For much of the last year, I have felt powerless against the pandemic and disconnected from friends and family. Despite my family’s efforts to keep ourselves and others safe by mask-wearing and social distancing, the impact of our actions feels negligible with respect to the many hundreds of thousands who have died from COVID in the last year.

In this way, the last twelve months have been a reckoning with powerlessness. I have had to accept that I don’t have the power to change the behavior of others. I have had to accept that I don’t have the power to enact legislation that would prevent the rapid spread of the disease. I have had to accept that the timeline for a return to a world without COVID—a world with schools, playdates, and meals with friends—is beyond my control. Instead, I have learned to focus on what is in my control: my ability to make this time a little bit more bearable for someone else.

In the pages of Masekhet Ta’anit, the Sages wrestle with a world eerily similar to our own. Plagued by life-threatening droughts, fire, and a pandemic, they attempt to answer the same question we have wrestled for the past year: How do we face a pandemic? How do we control that which feels out of our control? In the Mishnah of Masekhet Ta’anit, the Sages prescribe in detail exactly how many deaths define a plague and how one responds differently to a contained outbreak versus a contagion likely to spread to neighboring communities. Through a schedule of communal fasts, soundings of the shofar, and the recitation of specific prayers, the Sages of the Mishnah offer a cohesive response to communal disaster. This is what we can do. This is how we can move God to change.

Yet in the midst of this tractate devoted to the halakhah, the laws of how to survive a pandemic, the Talmud takes a turn to tell us a series of stories about the greatness of ordinary individuals. As we continue page after page, we leave behind the rules to which the Sages are so committed and the laws about when and how often to fast, what verses to say, and who should sound the alarm. Instead, we focus on stories featuring individuals caring for others and being cared for.

These stories, rooted in acts of kindness and care, offer another answer to our question: How does one face a pandemic? What do we do when we feel like so much is beyond our control? Communal fasts, shofar blasts, and heartfelt prayers alone will not get us out of this. Rather, these actions taken on a communal and societal level must be paired with acts of kindness performed on an individual level. It is acts of hesed, acts of caring and kindness, that will get us through.

The Mishnah teaches that if a city is afflicted by crumbling walls and collapsing buildings, all of its inhabitants should fast and cry out because of the immediate danger that these present to the buildings’ inhabitants. In Masekhet Ta’anit, we see that Rav Huna takes a different approach to crumbling walls. The Talmud teaches us that on every cloudy day, every day which might bring rain that would threaten the stability of already precarious walls, Rav Huna would go out in his golden carriage and command the owners of these walls to tear them down and rebuild them safely to avoid collapse. If the owners did not have the resources to rebuild their crumbling walls, Rav Huna, a man of significant financial means, would foot the bill himself and pay to rebuild the walls to ensure the safety of all of the city’s residents. Strikingly, Rav Huna doesn’t wait for walls to crumble and then fast and cry out to God in response.
Rather, Rav Huna proactively—and on a regular basis—surveys potential sources of danger to his neighbors and friends. He uses his privilege to find walls in danger of collapse and, if necessary, he rebuilds them himself in order to protect the vulnerable from injury. Rav Huna’s example teaches us that we too must take note of the crumbling walls in our society and then use whatever means available, through acts of generosity and personal responsibility, to tear down and repair the walls ourselves.

But, what if we don’t have the financial resources of Rav Huna? What if this is a story only meant to speak to leaders in power and people with wealth, and not those of us who lack golden carriages?

Soon after this story, the Talmud reports that there was a fire in the city of Drokart. While the entire city was impacted by a raging fire, we learn that Rav Huna’s neighborhood miraculously remains untouched. Initially, everyone assumed that his neighborhood was spared because of Rav Huna’s greatness, including the kindness he performed in tearing down and rebuilding crumbling walls. In the end, they learn it was in fact as a result of the actions of one anonymous woman that the neighborhood was saved. What did this woman do that merited saving her whole neighborhood? She would heat her oven and then lend it to others to use, allowing them to benefit from its warmth and prepare their foods. This unnamed woman did not have a golden carriage or large sums of money to rebuild city walls, but she had a warm oven she was willing to lend as well as the generosity to share it with neighbors in need. In this story, it is not the rabbis’ prescribed fasts and prayers that save this neighborhood from a deadly fire; rather, it is the generosity of one woman, and her readiness to share with her neighbors, that spares the city.

Despite the rabbis’ emphasis on the importance of prayers and fasting in staving off contagious plagues and devastating droughts, the Sages admit through their own stories that the prayers and fasts of even the greatest rabbis don’t always bring salvation. For the Sages, these stories do not negate the importance of the halakhic response to disaster. We need the prayers and the shofar blasts and fasts just as we need a coordinated widespread response to COVID that emphasizes social distancing, mask-wearing, and an efficient and just distribution of the vaccine. Yet, these measures alone will not save us. If we want to make it through this pandemic, we will need not only a coordinated response to disaster on a communal level; we also need acts of hesed, acts of kindness, on an individual level.

When there is so much beyond our control, it is easy to succumb to feelings of powerlessness. We either leave the saving of our world to those with the power to do so—or worse, we give into despair when we see that our leaders are ill-equipped to handle the task at hand. Masekhet Ta’anit teaches us that it’s not all beyond our control. We have exactly what we need right in our homes to make this pandemic more bearable for someone else and, in fact, we even might be the ones that can prevent disaster. Whether we have the means of Rav Huna to fix the crumbling walls or we are simply a person with a warm oven to lend, this is the time for small acts of hesed that can have far-reaching effects. What acts of hesed will you do? In which ways might you be powerful?

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1 m. Ta’anit 3:5
2 m. Ta’anit 3:4
3 Ta’anit 20b
4 Ta’anit 21b
5 The tractate itself called “Ta’anit” (from the Hebrew word for “fast”) emphasizes the importance of fasting as a way of combating disaster.
Four Reasons to Leverage Pop Culture in the Judaic Studies Classroom

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This is a story about teenagers and Torah.

But it’s not your typical story.

There are some students who are born with the taste of Torah on their tongues. They savor it, eyes glittering as they argue over different interpretations of text. To them, learning is a blood sport, debate an art form. But the more typical teenager is bleary-eyed; head bowed, checked out, he shuffles his way to Limudei Kodesh classes, wondering how this will help him in college. It’s this student that I am most interested in, because he’s the one who thinks Torah has nothing to say to him.

I teach Tanakh and Oral Law in a Modern Orthodox high school, but my classroom is unique. In it, students design TV shows starring the Davidic dynasty, modeled on Netflix’s “The Crown” (click the link here, and throughout this piece, to see examples of their work). Or they create wedding websites detailing the fictitious Jewish nuptials of TV characters (for example, check out this wedding of “Once Upon a Time” characters Emma Swan and Killian Jones.) Students have synthesized material they learned in the form of essays, such as this one comparing Jay from ‘The Great Gatsby’ and King Solomon, or this one comparing the prophet Elijah to Iron Man.

This may seem unusual, but I believe it is a worthy pursuit. Leveraging pop culture for use in the Judaic Studies classroom is a powerful way to help students connect to the material, build their Jewish identity, an environment.

In this essay, I explore four reasons why I find using pop culture so effective. (1) It makes use of students’ passions to help them connect to Torah. (2) It helps students become more creative thinkers. (3) It aligns with best practices in education; effective teacher pedagogy supports the use of alternative assessments. These can include pop culture components. (4) It enables students to live a more integrated Jewish life.

Passion

Students are steeped in pop culture, whether it is following the latest Instagram influencer, playing fantasy football, or attending live concerts with music performed by celebrities. Thus, forging a link between students’ passions, which are often connected to pop culture, and their Torah learning strengthens their religious life. The need to prioritize student passion can be witnessed daily in the school environment.

Some students are eager to attend school, seeing it as a hub for learning, socialization, leadership roles, clubs, or the key to the next step in their life trajectory. But others see school as more of a prison. They are forced to take classes they may not have chosen and that do not necessarily speak to their interests, forced to share space with individuals they may not like, and forced to do work they may not find meaningful or interesting. When students do not like traditional school, we hope there is something they like. Something that makes them want to get up in the morning. It might be rap music, fantasy novels, video games, ESPN, politics, advances in STEM ... a passion.

If a teacher can tap into their student’s passion, they’ve transformed a lesson that might have been experienced as boring, vapid, and unnecessary into something that piques the child’s interest. Even more important, they are much more likely to make the learning stick.

In their book Make it Stick: The Science of Successful Learning, authors Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel use cognitive science to explain best practices when it comes to learning. Among these is connecting learning to prior knowledge. This process is called “elaboration” and it is achieved when one is able to thoroughly express the material taught in their own words (5).

Additionally, “putting new knowledge into a larger context helps learning” (6), especially when students give it personal meaning. An example of this might be connecting the subject of history to “your understanding of human ambition and the untidiness of fate” (6).

This is why teachers must learn about their students’ passions. To be the best teacher, one must make content meaningful. What better way to make Judaism matter than to connect it to what students already love? It is easy to find out students’ passions: ask them. Have them fill out a Google Form at the beginning of the year asking them about their hobbies, their interests, and what they love doing. Most of the time, their passions will align with some aspect of pop culture, whether it be music, film, sports, politics, or
Young Adult novels. At that point, steal Simon Sinek’s motto, “Start With Why.”

Why should students love Judaism? There are many answers. Because it is their heritage, because it is their birthright, because they are a letter in the scroll, important and necessary. But a simple approach, perhaps the simplest, is because Judaism can connect to whatever their passion is. Whatever it is they already love, Judaism can be a part of, or is a part of. Judaism can be used to analyze the behavior of famous athletes, and to examine in which respect they are worthy role models. Are they caring? Are they kind? Do they exhibit sportsmanship? It can be used to interrogate characters in books. Does this character act with the nobility of the leaders in the Tanakh? In what ways yes? In what ways no? Judaism has something to say about every aspect of life, “turn it and turn it for everything is in it” (Ethics of the Fathers 5:22).

In practice, this means providing multiple entry points into our religion. There are students who would be content to come to class, open their texts, read them, decode them, and look at the commentators’ understanding of them. But there are other students who will benefit from a gateway, an answer to the question of why they should care, a connection to their personal passion. How to do that? Structure lessons to include that component. For example, before learning Psalms, ask students why people write. Ask them why popular musical artists write. Then show them the answers. Have them look at quotes from the likes of NF, Ed Sheeran, and Kesha. By connecting what they are about to learn in Psalms to what they already know—the music they listen to, that is on their iPhones, on Spotify, and on the radio—one deepens their connection to the material. Now Psalms is not simply a book of unintelligible Hebrew words. It’s a book of songs—songs that speak, just like the lyrics of contemporary musicians do.

Creativity
An artist requires tools to express his creativity: brushes, paints, modeling clay, sculpture wire. So too, students require a well from which to draw when they innovate. For many, pop culture is that well. They are familiar with it because it is all around them; now, they can bend it to their will.

Little kids are innately creative. This is not just nostalgia; it is fact. In 1968, George Land and Beth Jarman were approached by NASA to create a test that would help find the most innovative astronauts. After designing the test, they then decided to also give it to children. The question was simple: how many uses could the test-taker come up with for a paperclip? 98% of five year olds scored at genius level on this test. As they got older, fewer and fewer retained that capacity for creative thinking. Adults (average age of 31 years old) were only at 2%. There are competing reasons as to why this is so, but one of the most depressing was advanced by Sir Ken Robinson: schools kill creativity.

As Robinson elaborates, “the whole system of public education around the world is a protracted process of university entrance. And the consequence is that many highly talented, brilliant, creative people think they’re not, because the thing they were good at at school wasn’t valued, or was actually stigmatized.” A quote attributed to Albert Einstein puts it more succinctly: “Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid.”

Luckily, we are now in the middle of a creativity revolution. The Battelle for Kids Partnership for 21st Century Learning (sometimes called P21) lists the four competencies kids must currently master in school: critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. An educational documentary titled “Most Likely to Succeed” has put forward the need for students to “put wonder, creativity, and initiative at the very heart of the learning process.” ISTE, the International Society for Technology in Education, lists “innovative designer” and “creative communicator” as part of their core standards for students. The maker movement, which promotes constructivism (an educational philosophy that states that learners construct their learning rather than passively receiving content) and constructionism (an educational philosophy that prioritizes actively creating physical or technological products), has caught on. As our world consistently changes, students need creativity as a means to adapt, innovate, and take pride in their own abilities.

Traditional assessments require students to learn material and exhibit mastery by regurgitating it on a test. There are, of course, clever ways to go about this—essay tests, for example, or tests that use the “in connection to what did we learn this” format as a means to ensure students can connect their learning to other topics. At the end of the day, however, as depicted in the documentary “Most Likely to Succeed,” most students get the test back, check it over to make sure they’ve earned a good enough grade, then crumple up their paper and throw it in the garbage. Taking that test was not a transformative experience.

Alternative assessments, those that make use of creativity, are a whole different story. They have the power to force students to think, to plan, to design, and to create something of which they are justly proud. When students are engaged, they can create recut trailers like this one.
using “The Lion King” to depict the story of Saul’s ascension to power. Or this one, depicting the same story, using clips from “Black Panther.” During this process, students collaborate with one another. When one group figures out how to do something—for example, how to record voiceovers in iMovie—they share it with the others. Students help each other, delight in each others’ success, and look forward to seeing how each group was able to take the same material and reframe it and refract it differently. This is deep learning.

These are the types of assignments that students talk about at their dinner tables. Yes, children are willingly bringing up Navi at the dinner table, showing their parents different iterations of the project, and proudly presenting the finished product. This is a moment of accomplishment. But it does not stop there. Because once the movies are finished, we will gather in our school’s auditorium or theater, hand out bags of freshly-popped popcorn and chocolate-covered raisins, dim the lights, and begin the show. The audience can consist of others in the class—or the grade—or even their parents! We do this in order to create a peak. In the words of Chip and Dan Heath in their book *The Power of Moments*:

> Even though high school students log more time in the classroom than anywhere else, their most memorable experiences rarely take place there. Instead, they remember prom, football games, musical productions, student body elections, swim meets, talent shows.

> [...]  

> What if we could design an academic experience that was as memorable as prom? (48)

A test won’t cut it. But a creative assignment that leverages students’ interest in pop culture, forces them to think deeply about what they learned, urges them to depict it in a new format, and is in their *zone of proximal development* ... just might.

**Pedagogy**

Judaic Studies teachers want their students to be impacted by what they learn in the classroom. We are trying to impart lessons that affect the way people live their lives, not just their report cards. To accomplish this, we must use education research and best practices to inform our practice. As I will explain below, cutting edge pedagogy supports the use of alternative assessments, which prioritize student voice and choice and can benefit from the inclusion of pop culture components.

Pedagogy refers to the art of teaching. The term encapsulates the means and methodology through which teachers facilitate learning in their classroom. Excellent teachers must understand their content (the subject area that they teach) and context (the unique factors in the physical environment, emotional makeup of students, and cultural background that will impact their students’ ability to learn). Perhaps most important of all, teachers must possess **PCK, or pedagogical content knowledge**. This is knowledge that “teachers develop over time, and through experience, about how to teach particular content in particular ways in order to lead to enhanced student understanding.”

In order to be truly effective, using pop culture to facilitate student learning must be done in a methodological, intentional manner. Sprinkling it in as a form of edutainment may engage students for a day, but will not affect learning outcomes in the long term. In my classroom, I have found that an effective way to use pop culture is by adapting current research in order to make use of **project-based learning, design thinking, and authentic assessments**.

The advantages of this approach are clear. Students are engaged in inquiry-based learning where they are exploring a deeper question or truth. The products they are being asked to create, such as a website or a well-edited film, are authentic in that they are inherently valuable and teach transferable skills. The process of having to go through various iterations, forced to consider their audience and whether whatever they have designed is addressing their audience’s needs, teaches empathy and the importance of thinking through and incorporating feedback.

In order for this to work, the teacher must support the students’ process. In my class, end-of-unit assessments are completed during class time, not as homework. I introduce the tool we are using (whether Weebly for building a website, Eko to create an interactive film, or iMovie in order to create a trailer) with a play day. On this day, the students and I play around with the tool in order to make sure they feel comfortable using it. We read through their assignment together, and go over a very clear rubric to make sure they understand exactly how they will be assessed. When it comes to the assignment itself, the first step they must take is to fill out a planning document, which I review, and where I offer feedback. At this point, they must make edits, and only afterwards are they permitted to begin work on the actual product (the website, film, or iMovie). To see an
Because I prioritize the process, I cover less curricular content than other teachers. However, I am doing something equally if not more important. I am helping my students learn how to collaborate and communicate with their group members and think critically about their work. My students see that I am in the room with them while they plan, and can turn to me for guidance. They can revise based on feedback before they ever receive a final grade. We are mimicking a real world environment, and it is clear to them that I want their success. Under such conditions, they can be far more successful than if their assessment consisted of a timed test focusing on how well they can memorize or analyze material on one particular day. Moreover, with my approach, they are unable to duplicate others’ work or otherwise cheat; nor will they feel the need to. I have given them the roadmap to demonstrate mastery, and to earn a commensurate grade.

Much ink has been spilled on the topic of grades in the Judaic Studies classroom. Sharon Freundel, managing director of JEIC, the Jewish Education Innovation Challenge, addresses the issue head-on. She writes, “if a child’s self-confidence in math suffers because of math grades and they opt never to pick up a math book again after high school, that is sad. However, if a child’s view of his or her worth as a Jew suffers because of Judaic Studies grades, and they opt out of Judaism, that is a true tragedy.”

With my method, something magical happens. Students who have earned poor grades in every other course suddenly earn As in Judaic Studies class. They are engaged and excited, laughing as they plan out exactly which amenities will appear at their Nazirite wellness center, or who will host the Sheva Brachot for Emma and Killian. It is not that the work is easier. It is that it is being framed and presented in a way where students can succeed.

Not only does this help rewrite a child’s relationship with Judaic Studies; it also builds trust between the student and the teacher. The student learns the teacher values her time, believes in her ability to succeed, has created a road map to help her get there, and is willing to step in to help redirect her. And, as the child becomes more competent, she may need fewer assists from the teacher, placing her further on the road to mastery and independence.

**Integration**

An integrated person is one who is tokho ke-varo—his inside is like his outside. He cannot be one person in public and a different person in private. Instead, he is always, entirely, himself. Bound by the same values, living by the same ideals.

Unfortunately, this is not always the case with Modern Orthodox students. There are students who find that they are Jewish in some settings and secular in others. At school, they may don a kippah; out of school, they remove it. At school, they may keep kosher; out of school, they will eat dairy out. At school, they may pray; out of school, they may sleep in rather than rising to attend synagogue. There is a constant tug of war and back-and-forth between the different aspects of the teenager’s reality.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik argued that this was problematic. He stated that the Halakhah does not distinguish “between the man who stands before the Lord in an atmosphere suffused with heavenly solemnity and the man driving a hard bargain with his fellow in the marketplace” (Halakhic Man, 92). He explained that the Halakhah is intended to penetrate into “every nook and cranny of life,” and lists “the marketplace, the street, the factory, the house, the meeting place, the banquet hall” as places it must live (94). God does not only desire “one region to be consecrated to His name;” indeed, there should be no “discontinuity between the secular and sacred domains” (Worship of the Heart, 168).

What we want of our students is for them to see themselves as Jewish all the time. This means that they are Jewish at synagogue, at Jewish day school, at Jewish camp, but also while they are at the movie theater, watching Netflix, buying groceries, riding their bike, eating at restaurants, and hanging out with friends. In this way, they become an integrated self—a person whose Judaism so permeates them such that it is always with them, as opposed to something which they can take up or lay down at will.

To achieve this, we must demonstrate that it is possible to live an integrated existence. Halakhic man, Rabbi Soloveitchik explains, sees a spring of water and immediately wonders whether it can be a mikveh. We, and our students too, can see the proverbial spring and come with our “a priori, ideal principles and precepts which establish the character of the spring as a halakhic construct” (Halakhic Man, 20). This framework of seeing everything through the lens of Halakhah can be expanded to encompass seeing everything through the lens of Judaism. Teachers must actively model this way of living, this lens through which to view the world. When a teacher shows that she, just like her students, watches the same show, reads the same media, listens to the same pop song, but finds something Godly in it, a way to elevate it and sanctify it, a way to use it to shed light on the section of Tanakh she

example of an assignment with all these components, click here.
and her students are learning together, she is demonstrating what it means to lead this integrated existence. She is modeling what it means to be whole.

In practice, this means that when the teacher is teaching about King Jeroboam’s arm freezing in midair, she may stop to show the clip from *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* where Kylo Ren freezes Rey’s hand in midair. She might tell the story of how she gleefully realized, while sitting in that movie theater, that this would be a perfect scene to showcase the desperation and fear Jeroboam must have felt when the man of God immobilized him. Maybe students will start looking for Torah references in their own media consumption. Maybe they will simply smile, remembering their teacher’s excitement as she shared the story. One lesson will surely have been communicated: one can be a Jew in the movie theater just as one is a Jew in school. One can lead a life of integration.

This is perhaps the most important aspect of leveraging pop culture in the Judaic Studies classroom. It is possible that one can speak to students’ passions and creativity and accomplish pedagogical goals through different methods, but integration occurs in its most robust form when one marries pop culture to Jewish practice.

Teenagers crave authenticity. It is why they gravitate to people who are genuine. Blending pop culture with Torah is a means of enabling them to live an authentic life: one that values their passions, offers them a creative outlet, is supported by best practices in pedagogy, and teaches them to live an integrated Jewish existence.