

The SVARA Teaching Kollel:

Constructing a “Place” of Learning, Teaching,
and Transformation

June 2021

a Jim Joseph Foundation Case Study

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The words in the image above—among them “community,” “supportive,” “Talmud,” “queer,” “learning,” “teaching,” and “practice”—are a distillation of SVARA’s Teaching Kollel, a two-year, cohort-based learning and teacher training fellowship. The word cloud was created by SVARA, which asked the Teaching Fellows to share their hopes and expectations for the Kollel experience and the community they would build together. At the center is “place”—not really itself a descriptor of the Kollel, but rather a container for the evocative concepts that surround it in the word cloud and follow it in the text that generated the graphic. As they shared with each other, Fellows wish the Kollel to be:

- A place to experiment
- A place to have fun
- A place to build skills and confidence
- A place of growth and stretch
- A place to be held in learning
- A place of reciprocity
- A place of friendship
- A place where I (we) can frolic in text
- A place to develop long term relationships with colleagues
- A place of deep curiosity and co-nerding
- A place where each of us can bring questions, doubts, challenges to think about together
- A place to support each other in cultivating/practicing liberatory pedagogy and support/hold one another accountable in that practice
- A place where each of us can show up as exactly who we are, and that will be enough

There is a particular poignancy in the prominence of “place” in these aspirations given that, like nearly all such programs, the Teaching Kollel became entirely virtual with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. While SVARA did offer some pre-pandemic online programming, one of the unique impacts of its signature programs has long been the opportunity for participants to gather together with so many queer co-learners, often for the first time ever, and the joyous energy that created. This cohort of the Teaching Kollel experienced this in their Year One retreat and anticipated the same for Year Two. Having this opportunity taken away so unexpectedly was a profound disruption and disappointment.

And yet, as this case study will explore,¹ the aspirations and goals of the Teaching Kollel were not deterred by the shift to online learning. There is precedent in Jewish thought for the idea that incorporeal realities—time, holiness—can be so powerful as to have an almost physical presence. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously wrote that “the Sabbaths are our great cathedrals ... Jewish ritual may be characterized as architecture of time.”² For this SVARA Teaching Kollel cohort, the work of the past year has been to construct a *bet midrash*—a sacred space of learning and teaching—out of words: those read from a *daf* (page) of Talmud, and those that emerge from the hearts and minds of the Fellows. This shared project shaped the Fellows’ transformation from learners to “teachers,” although in SVARA’s model there is little boundary between the two, as teaching at its core is “learning made visible.”

SVARA’s Traditionally Radical Mission

Before focusing specifically on the Teaching Kollel, it’s necessary to situate the program within the broader context of SVARA’s mission and methodologies, since the primary goal of the Kollel is to train educators to replicate both. Upon opening SVARA’s website, visitors read that “SVARA is a traditionally radical yeshiva dedicated to the serious study of Talmud and committed to the Queer experience.” Unpacking each element of this statement provides a lens into the organization’s core identity, goals, and values.

The “Radical Tradition” of “Svara”

SVARA’s mission is to develop a new generation of Jewish leaders who are able to use both their deep Jewish knowledge and authentic *svara* (moral intuition) to reinvent Jewish life and tradition for today’s world. This enterprise is both “radical”—in that it seeks to overturn the rules and assumptions of the past—and traditional, as it replicates the work of the rabbinic figures who created an entirely new form of Judaism when Temple-centered religion was no longer sustainable. As Rabbi Benay Lappe, SVARA’s founder and Rosh Yeshiva, has written:

1 Research for this case study—one of a series of such studies developed by Rosov Consulting as part of the Jim Joseph Foundation Professional Development Initiative—was conducted from October 2020 through April 2021. Data were gathered via virtual observations of the 2020 Teaching Kollel Fall Intensive and the Kollel Weekly Shiur in spring 2021; interviews with each of the Teaching Fellows in January 2021; and interviews with Laynie Soloman, SVARA’s Associate Rosh Yeshiva & Director of Transformative Leadership, in October 2020 and March 2021.

2 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005; first published 1951).

The Talmud is a ... gift of the sages of the past to the sages of subsequent generations. “Listen,” they’re saying. “This is how we took the parts of the tradition we inherited that no longer worked for us and made them better. We don’t know what parts of the tradition will stop working in your generation, but we trust you to know that. Stand on our shoulders. Use our methodology. Be courageous and bold, like we were, and know that what you are doing may seem radical, but is deeply Jewish—and deeply traditional.”³

Rabbi Lappe recounted in SVARA’s blog how she first learned that this process of radical reinterpretation was named “*svara*,” and why she used the concept to name and define the institution she then created:

*I didn’t learn the word *svara* until I stepped into my first rabbinic job after ordination. ... Those courageous moves to overturn Torah when—it seemed obvious to me—the Rabbis could no longer morally tolerate what the Torah was commanding them to do. The Rabbis’ willingness to prioritize their moral intuition over the actual words of the Torah itself. It was not my imagination. Or a projection. It was real. And it had a name. *Svara* ... the deep, informed, moral intuition that I sensed was really at play.*

But now I needed to go back into the Talmud, to see how the Rabbis actually used the concept, to learn everything I could about it, directly from them. I would need to start my learning all over again, from scratch. ... I would need a group of other out, queer folk to learn with, and a fully queer-normative, loving space to do it in. No such thing existed, of course. So I started it.⁴

Serious Study of Talmud

The defining characteristic of every SVARA learning experience—from online courses to the annual Queer Talmud Camp to the Teaching Kollel—is that the Talmud is studied in the original Hebrew and Aramaic with no translations provided, either written or via a teacher’s interpretation. Working with their *chevruta* (study partner), SVARA learners explore and decipher each text word by word, using dictionaries to identify linguistic roots and grammatical variations. Though one might assume such learning can only be done by fairly advanced Hebrew speakers, in fact the only requirement for learning with SVARA is knowing the Hebrew alphabet. Nor are SVARA programs divided by level of proficiency; every bet midrash is mixed level, with “novices” and “experts” (terms not heard at SVARA) learning side by side. As its website assures, “Everyone has the same amount of time to work through the text, and whether you prepare five words or five lines, your learning is valuable and will contribute to the vibrancy of the discussion and your own growth as a ‘player’ and as a human being.”

³ Rabbi Benay Lappe, “How to Read the Talmud,” *My Jewish Learning*, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/how-to-read-the-talmud/>.

⁴ Rabbi Benay Lappe, “The Word that Changed the World,” *Hot Off the Shtender*, SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva, February 12, 2021, <https://svara.org/hot-off-the-shtender-the-word-that-changed-the-world/#more-34367>.

This approach underscores that SVARA’s focus on Talmud study is less about imparting Talmudic content than creating learners with the skills and confidence to employ and own the Talmudic method. As Rabbi Lappe explains in her article “How to Read the Talmud,” what many believe to be a rulebook for practice is actually a guidebook for transformation:

The text of the Talmud is intentionally pieced together in such a way that the very act of learning it becomes a spiritual practice unto itself, one which was designed to shape the learner into a morally courageous, empathic, resilient, flexible human being, one with the capacity to tolerate contradiction, paradox, complexity, and uncertainty. The act of learning Talmud is the Jewish tradition’s core spiritual technology designed to help the learner become this kind of person.⁵

The Lens of Queer Experiences

Queerness at SVARA operates on multiple levels. Nearly all involved with SVARA identify as LGBTQ, which creates a Jewish learning space that feels uniquely welcoming for many participants. SVARA’s understanding of Talmudic process and culture draws a direct line between the rabbis and queer and trans Jews today based in a shared experience of marginalization and the need to think and act in ways outside of what many consider normative. Rabbi Lappe’s welcome letter to SVARA learners explains:

Queerness is about thinking, living, and learning in radical ways. It is about challenging society’s norms related to gender and sexuality, as well as more broadly challenging the silences and injustices around us, while creating subversive, brave, joyful culture that celebrates who we are. Like Jewish insight, queer insight is drawn from the experience of being on the margins and the wisdom gained from it. We believe that in their creativity, resilience, and radicalism, the Rabbis of the Talmud were queer. The innovators of the Jewish future will be queer. To be deeply Jewish is to be queer.⁶

A number of the Teaching Fellows shared in interviews what it meant to them to be learning Talmud in an environment that centers queerness and queer people. In addition to feeling “comfortable,” “accepted,” “invigorated,” and “supported” in ways they had rarely been in previous Jewish environments, they also emphasized the personal and communal impacts of elevating previously marginalized voices:

There’s real healing that happens when you get to learn in a context where you are perceived as someone with a voice that matters. There’s a power in this practice that’s millennia old. The belonging that someone can feel can be really healing, especially for people who have felt marginalized in any way, which I think at this point is almost everyone.

⁵ Lappe, “How to Read the Talmud.”

⁶ “A Letter to Students,” SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://svara.org/letter/>.

Ultimately Judaism is defined and expressed by the people who have had a voice in interpreting tradition and innovating tradition. And the more that includes different kinds of people—especially queer people who have experienced being on the margins and have a different perspective and a different outlook—there’s an enrichment and a rounding out and an expansion of what Judaism will be.

Building a Bet Midrash: The Teaching Kollel

The Teaching Fellows

While most SVARA programs welcome learners of all levels, the Teaching Kollel is designed for more advanced learners. The SVARA website states that “Ideal Kollel applicants ... have had at least three years of experience learning in a SVARA bet midrash and/or in the SVARA method in chevruta [and] have experience learning rabbinic texts in the original beyond the intermediate level.” The nine members of Cohort 2, who span the country from Boston to the Bay Area, bring to the Kollel a diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and identities. Five are or have been rabbinical, masters, or doctoral students in more mainstream Jewish and academic settings, and a few noted in interviews that the dynamism and intellectual excitement of SVARA is both a contrast and complement to their experiences in these institutions. Some who are not full-time students serve as Jewish educators or spiritual leaders, while others hold professional roles outside of the Jewish community while exploring their passion for Jewish learning and teaching. Many first encountered SVARA through Queer Talmud Camp or a SVARA seminar, and were then “hooked” on a kind of learning they had never before encountered. As one Fellow explained:

It turns out that learning Talmud really slowly in the original is a lot more interesting than quickly reading a translation. When you know what to pay attention to and what the Talmud is trying to do. It’s a completely different experience.

“Good Teaching Is Good Learning in Public”

During the two years of the Teaching Kollel, Fellows engage in intensive Talmud learning with their cohort (both with *chevrotot* [study partners] and as a group), learn pedagogy and facilitation skills from SVARA instructors, and hone these skills through leading SVARA-method programs in their home communities or online.⁷ Although it is a teacher training Fellowship, SVARA deliberately seeks to blur the boundaries between “teachers” and “students,” emphasizing intention and commitment over expertise. In the words of SVARA’s Handbook for Teaching Fellows, “we treat our students not just as students, but as future teachers, every one of them.” Further, this future in which a student becomes a teacher

⁷ A full description of the Teaching Kollel can be found at <https://svara.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Teaching-Kollel-Info-Packet-4.pdf>.

is often not a distant one, as would be the case for students in more traditional training programs. SVARA’s philosophy that “teaching is learning in public” means that learners are actively discouraged from becoming “experts” before taking on a leadership role. As the Handbook explains:

Expertise is not a marker of powerful education, and can often get in the way of facilitating learning experiences in a way that helps learners feel empowered. ... A SVARA-method teacher should take responsibility for drawing the insights out from the room, shifting the focus and power from teacher to learner and learning community as the locus of knowledge. ... As a result, shiur is not about the teacher sharing their insights and knowledge, but cultivating a learning community in which everyone’s learning becomes visible.

This philosophy is translated into the advice given to Fellows to prepare at an “80% level” for leading classes and discussions. Laynie Soloman, SVARA’s Associate Rosh Yeshiva & Director of Transformative Leadership, shared in an interview:

We tell facilitators they should know a text 80%. If you know a text 100%, you’ve left no space for learners to enter the conversation and to learn with and from them. But if you don’t know it at least 80%, it’s hard to be an anchoring container for the learning. It’s hard for Fellows to get comfortable with stopping at 80%—we’re all so used to trying to get to 100% to prove we know enough.

When a Fellow shared in a workshop that they⁸ found it much easier to use the term “facilitator” than “teacher” because “as soon as I say, I’m a teacher, all of that baggage of needing to be a content expert can get in my way, and I’m worried I won’t know enough,” Soloman immediately responded, in a tone both reassuring and emphatic, “The thesis of this whole entire SVARA project is: you do know enough!” Soloman went on to explain that even more than the focus on Talmud or the community of queer learners, it is the commitment to this pedagogy that defines SVARA:

Any other aspects of [SVARA’s learning framework] are negotiable, except pedagogy. SVARA could happen in a non-queer environment, or with a different methodology. But if the specific pedagogic beliefs aren’t there, it can’t be SVARA. This is the fuel behind the whole system.

A Fellow reflected in an interview on how they came to understand and appreciate this truth in a deeper way during the first year of the Kollel:

We focused on learning within the framework of “teaching is learning made visible,” and that was a very big shift for me in my understanding of teaching. I understood that it’s all about making my own process of learning shareable—I’ll teach you what helped me. I think I had always understood that instinctively, but I hadn’t heard it articulated that way before.

⁸ To help preserve anonymity, all Kollel Fellows and alumni are quoted using the generic singular pronoun “they.” SVARA faculty and leadership who are quoted by name are referred to by their pronouns.

Further, if learning and teaching is essentially the same process, it erases the imbalance between instructors and students that underlies most educational settings. As the Fellow explained:

Often in society there's a line of hierarchy, of power and authority, between students and teachers. The idea that teaching is about making learning visible and perceivable really softens that line. There isn't that sense that the teacher is more valuable or respected than the student. It's an equalizing of respect and value, even while some are taking leadership and responsibility and others being held and being guided.

Putting Pedagogy into Practice: The Weekly Shiur

Throughout the two years of the Teaching Kollel, Fellows gather along with their SVARA instructors for a weekly *shiur* (lesson) in which a Talmudic passage is unpacked and discussed in depth. During the final semester of the program, each Fellow facilitates one shiur session, taking over this role from the instructors who have taught and guided them to this point.⁹ Before making this shift, Soloman and their co-instructor Rabbi Mónica Gomery invited Fellows to share both their excitement and fears about stepping into this role, and reminded them that the challenges they might face are actually a critical part of the process:

This is about facilitation as co-learning—holding the space, calling on people, moving along, inviting the learning. If you get stuck, then you get to explore the interesting experience of really co-learning with your learners—not at 80% preparation, but maybe at 70% or 60%. You can be open to the growth that happens when you allow yourself to not hold the sugya [Talmudic passage] fully in order to teach it. If there are moments when you are feeling lost and stressed out, memorize that feeling—because that's part of the learning too.

Supported by the previous year and a half of learning, growth, and building deep cohort connections, each Fellow seemed to embrace the opportunity to create a “container” for the group’s exploration of the first sugya of Masechet Ta’anit.¹⁰ Though it is impossible to fully capture the range, depth, and complexity of the learning and discussion that took place over the four months, a few scenes can offer a flavor of the experience. All shiur sessions begin with a *niggun* (a rhythmic melody without words), allowing the group to sing themselves into a distinct mental and emotional space for their learning. As the Kollel Handbook explains, “[Singing together] creates a container that is about the body, mind, and heart in an integrated way as opposed to only the intellect, [and] signals to the learners that the bet midrash is a sacred space, a place of *kedusha*.” After the melody winds down, the facilitator welcomes the group and invites each person to offer a dedication for that day’s learning. Often the dedications are in celebration or support of someone in a Fellow’s life, though they are also directed to places, events,

⁹ Recordings of these weekly Zoom sessions were made available for this case study, allowing for analysis of the content and process of the shiur without the risk that real-time observation might create a sense of intrusion into this close community.

¹⁰ The Talmudic tractate that primarily addresses fast days and other holy times and practices.

or ideas that hold special meaning. According to the Handbook, “Dedications affirm that our learning impacts the world for the larger good, and help us articulate where we want to direct the positive energy of our learning. ... They also immediately set the tone of the bet midrash as a space where everyone’s voice matters, and where everyone can be heard.” While singing and dedications would fulfill these goals in any environment, they are particularly valuable for helping Fellows connect within the virtual space by bringing together their distant voices in song and grounding the cohort in the joys and challenges each member is currently experiencing.

After reciting the blessing for studying Torah, the group dives into the sugya by reciting and unpacking the text word by word, using no vocalized texts (Hebrew or Aramaic with vowels) or English translations for assistance. While engaging in this process during one session, the group encountered a word spelled דבתפלה (*dalet, bet/vet, taf, peh/feh, lamed, heh*). The next twenty minutes were spent intensely discussing whether the ב (*bet/vet*) letter should be pronounced with a *patach* (“ah” sound) or a *hirik* (“ee” sound). This seemingly trivial detail—which a teacher in another setting might have quickly resolved in order to move onto more “important” topics—was given full attention by the Fellow facilitating this lesson. They invited each Fellow to share their interpretation and reasoning behind it, while also guiding the group toward understanding why determining the correct pronunciation mattered in this case.¹¹ Eventually the discussion closed not with a definitive solution, but with the facilitator’s question, “Do we need to land on one or the other, or is it possible to hold onto both possibilities?” To emphasize that they were in the role of co-learner rather than a source of the “right” answer, the facilitator moved the conversation forward by assuring the cohort that “we’re all searching together.”

Later on, the discussion—which had until then stayed mostly focused on the details of textual grammar and translation—suddenly widened to make room for a much broader insight about the Talmudic enterprise. The group was continuing to unpack a sugya from Ta’anit 2a, for which Sefaria.org provides the following translation (the bolded words are direct translation, the unbolded are inserted by the William Davidson Talmud to enhance comprehension):

*The Gemara asks: **And from where do we derive that rain must be mentioned specifically in the Amida prayer?** The Gemara answers: **As it was taught in a baraita with regard to the verse: “To love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart” (Deuteronomy 11:13). Which is the service of God that is performed in the heart? You must say that this is referring to prayer.**¹²*

One question this raised for the Fellows is why the text declares that “service of the heart” refers to prayer, without providing any evidence for that assertion. After a few minutes of contemplation by the group, Rabbi Gomery noted that the lack of explanation might actually be the key to the passage’s deeper meaning. She explained that by taking for granted that “*avodah b’lev*” (“service that is in the heart”

11 Doing so would help reveal whether the word in question referred to tefillah, prayer in general, or HaTefillah, another word or the Amidah prayer.

12 Ta’anit 2a:11 (translation from The William Davidson digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud, with commentary by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz).

from the passage above) is performed through prayer, the rabbis are “sneaking in” the radical idea that “avodah,” which in the Torah refers only to Temple sacrifice, now has an entirely different meaning. The facilitator then followed up this insight with a statement that succinctly and profoundly contextualized the entire shiur:

In a lot of ways this is getting at the core foundation of what the Talmudic project is, and why we’re studying it in the first place. Things that we previously knew as avodah are not that anymore, and that’s quite a significant shift.

Reinforcing Pedagogy through Appreciation

The descriptions above highlight some of the skills that Teaching Fellows gain and hone as they shift roles from learner to teacher/facilitator: keeping discussions moving forward while still making space for exploring intriguing facets of the text, asking questions that will help learners reach their own interpretations rather than providing the “correct” answers, and—when the moment is right—offering insights that underscore and elevate the meanings that have been uncovered. In the initial months of the Kollel, these and other skills are explicitly conveyed to Fellows through SVARA’s teaching guidebook and the training and modeling from the instructors. Once Fellows reach the stage of facilitating shiur, the pedagogy of teaching is reinforced in a more subtle, and rather ingenious, way. Each shiur ends with the Fellow who facilitated receiving “appreciations” from the rest of the cohort (and the two instructors) for the abilities they displayed during the session. These appreciations are lovely and uplifting, and they speak to the genuine warmth, caring, and trust that the cohort has developed over the years of learning together.¹³ They are also fascinating articulations of what the Fellows value in a teacher/facilitator, what they found most conducive to their own learning, and what they hope to emulate when they are in a position to teach and guide others. Below is a sample of these appreciations, a number of which highlight the contrasts Fellows observed between the teaching presence that the Kollel seeks to develop and the kinds of instruction found in many other educational settings:

I loved when you slowed us down and had us dig into the terms and not take for granted what they meant. In another yeshiva, the teacher would be like, “This means this, let’s keep moving.” You didn’t do that with us, you let us unpack and explore, but you didn’t make me feel lost in the material. There is an answer, but you let us explore our own paths for getting there.

I loved how you moved us through the text in a way that felt really spacious and expansive. I felt I could ask questions again and again. You gave us permission to learn and be in it.

¹³ Fellows also provide constructive criticism of their peers. However, this is shared privately with the instructors, who then incorporate these critiques (without attribution) into their one-on-one mentoring of Fellows. This process helps ensure the group environment stays fully supportive and encouraging.

You taught me and us all today that the best facilitation is almost absent of facilitation. You don't show your cards, you just guide us through. The metaphor I would use is, now you've painted a whole canvas for us of where we could have gone, in invisible ink. We didn't get everywhere, but it felt like elements were beautifully revealed.

I loved the way you made so transparent your personal goals as a teacher. That's really exciting because as we're all figuring out, sometimes teachers can seem like big scary figures with ulterior motives. And you showed a lovely way to say, here's what I'm about and let's do it together.

I appreciated when you brought in your learnings from your chevruta. It was so relatable and very humanizing, and I loved that you were willing to show us a little bit about the inside of your chevruta and the questions and discussions that had come up there as part of your teaching.

One thing I loved that you did over and over again is that someone would present an idea that advanced your understanding of the sugya, and you would be like, "Oh, I didn't think about that! What you're saying is x," and you would restate it so that we all could synthesize it. I thought, wow, you have to be so present, and so porous and listening so fully to be able to do that. To be able to take in completely new ideas on material you're teaching such that it shapes your understanding, and then offer it back into the room.

These appreciations vividly show how "80% teaching" requires more deftness and work than simply demonstrating expertise and quizzing students until they achieve the "right" answers. They also make clear that being on Zoom did not hinder the Fellows from successfully building this learning community. Each Fellow may have been in their own physical space (and occasionally these spaces were commented upon if the backgrounds were particularly intriguing), but once immersed in the shiur, the virtual space took on an all-encompassing presence of its own. This was reinforced by certain appreciations that used strikingly physical imagery to describe the learning experience:

*I appreciated how you gently brought in questions of **structure and framework** to the discussion. You softly said them **in the room**, and then when we were ready, they were there for us to pick up and consider. You were **building scaffolding** almost surreptitiously that we got to grow from.*

*You guided us through this journey where, by the end, people said, my insights are my own. You didn't say, here's why your mind should be blown. You **built the scaffolding and made space** for people to be true to their orientations.*

*The tone and space you set gave me **space to breathe**. Here I can breathe around each word and wonder about it and sit with it. Not just in the questions, but in the way you **held the room**.*

*So good to see you in the method, and a reminder to me that the method is **a container that is supposed to hold us, and we hold**. So grounding and good to feel your presence and your sense of the text in such*

a powerful way that was so spacious and open.

On Zoom we're all the same size box, but I really felt like we were in your bet midrash. The way you held the space really felt like I was in your learning space.

The last appreciation quoted above was one of the few to directly reference the shiur's virtual environment. However, what is implied to be a constraint of Zoom—everyone is in “the same size box”—could actually be seen as supporting SVARA's pedagogy. A teacher who is a “one-step-ahead-learner” would likely not want to have a privileged location in the learning environment—certainly not as the “sage on the stage,” but perhaps not even the “guide on the side” or the “mentor in the center,” which still define the learners in relation to the teacher's role and position. The best spatial metaphor for SVARA teaching may be “*tzimtzum*,” the kabbalistic concept of deliberate withdrawal that creates a space for others to fill, a space that is both surrounded by and imbued with the original presence (divinity in kabbalah, the teacher here). The visuals of the virtual space can actually facilitate this withdrawal—a “*tzim-Zoom*,” so to speak. Depending on the view selected, the teacher is either one of many equal boxes on the screen or actually disappears from the screen when not speaking. And yet, as the Fellow above expresses, a successful facilitator can still “hold the space” even off-screen, having filled that space with sparks of learning—questions to explore, ideas to contemplate, and emotional energy that uplifts and inspires.

From Teaching to Transformation

Individual and Communal Impact

While the Fellows deeply value how the Teaching Kollel has supported and developed them as learners and teachers, they also recognize how SVARA's unique philosophy and mission both enriches the meaning of their own experience and, potentially, plants the seeds for broader impact. One Fellow described how as their own conceptions of what it means to be a teacher evolved, this personal transformation opened up new understandings of the ways that this approach could be transformative at a communal level:

I learned that the role of the teacher was actually to empower students, to transform and facilitate the conversation, and just make sure that I knew where to go for the answer, not to have the answer. And I realized how that was going to create a better learning community and better Torah for the Jewish people. I think that a lot of people want the real stuff, the authentic stuff, and there's no reason why they can't have it. And I think SVARA is harnessing and tapping into the amazing experiences and wisdom that especially people in the margins have to offer and to uncover in the Torah.

Another Fellow similarly drew a connection between individual empowerment to communal transformation, noting that shifting the goal of Jewish education away from “literacy building” allows people of all knowledge levels and backgrounds to feel their learning and contributions have value:

I think SVARA could change the way that Talmud is taught and also transform the culture of Jewish learning environments. A lot of Jewish learning and Jewish teaching comes from an orientation of literacy building—here are the things you should know—as opposed to more of an empowerment orientation where you meet someone where they are and then the role of the facilitator is really one of curation and skill building. You know that this belongs to you, and what are the tools that you need to access it, and how can I help lay down the path for you in your learning? It’s a really different orientation that values what people already bring, as opposed to seeing them as an empty vessel that needs to be filled. And I think that’s transformative.

A third Fellow articulated a somewhat different relationship between individual and communal transformation, though still grounded in SVARA’s orientation and pedagogy. After explaining that the Kollel “reflects the core values of SVARA and the particular orientation around people that have been left out of leadership becoming empowered,” they contrasted this with institutions that seek to select and train individual leaders rather than redefining the very idea of communal leadership:

At [my rabbinical school] they were trying to empower us individually into our rabbinic identities and voices. But at SVARA, the empowerment orientation is not only for individuals, but an entire swath of the population. It’s not each person airlifted out one by one, which is what rabbinical school felt like—lots of money and time invested to prepare specially selected Jews to educate and lead the Jewish world. At SVARA, while there is an individual process of skill building, they’re also taking the whole field of us up together. I feel more powerful as part of a community that is being lifted up.

Pathways to Transformation

While the idea of SVARA creating widespread transformation of Jewish learning, leadership, and community is exciting and inspiring, the actual channels for this transformation are still being envisioned and developed. One Fellow cited this as a possible challenge when asked about SVARA’s potential for broader impact on the Jewish world:

I think there’s still a bit of an open question about where the Fellows go when they’re done with the Kollel, and what sort of supports SVARA can give for creating teaching opportunities for them. Because it’s very exciting that we’re building what is going to be a very large cohort of SVARA-style Talmud teachers. But there’s still this question of, where will we teach? How does this resource enter the world? I know one possibility is specifically recruiting people for the Kollel who already have those existing teaching opportunities. But that would limit who can enter the Kollel pretty significantly, so I’m interested in other approaches to that question.

One approach that might answer these questions was offered by an alum of the first Teaching Kollel cohort who now serves in a variety of educational and spiritual leadership roles in their community. They suggested that the key to broadening SVARA's impact is embracing the idea that all Jewish learners can benefit from SVARA-style teaching, not only those seeking a "full" SVARA experience of intensive Talmud study:

Think of a congregation taking in a drash [discourse on Jewish text]. That may be frontal teaching, but when I'm giving a drash I can still reveal the learning process that I went through to prepare it. I can still try to lower the partition between teacher and learner. I can say, "I always thought this word meant this, but then I looked it up and saw it also meant that, and now I have a whole different relationship to that word." Just doing that is changing my position from expert to a learner, and revealing my excited beginner's mind. And who doesn't want to learn from people who show you how excited they are by their own learning?

The underlying belief being expressed is that individual SVARA-trained educators can create communal transformation by bringing SVARA methods and values with them into any Jewish or educational setting in which they teach and guide others. A current Fellow expressed this view when describing their motivations for entering the Kollel and their goals upon completion. As a doctoral student, they hope to bring more "SVARA-ness" into the university environment, though they recognize that doing so would likely require a significant cultural shift:

My experience in graduate school is kind of oppressive. It's really more about the students propping up the teacher than about the students learning. I knew I wanted my students to have a better experience than what I was having as a student, and I really felt like SVARA was the best and maybe only place that I was going to get that. ... I want to offer something [as a teacher] that they aren't going to get in their other classes. I'm aware that the structure is so powerful that you can't just break down all the norms at once. It's a lot to ask of students in a university class to be vulnerable in the way that we are. The trust is really earned when the whole environment is promoting love and support and vulnerability and communal growth.

Another Kollel alum noted that in addition to impacting individual learners who actively seek out SVARA's programs, SVARA is beginning to catalyze change through partnerships with other Jewish educational institutions. This could help create a new generation of educators and leaders who, by experiencing SVARA's methodology and ideas, will be more likely to embrace SVARA's understanding of Jewish history and vision for the Jewish future:

I think the Kollel will continue to be a primary way in which we undermine hierarchy within Jewish education and revolutionize the Jewish community by creating a network and a platform for queer Torah to grow. ... A question is to what extent we continue to just exist in, and try to expand, our own lane, and to what extent we dive into collaboration and connection with other folks. Some of that's already happening. We have already affected, and will continue to affect, how Talmud is taught in rabbinical schools. And if there were ever a force multiplier in the Jewish community, it's through rabbinic training.

Conclusion

While the number of people SVARA can train directly or impact through institutional partnerships is necessarily bounded (though increasing every year), the scope of the potential transformation that SVARA’s pedagogical approach could bring to the Jewish community is vast. What would it mean if Jewish educators and leaders at all levels viewed themselves as a “container for learning” rather than a source of expertise? How might learners—across all ages and backgrounds—view their own capabilities differently if their teachers did more “learning in public” to model the messy and exciting process of discovery? What kinds of space and possibilities would open up if those at the “front of the room” sought to hold only 80% of the knowledge, decision making, and power? How might these actions transform our communal centers of learning and gathering, as well as the institutions that prepare those who create and lead them?

Thinking about the possibilities contained in these questions underscores one of SVARA’s core truths: as much as Talmud study might seem like a primarily cerebral activity—particularly given SVARA’s emphasis on meticulous linguistic explorations and excavations—it is actually a spiritual enterprise meant to impact both individuals and the community at the deepest levels. As its website explains, Talmud study creates internal transformation that will ultimately be expressed in communal revolution: “Talmud study [is] a spiritual practice for developing radically empathic, mature, evolved human beings who will create a more just, peaceful, and healthy world. We believe that radically courageous, compassion-driven change is native to the tradition, should be revived, and that every person can be given the tools to participate in it.”¹⁴ With this in mind, one could translate the center of the SVARA Teaching Kollel word cloud not only as *makom*—Hebrew for “place”—but *HaMakom*,¹⁵ however one might wish to define it: a source of spiritual energy, a reminder that every human being has infinite worth, an exhortation to embrace and develop our unlimited potential.

¹⁴ “How to Learn SVARA-Style,” SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://svara.org/how-to-learn-svara-style/>.

¹⁵ “The Place,” one of the divine names in Jewish tradition.