

On Setting Up the *Beit Midrash*

Why create a ritual for setting up the beit midrash in the classroom?

Rituals create structure for students. They signal the nature of a particular time period and how students should act during it. When a disciplined teacher remains committed to rituals over time, students eventually take ownership over them, and furthermore, they enjoy and celebrate the rituals as a class.

Part of my goal in using rituals to transition to beit midrash time is to transform the space from a regular classroom, in which learning may be group focused, into one in which students learn from one another in a paired structure. Additionally, I want my students to feel that studying these Jewish value texts is something special, so both the time and space in the classroom should feel different.

We begin the “move of the desks” by singing *V’ha’er eynaynu* (a song based on a prayer that talks about enlightening our eyes with Torah, respecting other people and not humiliating or shaming one another). This music is the students’ cue that serious study is about to begin. This sets a tone of respect throughout. Desks that normally face the front board or are clustered become separated. Students move the desks to new assigned spots. Each desk is shared by two students so that they are sitting in a closer proximity to one another and are better able to do serious active listening. At each desk, havruta pairs have to face one another so they can see and hear each other over the other pairs. The desk-moving takes less than two minutes, so this ritual is neither time-consuming nor burdensome. Instead, it is generally a spirited transition time. Students enact the values of partnership and community reflected in the texts they are studying, experiencing those values as classroom values as well.