

# HoMoreh Derech

a reference guide & manual  
for svara-style teaching

svara סבּרָה

a traditionally radical yeshiva

## **HoMoreh Derech Version 1.5**

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## FINDING YOUR WAY THROUGH THE HOMOREH DERECH

### About the HoMoreh Derech

This manual is here to be your *HoMoreh Derech*<sup>1</sup> (“guider of the path,” but make it gay!), a queer-tastic guide and companion in your learning and teaching in SVARA’s method and beyond. The resources in these pages will accompany you in the bet midrash. They will also support you in your nurturing of a learning community that, in the spirit of our sages, makes possible liberatory expressions of our tradition, and shows just how radical that tradition is when rooted in the lives of queer folks. We hope it serves you well!

There are four main sections to this resource:

- 1 | About SVARA & SVARA-Style Learning**
- 2 | Gemirna Resources: Tools for Cultivating & Practicing Independent Learning**
- 3 | COMP: A Framework for Teacher Training**
- 4 | Teaching Tachlis: Tools & Tips to Prepare for Your Teaching**

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<sup>1</sup> In Hebrew, הו-מורה דרך.

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## FOREWORD

What came to be known as the SVARA method was created by SVARA's Founder & Rosh Yeshiva **Benay Lappe** and her chevruta **Eddie Harwitz** during their time in rabbinical school at The Jewish Theological Seminary. As two students with rudimentary Hebrew skills and an admittedly shaky sense of confidence in their learning, they developed this rigorous and precise method to help them feel a sense of empowerment and ownership in and of the tradition, and authenticity in their future role as transmitters and transformers of it. Over the next decades, Benay continued to develop and expand this method at SVARA, giving hundreds—and eventually thousands—of learners access to a tradition that they felt they needed, and that needed them. This method eventually became the cornerstone of SVARA's bet midrash.

In 2015, a group of eager SVARA-niks at Queer Talmud Camp began asking how they could get themselves trained up in SVARA's approach to learning and teaching. At that time, Benay was beginning to articulate *what was really happening* in the bet midrash, and how SVARA could grow. Benay and **Frankie Sandmel**, then SVARA's Program Director, gathered and organized Benay's many teaching notes and writings into what became SVARA's first *Teacher Training Manual*, the earliest compilation of resources for folks aspiring to teach in SVARA's method. Later that year, Benay convened a group of folks (**Ari Lev Fornari, Frankie Sandmel, Leora Abelson, Laynie Soloman, and Mónica Gomery**) to come together for a dreamy weekend and began imagining what teacher training at SVARA could be, and how other people could learn to transmit our tradition in a way that would continue to build up “players.” They read through the Teacher Training Manual, making edits and asking questions, imagining up what would eventually become SVARA's Teaching Kollel.

In 2017, we (Laynie and Benay) revamped these materials for SVARA's first-ever attempt at training teachers in SVARA's method: the Radical Educator's Track at Queer Talmud Camp. As Laynie, Benay, and Mónica facilitated this program, we iterated, and iterated, and iterated some more, creating new materials along the way. In the years since, we've incorporated new elements into the way we train and support teachers at SVARA: new resources, charts, frameworks, acronyms, and concepts that have been uncovered by SVARA teachers and learners along the way. These resources then became the core curriculum for SVARA's Teaching Kollel.

From 2019–2021, Laynie dreamed up a more comprehensive guide that would support and equip teachers—in SVARA's Teaching Kollel and beyond—to transparently and holistically encounter this “Oral Torah” of SVARA's approach to queer, empowering, liberatory Talmud study. They began to compile and synthesize the many worksheets, Google Docs, scanned .pdfs, and binders full of notes—along with new articulations and insights that emerged in the first several years of the Teaching Kollel—into an expanded guide for SVARA teachers, the *HoMoreh Derech*.

Like the Talmud, this guide was put together over a long period of time (okay, five years vs. five hundred!), and reflects the writing down of oral teachings that were nurtured in our community through hundreds of shiurim, hallway conversations, Queer Talmud Camp breakfasts, Zoom chats, and late-night document editing. Everything in this text has been touched, shaped, refined, expanded, and grown by hundreds of learners, especially the first three cohorts of SVARA's Teaching Kollel. It is impossible to identify a single author of this guide, and there is barely a single



line of text here that has not been shaped in chevruta. In particular, so many of the resources in the Gemirna Resources section were designed, formatted, and reformatted by SVARA's Learning Coordinator **Amir Weg**, and the foundational content of the Kollel curriculum that this guide is designed to anchor was shaped by Benay, Laynie, and Mónica in chevruta as SVARA faculty.

Finally, this entire guide was edited and beautified through the work of **Anna Schnur-Fishman**.

We're grateful to all of our students and teachers and colleagues and comrades who have helped us clarify, refine, and articulate what, in fact, it is that's *really going on* when queer folks are empowered to translate and transform the tradition for themselves, and for the multiple layers of love and learning that have gone into this guide as we find it now.

With lots of SVARA love,



Rabbi Benay Lappe  
SVARA's Founder & Rosh Yeshiva



Laynie Soloman  
SVARA's Associate Rosh Yeshiva

September 1, 2021 | 24 Elul, 5781

## SECTION 1

# about learning & teaching at svara

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## ABOUT SVARA: A TRADITIONALLY RADICAL YESHIVA

SVARA is a traditionally radical yeshiva dedicated to the serious study of Talmud through the lens of queer experiences. SVARA's unique pedagogy makes Talmud study *in the original* accessible—for the first time in Jewish history—to all who want to learn. At SVARA, everyone—queer, straight, trans, cis, alef-bet beginners, experienced talmudists, secular, religious, Jews, non-Jews—everyone learns together in a mixed-level bet midrash that recognizes as crucial the insights of all those on the margins.

We see Talmud study as 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 and should be revived, and that every Jew can be given the tools to participate in it. For almost two millennia, these intellectual, moral, and spiritual tools have been available to just 1% of the Jewish population, so SVARA exists to bring it to the other 99%—and beyond.

A 2,000-year-old talmudic term, *svara* means “moral intuition.” Within the rabbinic system, it is the only source of law that can overturn even the Torah itself. When you have *svara* (moral intuition) and *gemara* (learning), you are qualified to be a player, changemaker, and radical innovator in the Jewish project and the world at large. Our message to our students is: *Come to SVARA and be a player!*

First and foremost, SVARA seeks to bring serious, rigorous, traditionally radical Talmud study to a queer, outsider audience, and, ultimately, SVARA seeks to change the way Talmud is learned and taught in the world. We create a space in which people historically excluded from the tradition can engage in intimate and intense conversation with it—and each other. By facilitating a space where everybody can learn the texts that have shaped Judaism for the past 2,000 years, we believe that we will create players in shaping the next chapter of Judaism, and our society as a whole. **As more and more individuals gain knowledge of how Judaism works, especially those who have been excluded from Jewish learning in the past, we will be able to build a stronger, more empathic, better Judaism for the future, and a more peaceful and just world.**

Our goal is to create “players,” and, therefore, we treat our learners not just as learners, but as future teachers, every one of them.<sup>2</sup> Their learning matters. It matters that they learn well. It matters that they know each word—what they mean, and why and how they mean what they mean. It matters that they “own” the material. It matters that they bring their insights and experiences to bear, so that the tradition can learn and grow from them.

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<sup>2</sup> *And*, we see our teachers not just as teachers, but as learners!

## **SVARA's Vision, Mission & Impact Statements**

### **vision.**

SVARA envisions a future in which liberatory expressions of Judaism equip individuals and communities to realize a just and healed world.

### **mission.**

SVARA's mission is to empower queer and trans people to expand Torah and tradition through the spiritual practice of Talmud study.

### **impact statement.**

We believe that the spiritual practice of Talmud study, particularly as it's done at SVARA, shapes learners into the kind of people who are moved to, equipped to, and courageous enough to, bring about a more just and equitable world. Through our strategic focus areas, we support a growing base of people for whom Talmud study is a transformative spiritual practice, a roadmap for making radical change rooted in tradition, and the grounding force behind a bet midrash-centered movement made up of leaders of the Jewish future.

# Educating Rabbis to be Traditional Radicals...Once Again<sup>3</sup>

BY RABBI BENAY LAPPE

Rabbinic recognition of the full and equal Jew-ish personhood of gays and lesbians is a matter of nothing less than pikuach nefesh. But the nefesh at stake is not only that of gays and lesbians—it is the nefesh of Judaism itself.

What does this have to do with rabbinic education? Everything.

In one somewhat puzzling talmudic text (TB Sanhedrin 17a), we learn that the ability to use the Torah to declare a sheretz [a creepy crawly explicitly defined as impure by the Torah (Lev 11: 29)] to be pure was one of the skills a rabbi had to have to serve on the Sanhedrin. Another text (TB Eruvin 13b) brags of a student at Yavneh who could find 150 ways to declare a biblically impure sheretz pure! Now, clearly the concern was not the dignity of poor, maligned reptiles. So what was the point of training rabbinic students with such analytic acumen and audacity that they could find a way to declare clean that which the Torah deemed unclean—something that was clearly “impossible”?

It was so that when an overly formalistic application of a Torah verse yielded an intolerably harsh or oppressive result for a class of people—in which suffering was in fact caused by the laws of the Torah rather than alleviated by them—our rabbis would have not only the skill but also the courage to utilize the tradition in radical yet authentically Jewish ways to relieve that suffering, even if it initially appeared “impossible” to do so. The ultimate goal, we should remember, was not simply that the suffering at hand be eliminated, but that our tradition would continue to fulfill its mission: to enable Jews to become fully human, human beings, and to help us create a world where all barriers to the fulfillment of each person’s humanity are removed.

The academies of the talmudic era were not just rabbinical schools. They were think tanks where the many dilemmas of living in an era of enormous change were resolved with the most radical and courageous of new methodologies. The deans of our founding rabbinic institutions knew that there were “captives” to be freed—freed from the bondage of the laws of the Torah itself—and they were moved to do something about it. They understood that, if Judaism were to remain a believable and effective path to wholeness and a repaired world, then their mandate was to address these injustices and to use the Torah, in its broadest sense, to do so.

Our tradition’s early vision of rabbinic education was to train rabbis (a) first and foremost, to have the sensitivity to recognize who our tradition’s captives were, (b) to master the principles and mechanisms of the Jewish legal process, and (c) to have the courage to utilize them. I am convinced that they intended their record of this process—the Talmud—to be not so much a compendium of laws to follow as a blueprint for how to change those laws in authentically Jewish ways when necessary. It is a sixty-three-volume charge to future generations of rabbis to be observant enough to know when such times had come, compassionate enough to be moved by them, and courageous enough to utilize the radical talmudic methods bequeathed to them. We need to return to that vision of rabbinic education, to rabbinical schools that see themselves as modern Jewish think tanks—certainly so that we produce

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<sup>3</sup> This article originally appeared in *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Ideas* (2003).

humane and courageous rabbis, but, more important, so that Judaism remains a humane and courageous tradition.

How rabbis respond to their generation's captives determines the health of our nefesh as a people. Today, to the disgrace of our tradition, gay and lesbian Jews have been rendered captives by rabbis who either lack their ancestors' courage to be legal activists or who fail to realize the enormous pain they perpetuate with their inaction. We risk our nefesh as a people when we pretend that the only way to do the right thing is to step outside of a Jewish legal framework. And we risk our nefesh as a people when we diminish Jewish law—and God—by hiding behind an impoverished caricature of both, claiming that "Our hands are tied," or "It's God's will," allowing injustice and human suffering to continue.

## WHY WE TEACH TALMUD AT SVARA

**At SVARA, we teach Talmud in order to empower and transform learners so that they can grow into their boldest, most courageous and compassionate selves because we believe both that the Talmud is a guidebook (in form and in process) for liberation and radical innovation, and that the learning of it is a transformative spiritual practice.**

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### **As a result of learning at SVARA, we hope learners will...**

#### **1) learn how to learn Talmud.**

This is why we take a rigorous approach to the acquisition of text skills. We pay attention to the vocabulary and technical structures of the talmudic sugya. We also pay attention to the deeper messages of the Rabbis, whose ultimate concern in creating this new tradition—and in recording it through the Talmud—was not so much how to *act* (in a ritual context), or *what* to think, but rather, *how* to think.

#### **2) be transformed by the creativity, boldness, and innovative spirit that is what is most deeply Jewish about Jewish tradition.**

We learn Talmud to discern—and *resuscitate in order to apply to Judaism today*—the radical principles of the Jewish tradition which have been long submerged or reserved only for the elite rabbinic class in every generation. The experience of learning in the bet midrash, and the texts we learn there, demonstrates that what is considered “Jewish” is not static, and introduces learners to the mechanisms through which we have been making radical, transformative changes to and through tradition for millennia. Learners will witness and experience how courageously and radically this transformation has been carried out over the past two thousand years and how it might continue in this traditionally radical fashion today, and will bring these insights to their work and lives in and beyond the Jewish world.

#### **3) become empowered by gaining the confidence and expertise to engage with the Jewish tradition as “players.”**

The third purpose of our learning is to begin to nurture a cadre of “players” who will bring their insights and life experience to bear on the re-interpretation of Judaism today using a “traditionally radical,” i.e., rabbinic, approach. A player is a person who is actively and seriously engaged in pushing the tradition and being pushed by it. The talmudic requirements for being a player are that a person be both *gemirna* (learned/learning) and *sevirna* (possessing moral intuition; the queerer you are, the more *sevirna* you are).

#### **4) experience Talmud study as a spiritual practice.**

While the content of the texts themselves is a crucial component of our learning, the process (or practice) of learning Talmud in the original, *be'chevruta* (with a study partner), is at the core of the millenia-old spiritual practice called *derech ha'shas*, "the way of the Talmud." Its ultimate goals include self-awareness, the opportunity to reveal otherwise inaccessible inner truths, and the imbuing of the learning process itself with religious and spiritual meaning.

# Practicing Freedom in the Bet Midrash<sup>4</sup>

BY LAYNIE SOLOMAN, ASSOCIATE ROSH YESHIVA

Throughout this pandemic, in my learning, in my teaching, and beyond, I keep returning over and over to the same anchoring questions: What does it mean to be a yeshiva during a pandemic? How do we understand our work during a time of upheaval? What is the role of a yeshiva in a revolution?

Several weeks ago at SVARA's inaugural Queer Talmud Camp: Diaspora Edition, we opened that exploration up to our wider learning community and learned one of the Rabbis' most quoted texts that provided a powerful playground for this question:

וכבר היה רבי טרפון וזקנים מסובין בעלית בית נתזה בלוד  
נשאלה שאילה זו בפניהם תלמוד גדול או מעשה גדול  
נענה רבי טרפון ואמר מעשה גדול  
נענה ר"ע ואמר תלמוד גדול  
נענו כולם ואמרו תלמוד גדול שהתלמוד מביא לידי מעשה

*And it happened that Rabbi Tarfon and the elders assembled in the attic of Beit Nitza in Lod. The following question was asked from among them:*

*Is learning [talmud] greater, or is acting [ma'aseh] greater?*

*Rabbi Tarfon answered and said: Acting is greater.*

*Rabbi Akiva answered and said: Learning is greater.*

*They all answered and said: Learning is greater, as the learning brings [the learner] into the hands of acting.*

— *Kiddushin 40b*

The Rabbis, who invented the process of *talmud*, who placed learning at the center of their world, ask each other whether that is *really*, in fact, the best way that they could spend their days. Tucked away in a secret attic they finally allow themselves to utter their deepest fear, to express their true anxiety over their newly invented system: Is sitting in the bet midrash, learning, really the best use of our time, with everything we know burning around us, as we try to create a more liberated world?

They seem to resolve the question and assuage their anxiety as the sugya ends with the conclusion, "Learning is greater, as the learning brings [the learner] into the hands of action." But on second glance, it's not quite that simple. The conclusion of this text screams out "Interpret me!" as so many of our favorite sugyot do. If learning is only better because it leads to action, then isn't action better? Rabbi Akiva's position would seem to win the day!

<sup>4</sup> First posted in *Hot Off The Shtender* (September, 2020).



I've encountered this text dozens of times (though I'd never learned it in the original until we began exploring it for Queer Talmud Camp: Diaspora Edition!), and each time, this text was brought to explain the emphasis in our tradition on learning, supporting the powerful belief that learning is a transformative tool that can *lead* to action, and that learning and action, in some cases, can be one in the same.

This is the approach that supports the creation of anti-oppression book clubs or political education, for example, as folks realize that we must learn about harm caused, and build new frameworks in our minds, which will bring us into newly informed and transformed action. When we argue this, we claim, I think, that learning is actually a form of activism, where joining our book club is our first action step. However, as we ask ourselves what it means to invest time, energy, and care into our practice of learning, we should not get confused by this false synthesis. Learning is not the same as doing. *Talmud* and *ma'aseh* are not, at the end of the day, the same. We cannot be confused and distracted by the impulse to read this text to justify our learning by claiming that it is the entirety of *ma'aseh*.

*Ma'aseh*, at its core, is about transforming material conditions. The results of *ma'aseh* must be felt, seen, witnessed, experienced; *ma'aseh* is about acting in and through the world in such a way that it results in a clear change in a lived reality. Is the world actually different as a result of what I just did? How have material conditions changed as a result of my anti-oppression book club? This kind of learning is essential and beautiful, but it must then be put into action. As a student and teacher of talmud, I know that I need to do *ma'aseh*. And, I know that the only way to authentically do *ma'aseh* is by learning how to do it better, by learning what is needed, and by allowing deep learning to inform what I do. BUT the powerful *hiddush*, the innovation, of the resolution in our sugya, is not only to say that learning is greater because it deepens our action. I think there is something even more to it than that.

My read of this text was transformed when I brought it into conversation with another piece of holy text that has stirred me up from the great Sage of our time bell hooks about the process of learning and why it matters:

*The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.*<sup>5</sup>

- bell hooks

When we bring in bell hooks as a *rishon*, as a commentator on our sugya, we see that it's not that learning is where you go to figure out how to do *ma'aseh*. Learning doesn't inform *ma'aseh*, at least not only. It's that learning is where you practice *ma'aseh*—*education as the practice of freedom*—learning in which we embody freedom, to know freedom in our selves, in our bodies, in our hearts.

In the bet midrash, we don't learn about accountability, interdependence, and radical empathy by reading about it together and then bringing our learnings out into the world. We *practice* it in our chevruta relationships. We don't learn about how to be more loving, and then leave the bet midrash to

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<sup>5</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 207.

bring our insights about love into the world. We *practice* love in our learning space when we celebrate each other and embody a space that loves each other into loving the tradition and ourselves. Liberatory learning is not what we learn *about*, but how we learn. The bet midrash is not a place where we go to learn about something so that we can bring that knowledge out into the world. Instead, our learning spaces are where we practice the freest forms of who we are, and the world we want to create. When we learn like that, *that's the Talmud that brings [the learner] into the hands of action.*

And if that's how we're learning, if we've done it right, then **there's no way we won't change the material conditions and reality of the world.** May we invest in imagining who we want to be, how we want to be most aligned with our values and commitments, and how we want to accountably reground ourselves in who we are, as we find glimmers in the bet midrash of our freest selves as we practice who we want to be.

## STARTING FROM THE “SELF”: AN INVITATION FOR SVARA-STYLE TEACHERS

Teaching at SVARA is about learning in the front of the room. As a facilitator in the bet midrash, you are tasked with creating a celebratory space in which all learners—including you—are “showing their work,” so to speak. Your posture, questions, and leadership should elicit from the group *how* they arrived at any particular pronunciation, inside translation, or root. “Tell us more about how you got that!” and “How do you know that?” and “Which part of the word tells you that?” are the bread and butter of your teaching vocabulary. Asking learners to show their work to others in the space democratizes the learning that happened in each chevruta’s prep, and creates a process-oriented learning space in which learners are invested in each other’s growth.

When we’re facilitating a bet midrash, all we have at our disposal is our learning and our personality. This wisdom about SVARA-method learning (shared by beloved teacher & Queer Talmud comrade at SVARA Rabbi Dev Noily) is what informs our thinking about teacher training at SVARA, most expansively explored in SVARA’s Teaching Kollel. It is our practice of and relationship to learning and our very being—the way we move through the world—that we are offering to our learners when we facilitate a bet midrash session. SVARA’s Teaching Kollel is designed to help us bring our attention to these realms (what we call here “*gemirna*” and “*sevirna*”) so that we are able to reflectively, humbly, honestly, and resiliently allow our *gemara* and our *svara* to be of use to our learning communities.

As such, the rubric that follows—and the reflections that surround it—is not a report card or a checklist: it is a tool designed to help us bring attention to our practice and the way we move through the world. Given that what we have is who we are and how we learn, this *HoMoreh Derech* will start from a place of self—who you are and what brings you to this work, and then move to a place of learning and skill-building.

# reflection: your tree<sup>6</sup>

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**Step 1:** Draw a tree!

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<sup>6</sup> This exercise is adapted from a storytelling and narrative therapy workshop by Nathan B. Weller, "The Tree of Life: A Simple Exercise for Reclaiming Your Identity and Direction in Life Through Story."

**Step 2:** Follow the labeling instructions below. If you can only think of one or two things per section at a time, that's okay! The goal is to, as you complete each step, you'll unlock more memories and ideas for other parts. Just see where it takes you!

### **The Compost Heap**

Write down anything in your compost heap that would normally go in the other sections described below but which are now things you no longer want to be defined by. These are often sources of trauma, cultural standards of normality/beauty/etc. or anything else that shapes negative thoughts about yourself in your mind. You can write down places, people, problems, experiences. Whatever you need to.

### **The Roots**

Write down where you come from on the roots. This can be your hometown, state, country, etc. You could also write down the culture you grew up in, a club or organization that shaped your youth, or a parent/guardian.

### **The Ground**

Write down the things you choose to do on a weekly basis on the ground. These should not be things you are forced to do, but rather things you have chosen to do for yourself.

### **The Trunk**

Write your skills and values on the trunk. I chose to write my values starting at the base of the trunk going up. I then transitioned into listing my skills. For me this felt like a natural progression from roots to values to skills.

### **The Branches**

Write down your hopes, dreams, and wishes on the branches. These can be personal, communal, or general to all of humanity. Think both long and short term. Spread them around the various branches.

### **The Leaves**

Write down the names of those who are significant to you in a positive way. Your friends, family, pets, heroes, teachers, etc.

### **The Fruits**

Write down the legacies that have been passed on to you. You can begin by looking at the names you just wrote on leaves and thinking about the impact they've had on you and what they've given to you over the years. Most often this will be attributes such as courage, generosity, kindness, etc.

### **The Flowers & Seeds**

Write down the legacies you wish to leave to others on the flowers and seeds.

## reflection: talmud stories

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As we begin our learning with ourselves, it can be powerful to spend time reflecting on who we are and who we have been in our relationships with Talmud. Through this reflection, we locate ourselves in the emotional experiences, vignettes, and narratives that have shaped who we are as students of Talmud and this tradition. Sometimes these stories are painful, sometimes they are powerful, sometimes they are joyful, sweet, activating, and anything in between. These stories remind us of the place in ourselves from which we learn and teach.

Spend some time reflecting on the following:

- When/where did you first start learning Talmud?
- When was the first time you felt excited, alive learning Talmud?
  - Was there a specifically significant teacher, chevruta, bet midrash?
  - Was there a specific text?
  - How did you feel?
- When did you start teaching? How did you make the jump from learner to teacher?



## GEMARA & SVARA: THE REQUIREMENTS FOR BEING A “PLAYER”

At SVARA we are committed to making players, people who mess with, transform, and shape the tradition. The Talmud introduces two requirements for people to do this work: *gemara* and *svara*.<sup>7</sup>

### **gemara (“learning”) | גמרא**

root: גמר | to learn; complete; seal

&

### **svara (“moral intuition”) | סברא**

root: סבר | to hope; brighten; imagine; reason

**Being *gemirna***<sup>8</sup> (i.e., “having learned gemara”) means knowing your “learning,” or having facility with (what we call “owning”!) some canonized set of teachings. For the Rabbis, it simply meant knowing the teachings of their teacher—called *shmu’ot*<sup>9</sup> or *mishnayot*—backward and forward, just as that teacher had learned it from *their* teacher. To have “gemara” in the Talmudic era didn’t actually require knowing what we now call the Gemara—because it hadn’t been written yet! Instead, what being *gemirna* required was intimate knowledge of a relatively small canon.<sup>10</sup>

**Being *sevirna***<sup>11</sup> (i.e., “having cultivated svara”) means having and using svara. To paraphrase Menachem Elon, svara is an informed moral intuition based on a broad range of experiences, exposure to people different from ourselves, insight into human nature, and an understanding of the human condition. Rashi defines the process of using one’s svara in the following way:

*One who uses their “svara”...has first learned what the tanna'im would call “talmud”: knowing the foundational teachings of the Mishnah, with an understanding of the reasons behind each law—not only what is permitted or forbidden, pure or impure, but also why the law is that way and what source it has [of the five sources of Jewish law].*

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<sup>7</sup> See Sanhedrin 5a, Horayot 2b for a detailed explanation of what each term means, and for further exploration see Rashi’s comments on “gemar gemara” and “sevar sevara” on Sotah 20a and Eruvin 13a.

<sup>8</sup> Gemirna = גמירנא (*inside*: I am learned; *outside*: I know my stuff).

<sup>9</sup> Shmu’ot = שמועות (*inside*: hearings; *outside*: oral teachings).

<sup>10</sup> This raises important questions for communities today: What does it mean today for someone to be *gemirna*? How much would they have to know? And of which genres of Jewish literature? All of them? Only some of them? What are the other forms of knowledge, expertise, or understanding that inform one’s status as “learned”?

<sup>11</sup> Sevirna = סבירנא (*inside*: I have imagined, I have reasoned; *outside*: I have exercised and developed my “svara,” my guts and moral intuition).

*They then are able to apply their learning when a new question is asked in the bet midrash. They know how to use the existing teachings to answer the new question. This is "svara."*

- paraphrased from Rashi's Commentary to the Talmud, Sotah 20a<sup>12</sup>

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Svara implies a profound sensitivity and deep moral empathy for others, the courage to take action on an issue even when it is not popular or might cost us, and the knowledge and confidence to carry it out *in a Jewish way*—i.e., playing by the rules of the Jewish game, basing ourselves on the sources of Jewish law and the mechanisms of authentic Jewish change. Svara is what our *kishkes*<sup>13</sup> tell us is right, but only when it is shaped by being steeped in a learning community that grounds itself in Jewish values, principles, and texts.

Here we see that *svara* has to include *gemara*. The opposite is not true—we *could* be full of Jewish learning, but still be without the insight into human nature and empathy that would enable us to upgrade the tradition as needed. But we can't call what our *kishkes* tell us "svara" if we've never taken the opportunity to learn, to deepen our relationship to tradition. *Gemara* and *svara* work together to help us ground in, take root in, and transform our tradition in each generation.

Notice that getting ordained as a rabbi is *not* a requirement! Many of the talmudic sages whom we now call "the Rabbis" were never ordained and had no titles. (In fact, one of the the only things the title "rabbi" granted, in the time of the Talmud, was indemnity against financial damages in the event that you made a halachic decision that turned out to be wrong. In that event, the status of "rabbi" protects you from being sued. For a rad sugya that explores this, see Sanhedrin 5a!)

## **ON BEING GEMIRNA**

Informed by the approaches of feminist pedagogy, democratic education, and empowering learning, we developed a "Gemirna & Sevirna Rubric" to help us refine our practices of learning and teaching. In our rubric, we use "gemirna" to describe having facility and comfort with the processes of learning that enable us to play in, with, and through the tradition. It includes knowing our alef-bet, getting comfortable with our dictionaries, reference books, knowing how to learn in relationship to our chevrotas and communities, and having tools for what to do when we get stuck (...i.e., a lot of the stuff in this book!).

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<sup>12</sup> Full comment from Rashi: והדר אתא לקמיה דר"ע למיסבר סברא: לעמוד על עיקר טעמי המשנה מפני מה זה טמא וזה טהור זה אסור וזה מותר ועל מה כל דבר נסמך ועל איזה מקרא וזה תלמוד שהיה בימי התנאים ולהבין דבר מתוך דבר כשהיה דבר חדש נשאל בבית המדרש מהיכן ילמדוהו ולא יזהו משנה ידמוהו:

<sup>13</sup> Yiddish: intestines, guts.

# GEMIRNA RUBRIC

	WHERE AM I AT?	
<b>WORD &amp; SENTENCE   READING &amp; DECODING PHRASE BY PHRASE</b>		
Know why, when, and how to use the following bet midrash tools with comfort, facility, and significant fluency:		
→ Jastrow Dictionary		
→ Frank Dictionary		
→ Frank's <i>Grammar for Gemara</i>		
→ Steinsaltz's <i>Reference Guide to the Talmud</i>		
→ Shulamis Frieman's <i>Who's Who in the Talmud</i>		
→ Aryeh Carmell's <i>Aryeh Carmell's Aiding Talmud Study</i>		
→ Menachem Elon's <i>Principles of Jewish Law</i> (the one-volume edition)		
→ Menachem Elon's <i>Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles</i> (the four-volume edition)		
Attend to precision in Talmud reading & learning		
→ Read and analyze text with investment in reaching a clear and precise inside/outside translation		
→ Identify what's unclear about a text and why it's unclear		
→ Figure out Hebrew & Aramaic grammatical structures encountered in learning, and know the appropriate tools for further investigation		
→ Check understanding of a text using What It Means to "Own" A Word or Sentence (a.k.a. 15 Things to Know About a Word / 8 Things to Know About a Sentence)		

Have a strong practice of and familiarity with chevruta learning, both as a learner and a facilitator		
<b>SUGYA   UNDERSTANDING THE TALMUD'S LOGIC &amp; AGENDA</b>		
Read and translate a sugya independently (i.e., in chevruta) with bet midrash tools (without necessarily having complete understanding)		
Map out the structure of a sugya		
→ Identify the historical LAYERS of a Talmudic text (respond to language shifts, signal words, and key phrases)		
→ Read with attention to surfacing stamma's agenda in a text		
→ Figure out the agenda of the gemara using ACCeSS		
→ Understand, identify, and explain a kra proof using THREE STEPS OF A KRA PROOF and attention to subtle and creative wordplay		
Recognize FIVE SOURCES OF JEWISH LAW being used and how they're being used		
Identify themes and big questions that a text is opening up		
Know how to spot SVARA-itic teachable texts (i.e., those particularly well suited to being learned in SVARA's method)		
<b>DAF, MASECHET &amp; BEYOND   GOING DEEPER ON &amp; OFF THE PAGE</b>		
Identify core map of a daf		
Know how to read Rashi script		
Hold a posture of curiosity and confidence about the known and unknown contents of a masechet		
Actively decode hyperlinks on the daf, knowing WHAT it is, HOW it works, and WHY to use it		
Independently identify supplemental sources to research questions		

that emerge while learning a sugya		
Find and read texts in the broader genre of rabbinic literature and ask, "What is the relationship between this text and our sugya?"		
Find and read the codification of a text in a halakhic code and ask, "What is the relationship between this halakhic text and our sugya?"		
Know WHAT Rashi's commentary is, HOW to use it, and WHY to learn it		
Know WHAT Tosafot is, HOW to use it, and WHY to learn it		
Develop personal relationships with select Rishonim (Rashi, Tosafot, Rabeinu Chananel, etc.!)		
<b>THE RABBINIC PROJECT   UNDERSTANDING THE RADICAL LINEAGE &amp; HISTORIES OF THE RABBIS</b>		
Hold a posture of curiosity and confidence about known and unknown aspects of a) rabbinic history and b) the broader historical context for rabbinic literature		
Know the basic rabbinic timeline that includes: destruction of the Temple, editing of the Mishnah, closing of the Yerushalmi, closing of the Bavli, border dates of rabbinic categories		
Be familiar with rabbinic historical geography & political context (e.g., What empires did the rabbis live under? Where did they live? What do we know about what their worlds were like?)		
Know SVARA's perspective on Talmud and personal perspective, noticing where they overlap or contrast, including the answers to questions like: <i>What is the Talmud? Why did it emerge? What purpose does it serve? Why should we learn it?</i>		

# SEVIRNA RUBRIC

	WHERE AM I AT?	
<b>SELF-AWARENESS &amp; GROUNDEDNESS</b>		
Commit to cultivating a genuine sense of self-awareness, groundedness, and humility		
Demonstrate personal maturity, depth, thoughtfulness, wisdom, and warmth		
Commit to sensitively and attentively acknowledging and interrogating mechanisms of power and inequality in the world		
Maintain a commitment to personal growth through spiritual practice		
<b>POSTURE OF INQUIRY &amp; CURIOSITY</b>		
Hold a lovingly curious approach to text, learners, and self		
Hold a posture of curiosity, confidence, and a feeling of opportunity when relating to new people, ideas, and questions		
Demonstrate enthusiastic commitment to lifelong learning		
<b>QUEERNESS</b>		
Internalize & articulate SVARA's understanding of queerness (i.e., in terms of identity, power analysis, and values); articulate personal understanding of queerness in relation to SVARA's		
Uncover queer-headed, critical, creative readings		
Recognize injustice and systemic inequality both in the world and in the text and offer framing and wisdom for students to engage with it		
Cultivate awareness of the realities (cultural, political, personal, etc.) that impact your learners' lives in and beyond the bet midrash		
Recognize and articulate the radicalness and queerness of rabbinic innovation in the Talmud and rabbinic literature more widely		

## reflection: sticker-ing your rubric

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Pick three different stickers that make you feel fabulous. Put them in the little box on the left-hand side where it says 'Sticker' in order to create the following key:

Sticker:

= I'm excited to learn more about this!

Sticker:

= I can do this!

Sticker:

= I can teach this!



## reflection: revisiting your rubric

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As you wrap up your time in this program, take a moment to go back to this rubric to reflect on your learning and practice right now.

- How did you feel when you first saw this rubric? How do you feel now?
- Where have your answers changed? Where have they stayed the same? What is next for you and your learning?

## SECTION 2

# gemirna resources:

**TOOLS FOR CULTIVATING &  
PRACTICING INDEPENDENT LEARNING**

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## ABOUT THESE RESOURCES

In the SVARA bet midrash, we are almost always curating materials for our learners. As teachers and facilitators—public learners—we prep the text, we identify what is complex and compelling about it, we create a text breakdown that shapes the learners' experience, we make materials like Hint Sheets designed to support learning at all levels, we curate Supplemental Texts that speak powerfully to the concepts and ideas of the text in front of us, etc. A significant aspect of our teaching is curation.

All of this curation is enhanced and improved when we are rooted in our practice as learners. **These resources are designed to help you tend to your muscles as an independent learner who approaches Talmud from a grounded place, equipped to become a curator for others.** As you become a teacher in this method, your own learning will be the foundation from which you draw in order to hold and guide your learners.

# word & sentence

## READING & DECODING PHRASE BY PHRASE

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## KNOWING YOUR HEBREW LETTERS & VOWELS

### Alef-Bet Chart

PRONUNCIATION	NAME	SOFIT <sup>14</sup>	LETTER	NUMBER
Silent letter	<i>Alef</i>		א	1
<b>B</b> as in <b>B</b> all	<i>Bet</i>		ב	2
<b>V</b> as in <b>V</b> ase	<i>Vet</i>		בּ	
<b>G</b> as in <b>G</b> oofy	<i>Gimel</i>		ג	3
<b>D</b> as in <b>D</b> oor	<i>Daled</i>		ד	4
<b>H</b> as in <b>H</b> ouse	<i>Hey</i>		ה	5
<b>V</b> as in <b>V</b> ine	<i>Vav</i>		ו	6
<b>Z</b> as in <b>Z</b> oo	<i>Zayin</i>		ז	7
<b>CH</b> as in <b>CH</b> anukah	<i>Cet</i>		ח	8
<b>T</b> as in <b>T</b> axi	<i>Tet</i>		ט	9
<b>Y</b> as in <b>Y</b> am	<i>Yud</i>		י	10
<b>K</b> as in <b>K</b> ite	<i>Kaf</i>	ך	כ	20
<b>CH</b> as in <b>CH</b> anukah	<i>Caf</i>		כּ	
<b>L</b> as in <b>L</b> ight	<i>Lamed</i>		ל	30
<b>M</b> as in <b>M</b> ountain	<i>Mem</i>	ם	מ	40
<b>N</b> as in <b>N</b> ook	<i>Nun</i>	ן	נ	50
<b>S</b> as in <b>S</b> nake	<i>Samech</i>		ס	60

<sup>14</sup> Sofit = סופית (*inside*: final, *outside*: final letter, or the way the letter appears at the end of a word).

Silent letter	<i>Ayin</i>		א	70
<b>P</b> as in <b>P</b> arty	<i>Pey</i>	פ	ט	80
<b>F</b> as in <b>F</b> an	<i>Fey</i>		ט	
<b>TZ</b> as in <b>CaTS</b>	<i>TZadi</i>	ץ	א	90
<b>K</b> as in <b>K</b> ite	<i>Koof</i>		ק	100
<b>R</b> as in <b>R</b> obin	<i>Reish</i>		ר	200
<b>SH</b> as in <b>SH</b> ip	<i>SHin</i>		ש	300
<b>S</b> as in <b>S</b> nake	<i>Sin</i>		ש	
<b>T</b> as in <b>T</b> axi	<i>Tav</i>		ת	400

## Vowel Chart

PRONUNCIATION	TRANSLITERATION	NAME	VOWEL
<b>A</b> as in <b>A</b> qua	<i>Kamatz</i>	קָמָץ	אָ
<b>A</b> as in <b>A</b> qua	<i>Patach</i>	פָּתַח	אַ
<b>A</b> as in <b>A</b> qua	<i>Chataf Patach</i>	חֲטַף פָּתַח	אֲ
<b>I</b> as in <b>V</b> iolet			אֵי / אִי
<b>E</b> as in <b>RE</b> d	<i>Segol</i>	סֶגוֹל	אֵי / אִי
<b>E</b> as in <b>RE</b> d	<i>Chataf Segol</i>	חֲטַף סֶגוֹל	אֶ
Silent (when ending syllable)  <b>E</b> as in <b>AmE</b> thyst (when beginning a syllable)	<i>Sheva</i>	שְׁוָא	אִי
<b>AY</b> as in <b>GrAY</b>	<i>Tseirei</i>	צִירֵי	אֵי / אִי
<b>UE</b> as in <b>BIUE</b>	<i>Kubutz</i>	קִבּוּץ	אִי
<b>UE</b> as in <b>BIUE</b>	<i>Shuruk</i>	שׁוּרוּק	וּ
<b>EE</b> as in <b>GrEE</b> n	<i>Chirik</i>	חִירִיק	אֵי / אִי
<b>O</b> as in <b>YellOw</b>	<i>Cholem</i>	חֹלֶם	אוּ / אוֹ
<b>O</b> as in <b>YellOw</b>	<i>Chataf Kamatz</i>	חֲטַף קָמָץ	אָ
<b>AV</b> as in <b>AV</b> ocado			אֵיוּ / אִיוּ



## HEBREW FONTS

There are three styles of the alef-bet that you will encounter while learning Talmud.

### BLOCK LETTERS:

The core of the Talmud (Mishnah + Gemara) is printed in **block letters**, which is the standard form of Hebrew type found in most printed works.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ ק ר ש ת

### CURSIVE LETTERS:

Teachers at SVARA frequently write on the board with **“cursive” letters**. This script is the style of Hebrew handwriting that has become normative for Modern Hebrew speakers. Knowing this script will not only help you read your teachers’ writing, it will also make your own note-taking much faster.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ ק ר ש ת

### RASHI SCRIPT:

Some commentaries printed alongside the Talmud text on your daf (e.g., Rashi and Tosafot) are in an alternative font known as **“Rashi” script**. This printing convention was adopted so that these additional texts would be easily distinguishable from the Mishnah and Gemara, and got its name after it was used to print Rashi’s commentaries.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ ק ר ש ת

Below is a table showing the form of the alef-bet in all three styles:

א	ב	ג	ד	ה	ו	ז	ח	ט	י	כ	ך	ל	מ	ם	נ	ן	ס	ע	פ	ף	צ	ץ	ק	ר	ש	ת
א	ב	ג	ד	ה	ו	ז	ח	ט	י	כ	ך	ל	מ	ם	נ	ן	ס	ע	פ	ף	צ	ץ	ק	ר	ש	ת
א	ב	ג	ד	ה	ו	ז	ח	ט	י	כ	ך	ל	מ	ם	נ	ן	ס	ע	פ	ף	צ	ץ	ק	ר	ש	ת

Tip: Highlight the letters in cursive and Rashi script that look significantly different from their familiar block counterparts. Also, pay special attention to differentiating between letters that look similar—for example, lamed and tzadi in Rashi script.

## HOW TO FIGURE OUT WHAT YOUR WORD MEANS

The process for figuring out the meaning of a word begins by breaking it down into its components and then building it back up to its full definition. Most words in Hebrew have a three-letter root. This root encodes a core nugget of meaning, but on its own, it is not a complete word. Imagine a root as a person. The person has a core identity, but depending on what they're doing at any given time, they will dress in clothing that fits the role. Roots become words by dressing up and accessorizing with vowels and affixes that communicate their meaning in that context. "Affix" is an umbrella term that includes prefixes (bits that attach to the beginning), suffixes (bits that attach to the end), and infixes (bits that attach by worming into the middle).

1. **Make your best guess at identifying the root** by eliminating prefixes, suffixes and infixes. At SVARA, we're all about finding roots! → Use **HINTS FOR FINDING THE ROOT** as a guide!

If you're stuck trying to identify the root letters, try looking up the word as is! You may have to remove a plural suffix (or a prefixed preposition) to use this approach. If you find your word this way, use Jastrow to find the root—Jastrow will indicate the root in parentheses (or sometimes with a root symbol, like this: √ ). Now look up that root! Always look up the root of every word, even if you've found the definition of the entire word as it appears in the text.

Finally, don't be reluctant to use your Hint Sheet, which may guide you to your root or suggest an alternative approach to tricky words.

2. **Look up your root in the Jastrow Dictionary** (remember, Jastrow is organized by root!) and identify your root's core meaning. → See **JASTROW AND FRANK PRIMER** and **ANATOMY OF JASTROW ENTRY** for more on how to use these dictionaries!
3. **See what you can learn from the affixes.** Is there a prefixed preposition that explains how the word relates to its context? Is the word a noun or a verb? If it's a verb, what binyan is it in? What tense is it? Who or what is the subject? → See **BINYAN BASICS**.
4. Remember: The Talmud is an Oral Tradition. It is not meant to be fully understood merely from the words written down. Don't spend too much time trying to figure out exactly what the sentence means as you look up words in chevruta. Translate as many words as you can during chevruta time, and we'll put the pieces of the puzzle together during shiur.

## HINTS FOR FINDING THE ROOT

Roots usually have 3 letters. Eliminate prefixes, infixes and/or suffixes to find your 3-letter root. These letters are always root no matter where they appear in the word: ט ר צ פ ע ס ח ז ג (ט is very rarely an infix)

1. Eliminate prefixes, infixes, suffixes:

Suffixes	Prefixes
א- Aram. conjugation: <b>past or present</b>	Aram. preposition: ' <b>on, about</b> ' א-
ה- Heb. conjugation: <b>past, 'she did' or present 'I/you/she is'</b>	Aram. binyan: <b>afel</b> א-
ה- Heb. pronoun: ' <b>her, hers</b> '	conjugation: <b>future, 'I will'</b> א-
הם- Heb. possessive pronoun: ' <b>their (m.)</b> '	Aram. binyan: <b>itp'el and itpa'al</b> אי-
הן- Heb. possessive pronoun: ' <b>their (f.)</b> '	Aram. binyan: <b>itp'el and itpa'al</b> את-
ו- Heb. conjugation: <b>past, 'they (m.) did' or future, pl.</b>	preposition: ' <b>in, with</b> ' ב-
ו- Heb. Poss. pronoun: ' <b>him, his</b> '	Aram. preposition: ' <b>that, of</b> ' ד-
ון- noun-ifier	Heb. article: ' <b>the</b> ' ה-
ות- Heb. conj: <b>present 'we/y'all/they (f.) are' or noun: pl. f.</b>	Heb. binyan: <b>hifil, past</b> ה-
י- Heb. conjugation: <b>future, 'you (f.) will'</b>	Heb. binyan: <b>hitpa'el, past</b> הת-
י- Heb. pronoun: ' <b>me, my</b> '	conjunction: ' <b>and</b> ' ו-
י- Heb. noun: <b>pl. m. in construct state</b>	conjugation: <b>future, 'he will, they will'</b> י-
י- Aram. noun: <b>pl. m.</b>	preposition: ' <b>like, as</b> ' כ-
יה- Aram. pronoun: ' <b>him, his</b> '	preposition: ' <b>when</b> ' כש-
יו- Heb. pronoun: ' <b>him</b> '	Heb. binyan: <b>nifal, past and present</b> נ-
ים- Heb. conj: <b>present 'we/y'all/they (m.) are' or Noun: pl. m.</b>	conjugation: <b>future, 'we will'</b> נ-
ין- Heb. conj: <b>present 'we/y'all/they (m.) are' or Noun: pl. m.</b>	preposition: ' <b>to, for</b> ' ל-
ית noun-ifier	Heb. conjugation: <b>infinitive</b> ל-
ך- Heb. pronoun: ' <b>you, your (singular)'</b>	Aram. conj: <b>future or jussive, 'he/we will'</b> ל-
כם- Heb. pronoun: ' <b>y'all, y'all's (m.)</b> '	Aram. conj: <b>future or jussive, 'he/we will'</b> ליי-
כן- Heb. pronoun: ' <b>y'all, y'all's (f.)</b> '	Aram. conjugation: <b>p'al infinative</b> למי-
נא- Aram. conjugation: <b>present, 'I am'</b>	preposition: ' <b>from</b> ' מ-
נו- Heb. conjugation: <b>past, 'we did'</b>	Heb.& Aram. conjugation: <b>present</b> מ-
נו- Heb. direct object: ' <b>him' or 'us</b> '	noun-ifier מ-
ני- Heb. direct object: ' <b>me</b> '	Heb. binyan: <b>hitpa'el, present</b> מת-
ת- Heb. conj: <b>past, 'you (singular)' or present 'I/you/she is'</b>	<b>Aram. emphasis marker for participles</b> ק-
ת- Heb. noun: <b>singular, f. in construct state</b>	Heb. preposition: ' <b>that, of</b> ' ש-
תי- Heb. conjugation: <b>past, 'I did'</b>	conj: <b>future, 'you will, y'all will, she will'</b> ת-
תם- Heb. conjugation: <b>past, 'y'all (m.) did'</b>	noun-ifier ת-
תן- Heb. conjugation: <b>past, 'y'all (f.) did'</b>	

## Infixes

- 1 - - passive participle pi'el gerund	- - 1 - pa'al, present tense pu'al	- ' - - hifil most Aramaic binyanim	- - ' - pi'el gerund
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2. Only **two letters left**? The following letters are weak and tend to fall out: ה ו א י נ. They typically fall out from the following positions:

3rd position	2nd position	1st position
י - -	- 1 -	- - 1
ה - -		- - י
א - -		- - א (only in Aramaic)

In addition to the weak letters above, words built from roots of the form פלל (in which the second and third root letter are the same) often drop one of the repeated root letters. These are called **geminate roots**.

3. Eliminated everything and still have **four letters left**? A small number of Hebrew and Aramaic words have four-letter roots.
4. Still stuck? Try looking up the word as is in Jastrow, or take a look at your Hint Sheet to see if there are any special notes about this word.

## JASTROW AND FRANK PRIMER

### Jastrow

**What's inside:** Every word in Rabbinic literature (well...almost!)

**Organized by:** Roots. Find the root of the word you're looking for (→ See **HINTS FOR FINDING THE ROOT**); then you can find it in Jastrow. You can also sometimes find words in Jastrow, particularly nouns, as they appear in your text (minus prefixes and suffixes), which can help you find the root to chase down.

**Direction:** Left to right (like English)

### Jastrow Tips:

Often there are multiple entries for the same three letter root in Jastrow—make sure you start with the first one and take a look at them all. Note what language you're working in—Hebrew or Aramaic—and make sure you are looking at the right entry. Jastrow marks Hebrew entries with b.h. and Aramaic entries with ch.

→ See **ANATOMY OF A JASTROW ENTRY**.

**Clues that you're in Hebrew:** You're in a mishnah or a Baraita (Baraitas will be introduced by ת"ר or some other form of the word תניא)

**Clues that you're in Aramaic:** (1) You're in the gemara—not a mishnah—particularly unattributed sections of gemara (2) You see lots of these: prefixes: —ך Suffixes: —א— or —יה—

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### Frank

**What's inside:** Technical terms and other *very common*, mostly Aramaic, words and phrases. Plus: a great list of acronyms in the back.

**Organized by:** Whole words or phrases, alphabetically, *not by root*.

**Direction:** Right to left (like Hebrew)

### Frank Tips:

- Be sure to take a look at the entries immediately before or after the one where you've found the word from your text. Frank defines common phrases and often a word will appear in several phrases, one after another in the dictionary. Skim through all entries with your word to find your phrase, or skim other phrases that include your word to find out more about what it might mean.
- Most of the words in Frank are Aramaic. He gives a Hebrew definition for the word as well, immediately to the left of the entry.
- Headwords are in bold.

- Frank explains how the word works, i.e., not just the literal definition of the word, but what it implies and how it is used in the Talmud as a rhetorical device. This is why we love Frank.
- Read the whole entry! Read the examples! They can help you understand how the words fit together in context and what moves the Rabbis are making.

## ANATOMY OF A JASTROW ENTRY

The Jastrow Dictionary has a whole lot of information! Often the answers we need are somewhere in the entry, and the trick is knowing where and how to find them. Below you'll find the common features of a Jastrow entry explained through two sample entries, one verb and one noun. We'll start with the entry for **לָמַד I לָמַד** found on page 712. This is our verb!

<p>לָמַד I לָמַד</p>	<p><b>Headword.</b> This entry is for the verb derived from the root לָמַד. The headword of a verb entry is typically the verb conjugated in the past tense, third person, masculine singular of Binyan Pa'al—i.e. the <i>'he did it'</i> form. You can tell it's a verb because the definitions are all infinitives (i.e. they begin 'to...'). (See the section below for a tour of a noun entry!)</p>
<p>(b. h.)</p>	<p><b>Langage.</b> (b. h.) indicates biblical Hebrew. (ch.) stands for Chaldaic—an old-fashioned name for Aramaic.</p>
<p><i>Pi.</i></p>	<p><b>Binyan label.</b> Roots can be transformed to derive several related but distinct verbs. Each of these distinct verbs is said to be in a different binyan and each binyan transforms the roots meaning a characteristic way. Jastrow devotes one paragraph to each binyan and begins each paragraph with an abbreviation of the binyans name. Unless noted otherwise the first paragraph is always binyan pa'al. → See <b>BINYAN BASICS</b>.</p>
<p>לָמַד, לִימַד</p>	<p><b>Vocalization.</b> The verb conjugated in the past tense, third person, masculine, singular of the specified binyan (in this case pi-el).</p>
<p>1) <i>to join; to arrange...</i> —2) <i>to train, to accustom.</i></p>	<p><b>Definition.</b> The meaning of the verb in the specified binyan. Definitions in Jastrow appear in italics. Often Jastrow lists multiple definitions for the same word, and will begin each definition with a number, 1) 2) 3)... Each subsequent definition is set off with a —. Sometimes, in place of a definition, you will find the word "same," which indicates that your word has the same meaning as whatever came before it.</p>



Next, we'll take a look at the entry for **תלמוד** which you'll find on page 1672. This is a noun!

<b>תלמוד</b>	<b>Headword.</b> This entry is for the noun derived from the root למד. The headword of a noun entry is given in the singular form.
m.	<b>Grammatical gender.</b> The indication of a grammatical gender communicates that the entry is for a noun. m. stands for masculine; f. for feminine; c. for common gender (i.e. the noun is used with both masculine and femine verbs).
(למד)	<b>Root.</b> Typically Jastrow lists the root of a noun in parentheses. If you're not looking at the root entry, be sure to chase down that root!
B. Mets. 33 <sup>b</sup> ; Ab. IV, 13 הוי זהיר בת' ששגגת ת' וכ' be careful in teaching, for an error in teaching &c.	<b>Usage example.</b> A quotation from rabbinic literature that illustrates a typical use of the word. The bulk of most dictionary entities is a series of usage examples. Sometimes you find a usage example that quotes from the very text you are learning—we call this a Jastrow bonus. These are the components of a usage example:
B. Mets. 33 <sup>b</sup> ; Ab. IV, 13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Usage example: Citation.</b> Where the example comes from. In this case the same passage appears both on Bava Metzia 33b and in Mishnah Avot Chapter 4, Mishnah 13. Usage examples may be quoted from the Bavli , the Mishnah, the Yerushalmi (indicated by Y. before the masechet name), and other rabbinic texts.</li> </ul>
הוי זהיר בת' ששגגת ת' וכ'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Usage example: Quotation.</b> The actual example of the word's use in context. Jastrow often abbreviates words and truncates the quotation. In this example בת' is an abbreviation for בתלמוד. Truncated quotations end in וכ', an abbreviation for וכו', which means "etc."</li> </ul>
be careful in teaching, for an error in teaching &c.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Usage example: Translation.</b> Beware: the Jastrow dictionary was published in 1903 and was written in Victorian English! The translations Jastrow provides are very 'outside'—they can give you a sense of the nuance of a word, but you should be sure to distinguish the meaning of your word from the meaning supplied by the context.</li> </ul>
a. fr.	<b>Frequency.</b> After a citation, an indication of how often the word is used in this way. A particular usage may occur in the corpus "and very frequently," "and frequently," or 'and elsewhere.'
— ת' תורה	<b>An idiomatic phrase.</b> Just like before a numbered definition, the '—' here indicates a section break within the entry. Here, the new section lists a common phrase using the headword. Often Jastrow will define the phrase

	and a citation for where it can be found in use.
v. תורה	<b>Vide.</b> V. is an abbreviation for <i>vide</i> , Latin for 'see,' which directs you to a different entry in the dictionary. In this example Jastrow is telling you the preceding phrase is defined within the entry for תורה.

## WHAT DO I DO WHEN I'M STUCK?!: TIPS FOR UNSTICKING YOURSELF

When we're in the bet midrash and we get stuck, we call over a Fairy who flies over to us to help us get unstuck. Fairies are at their most powerful and most supportive when they guide us towards realizing what our questions are and where, precisely, we are getting stuck. Fairies are not there to give us the answers. When we're learning independently, it can be difficult to move forward without the opportunity to be guided and redirected in this way, and it can be tempting to immediately peek at an online translation. This might be the right choice, but it shouldn't be the first choice!

### STEP 1: KEEP TRYING TO FIGURE IT OUT

Try for a ridiculous amount of time to understand what's going on. This part is key: don't give up so easily. **Learning Talmud in this method is about supporting our "uncertainty muscles," and helping us become more resilient people who are able to tolerate being in the space of not knowing.** Many times we have exactly what we need in order to figure out what we need to figure out, but we don't give ourselves the amount of time we need to explore the possibilities that would help us unlock the text. Take an absurd amount of time to keep going through it, and don't be discouraged: if you're in it, you're doing it right!

### STEP 2: FIGURE OUT YOUR QUESTION

Knowing what you don't know and *why you don't know it* is a huge part of developing your muscles as an independent learner. This is can be the difference between flagging down a Fairy to come over because "you're "stuck" and flagging down a Fairy to come over to help you decode a specific word, phrase, etc. **Can you figure out with your chevruta what the *specific* question you have is?** Are you unsure about a particular word, prefix, grammatical form, subject, phrase, etc.? → Use **WHAT IT MEANS TO OWN A TEXT** to guide you through your understanding word-by-word and sentence-by-sentence to see if you can figure out what your questions are. Once you've got your question, you can ask a teacher, a comrade, a group of comrades, etc., for support. Remember: as Maggid Jhos Singer says, "The Talmud is too big for one brain," so learning collaboratively and asking questions of our peers is a perfect pathway to getting unstuck.

### STEP 3: CONSULT YOUR RESOURCES

- Look forward & look down: Is there something or someone on the page that can help you? Rashi? Someone else?
- Check the Steinsaltz *Reference Guide* for key words and concepts that you might have missed.
- Check out a Hebrew Steinsaltz vocalized printing of the sugya. This can be useful if you don't want to know *too much* and you just want a hint. You might consider Steinsaltz like a Hint Sheet! You'll still get the joy of figuring out the Hebrew. Once you get a hint from Steinsaltz, go back to your daf see if you can get unstuck.

- If you're still stuck, you can head over to a translation for support. Once you consult the translation, try to see if you can figure out how they got that translation (like working backwards from a Jastrow bonus). Re-examine the word and the sugya to get the inside translation, and see if you agree with the translation as it's presented.

## **CONSULTING TRANSLATIONS**

We do not allow folks in our bet midrash to consult translations, even when they're stuck. When learning on our own, we understand that sometimes we must consult translations. We only do this when we don't have access to a teacher, and we've tried all other options. In this case, a translation serves a teacher who doesn't live in a human body. Translations can be used like teachers: when you and your chevruta are stuck, consider how you might use the translation like a teacher. Our learners need not consult a translation, because they *do* have access to living human teachers in front of them: us!

In addition, in the bet midrash, checking a translation can reinforce for our learners that learning is about getting the answer. We want them, instead, to *learn how to learn*, to be in the magic of what happens in the process of figuring out.

After consulting a translation in your own learning, consider what is it you now know that you didn't know before? How can you add that nugget to your toolbox, so that the next time you encounter it you'll recognize it?

## WHAT IT MEANS TO “OWN” A WORD OR SENTENCE

a.k.a. 15 Things to Know About a Word / 8 Things to Know About a Sentence

**On the word level, know *from memory* these 15 things about each word:**

1. Language—Hebrew or Aramaic
2. Root letters
3. Core meaning of root
4. Prefixes
5. Suffixes
6. Part of speech—noun, verb, adjective, preposition, etc.

Plus, if it's a verb:

7. Tense
8. Person
9. Number—singular or plural
10. Gender
11. Binyan
12. Grammatical mood—command, jussive, stative, etc.
13. Inside (literal) translation
14. Vocalization/pronunciation
15. Outside (contextual) translation

**On the sentence level, know *from memory* these 8 things:**

1. Inside and outside translations, as well as an expanded (yet concise) explanation where necessary
2. How to recite the text fluently, with correct phrasing and punctuation
3. The technical terms and how they work
4. Who is speaking (i.e., which side of the argument does each utterance represent?)
5. The historical period of each utterance (i.e., is it tannaitic, amoraic, or the stamma?)
6. The function of the utterance (i.e., is it a statement, question, challenge, resolution...?)
7. How does each utterance relate to what came before?
8. The implicit antecedents of every pronoun

**A NOTE ON “OWNERSHIP” IN LEARNING:** “Owning a text,” even though it sounds like something you do once and for all, is an iterative process. The lists above can guide you as you start this iterative process, helping you know what you *can know now*. When you “own a text,” you should feel confident that you own it 100%—you can recite it in your sleep and teach it to someone who's never learned a page of Talmud and they'll totally get it. And *yet...*the next time you encounter the same text, you'll surprise yourself by learning something new that totally transforms your understanding of the text. You'll say, “Oh, *now* I see what's going on here!” and realize that now

you *really* own it...until the next time you learn it, when you'll get it at an even deeper level, and on and on. That's the way Talmud works. Life, too.

## WHY LEARN GRAMMAR

Take a moment and consider:

- Why are you embarking on this grammar exploration? What are you hoping to learn/to be able to do?
- What past learning experiences are you bringing into this space?

The study of grammar can be a complex endeavor; as learners we might feel disempowered about the idea of “grammar” as an outside force, a code of information and rules that *other* people, or people with power, know, that we can’t understand. In the bet midrash, people often use the word “grammar” as a stand-in for any aspects of a word or translation or movement from inside to outside that they can’t fully understand. In this way, grammar itself comes to represent the feelings of confusion, opacity, confusion, frustration, or anything beyond our reach!

As queer folks and folks committed to multiple ways of knowing, we may have encountered grammar as a rigid and restrictive set of rules. We know the ways in which grammatical systems are used to disenfranchise people, now and historically. Many of us have also had “grammar” weaponized against us in our own lives, and for so many of us just the idea of “grammar” can represent patriarchy, oppressive schooling, and class-based or racialized domination. Yuck! All of this is real and true, and we bring these experiences to our learning.

And yet! The exploration of grammar can also serve as a key that helps us unlock new arenas of empowerment in our learning. Grammar is, quite simply, “how words change their form and combine with other words to make sentences” (*Cambridge Dictionary*). In other words, “grammar” is about the norms and the systems behind that process that we uncover as we go “inside” of words and sentences. Grammar is how we put together the words and sounds each time we reconstruct a word after dissecting it to its smallest components (a three-letter root, prefixes, suffixes, and infixes).

We are not here to be prescriptivists, to “learn grammar” as a subject or a field of study so that we can dictate the ways in which grammar should be used. We come to this work as aspiring players, learning the systems that will help us play in, with, and through our tradition with more tools and more confidence. Our focus is on the work of decoding grammatical structures, noticing and uncovering what is in our texts, and revealing meaning at the highest level that we can.

## ALL ABOUT GRAMMAR

### Roots

As we know, Hebrew has this phenomenon of ROOTS<sup>15</sup>—those delicious, usually three-letter kernels of meaning we’ve been encountering!

So, Hebrew has two kinds of words:

- 1) **Words that don’t come from roots, called particles** (in the sense of “itty-bitty things”). These include pronouns (e.g., *me, them, her, mine*); question words (e.g., *why, where, how-in-the-hell?!*); conjunctions (e.g., *but, and, or*); and some prepositions (e.g., *as, from, to*). Particles are lovely but we won’t be saying anything else about them here, because this resource is about roots.
- 2) **Words that do come from roots.** Most Hebrew words are in this root-ed category, including nouns (e.g., *cats, waterfall, cinematography, toothpaste*); adjectives (e.g., *joyful, cool, neon-green*); adverbs (e.g., *slowly, soon, fully*); many prepositions (e.g., *under, regarding, during*); and verbs (which will be the focus of the rest of this resource; e.g. *eat, celebrate, scurry*).

A ROOT on its own is not a word...yet. It needs at least a couple of vowels to become a word, and it often gets more vowels than that and extra consonants, too. Below is an example of a root in its full procreative glory, expanding into all the types we just mentioned (nouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositions, adverbs, oh my—!).

**root: פנה *turn***

פָּנָה turn (one’s face), turn around, turn away<sup>16</sup>

פְּנִיָּה sunset

פְּנוּיָתָא turning away from everything; special business

פִּינָה remove

הִתְפַּנָּה be removed

הִפְנָה vacate

מִפְנָה vacancy

נִפְנָה be removed; die; be at leisure

פְּנוּי vacant, empty, free

<sup>15</sup> In Hebrew, these “roots” are called *shorashim* / שורשים = (*inside: roots; outside: roots!*)

<sup>16</sup> Definitions drawn from Jastrow.



מוֹפְּנֵה	single (i.e., unpartnered); free for exegetical interpretation; extraneous to the peshat of the text
פָּנִי	free from service; restless
פָּנִים	face, front
לְפָנַי	in front of
פְּנִים	the inside (i.e., what faces you when you enter), interior
בְּפָנִים	inside (of), indoors
פְּנִמִּי	inner, innermost, central
פְּנִמִּיּוֹת	relating to the innermost (i.e., to the Holy of Holies)

All those examples are ancient Hebrew and Aramaic words, and modern Hebrew has even more words that come from this root, with meanings about face-i-ness and inside-ness, like *boarding school*, *ulterior motive*, *confidential*, and *before* (i.e., in front of—in time!).

## From Root to Verb

VERBS are basically words that describe actions (even if a gym teacher wouldn't consider them "active"; *daydream*, *imagine*, *contemplate*, *snooze*, and *snuggle* are all verbs too!). VERBS are things we do or that get done.

So, how do we get from a three-letter Hebrew ROOT with the core meaning of *dance* to a real-live Hebrew VERB that means "we will dance" [the night away]? Or from a root with the core meaning of *write* to a verb that means "y'all corresponded"? Here's how: The ROOT gets dressed up in a dazzling outfit of vowels and affixes!

It may help to detour into English for a moment. The Hebrew system might be new, strange, and confusing to us, *but each* of us already knows at least one English system for changing around the core of a word to get different meanings. Think of all these forms our Englishes have relating to "eat": *eats*, *eating*, *ate*, *eaten*, *have eaten*, *am eating*, *be's eating*, *done ate*, *will eat*. What a wardrobe of outfits! All we're gonna do now is learn the Rabbis' system for specifying their own shades of meaning.

Soon enough, we are going to see roots in a lot of different outfits (i.e., vowels + affixes). It's going to be a full-on fashion show. But first, let's go over the five things that impact what outfit a Hebrew ROOT picks when it heads out to become a VERB in a sentence: BINYAN, TENSE, PERSON, NUMBER, and GENDER—plus a bonus concept called SUBJECT.

## Five Things That Determine a Verb's Outfit:

(1) **BINYAN**: We'll put a sticky on this one and get back to it later in this resource.

**(2) TENSE:** When the verb happens—in the *present*, the *past*, or the *future*.

**(3) PERSON:** The rules here are relatively straightforward:<sup>17</sup>

- If the verb's subject<sup>18</sup> is *I* or *we*, it's a 1ST PERSON subject.
- If the verb's subject is *you* or *y'all*, it's a 2ND PERSON subject.
- If the verb's subject is anything else, it's a 3RD PERSON<sup>19</sup> subject. That includes *they*, *she*, *he*, *Mr. Rogers*, *donkeys*, and *the Rabbis*.

**(4) NUMBER:** All we need to know here is whether one subject verb'ed or more than one subject verb'ed.

- *I*, *she*, *goose*, *cup*, and *idea* are SINGULAR subjects.
- *We*, *geese*, *cups*, and *ideas* are PLURAL subjects.

**(5) GENDER:** GRAMMATICAL GENDER both overlaps with and differs from people's gendered experiences. While there are a range of gendered experiences that people have as they move throughout the world (thank G!d), Hebrew and Aramaic grammar only mark two genders. In these languages, most verbs, all adjectives, and all nouns—even inanimate objects and abstract concepts!—are gendered as either "FEMININE" or "MASCULINE."<sup>20</sup> So, when we read and decode the Talmud, we encounter some markers of GRAMMATICAL GENDER in almost every word we read.<sup>21</sup>

Sometimes, Hebrew verbs wear the same outfit no matter the grammatical gender of their subjects. This happens when we have particular combinations of tense and person (like first-person verbs in future & past tenses). Those verb forms aren't inflected for GRAMMATICAL GENDER, so we call those forms COMMON GENDER.

The gendering of objects and people coercively through language can be harmful and icky, and we're not here for coercive gendering of *anything*, so why is this important!? When we're decoding a piece of Talmud, understanding how GRAMMATICAL GENDER works can help us crack open the case. It can help us get precise about what our subject is, who or what is being referred to as the direct object, etc., which can totally transform our reading of a text! There is *also* some powerful drashy-drashy potential that can come from being anchored in the fixed categories as they were used, so that we can play with them—joyfully and subversively!—as we go Option 3.

### And what's with 3ms, 2fp, and such?

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<sup>17</sup> The way to understand the rules, if one cares to, is that PERSON reflects the relationship between the verb's SUBJECT and the sentence's speaker or writer.

<sup>18</sup> The SUBJECT is the person or thing that's doing the verb. Every verb has one, even if you can't spot it right away!

<sup>19</sup> The concept of a "third party" can be a helpful mnemonic here. If it's not *me*, *us*, or *you*, it's some "third party."

<sup>20</sup> Despite using a binary system in their language, we sometimes see the Rabbis engage playfully and creatively with grammatical gender—and lived gender!—in the texts they handed down to us.

<sup>21</sup> We also know that the Rabbis had at least some cultural concepts of more than two genders and sexes.

These are just abbreviations for combinations of PERSON, GENDER, and NUMBER.

[1, 2, 3]: FIRST PERSON, SECOND PERSON, or THIRD PERSON

[m, f, or nothing]: MASCULINE, FEMININE, or COMMON GENDER (unspecified)

[s, p]: SINGULAR or PLURAL

## Patterns of Tenses

### PAST TENSE

PAST-TENSE verbs wear suffixes on their roots. Which suffix is determined by the PERSON, NUMBER, and sometimes the GRAMMATICAL GENDER of the verb's subject. These suffixes are great little clues for us while we learn; if you recognize one, you immediately know quite a bit about the meaning of your word. For example, if you see the word כתבתי and recognize the suffix תי[—], you know that you are dealing with a past-tense, first-person, singular verb—something that will take the form “I verb'ed” once you figure out what your root means!

The table below shows the suffixes associated with each subject in the past tense.

#### Past Tense

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st	תי— (common gender)		נו— (common gender)	
2nd	ת—	ת—	תם—	תן—
3rd	[no suffix]	ה—	ו— (common gender)	

## FUTURE TENSE

A FUTURE-TENSE verb wears a prefix, and sometimes a suffix too, determined by the PERSON, NUMBER, and sometimes the GRAMMATICAL GENDER of its subject. Again, when we can pick these out during our learning, we can get a whole lot of information about a word before we even know the meaning of the root!

### Future Tense

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st	אֶבְרָא (common gender)		נִבְרָא (common gender)	
2nd	תִּבְרָא	תִּבְרָאִי	תִּבְרָאוּ	תִּבְרָאוּן or תִּבְרָאוּ
3rd	יִבְרָא	תִּבְרָא	יִבְרָאוּ	תִּבְרָאוּן or יִבְרָאוּ

A few things to note, which will always be true in future-tense verbs; The 2ms and 3fs forms look the same; we have to decode these by context. In rabbinic Hebrew, the 2mp and 2fp forms are also lookalikes, as are 3mp and 3fp<sup>22</sup>.

## PRESENT TENSE

PRESENT-TENSE verbs wear suffixes that may look familiar to you from Hebrew nouns and adjectives, determined by the NUMBER and GRAMMATICAL GENDER of their subjects. Freebie: they aren't impacted by PERSON, so that's fewer forms to get familiar with!

<sup>22</sup> The תִּבְרָא—נָה form is from biblical Hebrew, so we encounter it mostly in quotes from Torah. Rabbinical Hebrew, which accounts for a bigger ratio of what we read, uses the lookalike forms (essentially common-gender forms).

## Present Tense (a.k.a., Active Participles <sup>23</sup>)

		Singular		Plural	
		Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st, 2nd & 3rd	[no suffix]	ה— or ה—	ים—	ות—	

PRESENT-TENSE verbs often throw on some prefixes and infixes, too, before they leave the house. We'll see examples of those in the BINYANIM sections ahead.

Note: the outfits of present-tense verbs are identical to those of something else, called the verb's ACTIVE PARTICIPLES. Active participles are sometimes described as “verbal adjectives,” because they relate to the meaning of the verb, but the role they play is a descriptive one, like an adjective. Here are some examples in English:

### Present-tense verb

The panda **saunters**.

The people **celebrate**.

### Active participle

The panda, **sauntering** through the forest, feels the breeze on his fur.

The **celebrating** people are making a lot of noise.

And here are some examples in Hebrew:

הוא כותב He **writes**.

האיש הכותב... The **writing** guy / The guy **[who] writes**...

...הכותב **[One who] writes**...

<sup>23</sup> For the nerds: Biblical Hebrew actually didn't have tense; instead, it had a perfect “aspect” to express completed actions and an imperfect aspect to describe incomplete actions. Those aspects were recycled as the past and future tenses, respectively. The present tense, on the other hand, developed from the biblical Hebrew PARTICIPLE. In the strata of Hebrew we encounter most often, present-tense verbs and active participles share those same forms.

## Binyan Basics

BINYAN<sup>24</sup> is a grammatical feature that's unique to Semitic languages. When a Hebrew root dresses up to be a verb, some of the affixes and vowels it puts on are determined by its BINYAN. (The rest are determined by its tense and the elements of its subject: person, number, gender.) Binyanim impact the meaning of the verb in two ways:

### 1) Active, Passive, or Reflexive

- An ACTIVE verb communicates that a subject performs an action, e.g., *Rabbi Yochanan wrote a letter.*
- A PASSIVE verb communicates that the subject receives the action, e.g., *A letter was written.*
- A REFLEXIVE verb describes the special case where the subject both performs and receives the actions, e.g., *Rabbi Yochanan dressed herself; Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish wrote to each other.*

### 2) Simple, Intensive, or Causative

- *Rabbi Yochanan wrote a letter* is **SIMPLE**.
- *Rabbi Yochanan engraved an invitation* is **INTENSIVE**.
- *Rabbi Yochanan dictated [i.e., "caused to be written"] a memo* is **CAUSATIVE**.

A BINYAN impacts a verb in both of these ways at once, as we'll see in the chart ahead.

## WORKING WITH BINYANIM

In Jastrow, you'll notice that within the entry for a root, Jastrow devotes separate paragraphs to each binyan (with an abbreviation of the relevant binyan name beginning the paragraph, except for pa'al which is unmarked; → See **ANATOMY OF A JASTROW ENTRY** for more). So, knowing which BINYAN our word is helps us navigate to the most relevant Jastrow entries. To figure out the binyan of a verb, use → See **HINTS FOR FINDING THE ROOT** and check out examples in Jastrow to see if one looks just like your word.

You'll also notice that most roots do not like ALL the basic outfits—i.e., they don't go into *every* binyan—so when you look up a root, take note of which binyanim it can dress up in and how its meaning changes from binyan to binyan.

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<sup>24</sup> Binyan = בְּנִינָן (*inside*: building, structure, construction)

## THE SEVEN BINYANIM AT A GLANCE

Here's a nifty way to see how each binyanim influences a verb's meaning. We use the root כתב because, conveniently, it *does* like to dress up in all seven outfits—thanks, כתב ! The table below has the names of the binyanim (in bold), their past-tense 3ms forms<sup>25</sup> and meanings.

	Active	Passive	Reflexive
Simple	<p><b>pa'al</b><sup>26</sup> - פָּעַל (1st entry in Jastrow, no abbrev.)</p> <p><i>example:</i> He wrote - כָּתַב</p>	<p><b>nifal</b> - נִפְעַל ("nif." in Jastrow)</p> <p><i>example:</i> It was written - נִכְתַּב</p>	<p><b>hitpa'el</b> - הִתְפַּעֵל ("hitpa." in Jastrow)</p> <p><i>example:</i> He corresponded - הִתְכַּתֵּב</p>
Intensive	<p><b>pi'el</b> - פִּיעַל ("pi." in Jastrow)</p> <p><i>example:</i> He engraved - כִּתַּב</p>	<p><b>pu'al</b> - פֻּעַל ("pu." in Jastrow)</p> <p><i>example:</i> It was engraved - כִּתַּב</p>	
Causative	<p><b>hifil</b> - הִפְעִיל ("hif." in Jastrow)</p> <p><i>example:</i> He dictated - הִכְתִּיב</p>	<p><b>hufal</b> - הֻפְעַל ("hof." in Jastrow)</p> <p><i>example:</i> It was dictated - הִכְתַּב</p>	

It is worth mentioning that the patterns of meaning associated with the binyanim are just that: patterns. They capture a "feeling," much like a root does, but they don't necessarily allow us to systematically deduce the meaning of a verb. As time passes, any given verb picks up more varied and context-specific meanings. For example, כתב in Hifil—i.e., *cause to be written*—means *dictate*, but at some point it also picks up the meaning of *enlist (someone else) in the army*. We can imagine how that came to be—and some of us find those things super fun to ponder!—but we need our friend Jastrow to tip us off.

<sup>25</sup> A verb is often referred to by its past-tense, third-person masculine form (3ms), which is its most bare-bones form. In fact, the names of the binyanim themselves come from taking the root פעל—which means "verb"—and dressing it up in the outfit of a past-tense, 3ms verb. The fact that the masculine singular is the "unmarked" (or least-marked) form of the verb is surely a product of patriarchy. Let's notice that, and put a sticky on it. (And refer to the verb however we want!)

<sup>26</sup> Pa'al is also called "Kal" = קל (*inside*: light, easy; *outside*: simple, basic).

## Binyan Pa'al | פָּעַל

For binyan pa'al, we will use כתב as our model root.

### Past Tense

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st	כָּתַבְתִּי		כָּתַבְנוּ	
2nd	כָּתַבְתָּ	כָּתַבְתְּ	כָּתַבְתֶּם	כָּתַבְתֶּן
3rd	כָּתַב	כָּתְבָה	כָּתְבוּ	

### Future Tense

The pa'al future tense typically takes a cholam (ו) after the second root letter, but some verbs take a patach (א) instead. See the difference below:

אֶלְמַד | אֶכְתֹּב

Verbs that take a cholam are called EFOL (אֶפְעֹל) verbs, while those taking patach are called EFAL (אֶפְעַל) verbs. Both forms are presented below.

### Future Tense: Efol Variation

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st	אֶכְתֹּב		נִכְתֹּב	
2nd	תִּכְתֹּב	תִּכְתְּבִי	תִּכְתְּבוּ	תִּכְתְּבֶנָּה or תִּכְתְּבוּ
3rd	יִכְתֹּב	תִּכְתֹּב	יִכְתְּבוּ	תִּכְתְּבֶנָּה or יִכְתְּבוּ



### Future Tense: Efal Variation

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st	אֶלְמַד		נִלְמַד	
2nd	תִּלְמַד	תִּלְמְדִי	תִּלְמְדוּ	תִּלְמַדְנָה or תִּלְמְדוּ
3rd	יִלְמַד	תִּלְמַד	יִלְמְדוּ	תִּלְמַדְנָה or תִּלְמְדוּ

### Present Tense (and Active Participle)

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st, 2nd & 3rd	כּוֹתֵב	כּוֹתֶבֶת	כּוֹתְבִים	כּוֹתְבוֹת

### Passive Participle

In addition to the ACTIVE PARTICIPLE discussed above, pa'al verbs also have corresponding PASSIVE PARTICIPLES. The following table illustrates the meaning of a PASSIVE PARTICIPLE and its relationship to the other forms we've seen.

<u>Present Tense</u>	<u>Active participle</u>	<u>Passive participle</u>
He <b>writes</b> the book.	The person <b>writing</b> wore out their pencil.	The <b>written</b> letter sat on the desk unsent.

The pa'al passive participle is often called the PA'UL (פעיל) form<sup>27</sup>.

<b>Passive Participle (Pa'ul Form)</b>				
	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st, 2nd & 3rd	כְּתוּב	כְּתוּבָה	כְּתוּבִים	כְּתוּבוֹת

### Infinitive<sup>28</sup>

לְכַתֵּב

### Gerunds

*Singular:* כְּתִיבָה | *Plural:* כְּתִיבוֹת

<sup>27</sup> For the nerds: Grammarians theorize that pa'ul is a remnant of a full-fledged binyan, that was the passive complement to the pa'al. The complementary passive binyanim of pi'el and hif'il—pu'al and hu'al—are still used in full. You may now be thinking, "Wait, isn't nif'al the passive complement to pa'al?" While nif'al frequently fills the semantic role of the simple passive, etymologically nif'al and pa'al are not closely related. Grammarians still debate the original role and function of nif'al.

<sup>28</sup> For more on infinitives and gerunds, see → **INFINITIVES** and → **GERUNDS**, later in this resource.

## Binyan Pi'el | פעל

Pi'el is characterized by a dagesh chazak (a strong dagesh)<sup>29</sup> in the middle root letter in all its forms.

For binyan pi'el, we will use דבר as our model root. In pi'el the root דבר means "to speak."

### Past Tense

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st	דִּבַּרְתִּי		דִּבַּרְנוּ	
2nd	דִּבַּרְתָּ	דִּבַּרְתְּ	דִּבַּרְתֶּם	דִּבַּרְתֶּן
3rd	דִּבַּר	דִּבְּרָה	דִּבְּרוּ	

### Future Tense

The vowel under the prefix letters is sheva, except in the first person singular. Because א is a guttural letter which cannot take a vocal sheva, it takes a chataf patach (אָ) instead. Remember, the dagesh chazak in the middle root letter is found in all pi'el forms!

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st	אֶדְבֵּר		נְדַבֵּר	
2nd	תְּדַבֵּר	תְּדַבְּרִי	תְּדַבְּרוּ	תְּדַבְּרֶנָּה or תְּדַבְּרוּ
3rd	יְדַבֵּר	תְּדַבְּרַתְּ	יְדַבְּרוּ	תְּדַבְּרֶנָּה or יְדַבְּרוּ

<sup>29</sup> For the nerds: The dagesh chazak doubles the letter it marks, meaning דִּבֵּר is theoretically equivalent to דִּבְּבֵר. (The dagesh in the ב is dagesh kal (a light dagesh) which has no doubling effect.)

## Present Tense

The present tense in pi'el takes a מ— prefix. (This will be true of hifil, hitpa'el, pu'al and hufal as well.) In pi'el the מ— prefix takes a sheva (ְ) just like the future-tense prefixes. (In fact the vowel pattern in the masculine singular is exactly the same as that of the future tense.)

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st, 2nd & 3rd	מְדַבֵּר	מְדַבֶּרֶת	מְדַבְּרִים	מְדַבְּרוֹת

## Infinitive

לְדַבֵּר

## Gerunds

*Singular:* דִּבּוֹר | *Plural:* דִּבּוּרִים

## Special roots

Certain letters, called GUTTURALS,<sup>30</sup> cannot be “doubled” (i.e., take a dagesh), so when they appear as the middle root letter of a pi'el verb, their forms look a little different.

The guttural letters are א | ה | ח | ע | ר . For more on these forms, see → See **SPECIAL ROOTS & THEIR EXCEPTIONS**.

<sup>30</sup> GUTTURALS are sounds produced in the back of the throat.

## Binyan Pu'al | פעל

PPu'al verbs have a passive, intensive meaning. In fact, pu'al is directly derived from pi'el, the active intensive binyan. Just like pi'el, pu'al has a dagesh chazak in the middle root letter of all its forms.

We will continue to use the root דבר as a model for binyan pu'al. In pu'al this root means "to be spoken."

### Past Tense

To form the hufal past tense, the vowel under the first root letter is changed from chirik to kubutz. Compare the pi'el forms in the previous section and pu'al forms below. Notice that, apart from the first vowel, the vowels of pi'el and pu'al past tense are exactly the same (except in the 3ms).

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st	דִּבַּרְתִּי		דִּבְרָנוּ	
2nd	דִּבַּרְתָּ	דִּבַּרְתְּ	דִּבַּרְתֶּם	דִּבַּרְתֶּן
3rd	דִּבַּר	דִּבְרָה	דִּבְרוּ	

### Future Tense

The pu'al future is modeled on the past tense 3ms. Just as in pi'el, the vowel under the prefix letters is sheva (׃), except in the first person singular where it is chataf patach (אָ) instead.

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st	אֶדְבַר		נִדְבַר	
2nd	תִּדְבַר	תִּדְבְּרִי	תִּדְבְּרוּ	תִּדְבְּרֶנָּה or תִּדְבְּרוּ
3rd	יִדְבַר	תִּדְבַר	יִדְבְּרוּ	תִּדְבְּרֶנָּה or יִדְבְּרוּ

## Present Tense

The pu'al present tense inherits the ה prefix of the pi'el present. Notice that the middle root letter is vocalized with a kamatz in the ms.

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st, 2nd & 3rd	מְדַבֵּר	מְדַבֵּרַת	מְדַבְּרִים	מְדַבְּרוֹת

## Infinitive

לְדַבֵּר

## Gerunds

None

## Binyan Hifil | הפעיל ה

Hifil has a characteristic ה prefix in the past (as the name implies!). The middle root letter takes the vowel chirik yud in the past tense 3<sup>rd</sup> person (and in all forms of the present and future as we will see below). Notice the yud in the name of binyan הפעיל ה. Remember, the name of the binyan takes the form of the past tense 3ms. The presence of the yud between the second and third root letter of a verb, even in unvocalized texts, is a reliable sign that you are encountering a hifil verb. However in the past tense 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person the chirik yud is replaced by a patach.

In hifil we will use the root דלק as our model. In hifil דלק means “to cause to burn/to ignite/to kindle.”

### Past Tense

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st	הִדַּלְקֹתִי		הִדַּלְקֹנוּ	
2nd	הִדַּלְקָתָּ	הִדַּלְקָתְּ	הִדַּלְקַתֶּם	הִדַּלְקַתְּ
3rd	הִדַּלְקָה	הִדַּלְקָה	הִדַּלְקוּ	

### Future Tense

In the future tense the ה prefix is replaced by the standard future tense prefixes. The prefix receives a patach in the future, rather than a chirik. As mentioned above, the chirik yod after the second root letter carries through all the forms. Notice the similarity of the past and future 3ms.

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st	אֶדְלֶקֶת		נִדְלֶקֶת	
2nd	תִּדְלֶקֶת	תִּדְלֶקֶת	תִּדְלֶקֶת	תִּדְלֶקֶת or תִּדְלֶקֶת
3rd	יִדְלֶקֶת	תִּדְלֶקֶת	יִדְלֶקֶת	תִּדְלֶקֶת or יִדְלֶקֶת

## Present Tense

The present tense is modeled on the future 3ms. A ׀ prefix replaces the standard future prefixes but its vowel remains a patach. The ׀ prefix is common to the present tense of all binyanim except pa'al and nif'al.

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st, 2nd & 3rd	מְדַלֵּק	מְדַלֵּקֵה	מְדַלֵּקִים	מְדַלֵּקוֹת

Notice that the feminine singular suffix is a ה, rather than a ת as we saw in binyan pa'al and pi'el previously.

## Infinitive

לְהַדְלִיק

## Gerunds

*Singular:* הַדְּלֹקָה

|

*Plural:* הַדְּלֹקוֹת



## Binyan Hufal | הפעל

Ready for a formal analogy?! Hufal is to hifil as pu'al is to pi'e! That is to say, huf'al is the passive counterpart to hif'il and is directly derived from it. Just like hifil, hu'fal takes a ה prefix in the past tense, a ה in the present, and the standard future tense prefixes in the future. The vowel which follows the prefix has evolved over time. In biblical texts we find the kamatz chatuf<sup>31</sup> (ה) which makes the sound "o" as in the word "cost." In rabbinic and later stages of Hebrew the kamatz hatuf is replaced by a kubutz (ה) or even a shuruk (וה) which make the sound "u" as in pull and rule, respectively. The workbook will present the huf'al paradigm using a kubutz.

Hufal is by far the least used of Hebrew binyanim. In fact I struggled to come up with a single real life example of its use in the Talmud.

We will use the root דלק as a model for the hufal although that form is not found in rabbinic literature.

### Past Tense

While the first syllable of each form is הַדְּ throughout the past tense, the remainder of each form matches the pu'al, as we have seen previously in other binyanim.

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st	הַדְּלַקְתִּי		הַדְּלַקְנוּ	
2nd	הַדְּלַקְתָּ	הַדְּלַקְתְּ	הַדְּלַקְתֶּם	הַדְּלַקְתֶּן
3rd	הַדְּלַק	הַדְּלַקָּה	הַדְּלַקוּ	

### Future Tense

Just as in hifil, the future tense is modeled on the past 3ms. Compare the two in the charts above and below.

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st	אֶדְלַק		יִדְלַקוּ	

<sup>31</sup> Yes, the kamatz hatuf and the regular kamatz (sometimes called kamatz gadol) look exactly the same. For a funny combination of phonetic and historical reasons the same symbol is used for two distinct vowels. There are complicated rules to figure out which is which, but you won't need know them in order to conjugate verbs and recognize verb forms.

2nd	תדלק	תדלקי	תדלקו	תדלקנה or תדלקו
3rd	ידלק	ידלק	ידלקו	ידלקנה or ידלקו

### Present Tense

The present tense is modeled on the future 3ms. A ם prefix replaces the ך. The second root letter receives a kamatz rather than a patach.

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st, 2nd & 3rd	ידלק	ידלקת ידלקה ידלקה	ידלקים	ידלקות

Several forms are possible for the fs. If you think you have encountered one of these forms, look up the root in the dictionary and carefully examine the entry to see if your form appears.

### Infinitive

להדלק

### Gerund

None

## Binyan Hitpa'el | התפעל

The binyan hitpa'el has (no surprise here!) the prefix הַת in the past tense. The ה of the prefix is replaced by a נ in present tense and the regular prefixes in future tense. Only in the future 1s does the vowel change (from chirik to segol, i.e. אָת). Like in pi'el, a dagesh chazak appears in the middle root letter unless it is a guttural (א ה ח ע ר).

We will use the root לבש as our model for hitpa'el, which, in hitpa'el means "to dress oneself."<sup>32</sup>

### Past Tense

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st	הִתְלַבְּשָׁתִּי		הִתְלַבְּשׁוּ	
2nd	הִתְלַבְּשָׁתָּ	הִתְלַבְּשְׁתְּ	הִתְלַבְּשְׁתֶּם	הִתְלַבְּשְׁתֶּן
3rd	הִתְלַבֵּשׂ	הִתְלַבְּשָׁה	הִתְלַבְּשׁוּ	

### Future Tense

The future tense 3ms and past tense 3ms differ only in the first letter of their prefix. The 3ms then serve a model for all the other future tense forms. In the forms in which the 3<sup>rd</sup> root letter receives a vowel (2fs, 2mp, 3mp), the vowel of the second root letter shortens to a vocal sheva.

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st	אֶתְלַבֵּשׂ		נִתְלַבֵּשׂ	
2nd	תִּתְלַבֵּשׂ	תִּתְלַבְּשִׁי	תִּתְלַבְּשׁוּ	תִּתְלַבְּשְׁנָה or תִּתְלַבְּשׁוּ
3rd	יִתְלַבֵּשׂ	יִתְלַבֵּשׂ	יִתְלַבְּשׁוּ	יִתְלַבְּשְׁנָה or יִתְלַבְּשׁוּ

<sup>32</sup> The root לבש does not actually occur in the hitpa'el in rabbinic Hebrew, but it is used regularly in modern Hebrew and it makes a nice model.

## Present Tense

Just as the past 3ms serves as a model for the future tense, it serves as a model for present tense as well. Here the ה of the past-tense prefix is replaced by a מ which is common to the present tense of all but the simple binyanim (pa'al and nif'al).

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st, 2nd & 3rd	מְתַלְבֵּשׁ	מְתַלְבֶּשֶׁת	מְתַלְבְּשִׁים	מְתַלְבְּשׁוֹת

Notice, in the forms in which the 3<sup>rd</sup> root letter receives a vowel (i.e. the plural forms), the vowel of the second root letter shortens to a vocal sheva.

## A Fun Feature of Hitpa'el

In roots that begin with a צ | ז | ס | ש | ש (sibilant letters) several spelling changes occur to make the words easier to pronounce. First, the ת of the prefix switches places with the initial root letter.

ההתשמש\* → השתמש

Additionally, if the initial root letter is a ז, the ת is transformed into a ד. If the initial root letter is a צ, then the ת is transformed into a ט. These phenomena are illustrated in the past tense hitpa'el conjugation of the root צדק, below, but the same change occurs in present and future.

ההתצדיק\* → הצטדיק\* → הצטידק

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st	הצטידקתי		הצטידקנו	
2nd	הצטידקת	הצטידקת	הצטידקתם	הצטידקתן
3rd	הצטידק	הצטידקה	הצטידקו	

**Infinitive**

להתלבש

**Gerunds**

התלבשות

## Binyan Nifal | נִפְעַל

Many of the observations we will make about the nif'al will be familiar from the previous binyanim we have explored. Nif'al (as the name implies) has a characteristic נ prefix in the past and present tense. In the future tense, the נ disappears to be replaced by the normal future tense prefixes (more on that below).

We will use the root כנס as our model in nif'al. In nif'al this root means "to be brought in/to enter."

### Past Tense

The past tense forms are again modeled after pa'al: the second and third root letters take the same vowels in both binyanim.

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st	נִכְנַסְתִּי		נִכְנַסְנוּ	
2nd	נִכְנַסְתָּ	נִכְנַסְתְּ	נִכְנַסְתֶּם	נִכְנַסְתֶּן
3rd	נִכְנַס	נִכְנַסָּה	נִכְנַסוּ	

### Present Tense

Compare the past-tense 3ms form above with the ms form below. Notice that the only difference is the vowel under the second root letter. When you encounter these forms in Talmud without vowels, you will have to determine from context when the meaning is past or present. After learning the other six binyanim, the remaining forms in the present will seem very familiar.

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st, 2nd, & 3rd	נִכְנָס	נִכְנָסֶת	נִכְנָסִים	נִכְנָסוֹת

### Future Tense

In the nif'al future tense, the first root letter receives a dagesh. This dagesh is a dagesh chazak ("strong dagesh") which phonetically doubles the consonant. (It's the same kind of dagesh we

encountered in pi'el, pu'al, and hitpa'el above.) Theoretically, the future tense nifal should have the form \*יִכְנֹס or \*יִשְׁמַר. A phonetic process called assimilation occurs, such that the ן "assimilates" to the first root letter producing the forms יִכְנֹס or \*יִשְׁמַר. Finally, the doubled first root letter is represented by a single letter with a dagesh chazak, producing the forms found below.

	Singular		Plural	
	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.
1st	אֶכְנֹס		נִכְנֹס	
2nd	תִּכְנֹס	תִּכְנֹסִי	תִּכְנֹסוּ	תִּכְנֹסְנָה or תִּכְנֹסוּ
3rd	יִכְנֹס	תִּכְנֹס	יִכְנֹסוּ	תִּכְנֹסְנָה or יִכְנֹסוּ

### Special roots

Certain letters, called GUTTURALS,<sup>33</sup> cannot be "doubled" (i.e., take a dagesh), so when they appear as the first root letter of a nifal verb, their forms look a little different.

The guttural letters are ך | ע | ה | ה | א . For more on these forms, see → See **SPECIAL ROOTS & THEIR EXCEPTIONS**.

### Infinitive

לְהִכְנֹס

### Gerunds

הִכְנֹסוֹת

<sup>33</sup> GUTTURALS are sounds produced in the back of the throat.

## Infinitives

Another verb form we sometimes encounter is the INFINITIVE. In English, this is the base form of the verb with a “to” in front of it: *to jump*, *to knit*. In both English and Hebrew, the INFINITIVE often comes up in phrases after another verb (e.g., *She wants to dance*; *he learns to shimmy*), after some adjectives (e.g., *They are likely to make cupcakes*), and in proclamations like *To love is divine*.

Ever wonder how the INFINITIVE got its name? The verb forms we covered in the previous sections are called “finite” because they have fixed elements; they are already inflected for tense and subject. In contrast, the life of an INFINITIVE is infinite-ly wide open. We can’t tell from its form whether its subject will be singular or plural; first or second person; masculine or feminine, etc. Each verb has just one form of the INFINITIVE.

As in English, the infinitive in rabbinic Hebrew<sup>34</sup> starts with “to”: the prefixed preposition לְ. In pa’al, pi’el, and pu’al, the rest of the infinitive form looks like the future-tense, 2ms form of the verb, with לְ replacing the תְ prefix. In hifil, hufal, hitpa’el, and nifal, the תְ prefix doesn’t entirely disappear; it turns into a ה and stays nestled between the root and the לְ.

	Pa’al	Pi’el	Pu’al	Hifil	Hufal	Hitpa’el	Nifal
Fut. 2ms, for comparison	תִּכְתֹּב	תִּדְבֹר	תִּדְבֹר	תִּדְלִיק	תִּדְלֹק	תִּתְלַבֵּשׁ	תִּכְפֹּס
INFINITIVE	לְכַתֵּב	לְדַבֵּר	לְדַבֵּר	לְהַדְלִיק	לְהִדְלֹק	לְהִתְלַבֵּשׁ	לְהִכְפֹּס

<sup>34</sup> Note for the nerds: If you hear people talking about the INFINITIVE CONSTRUCT and the INFINITIVE ABSOLUTE, that’s actually biblical Hebrew they’re talking about, which isn’t our focus here. The infinitive of rabbinic Hebrew is related to the biblical infinitive construct and is formed by prefixing the preposition לְ to that earlier form.



## Gerunds

The GERUND is another form we'll encounter. It's the noun that names the active do-ing of a verb; in fact, the inside translation of its Hebrew name, שם הפעולה, means "the name of an action." In English, gerunds are the nouns ending in "—ing" in sentences like, *Good writing is a lost art* and *It is time for the lighting of the candles*<sup>35</sup>.

Each of the five common binyanim has corresponding gerund. Pa'al, pi'el, and hifal have singular and plural forms for their gerunds; hitpa'el and nifal have singular gerund forms only.

Pa'al	Pi'el	Hifil	Hitpa'el	Nifal
כְּתִיבָה כְּתִיבוֹת	דִּיבּוֹר דִּיבּוּרִים	הִדְלָקָה הִדְלָקוֹת	הִתְלַבְּשׁוֹת	הִיכָנְסוֹת

<sup>35</sup> You might remember that "—ing" can also indicate an active participle in English, as in, *The dancing person needs some water*. They just happen to be the same form. Luckily, Hebrew has two different forms for that—easier to decode!

## Special Roots & Their Exceptions

Certain letters in a root can cause exceptions to the regular patterns we saw above<sup>36</sup>.

These are some of the situations that create special roots:

- 1. Guttural letters in any root position:** Gutturals are letters whose sounds are made in the back of the throat. They are: ׀ | ע | ׀ | ׀ | ׀ | ׀
  - They cannot take a dagesh chazak (strong dagesh). This comes up in pi'el and hifil especially.
  - These letters prefer to be followed (and often preceded) by vowel sounds produced in back of the mouth—in particular patach<sup>37</sup> (א). When they close an accented syllable, they receive a “furtive patach” which is pronounced before the consonant, as in לְשׁוֹמֵעַ (lishmo'a) and לִפְתוֹחַ (lifto'ach).
  - Additionally, the gutturals do not accept vocal sheva and instead take chataf patach, chataf kamatz and chataf segol (אָ אָ אָ) depending on contexts.
- 2. ׀ and ׀ in the first and second root positions, or ׀ in the last root position:** Sometimes those letters convert to vowels, and sometimes they disappear entirely.
- 3. ׀ in the first root position:** When ׀ is not followed by a vowel sound (i.e., when it takes a silent sheva: ׀), it “assimilates” to the following letter by becoming it...which doubles it...which dagesh-chazaks it! (This happens with the same sound in English too—the letter n before a consonant sometimes disappears and doubles the following consonant, e.g., *in+regular* → *irregular*; *in+logical* → *illogical*.)
- 4. Geminate roots,** in which the second and third root letters are the same.

When special roots are discussed, they are referred to by the letter that makes them special and its root position. We use the letters of פעל or the Roman numerals I, II, III to name the root positions (e.g., a root with a guttural in its first root position might be called פ-guttural or I-guttural).

Full examples of all the forms of the special roots are beyond the scope of this resource.

<sup>36</sup> These are sometimes called “weak roots,” while those with the regular patterns above are called “strong roots.”

<sup>37</sup> Want to review the names of the Hebrew vowels? See → **VOWEL CHART**.

## POINTING HEBREW TEXT

“Pointing” Hebrew text means adding in vowels so that the words are pronounce-able!

In our learning, we are attentive to pronunciation so that we can try to read and translate the text with as much precision as possible. Precision is not about finding the “right” answer. Instead, it’s surfacing our best guesses based on what we know and the tools at our disposal. This resource is here to be one of our tools!

You don’t need to memorize these rules (though you can). Instead, consult them as you learn. In particular, they will help you get comfy with some of the most common patterns you encounter, like the pointing of all of our favorite prefixes!

## Excerpts: “Basic Rules in the System of Pointing”

### from HaMillon Hehadash

BY AVRAHAM EVEN-SHOSHAN<sup>38</sup>

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#### The Problem of Pointing (§14)

The pointing that is used in our publications is the Tiberian[1] pointing, that was instituted by the Naqdanim (“pointers”) in accordance with the mode of pronunciation that was current in their day. One can readily hypothesize that the originators of pointing had a clear distinction between the pronunciation of a short Roman “a” and a long Roman “a,” and for this reason, they devised the pataḥ and qamats symbols. Similarly, they, no doubt, distinguished between a long Roman “e” and a short Roman “e” – and fashioned two symbols for them, the tsereh and the segol. On the basis of this precise distinction between syllables, the entire structure of pointing was established, in all of its rich detail, and this serves as the basis of the Hebrew language to this day.

If the pronunciation of Hebrew that we use today<sup>39</sup> (“the S’phardi Pronunciation”) had preserved the distinctions in the articulation of all of the vowels, we would not experience any difficulty in understanding the system of pointing in practice; and for Hebrew speakers (correct and exact Hebrew!) there would be no uncertainty about when to employ a qamats and when a pataḥ, and where to place a tsereh and where a segol or a sh’va.

Indeed, for speakers of Hebrew in the “Ashkenazi” or “Yemenite” pronunciation in which the differences in the articulation of all of the vowels have been preserved, it is quite easy to learn the practice of the system of pointing...

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<sup>38</sup> English translation courtesy of Leonard Berkowitz. Sections outside the scope of this translation have been removed from the text. Published on *Open Siddur Project*.

<sup>39</sup> As a Hebrew linguist in Israel/Palestine in the mid-1900s, Even-Shoshan was part of a movement of Zionist linguists who were passionate about creating a standardized, hegemonic pronunciation of Hebrew. Even-Shoshan here refers to a modern system of pronunciation that borrows more from traditional Sefaradi systems than from the others he mentions.

From the abundance of rules and sub-rules and “exceptions to these rules” that are part of traditional Hebrew grammar, we have provided below a short selection of the basic rules from which there is sufficient information to assist in dealing with doubts and problems in matters of practical pointing.

## The Rule of Syllables and Vowels (§15)

- **Every open syllable that is not accented** – its vowel is always long. [That is not followed by a silent sh’va or a dagesh forte.]
- **Every closed syllable that is not accented** – its vowel is always short. [That is followed by a silent sh’va or a dagesh forte.]

Note: This basic rule, that we have called “The Rule of Syllables and Vowels” applies only, and without exception, in the case of an unaccented syllable! If the syllable is accented, it is possible that the opposite of the rule will apply.

- An open, accented syllable, will likely have a short vowel.
- A closed, accented syllable will likely have a long vowel.

Examples:

a)

מֶלֶךְ-כֹּהֵן

חֹפֶּץ-צִי

רֶבֶךָ-קָה

אֶמְנָה

אֶרְוָה

In each of these, the first syllable is closed by a silent sh’va, and it is not accented; thus the vowel is short! The second syllable is open and its vowel is long!

b)

כֶּמֶה

סֶבֶה

שֶׁמֶשׁ

רֶנִּי

גֶּלֶה

In each of these, the first syllable is closed by the dagesh forte in the consonant following and it is unaccented; thus the vowel is short! The second syllable is open and its vowel is long.

c)

מִ-יָם  
שְׁ-מֶשׁ  
יָ-פֶן

In each of these, the first syllable is open and accented; thus, the vowel is likely to be short! The second syllable is closed in accordance with the rule.

d)

שְׁ-מָה  
הֶ-נָּה  
סִ-בּוּ

In all three of these the first syllable is closed by the dagesh forte in the consonant following) and accented, thus the vowel is likely to be long; the second syllable is open in accordance with the rule.

e)

כִּ-דוֹר  
שֶׁל-הֶן  
עַ-שִׂיר

The first syllable in all three of these follows the rule; in the first two, the vowels are short in closed syllables. In the third, there is a long vowel in an open syllable! The second syllable in all three is closed while there is a long vowel – because it is accented!

The rule of syllables and vowels is, as stated, one of the basic rules in the system of pointing. Most of the other rules are nothing but implications that arise from it. If we knew with certainty the nature of the syllables in every word, whether they are open or closed, we would not have any difficulty in determining the correct pointing of the word.

In order to simplify the determination of the nature of every syllable, we can avail ourselves of the following additional rules.

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## The Indicators of Silent and Vocalized Sh'va `im (§16)

The recognition of the type sh'va that occurs in great abundance in the vocabulary of the Hebrew language can be of help in determining the nature of the syllables and various issues with pointing.

The following are the four indicators of the type of sh'va:

a) A sh'va at the start of a word is a vocalized sh'va; a sh'va at the end of a word is a silent sh'va (this rule is implied by the definition itself of a vocalized sh'va and a silent one!) For example:

שְׁמַע  
בְּנֵי (!vocalized)  
קָם  
אֶת (!silent)

b) In the case of two sh'va-`im in the middle of a word, the first is silent and the second is vocalized. For example:

יְקַרְאוּ = יְקַ-רְאוּ  
כִסְפֵיכֶם = כִסְ-פֵיכֶם

c) A sh'va after a short vowel is silent; after a long vowel, vocalized (this rule derives directly from "The Rule of Syllables and Vowels" – §15). For example:

שְׁמַשׁוֹן = שְׁמַ-שׁוֹן  
שׁוֹמְרִים = שׁו-מְרִים

d) A sh'va under a consonant with a dagesh forte is always vocalized. For example:

שְׁלָמִי = שְׁ-לָמִי  
סִפְרוּ = סִ-פְרוּ

If one would know how to determine the type of the sh'va, it would not be difficult to resolve several issues that arise in points. Here is an example.

In the word "אַרְצְכֶם", the `aleph is not pointed – what is its vowel, a pataḥ or a qamats?

According to rule b) above, the consonant resh is pointed with a silent sh'va and the syllabification, then, is אַרְ-צְכֶם; The first syllable is closed and is not accented, so according to the Rule of Syllables and Vowels, the vowel must be short. Thus, the proper pointing of the `aleph is אַרְ-צְכֶם.

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## The Rule of Bet-Gimel-Dalet Kaph-Peh-Tav (17§) (בְּגִ'ד-דָּגֶשׁ"ת)

The consonants Bet-Gimel-Dalet Kaph-Peh-Tav (בְּגִ'ד-דָּגֶשׁ"ת) — as this acronym is usually pronounced — as is well-known, have two modes of pronunciation – soft and hard (in our pronunciation today, the distinction remains only for Bet-Kaph-Peh). When they occur with a dagesh (that is a dagesh lene!), they are hard consonants, without a dagesh, soft. When are they soft and when with a dagesh?

The sages of pointing established a clear rule:

**The consonants Bet-Gimel-Dalet Kaph-Peh-Tav (בְּגִ'ד-דָּגֶשׁ"ת) are pointed with a dagesh lene when they occur at the start of a word, and in the middle of a word only when following a silent sh'va.**

The great importance of this rule that is called "The Rule of Bet-Gimel-Dalet Kaph-Peh-Tav (בְּגִ'ד-דָּגֶשׁ"ת)" is that it can determine the type of the sh'va that occurs before these letter, for it is clear that, if they are pronounced as hard, no doubt will remain that we have before us a silent sh'va!

Thus, for example: in the words **לְשֹׁבֵר, מְלִכָּה, קָרְבָּן, חֲרֻפָּה**, the sh'va that is in the middle of the words must be a silent sh'va, according to the Rule of Bet-Gimel-Dalet Kaph-Peh-Tav (בְּגִ'ד-דָּגֶשׁ"ת), for if this were not the case, we would be pronouncing the words **לְשֹׁבֵר, מְלִכָּה, קָרְבָּן, חֲרֻפָּה**! Since the sh'va is silent, it is clear that the first syllables are closed: words **לְשֹׁבֵר, מְלִכָּה, קָרְבָּן, חֲרֻפָּה**, and their vowels are, per the rule, short!

In the verbs **הִלָּכָה, נוֹתְבִים**, the sh'va in the middle is vocalized (the consonants Bet-Gimel-Dalet Kaph-Peh-Tav {בְּגִ'ד-דָּגֶשׁ"ת} are soft here!). The first syllables are open and, per the rule, the vowels are long: **הִלָּכָה, נוֹתְבִים** [no dagesh in the lamed or the tav].

The Rule of Bet-Gimel-Dalet Kaph-Peh-Tav (בְּגִ'ד-דָּגֶשׁ"ת) is important, not only as an aid to determining the type of sh'va in the middle of the word: it has great importance, primarily, for its own sake – by means of this rule a person who wishes to speak correct Hebrew will know when to pronounce the consonants Bet-Gimel-Dalet Kaph-Peh-Tav (בְּגִ'ד-דָּגֶשׁ"ת) as soft; namely:

a) The consonants Bet-Gimel-Dalet Kaph-Peh-Tav (בְּגִ'ד-דָּגֶשׁ"ת) following a vocalized sh'va are always soft, for example: **לְפָתַע — וְקָלַב, פָּתַע — קָלַב** (a sh'va at the start of a word is obviously vocalized!)

b) The consonants Bet-Gimel-Dalet Kaph-Peh-Tav (בְּגִ'ד-דָּגֶשׁ"ת) following an open syllable with a long vowel – are always soft, for example: **שָׁבַרְתִּי** (the bet is soft after a long qamats; the tav has a dagesh following the silent sh'va!)

### Note:

a. The consonants Bet-Gimel-Dalet Kaph-Peh-Tav (בְּגִ'ד-דָּגֶשׁ"ת), apparently, as if they had a dagesh, not according to the rule (in the middle of a word, but not following a silent sh'va!) as in the words **חֲבָה, סָפַר, דָּבַר, סָפַה**. Take note, then: this dagesh is not a dagesh lene but a dagesh forte that closes, per the rule, the syllable following the short vowel, (חֲבָה similar to חֲלָה).

And despite this:

b. There are numerous other words where one should pronounced the consonants Bet-Gimel-Dalet Kaph-Peh-Tav (בְּגִ'ד-קָפִ'ת) as soft and, apparently, again not in accordance with the rule (in the middle of a word, following a silent sh'va!), like the words, מַלְכִי, עַנְפִי, עַרְכִי, עֶזְבוּ, בְּדַפּוּס, בְּזָכוּת.

The accepted reason for this is that the sh'va in all of these words is not a "real" silent sh'va, but a "hovering sh'va," as, indeed, each of these words should have its original form: מְלָכִי (from עַנְפִי), עֶרְכִי (from עַנְפִים), עֶזְבוּ (from עֶרְכִים), בְּדַפּוּס (from בְּזָכוּת), and since two sh'va-`im may not come at the start of a word, the first sh'va becomes a helping vowel ("a short vowel") while the second sh'va ("hovering") does not result in a change of the consonants Bet-Gimel-Dalet Kaph-Peh-Tav (בְּגִ'ד-קָפִ'ת) that remain soft!

c. The consonants Bet-Gimel-Dalet Kaph-Peh-Tav (בְּגִ'ד-קָפִ'ת) can become soft also at the start of a word that is connected by means of a hyphen to another word and that does not end with a silent sh'va but with one of the matres lectionis, `aleph hey, vav, yod, because the rule with respect to words connected by a hyphen is like the rule of a single word. Therefore, this is how to pronounce and point: אֶחָד-עַל-פִּי-כֵן, אֶחָד-עַל-פִּי-כֵן, לֹא-כֵן; we find the same condition in Scripture: זָרְעוּ-בוּ.

However, in the pointing in Scripture the dagesh is omitted from the consonants Bet-Gimel-Dalet Kaph-Peh-Tav (בְּגִ'ד-קָפִ'ת) in instances like these where there are two words not joined by a hyphen, but are only connected thematically to one another (for example: "אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת, הֵמָּה בְּדֶרֶךְ"). However, in spoken language, even in contemporary pointed prose, there is a tendency to omit this detail and to place a dagesh in the consonants Bet-Gimel-Dalet Kaph-Peh-Tav (בְּגִ'ד-קָפִ'ת) at the start of a word following unpronounced `aleph, heh, vav, yod. We have followed this practice even in this dictionary (only in the cases of bet and dalet where the dagesh does not change the pronunciation in our day – have we omitted, for the most part the dagesh following `aleph, heh, vav, yod.

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## The Rule of Guttural Consonants (§18)

The guttural consonants, `aleph, heh, het, `ayin and also the consonant resh (that it is sometimes pronounced by many as a guttural!) may never accept a dagesh forte. Therefore, if, according to the Rule of Syllables and Vowels (§15), these consonants are to be pointed with a dagesh forte to close the syllable with a short vowel, then one of the following occurs:

a. The short vowel becomes a long vowel (pataḥ to qamats, ḥiriq to tsereh, etc.). The change is called "compensation for a dagesh."

Thus, for example, parallel to the word אֵלֶם (mute) [with a dagesh lene in the lamed], we should say, for הָרֵשׁ "deaf," but the correct word is הִרֵשׁ, and, similarly, parallel to the verb מְגַדֵּל (grows, v.t.) [with a dagesh lene in the gimme] (in the pi-el conjugation), we should point the verb as "מְבַרֵּךְ, מְבַאֵר" both with a pataḥ under the vav]; however by virtue of the fact that the consonants `aleph and resh may not have a dagesh, the pointing is מְבַרֵּךְ, מְבַאֵר and in similar cases.

b. Or the vowel remains as is with no closure (especially before heh, het, `ayin), מְהַר, מְחוּט, בְּעַר.

The rules of pointing that have been set forth in this chapter – they are basic rules, the principles of pointing. The rules of pointing all words, nouns of various sorts, verbs, etc. derive from these principles.



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## THE POINTING OF AUXILIARY CONSONANTS (PREFIXES)

The auxiliary consonants are found frequently in Hebrew. There is hardly a word, whether spoken or written, that is not dependent on an auxiliary consonant. It is necessary, therefore, to describe the rules for pointing them to avoid frequent errors.

### The Pointing of the Definite Article (§19)

The basic pointing of the definite article is with a pataḥ (a short syllable!), and a dagesh forte occurs in the consonant that follows. For example: **הַסֵּפֶר, הַשֵּׁבֶט, הַגִּשָּׁם.**

Only five consonants are liable to cause departures from this basic rule: aleph, heh, ḥet, ‘ayin, resh that cannot have a dagesh (§18). Therefore, the occurrence of the definite article before one of these consonants requires a change in its pointing, mainly, in accordance with the explanation in §18. These are the departures:

a) The definite article

before `aleph and resh,

before an ‘ayin that is not qamats-pointed and

before a heh and an ‘ayin that are qamats-pointed and accented

is qamats-pointed (a long syllable). For example:

הָעַם | הָהָר | הָרֵאשׁוֹן | הָאִישׁ

b) Before heh and ḥet that are not qamats-pointed – the definite article remains pointed with a pataḥ without “compensation for a” dagesh: **הוּא, הוֹלֵךְ, הוֹטֵט.** (Exception: **הָהֵם.**)

c) Before a ḥet pointed with a strong qamats or a ḥataph-qamats, and similarly before qamats-pointed, unaccented hey and ‘ayin, the definite article is pointed with a segol. For example

הָעֵשִׂיר | הָהָרִים | הָחֲדָשִׁים | הָחָכֶם

However, **הָהַעֲרָמָה, הָחֲכָמָה** - the ḥet and the ‘ayin have a qamats qatan!

d) In addition, it is appropriate to keep in mind that, when the definite article occurs before a yod that is pointed with a sh’va and a mem on the model of maph’el or m’phu’al, the dagesh forte is omitted in these letters. For example:

# הַמְשׁוּמֵר | הַמְדַבְּרִים | הַיְלָדִים

Exceptions: הַיְהוּדִים, הַיְגֵנִים

Basic pointing	Before `aleph, resh (heh, 'ayin)	Before non-qamats-pointed heh, הֶת	Before qamats and hataph-patah-pointed הֶת	Before unaccented, qamats-pointed heh, 'ayin
ה	הֶ	הֶ	הֶ	הֶ

## The Pointing of the Interrogative Heh (§20)

The basic pointing of the interrogative heh is with a hataph-patah, for example: הַשְּׁמַעְתָּ? הַרְאִיתָ?

Instances that require departures from the rule:

a) The interrogative heh may not be pointed with a hataph-patah if it comes before a consonant already pointed with sh'va (as a hataph-patah is nothing but a vocalized sh'va, and two sh'va-`im may not occur consecutively in Hebrew at the start of a word. In this instance the interrogative heh will be pointed with a patah in most cases without a dagesh forte in the consonant that follows!), for example:

הַיְדַעְתָּ? הַשְּׁמַעְתָּ? הַרְאוּבֵן הַמְדַבֵּר

b) Before the consonants `aleph, hey, הֶת and 'ayin, the hataph falls off, also for phonetic reasons, and the interrogative heh is pointed with only a patah,

Example:

הַהוֹלֵךְ הוּא? | הַעוֹלָיִם הַאֲנָשִׁים? | הָאֵם?

c) Before the consonants `aleph, hey, הֶת and 'ayin that are pointed with a qamats and are unaccented, the interrogative heh is pointed with a segol, for example:

הַאֲנֹכִי עָשִׂיתִי? | הַהִיטָה כְּזֹאת? | הַחֲשַׁבְתָּ? | הָעָשִׂיתִי?

Basic pointing	Before `aleph, heh, het, 'ayin that are not qamats-pointed and before a sh'va	Before `aleph, resh heh, 'ayin, not accented
וְ	וְ	וְ

## The Pointing of the Conjunctive Vav (§21)

The basic pointing of the conjunctive vav in with a sh'va, for example:

אֲבָרָהֶם וְיִצְחָק וְיַעֲקֹב  
אֲכַלְתִּי וְשִׁבַּעְתִּי

Instances that require departures from the rule:

a) The conjunctive vav may not be pointed with a sh'va if it occurs before a consonant already pointed with a sh'va (and two sh'va-`im may not occur consecutively in Hebrew at the start of a word). In this instance, the vowel of the vav changes from a sh'va to a shuruq,[4] for example:

דָּוִד וְשָׁלְמָה  
רָבֵקָה וְדָבוּרָה  
שָׁמַעְתֶּם וְרָאִיתֶם

b) The conjunctive vav before a yod that is pointed with a sh'va is pointed with a hiriq, and the sh'va with which the yod is pointed falls off, for example:

שָׁמַעוּן וְיְהוּדָה,  
צִיּוֹן וִירוּשָׁלַיִם (from יְהוּדָה, יְרוּשָׁלַיִם!)

c) The pointing of the conjunctive vav before one of the consonants bet, vav, mem, peh (related as to the source of their sound is changed to a shuruq, for example:

אָהָרָן וּמִשָּׁה  
לָחֶם וּבָשָׂר  
לְשׁוֹנֵנוּ וּפִינוּ

[Of course, if the word itself starts with one of the consonants that takes a dagesh at the start of a syllable, the dagesh is omitted.]

d) The pointing of the conjunctive vav before a consonant that is pointed with a ḥataph is pointed with the same vowel as the ḥataph, for example:

עֲשִׂירָה וְעֲנִיָּה  
 סִירָה וְאֲנִיָּה  
 חֹדֶד וְאֲמֵת

e) The pointing of the conjunctive vav before an accented syllable (at the end of a sentence and in the case of commonly paired words even in the middle of a sentence) is for the most part with a qamats gadol, for example:

בְּשָׂר־וֹדָם  
 קִיץ וְחֹרֶף  
 יוֹם וְלַיְלָה

Basic pointing	Before a consonant pointed with a sh'va	Before a yod pointed with a sh'va	Before the consonants bet, vav, mem, peh	Before a consonant pointed with a ḥataph	Before an accented syllable
!	ו	(ו)	ו	As the ḥataph is pointed	!

## The Pointing of the Conversive Vav (§22)

The pointing of the vav that converts the tense from the past tense to the future follows rule of the pointing of the conjunctive vav in its basic form and in its departures, for example:

basic pointing - וְדַבֵּר  
 departure a - וְרִאִיתֶם אֶת הָאָרֶץ  
 departure b - וְיִשְׁבְּתֶם לְבֵטַח  
 departure c - וְבָאתְ אֶל הַתְּבָה  
 departure d - וְעֲשִׂיתֶם כֵּן  
 מְלָכִים יִרְאוּ וְקָמוּ

Basic pointing	Before a consonant pointed with a sh'va	Before a yod pointed with a sh'va	Before the consonants bet, vav, mem, peh	Before a consonant pointed with a ḥataph	Before an accented syllable
!	·	(י)!	·	As the ḥataph is pointed	!

The basic pointing of the vav that converts the tense from the future tense to the past is with a pataḥ; therefore, there is a dagesh forte in the consonant that follows, for example:

וַיֹּאמֶר  
וַיֵּצֵא

There are two departures:

a) Before the `aleph of the consonants in the acronym (אֵי"ת) (that may not contain a dagesh!) the pointing of the conversive vav is with a qamats (similar to the definite article, §19), for example: וַאֲמַר, וַאֲדַבֵּר.

b) Before a yod that is pointed with a sh'va, the pointing of the vav still is with a pataḥ, but the yod does not receive a dagesh, for example:

וַיְדַבֵּר  
וַיְהִי

Basic pointing	Before `aleph, yod tav, and nun, not pointed with a qamats and before a sh'va	Before a yod pointed with a sh'va
!	!	(י)!

## The Pointing of the Consonants Bet, Kaph and Lamed (§23)

The rules of the pointing of the auxiliary consonants bet, kaph and lamed are similar in almost every respect to the rules of pointing the conjunctive vav; namely:

The basic pointing of the consonants bet, kaph and lamed is with a sh'va, for example: **בְּתֵל-אֲבִיב, גְּבוּר, כְּשִׁמְשׁוֹן, נִסְעֵתִי לְאֵילָת, בְּשִׂכְבְּךָ, כְּשִׁבְתְּ, לְקַבֵּל**.

Instances that require departures from the rule:

a) The pointing of the consonants bet, kaph and lamed before a consonant that is pointed with a sh'va (two sh'va-`im may not come at the start of a word changes to a hiriq:

בְּרַחוּבוֹת  
כְּשִׁלְמָה  
לְצֶפֶת  
בְּרֵאוֹתַי  
כְּשִׁמוּעַ  
לְשִׁמוּעַ

b) Before a yod that is pointed with a sh'va, the pointing of the consonants bet, kaph and lamed, as is noted above, is pointed with a hiriq, and the sh'va with which the yod is pointed falls off, for example:

בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם  
לִילָדַיִם  
כִּיהוּדָה

(but "בִּישְׂרָאֵל" – according to the rule as the yod is not pointed with a sh'va!)

c) The pointing of the consonants bet, kaph and lamed before a consonant that is pointed with a hataph is pointed with the same vowel as the hataph, for example:

בְּעִשׂוֹתַי  
כְּהַרְיָמִי  
לְאָכַל  
כֹּל רֹאשׁ לְחֻלֵּי

d) When one of the consonants bet, kaph and lamed occurs before a word that starts with a definite article, the latter usually falls off and the auxiliary consonant takes the pointing of the heh according to all its rules and departures (above §19), for example:

בְּבֵית (בְּהֵבֵית in place of)  
בְּאֶרֶץ (–בְּהֶאֶרֶץ)  
לְרַחוּק (–לְהֶרַחוּק)  
בְּהַרִים (–בְּהֶהַרִים)

Basic pointing	Before a consonant pointed with a sh'va	Before a yod pointed with a sh'va[6]	Before a consonant pointed with a ḥataph	Before the definite article
בְּ, כְּ, לְ	בִּי, כִּי, לִי	בְּ(י), כְּ(י), לְ(י)	As the ḥataph is pointed	As the definite article is pointed

## The Pointing of the Auxiliary Consonant Mem (§24)

The auxiliary consonant Mem is nothing but a contraction of the word "min; therefore, its basic pointing is with a ḥiriq, and the consonant that follows has a dagesh forte (a dagesh that follows a short vowel and to compensate for the missing nun!)

There are two departures for the pointing of the mem:

a) The pointing of the auxiliary mem before a yod pointed with a sh'va is with a ḥiriq, but both the dagesh and the sh'va fall off from the yod, as is the case with the Consonants bet, kaph and lamed in instances like this, for example:

מִירוּשָׁלַיִם | מִיהוּדָה

b) For the pointing of the auxiliary mem before the consonants `aleph, heh, ḥet, 'ayin and resh that may not accept a dagesh, the ḥiriq (short vowel!) changes to a tsereh (long), for example:

מֵאֲפְרַיִם | מֵהָרָר | מִחֲדָרִים | מֵעֵיר | מֵרֹאשׁ

Only for the following words does the ḥiriq remain:

מְחוּץ | מְחוּט

Basic pointing	Before a yod pointed with a sh'va	Before `aleph, heh, ḥet, 'ayin and resh
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מְ

מְ(י)

מְ

## The Pointing of the Auxiliary Shin (§25)

The pointing of the auxiliary shin is always with a segol, and in the consonant following it, a dagesh forte, for example:

שִׁידְבֵּר | שְׁשַׁמְרְתִּי | שִׁפְן

In the pointing of the auxiliary shin, there are no departures — always a segol even before a guttural consonant that may not take a dagesh; in such a case, the consonant following will remain without a dagesh, for example:

שְׁהָרִי | שְׁעַשִּׂיתִי | שְׁאָנִי

## The Pointing of the Word “מה” (§26)

Finally we will add the rules of the pointing of the word “מה” about which many people err.

The basic pointing of the word “מה” is with a pataḥ, and at the start of the word that follows, there is a dagesh forte (similar to the definite article!).

Example:

מֶה זֹאת?  
מֶה טָבוֹ אֶהְלֶךְ!  
מֶה יָפִים הַלִּילוֹת!

Departures from the above are similar to the departures in the pointing of the definite article; namely:

a) Before `aleph, resh and an `ayin that is not pointed with a qamats, it is pointed with a qamats, for example:

מֶה אֵמַר וּמָה אֶדְבֹר?  
מֶה רְאִיתָ?



## מה עושים אלה?

b) Before 'ayin and het that are pointed with a qamats, and a heh that is pointed with a qamats and is part of the basic word without a prefix as well – the pointing is with a segol, for example:

מה עשית?

מה חשבת?

מה היית אומר?

[however, מה הרעש? (here the heh/qamats is the definite article and not part of the basic word!)]

c) As a stand-alone word and at the end of a clause – the pointing of the word "mah" is with a qamats. This includes the word in combination like:

"מפני מה?"

"עד מה?"

"במידת מה?" etc.

Basic pointing	Before `aleph, resh and 'ayin that are not pointed with a qamats	Before heh and 'ayin that are pointed with a qamats and before a heh that is pointed with a qamats and is part of the stem	As a stand-alone word and at the end of a clause
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מה

מה

מה

מה

# sugya

## UNDERSTANDING THE TALMUD'S LOGIC & AGENDA

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## WHAT IT MEANS TO “OWN” A SUGYA

*a.k.a Things to Know (or, Questions to Ask!) About Your Sugya*

We know that learning a word or a sentence can be an iterative, ever-changing process. *Kal va'chomer*, all the moreso, with a sugya. There is even more that you might see differently as you track a sugya's moves from statement to statement each time you learn. In one moment, you might learn a statement from Rabbi Yochanan. Two steps later in the gemara, Rabbi Yochanan's original statement may have been totally transformed, reread, or reinterpreted by a later layer, and *now* it means something totally different to “own” that original statement. In this way, Talmud is kaleidoscopic, and each move that you learn will change the contours of what you previously understood.

The following questions will guide you in unpacking and surfacing your sugya's logic and agenda.

- Do you understand the three components of the kra proofs in your sugya? Can you identify the midrashic technique? Is it Akivan or Ishmaelian? How is the kra being played with by the later layers of the sugya? → See **THREE COMPONENTS OF A KRA PROOF**.
- What “characters” appear in the text? Get to know them! Read up on them in *Who's Who in The Talmud?* by Shulamis Frieman, or, if you want to practice your Hebrew, go to the green, two-volume *Encyclopedia Le'Chochmei HaTalmud Ve'Ha'Geonim (Encyclopedia of Talmudic and Geonic Literature)* by Mordechai Margalioth. For quick chronological reference, use the pullout sheet in Carmell's *Aiding Talmud Study*, which maps all the Rabbis of the Talmud. If you don't have access to these books, Wikipedia can be your friend!
- What's the AGENDA of the gemara (ACCeSS)? → See **FIVE AGENDAS OF THE GEMARA: ACCeSS**.
- How was this sugya constructed; what are its layers? Consider marking off the tannaitic, amoraic, and stammaitic layers separately using whatever works for you: colored pencils or highlighters, marking up a Google Doc, etc.!
- How does the amoraic layer relate to the tannaitic pieces that came before it? Does the amoraic layer revise, challenge, limit, or expand the tannaitic layer? If so, *why*? (Keep in mind that the stamma often reworks amoraic material so that it *appears* to interact with the tannaitic piece, when actually, in its own time, it was never dealing with the subject of the tannaitic piece at all!)
- Where do you see the stamma in this sugya? How is the stamma weaving together the amoraic and tannaitic layers? Does the stamma seem to have an agenda here (beyond the surface agenda of ACCeSS)? If so, what might it be? Always ask yourself:
  - ◆ Why is the stamma saying what it's saying *the way it's saying it*?
  - ◆ Why is this sugya here? What crash-flex skill is the editor (and the editing!) try to instill in me as a learner?

## THREE COMPONENTS OF A KRA PROOF

The Rabbis use verses from Torah—what we (and they!) call *kra*<sup>40</sup>—as the building blocks for their Option 3 world-building. Kra is the bread and butter of the rabbinic innovative mind; the Rabbis use verses to creatively root their ideas, laws, and new frameworks for Jewish life. When they do this, it is called a KRA PROOF. (→See “SOURCE” in **FIVE AGENDAS OF THE GEMARA: ACCeSS.**)

Any given KRA PROOF has three components—the claim, the verse, and the midrash:<sup>41</sup>

- 1) the **claim** that’s being made;
- 2) the **verse** being used to make the claim; and
- 3) the way the verse is being used by the rabbis in order to prove or support the claim. This is called the **midrash**—how, exactly, the verse proves the claim.

Sometimes, each of these three components is spelled out explicitly by the text. Other times, we get just the claim and the verse, and our task is to figure out how, precisely, that verse proves the claim, i.e., the midrash. In other instances, we find the midrash and the verse together, and we need to do the work to figure out what claim is being made. Finally, there are moments when the text reveals *only* the verse, and we need to figure out what claim it’s coming to prove, and how, exactly, that verse proves this claim.

Our task, when we encounter a kra proof in our learning, is to work out—in chevruta and together in the bet midrash—all three of its components, whether or not they are explicit in the text. When we are clear about each component, we can more easily notice “winks” in the text—moments when the Rabbis telegraph what they are *really* up to, to learners who are attuned to the implications of their radicalness.

The editors of the Talmud *wink* at us when they clearly interpret a text in a way that radically diverges from its plain meaning, in order to show us precisely how *unfounded* in Torah their new innovation is. Lest we think the verse is there to truly demonstrate that this interpretation was here all along and comes *from* the Torah, the Rabbis often select verses for which the midrash goes *against* the plain meaning of the text, revealing their radical project and teaching us how to do the same.<sup>42</sup>

Unpacking and understanding the midrash enables us to grasp the implications of the radicalness of the rabbinic project, as we witness what the Rabbis are really up to. Namely, they are using

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<sup>40</sup> Kra = קרא (*inside*: recitation; *outside*: verse from scripture).

<sup>41</sup> Midrash = מדרש (*inside*: examine, question, expound; *outside*: textual interpretation).

<sup>42</sup> For more on this, see David Kraemer, *The Mind of the Talmud: An Intellectual History of the Bavli* (Oxford University Press, 1990).

their svara to radically reshape the tradition, and camouflaging their svara as one of the other four sources—most of the time as kra.

## WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU MEET A KRA PROOF:

Once you've translated the text of a kra proof inside/outside, it's time to go deeper and try to understand the three components. Ask yourself:

**First, what's the CLAIM?** What position or idea is being substantiated? In other words, what is this text coming to support?

**Next, what's the PROOFTEXT?** Look up the full verse and check out its original context. What is the citation? Which part of the verse is included? Are there any pieces that are *excluded*? Pay attention to those! What might the verse have meant in its original context?

**Then, what's the MIDRASH on the verse?** How are the Rabbis using this verse—perhaps subverting, transforming, or changing it—in order to prove this claim?.

- **What MIDRASHIC TECHNIQUE might be being used?** The Rabbis use many different interpretive techniques when they are making midrash. It is important to familiarize yourself with them both so that you can understand them more fully in your learning, and so that you can add them to your own toolkit as a player.
  - An example of a MIDRASHIC TECHNIQUE is a *gezeira shava* גְּזֵירָה שְׁוָה, a “verbal analogy,” which is the weaving together of two disparate ideas through one common word. For example: It says “blue moon” in one place, and “blueberries” in another. Therefore the laws that apply to the moon, apply to berries!
  - While there is no current comprehensive list of *all* those you might encounter, you can read more about many of these methods in the Steinsaltz *Reference Guide to the Talmud* (in the section titled “Talmudic Hermeneutics”) or in *The Written and Oral Torah: A Comprehensive Introduction* by Nathan T. Lopes Cardozo.<sup>43</sup>
- **Does this teaching seem to come from the MIDRASHIC SCHOOL of Rabbi Akiva or of Rabbi Yishmael?** These two sages had different philosophies of how to interpret Torah in order to expand its applicability beyond its contextual meaning. Both were incredibly creative and innovative, but they differed, essentially, in their beliefs about the process of interpretation.

## Rabbi Akiva & Rabbi Yishmael: Two Schools of Midrash

Midrash is, essentially, how the Rabbis take the material they've inherited and use it to tell a new story; it is the way in which the rabbis expound upon and create new meanings from verses in Torah. We often encounter midrash in Talmud when the stamma is looking for a source for a stated law, and either quotes an existing midrash from an earlier work, or creates an original piece

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<sup>43</sup> Nathan T. Lopes Cardozo, *The Written and Oral Torah: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Jason Aronson Incorporated, 1998), especially “The Rules of Interpretation,” 123-163.

of midrashic interpretation.<sup>44</sup> Other times, we encounter a sugya that is using midrash as a poetic tool, weaving together multiple midrashic interpretations of a verse or verses in order to to expound on a theme.

Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael had two very different ways of midrash-making. These two rabbis, called *avot ha'olam*<sup>45</sup> ("fathers of the world") by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and others, introduced two distinct, opposing approaches to midrashic interpretation whose legacies then carried through later rabbinic literature. Heschel characterized these opposing philosophies, and each one's impact on the tradition, in the following way:<sup>46</sup>

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## Two Approaches to Exegesis: The Torah Speaks in Human Language

BY RABBI ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL<sup>47</sup>

Rabbi Akiva, who extracted from every jot and tittle in the text piles and piles of *halakhot*, believed it impossible that there be in the Torah a single superfluous word or letter.<sup>48</sup> Each word, each letter issues the invitation: "Interpret me!" Even if the rules and conventions of language require that a certain word or letter complete the syntax, it is nevertheless fair game for exegesis.

Thus, he interpreted every seeming redundancy, and even the coupling of a verb to its infinitive: "Any man, any man [of the seed of Aaron... of the holy-donations he is not to eat, unless he is pure]" (Leviticus 23:4)--this is meant to include the uncircumcised;<sup>49</sup> "Cut off, cut off shall that person be" (Numbers 15:31)--"cut off" in this world, "[again] cut off" in the future world (2).<sup>50</sup> He even interpreted the word "saying" (in "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying"),<sup>51</sup> the letter *vav* in the word *ve-ratza* ["he shall pierce"] (in "His master shall pierce his ear" [Exodus 21:6]),<sup>52</sup> and in the word *u-vat* ["when the daughter"] (in "when the daughter of a priest" [Leviticus 21:9]).<sup>53</sup>

Even particles and prepositions such as *et* [accusative case particle], *gam* ["also"], *akh* ["yet"], and *rak*

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<sup>44</sup> Some argue that the ability to create midrashim was sealed with the *tana'im*. For a debunking of this myth, check out Menachem Elon, *Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles* (Jewish Publication Society, 1993), especially "Chapter 9: Exegetical Interpretation of the Torah," 281-305.

<sup>45</sup> This is a pun! *Av* means both "father" and "primordial category" (for example, *avot melacha* are the primary categories of prohibited labor on Shabbat from which all others are derived).

<sup>46</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted through the Generations*, trans. Gordon Tucker (New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 2006).

<sup>47</sup> Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, 47-50.

<sup>48</sup> Talmud Bavli Menachot 29b.

<sup>49</sup> Talmud Yerushalmi Yevamot 8c.

<sup>50</sup> Sifre Shelah 112.

<sup>51</sup> Sifre Naso 2.

<sup>52</sup> Talmud Yerushalmi Kiddushin 1:4 59d.

<sup>53</sup> Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 51b.

["only"] served as grist for his exegetical mill.

By contrast, Rabbi Ishmael would interpret scriptural verses in a straightforward and rational way, or through the use of the thirteen logical rules of exegesis (3), which also reveal what is hidden in the text by rational means. In his view, the seeming redundancies in Scripture do not imply anything substantive, for the Torah uses a style that is in keeping with the conventions of human language; for example "you had to go, yes, go" (Genesis 31:31); "you longed, longed" (ibid.); "I was stolen, yes, stolen" (Genesis 40:15).<sup>54</sup>

Even in places where synonyms appear in the Torah, it is not intended as a substantive addition, or for any specific purpose. For example: "He shall abstain from wine and any other intoxicant" (Numbers 6:3)--"Now are not 'wine' and 'intoxicant' one and the same? Yes, the Torah simply uses two synonymous terms."<sup>55</sup> In short: the Torah speaks in human language.<sup>56</sup>

For Rabbi Ishmael, this principle governs the text of the Torah: when any passage appears in one place and is repeated in another [with some changes], the purpose of the repetition is simply to introduce those changes, and thus it is unnecessary to reinterpret that which is identical to the original. Rabbi Akiva, by contrast, believed that one must reinterpret the entire passage, not simply the new material.<sup>57</sup> "Exegeses emanating from the school of Rabbi Ishmael are marked by their simplicity. They do not approach the text in a roundabout way, in order to extract laws by whatever means possible; they rather attempt to keep exegesis in line with the surface meaning and do not interpret mere superfluities and redundancies."<sup>58</sup>

Rabbi Ishmael protested Rabbi Akiva's mode of exegesis. When Rabbi Akiva inferred an important law from the letter *vav* in the phrase *u'vat ish kohen* ["When the daughter of a priest"] ("Brother Ishmael, my exegesis is the difference between *bat* and *u'vat*, Rabbi Ishmael said to him: "Shall we condemn this woman to be burned just because you wish to interpret the letter *vav*?!"<sup>59</sup>

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Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael were colleagues and contemporaries, and they were both courageous creators of Option 3 Jewish life in the early post-crash era. However, they differed in their relationship to the meta story that they inherited—which for them was the "Written Torah," Tanach—and they took different approaches to how they worked with the meta story to create new narratives in their Option 3. In other words, they had different philosophies about making midrash on the Torah for the purpose of expanding the Torah's applicability beyond its most literal, on-the-surface meanings.

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<sup>54</sup> Talmud Yerushalmi Shabbat 17a; Talmud Yerushalmi Nedarim 36c.

<sup>55</sup> Sifre Naso 23.

<sup>56</sup> Sifre Shelah 112.

<sup>57</sup> Sifre Naso 2; BT Sotah 3a, cited in the name of the school of Rabbi Ishmael (Tucker).

<sup>58</sup> J.N. Epstein, *Mevo'ot le-sifrut ha-tannaim* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1957), 536.

<sup>59</sup> Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 51a.

These surface-level meanings are often called *peshat*,<sup>60</sup> and this level of meaning refers to what the text might have meant in the time it was written. When we read a verse as part of a KRA PROOF, the second step of decoding the KRA PROOF, namely reading and understanding the verse itself, we are engaging with the *peshat*-level meaning.

**Text:** But, you can mix polka dots and stripes in an outfit.

**Peshat:** It's definitely okay to wear an outfit including both polka dots and stripes.

### **Possible Midrashim:**

Because polka dots and stripes are OK to mix, is it not logical that any patterns can be mixed?!

Dancing the polka dance is acceptable on Shabbat, as it is written "you can mix polka," and it says elsewhere "mix joy into your Shabbat."

Wearing polka dots and stripes is required by all queer people on Wednesdays, as it is written: "Obviously." [Oftentimes, a midrash will give you just about this much information! Later sages will come along and explain what's going on, or...try to.]

All of the rabbis believed that the *peshat* was only one aspect of the meaning of any given verse, and attached interpretations to create and derive new meaning from the verse. But Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael thought that this "stuff," the stuff that the rabbis derive from a piece of text, should be derived using very different interpretive methods. It is worth noting that Rabbi Akiva & Rabbi Yishmael often got to the same place, i.e. reached the same conclusions about a given practice, but got there through very different midrashic paths.

Rabbi Akiva was *doresh vavin*<sup>61</sup> (he made midrash out of *vav*'s), and he interpreted every word or letter of the Torah. He put forward the idea that the Torah was *omni-significant*—that God had encoded in it an infinite number of meanings, hinted at with a letter here or a repeated phrase there, which are our right and responsibility to tease out. In contrast, Rabbi Yishmael's motto and guiding principle was *dibrah Torah kilshon benei adam*:<sup>62</sup> "The Torah spoke like the language of people."

This means that the two Rabbis took very different approaches to pieces of Torah that appear redundant, ambiguous, or contradictory. Rabbi Yishmael would have said, "Don't make a big *tsimmes* out of the fact that this thing over here is repeated over there," or "Don't worry about those extra *vav*'s. God chose to talk to us the way people talk. It's that simple." Meanwhile, Rabbi Akiva would respond, "Don't worry about the *vav*'s?! Are you kidding? These two *vav*'s are God's way of telling us that the explicit law stated in the first verse also applies to the totally different situation discussed in the second." In other words, "God is not a blabbermouth" (as Benay likes to say in the lineage of her teacher Eliezer Slomovic).

So if the Torah is truly spoken in the language of people, how did Rabbi Yishmael make the midrashic moves he needed in order to make Torah applicable beyond the *peshat* level? He had a

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<sup>60</sup> *Peshat* = פשט (*inside*: spread out, undress; ; *outside*: plain, simple, contextual meaning of a text).

<sup>61</sup> "דורש ווין"

<sup>62</sup> "דברה תורה כלשון בני אדם"



closed system of rules that governed his interpretive process: 13 principles through which the Torah could be interpreted (→ See **RABBI YISHMAEL'S 13 MIDRASHIC TECHNIQUES**).<sup>63</sup> In contrast, Rabbi Akiva used a wide range of mechanisms for midrash-making, but did not make a comprehensive list. When you come across a midrash, make sure you spend some time unpacking which of these two schools it reflects!

The two approaches of Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva became more than just personal preferences or individual beliefs, and evolved into two MIDRASHIC SCHOOLS, each of which attracted followers. Eventually, especially during the stammaitic period, Rabbi Akiva's philosophy "won out" and became the normatively held philosophy for later Rabbis of the Talmud.

### **MIDRASHIC WORKS ATTRIBUTED TO EACH SCHOOL:**

The tannaitic sages, the group that includes Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael created two different genres of work: (1) Mishnah and (2) Midrash Halakha. Mishnah is all about what to do, i.e., laws. Midrash Halakha, on the other hand, is about how to think. It's where the Rabbis present the midrash that justifies *how* one could arrive at the laws of the Mishnah from the words of the Torah, i.e., it gives midrashic support for the Rabbis' halakhic conclusions. To be clear, the halakhic rulings of each text are agreed upon, but the midrashic justifications differ among the Rabbis. .

Followers of both MIDRASHIC SCHOOLS wrote midrashim on the Torah that were compiled into standalone texts of Midrash Halakha. Works of Midrash Halakha, instead of being organized by legal topic like the Mishnah, are organized by the section of the Torah that's being "drashed on." They exist only on the sections of the Torah that contain laws (i.e., not Genesis).

Below are the compilations of Midrash Halakha attributed to each school. This information can be useful when:

- You see these works getting quoted in the Talmud (which you'll sometimes know when they're referenced in the Masoret HaSha"s)
- You want to know more about how your sugya is constructed (→ See **THE MULTI-LAYERED TALMUD**) and you're interested in tracking down a parallel conversation that happened in an *earlier* text
- You are learning independently and looking for material that can help you build your toolkit as a player
- You want to see what the Rabbis had to say about the laws in the weekly Torah portion
- You want to witness the Rabbis' creative process in their earliest moments of going Option 3! These works are amazing and special. It is good to know them!

	<b>Rabbi Akiva</b>	<b>Rabbi Ishmael</b>
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<sup>63</sup> Fun fact! The list of these 13 mechanisms can be found in the early part of the Shacharit liturgy in many traditional siddurim.

<b>בראשית</b> Genesis ( <i>Bereshit</i> )		
<b>שמות</b> Exodus ( <i>Shemot</i> )	מכילתא דרשב"י <i>Mechilta De'Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai</i>	מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל <i>Mechilta De'Rabbi Ishmael</i>
<b>ויקרא</b> Leviticus ( <i>Vayikra</i> )	ספרא <i>Sifra (Torat Cohanim)</i>	
<b>במדבר</b> Numbers ( <i>Bamidbar</i> )	ספרי זוטא <i>[Sifre Zuta, survived in fragments in other works]</i>	ספרי במדבר <i>Sifre Bamidbar</i>
<b>דברים</b> Deuteronomy ( <i>Devarim</i> )	ספרי דברים <i>Sifre Devarim</i>	מדרש תנאים <i>Midrash Tanna'im [reconstructed]</i>

## MIDRASHIC TECHNIQUES<sup>64</sup>

Rabbi Yishmael lists 13 *midot*<sup>65</sup>, or midrashic techniques, to interpret Torah. Rabbi Akiva never named or enumerated his own interpretive techniques, but later scholars have tried to identify some of his school's common moves.

You can read more about the techniques from both MIDRASHIC SCHOOLS in the Steinsaltz Reference Guide to the Talmud (in the section titled "Talmudic Hermeneutics") or in *The Written and Oral Torah: A Comprehensive Introduction* by Nathan T. Lopes Cardozo.<sup>66</sup>

For quick reference, a list of Rabbi Yishmael's midot is as follows:

רבי ישמעאל אומר, בשלש עשרה מדות התורה נדרשת:

(א) מקל וחמר.

(ב) ומגזרה שנה.

(ג) מבנין אב מכתוב אֶחָד, ומבנין אב משני כתובים.

<sup>64</sup> Found in the Sifra, referred to as "Baraita De-Rabbi Ishmael." In English these are sometimes called his "hermeneutical principles."

<sup>65</sup> Midot = מדות (*inside*: measures, values; *outside*: attributes, dispositions).

<sup>66</sup> Cardozo, "The Rules of Interpretation," 123-163.

ד) מְקַלֵּל וּפְרָט.

ה) וּמְפָרֵט וּכְלָל.

ו) כְּלָל וּפְרָט וּכְלָל, אִי אַתָּה דָּן אֶלֶּא כְּעֵין הַפְּרָט.

ז) מְקַלֵּל שֶׁהוּא צָרִיךְ לְפָרֵט, וּמְפָרֵט שֶׁהוּא צָרִיךְ לְכָלֵל.

ח) כָּל דָּבָר שֶׁהִיא בְּכָלֵל וְנִצָּא מִן הַכְּלָל לְלַמֵּד, לֹא לְלַמֵּד עַל עֲצָמוֹ יֵצֵא, אֶלֶּא לְלַמֵּד עַל הַכְּלָל כְּלוֹ יֵצֵא.

ט) כָּל דָּבָר שֶׁהִיא בְּכָלֵל, וְנִצָּא לְטַעוֹן טַעַן אֶחָד שֶׁהוּא כְּעֵנִינִי, יֵצֵא לְהַקְלִיל וְלֹא לְהַחְמִיר.

י) כָּל דָּבָר שֶׁהִיא בְּכָלֵל, וְנִצָּא לְטַעוֹן טַעַן אַחֵר שֶׁלֹּא כְּעֵנִינִי, יֵצֵא לְהַקְלִיל וּלְהַחְמִיר.

יא) כָּל דָּבָר שֶׁהִיא בְּכָלֵל וְנִצָּא לְדוֹן בְּדָבָר חֲדָשׁ, אִי אַתָּה יָכוֹל לְהַחְזִירוֹ לְכָלֵל, עַד שֶׁיִּחְזָרְנוּ הַכְּתוּב לְכָלֵל בְּפֶרוֹשׁ.

יב) דָּבָר הַלָּמֵד מֵעֵנִינִי, וְדָבָר הַלָּמֵד מִסּוּפוֹ.

יג) וְכֵן שְׁנֵי כְּתוּבִים הַמְּכַחֲשִׁים זֶה אֶת זֶה, עַד שֶׁיָּבוֹא הַכְּתוּב הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וְיִכְרִיעַ בֵּינֵיהֶם.

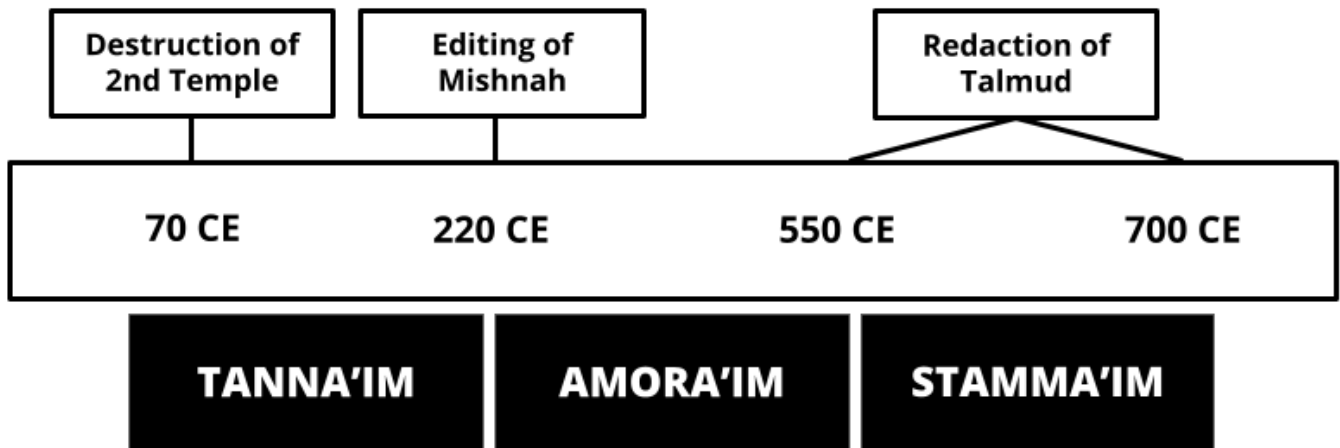
## THE MULTI-LAYERED TALMUD

### Tanna'im, Amora'im, Stamma'im

The Talmud is a conversation that takes place across time and space, a weaving together of texts from various time periods. It creates a complex, dynamic discourse among our sages and their ideologies—all in service of teaching us *how to think* as we move towards creating an Option 3 world. It is important to understand each of these layers as distinct building blocks, so that we can see how the blocks have been used to create the sugya in front of us.

Pieces of text in the Talmud typically come from one of these three groups of rabbis:

- 1) the tanna'im
- 2) the amora'im
- 3) the stamma'im ("the stamma")



Below are descriptions of each of these historical groups, along with information about the texts they authored and how to recognize pieces from their time period.

### TANNA'IM | 70-220 CE | ERETZ YISRAEL | HEBREW & BITS OF GREEK

**WHO THEY ARE:** Tanna'im means "repeaters" or "teachers," from the root תני. They lived in 70-220 CE in Eretz Yisrael, i.e., Palestine under Roman occupation. They taught in Hebrew (though sometimes you'll come across a neat Greek word, because the Rabbis of this period spoke Greek!).

**WHAT THEY DID:** They're most famous for creating the Mishnah, though their teachings can be found in a number of compilations of texts.

**KEY TERMS:** one tanna; multiple tanna'im; a tannaitic text; mishnah (pl. mishnayot); baraita (pl. baraitot)

**HOW TO SPOT THEM:** When you encounter a tannaitic text, it will often be introduced by words with the root תני, like תניא | תנו רבנן | תנן.

**THEIR TEXTS:** The tanna'im created teachings in two different bodies of text.

- A body of legal stuff, the Mishnah & Tosefta:
  - The **Mishnah** is a compilation of teachings presented primarily as “apodictic” legal statements (simple statements made as truth-claims without significant argumentation or narrative). The Mishnah is organized by topic (e.g., laws about harvests; laws about fast days; laws about Shabbat). → (For the full list, see **MASECHTOT (TRACTATES) OF THE MISHNAH, BAVLI, AND YERUSHALMI!**)
  - The **Tosefta** is a parallel text to the Mishnah, legal statements organized by topic. The organization of the Tosefta is the *same* as the organization of the Mishnah. You’ll find Masechet Shabbat in the Tosefta just as you’ll find Masechet Shabbat in the Mishnah, though there may be differences between the two, which reflect different choices made by their respective editors.
- A body of midrash:
  - **Midrash Halakha** are compilations of midrashim on Torah verses. The teachings in Midrash Halakha relate to the same legal rulings documented the Mishnah, but focus instead, and organized in order of which are the tannaitic teachings (many of which have the same rulings and laws as what is found in the Mishnah or Tosefta) that are organized by Torah verse. It can be confusing but is worth noting that the term MIDRASH HALAKHA is used to refer to the teachings of the tanna'im as organized by Torah verse or parasha because they are halakha (“laws”) that are taught in connection to midrash. Midrash is the genre, and halakha is what is being created through that genre.

מדרש הלכה <b>Midrash Halakha</b> <i>organized by Torah/Parasha</i>		משנה / הלכה <b>Mishnah / Halakha</b> <i>organized by topic</i>	
Mechilta d’R. Yishmael	מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל (שמות)	Mishnah	משנה
Mechilta d’Rashbi	מכילתא דרשב"י (שמות)	Tosefta	תוספתא
Sifra (Leviticus)	ספרא (ויקרא)		
Sifrei Bamidbar	ספרי במדבר (במדבר)		
Sifrei Devarim	ספרי דברים (דברים)		

When a tannaitic text shows up in the Talmud as a mishnah, it comes from...the Mishnah! When it shows up as a **baraita**, then it comes from...someplace other than the Mishnah. Sometimes full or partial baraitot can be found in another tannaitic text, like the Tosefta or a work of midrash

halakha, but sometimes we don't have any record of them except as they are quoted in the Talmud itself.

## **AMORAIM | 220-550 CE | ERETZ YISRAEL & BAVEL | HEBREW & SOME ARAMAIC**

**WHO THEY ARE:** Amora'im means "sayers" or "joiners," from the root אמר. They lived from approximately 220-500 CE in two different areas: Eretz Yisrael, i.e., Palestine under Roman occupation, and Bavel, i.e., central-southern Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq and Syria), which was part of the Sassanian Empire. They taught in Hebrew and Aramaic.

**WHAT THEY DID:** They elaborated upon, clarified, and expanded the teachings of the tanna'im, and their teachings became the foundation of the gemara. They authored **meimrot**, attributed statements in the gemara.

**KEY TERMS:** one amora; multiple amora'im; an amoraic text; meimra (pl. meimrot)

**HOW TO SPOT THEM:** When you encounter an amoraic text, it will often be introduced by words with the root אמר, like איתמר | אמרי.

**THEIR TEXTS:** The Talmud Bavli (the "Babylonian Talmud"—the one we study and is studied most pervasively throughout the world!) is the only work to emerge from the amora'im in Bavel. Palestinian amora'im authored the Talmud Yerushalmi (the "Jerusalem Talmud," often referred to as the Palestinian Talmud), which was "sealed" in 400 CE), as well as midrashic works that were compiled and redacted into collections (like Bereshit Rabbah and Pesikta DeRav Kahana). Unlike the "midrash halakha" of the tanna'im, these works are generally full of fan-fiction and narrative midrashim about the books of the Tanach, and are referred to as "midrash aggadah."

## **STAMMA'IM | 550-700 CE | BAVEL | ARAMAIC & BITS OF HEBREW**

**WHO THEY ARE:** Stamma'im means "closers" or "undefined ones," from the root סתם. They lived from 500-750, depending on which scholars you ask, in Bavel, i.e., central-southern Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq and Syria), which was part of the Sassanian Empire. They taught and edited predominantly in Aramaic, borrowing some Hebrew phrases from earlier texts.

**WHAT THEY DID:** There's no word for stuff written by the stamma. We just call it Talmud! The stamma'im are the editors (and some argue full-on authors!) of the Talmud; their unique rad-ness is in the connective tissue of the Talmud that creates cross-generational conversation by constructing argument and dialogue from previous sages' teachings and sayings. They are, essentially, the authors of the Talmud and the inventors of what we associate with the term "Talmudic discourse," with more than half of the Talmud composed of stammaitic weaving.

**KEY TERMS:** multiple stamma'im; a stammaitic piece of text; "the stamma," which can refer either to the most recent anonymous editor of a particular sugya (as in, "So what is the stamma doing here?"), or to the whole chronological layer (as in "Throughout the Talmud, the stamma is often interested in...")

**HOW TO SPOT THEM:** When you encounter stammaitic material, it will be anonymous or unattributed Aramaic words or phrases.

**THEIR TEXTS:** The main text of the stamma'im is...the Talmud. (Mic drop!) Seriously, though, folks believed for centuries that the amora'im were the end of the Talmud. But in the late 1900s, some scholars came to believe that later layers of Talmud had their own unique voice. This voice, which was responsible for much of the dynamic mode of thinking that we come to associate with Talmud, was identifiable in the anonymous Aramaic “connective tissue” of the Talmud’s discourse. They called this layer of Talmud the “stamma” or “setam haTalmud.”

This stratum was not produced by the Amoraim but by later—anonymous—sages whom Halivni called ‘Stammaim’ after the term for the anonymous ‘setam’ Talmud. They endeavored to explicate the Amoraic traditions they received but in many cases could not do so satisfactorily and provided forced explanations as the best effort to make sense of traditions from the distant past. The Stammaitic stratum amounts to more than half of the Talmud, as many Talmudic sugyot contain relatively lengthy explanations of the briefer Amoraic dicta or sustained argumentation between two disputing opinions. Halivni had therefore proposed a new theory of the provenance of much of the Talmudic text, and essentially even of the Talmud’s composition or ‘authorship.’

No longer should the Talmud be attributed to the final Amoraim, the last of the named sages in the Talmud, but to anonymous author-editors who postdated the Amoraic age.<sup>67</sup>

- Jeffrey Rubenstein, “Translators Introduction” in *Formation of the Babylonian Talmud*

The stamma'im carefully crafted the Talmud using fragments of teachings, traditions, laws, norms, and ideas from earlier eras, which they consciously and intentionally reworked and modified. The stamma'im chopped teachings here or there, took older texts out of context, juxtaposed two historically unrelated “pieces” of the tradition to appear to be speaking to each other, all therefore reshaping each of these teachings, and weaving them into an imaginary conversation of increasing nuance and depth.

It is this project of *showing* the weave-working that is the stamma's goal and message. We believe that the stamma'im intended to visibilize these distinct layers—and their winks and forced reads and deliberate reworkings of the previous traditions—because the stamma is ultimately not so much interested in showing us a *conclusion*, but in making transparent *how* an argument works, teaching us *how* to do that kind of argumentation and dialogue to transform our traditions.

When we identify the historical layer of a sugya that is the stamma’s “connective tissue,” it allows us to follow along in the minds/thought processes of the stamma'im. And it is their work which shows us, through the pages of the Talmud, *how* to be traditionally radical upgraders of the tradition.

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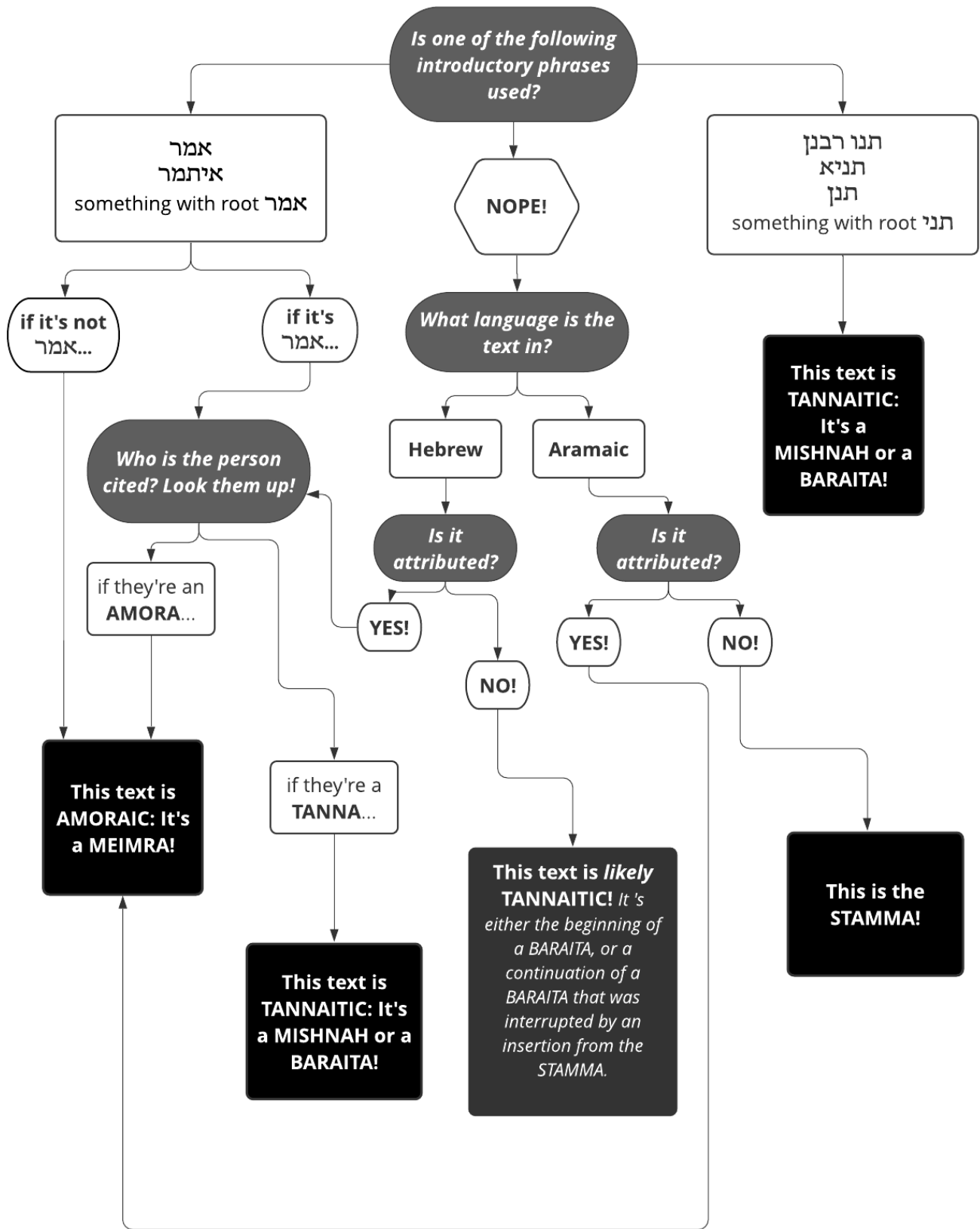
<sup>67</sup> Jeffrey Rubenstein, “Translator’s Introduction” in David Weiss Halivni’s *Formation of the Babylonian Talmud* (2013).

## **AFTER THE STAMMA'IM**

Wondering what happened in the time between the Stamma'im and the SVARA-niks?! → See **WHO ARE THE RISHONIM?!**



# WHAT LAYER IS MY TEXT?



# MASECHTOT (TRACTATES) OF THE MISHNAH, BAVLI, & YERUSHALMI

**Total Masechtot:** Mishnah: 63 | Bavli: 37 | Yerushalmi: 39

Y	B	Masechet	מסכת	Seder	סדר
✓	✓	Bava Kama	בבא קמא	<b>נזיקין</b> Nezikin	
✓	✓	Bava Metzia	בבא מציעא		
✓	✓	Bava Batra	בבא בתרא		
✓	✓	Sanhedrin	סנהדרין		
✓	✓	Makot	מכות		
✓	✓	Shavuot	שבועות		
		Eiduyot	עדות		
✓	✓	Avodah Zarah	עבודה זרה		
		Avot	אבות		
✓	✓	Horayot	הוריות		
	✓	Zevachim	זבחים	<b>קדשים</b> Kodashim	
	✓	Menachot	מנחות		
	✓	Chulin	חולין		
	✓	Bechorot	בכורות		
	✓	Arachin	ערכין		
	✓	Temurah	תמורה		
	✓	Keritut	כריתות		
	✓	Me'ilah	מעילה		
	✓	Tamid	תמיד		
		Midot	מדות		
		Kinim	קינים	<b>טהרות</b> Taharot	
		Keilim	כלים		
		Oholot	אהלות		
		Nega'im	נגעים		
		Parah	פרה		
		Taharot	טהרות		
		Mikva'ot	מקואות		
✓	✓	Nidah	נדה		
		Machshirin	מכשירין		
		Zavim	זבים		
		Tevul Yom	טבול יום		
		Yadayim	ידים		
		Uktzin	עוקצין		

Y	B	Masechet	מסכת	Seder	סדר
✓	✓	Berachot	ברכות	<b>זרעים</b> Zeraim	
✓		Pe'ah	פאה		
✓		Demai	דמאי		
✓		Kilayim	כלאים		
✓		Shevi'it	שביעית		
✓		Terumot	תרומות		
✓		Ma'asrot	מעשרות		
✓		Ma'asar Sheni	מעשר שני		
✓		Chalah	חלה		
✓		Orlah	ערלה		
✓		Bikurim	ביכורים	<b>מועד</b> Moed	
✓	✓	Shabbat	שבת		
✓	✓	Eiruvim	עירובין		
✓	✓	Pesachim	פסחים		
✓	*	Shekalim	שקלים		
✓	✓	Yoma	יומא		
✓	✓	Suka	סוכה		
✓	✓	Beitza	ביצה		
✓	✓	Rosh Hashana	ראש השנה		
✓	✓	Ta'anit	תענית		
✓	✓	Megila	מגילה	<b>נשים</b> Nashim	
✓	✓	Mo'ed Katan	מועד קטן		
✓	✓	Chagiga	חגיגה		
✓	✓	Yevamot	יבמות		
✓	✓	Ketubot	כתובות		
✓	✓	Nedarim	נדרים		
✓	✓	Nazir	נזיר		
✓	✓	Sota	סוטה		
✓	✓	Gitin	גיטין		
✓	✓	Kidushin	קידושין		

## FIVE AGENDAS OF THE GEMARA: ACCeSS

### What is ACCeSS and Why Does It Matter?

If you understand what a text is “trying to do,” it is easier to understand it. And the more complex the text is, the more helpful it is to know what its intended goal is. Think of your own experience with everyday English texts. Is this a recipe, which is trying to teach me how to cook a stew? If it’s in a cookbook, you can be pretty sure it is. Is this a shopping list telling me what items I need to buy to make the stew? If it’s sitting on the kitchen counter, likely it is. Is this a nutritional breakdown of stew? If it’s written on the back of a can of stew, and laid out in the rectangular box, that would be a good guess. Is this a restaurant review focusing on the stew the reviewer ordered? If it’s in the *New York Times* “Food” section, under “Restaurant Review,” that would be a good guess.

But now imagine that these various texts were all dislocated from their respective contexts—the cookbook, the label on the back of the can, your kitchen counter, the New York Times restaurant review section, etc.—and they all appeared, cut and pasted and reset in identical fonts, layout, and without punctuation, in a single bound book. If you wanted to make the stew but the fragment of text you’d deciphered was actually the shopping list, your stew may or may not turn out. If you were using the restaurant review to do your grocery shopping, you’d not likely be able to buy what you needed. If you were using the recipe to understand the nutritional content, it would require a lot of extra work, and you’d miss the opportunity to add a great stew recipe to your collection.

When you understand what the words in a complex, often opaque, text are, overall, *trying to do*, you can more easily decipher them and make better guesses about the missing words and how the words fit together to arrive at an understanding of the text on its own terms and for its own purposes, and then be able to “use” that text better.

**The same is true for Talmud, a famously complex and opaque text, with lots of missing words and “connective tissue” markers, all of which force the learner to make guesses as to how the words fit together to convey the text’s intended message.** As you get more experienced with the feel, vocabulary, style, and key words that indicate the structure of any given Talmud text, you’ll be able to make better and better guesses as to what that section of text is trying to do and that will help you more easily parse the text, land on better outside translations for keywords, and have the best mindset or set of mental expectations as you’re working through that text, to help you understand it and make better use of it as you’re trying to suss out the stamma’s ultimate goals.

Luckily, **the gemara always has one of five “agendas” with respect to the mishnah (or rarely, about a claim raised earlier in the gemara).** There are only five things a gemara text is ever “trying to do”; the *stamma* (or the amoraim that the stamma is bringing down) interrogates a mishnah with one (or more) of five possible questions. This is true of any sized “chunk” of gemara, anywhere from a single sentence to the entire sugya. We call these “agendas.” (The framework for this can be found in *A Living Tree: The Roots and Growth of Jewish Law*, a textbook for law students by Rabbi Elliot Dorff.<sup>68</sup> The snazzy acronym of ACCeSS is Benay’s!)

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<sup>68</sup> Elliot N. Dorff & Arthur Rossett, *A Living Tree: The Roots and Growth of Jewish Law* (New York: SUNY Press, 2012).

## ACCeSS: A Mnemonic for the Five Agendas of the Gemara

**A:** Author

**C:** Clarification

**C:** Conflict

**e**

**S:** Scope

**S:** Source

### AUTHOR

→ Often introduced by phrases like: **מאן | כמאן | כמאן תנא**

**Who wrote that?!** Who's the author of this or that particular claim in the mishnah? The mishnah is largely unattributed. It doesn't usually name the tanna who authored most statements in the mishnah (and be careful not to confuse Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi as the editor and compiler of the mishnah with being the "author" of the mishnah. Sometimes Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi will be identified as the actual author of particular statements, but even as the claimed editor he is not assumed to be the author of anonymous or unattributed statements in the Mishnah.). So: "*Which tanna is responsible for originating this or that claim in the previous mishnah?*" is the agenda referred to by "author."

Why might you want to know the author of an anonymous mishnah? If the mishnah is hard to understand, it might help you to decipher it if you know the personality, politics, or primary life concerns of the person who said it. If you had an opaque, difficult-to-decipher piece of legislation about, say, "the limits of executive powers," and you found out the author was Antonin Scalia, you could be pretty sure that it was a piece of legislation to ensure that the president had unlimited and unchecked authority and could not be investigated or charged with crimes while in office. If you found out the author of that piece of legislation was, say, Dianne Feinstein, you could be pretty sure it actually meant the opposite.

### CLARIFICATION

→ Often introduced by phrases like: **מאי**

**What does this word or phrase in the mishnah even mean?** Sometimes a word or phrase in the mishnah will be incomprehensible to the amoraim living in a completely different reality, in a different country (in the case of those who are living in Bavel), in a different time, and (again, in the case of those living in Bavel) speaking a different language. And they will look to clarify its meaning.

## CONFLICT

→ Often introduced by phrases like: והתניא | והתנן

**Wait a minute! How can this mishnah be saying this, when \_\_\_\_\_ says something contradictory?!** The contradiction can come from the Torah, the same tanna in another text, another mishnah, or another tanna in a baraita. There is an unspoken rule in Jewish jurisprudence that is the assumption of the gemara, i.e., the assumption of the Rabbis and stamma whose opinions are recorded in the gemara, namely, that the mishnah: a) is always right (after all, as it says about itself in its very first paragraph, in Pirkei Avot “*Moshe kibel torah miSinai...*” which includes the mishnah), and b) never conflicts with any other tannaitic sources or the Torah. Having said that, the amoraim and the stamma not infrequently overturn mishnayot (while pretending they’re not, *wink, wink*) and explain away obvious conflicts between certain tannaitic texts or verses from the Torah Torah (more *wink, wink*) when they want the obviously radically divergent mishnah.

Note: The mishnah is clearly a radically divergent document, both in form and substance. It overturns Torah not infrequently, and does so without even a hint of justification. It is as unapologetic and blatant an Option 3 as you might want. It is interesting to ponder what made the stamma, in his/their generation, feel the need to go back and “justify” the mishnah (though by doing so in so obviously forced a way, it is clear that the meta-message for *ha-mavin yavin*, “those who get it,” is that the Rabbis **do not need** to justify radical deviations from the Torah, and that their own authority is all they need to do so).

## SCOPE

→ Often introduced by phrases like: הכא במאי עסקינן | במה דברים אמורים | הני מילי

**OK, but what if...? Would this misha apply in this other case? How far does this mishnah apply?**

This agenda is a very common agenda of the gemara. Scope is one of the most frequent agendas of the gemara, and likely occupies the highest percentage of ink spilled in the Talmud. This is, essentially, the amoraim and stamma asking: what is the scope of this or that mishnaic legislation? In which cases would it apply? Would it apply here? Here? Would it apply in this situation? That situation? What if the case were this? Or that?

The amora'im/stamma also use the agenda of “scope” to:

- severely **limit** the applicability of a Torah verse or mishnah they find problematic. This is called *chakika m'tzamtzemet* (e.g., *ben sorer u'moreh*);
- radically **expand** the applicability of a Torah verse or mishnah they really like. This is called *chakika marchevet* (e.g., *shabbat*);

- **innovate** a new practice altogether. This is called *chakika m'chadeshet* (e.g., *hanukkah*); and
- explicitly **uproot** a Toraitic norm or mandate completely. This is called *chakika okeret* (e.g., *prozbul*).<sup>69</sup>

Note: Uprooting can be done explicitly—the Rabbis themselves acknowledge that *rabanan okrin davar min hatorah*<sup>70</sup> (“Rabbis have the prerogative to uproot the Torah”)—or it can be camouflaged as interpretation.

## SOURCE

→ Often introduced by phrases like: מנא לך | מנא ליה לרב(י) | ... מנין |

**Whoa, Mx. Mishnah, the Torah doesn't say that—where are you getting this?! What's your proof??**

Unlike the tanna'im, the amora'im and stamma seemed to feel the necessity to go back and articulate justifications and legal sources for the radical changes the Mishnah made (or recorded) in the Mishnah's characteristically terse, no-need-to-explain-myself style. There are five—and only five—possible answers to “What's your source?!”

### The Five Sources of Jewish Law

- |                   |                          |
|-------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Kra (קרא)      | Torah verse              |
| 2. Minhag (מנהג)  | Custom                   |
| 3. Ma'aseh (מעשה) | Precedent                |
| 4. Takana (תקנה)  | Legislation              |
| 5. Svara (סברא)   | Informed moral intuition |

For more on these sources and how to distinguish them from each other, → See **THE FIVE SOURCES OF JEWISH LAW**. If you can identify that your gemara is dealing with the agenda of source, you now know that you're looking for one or more of these five potential answers in the subsequent lines of text.

<sup>69</sup> This language and framework come from Benay's teachers at the Shalom Hartman Institute, particularly Noam Zion.

<sup>70</sup> For examples of this see Tosafot Yevamot 88a, Tosafot Nazir 43b; Elon, *Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles*, 521-533.

## Notes from Benay on Teaching ACCeSS

I typically teach “ACCeSS” when I’ve just finished teaching a mishnah and we’re about to move into the gemara on that mishnah. To be more specific, I teach ACCeSS during the “pre-teach” before sending learners into chevruta to prep their first piece of gemara after they’ve completed chazara on the previous mishnah. I want the learners to understand that the gemara is a very different kind of literature than the mishnah—that it came from a different era (sometimes I also do a quickie timeline of the tannaitic era, amoraic era, etc., with dates; also on the back of the SVARA ruler); is primarily in a different language (now in Aramaic or a mixture of Aramaic and Hebrew); *and has a different agenda* (five different agendas, to be exact).

This is when I tell them I’m going to give them a mnemonic to use to remember the five agendas of the gemara, and I write the letters “A, C, C, e, S, S” on the board, vertically. Since every SVARA bet midrash has a mixture of experienced SVARA-niks and newcomers, I use this opportunity to “check up on” the veterans, to see if they’ve memorized ACCeSS (which they should have). It’s also a chance for them to shine, and to show the newcomers that they’re about to learn something that will give *them* the status of “vatikim” (experienced learners) next time around, at which time they’re going to be given the chance to “show off.”

I define each letter (i.e., explain which agenda it stands for), and then explain out that agenda (as above). Then, I tell the learners to keep these five agendas “in their back pockets” as they prep the gemara and we unpack that gemara in shiur—to see if they can figure out what agenda that particular section of gemara is pursuing. I’m trying to get the learner to tune in to gemara on a slightly more meta level, so that they can more easily understand what the text is saying, and what it’s *doing*.

Once we’re in shiur on that piece of gemara, and we’ve unpacked enough to know what agenda is being pursued, I’ll ask the learner which of the five agendas is the gemara dealing with here. That’ll help them start to “map out” the structure of the sugya and help them see how the pieces of the sugya are fitting together.

Note: It is my belief that the gemara, as a whole, really only has *one meta-agenda*—to demonstrate the methodology and techniques for “going option 3” on the tradition you’ve received. The *content* of a given piece of text, however, has a “surface agenda” on its “surface content.” The surface content is merely the context being used at any given moment to demonstrate a particular halakhic technique for (sometimes radically) messing with the tradition. The surface content could be a case of two people finding a garment simultaneously and both claiming ownership of it; or the problematics of a man who has given his wife a conditional get but is detained and returns after the stipulated time period; or the question of what qualifications must someone appointed to the Sanhedrin fulfill to be appointed.

The gemara is not ultimately concerned with the answers to any of these questions! They’re just the context, the playing field, on which they’re going to demonstrate one or more of the techniques that they’ve employed—and which they’re teaching the reader to employ—to upgrade the tradition they received, and the one they know their reader will have received. In any given context, the surface agenda is going to be one of the five, mentioned above—yet, again, this is, ultimately, only a slightly elevated level of “surface content” which, to those who are reading with a “traditionally radical lens,” will not obscure the ultimate agenda of the stamma: to transmit a history of and methodology for

going Option 3, i.e., for using our svara to upgrade the tradition in every era with the insights from our lived experience.



## THE FIVE SOURCES OF JEWISH LAW

The Five Sources of Jewish Law:

1. Kra (קרא)	Torah verse	<i>De'oraita</i> <sup>71</sup>
2. Minhag (מנהג)	Custom	<i>De'rabanan</i>
3. Ma'aseh (מעשה)	Precedent	<i>De'rabanan</i>
4. Takana (תקנה)	Legislation	<i>De'rabanan</i>
5. Svara (סברא)	Moral intuition	<i>De'oraita</i>

The following are excerpts of various definitions given by Menachem Elon, a twentieth-century legal theorist who attempted to systematize and explain how Jewish Law works.<sup>72</sup> Elon describes the five sources as a general concept in the following way:

All [these] legal sources serve as the recognized methods of the Jewish legal system for solving new legal and social problems, creating new legal rules, and changing existing legal rules where necessary by changes in mores or in economic and social conditions.

- Menachem Elon, "The Basic Norm and the Sources of Jewish Law," *Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles (Ha-mishpat Ha-Ivri)*, Vol. 1, 238

### KRA | TORAH VERSE<sup>73</sup>

In Jewish law interpretation is called Midrash — a word deriving from the verb *darosh*, meaning study

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<sup>71</sup> All mitzvot can be broken into two categories. They are either de'oraita, meaning that they "come from Torah," or they are de'rabanan, meaning "we made that shit up"—i.e., they were created self-consciously by the rabbis. De'oraita = דארייטא (*inside*: of Torah, or that Torah; *outside*: derived from Torah), and De'rabanan = דרבנן (*inside*: of our rabbis; *outside*: derived from the rabbis). Mitzvot that are de'oraita have a higher status than mitzvot that are de'rabanan, and if they come into conflict, we go with the mitzvah that is de'oraita.

<sup>72</sup> It is important to note that these "Five Sources" are the sources from which *new laws can be derived*. In his work, Menachem Elon identifies *six total sources*, the additional source being *Kabbalah/Tradition*, which he describes as follows: "Chronologically, the first of the legal sources is 'matters of tradition transmitted orally from person to person,' tracing back to their reception by Moses from God. A legal rule derived from this legal source is transmitted from generation to generation (see Maimonides MT, Mamrim 1:2; Maimonides' Introduction to his *Commentary on the Mishnah*). This legal source is fundamentally different from other legal sources of Jewish law in that it is inherently not amenable to development; it does not change but remains fixed—a static source of Jewish law. In contrast, the other legal sources are inherently dynamic; in fact a significant aspect of their function is to continue the creativity and development of Jewish law." (*Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles [Ha-mishpat Ha-Ivri]*, Vol. 1, 238-239)

<sup>73</sup> Menachem Elon refers to this source as "midrash," likely because each kra proof that serves as a source for legal change or innovation carries with it a creative interpretive act that we would refer to as "midrashic interpretation" or "midrash." (→ See **THREE COMPONENTS OF A KRA PROOF**)

and investigation of the inner and logical meaning of a particular text as opposed to its plain and literal reading...The interpretive process is often executed with the aid of fixed rules by which the exegete is guided; these are "the *middot* by means of which the Torah is interpreted."<sup>74</sup>

It appears that from the inception of the *halakhah* and throughout its history, Midrash has served as a creative source of Jewish law and as an instrument in its evolution and development. In point of time and importance, it constitutes the primary source of Jewish law. Throughout the history of the *halakhah*, scholars had to face the twofold problem of (a) reconciling difficulties emerging from the study of biblical passages, and (b) resolving new problems arising in daily life, particularly in consequence of changed economic and social realities. The evolution of new *halakhot* was a natural outcome of the use of Midrash by the scholars in their efforts to overcome difficulties in the elucidation of Scripture, and Midrash led to great creativity, especially when applied to the solution of new problems. Although other means of solving such new problems were available, the scholars nevertheless first and above all sought to find the solutions in Scripture itself, by endeavoring to penetrate to its inner or "concealed" content.

- Menachem Elon, "Interpretation," *The Principles of Jewish Law*, 58-59

## MINHAG | CUSTOM

Minhag (custom) indicates a particular normative act, occurring constantly, and whose existence can be demonstrated without doubt. Three possible meanings may be attributed to the term "source of law": a historical source of the law, i.e., a source which factually and historically speaking constitutes the origin of a particular legal norm; a legal source of the law; i.e., the source which lends the particular normative direction legal recognition and validity as part of the entire body of legal ruse comprising the relevant legal system; and a literary source of law, i.e., the informative source constituting the authentic repository for purposes of ascertaining the content of a particular legal direction. *Minhag*, as does custom in other legal systems, sometimes serves as the historical source of a particular legal norm and sometimes as the legal source.

*As a Historical Source:* A Study of the formative stages in any system will reveal that to some extent its directions originated from customs evolved in the practical life of the society concerned, and that only at a later stage was recognition conferred on such customs — by way of legislation or decision on the part of the legislator or judge. This phenomenon is also evidenced in Jewish law.

*As a Legal Source:* Custom constitutes a legal source when the legal system, in certain circumstances and upon fulfillment of certain requirements, recognizes a consistently followed course of conduct as a binding legal norm. When a custom serves merely as a historical source, it is only capable of preparing the normative course of conduct toward acquisition of legal recognition by means of a law-creating source, such as a *takkanah*; however, when custom is a legal source, the normative usage already has legal force by virtue of such usage alone, without the affirmation of any law-creating source.

- Menachem Elon, "Minhag," *The Principles of Jewish Law*, 91-92

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<sup>74</sup> For this list of "middot," → See **THREE COMPONENTS OF A KRA PROOF.**

## MA'ASEH | PRECEDENT

Ma'aseh constitutes a legal source in two ways: one is represented by the judgement given in a concrete "case" before the court or competent adjudicator (halakhic scholar) — as in other legal systems; the other, by the specific act or conduct of a competent halakhic scholar, not necessarily in his capacity as judge or *posek*. In either case, *ma'aseh* serves as a source for the determination of a halakhic principle as regards both civil law (*dinei mamonot*) and ritual law (*dinei issur ve-hetter*)...

The particular force of a halakhic principle originating from *ma'aseh* is tied to the substantive principle underlying the entire halakhic system, namely that the Torah was entrusted to the authority (*al da'atan*) of the halakhic scholars, it being presumed that the judicial decision and conduct in daily life of the competent halakhic scholar are the outcome of his penetration and correct understanding of the *halakhah*.

In Jewish law, *ma'aseh* constitutes a legal source, not because it has the force of binding precedent ([which]...the Jewish legal system generally does not recognize as a principle), but because the scholars recognized it as a lawmaking source from which to derive halakhic principles becoming part of the general halakhic system. The fact that it remained permissible to dispute a halakhic principle derived from *ma'aseh* did not serve to deprive it of its substantive character as one of the legal sources of Jewish law — just as, for instance, Midrash remained such notwithstanding the fact that different and contradictory halakhic principles were often derived from it by use of different methods of Bible exegesis.

- Menachem Elon, "Ma'aseh and Precedent," *The Principles of Jewish Law*, 110-111

## TAKANA | LEGISLATION

This source includes legislation by the halakhic authorities and by competent public bodies (62). (See Chapter 7) A *takkanah* is a directive enacted by the halakhic scholars, or other competent body (see *Takanot HaKahal*), enjoying the force of law. It constitutes one of the legal sources of Jewish law. A law which has its creative source in *takkanah* serves as the motivated addition of a new form in the overall halakhic system, whereas a law originating from the legal source of midrash (exegesis), serves to reveal the concealed content of existing law within the aforementioned system...The Written Torah is the constitution — the supreme legislation — of Jewish law, and in the Torah itself, power is delegated to the halakhic scholars to enact takkanot.<sup>75</sup>

- Menachem Elon, "Takkanot (Legislation)," *The Principles of Jewish Law*, 74

## SVARA | INFORMED MORAL INTUITION

An important creative source of Jewish law is the legal reasoning (*sevarah*) employed by the halakhic authorities. Legal reasoning as a creative source of halakhic rules involves a deep and discerning probe into the essence of halakhic and legal principles, an appreciation of the characteristics of human beings in their social relationships, and a careful study of the real word and its manifestations.

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<sup>75</sup> See Deuteronomy 17:11, Deuteronomy 32:7, Shabbat 23a.

...Clearly, an interpretation, whether explanatory, logical, or analogical, must be preceded by reasoning that leads and guides the interpreter. The same is true for legislation: legislative enactments are the result of certain needs dictated by logic and experience. Even custom, the covert legislation of the people as a whole, in the final analysis arises out of various logical and experiential needs perceived by the public or by some segment of the people. Certainly, *ma'aseh*—both as judicial decision and as conduct of a halakhic authority—is fashioned by the individual logic and reasoning of the authority involved. The halakhic authorities stressed the importance of the role of logic and reasoning particularly in the civil-law areas of the *Halakhah*.

In the cases of all of these legal sources, however, logic and reasoning operate only indirectly and peripherally: the direct legal source through which the rule enters the halakhic system is not logic and reasoning but interpretation, legislation, custom, or *ma'aseh*. On the other hand, when legal reasoning is referred to as a legal source of Jewish law, the reference is to those instance where legal reasoning is the direct source for the particular rule, *i.e.*, the rule entered into the halakhic system directly by virtue of logic and reasoning alone, with no admixture of interpretation, legislation, custom, or *ma'aseh*. Here, legal reasoning itself is the instrument directly creating the legal rule.

Jewish law assigns to legal reasoning an important and honored place as a source for the creation of legal norms in all areas of the law, whether concerning the relationship between people and God or relationships in human society, and whether the issue is one of *issur* or *mamon*. Not only do a substantial number of laws have legal reasoning as their source, but these laws also have a special quality and status within the halakhic system. A rule for which the source is legislation or custom is classified as “rabbinic” (*de-rabbanan*), *i.e.*, created by the halakhic authorities, whereas a law for which the source is the logic and reasoning of the halakhic authorities is generally classified as “Biblical” (*de-oraita*). Rules based on legal reasoning have this special status by virtue of the principle underlying the entire structure of the legal sources of Jewish law, namely, that the Torah was entrusted to the halakhic authorities.

- Menachem Elon, “The Basic Norm and the Sources of Jewish Law,” *Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles (Ha-mishpat Ha-ivri)*, Vol. 2, 987-989

# daf, masechet & beyond

**GOING DEEPER ON & OFF THE PAGE**

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## SO YOU LEARNED A SUGYA...?!

Often when we “finish” learning a sugya and want to go deeper, it’s unclear where we might go next. There are hundreds of options and learning trajectories to deepen our understanding of the sugya, explore concepts further, introduce us to new “takes” on the sugya, etc.

So how do we figure out what to do?! **There is no one right way to go deeper on a sugya**—where we should go, what materials we should turn to, etc.—**but there is a right way to start going deeper on a sugya, which is to pause and focus in on *what* you want to learn and *why* you want to learn it.**

### QUESTIONS THAT HELP US DECIDE HOW TO GO DEEPER ON A SUGYA

- Are there specific pieces of the sugya—words, phrases, or concepts—that I want to clarify? Why?
- Am I hoping to track down the subsequent halakhic conversation that emerged from this sugya? Why?
- Am I looking for more context about a particular idea or concept? Why?
- Do I have a hiddush about the sugya, and want to see if others share my insight? Why?
- Do I want to uncover more about how the sugya is constructed? Why?

These are just a few examples of reasons to go deeper. **Each of these learning desires (and more!) is perfect and completely worthwhile. We pause to ask ourselves WHY so that we stay active and self-directed in our learning,** or to put it another way, to avoid passively relying on a default canon and process that were potentially shaped by dominating approaches of literacy.

# k/w/l reflection: a framework for independent learning

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Empowered learning is about making our own choices grounded in a clear understanding—for ourselves—of what we know, don't know, and want to know. There is no right path for going deeper; the questions you are sitting with should guide your continued exploration. One tool that educators have developed for self-guided exploration of any material is a "KWL chart." Below is a guide to this process as it relates to Talmud study.<sup>76</sup>

**STEP 1—KNOW/WONDER:** With your chevruta, answer the questions (a) *What do we KNOW about the sugya?\** & (b) *What do we WANT to know/what do we WONDER about the sugya?!* Use stickies, a Google doc, Zoom whiteboard, piece of paper, or whatever works for you.

*\*Even though you may want to, don't skip over this first step of naming and listing what you KNOW. It is essential to take the time to acknowledge that we've truly learned things, and to take stock of what is known to us. In fact, after you've done the first round of things you KNOW, go back and see if you can list 10 more!*

<b>KNOW</b>	<b>WONDER</b>

- What is it like to list what you KNOW and WONDER about the sugya?

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<sup>76</sup> This method is an approach to learner-centered learning that can be utilized across many ages. Try it in your other teaching spaces, in the bet midrash after learning a sugya, or anywhere else.

**STEP 2—WONDER/HOW:** Pick one or two of the most exciting questions from your “wonder” column, and take the next step: *HOW can I find out some more information to help me answer this question? What are the tools & resources we know of that we might turn to?*

<b>WONDER</b>	<b>HOW</b>



**STEP 3—LEARN!:** Explore! Use some of the tools that you identified in HOW, and do some digging! See what you can (or can't) find out about your question.

<b>WONDER</b>	<b>HOW</b>	<b>LEARNED</b>

Reflect on the questions below with your chevruta or on your own. As you're reflecting, feel free to add to the LEARNED section of the K/W/L chart!

- What did you LEARN from this process?
- What was it like to go on this learning journey? How did it feel?
- What are you taking away?
  - Any answers?
  - Any new questions?
  - Any new skills?

## ABOUT THE DAF

The word “Talmud,” for many of us, immediately brings to mind the image of a daf<sup>77</sup>: the two-sided folio of interwoven gemara and mishnah surrounded by commentary that has become the standard way Talmud is printed throughout the world. The daf is a tremendous resource that has been curated and expanded over many centuries to help us learn better and with more ease, and its physical form is iconic. And yet, this printing—this unique format that lends itself to multivocal, cross-generational time-travel (!!)—is only 500 years old.<sup>78</sup>

Prior to the invention of the printing press, texts were written and copied by hand. Mishnah and Gemara were often written in separate manuscripts, and when they *were* written together often the first page of a text would contain the full chapter of mishnah, and the gemara would follow. (Imagine how hard it must have been to find the gemara on any given mishnah!) There was no standard layout for any of the forms, and pagination was different in each edition. Additionally, the *commentaries* on the Mishnah and Gemara were written in separate manuscripts, which required maneuvering between many books and documents. Essentially, each element on the daf that we have received was its own book!

With the invention of the western printing press in 1439, the Talmud began being *printed*, rather than distributed as a handwritten document or manuscript. This brought on an era of dynamic innovation in Talmud learning and publishing, as Jewish printing presses, mostly in modern-day Spain, Portugal, and Italy—along with their Christian contemporaries—began developing layouts for the printed page of the Talmud that would make learning easier and less cumbersome for students. These editions each featured a centralized Mishnah and Gemara text with additional commentaries on the page, though the specific commentators and their locations on the page were not standardized until the sixteenth century. They also each adopted new fonts to help learners distinguish from the central text and surrounding commentaries. (This is where Rashi script comes from, y'all! Remember: Rashi didn't know Rashi script!)

**The Guadalajara press of Solomon ben Moses HaLevi Alkabetz, a Sefaradi printing press that published from 1472–1482, printed some of the first volumes of Talmud in Spain, known as the Guadalajara tractates.** The number of tractates are unknown, and were first published in around 1480. These tractates feature the central Mishnah and Gemara text printed in “square letters” (an earlier version of the “font” we might call “block letters”), with Rashi's commentary printed separately on the page in what we might call a “cursive script” that was in regional use. In this edition, Rashi's comments are on the outside margin of the page, with the Mishnah and Talmud text on the inner column of the page. The Guadalajara tractates, like other printed editions that emerged throughout the Iberian peninsula, featured *only* Rashi's commentary. In Sefaradi yeshivot, students learned the commentaries of Rashi, now on the page,

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<sup>77</sup> Daf = דף (*inside*: board or plank [from the root “to join” or “to hammer”]; *outside*: a leaf of a book, i.e., a page of Talmud).

<sup>78</sup> The information below was gathered from several sources: Marvin J. Heller, “Guadalajara: A Fifteenth Century Hebrew Press of Distinction,” *Sephardic Horizons*, Vol. 1:1, Winter 2021; Marvin J. Heller, “Designing the Talmud: The Origins of the Printed Talmudic Page,” *Tradition* Vol. 23:9 (1995); Marvin Heller, *Printing the Talmud: A History of the Earliest Printed Editions of the Talmud* (New York, 1992); and Barry Wimpheimer, *The Talmud: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

and Ramban, whose commentary *Chidushei HaRamban* was presumably printed in a separate volume as it is today.

**Another edition printed at this time was published in 1483 by Joshua Solomon Soncino, an Ashkenazi publisher in Soncino, Italy.** Like the Guadalajara tractates, Soncino's printed edition of Masechet Berachot featured the Mishnah and Gemara in the center of the page, with commentaries added to the page for ease of study. Soncino's edition was the first to incorporate Tosafot, and to format the page with the layout of Rashi and Tosafot that eventually became standard, the iconic form of the daf as we know it: with Rashi's commentary on the inside margin of the text and Tosafot on the outer margin. Like the Guadalajara tractates, in Soncino's edition the central Mishnah and Gemara text is printed in square-like letters, and Rashi and Tosafot's commentaries are printed in a cursive-like script. Joshua Solomon Soncino, along with his nephew Gershom, went on to publish a number of tractates in this format.

**The first complete printed edition of the Babylonian Talmud was published sometime between 1520 and 1523, in Venice, by Daniel Bomberg.** Bomberg was a Christian publisher who employed rabbis, Jewish scholars, and Jews who had converted to Christianity in his publishing house in Venice. Using the layout established by the Soncinos almost forty years earlier, Bomberg printed the full Talmud and introduced standard pagination. Almost all printings of the Talmud since Bomberg have followed the same pagination, which is relevant for Talmud learners because we refer to page numbers all the time! (When we say a sugya is on Bava Batra 12b, and folks around the world can find that same page, we're using the pagination that Bomberg introduced!) Bomberg's printing also added what we like to call "Bois in the Back"—additional commentaries in the *back* of the masechet—and included the Rosh, the Rambam's commentary on the Mishnah, and Piskei Tosafot (a collection of rulings, "psak,"<sup>79</sup> from Tosafot).

In the decades after Bomberg's printing, new editions of the Talmud were printed throughout Europe. **In 1546–51, an Italian printer Marco Antioni Giustiani published the first edition to feature the "hyperlinks" (indices) prepared by Rabbi Yehoshua Boaz Mevorach,** a Sefaradi scholar: the *Torah Or*, the *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah*, and the *Masoret HaShas* (then called *Mesorat HaTalmud*). These hyperlinks continued to be incorporated into later editions of the Talmud, and have become a standard feature of the daf today.

After Bomberg's Talmud was printed, it became known as the "Venetian standard." In the centuries to come, Jewish printers around the world would adapt and incorporate this basic structure. Early after Bomberg's printing, several printers would swap out Tosafot's commentary for a commentator whose insights were actively studied in their local yeshivot, including Sefaradi printers whose learning did not centrally focus on Tosafot's commentary and a community in Krakow who preferred the commentary of the "Arukh." But by the 16th century, the Venetian standard was widely used throughout the Jewish world, adopted by both Ashkenazi and Sefaradi printers.

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<sup>79</sup> Psak = פסק, (*inside*: separate, interrupt, distribute; *outside*: ruling or halakhic decision).

The next edition that hugely influenced Talmud publishing happened in 1835, when Romm Publishing House in Vilna, Lithuania, published what is now called “the Vilna Shas.”<sup>80</sup> This edition is the most commonly printed edition today, and has become synonymous with “Talmud” over the last two centuries. This edition added more commentaries and glosses both to the page and the “Bois in the Back,” including the addition of Rabeinu Chananel, a prolific commentator from modern-day Tunisia and one of the first Rishonim (→ See **ABOUT RISHONIM**), to the daf, and adding the Rif to the back of the masechet.

While there are dozens of editions of Talmud that are printed today, they generally now have the same core form and format: that of the Vilna Shas, which itself is an outgrowth of centuries of dynamic arrangements and innovations from Jewish scholars and printers. Current editions differ in the additional commentators and glosses they include, the titles they give to hyperlinks, and the symbols they use on the page for footnotes and indices (just to keep you on your toes!).

Each aspect of the daf comes to us after being shaped and crafted by many hands, voices, and perspectives. When we are looking at a daf, we are looking at a dynamic arrangement of texts and citations and fonts and footnotes that weave together a multi-cultural, cross-ideological, living artifact that creates a space-time continuum, allowing us and our ancestors to talk to each other with continuity.

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<sup>80</sup> Shas (ש"ס) is an acronym for shisha sedarim = שישה סדרים (*inside*: six orders; *outside*: the six orders of the Mishnah & Talmud, a way of referring to the whole corpus of Talmud or Mishnah).

## reflection: daf & masechet scavenger hunt

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Take a moment to try to fill out the components of the blank daf on the next page.

- What do you notice?
- What stands out to you?
- Which pieces of the daf are familiar and comfortable to you?
- Which are less comfortable? Which are completely new?



Now, take some time with your chevruta and go on a scavenger hunt throughout the masechet (daf, title page, bois in the back).

- Use the scavenger hunt given to you and begin exploring!<sup>81</sup>
- When you come across a new tool, identify WHAT it is, WHO created it, and WHY you would use it.

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<sup>81</sup> If you haven't been given a scavenger hunt page, we recommend spending some time exploring the title page to see what you can decode and find in your masechet.

## What / Who / Why

Learning device name	
What:	<b>One-sentence description of the device.</b>
Who:	<b>Who wrote it? In what time period?</b>
Why:	<b>Why would I use this as a learning tool? What will it show me?</b>

What:	
Who:	
Why:	

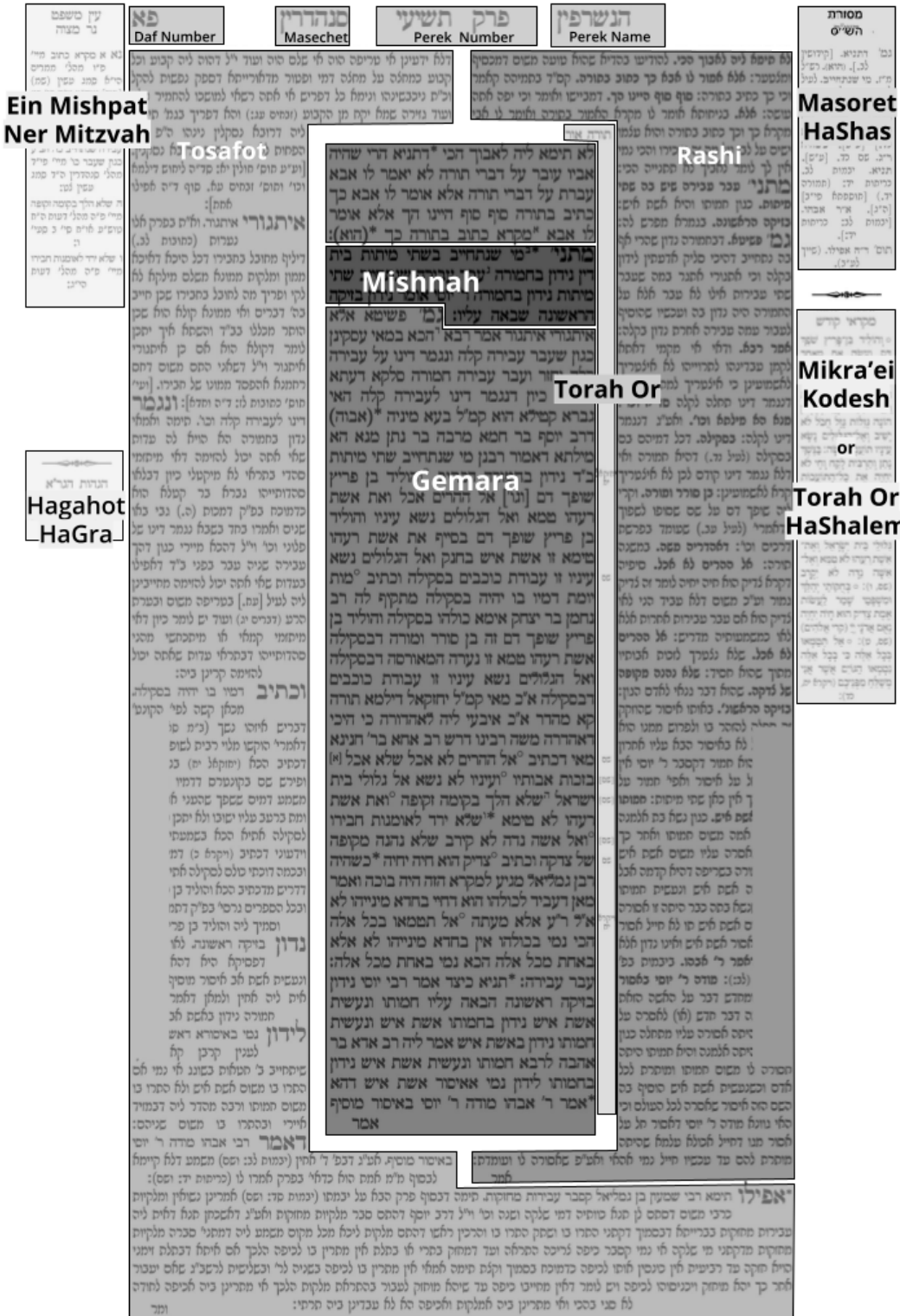
What:	
Who:	
Why:	

What:	
Who:	
Why:	



# MAP OF THE DAF

This map reflects a typical Vilna Shas layout of the Talmud, and indicates chronological layering from dark to light.



Inner Edge / Binding

## WHAT'S ON THE DAF?!

All the stuff on a daf falls into a handful of “buckets”:

- **MISHNAH & GEMARA:** you already know about these parts ;) !
- **NAVIGATION TOOLS:** answers to questions like, What book is this again? What page am I on?
- **HYPERLINKS:** citations that connect you to other related texts (e.g., other rabbinic texts, halakhic codes, Tanach)
- **GLOSSES:** little bitty notes and amandations (i.e., alternate spellings of words) that come from post-Talmud generations of teachers and scholars
- **RISHONIM:** commentaries from post-Talmud generations of teachers and scholars

## WHAT'S ON THE DAF: NAVIGATION TOOLS

No matter what *masechet*<sup>82</sup> (tractate) you are in, you can find this information at the top of your daf. These four things can tell you where you are and what you're learning.

On the top of every page, you'll find:

**1. PEREK NAME** | Each masechet (tractate) is split into *prakim* (chapters; singular *perek*).<sup>83</sup> The PEREK NAME tells you the name of the perek you are currently in. Prakim in the Talmud are named by the first few words of the first mishnah in that chapter.<sup>84</sup> While there are *some* well-known chapter titles, for the most part your perek title will not tell you much about the sugya you're learning!

**2. PEREK NUMBER** | This tells you the number of the *perek* you are learning. These numbers are indicated using descriptive adjectives (“first,” “second,” “fifth, etc.).

**3. MASECHET NAME** | This tells you the name of the masechet from which you are learning. → See **MASECHTOT OF THE MISHNAH, BAVLI, AND YERUSHALMI** to see a complete list of masechtot and find out which SEDER your masechet is in. (Remember: the Talmud is organized into six seders—the shisha sedarim, or “shas”). Unlike the perek name, the masechet name is topical and at least tells you what the Rabbis had started talking about before they got sidetracked into whatever they're now discussing in your sugya. Each masechet name refers to an area of law (e.g.: damages, laws about specific holidays, agricultural laws).

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<sup>82</sup> Masechet = מטכת, (*inside*: web on the loom; *outside*: tractate, volume). Plural: masechtot = מטכתות.

<sup>83</sup> Perek = פרק, (*inside*: break, split; *outside*: chapter).

<sup>84</sup> Just like how Torah portions get their names!

**4. DAF NUMBER** | The *daf*<sup>85</sup> (sheet of paper) number will be indicated by Hebrew letters.<sup>86</sup> There are 2,711 *dapim* in the Talmud Bavli! The daf number refers to the whole of the sheet—both of its sides! Which leads us to...

- **AMUD** | Because each sheet of Talmud is printed on both sides, each daf has an *amud*<sup>87</sup> *alef* (“side a”) and *amud bet* (“side b”). Here are some ways to tell if you’re on amud alef or amud bet:
  - Amud alef is always the left-hand page (i.e., the binding is on the right hand side)
  - Sometimes the daf number has dots after it—either “:” or “.” One dot indicates amud alef, two dots indicate amud bet
  - Sometimes the daf number is only indicated on amud alef, so if you see a page with no daf number, you can guess that you’re likely on amud bet<sup>88</sup>

### HOW TO PUT THIS ALL TOGETHER:

“Hey friend! Want to learn a cool sugya with me? So, first of all, it’s Masechet Sanhedrin, on daf 71, on amud bet. It happens to be in the masechet’s 9th perek, which is called HaNisrafin. Our sugya starts seven lines down into the page. Got it? Great, let’s go!”

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<sup>85</sup> Daf = דף (*inside*: board or plank [from the root “to join” or “to hammer”]; *outside*: a leaf of a book, i.e., a page of Talmud).

<sup>86</sup> In Hebrew, letters carry numerical value. For example, alef, as the first letter of the alef-bet, represents the number 1. Bet = 2, and so on. You can use your Rainbow Strip to help you figure out the numbers!

<sup>87</sup> Amud = עמוד (*inside*: standing thing, pillar; *outside*: front or back side of a folio).

<sup>88</sup> If you find a random numeral that doesn’t correspond with the daf, you’re likely looking at some sort of apparatus to help printers and publishers. You can make a dash out of this or ignore it!

## WHAT'S ON THE DAF: HYPERLINKS

### Torah Or | תורה אור

**Location on daf:** Between Talmud text and Rashi, *or* in a section on the inner side of the daf

**Author:** Rabbi Yehoshua Boaz Mevorach | 1500s | Sefaradi; modern-day Italy

**This points you to:** Tanach verses that are cited in the Talmud text<sup>89</sup>

**You would go here to:** look up a verse that is being cited and see it in context, *IF* you don't have the whole Tanach memorized

### Masoret HaShas<sup>90</sup> | מסרת הש"ס

**Location on daf:** Inside upper corner of page, always on binding side. In many editions, it goes all the way down the page. In some editions, it's all smushed in one paragraph.

**Author:** Rabbi Yehoshua Boaz Mevorach | 1500s | Sefaradi; modern-day Italy

**This points you to:**

- parallel texts in the Talmud Bavli
- parallel texts in the Mishnah
- parallel texts in tannaitic material beyond the Mishnah, e.g., Tosefta & Midrashei Halakha
- parallel texts in the Talmud Yerushalmi

**You would go here to:** deepen your understanding of a phrase or concept across rabbinic literature by encountering other texts where the rabbis explore this phrase or concept. These are referred to as

"parallel texts." As you explore these texts, consider: *What is the connection between this text and my sugya? Are there variations in language that are interesting or relevant? What, if anything, might this parallel text teach us about the stamma's agenda?*

### Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah | עין משפט נר מצוה

**Location on daf:** Outside upper corner of page

**Author:** Rabbi Yehoshua Boaz Mevorach | 1500s | Sefaradi; modern-day Italy

**This points you to:** four different legal "codes," i.e., texts where sugya gets translated into practical halakha. These four texts are: the Mishneh Torah, the Smag, the Tur, and the Shulchan Aruch.

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<sup>89</sup> In some editions, there is an *additional* apparatus called "Torah Or Hashalem" or "Mikra'ei Kodesh" that contains the full verse along with the citation.

<sup>90</sup> Remember, shas (ש"ס) is an acronym for shisha sedarim = שישה סדרים (*inside*: six orders; *outside*: the six orders of the Mishnah / Talmud, a way of referring to the whole corpus of Talmud or Mishnah).

**You would go here to:** follow the halakhic process of our sugya, to see what got codified into actionable halakha hundreds of years later and what didn't (but don't let that shake you from the radical read of the gemara!). Remember: determining normative halacha is not the goal of the Talmud, so it is not our primary focus either. Rather, it can be an interesting learning journey to follow how this sugya has been translated into action throughout time.

When you look through the entry, you will find so many confusing citations in Rashi Script! That's okay, read on for a guide to unlocking these citations through the → See **DECODING THE EIN MISHPAT NER MITZVAH** on the next page.

## DECODING THE EIN MISHPAT NER MITZVAH (CODES CHEAT SHEET)

In the Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah, you'll find yourself looking at a mish-mosh of abbreviations in Rashi script, which can feel overwhelming, confusing, intriguing, or any other emotion! Decoding these abbreviations is half of the journey to chasing down your text. See below for a guide to decoding the majesty of this resource.

Each entry of the Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah is numbered in Hebrew starting with alef. These numbers appear as footnote markers on words in your sugya where a connection is being made to a halakhic text. These footnote markers will likely be a superscript block letter above a word. Once you find that Hebrew number, head over to the Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah, which will be on the outside column of the page. Find the entry that matches your number.

When you hit an entry, here's how to figure out what's inside.

The diagram illustrates the numbering system for Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah citations. It features three callout boxes with arrows pointing to specific parts of the Hebrew text:

- Entry number within the amud (starting from alef at the beginning of each amud)**  
*\*this will correspond to the footnote marker in your sugya\**
- Entry number within the perek (starting from alef at the beginning of each perek)**  
*\*you basically can ignore this\**
- Acronyms that begin citations**  
*\*note the absence of visual markers between citations\**

The Hebrew text shown is:

עין משפט  
נר מצוה

פ"ז מהל' בית  
הבחירה הל' ט טוש"ע  
או"ח סי' ג' סעיף ו ובסימן  
ר"מ סעיף יז:

### UNDERSTANDING ACRONYMS THAT BEGIN EIN MISHPAT NER MITZVAH CITATIONS

These acronyms point you to one or more of the following texts: the MISHNEH TORAH, the SMAG, the TUR, and the SHULCHAN ARUCH. All four are major codes of halakha (more information on each one below). When more than one is cited, they're typically listed in that order. Note that there are no visual markers (like punctuation) to indicate when the Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah is moving from one citation to the next; a new citation is introduced just by listing the name of the next work.

Here's how to decode each type and find the halakhic material that the Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah is pointing you to!

### Mishneh Torah ("Second to the Torah") | משנה תורה

**Author:** Rambam (acronym for Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, also called Maimonides) | 1100s | North African/Sefaradi; modern-day Spain, Morocco & Egypt

**About this code:** Earliest of the halakhic "codes." Reorganizes the gemara into his own idiosyncratic topical arrangement: 14 books, with sections named "Hilchot \_\_\_\_" ("The Laws of \_\_\_\_"), each of which is then divided into prakim, then halachot. Intended to create a clear "one-stop shop" for all things related to Jewish life and practice that would supersede Talmud study. Deletes sources and opposing opinions.

Here's how you break down a citation in the Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah that's leading you to the Mishneh Torah:<sup>91</sup>

_____	הלכה -or- הלי'	_____	מהלכות -or- מהלי'	_____	פ"י	מ"י
# of the halakha	halakha	name of book of halachot	me'hilchot ("from <i>The Laws of...</i> ")	# of perek	perek	Maimonides

### Smag (acronym for Sefer Mitzvot Gadol, "Big Book of Mitzvot") | סמ"ג

**Author:** Rabbi Moshe ben Yaakov of Coucy | 1500s | Provençal; modern-day France

**About this code:** Organizes the 613 mitzvot into "do's" and "don't-do's." Gives sources for each mitzvah.

Here's how you break down a citation in the Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah leading you to the Smag:

_____	לאוין	-or-	עשיין	סמג
mitzvah #	lavin ("don't-do's")		asin ("do's")	Smag

### Tur (short for Arba'ah Turim, "The Four Pillars") | ארבעה טורים

**Author:** Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher (also called Ba'al HaTurim)<sup>92</sup> | 1300s | Ashkenazi/Sefaradi; modern-day Germany & Spain

<sup>91</sup> In English, this citation would be something like: "Maimonides, Chapter 7 of The Laws of Blessings, Law #10."

<sup>92</sup> He was the son of the Rosh!



**About this code:** Gives sources. Quotes original Talmudic texts extensively. Divided into four books: *Orach Chayim* (laws relating to prayer, Shabbat and holiday observance, and other rituals of everyday life), *Yoreh De'ah* (laws of kashrut, tzedakah, conversion, and other ritual matters), *Even Ha'Ezer* (laws relating to marriage), and *Choshen Mishpat* (civil law, including sections on lending money, renting and buying homes, and worker-employer relations). Subdivided by *siman* and *se'if*.

Here's how you break down a citation in the *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah* leading you to the Tur:

_____	סעי' / סעי'	_____	סי' / סי'	ח'י"מ / חיימ	-or- אה"ע / אהייע	-or- י"ד / ייד	-or- או"ח / אויח	טור
# of se'if	se'if	# of siman	siman	Choshen Mishpat	Even Ha'Ezer	Yoreh Deah	Orach Chayim	Tur

## Shulchan Aruch ("The Set Table") | שולחן ערוך

**Author:** Rabbi Yosef Caro (also called "the *mechaber*"<sup>93</sup>) | 1500s | Sefaradi; modern-day Spain & Israel/Palestine

**About this code:** Composed in 1564. Maintains Tur's structure of four divisions, subdivided by *siman* and *se'if*. Very clear. A concise version of Caro's own Bet Yosef on the Tur (from which he deleted the sources given there). Gained wide acceptance as an authoritative text. R. Moshe Isserles' (known as the Rema's) created a gloss on Shulchan Aruch called the "mapa"/tablecloth, which gives the Ashkenazic position where it differs.

Here's how you break down a citation in the *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah* for the Shulchan Aruch:

_____	סעי' / סעי'	_____	סי' / סי'	ח'י"מ / חיימ	-or- אה"ע / אהייע	-or- י"ד / ייד	-or- או"ח / אויח	טושי"ע / טושיע
# of se'if	se'if	# of siman	siman	Choshen Mishpat	Even Ha'Ezer	Yoreh Deah	Orach Chayim	Tur / Shulchan Aruch

<sup>93</sup> Mechaber = מַחְבֵּר (inside: gatherer, connector; outside: author, composer).



## WHAT'S ON THE DAF: GLOSSES

### Hagahot HaGra (Glosses of the Gra) | הגהות הגר"א

**Location on daf:** Outside middle of page

**Author:** Vilna Gaon (also called the "Gra," acronym for HaGaon Rabbenu Eliyahu) | 1700s | Ashkenazi; present-day Lithuania

**This takes you to:** the Gra's notes!

**You would go here to:** see variant readings of your sugya text based on the Gra's notes and ideas

### Hagahot HaBach (Glosses of the Bach) | הגהות הב"ח

**Location on daf:** Inside middle of page

**Author:** Rabbi Yoel Sirkes (known as the "Bach," acronym for the name of his book, Bayit Chadash | late 1500s & early 1600s | Ashkenazi; present-day Poland

**This takes you to:** variant readings of your text and suggestions for textual emendations to both the Talmud and to Rashi. These glosses are preserved from notes that the Bach added to his own copy of the Talmud. Footnote markers for the Bach are typically indicated by a letter, in Rashi script, in parentheses.

**You would go here to:** see the Bach's suggestion for how the text should be read based on his own notes

## WHAT'S ON THE DAF: RISHONIM

### Rashi | רש"י

**Location on the daf:** Inside of the page toward the binding, written in Rashi script<sup>94</sup>

**Author:** Rashi (acronym for Rabbi Shlomo ben Yischaki) | 1000s | Provencal/Ashkenazi; modern-day France

**This takes you to:** a comprehensive, phrase-by-phrase commentary to the Talmud

**You would go here to:** find clarification and/or interpretative commentary on a word, phrase, or idea in the Talmud. Rashi sometimes brings in outside information about the sugya to provide important context, and occasionally translates a word into medieval French. Rashi is your friend!

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<sup>94</sup> Remember that Rashi script is named for Rashi but he did not make it up; the font was named & created after his time!

## Tosafot | תוספות

**Location on the daf:** Outside of page, written in Rashi script with bigger *diburei hamatchil* (starting words that begin the comment)

**Authors:** A group of learners from the Haus of Rashi, i.e., Rashi's intellectual descendents, known as the *Ba'alei Tosafot* | 1100s & 1200s | Provençal/Ashkenazi; modern-day France & Germany

**This takes you to:** *Tosafot Shelanu* ("Our Tosafot"), medieval commentaries created by Rashi's descendents that analyze the concepts, phrases, and rulings in a sugya in light of parallel sugyot, aiming to synthesize seemingly contradictory texts in the Talmud. Some masechtot contain a specific (known or unknown) Tosafist's work, while others a mish-mosh of unattributed material. Some heavy hitters among the Ba'alei Tosafot are: Rabbeinu Tam (Rabbi Jacob ben Meir), Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg, Rabbi Isaac of Dampierre, & Rabbi Samson of Sens.

**You would go here to:** surface questions and dilemmas that are at stake in our sugya or see how our sugya interacts with other sugyot that might seem to contradict or support it

## Rabeinu Chananel | רבינו חננאל

**Location on the daf:** Along the outer edges of the daf, toward the bottom

**Author:** Rabbi Chananel ben Chushiel | 1000s | Sefaradi/North African; modern-day Tunisia

**This takes you to:** Rabbeinu Chananel's commentary on the Talmud, which is a clarified and paraphrased summary of the gemara, excluding highly narrative sections. He commented on key masechtot that had practical import, and is considered one of the first Rishonim.

**You would go here to:** check your understanding of a text against Rabeinu Chananel's paraphrasing of the sugya, or to trace the halakhic development of a sugya

## ABOUT RISHONIM

I start shiur. I don't know what the conclusion will be. Whenever I start the shi'ur the door opens, another old man walks in and sits down. He is older than I am. He is the grandfather of the Rav; his name is Rav Hayyim Brisker, without whom you cannot learn nowadays. The door opens quietly again and another old man walks in. He is older than Rav Hayyim. He lived in the 17th century. What's his name? Shabbesai Cohen, the famous "Shakh" who must be present when [rulings about monetary cases] are discussed... More visitors show up, some from 11th, 12th, 13th centuries, some from antiquity: Rabbi Akiva, Rashi, Rabbenu Tam, the Ra'avad, the Rashba, more and more come in.

What do I do? I introduce them to my pupils and the dialogue commences. The Rambam says something and the Ra'avad disagrees: sometimes it's very nasty; the Ra'avad uses very sharp language. A boy jumps up to defend the Rambam against the Ra'avad and the boy is fresh. You know how young boys are. He uses improper language so I correct him. Another boy jumps up with a new idea, the Rashba smiles gently. I try to analyze what the young boy meant... another boy intervenes... we call upon Rabbenu Tam to express his opinion and suddenly a symposium of generations comes into existence. Generations, young boys twenty two or twenty three, and my generation, the generation of Rav Hayyim Brisker, of the Shakh... of Rabbenu Tam, Rav Hai Ga'on, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Elazar, and Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakai...

There is Mesorah collegiality, friendship, comity between old and young between antiquity and Middle Ages and modern times...

This unity of generations, this march of centuries, this conversation of generations, this dialogue between antiquity and present will finally bring the redemption of the Jew.

- Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Uniting of Generations: Pidyon Haben"

### reflection:

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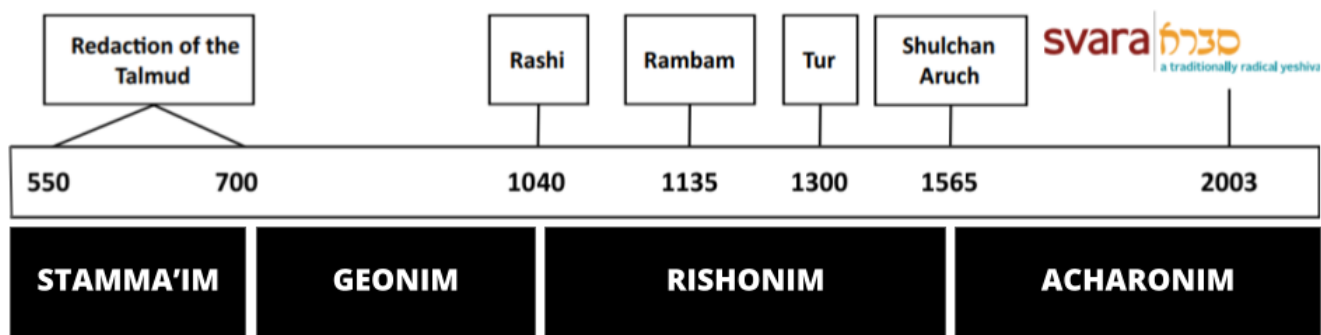
What comes up for you as you read this quote?

There is a whole lot we can (and should!) problematize about Rav Joseph Soloveitchik’s reflection on learning in a bet midrash. In this meditation, he inadvertently reveals and reinforces the painful patriarchal lineage of text-learning, and the invisibility of so many of us who have not been part of this lineage for centuries. At the same time (y’all know we love to hold complexity), Soloveitchik articulates well what can be so powerful and meaningful about learning Rishonim—we learn alongside generations of sages and teachers who read the same texts we do now. **When we explore the commentaries of Rishonim, we join the unfolding conversations that have been taking place for centuries, and we expand that conversation beyond the 1% of the Jewish people who have learned Talmud throughout history.**

When we learn Rishonim, we might see some of our own questions and perspectives reflected back at us, *and* we might see some of the ways in which the radical nature of the Talmud is minimized for the sake of the status quo. We might uncover a new question, see the text from a different angle, or, (if we are lucky!) find our own place in the living conversation as we bring new life to our ancestors' words.

## Who are the Rishonim?!

The period of the Rishonim, “the first ones,” takes place from the 11th century through the 16th century. It is often described as a period bracketed by two great scholars: It begins with the great early commentary of the Rif, and ends with the codification of the Shulchan Aruch by Rabbi Yosef Caro.



Menachem Elon writes of this period:

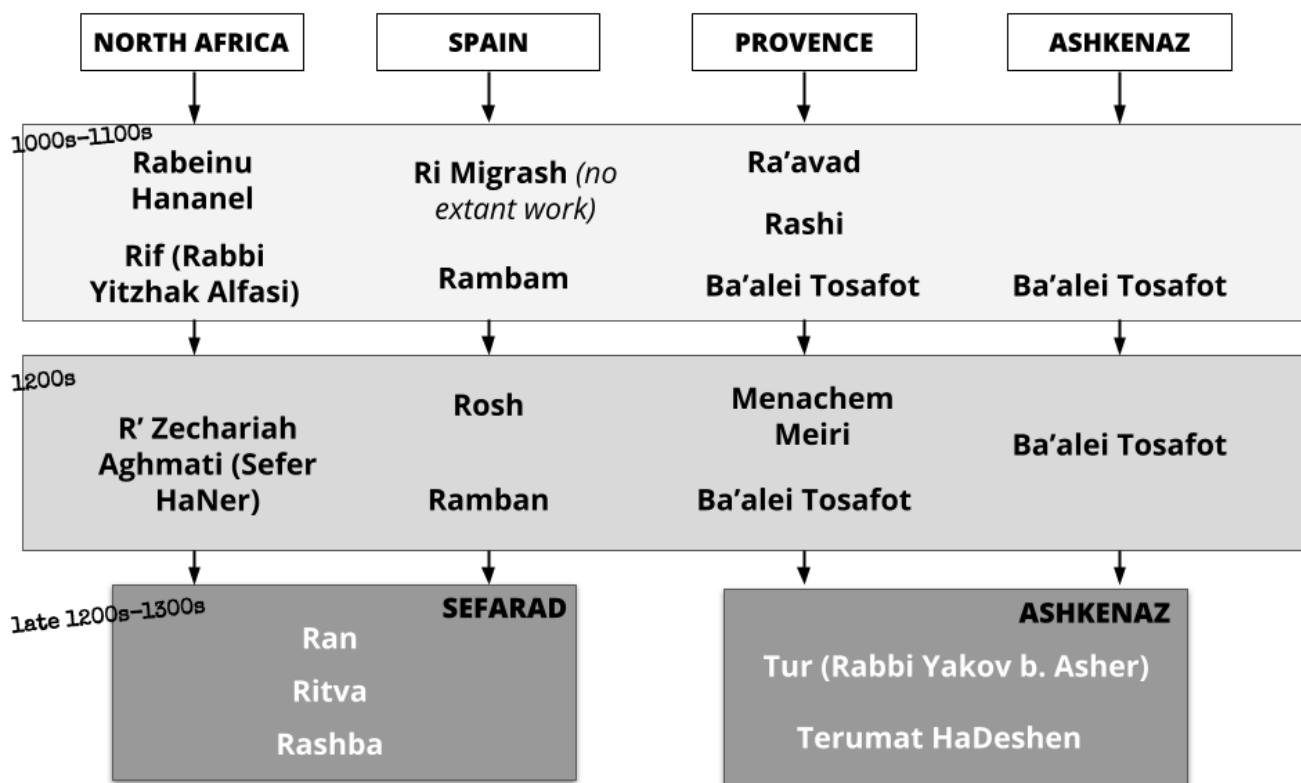
This was the golden period of the rabbinic age in which were compiled the classic creation in all three branches of the post-talmudic literary sources of Jewish law: Rashi’s commentary on the Talmud and the novellae of the tosfotists; the codes of Isaac Alfasi, Maimonides, Jacob b. Asher, Joseph Caro, Moses Isserles, and others; the responsa collections of Solomon b. Abraham Aderet (Rashba), Meir (Maharam) of Rothenburg, Asher b. Jehiel (Rosh), Isaac b. Sheshet Perfet (Ribash), Simeon b. Zemah Duran (Tashbez), Joseph b. Solomon Colon (Maharik), and others. This was also the period in which the main part of the communal enactments was produced. It embraces the rise and decline of Spanish Jewry, and its close saw the initial flowering of several other Jewish centers — particularly in Erez Israel and

Poland-Lithuania — whose outstanding scholars were to make great contributions to Jewish law, especially to its codification and to its responsa literature.<sup>95</sup>

- Menachem Elon, "Introduction" in *The Principles of Jewish Law*, p. 17

Generally speaking, the Rishonim flourished in four core geographic communities in the diaspora: North Africa, modern-day Spain, Provence (modern-day France), and Ashkenaz. The commentaries that emerged from each of these four geographic regions have distinct styles. At the same time, relationships between these communities and places were more porous than any chart or list of identities can convey! When you look through biographies of various Rishonim, you'll notice that many of them moved from one area to another, carrying with them multiple ways of thinking and learning. Their commentaries often reflect this dynamic movement.<sup>96</sup> Rishonim moved around for many reasons, including that they were often navigating an ever-changing map of dangerous or oppressive political environments.

**SOME OF OUR FAVE RISHONIM:<sup>97</sup>**



<sup>95</sup> Elon, *The Principles of Jewish Law*, 17.

<sup>96</sup> For more on these dates and distinctions Aryeh Leibowitz, *The Early Rishonim: A Gemara Student's Guide* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015) and Hersh Goldwurm & Shmuel Teich, *The Rishonim: Biographical Sketches of the Prominent Early Sages and Leaders* (ArtScroll Mesorah Publications Ltd., 1986).

<sup>97</sup> Rishonim are identified in this chart either by their name or their work's name, depending on what they are most often referred to as.

## LEARNING RISHONIM

It can be powerful to see the gemara we're learning as the *beginning* of a 2,000-year-old conversation (or, more accurately, as the continuation of a 3,500-year-old conversation), and to take time to get in on the conversation that's happened on it *between the time of the stamma and now*.

Below are some reasons you might want to "go off the daf" and explore insights from one or more Rishonim. Remember that Rishonim offer different things from one another. They have different agendas, goals, and relationships to Talmud, just like us!

- you still need clarification on something in the sugya, or you're still puzzled by what the text is *really* saying
- you have a problem with what you think the text is saying, and want to see if anyone else has had this same problem in the last 2,000 years!
- you smell something odd in a Rashi or Tosafot. Are you sniffing out apologetics, anxiety? Is Rashi or Tosafot's solution inadequate?
- you can't believe how radical this text is and you want to see if others have seen this radicalness, too! (they might try to shut it down; they might highlight it; they might be silent on it)
- you're wondering if you *missed* some "radical" in the sugya. Sometimes seeing where the rishonim go helps you see radicalness (or other things) that you may have missed in the gemara your first time through it.
- you're interested in how an idea or concept in your sugya evolved over time or in different locations and communities

### reflection:

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Before digging in, take a moment to reflect on the following (and then share with your chevruta!):

- As you get ready to incorporate Rishonim into your learning, what are you hoping to explore and learn from this process?
- What comes up when you think about learning Rishonim? How does it feel?
- What prior experiences & expectations are you bringing into the learning?

## WHAT YOU'LL NEED TO LEARN RISHONIM:

1. Rishonim to learn! You can find these:
  - Right in your masechet, either:
    - On your daf: Rashi, Tosafot, Rabeinu Chananel
    - In the back of your masechet: the specific commentators back here vary from edition to edition, but most likely include the Maharsha,<sup>98</sup> Rosh & Rif
  - A Kovetz Mefarshim<sup>99</sup> or Shita Mekubetzet<sup>100</sup> on your masechet, which you can purchase from a local Jewish bookstore, or used on eBay
  - An individual volume on your masechet by one or two Rishonim (as you get to know and befriend different commentators, you'll know who you turn to), which you can similarly purchase from a local Jewish bookstore, or used on eBay
  - Online (more info below)
2. Your Jastrow<sup>101</sup>
3. A dictionary of Hebrew acronyms (an *otzar rashei teivot*)<sup>102</sup>
4. A Tanach, in case you find some quoted prooftexts!
5. Stickies!

## HOW TO FIND RISHONIM IN THE KOVETZ MEFARSHIM OR SHITA MEKUBETZET

1. We recommend starting with Kovetz Mefarshim, if there is one on your masechet. If you don't have access to a Kovetz Mefarshim for your masechet and you do have a Shita Mekubetzet, start there! If you don't have access to these, check out the resources online (below!).<sup>103</sup>
2. Go through each commentary, rishon by rishon, from the front to the back of the book.

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<sup>98</sup> The Maharsha is actually an Acharon, and lived after the period of the Rishonim!

<sup>99</sup> A *Kovetz Mefarshim* is a modern compilation of commentaries assembled by various publishers. They are published individually by masechet, and contain different Rishonim depending on the edition.

<sup>100</sup> *Shita Mekubetzet* is a collection of older interpretations / glosses on the Talmud, many of which have been preserved only through their publication in this collection! This work is attributed to Bezalel ben Abraham Ashkenazi, a 16th-century scholar who lived in Palestine.

<sup>101</sup> There is no comprehensive dictionary to help you understand and decode the medieval Hebrew that the Rishonim spoke. Jastrow can help you, BUT keep in mind that his dictionary is specifically for earlier texts. A modern Hebrew dictionary can help, BUT is similarly not designed for these texts. We're puzzling it out, team!

<sup>102</sup> “אוצר ראשי תיבות”

<sup>103</sup> Most Rishonim in these texts and in individual volumes are published in Rashi script. If you're still working on your Rashi script, you can check out Rabeinu Chananel's commentary (located on the daf) or the Rif's commentary (typically in the back of the masechet).

3. In each rishon's section (his name will be at the top of the page), skim for your daf. Then skim for the words in your sugya to see if that rishon said anything about those words (skim the diburei hamatchil). Put a sticky on every page that pertains to your sugya (or the words/phrase in question).
4. Work your work through the whole book this way.
5. Go to each stickied page and skim the relevant words to see if they seem "juicy." If they seem like they might be, keep that sticky on. If they don't, take that sticky off. Not sure if they're juicy? Keep the sticky there.
6. Work your way through the whole book this way.
7. Go back and read through each of the perushim you've stickied up! As you get familiar with certain Rishonim, you'll want to pay attention to their commentaries particularly.

### HOW TO FIND RISHONIM ONLINE

1. Open your sugya on Sefaria.
2. Click the section you're learning to open up the "RESOURCES" menu.
3. Click "COMMENTARY" to open up the commentaries on your text.
4. Click around and read through whatever commentaries you can find!
  - a. If you hit a commentary authored by someone who is new to you, take a moment to look them up on Wikipedia, in the Encyclopedia Judaica, or in the ArtScroll Guide to Rishonim
5. If you want to gather these texts in one place, copy them into a Google Doc and learn on!

**Note:** Because each of the Rishonim writes in a unique style, there is no generic step-by-step guide that can be applied to all Rishonim. It's best to use what you know about learning Talmud and go word by word, phrase by phrase, trying to get the inside/outside as you move through. Rishonim are often writing in a language that they did not primarily speak, and the language they use—and with it the grammar!—is created through a synthesis of their primary languages and borrowed Talmudic phrases. It can be hard to get a seamless and tight "inside" translation; do not worry about having a slightly looser transition from "inside" to "outside. Do what you can, and if you and your chevruta are curious and present you're doing it right!



## ABOUT TOSAFOT

The tosafists, the great Franco-German glossators of the two centuries following Rashi, undertook the massive project of collating all of the talmudic discussions on a given issue, noting any contradictions among them, and resolving them in good dialectical fashion by distinguishing between two apparently similar cases or seemingly identical legal terms.

The founder of the tosafist movement, the man who restored dialectic to the prominent place in halakhah that it had occupied in talmudic times, was Rashi's grandson, R. Jacob ben Meir, known more commonly as Rabbenu Tam, who died in 1171. He ranged freely over the entire Talmud and revolutionized all that he touched; he left, however, little written record of his thoughts. His teachings were preserved by his nephew, Rabbi Isaac, also known as Ri, who, together with his pupils, proceeded to subject every line of the Talmud to relentless, dialectical inquisition. The upshot of the far-ranging analyses in Ri's yeshiva in Dampierre, a tiny hamlet in Champagne, was inscribed by his disciples, and entitled simply "Tosafot" ("additions" [to Rashi]).

The Tosafot swiftly spread throughout the diaspora and shaped decisively all subsequent halakhic thought, both in substance and in method. A somewhat abridged version of these glosses has been printed alongside every edition of the Talmud since the 1520s.

- Hayim Soloveitchik, "The People of the Book—Since When?"<sup>104</sup>

The tosafists' panoptic approach to Talmud was built on an assumption held by Rashi. Where he had clarified obscure passages with reference to clearer ones that appeared elsewhere in the Talmudic tractate, the tosafists regarded the entire Talmud as a unified and internally coherent corpus. Relying on this notion, they put scaffolding into place that would enable students reading the Talmud to compare and contrast related utterances that occur throughout the corpus. Even before pagination was standardized, the tosafists identified textual parallels and created a comprehensive system of cross-referencing...

The tosafists appended their comments to far fewer selections from the talmudic text than had Rashi, and they used these glossatorial sites to entertain a wider range of concerns. Apart from offering exegesis, comments by the tosafists set forth alternative readings of the talmudic text, challenged Rashi, noted the recurrence of particular phrases in other sugyot (units) of the Talmud, drew attention to ostensible contradictions between talmudic passages, and resolved them by means of dialectical reasoning. This last activity, reminiscent of the give and take of the amoraim, involved the systematic comparison of related talmudic passages, the identification of conflicts between them, and, ultimately, the dissolution of the problems raised.

In this final stage of the activity, the tosafists would reveal that the circumstances treated in the apparently incompatible talmudic passages were, in fact, hardly identical. The undertakings of the tosafists affirmed two assumptions about the Babylonian Talmud on which their logocentric activity was predicated: the notion that the Talmud's language was fixed and authoritative, and the notion that the Talmud was internally consistent.

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<sup>104</sup> Hayim Soloveitchik, "The People of the Book—Since When?" *Jewish Review of Books*, 12 (2013).

- Talya Fishman, *Becoming the People of the Talmud: Oral Torah as Written Tradition in Medieval Jewish Cultures*<sup>105</sup>

## reflection:

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What comes up for you as you read these quotes?

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<sup>105</sup> Talya Fishman, *Becoming the People of the Talmud* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 134-5.

## LEARNING TOSAFOT

### STEP 1. DO DEEP CHAZARA

Do not move onto learning Tosafot until you feel like you own the sugya fully (for this moment, at least! Next time you learn it, you'll "own" it differently, of course!). Many times when we're stuck, we think that if we peruse the daf we might find something that can help unstuck us. While Rashi is our friend (most of the time) and is on the daf to help us understand what's going on in the sugya according to his reading, Tosafot are not here to be our friends (but they *are* here to be our comrades). **Tosafot are *not* here to explain the sugya or help us understand it. They are here to complicate, interrogate, and analyze the sugya.**

Just like you need to make sure you understand a MISHNAH before moving onto learning the GEMARA on that MISHNAH, you should make sure to understand the SUGYA completely before moving onto learning TOSAFOT on that SUGYA.

### STEP 2. REFLECT

#### reflection:

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Before digging in, take a moment to reflect on the following (and then share with your chevruta!):

- As you get ready to incorporate Tosafot into your learning, what are you hoping to explore and learn from this process?
- What comes up when you think about learning Tosafot? How does it feel?
- What prior experiences & expectations are you bringing into the learning?

**STEP 3. LEARN ABOUT TOSAFOT**

Read through the introductory material in Rabbi Haim Perlmutter’s *Tools for Tosafos* to help you get a sense of WHAT Tosafot is/are, WHY we learn them, and HOW to go about learning their comments on the your sugya. Fill out the chart below. (For more on the project of Tosafot from an academic lens, check out the short quotes from Haym Soloveitchik and Talya Fishman in → **ABOUT TOSAFOT**)

<b>WHAT IS / ARE TOSAFOT</b>	<b>WHY WOULD I LEARN TOSAFOT</b>

Is there any other information you learned about Tosafot that you’d like to capture? Are there any other questions you’re sitting with about who they are and what their project is? Jot them down below!

#### STEP 4. GET YOUR REFERENCE MATERIALS HANDY

Get ready for your Tosafot adventure! Here are some tools that will help you:<sup>106</sup>

- *Tools for Tosafos* by Rabbi Haim Perlmutter (specifically the tips in Chapter 13)
- A dictionary of Hebrew acronyms (an *otzar rashei teivot*)

#### STEP 5. DIG IN!

Lastly, using the tips from *Tools for Tosafos* (especially “Tip 2: Approach Tosafos Gradually”), begin learning the comment from Tosafot that you’re excited to learn.

**You do not need to, nor should you plan to, learn the entire comment. If you’re present and curious, you’re doing it right!** *Tools for Tosafos* offers the following advice (which should sound familiar to y’all!): “It is not necessary to finish every Tosafos at first...it is sufficient to learn one question and answer, or one idea, and then to proceed with the study of the Gemara.” Wherever you get to is perfect, whether it’s a few words, a few lines, a comment, an idea, etc.

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<sup>106</sup> It is worth noting that, while learning Tosafot can be truly rad (for some!), there are limited resources for those seeking to unlock the magic of Tosafot. One of the best resources that provides good scaffolding is the Daf Yomi Advancement Forum, which provides outlines of Tosafot and the key points of their comments in English for the entire Talmud. You can find that here: [https://www.dafyomi.co.il/new\\_gemara\\_picker.php](https://www.dafyomi.co.il/new_gemara_picker.php)

# SECTION 3

# comp:

## A FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING TRAINING

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# reflection: experiencing svara learning

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After you've gotten a chance to experience learning in this method, take a moment to reflect.

- What was that experience like?
- What did we do, step by step?
- How did you feel?
- What did you notice?
- Beyond the step by step, what bigger aspects of the learning did you notice?

## WHAT

*What were some of the learning steps you listed above?*

## WHY

*Why might this element be part of SVARA's method? What do you think it achieves? How did it impact your experience as a learner?*



## COMPONENTS OF SVARA-STYLE TEACHING

Any learning environment can be described through the four elements of COMP: *culture*, *orientation*, *method*, and *pedagogic beliefs*. As such, SVARA's approach to learning is more than a set of steps or rules for studying Talmud in the original. It is holistic, a way of relating to our text and each other, along with a discrete set of practices and methods, that together create our empowering and transformative learning experiences. We believe that the success, magic, and ultimate impact of a learning space happens when there is alignment between each of the four COMP elements, defined below.

As you prepare to teach in SVARA's style, you will learn to embody (own!) SVARA's approach to each of these four components and make them your own.

### culture

the values of the space and community that surrounds the learning. What are the norms, and how do they play out? Who's in the room, and who's at the front of the room? How do learners feel in the space? What is the "vibe"?

### orientation

an educator's fundamental (& hopefully articulated!) posture towards the Talmud (or towards any material they're teaching). What do they believe it is? What do they believe it's trying to do? What matters to them about the material? Why do they believe it should be taught at all?<sup>107</sup>

### method

the nuts and bolts of how the learning happens—what the learner actually does, and how the educator facilitates it. ORIENTATION, CULTURE, and PEDAGOGIC BELIEFS should each be encoded and expressed through every step and element of the METHOD.

### pedagogic beliefs

an educator's beliefs about pedagogy and education more broadly. Who is at the center of learning? What should be the relationship between learners and teachers? Why do we learn? What ideologies and ideas inform the educator's relationship to the act of teaching itself?

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<sup>107</sup> Jon A. Levisohn, "A Menu of Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature," *Journal of Jewish Education* 76.1 (2010): 4-51.

# reflection: mapping our learning onto 'comp'

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How would you categorize the various elements of the SVARA-style bet midrash within this framework?

## CULTURE

What was the vibe of the space? What was the energy? How would you describe the CULTURE of the learning?

## ORIENTATION

What was communicated, explicitly or implicitly, about why we learn this material? (This could be spiritual, political, religious, cultural, etc.)

## METHOD

What actually happened? What were the activities and steps that the learners moved through?

## PEDAGOGIC BELIEFS

What assumptions about learning were present in the learning space? What role did the teacher play? Could you sense anything that revealed the teacher's beliefs about learners, teachers, and the act of learning?

## reflection: bet midrash observation

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While you're in the bet midrash, pay attention to the following (and feel free to take notes below!):

CULTURE	ORIENTATION	METHOD	PEDAGOGIC BELIEFS

What did you observe or notice that you might start to try in your teaching setting or bring attention to in your bet midrash?

# culture:

the values of the space and community that surrounds the learning. What are the norms, and how do they play out? Who's in the room, and who's at the front of the room? How do learners feel in the space? What is the "vibe"?



## BUILDING SVARA'S CULTURE

CULTURE can be hard to pin down. It includes our shared values, the ways we live into them, and the vibe we create as we do so. It's how we *feel* this community. It's how we embody our aspirations for this community. CULTURE includes what educators call the "hidden curriculum": the "everything else," beyond the specific sugya we're studying, that we are working to instill and embody as we study that sugya. Below we name some core values that we hold as a learning community, and some examples of how we live them out through the CULTURE we create.

### WE VALUE AND ASPIRE TO...

#### QUEER NORMALITY & CENTERING MARGINALIZED IDENTITIES

What do we mean by queer? Queerness is about challenging society's norms related to gender and sexuality, AND, more broadly, it is about challenging the silences and injustices around us while creating a subversive, brave, joyful culture that celebrates who we are. It is about thinking, living, and learning in radical ways. Like Jewish insight, queer insight is drawn from the experience of being on the margins and the wisdom gained from it.

And what do we mean when we call the Rabbis of the Talmud queer? We see ourselves in their stories. Living under a hegemonic occupation, they resisted assimilation. Geographically and spiritually uprooted by diaspora, they rerooted in (reinvented) tradition. Often estranged from their families of origin because of their politics and religious impulses, they created tight lineages of teachers and pupils. Systematically disempowered and marginalized by the state, they located their protest *and* resilience in an old-new system of meaning with radical potential. In these ways, the Rabbis of the Talmud thought queerly and lived queerly, creating worlds as a way of resisting a society that was not built for them. In this way, the innovators of the Jewish future will be queer. To be deeply Jewish is to be queer.

SVARA exists to celebrate the beautiful, fierce, diverse, glittering gorgeousness of our whole community, and to transform the Talmud and the Jewish tradition by bringing ourselves to the bet midrash. **We understand our project as QUEER in our effort to move towards a more just, inclusive and accessible world in which all people are able to live out their most fully human lives by allowing the insights of those on the margins to be brought to bear on the world.**

### ...AND WE LIVE INTO THAT COMMITMENT BY...

- having queer people, whose queerness and stories are brought into the space, at the front of the room
- having people whose voices our tradition needs the most comprise the majority of our community, e.g., trans people, Black people, non-Black people of color, and disabled people

- actively inviting conversation with learners about their specific access needs during program registration
- making online and in-person batei midrash physically accessible, e.g., with live captioning, screen-reader compatibility for all materials, creating scent-free spaces, ensuring spaces are easily navigated with mobility tools
- using alternatives to policing for safety and security
- giving folks with relative privilege the tools they need in order to be self-aware in queer-normative space

## EMPATHY & INTERDEPENDENCE

Maggid Jhos Singer often reminds us, “The Talmud is too big for one brain.” At SVARA we never learn alone—we learn in chevruta pairs, and we learn collectively as a whole community. We grapple together with what the words say, what they mean, and what they mean *to us*. In other words, we understand that *we need one another* in order to make sense of the world. The premise rejects individualism and competition, two core elements of our current societal culture. Instead, SVARA learning uplifts interdependence, compassionate listening, humility, and our genuine investment in one another. At SVARA we don’t move forward in our learning until our chevruta understands and owns the material as well as we do, and we are as invested in our comrades’ understanding of the material as we are in our own. We are here for one another’s transformation and empowerment. This itself is a spiritual practice and an exercise in empathy.

SVARA’s batei midrash are always mixed-level spaces. Even when we create spaces for specific groups, like “beginners” or “experienced learners,” we understand these spaces to be profoundly diverse and fundamentally mixed level. In fact, we name and celebrate that *all learning spaces are mixed level*. We, as human beings and learners, are mixed level! For our teachers, managing a space that is not primarily tracked by “level” or experience is one of the most radical, challenging, *and* rewarding elements of SVARA’s culture. Learners become invested in the success of everyone else in the bet midrash and are more likely to see themselves as potentially learning from or teaching anyone else in the room.

### ...AND WE LIVE INTO THAT COMMITMENT BY...

- modeling comfort, honesty, and curiosity about what we don’t know
- learning in front of the room
- learning only in pairs or groups, never alone
- helping learners understand how to study in chevruta, e.g., by emphasizing responsibility to their chevruta
- modeling thoughtful discourse, e.g., by listening to understand rather than listening to respond, by bringing curiosity to discomfort



- asking learners to engage in thoughtful discourse, e.g., by reminding them to take space / make space
- teaching learners to identify and celebrate expertise at every level, e.g., by calling on “beginners” first, to let their achievements really shine in the room
- fostering group excitement and pride around accomplishments achieved by one or two, e.g., by clapping learners up at every opportunity

## **RIGOR**

At SVARA, the only prerequisites to learning are knowing your alef-bet, committing to attending all bet midrash sessions, and working hard. Everyone, from the experienced learner to the absolute beginner, is expected to own and memorize the amount of text they are able to prepare. We hold our learners to high expectations while creating a low bar for entry, and we provide as much support as possible along the way.

The rigor of our Talmud study lets learners know they are trusted and respected. It builds learners' confidence as nothing else can, and it communicates our belief (and excitement) that every learner will be a player: They will transform and shape the Jewish tradition, they will teach and transmit this learning to others, they will be change-makers in the wider world informed by their practice of studying Talmud. In order to do all of that, they have to know their shit!

### **...AND WE LIVE INTO THAT COMMITMENT BY...**

- learning in the original Hebrew & Aramaic
- consciously imparting learning skills, e.g., dictionary literacy; “zone out/fly away” tactic
- modeling accountability to the text
- expecting the same skills of all learners
- empowering learners to be in charge of their study, e.g., by determining how much text is the right amount for them to cover

## **ACCOUNTABILITY & REPAIR**

We know that building a culture that is responsive, healing, and connective is not static work. And just as we approach our time in the bet midrash as a space to practice liberatory learning, we know the work of creating a community that is growthful and takes time and practice. **We hold the wisdom of bell hooks in our commitment to keep striving:**

“The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.”

- bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*<sup>108</sup>

Inevitably there are moments where we let one another down, misstep, misspeak, hurt others, or get hurt ourselves. This is part of the deal when building community (not to mention when just being human!), and it can get messy. Harm can happen on multiple levels and we are here to nurture a community where it's okay to own mistakes and work towards repairing them.

### ...AND WE LIVE INTO THAT COMMITMENT BY...

- having a protocol for addressing harmful acts and speech that arise in our programs and spaces; responding proactively & with intentionality when we see harmful acts or speech in our spaces
- inviting learners to reflect on the ways in which we occupy positions of privilege (as opposed to asking those who are in a marginalized group to explain our oppression) making sure learners know who they can talk to privately if they've felt uncomfortable with the way a teacher or a learner engages in the space
- encouraging learners to keep kindness and love at the fore, and to see our bet midrash's potential as a healing space

### SPIRITUAL GROUNDING

At SVARA we are committed to framing and offering Talmud study as a spiritual practice, one that feels deep, rooted, and transformative for learners. **Spirituality is about, among other things, dropping into our inner world and our bodies, and engaging with deeper presence and awareness. The way we learn at SVARA—slowly, carefully, in relationship to others—attunes us to ourselves and those around us in the present moment.**

At SVARA we don't learn competitively, and there's no incentive to get through more material. We ultimately don't care how much text you see. Rather, we reflect back to learners that they have succeeded if they are immersed in the experience of learning, engaged in the present moment, and feeling connected to their chevruta and to the text. We care that you've been deeply and totally invested in the process, and that you've let it shape and transform you as a person.

It's not about plowing ahead, crossing a finish line, or accumulating more. It is a practice of *presence* and of *being*. The deep presence and flow facilitated by this kind of study is one way that people access *kedusha* (sacredness) or a connection with God.

In a culture and society that promote overstimulation, multi-tasking, and rushing, the deep singular focus required to study Talmud is totally countercultural. Talmud study at SVARA is modeled as an almost contemplative or meditative practice, in which your mind/body/heart are

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<sup>108</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 207.

engaged in *one* activity fully. We learn Talmud methodically, word by word, in part to foster what some psychologists call *flow*: a state of full immersion, focus, and enjoyment in an activity.

Here's one way Benay often talks about this at the beginning of the first shiur of a session:

"Think back to the chevruta session you just had. How many of you were thinking about your mortgage? Your job? The fight you just had with your roommate? (...*waiting to see if hands go up... no hands go up*) Nobody? ... That tells me that you're doing it right. That you were fully present in your learning. This is what it means to learn as a spiritual practice. It's about being transformed through the process of learning. It is not about transmitting information. If I wanted you to get the information, I would've sent you to Barnes and Noble's and you'd know what the text said in 3 minutes. And you know what would have happened inside of you? Nothing. For the Rabbis, it's about the meditative practice of chevruta learning, which changes you fundamentally as a human being. That's where they found God. And this is where I find God. I offer it to you as a possibility for your own lives. Just like you might have other practices, such as yoga, or prayer, the practice of Talmud study can be a way you connect deeply to God, yourselves, and one another."

### **...AND WE LIVE INTO THAT COMMITMENT BY...**

- moving through the text slowly and methodically, word by word
- emphasizing deep ownership of the text, presence, and focus over completing large amounts of material
- repetition and predictability
- creating ritual containers (e.g. blessings; nigunim)
- inviting intentionality (e.g. dedications; "How did that feel?")
- dedication to the task: staying accountable, focused, thoughtful; sticking with the hard stuff

## **JOY**

Black feminist scholar Toni Cade Bambara wrote that "as a culture worker who belongs to an oppressed people, my job is to make revolution irresistible."<sup>109</sup> At SVARA we take this charge seriously. We feel that **as queer Talmud teachers, our role is to make queer-normative, justice-oriented, unapologetically Jewish space irresistible**. All of our learning happens within a culture of joy, celebration, laughter, and fun! If we're not havin' fun in the bet midrash, we can't learn!

SVARA teachers cultivate a culture of reverent irreverence by being playful, making jokes, expressing humility and curiosity about what we don't know, and relating to Talmud study with enthusiasm, light-heartedness, and love. We genuinely love Talmud, and we genuinely love our learners—this love shines through in an infectious way. When we are relaxed, joyful, human, and

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<sup>109</sup> Kay Bonetti & Toni Cade Bambara, "An Interview with Toni Cade Bambara," *Conversations with Toni Cade Bambara*, ed. Thabiti Lewis (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2012).

even silly, in our teaching, learners feel invited to relax, which can disarm some of the fear and baggage they may otherwise be bringing to the Talmud and Jewish community.

**...AND WE LIVE INTO THAT COMMITMENT BY...**

- clapping folks up
- wearing glitter fairy wings!
- being physically comfortable: snacks, breaks, clothes
- having teachers who are informal
- knowing that fun and seriousness definitely go together
- elevating humor in the bet midrash

**reflection:**

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Look back at the aspects of CULTURE that you generated when describing SVARA's "vibe" and peering through its window.

- Are there any aspects of SVARA's CULTURE that you named that are missing?
- What are those aspects of SVARA's CULTURE trying to embody and do? How do they show up in the space?

# reflection: my role in creating culture

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We create culture as educators with our bodies, our voices, and our behaviors as much as by stating cultural norms. What are some aspects of bet midrash CULTURE that you want to bring attention to? What are some practices or tools that can help you embody those? What gets in the way?

ASPECT OF 'CULTURE'	TOOLS, PRACTICES, BEHAVIORS	WHAT GETS IN THE WAY?

## CREATING A CONTAINER FOR TALMUD STUDY AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

The way a spiritual practice feels and manifests is subjective, and the more you know about what “Talmud study as a spiritual practice” means to *you*, the better you’ll be able to articulate it—and facilitate it—for your learners. Like any facilitator or practitioner of a spiritual practice, the teachers at SVARA have a role in guiding, framing, articulating, making accessible, and inviting learners into the practice. So, first and foremost, we invite you to reflect on your own experiences.

### reflection:

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In what ways is learning Talmud at SVARA a spiritual experience for you?

# orientation:

an educator's fundamental (& hopefully articulated!) posture towards the Talmud (or towards any material they're teaching). What do they believe it is? What do they believe it's trying to do? What matters to them about the material? Why do they believe it should be taught at all?!

what is

talmud

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# reflection: what is talmud?!

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Take a moment to consider:

- What is it that I love about teaching Talmud?
- What is Talmud?
- How do I describe it to others?

*Note: How would your answers be different if you were answering them from the perspective of a particular learning space in your life?*

**Put simply, what we believe the Talmud is shapes our learners' relationships to it. As we become more conscious of the stories we're holding about the Talmud, we can become more intentional, empowering, transparent teachers.**

## reflection: recovering texts we love

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What are some of the most powerful and impactful texts that you have learned from the "rabbinic" era? (Define "rabbinic" however you'd like!)

- Make a list of 5-10, if you can.
- Go back to them (whether online or in a book). What was it like to learn each of these texts? How did you come across this text (who taught it to you, did you find it for yourself, etc.)? What do you love about or what are you drawn to about this text?
- Once you've compiled your list, take a look at the whole list and consider: What do you notice about the full list of texts? Do these texts have anything in common?

- Go deeper: After you've compiled your list, start to gather additional sources. What articles, books, etc. have been most impactful in your learning?
- What, if any, were the common threads among the texts that came to mind?

## ABOUT ORIENTATIONS

**“It is a teacher’s fundamental stance toward a particular subject that encompasses a conception of purposes (of teaching that subject) and a set of paradigmatic practices. These purposes and practices hang together; an orientation has internal coherence.”<sup>110</sup>**

ORIENTATIONS to teaching is a framework developed by Pamela Grossman to articulate a taxonomy of purposes that teachers of English literature have in their diverse classrooms.<sup>111</sup> She aimed to help teachers understand the 'why' behind so many of their distinct choices, and to broadly understand why there were so many approaches to teaching English literature. She wrote: “an orientation towards literature represents a basic organizing framework for knowledge about literature.” Once a teacher knows why they're teaching something, they can bring attention to what they're doing in the classroom to ensure that it reflects their orientation maximally. Almost a decade later, Barry Holtz applied Grossman’s framework of orientations to the teaching of the Bible in a Jewish educational context.<sup>112</sup>

In a later article, Jon A. Levisohn re-applied this framework of orientations to the field of rabbinic literature. What follows are excerpts of his article, adapted by SVARA, with two of our own additions.

Levisohn describes orientations in the following way:

“What is an orientation to teaching? An orientation is not a technique or method of teaching, and not merely an attitude held by the teacher, and not an approach to studying a subject. Instead, a teaching orientation is a conceptual model of teaching that subject. It is a teacher’s fundamental stance toward a particular subject that encompasses a conception of purposes (of teaching that subject) and a set of paradigmatic practices. These purposes and practices hang together; an orientation has internal coherence. An orientation can be pursued well or it can be pursued poorly; an orientation is not, itself, good or bad. As part of our understanding of an orientation, we assume that any subject can have multiple orientations—but we do not assume that the multiple orientations are mutually exclusive (either in their purposes or their practices). Nor do we assume that orientations are fixed and eternal. On the contrary, the menu represents the range of stances that, we claim, are present at this moment in this place.”

- Jon Levisohn, “A Menu of Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Levisohn, “A Menu of Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature.”

<sup>111</sup> Pamela Grossman, “What are we talking about anyway? Subject-matter Knowledge of Secondary English Teachers,” *Advances in Research on Teaching*, ed. J. Brophy (JAI), (1991): 245-264.

<sup>112</sup> Barry Holtz, *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and Practice* (JTS Press, 2003).

<sup>113</sup> Levisohn, “A Menu of Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature.”

## SVARA'S Adapted Menu of Orientations

### From Levisohn's menu:

1. Torah/Instruction
2. Contextual
3. Jurisprudential
4. Halakhic
5. Literary
6. Cultural
7. Historical
8. Canonical (our word; "Bekiut" in Levisohn's original)
9. Interpretive

### SVARA's additions:

10. Empowering
11. Transformative

#### 1. TORAH / INSTRUCTION ORIENTATION

"... Encounter with this sacred literature has the potential to be illuminating, or inspirational, or instructive... [The] instructor believes that, under the right conditions, a patient encounter with this material can promote increased awareness of truths about the world or human nature or the divine, leading to inspiration or guidance or enlightenment. What is uniquely characteristic of the Torah Orientation, however, is the way in which that purpose—the idea of engagement with the subject for the purpose of instruction or enlightenment—becomes the dominant and guiding principle for pedagogic decisions."

- **Grounding question:** What does this text mean to me in this moment? How can I derive personal meaning and instruction that helps me live better?
- According to this ORIENTATION, **Talmud is:**

#### 2. CONTEXTUAL ORIENTATION

"Within this orientation, teachers are primarily interested in understanding the original contexts of rabbinic texts, including how the texts came to assume their final form, and how understanding that context illuminates their meaning—and they do so because of an overriding concern for peshat, for discerning the plain sense of the text as they see it... In terms of student learning, they focus on the

students' capacities to discern [historical layers of] strata and those [historical/contextual] issues on their own as important learning outcomes."

- **Grounding question:** What does this text mean on its own terms in its original context?
- According to this ORIENTATION, **Talmud is:**

### 3. JURISPRUDENTIAL ORIENTATION

"With this orientation, rabbinic literature is taken to be a product of a legal system—not a literary text, not an historical text, not even (primarily) a text that ought to trigger a wide-ranging exploration of truths about human nature or the world. Legal argument, *shaqla ve-tarya* ("give and take"), debates about legal concepts and rulings--these are the heart of the subject. As the manifestation of a legal system, rabbinic literature is appropriately examined through categories of legal analysis, sometimes (in some settings) in comparison with other legal systems (e.g. Roman law) and sometimes with categories developed internally to the Jewish tradition of talmudic interpretation."

- **Grounding question:** What does this text demonstrate about the ways in which law has developed over time (in relation to what we know about law and legal systems more broadly)?
- According to this ORIENTATION, **Talmud is:**

### 4. HALAKHIC ORIENTATION

"Rabbinic texts—especially the legal texts, of course, but in some cases non-legal texts as well--are the primary sources for understanding the development of halakha, the Jewish legal tradition. Teachers within this orientation aspire to help students understand halakha in its complexity as a legal tradition and system. Typically, the emphasis will be on Mishnah and Talmud, although in some contexts this orientation will be served by a focus on midrash halakha. Rabbinic material may or may not be juxtaposed with pre-rabbinic material, but it will often be juxtaposed to later legal layers--the commentators, responsa literature, and legal codes that build on the classical rabbinic texts as the legal tradition develops over time."

- **Grounding question:** How is this text situated within a broader halakhic conversation (of Jewish legal texts and practices)?
- According to this ORIENTATION, **Talmud is:**

### 5. LITERARY ORIENTATION

"In addition to whatever else it is, rabbinic literature (both legal and non-legal) is also *literature*, consciously crafted compositions that employ their own literary forms, structures, and patterns in the service of their literary objectives. Teachers within this orientation will typically choose texts on which

literary analysis can be performed to great effect, and will aspire to foster their students' capacities to do so as well."

- **Grounding question:** How does this text function as literature? What does the language, structure, and narrative of the text teach us about the text itself (and beyond)?
- According to this ORIENTATION, **Talmud is:**

## 6. CULTURAL ORIENTATION

"Studying rabbinic literature provides a window into rabbinic culture, the wellspring of Judaism as it developed over time. The tools used to understand that culture are the analytical and conceptual tools of the cultural anthropologists, reading texts as products and makers of culture... The Cultural Orientation asks questions about culture, seeking answers in the texts but also explicitly facilitating an encounter between the culture of the Rabbis and the culture of the students."

- **Grounding question:** What does this text teach us about the nature of rabbinic culture? How does this interact with our own cultural experiences?
- According to this ORIENTATION, **Talmud is:**

## 7. HISTORICAL ORIENTATION

"Rabbinic literature provides evidence for the social, intellectual, and political history of the Jewish communities of late antiquity. The goal of teaching within the Historical Orientation is the development of an appropriate understanding of some aspect of the history of the Jews in late antiquity, or the development within students of historiographical sensibilities appropriate to the study of that history."

- **Grounding question:** What can we learn about the historical experience of the rabbis through this text?
- According to this ORIENTATION, **Talmud is:**

## 8. CANONICAL ORIENTATION (described by Levisohn as "Bekiut orientation")<sup>114</sup>

"The purpose of studying Talmud or Mishnah *biv'kiut* (in a bekiut way) or *liv'kiut* (for the purpose of *bekiut*) is to cover ground. Just as students will absorb the literary norms associated with the modern novel, even if they forget the details of the novels that they read, so too here, the sequential,

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<sup>114</sup> Bekiut = בְּקִיאוּת (*inside*: expertise; *outside*: learning for breadth, for example: learning in a Daf Yomi cycle).

immersive exposure to the texts may foster an apprehension of rabbinic norms, a facility with rabbinic logic, and a familiarity with rabbinic concepts, even as the details quickly slip from mind.”

- **Grounding question:** How does this text fit into the canon of what a Jew “should” know (vis à vis the perspectives of my teachers, and others who define the norms of literacy in my community)?
- According to this ORIENTATION, **Talmud is:**

## 9. INTERPRETIVE ORIENTATION

“In contrast to other classical literature, much of rabbinic literature is constructed as interpretation of other texts, both biblical and earlier rabbinic texts. Those interpretations proceed according to their own norms, sometimes playful and pluralistic, sometimes rigidly argumentative. The Interpretive Orientation of the text takes this quality of the text to be its defining characteristic, the answer to the question of what the subject of rabbinic literature is about.”

- **Grounding question:** How is this text interpreted over time? How does this text reflect the rabbinic process and practice of interpretation?
- According to this ORIENTATION, **Talmud is:**

## SVARA’s Additional Orientations

### 10. EMPOWERING ORIENTATION

The purpose of teaching Talmud with an orientation of empowerment is to support learners in collapsing the distance between themselves and the sages; “**We** are Chazal!” is the message. The Empowering Orientation seeks to engender “ownership” of the text, which occurs when learners feel like what they’ve learned is truly theirs and transforms them from being passive recipients of the tradition to feeling like, and being in a position to become, *players—active shapers of it*. Learners begin to *identify* with the text, its authors, and *themselves*, as participants in an ongoing tradition. In this orientation, rabbinic literature—in genre and purpose—is characterized as follows:

“Our tradition’s early vision of rabbinic education was to train rabbis (a) first and foremost, to have the sensitivity to recognize who our tradition’s captives were, (b) to master the principles and mechanisms of the Jewish legal process, and (c) to have the courage to utilize them. I am convinced that they intended their record of this process—the Talmud—to be not so much a compendium of laws to follow as a blueprint for how to change those laws in authentically Jewish ways when necessary. It is a sixty-three-volume charge to future generations of rabbis to be observant enough to know when such times had come, compassionate enough to be moved by them, and courageous enough to utilize the radical talmudic methods bequeathed to them... Rabbinic literature provides us with the tools and

inspiration to make change and innovation in our lives and society, and students of Talmud as empowered agents of change understand that “their mandate [is] to address injustices and to use the Torah, in the broadest sense, to do so.”<sup>115</sup>

- Benay Lappe, “Educating Rabbis to be Traditional Radicals Once Again”

- **Grounding question:** What does this text teach me about my own ability and mandate to make change in the world? How does this text support my role as an agent in relation to Jewish text and tradition?
- According to this ORIENTATION, **Talmud is:**

## 11. TRANSFORMATIVE ORIENTATION

In a striking essay about her own teaching, Dr. Sarra Lev asks: “Can we read Talmud so that people stop killing each other?” Answering this question with an affirmative Yes! offers insight into the power of studying Talmud as a tool for transformative change. This orientation assumes that the study of Talmud itself transforms the individual learners into more thoughtful, more loving, more empathic people, people who can tolerate ambiguity, paradox, and contradiction. Distinct from the Torah/Instruction Orientation, in which learners turn to rabbinic literature as a source of wisdom that provides instruction for a more meaningful, moral life, a Transformative Orientation assumes that the process of learning Talmud itself has transformative influence and power. Lev frames this process as “teaching for the heart,” by which our hearts are opened, shaped, and eventually transformed by experiences of learning Talmud.<sup>116</sup>

- **Grounding question:** How are learners different as a result of learning this text and as a result of the process of learning, more broadly? How have they changed? In what ways have they been transformed?
- According to this ORIENTATION, **Talmud is:**

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<sup>115</sup> Benay Lappe, “Educating Rabbis to be Traditional Radicals Once Again,” in *Sh’ma Journal of Jewish Ideas* (2003).

<sup>116</sup> Sarra Lev, “Talmud that Works Your Heart: New Approaches to Reading,” *Learning to Read Talmud: What It Looks Like and How It Happens*, eds. Jane Kanarek and Marjorie Lehman (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2016), 176-7. Specifically: “I want to provide learners the opportunity to use their encounters with rabbinic texts to deepen themselves in multiple ways: as individuals, in their relationships with others, and in their relationship with the material itself... By that I mean to treat the texts of the Talmud as if they exist to help us achieve holiness, not by telling us what is or what should be, but by impelling us to interact with the text. It is a text that pushes our buttons and by which we can be pushed to become ever more reflective, understanding, empathetic, discerning, and expansive.”



## reflection:

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What other ORIENTATIONS can you think of that are not listed here?

# reflection: my orientations

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- How would I articulate in my own words what an ORIENTATION is?
  
- Which ORIENTATIONS on this menu am I most drawn to? Why? What is it that I am drawn to about each of them?
  
- Which ORIENTATIONS do I notice within the institutions and communities I've been part of (as a student or a teacher)?
  
- Is there anything these ORIENTATIONS help me articulate or notice about what I believe the Talmud is & why it's important?

- As a group, what ORIENTATIONS are we naming & observing (in ourselves & in our communities)?

<b>1) OURSELVES</b>	<b>2) OUR INSTITUTIONS / COMMUNITIES</b>

- How might I make my ORIENTATION clearer & more transparent to my learners?

# How to Read the Talmud<sup>117</sup>

*Why this classic work of law, stories and wisdom isn't really about any of those things.*

**BY RABBI BENAY LAPPE**

If you buy a new car, you will find in the glove compartment a thick paperback book called an owner's manual. It will tell you everything you need to know to operate your car—what the knobs on the dashboard do, how to adjust the mirror, turn on your brights, engage the cruise control. Its job is to make operating the car as simple as possible.

But if the carburetor goes out or the fuel pump fails or a part is recalled, you'll probably need to bring the car to a shop, where a mechanic will pull out a different thick paperback book, called a repair manual. Unlike the operator's manual, which goes to great lengths to conceal the inner workings of the car, the repair manual shows its reader exactly how the car works in all of its complexity, with detailed drawings of each system and expanded views of every screw, washer, pin, and gear assembly.

Jewish tradition works the same way. The Jewish owner's manual consists of those texts that help us use the tradition in everyday life. They are meant for consumers. These include the prayer book, the Passover haggadah, the High Holiday machzor, and even the Bible.

The Jewish repair manual are those texts that help us fix the tradition when it stalls on the side of the road. Like all technical manuals, these were initially intended not for the masses, but for the relative few who would devote their careers to getting under the hood of the tradition. For Judaism, that repair manual is the Talmud.

The Talmud is not a code of Jewish law, though there's plenty of law in it. Nor is it a collection of Jewish wisdom, though there's a lot of wisdom in it, too. Nor is it a compendium of Jewish lore, though it's chock full of stories. The Talmud is a manual for repairing, modifying, upgrading, and improving the Jewish tradition when components of it are no longer serving us well.

The Talmud's creators understood that religious traditions exist to answer our basic human questions and to help us create frameworks to fulfill our basic human needs—the most important of which is the need to grow into the fully human beings we have the potential to become. They also understood that people grow and change faster than traditions do, so our traditions will inevitably stop working unless we have ways of tweaking them along the way—sometimes radically.

The Talmud is a curriculum for educating and empowering those who will do this kind of upgrading in every generation. It is the 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."

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<sup>117</sup> This article originally appeared on My Jewish Learning (2020): <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/how-to-read-the-talmud/>

This is the meta-message on every page of the Talmud. But to access it, you have to learn how to read deeply. Much of the discussion in the Talmud revolves around intricate cases of Jewish law, but that's just the surface content. What's being pointed to is not the details of the cases, but the legal principles and methodologies derived from them.

The Talmud, in fact, is no different from any legal casebook. In law school, students are required to buy casebooks—thick anthologies, elegantly bound, with gold lettering on their covers, that contain hundreds of historic, precedent-setting cases. There's the well-known case in which a locomotive struck and killed a pedestrian at an uncontrolled street crossing, and the case of the tugboat that broke free of a dock and killed a sailor. But the point isn't to teach about locomotives and tugboats, and no law student would think that it is. The particulars of these cases aren't what ultimately matters. What matters are the legal principles derived from the cases. The goal is to teach the lawyers of the future how to think like lawyers—how to deduce principles that can be used in new cases, how to think in complex ways about new complex problems. The Talmud is doing exactly the same thing.

That might lead to the conclusion that the Talmud is the product of religious insiders, but in fact the Talmud records the voices of those who were on the margins of Jewish life during the late Second Temple and post-Temple periods—those who were both critiquing a Judaism that was failing and creating one that would work better. To do so, they invented and put into practice a system of mechanisms, principles, and rules-of-change that would guide them and future generations in the project of upgrading the tradition according to their new insights and lived experiences, one which might better serve the world of the future.

The core innovation that made this new system possible was the concept of *svara*—moral intuition. The sages of the Talmud named *svara* a source of Jewish law equal to the Torah in its power to overturn any aspect of the received tradition that violated their moral intuition or that caused harm that they could no longer justify, rationalize, or tolerate—even if it was written in black-and-white in the Torah itself. The sages' trust in *svara* is what drives the evolution of the entire tradition and can be found on every page of the Talmud—if you know to look beneath the particulars of the locomotives and the tugboats.

And it is the refinement of the Talmud learner's *svara* which is the Talmud's ultimate goal. To paraphrase the philosopher Moshe Halbertal, the Talmud is not a normative document, but a formative document. It is designed not to tell us what our behavioral norms should be, but rather to form us into a certain kind of human being.

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.

For two millennia, only Judaism's mechanics and engineers had access to this technology. Only a small fraction of our community was empowered to utilize the spiritual, moral, and intellectual resources of Talmud study to become the kinds of people the Jewish tradition would have us be, and to bring our insights and life experiences to bear on the project of upgrading the tradition itself.

Today, for the first time in Jewish history, we have the opportunity, every one of us, to roll up our sleeves and participate in the creation of the Jewish future. The Talmud is a gift entrusted to every one

of us by our Jewish ancestors who hoped we would find within it the tools to make ourselves, our tradition, and the world around us, better. So consider this an invitation to take a seat at the table where the tradition of the future will be created. By all of us.

## WHY TALMUD?!: CREATING A KAVANAH FOR YOUR TEACHING

The main question that helps us get at ORIENTATION is: “WHY do you teach Talmud? Towards what end?” As we continue to develop language that helps us express our ORIENTATIONS, we have found it helpful to articulate a *kavanah* as teachers, a statement that helps us know we’re teaching with alignment.

### WHAT’S A KAVANAH?

Our friend Marcus Jastrow tells us that the root of kavanah (קוּו) contains the following meanings:

1. To direct, aim, draw a direct line
2. To direct the mind, to pay attention, to do a thing intentionally
3. Intention, attention, devotion

Your kavanah is a mission statement or a direction statement, an articulation of the direction and intention of your teaching. *Where do you want it to go? Towards what larger mission?* Writing out, and regularly revising, your kavanah will allow you to better understand your work, evaluate where you are in relation to where you want to be, and to remind yourself of why you teach in moments when this work feels confusing or complicated. If it’s helpful, you might think about it as a compass for aligning your teaching with your ORIENTATION (the ‘why’ of the material you’re teaching) and PEDAGOGIC BELIEFS (what you believe about the nature of learning, the role of a teacher, and what education is/should be). Here’s SVARA’s kavanah, and on the next page you’ll have a chance to write your own!

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**At SVARA, we teach Talmud in order to empower and transform learners so that they can grow into their boldest, most courageous and compassionate selves because we believe both that the Talmud is a guidebook (in form and in process) for liberation and radical innovation, and that the learning of it is a transformative spiritual practice.**

# reflection: generating my kavanah for teaching talmud

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*The following questions might help you gather & harvest the material, experiences, ideas, and images for shaping your kavanah.*

Think about one of the best moments of learning Talmud you've had—a powerful, good moment when you were really learning.

- Who was there?
- What was the learning atmosphere like?
- How does great learning feel in your body?
- What was the impact of this learning on your life?

Go back to your list of texts you love.

- What do you notice about your list?
- Why have you enjoyed learning these texts? What about them gets you going?
- Why do you love the texts you love?



Reflect back on your ORIENTATION(s).

- Which ORIENTATIONS move you, excite you, interest you?
- Which ORIENTATIONS alienate you?
- Where is there alignment, or lack of alignment, between your ORIENTATIONS and other ORIENTATIONS present in your institutions/communities?
- Where is there alignment, or lack of alignment, between your ORIENTATIONS and your own teaching?

Look back at your descriptions of Talmud at the beginning of this section. What stands out to you about how you describe Talmud? What are some key words you used in your definition of the Talmud, the rabbinic project, and we're trying to do through our learning?

What do you hope will happen as a result of your teaching Talmud? What do you want your learners to be able to do, to know, to understand, to feel, and/or to believe?

Using all of the reflection generated above, try to draft your own kavanah for teaching Talmud. *Feel free to use the template below if it is useful!*

**I teach Talmud in order to** \_\_\_\_\_

**so that learners** \_\_\_\_\_,

**because I believe the Talmud is** \_\_\_\_\_.

## CRASH-ING YOUR LEARNERS

At SVARA, CRASH is the primary way we communicate our ORIENTATION to our learners. A prerequisite for every bet midrash, encountering CRASH Theory is also the first step toward learning in SVARA's method.

CRASH is essential because it paints a compelling picture of rabbinic history through the lens of the learner's personal experience as an outsider, which enables learners to then see themselves in the story of the Rabbis and in the very DNA of Judaism. This actively reinforces an Empowerment Orientation, in which learners see themselves as Chazal, as future rabbis and agents of radical change from a deeply traditional place.

### The CRASH Talk...

#### ⇒ RETELLS RABBINIC HISTORY

- It establishes what the Talmud is, where it came from, what the guys who are in it and who wrote it are up to, and why it should matter to us today. Understanding that the Talmud is a document that records the history of radical, compassionate change, and that the learning of it is a process which helps us become more adept at dealing with and effectuating such change (i.e., becoming crash-flex)—are the first steps in helping your learners understand why Talmud study is so important and so powerful, and in motivating them to learn.
- It establishes the Rabbis as queer, fringy, radical folk—*just like us!*

#### ⇒ GETS LEARNERS ON THE SAME PAGE

- It lays out a shared vocabulary that will be used with every text studied (option 1, option 2, option 3, *kra*, *minhag*, *ma'aseh*, *takana*, *svara*, *mishnah*, *gemara*, crash, the Rabbis, etc.).
- It ensures that everyone in the room—even if not in full agreement with the framework—pays attention to the larger questions that guide our learning:
  - How is this text a part of our history of radical change?
  - What can we learn about creating radical, compassionate change from learning this text?
  - How can I move beyond the surface content of the sugya to access the meta-messages of radical, compassionate, and courageous change?

#### ⇒ RESTORES TRUST IN OURSELVES AND THE TRADITION

- It names the angst and sense of internalized shame or inauthenticity (subconscious or conscious) that Jews—especially queer Jews—are apt to feel when the Jewish meta story doesn't speak to them, or even hurts them. It helps them understand that what they are

experiencing is systemic, not just personal. “Wow, it’s not ‘just me!’” The personal is political; the spiritual is political. You’re feeling exactly what you should be feeling if Judaism isn’t working for you. Everyone will feel it eventually.

- It establishes queer folk as having a prophetic voice (the queerest folk crash first; we’re the canaries in the coal mine; everyone behind us will eventually crash as well), and enfranchises and elevates those who feel like outsiders. They now get that they’re not just “welcome,” but essential, and are the ones who have *always* driven Option 3s—both in the Jewish story and everywhere else.
- It conveys the idea that the *Jewish tradition trusts you* (svara is something that everyone has, and everyone can further develop and refine), values your insights (svara can trump kra), and wants you to use your svara the same way they used theirs, to solve the issues of your own time. “The Talmud is a record of how the Rabbis responded to the crashes of their time, a manual that they handed down to the players of the future to use in order to respond to the crashes that they knew would continue to happen.”
- It engenders a sense of empowerment: You don’t need to be a rabbi; all you need is to be gemirna and sevirna.

There are many different ways to communicate CRASH to your learners. We encourage you to deliver your own CRASH Talk, incorporating your own stories and anecdotes. Your CRASH Talk will inevitably be different from Benay’s, and that’s ok! It’ll work best if you deliver it from your own authentic voice, drawing from the wisdom of the crashes you’ve lived through in your own life. Everyone has a CRASH story. Tell *yours*! When you give a CRASH Talk, please remember to credit this theory of change to Benay.

On the next pages you’ll find an illustrated outline of the essential points of the CRASH Talk. To help you turn this outline into your CRASH Talk, we’ve added some questions that might help you locate within your own lives those experiences which you might want to draw on and reference—stories you might want to weave in—while giving your own CRASH Talk. These guiding questions are marked with an arrow (→).

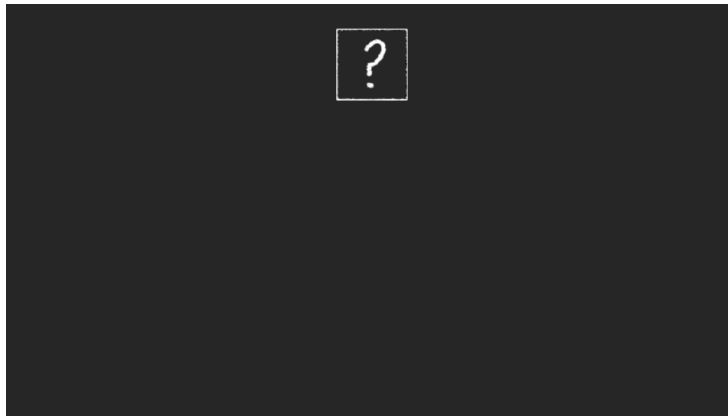
## reflection:

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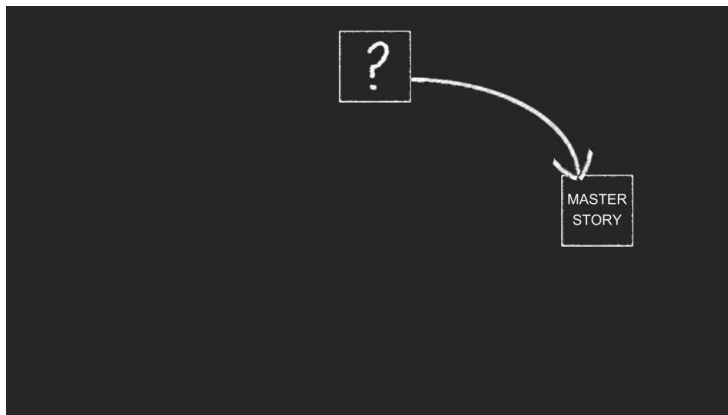
Which ORIENTATIONS do you think the CRASH Talk reinforces?

## START WITH BASIC CRASH THEORY

- **Hypothesis #1:** All human beings share the same basic “big questions” of life. What are they? Elicit from your learners. (E.g., Why am I here? How should I live my life? Is there a God? What is right? What is wrong? What is important? Etc.)



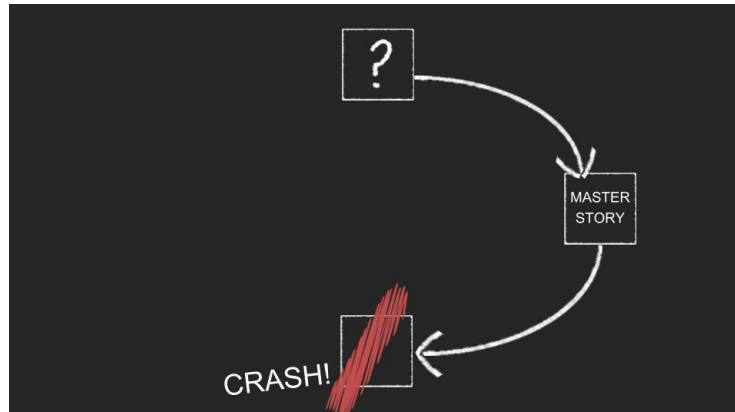
- Every tradition comes into being for one and only one reason: to answer those very questions. And it does so by means of a **meta story**.<sup>118</sup>



- As long as your meta story is working for you, you’re not even aware that you have questions: You know how you got here. *It tells you.* You know if there is a God. *It tells you.* You know what you’re here to do. *It tells you.* Etc.

<sup>118</sup> In previous versions of the CRASH Talk, we referred to the meta story as a “master story.” We realized the ways in which the word “master” communicates elements of power and domination that we seek to dismantle. You’ll see the words “master story” on the slides as you move through this exercise.

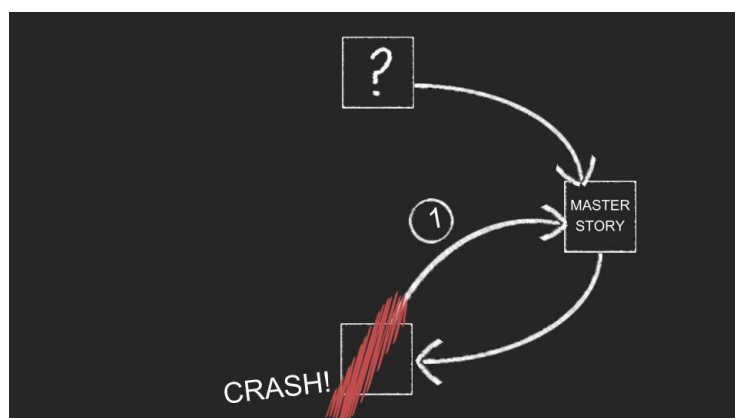
- **But...Hypothesis #2:** All meta stories will ultimately, and inevitably, **CRASH!**



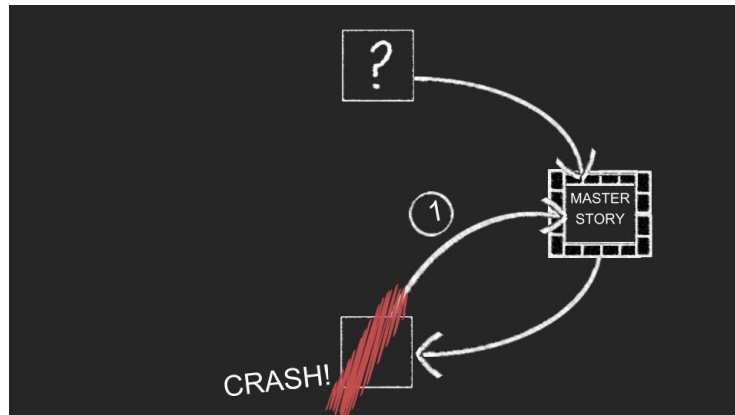
- One of three things will have happened: a) Your meta story came into contact with a conflicting meta story; b) a historical event has made it impossible for some of the answers in the meta story to work; or c) *you've changed*, and your meta story's answers no longer seem true. This is a CRASH.

→ What is a crash story of *your* life? Note: It may have nothing to do with being queer or trans! If you actually chose, at some point, each of the three options for yourself, this will be a particularly rich story for you to reference in your CRASH talk. If you didn't choose each of the options, you can talk about why.

- There are **three and only three possible responses to a crash**. Which one you choose will determine the kind of person you'll become, the kind of life you'll live, and the kind of world you'll create.
- **Option 1:** Deny the crash and revert to your meta story.



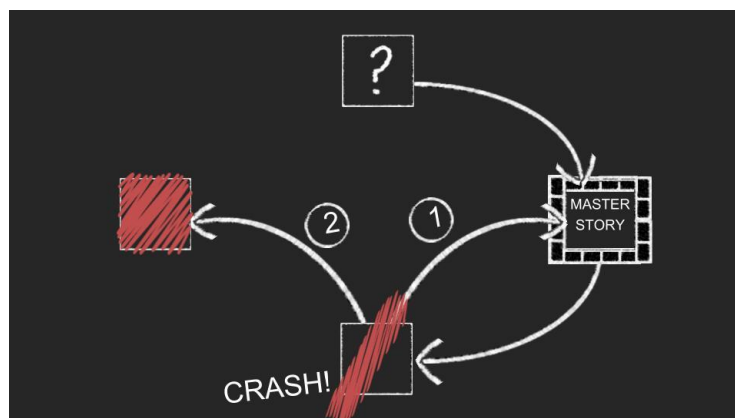
- You're likely to build a "wall" around it—either physical, social, or otherwise—to be sure nothing challenges it.



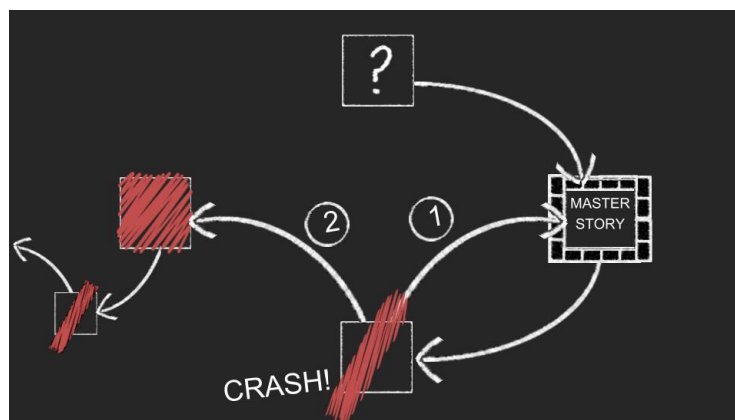
→ What was, or might have been, *your* Option 1? Did you choose it, reject it, or both at different times? Why? Did you see others in your situation go Option 1?

→ What are the upsides of Option 1? Downsides? Ask your learners. Find the answers in your own life.

- **Option 2:** Accept the crash and reject your meta story in its entirety. This is the baby-with-the-bathwater option. You are jumping off into a new story here (you always live "in a story")—the story of the "crash material" which seems more plausible to you now than your meta story. But remember: all stories will ultimately and inevitably crash, and this one will, too.



- What are the upsides of Option 2? Downsides? Ask your audience. Find the answers in your own life.
- How did you feel about your meta story when you went Option 2? What was your relationship to it then?
- What caused your Option 2 to start crashing?



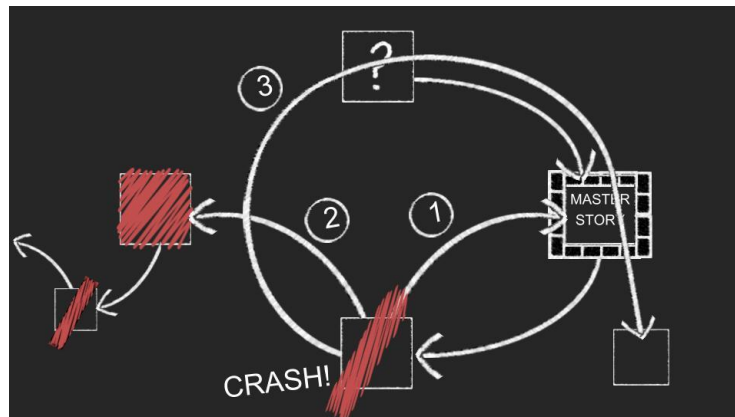
- **Note:** Both Option 1 and Option 2 are opposite sides of the same coin: they're responses to the mistaken belief that meta stories are fixed, unchanging, and immutable—and that any crack in them signals a full collapse. One option refuses to see the crack, the other rejects the whole story because of the crack.

### NOW OVERLAY JUDAISM ONTO THE CRASH FRAMEWORK

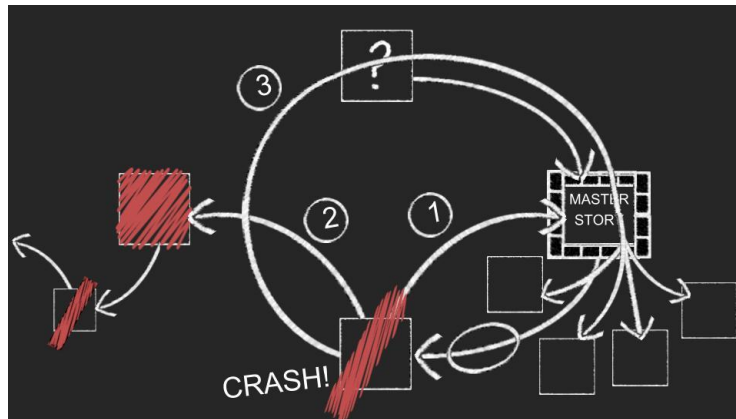
- One of the greatest crashes in Jewish history was the Destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E.
- Crank back one year:
  - Who was going Option 1? The priests! **Note:** If you're getting your paycheck from the meta story, it's going to be very difficult for you to do anything other than Option 1!
  - Who was going Option 2? Nearly all other Jews. Ninety percent of Jews went Option 2 after the Destruction. Why? Because that's what people do.



- But, at that same time, there was one, small group of queer, fringy, radical hippie guys...who went Option 3.



- **Option 3:** Accept the crash, go back to your original big questions, revisit the meta story, and retell your meta story in light of the crash, bringing into your retelling those parts of the meta story that still work and innovating new components, so that you have a new set of working answers to those original animating questions.
- The Rabbis went Option 3. A couple hundred years after the beginning of their crash (which, by the way, began well before the Temple was actually destroyed), their retelling got written down in what became the mishnah (and later continued in the gemara, and all the rest of what we now call “Oral Torah”).
  - What did *your* Option 3 look like? What was gained? What was lost? How did it feel to go Option 3?
  - Did you create your Option 3 alone or in community? How many Option 3 choices did you have?
  - How does your Option 3 feel now? How has it changed?
  - Where do you see this dynamic playing out in the world around you?
- Crashes create a proliferation of Option 3s. That’s good! That’s what you want! There were many “mishnahs” after the destruction of the Second Temple (including Christianity). Ours is merely one.



- The Rabbis knew that crashes were going to keep happening. And so, they built within their Option 3 core principles and mechanisms for making radical change, so that future generations would be able to withstand their own crashes. The rabbis created a blueprint for how to change our own laws and ideas in authentically Jewish ways when necessary, and they called it Talmud.

### NOW INTRODUCE THE RABBIS' BIG INNOVATIONS

- The Rabbis inherited a meta story in which there was only one source of truth and law: Scripture, or Tanach. Their revolution was relying on *multiple* sources (five!) from which to innovate new laws.

#### The Five Sources of Jewish Law:

6. Kra (קרא)	Torah verse
7. Minhag (מנהג)	Custom
8. Ma'aseh (מעשה)	Precedent
9. Takana (תקנה)	Legislation
10. Svara (סברא)	Informed moral intuition

- Introduce and explain each of the sources.

- Overlay the categories of “de’oraita”<sup>119</sup> and “de’rabanan”<sup>120</sup> onto these five sources: All mitzvot can be broken into two categories. They are either de’oraita, meaning that they “come from Torah,” or they are de’rabanan, meaning “we made that shit up,” in other words, they are created self-consciously by the rabbis. Mitzvot that are de’oraita have a higher status than mitzvot that are de’rabanan, and if they come into conflict, we go with the mitzvah that is de’oraita.
- Which status do you think each source carries?

The Five Sources of Jewish Law: <sup>121</sup>		
6. Kra (קרא)	Torah verse	<i>De’oraita</i>
7. Minhag (מנהג)	Custom	<i>De’rabanan</i>
8. Ma’aseh (מעשה)	Precedent	<i>De’rabanan</i>
9. Takana (תקנה)	Legislation	<i>De’rabanan</i>
10. Svava (סברא)	Informed moral intuition	<i>De’oraita</i>

- In order to “play” in the rabbinic system and use these tools, the Rabbis tell us that one needs to have two things (*neither of which* is rabbinic ordination!): svava and gemara. One needs to have deep moral intuition that is shaped by powerful learning. You already have svava in spades. That’s why you’re here. We’re here to help you get the gemara that you want and need to become a player. Let’s go!

## ABOUT SVARA

**Svara:** “informed moral intuition”—a talmudic term of Jewish law that reflects the 2,000-year-old rabbinic notion that the most powerful source of truth is that insight which grows out of the experience of our own lives informed by Jewish learning.

According to Menachem Elon, a great twentieth-century scholar of Jewish law, svava “involves a deep and discerning probe into the essence of halakhic and legal principles, an appreciation of the characteristics of human beings in their social relationships, and a careful study of the real world and its manifestations” (*Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles*, p. 987). Elsewhere, Elon defines the term more succinctly: “legal reasoning that penetrates into the essence of things and reflects a

<sup>119</sup> De’oraita = דארייתא (*inside*: of Torah, or that Torah; *outside*: derived from Torah).

<sup>120</sup> De’rabanan = דרבנן (*inside*: of our rabbis; *outside*: derived from the rabbis).

<sup>121</sup> → See **FIVE SOURCES OF JEWISH LAW**.

profound understanding of human nature” (*Jewish Law [Mishpat Ivri]: Cases and Materials*, p. 97).

Svara is one of five sources of Jewish law, one of which, of course, is the Torah itself. Just as any law which grows out of a Torah verse is understood to have the higher status of *de’oraita* (“torah-itic,” or “straight from God”) rather than merely *de’rabanan* or “rabbinic,” a law whose source is svara is also *de’oraita*! What’s more, when one’s svara and a verse in the Torah conflict, svara has the power to trump even Torah in the determination of law, when that svara is understood to more accurately reflect the deepest foundational principles of the Jewish tradition.

## CRASH Principles

- After a crash, most people go Option 2. Those in power tend to go Option 1. And those who likely felt marginal *before the crash* will go Option 3. Option 3 will always be the option which the fewest people will follow.
- Option 3 always begins as a grassroots movement by those outside of the power structure.
- Crashes create a proliferation of Option 3's. This is good. This is what you want. You want to encourage—*not close down*—new retellings in a time of crash. You don't know which ones are going to make it. These new retellings are Innovation 1.0
- Innovation 2.0 happens when *some* of these Innovation 1.0 enterprises “thicken” (become more deeply rooted), and expand, diversify, and come together into a more “full-service” Option 3 which is now able to serve more functions and meet more of your needs.
- When people go Option 2, *but then come back to Judaism* and go Option 3...you get...Jewish Mindfulness! Among many other innovations (and discoveries of submerged aspects of the tradition that have always been there in rudimentary form). That is, they bring with them ideas and practices from the external culture or from deep within the tradition that work for them (and will inevitably work for others!).
- No tradition that lasts any length of time ever *really* goes Option 1. Option 1 is actually more of a mindset and a myth than a reality. It is a story certain Option 3's tell about themselves. All lasting traditions evolve. The question is whether your community is willing to acknowledge this or not. If not, they're an Option 1 community.
- You can move from one Option to another, serially, in response to the same crash. Ex: Coming out. Option 1: Denial. Try to be or pretend to be straight. Keep the “goodies” straight people get. Option 2: Embrace your queerness and reject your former Jewish life and community. Option 3: Learn in a queer yeshiva.
- Crashes happen in every generation. Crashes can be individual, familial, institutional, societal, or communal. Big or little. *Really big ones* happen every couple of thousand years.
- Crashes are “part of the plan.”
- Our “original” Meta Story was, itself, a retelling of a previous Meta Story.
- *Every* retelling (Option 3) feels thin, inauthentic, and “made up” to the generation experiencing the crash...but it won't to their grandchildren!

# reflection: finding the queer magic of a sugya by developing your khop

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Your *khop* is your “take,” or the driving interpretation that you carry with you as you learn a specific text.<sup>122</sup> What are you *taking* away from this text? What’s *grabbing* you about this text? That’s your khop.

**A note about khops:** At SVARA, teaching is not primarily about sharing your own insights, but is about the process of co-learning and drawing out the insights of others. At the same time, it is meaningful and empowering to learners to know why a text is important to you as their teacher and facilitator. This is one of the ways in which you can make your ORIENTATION transparent from the front of the room, and help create a shared sense of *why* you are teaching any given text.

## QUESTIONS FOR DEVELOPING YOUR KHOP

*These questions are designed to help you locate what is meaningful to you about this text, as well as deepen your understanding within a text of the possibility for queer, critical readings.*

- What do I feel is the most important word in this text?
  - List five more keywords that this text is “about” (they can be words *from* the text, or concepts/themes *about* the text).
- What do I find interesting about this text?
- What moves me/excites me about this text?
- List three big questions/ideas this text is exploring.
- In my own words (three to five sentences), I think this text is about:

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<sup>122</sup> Khop (Yiddish) = grab, grasp.

### **MORE QUESTIONS TO GET YOUR KHOP JUICES FLOWING:**

- What's transformative about this text?
  - Does this text transform, interpret, subvert, destabilize, restrict, or expand what came before it? If so, how?
  - How might this text transform my own thinking/practice/ideas?
- Does this text show us anything about radical innovation?
- What is one thing this text shows us about the Rabbis?
- What is one thing this text shows us about who the Rabbis want *us* to be?
- Why do I think it's important to learn this text?

### **QUESTIONS TO HELP CULTIVATE QUEER, SUBVERSIVE, CRITICAL KHOPS:**

- Who is being left out of this text?
- Who is being brought in by this text?
- Is there someone who is being hurt in the scenario described by this text?
- What is the role of systemic change in this text?
- What is the role of empathy in this text?

# method:

this is the nuts and bolts of how the learning happens—what the learner actually does, and how the educator facilitates it. ORIENTATION, CULTURE, and PEDAGOGIC BELIEFS should each be encoded and expressed through every step and element of the METHOD.



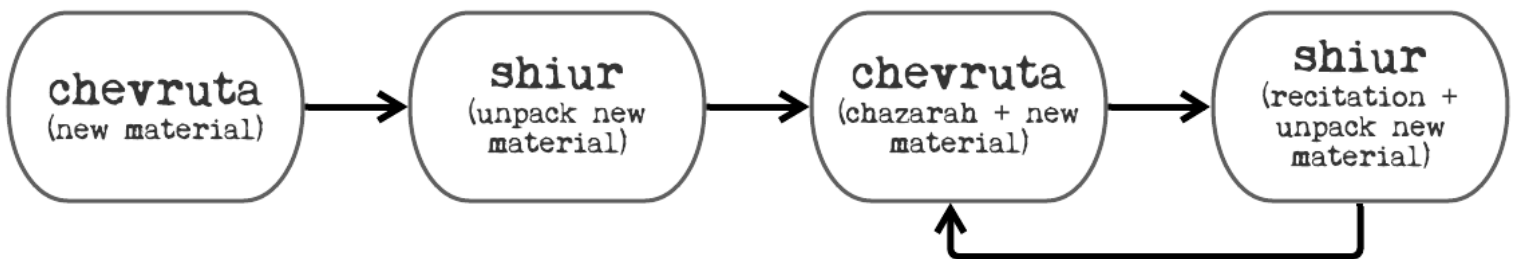
## FOUR STEPS OF THE SVARA METHOD

METHODS are the nuts and bolts of how learning happens: the behaviors and activities that learners move through as they engage in learning. SVARA’s four-step learning method—i.e, the “SVARA Method”—is one of the most recognizable of the METHODS we use.

The SVARA Method enables learners of all levels to own the text and the tradition, and it is crucial for building a traditionally radical culture of Talmud study. **The four steps of SVARA’s method are:**

- 1. PREP (IN CHEVRUTA)**
- 2. SHIUR (ALL TOGETHER)**
- 3. CHAZARA (IN CHEVRUTA)**
- 4. RECITATION (ALL TOGETHER)**

After introducing each of these steps, they will continue in the bet midrash in the following cycle:



While most of these steps are present in some way in many yeshiva settings and learning environments, SVARA has a unique approach to each. It is the steps of the METHOD, and how they are situated within our COMP framework, that make learning at SVARA unique. Below, we’ve outlined and described each of the four steps.

### 1. Prep in Chevruta

*decoding the text with a learning partner, word by word*

Learning at SVARA happens in chevruta—in pairs. Chevruta learning should disintermediate the teacher from the position of being “in control of” both the experience of learning the text and the text’s meaning. About half of the time in the bet midrash is spent in chevruta. This is where the

action is! Later, in shiur, the teacher merely clarifies and facilitates, always redirecting the discussion back to the learners, to explore what they uncovered in chevruta.

### **So what is chevruta?!**

- A framework for intimate connection with another human being, with the text, and with the tradition
- A spiritual technology for developing radical empathy and interdependence
- An interactive, engaging, busy, immersive time of/in flow, with both chevrotas feeling totally present to the relationship and the learning
- A profoundly empowering experience that nurtures democratized learning

### **How to Learn in Chevruta: Shpiels & Instructions for Your Learners**

- **Start with a check-in.** Is there anything you need your chevruta to know about how you're feeling right now so that you can become fully present? Is there anything on your mind that you need to say out loud to clear your head—or heart—a bit to be able to begin learning without being distracted or preoccupied?
- **Decide who will be driving**—we encourage each chevruta pair to decide who will be the “driver,” the one who will take the lead in vocalizing each word (or their best guess at how each word might be pronounced) and making sure both partners are working on the same word at the same time. At a certain point, you can switch and the other chevruta can take a turn being the driver.
- **Look up every word!** Oftentimes we *think* we know what a word means based on previous learning or experience. At SVARA, everyone looks up every word to uncover hidden meanings, connections, and etymology that are present in the text and to help us go deeper in our learning.
- **Look up every word...together!** Don't “split up the work”: You take this word, I'll take the next word! You and your chevruta should be always be working on the same word at the same time. You may be looking that word up in different dictionaries, but you're always working on the same word at the same time. Whoever finds the entry first should direct their chevruta to it. For example, if you're both learning from printed Jastrows, call out the dictionary name, page number, and area of the page, as in: “Found it! Jastrow, page 24, left-hand side, right near the top!”].
- **Keep it collaborative.** Learning is not a race or a competition! Talmud study—and all learning—should be a collaboration between learners who understand that they're on the same team. Remember: You are responsible for your chevruta's learning, and your chevruta is responsible for your learning.
- **Take your time!** Don't worry if other learners are ahead of you in the text, behind you, or anywhere else! Wherever you and your chevruta are is just plain perfect.

**Emphasize to learners that they do not need to understand the text during chevruta.**

This is a big change in how they're used to learning and they're likely to feel very anxious because they expect to understand what they're reading (like in a college class: “Please read the following

assignment and come back ready to discuss it.”). In chevruta, rather than attempting to read for comprehension, we are working to understand each word in depth, both in terms of grammar and its core meaning, so that we can piece the text back together in shiur as a group process. Learners often need some time to adjust to the sensation of not-knowing and not-understanding. Remind them that Talmud study is a spiritual practice that teaches humility. Encourage them to spend their time looking up as many words of the assigned text as possible, rather than spending lots of time trying to figure out how the words fit meaningfully together. The more words they’ve looked up, the more “hooks” they’ll have to hang the shiur on.

## 2. Shiur

*learners come back together as a larger group with a teacher and unpack the text word by word, with special attention paid to what each phrase and sentence means, along with the larger ideas and implications of the text*

The teacher will call on learners to read. Reading happens in a three-part process: Read, Inside Translation, Outside Translation.

### READ

The chosen reader vocalizes the text in the original Hebrew or Aramaic, in small, logical chunks. Learners are not expected to accurately pronounce the words, but merely to make their best guess. As they read, the teacher will make corrections to pronunciation.

Let learners know that as they read, they will make their best guess at how the words might be phrased and read the typically two, three, four, etc., words they think go in a phrase together. Teachers can say “Stop there” if they keep reading beyond where the phrase ends, to keep the phrasing short and manageable.

Once a reader is chosen, it’s helpful to remind everyone else that they should take really good notes; they will need those notes for when they go back into chevruta on this section of text so that they can own the text properly and correctly (in Step 3 of the SVARA Method, chazara).

### INSIDE TRANSLATION

The “inside” translation is the hyper-literal translation of each word, in the order in which the words appear, following the syntax of the original. If a learner is correctly giving an inside translation of a phrase, the words will not “flow” together in a fluid way, but will sound choppy. That’s as it should be at this point. The goal here is to understand the components of every single word, not yet how they work together. *What is essential is that the learner understands not simply what the word means, but **how the word means what it means**.* This is an important and essential piece of the SVARA method that contributes to a deep, meaningful sense of empowerment among those learning in the bet midrash.

Every single prefix and suffix should be represented in an inside translation (example: אמר רבי עקיבא would be translated as: *said Rabbi Akiva*). Nothing that isn’t syntactically in the sentence should appear in one’s inside translation. For example, rabbinic literature often implies an “if” at

the beginning of a case... “if one injures his fellow,” but that implied “if” should not appear in the inside translation unless it’s in the actual text.

## **OUTSIDE TRANSLATION**

After giving an inside translation, the learner gives their best guess at the “outside” translation—a colloquial translation that flows smoothly in everyday English, adding whatever English words might be needed to make the translation smooth and colloquial. Then, if necessary, the learner should explain out what this means, adding any additional information they think is necessary to understand—and communicate out into the room—what’s going on in that phrase. Articulating this kind of careful, super-clear explanation both helps the reader clarify for themselves whether or not they understand the text super clearly and also clarifies what’s going on for everyone else in the room, so that no one is getting lost.

After the first reader reads the first chunk and translates it inside and outside, the teacher should lead everyone in CLAPPING THEM UP! This demarcates what it looks like, and what it means, to read in shiur. When that first learner has finished with two or three chunks, the teacher should lead the entire group in a second round of enthusiastic, appreciative, and loving applause. And then switch to a new reader (who will be clapped up only at the end of their two or three chunks). And similarly, onward, until the material assigned for that shiur has been unpacked.

## **UNPACKING**

Along the way, as readers offer their inside/outside translations, the teacher should offer clarification, and pause for questions and comments. This might include going into more detail about grammatical issues of a given word, relevant halakhic concepts coming into play, and the larger meaning of what is going on in the text. *Balancing the unpacking of each word with discussion of both the meaning of the text and the meta-messages of the text is key.*

Be sure that everyone understands how the individual words fit together to create the text’s surface meaning, and that everyone understands that surface meaning, before opening up the shiur to questions, challenges, or discussion about the larger meanings of the text. This is an art and will take practice! Some teachers like to mix the discussion into the unpacking. Some teachers prefer to unpack the words then go back and discuss. Either is OK. Both have their pluses and minuses.

## **3. Chazara**

*review in chevruta to total clarity, understanding, memorization, and ownership*

It’s all about chazara! This is where the magic happens. Chazara serves, first and foremost, to help the learner diagnose weak points and gaps in their understanding, to resolve those, and then to deepen that understanding. *This is where the text’s molecules and the learner’s molecules come together. This is where the learner becomes the text. Without chazara, text study can actually reinforce a sense of powerlessness within the learner.* If the learner doesn’t achieve absolute clarity on the meaning of the text—which can only happen through chazara—the teacher will remain the only

one, both in reality and in the eyes of the learners, in possession of the text or most of the “smart ideas” about what the text is saying.

### Steps in the chazara process:

- **Read, Inside, Outside:** While looking at the text, the stronger chevruta, the one more confident of their understanding of the text (chevruta (a)), goes first, reading through the text out loud, phrase by phrase, with proper phrasing and pronunciation, and translating both “inside” and “outside,” also providing any necessary background information as if explaining the material to an uninitiated listener. Chevruta (b) should monitor while looking at their masechet, checking precision very carefully and correct any mistakes immediately (with the help of careful notes taken during shiur).
- **Switch roles:** When chevruta (a) finishes, chevruta (b) reads and translates the same section of text inside/outside, etc., while (a) monitors and corrects. Note: At this point, both (a) and (b) should understand every individual word, inside and outside, and as many details about the word and phrase that their Hebrew experience will allow.<sup>123</sup> Achieving this step is what allows the memorization process that comes next to *not be rote*, but rather facilitates a deepening of the learner’s understanding of the text and helps diagnose those places where the learner’s understanding is weak.
- **Optional further comprehension step:** Chevruta (a) should talk out the text, in English, from memory (without looking at the text), in a good, flowing, logical, colloquial outside translation, but staying fairly close to the inside translation, going phrase by phrase, sentence by sentence. The translation should follow the original words closely enough that chevruta (b) should be able to know, at every point in this oral recitation, where chevruta (a) is. **Switch roles.** Now (b) does the same thing.
- **Recite from memory:** Chevruta (a) then closes their masechet and starts the memorization/internalization part of chazara, reciting the text out, in the original Hebrew/Aramaic. This is not a rote recitation. They are now producing the text, from within themselves, from their deep understanding of it, thinking through the progression of each section of the text, and deepening the mental connections between the sections of the text as they move from sentence to sentence. They are now becoming the text. No translation is made during this last step. As soon as a mistake is made, (b) corrects the reciter by simply saying correctly the word which was mispronounced or missed, and returns (a) “Back to the top!” to begin reciting again, from the beginning. **This “Back to the top!” step is very important in the internalization process.** Chevruta (a) is not finished until they can recite the entire section of text fluently and without error. Remember: memorization is primarily a means to an end (deep, integrated understanding), not an end in itself (the ability to rattle off a lot of words). Switch. Chevruta (b) then goes through the same process of recitation from memory with (a) correcting.

Note: Learners are instructed to do chazara on the amount of text they were able to “prep” during the initial chevruta process prior to shiur. They are not responsible for chazara on material they heard unpacked in shiur but did not have time to look up themselves. Ideally, though, if time

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<sup>123</sup> → See **WHAT IT MEANS TO “OWN” A WORD OR SENTENCE**

allows, all learners should be able to read and translate inside/outside, while looking at the text, that material which they did not prep but which was assigned and unpacked in shiur.

## 4. Recitation

When running the recitation portion of shiur, the teacher will call on a few learners to recite what they memorized in chazara. The whole room enthusiastically “claps up” and cheers for each learner when they’re finished, no matter how many words or lines they were able to recite!!

After someone recites, try to make space to ritualize, acknowledge, and honor that they have offered a recitation to the room. You might borrow a phrase from Benay (“How do you feel?” [Good!] “Do you own it?” [Yeah!] “Memorize that feeling!”), and as you teach in the SVARA method, you’ll develop your own sayings or rituals for how to celebrate reciters, elevate their ownership of the text, and transmit wisdom to them on the value of memorization and recitation. There’s a lot of Torah wrapped up in learners going through the process of studying a text to the point of ownership. You should feel encouraged to name this and frame the incredible power of what they’re doing in your own unique way!

At SVARA, we want to help the learner feel, in their body, what *real knowing feels like* (few things are as dangerous, in learning Talmud and in life, than thinking you know when you really don’t). We are then careful to remind them that, in spite of how confident they feel that they totally understand the text now, the next time they learn it, they’re going to discover a new understanding that will leave them slapping their forehead and exclaiming, “Now I *really* understand it!”...only to have that understanding crash the next time they learn it. And on and on. Learning Talmud is like that. So is life.

**This is important:** Learners should only be reciting *what they own!* For some, this will be three words, for some of them it’ll be the whole text. All of it is amazing and worthy of the same wholehearted celebration.

It takes some practice to know when to let a learner who’s struggling during recitation off the hook—and when to stay silent and let them press on. Give the learner a lot of time to find the text within themselves. Be *very, very slow* to jump in to give them a prompting word or syllable unless and until they’ve made a mistake, and don’t allow other well-intentioned learners in the room, including their chevruta, to jump in to prompt them while they’re searching to find the next word. Get comfortable with silence. Allow the reciting learner the time they need to find that text within themselves. Nine times out of ten, they will! However, if a learner, while reciting, is making mistake after mistake, find a way to stop them gently and lovingly, and tell them you’ll come back to them another time.



## TALMUD STUDY AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

At SVARA, we emphasize that learning Talmud is a powerful, grounding, transformative spiritual practice. As such, several of the METHODS we use in the bet midrash are rituals designed to create a spiritual container.

We're big on repetition on SVARA, and every bet midrash session shares a common structure. Structure, repetition, and consistency facilitate spiritual experience. Some predictability allows us to be more fully present for the deliciously unpredictable learning that we are about to do and that necessarily comes with learning, and learning Talmud specifically.

The repetition is what makes this kind of learning a *spiritual practice*, instead of an *action*. Every day, you sit back down to the meditation mat, or reopen the siddur, or return to your creative medium, or open a daf across the table from your chevruta. What matters ultimately is not what you produce, but rather your dedication to the practice. This dedication shapes us into better people—accountable, focused, thoughtful, and willing to stick with the hard stuff. Talmud learning, and life, are both iterative. Having spiritual practices built around repetition helps remind us of this, and conditions us to be these kinds of lifelong learners.

### SONG

Opening each session with a nigun is fundamental to SVARA learning. Singing together helps differentiate the bet midrash from the rest of the day and the world. It begins an evening or session of learning in ritual, and begins a series of fixed and sacred rituals surround the learning that build the culture of the group. It creates a container that is about the body, mind, and heart in an integrated way as opposed to only the intellect. Singing together signals to the learners that the bet midrash is a sacred space, a place of *kedusha*, and that as we enter the bet midrash we can put the more mundane or pedestrian parts of our lives down for a bit, and give ourselves a break. It opens the bet midrash joyfully and encouragingly. It captures disparate energies, and creates a collective group energy by bringing voices together in unison and resonance. It helps cultivate the sense that our learning together is a window into, or a taste of, *olam haba*.

### DEDICATIONS

Like singing, dedications enrich the bet midrash with *kedusha*. Dedications help us frame our learning as a part of something larger than ourselves. We are connected to people we love, people in need of support and healing, ancestors and teachers who made it possible for us to exist.

In the Jewish tradition, learning is believed to carry within it the power to repair and to heal. (This is why on Shavuot we call the learning we do all night a “tikkun,” a repair.) It is our custom, as it has been the custom in many yeshivot in the world for thousands of years, to begin our learning by directing that power to someone or something in need of healing, strength, or encouragement. Learners might dedicate their learning to someone in whose honor or memory they would like to learn, someone who is travelling, someone thanks to whom they are present, or someone who they think would be so proud to know that they're learning.

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. In other words, dedications can help us clarify and articulate our values. They also immediately set the tone of the bet midrash as a space where everyone's voice matters, and where everyone can be heard. It allows the learners to begin to be present in the room, to show themselves to one another, and to allow themselves to be seen.

## **BLESSING**

The *bracha* for Torah study closes dedications and elevates our learning into the realm of *mitzvah*, the language that the Rabbis used for what matters most to them. It's helpful and important for SVARA learners to see that, in Jewish tradition, study is as important as prayer. It's a sacred obligation in the language of Jewish tradition. Their love of learning, of complex thinking, of chevruta, of argumentation, etc., is about fun and juiciness *and* sacredness. "Welcome to mitzvah-land!" intends to signal to learners that what they're doing really matters, and it is worthy of a blessing.



## ANNOTATED SCHEDULE FOR A SESSION OF SVARA-STYLE LEARNING

Below is a sample schedule for a session of learning that includes facilitation tips.<sup>124</sup>

### **7:00-7:10 Nigun, Dedications, Blessing for Torah Study**

We begin with a nigun as learners enter the bet midrash. This can help learners arrive fully, and also should help you arrive and become present as a facilitator.<sup>125</sup>

Next, we make space for dedications for our learning. Invite folks to make their dedications using the formula, “I’d like to dedicate my learning tonight to...” We do not do a “go-around” for dedications, but allow learners to share as they are ready.<sup>126</sup> You can invite learners to share “popcorn style” or to raise their hands. If they’re raising hands, you might “call on” them with eye contact, a hand motion, or by gently saying their name. We give dedications as much time as they take to ensure that even the most reluctant to share have had a chance, if they so choose. During this time, your presence and listening helps to create an atmosphere of loving and reverent attention, in which everyone values and affirms others’ dedication.

After dedications, we recite the blessing for Torah study (which learners have in their folders), together.

### **7:10-7:20 Introduce the Day’s Text & Quick Review (if necessary)**

We use this time to pre-teach any tricky grammatical concepts that will come up in the new material, background concepts that are assumed by the text, address anything left unresolved the week before, give brief, necessary context or to go over learning skills, like how to do chazara. If necessary, give a quick recap of the previous week’s material to jog everyone’s memory, or call on a series of learners to do a step-by-step chain recap in English.

### **7:20-8:20 Chevruta Learning**

Learners should start with chazara on the previous week’s text, then move into preparing the new text. Ideally, learners should never move forward until they’ve owned the text they prepared the week before. For the green and blue sticker learners, this may not be possible. If that’s the case, their time should be split roughly half and half, chazara and prep of new material. For super-beginners, be sure to encourage them to move on to some prep each week.

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<sup>124</sup> For several samples of teaching scripts and schedules that address a variety of time frames (online 2-hour sessions, in-person 3-hour sessions, etc.) → See **TEACHING TACHLIS**.

<sup>125</sup> When facilitating learning online, we encourage teachers to play audio of the nigun (or sing!) as folks arrive into the virtual space. This lets folks know they are entering into a sacred space, and helps avoid Internet awkwardness!

<sup>126</sup> In online spaces with groups over 20, we recommend inviting learners to dedicate their learning in the chat. This, too, is sacred space-holding, and requires attention and presence from the facilitator.

### **8:20-8:30 Snack & Break**

Don't skip snack! People need a chance to shmooze, move their bodies, and give their brains a break. This also adds to the sense of community and connection with the other people in the bet midrash beyond each person's chevruta.

### **8:30-9:30 Shiur & Concluding Kaddish De'Rabanan**

Recitation (typically 10-15 minutes or so) and then unpacking new material (→ See **FOUR STEPS OF THE SVARA METHOD** for detail).

We end the session with the recitation of Kaddish De'Rabanan, which is found on the "Bracha Card," one of the materials we distribute to all learners. When learning online, it has become our practice to recite only the refrain portion of the Kaddish ("yehey shmei," which we share on a slide) to wrap up a session, followed by a reprisal of whatever nigun opened the session, so folks can sing together as we close the container of learning.

## reflection: putting the 'm' in c-o-m-p

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**A note on METHODS:** METHODS themselves are fundamentally neutral: they are practices that can support liberatory, empowering, beautiful learning, AND the same practices can be used to create harm, discomfort, or domination in a learning space. As you build comfort and develop muscle memory in facilitating the SVARA method, it is important to constantly remind yourself—and your learners—*why* each step is important, so that you use methods for “good,” not “bad.”

What are the METHODS we use in the SVARA bet midrash?

WHAT IS IT?	WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Once you have a sense of WHY each aspect of the METHOD is important, consider the following:

- How can this part of the METHOD be liberatory?
- How can this part of the METHOD be oppressive or harmful?
- What needs to happen (or what assumptions need to be shared) in the room and the space in order for this to serve its liberatory purpose?
- How am I implementing this piece of the METHOD in a way that supports:
  - ...the CULTURE I want to create?
  - ...the PEDAGOGIC LENS I hold?
  - ...the ORIENTATION I have?

## reflection: creating & delivering shpiels

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Learning Talmud is complex and hard, and it requires lots of step-by-step instructions that can feel overwhelming and tedious. Whenever we give over instructions for how to move through the learning process, we accompany those instructions with a clear *why*, imbuing each step with a sense of purpose. We lovingly refer to this combination of **the instructions + the why** as “shpiels.” When you are introducing a new aspect of the METHOD, take the time you need to ground the step-by-step instructions in the *why*. Knowing *why* we are doing something and sharing that with our learners is essential to the cultivation of empowerment. By explaining *why* we are doing something, we are pushing back against expected power dynamics in which teachers instruct and learners simply obey.

Now that you have surfaced the WHY for each step of the METHOD, consider how you would give that over in a shpiel. Take one step of the METHOD along with the *why*, and try explaining it below:

Share with your chevruta!

- What did that feel like?
- Try it again!

# The Radical Act of Becoming a Talmud Person<sup>127</sup>

BY RABBI BENAY LAPPE

I want to tell you why I'm in the Talmud business.

And I want to tell you *today* because, perhaps like some of you, and in spite of the likely outcome of the election, I'm still feeling decidedly less joyful than I had hoped to feel.

Even though many of us may be happy about the ultimate result of this election, my heart is still a bit heavy. Yes, I am gratified that a majority of Americans have chosen to repudiate a candidate who represents, encourages, and further entrenches White supremacy, racism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, anti-semitism, and general hatred, bigotry, anti-science, anti-democracy, and anti-truth values. That is definitely a victory to celebrate.

But I am also profoundly disappointed—though not surprised—that 48% or so of our fellow Americans—some our very own neighbors and family members—would knowingly vote to *support* these very things, or vote to support their own financial or other interests in *spite* of those things.

And at the center of this disappointment, frankly, is incredulity. I have always struggled to understand how it is that people—*masses of people*—can believe things told to them that are so obviously untrue (and then act in harmful ways as a result). That is the problem that has always vexed me, and the one I am out to solve. I understand why corrupt leaders lie—that's easy—but that people *believe* those lies—often against their own self-interests—that is what has always struck me as not only profoundly mystifying, but actually terrifying.

As Jews, we know, with our lived life experience, with our bodies and our lives, what happens when people simple-mindedly believe obvious lies. And as Queer and Trans people, as People of Color, as Indigenous people, as people with disabilities—just to name some of us on the margins—we, too, have been on the receiving end of the violence of such baseless and hateful lies—both literal, physical violence as well as the systemic violence of the policies and laws created, or allowed to be created, by the people who believe them. We have spent so much of our lives, so much of our precious time and energy, fighting back against those who, without seeming to be able to *think* or *feel* their way through them, *believe lies*, about us, about others, and about the world.

So what does all of this have to do with Talmud?

I believe with all my heart that the *way* we learn Talmud—with the traditionally radical lens through which I believe it was always meant to be learned, in the radically loving Queer-normative spaces in which we learn it, and in the Queer pedagogy through which we teach and learn it—is one of the most powerful ways our tradition offers to create a *different* kind of person—in short, an empathic, loving, courageous, and critical thinking person.

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<sup>127</sup> First posted in *Hot Off the Shtender* (November, 2020).

And I emphasize all of these qualifiers about the *way* we learn Talmud because we have to acknowledge that even the spiritual practice of Talmud study can be—and has been in the vast majority of the spaces in which it is learned today—subverted so fully that it not only ceases to create the kind of person I believe it was designed to create, but can and has been used to create the exact opposite kind of person. As Laynie reminded us the other day, the vast majority of Talmud learners in this country voted for Trump. A sobering fact. And a reminder that even the most powerful and radical spiritual technologies can be both misunderstood and misused.

So, what kind of person do I believe the Talmud was designed to create? I believe the *entire* Jewish enterprise, with Talmud as its core spiritual practice, was designed to create—you've heard me say this before—a person who is profoundly empathic, deeply connected to others, and radically loving; challenging rather than compliant, more disposed to resistance than obedience, active rather than passive; bold, courageous, and risk-taking when necessary; who can not only tolerate but appreciate and navigate uncertainty, paradox, and contradiction—because life is that way; who can appreciate and deal with complexity—because life is complex—rather than retreat into the need for and illusion of simplicity; who is resilient and can hold their truths lightly; and who walks through the world bringing the insights from their lived life experience to bear as a critique on a world which needs to be repaired precisely in those ways.

Simply put, I think learning Talmud should and must create people who are less likely to walk through the world *believing stupid shit*. It was designed to and must be utilized again to create people courageous enough to bring their *svara*, their moral intuition—refined and shaped by their learning—to bear on the world around them in such a way as to create a liberatory world in which all people can thrive in freedom and dignity, without barriers to being able to live out their fully human selves. And I believe that becoming that kind of person is a radical act of resistance.

I've devoted my life to, and created a yeshiva dedicated to, opening up the liberatory spiritual practice of Talmud study—not just from the 1% of Jews who have claimed ownership of it, to the 99%—but ultimately far beyond our own community to anyone who might engage in this practice to become just that kind of person this radical, transformational, and liberatory spiritual technology was designed to create.

This practice belongs to the world. It is yours. And our community of learning and practice is growing. Over 7,000 of you, so far this year alone, have learned at SVARA and are part of the worldwide SVARA community. SVARA is where we go to learn Talmud together in order to become *that kind of person*. And to reimagine and create *that kind of world*. It is where we go, and what we do, to ground ourselves and re-center ourselves, so that we can continue to work on, and engage in the struggle of creating that world. And it is where we go to remember and *experience* olam haba—the liberatory world that is coming. Thank you, all 7,000 of you—and those who have yet to join the Queer Talmud Revolution but will, and please consider this your invitation!—for creating this community that, even and especially in this difficult week, gives me so much hope.

# pedagogic beliefs:

an educator's beliefs about pedagogy and education more broadly. Who is at the center of learning? What should be the relationship between learners and teachers? Why do we learn? What ideologies and ideas inform the educator's relationship to the act of teaching itself?



## reflection: how do you love to learn?

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- When you sit down to learn Talmud, what do you do?
- What do you love about learning Talmud? What aspects of the learning do you connect to most? (Are there specific practices, ways of thinking, etc.?)
- What do you love about learning Talmud SVARA-style in particular?

## Fallacies About Teaching in the Original

Teaching in the original is central to SVARA's method, and we've found that conversations about teaching/learning in the original can be where the heart of our PEDAGOGIC BELIEFS are located. Most people who are called to teach Talmud fundamentally love learning Talmud, and they, more often than not, love learning in chevruta, in the original, from a daf. BUT most Talmud teachers don't teach Talmud in the original, in chevruta, from a daf. When asking teachers why they tend to avoid teaching in the original (or in other modes that most inspire them as learners), we've found the same few answers typically emerge:

1. *"I love learning this way\*<sup>\*</sup>; but my learners won't."*

*\*"this way" = in the original; in chevruta; with dictionaries; slowly and carefully; etc...*

2. *"I can learn this way; my learners won't be able to."*

3. *"It's important that people like us learn this way; it's not important that they learn this way."*

4. *"Even if I wanted to, I could never teach this way—I don't know enough Talmud, my Hebrew isn't good enough, my grammar isn't good enough."*

# reflection: why don't we teach how we like to learn?

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What are the assumptions behind each of these fallacious ideas?!

IDEAS	ASSUMPTIONS
1. "I love learning this way; but my learners won't."	
2. "I can learn this way; my learners won't be able to."	
3. "It's important that people like <i>us</i> learn this way; it's not important that <i>they</i> learn this way."	
4. "Even if I wanted to, I could never teach this way—I don't know enough Talmud, my Hebrew isn't good enough, my grammar isn't good enough."	

These assumptions surface beliefs that can stand in the way of good, empowered learning. Most significantly, they assume: (1) there is a fundamental difference between a teacher and a learner, and (2) that a teacher must be an expert in order to facilitate learning.

- What *different* assumptions are at the heart of your relationship to teaching & learning?
- How might you restate these fallacies using your *different* assumptions?

At SVARA, we know that learning is a collaborative process between a teacher and the learning community they are nurturing. Our teaching should be nothing other than a refined iteration of our practices. We know that there are no fundamental differences between learners and teachers. Teachers need not be experts but, instead, should be learners committed to supporting their learners through a communal process of discovery. **Our approach to learning is rooted in the following PEDAGOGIC BELIEFS:**

- |  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| 1. <i>"I love learning this way*;<br/>but my learners won't."</i>  | → | 1. I am no different than my learners! What is fun / pleasurable / enjoyable to me can be fun / pleasurable / enjoyable to them. <sup>128</sup> |
| 2. <i>"I can learn this way; my learners won't be able to."</i>  | → | 2. Anything that <i>I can do</i> , my learners can do. <i>*Teachers are just learners who prepped the text in advance!</i>                      |
| 3. <i>"It's important that people like us learn this way; it's not important that they learn this way."</i>  | → | 3. If <i>I</i> can be trusted to interpret the tradition, so can and should my students!  |
| 4. <i>"Even if I wanted to, I could never teach this way—I don't know enough Talmud, my Hebrew isn't good enough, my grammar isn't good enough."</i> | → | 4. Good teaching is good learning in public.  |

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<sup>128</sup> While the second and fourth fallacies address assumptions about learners and teachers specifically, the first fallacy ("*I love learning this way\*;  
but my learners won't.*") more likely demonstrates an issue of ORIENTATION, and potentially a lack of clarity about why you are interested in learning and teaching the material. In other words, the assumption might be less about a fundamental difference between learner and teacher, and more about a fundamental assumption about the Talmud and its general lack of appeal. If you're bumping up against this, consider: *Why do you love Talmud? What helped you cultivate the kind of trust and love you have for the tradition? How can you be transparent about this in your teaching?*

## SVARA'S PEDAGOGIC BELIEFS

1. I am no different than my learners! What is meaningful to me can be meaningful to them.

***Our learning is most empowering when it comes from a place of authentic love and joy.***

For a more robust exploration of this, see the section on ORIENTATIONS in this manual!

2. Anything that I can do, my learners can do.

***All learners should be held to high standards through rigorous and systematic pedagogy.***

The rigor of the learning instills confidence and conveys to the learner a sense of being trusted. It is also about our belief and expectation that every learner will be a player—they will one day have to teach what they are learning, so they have to know their shit! They will also be “messing with the tradition,” so they have to know what they’re messing with! Systematic pedagogy is simply the best way to achieve good, solid learning.

Learning in the original brings out so much more that can be talked about during chevruta and shiur while unpacking the opaqueness—and actually creates a setting in which the beginners are more empowered rather than less empowered. Learning in the original also makes the stamma’s role much more explicit and obvious, adding an additional layer of transparency to the tradition of radical change over time.

***Mixed-level learning is better for anyone.***

All learning is mixed-level, but what’s special about SVARA’s mixed-level spaces is that we name them as such! Managing a mixed-level bet midrash is both one of the most radical and most challenging elements of the SVARA bet midrash. In any given room, there will be one chevruta that is sitting with an alef-bet ruler for reference and looking up every word they come across, getting through only four or five words in a session, while another chevruta is finishing the entire assigned text for that session, all the associated Rashis, and moving into codes and mefarshim.

The magic comes when all learners feel comfortable achieving whatever they are able to, and that the ideas they share about the text in shiur are valued no matter how much of the text they managed to prepare. We make sure each learner knows that this isn’t a race or competition. Talmud study is about the practice as much, if not more, than the content. After the first chevruta session: *“If you were fully present, with your complete focus on what you were doing—no matter if you covered three words or three lines and all the Rashis—you were doing it right!”* Learning resources like Hint Sheets, Torah Verses Sheets, and alef-bet Rainbow Strips help us manifest this commitment to a mixed-level space in which everyone is challenged uniquely at their level.

3. If I can be trusted to interpret the tradition, so can and should my learners!

***People should be trusted and empowered to interpret the tradition for themselves.***

Our Jewish communities often suffer from deep disempowerment. Our educational models are built on centuries of elitism, and while the “stuff” of our textual tradition has the power to be liberating and life-giving, it is usually taught in disempowering models that shame regular people into believing that they’ll never have what it takes to be smart, sophisticated contributors to our unfolding Jewish history. Talmud is iconic, as the material of what has become a Jewish power-elite, and is notorious for being extremely difficult. Learning this text in a rigorous environment, being trusted and pushed to own the material as deeply as possible, engenders a deep sense of empowerment, authenticity, and inspiration for our learners.

#### 4. Good teaching is good learning in public. (Experts need not apply!)

***Authentic co-learning is at the heart of powerful bet midrash experiences.***

The role of the teacher is to be 15 minutes ahead of the room: the facilitator of SVARA-style learning has prepared the text in advance in chevruta, but doesn’t come to shiur with all of the answers. If they had all of the answers, what would the point of shiur be?! Instead, at SVARA we recommend teachers follow an “80/20 rule,” in which teachers feel they *know* the text 80%, and are holding 20% of the text with curiosity and openness. This provides space for the teacher to bring out the insights of learners, and to authentically learn alongside the learners as they discover together what the text might mean.

***Teachers are not experts: they are learners in front of the room.***

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. An “expert” knows the answer, and can explain what’s going on to their learners. A SVARA-method teacher should take responsibility for drawing the insights out from the room, shifting the focus and power from teacher to learner & learning community as the locus of knowledge. Good teaching, then, is about making one’s learning transparent, asking, “*Show us how you got that!*” and sharing “*Here’s how my chevruta and I got here when we prepared this...*” 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.

**Anyone and everyone *can* learn Talmud in the original (as long as they can sound out their *alef-bet!*), and it is *essential*, if our tradition is to survive, that they do so.**

reflection:

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What is one area in my teaching practice that can get more aligned with my PEDAGOGIC BELIEFS? What is something that, if I took my PEDAGOGIC BELIEFS seriously, I would want to explore or change about my teaching in some way?



# It's Not What You Know, It's How You Know It<sup>129</sup>

BY LAYNIE SOLOMAN, ASSOCIATE ROSH YESHIVA

Teachers have always set me on edge. In third grade I was labeled a “gifted underachiever.” I’m not quite sure *precisely* what I did to warrant that designation as an eight year-old (though I will easily admit my contrarian ways!), but it followed me through high school as I was tracked in “remedial” classes throughout my education. I experienced teachers as a symbol for capriciously distributed power—people to whom I owed respect and obedience without their having earned it.

Schooling has been a source of pain, anxiety, and anger for me, so it’s strange that the places in which I’ve found the most joy are learning and teaching. Education is so often centered around a “banking” model<sup>130</sup> and approach that treats learners like deposit boxes in which to place information from teachers on high.

Talmud can be learned and taught with methods that reinforce this approach, nurture existing hierarchies, and maintain the status quo of patriarchal power and literacy (“I don’t know enough,” “You need to know X before you can Y,” “Who are *you* to interpret the text?!”). This is how Talmud has been taught for millennia. But it doesn’t have to be.

Despite being taught most commonly and conventionally in ways that maintain the status quo and normative systems of power and patriarchy, I’ve always felt like Talmud itself rejects those forms of power. *All the more so* I’ve experienced this at SVARA, where we bring attention to our learning processes as tools for creating people who are equipped and resilient enough to subvert normative hierarchies—in and beyond the bet midrash.

What is it about the way we do Talmud that enables me to *really learn*?

At our first gathering of fellows in SVARA’s Teaching Kollel in the fall of 2018, we learned a sugya about Rabbi Hiya, a sage who we see as one of the earliest SVARA teachers. In Masechet Bava Metzia, our Sages tell the tale of two rabbis, Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Hiya, who were Torah comrades, learning in chevruta together and often disagreeing (as chevrotot can be known to do!). When their debates would reach a peak, Rabbi Hanina would declare his superiority by saying to his friend, “Do *you* dare to debate with *me*?! If, G!d forbid, the Torah were forgotten by the Jewish people, I myself could restore it alone through my powers of analysis and intellectual acumen!” Rabbi Hiya would respond, “Do *you* dare to debate with *me*? I prevent the Torah from being forgotten by the Jewish people *in the first place!*”

Rabbi Hanina puts himself out there as a supreme expert in learning and Talmud, with the ability to restore all of the Torah’s arguments all by himself. For Rabbi Hiya, none of Rabbi Hanina’s intellectual acumen has any relevance. Rabbi Hiya prevents the Torah from being forgotten altogether! Rabbi Hiya’s power, though, is not in what he *knows*—it’s what he *does*:

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<sup>129</sup> First posted in *Hot Off The Shtender* (January 2021).

<sup>130</sup> See Paulo Friere, “The Banking Model of Education,” *Critical Issues in Education* (2006).

מאי עבידנא אזלינא ושדינא כיתנא וגדילנא נישבי וציידנא טבי  
ומאכילנא בשרייהו ליתמי ואריכנא מגילתא וכתבנא חמשה חומשי  
וסליקנא למתא ומקרינא חמשה ינוקי בחמשה חומשי ומתנינא שיתא  
ינוקי שיתא סדרי

ואמרנא להו עד דהדרנא ואתינא אקרו אהדדי ואתנו אהדדי ועבדי לה  
לתורה דלא תשתכח מישראל

*What do I do? I go and sow flax and weave nets [with that flax], and I hunt deer and feed their meat to orphans. I prepare parchment from the hides and I write the five books of Torah on them. I go out to a town and teach five children the five books, and I teach six [other] children the six orders of the Mishna, and I say to all of them: Until I return, read each other the Torah and teach each other the Mishna.*

*This is how I act to ensure that the Torah will not be forgotten by the Jewish people.*

— *Bava Metzia 85b*

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Rabbi Hiya takes a process-oriented approach to teaching and learning. He travels to the outskirts of the city to find groups of young children. To each child, he teaches one of the five books of the Torah, and to another group, he teaches each child one of the six orders of the Mishnah, saying to both groups, “Until I return, each of you should teach each other what you know.” But Rabbi Hiya knows full well he will never return.

The key to the survival of the tradition, according to this talmudic tale, happens when Rabbi Hiya takes a back seat and puts his students in charge of their own learning. Unlike his adversary, Rabbi Hanina, who offers a vision of leadership that relies on a singular expert-scholar, Rabbi Hiya *actually* ensures the flourishing of Torah by getting out of the way. His insights, intellectual acumen, and personal expertise are de-centered in this story, which offers an alternative that we—as Fellows, Fairies, and teachers—strive *always* to embody in our learning and teaching.

Rabbi Hiya is my Talmud teaching hero. A true SVARA-nik at heart. He offers a model for process-oriented, democratic education, creating the space for us as teachers committed to liberatory approaches to education to find reflections of ourselves in our tradition. Learning about his teaching—and his attention to every detail and process that enables it, from planting flax seeds to stretching hides for parchment—offered me a window into my own aspirations as a teacher, along with our dreams at SVARA for what teaching can look like.

Rabbi Hiya created a learning space in which learners teach each other. Each student takes the piece of the Torah that is *theirs*—a book, a section of mishnah—and teaches their comrades what they have learned. At the center of this model is an investment in a practice of democratized learning in which teachers are not experts but are a chevruta who is just a few steps ahead. Rabbi Hiya teaches his students, who are then tasked with teaching each other. Each student is not a scholar or an expert in the single book that they've learned. What qualifies them to teach this material is that they've learned it; all they need to do is show their friends what they've learned and how they learned it, making their learning public.

As teachers in the SVARA bet midrash, we try to do the same. Our task—for ourselves and for all SVARA-niks—is to take what we've learned in chevruta and to show our work, offering ourselves and our learning to the future players who learn in the bet midrash with us. We say over and over: “We don't care if you know what the word means. We care that you know *how* the word means what it means.” In other words, it's not what you know—it's *how you know it*. This oft-stated mantra in the bet midrash is the invitation to take what we know and make our processes for getting from here to there as transparent as possible. Each time we call on a reader who explains *how* they figured out the root in chevruta, or *how* they came up with an outrageously poetic inside translation that turns the whole text upside down, we are doing Rabbi Hiya's work, creating a world in which the Torah can never be forgotten. It's this practice of turning a text inside and out, of teaching and learning from each other, that leads us to ownership—of our learning and of the tradition, inhabiting a new model for education that has the power to transform us all.

## reflection: asking empowering questions

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One of the ways we most actively communicate our PEDAGOGIC BELIEFS is through the questions we ask in the back-and-forth of shiur as we unpack a text together. Even as we spend time framing and naming and shpieling about empowerment, cooperation, and learning in front of the room, it's the questions we ask our learners in the bet midrash that are the most salient tools for living out our approach.

Record yourself teaching. Make a list of the questions you asked learners below. (Feel free to use a 15-minute sample!)

Take a look at your list of questions, or use the list of questions below. For each question, what does the teacher ask of the learner? What is the teacher communicating to the learner(s)?

- Is this person a tanna or an amora?
- Do you want to phone a friend?
- How did you figure out what language we were in?
- Where could you go to find out if this is an acronym?
- Why would we care if this person is a tanna?
- How did you decide if this was a prefix?
- When was the Talmud codified?
- What else did Jastrow tell you about this root?
- Did anyone think this was actually future tense?
- What part of speech did you expect this word to be? Why?

## Asking “How Do You Know That?”

We often are used to asking questions that invite our learners to recall facts and basic concepts. This is an important step in our learning space, as it helps to reinforce core ideas and content areas that we want learners to remember (“*What is Talmud?*” “*Mishnah + Gemara!*” or “*What is a meimra?*”).

However, our goal is not only to teach information, it is to empower learners with the skills that will enable them to become players. It does not matter what they know, it matters *how they know it*. When asking questions that will bring out learners’ knowledge of facts and basic concepts, take a moment to follow up the question with “How did/do you know that?” For example:

- “Is this person a tanna or an amora?” “How do you know that?”
- “What is the root of this word?” “How do you know that?”
- “What tense are we in?” “How do you know that?”

A simple “How did you know that?” can transform the bet midrash, enabling the learner to make their learning visible to the rest of the room, and providing space for other learners to do the same as they share different pathways that they took. When we ask learners “How did you get that?” or “How do you know?” it shifts our work from that of banking information to that of moving through a process. By retracing their steps and showing their work, learners focus on the process of study. If they know how the word means what it means, they will be able to figure it out next time.

Additionally, asking this question can help to demystify some learners’ pre-existing knowledge. For newer learners, this can be a relief! “Oh, they knew that root because they know modern Hebrew, not because we all learned it yesterday and I should have remembered and I’m bad at this....” This also gently invites more experienced learners to name privileges & access they may have had, e.g., “I remembered that halakhic concept from learning in another yeshiva,” and helps them realize what they do/don’t know about how they arrived at any given translation.

## LOVE & CARE IN THE BET MIDRASH

**“I’ve been shamed into learning, I’ve been cajoled into learning, but it is transformative, as a queer person, to be LOVED into learning.”**

**-SVARA-nik**

Learning Talmud is incredibly difficult. There are tremendous obstacles that stand in the way of queer and trans people—along with folks holding a wide range of marginalized identities—feeling at home in a bet midrash. We hear from our learners over and over that one of the things that makes it possible for them to lean into this difficult practice is the sense of love and care that comes from not *only* the facilitator, but everyone in the learning space. Each of the pieces of COMP is, in some way, designed to facilitate the creation of a space that reinforces care and love.

At the core, if our work is to be truly liberatory, we must work as facilitators to love our learners into more fully loving the tradition and themselves. **When we teach, we share our love of learning, love of the tradition, love of our dazzling queer selves, and embody a sense of love and care that moves through the framework of COMP.** COMP should take root in love, and then continue to be informed by love. This is at the center of our work always.

### reflection:

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What are your practices for feeling, cultivating, generating *love* as a learner and a teacher?

**“When I’m thinking about the teacher, I’m asking myself: Can I feel your heart? Can I feel you in the room? Can I feel who you are? Can I feel YOUR heart in the room enough to let MY heart be in the room?”**

***-SVARA-nik***



# Delighting in Our Learning<sup>131</sup>

BY LAYNIE SOLOMAN, ASSOCIATE ROSH YESHIVA

As we wrapped up our semester of weekly learning for the Teaching Kollel, I declared (as I often do!), that the text we had learned is my favorite sugya. One Fellow noted, “Laynie, I’d love to find some time to hear more about what you love about this sugya.” The text hadn’t quite landed for them in their body, they noted, and they wanted to do some extra thinking and learning together to explore the “magic” that’s underneath this text. This is the true blessing of learning at SVARA, y’all.

In 2020 we’ve learned more text than ever before: we’ve explored the mishnah in Masechet Avot through daily study over the past 10 months (and learned almost 70 mishnayot in almost 250 sessions!), we’ve learned over a dozen sugyot (sections of Talmud), we’ve sat with folks in countless Fairy Hours, and we’ve had our hearts expanded infinite times.

More SVARA-niks are learning more Torah, and finding new ways to bring the wisdom of our ancestors to life. We’ve spent this past year deepening our learning personally, and deepening our learning together as a yeshiva. For many of us this year brought the first time we’ve delved into Mishnah, or the first time we worked our way through a page of Talmud. For some of us this year we learned a new grammatical structure, explored a new root-meaning (or found new meaning from a familiar root!). For others this year brought our first moments of *owning* a text, or new realizations about the role we want our tradition to play in our lives. We’ve experimented with new practices, taken on different forms of observance, and we’ve lived our tradition in new ways.

As I am clapping up this learning community for the deepening we’ve done, for the ways in which we’ve moved along our spiraling non-linear paths to becoming players—people who are transformed by our tradition and in turn transform it—I’m struck by the invitation from this Fellow to take the time to name and unpack the places of love that we’re experiencing in our learning and our teaching.

Our Rabbis know that the power of learning is in its delight, in the pleasure that we find in it:

**א"ר אין אדם לומד תורה אלא ממקום שלבו חפץ**

**שנאמר (תהלים א, ב) כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו**

*R' Yehuda HaNasi says: A person can learn Torah only from a place that their heart desires.*

*As it is stated: But his delight is in the Torah of the Lord... (Psalms 1:2)*

—Avoda Zara 19a

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A person can only learn **ממקום** / “from a place” that their heart desires, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi argues. This statement from Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi is interpreted by his students as reflective of the material

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<sup>131</sup> First posted in *Hot Off The Shtender* (December, 2020).

itself, offering the following emendation: “A person can only learn from [the places in Torah] that their heart desires,” suggesting that we can only learn the texts, traditions, and teachings where we find our hearts aligned with what is in front of us. True learning comes from exploring the material we want to explore, finding the texts and teachings that speak most directly to our hearts. (His students use this as an excuse to leave *shiur*, because they’d rather learn Proverbs instead!) A later sage, Rava, joins the conversation, adding a different interpretation of the same verse:

## אמר רבא לעולם ילמוד אדם תורה במקום שלבו חפץ

### שנאמר כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו

*Rava says: A person should always learn Torah in a place that their heart desires.*

*As it is stated: “But his delight is in the Torah of the Lord” (Psalms 1:2).*

— *Avoda Zara 19a*

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At first glance, Rava’s read of the verse is the same as Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s: when you’re learning, make sure your heart is in it. But when we read closely, some subtle differences emerge in the two teachings that add texture to what it means to truly delight in our learning. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi uses the language of **ממקום** / “from a place,” while Rava uses the language of **במקום** / “in a place.” The prefix “ב-” / “in” or “with” in Rava’s teaching tells us that perhaps there is something about the learning space itself that enables one’s heart to be filled with pleasure and delight. For Rava, it’s not about the material itself, but rather the community and space that holds them.

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi and Rava are offering complementary perspectives, each inviting us to consider one fundamental aspect of what we need in order to learn most fully. Both of their teachings remind us that it’s impossible to *really* learn when our heart is not in it, when our full desire is not there. Together they offer us a vision of desirous and delightful learning, learning in which we take pleasure in the topic at hand, the material in front of us, the teachers who guide us, and those learning alongside us.

As queer folks it is not a given that we would find the places and the texts that delight our hearts. We know all too well the ways in which learning can feel impossible when we are forced to conceal, adjust, tamper aspects of who we are in order to show up somewhere to learn, and we know all too well the pain of learning Torah whose content speaks about us, treating us as objects rather than subjects of Torah and *halakha*. To learn as our full selves and to learn in and from a place of delight is a deeply radical act.

Rava’s statement in the gemara continues, adding that when we learn from this place of deep desire, and we bring that desire to our learning fully, our learning leads to true ownership. **Owning our tradition, according to Rava, is not about a deep sense of mastery over something, but is a pleasure-filled act that demonstrates the kind of love we have for the tradition and for the**

**community that helped us come to understand it.** This is, I think, why each sugya we learn in the bet midrash is truly my favorite, and is the magic of our learning that I carry with me each day as I move in and out of our dreamy queer mitzvah-land with each of you: deep learning that is in, with, through, and from a place that delights my heart. What is some of the learning that you've loved this year? What have you loved about it?

# reflection: comp debrief

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## CULTURE

What worked about the CULTURE you created? What is something about CULTURE you'd like to sharpen in your next round of SVARA-method teaching?

## ORIENTATION

How did you ORIENT folks to what the Talmud is and what it's trying to do? Where would you like to sharpen this in your next round of teaching?

## METHOD

What worked about your implementation of the METHOD?  
What is something about your implementation of the METHOD you'd like to sharpen in your next round of teaching?

## PEDAGOGIC BELIEFS

How did you successfully create an empowered environment of co-learning in your bet midrash?  
What's something about PEDAGOGIC BELIEFS you'd like to sharpen in your next round of teaching?

- What have you learned and clarified about the vibe of the learning spaces you are aspiring to create?
- How did this process influence or change your relationship to Talmud (spiritually, religiously, politically and/or culturally, for example)?
- What do you feel particularly proud of and what is something that continues to be challenging in your implementation of the SVARA method?
- What assumptions about teaching have you surfaced or clarified for yourself? What (new) beliefs about teaching did you develop or cultivate for yourself?

## SECTION 4

# teaching tachlis:

**BLUEPRINTS & TIPS FOR PREPARING  
YOUR BET MIDRASH**

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## SVARA BRANDING, LOGOS & MATERIALS IN YOUR TEACHING

Hooray! We are so excited for you, for your future learners, and for the #QueerTalmudRevolution! Thank you for building this movement with us and creating a community of players.

We want you to feel empowered to run your own bet midrash, to experiment, and to bring your own voice to SVARA's method. And we want you to feel supported by us! We're here to be your biggest cheerleaders! We're available to help you think through teaching challenges, text questions, the process of organizing and sustaining a learning community, and any other issues that emerge in your teaching and community-building.

Since SVARA is both a yeshiva *and* a way of learning and teaching, we know that the question of how your emerging bet midrash relates to the organization and yeshiva of SVARA—and accompanying questions of wording and “branding”—can feel sticky sometimes. Even though we love stickies, we want to make sure that our hopes and expectations for communities implementing SVARA-method learning are as clear as possible for you, so we've gathered some information here to help guide you in your process of starting a SVARA-method bet midrash.

### Here are things we hope you'll do:

1. **Please credit and acknowledge SVARA as you spread SVARA's method near and far!**  
We ask that you share with your learners, with your community, and in your marketing materials that this learning method comes from SVARA. As we grow, we're less invested in spreading our “brand,” but we do care about spreading this method! We learn in a lineage that connects us to our teachers and our chevrotot, and we ask that you do the same in your bet midrash.
2. **Use the language of “inspired by SVARA” or “SVARA-method learning” in the description of your bet midrash when marketing and sharing about it.** As noted below, we ask that you refrain from including the word “SVARA” in the title of your program or event (we find that this creates confusion!). You can generate excitement, and clarify for folks what they're in for, by using the phrase “SVARA-inspired,” or “SVARA-method,” for example, in a blurb describing the bet midrash. (Sample language folks have used in the past: “We will learn Talmud using the method developed at SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva” or “Inspired by our friends and teachers at SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva, we'll learn Talmud in the original language using a precise method” or “(Your Name) has studied/studies at SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva, and is excited to share this methodology with \_\_\_ community.” )
3. Use the contents of the folders we give learners during programs, like the Hints for Finding the Root Sheet, Text Prep Sheets, etc. Please keep SVARA's logo on all of these materials, to give credit *b'shem omro* (in the name of the folks who created this resource).
4. Give your own version of a CRASH Talk (though please don't call the program “The CRASH Talk”)! **We ask that you cite the idea of CRASH theory as an idea that Benay has developed and taught.**

5. Feel free to create your community based on the structure of SVARA's program models: a 6-week unit, a day of learning, a weekend of learning, etc.
6. Send us pictures so that we can kvell!! And do please let us know what you're doing and keep us updated generally. We're dreaming of one day putting together a map of all of the SVARA-style batei midrash in the world. Wouldn't that be so sweet?!

**Here are things we ask you not to do:**

1. **Please don't call your bet midrash a "SVARA Bet Midrash."** In other words, please use and credit the method, but please do not use the organization name.
2. **Please don't use SVARA's name or the name of any SVARA programs in your title.** (For example, please don't call your bet midrash "Fun With Talmud: A SVARA-Method Bet Midrash" or "The CRASH Talk with Ploni MiBeit Ploni.")
3. Please don't distribute SVARA folders with SVARA phrases on them.
4. **Please don't quote directly from any of SVARA's promotional or marketing materials.**
5. **Please don't use SVARA's logo, photographs, or any other content you find on the website or Facebook without checking in with us.** This includes SVARA's taglines, program names (e.g., One-Night Stand, Fling, Queer Talmud Camp), etc.



**For example...**

	<b>PLEASE DO</b>	<b>PLEASE DON'T</b>
<i>In the title of your bet midrash...</i>	<p><b>Do name your program with something catchy &amp; snazzy</b></p> <p><i>Examples:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shmuly's Bet Midrash for Queerdos</li> <li>• Elul Bet Midrash</li> <li>• Talmud for Radical Dorks</li> </ul>	<p><b>Don't use the word "SVARA" or the names of current or past SVARA programs</b></p> <p><i>Examples:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shmuly's SVARA-Style Bet Midrash</li> <li>• Traditionally Radical Bet Midrash</li> <li>• One-Night Stand with Shmuly's Talmud</li> <li>• Shmuly's CRASH Talk</li> </ul>
<i>In the description/ blurb about your bet midrash...</i>	<p><b>Do cite and acknowledge that you're teaching in SVARA's method</b></p> <p><i>Examples:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We'll be learning Talmud in the original, using the method developed by SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva.</li> <li>• Inspired by their learning at SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva, Tinker Bell teaches Talmud in the original using the method developed by SVARA.</li> <li>• Shmuly is a Teaching Fellow at SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva, and this class will be taught in SVARA's method.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Don't borrow language directly from SVARA's website</b></p> <p><i>Examples:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Join us for traditionally radical Talmud served up the old-fashioned way: hardcore, queer, and radically inclusive.</li> </ul>
<i>When relating to CRASH theory...</i>	<p><b>Do use your version of a CRASH talk when you are teaching in your bet midrash, crediting Benay with the theory</b></p>	<p><b>Don't promote an event using the phrase "CRASH Talk"</b></p> <p><i>Examples:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The CRASH Talk with Shmuly</li> <li>• Shmuly's CRASH Talk</li> </ul>
<i>In the visuals &amp; materials you create...</i>	<p><b>Do make your own snazzy pictures and marketing materials!</b></p>	<p><b>Don't pull pictures from SVARA's website or use SVARA's logo</b></p>

# planning

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## PLANNING GUIDE

### Create a WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY for Your Bet Midrash

You'll find a number of questions below to help you organize your thoughts, ideas, and dreams for your bet midrash, and we strongly recommend talking these questions through with a mentor, a member of the SVARA team, a trusted comrade, or your chevruta to help you sharpen and deepen your dreams and schemes!

- **WHO do you want to reach?**
  - Do you have a particular learner base in mind?
  - Is your bet midrash for a specific identity group or affinity group?
  - Is your bet midrash catered to a specific kind of experience with Hebrew language and text study?
- **WHAT do you want the structure of your bet midrash to be?**
  - Chevruta & shiur together or separate?
  - How many weeks is it?
  - Do you want to partner with an institution or run your bet midrash independently?
  - What text do you want to teach?
- **WHERE will your bet midrash meet?**
  - Will you meet in person?
    - What is the physical location you'll use & what prep do you need to do to get it ready?
  - Will you meet on Zoom?
    - What kind of tech support & structure do you want?
  - What needs to happen to/in your space (whether online or in person) to ensure it is maximally accessible? What are the access norms you can communicate about the space to your learners?
- **WHEN is your bet midrash?**
  - What are the dates?
  - What time of day?
  - How long will sessions be?
  - Do you want a siyum?
- **WHY are you running this bet midrash?**

- What are you hoping to achieve as a facilitator?
- What aspects of COMP do you want to focus on?
- What are you hoping will happen as a result of the bet midrash?

## **Checklist: 6–8 Weeks Out**

### ***Pick your text & start learning!***

- Start learning text w/ a chevruta (→ See **HOW TO PREP A TEXT TO TEACH IT**)
  - Plan breakdown of text
- Begin creating and gathering learning materials

### ***Finalize the location & timing!***

- If renting space: find & sign contract with venue
- Set up registration (with partner org, if applicable)
- Reach out to potential volunteers (2-4) to help set-up & greet AND/OR procure fairies or tech support

### ***Get your registration form & marketing info ready!***

- Create registration form & information
  - Write a blurb
  - Do you want any images for your marketing? How will you create them; who will create them for/with you?
  - Information to include:
    - What will participants need?
    - Access information
    - Cost
    - Chevruta-matching information as necessary

### ***Create a turnout plan!***

- WHO do you want to reach and HOW will you reach them?
- Make a turnout plan & start reaching out to folks!
  - Who are the connectors & community-members that can help you do outreach?
    - Send them information to forward to their people!
  - Do personal outreach

- Social media? Email? Listservs?
- Send info to SVARA for marketing support (if you want!)

## **Checklist: 2-4 Weeks Out**

### ***Create & collect materials!***

- Make a list of all of the materials & supplies you'll need (→ See **SAMPLE MATERIALS LIST**)
- Gather any learning materials you'll need from Team SVARA
- Make a plan for how these materials will be distributed (folder, digital folder, print-it-yourself)
  - Then get this assembled
- Create any slides or teaching plans that you'll need (→ See **SAMPLE TEACHING OUTLINES**)

### ***Get your people & space ready!***

- Assemble a support team as needed, considering if you'll want:
  - fairies
  - captioners
  - greeters
  - set-up volunteers
  - clean-up volunteers
  - tech support
- Finalize online or in-person space (make Zoom links, make sure space is booked, etc.)
- Gather and respond to access needs (→ See **ACCESSIBILITY AT SVARA**)

### ***Continue spreading the word & doing turnout!***

- Last minute email blast? Social media push? Personal outreach?

### ***Prep emails ahead of time!***

- Set up reminder emails
- Set up email post-session to send out after first session (→ See **SAMPLE LEARNER CORRESPONDENCE**)
- Create evaluation for final session

## Checklist: Day of

### ***Review your teaching plan!***

- Review schedule, make any adjustments, etc.

### ***Send reminder email!***

- Remind your folks about the session, where to go, what they'll need, etc. (→ See **SAMPLE LEARNER CORRESPONDENCE**)

### ***Set up your space!***

- Arrive at space with team ahead of time to set up
  - Conclude set-up 30 minutes prior to start-time (*in-person*)
    - Greeting table with all materials
    - Whiteboard with markers & eraser
    - Extra pencils, sharpeners, stickies
    - Sign-in sheet
    - Snack table
  - Conclude set-up 30 minutes prior to start-time (*online*)
    - Assign all roles to captioners, co-hosts, etc.
    - Set up slide share & nigun
    - Set up waiting room
- Review schedule together



## **Checklist: Post-Session**

### ***Clean up your space!***

- Gather all materials and put them away for next time

### ***Debrief & clap yourself up!***

- Take a deep breath, you did it!
- Debrief with your team: what worked and what are you proud of?
  - Note any changes or adjustments for next session
- Clap yourself up, dance in front of the mirror, take a bath, smell something nice, etc.

### ***Send follow-up email!***

- Send out post-session email (which you might have already prepped!)

## SAMPLE MATERIALS LIST

As you create your learning space, feel free to consult our materials list and tweak it for your own use!

### Room & space set-up:

- Whiteboard
- Low-odor markers, multiple colors
- Standing shtender

### Bet Midrash supplies:

- Pencils
- MagnaBrite magnifying glasses
- Fairyboards (small dry-erase boards for Fairies)
- Fairy wings
- Blue tape
- Sharpies
- Arrow stickies (several packs for each table)
- Extra Jastrow dictionaries
- Extra Frank dictionaries

### Registration table things:

- Registration list
- Registrant name tags
- Pronoun stickers

### Content materials:

- Folder (with contents below)
  - Bracha card
  - B”M Reference Guide
  - Hint Sheet
  - Text Prep Sheet
  - Supplementary texts
  - Bookmarks
  - Magnet
- Masechtot
- Blown-up copies of the text
- Rainbow alef-bet strip
- Extra Text Prep Sheets

## SAMPLE learner CORRESPONDENCE

As you're getting ready to be in touch with your learning community, feel free to consult the following list for all of the deets folks may need to participate fully!

### Your pre-session emails might include:

- Location, date, and time of each session in the program
- Other important dates of the program, if applicable (e.g. community-building moments; siyum; friends & family night)
- Information about orientation for new learners
- Access notes, asks, and invites
  - Share accessibility information you already know (e.g., physical accessibility of the building, when bathroom breaks will happen, etc.)
  - Make any asks you have (e.g., for low-scent or scent-free space)
  - Invite correspondence from learners about any & all access needs (e.g., "tell me about any access needs you have!")
- List of what to bring
  - Dictionaries (Frank & Jastrow), including tips on how to get or borrow them
  - Learning materials (notebook, pens/pencils, etc.)
- Chevruta-matching information or requests for information
- Love from teachers & fairies

### Your follow-up emails might include:

- Clarifications after shiur
- Links to recordings
- Links to class resources online
- Resources for cursive Hebrew script and/or Rashi script
- Invitation for learners to report on how their chevruta pairings are going
- Opportunities to connect further with teacher or fairies

# selecting your text & creating materials

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## SELECTING A TEXT

At SVARA we teach texts that expose learners to, and initiate them into, a tradition that is courageous and radical in its willingness to deviate from the past to create a new and better future. These texts help us make our ORIENTATION transparent, and help communicate to folks in our bet midrash why we think it is important that they learn Talmud. Though SVARA's METHOD can be used to support empowering learning for *any* Talmud text, we select our bet midrash texts to show that:

- the tradition is extraordinarily smart and sophisticated
- change, even radical change, is native to the tradition and the entire halachic system is actually driven by *svara*/moral conscience
- the Rabbis were courageous and radical
- a conflict between one's conscience and the apparent meaning of a biblical text is, and has always been, the beginning of a process, not the end of the process
- the Rabbis laid out a system for dealing with "crashes" (times during which the received tradition was perceived to be inadequate in one or more of its aspects), including: sources from which to get new laws; mechanisms for change; and a theology and philosophy which encouraged an active, rather than passive or compliant, role for human beings in relation to God and Torah
- a law whose source is acknowledged explicitly to be *svara* has the same status as a law whose source is a verse in the Torah—both are *de'oraita*. And *svara* can trump *kra*!

In addition, we like to teach texts that:

- contain Mishnah + Gemara
- provide an opportunity to teach the 5 Agendas of the Gemara (ACCeSS)
- contain a *kra* proof

These content areas help learners build core skills and vocabulary in their learning that will serve them as they encounter any text in the future.

### reflection:

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What are some things that you are hoping to convey about Talmud to your learners in the bet midrash? Revisit ORIENTATIONS and the reflections in that section to help get your juices flowing.

## A STARTER GUIDE TO SVARA'S FAVE TEXTS

SVARA has an ever-expanding library of texts that fit these descriptions. We are excited to see that library grow as more and more people teach using SVARA's method. Below is a list of some of our favorite sugyot to help you get started! While any talmudic text, of course, can be read in an infinite numbers of ways, the texts below were chosen because they facilitate the learning of concepts integral to the early Rabbis' "traditionally radical," disruptive, queer approach to Jewish innovation. It is our hope that these concepts and precedents and the ultimate boost in confidence the learners will likely experience when learning these texts, will allow them to be better and bolder Jewish innovators themselves.

### TEXTS FOR 2-5 SESSIONS

#### L'Taher et HaSheretz (Sanhedrin 17a/b)

- **Concepts:** The danger of unanimity; the power of debate and disagreement to achieve a greater truth; the ideal of being willing and halachically astute enough to be able to overturn Torah when necessary to achieve a greater good.
- **Number of Sessions:** 1-5

#### Do People Really Own Torah?! (Kiddushin 32a)

- **Concepts:** The notion that, while it appears that it's really God who "owns" Torah and has authority over its interpretation and application, it's really people who own and are the shapers of Torah and the tradition (if they are engaged in learning it in a disciplined way).
- **Number of Sessions:** 2-4

#### Talmud vs. Ma'aseh / Learning vs. Action (Kiddushin 40b)

- **Concepts:** The complex tension between learning and action as strategies for creating the world that we want to see. This text also surfaces questions of learning—what it is and what it's for, definitions of "Talmud," and the rabbinic project's attempt to cultivate people who can hold complexity.
- **Number of Sessions:** 2-3

#### Eilu V'Eilu / These & These (Eruvin 13b)

- **Concepts:** Who you are as a person (modest, patient, thoughtful, open to others' ideas—or not) influences what kind of halacha, or world, you come up with; opposing ideas can both be true at the same time; principled pluralism: i.e., we come up with bigger truths when we take our opponents' ideas into account, examine them carefully and respond to them with sincerity, and we should stay in conversation—even for long periods of time—with our opponents.

- **Number of Sessions:** 2+

### Chacham Adif Mi'Navi / Sage is Preferable to Prophet (Bava Batra 12a)

- **Concepts:** The Rabbis claiming their prophetic legacy after the destruction of the Temple; questions about the process of interpretation as revelation. Includes a wildly subversive kra proof.
- **Number of Sessions:** 2-3 (ideally 3)

### Mai Chanukah? / What's Chanukah? (Shabbat 21b)

- **Concepts:** The creation of myths to galvanize support; the suppression of historical factors that play less well in certain later historical periods. Introduces the concept of *machloket* (here, Hillel-Shammai).
- **Number of Sessions:** 1-3

### Har Kegigit / Mountain Held Over B'nei Yisrael's Head (Shabbat 88a)

- **Concepts:** Destabilizing the Sinai myth; the importance of consent in covenantal relationship (and beyond); undoing the covenant at Sinai for the sake of a communally accepted moment of innovative Torah.
- **Number of Sessions:** 3-6

## LONGER STORIES<sup>132</sup>

These texts can help learners build relationships with key figures, understand core dilemmas in rabbinic theology, and help uncover some of the stories that drive the rabbinic project.

### Rabbi Meir's Origin Story (Eruvin 13b)

- **Concepts:** fixed law is an accommodation to reality, but unbounded "contrarian" exploration is what gets us closer to Truth and is an indispensable component of working out law/norms/practice; the value of being able to think beyond the apparent limits of Torah/status quo, to overturn the system where necessary to better the system (another instance of *l'tahev et ha-sheretz*)
- **Number of Sessions:** 4+

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<sup>132</sup> While the binary of "halakha" and "aggadah" is false (like all binaries!), we find that different skills are developed when teaching/learning sugyot that are a lengthy story vs. a technical back-and-forth. As such, we've broken this sampling down this way.

### **Moses in Rabbi Akiva's Academy** (Menachot 29b)

- **Concepts:** God “planned” that Torah would undergo constant and even radical change when necessary, even to the point of being unrecognizable to past generations, as long as the ultimate goals of the system are being met.
- **Number of Sessions:** 6+

### **Tanur Shel Achnai** (Bava Metzia 59b)

- **Concepts:** Human authority over and through the tradition; God's desire for human beings to take the project of creating and determining practice into their own hands—even when they know that God disagrees in any given circumstance.
- **Number of Sessions:** 9+

## **LONGER HALAKHIC SUGYOT**

These texts help learners build their toolkit for radical change-making in the rabbinic tradition. They often introduce learners to core halakhic concepts, core categories of change-making, innovative and creative uses of kra and sources of law, etc.

### **Yehareg Ve'Al Ya'avov / Kill or Be Killed in Nitza's Attic (Sanhedrin 74a)**

- **Concepts:** Remembering that core ideas, like pikuach nefesh, were actually thought up by people—and were not always part of the Jewish system—and recognizing the dangerous and radical nature of their introduction at the time, as well as the boldness of the guys who promulgated them; that lay people (non-rabbis; possibly even non-talmidei chachamim) were involved in innovation from the beginning.
- **Number of Sessions:** 4+

### **E'ba'eit Eima Kra/Svara / Say Kra or Svara / Food or Clothing (Bava Batra 9a)**

- **Concepts:** The equivalence of kra and svara; the implied message that kra is used as an “excuse” to make changes driven by our svara; the idea that there are core foundational principles that innovations have to be consistent with to be accepted by the system—that these foundational principles arbitrate between competing svaras.
- **Number of Sessions:** 4+

### **Lev Yodea Marat Nafsho / Eating on Yom Kippur (Yoma 83a)**



- **Concepts:** The trust that the system puts in the individual to adjudicate best regarding themselves, i.e., the ultimate trust and authority of the individual over matters pertaining to their life experience.
- **Number of Sessions:** 5+ (ideally 8 online, 5 in person)

#### **Gemar Gemara & Sevar Sevara** (Eruvin 13a/Sota 20a)

- **Concepts:** A kind of meta-curriculum for leaders; great definitions of these two terms (Rashi); the need to have one's gemirna down before one "plays with the pieces." The inadequacy of gemirna without sevirna. The incomprehensibility (or scariness) of sevirna without gemirna. NOTE: This text is really in service of learning Rashi, and requires learners to be able to recognize and read Hebrew letters in Rashi script.
- **Number of Sessions:** 4+

#### **Pikuach Nefesh / Saving a Life on Shabbat (Yoma 85b)**

- **Concepts:** Example of a deliberately far-fetched read of Torah to justify a concept (pikuach nefesh) innovated as a moral upgrade, particularly one which was particularly adaptive given the historical circumstances of its time. Source for pikuach nefesh.
- **Number of Sessions:** 4+

#### **Hillel's Prozbul (Gittin 36a)**

- **Concepts:** The abrogation of Torah (through takkanah) for the purpose of helping the economy and the well-being of one's fellow citizens.
- **Number of Sessions:** 5+

## ANNOTATED SAMPLE BREAKDOWNS

Text breakdowns might not seem like they'll impact learning *that* much, but we believe they do, as we'll explain throughout this section! Below we have listed sample breakdowns designed for shiurim that last between 50–60 min. For this unit of time, we recommend 10–15 new words per session. When you are designing your breakdown, keep this ratio in mind and adjust where you need to! These are samples, intended to help you design the breakdowns for your learning space that feel right for you and your learners.

### L'taher et HaSheretz (Sanhedrin 17a/b)

#### BREAKDOWN #1 | For a six-session bet midrash

Session 1:

אמר רב כהנא סנהדרי שראו כולן לחובה פוטרין אותו

Session 2:

מ"ט כיון דגמירי הלנת דין למעבד ליה זכותא והני תו לא חזו ליה

Session 3:

א"ר יוחנן אין מושיבין בסנהדרי אלא בעלי קומה ובעלי חכמה ובעלי מראה ובעלי זקנה ובעלי כשפים ויודעים בע' לשון שלא תהא סנהדרי שומעת מפי המתורגמן

Session 4:

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב אין מושיבין בסנהדרין אלא מי שיוודע לטהר את השרץ מה"ת

Session 5:

אמר רב אני אדון ואטהרנו ומה נחש שממית ומרבה טומאה טהור שרץ שאינו ממית ומרבה טומאה אינו דין שיהא טהור

Session 6:

ולא היא מידי דהוה אקוץ בעלמא

Depending on your learners, you might want to combine (1) and (2), and/or split up (3). It's worth noting that (3) has a solid number of repeat words, as does (5). This teaching plan shows our oft-quoted "letaher et hasherez" in context, and highlights the importance of the Sanhedrin's ability to see those who are guilty as innocent. This breakdown also carries through the conclusion of this sugya, including (5) and (6). This final session is so short in order to leave enough time for playing out the logic in these two sessions.

#### BREAKDOWN #2 | For a four-session bet midrash

Session 1:

אמר רב כהנא סנהדרי שראו כולן לחובה פוטרין אותו

Session 2:

מ"ט כיון דגמירי הלנת דין למעבד ליה זכותא והני תו לא חזו ליה

Session 3:

א"ר יוחנן אין מושיבין בסנהדרי אלא בעלי קומה ובעלי חכמה ובעלי מראה ובעלי זקנה ובעלי כשפים ויודעים בע' לשון שלא תהא סנהדרי שומעת מפּי המתורגמן

Session 4:

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב אין מושיבין בסנהדרין אלא מי שיוודע לטהר את השרץ מה"ת

**BREAKDOWN #3** | For a one-session bet midrash

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב אין מושיבין בסנהדרין אלא מי שיוודע לטהר את השרץ מה"ת

**Notable differences & teaching implications:** This text can be taught and broken down in *so many* ways! The questions you might want to consider are: (a) how much time do you have? (b) what is the emphasis you want to draw out and make space for your learners to unpack and own fully? Is the center of this text for you the radical statement about purifying a sheretz? Is this sugya emphasizing the importance of effective and just judicial process? Like with all breakdowns, use your goals to create a breakdown that supports a powerful teaching plan for you in your context.

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## Talmud vs. Ma'seh / Learning vs. Action (Kiddushin 40b)

**BREAKDOWN #1** | For a three-session bet midrash

Session 1:

וכבר היה רבי טרפון וזקנים מסובין בעלית בית נתזה בלוד נשאלה שאילה זו בפניהם

Session 2:

תלמוד גדול או מעשה גדול נענה רבי טרפון ואמר מעשה גדול נענה ר"ע ואמר תלמוד גדול

Session 3:

נענו כולם ואמרו תלמוד גדול שהתלמוד מביא לידי מעשה

## **BREAKDOWN #2** | For a two-session bet midrash:

Session 1:

נשאלה שאילה זו בפניהם תלמוד גדול או מעשה גדול נענה רבי טרפון ואמר מעשה גדול

Session 2:

נענה ר"ע ואמר תלמוד גדול נענו כולם ואמרו תלמוד גדול שהתלמוד מביא לידי מעשה

**Notable differences & teaching implications:** In the first breakdown, we give time and space to the elders gathered together in the attic, and wonder what the question might be. In the second breakdown, we would “teach out” that idea (explaining the necessary context and characters) so that learners can begin to explore the dilemma posed by the text. The tension is built in the first breakdown with the debate between Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva, and then is resolved in the third session with the synthesizing answer. In the second breakdown, the tension is hinted at in the first session with Rabbi Tarfon’s answer, but will need to be fleshed out more substantially to ensure that the resolution carries meaning.

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## **Chacham Adif Mi’Navi / Sage is Preferable to Prophet (Bava Batra 12a)**

### **BREAKDOWN #1** | For a three-session bet midrash

Session 1:

אמר רבי אבדימי דמן חיפה מיום שחרב בית המקדש ניטלה נבואה מן הנביאים וניתנה לחכמים

Session 2:

אטו חכם לאו נביא הוא הכי קאמר אף על פי שניטלה מן הנביאים מן החכמים לא ניטלה

Session 3:

אמר אמימר וחכם עדיף מנביא שנאמר ונבא לבב חכמה מי נתלה במי הוי אומר קטן נתלה בגדול

### **BREAKDOWN #2** | For a two-session bet midrash

Session 1:

אמר רבי אבדימי דמן חיפה מיום שחרב בית המקדש ניטלה נבואה מן הנביאים וניתנה לחכמים

Session 2:

אמר אמימר וחכם עדיף מנביא שנאמר ונבא לבב חכמה מי נתלה במי הוי אומר קטן נתלה בגדול

**BREAKDOWN #3** | For a quick intro session

וחכם עדיף מנביא שנאמר ונבא לבב חכמה

**Notable differences & teaching implications:** This text can be configured in so many ways! In Breakdown #1, you get a full picture of the story, the flow of the sugya, and the midrash. With Breakdown #1, you can still get a good juicy learning session, but the move that connects (1) and (2) has to be teased out or talked through so that learners know what is at stake in the resolution. Finally, the seven-word version of this text can be an incredibly powerful one-off or introductory session. You could *even* just do the first three words of that section, and you'd still get some goodies out of it! (It's one of the best three words to start teaching with because there is a prefix, a suffix, *and* an infix.)

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## Moses in Rabbi Akiva's Academy (Menachot 29b)

**BREAKDOWN #1** | For an eight-session bet midrash

Session 1:

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב בשעה שעלה משה למרום מצאו להקב"ה שיושב וקושר כתרים לאותיות

Session 2:

אמר לפניו רבש"ע מי מעכב על ידך אמר לו אדם אחד יש שעתידי להיות בסוף כמה דורות ועקיבא בן יוסף שמו

Session 3:

שעתידי לדרוש על כל קוץ וקוץ תילין תילין של הלכות אמר לפניו רבש"ע הראהו לי

Session 4:

אמר לו חזור לאחורך הלך וישב בסוף שמונה שורות ולא היה יודע מה הן אומרים תשש כחו

Session 5:

כיון שהגיע לדבר אחד אמרו לו תלמידיו רבי מנין לך

Session 6:

אמר להן הלכה למשה מסיני נתיישרה דעתו

Session 7:

חזר ובא לפני הקב"ה אמר לפניו רבונו של עולם יש לך אדם כזה ואתה נותן תורה ע"י

Session 8:

אמר לו שתוק כך עלה במחשבה לפני אמר לפניו רבונו של עולם הראיתני תורתו הראני שכרו

## **BREAKDOWN #2** | For a six-session bet midrash

Session 1:

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב בשעה שעלה משה למרום מצאו להקב"ה שיושב וקושר כתרים לאותיות

Session 2:

אמר לפניו רבש"ע מי מעכב על ידך אמר לו אדם אחד יש שעתיד להיות בסוף כמה דורות ועקיבא בן יוסף שמו

Session 3:

שעתיד לדרוש על כל קוץ וקוץ תילין תילין של הלכות אמר לפניו רבש"ע הראהו לי

Session 4:

אמר לו חזור לאחורך הלך וישב בסוף שמונה שורות ולא היה יודע מה הן אומרים תשש כחו

Session 5:

כיון שהגיע לדבר אחד אמרו לו תלמידיו רבי מנין לך

Session 6:

אמר להן הלכה למשה מסיני נתיישרה דעתו

**Notable differences & teaching implications:** In the first breakdown, learners are introduced to the full conclusion of the story, and the climactic moment is not *exclusively* the "halakha le'moshe mi'sinai" reveal. In the second breakdown, the story ends with this statement and Moshe's resolution. In either case, sessions (5) and (6) *could* be combined (and has certainly been taught that way!), but there is something powerful and giving space to the full conversation that can emerge by separating them out this way. If you're feeling *really* creative and want to give folks this text inside without a whole lot of time, you could try teaching only (3) (4) (5) (6). Let us know how that goes!

## Lev Yodea Marat Nafsho / Eating on Yom Kippur (Yoma 83a)

Session 1 (Mishnah):

חולה מאכילין אותו ע"פ בקיאים ואם אין שם בקיאים מאכילין אותו על פי עצמו עד שיאמר די

Session 2 (Gemara):

אמר ר' ינאי חולה אומר צריך ורופא אומר אינו צריך שומעין לחולה מ"ט לב יודע מרת נפשו

Session 3:

פשיטא מהו דתימא רופא קים ליה טפי קמ"ל רופא אומר צריך וחולה אומר אינו צריך שומעין לרופא מ"ט תונבא הוא דנקיט ליה

Session 4:

תנן חולה מאכילין אותו ע"פ בקיאים אין ע"פ עצמו לא ע"פ בקיאים אין על פי בקי אחד לא

Session 5:

הכא במאי עסקינן דאמר לא צריכנא וליספו ליה ע"פ בקי

Session 6:

מר בר רב אשי אמר כל היכא דאמר צריך אני אפי' איכא מאה דאמרי לא צריך לדידיה שמענין שנאמר לב יודע מרת נפשו

Session 7:

תנן אם אין שם בקיאים מאכילין אותו ע"פ עצמו טעמא דליכא בקיאים הא איכא בקיאים לא

Session 8:

ה"ק בד"א דאמר לא צריך אני אבל אמר צריך אני אין שם בקיאים כלל מאכילין אותו ע"פ עצמו שנאמר לב יודע מרת נפשו

## HOW TO LEARN A TEXT TO TEACH IT

NOTE: This resource is for bet midrash leaders & teachers. When you are fairying in a bet midrash, you'll likely be preparing a text that another person has selected, blocked off, and created materials for. The prep process for that experience might be slightly different, and you'll want to figure out for yourself what practices help you feel prepared to flutter in the bet midrash.

### STEP 1: PICK A TEXT

What text do you want to teach? Maybe you read about a text referenced in a secondary source. Maybe you heard about a text and it sounded cool. Pick that to teach! Or go back to a text you've learned before. Or pick one from → **A STARTER GUIDE TO SVARA'S FAVE TEXTS**. Try to always teach a text you're excited to learn for yourself. Even better if you're struggling with something in it, or intrigued about an idea or concept it introduces.

Once you know what text you want to teach, it's time to learn it to teach it!

### STEP 2: DO A FULL READ-THROUGH (SKIM!)

Once you've landed on the text and you and your chevruta have some time blocked out to go more inside, do a first run-through of the text as a whole. Learning the text as a whole will help you: figure out if it's the right text for you, block out the text, identify areas to focus on, and gather your questions.

This can mean skimming the text, learning from a teacher, having the text explained to you by a chevruta, listening to online recordings from SVARA's website or another place, etc. Consult any resources you need to give yourself a grounding in the overall structure before you go back in and do a full SVARA-style deep-dive.

### STEP 3: BLOCK OUT THE TEXT

Now that you've seen the full text, try to start imagining how you'll break the text up into teach-able chunks for each session. A text should be approximately 12-18 words per 2-½-hour bet midrash session, or 10-14 words for a 2-hour session. (→ See **SAMPLE BREAKDOWNS** for guidance and examples.)

- Consider the following questions as you're deciding how to block out the text:
  - What is the appropriate number of words for each shiur? (Think about how much time you have, the general range of experiences of your learners, etc.)
  - Where are the natural breaks in the flow of the argument? Try not to break up sentences or, if you can help it, stop in the middle of a source, a *baraita*, a referenced *mishna*, a *meimra* or a rhetorical argument. The gemara is designed to be dialogical; let each section of the text make its point before cutting it off. The text will guide you!



- Are there comments from Rashi on this section? Do you want to assign some Rashis to everyone? If you do, this impacts the total number of words you should be planning to cover for that shiur. If you don't have any Rashis, think about how will you create opportunities for experienced learners to dig deeper? (Is there a parallel or related text you can bring in? Something else on the *daf*? Codes? *Mefarshim*?)

#### STEP 4: PREP THE TEXT SVARA-STYLE

This is an essential piece of learning to prepare a text—the best way to prepare for teaching is to authentically learn the text, which requires a slow, careful, precise, spacious journey with your chevruta. Cultivate your beginner's mind and learn the text SVARA-style. Of course. Then, once you're done, learn it again, this time looking up every word, as though you were your learners. The radical empathy necessary to be a great teacher begins here: how will your learners attack each word? What will they see when they look it up this way? Do what they will do to decipher each word:

- Remove any prefixes, infixes, and suffixes for each word.
  - Think about what beginner learners might do as they meet each word. Put yourself into their heads. Intentionally make their mistakes and follow their process:
    - What letters might they remove? What letters might they not remove?
    - What letters will they mistake for each other?
    - What root letters might they mistake for prefixes, and vice versa?
    - Look up their erroneous guesses in the dictionary and see what they will see.
    - Where will they go next?
- Look up every single word from your text in Jastrow the way you imagine your learners might.
  - Make sure you're looking at the entry in the right language!
  - Look for all possible constellations of meaning for each word (all the different options of what this shorash means)
  - Note the words that Jastrow sends you to (and chase down all of the *vide* notes, marked as "v." if you want to see those!)
  - Note proto-roots (the roots that are in parentheses)
- Do a close inside and outside reading of the text (make sure you and your chevruta can both do a full inside and outside translation of the whole text).
  - Where are the holes for you? Which pieces do you still not fully understand? At this point, you should be able to pronounce every single word, identify its pronunciation, and understand why it is vocalized and conjugated the way it is...except for the words you're stuck on. That's OK! Leave it at that. It'll be exciting (for you and your

learners!) to work out those parts together. This is what makes the learning—and the teaching—authentic.

- Check your understanding against the “Things to Own about a Word & Sentence:”

<p><b>Word:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Language—Hebrew or Aramaic</li> <li>2. Root</li> <li>3. Core meaning of root</li> <li>4. Prefixes</li> <li>5. Suffixes</li> <li>6. Tense</li> <li>7. Person</li> <li>8. Gender</li> <li>9. Number--singular or plural</li> <li>10. Binyan</li> <li>11. Vocalization/pronunciation</li> <li>12. Inside (literal) translation</li> <li>13. Outside (contextual) translation</li> <li>14. Part of speech—noun, verb, etc.</li> <li>15. Voice—command, jussive, stative, etc.</li> </ol>	<p><b>Sentence:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Inside and outside translations</li> <li>2. Fluent recitation with correct phrasing</li> <li>3. Know all technical terms and how they work</li> <li>4. Who’s speaking? (i.e., which side of the argument does this utterance represent?)</li> <li>5. The historical period of the utterance--i.e., Is the utterance a tannaitic teaching? a mishna? a baraita? a meimra? the stamma?</li> <li>6. Is the utterance a statement, question, challenge, resolution, etc.?</li> <li>7. How does this utterance relate to what came before?</li> <li>8. Articulate all implicit antecedents</li> </ol>
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- It’s wonderful and perfectly good if you need to put a sticky on a few words that you don’t fully “own”—you’ll bring those words to your learners and rely on their insights and collaboration to figure these words out together! This helps your learners feel like their learning and their contributions really matter. Because they do. You’ll need them to sometimes figure out the text better than you have it going in.
- We follow the 80/20 rule at SVARA: We like to go into the bet midrash having about 80% of the text nailed down, solid, and 20% understood fairly well but not “in our back pocket.” This allows us to be authentic chevrotas with our learners. They will inevitably raise the clarity on the 20% and deepen our understanding of it and the entire text, and our excitement when that happens keeps the energy in the room dynamic and keeps our teaching authentic because our learning is authentic. Ultimately, as teachers, we’re not *teaching* as much as modeling learning.

**STEP 5: THINK ABOUT HOW YOU’LL TEACH THE TEXT**

- Identify some key questions that are present in your chevruta that you’d like to bring into the shiur.
  - What are the questions that come up in your chevruta? What do you find yourselves most curious about?

- What questions might you ask your learners in order to unpack the text on a grammatical level, on the level of syntax, on a conceptual level, on a content level, on a personal level, etc?
- Note these questions, and also hold them lightly—don't impose them on the learning space if they're not emerging naturally. Follow the questions that emerge for your learners primarily, and bring in your own questions as they serve where the shiur is naturally going.
- In order to support maximal comprehension, is there a question or two you need to ask that guides your learners to deeper understanding?
- Identify your own "take" (khop" on the text. (→ See **FINDING THE QUEER MAGIC OF A SUGYA**)
  - As with everything, you should hold onto your take ever so lightly, knowing that the voices of the folks in the room, your own experience of learning the text again, and encountering rishonim and other commentaries, can—and *should*—impact your perspective!
  - Remember: Your take on the text should not be the main takeaway in a SVARA bet midrash. Your learners are in the room to learn how to learn and to develop their own take! The project here is not to be the flashy teacher who "delivers an amazing shi'r"! Being that kind of teacher is not going to change anyone's life; being this kind of teacher will. At the same time, as their teacher, your take should be communicated clearly to your learners—it's why you chose this particular text to teach! And it'll inspire the room! But it's not the main point, and shouldn't be conveyed as such.

## CREATING & DISTRIBUTING MATERIALS

At SVARA, we nurture and support a mixed-level learning space that welcomes absolute alef-bet beginners alongside experienced Talmudists. In order to help everyone learn at their precise level, we create and distribute a comprehensive set of materials for each session that we teach.

WHAT IS IT?	WHY DO WE USE IT?	CREATION TIPS
<b>Hint Sheet</b>	Even with the Hints for Finding the Root sheet, it can be hard to decode some words! Hint Sheets allow us to better scaffold chevruta learning and make sure folks have what they need.	Print on a separate color so that you can say "Look on the [fill in color] sheet, your Hint Sheet!"
<b>Torah Verses Sheet</b>	Not everyone has memorized the entire Tanach! Printing out the Torah Verses sheet gives everyone access to the same translation, and allows learners to see the verse in context if they do not have the Tanach with them.	Print on a separate color sheet, as well, so that you can point it out more easily to your learners.
<b>Supplemental Texts</b>	This provides additional materials for folks to learn during chevruta or outside of the bet midrash that will enable them to go deeper (resources, codes, and commentaries)	Print a cover sheet that indicates which sources folks should prioritize to help scaffold the journey.
<b>Text Prep Sheet</b>	This chart helps learners track words as they go, noting the dictionary page numbers, roots, etc.	Don't force folks to use this! (Some people don't like charts.)  Make sure you have extras in the bet midrash.
<b>Hints for Finding the Root</b>	This resource enables folks to go word-by-word in the method by eliminating prefixes, suffixes, and infixes.	Print on cardstock in a separate color. This is a very important resource, and possibly the most essential one!
<b>Bet Midrash Reference Guide</b>	There is a lot in here! This packet serves as a useful reference guide that will enable your learners to have resources at their disposal that help them get a real sense of their own player-dom.	You don't have to print this for every learner each session!  You can have a few available in the bet midrash for folks to use.
<b>Rainbow Alef-Bet Strips</b>	This helps alef-bet beginners with a clear visual representation of the alef-bet in block letters and script (and Rashi script for those who need it).	You can use SVARA's specific resource or create your own!

## HOW TO MAKE A HINT SHEET

### Technical information for creating a Hint Sheet:

- Open up a Google Doc, or the word processor of your choice.
- Create a table with two sides, one side for the word in the text, and one side for the hint.
  - Make separate hint tables for Mishnah, Gemara, and Rashi
  - Include the way the citation for the text will appear as a “Jastrow Bonus” under the title of the hint sheet. For example:

### Hint Sheet for Ketubot 16b-17a

Jastrow Abbreviation: Keth. 16<sup>b</sup>- Keth.17<sup>a</sup>

- To get the words in the table, you can either:
  - Type in Hebrew, which allows you to go through each word, type it out, and determine whether it needs a hint or not.
  - Go to HebrewBooks.org or Sefaria and copy the Hebrew text and paste each word of the *sugya* into a new box, which allows you to put all of the words in one place and then evaluate if any words should be taken off.
  - Or jot down on a piece of paper the words you think need to go on the hint sheet, and what you think the hint should be, and then type up your list at the end.
- Put yourself in the mindset of the greenest of greens; you’re writing hints for the most beginner learners.
- Go word by word through the text. Evaluate each word: notice the prefixes, suffixes, infixes and imagine what your learners will try out as they search for the 3-letter root when they get to this word.
  - Is there something that can trip them up?
  - Is this word part of a specific phrase that they might miss?
  - Does this word have a complex grammatical structure?
  - Do any root letters drop out, or is there an additional letter that crept in somewhere that might trick them?
  - **Keep these things in mind when deciding whether to make a hint for that word!**
- Here are a few examples for creating different kinds of hints for a word:

**1. Pull apart super confusing words and indicate the prefixes and suffixes, and then identify the root.**

ש, + יאמר, Root: אמר	שיאמר
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- We do this when...
  - The root is irregular
  - One of the root letters has fallen off (י, ג, י)
  - There are multiple prefixes or suffixes

**2. Direct learners to Jastrow entry with word as is.**

Look up in Jastrow as is.	חולה
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- We do this when...
  - The word is a noun
  - The form or conjugation is unusual or irregular, and the word appears in Jastrow exactly as it does in the text
  - If you make this kind of hint, it's especially important to remind the learners that they're always responsible for looking up and taking notes on the root of every word even if they find their word in noun form or in a "Jastrow Bonus."

**3. Direct learners to *specific* Jastrow entry.**

Look up in Jastrow as is, see fourth entry.	אין
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- We do this when...
  - There are multiple entries for the same word

**4. Direct learners to a Frank entry.**

Look up in Frank.	כיצד
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- We do this when...

- A word is functioning in a technical way in the gemara and we want to make sure the learner sees the way it functions in the sugya

There are many other kinds of hints, and as you create your own hint sheets, you'll create your own style and preferences. See the next page for a fuller sample Hint Sheet!

## Hint Sheet for Ketubot 16b-17a

Jastrow Abbreviation: Keth. 16<sup>b</sup>-Keth.17<sup>a</sup>

Look up in Frank	תנו רבנן
Look up in Frank	כיצד
Look for לפני in פנים entry in Jastrow	לפני
Look up in Frank	כמות
ל (prefix: "to") + הן (suffix: "them")	להן
Look up abbreviations in back of Frank	ב"ש
Look up abbreviations in back of Frank	לב"ה
הוי: היתה + שי	שהיתה
Look up as is	סומא
Abbreviation of אומרים	אומרי
ל (prefix: "to") + ה (suffix: "her")	לה
ל (prefix: "to") + הם (suffix: "them")	להם
Root: שבה	ישבחנו
Root: גנה/גני	יגננו
Look up in Frank	הוי אומר
Look up כאן in Frank	מכאן
Root: הוי	תהא
Look up in Jastrow as בריה	בריות





culture-setting,  
accessibility,  
& liberatory  
facilitation

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## CHEVRUTA MATCHING

We often say that chevruta matching is an art, not a science. The process of matching folks with a chevruta, like all aspects of teaching, can feel mysterious and strange—where to begin?! The key, we've found over time, is to ask the right questions that get you the information you need so that you can make your best guesses. Below you'll find a list of our questions and how we use them to help create matches.

### QUESTIONS TO ASK AHEAD OF TIME<sup>133</sup>

- Have you learned Talmud in SVARA's method before (not including Mishnah Collective)? (Yes/No)
- All SVARA programs are mixed-level spaces. Please share a few sentences about your experience learning Talmud, at SVARA and beyond. Where & when have you studied Talmud before?
- What brings you to [Name of Program]?

*In every SVARA bet midrash, we spend time decoding a talmud text in chevruta (learning partnerships). If you are coming with a chevruta (learning partner), please let us know below. The questions below will help us get to know you as a learner and match you with a chevruta, if you need one. If you see something in those questions that is unfamiliar to you, that's okay! All you'll need to navigate your way through the learning space at SVARA is your alef-bet. You're in the right place!*

- Are you coming with a chevruta (learning partner)? (Yes/No, please match me with someone)
- How would you characterize your experience with Hebrew? Give us your best guess!
  1. I know my alef-bet (I may have just learned it!). I can sometimes understand a few words here and there.
  2. I can pick out quite a few words that I understand or recognize, and have learned some grammar.
  3. I can understand a good amount of what I read, without a dictionary. I am conversant in Modern Hebrew or have experience studying text in the original Hebrew/Aramaic.
  4. I have extensive background learning rabbinic texts and commentaries in the original Hebrew/Aramaic.

*Please respond to each of the following questions (on a scale of 1-5) where 1 indicates a response of "What's that??" and 5 indicates a response of "I'm so great at that!" Remember: these questions are just to help us get to know you as a learner. All you need is the ability to decode your alef-bet—don't worry if these questions have things in them that feel unfamiliar! You're in the right place!*

- How do you feel about...

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<sup>133</sup> You can ask these questions in a registration form, in a survey you send out post-registration, etc.

- vocalizing Hebrew words without vowels? (1-5)
- being able to identify prefixes and suffixes? (1-5)
- reading Rashi script? (1-5)
- knowing what the binyan is? (1-5)
- using knowledge of a word's binyan to help you understand what the word means? (1-5)
- decoding and reading words in Aramaic? (1-5)

*Please respond to the following questions in one sentence or so:*

- Are you an internal or external processor? When you're integrating new ideas, does it help you to talk things out or do you prefer thinking things through on your own? How well do you work with people who are similar or different from you in this way?
- Are you a "tree person" or "forest person"? Do you tend to focus on the details or do you prefer trying to see the big picture? You might want someone similar or different from you in this way.
- Do you want a relaxed experience or a really driven experience?
- What are you hoping to get out of your time in the bet midrash? (Personal meaning-making? Skill-building? Presence? Connection? Etc!)
- What are 3-5 words you'd use to describe yourself as a learner?
- Is there anything else you'd like us to know or keep in mind when matching you with a chevruta (learning partner)?

## **MAKING A MATCH**

- Create a spreadsheet (or some way of capturing information) with folks' names and their answers to your chevruta-matching questions.
  - Go through the list.
  - Put folks who have requested each other to the side—they're good to go!
  - Read through the longer-form answers and start to get a feel for your folks.
- Next, sort them by their answer to *"How would you characterize your experience with Hebrew? Give us your best guess!,"* what we call "dot color" at SVARA.<sup>134</sup>
  - At this point, you've sorted folks into four categories:
    - *(1) I know my alef-bet (I may have just learned it!). I can sometimes understand a few words here and there.*

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<sup>134</sup> This name comes from the sticker dots we've used on nametags to help folks identify their experience with Hebrew text. Now that we assign chevrotot ahead of time to better support learners, these colors are slightly obsolete.

- (2) *I can pick out quite a few words that I understand or recognize, and have learned some grammar.*
  - (3) *I can understand a good amount of what I read, without a dictionary. I am conversant in Modern Hebrew or have experience studying text in the original Hebrew/Aramaic.*
  - (4) *I have extensive background learning rabbinic texts and commentaries in the original Hebrew/Aramaic.*
- Starting with the third and fourth categories (because these tend to have fewer folks), and try to find folks whose answers to the chevruta-matching questions align.
  - You'll want to put folks together who are similarly looking for a "driven" or "relaxed" experience, for example. Be sure to check what folks have shared about their access needs and what they wrote in the question "Is there anything else you'd like us to know or keep in mind when matching you with a chevruta (learning partner)?" to make sure it is aligned with your proposed match. Sometimes folks will share important information there that can help guide the match-making.
- Keep going through the rest of the list, and then you've got your proposed matches. Mazal tov, you did it!

**Note: These matches *always* need shifting and adjusting throughout any period of learning.** That's okay! Expect that matches will change, and make it clear to folks that this is normal, *and* that if their chevruta swaps, there's nothing that they did wrong. Use the information you've got and whatever you learn along the way to keep adjusting as needed.

## GUIDE TO FAIRYING IN THE BET MIDRASH

What do teachers do when learners are in chevruta?! You exhale, have a snack and transform into a winged fairy! Fairyng during the chevruta portions of the bet midrash is truly an art form unto itself. Here are some principles to help you as you flutter around the bet midrash and support your learners.

### HAVE ENCOURAGING & SUPPORTIVE ENERGY

- Your main job, as a fairy, is to be a cheerleader—to be encouraging, supportive, affirming, and enthusiastic! When people call you over, they're likely to be frustrated. Your job is to help soothe their anxiety and frustration. Help them relax!
- Lead with warmth and kindness as you approach a chevruta. In many cases, learners are scared, anxious, activated, etc. and are encountering something tremendously new and stretchy. *You* are their support team in navigating this new practice. Give them lots of praise and affirmation, and help them celebrate whatever they are achieving in any given session.
- In every interaction, be sure to remind them that they're doing great, wherever they are. Whatever word they're on, that's fantastic. They don't need to be any "further along" or know anything more than what they know.
- By modeling enthusiasm, light-heartedness, and curiosity, we model for learners that this whole practice is about enjoying our learning. Show your learners that *you're* learning with and from them, and have fun!

### VISIT EVERY CHEVRUTA

- Hover next to a chevruta to listen to their process. Or pull up a chair and tell them you're just going to sit and hang with them for a bit if it's OK with them. It's very helpful to see how chevrotas are doing and whether they have good chevruta process and chemistry. This will help you address any problems that have arisen or switches that need to get made in the chevruta pairing process.
- Make note of beginners who have really owned their chazara and are super-excited about it; you might want to call on them to recite during shiur (especially the quieter ones who aren't likely to raise their hand to volunteer).

### BALANCE SUPPORT WITH EMPOWERMENT

- When learners ask a question, you don't want to always just *give them the answer*—that wouldn't be empowering, and would only reinforce the idea that the teacher is the one with all the answers. At the same time, there's also no need to rigidly withhold a simple answer that will help them along.

- Knowing how to respond to a question is a product of multiple variables, including:
  - how far they've gotten in their prep
  - how experienced in learning text they are
  - how frustrated they are
- In general, you should be trying to help a chevruta identify what guesses they made, and guiding them through the process of pursuing a next guess. If it's relevant, you can also help them see why this next guess is a better one so that they will be more likely to pursue this path the next time they come to a similar problem.
- You can try asking questions to help guide them on the "right" path if you're noticing they're going in a direction that will lead to a dead end. For example, if it seems they're looking in the wrong dictionary entry, you could ask: "OK, what language are you working in? How do you know?"

### HELP FOLKS REMEMBER WHAT CHEVRUTA IS ALL ABOUT

- Watch out for the situation—which is very common—of learners who are stuck because they are spending a lot of time trying to "figure out what it means." Remind them about what their task is in chevruta: to go word by word with their chevruta, identifying the root and anything else about the word that their level enables them to figure out. It is much better for them to "cover" as much of the prep material as they can (i.e. make a guess at a root and look it up in the dictionary!), rather than spend lots of time trying to *understand* what's going on. The more of the text they've prepped in chevruta, the more "hooks" they'll have to hang the shiur on.
- When a chevruta calls you over, encourage them to articulate a clear question to you, which you can then respond to, rather than giving them a long explanation in response to a general request for help. Try to resist getting pulled into answering requests like: "We want to make sure we have it (meaning the whole passage)...is this right?" These folks are likely to want you to do a whole mini-shiur for them. When this happens, try saying: "I love what y'all are cooking up. Is there a specific question you're sitting with about one of the words?" OR take the opportunity to remind folks that shiur is the place to piece the meaning together, *together*.
- Learners often forget about the Hint Sheet! **Beginners, especially, should be reminded—and encouraged—to use the Hint Sheet!** Reassure them that it's not cheating to use the hint sheet; we're not "giving them the answers," we're just giving them a little bit more information which will help them look up the words themselves more easily.

### SUPPORT THE CHAZARA PROCESS

- This is where most chevrotas fall down on the job and need guidance. If chazara doesn't happen, the learner—especially the super-beginner—is likely to decide, "This is too hard for me." Or "My Hebrew isn't good enough to do this." This is, of course, exactly the *opposite* of what we're going for! Chazara is precisely what will give those learners the experience of

success and accomplishment that they need to both find learning Talmud an enjoyable experience *and* to encourage them to keep learning.

- Typical problems in the chazara process that you might encounter: 1) the learner didn't take good notes during shiur, so are learning the words with the wrong pronunciation or meaning; or 2) they're making mistakes and their chevruta is either not listening carefully enough to catch the mistakes; doesn't know that the mistakes are mistakes; *or* won't correct mistakes because they don't want to "hurt their feelings," sound judgemental, or seem picky. In these moments, you can intervene and support the chazara process as a third chevruta for a bit of time.

### **KNOW WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW... AND SAY IT!**

- If you don't know the answer to a question, do not hesitate to say "*Hmmm...you know, I don't know! Let me ask!*" Or: "*Hmmm...I don't know...let's see if we can figure this out together.*" Or: "*I don't know, but here's what I'd guess,*" and then explain why that would be your guess. There is no expectation that you will know the answers to everyone's questions. It's actually wonderful when you *don't* know something, because it gives learners a chance to see you in your learning process and for you to share that with them.



## BEST PRACTICES FOR FACILITATING LIBERATORY LEARNING ONLINE

Throughout history, the Talmud has been accessible to just 1% of Jews. We believe in expanding the Talmud's teaching to the other 99%, and we commit to ensuring accessibility in the bet midrash for all people who are seeking to learn. As such, there are a number of systems that SVARA staff implement across all of our programs to ensure access needs are met. These include providing CART (live transcription captions) for all sessions, making enlarged materials available upon request, as well as other practices outlined in our [accessibility protocols \(https://svara.org/accessibility-at-svara/\)](https://svara.org/accessibility-at-svara/). → See **ACCESSIBILITY AT SVARA**.

While these protocols, which are implemented by SVARA's staff, help meet the needs of some members of our community, there are other needs that can only be met by the facilitator and the broader culture that they help to create in the bet midrash along with other participants. Below are guidelines for leading in a way that centers accessibility and creating a culture that nurtures SVARA's values.

### TEACHING PREPARATION & SETTING UP YOUR SPACE

- Review [SVARA's Community Norms](#), (→ See **COMMUNITY NORMS**) and specifically on *Making Space for Accountability and Repair*. Create a protocol with your teaching team for addressing acts and speech in the bet midrash that undermine SVARA's commitment to anti-racism, gender liberation, and disability justice.
- Review [SVARA's Accessibility Protocols](#).
- Set up your teaching equipment in a way that maximizes your ability to be heard and seen.
  - a. Use an external microphone, headset, or earbuds if possible to minimize background noise/feedback from your computer audio, and to ensure your voice can be heard.
  - b. Use a tablet or other tool so that you can write on a virtual whiteboard (rather than a physical whiteboard behind you).
- Ensure live captioning is provided before the start of the session. (*SVARA will provide a live captioner for each shiur, and you will be notified which learners would like live captioning while in chevruta or in small groups.*)
  - a. Ensure that learners who would like live captioning while in chevruta or in small groups have the opportunity to do so. The live captioner will be able to go into breakout rooms to provide live captioning where it's needed.

### CREATING & USING VISUALS & LEARNING MATERIALS

- When using and creating slides and materials:
  - a. Format materials so that they are easy to see and read:

- i. When making slides, try to make the font size as large as the slide will permit.
  - ii. Use a large font size (use a minimum size 20pt font for slides, and shoot for 40pt font), and a simple sans serif font. For English, use Open Sans. For Hebrew, use Times New Roman or David Libre.
  - iii. Use contrasting colors for text and background, for higher readability (or just stick with black and very light pink! On Google Docs, the lightest option under the red, aka “light red 3”.)
  - iv. Avoid animations and transitions.
- b. If English text size is smaller than 40 and Hebrew text size is smaller than 65, provide a PDF and/or google doc version in addition to the slide presentation or google doc, since that is sometimes a preferable format. You can provide links in the chat.
- c. Ensure that large-print copies of materials are available to send to participants with printed materials. *(SVARA will provide this to participants who request this upon registration.)*
- d. Ensure that all materials are available digitally, and are available in 13-point font, 20-point font, and/or in Google Doc formats compatible with screen reader technology and other formatting options. *(For batei midrash, SVARA will provide links to these materials on program portals. For Mishnah Collective, a link to a document for the daily text for each session will be provided on Basecamp with the text breakdown.)*
- Provide visuals when giving instructions as much as possible. For example:
  - a. When sending folks into breakout rooms to answer a question, put the question in the chat.
  - b. When pointing out text assignments, put text in the chat or pull up a slide with the daf and/or words to help folks follow along.
- Provide visual descriptions throughout the session. Verbally describing visuals makes the session more accessible to folks who are blind or have low vision, and also to folks who are calling in via phone and not able to see the screen
  - a. Give a brief visual description of yourself, when you introduce yourself at the beginning. This can be helpful to give folks who are not following the video for whatever reason a sense of who is in the “front” of the room and what others might be seeing. This description should not be extremely detailed; see below for two examples:
    - i. Example 1: I am a white nonbinary person with short purple hair and glasses, wearing a black shirt, sitting against big windows.
    - ii. Example 2: I am a white femme-esque nonbinary person with short purple and brown hair, a black flowy shirt, clear glasses, visible tattoos, and a nose ring in a bright room with big windows that overlook a semi-visible busy city

street below. My frame is very clear otherwise, with two hanging plants in view to my left.

- b. Give brief descriptions of any images or videos that appear on the screen, and also give descriptions of anything you're doing that some folks might not be able to see.
  - i. For example: "I'm writing the word amar on the board...now I'm circling the alef..."
  - ii. If you're sharing a photo or simple chart, it is helpful to include a brief description. If it's very detailed or wordy, you can always mention it's there, but don't worry about giving a detailed description of it. Feel free to send it out afterwards in your follow up email if you think it would be helpful for learners.

## INTRODUCING YOURSELF

- When introducing yourself, share your pronouns along with your name.
- Encourage participants to share their pronouns in their Zoom display, if desired.
- Take care to respect the pronouns and stated name of everyone in the space, including those who would rather be referred to by name only. (Note: Names & pronouns might change throughout the zman! That's rad. Be attentive to name & pronoun shifts.)
- If you are sharing where you're located or calling in from, you can also share the native land you're on, and invite learners to do the same: "We encourage you to name the native land you're on. You can find that here: <https://native-land.ca/>"

## SHARING NORMS

- Share SVARA's norms (on a slide), along with the specific norms of engagement for your specific class at the beginning of your session.
  - a. In a drop-in class like Mishnah Collective, read out the slide for norms at the beginning of the session.
  - b. Link to larger community norms in chat: <https://svara.org/community-norms/>
  - c. Give clear instructions for how you want to set the norms in the session regarding: chat, interruption, raising hands/zoom hands, cold-calling, etc.
  - d. Encourage participants to feel free to turn their video on/off as needed throughout the session.
  - e. Let learners know they always have the option of declining to read when they're called on, and share that teachers will not call on them if they have their video off (unless they've notified the teacher otherwise—through the private chat, for example).

- f. Make a consistent schedule, and avoid deviating from it. Whenever possible, share the schedule ahead of time to learners so folks know when to anticipate breaks.

## PROVIDING BREAKS

- Ensure that your teaching plan accounts for a 5-10 min break for two-hour classes (e.g., after chevruta, encourage folks to take a 5-min break before shiur). If your session is shorter than two hours, breaks are encouraged at your discretion.
  - a. Normalize taking additional breaks, going off screen, and taking care of our bodies as needed & as feels good. For example:
    - i. “We’ll be learning for 1.5-2 hours at a time on Zoom. There is a break scheduled for all learners during 2-hour shiurim. At all times, you are welcome to sit, stand, lay down, stretch, get a snack, drink some water, and take breaks according to your own needs. Please do what you need to do to take care of your body and yourself!”
  - b. Encourage participants to go on or off video throughout the session. For example: “Feel free to turn your video on/off as needed throughout the session. While you are encouraged to have your video on during shiur, we honor that at times learners may need to have their cameras off. You always have the option of declining to read when you’re called on, and teachers will not call on you if you have your video off unless you have previously notified the teacher otherwise.”

## SPEAKING & FACILITATING

- Choose language that is liberatory! Avoid ableist language, appropriative language, trans-antagonistic language, and language that carries harmful connotations. Find more information in the resource, “Alternatives and Substitutes for Appropriative or Problematic Language”<sup>135</sup>.
  - a. Be mindful and encourage others, as a general rule, to invite each person to reflect on the ways in which we occupy positions of privilege, as opposed to asking those who are in a marginalized group to explain their oppression. These kinds of inquiries may be experienced as intrusive, insensitive, misguided, or hurtful.
- Speak slowly and clearly. Try practicing speaking slowly in preparation for the session, and be receptive and responsive to feedback about slowing down during the session.

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<sup>135</sup> Google-able by title, or available at the following link:  
[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1loy3CDX\\_iR75DNJwvz7ftq51EXAvZ99C51HP1V\\_zPOY/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1loy3CDX_iR75DNJwvz7ftq51EXAvZ99C51HP1V_zPOY/edit)

## COMMUNITY NORMS

Below are SVARA's Community Norms that help guide and anchor our yeshiva. We share these norms with all learners ahead of registration in our marketing materials for each class, after registration in welcome emails, on the class portals where digital materials live, in folks' printed materials, and in the front of the room when we begin each round of learning.

These norms help shape our CULTURE, and share what folks can come to expect when they learn with us. As you create your learning space and imagine the type of culture and community you want to help your learners embody, feel free to consult, borrow, and take inspiration from language below! As you use and are inspired by this language, please cite SVARA's learning space as the community from which these norms emerged.

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## SVARA's Community Norms

SVARA envisions a future in which liberatory expressions of Judaism equip individuals and communities to realize a just and healed world. As a learning community, we hold ourselves to a set of community norms to help shape a bet midrash experience that enables each person to be fully present, supported, and nurtured.

We know that building a culture that is responsive, healing, and connective is not static work. And just as we approach our time in the bet midrash as a space to practice liberatory learning, we know the work of creating a community that is growthful and takes time and practice. We hold the wisdom of bell hooks in our commitment to keep striving:

*"The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond the boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom."<sup>136</sup>*

Thank you for your partnership in growing this incredible movement, for holding us accountable to our actions, and for your commitment to holding these community norms as they evolve over time.

### ROOTED IN QUEERNESS

We understand our project as queer in our effort to move towards a more just, inclusive and accessible world in which all people are able to live out their most fully human lives by allowing the insights of those on the margins to be brought to bear on the world.

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<sup>136</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 207.

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.

There are folks in our batei midrash with many different identities, and we are committed to making sure that everyone feels comfortable bringing their most dazzling, embodied, fabulous queer selves into the room. We invite you to bring the full range of your experiences and identities to the learning, something queer folks are rarely invited to do in Jewish community. We also welcome allies, and are grateful for their self-awareness and humility while engaging with queer culture and participating in queer-normative space. We ask that you:

- share your pronouns and take care to respect the pronouns of everyone in the space
- don't ask someone about their identity and experience without their consent
- honor the names that folks use no matter what
- share what you're comfortable with about your identity and honor others' self-determination as well

## **MAXIMIZING ACCESS TO LEARNING**

Throughout history, the Talmud has been accessible to just 1% of Jews. We believe in expanding the Talmud's teaching to the *other* 99%, and we commit to ensuring accessibility in the bet midrash for all people who are seeking to learn.

All of our online programming includes:

- live captioning
- ample breaks to help reduce screen fatigue
- low teacher-learner ratios
- materials that are compatible with screen readers

Additionally, as part of our commitment to accessibility, our programs will remain online until the point at which there is a widely distributed vaccine for COVID-19 to help protect our whole community.

When we are in person, we utilize venues that meet or exceed ADA requirements and allow full access to folks who use scooters, wheelchairs, and other mobility tools, and we seek out locations that are easily accessible by public transportation.

We invite participants to share specific access needs with us in all of our registration processes and do our best to support our learners by designing an environment that works for them.

## **EXAMINING OPPRESSION & PRIVILEGE**

As a general rule, we invite each person to reflect on the ways in which we occupy positions of privilege, as opposed to asking those who are in a marginalized group to explain their oppression. These kinds of inquiries may be experienced as intrusive, insensitive, misguided, or hurtful—so be mindful before asking questions.

If you feel uncomfortable with the way another participant is engaging in the space, reach out to a staff person privately to let them know. The SVARA bet midrash is, in its most powerful moments, a healing space and we ask everyone to treat each other with kindness and love.

## **ADVANCING RACIAL JUSTICE**

We strive to be an anti-racist space, which we understand to mean one that is actively working to dismantle white supremacy culture and lift up the voices and insights of Black people, Indigenous people, and People of Color in our community. This year (the academic year of 2020-2021), we are committed to:

- creating a protocol for addressing racist acts and speech if and when they arise in our programs or through interpersonal interactions in our spaces,
- creating a safety and security plan with built-in alternatives to policing that we will put into action when we gather again in person,
- actively recruiting Black Jews and non-Black Jews of Color in our programs,
- reviewing and updating our hiring practices to ensure that they are anti-racist and inclusive, and
- forming an anti-racism working group tasked with assessing and advancing SVARA's culture, policies, and programming.

## **THOUGHTFUL DISCOURSE**

SVARA is a home for queer and radical Torah, and we are committed to building a culture where we are all learners and teachers to each other. We strive to create an environment of mutual respect, where a myriad of voices and perspectives are welcome.

We believe that words create worlds, and we commit to thoughtful speech with integrity. We invite you to play an active role in manifesting this commitment by:

- holding a posture of curiosity when you're encountering something new or uncomfortable
- listening to understand rather than listening to respond
- using a "yes, and" framework to add to conversation & learning



- noticing when you're talking more than others and thoughtfully choosing where you might offer your voice (take space / make space)
- showing respect for the person sharing while challenging the idea being shared
- striving not to deliberately or inadvertently undermine, disrespect, or dehumanize another person's identity or experience

## **MAKING SPACE FOR ACCOUNTABILITY AND REPAIR**

Inevitably there are moments where we let one another down, misstep, misspeak, hurt others, or get hurt ourselves. This is part of the deal when building community (not to mention when just being human!), and it can get messy. Harm can happen on multiple levels and we are here to nurture a community where it's okay to own mistakes and work towards repairing them. While we always strive to reach resolutions that lead to an ongoing relationship with SVARA, we reserve the right to restrict people from learning with us for a given period of time, or in some cases indefinitely, as they move through a *teshuva* process.

### **Harm from Surfacing Past Events**

- We welcome you to the bet midrash in your current context, as the person you are today. And we also recognize that each of us brings a personal history to SVARA—some aspects that we're proud of and some aspects that we wish we could have done differently. Even as we attempt to make SVARA as safe a space as possible, there may be times that the struggles someone else brings to the table will be difficult for you or create an issue for you. If you are triggered by something in another participant's past, we invite you to reach out to a staff member for support.

### **Harm Between Participants in the Present Moment**

- If you experience harm or are concerned you may have harmed someone else, please reach out to a staff member for support. We're here to listen, to support processes of transformative repair whenever possible, and to remind you all that you're human and humans make mistakes. We might invite you to engage in a process of *teshuva*, the Jewish spiritual practice of acknowledging and repairing harm and asking for forgiveness (invented by our oh-so-queer talmudic ancestors!), and are happy to talk you through how that could work.

### **Harm Between Participants and SVARA's Staff, Faculty, or Fairies**

- Our team is committed to embodying the steps of transformative repair that we ask of our community and we take your feedback and trust seriously. We are always open to direct feedback about any ways in which we may have caused or perpetuate harm in our learning spaces. If you experience harm in the bet midrash from a staff member or teacher, and feel that it's too challenging for whatever reason to engage the person directly, please reach out to Ayana or Becky (our executive director and board chair, respectively) who can help guide you through next steps. Your feedback to Ayana or



Becky will remain confidential unless you request otherwise, and you are welcome to request that your feedback be offered to a staff person or teacher anonymously.

## ACCESSIBILITY AT SVARA

Below is information about accessibility at SVARA. These practices, which are listed on our website and shared with all learners ahead of their time in the bet midrash, help us systematize and center our commitment to disability justice in our yeshiva. As you create your learning space, feel free to consult, borrow, and take inspiration from the language below! As you use and are inspired by this language, please cite SVARA's learning space as the community from which these norms emerged.

### Accessibility Processes

- Share norms as much as possible ahead of and within registration
- Make areas for accomodation clear in registration form an ask specific questions
- Follow up with all participants who state access needs, confirm what is already being done, and ask if they have any additional needs or wants to share
- Compile participant access needs and share relevant information with fairies, tech folks, staff, ceptions or interpreter, etc.
- After 1-2 sessions, follow up with all participants who have stated access needs to see how they are doing, what they need, and how they're finding the learning
- Improve systems along the way as needed

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## Access Information for Online Shiurim

Throughout history, the Talmud has been accessible to just 1% of Jews. We believe in expanding the Talmud's teaching to the other 99%, and we commit to ensuring accessibility in the bet midrash for all people who are seeking to learn.

We invite you to share specific access needs with us in all of our registration processes, and we'll do our best to incorporate your requests as much as possible to ensure that the bet midrash is an environment that supports your learning.

Below, you will find the latest accessibility systems we are using to support our online learning. We know that systems don't always work, or fail to live up to their greatest, dreamiest potential. If something isn't going right for you in a learning space, please be in touch with your fairies, your facilitator, Elaina, or Olivia, SVARA's point people for supporting access needs.

## **In Shiur**

### **TIMING & BREAKS**

We learn for 1.5-2 hours at a time on Zoom. There is a break scheduled for all learners during 2-hour shiurim. At all times, you are welcome to sit, stand, lay down, stretch, get a snack, drink some water, and take breaks according to your own needs. Please do what you need to do to take care of your body and yourself!

### **VIDEO**

Feel free to turn your video on/off as needed throughout the session. While you are encouraged to have your video on during shiur, we honor that at times learners may need to have their cameras off. You always have the option of declining to read when you're called on, and teachers will not call on you if you have your video off unless you have previously notified the teacher otherwise.

### **CAPTIONING**

All full-group learning will be live-captioned by our captioning team, and all Zoom rooms support automatic integrated live-captioning. At various moments throughout our sessions, we may make use of breakout groups for chevruta (one-on-one learning) and smaller group discussion spaces of 3-6 people. Upon registration, you will be asked if you would like your chevruta and breakout groups to be captioned by one of the members of our captioning team.

### **ZOOM TIPS**

All shiurim provide instructions for using Zoom, as well as options for increasing contrast and font size on your screen.

## **Materials / Supplies**

### **LARGE-PRINT MATERIALS**

We have large-print copies of materials available to send along with printed materials. If you would like enlarged printed materials, please indicate this on your registration form and we will send them to you. Many learners also choose to use a magnifying glass to read small print texts—we recommend the Magnabrite Magnifier.

## DIGITAL MATERIALS

Each shiur session will have an online learning portal with all bet midrash materials available digitally. Materials will be available in 13-point font, 20-point font, and in Google Doc formats compatible with screen reader technology and other formatting options.

After each session, we will upload recordings of the session, along with the Hebrew/Aramaic pronunciation of the text covered and inside/outside translations of the text onto the Class Portal.

## DICTIONARIES

There are two dictionaries that you will use when learning Talmud in the original at SVARA (or anywhere else!): a “Jastrow,” and a “Frank.” Below you will find descriptions for how to access these dictionaries.

### **A “Jastrow”—Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature, by Marcus Jastrow**

You can access this dictionary in a printed bound book, or online. Only you know what you need in order to learn best! We encourage when possible to use printed and paper materials and recommend, if accessible to you, a paper copy of the Jastrow dictionary.

About the printed Jastrow Dictionary:

- The typeface in printed editions of the Jastrow Dictionary is quite small. Many of our learners and teachers use a Magnabrite magnifying glass to help increase the size and clarity of the printing. You can find these magnifiers here!<sup>137</sup>
- Some folks find the online versions of the dictionary more accessible for various reasons. Below is information about the various online editions:

About the online Jastrow Dictionary:

The Jastrow dictionary is available online in several forms. We recommend the following two options:

- Option #1 is the [Tyndale Archive Jastrow Dictionary](#). This is a complete scan of the printed dictionary. You can find your dictionary entry by the first letter of the word you are looking up and then selecting the first word on the page that will contain your entry. You can enlarge the scanned pages of this dictionary by using the interface’s built-in enlargement tools which are available in the page header. Some benefits of using this option include that it feels more like the book – if your chevruta is using a printed dictionary, you will be looking at the exact same thing and can share page numbers, and you will reinforce learning the order of the alef bet.

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<sup>137</sup> Insert link to magnifiers!

- Option #2 is the [Jastrow Dictionary on Sefaria](#). With this option you can type the root or word you are looking for into a search box (via the onscreen Hebrew keyboard) and jump directly to an entry. You may need to scroll backward and forward from there because there can be multiple entries for the same term. Sefaria includes a built-in function to adjust the font size which you can access by selecting the “אך” button on the upper right side of the page. Some benefits of using this option are that the digitized text is clearer than the Tyndale Archive’s scans and Sefaria is compatible with screen reader technology. Some challenges are that it is harder to get on the “same page” as your chevruta (there are no page numbers), and sometimes the search function takes you to unexpected places.

### **A “Frank”—Practical Talmud Dictionary, by Yitzhak Frank**

A note about the “Frank”: It has come to our attention that this dictionary is currently not in print and finding a copy of a Frank might be difficult. We will ensure that any entries that are relevant to your learning will be scanned and placed on the portal for you to use during this class.

If purchasing dictionaries or a magnifying glass is beyond your means, please be in touch with Olivia.

## **Financial Access**

### **TUITION**

Some learning spaces at SVARA are offered at no cost, and some invite tuition contributions. When tuition is listed for one of our programs, it is listed on a suggested sliding scale. All of our classes are “pay what you can,” and no one will be turned away for lack of funds. When registering, you can indicate the amount you would like to contribute for tuition, which can be below, on, or above the suggested scale.

Payment options include the opportunity to pay all at once or in a 2- or 3-installment pay plan.

**If you have any other needs for making your learning experience with SVARA accessible, please don’t hesitate to reach out to us. We’re learning more each day about how to make online learning more accessible, and we’re grateful to everyone who shares feedback and ideas!**

# Access Information for In-Person Retreats (Queer Talmud Camp)<sup>138</sup>

We are committed to supporting the wide-ranging access needs in our community to ensure that folks can show up fully, comfortably and whole to our learning together. As such, we'd love y'all to note the following:

## Physical Space

### BUILDINGS & CAMPUS

All buildings are accessible without the use of steps and can be entered through a ramp or small incline.

Spaces at camp are somewhat spread out—sometimes up to a 5-10-minute walk or roll from one building to another. If you would like assistance getting around camp, please indicate this in the access needs section of your registration form and we can arrange a golf cart, van, or other transportation support.

### TIMING & BREAKS

We will be learning together in the bet midrash for many hours each day. If there is something that would make your time in the bet midrash more comfortable, please let us know and we will do our best to provide them. We'll do our best to break up the time with movement, stretches, breaks, and more, and we'll work together to take care of our bodies!

### FRAGRANCE-FREE SPACE

A number of our community members have severe multiple chemical sensitivities and can become ill when exposed to even the tiniest amounts of fragrance, including in such things as deodorant, hand creams, moisturizers, lip balms, shampoo, hair gels, sunscreen, etc. Therefore, we're asking for your help to make Queer Talmud Camp a fragrance-free zone.

For more information about how to support our fragrance-free space, including a list of fragrance-free products you can consider using, check out this handy guide from our friends at the East Bay Meditation Center ("Fragrance Free"). And if you can bring clothes to camp that haven't been washed in commercial, scented detergents (like Tide, etc.) or that haven't been washed or dried with fabric softeners, all the better! We will be selling fragrance-free shampoo, deodorant, hair gel, and sunscreen at our Camp store.

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<sup>138</sup> Sample access information from Queer Talmud Camp: Walker Creek Ranch (2019).

## Materials & Supplies

### LARGE-PRINT MATERIALS

We have large-print copies of materials available along with printed materials. If you would like enlarged printed materials, please indicate this on your registration form and we will ensure that we have them in the bet midrash for you. Many learners also choose to use a magnifying glass to read small print texts—we recommend the Magnabrite Magnifier.

### DICTIONARIES

There are two dictionaries that you will use when learning Talmud in the original at SVARA (or anywhere else!): a “Jastrow,” and a “Frank.” Below you will find descriptions for how to access these dictionaries.

#### **A “Jastrow”—Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature, by Marcus Jastrow**

You can access this dictionary in a printed bound book, or online. Only you know what you need in order to learn best! We encourage when possible to use printed and paper materials and recommend, if accessible to you, a paper copy of the Jastrow dictionary.

About the printed Jastrow Dictionary:

- The typeface in printed editions of the Jastrow Dictionary is quite small. Many of our learners and teachers use a Magnabrite magnifying glass to help increase the size and clarity of the printing. You can find these magnifiers here!<sup>139</sup>
- Some folks find the online versions of the dictionary more accessible for various reasons. Below is information about the various online editions:

About the online Jastrow Dictionary:

The Jastrow dictionary is available online in several forms. We recommend the following two options:

- Option #1 is the [Tyndale Archive Jastrow Dictionary](#). This is a complete scan of the printed dictionary. You can find your dictionary entry by the first letter of the word you are looking up and then selecting the first word on the page that will contain your entry. You can enlarge the scanned pages of this dictionary by using the interface’s built-in enlargement tools which are available in the page header. Some benefits of using this option include that it feels more like the book—if your chevruta is using a printed dictionary, you will be looking at the exact same thing and can share page numbers, and you will reinforce learning the order of the alef bet.

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<sup>139</sup> Insert link to magnifier!

- Option #2 is the [Jastrow Dictionary on Sefaria](#). With this option you can type the root or word you are looking for into a search box (via the onscreen Hebrew keyboard) and jump directly to an entry. You may need to scroll backward and forward from there because there can be multiple entries for the same term. Sefaria includes a built-in function to adjust the font size which you can access by selecting the “Aα” button on the upper right side of the page. Some benefits of using this option are that the digitized text is clearer than the Tyndale Archive’s scans and Sefaria is compatible with screen reader technology. Some challenges are that it is harder to get on the “same page” as your chevruta (there are no page numbers), and sometimes the search function takes you to unexpected places.

### **A “Frank”—Practical Talmud Dictionary, by Yitzhak Frank**

A note about the “Frank”: It has come to our attention that this dictionary is currently not in print and finding a copy of a Frank might be difficult. We will ensure that any entries that are relevant to your learning will be scanned and placed on the portal for you to use during this class.

If purchasing dictionaries or a magnifying glass is beyond your means, please be in touch with Olivia.

## **Financial Access**

### **TUITION**

Some learning spaces at SVARA are offered at no cost, and some invite tuition contributions. When tuition is listed for one of our programs, it is listed on a suggested sliding scale. All of our classes are “pay what you can,” and no one will be turned away for lack of funds. When registering, you can indicate the amount you would like to contribute for tuition, which can be below, on, or above the suggested scale.

Payment options include the opportunity to pay all at once or in a 2- or 3-installment pay plan.

**If you have any other needs for making your learning experience with SVARA accessible, please don’t hesitate to reach out to us. We’re learning more each day about how to make online learning more accessible, and we’re grateful to everyone who shares feedback and ideas!**



# sample teaching plans & schedules

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# SAMPLE TEACHING PLAN FOR “INTRODUCTION TO TALMUD” SESSION

## Overview

12:00–12:15 | Nigun, Welcome (Dedications, Review Agenda)

12:15–12:20 | Meet Your Queer Talmud Comrades (*in breakout rooms or by table*)

12:20–12:30 | What is Talmud?

12:30–12:40 | What’s on a page?

12:40–12:55 | How do I learn?

12:55–1:00 | Closing

## Teaching Plan

### 12:00–12:15 | Nigun, Welcome

- Welcome to the Bet Midrash
- Folks introduce themselves in the chat
- Introduce myself
  - I’m Laynie, they/them, I’m the Director of National Learning and a Faculty Member at SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva
  - I’m here because I believe that learning Talmud can open our hearts, transform us, heal us, connect us to our radical roots.
  - SVARA is a yeshiva, a home for Jewish learning, committed to rigorous learning as a spiritual practice through the lens of queer experiences.
  - I’m so glad we’ll be in this learning space today
- Dedications
- Invite folks to *arrive*
  - \*Pause screen share\*
  - Invite you to take a breath, maximize your screen, relax your body, do what you need to do to be present—this is a spiritual practice that inherently collective, not an individual exercise
    - Take in this room however you take in Zoom space: take a look around, scroll through and read or listen to the names of folks who are here, notice who is here.
      - Drash:

- This room of people could never have come together in history—because of sexuality, because of gender, because of politics, because of access to learning, across time and space
- The Rabbis could never have imagined this group coming together. But we deeply believe that they made, through their radical innovation and creativity, it inevitable that we would be here, using their methods, learning from them how to infuse our selves with the tradition to expand it and bring it to life
- At SVARA, we believe that this is exactly what the rabbis created this tradition for — moments of uncertainty, of CRASH, of anxiety and pain, of loss, grief, and unknowing. On some level, that’s why we’re all here
- Read “Community Norms” slide

### 12:15–12:20 | Meet Your Queer Talmud Comrades (*in breakout rooms or by table*)

- Create breakout rooms of 3 \*OR\* small groups at the table
  - Say hi
  - Share your name + pronouns
  - What’s bringing you into the room?
  - What comes up when you think about “queer talmud”?!
- Review Agenda
  - Here’s what we’re up to today!
    - What is Talmud?
    - What’s on a page?
    - How do I learn?

### 12:20–12:30 | What is Talmud?

- Note about mixed-level learning: We’re all coming to this learning with different experiences and assumptions: SVARA batei midrash, and \*all learning spaces\* are mixed-level, they contain folks with wide-ranging experiences, and even in our own selves we are mixed level!
  - Notice what comes up for you about being in a mixed-level learning space: you might be bored! You might be overwhelmed! You might be curious but afraid to ask! It’s all good. **You are in the right place.**
  - We’re all working different muscles being here, so notice which ones you’re working!
- What is Talmud?

- Orienting information
  - Give CRASH Talk or opening framing to ground in your ORIENTATION.
- Talmud is a mathematical equation:
  - MISHNAH (משנה) + GEMARA (גמרא) = TALMUD (תלמוד)
  - Explain differences & dates for MISHNAH + GEMARA, explain roots of each
- Two Talmuds: Yerushalmi & Bavli. We learn Bavli.
- Talmud is broken into Tractates, called MASECHTOT— 37 tractates of Talmud
- Pages of Talmud = amud, on a folio = daf
  - A DAF is two folios, each side of the folio is referred to as an AMMUD. Every DAF has AMMUD A / Alef & AMMUD B / Bet.

### 12:30–12:40 | What’s on a page?

- What’s on a page?
  - Is this anyone’s first time looking at a daf of Talmud in the original? Invite us to go off mute to clap folks up (if that doesn’t work for your sensory processing, please do feel free to turn off the sound for a moment or unplug your headphones)!
  - Take folks on a tour
    - Open up the first page!
    - Mishnah
    - Find the Gemara!
    - Which is longer?
  - On the page:
    - Open to the first page :
      - There are 4 pieces of information at the top of every page. Three are centered in the middle at the top of every page:
        - Tractate name—on the left of that center section. What’s the name of our tractate, again? Right!
        - Chapter number
        - Chapter name
          - like parshas, named from the first few words of the first mishnah in that chapter
      - Page number
        - Daf denotes folio; two-sided sheet with same number front & back

- Daf vs. Amud; front is amud alef, back is amud bet
- Use rainbow strips to determine what page we're on!
- Middle of the page is combination of Mishnah and Gemara
  - Mishnah + Gemara = Talmud
  - Mishnah = Torah 2.0, codified in 220 CE
  - Gemara = discussions, elaborations, expansions, and deconstructions of ideas in the mishnah by later rabbis
- Rashi + Tosafot
  - Point out Rashi & Tosafot in the margins of the page
  - Rashi is on the inside, Tosafot are on the outside
- You can find a map of this on page X in your B"M Reference Guide
- Questions?

### 12:40–12:55 | How do I learn?

- How do we learn?
  - Be'chevruta
    - WHAT IS CHEVRUTA?
    - A framework for intimate connection with another human being, with the text, and with the tradition ("chevruta" refers to both the partnership and the people in the partnership!)
    - A spiritual technology for developing radical empathy and interdependence
    - Interactive, engaging, busy, immersive, with both chevrotas feeling totally present to the relationship and the learning
    - When done with rigorous and clear expectations of text ownership, chevruta becomes a profoundly meditative and empowering experience
    - You are responsible for your chevruta's learning, and your chevruta is responsible for your learning.
    -
  - Be'iyun
    - Talmud learning is often divided into two main approaches: BE'YUN & BEKIYUT
    - BEKIYUT learning is about covering a lot of ground; learning for breadth
    - BE'YUN learning is about going deep, covering smaller amounts of material and examining the text very closely. We're all about B'YUN learning.

Experienced learning at SVARA is not about covering more; it's about going deeper.

- BE'SVARA's Method.
  - There are four steps to SVARA's method, which is a unique approach designed to really help folks deconstruct and come to "own a text"—whether it's one word or three lines.
- What you'll need
  - You'll need three things:
    - (1) Text you're learning (Daf)
    - (2) Sheets
      - Hints for Finding the Root
      - Hint Sheet
    - (3) Dictionaries
- Here's how we learn *be'iyun, be'chevruta, be'SVARA's method*: word-by-word, find the three-letter root, looking up every word in the dictionary.
  - Every Hebrew word--basically--has a 3-letter root. We find it by:
    - Eliminating PREFIXES: What's that?
    - Eliminating SUFFIXES: What's that?
    - Eliminating INFIXES: What's that?!
      - Absolutely!
  - Use your HINTS FOR FINDING THE ROOT sheet to find these.
  - Do a sample word or phrase together:
    - מאכילין
    - וחכם עדיף מנביא
    - *\*\*Pick a word ahead of time on the page that folks have in front of them\*\**
- Then when we find the root, we look it up in the dictionary! Here's the quick and dirty on dictionaries:
  - Dictionaries 101 / Look Up a Word
  - Explain two dictionaries:
    - Two kinds of words: content words & signal words
    - Content: verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs
    - Signal words: ...iiiiif, however..., nevertheless, you might have thought, etc.

- Signal words are the connective tissue of the Talmud, they move along a discussion or argument
- Also in Jastrow, BUT better to look up in Frank
- Let's look up our word, holler out the page when you've got it!
  - When you get to the page in Jastrow:
  - Look around the neighborhood
  - Make sure you're looking at a root instead of a noun, show difference on page
  - b.h. vs ch.
    - Gemara is a combo of Hebrew & Aramaic; they use the same letters, sometimes words mean the same thing (cognates) and sometimes they don't!
    - We'll talk more in the future abt how you know you're in Aramaic
  - See proto root in brackets, and root in italics
  - Mention binyanim
  - Root meanings are in italics; one 3-letter root can have several root meanings
    - They'll be numbered
  - Skim & jot down a handful of root meanings; context will help you narrow them down
- (If you have time and you're using both dictionaries, now you can explain the differences between Frank & Jastrow)
  - Jastrow goes by root, Frank you look up the word as it appears minus the prefix
  - Jastrow goes English way, Frank goes Hebrew way
  - When you're first learning, you won't know which is a content word and which is a process word. You might say to your chevruta, "I'll look in Frank, you look in Jastrow"
    - Whoever finds it says: dictionary name, page number, column, top/bottom/middle
    - E.g. Jastrow p. 63, left column, bottom
- Point out in Jastrow:
  - There are a number of other abbreviations, there is a list in the front of the dictionary to explain them, or ask a fairy

- In chevruta, your goal is *not* to figure out what the text means. That's what SHIUR is for. Your goal is to find the 3-letter root of every word, be present, and support your learning comrade.
- *If you are giving this intro at the beginning of a class, you might want to explain the steps as you go, pausing here to then let folks go into chevruta, and then pick up with explaining shiur after chevruta.*
- That was "STEP 1: CHEVRUTA." Now, we're moving on to STEP 2: SHIUR. What is SHIUR?
  - The group discussion section during which the text is unpacked, word by word
  - Careful attention is paid not only to what each word means but how each word means what it means
  - Larger ideas and implications of the text are also explored in a freewheeling discussion
  - *If a phrase was unpacked, do the inside/outside of Shiur on that phrase.*
- STEP 3: WHAT IS CHAZARA?
  - The process of reviewing a text, in chevruta, to complete understanding and deep ownership
  - A diagnostic process designed to help you understand what you thought you understood but really don't, and where your gaps in understanding are
  - The process of you becoming the text
  - Instructions:
    - Pick a stronger chevruta (A)
    - FIRST: A: read, inside, outside, then switch! B: read, inside, outside
    - SECOND: talk it out
    - THIRD: close your masechet, remove the text from sight. A: put the text together from memory, B: check them! Switch!
  - *Practice chazara with your fairy & do a demonstration.*
- STEP 4: RECITATION
  - Sharing, out loud, the text you've come to own—in the original, in perfect rendition of the original but voiced through you

## 12:55–1:00 | Closing

- WHAT'S NEXT?!
  - Share a first time or a take-away in the \*chat\*
  - For some of us this was the first time we ever saw a page of Talmud!



- For some of us this was the first time we learned in this method
- Full Kaddish De'rabanan or Yehei Shmei excerpt; Sing Out

## SAMPLE TEACHING PLAN FOR SESSION ONE

### In-Person<sup>140</sup> Session One (2.5 hrs): Overview

- 12:00–12:25 | Nigun, Welcome, Intro
- 12:25–12:40 | Masechtot, Dedications, Bracha
- 12:40–12:50 | Review Materials & How to Learn
- 1:05–1:40 | Chevruta
- 1:40–1:50 | Snack
- 1:50–2:30 | Shiur
- 2:30 | Kaddish De'rabanan

### In-Person Session One: Teaching Plan

#### Set-up & Prep Info

- Prep room ahead of time:
  - Masechtot in stacks at head of tables
  - Blue tape and Sharpies on tables
  - Fairies know they're passing out masechtot in pairs
  - As folks arrive:
    - Welcome Table person welcomes you, etc., signs you in, points you to the chevruta chart on the wall, see if you can go find your chevruta, and if you can, sit together.

#### 12:00–12:25 | Nigun, Welcome, Intro

- Introduce myself (you can do an “Inspiring Opening” here, or before Dedications)
- Introduce yourselves:
  - 4 things, Please keep it to under 30 seconds
    - Name
    - Pronoun
    - Something about yourself from outside of the bet midrash
    - What's bringing you into the room tonight?

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<sup>140</sup> For an outline of Session 1 [online](#) instead of in-person, skip ahead a few pages!

- Let them know there are some missing folks who'll be here next week, if that's the case.
- Introduce the fairies & explain fairy roles
- Intro the space, bathrooms are located, etc.

### **12:25–12:40 | Masechtot, Dedications, Bracha**

- Pass out masechtot
  - We take this moment very seriously at SVARA!
  - This is yours. The tradition is yours. It's always been yours. And it is in your hands.
  - Hold masechet with two hands, and make sure the book is right-side-up for the learner
  - When handing over the masechet, make eye contact as relevant with learners and say "mazal tov!"
- Shehechyanu for first time masechet owners
  - Write on the board!
- Frame dedications & invite folks to dedicate
  - The formula is "I'd like to dedicate my learning tonight to..."
  - Teacher goes last
- Bracha
  - "Take out the bracha card from your folder..."
  - Welcome to mitzvah-land!

### **12:40–12:50 | Review Materials & How to Learn**

- Orientation to folder materials
- What's in the Bet Midrash
  - Be aware that we're in not only a mixed-level space, but a profoundly diverse space in which there are folks who are Jewish, not Jewish, born Jewish, not born Jewish, people with different kinds of bodies and abilities, experiences of gender and sexuality, Sefardim, Mizrahim, Ashkenazim, people from all sorts of Jewish identities, people from all sorts of Jewish educational backgrounds (and none), class backgrounds, etc.
  - Reminders about mixed-level b"m, rising up and passing away, sit with the uncomfortable not-knowing.
  - What's in the B"m:

- Extra text prep forms and other paper resources
  - Blown-up copies of the daf
  - Screen-free environment
  - Magnifying glasses for loan
  - Fairies! Intro the fairies and explain their role
- Write your name on your masechet, folders, and dictionaries!
  - Blue tape and sharpies
- Take a look at the front cover to find the name of our masechet...
- Reminder about how we learn at SVARA
- Intro to chevruta:
  - You are responsible for your chevruta's learning
  - Driver, also take turns
  - Holler out page when you find it, or when you think you're in the neighborhood. You should be on the same word!
  - Start out with a check-in before diving in; 2 minutes each to talk out what you're feeling, what may be occupying your head, heart, or body; connect with your chevruta.
  - Chevruta-matching is an art, not a science; don't hesitate to let us know if you feel like your chevruta is not working out, or you'd just like to try out another chevruta situation. Make it sound very low-stress for them to do that.
- Point out material for tonight & explain schedule
  - Don't get seduced by meaning making, or by thinking that your job is to translate the text! Your mission in chevruta is to move slowly, word-by-word, to uncover the root, and find as much as you can about each word!
  - We've got you!
- Off you go, have fun! Send folks into chevruta & point out the schedule.

### **1:05–1:40 | Chevruta**

- Give 5-minute warning before snack starts

### **1:40–1:50 | Snack**

- Give 2-minute warning before shiur

### **1:50–2:30 | Shiur**

- Gather folks back with nigun
- "How was that?" - take two reflections or thoughts from folks about the process
- Read / Inside / Outside
  - Explain the rules of engagement in shiur ("I'm going to call on someone to read...")
  - Pick a reader, clap up the first person to read!
  - Explain inside/outside

## **2:30 | Kaddish De'rabanan**

## **Online Session One (2 hrs): Overview**

12:00–12:10 | Nigun, Welcome, Intro

12:10–12:15 | Breakout Groups

12:15–12:25 | Review Materials & How to Learn

12:25–1:05 | Chevruta

1:05–1:10 | Break

1:10–2:00 | Shiur

2:00 | Yehei Shmei (excerpt of Kaddish De'rabanan) & Sing Out

## **Online Session One: Teaching Plan**

### **12:00–12:10 | Nigun, Welcome, Intro**

- TECH: Slides up & nigun playing
- Welcome to this space!
- Dedications
  - Frame dedications
  - Share dedications in the chat
  - Pause, read through dedications
  - (Facilitator say your dedication out loud)
  - Bracha
- Stop screen share, invite folks to arrive
- Introduce ourselves
  - Teachers, Fairies, Tech, CC

### **12:10–12:15 | Breakout Groups**

- TECH creates breakout rooms, TEACHER introduce rooms
- Name, pronouns
- What's bringing you here?

### **12:15–12:25 | Review Materials & How to Learn**

- Orientation to materials

- What page are we on?
  - Instructions for accessing the portal ( to put in chat)
  - Remind ourselves about information at the top of the page: page number, chapter number, chapter name, masechet name
- Point out material for tonight & explain schedule
  - Don't get seduced by meaning making, or by thinking that your job is to translate the text! Your mission in chevruta is to move slowly, word-by-word, to uncover the root, and find as much as you can about each word!
  - We've got you!
- Reminder about how to learn in chevruta:
  - You are responsible for your chevruta's learning
  - Driver, also take turns
  - Holler out page when you find it, or when you think you're in the neighborhood. You should be on the same word!
  - Start out with a check-in before diving in; 2 minutes each to talk out what you're feeling, what may be occupying your head, heart, or body; connect with your chevruta.
  - Chevruta-matching is an art, not a science; don't hesitate to let us know if you feel like your chevruta is not working out, or you'd just like to try out another chevruta situation. Make it sound very low-stress for them to do that.
  - You should be looking up each word, on the same word, go through the text, eliminate prefixes & suffixes in order to get the three letter root, then look it up!
- Off you go, have fun! Send folks into chevruta & point out the schedule.

### 12:25–1:05 | Chevruta

- TECH set up breakout rooms during pre-teach

### 1:05–1:10 | Break

### 1:10–2:00 | Shiur

- Gather folks back with nigun
- "How was that?" Take two reflections or thoughts from folks about the process
- Be aware that we're in not only a mixed-level space, but a profoundly diverse space in which there are folks who are Jewish, not Jewish, born Jewish, not born Jewish, people with different kinds of bodies and abilities, experiences of gender and sexuality, Sefardim,

Mizrahim, Ashkenazim, people from all sorts of Jewish identities, people from all sorts of Jewish educational backgrounds (and none), class backgrounds, etc.

- Mixed-level bet midrash reminder
- Read / Inside / Outside
  - Explain the rules of engagement in shiur (“I’m going to call on someone to read...”)
  - Pick a reader, clap up the first person to read!
  - Explain inside/outside

## **2:00 | Yehei Shmei (excerpt of Kaddish De’rabanan) & Sing Out**



## SAMPLE TEACHING PLAN FOR SESSION TWO ONWARD

### In-Person Session Two (2.5 hours)<sup>141</sup>: Overview

12:00–12:15 | Nigun, Dedications, Bracha

12:15–12:30 | Recap & Pre-Teach

- Recap:
  - Ask someone to give a recap of the outside translation (someone who hasn't spoken yet) OR teacher give an outside reminder of what happened last week
- Introduce chazara
- Introduce or point out new material for tonight's session
  - Indicate where on Hint Sheet to pick up
  - Pre-teach any relevant or significant concepts if necessary

12:30–1:30 | Chevruta

1:30–1:40 | Snack

1:40–2:30 | Shiur

- Begin shiur with recitations
  - Make space to frame recitation: explain why we're doing this in some way
- Read / Inside / Outside

2:30 | Kaddish De'rabanan

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<sup>141</sup> For an outline of Session 2 [online](#) instead of in-person, see the next page!

## **Online Session Two (2 hrs): Teaching Plan**

### **12:00–12:10 | Nigun, Dedications, Bracha**

- TECH: Slides up & nigun playing
- Welcome to this space! Arrive! (stop screen share, wave, take in the space)

### **12:10–12:23 | Pre-Teach**

- Recap:
  - Ask someone to give a recap of the outside translation (someone who hasn't spoken yet) OR teacher give an outside reminder of what happened last week
- Introduce chazara
- Introduce or point out new material for tonight's session
  - Indicate where on Hint Sheet to pick up
  - Pre-teach any relevant or significant concepts if necessary

### **12:23–1:05 | Chevruta**

### **1:05–1:10 | Short Break**

### **1:10–2:00 | Shiur**

- Begin shiur with recitations
  - Make space to frame recitation: explain why we're doing this in some way
- Read / Inside / Outside

### **2:00 | Full Kaddish De'rabanan or Yehei Shmei excerpt; Sing Out**