sees the image of God.”*

On these verses, Jay asked the following question: “How can he see an image of God because he can’t see Him?” What interested Jay was not the complex sibling rivalry in this story or the moral lesson in God’s admonishment. Rather, Jay was focused on the conception of God here. It didn’t make sense to him, and so he challenged the account of the text. In the Hebrew Bible, God is visible in various forms: God has a face (Exodus 33:11), God has arms (Psalms 126:12), God walks (Genesis 3:8), God has a finger (Exodus 31:18), etc. Yet Jay subjects the biblical account of God to his own theological understanding of God.

When Jay read the Bible, his attention was drawn to certain features. Through the lens of his own experience and the interpretive rules that operate for him, he created his own commentary on the text as he read. He found in the strange name “Canaan,” a window into a relatable system and society where people in all times name places after important leaders. The word “spy” transformed this text into an ethically questionable story of God commanding Moses to do something unkind and potentially unnecessary. Jay supported this interpretation by noticing Moses’ unwavering and unhesitant obedience. This interpretation emerged from the words of the text refracted through this particular reader, Jay, and his interests.

## 3.2. Meg

Just like Jay, when Meg read, she identified the parts of the biblical text that stood out to her and began to work through what they might mean. Like Jay, her efforts to interpret Numbers 13 show her struggling to make sense of details in the text. Unlike Jay, Meg takes as a given in this story the premise that Moses follows God’s command. Meg was interested in the formal features of the text—the way the text says what it says was more interesting to her than what it says.

Meg identified three features of the text that stood out to her:

1. the repetition that Moses sent them to spy;
2. the variety of places referred to in the text, and the lack of clarity;
3. the lack of clarity in Moses’ instructions.

### 3.2.1. “God Said to Moses, ‘Send. . .’ So Moses Sent. . . Moses Sent”

Meg noted that in verse 3, the text says that Moses sent them from Paran, as God had instructed him. Then, at the end of the verse 16, it says again that Moses sent them. This wording stood out to Meg as repetitive. She wondered why the text needs to communicate

substantially the same information twice? In her mind, the fact that the text says twice that Moses sent the spies is suspicious. In this particular think-aloud interview, Meg did not offer a possible meaning. She only noted the repetition as a sign post of meaning in the text.

Meg often noted repetition. As a reader, she was drawn to formal literary features in the text, and, in the context of her classroom, her teacher valued these types of observations. On another occasion in a different think-aloud interview, Meg read Numbers 12. The chapter begins as follows:

*Miriam and Aaron spoke about Moses concerning the cushite woman he married for he had married a cushite woman. And they said, "Does God only speak to Moses? Doesn't God also speak with us?" And God heard . . .*

Thinking aloud while reading these verses, Meg commented, "I don't understand why they repeat that he married a Cushite woman." Meg went on reading and continued sharing her thoughts: "Maybe they're trying to say that God is also talking to the Cushite woman, Moses and the Cushite woman, and maybe they're thinking if he talks to her, why not us too?"

### 3.2.2. "Go to the Negev, and Go into the Hill Country, Paran, Canaan"

Meg paid close attention to the particular words in the text. Here, she pointed out the variety of places named in this text: Paran, Negev, hill country, Canaan. She may have just been noticing that there are a lot of places mentioned and been trying to fit them together into a mental geographic map. Perhaps she was realizing that there is a geography to the story which, to her, is unfamiliar. She suspects that were she able to locate these places on a map, it might help her make sense of the text.

### 3.2.3. "And Whether the People in It Are Strong or Weak. . ."

Meg shares her impression that the report Moses asks for from the spies does not consist of objective questions with obvious answers. She says, "Some of the questions are impossible to answer because they are opinions!" She goes on to argue that categories like good or bad, rich or poor, strong or weak are relative. Meg again thinks about word choice in biblical texts and engages in a close reading. While the overarching critique about Moses' direction is large, the substance in her critique is focused on the examination of particular words. In this way, even when getting at the very central point of the narrative, Meg does not pivot from her interpretive proclivity for word analysis. Meg wanted to understand why the text tells the story the way it does. Her interest was in composition and style. This sort of literary focus was well-aligned with her teacher's, and it was rewarded in class with much praise and teacher uptake.

## 4. Discussion

Meg and Jay are different from one another. Jay was interested in theological and ethical questions. Meg was interested in literary questions. Jay noticed what the text has to say about God and about ethics. For him, reading the text was about grappling with the tensions between his own experience of God and what is right, and what he finds in the text. Meg seemed relatively untroubled by these points. She seemed able to step back from the text and look at it as an exercise in literary interpretation. For her, the repetition of words, among other formal literary features, was most salient.

Readers may have noticed that Jay gets significantly more space dedicated to understanding his interpretive patterns in this paper than Meg. This is because Jay's way of interpreting texts was much more marginalized than Meg's in their classroom. Jay's comments about the biblical text were treated as off the mark and off topic by his teacher. Meg's way of interpreting texts in their classroom were far less marginalized. She was often seen as giving an idea or interpretation that moved the class forward, not off track. For this reason, it felt particularly important to me to emphasize the coherent interpretive work Jay was demonstrating. There was a way for Jay and his teacher to develop mutual

trust, through listening and understanding, that [Schein \(2013\)](#) writes is so important for Jewish and spiritual education.

Because I only worked with Jay and Meg over the course of a few months, I cannot speak to how they became the readers that they became, or why they were each drawn to different aspects of the text, but it was clear that they were. In other words, each of them had their own set of preferred interpretive rules, strategies, and foci for reading the biblical text. What is true for Meg and Jay is true for all of us. As soon as humans start to acquire language, they become able to engage in symbolic play, and as they engage, they develop preferred ways of meaning-making situated in their sociocultural realities.

Children come to sacred texts with questions and ideas and enter classrooms excited to share those questions and ideas, but those questions and ideas can sometimes seem so off that even progressive educators might lose sight of the insights they offer.

I opened this essay with a reflection on the pedagogy of multiliteracies set out by the New London Group, and the ways in which Jewish education researchers have begun to converge with the ideas of sociocultural pedagogy through traditional language and models of Jewish reading and learning. My purpose in this essay was to offer a model for how researchers and educators can begin to identify the interpretive resources, assumptions, and frames that students are using in their comments and ideas about a biblical text. I do not offer a step-by-step guide, but rather my own intellectual work moving from a deficit orientation towards an orientation of curiosity and student assets. Getting to know students outside of class, asking follow-up questions, especially when an interpretation feels really off-base, writing the comment down in order to follow up—these are all easy ways to start to understand a student's interpretive world. For example, when Jay said in his think-aloud, "Like my mom says, 'Don't run away from your problems'," I sat with this comment. I listened to it on the recording. I thought about how Jay invoked his mother to make sense of the spies in the biblical story. I asked teachers about Jay's family and learned more about his siblings and his parents. These are small, but intentional choices I made to learn more about Jay and the world he comes from, the very world through which he reads texts. The NLG's "Pedagogy of Multiliteracies" asks for a pedagogy, "... [that does not] ignore and erase the different subjectivities, interests, intentions, commitments and purposes students bring to learning." ([Cazden et al. 1996](#), p. 72). In learning more about Jay and taking seriously his invocation of his mother as a source of wisdom, I worked to celebrate Jay's subjectivity—his interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes. It is a small step, but a meaningful one. A change in attitude and perspective is the first step towards a change in pedagogy.

I offered a conception of marginalized students, as I wrote above, that considers students whose ways of reading and interpretive communities outside of school misalign with the teacher's and who are subsequently alienated and excluded in the classroom conversation, and therefore, marginalized. This conception of marginalization allows for students to move between inclusion and exclusion, privileged status and marginalized status, depending on the teacher. It represents a situated and sociocultural approach to literacy and literate practice ([Collins and Blot 2003](#)). It also allows a clear path forward to moving these students from the periphery to inclusion. An intentional effort to understand these students' interpretive identities will allow a teacher to engage them instead of dismiss them.

I acknowledge that many pedagogical questions are left unexplored here. Most pressing, how does the teacher turn the cacophony of 16–25 idiosyncratic interpretive identities into a synchronized and shared interpretive activity? This question is beyond the scope of this short essay, but it occupies the center of my research agenda. The first step, which this essay sought to model through my own close reading of two student interpretations, is a change in attitude and perspective, where the goal is to understand students' interpretive identities.

## 5. Conclusions

Even more important than active engagement and Jewish identity development is the responsibility to do no harm. If religious education aims to contribute to positive child development, then it is incumbent on religious educators to move away from a deficit perspective and towards a perspective of students as interpretive assets. When teachers marginalize students' interpretive priorities and interests, they message to students that their ways of being in the world are irrelevant to their Jewish identity and, more broadly, to their identity as a reader. The case of Jay and Meg demonstrates that students have many questions about biblical texts and many resources to draw upon in making sense of biblical texts. This is true even when they are missing important background knowledge. To bring students from the periphery to the center starts with more curiosity and more willingness to listen on the part of Jewish educators.

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> The think-aloud method has traditionally been used in the field of cognitive psychology in order to access people's pure cognitive processes (Pressley and Afflerbach 1995). I was not interested in isolating cognitive processes from social processes. The think-aloud method simply created a context where students could interpret texts at length without interruption.

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