

Drawing Out A New Torah

OVERVIEW

Drawing Out A New Torah is a pedagogy that brings together two activities not usually found in the same room: traditional Torah study and drawing. Its central claim is straightforward: drawing is not merely a form of artistic expression but a way of thinking. When learners pick up a pen and draw in response to a sacred text, they are not illustrating what they already know. They are discovering what they did not yet know they thought. This pedagogy creates structured opportunities for that discovery to happen in community, where the act of drawing alongside others becomes a practice of Jewish Peoplehood in miniature.

The practice is designed primarily for adult learners, including those who insist they cannot draw. In fact, it is precisely those learners — the ones who say they “failed drawing in primary school” — for whom this approach opens something genuinely new. By treating drawing as a verb rather than a noun, a process of thinking rather than a product to be judged, the sessions invite every participant into the conversation. The result is a *beit midrash* (house of study) that is both more embodied and more democratic than many learners have previously experienced.

JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD AND THE INDIVIDUAL LETTER

In his final speech to the people in the book of Devarim (Deuteronomy), Moshe describes the Torah as not being far away in heaven. This is a radically democratizing image: the sacred text belongs to all the people, not only to the hierarchical class of holy leaders. The Torah is the inheritance of every Jew, and it follows that everyone has the potential to find their own path and mode of engagement with it.

An idea attributed to the Ba'al Shem Tov takes this further. The Jewish people are compared to a Torah scroll, and every individual is a single letter within it. If a single letter is missing, damaged, or indistinct, the scroll is invalid and cannot be used. So too, each person needs their own distinct expression — to be their own defined letter. Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks expands on this: “Every Jew is a letter in the Scroll. Each Jewish family is a word, every community a sentence, and the Jewish people at any one time are a paragraph. The Jewish people through time constitute a story, the strangest and most moving story in the annals of mankind.” (*Radical Then, Radical Now*). Before these letters combine to enhance the meaning, each must be distinct. This pedagogy is grounded in the conviction that drawing is one powerful way for an individual to become their own distinct letter.

This is Jewish civilization as a dynamic relationship: a conversation between Torah and the particular time, place, and perception of each individual. Expanding the *beit midrash* to include drawing is not a departure from tradition but an extension of it — a way of drawing out new insights and returning them to the ongoing Jewish conversation.

TORAH IN THE BODY: THE CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

The central text for this pedagogy is Devarim 30:12-14: “It is not in the heavens... neither is it beyond the sea... No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it.” The Hebrew word translated as “to do it” is *la’asotah* — which more precisely means to make or to act. Torah is not an abstract spirituality. It requires living, breathing, thinking, feeling expressions of being. It needs mouths, hearts, and bodies. The Talmud in Shabbat 88 imagines the angels objecting to God giving the Torah to humans, and Moshe’s winning argument is that Torah is written with instructions for human bodies and human relationships. It makes no sense as a disembodied spirituality. And so one should use one’s body and physical materials to engage with it — discovering the embodied knowledge within.

The biblical craftsman Bezalel is described as filled with *chokhmah*, *binah*, and *da’at* (wisdom, understanding, and knowledge) — three distinct types of thinking — as well as *kol melakhah*, all manner of workmanship. The medieval commentator Rashi interprets these three as wisdom learned from others, intelligence deduced for oneself, and divine inspiration. In his book *The Craftsman*, sociologist Richard Sennett identifies a strikingly parallel structure in the artisan’s education: apprentice, journeyman, master. Both frameworks affirm that making is itself a form of knowing, one that involves the mind, body, and material all working together.

Artists and thinkers have been clear about this specifically for drawing. David Hockney: “Drawing is the thing you do to understand something, to make it more present in your mind... The act of drawing forces the artist to slow down, take note of details and look at the world.” John Berger: “For the artist drawing is discovery... A line, an area of tone, is not really important because it records what you have seen, but because of what it will lead you on to see.” Drawing is not an illustration of what is already understood. It is the process by which understanding is reached. And when drawing happens alongside others, it creates community. The Paris-based artist Chloe Briggs, who convenes open drawing sessions attended by hundreds around the world, reflects: “These sessions are about a lot more than drawing practice... They are about life and love and learning to see other human beings through the gentle act of drawing.” This convergence — of Torah’s insistence that sacred knowledge is embodied, and the art world’s understanding of drawing as a mode of collective thinking — is the foundation on which this pedagogy rests.

THE PEDAGOGY OF PEOPLEHOOD

The session structure brings Torah study and drawing into direct conversation across seven stages: (1) an introduction to both the topic and the methodology; (2) a “What is Drawing?” exercise, in which participants write their own name, hold it up, and discover that every person’s mark is different — eliminating competition before it can take root; (3) a warm-up sequence using a purpose-designed warm-up notebook, pairing short drawing exercises with brief rabbinic texts to establish drawing as a way of slowing down seeing; (4) text study accompanied by abstract mark-making, inviting participants to doodle and try out materials freely while engaging with the source sheet; (5) deeper text study, deliberately leaving questions open rather than resolving them, so that the drawing process can do that work; (6) individual prompted drawing in response to the main text, with the facilitator moving through the room; and (7) a show-and-tell, using a purpose-designed reflection notebook, in which all drawings are displayed together and participants consider each other’s responses.

The show-and-tell is the heart of the session’s Peoplehood dimension and not to be rushed. All participants have engaged with the same texts and the same drawing prompts — yet every drawing will be different. Much like handwriting, a drawing is a trace of another’s unique thought process. When the drawings are gathered and viewed together, something remarkable happens: interpretations that in traditional textual learning would be presented as competing or adversarial — “Rashi says X but Ramban says Y” — instead sit alongside each other in respectful harmony. Even if a hundred people draw the same tree from the same viewpoint, the result is a hundred different drawings, none of them the “correct” tree, yet each revealing something true. It is in this moment of mutual recognition that the values of Jewish Peoplehood are made tangible: the dignity and worth of each perspective, and the enrichment that comes from encountering others without being diminished by them. The participant is not wrong because someone else sees it differently.

In testing with the M² cohort, the approach proved effective across different types of Torah texts — biblical narrative, Talmud, legal material — and has been adapted for intergenerational groups, including a workshop at the Polin Museum in Warsaw. The two purpose-designed resources, the warm-up notebook and the reflections notebook, are each constructed from a single sheet of paper folded into a small book of sixteen pages, keeping the materials simple and non-precious, which is itself a pedagogical choice: adult learners should not feel they are handling materials designed for children, nor that the drawing they produce is a precious object that must be done correctly.

CONCLUSION

Torah is not an abstract spirituality in the possession of angels. It belongs on the physical, earthly world of humans, in their mouths and in their hearts — and in their hands. Drawing is a way for the body to think with physical materials, and when that thinking happens alongside others in response to sacred text, it enacts the core values of Jewish Peoplehood: each individual contributing their distinct letter to the shared scroll, none diminishing the other, all of them together revealing something of the Torah that no single person could reach alone. This pedagogy models the dignity and mutual respect that are not merely desirable features of Jewish community but its vital foundational values.



To access the full practice guide, including session structure, source sheet guidance, and the warm-up and reflections notebooks, scan the QR code or [click here](#).



Jacqueline Nicholls is a London based fine artist, Jewish educator, and award winning visual poet. She uses art to engage with traditional Jewish ideas in untraditional ways. Her main focus of her artistic practice is to consider handwriting as a form of drawing. Her drawing project, Draw Yomi, completed in Jan 2020, Jacqueline drew the Talmud, following the Daf Yomi schedule. She regularly teaches at the London School of Jewish Studies. Jacqueline's art has been exhibited in solo shows and significant contemporary Jewish Art group shows in the UK, USA and Israel. Jacqueline has an MA in Fine Art from Central Saint Martins. Art. Recent residencies include 'Wasted Books' at The London Library, '50 Jewish Objects' Jewish Studies Department, Manchester University, and Beit Venezia, where she was the lead artist for New Venice Haggadah (2016) and the Deck of Esther (2022), reimagining Megillat Esther as a pack of playing cards.