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“Na’ase v’Nishma”: Putting Passion into Action and Learning by Doing

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"Na’ase v’Nishma": Putting Passion into Action and Learning by Doing

According to Jewish teachings, it is said that at Sinai, when asked whether they would take on the commandments of their faith, the Hebrews said “Na’ase v’Nishma”: “we will do, and we will hear/understand”. While there is a great lack of explication of cryptic passages in the actual Bible--the Old Testament is filled with predominantly laws and rules of living without much elaboration, leaving Jewish sages to theorize their deeper meaning or purposes retroactively--Jewish scholarship has come to interpret this passage to mean that true understanding of the value behind an action is achieved through action or experience. Upon further analysis of many of the laws by which the Jewish people live, it becomes clear that Judaism seeks to create righteous people through righteous action rather than by preaching righteous character; Instead of being told to be charitable, Jews are mandated to section off portions of their fields to the poor to collect (for themselves, so as not to cause shame), to give gift-baskets to the poor on certain holidays, and to welcome those who have nowhere to eat to their dinner tables. It is hoped that over the course of repeatedly doing these actions and making a habit of them, we will come to understand and absorb the value behind them of being charitable (worst case scenario, if the feeling never comes, at least you have a group of people doing good, right?). Over this past year (technically, the past three years), I have been exploring this notion of learning through experience for my final year SASAH by directing the Arts and humanities Student Council play, and by establishing the SASAH Blog. First I will talk about my experiences directing the play and its relationship to SASAH, and then I will move onto the Blog, before summing up my thoughts about what I have learned and the future of both of these projects.

While my connection to Judaism has always had a strong academic component, one of the strongest ways I always found connection to Judaism and to others in the Jewish community is through participating and performance in the Arts. In elementary school, I sang Yiddish and Hebrew songs in the choir; we performed all across Ontario at Holocaust memorial ceremonies, at old age homes, at local festivities, at national Jewish choir conventions, and once in front of Ontario’s Premiere, Dalton McGuinty. In high school, I tagged along school talent show trips to Baycrest, the Jewish Old Age home, and sang Yiddish songs to the residents (I’d learned these songs both from my Bubby and from my Elementary school, Bialik, the only one in Toronto that still taught Yiddish). In eleventh grade, I sang in the choir of the March of the Living’s Holocaust education trip to Poland, and stood onstage, overlooking abandoned concentration camps, mass burial sites, and majestic memorials of an atrocity that many tried to hide (and that many still, deny). One of the most impactful moments on this international trip was meeting up in a small, Polish synagogue Shabbat services, and finding that despite all of us speaking different languages, we were united in singing the same Hebrew psalms to the same melodies. In twelfth grade, I directed the Hebrew Play, translating the script and songs of Disney’s Beauty and the Beast into Hebrew myself.
As I was packing my bags to start a new adventure at The University of Western Ontario in London, my first pluralistic school, I knew things would be different. I wouldn’t have to stand at my seat every afternoon and hear the melodic Israeli National Anthem over the P.A. I wouldn’t have days off every time there was a Jewish holiday (and there are a lot of them, especially in the Fall). My peers wouldn’t wish me “Shabbat shalom” in the hallways on Friday afternoons after class. I didn’t know the next opportunity, if any, that I’d have to practice my Hebrew. I recalled images of the Israeli Apartheid week rallies my Arab-Israeli Conflict teacher showed the class in one of the final weeks of high school, and worried about how I, and my culture, would be received by my peers. Coming to Western was an all-consuming bombardment of new stimuli and opportunities, and I rapidly found myself pulled in every direction by all the new people, activities, subjects, and clubs around me in the best way possible. While I eagerly found my bearings socially, academically and extracurricularly, my plaque collected dust in the back of my Toronto closet. When the high holidays arrived, my parents saw my struggle to find the time to come home to attend synagogue services and told me to focus on my studies instead. To “make up for it” (according to my internal logic), I joined the Holocaust education week committee and helped research and design their visual presentation for the Atrium, but I did not volunteer to help present it to student passers-by. To make myself “feel Jewish”, I would explain the Jewish holidays and customs as they came and went to my multicultural friends over sushi.

I finally got the council position I desired, Play Coordinator, in my fourth year, and brainstormed ideas for a play. It would have to be intelligent, witty, soulful, and have some Arts and Humanities-related educational content, to delight and educate the public, I decided. By this point, I was in what I can only explain as Jewish withdrawal, and I had the wild idea of directing the very play my CHAT Jewish Philosophy class had seen in twelfth grade: The Interrogation of Baruch de Spinoza, by David Ives. I didn’t remember much about it except that it was interesting, full of Spinoza’s heretical (and seemingly undisputable) philosophies, and that he won a war of the wits against his Rabbi who was unfairly forcing him to conform to those around him. I remembered having related deeply to Spinoza at the time for his resistance to conforming to his peers despite external pressures, and for his love of thinking and his playful wit, and thought what better way to leave my mark on Western than to tell a story about individuality vs. community that should relate to all Western students (most of whom are non-religious and very liberal-minded) who are seeking to think for themselves and define themselves in contrast to their communities.

When the script arrived, and I did my first read-through, was shocked. As I recalled, Spinoza’s philosophies were beautifully articulated, and well-argued, but there were hidden nuances of emotion (regret, and internal conflict, for example) in him that the rendition I’d seen had completely missed. Rabbi Mortera, too, seemed to have many more opportunities for mirth and likeable warmth than his onstage counterpart had afforded, which had had the effect of flattening him out into an
unrelatable antagonistic obstacle to Spinoza’s individuality. Having spent so much time feeling alienated from my own Jewish community, I suddenly saw the story with new eyes; I found myself understanding (and relating to) Rabbi Mortera’s perspective on the burden of leadership, and the importance of tradition and of holding a community together, and I realized that he was doing his best to protect his people from the violence of the Spanish Inquisition. While it was still, of course, unfair to force Spinoza to be silent about his philosophies and to maintain a front of orthodoxy, Rabbi Mortera knew that staying “under the radar” was the only way to appease the Dutch authorities whose veil of “tolerance” wore thin. Spinoza’s jokes sounded jarring, condescending, and insensitive, and his propositions selfish, while Mortera’s pleas sounded more desperate (and out of love for Spinoza) rather than demanding; the issue (and characters) became complexified anew, and I felt more inspired than ever to present this new story of compromise between authenticity and community belonging, hoping that in an age where liberal atheism is the university “norm”, it would resonate with my Jewish peers who were embarrassed of their culture and my non-Jewish peers who were hasty to dismiss religion and tradition. With the help of my cast both SASAH and non, who were able to make subtle changes to their expressions and tones that added unforeseeable layers of depth their characters, the performances that came to life before my eyes. During the full tech rehearsal when the cast, costumes, props and full lighting were in effect, a magical feeling overcame me as I found myself watching something beyond my original vision, something even greater, more magical, due to the creative input of this community of talent that I had brought together, originally bound by our mutual passion for the theatre but now also by this project specifically and by friendship.

I remember sitting across from a play director friend of mine from council; I asked her a flurry of questions about the directing and staging process, but was confused and slightly off put by her pitying smile, and statements like “yup, that’s how it was for me too” when I would voice my difficulties. Whereas I had wanted advice and concrete solutions, she was giving me empathy and camaraderie. While I expected Arts Council to be primary support system during the play, I unexpectedly ended up leaning on SASAH just as heavily. The SASAH administration was instrumental in the process of getting the word out about the play’s multiple audition periods and performance dates through the newsletters, and my SASAH professors were also extremely supportive; all my professors let me make announcements about the upcoming shows in their classes, and a couple SASAH professors such as Nino Ricci and Lawrence De Looze even attended and told the class how much they enjoyed it.

The biggest and most deserved SASAH shout-out, however, goes to my SASAH friends, with whom I’ve been close and sharing all my achievements and disappointments since we lived together in first year in Ontario Hall. I am proud of all that I was able to achieve with the play, but I know that I couldn’t have done it all without the moral and practical support my core group of SASAH friends provided me. Throughout the entire process, I would regularly update my SASAH friends with humorous rants and updates (often over social media as I was rarely free...
enough for coffee) about the latest thing gone wrong (first the actor dropouts, then
the technical glitches, then the ticket sales...). Many of them came to my aid, offering
advice, words of encouragement, driving actors home from rehearsals, and even
transporting an unwieldy prop (the arc of the covenant) over to my house. It should
also be mentioned that two stars of the show were SASAH students, both of whom
would soon become good friends of mine. On the day of the show, I was
overwhelmed with the attendance and support of my friends from SASAH, and felt
as though this was the icing on the multicultural cake we had been baking over the
past four years; a group of diverse intellects, we were never ones to shy away from
what made us different. Over the years we jumped at every chance to challenge
each other with respectful but intellectual debates and diverse perspectives about
our varying religious beliefs and ethnocultural backgrounds, first over tea, then
coffee, and then alcohol. Ever since first year, when I would spend hours with my
SASAH peers deciphering our dense, multi-page readings, I have been in awe of their
brainpower, and my respect for them has only increased during these “heavier”
conversations, no matter how much they may differ from me in faith or
religiousness.

Perhaps it is because of my wonderful learning experiences with the students
of SASAH in first year outside the classroom that I believed so intensely in the Blog.
Ever since I took on this position, I dreamed of forming an online resource for
SASAH students to share their creative writing, travel experiences, and intellectual
reflections with each other, and engage with each other’s ideas without teacher
moderation. Adam Helmers, my then-co-managing editor helped me add strategic
widgets, add-ons, and stylistic customized elements to a Wordpress pre-set theme,
and soon, we had a crisp, functional, and user-friendly site ready for input. I began
the Blog with only SASAH students’ needs in mind, fixing their bios, creating a space
for their articles with appropriate tags, choosing an aesthetic they would be proud
to send to their friends and families back home, and saving them the trouble of
explaining what SASAH was to their friends and family all the time by adding a
section where they could explain what SASAH meant to them. Over conversations
with Joel, Julia, and later, Patrick and Michelle, I became aware of the Blog’s
marketing and recruitment potential, and made sure to include a message from the
director, an “About the program” page, and paid more attention to keeping content
as Copyright free as possible to promote post-sharing Western-wide. At first, Adam
and I first thought we would base our structure off of Western’s student newspaper,
the Gazette, and hire students as designated writers to cover diverse topics and
SASAH events; however, we were dismayed when few people volunteered for the
position. Many of the students were already writing intellectual pieces all the time
for their essay-heavy classes and were afraid of taking on such a large
extracurricular commitment, even if it gave them publishing experience.

I realized that the reflection assignments that some students in some SASAH
classes were already writing would be perfect for the Blog; the only question was
how to acquire them from every class. I corresponded with the program director
and with all the professors and was blown away, once again, by the supportiveness
of the SASAH faculty and administration. The professors agreed not only to forward us a number of students’ reflection assignments, but also to integrate more reflection-style writing assignments into their curricula, and to promote being published on The SASAH Blog as prestigious and good publishing experience! It seemed that once the SASAH Blog was integrated into the SASAH student experience, students would understand from experience how much it will benefit their extracurricular learning and their careers. I couldn’t wait for students to tell me they’d used a blog post they’d written as a writing sample for a job application; I also opened up a Work Study portal to give (primarily) SASAH students the chance to work on the Blog like me for credit or even for pay, another extracurricular experience I thought would benefit their job hunts later on.

Overjoyed, I began announcing the existence of the Blog and these Work study opportunities to the first and second year classes, waiting for the applications to roll in. In a couple ways, much of my vision was successfully fulfilled. Last year, professors had many more reflection assignments than before, and I was receiving a regular stream of student posts (more like a flow, since I’d often receive all 20 of the students’ submissions rather than the top 5); however, much to my disappointment, no students volunteered to take on any of the work study positions, SASAH or otherwise. Aware that I could very well be left doing this all on my own, I corresponded with Adam in his last year working with me, desperate to find a way to fill these positions. After asking students some questions about why they didn’t apply, I learned that a couple things had gone wrong: first, many of them had difficulty finding and using the Working at Western portal. Second, though I’d had a number of excited first years approach me after my class announcement, their interest waned when they heard that they could not be compensated financially for their efforts while in first year.

I realized that my best bet in the coming year was to play up the financial and CEL benefit of the Blog to second and upper-year students, and I made more class announcements at the start of the year and encouraged the SASAH administration to share the portal more in the newsletters. While I still hoped that I might find a first year SASAH journalist to chronicle SASAH events on campus and in the London community, I didn’t hold my breath for first year engagement. Sure enough, this past year I was able to acquire a graphics department lead from SASAH to adjust posts’ and the website’s format (for pay), as well as a copy-editor, though they were a non-SASAH student. As expected, there were no applications for the role of SASAH journalist. For the first time this year, I was finally able to test out the workflow I had already had the opportunity to experience as part of the Arts and Humanities Student Council’s publication portfolio for The Semicolon and Symposium, and as online Editor-in-chief of the Western Scholar’s Blog, Purpology. I have also had a few students tell me they’ve used blog posts that they have written as writing samples, though not as many as I would have hoped. I believe a possible reason for this is that perhaps students are not notified when their posts are selected for publication, and they are not in the habit of regularly checking the blog. Another “failure” of the Blog is the lack of excitement students seem to have about it; I
overheard a couple students complaining about the number of structured reflection assignments they’d had to write that term for the blog, and considered that perhaps the age of mandating expository-style blog posts was passé; I had already had the opportunity to upload some exciting and creatively formatted projects this past year such as erasure poetry and sound files, but I feel this might be something worth mentioning to my successors to bring up during their correspondence with professors.

On the note of my successors, this past week, I had the immense pleasure of meeting the three (THREE!) SASAH students who would be taking over my role as Managing Editor of the SASAH Blog. While I’d expected this meeting to go by quickly after a simple tour of the website and how to use the administrative side of Wordpress, it ended up taking about two hours going over with them each role worked, and what the Managing Editor was responsible for each Summer (updating the student bios), Fall (spreading the word about the blog, and reminding professors to pass on reflections, and doing work study interviews) and Winter (continuing the workflow as posts come in and finding a replacement Managing Editor, if needed). Even more interesting was how passionate I felt about going over with them what considerations I’d had in mind when designing the blog and creating each page in the navigation bar, and the meaning behind each digital element, created from scratch with current and prospective students’ needs and interests in mind. Still, I stressed to them that this was only as far as I had been able to take the website, and reminded them that they could (and, in fact, encouraged them to) change anything they liked about the body text of each page, and the order of the navigation bar as they saw fit. I also encouraged them to right my wrongs and encourage more student engagement with the site and with each other’s posts. Immediately, a student suggested that they change the website’s theme each month to keep the site fresh and festive. I was stunned; what an innovative idea. I realized that I’d already outgrown my use to the site. I applied knowledge of coding, design, user interface and experience, and what I knew about how the job market works regarding published writing samples. But, I was designing the Blog for Millennial SASAH students; we were on Facebook (we still regularly posting queries and our memes to our cohort and a general SASAH group on Facebook), we were pioneers of Western’s Mental health initiatives, we printed out many of our readings, and many of us were in English and Creative writing. The new cohort of SASAH students are Digital natives; Generation “Z”. They avoid Facebook like the plague, many of them have jobs to supplement their education, they have shorter attention spans, and who knows what other needs they may have that only other “Gen Z” SASAH students would understand and be able to provide for. The Blog needs new leadership to keep itself relevant and make sure that SASAH students feel empowered to use this resource, run by and for SASAH students, to their advantage.

Similarly, I recently had the Arts and Humanities Student Council “changeover” meeting during which I was meant to introduce myself and officially pass over my role as Play Coordinator to my successor as Play Coordinator. As I looked at her hopeful face, knowing that she had yet to face the pending swarm of
challenges, some of which might even make her ask herself why she took on this role in the first place, I suddenly recalled my brunch with my director friend, and how she had looked at me probably very similarly to how I was now looking at this student. While I would never undo the incredible experience I had directing the play, there was no “2-minute spiel” I could give that would sum up what it was like, and so it was all I could do not to say, “You’re in for a wild ride”. The session was rushed, so I gave her some quick words of advice, my contact information, and an offer to help her out if she needed it later on. Reflecting now on my experiential learning experiences both directing the play and running the SASAH Blog and seeing them live on past my time at Western, what I wish I had said to her was the following: “If you’re anything like me, you’re going to want to be prepared. You’re going to make budget spreadsheets, rehearsal schedules, the perfect lease with the perfect venue, and the ideal cast list. You’re going to tour the venue almost a year in advance, and have all your promotional materials done months before opening night. Still, no matter how prepared you are, new, unexpected challenges will pop up at the last minute; they always do. I can tell you all the mistakes I made so you can learn from my experience, but you’re still going to make your own mistakes and learn from your own experience, and that’s okay. It’s actually better than okay, because in these moments, other people will step in and, if you let them, they will help you turn those mistakes into something even better than what you imagined it would be. Don’t be afraid to take on those big and scary challenges, though, because, what you’ll learn through doing is that you’ll grow as you go”.

The advice I would give to my play successor I think applies to the Blog, as well, since there are a number of notable similarities between these two projects, as different as they may seem at first glance. Both experiential learning experiences were “passion projects” that took a lot of time, effort, labour to realize a creative “vision”. Both had me learning a great deal about fields I realized I knew very little about upon committing myself to doing a good job in a leadership position. And, most significantly, the inspirations for both were born from my passion for intellectual and creative engagement with my communities: London, Jewish and SASAH. When I think about my relationship with community engagement, I am forced to acknowledge that in the past, my instincts have been to retreat into myself and choose to spend time alone working on creative projects that rarely make their way to the public instead of putting myself “out there” for ridicule. Over the course of these experiential learning projects, however, I have forced myself to interact with and make requests of members of my various communities in social and professional settings that were entirely new to me; while I’ve always understood the value of “putting yourself out there”, these adventures pushed me to move past my initial culture-shock upon being thrown into a giant, pluralistic university with tens of thousands of students and just as many ways to leave my mark in its history, and forced me to become a confident leader with a vision. I have always been one to put my passions into action (in truth, it is the only way I’ve managed to finish so many curricular and extra-curricular projects over my time at Western), but never before have I understood so well the value of tackling such a passion project with a team, or what active “community engagement” actually looks and feels like when I am
initiating it and not simply thrown on a choir bus and ushered along to some choir concert somewhere before being bussed back home again. As I marvel at these new revelations, I cannot help but return to my /ruts/ (pardon the pun) and recall that phrase the Children of Israel said upon being given new rules for living: “Na’ase v’nishma”. “We will do and then we will understand”. Far from ending this post on a self-congratulatory note, I do not wish to say, “I finished, and now I understand”; rather, I am now interested in looking beyond the community-engaged learning experiences already behind me in search of new habits or actions I might take on in the hopes of acquiring some new personality trait or value. Unsurprisingly, I already have an idea as to what this might be, and, also unsparingly, it is one that comes up a lot in passionate conversations with my SASAH friends: environmentalism. As I graduate from Western into the real world, I am considering shifting my actions to be more global in focus, too: after all, what better way to make my mark on this world than leaving it in better shape than I found it?