

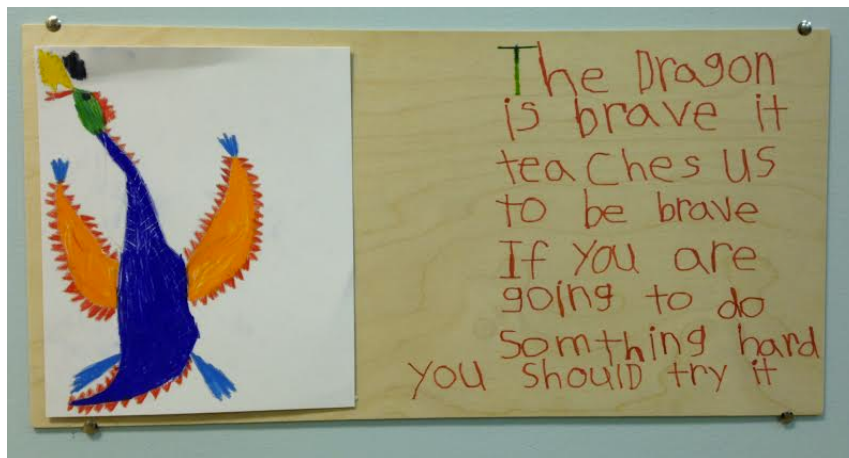
Fighting Time?

Rabbi Rebecca Milder | The Bronfman Fellowships | Elul 2014

As part of a new Bronfman Fellowships initiative to incorporate alumni voices into our weekly Dvar Torah emails, this week's dvar is from Rabbi Rebecca Milder (BYFI 1991). Rebecca is the Executive Director of the Jewish Enrichment Center, an innovative Jewish afterschool program that brings together congregational, unaffiliated, and day school families in Chicago. You can reach her at rmilder@gmail.com.

Interested in writing a Dvar Torah? Email tobah@byfi.org for more information.

This summer I faced a new challenge as I led a Jewish Enrichment Camp for young students. Instead of an extended exploration of an idea or text, we had only a single week – four days, actually – to step inside the Hebrew month of Elul's introspection in preparation for Rosh Hashanah, set a new vision for ourselves and our community in the new Jewish year, and begin the challenging work of realizing our vision. I struggled with what we could possibly do with our 2nd – 4th grade children that would lodge so deeply that they would carry it through the year.



We decided our motivating text would be Job 12:7: "But ask the animals, and they will teach you." Our primary textual exploration would focus on what Torah and rabbinic texts suggest we could learn from *Tanakh*, to *Pirkei Avot* (30:24-28) in the *Mishnah*, to the Talmud (*Eruvin* 100b), and finally, to Rashi's comment on the original Proverbs text. We would ask children to research facts about animals, choose an animal, and name how this animal could teach us how to be a community in the new year. The texts weren't particularly provocative, but the design emphasized a key part of the Jewish Enrichment Center's orientation: we take part in an ever-unfolding Judaism.

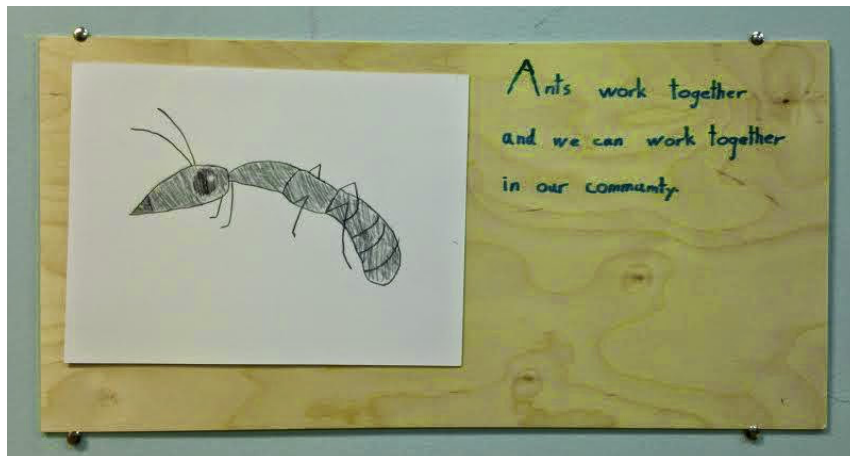
ants. We'd trace ideas about ants from Proverbs (6:6-8) in the

I was worried. Without time for ideas to settle and grow within the children, would our text exploration feel flat, devoid of children's genuine engagement with the text and

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each other? In such a compacted time to wrestle with text, would children hear distinctions between the Torah's ideas and rabbinic ideas? Would children feel that they'd had sufficient time to make drafts, develop their ideas, and express ideas to the best of their capacity?

They did. Every final project was unique, reflecting the child who created it and his/her vision for self and community in the new year. What is present in the children's work, but perhaps not visible, is the children's genuine enthusiasm for grappling with Torah and rabbinic texts; their many, many conversations; how when the children played tag together, they worked out their differences quickly and without my intervention; Tzipporah's excitement and relief in contributing so many ideas after months of silence with her peers; Eli's struggle for an entire day to name an animal he wanted to learn from, and his pride in his completed work; the 2nd – 4th grade children's care for younger children when the entire Jewish Enrichment Center came together.



What I learned from this

week was that my fundamental premise was wrong. I wasn't fighting time; I wasn't trying to design a four-day camp that would constitute the entirety of children's experience with this *or* each other. Rather, I was designing a four-day potential experience that built upon all of the work we'd experienced together in the past three years, and would continue as long as we – the children and families and educators – chose to be together at the Jewish Enrichment Center. Our four-day exploration was a single moment in the long trajectory of our relationship. Each step we take together is movement forward.

But is it movement forward in the ways we want to grow? During camp, we invited children to participate in a central act of Elul: look inside themselves, and in their community, to determine if they were, indeed, proceeding forward in the ways they wanted to grow. We asked children to set a vision for themselves for who they want to be in the new year, and for what they want their community to be like. We asked children to create a visual of their Elul process of introspection and its embedded message of hope, to serve as a reminder in the children's educational environment of their collaborative work as well as its outcome.

Zochreinu l'chayim, remember us for life, we recite in our High Holy liturgy. And what is this phrase but a profound hope that we will be able to move forward in ways that allow

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us to *live*, to be the person we know we can be. And more: that our profound hope to realize our vision does not remain only an individual hope, living inside each one of us but never named out loud; instead we plead further, *Kotveinu b'sefer hachayim* ("write us in the book of life"): may our hope be written in the book that contains every individual's hopes and dreams, so that we may gain power for the task by moving forward together in community.

And so daily, we asked children to raise their bodies tall at *Shirat Boker* (Morning Singing) and let the shofar's sound rush through us, leaving readiness and power in its wake to realize our vision for who we will be in the new year.