

Blasting Towards Empathy

Topic

Professional Development, Elul

Big Ideas

Consistent reflection on pedagogic practice is essential for elevating learner and educator growth.

Empathic relationships with learners can have a great impact on how they develop communally, academically, and socially.

Learning Targets

Educators will:

1. Use the themes of Elul to reflect on their own pedagogy
2. Connect the sounds of the shofar to their own pedagogic practices
3. Reflect on how they can be more empathic with their students
4. Form deeper relationships with their students

Materials / Technology Needed

- [Video of Shofar Blowing](#)
- Educator Personal Reflection sheets (included at the end of this activity)
- Educator/Learner Interaction Reflection sheets (included at the end of this activity)

Background

This activity uses the themes of Elul to help educators reflect on how they can build more empathic relationships with their students. It can be used by education directors as a group activity and it can also be used by individual teachers who are looking for ways to reflect on how building relationships with their learners can inform their pedagogy. It can even be used throughout the year even though the means of reflection might seem to be particular to a specific time of year.

The close of summer brings the beginning of the month Elul. The coming of the month of Elul means that there is one month before Rosh Hashanah and the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, and the month of Elul is often regarded as a time for self-reflection and focus on how one can improve oneself in the upcoming year. Elul also often coincides with the

Relevant Vocabulary

תְּשׁוּבָה (Teshuvah)	Repentance
עֲשֶׂרֶת יָמֵי תְּשׁוּבָה (Aseret Yemei Teshuvah)	Ten Days of Repentance (Days from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur)
בֵּין אָדָם לַמָּקוֹם (Bein Adam l'Makom)	Between a Person and God
בֵּין אָדָם לְחֵבֶרֶוֹ (Bein Adam l'Haveiro)	Interpersonal Relationship (literally: between a person and their fellow)
גְּמָרָא (Gemara)	Collection of rabbinic commentaries on the Mishnah
שׁוֹפְטִים (Shoftim)	The Book of Judges
חַז"ל (הַחֲמִינָה זְכוּרָם לְבָרְכָה) (Hazzal / Hachameinu Zichronam Livrachah)	The Sages (literally: Our sages, may their memory be for a blessing)
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (B'nei Yisrael)	The Israelites

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beginning of the school year (at least in the Northern Hemisphere), which makes it an ideal time for educators to reflect on their own best practices and how they can better serve their learners.

Traditionally, the shofar is blown each day of Elul (except for the last day) (Rama, [Orach Chaim 581:1](#)) with a single *tekiah*, *shevarim*, *teruah*, and *tekiah gedolah* being blasted out. While several explanations are offered for why this is done, one of the major ones is that the blasts act as a wake-up call in the days leading up to the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, and the blasts remind listeners to begin thinking about the *teshuvah* they must do in the coming days.

There are generally thought to be two categories of *teshuvah*, that which is done *bein adam l'Makom* and that which is done *bein adam l'haveiro*. Yom Kippur atones for transgressions between people and God. However, more is required for transgressions *bein adam l'haveiro* ([Mishnah Yoma 8:8 – 9](#)). In order to be forgiven for transgressions *bein adam l'haveiro*, the one seeking forgiveness must seek forgiveness from the person they have wronged. In other words, there must be a level of relationship building. Importantly, one should also be easy to forgive when asked ([Mishneh Torah, Laws of Teshuvah 2:10](#)). Through personal interactions and empathy for others, the relationship is repaired and can, ideally, grow.

Growing relationships through empathy can be important for teacher-learner relationships. Demonstrating real empathy for learners can help teachers build trust with their learners and, thereby, cause learners to experience more growth. When learners know that their teachers care about them, they are more likely to strive to grow academically and communally. The empathy in this case is not centered around *teshuvah*, but the need for empathy in the classroom is no less important than it is in the *teshuvah* process; and, while educators should reflect on their pedagogic practice throughout the year, Elul offers a particular reminder to reflect on how to be more empathic with learners.

This focus on empathy shows through in the sounds of the shofar blasts. While the Torah instructs that Rosh Hashanah is meant to be a *yom teruah*—day of blasting—*Hazal* debate exactly what *teruah* means; and they connect it to the cries of Sisera's mother. Sisera was a Canaanite general who terrorized *B'nei Yisrael* ([Shoftim 4](#)). His mother waited at home for news of his victory; and, when she heard that he had been defeated and killed, she cried out ([Shoftim 5:28](#)). The Gemara debates whether those cries were moans, like the *shevarim*, or whimpers, like the *teruah* ([Tractate Rosh Hashanah 33b](#)). Note that the source for thinking about what the sound of the shofar should be is the cries of the mother of *B'nei Yisrael's* enemy. In other words, we are asked to think about our enemies at the time we are most focused on our own *teshuvah*.

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Description of Activities

- Listen to the sounds of the shofar. Focus on how the sounds might inspire you or cause you to look at things in new ways.
 - What does the *tekiah* make you think of? What does it make you feel?
 - What does the *shevarim* make you think of? What does it make you feel?
 - What does the *teruah* make you think of? What does it make you feel?
 - What does the *tekiah gedolah* make you think of? What does it make you feel?
 - Which of the sounds most reminds you of your purpose as an educator to help learners grow? Why does that sound do so?
 - How does listening to the *shevarim* and *teruah*—with the understanding that they can recall the cries of an enemy's mother—help you to focus on how you can be more empathic with learners?
- Answer questions on the Educator Personal Reflection sheet in writing.
- If doing this activity with a group, share your thoughts with others if you are comfortable doing so.
- Keep an Educator/Learner Interaction Reflection sheet for each of your learners. As you have meaningful interactions with learners, think about what works for each individual learner and what does not. Focus on how the relationships can better help learners to grow communally, academically, and socially. Note that not every interaction needs to be recorded and each interaction might not merit deep reflection, but keep in mind that there will be times that simply saying, “Hello,” can be meaningful; and it is worthwhile to reflect when these times occur.

Educator Personal Reflection

What do I do well as an educator?

How well do I relate to my students?

What do I think my students would say positively about me?

How can I be more empathic with my learners?

How will being more empathic improve the learning experience for me and for my learners?

What do I want my students to take away from their interactions with me?

What do I think my students would say I need to improve in my relationship with them?

What can I do to better help my students take away what I want them to take away? What can I do to better help my students take away what they want to take away?

How can I bring more of myself to my teaching?

Who is one student that I think I made an extra positive impression on last year? How did my relationship with that student help me make an impact on that student?

Who is one student that I think I could have done a better job with last year? How could I have been more empathic in order to better help that student?

Educator/Learner Interaction Reflection

Name of Learner: _____

Date of Interaction: _____

How did the interaction go?

What about it was particularly positive or negative?

What did I do well?

What could I have done better?

What next steps will I take to build a relationship with this learner?