



TEACHING TACTIC

Teaching Dissent through Debate: Feminist Perspective on the *Mikveh*

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The context

In my seminar on feminism and religion at Texas Woman's University, we study Judaism, Christianity, and Islam from feminist and social-justice perspectives. During our unit on Judaism, I focus one day on feminist perspectives on *niddah*, family purity laws, and the use of the *mikveh* for ritual purification after menstruation.

The pedagogical purpose

This teaching strategy was born out of my desire to motivate students to wrestle and struggle with the various and conflicting ideas they encounter instead of simply agreeing with the perspectives of whatever author I assign that day. I do this by outlining three different contradictory feminist perspectives on the *mikveh* and having students debate each other from their assigned perspectives.

Description of the strategy

Before class, students read about [menstruation](#) and the practice of the *mikveh* from [several perspectives](#) and read about [menstrual customs and prohibitions across religions and cultures](#). In class, I assign students to argue for one of three conflicting feminist perspectives on the *mikveh*, each of which can be supported by assigned texts:

1. The practice of *niddah* and *mikveh* is a way for men to control women's bodies and sexuality.
2. Obedience to the rules of *niddah* and *mikveh* is a spiritually empowering practice beyond human logic for women who practice it.
3. Feminists should reclaim the *mikveh* and create new, inclusive rituals and spaces.

Students meet in groups to plan their arguments and then move into debate groups where each student is responsible for arguing for their assigned perspective against students from other groups.

Why it is effective

Making students debate each other reminds students that there is usually not a singular feminist perspective on complex religious questions and that various feminist perspectives are often mutually exclusive. By assigning perspectives, I depersonalize the competing viewpoints, and students feel free to argue their point without fear of offending other students. Engaging students in open-ended debate without a teleological goal of arriving at the correct answer seems to be an appropriate way to engage students in the study of Judaism, but the basic format of this debate can be used with a variety of topics. When I first taught this lesson, I ended by pushing students to explain their own opinion, but I found that students responded to the activity with a respect for all perspectives and a deeper appreciation for the complexity of the issue.