

Reading by Heart

One mother recites to her children to help them memorize their favorite books | By Ilana Kurshan

I AM AN AVID READER, THOUGH these days I read fewer novels and more children's picture books. I'm not complaining; one of the greatest pleasures of being a parent is reading aloud to my children—which I do all the time. In the middle of our kitchen table sits a *shtender*, a wooden stand more commonly used to support volumes of Talmud. Ours contains calligraphy of a phrase from the Mishnah: "Do not say: 'When I have time, I will study,' lest you never have time." When I bought it 10 years ago, I had far more time to study Torah than I do now, but I have rehabilitated the *shtender* by using it as a stand for the picture books we read during dinner every night.

While I am walking my kids to school—my son biking in circles around me, the twins at each side and my baby in the stroller—I recite to them from the poems I've committed to memory, generally after many nights of reading and re-reading. We have illustrated picture books containing Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (which my kids can recite by heart) and William Blake's "The Tyger" (they deliver a mean first stanza). I haven't found an actual illustrated children's version of "The Tyger"—it is not standard children's fare—but we own a book about a tiger in a forest with awful text but dazzling



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illustrations, so I printed out the poem and pasted one stanza over the text of each page. I do this when we have books with terrific illustrations but lackluster words; the book becomes a palimpsest, with a new layer of text overlaying the original.

Most of the books we read are heavy on text—either Hebrew or English, with complicated words—but I rarely stop to explain as I read. I assume that the kids will internalize what they don't understand nonetheless. Sure, there are dangers to this approach. Recently, while reading my daughter an illustrated children's book version of the song "Sunrise, Sunset," we came to the line "Share the sweet wine and break the glass," and she pointed to the eyes of the bespectacled groom in the picture and yelled, "Break the glasses, break the glasses," before lunging for my pair.

Often I compose melodies for the texts. Every Shabbat afternoon, I chant aloud from *Pirkei Avot*, an ancient collection of rabbinic wisdom that I've set to music. The kids are more likely to remember, say, that a shy person cannot learn (Chapter 2:5) if I belt out these words to them again and again to the same tune.

Sometimes I wonder if I focus too

much on memorization, but it has been a key part of my own learning. When I started reading Shakespeare in high school, I committed to memory several sonnets and soliloquies, even though I only partially understood them. Over the years, a couplet would inexplicably pop into my head and I'd find that I suddenly understood its meaning. Likewise, much of the Torah I know by heart comes from practicing to chant the verses aloud in synagogue. These verses, now internalized, have become part of the fabric of my being, and I'm reminded of the Talmudic sage Rabbi Eliezer, who referred to his "two arms, like two wrapped Torah scrolls."

To memorize something is to be able to summon it at any time, and therefore truly to own it. I'd like my children to become "walking books"—like Rabbi Eliezer—able to recite their favorite books from memory and thus to be able to sit down and "read" to themselves even before they are literate. This hasn't happened yet, but when it does, I'm looking forward to some quiet time to curl up with a novel. **H**

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