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Gratitude to Old Teachers

by

Judith Langer

I began college when I was 25 by taking courses at Harvard University Extension, the stepchild of Harvard College. During my second semester, I took first-year Hebrew with Bernie Cooperman, whose students demonstrate their universal respect and admiration by referring to him by his first name. Eventually I took a part-time job at Harvard that provided tuition benefits so I could take regular day courses, and in this way, I worked my way through the Hebrew language sequence as far as Bernie taught it and ended up in Bezalel Safran's Modern Hebrew Literature, a year-long course.

Before I had begun learning Hebrew with Bernie, I had had no exposure to the language at all. Most of the students in Modern Hebrew Lit had had at least a Hebrew school education; some had lived in Israel or attended Jewish day schools, where they had received a solid education in Hebrew language. Furthermore, they were all real Harvard students, not adults working part-time as they pursued a ten-year degree.

Not only was I intimidated by the other students, I was terrified of Professor Safran. In retrospect, I see him as a gentle and probably approachable man, but what I saw in class was an Orthodox Jew in a three-piece suit who stood in front of the class lecturing steadily in Hebrew for an hour and a half twice a week.

Mostly we read short stories by S. Y. Agnon, a difficult writer who uses complicated language structures that demonstrate his extensive knowledge of Jewish scriptural, legal, and mystical sources. Like Hebrew mysticism, his work can be divided into four levels: the plain text, the symbolic meaning, the allegorical interpretation, and the hidden implications. Professor Safran would become very excited about the hidden aspects and go off into elaborate explanations of the ten levels of the God-idea and how the mother in Agnon's "My Bird" symbolized the *Shchina*, the feminine aspect of the God-idea, and what her/Her relationship was to the rest of the story/the rest of the *sephirot*. I would go home crying hysterically because I couldn't understand a word the man said, and I didn't see how I could possibly pass the course. (It was several years later that I realized I wouldn't have understood a word he was saying even if he'd said it in English.)

As a result of my panic, I was possibly the only student in the course who not only read every word of every story, but looked up every word I didn't understand. At the beginning of the year, I would spend ten hours preparing a three-page story: first ploughing through it just to get the general idea, then reading to understand most of it, then plodding through and looking up word after word. Once in a while, I would realize how beautifully crafted the sentences were, but I never understood much past the first level of plain text. I did learn to read Hebrew. By the end of the year, I could read a ten-page Agnon story in only three hours.

I slept very badly the night before the final exam, a three hour exam that began at 9:15 a.m. When the proctor handed me the three pages of hand-written, badly xeroxed essay questions (answer six out of ten), all I wanted to do was to put my head down on the desk and cry myself to sleep.

Suddenly, Bezalel Safran appeared and sat down in the empty chair next to me. In a whisper, he translated the entire exam into English. Then he said, "Do as much as you can. Whatever you do will be fine." Until I became a teacher myself, I never understood how he knew how much work I had done in the course and how much I had learned, but on the exam that day I did as much as I could, and what I did was fine.

I've told this story over the years when I felt someone needed to know that "whatever you do will be fine." I told it to my daughter when, struggling to overcome an eye functioning problem, she knew that she must be stupid if she couldn't learn to read. I told it to a *bar* and *bat mitzvah* class to reassure them that they could get through the ceremony. I didn't tell it, but I thought of it last semester when I taught an extraordinary student named Michael.

Michael was in my introduction to literature class at a community college, and early on he came to talk to me about his difficulty in reading and writing and how terrified he was that he would fail the class. He was the most appallingly ignorant student I have had in a college not known for its general level of academic excellence and the most desperate person to learn I have ever encountered. All semester, he asked the kind of questions that I am sure had students sniggering at him throughout his years at a wealthy suburban high school: "Where is London?" "What does solar mean?" Once he had the information, he used it to make insightful and innovative connections among the stories we were reading. He came to talk to me, frantic because he couldn't understand the poems I assigned until I explained them in class, and then added, "But that poem by Shakespeare was so beautiful that I read it four times when I got home, and then I called up my friend in Ohio and read it to her over the phone." Because I suggested it, he tried out for and obtained a walk-on part in the school production of *Light Up the Sky*, an experience that taught him far more than I could about drama. He taught the class, too, when he proudly explained what he had learned about blocking out a scene, even though some of the students smiled condescendingly at his enthusiasm and basic terminology.

Michael's writing was not strong. He told me that he often had to have someone read the assignments out loud to him before he could understand the stories. He did poorly on the practice quizzes I gave in class, although I knew he understood the information and, what is more, could use it. His transfer to a four-year college hinged, in part, on his grades during this semester, and my final exam, most of which was essay, counted for 30% of the class grade.

Michael had a B- average going into the exam. As he handed in his blue book, I handed him back his last paper with a note that read, "Michael, unless you do something really bizarre, like turn in a blank exam, the lowest grade you will receive in this course is an A-. Your desire for knowledge and your intelligent application of what you learn make you a joy to teach. Good luck with your transfer."

Thinking, perhaps, of my experience in Modern Hebrew Literature, I had written a poem by Robert Bly on the board before the exam began:

Gratitude to Old Teachers

When we stride or stroll across the frozen lake,
We place our feet where they have never been.
We walk upon the unwalked. But we are uneasy.
Who is down there but our old teachers?

Water that once could take no human weight -
We were students then - holds up our feet,
And goes on ahead of us for a mile.
Beneath us the teachers, and around us the stillness.

The weight of Bezalel Safran held me up when I decided I could go ahead and grade Michael on what I already knew he had learned. Whatever he did on the exam would be fine.