

# ***Hineini*: The Inquiry Beit Midrash**

Rina Hoffman, Michal Smart, Tikvah Wiener

G-d's first word to human beings was a question -- a question whose answer would vary with each individual and demand personal reflection. וַיִּקְרָא ה' אֶל־הָאָדָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ :אֵינְךָ: The LORD God called out to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" An essential component of religious education is to help students formulate an evolving response to this essential set of questions: Who am I? What do I believe in? How should I live my life?

Unfortunately, as Neil Postman bemoans, most education consists of someone else's answers to someone else's questions. This is true for the Judaic Studies classroom, as well. But students, like adults, have real questions, interests, and passions, and Judaism can and should inform and enrich each one of them.

Our model, *Hineini*: the Inquiry Beit Midrash, invites students to identify their passions and questions, and engage in Torah study to formulate personal responses. It emphasizes that Jewish action extends beyond limmud Torah and ritual moments to inform the totality of their life experiences.

The Inquiry Beit Midrash consists of four components:

***Sparking Inquiry***: Students learn how to ask questions in a multitude of ways. They then choose a topic they are passionate about, generate lines of inquiry about it, and develop an essential question they want to explore.

***Text Study***: In a Beit Midrash setting, students seek answers to their questions in a variety of traditional sources. In this phase, students gain exposure to Jewish values,

role models, and laws. Text study empowers them with a specifically Jewish perspective on their question.

***Application of Learning:*** Students take the question that they have explored in the Beit Midrash and ask themselves, “How can I use this knowledge to make myself a better person and improve the world? How does my Jewish learning influence what I choose to do?” Students will then design and carry out a related project.

***Reflection:*** Throughout the process and at its conclusion, students will reflect actively on how answering their question helped them make sense of Judaism, themselves and the world.

In order to enable schools to implement our model, we will develop an open source teacher’s guide and offer ongoing, cohort-based coaching.

The Inquiry Beit Midrash empowers students, giving them agency over their learning, engaging their passions in Judaic Studies, and enabling them to find meaning, relevance, and joy in their religion.

At the conclusion of our inquiry-based model, when students are asked, “*Ayeka*, where are you?”, as members of the Jewish community and as citizens of the world, they will be prepared to respond, “*Hineini*--here I am.”