

SVARA Pedagogy Chaburah

readings

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SVARA Pedagogy Chaburah Readings

What is Talmud?!

Prologue & Chapter 1 from *The Talmud: A Biography* 1
Barry Scott Wimpfheimer

Pedagogy

Chapter 1 from *Integrating Mindfulness into Anti-Oppression Pedagogy: Social Justice in Higher Education* 24
Beth Berila

"Justify My Love" 41
Daniel Boyarin

"Transformation and Empowerment: Teaching Talmud to Adult Beginner Learners" 45
Mónica Gomery

Introduction, Chapters 1 & 14 from *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* 77
bell hooks

Chapter 4 from *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* 93
bell hooks

"The Pedagogy of Slowing Down: Teaching Talmud in a Summer Kollel" 104
Jane Kanarek

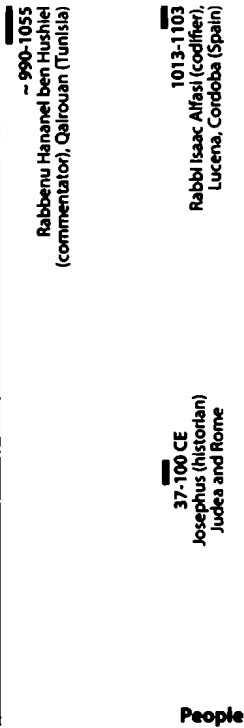
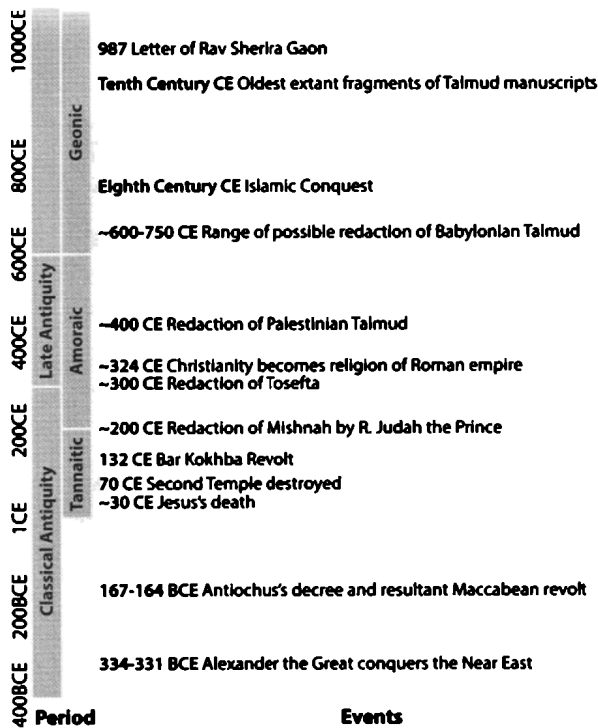
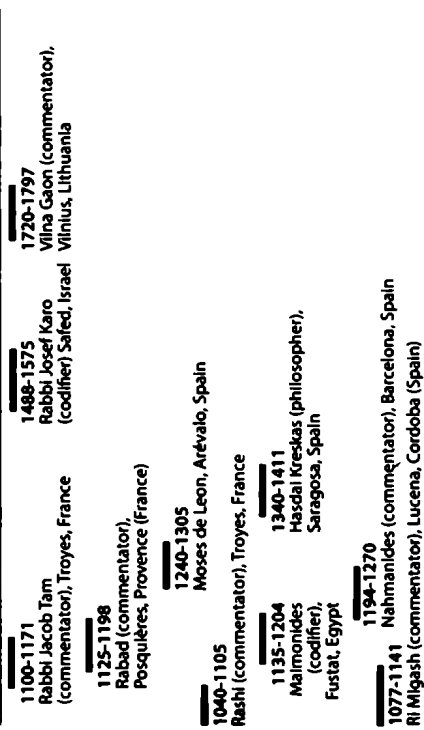
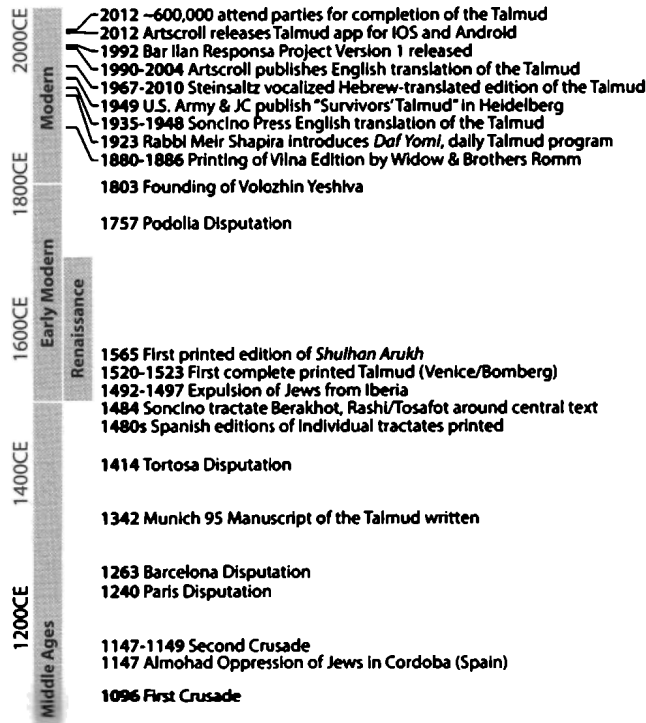
"The Twisted Wick: Talmud Study as Spiritual Practice for Post-Modern Jews" 127
Elliot Kukla

"Talmud That Works Your Heart: New Approaches to Reading" from *Learning to Read Talmud* 132
Sarra Lev

"A Menu of Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature" 148
Jon A. Levinsohn

Introduction to *Teaching with Tenderness: Toward an Embodied Practice* 180
Becky Thompson

The Talmud: A Biography



The Talmud—Essential, Enhanced, and Emblematic

PROLOGUE

The Babylonian Talmud can be accurately defined in three distinct ways:

1. The Babylonian Talmud is a work of religious literature collectively produced by a group of rabbi scholars who lived in two geographic regions (Palestine and Babylonia) between the first and eighth centuries CE.
2. The Babylonian Talmud is the central canonical work of the Judaism that emerged after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem; within an idiosyncratically scholastic culture that relied heavily on texts to ground religious meaning, the Talmud has been the text on which scholars have focused their energies.
3. The Babylonian Talmud is a uniquely Jewish scripture and has often come to function as the ultimate symbolic representation of Judaism, Jewishness, and Jews.

The above three definitions are not mutually exclusive. All are true and can work together. It is necessary to delineate these definitions, though, because each implicates a different historical story and each of these stories produces a register of meaning. This book will demonstrate that there are three registers of Talmudic meaning. (Chapter 1 contains a fuller description of the Talmud itself.)

To understand this notion of multiple registers of meaning, the reader who has not yet encountered the Talmud should consider the biblical Ten Commandments or the United States Constitution as comparable foundational texts. These three texts (the two comparators and the Talmud) were produced in historical time and place. The original meaning of the text is the *essential* meaning of the text. There are fundamental problems that affect one's ability to confidently recover the original meaning of a text. And yet we can easily comprehend historical meaning as an ideal to which one might strive. This is the first register of Talmudic meaning.

The three texts we are considering are fundamental to ongoing cultural (including legal and religious) practices of reading and have engendered interpretations and applications (to say nothing of explicit amendments) that exponentially expand the work as each original word or sentence generates exegesis, and becomes the basis for inferences and new applications. From its completion (ca. 750 CE) until today, the Talmud has been at the center of an active culture of reading that has generated an enormous literature of reception that understands, interprets, and applies it. This enormous

literature is often understood as the Talmud by cultural insiders and should be considered the *enhanced* Talmud.

Part of what makes the Ten Commandments or the Constitution relevant long after their respective historical moments of production is the potency of their symbolic meaning. This symbolic meaning is sometimes employed without awareness of essential or enhanced meanings and even, occasionally, in contradiction to those meanings. People regularly invoke the Ten Commandments as a symbol of divine legislation and moral justice without knowing the specifics of the commandments themselves. The Constitution is invoked as the basis for liberal democracy and all that is noble about the United States without recourse to its specific words. This book argues that the Talmud also possesses a register of meaning that is only loosely connected with the underlying original content (essential) of the work or the vast apparatus of reception (enhanced). When functioning in this *emblematic* register, the Talmud is sometimes concrete and sometimes abstract. It is concrete when the Talmud embodies tradition and a particular modern Jewish movement attempts to behead the personified Talmud on the way to a repudiation of tradition. It is abstract when the Talmud is made to signify the idea of Judaism or inherent Jewishness.

The three different registers of Talmudic meaning map somewhat neatly on three distinct scholarly fields. Academic scholars of the Talmud are primarily interested in the essential Talmud. Traditional scholars of the

Talmud engage the enhanced Talmud. Historians of all periods take a strong interest in the emblematic Talmud.

Chaim Potok's 1969 bestseller *The Promise* builds on the tension that exists among the essential, enhanced, and emblematic Talmuds.¹ The novel's first-person narrator, Reuven Malter, is a rabbinical student who spends his days immersed in intense study of the Talmud. The Talmud as a work of literature features multiple layers of rabbinic argumentation about law, myth, and theology. Students of the Talmud within a *yeshiva* [traditional learning] environment strive to decipher the Talmud's often messy text. The density and complexity of the Talmud make the reader work actively to produce both basic comprehension and a coherent sense of the whole. Talmudic aptitude is measured by assessing a reader's ability to wring coherence out of the text. Talmudic genius inheres in the ability to reimagine the set of Talmudic variables to resolve a dilemma.

The Promise is set in postwar New York, and its central plot device is a battle over how to read the Talmud. Reuven Malter has been trained by his father to employ the tools of a textual historian to resolve Talmudic difficulties. By altering a problematic text, the text critic can make the Talmud readable. When the correction is based on a text witness—a different version of the original text preserved in a handwritten manuscript or an alternate print edition—it is as if history itself justifies the alteration. According to the Malter's methodology, the scholar is fixing a mistake that has crept into the print editions and caused the textual dilemma. The correction restores

the text to its original unblemished form. Implicitly, this methodology argues that the essential meaning of the text—the historically original understanding—is its correct meaning.

For Rav Kalman, Reuven Malter's teacher and his father's nemesis, textual emendation is heretical. It is a cheap solution to an expensive problem. Generations of Talmud scholars sweated over the textual inconsistencies and performed logical calisthenics to circumvent and resolve such issues. Emendation retroactively transforms these creative attempts—part of the literature that constitutes the enhanced Talmud—rendering them mistaken or irrelevant. Rav Kalman resists the alluring historical solution to preserve a vision of the Talmud's reception that understands the millennium-long debate about Talmudic ideas asynchronously, as if all the rabbis from all the periods and cultures participate in a single debate that defies time and space. In defense of the expansive Talmud, Rav Kalman willfully blinds himself to the easy solution of changing the original text. And, as a result, the Talmud is an enhanced text that includes both the original text and the millennium of texts that comment upon the original.

The climactic scene of *The Promise* stages an oral examination to certify Reuven Malter as a rabbi.² A tribunal disguised as an exam, the scene finds the book's hero facing a three-person panel of rabbis who test him on his control of the corpus of rabbinic Judaism. The examination stretches over several days. On day one, Reuven handles the panel's questions with aplomb, demonstrating

his ability to make both the Talmud and its commentarial texts readable—he demonstrates mastery of the enhanced Talmud. As the exam moves to a second day, though, the panel targets the core methodological divide between Rav Kalman and David Malter. Kalman begins to ask thorny questions of Talmudic exegesis—how to explain a passage's troubling logic and how to resolve apparent contradictions within the Talmudic corpus. Initially reluctant to employ his critical methodology, Reuven eventually demonstrates his aptitude (indeed his creative brilliance) by resolving textual problems through emendation—by correcting the words of the text that appear in the standard print editions. His emendations are progressively more "heretical": his first emendation draws on a variant of the text found in the printed edition of a related passage in another tractate of the Babylonian Talmud; his second derives from a version of the text found in an alternate print edition of the Palestinian Talmud; his third and most egregious draws upon a version of the text found in a handwritten medieval manuscript. This last emendation is simultaneously the most impressive (Reuven had hypothesized the existence of a variant and then discovered it) and the most heretical (from Rav Kalman's perspective). Canceling the final day of exams, Rav Kalman says that he has heard enough and indicates that Reuven will not be ordained. The rabbi relents, with conditions, a day later.

That the central tension of a major American bestselling novel should be about how one reads the Talmud may seem strange. But the conflict encapsulates one of

the core dramas of religion in modernity. The Malters, who wish to emend their Talmudic texts, stand on the side of reason, history, and autonomy, while Rav Kalman stands on the side of mystification, tradition, and romanticism. Their clash is a microcosm of the modern post-Enlightenment struggle between traditional religious life and modern scientific modes of thinking. It is precisely because the Talmud is both intellectually sophisticated and religiously essential that it can function for the novelist as the perfect symbol to evoke this tension between the critical scientific method that wishes to recover a rational historical object, and the traditional intellectual methodology that finds comfort in resisting history, and embracing the most expansive version of the Talmud.

The novel is set in the postwar period because it seeks to ask what Jewishness and Judaism will become in the Holocaust's wake. Debates about how to read the Talmud are nothing less than ruminations about the anxiety of Jewish survival after World War II. Rav Kalman's resistance to modernity is buttressed by the deep-seated fear that capitulating to text criticism finishes Hitler's work.³ On the other side, Reuven Malter's incredulity at his teacher's resistance is a mark of his comfort in American modernity.

Historically, the tension between the essential and enhanced Talmuds in the United States was largely dissipated by the splintering that separated Conservative Judaism from Orthodox Judaism as two different denominations.⁴ Today, critical readers of the Talmud and traditional readers of the Talmud in the United

States have retreated into denominational corners. Without the shared religious space of institutions and the shared public space of intellectual journals, the two distinct interpretive communities only rarely intersect.

By making Talmudic reading a stand-in for Judaism in modernity, Chaim Potok transforms the Talmud into a symbolic rope being tugged by two visions of the future of Judaism. The tension between the traditional and critical readers is significant not for its particulars (the novel doesn't really provide the specifics of either the essential or the enhanced Talmudic particulars) but because of its larger ramifications for Judaism and the universal questions of tradition and modernity. For all his originality, Potok did not originate this symbolic usage of the Talmud. For as long as the Talmud has been a canonical work, it has served as a symbol of Judaism, Jewishness, and Jews. It is this Talmudic personification in the emblematic register that most entitles the Talmud to a biography.

This book explores the three different registers of Talmudic meaning both as discrete and as intertwined entities. The opening two chapters provide historical context for understanding the essential Talmud and some examples to introduce the hero of our story. The third chapter describes the processes through which the enhanced Talmud began to be generated, while the fourth includes a large quantity of material about the earliest emblematic uses of the Talmud. The final chapter presents three stories of the Talmud in modernity that provide a thick picture of the Talmud's tremendous success and contemporary popularity.

Talmud on Fire Liability

The Talmud is a commentary on an earlier law code, the Mishnah, which was published orally by the rabbis around the year 200 CE. Much like other ancient law codes (including the ones found in the Hebrew Bible) the Mishnah writes many of its laws as hypothetical scenarios. A far-fetched hypothetical is grounds for a fascinating Talmudic discussion of the basis of liability for fire that damages a neighbor's property. This brief foray into a Talmudic text introduces a passage about fire liability that this book will return to in greater depth in subsequent chapters.

Mishnah Baba Qamma 2:3b

A dog who took a cake [baking on top of hot coals] and went to a haystack; it ate the cake and set fire to the haystack:
on the cake [an owner] pays full damages, but on the haystack [an owner pays] half damages.¹

The owner pays the full value of the eaten cake and half of the value of the burnt haystack. Liability for the full value of the cake follows a basic principle of expectation: since animals can be expected to eat cake, one is responsible to watch them and ensure that they do not do so. For the haystack, the owner of the dog is liable for half of the damages. No rationale is offered in the Mishnah and a reader must work to produce an explanation. One common explanation is that the burning of a haystack is unexpected; since the owner could not have anticipated this form of damage, the owner is only liable for half of the damages. Another common explanation considers fire damage to be a form of secondarily causal damage such as when pebbles projected by an animal's moving feet break a pane of glass.

The Talmud begins its discussion of this mishnah by citing a debate between two rabbis, R' Yohanan and Resh Laqish, who lived in Palestine and were active in the first half of the third century.

Babylonian Talmud Baba Qamma 22a

It was said:³ R' Yohanan said, "his fire" because [it is] his arrow."

And Resh Laqish⁴ said, "his fire because [it is] his property."

Though the Babylonian Talmud was produced in Babylonia, it preserves many texts that were first articulated by Palestinian rabbis. Each of the two rabbis explains fire liability by drawing a specific analogy. R' Yohanan says that

liability for fire is like liability for an arrow: just as one is liable for the distant damage caused by a launched arrow, one is also liable for the distant damage caused by kindled fire. Resh Laqish analogizes liability for fire to property liability: as one is liable for damage caused by property (such as one's animal), one is also liable for damage caused by a set fire.

The Talmud's anonymous voice teases out the differences between these two analogies by asking after the stakes for each individual rabbi.

Why did Resh Laqish not explain like R' Yohanan?

(He would say to you.)⁵ "arrows move from his force, this [fire] did not move from his force."

And why did R' Yohanan not explain like Resh Laqish?

(He would say to you.)⁶ "property has tangibility, this [fire] does not have tangibility."

Why does R' Yohanan prefer the analogy to an arrow and Resh Laqish the analogy to property? Resh Laqish rejects the analogy to the arrow because the damage caused by the arrow is directly linked to the energy of the archer's pulling the bow; while fire may share the feature of being able to cause distant damage, it does not share this direct connection between the energy of the person responsible and the damage. R' Yohanan rejects the analogy to property because property is tangible while fire is not; though the two are similar since one is responsible for them, there is a fundamental difference between responsibility for tangible items and intangible ones.

The Talmudic passage continues by connecting this debate about fire liability to the mishnah cited above on which the entire Talmudic passage is something of a commentary. Drawing an inference, the Talmud asserts that the mishnah seems to support the view of R' Yohanan that liability for fire is like liability for the damage of an arrow:

It was stated in the Mishnah, "A dog who took a cake, etc."⁷

Granted that for [R' Yohanan] who said (fire liability is)⁸ like an arrow, the arrow is of the dog⁹ (and for this reason the owner is not liable for full damages). But for [Resh Laqish] who said (fire liability)¹⁰ is like property liability, (this fire)¹¹ is not the property of the dog's owner?

A hungry dog eats a cake that was cooking on some coals. The cake is still attached to a coal and the dog transports the coal to a haystack, setting the stack on fire and burning it to the ground. The mishnah rules that the owner of the dog pays full damages for the cake and half damages for the haystack. The Talmud's anonymous narrator seeks to determine whether this mishnah about a bizarre case of fire liability holds the clue to the conceptual debate regarding whether fire is like an arrow or like other property. Drawing attention to the idea of half damages for the haystack, the Talmud's anonymous voice suggests that this scenario's law reflects the arrow view more than the property view. For while one can understand a dog owner's

responsibility for the secondary effects of the dog as akin to the repercussions of shooting an arrow, the indirect nature of this tort makes any liability for the haystack hard to explain for someone who thinks of fire liability as based on liability for one's property.

The anonymous voice of the Talmud does not concede that this bizarre case of the Mishnah supports R' Yohanan. Rather, it modifies the narrative of the scenario to create space for Resh Laqish's property-based notion of fire liability.

Here with what are we dealing? [With a scenario in which the dog] threw the coal. For the cake [the dog's owner] pays full damages, for the site of the coal [the dog's owner] pays¹² half damages and for the entire haystack [the dog's owner] is exempt.

In this new version of the story, the dog threw the coal in the air and it landed on the haystack. The owner of the dog is liable for full damages for the cake, half damages for the initial landing spot of the coal and exempt from the damage to the rest of the haystack. By modifying the story such that the dog threw the cake/coal onto the haystack, the Talmud has created space within which to understand the mishnah as agreeing with the conceptual approach of Resh Laqish that fire liability is based on property liability.

The Talmud is replete with passages like this one that explore the intricacies of law (ritual, civil, criminal), metaphysics, and theology. The Talmudic method of drilling down into the underlying bedrock to uncover

core doctrines involves a marriage of creative logical deduction with careful analysis of valued canonical texts. The specific way in which the Talmud attempts to maintain the validity of the mishnah as a core textual precedent alongside the conceptual possibility of fire liability as a subset of property liability is thorny, and became the basis for commentarial controversies in the enhanced Talmud. This book will return to further probe this Talmudic passage more extensively in the second chapter, and to unpack the controversies surrounding its interpretation in the third chapter. For now, though, this taste of the Talmud provokes a series of questions:

1. The passage opens with a legal dictum from the Mishnah. What is the Mishnah and in what ways is it central to the Talmud?
2. R' Yohanan and Resh Laqish are two named rabbis whose debate structures the passage. Who were these rabbis, and what was the context in which they debated the conceptual character of fire liability?
3. The original debate is enriched through a seemingly unique idiosyncratic textual discourse. Where did this interesting rhetorical and exegetical project come from, and how did it come to be the quintessence of rabbinic religiosity?
4. The anonymous narrator thickens the respective conceptual approaches of the two named rabbis and draws their debate into conversation with the Mishnah's strange hypothetical of the dog with the cake. Who is this anonymous narrator?

14

CHAPTER 1

5. The passage about fire liability continues in the Talmud for a few pages in the standard print editions. As we will see in the next chapter, the Talmud uses different scenarios found in rabbinic legal precepts to prove that fire liability is more akin to an arrow than to property liability and each of these is explained away.¹³ Then a fourth-century Babylonian rabbi, Abaye, draws attention to a statutory scenario that works better with a property liability understanding and not as well with an arrow liability approach, and the Talmud works extremely hard to explain this problem away. The passage's conclusion is that even those who think that liability for fire is akin to arrow liability must accept, at times, that one is liable for fire because it is one's property. A reader who successfully follows the intricacies of this passage might justifiably wonder about its goals. Is the reader expected to land on a specific understanding of fire liability? If not, does this passage have a specific learning outcome? Do Talmudic passages have goals?

Who Were the Rabbis?

History: Continuity and Disruption

Among its many stories, the Talmud includes a legendary rabbinic origin tale.¹⁴

Abba Sikra, the head of the *biryoni*¹⁵ in Jerusalem, was the son of the sister of Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai.

Gestation and Birth

15

[R. Yohanan] sent (to him)¹⁶ saying, "Come visit me privately."¹⁷

When [Abba Sikra] came, he said to him, "How long are you going to act this way and kill all the people with starvation?"

[Abba Sikra] replied: "What can I do? If I say something¹⁸ to them, they will kill me."

[R. Yohanan] said: "Devise some plan for me to escape. Perhaps there will be a small salvation."

[Abba Sikra] said to him: "Pretend to be ill, and let everyone come to inquire about you. Bring something evil smelling and put it by you so that they will say you are dead.¹⁹ Let then your disciples get under your bed, (but no others, so that they shall not notice that you are still light),²⁰ since they know that a living being is lighter (than a corpse)."²¹

[R. Yohanan] did so, and R. Eliezer went [under the bier] from one side and R. Joshua from the other. When they reached the opening, [some of the people inside the walls] wanted to run a lance through [the bier].

[They]²² said to them: "Shall [the Romans] say. They have pierced their Master?"

They wanted to jostle it.

[They] said to them: "Shall they say that they pushed their Master?"

They opened a town gate²³ for him and (he got out).²⁴

When [R. Yohanan] reached [the Romans] he said, "Peace to you, O king, peace to you, O king."

[Vespasian] said: "Your life is forfeit on two counts, one because I am not a king (and you call me king),²⁵ and again, if I am a king, why did you not come to me (before now)?"²⁶

[R. Yohanan] replied: "As for your saying that you are not a king, (in truth you are a king),²⁷ since if you were not a king, Jerusalem would not be delivered into your hand, as it is written (Isaiah 10:34), "And Lebanon shall fall by a mighty one." 'Mighty one' [is an epithet] applied only to a king, as it is written (Jeremiah 30:21), "And their mighty one shall be of themselves etc.;" and Lebanon refers to the Sanctuary, as it says (Deuteronomy 3:25), "This goodly mountain and Lebanon."²⁸ As for your question, why (if you are a king),²⁹ I did not come to you (till now),³⁰ [the answer is that] the *biryonim* among us did not let me."

[Vespasian] said to him: "If there is a jar of honey round which a serpent³¹ is wound, would they not break the jar to get rid of the serpent?"

[R. Yohanan] could give no answer.³² . . .

At this point a messenger came to him (from Rome)³³ saying, "Up, for the Caesar is dead, and the notables of Rome have arranged³⁴ to establish you as head [of the State]."

[Vespasian]³⁵ had just finished putting on one boot. When he tried to put on the other he could not. He tried to take off the first but it would not come off. (He said: "What is the meaning of this?")³⁶

R. Yohanan said to him: "(Do not worry:)³⁷ the good news has done it, as it says (Proverbs 15:30),

'Good tidings make the bone fat.' What is the remedy? Let someone whom you dislike come and pass before you, as it is written (Proverbs 17:22), 'A broken spirit dries up the bones.'" He did so, [and the boot] went on.

[Vespasian] said to him: "Seeing that you are so wise, why did you not come to me (till now)?"³⁸

[R. Yohanan] said: "Have I not told you?" —

[Vespasian] retorted: "I too have told you."

[Vespasian] said: "I am now going, and will send someone [to take my place]. Ask something of me and I will grant it to you."

[R. Yohanan] said to him: Give me³⁹ Yavneh and its Wise Men, and the [family] chain of Rabban Gamaliel, and physicians to heal R. Zadoq.

The setting for the legend is the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE. A rabbinic intellectual inside Jerusalem, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, uses the ruse of death to sneak out of the city and speak directly with Vespasian, the Roman general. Fumbling over himself, the rabbi refers to the general as a monarch and the general considers this a blasphemous offense. When an emissary arrives mid-conversation informing Vespasian of a Roman election that has elevated him to the position of Caesar, the newly crowned monarch recognizes the prophetic abilities of his interlocutor. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai frames his ability to see the future as a byproduct of a midrashic reading of biblical verses that had predicted Jerusalem's destruction. Vespasian offers him three requests. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai asks

for the preservation of the Gamaliel family, for a healer to heal Rabbi Zadoq, and for Yavneh (Jamnia) and its rabbis. This last request is often understood as a trade of Jerusalem for rabbinic Judaism.⁴⁰

The Roman siege of the city of Jerusalem⁴¹ was a siege preceding the final battle in a war that had stretched on for more than three years. The war had been triggered by the rise of militant Judean factions who sought the kind of political autonomy enjoyed earlier in the century under the Hasmonean rulers. Such Judean autonomy was not desired by the Romans, who understood the positioning of biblical Israel along the Mediterranean Sea as pivotal.

The rabbis who collectively produced the corpus of writings known as "rabbinic literature" did not produce epic poems like Homer's *Odyssey* or national historiography along the lines of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*.⁴² On the rare occasion that they produced histories, the rabbis produced short episodic legends that densely capture important themes. The story of Rabban Yohanan Ben Zakkai and Vespasian is one such legend.

In the ancient world, religion was not a separable piece of cultural activity or identity. Religion was closely related to national activity and identity. In the decades leading up to the Temple's destruction, there was sectarian strife that pitted certain sects against the national religious leadership and its ideology, but even these sects still venerated Jerusalem. Rabbinic Judaism was a movement that gave up on the idea of political autonomy in exchange for a portable and robust religiosity. Rabban

Yohanan ben Zakkai's requests explicitly did not include a request for Jerusalem itself or for political power; he was prepared to sacrifice political hegemony for religious opportunity.

The term "sacrifice" gives pause. In giving up Jerusalem, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai not only sacrificed political ambition, he also acquiesced to the loss of the Temple—the building that had been the essential space of the Second Temple cult. Judean religiosity in the Second Temple period required the sacrifices that were the nearly exclusive cultic ritual; these could only be performed in Jerusalem's Temple. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai chooses a diasporic form of religiosity with no Temple and sacrifices, effectively renouncing the central religious cultic behaviors of prior generations.

To someone schooled in the Hebrew Bible, the story of the rabbi and the general may be surprising for its failure to directly feature God as a character. The God of the Hebrew Bible is incredibly and overwhelmingly present. God's presence is manifest both in communication and action. Within the patriarchal stories of Genesis, God is a character who interacts with other characters, engaging them in dialogue from on high. As one progresses through the historical time of the biblical story, God remains an active presence, but communication is mediated through the person of the prophet, who is distinguished by his or her ability to hear God's messages. Even though communication with God is limited, the biblical narratives continue to understand God to have an active role in historical events. The legendary

encounter with Vespasian models a different mode of relating to God than through direct divine communication or manifestation. When God appears in rabbinic texts, that appearance is often the result of human manipulation. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai employs *midrash*, a creative mode of reading the Bible, to read God into historical events. God's control of the events of the day is less direct; there are neither Egyptian plagues nor the smiting of an Assyrian army. God is present because the Bible is a lens through which to process world events. The rabbi empowers himself to see God in a world which no longer has a direct prophetic line of communication and no longer witnesses miraculous divine intervention.

Midrash, a form of biblical interpretation which will be further explained below, empowers the rabbi to introduce God into a set of historical events from which God is seemingly absent. God's voice is now the voice of the Bible as read by the rabbi. The rabbi is the new prophet who produces God's word in the world.⁴³ The relationship between God and rabbi differs from the relationship between God and prophet. The God-prophet relationship is a unidirectional one in which God overwhelms the prophet with the message; the prophet, however reluctant, accedes and represents God to the people. The God-rabbi relationship is more aptly characterized as rabbi-God; it is the rabbi who produces God in the world through an act of interpretation.

The legend of the rabbi and the Roman general has been popular throughout Jewish history because it

prefigures various events in Jewish realpolitik in the medieval and early modern periods.⁴⁴ Gauging the limited likelihood of resisting the enemy, Rabban Yohanan Ben Zakkai strikes up a vertical alliance with the most powerful enemy authority and works out a contract.⁴⁵ Pragmatism is strange in a legendary text. Rarely do peoples brace their status as a political minority by creating a legend that extols a rabbi for just that pragmatism.

This rabbinic legend is often employed to assert that *rabbinic Judaism reinvents Judaism in the wake of the Temple's destruction*. This pithy formulation captures a fundamental truth about the rabbinic project. The legend of the encounter with Vespasian is evidence that the rabbis themselves were occasionally aware of this assessment of their project. But the legend is ahistorical, and the historical record is more complicated than the pithy formulation. By shifting to the unreliability of the story as history, we can attend to an alternative understanding of the rabbis that supplements the reinvention claim with an understanding of the rabbis as a continuation of Second Temple realities.

It is difficult to accept the legend as historiography.⁴⁶ It is unlikely that the historical factions in Jerusalem shared the strong commitment to the laws of purity that enables the ruse that gets the rabbi outside the city walls. The opening of the gates to the city to remove the body would literally open the door to the enemy. The similar ease with which Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai can meet and address the Roman general is suspicious.

External historical data also makes the story hard to accept. Roman sources indicate that Vespasian first seized the title of Caesar in the Middle East and only afterwards received Roman consular approval.⁴⁷ The episode in the story would have taken place in 69–70 CE, and shows the rabbis' willing to sacrifice political sovereignty for religious space. But in 132 CE, various rabbis supported Simon ben Kosiba (Bar Kokhba) in his military revolt against Roman rule in Judea to restore Jewish self-rule. Historically, it is the crushing of *this* revolt that eliminated Jewish fantasies of sovereignty.

An autobiographical story nearly identical to the legend of Vespasian and Rabban Yohanan appears in the work of Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian who switched from the Judean to the Roman side in the war and wrote various extant works in Greek about those experiences.⁴⁸ *The Jewish War* describes how Josephus, the Judean general, was imprisoned by the Romans upon surrendering. As he was led off in chains, Josephus prophesied that Vespasian would be named the Caesar. When the prediction came true a year later, Vespasian informed his son Titus, and Josephus was elevated to Titus' *aide-de-camp*. Josephus spent the rest of the war on the Roman side before retiring to Rome where he wrote his works.

Though Josephus was a contemporary first century eyewitness to the events described, discrepancies between his own versions and his tendency towards self-aggrandizement make scholars suspicious of his work. In this particular case, Josephus' Vespasian story draws on tropes from the biblical Joseph story in which a Jewish

character is imprisoned and elevated to an important political post in exchange for an accurate prophetic prediction.⁴⁹ Bracketing the question of the historical reliability of Josephus' story about Vespasian, it is clear that a rabbinic writer, working between two to four centuries after Josephus, was familiar with the basic contours of Josephus' story when the Talmudic legend was crafted.⁵⁰

The unreliability of the legend as historiography throws suspicion on its message that rabbinic Judaism is a post-Temple innovation, and pushes for consideration of an opposing characterization—that the rabbis continue the ideological and social realities that were present during the Second Temple period. *The rabbis magnify and unify the energy of the sectarian movements of the Second Temple period.*⁵¹

The elite populations of first-century Judea produced several different sects of Judaism. These sects self-segregated from the Jewish population at large—and each other—to engage in religious practices and scholarship. They were polemical rivals divided by core fundamental differences with respect to ideology and law. For all their differences, though, the sects had much in common with one another. They were highly scholastic, predominantly male organizations that filtered the world through a primarily religious lens. Their differing ideologies all bore the imprint of apocalypticism, and they were staunchly committed, as both producers and consumers, to the idea of a scriptural canon.

The rabbis were a social group that perpetuated many of the values of these earlier sects without preserving the

polemical reality of multiple sects.⁵² Some of the rabbis were biological descendants of Pharisees. Acts of the Apostles, a New Testament work, features a Pharisee leader named Gamaliel who saves the apostles from execution by a Jewish tribunal, which flogs them instead.⁵³ Rabbinic texts fill out the genealogy of Gamaliel's family, tracing a distinguished paternal line from the time of the Pharisees to the time of the rabbis. It is this distinguished family of heirs to sectarian Judaism whom Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai saves with one of his three requests.

Both the sects and the rabbis actively attempted to resist the overwhelming influence of Hellenistic culture. The Hasmonean monarchy that ruled greater Judea for much of the first two centuries BCE was founded on a revolt that had an element of ideological resistance to Hellenic culture. The Maccabean resistance to Hellenism was but a monetary and minority phenomenon. As the centuries wore on, Judean culture became increasingly indistinguishable from other Hellenic subcultures.⁵⁴ The Hasmonean monarchs resembled other vassal kings and their children were sent abroad to receive schooling in Hellenistic schools. The sects that emerged in the last two centuries BCE were, in part, a response to increasing majority Hellenization. In this sense, they continued the trajectory of the zealous Maccabees who had revolted against Antiochus IV and set the Hasmonean Era in motion. As the populace and the royal elite were both becoming more Hellenized, the sects isolated themselves within the hermetic confines of the textual and cultic Jewish tradition. The rabbis carried on this mantle after the Temple's destruction.

Many rabbinic texts speak ill of Greek culture and mandate practices—like prohibitions on teaching Greek to one’s children—that are designed to keep Jews from being overrun by Greek ideas and inventions.⁵⁵ But by the close of the first century CE, Judea had been under Greco-Roman cultural influence for more than four hundred years. Roughly one-third of the vocabulary in rabbinic Hebrew and rabbinic Aramaic is comprised of words with Greek etymologies.⁵⁶ Archeological evidence of the period demonstrates the ubiquitous Greek influence on cultural production from pottery to coinage to sculpture.⁵⁷ This helps explain how the structure of the rabbis’ primary cultural activity—scholarship—was a Jewish facsimile of Greek scholastic culture.

One of the profound transformations wrought by Hellenism within Greek culture was the transition from the centrality of the city to the centrality of education.⁵⁸ That form of education was referred to as *paideia*, a term that meant both education and culture.⁵⁹ Where once one would want a child brought up as a warrior in service of city, now one aspired to educate a child through (or to) *paideia* into the leadership class. *Paideia* instruction was divided into three tiers: teachers of letters, grammar, and rhetoric, respectively. The elite student was one who could rise to the third tier and excel in its rhetorical exercises.

Similarly, the rabbinic educational movement was part of a transformation from the centrality of city (Jerusalem) to the centrality of education (rabbinic learning). A Jewish child would be trained by a teacher of letters

before moving on to a teacher of biblical reading and comprehension.⁶⁰ The role of the Bible was like the role of classical literature, which was the subject of instruction in the Greek system. Only advanced learners would progress to study rabbinic basic texts and be trained in the specific skills of argumentation and dialogue that contribute so much to the production of the Talmud. Like the Greeks, who understood *paideia* as a meritocratic way for lower classes to elevate their position in society, the rabbis understood their social practice of Torah study as a meritocratic enterprise open to all strata of society. Some of the most compelling rabbinic legends are rags-to-riches stories of men who start out ignorant, poor, and powerless before becoming wise, wealthy, and powerful through the vehicle of Torah education.⁶¹

The legend of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai and Vespasian testifies to the idea that the rabbis invented something new that replaced the Temple-based Judaism that had been rendered impossible by Jerusalem’s destruction. At the same time, critical examination of the legend’s limitations as history allows one to see that the rabbis both continued the legacy of the sects that thrived in the late Second Temple period, and drew upon a Hellenistic intellectual educational model.

Theology: Torah as Abstract Ideal

Legends are not the only types of texts in which the rabbis produced their own origin stories, and the rabbis did not always connect their origins with the destruction of

Jerusalem. At times, the rabbis indeed told their story as an uninterrupted continuation of prior religious realities. *Ethics of the Fathers*, a *sui generis* tractate of the Mishnah that is a compilation of proverbs and ethical teachings, opens with a chain of transmission that connects rabbinic literature with God's revelation at Sinai:

Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua;
and Joshua to the elders;
and the elders to the prophets;
and the prophets transmitted it to the men of the Great Assembly . . .
Sim'on the righteous one was one of the remaining members of the men of the Great Assembly . . .
(*Mishnah Avot* 1:1–2)

Within a few words, the text moves from revelation on Mount Sinai to the late Second Temple period. The text's continuation is a bit more complicated, but a few additional generational links reach the period of the *tannaim*, the rabbis who were active before the oral publication of the Mishnah around the year 200 CE.

In the opening line of this chain, Torah is the entity that Moses receives and transmits to the rabbinic present. The chain of transmission is a genre employed in the Greek writings of near contemporary Stoic philosophers.⁶² While the Stoics were interested in philosophical *truth*, the rabbis were interested in *Torah*. "Torah" literally means teaching, but the type of lesson implied by the word Torah led Egyptian Jews to translate the term into

Greek as "*nomos*" or law. "Torah" is the teaching of a religious way of being in the world.

The text describes Moses as receiving Torah "from" Sinai. The sentence makes Sinai (rather than God) the object of the preposition "from"—the *mountain* is the source of this teaching. This displacement of God is not incidental; it reflects a broader rabbinic substitution of the abstract value of Torah for the concrete God whose tangible home in Jerusalem no longer exists.⁶³

The theology of the rabbis is often characterized as a doctrine of two Torahs: a written Torah produced with ink on parchment, and an oral Torah produced in an unwritten ether of transmission from teacher to student, that encapsulates ideas of Judaism not contained within the verses of the written Torah's text. This helpful characterization of rabbinic theology ends up producing the oral Torah as an analog to the written—one could imagine the oral Torah as a virtual text containing all the traditions missing from the written Torah. In the opening to *Ethics of the Fathers*, in contrast, Torah is not a text but an abstract concept. Moses is not receiving a second (oral) book.⁶⁴ Moses receives an idea of Torah more powerful than any tangible book.

Throughout their writings, the rabbis display a profound commitment to Torah that transcends its function as an educational book or a ritual object. Torah is the rabbinic *raison d'être*. Life derives meaning from its association with the exercise of learning and living Torah. Though the rabbis value biblical laws and understand the Bible's mandates as the specific commands of a divine

Babylonia

Tannaitic Period

Amoraic Period

Palestine

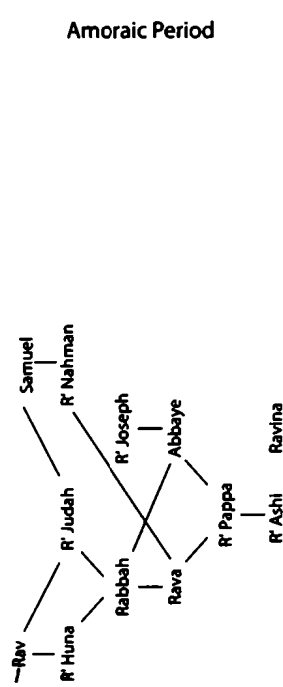
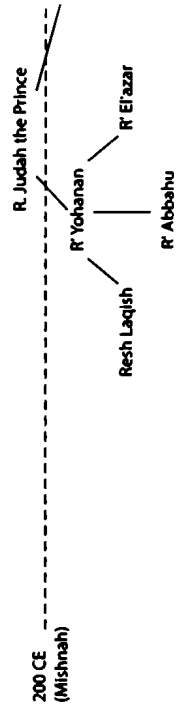
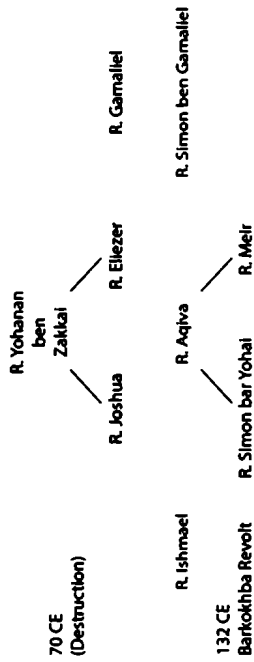


FIGURE 1.1. Selective Genealogy of the Rabbis

commander, commitment to Torah study supersedes. While the rabbis do not advocate a monastic disappearance from the world, Torah study challenges material needs, and Torah relationships challenge those of flesh and blood.⁶⁵ Scholastic pursuit of Torah-as-ideal epitomizes religious commitment. Along the way, the

prioritization of Torah and the scholastic way of life that commits fully to its acquisition, threatens the religious primacy of God, ritual, liturgy, and all other cultic aspects of Judaism. And this prioritization is profoundly important to the biography of the Talmud for two reasons. First, because the Talmud is the result of this scholastic

immediately surrounding the destruction of the Second Temple and for the next hundred years, the rabbis engaged in two pedagogical practices—one primarily interpretive and the other primarily a mode of organizing the interpreted material. The interpretive method of study was called midrash while the organizational articulation was called mishnah.⁶⁷

Midrash

During the Second Temple period, the Hebrew Bible was becoming both increasingly central and more solidly fixed. The early rabbis studied their Bible in ways that contributed both to the nature of canonical authority (what it means for there to be a canon) and to the contours of the canon (what is included and what excluded).⁶⁸ They read their Bible in almost absurdly punctilious ways. In the hands of these rabbis, the Hebrew Bible became a cryptic code in need of deciphering. Every nonessential component of syntax (and even spelling) came to be understood as an opportunity for producing new meanings, whether legal, narrative, or theological. Biblical stories were expanded in plot, characterization, and drama; the nature of all things theological (God, heavens, Torah, angels, etc.) became richer; legal statutes were made both more specific and principled. At the same time, the rabbis developed a technique of resolving issues in one book of the Hebrew Bible through recourse to another passage of the Hebrew Bible.⁶⁹ This, even though the Hebrew Bible is an

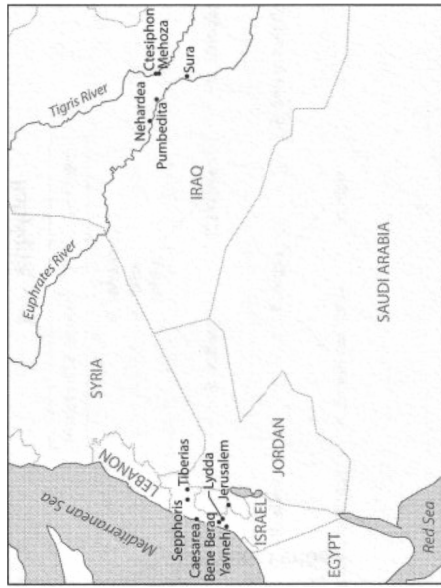


FIGURE 1.1. Map of Palestine/Babylonia

prioritization—it was produced as part of this new cultural commitment to Torah above all. Second, because it is the cause of this increased prioritization—its discourse of reception made it into the central piece of a religion built around scholasticism as religious devotion. *Within a religious production that has rewritten its story and changed its lead from God to Torah, the part of Torah has been played for over a millennium by the Babylonian Talmud.*

How the Talmud Was Made

The early rabbis engaged in scholastic activity in small *ad hoc* disciple circles; each consisted of a charismatic rabbi surrounded by a handful of students.⁶⁶ In the period

anthology of works in different genres written by different authors at different times. Whether self-consciously or not, the rabbis read verses in the book of Genesis, for example, in light of some in the Song of Songs and vice versa. This reading practice both reflected the rabbis' understanding of the boundaries of the biblical canon and solidified those boundaries by broadcasting which books were to be included as part of the hermeneutic corpus.

Mishnah

Even as the rabbis devored significant backward glances at the Bible, they also engaged in a form of study that produced something new. This pedagogical process involved formulating their religious culture in statutory form as law. The ritual requirements of prayer, the calendrical requirements of the holidays, the particulars of sacraments and sacrifices; all of these were formulated as religious statutes. This procedure produced clarity within a cultural environment in which both inherited practices and interpretive polysemy could produce confusion about everything from basic requirements to smaller details. Organization was a major purpose of this form of pedagogy. The anthological makeup of the Hebrew Bible contributed a basic lack of substantive organization to the Hebrew Bible; the exegetical practice of reading across the corpus further undermined even local coverage of a religious subject. If the exegetical practices allowed the creative free work associated with the right

side of the brain, the statutory formulation organized the material as might the left side of the brain.

Over the course of the post-Temple period, the two pedagogical practices of midrash and mishnah influenced each other but remained separate. During the second century CE, various rabbinic disciple circles developed their own approaches and produced varying versions of similar works. Within the world of midrash, Rabbi Aqiva and Rabbi Ishmael (both active in the first half of the second century) developed slightly different, consistent philosophies.⁷⁰ On a hermeneutic (rather than ideological) level, Ishmael was restrained and Aqiva creative.⁷¹ What Aqiva interpreted as an extraneous feature (worthy of interpretation), Ishmael considered a regular feature of language. These philosophical differences led to the production of two midrashic oral traditions covering four Pentateuchal books (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy).⁷²

Among the rabbis who constituted the Aqiva school of midrash, a standard practice developed to produce works of legal statutes covering all the topics of Judaism. This pedagogical process continued until the end of the second century, when a political figure and scholar, Rabbi Judah the Prince, gathered the different mishnah traditions, edited, and redacted them into the definitive Mishnah ("the Mishnah"). The Mishnah consists of sixty tractates that are organized into six orders. The Mishnah contains three levels of organization: there is a rationale for individual orders (e.g., Moed includes tractates related to holidays and the calendar), for individual

tractates (e.g., Sukkot has its own tractate within Moed) and for individual chapters (e.g., the rules regarding the gathering of the four species on Sukkot are delineated in their own chapter in tractate Sukkah).⁷³

Production of the Mishnah had a major effect on the rabbis. Over time, the Mishnah became so authoritative that it produced a chronological dividing line for the rabbis: those rabbis who lived early enough to be included in the Mishnah were called *tannaim*, and those rabbis active after the Mishnah's proliferation were called *amoraim*. It would eventually come to be understood within the rabbinic community that an *amora* could not directly contest the opinion of a *tanna*. The arrival of the Mishnah also affected the way in which the rabbis studied. Where *tannaim* bifurcated their study time into *mishnah-style* and *midrash-style* conversations, *amoraim* developed *talmud-style* conversations by formally structuring their study around the Mishnah but including *midrash* in those conversations.

Talmud

As *midrash* was a *freestyle* conversation surrounding Bible, *talmud* was a *freestyle* conversation surrounding the Mishnah. A *mishnaic* text is usually a statute which states a requirement or prohibition clearly without authoritative source or rationale. *Talmudic* discussions often begin by asking, "how do we know this?" about a *mishnaic* rule. The answer to the question is typically a *midrashic* explication of a biblical verse. In this way, the

Talmudic discussion opens the Mishnah to the rich lode of rationales and verse interpretations of *midrash*. Several generations of rabbis (Figure 1.1) in both Palestine and Babylonia conducted *talmud* conversations. Through these conversations, the Palestinian and Babylonian *amoraim* produced new *midrashic* interpretations of the Bible, new *mishnah-style* statements of law and new interpretations of the Mishnah's laws. The *amoraim* often disagreed with one another about these types of text. These distinct types of text (*midrashic* interpretations, *mishnah* statements, *amoraic* arguments about prior texts, etc.) are all captured within the two extant *Talmuds*, the Palestinian and Babylonian.

The Palestinian and Babylonian *Talmuds* are similar in form and content, but have significant differences. The Palestinian *Talmud* attributes ideas to rabbis who lived until the middle of the fourth century CE, while the Babylonian *Talmud* attributes ideas to rabbis who lived until the end of the fourth century CE. This additional gestation period is accompanied in the Babylonian *Talmud* by a comparatively richer layer of anonymous editorial text. These unattributed words function as signposts that alert the reader to turns within the text. A reader well-schooled in the Babylonian *Talmud* can have trouble reading the Palestinian because it comparatively lacks these internal textual aids.

Despite the nearly equivalent number of tractates (thirty-three for the Babylonian and thirty-six for the Palestinian) in the respective *Talmuds*, the Babylonian is considerably longer than its Palestinian counterpart in

both length of individual conversations and the number of such conversations per mishnaic legal subject.⁷⁴ The Palestinian Talmud also often replicates identical passages in multiple tractates; when this phenomenon is taken into account, the Palestinian Talmud shrinks in size by a third.⁷⁵ The conversational style of the Talmud and its origins in a social educational practice led most traditional readers to the presumption that the Talmuds are a transcription of actual rabbinic conversations. This is not the case. The insufficiency of this paradigm is evident when one looks closely at the Talmud's multi-generational character. Since the Talmud's conversations span across centuries, the Talmud's literary conversations are evidently manufactured. The standard stylistic uniformity in the presentation of debates also indicates an editor's framing of controversy. In the past four decades, scholars have demonstrated that the anonymous editorial layer of the Bavli (Babylonian Talmud) routinely reflects a chronologically later voice that goes beyond framing the earlier debates and produces itself as the evolutionarily final approach to matters of law or theology.⁷⁶

The final editors of the Talmud (sometimes referred to in the singular as the *Stam*—meaning anonymous, or in the plural as the *Stammaim*), are responsible for altering and framing the inherited traditions that are embedded in a Talmudic passage. The words of the Stam are the clearest site for identifying a conscious editing of the text.

The rabbis were active in two regions: Palestine and Babylonia (Figure 1.2). The rabbis of Palestine produced more than twenty works that survived the vagaries of

oral, handwritten, and print transmission and are available for readers today.⁷⁷ *The rabbis of Babylonia produced only one surviving work, the Babylonian Talmud!* The Babylonians left no independent works of mishnah or midrash.⁷⁸ They used the Talmud to collect the opinions and interpretations of Babylonian rabbis from the second through the sixth centuries and perhaps even later. It is possible that the Babylonian rabbis produced many works, but none of them survived. It is also possible that the Babylonian rabbis produced only one *magnum opus*, the Babylonian Talmud, and used it as a repository for every scholastic idea. Either the Bavli overwhelmed all competition such that it did not survive or no other works were created. A single work produced over the longest duration of any rabbinic text, the Bavli encapsulates all rabbinic creativity and organization.

Multiplicity (the existence of more than one authorized statement on a topic) and polysemy (openness to multiple interpretations) are two hallmarks of rabbinic literature. Multiplicity emerged incidentally out of the editorial decision to incorporate multiple mishnaic traditions within a single definitive text.⁷⁹ The Mishnah registers differences by simple attribution (e.g., “Rabbi X said” or “these are the words of Rabbi Y”), without hand-wringing or soul searching about the availability of multiple legal possibilities; frequently the Mishnah authorizes both one position and its binary opposite.

Polysemy is a byproduct of midrashic creativity.⁸⁰ The exercise of freely producing meaning out of material perceived to be extraneous is a creative process that invites

multiple outcomes. Even as there are restrictions on midrashic creativity, midrash can be characterized as an exercise in producing fuller and more detailed understandings of texts in a mode that builds off the possibility of multiple interpretations. The Talmuds build on both multiplicity and polysemy by producing new generational layers of mishnah-style statutory rule and debate; this process involves registering several generations of rabbinic interpretation of scripture, Mishnah, or midrash, and allows such interpretation to grow with minimal restraint and with new and explicit justifications. Though neither multiplicity nor polysemy originated as determined ideological stances, later rabbinic texts came to understand these phenomena as such. A retrospective rabbinic judgment found in the Mishnah touts multiplicity as a boon to judicial fairness and the possibility of change.⁸¹ The Talmud's late anonymous voice explicitly embraces both multiplicity and polysemy in theological terms as representing a divinely authorized pluralism.⁸²

The Babylonian Talmud is the largest collection of rabbinic ideas, interpretations, or stories. Its lengthy period of gestation allowed it to evolve the most advanced explicit theorizations of pluralism and to develop the most sophisticated conceptualizations of abstract legal concepts. By combining the earlier rabbinic genres of mishnah and midrash into a meta-genre, and incorporating insights from seven centuries of rabbis in two distinct, robust regions of operation, the Babylonian Talmud was able to produce the most thorough and comprehensive version of rabbinic Judaism.

1

MINDFUL ANTI-OPPRESSION PEDAGOGY

On November 24, 2014, at 8:00 p.m. Central Time, officials in St. Louis, Missouri, announced that a grand jury would not indict Officer Darren Wilson, a White police officer, in the murder of Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager. Outrage, anger, and despair erupted throughout the United States. I, too, felt grief and fury in the very depth of my being. As a professor in higher education, I wondered how I was going to address this event in my courses: what were the best ways to engage in a thoughtful, critical, and caring dialogue about race relations when tensions were running so high throughout the country? It seems to me that these fraught moments are when our capacity for such dialogue so often fails us, but they are precisely the moments when we need to learn better ways of being with one another.

I entered my classroom the following morning heartsick and furious. I teach Women's Studies courses and so, of course, the grand jury's decision and its implications were highly relevant subjects for our class. We had begun the semester with discussions of the events in Ferguson, and after discussing how different bodies are raced and gendered in inequitable ways, it was time to revisit the subject. I felt unprepared to teach that day because my emotions were so raw, but my yoga and meditation practice have taught me that often such vulnerability opens a space for authentic human connection and deeper wisdom. My feminism, meanwhile, has taught me that it is my responsibility as a White anti-racist advocate to confront these issues of institutionalized racism and gendered violence in order to help students learn how to analyze and interrupt them.

So I started class by sharing the heaviness of my heart and asked students what they felt. That was the pattern in all four of my classes throughout the day: I opened with a simple, honest, and nonjudgmental description of what

I was feeling and asked them how they were. Many of my students, particularly students of color, clearly needed to express their feelings of anger, frustration, pain, and deep grief. Some students of color hollowly expressed their realization that “the system did not fail them because it was never designed to protect them” as people of color. One Black man, who rarely spoke in large group discussions, asked the class if we thought a genocide of Black men is happening. A woman of color expressed her deep fear for all the Black men in her life and her sense of powerlessness to protect them. In a later class, a young Black man asked how he was supposed to deal with police officers when he has to fear for his life in every moment of every encounter with police. Many White students expressed outrage as well. They critiqued the injustice of the verdict and condemned the deep pattern of racial profiling and police brutality against Black men. Others were notably silent, though I have learned over the years not to assume that I know what the silence means. One White man, a former police officer himself, said that while he felt that in some cases the injustice was clear, in the case of the death of Michael Brown, the facts were not so clear. “If you take race out of it,” he said, “Wilson might have been truly fearing for his life.” Of course, the feminist framework I teach in my classes insists that race cannot be taken out of this equation, because racial and gendered dynamics created the situation in the first place.

But his perspective, along with those of all the other students in the room, were simply a microcosm of what is happening in our communities throughout the United States at this historical moment. Nothing that was said in my classes has not been said in the broader, public conversations about police brutality, the failure of the criminal justice system, racial profiling, and the killing of Black youth in the United States. The raw emotions and the tensions were palpable in the classroom throughout the day.

The challenge for us as anti-oppression educators is to help students learn how to deeply and productively engage in these hard conversations, unpack the learned ideologies that produce inequalities in society, and learn more equitable and empowering ways of relating to one another. Fraught social issues such as the killing of Michael Brown, and the long history of deaths of young Black men that it continues, provide relevant and necessary examples to examine in social justice classes. But how to do so with intellectual nuance, analytical vigor, historical context, and empathy and compassion is still a challenge. Some students reiterate stereotypical ideas that make the conversation even more painful for those who are directly affected by the issue, while the pain and fierce fury of the latter sometimes overwhelms and seems out of place to those students who are not placing the situation within its trenchant historical context. The stakes for learning how to navigate these conversations are high, because the students in our classrooms will be shaping our societies for years to come. If they do not learn the skills in our courses, I am not sure where they will learn them.

When I was new to teaching Women’s Studies courses, I struggled with how to best address instances like this one, which are all-too-common in diversity classrooms. When students inevitably make statements that are uninformed or stereotypical, I would either challenge certain comments directly in a way that often shamed the student into shutting down and refusing to learn more, or I would challenge them so indirectly that students did not realize I was trying to trouble the assumptions made. As a cisgendered woman living in a society that often shames women, I do not find shaming to be a useful or a kind pedagogical challenge, nor is direct conflict my best operational mode (Bordo 1996). But the indirect approach was also ineffective, since students often missed the point and failed to deeply examine their belief systems.

Over the next fifteen years, as I became more experienced at teaching, I grew more adept at challenging students’ deeply held ideologies without alienating them from the learning process—a balance that I believe is critical for anti-oppression courses. Too much discomfort and students will simply disengage, which is not a helpful pedagogical strategy. But some discomfort is necessary, because inequalities have become normalized. It is also not enough to simply learn *about* oppression. We have to literally *unlearn* oppression: examine our role in it, dismantle deeply held ideologies, and create alternative, more empowering, ways of relating to one another. In order to achieve this outcome, students need to not merely learn the subject matter as objective content but also examine it as a social system in which *we all participate*. That participation occurs not just at the level of external behaviors but also at the level of our internal thoughts and feelings and in our ways of relating to one another. This deep inquiry often produces some necessary discomfort, but in order for it to be effective, we need to offer our students the requisite tools with which to process through that inquiry.

Though anti-oppression pedagogy highly values critical self-reflection of ideologies, power, and privilege, it often stops short of the deep reflection that mindfulness has to offer. Over the past fifteen years, I have watched many Women’s Studies students become empowered intellectually and politically, only to still express self-denigrating sentiments, end up in abusive relationships, or have disordered relationships to food and their bodies. My own rather rocky path to wholeness illustrated to me that feminism, while profoundly empowering, was not enough. It sometimes failed to reach the deepest layers of self or provide all of the tools I needed to bring my feminist empowerment to a more integrated level. Those tools came to me through my yoga and meditation practice. But neither were the mindfulness tools alone enough, as too often in the Western world they remained apolitical at best or reinforced privilege and inequality, at worst. Eventually, I realized that I had to integrate feminist praxis with mindfulness in order to access the full benefits of each. The combination has proven very invaluable to my social justice teaching. This book outlines those insights, offering a model for a mindful anti-oppression pedagogy.

Some Foundational Definitions

Since this project hinges on several terms that are themselves worthy of their own lengthy discussions, I will start with some brief definitions. These concepts will be further developed throughout the following chapters.

By *feminism*, I mean an intersectional analysis of systems of oppression that examines how race, gender, class, ethnicity, and ability, along with sexual and national identities, work together to position us in complex power dynamics with one another. This form of feminism sees oppression as operating through social institutions, such as the government, the media, the educational systems, and so on. It seeks to cultivate empowerment for members of marginalized groups. The form of feminism I invoke here is a way of asking questions and a set of values, rather than a set of foregone conclusions. It does not see men and women as monolithic categories nor does it see the male/female binary as the only options for gender. Instead, this form of feminism addresses how other aspects of identity (race, religion, sexuality, class, national location, ability) shape gendered experiences.

Feminist pedagogy builds on this definition of feminism to inform teaching practices that educate the whole student. This model of pedagogy sees students and teachers as co-creators of knowledge and the classroom space as a site of knowledge production. Self-reflection is a central feature of this feminist pedagogy. Because my teaching has been in Women's Studies courses, my specific examples will come from feminist pedagogy. However, throughout the book, I argue that the mindfulness model I offer can enhance anti-oppression pedagogy in general, including critical pedagogy, anti-racist pedagogy, and queer pedagogy. I will outline these different frameworks later in this chapter.

Oppression is a system of power that subordinates some groups in order to over-empower others. It also refers to the painful and violent effects of oppression, both on individuals and on collectives. *Anti-oppression* will be used throughout this book to refer to the process of unlearning the tools of oppression and dismantling inequitable systems. For the purposes of flow, I will use the terms diversity and social justice interchangeably with anti-oppression. Obviously, all of these terms are more nuanced and differentiated, but that discussion is beyond the scope of this project. Classes such as Women's and Gender Studies, Ethnic Studies, LGBT/Queer Studies, Multicultural Education, and Sociology teach about anti-oppression.

By *mindfulness*, I mean the process by which we become more self-aware through particular practices. I will refer to these activities interchangeably as either mindfulness or contemplative practices. Some techniques are already regularly used in academic classrooms, while many are not yet widely recognized as valid academic skills. In the former category lie journaling, volunteering, storytelling, dance, and dialogue. In the latter category lie meditation, yoga, visualization, bearing witness,

contemplative arts, Aikido, deep listening, and centering practices. The Tree of Contemplative Practices designed by the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society nicely depicts the interconnected array of activities that fall under the heading of contemplative practices (see Figure 1.1). Some come from particular religious or cultural traditions and, therefore, raise questions of cultural appropriation and religious belief systems, which I will discuss further in Chapter 6. For the purposes of this project, I will be focusing on secular mindfulness practices that are designed to cultivate self-awareness, embodiment, balance, clarity, and compassion. A further delineation of these techniques comes later in this chapter. First, though, I will speak to the value of integrating these practices into the college classroom.

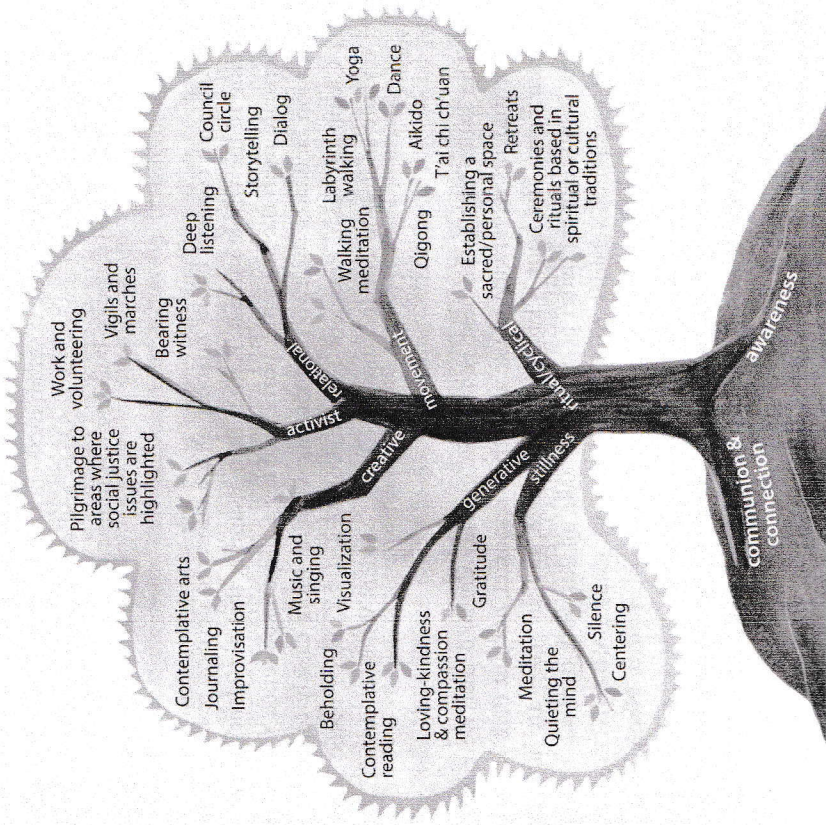


FIGURE 1.1 The Tree of Contemplative Practices

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Concept & design by Maia Duerr; illustration by Carrie Bergman

Educating the Whole Student

Over the past ten years, mindfulness initiatives have become more common, more visible, and more coordinated throughout U.S. colleges and universities (Shapiro, Brown, and Astin 2008). Increasingly, higher education is recognizing the value of integrated student learning. Some call it holistic education, which, according to Ron Miller, is “based on the premise that each person finds identity, meaning, and purpose in life through connections to the community, to the natural world, and to spiritual values such as compassion and peace” (1997, 1). Mark Nepo, author of *The New York Times* bestseller *The Book of Awakening* uses the term “transformational education,” which is

understood as educating the whole person by integrating the inner and outer life, by actualizing individual and global awakening, and by participating in compassionate communities—[it] has become a quiet but sturdy movement that encourages the recovery and development of the academy as a liberating and capacity-building environment. (2010, vii)

Though each concept has its nuances, all are efforts to develop resiliency and well-being in the whole student. Rather than assuming that a student’s personal life is separate from the academic portion of her college experience, this vision of education facilitates the two components working more closely together. As Diana Chapman Walsh, President Emeritus of Wellesley College noted in her 2005 keynote address to The Institute on College Student Values at Florida State University,

The issues facing the next generation globally demand that we educate our students worldwide to use all of their resources, not just their mind or their heart. The hour is late, the work is hard, and the stakes are high, but few institutions are better positioned to take up this work than our nation’s colleges and universities. (qtd. in Nepo 2010, v)

Rather than the more traditional silo model of higher education, in which academic study remains separate from student affairs, this trend speaks to the need to not only intentionally integrate students’ college experience but also to teach students how and why that integration is critical to their own well-being and that of their communities (Awbrey and Dana 2006; Palmer and Zajonc 2010). Women’s Studies, of course, has long recognized the need for this integration. Women’s Centers, often housed within student affairs at universities, have forged strong interdependent relationships with academic Women’s Studies departments.

Similar relationships exist between Ethnic Studies departments and Multicultural Student Services offices and between Queer Studies academic departments and LGBTQ resources centers in Student Affairs. These mutually supportive partnerships provide valuable models for more holistic higher education.

Truly transformational learning, though, requires an even more fundamental integration. Feminist scholar bell hooks has called for an “engaged pedagogy,” which she suggests goes further than either critical or feminist pedagogy because it emphasizes well-being and calls for “radical openness,” “discernment,” and “care of the soul” (1994, 15–16; 2010, 8–10). This well-being involves a knowledge of oneself and an accountability for one’s actions, as well as a deep self-care, for both students and professors. Teachers, hooks argues, must be self-actualized if they are to help empower students. Engaged pedagogy is an education for how to live in the world. Discussions of holistic learning have come much further since the publication of her groundbreaking book *Teaching to Transgress* in 1994. However, the specifics that explain *how* to educate on the level of mind, body, and spirit are still up for discussion, which is where this book enters the conversation. All of these levels are critical, I argue, for social justice classrooms.

While there are many different routes to achieving holistic education and integrated student learning, this book focuses on mindfulness and contemplative pedagogy as a promising path to not only educating the whole student but, more specifically, contributing skill sets that are particularly *vital* in diversity courses. I will first define what I mean by anti-oppression pedagogy, arguing that most forms of emancipatory teaching and learning can benefit from contemplative practices. I will then discuss the benefits of mindfulness, outline important parallels between contemplative pedagogy and anti-oppressive pedagogy, and then conclude the chapter with tips for integrating mindfulness into social justice courses in order to better help students unlearn systems of oppression.

Basic Principles of Anti-Oppressive Pedagogy

Most social justice courses use some variation of what I will call anti-oppression pedagogy, the most well-known forms of which are critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, anti-racist pedagogy, and queer pedagogy. Each form has its unique history and dimensions, but there are some common components of each. My foundation is in feminist pedagogy, but I use the broader anti-oppression framework because mindfulness can effectively be integrated into a variety of forms of emancipatory pedagogies. It is worth establishing some of their commonalities and differences before outlining how mindfulness can enhance them.

Critical pedagogy seeks to bring radical politics to educational systems. Reflected most prominently in the work of Henry Giroux, Michelle Fine, bell hooks, Paolo Freire, Stanley Aronowitz, and Maxine Green, this pedagogy argues

for the emancipatory potential of democratic learning to better the situation for disenfranchised groups. Its roots lie in James Dewey's ideas that progressive education should engage community-building and that interaction with one's environment is part of knowledge production (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2003, 3). These ideas were placed within a more radical framework when combined with the work of Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, and The Frankfurt School (Giroux 2003a). The first two analyzed power and knowledge; Gramsci to argue that hegemony is a more effective way of achieving domination than is outright force. Through hegemony, Gramsci argued, individuals are conditioned to adopt the interests of the ruling class, even when they work against their own self-interest (Gramsci 1971). However, hegemony is always partial, opening clear fissures for resistance (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2003, 3). Foucault (1980) questioned the "regimes of truth" that were legitimated through institutionalized forms of knowledge production. He, like others, recognized the educational system as a site of power knowledge, but he did not see power as merely oppressive. For Foucault, power is generative as well as repressive; it produces as well as dominates. Moreover, since power is everywhere, according to Foucault, so is resistance. Critical pedagogy also draws on the critique of rational knowledge and capitalist production (both material and cultural) articulated by The Frankfurt School.

Among the other central founders of critical pedagogy is the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) centered questions of culture, power, and oppression within traditional models of schooling. Freire developed a model of pedagogy focused on grassroots activism, agency, and democratic, active learning. Another Brazilian, Augusto Boal, situated Freire's ideas within the context of theatre and performance to incorporate participant interaction and community reflection (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2003, 6; Boal 1993).

This heterogeneous theoretical base produced a few basic tenets for critical pedagogy. First, critical pedagogy seeks to empower disenfranchised groups to democratically participate in their educational process. Central to this *consentification* is a critique of the repressive nature of traditional learning and classroom structures (Freire 1970). Many of these theorists argued that education masquerades under the guise of objectivity and neutrality that masks the underlying power dynamics (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2003, 11). By validating the personal experiences of marginalized groups and enabling more democratic educational spaces, this pedagogy helps schools become sites of struggle over knowledge.

Second, critical pedagogy argues that schools traditionally work against the interests of most students who are hegemonically conditioned to adopt the interests of the elite ruling class. This component challenges the myth of equal opportunity to education and instead argues that schools reproduce vastly inequitable class hierarchies (Giroux 2003b). Critical pedagogy also acknowledges that the material conditions and lived experiences of the students and teacher directly shape how and what they can know.

Rather than seeing knowledge as objective "Truth," critical pedagogy argues that knowledge is historically produced and culturally located. Students are thus encouraged to situate themselves and their experiences within historical socio-political power dynamics and to understand those dynamics as both socially produced and changeable (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2003, 12). This social agency is practiced both by empowering students and by revealing the fissures, gaps, contradictions, and ideologies that are embedded in knowledge production, thereby opening space for resistance. This critique is an ongoing process, since hegemony and the production of power/knowledge are also ongoing processes.

This latter component opens the door to uncertainty, undermining the emphasis on rationality and Truth that so often pervades more traditional education. "In opposition to traditional theories of education that serve to reinforce certainty, conformity, and technical control of knowledge and power, critical pedagogy embraces a dialectical view of knowledge that functions to unmask the connections between objective knowledge and the cultural norms, values, and standards of the society at large" (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2003, 12). It thus emphasizes the interdependence and relationality of systems and individuals, domination and liberation, theory and praxis, students and teacher.

Finally, though no less importantly, critical pedagogy centers a theory of resistance, to explain why disenfranchised groups often do not succeed in traditional educational systems that marginalize them. This resistance also opens the possibility for an oppositional consciousness, in which students actively resist their dehumanization and develop counter-hegemonic alternatives that center marginalized voices (Freire 2000). These alternatives are partly made possible by the praxis that encourages students to apply critique, analysis, and questioning to their everyday lives (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2003).

While critical pedagogy contributes a great deal to emancipatory learning, it has also come under some critique, most notably from feminist and critical race theorists. The majority of influential founders of critical pedagogy were men, so some of the critiques stem from a sense that they only superficially challenge the hegemony of patriarchy (Luke 1992). A deeper criticism surrounds their reification of the Enlightenment privileging of cognitive, rational knowledge (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2003). Feminists have staunchly argued for the importance of personal stories, biographies, and the situated nature of each individual's knowledge and experience (Darder, Baltodano and Torres 2003). Gender needs to be a category of analysis so that women and girls are included in both the content and process of education. These scholars focused on nonhierarchical learning spaces, multiple perspectives, and providing students with tools for self-empowerment (Rendón 2014).

The feminist intersectionality framework that I adopt throughout this book emerged in the context of these debates. Intersectionality argues that matrices of race, class, gender, sexuality, and national location need to be addressed, not only

to challenge dominant forms of education but also to center the histories and perspectives of disenfranchised groups (Crenshaw 1991). In fact, some feminist critical race theorists have argued that important insights can emerge from the perspectives of those on the margins. Patricia Hill Collins (2000), for instance, offered the concept of “the outsider within” to explain how people from marginalized groups see the exclusionary practices of social institutions, because even when they are on the “inside,” they are still marginalized by the paradigms that Other them. Those perspectives offer invaluable insights into how dominant educational systems can be deconstructed. With intersectionality, there is a greater emphasis on uncertainty, open-endedness, and relational knowledge (Luke and Gore 1992).

Feminist teaching practices draw on prominent feminist theory that argues for situated knowledges and examines the standpoint (or sitpoint) of all perspectives (Haraway 1988, Harding 2003; Garland-Thomson 2005). Because the body is such a central issue in feminism, with a focus on issues such as body image and beauty, reproductive justice, and violence against women, it makes sense that feminist pedagogy would examine the embodiment of learning, including how different bodies are constructed in the classroom (Wilcox 2009; Weller 1991). Feminist pedagogy recognizes the power dynamics in the classroom and seeks to share power between all participants (Luke and Gore 1992).

This form of pedagogy also seeks to empower students to create social change by catalyzing their agency. Here, “empowerment means not only helping students to understand and engage the world around them, but also enabling them to exercise the kind of courage necessary to change the social order where necessary” (McLaren quoted in Gore 1992, 57). Gore (1992) raises concerns about the extraordinary abilities attributed to teachers in this notion of empowerment. If power is something that is exercised, not a form of property in a zero-sum game, then empowerment in this context would need to be context-specific and grounded in particular practices (Gore 1992).

Critical race theorists expressed a similar critique of critical pedagogy, not only pointing out that many of the founding leaders were White, but also that the pedagogy failed to center the perspectives of the subordinate groups themselves, who were often communities of color (hooks 1994; Allen 2006; Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2006; Brown-Jeffrey and Cooper 2011). Anti-racist pedagogy challenges the foundation of the Western educational system as one historically grounded in White male supremacy. It troubles claims of universality and detached “objectivity” to instead argue for historically situated knowledges from multiple perspectives. In anti-racist pedagogy, like in feminist pedagogy, students are challenged to learn and unlearn paradigms at deep cognitive and affective levels—what I call our very sense of self—which is why deep emotions are often triggered in these classrooms (Wagner 2005; Blakemey 2005). Because traditional learning is seen to reinforce structures of domination, the *process* of learning how to think

critically from an anti-racist perspective is critical (Wagner 2005; ARPAC 2014). This process is made explicit, for instance, by preparing students at the beginning of class that deeply held ideologies will be challenged and that students will be asked to take risks that will likely be unsettling. Anti-racist pedagogy, like feminist pedagogy, challenges participants to examine how their own identities position them in relation to the material they are learning and to the other participants in the classroom.

Queer pedagogy takes up some similar principles by positioning the identities of both teachers and student in power dynamics and by challenging the heteronormative frameworks of traditional education (Luhmann 1998). A queer pedagogy explores gender performativity as it is related to sexual identity and sees both as fluid and dynamic, rather than static, and challenges assimilationist frameworks (Halberstam 2003). Like the term queer itself, a queer pedagogy deconstructs the very frameworks through which we presume to know and works toward more radical alternatives (Britzman 1995; Winans 2006).

The scholar Kevin Kumashiro distinguishes between four major threads of working against oppression: “education for the Other, education about the Other, education that is critical of privileging and Othering, and education that changes students and society” (2002, 31). Many of the models of pedagogy discussed thus far include components of these different ways to challenge oppression. Many diversity classes, for instance, include information about marginalized groups and narratives told in the voices of marginalized groups, so as to more fully teach about the “Other” and to challenge the erasure of marginalized groups’ experiences that so often pervade traditional forms of education. When marginalized groups see themselves reflected in the curriculum, they are validated in important ways. But, of course, these first two methods that Kumashiro describes have their limits, since they do not fundamentally question the paradigms that marginalize and Other in the first place. Forms of pedagogy that teach students how this privileging and Othering operate and what its consequences are go further toward dismantling the systems, particularly if students are taught the tools with which to interrupt the process. They can then develop the skill sets to create alternative, more emancipatory ways of relating to one another. I argue that mindfulness is an important component of this last step because it takes us beyond the cognitive into embodied transformation, at both the individual and the collective levels.

Though there are important differences between all of these forms of pedagogy, they do have some basic commonalities: 1. learning is politicized; 2. educational systems are recognized as both sites of oppression and sites of resistance; 3. students are taught to apply the concepts to their everyday lives and the sociopolitical power dynamics in which they live; 4. objective “Truth” claims are challenged as forms of domination; 5. knowledge is instead understood as historically and culturally specific; 6. teachers and students participate in knowledge construction; 7. the process of learning is as important as the content of learning, if not more so;

8. democratic participation is highly valued; 9. awareness and consciousness-raising is critical; 10. multiple perspectives are highlighted, often centering the experiences of marginalized groups; and 11. students are encouraged to use their learning process to actively transform society in socially just ways. Many of these forms of pedagogy examine how and where they may be complicit in the very systems they are trying to dismantle. Of course, each form of pedagogy defines some of these tenets in particular ways and centers certain aspects of identity in its mission (gender, race, class, sexuality). In doing so, each brings important dimensions to the conversation.

I believe that mindfulness offers a valuable contribution to each of these types of pedagogy. Therefore, despite the nuances in each form discussed above, I will use the umbrella term “anti-oppression pedagogy” to include all of them. Further scholarship in this area can explore the specific ways mindfulness can be integrated in the unique strategies of each form of pedagogy. But as one of the first texts in this field, this book is interested in establishing the foundation of intersections between mindfulness and anti-oppression pedagogy, explaining how and why mindfulness provides critical methods for students to unlearn oppression, and offering teachers “action” tips for implementing mindfulness practices in the classroom.

Parallels between Mindful Learning and Anti-Oppression Pedagogy

Recent efforts in contemplative education make important strides toward fulfilling hooks’ call to “educate the whole student” but sometimes without the explicit social justice consciousness that is integral to anti-oppression pedagogy. However, anti-oppression pedagogy does not always help students fully *embody* their learning. In Women’s Studies courses, for instance, students cultivate social awareness and feminist political consciousness. They learn how to apply the concepts from class to their own lives and the world around them. They also develop leadership, advocacy, and empowerment skills. But all of these tools have their limits if student cannot fully *embody* them. To really integrate these lessons, they need to be absorbed into our very selves, not merely learned at the level of the intellect or political consciousness.

Mindful education is one valuable way to help students fully integrate and embody the lessons of anti-oppression pedagogy. In fact, the very practice of mindfulness is a fundamental catalyst for transformation. Like feminism, mindfulness is more about process than it is about product. If, as Audre Lorde said, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” then we need to learn new ways of being in the world. Integrating mindful learning into anti-oppression pedagogy lets us do just that. Contemplative practices, when integrated into the college classroom, can help students develop the ability to critically *self-reflect* (Barbezat

and Bush 2014). They can also offer students the tools to remain present—and *embodied*—in the classroom, an idea I will examine more fully in Chapter 2.

Growing research demonstrates the vast benefits of mindfulness. Recent advances in Western neuroscience have supported what ancient yogis and meditators have long known: that mindfulness has extensive emotional, psychological, and physiological benefits. Regular mindfulness practice strengthens the immune system and eases stress. It can ease anxiety and depression, while increasing concentration and awareness (Davis and Hayes 2012; *Free the Mind* 2012; Wadlinger and Isaacowitz 2011; Williams and Penman 2011). Meditation, yoga, and *pranayama* (yogic breathing) have also been shown to decrease the effects of trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Emerson and Hopper 2011; Van Der Kolk 2014).

Mindfulness, then, can enhance the overall well-being of college students. It offers students tools that they can use anytime and anywhere to ease their anxiety and stress, which can be particularly helpful during semester crunch. Some studies indicate that regular mindfulness practice increases academic performance and enhances students’ ability to relate to others (Barbezat and Bush 2014; Brown University 2014; Shapiro et al. 2011). Given the personal identity development trajectories common for most traditionally aged college students, the proven benefits to emotional intelligence also makes mindfulness particularly helpful in college. It can enable students to establish healthy life skills that can serve them long after graduation (Goleman 1994). Even if the seed does not fully take root during the college years, once students learn about mindfulness, they may be more likely to access it later in life when they find they are in need of its benefits.

However, mindfulness practices are not just dropped willy-nilly into a syllabus but are instead integrated into a pedagogy that seeks to deepen introspection and inquiry. As such, they nicely compliment more traditional modes of learning, while also enhancing students’ deeper self-awareness. In fact, this type of learning recognizes the contextual nature of knowledge. In her groundbreaking book *The Power of Mindful Learning*, Ellen J. Langer distinguishes between Intelligence and Mindful Learning (1997). The former, she argues, entails a linear process of stable categories, objective facts, and learned skills that correspond to reality and moves toward resolutions. Mindfulness, on the other hand, values multiple perspectives, encourages the participant to experience control by shifting between these perspectives, and sees knowledge as fluid. Skills and information are neither inherently good nor bad; instead, the knower is encouraged to step back and reflect on solutions and outcomes to determine deeper meaning within context (Langer 1997, 110).

Though she is careful to distinguish her discussion of mindful learning from the broad-based contemporary use of the term mindfulness, her work has been influential in the field of contemplative pedagogy. Langer suggests that mindful learning generates psychological states that enable several qualities: “(1) openness to novelty;

(2) alertness to distinction; (3) sensitivity to different contexts; (4) implicit, if not explicit, awareness of multiple perspectives; (5) orientation in the present” (1997, 23). Scholar Laura A. Rendón makes a similar distinction between knowledge and wisdom. The former, she suggests, values rationality, detached objectivity and facts about the outer world but without *application to life*. Wisdom, on the other hand, “arises from personal communion and reflection on life” (2014, 90). It emphasizes self-reflection on the inner life and cultivates self-awareness. It begins with the personal space, but then expands to integrate a social responsibility (Rendón 2014, 90).

Mindful learning, then, parallels a basic tenet of anti-oppression pedagogy that recognizes all knowledge as culturally constructed and partial. Who we are shapes what we know. One goal of anti-oppression pedagogy is to make that lens visible and to try to step outside it. Both forms of learning value the *process* of inquiry as much as the results. Both, then, allow what the poet Rainer Maria Rilke calls “living the questions.” In his classic book, *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke writes, “Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer” (1993, 12).

Contemplative pedagogy invites student to actively situate themselves within the content of their courses and apply the concepts to their own lives, another clear parallel with anti-oppression pedagogy. As such, it takes experiential learning to a different level, one that integrates the mind and body with a more holistic value system. As Daniel P. Barbezat and Mirabai Bush, current and founding director of the Center for Contemplative Mind and Society (respectively) define it, contemplative pedagogy has a few basic goals:

1. Focus and attention building, mainly through focusing meditation and exercises that support mental stability.
2. Contemplation and introspection into the content of the course, in which students discover the material in themselves and thus deepen their understanding of the material.
3. Compassion, connection to others, and a deepening sense of the moral and spiritual aspect of education.
4. Inquiry into the nature of their minds, personal meaning, creativity, and insight. (Barbezat and Bush 2014, 11)

Contemplative practices focus on the present moment, helping students cultivate clarity about their internal experiences in any given moment. When used in an academic setting, mindfulness practices have proven to increase students’ concentration, deepen their understanding, increase their emotional intelligence, sustain emotional regulation, and develop their creativity (Barbezat and Bush 2014, 22–32; Goleman 1994).

More and more educators are integrating various contemplative practices into the university classroom in order to help students cultivate presence and self-reflection.

Contemplative pedagogy uses practices that enable deep introspection into meaning, ethics, purpose, and values. They encourage reflection on our internal experience as well as our interdependence with others. Like much anti-oppression pedagogy, contemplative pedagogy challenges the objectivism and empiricism of traditional learning, suggesting that there is much more to learn than a privileging of rational knowledge and scientific methods allow. Without discounting the value of the former, contemplative pedagogy reveals the rich potential of introspection that helps cultivate the depth of our hearts with an eye toward greater sustainability. As Barbezat and Bush write, “[C]ontemplative pedagogy does not supplant or detract from rigorous analytical inquiry . . . rather, they can augment and enhance, and even transform, traditional modes of teaching and learning” (2014, 84). Just as traditional analytical education trains students how to question and perceive in nuanced ways, contemplative pedagogy helps students cultivate a nuanced discernment of their own experience. When it comes to learning about oppression, I argue, one without the other is ultimately ineffective to both understanding how oppression operates and to unlearning it.

Why Mindfulness Is Critical in Courses That Teach about Diversity

Courses that deal with oppression and diversity can greatly benefit from contemplative practices because they can help us unlearn the conditioned responses that uphold systems of oppression. Diversity classes are not just objective studies of content. They also teach self-reflective processes that invite students to examine how systems of oppression affect them and what their roles might be within those systems. Feminist and other diversity classrooms counter a one-dimensional privileging of cognition to highlight an “embodied reflexivity” in which participants learn to reflect on their own ideologies and experiences, question their ways of thinking, and imagine alternatives (Lather 1991, 48).

Contemplative practices enable students to cultivate emotional intelligence, learn to sit with difficult emotions, recognize deeply entrenched narratives they use to interpret the world, cultivate compassion for other people, and become more intentional about how they respond in any given moment. All of these abilities can transform dialogues about power, oppression, and privilege from intense reactionary debates into more relational, empathic, and reflective experiences. By integrating mindfulness into our social justice courses, we can help students learn how to navigate fraught situations in intentional, more compassionate ways. This ability is crucial not only in the academic social justice classroom but also in our broader society.

Oppression leaves its mark on our hearts, bodies, and spirits. Numerous writings by feminists, people of color, LGBT communities, colonized peoples, and people living in poverty have attested to the debilitating effects of oppression on people's very sense of self. It marks all of us, albeit in different ways, whether we are members of dominant groups or of marginalized groups. Indeed, intersectional feminist theory teaches us that while some people fit neatly in the category of "oppressor" or "oppressed," most of us hold identities across these different groups, so that we are at times marginalized and at other times privileged.

For those of us who are marginalized, the violence of oppression wounds and exhausts us. We expend a great deal of energy everyday enduring the microaggressions of oppression, while the macroaggressions may leave a powerfully traumatic mark on us. Oppression can also ooze into our very sense of self through the internalization of negative cultural messages about our group. The consequences of oppression include depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and anger.

Oppression takes a different toll on those in the dominant groups. Though we do not suffer the same kinds of microaggressions and internalized oppression, we also do not get to live into our full humanity. While dominant groups certainly benefit from the privileges we receive, we are also disconnected from others by that very privilege. Many of my students experience a certain amount of dismay and pain when they realize that they accrue daily privileges at the expense of their classmates and community members in marginalized groups. Though some people, obviously, revel in their privilege, I believe that far more people would prefer to dismantle systems of oppression even when they benefit from them. They are often unaware of the deep and difficult work this will entail on their part, but many of my students want a more equitable world, at least theoretically.

The tricky part lies in the fact that we cannot deconstruct oppression on merely theoretical grounds. Of course, we have to engage in social transformation at the collective, societal, and institutional levels, but we also have to do it at the level of the individual. We have to get down and dirty with the hard work on ourselves and in our communities. Since oppression insinuates itself into our lived experiences and our very sense of selves, that is where some of the work lies. Anti-oppression pedagogy demands accountability for our own roles in systems of oppression, whatever those roles might be. But I find that students often feel at a loss about what to do with the intense feelings that arise or how to interrupt deeply entrenched patterns in themselves and others. Recognizing them is a first step, but I have long felt that an entire set of tools are missing from the tool belts we provide students.

Fortunately, mindfulness can help fill that gap by deepening our self-awareness on an embodied level. Rather than merely seeing patterns of oppression in the society around us or even in our external behaviors, we can begin to recognize *how* they have insinuated themselves into our selves, bodies, and spirits. We can learn to recognize the effects in our rapid heartbeat, our anger, our deep

shame or sadness. We can start to recognize how we want to lash out as a defense mechanism that both protects us from external threats and gives us something to focus on besides our pain. While there is a time and place when such lashing out is a necessary survival mechanism, with deeper reflection we might find that that behavior does not serve us in every moment. Mindfulness allows us to be more intentional in our choices. In the remaining part of this chapter, I will outline some of the most critical benefits that mindfulness can bring to anti-oppression pedagogy.

The Ultimate in Applied Learning

Anti-oppression pedagogy centers around active and applied learning. Knowledge is not a static product to be absorbed by the student but rather a dynamic process in which teachers and student co-participate. The sum of what can be created in the collective process is often greater than anything that could have been produced by any one person. While there are, of course, fundamental concepts to be studied, anti-oppression pedagogy also focuses on the power dynamics of knowledge production: who has historically been excluded from that process, what gaps have resulted from those exclusions, and how understanding is altered when multiple voices are included.

Mindfulness is the penultimate form of applied learning, since it cannot be understood in the abstract. *It must be practiced.* The richness of the learning process lies in working with whatever arises, rather than from expecting prescribed or forgone conclusions. Brown University's Contemplative Studies Initiative calls this skill "critical first person inquiry" or the ability to experience something with an open mind and then step back and study the experience (Brown University 2014). This kind of engagement recognizes that learning is not merely intellectual and knowledge is not something "out there," removed from us. What mindfulness practices can bring to anti-oppression pedagogy is a more deeply embodied sense of this process. Just as feminist thought teaches students to analyze conventions long taken for granted, yoga, meditation, and other mindfulness practices invite students "to investigate what we assume to be true through a series of experiments, so that we may relinquish what we have been told and come to our own firsthand understanding about the nature of reality, the world, and ourselves" (Miller 2010, 23). When contemplative pedagogy is combined with feminist analysis, it offers the possibility of embodying wisdom.

Mindful learning, like anti-oppression pedagogy, teaches students an "appropriation of the conditional, or context-dependent, nature of the work and the value of uncertainty" (Langer 1997, 15). In social justice classrooms, students learn that generalizations need to be contextualized in the specificity of identity locations. For instance, though sexism and patriarchy absolutely exist, not all men have power over all women. Men of color, for instance, are marginalized in ways

that White women are not and are often oppressed by White women. Mindful education encourages students to see knowledge as conditional and to examine how different perspectives offer different insights. Looking at something from a variety of perspectives not only helps students get a more well-rounded comprehension of the issue; it also helps them see that all perspectives are partial. Each has its place and each is incomplete.

Mindful learning also helps students learn to trust their own authority, because they get to test it out and examine how well a practice or theory works for them. As Langer (1997) suggests, when conditional and context-dependent learning is valued, it becomes more possible to generate alternatives, because there is a greater openness to possibility and a greater willingness to step off the beaten path.

Cultivating the Discernment to Interrupt Learned Storylines

Most contemplative practices enhance clear seeing and focus, while also enabling an ability to think on one's feet in the moment. They cultivate an ability to see things from multiple perspectives, something that is critical in anti-oppression courses. By developing compassion and empathy, they also strengthen mental and emotional health. These latter aspects of contemplative pedagogy are critical for anti-oppression classrooms, given the emotional and psychological toll oppression takes on everyone, most especially members of marginalized groups. His Holiness the Dalai Lama himself has stated that in "analytic meditation, one brings about inner change through systematic investigation and analysis. In this way we can properly use our human intelligence, our capacity for reason and analysis, to contribute to our happiness and satisfaction" (qtd. in Barbezat and Bush 2014, 84). The combination, I suggest, creates more empowering and sustainable tools for students to not only unlearn oppression but to cultivate more humane ways of relating to one another.

One of the key gifts of mindfulness is that it uncovers the mental chatter that is always present in our minds. While the exact content of that chatter differs from person to person, most of us believe our inner monologues to be "Truth" and, therefore, base our behaviors and actions on them. Mindfulness teaches us to *discern* the difference between our thoughts and our being. As Daniel J. Siegel writes in his book, *The Mindful Brain: Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being*,

Discernment is a form of disidentification from the activity of your own mind: as you become aware of sensations, images, feelings, and thoughts, you come to see these activities of the mind as waves on the surface of the mental sea.

(2007, 19)

This process enables us to "disentangle" from "the chatter of the mind" by recognizing that we are bigger than our thoughts. Our thoughts and emotions are a part of us, but they are not the totality of us (Seigel 2007, 19). When we can recognize that distinction, we can bring a more analytical lens to the chatter in our minds, discern where it comes from, and make more intentional choices about how we want to be in the world. This discernment helps prevent practitioners from drowning in the sea of their emotions.

This skill becomes particularly important for interrupting systems of oppression because much of our chatter is shaped by learned ideologies. Beliefs about ourselves and others are socially produced, as are the power hierarchies that result from them. For most students, these ideologies are so normalized that they just take them for granted. Even those who are from marginalized groups, while they may recognize their oppression, may nevertheless lack the awareness to accurately name what is happening. Mindfulness can help students learn to minimize the damaging effects of oppressive ideologies on their sense of self and learn to interrupt the systems at both individual and structural levels. Similarly, students who are members of dominant groups in society are taught not to see the privileges they receive. Often they have learned a sense of superiority and entitlement that remains invisible to them. This is how systems of oppression work: when privileged students come to our classes unaware of the benefits they receive that are denied those of marginalized groups, that is the oppressive system working the way it is designed to work. Intersectional feminism reveals this process to be even more complicated, since many of us receive benefits in some ways and are oppressed in others, which manifests in similarly complex dynamics in the classroom.

Our job as teachers is to help our students develop an awareness of this process so that they can learn to interrupt the system. Most anti-oppression teachers make this the central tenet of our classes. We generally do a good job of revealing inequitable power dynamics throughout society and the ideologies that fuel them. But these learned ideologies operate at more than merely an intellectual level, so analytical awareness is not enough. Oppressive ideologies insinuate themselves into our very selves, which means that they inevitably inform that mental chatter I mentioned earlier. While many writers discuss kinds of life experiences that inform our mental narratives, it stands to reason that some of those narratives are shaped by the oppressive ideologies that so deeply influence society and the construction of identity. Women's Studies critics, for instance, have long noted that ideologies of beauty and the devaluation of women have detrimental effect on women. Women's Studies courses help students develop media literacy and understand the effects of those portrayals on women's self-esteem and body image. This is a critical step in the unlearning process. But these ideologies so deeply inform many women's internal self-talk. It takes the capacity to recognize that negative mental chatter and the skills to

interrupt it if we are to truly unearth the seeds of oppression. That means, for most of us, reworking our very wiring.

The good news is that mindfulness can help us do just that. Leading contemplative neuroscientist Dr. Richard Davidson, the William James and Vilas Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, has used developments in MRI technology to measure the effects of meditation on the brain. His work reveals that, unlike previously thought, the adult brain actually has a great deal of plasticity, which means that deep cognitive changes can still occur throughout adulthood (Davidson and Begley 2012; *Free the Mind* 2012). While much of this research focuses on conditions such as PTSD and depression, on the one hand, or compassion and empathy, on the other, it reveals that deeply ingrained pathways that have become automatic can, indeed, be interrupted. They can be reworked not just on a one-time basis but in more sustainable ways. This plasticity could prove valuable in social justice classes, since oppressive ideologies that inform practices and behaviors are learned and deeply ingrained. If the storylines we repeatedly narrate to ourselves are laced with oppressive ideologies—and I argue that they inevitably are—then the ability to pause those storylines and even rewrite them can go a long way toward creating a more just world. Thus, while Davidson and his colleagues do not necessarily apply their findings about adult neuroplasticity to issues of oppression, I think they offer profound possibilities for our work as social justice teachers. This work reveals that we can choose to feed the part of ourselves that can create more empowering worlds—such as our compassion and kindness—by engaging in regular mindfulness practice. Let me reiterate here that I am *not* saying that we can “choose not to be affected by oppression.” That, of course, is not possible. But we can claim some degree of agency about how deeply oppression erodes our sense of self and rework how our self relates to others. When combined with structural change, these steps can take us a long way toward creating a more just world.

Deepening Self-Reflection

Feminist and anti-oppression pedagogy mark self-reflection as a central ingredient for a transformational learning process. In this context, self-reflection usually means examining our own positionality in society, our role(s) in power systems, and an evaluation of how issues affect our personal lives. It involves questioning how we both uphold and can interrupt power systems. The reflection that contemplative pedagogy allows is an internal one that explores an individual's emotional, physiological, and cognitive responses. As such, it provides an added dimension to the analytical and structural analysis emphasized in anti-oppression pedagogy. If students are to really reflect on their roles in systems of oppression, they need to cultivate the tools for recognizing and understanding their internal and external reactions to that growing awareness. Like holding a camera,

our positionality frames what we can and cannot immediately see. The critical self-reflection tools cultivated in mindfulness, combined with a feminist analytical understanding, helps us see that who we are shapes what we know, but it also helps us expand the lens of what we can see. This reflexivity helps students examine how their beliefs, values, and emotions affect them, enabling students “to critically analyze dominant belief systems, recognize how others have imposed limiting beliefs on them, and liberate themselves from those negative views” (Rendón 2014, 102).

I argue that mindfulness is a critical and often missing component in this self-reflection. Mindfulness invites us to reflect not only on what we are thinking but also on what we are feeling. By teaching practitioners to be more fully present in the moment, they become much more familiar with their personal responses, feelings, and thoughts. Mindfulness practices take a variety of forms, all of which develop the introspection through which we recognize, understand, and befriend our patterns. In doing so, we learn a great deal about ourselves. We become familiar with how we respond to various matters, how those responses feel in our bodies, and how they tend to manifest in our external behaviors. Just as anti-oppression pedagogy teaches how to recognize patterns in society, mindfulness teaches us how to recognize patterns in ourselves, including the mental tapes that play and the embodied effects they have. We begin to see not only what happens in our intellects but also how it rests in our bodies: what triggers our fears, resentments, and insecurities. We begin to see how we respond to those emotions: how they manifest in our bodies (rapid heartbeat, cold sweats, panic) and how we typically react to them (do we shut down or lash out?).

Mindful learning does not assume that students will take things for granted but instead invites them to engage in experiential inquiry. Contemplative practices help students cultivate the *Witness*, which allows one to be fully in an experience and simultaneously bigger than it. Rather than being entirely consumed by an experience, students are invited to have an experience and then step back and reflect upon it. As such, mindfulness takes the self-reflection that is at the heart of feminist pedagogy a step deeper. Rather than taking a teacher's word for it, students are expected to try it themselves and see what happens.

Much like feminism requires us to reflect on our own process and consider what did and did not work, mindfulness teaches us to work with whatever arises for us. There is not an ideal goal; instead, whatever resistance, avoidance, joy, or thoughts, or preoccupations arise as we meditate is precisely what we need to reflect upon. They lead us to the internal work we need to do. The *Witness* teaches us to accept our emotions, be with them in the present but also to be bigger than they are. It creates a distance between our basic selves and whatever we are feeling in the moment. This distance is not the same as disassociation, because we are still fully feeling our responses, but we also recognize that they *need not consume us* because they are only a part of us.

This mindful embodied learning is a crucial component to anti-oppression pedagogy because it teaches us how to meet our responses with clarity and compassion. Only then can we begin to unlearn these deeply embedded responses. Creating a more just society requires institutional and collective change, but it also requires the individual work of unlearning the messages internalized in an oppressive society and relearning more compassionate ways of being with ourselves and others. That work cannot be done at a merely analytical level. It MUST be done at the level of our hearts, bodies, *and* our minds.

Create a Gap between Reaction and Response

One of my yoga teachers calls this tool the “holy pause.” In that pause, students can learn to accept their reactions—whatever they may be—and then thoughtfully decide how and whether to engage them. Those of us who teach about diversity issues have likely had the experience of students blurting out a statement that, intentionally or not, reinforces racism, sexism, homophobia, or some other “ism.” These outbursts occur because students have learned oppressive messages from society and may not recognize how deeply those messages shape their ways of thinking. Even if they do recognize the deep ideologies, they likely will not be able to unlearn those heavily reinforced messages overnight. Indeed, given how effectively systems of oppression work, I think we should be surprised if these moments do not occur in our classroom, rather than discouraged when they do.

When these outbursts happen, the other students in the room tend to “react” back. Students might get defensive and lash out; they might become hurt and shut down; they might look to the teacher to “interrupt the moment.” The level of trust and community that has been established in the class will shape how effectively the other students handle the situation. The teacher is in the position of turning the situation into a “teachable moment” that validates the responses of the students who are angry and hurt but also reaches the student who blurted the statement out. I see these kinds of situations as key opportunities for mindfulness to enhance anti-oppression pedagogy, because these moments in our classrooms also occur in our broader communities—the former is a microcosm of the latter. Helping students learn how to navigate these moments in successful ways in the classroom provides them with invaluable tools they can continue to utilize throughout their life.

Mindfulness lets us become very self-aware of what is arising for us and allows us the time to: 1. accept what we are feeling; 2. discern the situation with some clarity; and 3. determine more intentionally how we want to respond. These are crucial steps in developing more compassionate and effective social change efforts that are strategic rather than reactionary. Mindfulness creates an internal self-reflection that enables a pause between our gut reactions and our external responses. In other words, as we recognize our reactions, we also become more

capable of deciding more intentionally how we might want to respond. While our automatic responses have their place and are sometimes necessary survival mechanisms, they do not always serve us. Mindfulness can help us more effectively choose what will be helpful to us and to the situation in any given moment.

Understanding the Responses of Others

When we befriend and understand our own responses, we have a better framework for understanding those of others. When mindful awareness is situated within a feminist analysis of sociopolitical power dynamics, we have a more comprehensive and sensitive way to understand WHY people respond the way they do. We can see their reactions as *the inevitable by-products of living in an oppressive society*. This understanding does not mean we excuse people’s hurtful behaviors, but it does help us learn to see how systems of oppression work through and on individuals.

This brings a couple different layers of insight into the classroom. It can prevent the easy dismissal of the reactions from oppressed groups because their classmates can situate their responses within histories of oppression. For instance, women are often accused of “overreacting” to a particular sexist comment, while people of color are often accused of being too sensitive if they get angry at a comment that they experience as racist. To the classmate who just said it, it seems like a simple comment that is being blown out of proportion, so they blame the victim and reduce the significance of the comment. That situation can be reframed if we as teachers help students understand that for the member of the marginalized group, this is the thousandth time such a microaggression has occurred, so it acts like pouring lemon juice on an open wound which never gets the chance to heal because it keeps getting poked.

For the member of the marginalized group, it can be helpful to understand that their classmate is speaking from years of accumulated acculturation into systems of oppression. That does not excuse their behavior, but it does help situate it. This realization can be particularly helpful when the microaggression comes from a person they considered their ally. Perhaps this person is well-intentioned and has done a great deal of work building trust and trying to unlearn oppression. Nevertheless, they will likely reproduce systems of oppression at some point, albeit unwittingly. Depending on the level of violence of this infraction, the marginalized person might need to sever relationships with the person. But it might also be possible to recognize that the individual is a product of his/her/zir culture and that his/her/zir unlearning process is likely a lifelong process that will involve a great many mistakes. Rather than ignoring the mistake on one hand or writing them off on the other, mindfulness offers another option: holding each other accountable and having a hard conversation about why the microaggression was hurtful.

We cannot hope to have our allies unlearn their own privilege if we do not work on unlearning ours. We must start with ourselves, do our own work (whatever it is), before we can expect others to do their work. At the same time, however, I do not think it is helpful to rank oppressions. Instead, we all need to do the work simultaneously. We can learn to have more compassion for our allies who slip and fall when we recognize the myriad of ways we slip and fall, participating in microaggressions even when we strive not to do so. As a White, Western, middle-class woman, there are all sorts of ways I participate in oppression, even when I struggle daily to unlearn and interrupt my privilege. As a queer woman, I am also marginalized in many ways. Recognizing my power, privilege, and marginalization allows me to do my work and to have more compassion for others who are doing theirs. When I am mindful of the moments when I inadvertently uphold oppression, I have more compassion for those people who inadvertently marginalize me. That does not mean I do not get angry, challenge them, or hold them accountable. But it does prevent me from demonizing them, because I recognize that we are all in this together. This context helps us relate to people in more compassionate ways and helps us develop responses that neither oversimplify nor demonize the reactions of others.

Mindfulness, then, helps us strengthen our capacity for compassion. Davidson's now famous studies with Buddhist monks reveal that even when exposed to extremely disturbing stimuli, they had the ability to activate the parts of their brain responsible for compassion and empathy (Davidson 2012). Further studies by Davidson and his team indicate that compassion meditation in particular can regulate emotions and intentionally stimulate the parts of our brain responsible for kindness and compassion. Studies have shown that consistency of practice is more important than length of practice, which means that even a daily practice of ten to twenty minutes can provide positive results. (Moore et al. 2012; Ricard 2006).

One central component to mindfulness is a nonjudgmental acceptance of what is. Practitioners learn to accept their reactions, whatever they may be, as a first step toward befriending ourselves. In the context of anti-oppression pedagogy, it is important to note that *accepting our responses is not the same thing as accepting oppression*. Instead, it is a way of validating our own experiences and feelings, rather than perpetuating the violence of oppression by condemning our own reactions. Mindfulness enables us to gradually understand and befriend our experiences, which can actually serve as a tool to counter oppression. We can learn to meet ourselves with compassion, which can help heal the deep wounds of oppression. When we can meet ourselves with deep kindness and compassion, we can also more fully empathize with others, which counters the separation and Othering that uphold oppressive systems.

Tips for Integrating Mindfulness into Social Justice Courses

Since this book is focused on the praxis of integrating mindfulness into anti-oppression pedagogy, each chapter will include practical tips for doing so. In this chapter, I will address some of the responses one can expect when beginning this process of integration.

1. Colleagues and Students May Meet These Steps with Skepticism

Our colleagues in more traditional disciplines will likely scoff at mindfulness as a pedagogical tool. Its growing popularity in the West, with the scientific evidence that attests to its benefits, is certainly granting it increasing credibility. Still, we may find we need to “justify” or validate our use of it in our classroom.

Similar doubts may come from social justice colleagues and students, who see it as detracting from the “real” social justice work. They may squirm impatiently as we lead a meditation or a breath exercise, wishing we would get to the “more important” social analysis. Be prepared to sit with these reactions, explain what mindfulness offers social justice work, and invite them to give it a try.

2. Social Justice Colleagues May Dismiss Mindfulness Practices as a Way of “Protecting” Students From Doing the Hard Work of Facing Their Own Racism, Sexism, Classism, or Homophobia

As self-reflective teachers and mindfulness practitioners, it is important to carefully consider these concerns. Ask ourselves honestly if mindfulness practices are deflecting or deepening this work. Like any pedagogical tool, they can be used in a variety of ways, some of which are counter-productive to social justice goals. However, as we will see throughout this book, when used in particular ways, mindfulness techniques can help students and teachers do the work of unlearning oppression in deeper, more embodied, ways. They also enhance emotional intelligence and resilience for our students, which are critical benefits for supporting them in continuing the work of unlearning oppression long after the end of a semester's class or even a four-year-degree.

3. The Language of Acceptance and Compassion that Informs Mindfulness Will Be Seen by Some Social Justice Colleagues as “Watering Down” the Importance of “Fighting” against Systematic Violence

I have had more than one colleague express hesitation that mindfulness will simply “coddle” privileged students and dismiss the pain and anger of marginalized students. These are legitimate concerns that anyone utilizing contemplative practices

in the classroom needs to consider. However, I would argue that, when done properly, it does precisely the opposite. As Musial notes, “caring is not about cod-ling students, it is about being completely present with individuals” and meeting them where they are (2012, 221). I was initially disheartened when I heard that response from my social justice colleagues, but I have come to accept that we may simply disagree about the best ways to reach a common goal. I believe that mindfulness provides a deeply needed seed for sustainability in our efforts toward social change. Mindfulness offers the tools for students to learn to support themselves and one another in the experience of any emotion—anger, frustration, sadness, guilt, fear—and can help them stay present together as they work through those complex discussions in the classroom.

Emphasizing compassion and peace does not preclude battling oppression or dismantling systems. The language of compassion and peace I use here comes from socially engaged mindfulness activists from a variety of traditions, including the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, the Tibetan leader His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the nonviolent philosophy of Mohatma Gandhi, the feminism of bell hooks and Audre Lorde, along with centuries of yogi and meditation scholars, many of whom addressed the inequalities of society. Drawing on both feminist pedagogy scholars and yoga philosophy, Jennifer Musial calls it a “heart-centered” pedagogy (2012, 215). Indeed, I arrived at this approach because it was a more sustainable for me. After years of teaching Women’s Studies courses in the academy, I found the approach of “fighting” oppression without the complementary ingredient of compassion and healing left me feeling like I was doing more violence to myself and others—constantly challenging without having the capacity to rebuild more equitable and socially just alternatives. I see social justice, mindfulness, and anti-oppression pedagogy as supporting each other as we seek to create empowering alternatives and support our students in doing this work for the rest of their lives.

4. *Talking About Oppression May Be Seen as Disturbing the “Peace” of Mindfulness Spaces*

Some mindfulness colleagues may express frustration that we are bringing critique and social issues into the supposedly “peaceful” realm of meditation and yoga. They might bristle at being challenged on their privilege. This accusation is nothing new for those of us who do this work. What is unique about this context is that too often these practices are seen as “escapes” from life that should remain removed from critical analysis. While I do believe that there are some ways of being that require modes of inquiry other than intellectual critique, I also believe that mindfulness spaces need to address social justice concerns if they are truly to live up to their potential. As Rendón writes, “When all we do is focus our self-awareness without a concomitant emphasis on social consciousness and

action, what remains is a self-serving, individual blindness to world needs” (2014, 9). For instance, those of us who discuss racism, sexism, or homophobia in yoga studios are often accused of being disruptive, as though these issues are not already in those spaces and too often are not named. The claim that the yoga studio is people’s “escape” from the harsh realities of life does not hold when U.S. yoga studios are so predominantly White, heteronormative, and middle- to-upper class. More and more activists, including the Yoga and Body Image Coalition, an organization in which I am member, are raising these conversations in order to make those spaces more inclusive and more informed. The integration of mindfulness and social justice is a dialectical and mutually transformative process.

5. *Some Students Will Dislike Some of the Practices*

No mindfulness practice is a silver bullet that will meet all the needs of every student. We should be skeptical of anything that claims otherwise. It is helpful to prepare students ahead of time that some practices will resonate with them more than others and to create spaces to discuss what did and did not work for students after each practice. That also means integrating a range of practices so that hopefully something will resonate with each student. Alternatively, a class might focus on one or two particular practices so as to develop depth and consistency throughout the semester. In the latter case, students should be informed of that expectation at the very beginning of the semester, in time for them to drop the class if they are unable to participate in the practices for any reason. It is also incumbent on the professor to work with students to make the practices accessible for everyone if they are required for the class; that may mean offering alternatives for some students.

6. *The Pressure to Place Content over Process in Limited Class Time*

This is a tricky one, often informed by our own internalized paradigms as teachers that the content is actually more important than this “out-of-the-box” mindfulness practice. Our students and colleagues cannot be expected to accept the value of these practices if we doubt them ourselves (believing in their value is not the same thing as suggesting that they are silver-bullet, universal fixes). So we must try to resist the urge to cut mindfulness practices in favor of devoting more class time to content. (I myself have been guilty of doing this, but when I do, the mindfulness practices do not have their desired effect.)

The best way of countering the content-over-practice paradigm is to clearly articulate the value of the process itself. Explain why and how you are using mindfulness in the classroom and why it brings such valuable contributions to social justice work. Help students see that often, the “resistance” that arises in doing the practices is precisely the material we need to work with, just as the

“resistance” that arises in working against power and privilege often highlights the exact power dynamics we are trying to dismantle. The teacher can facilitate reflective discussions about the process itself, thereby modeling the experiential process.

Unlearning oppression in the college classroom usually produces some intense discussions, and I believe that teachers have an ethical responsibility to prepare students for the affective rawness that can emerge through this kind of pedagogy and to provide them with tools to handle it. Class discussions can flow more effectively if participants are able to recognize, understand, and be accountable for their own reactions. Contemplative practices offer the tools to do just that. When learned and practiced effectively, mindfulness also offers more compassionate alternatives to the ways that people often engage the challenging conversations about diversity. As such, I believe they are a necessary addition to diversity classrooms. Neither anti-oppression pedagogy nor contemplative education are enough on their own, but their integration can provide a powerful recipe for enabling social transformation through the learning—and unlearning—process.

Mindfulness Practices

Each chapter will include at least one specific mindfulness practice related. This first one focuses on developing more general mindful awareness, as we first need that before we can move it into the more complicated and fraught context of anti-oppression work.

Mindfulness Check-In

Read the directions over first before starting so that you do not have to interrupt your inward focus to read. If it would make it easier for you to have a guided meditation, you can record yourself reading the directions or use the MP3 of this meditation on my web site. Have a notebook and pen handy for the follow-up reflection activity.

Find a quiet space where you can sit with minimal distraction for 5–7 minutes. Dim the lights, light a candle (or use a battery operated one if candles are not allowed), turn off the music, silence your cell phone, and minimize any other noises.

Take a good seat. You might want to sit up on some blankets or a cushion so that your pelvis tilts slightly forward and your knees angle down a bit. Alternatively, you can sit on a chair, making sure your feet are flat on the ground and only your lower spine is resting against the back of the chair. Your palms can be open or closed, resting gently on your upper thighs or knees.

Take a few deep breaths. Feel the breath move all the way through your lungs and into your belly as you inhale. Exhale from your belly through your lungs and out your mouth. As you breathe three or four times, imagine your breath wiping away all the thoughts of the day and bringing your attention to the here and now.

Now let your breath return to normal.

Once you feel fairly present, turn your attention inward. What are you feeling right now? Can you detect the emotions that are swirling through you? Do you notice worry? Excitement? Anger? Joy? Fear?

Where do you notice the emotions in your body? Do they rest in your heart? Your head? Tension in your shoulders? A fluttering in your belly? See if you can find them in your body. Do they have color or texture? Are they cool and blue or fiery and rough?

Try to familiarize yourself with your emotions and how your body holds them. Most importantly, try not to judge them. You are allowed to feel whatever you feel. At this point, we are just trying to recognize them. We'll work more with them later.

Try not to get caught up in the storyline of thoughts. Just notice the thoughts and let them go, like a leaf floating by on a river. Take note of the emotion behind the thought and then let it go.

As we move toward the close of our meditation, take 4–5 deep, cleansing breaths. With each breath, gradually move your attention back outward, maybe gently inviting some movement back into your fingers and toes. When you are ready, open your eyes.

Journal Reflection

Allow yourself to sit quietly for a moment, digesting your experience and returning to the outer world. Then journal for a few minutes to record your experience. What did you notice about your emotions: color, texture, location. If none of that stood out to you and your observations were to merely name the emotions, that's OK, too. Jot that down.

Where do you think some of these emotions come from? Here it is OK for you to follow your thoughts. Unlike in meditation, where we want to stay with the visceral emotions, in your journal, it would be helpful for you to discern where some of the emotions come from. For instance, if you noticed a solid knot in your belly during your meditation, in your journal, you might explore what is causing that feeling.

Simple Practices to Cultivate Mindfulness

1. Declare the classroom a “Cell phone-free space.” Students are not to check their cell phones during the class. While many faculty members have this rule anyway, the purpose here is to prevent distractions and multitasking that can impede full presence.
2. Pause and breathe in between each comment. Rather than the usual non-stop flow of a class discussion, implement a “pause and breathe” pattern. Students

are to listen to the speaker, then turn inward, breathe, and reflect on what the person said. Only then can the hands go up for the next comment.

- Journal: add a journaling piece to the previous step. Have students jot down a few notes about their initial reactions to whatever was just said. The idea here is not for them to write down thoughts, but rather feel sense: the emotions that arise, what is happening in their body, their gut reactions.

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2

BRINGING THE BODY BACK IN

You can't dominate a people without separating them from each other and from themselves. The more people get plugged back into their bodies, each other, the more impossible [it] will be for us to be dominated and occupied. That is the work right now.
—Eve Ensler (2013)

Mindful education not only echoes many of the principles of anti-oppression pedagogy, it also deepens them by bringing an embodied layer into the learning process. More precisely, it highlights the embodied layer that is always present for us but that often remains buried deep below our thinking mind. The legacy of the Western mind/body dualism places much greater emphasis on the intellect than on most other aspects of our being. As we saw in Chapter 1, trends toward holistic learning call for a more well-rounded and inclusive education (Brown University 2011; Palmer and Zajonc with Scribner 2010; Shapiro, Brown and Astin 2008). As important as these calls are, they still tend to refer to student lives inside and outside the classroom, rather than to workings of power and ideology inside and outside the individual and between the individual and the collective. While much education seeks to be transformative, social justice courses, in particular, urge participants to “walk the talk,” which means that our belief systems inform our choices. We also teach students how to collectively organize, so that they learn how groups and individuals make change in their communities. Mindful anti-oppression pedagogy posits that there is yet another layer of change that is necessary: one that is embodied and that requires learning to turn within in order to effectively transform both ourselves and the larger collective.

Reclaiming embodiment is critical for well-being, resilience, and the ability to make healthy and informed choices in life. Resilience, in the words of yoga

JUSTIFY MY LOVE¹

by

Daniel Boyarin

Daniel Boyarin is Taubman Professor of Talmudic Culture in the departments of Near Eastern and Women's Studies at the University of California at Berkeley. His two most recent books are *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) and *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). The present essay is excerpted from the introduction to his forthcoming *Judaism as a Gender; or, the Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man: An Autobiography*.

From almost the first sentence in my first preparatory course in reading the Talmud, I was charmed—in the full antique sense of the word. Here was a world so strange and rich, so colorful and exciting, with myths and legends, challenges to the intellect, and most of all, personalities rendered so vital that they seemed living men, men, moreover, who devoted their lives to the elaboration of what it means to live correctly as a Jew. And all this was “mine.” I became Orthodox for love of the Talmud. I admit freely, if ruefully, that it was all so absorbing that I hardly noticed at all that they *were* all men, or that the text was primarily addressed to me just because I was a Jewish *man*. I failed to see the exclusions and oppressions that those facts encode and mystify.

I believe there is no textual product of human culture quite like the jumbled, carnivalesque, raucous, vulgar, vital, exciting Talmud, nor any practice quite like the practices of study that characterize it and the way of life it subtends. And just as the Talmud entranced me, so much that I

¹ Many warm thanks to Laura Levitt and Miriam Peskowitz—colleagues in the richest sense of the word. Their help here has gone far beyond the work of editors.

decided to devote my life to it, others have been drawn to it, including women and lesbian people. I feel a deep love for and connection to rabbinic texts and culture, and more so, to the Rabbis themselves. But there is much that I find deeply disturbing as well, and much of that has to do with the oppression of women.

My endeavor is to justify my love, that is, both to explain it and to make it just. I explain my devotion in part by showing that Judaism provides exempla and ideals for an Other kind of masculinity, one in which men do not manifest “a deeply rooted concern about the possible meanings of dependence on other males,”² and thus one within which “feminization” is not experienced as a threat or a danger. I cannot, however, paper over, ignore, or explain away the oppressions of women and lesbian people that this culture has practiced, and therefore, I endeavor as well to render my love just by presenting a way of reading the tradition that may help it surmount or expunge—in time—that which I, and many others, can no longer live with. In this respect, my project is homologous to other political and cultural acts of resistance in the face of colonialisms.

For some three hundred years now, Jews have been the target of Western and Central Europe’s civilizing mission. Laura Levitt makes palpably clear the homologies between the “liberal” colonizing impulse directed locally toward those Others within Europe, and outward, toward those colonized outside Europe’s geographic borders, insofar as both were made to “reform” their sexual practices in order to conform to the liberal bourgeois regime.³ One of the most common of liberal justifications for the extension of colonial control over a given people and for the maintenance of the civilizing mission is the imputed barbarity of the treatment of women within the culture under attack. The fact that Jewish women behaved in ways that European bourgeois society considered masculine was simply monstrous to the civilizing mission and its Jewish collaborators—the “Enlighteners.” This civilizing mission, in turn, led to the development of modern Jewish culture, with its liberal, bourgeois aspirations and its preferred patterns of gendered life. As Paula Hyman has

²Lee Edelman, “Redeeming the Phallus: Wallace Stevens, Frank Lentricchia, and the Politics of (Hetero)sexuality,” in *Engendering Men*, ed. Joseph A. Boone and Michael Cadden (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 50.

³Laura Levitt, *Reconfiguring Home: Jewish Feminist Identities* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Emory University, 1993), pp. 152–173, forthcoming as *Ambivalent Embraces* (New York: Routledge).

recently demonstrated, the very religiosity of the modern bourgeois Jewish family is an assimilating mimicry of Protestant middle-class piety, not least in its portrayal of proper womanhood.⁴ The richness of Jewish life and difference has largely been lost. I think the gains that the European Enlightenment held for Jewish women have been largely illusory. So the Jewish anticolonial project (perhaps like many others) may seek to protect traditional culture from destruction from without. But such a project must also engage a trenchant, unflinching, and unapologetic internal critique of the harsh oppressions within that very culture.

I repeat that I deeply love and feel connected to rabbinic texts and culture, but there is much within them that disturbs me. Jewish culture may have been a place of safety for the sissy, but it has hardly—to understate—provided such felicitous conditions for Jewish women. My project is a feminist one, to the extent that it owes its life to feminism and the work of feminist critics. The tasks of male self-fashioning have consequences for women. Male critique of masculinity can be feminist, as Tania Modleski states, when “it analyzes male power, male hegemony, with a concern for the effects of this power on *the female subject* and with an awareness of how frequently male subjectivity works to appropriate ‘femininity’ while oppressing women.”⁵ I try to meet Modleski’s challenge, in the process of reclaiming Judaic culture from the depredations of the civilizing, colonizing onslaught to which it has been subject(ed). I want to keep from interfering with—and perhaps even contribute to—the ongoing project of feminist critique of that same traditional culture that I seek to uphold. Whether or not my work is part of the solution, I do not want it to be part of the problem. Thus the duality of my political project: to resist the delegitimizing of Judaic culture from without, and to support the feminist critique from within.

In some sense I have always been more of a “girl” than a “boy.” I was a sissy who did not like sports. I want to find in the Talmud a genealogy for the sissy, the Jewish male femme, and to use this genealogy as a positive site for a critical practice. As I came of age in New Jersey, my mother used to holler at me, stop reading and go out and play. And, in fifth grade I went out for—ballet, which I explained to the guys as a kind

⁴Paula E. Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), pp. 26–27.

⁵Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a “Postfeminist” Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 7.

of sophisticated body-building. In itself, this is a rather familiar story, a story of inexplicable gender dysphoria. It had for me, even then, a rather happy end: I didn’t think of myself so much as girlish but rather as Jewish.

I start with what I think is a widespread sensibility in our culture, that being Jewish renders a boy effeminate. Recognition of this sensibility could have led me to try to “pass,” to become a “man.” But in my case, it reinforced the desire to remain a Jew, where being a sissy was all right. To be sure, this has meant accepting a marginal status, and it has left me with a persistent sense of standing on the outside of something and looking in, with my nose pressed to the glass. Still, my understanding of the cultural and communal place that a sissy occupied in my social world was not one that enforced rage and self-contempt.

There is critical force left in the idea of a culture and a cultural memory within which “real men” were sissies. Rather than denying the image of the effeminate Jewish man as an antisemitic fantasy, my theoretical-political work attempts to reclaim it. I find in the nineteenth-century Austrian notion of the feminized Jewish male only one example of a Jewish ideal that goes back to the Babylonian Talmud. In this ideal I hope to locate a model for a gentle, nurturing masculinity (no matter how often it was, or was not, realized); a man who could be so comfortable with his little, fleshy penis that he would not have to grow it into “The Phallus,” a sort of velvet John. The feminized Jewish male, colonized and considered contemptible in the past—both by the dominant culture and by those Jews who internalized its values—may be useful today. “He” may help us in the attempt to construct an alternative masculine subjectivity that does not rely on such cultural archetypes as Iron Johns, knights, hairy men, and warriors within.

Thinking about the sissy body of the “Jewish man,” I think simultaneously about another discourse and practice—one that is possibly but not necessarily liberatory—that constructs the male body in a very different way. The “gay male gym body” is another body constructed as an alternative to that of the heterosexual male. David Halperin (following in part D. A. Miller) has recently given us a brilliant and moving account: “What distinguishes the gay male gym body, then, in addition to its spectacular beauty, is the way it advertises itself as an object of desire. Gay muscles do not signify power.” He makes the impeccable point that the (ideal) gay male body does not look at all like the straight macho body:

[Gym bodies] are explicitly designed to be an erotic turn-on, and in their very solicitation of desire they deliberately flaunt the visual norms of straight masculinity, which impose discretion on masculine self-display and require that straight male beauty exhibit itself only casually or inadvertently, that it

refuse to acknowledge its own strategies. If, as Foucault hypothesized in *Discipline and Punish*, those whom modern disciplinary society would destroy it first makes visible, then gay male body-builders, in visibly inscribing their erotic desires on the surfaces of their bodies, have not only exposed themselves to considerable social risks in the course of pursuing their ethical projects but have also performed a valuable political service on behalf of everyone, insofar as they have issued a challenge of defiance to the very mechanisms of modern discipline.⁵

All this is unarguable, but it nevertheless maintains a standard for male beauty whose form of muscular development emphasizes the dimorphism of the gendered body and thus participates in, rather than resists, the general cultural standard of masculinity.

The pale, limp, and semiotically unaggressive "nelly" or sissy male body is not seen as beautiful or as erotic at all—but, it can be. Lori Lefkowitz makes the point that in midrash, Joseph's body is explicitly designed to be an erotic turn-on, but not on the model of the muscle-Jew. He pencils his eyes, curls his hair, lifts his heels. Moreover, his beauty is like that of his mother Rachel, and it was this beauty that so attracted Potiphar's wife and indeed all of the noblewomen of Egypt!⁷ Thus, on the one hand, I think that Halperin is clearly right that "the hypermasculine look of gay clones is deceiving. What the new styles of gay virility represent, paradoxically, is a strategy for valorizing various practices of devirilization under the sign of masculinity, thereby forging a new association between masculinity and sexual receptivity or penetrability, while detaching male homosexuality from its phobic association with 'femininity' (conceived in phallic terms as 'passivity' or as an absence of phallic aggressivity)."⁸ On the other hand, I fear this strategy backfires, insofar as it continues to register only one kind of male body—"clonedom"—as attractive (I do not claim, of course, that this is true for all gay male culture). But just as the gay male gym body dislodges the negatively coded sense of passivity and separates it from a stereotyped "femininity," so must a new view devalorize a masculinity whose image is concentrated in the penetrating penis—gay or straight—, and one which conceives this as

⁵David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 117.

⁷Lori Lefkowitz, "Coats and Tales: Joseph Stories and Myths of Jewish Masculinity," in Harry Brod, *A Mensch Among Men: Explorations in Jewish Masculinity* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1988), p. 21.

⁸Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, p. 90.

phallic aggressivity. In this same way, the valorization of masculinity as "topness" can give way to a better valuation of receptivity, or "bottomness," in all sectors of our sexual culture.⁹

One place to find the eroticized sissy is in a reading of the rabbinic textual tradition. This tradition clearly privileges sexual connections between men and women (to understate the case).¹⁰ And it also clearly prescribes some forms of social domination of men over women. At the same time, sexually, it does not privilege "masculine" "tops" over "feminine" "bottoms." Nor does it stigmatize "femininity" in anything like the ways that hegemonic European culture has come to, particularly since the nineteenth century. In part, Jewish culture demystifies European gender ideologies by reversing their terms. This is not, I hasten to emphasize, an essentially liberatory process. It can be mobilized—strategically—for liberation.

As a tool for liberation, my project of reclaiming the eroticized Jewish male sissy faces a conflicted legacy, in that the traditional valorization of "effeminacy" for Jewish men hardly secured good news for Jewish women. There is no question that women were disenfranchised in many ways in traditional Jewish culture. The culture authorized, even if it did not mandate, efflorescences of misogyny. If the ideal Jewish male femme has some time a critique must be mounted against "him" for his oppression of Jewish women—and indeed, frequently enough, for his class-based oppression of other Jewish men as well, namely the "ignorant" who were sometimes characterized as being "like women."¹¹ Any attempt at a male feminist rereading of Jewish tradition must come to terms with this material fact and with the legacies of pain that it has left behind. My goal is not to preserve rabbinic Judaism "as we know it," but to reconstruct a rabbinic Judaism that will be quite different in some ways from the one we know and yet be and feel authentically grounded in the tradition of the Rabbis. My work is one of changing ethos and culture, and I hope it joins with a stream of feminist work on rabbinic Judaism that includes the

⁹Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed., *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture, Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 300.

¹⁰But see Daniel Boyarin, "Are There Any Jews in the 'History of Sexuality'?", *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (1995): 333-355.

¹¹Chava Weissler, "For Women and for Men Who Are Like Women," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5 (1989): 7-24.

researches of Judith Baskin, Judith Hauptman, Miriam Peskowitz, Laura Levitt, Susan Shapiro, and others.

Certain apologies for Judaism have used the fact of Jewish women's economic activity in traditional culture as an alibi for the entire system of oppression of women. This economic activity, however real, was a double-edged sword. Iris Parush has captured something of this paradoxical double charge of Jewish gender culture in modern Europe: "Over the years, the lifestyle which crystallized in Jewish society caused the men to cluster under the sacred tent of Torah study, and the women to stand at the front line of the daily confrontation with the outside world. . . . An interesting combination of weakness and power—of inferiority in terms of the traditional Jewish perspective, and superiority in terms of the trends of Europeanization—opened the 'door of opportunity,' so to speak, for certain circles of the female population."¹² The "fact," then, that Jewish women (of certain classes) had opportunities in the secular world and access to education and economic power and autonomy beyond those of their husbands must not be permitted to erase the fact that within Jewish culture these roles were genuinely less valued than those of men. The time for the apologetic strategy of pointing to "positive" structures or ideals, and allowing them to excuse whole systems of repression has passed. I do not have no desire to return to it, for it is fundamentally reactionary. I do not want to discount, excuse, or pretend that there was not powerful oppression of women, but rather, to displace that oppression by arguing that such abuse is the product of a particular reading of the past and its canonical texts; a reading that is not ineluctable. I hope, then, to make a very different move: to maintain the passion of critique of what has been, and simultaneously, to mobilize that same past for a different future by consciously reinterpreting it.

To participate in this work is the calling of the scholar. My role model for this kind of scholarship is Bertha Pappenheim, cohort of such giants of Jewish scholarship as Shmuel Krauss, and, among her accomplishments, teacher in Rosenzweig and Buber's *Lehrhaus*. I want to claim Bertha Pappenheim as a model for an alternative to the pseudo-objectivity of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Although I can barely stake out my claim here, I would suggest that it was her first-wave feminism that fueled her achievements in Judaic scholarship, just as it is second-wave feminism that has empowered engaged, politically frank scholarship and critique in our

generation. Pappenheim remained an Orthodox Jew all her life and thus is the prototype for me of a radical critic of the oppression of women within traditional Judaism, who yet remains within the traditional culture. She also criticized bourgeois European culture and its effect on the female subject, by identifying with historically Jewish alternatives and models for women's lives, notably the life of Glikl of Hameln. Pappenheim empowered herself by remaining "deviant" from the bourgeois heterosexual ideal; a strand of the gendering of traditional Jewish women became her own, to be used as a tool in the struggle for women within and outside of Judaism. I seek to do the same, to save myself and also contribute something to others, through a parallel (but not identical) reclamation of the Jewish sissy. Pappenheim teaches us that the struggle against oppression within Jewish culture need not lose sight of the critical force that Jewish culture can bring to bear on models of gender that were developed within romantic European culture. I hope to be continuing her work.

¹²Iris Parush, "Women Readers as Agents for Social Change: The Case of East European Jewish Society in the Nineteenth Century," *Gender and History* (forthcoming).

Mónica Gomery
Capstone Paper
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Hebrew College Rabbinical School

Transformation and Empowerment: Teaching Talmud to Adult Beginner Learners

INTRODUCTION

In 2010 I began to study Talmud for the first time at Yeshivat Hadar. I was there for a summer, studying with 49 other fellows, and I was the #1 beginner- the person in the room with the least background in, and familiarity with, the Talmud itself and the process of learning it. This was an arduous experience, but also foundational for me in the evolution of my Jewish life, and of my life in general. At the time I don't know how I would have articulated *what* exactly it was that drew me in and hooked me to Talmud learning, but I did get hooked. One afternoon, after a particularly discouraging class in which my classmates had unpacked a sugya at a pace and depth that I could not keep up with, my teacher Rav Jason Rubinstein approached me to talk. He told me the story of Rabbi Akiva (Avot de-Rabbi Natan, 6:2) who began studying Torah late in his adult life. It must have been difficult for Rabbi Akiva to learn how to learn, perhaps even more so than it was for me. One day Rabbi Akiva stumbled upon a spring that ran through a rock. Looking into the hole of the rock, he realized that the water of the spring had, over time, worn through the rock and created an opening. Rabbi Akiva thought to himself: "If something soft (like water) could chisel its way through something hard (like stone), then surely the words of Torah, which are as hard as iron, can penetrate my heart, which is flesh and blood!" The words of Torah he sought to learn were not primarily agents of information. Rather, they were an element of transformation that could reshape his heart. My understanding is that Jason told me this story as encouragement to keep learning: *Rabbi Akiva persisted in his learning when it was difficult, and you can too*. The result of this persistence is not simply better skills acquisition or more knowledge of Torah. Rather, studying is like water that carves a hole into stone, and then flows through. We are altered by our learning, in profound ways.

My six years of rabbinical school have been a continuation of the learning I began that summer. I have spent much of this time thinking about why and how we learn Talmud, what it can mean for learners in their broader lives, and what role it can play in my rabbinate. I look back on that experience as the #1 beginner in a learning setting and wonder about how Talmud education can best serve the needs and goals of new adult learners. I also wonder, why do adults come to the Talmud to learn? What are they seeking, and do

they find it? What was it that hooked me, six years ago? Through my work assistant-teaching and program directing at the Boston Teen Beit Midrash, and on the Talmud faculty at SVARA, I've watched many people be exposed anew to the Talmud and have a wide range of reactions. Usually these reactions, even when mixed with the challenges of study and the pain of confronting patriarchy, include a sense of awe, a hunger to keep learning, and a feeling that something has changed for the learner, that they are somehow different than they were before.

During Shana Daled I received an invitation to teach a workshop on "queer Talmud" at Tufts Hillel, at the request of their Queer Jewish student organization. That same year, the Boston Workmen's Circle asked me teach a Talmud class for their membership, and I joined the SVARA summer Talmud faculty. These settings are spaces for lay-people to encounter Talmud for the first time or to continue their studies without the high-level commitment of a full-time yeshiva. Furthermore, they are spaces where people with particular identities congregate: LGBTQ and queer, secular, radical, progressive, activist, etc. I used to think that Talmud study only happened in Orthodox environments, in high-level graduate programs at universities, and at rabbinical schools. Through working in these other settings, I now see that regular people— liberal and progressive and post-modern and contemporary people, feminists and queer people, teens and adults— really want to know what's in the Talmud and how to study it! The Talmud is relevant to the lives of modern Jews looking for meaning.

This capstone project is dependent on two assumptions: 1) Learning can transform students and it is worthwhile for me as an educator to investigate the transformative potential of my teaching, and 2) the Talmud is a text that can be a vehicle for this transformative learning process. The basis for my reflection comes from my two most recent Talmud teaching experiences: 1) Serving as a “Beit Midrash fairy” (known in a yeshiva context as a *shoel umeshiv*, a person who circulates the beit midrash and assists students when they have questions or need guidance on the text) and the primary instructor for the Beginner’s Shiur at the 2016 SVARA Queer Talmud Camp and 2) Creating and teaching a six-week beginners Talmud class at the Boston Workmen’s Circle. This class was the second in a series called The Secular Talmud, oriented toward the community’s secular Jewish identity, and addressing their curiosity about what studying Talmud can offer them as secular Jews. Though these two learning spaces are distinct from one another in goals and methodology, what they have in common is the creation of a Talmud learning environment for adult beginners. Furthermore, these spaces draw from the premise that learning Talmud is somehow transformative for students, and relevant to their lives as people who identify as progressive, politically oriented, and/or hold marginal identities in society. In both learning environments, my students ranged in age from early 20’s to late 60’s. They had either no prior exposure to the Talmud, or limited exposure, and came to this practice with a curiosity about what the Talmud could offer their Jewish, queer, and political lives.

By researching within the field of Talmud pedagogy, and by exploring my own recent teaching experiences, I hope to engage with the following questions:

- What is transformative education?
- Why do people study Talmud?
- Does studying Talmud transform them in some way? How?
- What are my own goals as a Talmud educator, particularly focused on Talmud education for beginner learners?
- Who are my models for this kind of teaching?
- What does it look like to create a learning environment that is conducive to transformation?
- How do I teach? How do I teach Talmud? What experiences are my students having? How do these experiences impact and change them? What can I do better? What do I still not know or understand?

In this paper, I will first consider the field of Transformative Education in order to better understand my own goals in teaching Talmud. Then I will explore how my students, as well as scholars of Talmud pedagogy, have responded to the question “Why study Talmud?” Lastly, I will reflect on my own goals as a new Talmud instructor, in the hopes of carrying this work forward with more awareness and intentionality.

DEFINING TRANSFORMATION

“If I never came back to Talmud, it still has had a very intense impact on the way I see a lot of things. In and of itself, four days of Talmud were very extremely powerful.” (Queer Talmud Camp participant)

Recently, the world of Jewish education has been abuzz with the goal of creating “transformative” experiences. Programming for both adults and young people is meant to “transform” them in some way. For example, on the website of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, one can visit a page entitled “[Stories of Transformation](#).” On the Hazon website, there is a tab to click for “[Transformative Experiences](#).” But what do we mean when we say “transformation” in an educational context?

In 2010 I participated in Adamah, the Jewish farming fellowship at the Isabella Freedman Center, and studied as a fellow at Mechon Hadar. Afterwards, I described both of these as “transformative” experiences. I meant that these experiences had changed how I lived and how I understood the world around me – each program provided me with a Jewish vocabulary and a deepened Jewish worldview through which to understand my human experience. These “transformations” each had an internal and external component – they impacted my external *doing* (for example: observing Jewish time, learning to daven, learning to farm), and they impacted my internal *knowing/feeling* (for example: I developed a stronger relationship to God, I

cultivated commitments to environmental sustainability and Jewish ethics). I had also, during the same period of time, spent a semester studying at the Drisha Institute in Manhattan, which I would not describe as a transformative experience. Drisha is a yeshiva, and from my time there I learned many things (text skills, Hebrew grammar, better familiarity with liturgy), but the experience did not shake me to the core and impact the way I lived or experienced myself in the world.

Rebbitzin Dena Weinberg is attributed with having said: “Torah is not education. It’s transformation.”¹ Weinberg implies that the two are distinct: education is one thing, but transformation is a deeper and more valuable endeavor, one she associates with Torah, the most sacred kind of study. Is Torah transformative because any encounter with something of such sacred status inherently changes us, or does an educator need to create the conditions for transformation? The contrast between my time at Adamah or Hadar with my time at Drisha confirmed for me that not all religious educational experiences are inherently “transformative.” There had to be more to it, and I wanted to learn how to foster this kind of personal growth for others. I applied to rabbinical school, and wrote on my application “I want to be part of building a Judaism that is inspiring, relevant, creative, and transformative.” I wanted to bring Judaism to people’s lives in a way that profoundly shaped them, that transformed them into better versions of themselves, that cultivated them as better people—kinder, bolder, calmer, more righteous, more humble, more creative, more generous, healing from our individual and collective traumas, and rooted in our own traditions. Having been impacted in this way, I felt confident that Jewish spiritual technologies and paradigms (time, prayer, calendar, halakha, song, ethics and environmentalism, activism, study, etc) are needed by the world and bring out a higher level of being for the people who choose to engage with them. They offer us a “transformative” path, a way to transform into our higher potential as human beings.

In a conversation describing my capstone project, Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari remarked: “Oh yes, I know what transformative education is! It’s when you take someone on a spiritual journey through your teaching.” Here I am reminded of Rabbi Benay Lappe, Rosh Yeshiva of SVARA, who likes to say some version of the following to her students after they have gathered for shiur:

Think back to the hevruta session you just had. How many of you were thinking about your mortgage? Your job? Your troubles? (...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 kind of learning is a spiritual practice, it is 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

¹ Jon A Levisohn, “Two Models of Transformation: Introduction to the Conference on Transformative Jewish Education” The Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University Transformation Project, March 20, 2016, <https://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/pdfs/2016-3-Levisohn-Two-Models.pdf>, 2.

Bartenura and you'd know what the rules are in 3 minutes. And you know what would have happened inside of you? *Nothing*. For the rabbis, it's not really about finding God through prayer. It's about the meditative practice of hevruta learning. That's where they find God, and this is how I meditate and find God, and I offer it to you as a possibility.²

Lappe presents Talmud study in hevruta to her students as a transformative spiritual practice—one that requires so much presence of mind and attention that its effects are likened to meditation. Contemplative practices are meant to clean out the gunk within us – to leave us more open, more clear-thinking, and more spiritually attuned than before. Here, the emphasis is on the *modality* of learning, rather than the content. Lappe does not necessarily care what her students discuss in hevruta³, she cares that the process takes them out of their lives, out of their troubles, and deeply into the focus of study. As Fornari suggested in our conversation, the journey transforms a person, leaving them spiritually impacted and different from before. Perhaps this journey is best characterized as a journey away from the monotony, familiarity, or difficulty of one's own life. Having left one's life temporarily behind, a person is then available to become a higher version of themselves.

In 1999, Diane Tickton Schuster, along with a team of researchers, explored the educational impacts of the Florence Melton School of Adult Jewish Learning. Her research was presented as a foundational model for the 2016 Conference on Transformative Jewish Education at the Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education of Brandeis University. The Mandel Center has initiated The Transformation Project, an attempt to gather voices and resources from the field addressing the questions of what we mean when we say “transformation,” and how to create pedagogies of transformation in Jewish learning. Synthesizing the impactful experiences of the students she interviewed, Tickton Schuster notes:

A consistent dynamic that threads throughout [this research] is that of new *meaning making*: how the interviews revealed shifts in the learners' belief system, activities, or Jewish identity as a result of their learning experiences. Whether or not such shifts are long lasting or measurable over time could only be determined through longer-term follow-up. However, in the short run, it appeared that the Mini-School's systematic structure for helping learners to encounter and reflect on Jewish ideas and

² Benay Lappe, said to her students at Queer Talmud Camp, June 2015.

³ This is not exactly true, because Rabbi Lappe does teach in a very specific method, but the method is more about *how* a hevruta learns, and less about *what* the hevruta discusses.

values had a significant impact on these adults' sense of themselves Jewishly. To that extent, from the learners' vantage point, the learning was transformational.⁴

Her research suggests that if learners' understandings of themselves within a Jewish framework are changed, the experience has been transformative. In this way, transformation is partly about Jewish identity and belonging, and altered or shifted perceptions of ourselves.

In a document they are composing about the potential for Judaism to serve as “a pathway and theory of personal and societal transformation,” Rabbis David Jaffe, Lisa Goldstein, and Jason Kimmelman-Block⁵ explore Judaism as a set of wisdom concepts and accompanying practices that can serve as “life-enhancing practice” for activists engaged in social and societal change. According to their work, Judaism’s “notions of time, priorities, conflict and peace, and moral and spiritual development have been refined over thousands of years in cultures around the world,”⁶ resulting in a deeply honed resource for people whose lives are dedicated to a better, more just society. Their project utilizes a working understanding of transformation that seems rather distinct to me from Tickton Schuster’s. Whereas Tickton Schuster focuses on a changed sense of self, Jaffe, Goldstein and Kimmelman-Block emphasize that transformation leads a person with an established set of values to live an “enhanced” life, a life that can sustain the values that they already have. These are two very distinct understandings of transformation: the former highlights change, while the latter foregrounds a deepened sense of an already existing self.

The distinction between these two frameworks feels essential to me in my own teaching, and specifically in the teaching I have done through SVARA and The Boston Workmen’s Circle. Whereas with youth education, the opportunity to mold and alter a student’s identity is a more reachable goal, my experience of adult learners is that they bring an already defined, rich and enduring sense of self to their learning. As adults we have already decided that we are a certain kind of person. Though some adults will (figuratively or literally) travel far outside of their comfort zone to learn, many will not. Or perhaps some adults are willing, even desiring, to be pushed in a new direction, while still maintaining a general framework for who they are in the world. The students who attended SVARA’s Queer Talmud Camp and my Secular Talmud class at the Workmen’s Circle certainly arrived to these settings because of strong and self-selecting identities they carried: gay, lesbian, trans, queer, secular, frum, radical, progressive, activist, nerd,

⁴ Diane Tickton Schuster, “Assessing Transformative Jewish Learning in Adulthood.” Learning About Learning, last modified May 9, 2016, <http://blogs.brandeis.edu/mandeljewished>.

⁵ Directors of the following organizations, respectively: Kirva, The Institute for Jewish Spirituality, and Bend the Arc Jewish Action.

⁶ Rabbis David Jaffe, Lisa Goldstein and Jason Kimmelman Block, “Inner Life and Social Change,” white paper written in 2016.

etc. My goal of creating a transformative learning environment was not to unsettle or disrupt these identities or values.

What was the goal then? Was it to bring them into a learning environment that affirmed their pre-existing values? Was it to change their sense of “I’m not a person who studies Talmud,” focusing more on their identity as a person who does or doesn’t *do* something as opposed to their system of beliefs? Was it to introduce them to a spiritual practice that could enhance their sense of wholeness and wellness in their lives? Was it to expose them to a spiritual practice that could serve as an ongoing resource for their own change and growth in the long term? On some level, I aspire to teach Talmud to others simply because I love it, both as a literature and as a process. I want to share what I love with other people. But on a deeper level, I want to share it because I believe it has transformative and liberatory potential.

Jon Levisohn, a longtime researcher of Jewish pedagogy, has explored the question of transformative education through the Morton Mandel Center. In his writing, he describes the goals of transformative learning, in which I can recognize my own motivations:

We want some educational programming not just to teach participants certain ideas or certain skills, but to do more. We want to go deeper, to shape their character or their identity. We want to have an influence on how they move through the world. We are thinking not just about what they know or what they can do, but who they *are*... The point of engaging in Torah study is not to become smarter or to accumulate information. The point is to be transformed in the encounter, to become a different kind of person, a *better* person.⁷

According to Levisohn, transformative education comes to bear on our sense of identity – how we perceive ourselves and also perhaps how others perceive us. Levisohn goes on to outline two different models for/definitions of transformation. In the first model, the primary mode of transformation is that our assumptions about ourselves are challenged. Paraphrasing Jack Mezirow, “the researcher most frequently cited in the field of transformative education,” Levisohn describes this model: a person encounters “some experience or intervention that changes one’s frame of reference in some fundamental way.”⁸ In order to be shaken into a new sense of identity, there needs to be a catalyst event. This catalyst can be traumatic, such as the loss of a loved one, or an experience of violence or violation. It can also be an encounter with a text or tradition that moves us such that we are never the same again. Other catalysts include divorce, job changes, life-style changes such as retirement, or simply an eye-opening discussion. Sometimes these experiences are

⁷ Levisohn, *Two Models*, 2.

⁸ Levisohn, *Two Models*, 3.

large and life-defining, other times they are subtle, small, yet impactful. Jack Mezirow elaborates on the process:

Transformative learning is the process of effecting change in a frame of reference. Adults have acquired a coherent body of experience – associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses – frames of reference that define their life world. Frames of reference are the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings. They set our ‘line of action.’ Once set, we automatically move from one specific activity (mental or behavioral) to another. We have a strong tendency to reject ideas that fail to fit our perceptions, labeling those ideas as unworthy of consideration – aberrations, nonsense, irrelevant, weird, or mistaken. When circumstances permit, learners move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience.⁹

In Mezirow’s framework, our frames of reference become entrenched, and our transformative experiences dislodge us from these “stuck” or “familiar” frames. Levisohn explains: “So, for Mezirow, transformation happens when someone moves from a narrower frame of reference, with more limited possibilities, to a more expansive one.”¹⁰ Elsewhere in his work, Mezirow posits that when we encounter something anomalous to our old way of knowing, “critical reflection and transformations”¹¹ can result. These catalysts are incompatible with our limited scope and prior systems of sense-making. In this model of transformation, disorientation is highly positive if it challenges our assumptions and leads us toward a broader, new way of perceiving ourselves in the world.

Levisohn also offers a second model of, or definition for, transformation. In the second model, there is no disorienting encounter, experience, or catalyst. Instead, a person’s sense of identity and knowing in the world is changed gradually. When a person adopts a practice or a set of practices, these practices influence and change the person’s character over time. Levisohn calls this the “Becoming what we do” model, in which: “instead of a sudden shift, the transformation is incremental and perhaps even imperceptible, moment-to-moment. But the outcome is no less significant: becoming a certain kind of person, different than the person was to begin with.”¹² This model is significant because the catalyst is just as important, but

⁹ Jack Mezirow, “Transformative Learning: Theory into Practice,” *New Directions for Adults and Continuing Education* 74, Summer 1997.

¹⁰ Levisohn, Two Models, 4.

¹¹ Mezirow, “How critical reflection triggers transformative learning,” *Fostering critical reflections in adulthood*, 1990, 1-20.

¹² Levisohn, Two Models, 5.

instead of coming to jolt or a shake a person, the catalyst actually includes or embodies the characteristics that the person will eventually take on.

If we consider Torah as an example, according to Levisohn's first model, Torah might be far enough outside of someone's frame of reference that it destabilizes them, widening their scope of reality and transforming them into a new kind of person who can integrate this new scope into their worldview. In Levisohn's second model, the study of Torah involves a set of practices that shape a person gradually over time, and the defining characteristics of Torah study become this person's transformed identity.

Considering Levisohn's two definitions for the process of transformation is helpful to me as an educator who feels a desire to "transform" something about people's lives in the course of teaching them. Instead of Jewish education for the sake of knowledge and information, I aspire to create Jewish educational experiences that have a lasting impact on how people live in the world, conceive of themselves, and relate to others. But as Levisohn specifies, "We don't actually care about transformation *per se*. We don't care about coming up with a precise definition of the term... But we do care about our highest educational aspirations, aspirations to influence character and identity in particular ways."¹³ Reading Levisohn's work, I am left with the question: In what *specific* ways do I want Talmud study to shape and influence the character and identity of learners? I carried this question with me into the Talmud classes I taught as part of this Capstone.

As I read through Tickton Schuster, Levisohn, and Mezirow's scholarship, I couldn't help but notice that these authors do not mention systems of oppression or power in our world. Is transformation a politically neutral idea, with the goal of personal change, regardless of the content of that change? Does transformative learning come to interact with injustice in any way? In addressing this dilemma I found the work of Sarra Lev, a professor of Talmud at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical School, who has sought to concretely apply abstract theories of transformative education to her pedagogy. She describes her motivation:

So I ask myself: 'Can we read Talmud to create a kinder, more compassionate, empathetic, and self-reflective society?' English professor Ihab Hassan once asked his student teachers, 'Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?' That is the question that this reading system addresses. *Can we read Talmud so that people stop killing each other?*¹⁴

For Lev, transformative learning means, specifically, that people become less violent, and more able to see themselves as an integral part of a larger human ecosystem. Transformation is not politically neutral; rather

¹³ Levisohn, Two Models, 2.

¹⁴ Sarra Lev, "Talmud that Works Your Heart: New Approaches to Reading," in *Learning to Read Talmud: What It Looks Like and How It Happens*, edited by Jane Kanarek and Marjorie Lehman (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2016) 176.

the instructor brings her own agenda to it, with a goal of mitigating violence and fostering empathy and compassion in her students.

In an earlier work, Lev addresses her goal of teaching Talmud to rabbinical students in service of creating more ethical leaders: “by ‘teaching ethics’ I mean employing in our study of sacred texts a lens through which we examine ourselves and our values in a manner that can help us act as spiritual leaders in promoting social justice.”¹⁵ She is particularly interested in the tense balance between this kind of ethical self-reflection and the acquisition of skills, “making sure that our students know how to properly decipher and understand the texts as they are.”¹⁶ For Lev, a practitioner of transformative education has two primary goals: 1) to cultivate reading skills in students that will allow them to access the texts on the terms of the texts themselves, and 2) to animate students toward ethical frameworks and critical self-reflection. In identifying her unique orientation¹⁷ to Talmud study, Lev coins a new genre:

... which I will call ‘summons.’ 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.”¹⁸

In Lev’s vision, “Talmud as summons” seeks to transform the learner by demanding something of us, by summoning us toward a higher version of ourselves. We come closer to this higher version by interacting with the text. Perhaps the student will be altered in unrecognizable ways, but the student may also come into a stronger, more nuanced, more open-hearted embodiment of the values they already hold. I am drawn to Lev’s exploration of Talmud study with an explicit justice orientation, and I find that her scholarship adds a necessary dimension of social responsibility and ethics to the question of transformative education.

WHY TALMUD

Having begun to explore the field of Transformative Education above, I am left with the following questions: Are all subjects equally capable of producing the kind of transformation we might seek to cultivate in students? Are there fields of study that lend themselves more strongly to transformation? And

¹⁵ Sarra Lev, “Teaching Rabbinics as an Ethical Endeavor and Teaching Ethics as a Rabbinic Endeavor,” in *Turn It and Turn It Again: Studies in the Teaching and Learning of Classical Jewish Texts*, edited by Jon Levisohn and Susan Fendrick (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2013) 391.

¹⁶ Lev, *Teaching Rabbinics as an Ethical Endeavor*, 392.

¹⁷ I will write more on “orientations” later in this paper.

¹⁸ Lev, *Talmud that Works the Heart*, 177.

lastly, honing in on my own area of pedagogical growth: What about the Talmud lends itself to transformative learning?

There are many ways to teach the same topic or text. Not all Talmud learning is focused on transformation as a goal. Supporting this understanding of the variety of ways in which one topic can be taught, Jon Levisohn explains that generally in education, we talk about “subjects” or “disciplines,” however there is a deep internal diversity to each subject.¹⁹ The approach a teacher takes is composed of the values, questions, assumptions, and pedagogic choices they bring to a subject. Levisohn critiques teachers of Jewish studies, who “often lack a sense that curricular choices ought to be responsible to some larger framework of purposes.”²⁰ Levisohn urges educators to identify the underlying values that drive their commitment to a particular subject. He problematizes the idea that Jewish textual education is inherently valuable:

What is Tanakh or Talmud, for example, as a subject, beyond a book or set of books? What constitutes an intriguing question or a compelling answer within these subjects? What are the particular skills or intellectual habits that are associated with these subjects? What are the multiple orientations to the subject itself, and how are they importantly different from one each other? What, in the end, do we want students to know and be able to do in the study of these subjects – and why? And what kinds of educational experiences will promote those goals? There must be a conception behind our pedagogic decision-making that is richer and deeper, a conception that allows us to establish and prioritize the goals of teaching and learning this particular subject, a conception of the subject area to which we feel responsible and to which we want to hold ourselves accountable.²¹

As discussed above, I suspect that even a larger framework of “transformation” is still too vague to stand as a legitimate orientation to studying Talmud. Though I think transformation plays an important role, I am left wondering: “Transformation in the service of what?”

With a set of hunches about what makes Talmud study interesting, at least for myself, I set out to teach my own class of beginner Talmud learners, all the while tracking their experience in order to later reflect upon it. My students learned excerpts from Perek Hahovel (see the Curriculum which follows this paper), spending part of each class in hevruta and part of it in larger group discussion. While I may carry strong theories or convictions about the question of “Why study Talmud,” it is powerful and useful for me as

¹⁹ Jon A Levisohn, “A Menu of Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature,” *Journal of Jewish Education* (2009): 5-8. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15244110903534510>.

²⁰ Jon A Levisohn, “What is Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy?” The Initiative on Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy in Jewish Studies, revised Sept 2006, <http://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/projects/bridginginitiative.html>

²¹ Levisohn, What is Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy, 15.

an educator to hear how my students have absorbed, internalized, or rejected my convictions, and what has emerged for them as the heart of their experience studying Talmud. Has it been a transformative process? Do they have a transformed relationship to the text, to themselves, and to the world? What has this transformation been in the service of? These are the questions I sought to address, by interviewing and recording my students in conversation with me and with one another. My hope is that by better understanding the learning experiences of my students, I will better understand myself as an educator, and sharpen my sense of why and how I teach Talmud.

What is the Talmud (round one)

I utilized a number of techniques in order to better understand the experiences my Workmen's Circle students were having in their learning. One technique was to ask them to record their answers to the question "What is the Talmud?" on the first day of class, and again on the last day of class. This exercise allowed me to track the overall framework my students gained of Talmudic literature, their comprehension on a basic facts level, as well as their more conceptual comprehension of the larger rabbinic project. About half of my students entered the class with no real sense of the Talmud, writing answers such as:

I'm honestly not really sure. I've obviously heard a lot about it as a concept in Jewish spaces and I understand the importance of studying religious texts, but I don't actually know what the Talmud really is, other than commentary on the Torah and/or other Jewish texts. And I'm not sure that's really right. As I come more into my Jewish identity I feel like it's important for me to know these things.

Talmud is a commentary by a myriad of people (men) on the Torah.

Honestly I have no idea. It is written by rabbis? It is about Jewish law? It is old? People use it today as a way to wrestle with tradition and make Judaism queer, subversive, and secular?

The other half of my students demonstrated a higher-level understanding of the Talmud, its location in the timeline of Jewish history, its authorship, and its mission, submitting variations of the following answer:

The Talmud is a collection of both the written down oral law of the Jews post destruction of the second temple and then legalistic debates of rabbis on interpretations of this oral law. It is the redefinition of Jewish laws/community during the diaspora.

What is the Talmud (round two)

The answers I collected in our final class demonstrate that every student had developed a correct comprehension of basic orienting facts on the Talmud, as well as a level of conceptual understanding of the Talmud's overall project, articulated with some very nuanced details. Below is an assortment of answers that I think illustrate the progress my students made from the first to the last class:

The Talmud is a compilation of stories, law and ideas that form the basis of Jewish law and rules for Jewish life. It is presented through examination of multiple opinions, which question the moral and ethical authority on which Jewish law is based.

Talmud is a set of texts that try really hard to make rules & guidelines for Jewish people to live by. It is commentary on the Torah and contains the Mishnah and Gemara. They use stories and examples to help explain situations, variations on rules/guidelines, and how they got there.

A collection of discussions of communal norms around practice but also a record of how Jewish communities self govern and, one can infer from studying it, what Jewish values underlie these communities.

Debate. Great, confusing, open-ended, stirring, law-making debates about the arcane and quotidian practices of Jewish people. A maze to train the mind. A Rorschach for one's values and present circumstances. A compendium of legal and moral voices from long ago.

Their responses demonstrate a deepened factual understanding, as well as a new knack for the depth of the rabbinic project undertaken in the Talmud. This move seems like a necessary step in the process of transformative learning: in which one's mind is sharpened, and new information is gained alongside an increased capacity for complexity.

Final Go-Around

In our final class, I asked students the question: "Why study the Talmud as progressive and radical people, as activists, or as secular Jews?" They wrote quietly for about five minutes, and then we went around, each person sharing their answer with the rest of the class. Below is a selection of responses to this question, which offer a range of perspectives on why studying Talmud feels worthwhile to my students:

The Talmud is a text that works out (back and forth) what society should look like and how it should be organized. Because it does this within a context that is old and male and authoritative, it seems like studying Talmud today within our various identities can give us a starting point to imagine the kind of society *we* want. The one that we deserve. The Talmud provides a framework to work out, to question, and does not always have answers. So it gives us permission to do the same now. To find answers that make sense to us, which may in some ways agree with the text, and in some ways not, just like the rabbis are doing in the text.

Social structure, human needs, and peaceful coexistence turns today on many of the same basic principles that it did in Talmudic times. Understanding the competing ideas and listening to the debates from that era help identify societal and governmental needs today.

[Studying Talmud] gives me an opportunity to be in touch with a system of thinking and appreciating moral and legal questions that operates in a framework and context outside that of our current State's. An opportunity for creativity and a model of the rigor and dissent and flexibility needed to govern, rule and support a people.

These comments demonstrate to me that as my students learned Talmud, they were thinking on a macro-level about how societies are structured and what kinds of questions are at play when we think about how people should live. Through the specifics of Perek Hahovel, and the way that I framed this material, they were able to identify these big-picture questions. When asked "Why learn Talmud," most students answered from this big-picture framework, which demonstrated to me that what they most valued about the learning was the opportunity to reflect on these kinds of questions, and the way the minutiae of the sugyot we studied pointed toward larger topics.

Interviews

Another mechanism I used was to interview my students from the Workmen's Circle as well as participants in SVARA's Queer Talmud Camp. I composed a loose set of interview questions, which were not always asked in the same order. The questions I asked were the following:

- Had you learned Talmud before? How/When? How would you describe your level of familiarity prior to this course/retreat?

- Did anything in these texts speak to your life, make you think differently about yourself, make you question something, or help you learn something about yourself? How?
- Was there something about Talmud in particular that spoke to you differently than another type of literature?
- Did learning Talmud feel different than other kinds of learning processes? If so, how?
- Did anything about this learning impact or influence you as an activist?
- What questions did this class/material raise for you?
- Will you keep studying Talmud?

I also tried as much as possible in my interviews to encourage people to be specific in their language, for example if an interviewee used words like “transformative” or “meaning,” I would ask for more information, hoping to uncover the intent behind the term.

I received so much interesting and useful information in these interviews- much more than I can include in this paper. I have tried to distill the responses into categories that reveal some of the major themes my students highlighted about why studying Talmud was impactful and important to them. Below I have created categories for their responses and included one or two quotes from interviews for each category.

Talmud study for Empowerment

In this category, students discussed how the study of Talmud enhanced their sense of personal empowerment –in terms of empowering them with the tools and skills to be Talmudic readers, as well as in a broader sense by empowering them to consider the world differently. Studying Talmud can be a source of motivation and encouragement to consider difficult questions and feel a sense of personal strength in responding to the issues that arise.

“I think it was transformative in that you’re in this entirely different space for that week (SVARA Queer Talmud Camp), where you really leave feeling transformed— at a little bit of a higher level in your thinking and approaching text. It made me feel empowered to do that study and struggle with the text, to read Hebrew and speak out loud in Hebrew. [It was] transformative in that it was empowering – both in terms of how to

study and read Talmud, and also because the things I learned changed how I think about the world a little bit.”

“I’m just really empowered by this tradition, and the treasure-chest of tools that I have to explore and find answers, continue to ask questions and create answers for others. [Talmud] gives me a sense of belonging and gratitude, that my connection to the Jewish community isn’t just among my personal community or the fringe Communist Jewish world I grew up in, it is actually really foundational... Foundational meaning that the way I was taught to be Jewish, the values of my Leftist Judaism are the values I can find in the Talmud.”

Talmud study in an activist framework

The rabbinic project deals with questions of power and authority in a way that can be particularly compelling for activists, who frequently engage with similar questions. Students described their study of Talmud as providing them with tools to challenge power, amplifying for them the need to be active on justice issues, and exposing for them questions they have about integrity and hypocrisy when engaged in struggles for justice.

“I started out this class feeling very disenfranchised from the Jewish religious elite, and this election has made me continue to feel that way. But the way we have examined texts being so different from how I had examined them in religious settings has made me realize that I can take these texts and use them to challenge that power, that I can speak their language, and use the texts that they know, that they are most intimate with, and use it to challenge them.”

“[Studying Talmud] made me more aware of my need to be an activist. Generally I have been a very passive participant in [political/social] movements. The central theme [of Ben Sorer u’Moreh] is that we can’t just accept that this practice is in the past, forget about it and move on from it and say that we’re better now. If we don’t argue this or fight against it, it’s always going to be there. We are responsible for what happened and continues to happen, so we have to think about it as textual activists.”

“The thing that surprised me the most was how much this is like being in law school, and just how universal the questions that the Talmud, at least the ones presented here, seem to be. They are the same kinds of questions that different groups of people who are trying to create a society are grappling with on some level. One fundamental question for me, as someone who went into law school feeling like I wanted to be a radical lawyer, is whether there is also some contradiction inherent in that, because you’re participating in becoming

the power structure... Is there hypocrisy in the rabbis? They are still leaders and powerful people, even if they're chimney sweeps relative to other figures of authority in the community... Can you in fact still be radical when you're entering in to a system of power, or in their case building a system of power? That question... there's no answer, but this made me think about that."

Talmud study to enhance our own thought-process and creativity

The rabbinic process is one of innovation; a resourceful, playful and deeply wise way of moving into the future using tools both new and old. Students were inspired by Talmud study as a window into the creative process of the rabbis, as well as invited to participate in their own processes of thought and creation.

"I appreciate being able to delve deeply into a model of inquiry, discussion, rigor, creativity, flexibility and dissent that is just culturally and rationally different from our own. It's felt helpful, both in terms of the actual output, to have a different vision of what society could look like, and also the mode of debate is both familiar and also dramatically weird. And that inspires in me a sort of creativity and curiosity."

"The logic puzzle draws me in. You're trying to explain something, both to understand how to explain it and how these other people explain it. It's higher order thinking: non-linear, not just going from point A to B, but rather because of C, A goes to B which connects to C, or something. It changes the way your mind works, and afterward you feel different as a thinker."

Talmud study to help us articulate the responsibilities and values of a society

The discussions in the Talmud invite students to consider big-picture questions about the ethical frameworks and value systems of a society. By exploring how these questions were discussed two thousand years ago, students gain insight into the roots of modern Jewish and secular societies, as well as into their own value systems and desires for a just and socially responsible world.

"I knew [the Talmud] was a set of legal rules, but I didn't really understand that it was grappling fully with the basis of life, how decisions get made, how society works, very similarly to our legal system. I was surprised at how much it was like my law school learning. Even though its sources were biblical, it had a really interesting secular application in ways that I hadn't thought of. For example, I liked us using over time this question of how people are compensated for wrongs. For me, that has so many ethical questions in it. Even though the references are biblical, it's really about [the question:] "How do we want to run our society when there is conflict?" The questions of – "What kind of pain do we acknowledge, how do we acknowledge

suffering, does gender play a role, does class play a role”... Even though it’s a small topic of compensating for damages, we can view our whole society through that lens. Legal systems have so much in common, even across such time span and geography. Ultimately a society comes down to asking itself many of the same fundamental questions but within its own cultural perspective.”

“I’ve studied Talmud before but not in terms of the way this class was formatted, with a look at leadership and power and how that impacts fairness. In some ways that was, like, cherry-picking parts of the Talmud, but it actually was a really interesting and engaging way to look at this body of text. What is the Talmud? — Historically to me it felt like a discussion about communal norms, but this class made the conversation about the Talmud’s underlying values a little sharper.”

Seeing ourselves as part of the rabbinic conversation and tradition

Studying Talmud allows students to participate in ancient conversations. Learning these texts is not a passive process. Rather, through close reading, hevruta study and class discussion, students bring their own voices into dialogue with the texts. They expressed surprise and delight at the relevance of rabbinic conversations to their own current-day realities, and a feeling of connection across time and space with these foundational voices in Jewish tradition.

“It was really cool engaging with questions that are millennia old, and the relevance that these questions still hold, even though everything was kind of on a spectrum from ridiculous and irrelevant-seeming to super relevant and always present, and many things were simultaneously both of those things, and that was cool. I have studied some ancient philosophy before, but the Greek stuff that you have to read in school. It feels very different. The open-endedness and the contradictory nature of so many of the arguments [in Talmud] made me feel like I was actually engaging in a debate of many generations, which felt more powerful than just reading one dude’s philosophy. Because we’re reading many people’s philosophies at once, not just one. Well, many dudes’ philosophies I guess.”

“Studying Talmud creates such a line of communication through time. Even the performance of the beit midrash— sitting and studying in the same fashion, in a traditional way. [It] opens up an intergenerational line of communication. [It] doesn’t feel so abstract, it feels very connective and interactive. You don’t expect to feel that connected to such an ancient text, but especially in the way, in SVARA’s philosophy, in the way SVARA teaches the history of how this thinking came to be, it was like learning about myself in a really real way. To the point where, on Tuesday night of the election, I was thinking about the rabbis. They felt it

coming. They had nothing to lose. Their weird stuff is the reason that I'm alive. It kept the Jewish people together. It allowed them to survive a huge amount of oppression and change. It's a queer text. I'm proud of that. I think it's so important the way Benay talks about it, our ownership [of the text] for our own survival, this is the same task we're being called to today."

The process itself of Talmud study as transformative

Talmud study is not easy. Sticking with texts that are difficult to decode, to understand, and to engage with conceptually can be deeply rewarding. The process of studying Talmud, with its unique methodologies and modalities, can itself result in a feeling of transformation and a new-found commitment to the process.

"It's a real challenge – my first feeling about it was feeling really overwhelmed by the challenge, because I really tried to take [hevruta] seriously – I wanted to be responsible for someone else's learning, and also I wanted to learn. With a stranger, it's awkward and difficult, especially when I'm not great at Hebrew, and it's slow, and you don't really know why you're doing it until you know. And then it sneaks up on you, and then you really know in your bones why you're doing it, because it's gotten in...When I say "gotten in" I mean it has an effect on how you think, and you realize you like it, and want to keep doing it."

"The obvious difference [between Talmud and other kinds of literature] is that there is an additional translation aspect. When you're learning Talmud you're not learning a fact, but rather [you are asking]: "What does this fact tell me about the rest of the world, or about how I approach something?" You're not learning it for the sake of the law, but rather for what the law tells you about other things in the world."

Hearing from my students, most of whom were exposed to the Talmud for the first time in this class or on this summer retreat, highlights for me the transformative potential of Talmud study. Their thoughts and reflections affirm for me that even for adult beginner learners, the impactful and engaging elements of Talmud study shine through, especially when taught with an eye toward the kinds of themes they describe above. Even when studying in English translation, and even with such a limited exposure to rabbinic literature, students were able to glean many of the important motifs of this literature. They were able to ask specific questions local to the chapter of Talmud they learned, as well as broad questions about the rabbinic project. They were able to consider the subject matter in terms of its relevance and implications for their own lives and contemporary society. Most of them seemed to feel that this text made some sort of claim on them – asking something of them in terms of their own self-reflection. By interviewing them I am able to see that,

in the ways they articulated above, Talmud study is indeed a field with the potential for transformation, and that adult beginner learners can quickly and profoundly pick up on to the power of Talmud study.

ORIENTATIONS: SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVES ON “WHY TALMUD?”

Having considered the “Why Talmud?” question from the perspective of my students, I also sought to locate the “Why Talmud?” question in the work of scholars of pedagogy. In addition to his scholarship on Transformative Education, Jon Levisohn also publishes work about Talmud pedagogy. An important contribution to the field is his article “A Menu of Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature,” which utilizes Barry Holtz’s system of articulating distinct “orientations” for Torah education, and applies it to rabbinics. Holtz defines what he means by “orientation”:

... a description not of a teacher’s ‘method’ in some technical meaning of the word, but in a deeper sense, of a teacher’s most powerful conceptions and beliefs about the field he or she is teaching. It is the living expression of the philosophical questions... What is my view of the aims of education [in this subject], and how as a teacher do I attain these aims?²²

Teaching with a self-awareness of one’s orientation allows for a transparency that brings to the fore the teacher’s assumptions, priorities, and values. It might also clarify for a teacher their best choice of teaching methods. Levisohn elaborates: “The teacher’s conceptions are conceptions about what any particular subject is all about, its contours, its central issues and challenges, and its purposes – why is it worth teaching and learning.”²³ However, an orientation is not only about ultimate purposes. Levisohn warns that the ultimate purpose for studying a text might be theologically meaningful, but not pedagogically sound. For example, a math teacher might wax poetic about the beauty or fundamental universality of mathematics, “but this will not help us understand how such a teacher teaches, what she emphasizes, what mathematical capacities she tries to nurture in students and how she tries to do so.”²⁴ Distinct from ultimate purposes, orientations “combine a set of teachers’ conceptions and characteristic practices that hang together in a coherent way.”²⁵ An orientation is a cross-section of beliefs and pedagogical methodology, which point toward a central guiding framework for a teacher’s approach to the subject.

²² Barry Holtz, “Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and Practice,” JTS Press 2003, 48-49.

²³ Jon A Levisohn, “A Menu of Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature,” The Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University, June 2009, <https://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/pdfs/2010-Levisohn-Orientations.pdf>, 5.

²⁴ Levisohn, A Menu of Orientations, 5.

²⁵ Levisohn, A Menu of Orientations, 5.

Lastly, it is important to note in Levisohn’s article that there is no hierarchy to orientations. Each orientation contains examples of both excellent and mediocre teaching. Each orientation also contains a compelling case for its relevance and educational potency. Levisohn notes that “the theory of orientations emerges from the conviction that there are, in the world, a variety of responsible ways of thinking about teaching this particular subject—not good ways and bad ways, not educative ways and miseducative ways, but a genuine diversity of purposes.”²⁶ By outlining 10 orientations to rabbinic literature, Levisohn seeks to offer a “menu” to educators. One teacher will likely employ multiple orientations, but by honing in on the specificity of each, Levisohn makes these distinct orientations available to teachers in a new way. The orientations can serve as a toolkit, providing teachers with a heightened level of choice and reflection about their own approach to rabbinic texts in the classroom.

Levisohn’s work is particularly helpful to me as a new teacher of Talmud. Throughout rabbinical school I have been (consciously and unconsciously) observing my mentors and Talmud teachers (Rabbis Benay Lappe, Jane Kanarek, Micha’el Rosenberg, Ebn Leader, and Miriam-Simma Walfish), trying to understand how and why they teach Talmud and what values they impart to their students as they do so. Levisohn’s language about guiding orientations in one’s teaching gives me a way to understand that as I continue to grow, I am both integrating the orientations of my mentors as well as trying to hone in on my *own* orientation – the goals and values that underlie and drive my teaching.

In his “Menu”, Levisohn identifies ten orientations:

1. Torah/Instruction Orientation
2. Contextual Orientation
3. Jurisprudential Orientation
4. Halakhic Orientation
5. Literary Orientation
6. Cultural Orientation
7. Historical Orientation
8. *Beki’ut* Orientation
9. Interpretive Orientation
10. Skills Orientation

In my own pursuit of meaningful Talmud pedagogy, I have encountered two additional orientations that stand out as particularly influential on my teaching, which are not included on Levisohn’s list. Both are conceived of by contemporary queer Talmud educators.

²⁶ Levisohn, A Menu of Orientations, 5.

The first is the work of Rabbi Sarra Lev, which I began to address above. In the following excerpt, Lev answers for herself the questions of “Why Talmud?”

If we accept that the ‘stock of stories’ of the Jewish narrative constitutes us psychologically and spiritually as Jews, then the only way to reconstitute what it means to be a Jew is to visit those narratives and understand how they have done that work on us so that we can then move beyond the limitations of our own narrative.²⁷

For Lev, Jews need to study Talmud in order to understand the roles we’ve been assigned in the world, the way our tradition has shaped us as individuals and as a collective. In part, this is in service of a stronger self-awareness, and in part we need to face our foundational stories in order to transcend them. Having a stronger fluency in our ‘stock of stories’ allows us to ‘move beyond the limitations of our own narrative,’ a process of expanding who and how we are in the world. Here I am reminded of Rachel Adler’s claim for a feminist halakhah:

As a committed Jew, I come to ancient canonical stories, biblical, midrashic or aggadic, with an assumption that I belong to them and they belong to me. I encounter them searching for Torah, that is, for redemptive teaching, and for *zikaron*, for the collective memory that completes me, that binds me to all who ever have or will claim or been claimed by these stories.²⁸

Like Lev, Adler here expresses that Jewish canonical texts have a claim on her. The collective stock of stories has shaped who she is, who she is connected to, and how she understands herself in the world. For both Adler and Lev, this understanding of oneself as bound to Jewish text is not a passive relationship. Rather, this sense of boundedness calls upon a person to engage actively, and even become a producer of textual knowledge and methodology. For Adler, this is expressed through halakhic innovation. For Lev, her theory about the active role that one takes— as a woman, as a queer person, as a postmodern and politically progressive person—regarding the textual tradition evolves as her scholarship advances. Lev uses various terms to describe the essence of her orientation: “Talmud as ethics,” “Talmud as summons” and “Talmud that works the heart.”

In an essay published in the 2013 collection “Turn It and Turn it Again,” Lev focuses on Talmudic study as a way to teach rabbinical students – those entering a role of leadership in the Jewish world – to

²⁷ Lev, “Teaching Rabbinics as an Ethical Endeavor,” 390.

²⁸ Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 1.

better engage with questions of ethics: “Rabbinical students need to learn the tools, as rabbis, to be critical of power relations in the world, because they will be spiritual leaders who will be called upon to confront injustice.”²⁹ She offers numerous specific examples of how to employ this orientation. For instance, the rabbis in the Talmud worked to articulate their own standards for societal norms. When taught with an orientation toward ethics, these texts reveal the limits and boundaries of the rabbis. Lev then turns the critical lens onto her students: “If we are able to see that the rabbis lived within a set of boundaries, it might teach us how to explore our own.”³⁰ When we read for ethics, rabbinic texts can raise questions for us: “where our ethics come from and where those of the rabbinic sages come from, how these rabbis related to the ethics of the Torah and how we relate to theirs, how these rabbis solved their own ethical problems with the issues that came before them, and how we can deal with those which come from the rabbinic texts.”³¹ By bringing our own questions to the ethical themes of the Talmud, we also learn how to engage with questions of ethics, power and justice in our own lives.

In the same essay, Lev quotes her student Caren, who describes another specific example of the way in which Talmud study hones one’s ethical perspective: “I believe the Talmud’s dialogical thinking conveys an important ethical teaching about there being more than one way of looking at truth, non-dogmatism, and honoring of the process of searching for truth, not just the final result.”³² Caren’s statement reflects one of Lev’s criteria for an ethical orientation, in which students do not fall into a trap of binary thinking – neither accepting nor rejecting rabbinic ethics, but rather “making meaning out of them by exploring our own values through them.”³³ The study of Talmud can expand a student’s thinking by creating space for more nuance and complexity, as well as a sharper focus on the ethical systems of the past and one’s own contemporary encounter with ethical questions.

In her more recent work, Lev focuses on Talmud as a “call to look within.”³⁴ An essay written in 2016, published in the collection “Learning to Read Talmud: What It Looks Like and How It Happens” offers this new approach. It is not a radical shift from an ethical orientation, but does update Lev’s main emphasis. In her prior work, she focuses on ethics and power relations. In her most recent work, she has added new components to this orientation, including the vulnerability and empathy of the student. Her updated orientation, now called “Talmud as summons” or “Talmud that works the heart,” is meant to “push our buttons ...by which we can be pushed to become ever more reflective, understanding, empathetic,

²⁹ Lev, “Teaching Rabbinics as an Ethical Endeavor,” 393.

³⁰ Lev, “Teaching Rabbinics as an Ethical Endeavor,” 400.

³¹ Lev, “Teaching Rabbinics as an Ethical Endeavor,” 398.

³² Lev, “Teaching Rabbinics as an Ethical Endeavor,” 408.

³³ Lev, “Teaching Rabbinics as an Ethical Endeavor,” 414.

³⁴ Lev, “Talmud That Works Your Heart,” 193.

discerning and expansive”³⁵ people. Lev’s goal is still for her students to consider power and ethics, but the effort cannot be solely intellectual or analytical. Rather, the Talmud lays claim on the *heart* of a student – their feelings, their intuition, their gut reactions, their compassion.

One way in which Lev achieves this working of the heart is by exploring varying levels of affinity with, and estrangement from, the text itself. She writes:

for today’s liberal reader, the Talmud does little to promote identification with the characters and more often evokes estrangement (and sometimes derision). Hence, I chose texts that could bridge between this altogether different reality, the Other, and the students’ own cultural reality, and offer access to the familiar as well as the strange.... Additionally, if a text had elements with which the students might disagree, that friction itself could stimulate conversation. I did not want to alienate them entirely with ‘terrible texts’ merely to provoke discussion and regress into sensationalism, and yet, I wanted to deal head-on with highly problematic material. Ultimately, my basic organizing principle for choosing my texts was to present texts that were as complex as the Talmud itself.³⁶

I recognize elements from my own recent teaching experience in Lev’s methodology. Reflecting on their study of Talmud, my students expressed surprise at the level of familiarity they felt with rabbinic texts that they had never previously encountered. They sometimes expressed familiarity with the *shakla vetarya* (discussion, give and take) of the Talmud as a characteristically Jewish modality of argumentation that they recognized in their own cultural context. They also expressed familiarity with the content of the Talmud’s debates, finding the issues at play in Perek HaHovel (the eight chapter of Tractate Bava Kama, which we studied in our course) to be relevant and timely in their own lives and society. I also wanted to make sure that students engaged with the unfamiliarity and distance that Lev describes. For example, by spending a long chunk of class time unpacking the idea that a human being’s injury can be measured based on their hypothetical value in the slave market, our class considered their own departure from the ethical and cultural framework of the Talmud, and it was this distance between themselves and the rabbinic value system which allowed for a dynamic encounter with the text.

Lev models her orientation on the I-Thou encounter: the idea that coming into conversation with a distinct “Other” ultimately leads one toward deeper self-understanding. When we encounter this Other, we are destabilized and then ultimately re-stabilized. Our sense of self and certainty can be disrupted, which enables true learning and brings us into a fuller and more open-hearted wisdom. This theory echoes Jon

³⁵ Lev, “Talmud That Works Your Heart,” 177.

³⁶ Lev, “Talmud That Works Your Heart,” 185.

Levisohn's first model of transformation – in which one's sense of self is disrupted and changed. Lev explains the process:

'Working the heart' is meant to cause a disruption in what Paolo Freire calls 'circles of certainty,' by identifying (and dispelling) responses to a text that are entirely based on what we *think* we know. But, while trying to dispel the predisposition to 'know and judge,' I also want to keep my students close enough so that reading Talmud *matters*. How can they truly meet the Other, if they do not feel at all attached to the text? Reading the Talmud as 'summons' demands the ability to hold both enough distance to quell our assumptions and enough familiarity to feel something, to create meaning. I want the students to grow through *getting to know* a text that is laden with religious meaning, is entirely foreign, and yet, they can claim as their own.³⁷

Here too, I recognize some of my own goals as an educator. For each Talmud class I taught, there was an internal part of me crossing my fingers and desperately hoping that students would "buy in," that the invitation to make meaning would not be lost on them, and that the text would engage them enough to lay some sort of claim on them. This is still a mysterious process to me; it is not entirely clear how the "magic" of Talmud study happens, and at what point students get "hooked." In her scholarship, Lev does the work of putting language to this process. Students become involved in an encounter with the Other, and their dialogue with this Other, the text, enables meaning-making. It matters that the text is both close and far from their conceptions of normalcy. The familiarity and the alienation both respectively "work the heart" and "summon" the inner transformation of the reader.

The other Talmud educator whose orientation has deeply inspired my own teaching, and whose particular perspective is left off of Levisohn's menu, is Rabbi Benay Lappe, the founder and Rosh Yeshiva of SVARA. Though Lappe does not name her orientation explicitly, I would categorize it as either "Talmud for empowerment," "Talmud as radical innovation," or "Talmud as a queer text."

Lappe named her yeshiva after the rabbinic legal innovation of *svara*, which allowed the rabbis to grant legitimacy and authority to their own ethical and logical impulses on the same scale as a Torah text. In her essay *The New Rabbis*, Lappe classifies the rabbis of the Talmud as "queer", and explains her thinking:

The visionaries who picked up the pieces of a shattered Judaism two thousand years ago, after the destruction of the Second Temple and the crashing of Biblical Judaism, were courageous,

³⁷ Lev, "Talmud That Works Your Heart," 184.

creative, out-of-the-box thinking, fringy radicals. Queer, if you will. Not in the sense of sexuality or gender, perhaps, but in what *being* those very kinds of people usually makes you: courageous, creative, out-of-the-box-thinking, fringy, and radical. And deeply attuned to that still, small voice inside and confident of the truth it is telling you even when the whole world is telling you something else. These guys called themselves Rabbis. Teachers. They were the architects of a Judaism that would have been virtually unrecognizable to those practicing the Judaism of the Temple era.

... Those queer Rabbis took their outsider insights – their sensitivity to those marginalized and oppressed by the Torah itself, their courage to stand up for them and mess with the Tradition to incorporate them- and declared their informed internal ethical impulse an authentic source of God’s will. They deemed it a source of Jewish legal change as authoritative as a verse in the Torah itself – so much so that a law that they created out of *svara* has the same status as one that appears verbatim in the Torah itself – *d’oraita*. And they went even further than that. They declared that one’s *svara* could even trump a verse in the Torah when the two conflicted.³⁸

Lappe spells out how the invention of *svara* reveals the radical project of these “queer” rabbis. Her yeshiva is built on the idea that every system of logic and meaning eventually falls apart. She calls this her “crash theory.”³⁹ After a system crashes, for example the fall of the Second Temple, a person or a society generally have three options. The first is to walk away entirely from the system, and find a new system of truth. The second is to hold tightly on to the system, even after it has failed. The third option is to integrate the change – not abandoning the system but neither conserving the parts of it that have fallen. Rather, the third option is the creation of something new, utilizing the tools of the old. Lappe maps this theory on to Jewish history, claiming that the rabbis chose option three when the Temple and Biblical Judaism fell and they embarked on the project of the Talmud. She links this model to many moments, both in world history, and in the lifespan of a person. When Jesus was crucified, this was a “crash.” When a queer or transgender person comes out, and realizes they are not who they were socialized to be, this is a “crash.” When a spouse dies, or a person becomes terminally ill, or when someone raised religious realizes that they are an atheist, these and so many moments like them are what Lappe calls the “crash of the master narrative.”

In Lappe’s framework, change is inevitable. Our master narratives shift under our feet, no matter how hard we might try to control them. The role of *svara* in the crash cycle is to empower us to survive the

³⁸ Benay Lappe, “The New Rabbis: A Postscript.” (*Torah Queeries*, Eds. Drinkwater, Lesser & Shneer. New York & London: NY University Press, 2009), 311-312.

³⁹ Benay Lappe, “1, 2, 3, CRASH! How to Navigate Inevitable Change” (Online Video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, Feb 23, 2014. Web. Accessed on May 11, 2015).

change, and to innovate such that we do not have to abandon the past, but rather can work flexibly with it to create something better. *Svara* permits the rabbis to turn to their own life experiences, their own insights, observations and ideas, and to derive authority from these sources. *Svara* highlights and elevates the realm of personal experience. Lappe teaches these texts, containing rabbinic *svara*, at her yeshiva, in an effort to empower learners to understand this Talmudic innovation, and learn to see themselves as harbingers of the liberation our world needs, whether it be queer liberation, economic liberation, anti-racist liberation, etc. She warns about the risks of writing *svara* into the rabbinic system:

... *Svara* allows *any* change—even to the point of uprooting the entire Tradition itself—to create a system that better achieves that Tradition’s ultimate goals. It is a mechanism of change that arguably should be entrusted only to those who are committed stakeholders in the Jewish enterprise. My reading of Talmud also tells me that the Rabbis who came up with this potentially dangerous and potentially chaos-creating source of change required its practitioners to be learned in the Tradition. This cannot be overstated. They did not believe that *svara* was merely one’s uneducated “gut feeling” but that it was one’s moral impulse that was deeply influenced by having been steeped in the intricacies of the values, principles, and concerns of the entire Jewish Tradition as well as by a broad exposure to the world and its people.⁴⁰

The rabbis put careful limits around *svara*, ensuring that only a person who could also claim fluency in the Jewish tradition could bring his own insights to the table. This is why we cannot completely abandon our “master narrative” when change occurs. Rather, by maintaining a strong link to the past, the rabbis granted themselves, and their own deeply intuitive senses of justice and goodness, a high level of authority. For Lappe, “empowerment” happens both through the theoretical framing of rabbinic history, as well as through meticulous text-based methodology. Every single SVARA student, whether they are an advanced learner or have just learned their *aleph-bet*, is required to learn using the same steps of careful word-for-word translation, grammatical mastery of every word on the page, and memorization and recitation of the text. Shiurim are taught at mixed levels, allowing all students to experience a sense of mutual responsibility for, and investment in, one another’s learning. Empowerment happens when everyone, regardless of level, achieves mastery over a text. Lappe ensures that her students will become fluent in the tradition without shortcuts.

Teaching in this way, Lappe has formulated an orientation to Talmud learning based on two priorities: 1. Empowering students with marginalized identities to trust their own ethical intuition and lived

⁴⁰ Lappe, *Torah Queeries*, 312.

experience as a source of authority, and 2. To develop the same skill-set the rabbis utilized, a skill-set of resilience and creative innovation for the sake of justice and liberation.

WORKING TOWARD MY OWN ORIENTATION

On a personal level, studying Talmud has allowed me to better access my own moral, ethical and theological voice, while locating my voice within an echo chamber of ancestral predecessors. In addition to the fact that I simply find Talmud study to be really fun, it has also been an intriguing, illuminating, and rewarding practice, which has sharpened my critical mind and my capacity to think through complexity and paradox. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, studying Talmud has opened up a window for me into the radical nature of Jewish tradition, which has empowered me to feel that I am truly a part of it.

When I say “radical” here, I mean that both in form and in content, the Talmud teaches its readers to think critically about figures of authority, even while its authors engage in the project of constructing their own authority. In the wake of destruction and devastation, the project of rabbinic literature was to enable the rabbis to act boldly, to become agents of creation and builders of a society, shifting consciousness and shifting their world. This marginal group of visionaries responded by creating literature that would empower themselves and their people. In my own ongoing development as a student and teacher of Talmud, I believe that this literature can be read as a blueprint for a Jewish liberation theology. It shows us how survival and change are interwoven processes. The Talmud offers us a template for our own authority and empowerment, which is especially significant and subversive for those of us whose identities have been historically denied authority in the Jewish community and in our society more generally. This authority and empowerment is never without humility. Rather, the Talmud conditions us to question singular truths and to listen to one another. We are encouraged to claim a creative voice and a bold vision, to envision the world we want to live in, while simultaneously becoming better at recognizing the voices of others. The process of studying Talmud, of learning to read the text and think like the text, is the process of queering our relationship to power and to scripture. It is the process of finding ourselves and our values reflected through a difficult and seemingly outdated document, claiming it as our own, and adding our voices to its pages.

Before going further into this framework, which is an attempt to being to articulate my own orientation to Talmud education, it is important to point out the text’s limitations. The authors and redactors of the Talmud are men. The centuries during which these texts were written were centuries of patriarchy – women were kept out of centers of study, and mostly relegated to the domestic domain. Though we do not have much historical evidence of this time period, we know that men dominated nearly every public leadership role in the Jewish society of the time. There are rare and important occasions in the Talmud in

which women's voices are lifted up and their words are recorded. However, the majority of rabbinic texts exclude or denigrate the voices of women. Furthermore, the Talmud writes at length on women's lives, their concerns and needs, and their bodies. In many senses, the Talmud acts just like other ancient (and contemporary) texts, which freely comment and legislate on the lives of women without including women's perspectives or leadership in the process. This critique can be broadened to include other categories of subjugated peoples: the Talmud often includes rabbinic stances that also dehumanize queer people, people of non-normative body types, the disabled, the poor. However the Talmud also eschews a monolithic voice, and we find positions in the text that dignify and value all human lives, making crucial space in the legal system for the rights of those listed above.

Extensive scholarship and cultural activism is being done in this regard today. It is an exciting time to be a queer Jewish woman studying rabbinic texts. There are feminist and queer commentaries being written on the Talmud in the 21st century. There are scholars writing on the intersections of disability justice and Talmud, on intersex people and Talmud, on labor rights in Talmudic literature, and more. By bringing Talmud to spaces and students who would not otherwise be able to access them, I am hoping to broaden this field. Referring back to Sarra Lev's conception of Talmud study in an I-Thou relational framework, I believe that bringing students into relationship with Talmud has a reciprocal effect: the text is transformed by the reader, and the reader is transformed by the text. Talmudic study needs people of these identities to weigh in, to illuminate what has not yet been seen, and to expand the tradition.

When teaching beginners, one of my goals was simply to expose students to the basics of Talmud: What is the Talmud, when was it written, by whom, for whom, and why? When considering the question: "What does it mean to teach Talmud to adult beginner learners who identify as either secular, radical, or progressive," I also hoped to bring some of my own process, in which the Talmud opened up for me the complexity and radical elements of Jewish tradition, to my students. My curriculum reflects this intention: I am interested in asking students questions about authority, about the creative relationship between the rabbi and scripture, about the variety of opinions present within a text, and about the underlying values the text reveals. From listening to my students, it is clear that they picked up on these elements, which I emphasized in my teaching.

As I continue to refine my orientation to Talmud teaching, I hope to strike a balance between attention to reading skills and attention to the values of liberation and justice. My class at the Workmen's Circle was taught in English translation, which felt like a necessary choice given the community and the goals of the class as they were expressed to me. Students did not come to this course in order to learn the skills needed for studying Talmud in the original Hebrew and Aramaic. However, my interest in both rabbis Benay Lappe and Sarra Lev's approaches to Talmud study partly derives from an admiration that they

incorporate both the language skill set and the conceptual frameworks needed to learn on multiple levels and derive deep meaning from the text while also building linguistic mastery.

In my own goals as an educator, I see both of Levisohn's models of transformation at play. The first is a model of total change. I hear my students reflecting back this model when they say things like "I didn't know that Talmud had something for me! And now I do." Some of my students described their encounter with this text as disruptive and jarring to their sense of themselves and of the world, as well as formative of a new approach. They began this learning as people who don't study Talmud, and ended it as people who have begun to incorporate Talmud into their understanding of themselves, their Jewish lives, and their relationships to some of life's biggest questions.

I also see some of my students exemplifying a hybrid of Levisohn's second model of transformation with the idea of transformation proposed by Rabbis Jaffe, Goldstein and Kimmelman-Block in their "Inner Life and Social Change" document. Levisohn characterizes his second model as "gradual change," and "Inner Life and Social Change" identifies transformation as a process of cultivating practices that strengthen and deepen one's pre-existing values. Many of my students brought their existing convictions and identities into our class, and found new material to affirm and encourage them. The Talmud they learned enriched their commitment to certain progressive values – a form of transformation based in synthesis rather than disruption.

In the end, after embarking on teaching my class at the Workmen's Circle and writing this Capstone paper, the terms I would use to describe my orientation are the same as they were when I began: I teach Talmud for the sake of transformation, liberation, innovation, and empowerment. However, through the work of Talmud pedagogy scholars, and the reflections of my students, I now feel that I have a better, deeper, and more precise understanding of what each of these terms can mean.

CONCLUSION

Daniel Boyarin writes "What good can we do for a troubled world by studying ancient texts?"⁴¹ In other words, as someone dedicated to justice and liberation for all peoples, what does my lens bring to this ancient text? And what does the text bring to my religious and political life? Boyarin reflects on his own question:

⁴¹ Boyarin, Daniel. "Rabbinic Resistance to Male Domination: A Case Study in Talmudic Cultural Poetics." *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age*, Ed. Steven Kepnes. (New York & London: New York University Press. 1996), 118.

I desire to empower a change of gender relations within the communities of Jews who are dedicated to maintaining a powerful connection with the Talmudic tradition. This statement, unpacked, demonstrates two motivations: a progressive feminist motivation and a conservative religious and cultural one. I wish to change the practice of Judaism out of a moral, political commitment, but I wish to change Judaism because of another urgency: the need to have a Judaism to hold on to and pass on. Jews (or others) who simply find the memory of Talmudic Judaism irrelevant will not respond to the political force of this inquiry except perhaps vicariously.⁴²

I share Boyarin's dual motivation. My political commitment to justice is radical and feminist, and my religious commitment to the Talmud and other primary sources of Jewish tradition is conservative. For me, "the memory of Talmudic Judaism" is not irrelevant, and so I teach Talmud for myself and others who seek to build bridges between ancient texts and postmodern lives.

I have always wondered, and worried, about how Talmud will continue to be a part of my rabbinate after rabbinical school if I am not primarily living or working in a Jewish community with a high level of Jewish literacy and fluency. What role does Talmud play for lay-people, what can the process of learning it offer to them? And a more anxious question: Will anyone in the wider world ever want to study this with me? What I have learned is that people will indeed want to study this text with me, to probe it for meaning and relevance, and invite it to transform them. Increasingly, in non-Orthodox Jewish communities, the study of Talmud is gaining momentum. New *yeshivot* have formed in the United States, and pre-existing institutions have made new kinds of spaces for Talmud learning. These new institutions and spaces are committed to bringing the study of Talmud to a broader audience of Jews. I hope to be a part of this ongoing wave of renewal, and to teach with as much audacity and skill as the rabbinic project itself has taught me.

⁴² Boyarin, 118-119.

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Teaching to Transgress

Education as the
Practice of Freedom

bell hooks

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to all my students,
especially to LaRon
who dances with angels
in gratitude for all the times we start over—begin again—
renew our joy in learning.

“ . . . to begin always anew, to make, to reconstruct, and to not
spoil, to refuse to bureaucratize the mind, to understand and
to live life as a process—live to become . . . ”

—Paulo Freire

Introduction

Teaching to Transgress

In the weeks before the English Department at Oberlin College was about to decide whether or not I would be granted tenure, I was haunted by dreams of running away—of disappearing—yes, even of dying. These dreams were not a response to fear that I would not be granted tenure. They were a response to the reality that I *would* be granted tenure. I was afraid that I *would* be trapped in the academy forever.

Instead of feeling elated when I received tenure, I fell into a deep, life-threatening depression. Since everyone around me believed that I should be relieved, thrilled, proud, I felt “guilty” about my “real” feelings and could not share them with anyone. The lecture circuit took me to sunny California and the New Age world of my sister’s house in Laguna Beach where I was able to chill out for a month. When I shared my feelings with my sister (she’s a therapist), she reassured me that they were entirely appropriate because, she said, “You never wanted

to be a teacher. Since we were little, all you ever wanted to do was write." She was right. It was always assumed by everyone else that I would become a teacher. In the apartheid South, black girls from working-class backgrounds had three career choices. We could marry. We could work as maids. We could become school teachers. And since, according to the sexist thinking of the time, men did not really desire "smart" women, it was assumed that signs of intelligence sealed one's fate. From grade school on, I was destined to become a teacher.

But the dream of becoming a writer was always present within me. From childhood, I believed that I would teach *and* write. Writing would be the serious work, teaching would be the not-so-serious-I-need-to-make-a-living "job." Writing, I believed then, was all about private longing and personal glory, but teaching was about service, giving back to one's community. For black folks teaching—educating—was fundamentally political because it was rooted in antiracist struggle. Indeed, my all-black grade schools became the location where I experienced learning as revolution.

Almost all our teachers at Booker T. Washington were black women. They were committed to nurturing intellect so that we could become scholars, thinkers, and cultural workers—black folks who used our "minds." We learned early that our devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization. Though they did not define or articulate these practices in theoretical terms, my teachers were enacting a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance that was profoundly anticolonial. Within these segregated schools, black children who were deemed exceptional, gifted, were given special care. Teachers worked with and for us to ensure that we would fulfill our intellectual destiny and by so doing uplift the race. My teachers were on a mission.

To fulfill that mission, my teachers made sure they "knew" us. They knew our parents, our economic status, where we worked, what our homes were like, and how we were treated in the family. I went to school at a historical moment where I was being taught by the same teachers who had taught my mother, her sisters, and brothers. My effort and ability to learn was always contextualized within the framework of generational family experience. Certain behaviors, gestures, habits of being were traced back.

Attending school then was sheer joy. I loved being a student. I loved learning. School was the place of ecstasy—pleasure and danger. To be changed by ideas was pure pleasure. But to learn ideas that ran counter to values and beliefs learned at home was to place oneself at risk, to enter the danger zone. Home was the place where I was forced to conform to someone else's image of who and what I should be. School was the place where I could forget that self and, through ideas, reinvent myself.

School changed utterly with racial integration. Gone was the messianic zeal to transform our minds and beings that had characterized teachers and their pedagogical practices in our all-black schools. Knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived, behaved. It was no longer connected to antiracist struggle. Bussed to white schools, we soon learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was what was expected of us. Too much eagerness to learn could easily be seen as a threat to white authority.

When we entered racist, desegregated, white schools we left a world where teachers believed that to educate black children rightly would require a political commitment. Now, we were mainly taught by white teachers whose lessons reinforced racist stereotypes. For black children, education was no longer about the practice of freedom. Realizing this, I lost my love of school.

The classroom was no longer a place of pleasure or ecstasy. School was still a political place, since we were always having to counter white racist assumptions that we were genetically inferior, never as capable as white peers, even unable to learn. Yet, the politics were no longer counter-hegemonic. We were always and only responding and reacting to white folks.

That shift from beloved, all-black schools to white schools where black students were always seen as interlopers, as not really belonging, taught me the difference between education as the practice of freedom and education that merely strives to reinforce domination. The rare white teacher who dared to resist, who would not allow racist biases to determine how we were taught, sustained the belief that learning at its most powerful could indeed liberate. A few black teachers had joined us in the desegregation process. And, although it was more difficult, they continued to nurture black students even as their efforts were constrained by the suspicion they were favoring their own race.

Despite intensely negative experiences, I graduated from school still believing that education was enabling, that it enhanced our capacity to be free. When I began undergraduate work at Stanford University, I was enthralled with the process of becoming an insurgent black intellectual. It surprised and shocked me to sit in classes where professors were not excited about teaching, where they did not seem to have a clue that education was about the practice of freedom. During college, the primary lesson was reinforced: we were to learn obedience to authority.

In graduate school the classroom became a place I hated, yet a place where I struggled to claim and maintain the right to be an independent thinker. The university and the classroom began to feel more like a prison, a place of punishment and confinement rather than a place of promise and possibility. I

wrote my first book during those undergraduate years, even though it was not published until years later. I was writing; but more importantly I was preparing to become a teacher.

Accepting the teaching profession as my destiny, I was tormented by the classroom reality I had known both as an undergraduate and a graduate student. The vast majority of our professors lacked basic communication skills, they were not self-actualized, and they often used the classroom to enact rituals of control that were about domination and the unjust exercise of power. In these settings I learned a lot about the kind of teacher I did not want to become.

In graduate school I found that I was often bored in classes. The banking system of education (based on the assumption that memorizing information and regurgitating it represented gaining knowledge that could be deposited, stored and used at a later date) did not interest me. I wanted to become a critical thinker. Yet that longing was often seen as a threat to authority. Individual white male students who were seen as “exceptional,” were often allowed to chart their intellectual journeys, but the rest of us (and particularly those from marginal groups) were always expected to conform. Nonconformity on our part was viewed with suspicion, as empty gestures of defiance aimed at masking inferiority or substandard work. In those days, those of us from marginal groups who were allowed to enter prestigious, predominantly white colleges were made to feel that we were there not to learn but to prove that we were the equal of whites. We were there to prove this by showing how well we could become clones of our peers. As we constantly confronted biases, an undercurrent of stress diminished our learning experience.

My reaction to this stress and to the ever-present boredom and apathy that pervaded my classes was to imagine ways that teaching and the learning experience could be different.

When I discovered the work of the Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire, my first introduction to critical pedagogy, I found a mentor and a guide, someone who understood that learning could be liberatory. With his teachings and my growing understanding of the ways in which the education I had received in all-black Southern schools had been empowering, I began to develop a blueprint for my own pedagogical practice. Already deeply engaged with feminist thinking, I had no difficulty bringing that critique to Freire's work. Significantly, I felt that this mentor and guide, whom I had never seen in the flesh, would encourage and support my challenge to his ideas if he was truly committed to education as the practice of freedom. At the same time, I used his pedagogical paradigms to critique the limitations of feminist classrooms.

During my undergraduate and graduate school years, only white women professors were involved in developing Women's Studies programs. And even though I taught my first class as a graduate student on black women writers from a feminist perspective, it was in the context of a Black Studies program. At that time, I found, white women professors were not eager to nurture any interest in feminist thinking and scholarship on the part of black female students if that interest included critical challenge. Yet their lack of interest did not discourage me from involvement with feminist ideas or participation in the feminist classroom. Those classrooms were the one space where pedagogical practices were interrogated, where it was assumed that the knowledge offered students would empower them to be better scholars, to live more fully in the world beyond academe. The feminist classroom was the one space where students could raise critical questions about pedagogical process. These critiques were not always encouraged or well received, but they were allowed. That small acceptance of critical interrogation was a crucial challenge inviting us as students to think seriously about pedagogy in relation to the practice of freedom.

When I entered my first undergraduate classroom to teach, I relied on the example of those inspired black women teachers in my grade school, on Freire's work, and on feminist thinking about radical pedagogy. I longed passionately to teach differently from the way I had been taught since high school. The first paradigm that shaped my pedagogy was the idea that the classroom should be an exciting place, never boring. And if boredom should prevail, then pedagogical strategies were needed that would intervene, alter, even disrupt the atmosphere. Neither Freire's work nor feminist pedagogy examined the notion of pleasure in the classroom. The idea that learning should be exciting, sometimes even "fun," was the subject of critical discussion by educators writing about pedagogical practices in grade schools, and sometimes even high schools. But there seemed to be no interest among either traditional or radical educators in discussing the role of excitement in higher education.

Excitement in higher education was viewed as potentially disruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process. To enter classroom settings in colleges and universities with the will to share the desire to encourage excitement, was to transgress. Not only did it require movement beyond accepted boundaries, but excitement could not be generated without a full recognition of the fact that there could never be an absolute set agenda governing teaching practices. Agendas had to be flexible, had to allow for spontaneous shifts in direction. Students had to be seen in their particularity as individuals (I drew on the strategies my grade-school teachers used to get to know us) and interacted with according to their needs (here Freire was useful). Critical reflection on my experience as a student in unexciting classrooms enabled me not only to imagine that the classroom could be exciting but that this excitement could co-exist with and even stimulate serious intellectual and/or academic engagement.

But excitement about ideas was not sufficient to create an exciting learning process. As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence. Since the vast majority of students learn through conservative, traditional educational practices and concern themselves only with the presence of the professor, any radical pedagogy must insist that everyone's presence is acknowledged. That insistence cannot be simply stated. It has to be demonstrated through pedagogical practices. To begin, the professor must genuinely *value* everyone's presence. There must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes. These contributions are resources. Used constructively they enhance the capacity of any class to create an open learning community. Often before this process can begin there has to be some deconstruction of the traditional notion that only the professor is responsible for classroom dynamics. That responsibility is relative to status. Indeed, the professor will always be more responsible because the larger institutional structures will always ensure that accountability for what happens in the classroom rests with the teacher. It is rare that any professor, no matter how eloquent a lecturer, can generate through his or her actions enough excitement to create an exciting classroom. Excitement is generated through collective effort.

Seeing the classroom always as a communal place enhances the likelihood of collective effort in creating and sustaining a learning community. One semester, I had a very difficult class, one that completely failed on the communal level. Throughout the term, I thought that the major drawback inhibiting the development of a learning community was that the class was scheduled in the early morning, before nine. Almost always between a third and a half of the class was not fully awake. This, coupled with the tensions of "differences," was impossible to

overcome. Every now and then we had an exciting session, but mostly it was a dull class. I came to hate this class so much that I had a tremendous fear that I would not awaken to attend it; the night before (despite alarm clocks, wake-up calls, and the experiential knowledge that I had never forgotten to attend class) I still could not sleep. Rather than making me arrive sleepy, I tended to arrive wired, full of an energy few students mirrored.

Time was just one of the factors that prevented this class from becoming a learning community. For reasons I cannot explain it was also full of "resisting" students who did not want to learn new pedagogical processes, who did not want to be in a classroom that differed in any way from the norm. To these students, transgressing boundaries was frightening. And though they were not the majority, their spirit of rigid resistance seemed always to be more powerful than any will to intellectual openness and pleasure in learning. More than any other class I had taught, this one compelled me to abandon the sense that the professor could, by sheer strength of will and desire, make the classroom an exciting, learning community.

Before this class, I considered that *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* would be a book of essays mostly directed to teachers. After the class ended, I began writing with the understanding that I was speaking to and with both students and professors. The scholarly field of writing on critical pedagogy and/or feminist pedagogy continues to be primarily a discourse engaged by white women and men. Freire, too, in conversation with me, as in much of his written work, has always acknowledged that he occupies the location of white maleness, particularly in this country. But the work of various thinkers on radical pedagogy (I use this term to include critical and/or feminist perspectives) has in recent years truly included a recognition of differences—those determined by class, race, sexual practice, nationality, and so on. Yet this movement forward does not seem to coincide with any significant

increase in black or other nonwhite voices joining discussions about radical pedagogical practices.

My pedagogical practices have emerged from the mutually illuminating interplay of anticolonial, critical, and feminist pedagogies. This complex and unique blending of multiple perspectives has been an engaging and powerful standpoint from which to work. Expanding beyond boundaries, it has made it possible for me to imagine and enact pedagogical practices that engage directly both the concern for interrogating biases in curricula that reinscribe systems of domination (such as racism and sexism) while simultaneously providing new ways to teach diverse groups of students.

In this book I want to share insights, strategies, and critical reflections on pedagogical practice. I intend these essays to be an intervention—countering the devaluation of teaching even as they address the urgent need for changes in teaching practices. They are meant to serve as constructive commentary. Hopeful and exuberant, they convey the pleasure and joy I experience teaching; these essays are celebratory! To emphasize that the pleasure of teaching is an act of resistance countering the overwhelming boredom, uninterest, and apathy that so often characterize the way professors and students feel about teaching and learning, about the classroom experience.

Each essay addresses common themes that surface again and again in discussions of pedagogy, offering ways to rethink teaching practices and constructive strategies to enhance learning. Written separately for a variety of contexts there is unavoidably some degree of overlap; ideas are repeated, key phrases used again and again. Even though I share strategies, these works do not offer blueprints for ways to make the classroom an exciting place for learning. To do so would undermine the insistence that engaged pedagogy recognize each classroom as different, that strategies must constantly be

changed, invented, reconceptualized to address each new teaching experience.

Teaching is a performative act. And it is that aspect of our work that offers the space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts, that can serve as a catalyst drawing out the unique elements in each classroom. To embrace the performative aspect of teaching we are compelled to engage “audiences,” to consider issues of reciprocity. Teachers are not performers in the traditional sense of the word in that our work is not meant to be a spectacle. Yet it is meant to serve as a catalyst that calls everyone to become more and more engaged, to become active participants in learning.

Just as the way we perform changes, so should our sense of “voice.” In our everyday lives we speak differently to diverse audiences. We communicate best by choosing that way of speaking that is informed by the particularity and uniqueness of whom we are speaking to and with. In keeping with this spirit, these essays do not all sound alike. They reflect my effort to use language in ways that speak to specific contexts, as well as my desire to communicate with a diverse audience. To teach in varied communities not only our paradigms must shift but also the way we think, write, speak. The engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself.

These essays reflect my experience of critical discussions with teachers, students, and individuals who have entered my classes to observe. Multilayered, then, these essays are meant to stand as testimony, bearing witness to education as the practice of freedom. Long before a public ever recognized me as a thinker or writer, I was recognized in the classroom by students—seen by them as a teacher who worked hard to create a dynamic learning experience for all of us. Nowadays, I am recognized more for insurgent intellectual practice. Indeed, the

academic public that I encounter at my lectures always shows surprise when I speak intimately and deeply about the classroom. That public seemed particularly surprised when I said that I was working on a collection of essays about teaching. This surprise is a sad reminder of the way teaching is seen as a duller, less valuable aspect of the academic profession. This perspective on teaching is a common one. Yet it must be challenged if we are to meet the needs of our students, if we are to restore to education and the classroom excitement about ideas and the will to learn.

There is a serious crisis in education. Students often do not want to learn and teachers do not want to teach. More than ever before in the recent history of this nation, educators are compelled to confront the biases that have shaped teaching practices in our society and to create new ways of knowing, different strategies for the sharing of knowledge. We cannot address this crisis if progressive critical thinkers and social critics act as though teaching is not a subject worthy of our regard.

The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy. For years it has been a place where education has been undermined by teachers and students alike who seek to use it as a platform for opportunistic concerns rather than as a place to learn. With these essays, I add my voice to the collective call for renewal and rejuvenation in our teaching practices. Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom.



Engaged Pedagogy

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.

Throughout my years as student and professor, I have been most inspired by those teachers who have had the courage to transgress those boundaries that would confine each pupil to a rote, assembly-line approach to learning. Such teachers approach students with the will and desire to respond to our unique beings, even if the situation does not allow the full emergence of a relationship based on mutual recognition. Yet the possibility of such recognition is always present.

Paulo Freire and the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh are two of the “teachers” who have touched me deeply with their work. When I first began college, Freire’s thought gave me the support I needed to challenge the “banking system” of education, that approach to learning that is rooted in the notion that all students need to do is consume information fed to them by a professor and be able to memorize and store it. Early on, it was Freire’s insistence that education could be the practice of freedom that encouraged me to create strategies for what he called “conscientization” in the classroom. Translating that term to critical awareness and engagement, I entered the classrooms with the conviction that it was crucial for me and every other student to be an active participant, not a passive consumer. Education as the practice of freedom was continually undermined by professors who were actively hostile to the notion of student participation. Freire’s work affirmed that education can only be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor. That notion of mutual labor was affirmed by Thich Nhat Hanh’s philosophy of engaged Buddhism, the focus on practice in conjunction with contemplation. His philosophy was similar to Freire’s emphasis on “praxis”—action and reflection upon the world in order to change it.

In his work Thich Nhat Hanh always speaks of the teacher as a healer. Like Freire, his approach to knowledge called on students to be active participants, to link awareness with practice. Whereas Freire was primarily concerned with the mind, Thich Nhat Hanh offered a way of thinking about pedagogy which emphasized wholeness, a union of mind, body, and spirit. His focus on a holistic approach to learning and spiritual practice enabled me to overcome years of socialization that had taught me to believe a classroom was diminished if students and professors regarded one another as “whole” human

beings, striving not just for knowledge in books, but knowledge about how to live in the world.

During my twenty years of teaching, I have witnessed a grave sense of dis-ease among professors (irrespective of their politics) when students want us to see them as whole human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge. When I was an undergraduate, Women’s Studies was just finding a place in the academy. Those classrooms were the one space where teachers were willing to acknowledge a connection between ideas learned in university settings and those learned in life practices. And, despite those times when students abused that freedom in the classroom by only wanting to dwell on personal experience, feminist classrooms were, on the whole, one location where I witnessed professors striving to create participatory spaces for the sharing of knowledge. Nowadays, most women’s studies professors are not as committed to exploring new pedagogical strategies. Despite this shift, many students still seek to enter feminist classrooms because they continue to believe that there, more than in any other place in the academy, they will have an opportunity to experience education as the practice of freedom.

Progressive, holistic education, “engaged pedagogy” is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students. Thich Nhat Hanh emphasized that “the practice of a healer, therapist, teacher or any helping professional should be directed toward his or herself first, because if the helper is unhappy, he or she cannot help many people.” In the United States it is rare that anyone talks about teachers in university settings as

healers. And it is even more rare to hear anyone suggest that teachers have any responsibility to be self-actualized individuals.

Learning about the work of intellectuals and academics primarily from nineteenth-century fiction and nonfiction during my pre-college years, I was certain that the task for those of us who chose this vocation was to be holistically questing for self-actualization. It was the actual experience of college that disrupted this image. It was there that I was made to feel as though I was terribly naive about “the profession.” I learned that far from being self-actualized, the university was seen more as a haven for those who are smart in book knowledge but who might be otherwise unfit for social interaction. Luckily, during my undergraduate years I began to make a distinction between the practice of being an intellectual/teacher and one’s role as a member of the academic profession.

It was difficult to maintain fidelity to the idea of the intellectual as someone who sought to be whole—well-grounded in a context where there was little emphasis on spiritual well-being, on care of the soul. Indeed, the objectification of the teacher within bourgeois educational structures seemed to denigrate notions of wholeness and uphold the idea of a mind/body split, one that promotes and supports compartmentalization.

This support reinforces the dualistic separation of public and private, encouraging teachers and students to see no connection between life practices, habits of being, and the roles of professors. The idea of the intellectual questing for a union of mind, body, and spirit had been replaced with notions that being smart meant that one was inherently emotionally unstable and that the best in oneself emerged in one’s academic work. This meant that whether academics were drug addicts, alcoholics, batterers, or sexual abusers, the only important aspect of our identity was whether or not our minds functioned, whether we were able to do our jobs in the classroom. The self was presumably emptied out the moment the thresh-

old was crossed, leaving in place only an objective mind—free of experiences and biases. There was fear that the conditions of that self would interfere with the teaching process. Part of the luxury and privilege of the role of teacher/professor today is the absence of any requirement that we be self-actualized. Not surprisingly, professors who are not concerned with inner well-being are the most threatened by the demand on the part of students for liberatory education, for pedagogical processes that will aid them in their own struggle for self-actualization.

Certainly it was naive for me to imagine during high school that I would find spiritual and intellectual guidance in university settings from writers, thinkers, scholars. To have found this would have been to stumble across a rare treasure. I learned, along with other students, to consider myself fortunate if I found an interesting professor who talked in a compelling way. Most of my professors were not the slightest bit interested in enlightenment. More than anything they seemed enthralled by the exercise of power and authority within their mini-kingdom, the classroom.

This is not to say that there were not compelling, benevolent dictators, but it is true to my memory that it was rare—absolutely, astonishingly rare—to encounter professors who were deeply committed to progressive pedagogical practices. I was dismayed by this; most of my professors were not individuals whose teaching styles I wanted to emulate.

My commitment to learning kept me attending classes. Yet, even so, because I did not conform—would not be an unquestioning, passive student—some professors treated me with contempt. I was slowly becoming estranged from education. Finding Freire in the midst of that estrangement was crucial to my survival as a student. His work offered both a way for me to understand the limitations of the type of education I was receiving and to discover alternative strategies for learning and teaching. It was particularly disappointing to encounter white

male professors who claimed to follow Freire's model even as their pedagogical practices were mired in structures of domination, mirroring the styles of conservative professors even as they approached subjects from a more progressive standpoint.

When I first encountered Paulo Freire, I was eager to see if his style of teaching would embody the pedagogical practices he described so eloquently in his work. During the short time I studied with him, I was deeply moved by his presence, by the way in which his manner of teaching exemplified his pedagogical theory. (Not all students interested in Freire have had a similar experience.) My experience with him restored my faith in liberatory education. I had never wanted to surrender the conviction that one could teach without reinforcing existing systems of domination. I needed to know that professors did not have to be dictators in the classroom.

While I wanted teaching to be my career, I believed that personal success was intimately linked with self-actualization. My passion for this quest led me to interrogate constantly the mind/body split that was so often taken to be a given. Most professors were often deeply antagonistic toward, even scornful of, any approach to learning emerging from a philosophical standpoint emphasizing the union of mind, body, and spirit, rather than the separation of these elements. Like many of the students I now teach, I was often told by powerful academics that I was misguided to seek such a perspective in the academy. Throughout my student years I felt deep inner anguish. Memory of that pain returns as I listen to students express the concern that they will not succeed in academic professions if they want to be well, if they eschew dysfunctional behavior or participation in coercive hierarchies. These students are often fearful, as I was, that there are no spaces in the academy where the will to be self-actualized can be affirmed.

This fear is present because many professors have intensely hostile responses to the vision of liberatory education that con-

nnects the will to know with the will to become. Within professional circles, individuals often complain bitterly that students want classes to be "encounter groups." While it is utterly unreasonable for students to expect classrooms to be therapy sessions, it is appropriate for them to hope that the knowledge received in these settings will enrich and enhance them.

Currently, the students I encounter seem far more uncertain about the project of self-actualization than my peers and I were twenty years ago. They feel that there are no clear ethical guidelines shaping actions. Yet, while they despair, they are also adamant that education should be liberatory. They want and demand more from professors than my generation did. There are times when I walk into classrooms overflowing with students who feel terribly wounded in their psyches (many of them see therapists), yet I do not think that they want therapy from me. They do want an education that is healing to the uninformed, unknowing spirit. They do want knowledge that is meaningful. They rightfully expect that my colleagues and I will not offer them information without addressing the connection between what they are learning and their overall life experiences.

This demand on the students' part does not mean that they will always accept our guidance. This is one of the joys of education as the practice of freedom, for it allows students to assume responsibility for their choices. Writing about our teacher/student relationship in a piece for the *Village Voice*, "How to Run the Yard: Off-Line and into the Margins at Yale," one of my students, Gary Dauphin, shares the joys of working with me as well as the tensions that surfaced between us as he began to devote his time to pledging a fraternity rather than cultivating his writing:

People think academics like Gloria [my given name] are all about difference: but what I learned from her was mostly about sameness, about what I had in common as a black man to people of color; to women and gays and lesbians and the poor and anyone else who

wanted in. I did some of this learning by reading but most of it came from hanging out on the fringes of her life. I lived like that for a while, shuttling between high points in my classes and low points outside. Gloria was a safe haven . . . Pledging a fraternity is about as far away as you can get from her classroom, from the yellow kitchen where she used to share her lunch with students in need of various forms of sustenance.

This is Gary writing about the joy. The tension arose as we discussed his reason for wanting to join a fraternity and my disdain for that decision. Gary comments, “They represented a vision of black manhood that she abhorred, one where violence and abuse were primary ciphers of bonding and identity.” Describing his assertion of autonomy from my influence he writes, “But she must have also known the limits of even her influence on my life, the limits of books and teachers.”

Ultimately, Gary felt that the decision he had made to join a fraternity was not constructive, that I “had taught him openness” where the fraternity had encouraged one-dimensional allegiance. Our interchange both during and after this experience was an example of engaged pedagogy.

Through critical thinking—a process he learned by reading theory and actively analyzing texts—Gary experienced education as the practice of freedom. His final comments about me: “Gloria had only mentioned the entire episode once after it was over, and this to tell me simply that there are many kinds of choices, many kinds of logic. I could make those events mean whatever I wanted as long as I was honest.” I have quoted his writing at length because it is testimony affirming engaged pedagogy. It means that my voice is not the only account of what happens in the classroom.

Engaged pedagogy necessarily values student expression. In her essay, “Interrupting the Calls for Student Voice in Libera-

tory Education: A Feminist Poststructuralist Perspective,” Mimi Orner employs a Foucauldian framework to suggest that

Regulatory and punitive means and uses of the confession bring to mind curricular and pedagogical practices which call for students to publicly reveal, even confess, information about their lives and cultures in the presence of authority figures such as teachers.

When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive. In my classrooms, I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share. When professors bring narratives of their experiences into classroom discussions it eliminates the possibility that we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators. It is often productive if professors take the first risk, linking confessional narratives to academic discussions so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material. But most professors must practice being vulnerable in the classroom, being wholly present in mind, body, and spirit.

Progressive professors working to transform the curriculum so that it does not reflect biases or reinforce systems of domination are most often the individuals willing to take the risks that engaged pedagogy requires and to make their teaching practices a site of resistance. In her essay, “On Race and Voice:

Challenges for Liberation Education in the 1990s,” Chandra Mohanty writes that

resistance lies in self-conscious engagement with dominant, normative discourses and representations and in the active creation of oppositional analytic and cultural spaces. Resistance that is random and isolated is clearly not as effective as that which is mobilized through systemic politicized practices of teaching and learning. Uncovering and reclaiming subjugated knowledge is one way to lay claims to alternative histories. But these knowledges need to be understood and defined pedagogically, as questions of strategy and practice as well as of scholarship, in order to transform educational institutions radically.

Professors who embrace the challenge of self-actualization will be better able to create pedagogical practices that engage students, providing them with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply.

14

Ecstasy

Teaching and Learning Without Limits

On a gorgeous Maine summer day, I fell down a hill and broke my wrist severely. As I was sitting in the dirt, experiencing the most excruciating pain, more intense than any I had ever felt in my life, an image flashed across the screen of my mind. It was one of me as a young girl falling down another hill. In both cases, my falling was related to challenging myself to move beyond limits. As a child it was the limits of fear. As a grown woman, it was the limits of being tired—what I call “bone weary.” I had come to Skowhegan to give a lecture at a summer art program. A number of nonwhite students had shared with me that they rarely have any critique of their work from scholars and artists of color. Even though I felt tired and very sick, I wanted to affirm their work and their needs, so I awakened early in the morning to climb the hill to do studio visits.

Skowhegan was once a working farm. Old barns had been converted into studios. The studio I was leaving, after having

had an intense discussion with several young black artists, female and male, led into a cow pasture. Sitting in pain at the bottom of the hill, staring in the face of the black female artist whose studio door I had been trying to reach, I saw such disappointment. When she came to help me, she expressed concern, yet what I heard was another feeling entirely. She really needed to talk about her work with someone she could trust, who would not approach it with racist, sexist, or classist prejudice, someone whose intellect and vision she could respect. That someone did not need to be me. It could have been any teacher. When I think about my life as a student, I can remember vividly the faces, gestures, habits of being of all the individual teachers who nurtured and guided me, who offered me an opportunity to experience joy in learning, who made the classroom a space of critical thinking, who made the exchange of information and ideas a kind of ecstasy.

Recently, I worked on a program at CBS on American feminism. I and other black women present were asked to name what we felt helps enable feminist thinking and feminist movement. I answered that to me “critical thinking” was the primary element allowing the possibility of change. Passionately insisting that no matter what one’s class, race, gender, or social standing, I shared my beliefs that without the capacity to think critically about our selves and our lives, none of us would be able to move forward, to change, to grow. In our society, which is so fundamentally anti-intellectual, critical thinking is not encouraged. Engaged pedagogy has been essential to my development as an intellectual, as a teacher/professor because the heart of this approach to learning is critical thinking. Conditions of radical openness exist in any learning situation where students and teachers celebrate their abilities to think critically, to engage in pedagogical praxis.

Profound commitment to engaged pedagogy is taxing to the spirit. After twenty years of teaching, I have begun to need

time away from the classroom. Somehow, moving around to teach at different institutions has always prevented me from having that marvelous paid sabbatical that is one of the material rewards of academic life. This factor, coupled with commitment to teaching, has meant that even when I take a job that places me on a part-time schedule, instead of taking time away from teaching, I lecture elsewhere. I do this because I sense such desperate need in students—their fear that no one really cares whether they learn or develop intellectually.

My commitment to engaged pedagogy is an expression of political activism. Given that our educational institutions are so deeply invested in a banking system, teachers are more rewarded when we do not teach against the grain. The choice to work against the grain, to challenge the status quo, often has negative consequences. And that is part of what makes that choice one that is not politically neutral. In colleges and universities, teaching is often the least valued of our many professional tasks. It saddens me that colleagues are often suspicious of teachers whom students long to study with. And there is a tendency to undermine the professorial commitment of engaged pedagogues by suggesting that what we do is not as rigorously academic as it should be. Ideally, education should be a place where the need for diverse teaching methods and styles would be valued, encouraged, seen as essential to learning. Occasionally students feel concerned when a class departs from the banking system. I remind them that they can have a lifetime of classes that reflect conventional norms.

Of course, I hope that more professors will seek to be engaged. Although it is a reward of engaged pedagogy that students seek courses with those of us who have made a wholehearted commitment to education as the practice of freedom, it is also true that we are often overworked, our classes often overcrowded. For years, I envied those professors who taught more conventionally, because they frequently had small class-

es. Throughout my teaching career my classes have been too large to be as effective as they could be. Over time, I've begun to see that departmental pressure on "popular" professors to accept larger classes was also a way to undermine engaged pedagogy. If classes became so full that it is impossible to know students' names, to spend quality time with each of them, then the effort to build a learning community fails. Throughout my teaching career, I have found it helpful to meet with each student in my classes, if only briefly. Rather than sitting in my office for hours waiting for individual students to choose to meet or for problems to arise, I have preferred to schedule lunches with students. Sometimes, the whole class might bring lunch and have discussion in a space other than our usual classroom. At Oberlin, for instance, we might go as a class to the African Heritage House and have lunch, both to learn about different places on campus and gather in a setting other than our classroom.

Many professors remain unwilling to be involved with any pedagogical practices that emphasize mutual participation between teacher and student because more time and effort are required to do this work. Yet some version of engaged pedagogy is really the only type of teaching that truly generates excitement in the classroom, that enables students and professors to feel the joy of learning.

I was reminded of this during my trip to the emergency room after falling down that hill. I talked so intensely about ideas with the two students who were rushing me to the hospital that I forgot my pain. It is this passion for ideas, for critical thinking and dialogical exchange that I want to celebrate in the classroom, to share with students.

Talking about pedagogy, thinking about it critically, is not the intellectual work that most folks think is hip and cool. Cultural criticism and feminist theory are the areas of my work that are most often deemed interesting by students and

colleagues alike. Most of us are not inclined to see discussion of pedagogy as central to our academic work and intellectual growth, or the practice of teaching as work that enhances and enriches scholarship. Yet it has been the mutual interplay of thinking, writing and sharing ideas as an intellectual and teacher that creates whatever insights are in my work. My devotion to that interplay keeps me teaching in academic settings, despite their difficulties.

When I first read *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class*, I was stunned by the intense bitterness expressed in the individual narratives. This bitterness was not unfamiliar to me. I understood what Jane Ellen Wilson meant when she declared, "The whole process of becoming highly educated was for me a process of losing faith." I have felt that bitterness most keenly in relation to academic colleagues. It emerged from my sense that so many of them willingly betrayed the promise of intellectual fellowship and radical openness that I believe is the heart and soul of learning. When I moved beyond those feelings to focus my attention on the classroom, the one place in the academy where I could have the most impact, they became less intense. I became more passionate in my commitment to the art of teaching.

Engaged pedagogy not only compels me to be constantly creative in the classroom, it also sanctions involvement with students beyond that setting. I journey with students as they progress in their lives beyond our classroom experience. In many ways, I continue to teach them, even as they become more capable of teaching me. The important lesson that we learn together, the lesson that allows us to move together within and beyond the classroom, is one of mutual engagement.

I could never say that I have no idea of the way students respond to my pedagogy; they give me constant feedback. When I teach, I encourage them to critique, evaluate, make suggestions and interventions as we go along. Evaluations at

the end of a course rarely help us improve the learning experience we share together. When students see themselves as mutually responsible for the development of a learning community, they offer constructive input.

Students do not always enjoy studying with me. Often they find my courses challenge them in ways that are deeply unsettling. This was particularly disturbing to me at the beginning of my teaching career because I wanted to be like and admired. It took time and experience for me to understand that the rewards of engaged pedagogy might not emerge during a course. Luckily, I have taught many students who take time to reconnect and share the impact of our working together on their lives. Then the work I do as a teacher is affirmed again and again, not only by the accolades extended to me but by the career choices students make, their habits of being. When a student tells me that she struggled with the decision to do corporate law, joined such and such a firm, and then at the last minute began to reconsider whether this was what she felt called to do, sharing that her decision was influenced by the courses she took with me, I am reminded of the power we have as teachers as well as the awesome responsibility. Commitment to engaged pedagogy carries with it the willingness to be responsible, not to pretend that professors do not have the power to change the direction of our students' lives.

I began this collection of essays confessing that I did not want to be a teacher. After twenty years of teaching, I can confess that I am often most joyous in the classroom, brought closer here to the ecstatic than by most of life's experiences. In a recent issue of *Tricycle*, a journal of Buddhist thought, Pema Chodron talks about the ways teachers function as role models, describing those teachers that most touched her spirit:

My models were the people who stepped outside of the conventional mind and who could actually stop my

mind and completely open it up and free it, even for a moment, from a conventional, habitual way of looking at things. . . . If you are really preparing for groundlessness, preparing for the reality of human existence, you are living on the razor's edge, and you must become used to the fact that things shift and change. Things are not certain and they do not last and you do not know what is going to happen. My teachers have always pushed me over the cliff. . . .

Reading this passage, I felt deep kinship, for I have sought teachers in all areas of my life who would challenge me beyond what I might select for myself, and in and through that challenge allow me a space of radical openness where I am truly free to choose—able to learn and grow without limits.

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.



Teaching Community

A Pedagogy of Hope

bell hooks

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It is imperative that we maintain hope even when the harshness of reality may suggest the opposite.

—Paulo Freire

difficult, disturbing or just plain ideas that they disagreed with and wanted to think through. More than any other book I have written, *Teaching to Transgress* has reached the diverse audiences I imagined would be its readers. Bridging the gap between public school teachers and those of us who do most if not all of our teaching at colleges and universities, these essays focused on common issues teachers confront irrespective of the type of classroom we work in.

Certainly it was the publication of *Teaching to Transgress* that created a space where I was dialoguing more and more with teachers and students in public schools, talking with teachers training to be teachers, listening to them talk to me about teaching. The incredible success of *Teaching to Transgress* motivated my editor to urge me to write another book on teaching shortly after the publication of this first book. I was adamant that I would not write another book about teaching unless I felt that sense of organic necessity that often drives me to passionate writing.

In these past ten years I have spent more time teaching teachers and students about teaching than I have spent in the usual English Department, Feminist Studies, or African-American Studies classroom. It was not simply the power of *Teaching to Transgress* that opened up these new spaces for dialogue. It was also that as I went out into the public world I endeavored to bring as a teacher, passion, skill, and absolute grace to the art of teaching: It was clear to audiences that I practiced what I preached. That union of theory and praxis was a dynamic example for teachers seeking practical wisdom. I do not mean to be immodest in openly evaluating the quality of my teaching and writing about teaching, my intent is to bear witness so as to challenge the prevailing notion that it is simply too difficult to make connections—this is not so. Those of us who want to make connections who want to cross boundaries, do. I want all passionate teachers to revel in a job well done to inspire students training to be teachers.

Preface

Teaching and Living in Hope

Ten years ago I began writing a collection of essays on teaching—the end result was *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. In the early stages of discussing this project with my beloved white male editor Bill Germino, many questions were raised about the possible audience for this book. Was there really an audience of teachers and students wanting to engage the discussions about difference and struggle in the classroom that were the core of this text? Would college professors want to read this work? Were the topics broad enough? I was confident then that there were many educators out there who, like myself, wanted to engage in a dialogue about all these issues. Once the questions were answered we forged ahead with publication. Immediate response from readers let the publishers know that the work was timely, that its conversational tone made it an easy read, offering readers an opportunity to return to chapters, work with ideas they found new,

There are certainly moments in the classroom where I do not excel in the art of teaching. However, it is crucial that we challenge any feeling of shame or embarrassment that teachers who do their job well might be tempted to indulge when praising ourselves or being praised by others for excellent teaching. For when we hide our light we collude in the overall cultural devaluation of our teaching vocation. A big basketball fan, I often tell audiences, “Do you really think Michael Jordan does not know that he is an incredible ball player? That throughout his career he has been gifted with a level of skill and magnificence which sets him apart?”

In the past ten years I have spent many hours teaching away from the normal college classroom. Publishing children’s books, I have spent more time than I ever thought I would teaching and talking with children, especially children between the ages of three and six. This teaching takes place in various settings—churches, bookstores, homes where folks gather, and in diverse classrooms in public schools and at colleges and universities. The most exciting aspect of teaching outside conventional structures and/or college classrooms has been sharing the theory we write in academia with non-academic audiences and, most importantly, seeing their hunger to learn new ways of knowing, their desire to use this knowledge in meaningful ways to enrich their daily lives.

When I first began writing feminist theory, always talking through ideas with other feminist thinkers, one of our primary concerns was not to collude with the formation of a new elite group of women, those college-educated women who would benefit the most from feminist thinking and practice. We believed then and now that the most important measure of the success of feminist movement would be the extent to which the feminist thinking and practice that was transforming our consciousness and our lives would have the same impact on ordinary folks. With this political hope we made commitments to seek to write theory that would speak directly to an inclusive

audience. With the academization of feminism, the loss of a mass-based political movement, this agenda was difficult to achieve in a work setting where writing acceptable theory for promotion and tenure often meant using inaccessible language and/or academic jargon. Many amazing feminist ideas never reach an audience outside the academic world because the work is simply not accessible. Ironically, this often happens in those fields like sociology and psychology where the subject matter is organically linked with choices people make in everyday life. One example concerns feminist work on parenting, particularly writing on the value of male parenting. Yet much of this work is written in arcane academic jargon. Even dense books, which are not terribly full of jargon, are hard for tired working people to plough through, selecting the parts that could contain meaningful material.

As my academic career advanced, my yearning to take my intellectual work and find forums where the practical wisdom it contained could be shared across class, race, etc., intensified. I have written theory that many people outside the academy find difficult to read, but what they do understand often compels them to work with the difficulties. Concurrently, I have completed a body of popular writing that speaks to many different people at the level of their diverse learning skills. Not only do I find this exciting, it affirms that the mass-based goals of feminist politics that many of us hold can be realized. Indeed, we can do work that can be shared with everyone. And this work can serve to expand all our communities of resistance so that they are not just composed of college teachers, students, or well-educated politicians.

In recent years mass media have told the public that feminist movement did not work, that affirmative action was a mistake, that combined with cultural studies all alternative programs and departments are failing to educate students. To counter these public narratives it is vital that we challenge all this misinformation. That challenge cannot be simply to call

attention to the fact that it is false; we also must give an honest and thorough account of the constructive interventions that have occurred as a consequence of all our efforts to create justice in education. We must highlight all the positive, life-transforming rewards that have been the outcome of collective efforts to change our society, especially education, so that it is not a site for the enactment of domination in any form.

We need mass-based political movements calling citizens of this nation to uphold democracy and the rights of everyone to be educated, and to work on behalf of ending domination in all its forms—to work for justice, changing our educational system so that schooling is not the site where students are indoctrinated to support imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy or any ideology, but rather where they learn to open their minds, to engage in rigorous study and to think critically. Those of us who have worked both as teachers and students to transform academia so that the classroom is not a site where domination (on the basis of race, class, gender, nationality, sexual preference, religion) is perpetuated have witnessed positive evolutions in thought and actions. We have witnessed widespread interrogation of white supremacy, race-based colonialism, and sexism xenophobia.

An incredible body of texts has emerged that stands as the concrete documentation that individual scholars have dared, not only to revise work that once was biased, but have courageously created new work to help us all understand better the ways diverse systems of domination operate both independently and interdependently to perpetuate and uphold exploitation and oppression. By making the personal political, many individuals have experienced major transformations in thought that have led to changing their lives: the white people who worked to become anti-racist, the men who worked to challenge sexism and patriarchy, heterosexuals who begin to truly champion sexual freedom. There have been many quiet moments of incredible shifts in thought and action that are

radical and revolutionary. To honor and value these moments rightly we must name them even as we continue rigorous critique. Both exercises in recognition, naming the problem but also fully and deeply articulating what we do that works to address and resolve issues, are needed to generate anew and inspire a spirit of ongoing resistance. When we only name the problem, when we state complaint without a constructive focus on resolution, we take away hope. In this way critique can become merely an expression of profound cynicism, which then works to sustain dominator culture.

In the last twenty years, educators who have dared to study and learn new ways of thinking and teaching so that the work we do does not reinforce systems of domination, of imperialism, racism, sexism or class elitism have created a pedagogy of hope. Speaking of the necessity to cultivate hope, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire reminds us: “The struggle for hope means the denunciation, in no uncertain terms of all abuses . . . As we denounce them, we awaken in others and ourselves the need, and also the taste, for hope.” Hopefulness empowers us to continue our work for justice even as the forces of injustice may gain greater power for a time. As teachers we enter the classroom with hope. Freire contends: “Whatever the perspective through which we appreciate authentic educational practice—its process implies hope.”

My hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them. Educating is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness. As teachers we believe that learning is possible, that nothing can keep an open mind from seeking after knowledge and finding a way to know. In *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope: Prophetic Dreams for the Twenty-First Century* Mary Grey reminds us that we live by hope. She declares: “Hope stretches the limits of what is possible. It is linked with that basic trust in life without which we could not get from one day to the next . . . To live by hope is to believe that it is worth taking the next

step: that our actions, our families, and cultures and society have meaning, are worth living and dying for. Living in hope says to us, ‘There is a way out,’ even from the most dangerous and desperate situations . . .” One of the dangers we face in our educational systems is the loss of a feeling of community, not just the loss of closeness among those with whom we work and with our students, but also the loss of a feeling of connection and closeness with the world beyond the academy.

Progressive education, education as the practice of freedom, enables us to confront feelings of loss and restore our sense of connection. It teaches us how to create community. In this book I identify much that stands in the way of connectedness even as I identify all the work we do that builds and sustains community. *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* offers practical wisdom about what we do and can continue to do to make the classroom a place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership. Whether writing about love and justice, about white people who transform their lives so they are fundamentally anti-racist at the core of their being, or about the issue of sex and power between teachers and students, or the way we can use the knowledge of death and dying to strengthen our learning process, these pages are meant to stand as a testament of hope. In them I work to recover our collective awareness of the spirit of community that is always present when we are truly teaching and learning.

This book does not belong to me alone. It is the culmination of many hours spent talking with comrades, students, colleagues, strangers. It is the outcome of life-transforming dialogues that take place in the context of community-building. Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh teaches: “In a true dialogue, both sides are willing to change. We have to appreciate that truth can be received from outside of—not only within—our own group . . . We have to believe that by engaging in dialogue with another person, we have the possibility of making a change

within ourselves, that we can become deeper.” Openly and honestly talking about the ways we work for change and are changed in these essays, I hope to illuminate the space of the possible where we can work to sustain our hope and create community with justice as the core foundation.

Parker Palmer believes that enlightened teaching evokes and invites community. Many of us know this is so because we teach and live within the life-enhancing vibrancy of diverse communities of resistance. They are the source of our hope, the place where our passion to connect and to learn is constantly fulfilled. Palmer states: “This community goes far beyond our face-to-face relationship with each other as human beings. In education especially, this community connects us with the . . . ‘great things’ of the world, and with ‘the grace of great things.’ . . . We are in community with all of these great things, and great teaching is about knowing that community, feeling that community, sensing that community, and then drawing your students into it.” Hopefully, *Teaching Community* will draw you in and renew your spirit.

It is the public school that is the required schooling for everyone, that has the task of teaching students to read and write and hopefully to engage in some form of critical thinking. Everyone then who knows how to read and write has the tools needed to access higher learning even if that learning cannot and does not take place in a university setting. Our government mandates attendance at public school, thereby upholding public policy supporting democratic education. But the politics of class elitism ensure that biases in the way knowledge is taught often teach students in these settings that they are not deemed sophisticated learners if they do not attend college. This means that many students stop the practice of learning because they feel learning is no longer relevant to their lives once they graduate from high school unless they plan to attend college. They have often learned in public school both that college is not the “real” world and that the book learning offered there has no relevance in the world outside university walls. Even though all the knowledge coming from books in colleges is accessible to any reader/thinker whether they attend classes or not, tightly constructed class boundaries keep most high school graduates who are not enrolled in colleges from continued study. Even college students who receive undergraduate degrees leave college settings to enter the world of everyday work and tend to cease studying, basing their actions on the false assumption that book-based learning has little relevance in their new lives as workers. It is amazing how many college graduates never read a book again once they graduate. And if they read, they no longer study.

To bring a spirit of study to learning that takes place both in and beyond classroom settings, learning must be understood as an experience that enriches life in its entirety. Quoting from T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King*, Parker Palmer celebrates the wisdom Merlin the magician offers when he declares: “The best thing for being sad is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails . . . Learn why the world

Teach 4

Democratic Education

Teachers who have a vision of democratic education assume that learning is never confined solely to an institutionalized classroom. Rather than embodying the conventional false assumption that the university setting is not the “real world” and teaching accordingly, the democratic educator breaks through the false construction of the corporate university as set apart from real life and seeks to re-envision schooling as always a part of our real world experience, and our real life. Embracing the concept of a democratic education we see teaching and learning as taking place constantly. We share the knowledge gleaned in classrooms beyond those settings thereby working to challenge the construction of certain forms of knowledge as always and only available to the elite.

When teachers support democratic education we automatically support widespread literacy. Ensuring literacy is the vital link between the public school system and university settings.

wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you." Parker adds to this declaration his own vital understanding that: "education at its best—this profound human transaction called teaching and learning—is not just about getting information or getting a job. Education is about healing and wholeness. It is about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life. It is about finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world." Since our place in the world is constantly changing, we must be constantly learning to be fully present in the now. If we are not fully engaged in the present we get stuck in the past and our capacity to learn is diminished.

Educators who challenge themselves to teach beyond the classroom setting, to move into the world sharing knowledge, learn a diversity of styles to convey information. This is one of the most valuable skills any teacher can acquire. Through vigilant practice we learn to use the language that can speak to the heart of the matter in whatever teaching setting we may find ourselves in. When college professors who are democratic educators share knowledge outside the classroom, the work we do dispels the notion that academic workers are out of touch with a world outside the hallowed halls of academe. We do the work of opening up the space of learning so that it can be more inclusive, and challenge ourselves constantly to strengthen our teaching skills. These progressive practices are vital to maintaining democratic education, both in the classroom and out.

Authoritarian practices, promoted and encouraged by many institutions, undermines democratic education in the classroom. By undermining education as the practice of freedom, authoritarianism in the classroom dehumanizes and thus shuts down the "magic" that is always present when individuals are active learners. It takes the "fun out of study" and makes it repressive and oppressive. Authoritarian professors often

invest in the notion that they are the only "serious" teachers, whereas democratic educators are often stereotyped by their more conservative counterparts as not as rigorous or as without standards. This is especially the case when the democratic educator attempts to create a spirit of joyful practice in the classroom. In *Pedagogy of the Heart*, Paulo Freire contends that democratic educators "must do everything to ensure an atmosphere in the classroom where teaching, learning, and studying are serious acts, but also ones that generate happiness." Explaining further he states: "Only to an authoritarian mind can the act of educating be seen as a dull task. Democratic educators can only see the acts of teaching, of learning, of studying as serious, demanding tasks that not only generate satisfaction but are pleasurable in and of themselves. The satisfaction with which they stand before the students, the confidence with which they speak, the openness with which they listen, and the justice with which they address the student's problems make the democratic educator a model. Their authority is affirmed without disrespect of freedom. . . . Because they respect freedom, they are respected." Democratic educators show by their habits of being that they do not engage in forms of socially acceptable psychological splitting wherein someone teaches only in the classroom and then acts as though knowledge is not meaningful in every other settings. When students are taught this, they can experience learning as a whole process rather than a restrictive practice that disconnects and alienates them from the world.

Conversation is the central location of pedagogy for the democratic educator. Talking to share information, to exchange ideas is the practice both inside and outside academic settings that affirms to listeners that learning can take place in varied time frames (we can share and learn a lot in five minutes) and that knowledge can be shared in diverse modes of speech. Whereas vernacular speech may seldom be used in the classroom by teachers it may be the preferred way to share

knowledge in other settings. When educational settings become places that have as their central goal the teaching of bourgeois manners, vernacular speech and languages other than standard English are not valued. Indeed, they are blatantly devalued. While acknowledging the value of standard English the democratic educator also values diversity in language. Students who speak standard English, but for whom English is a second language, are strengthened in their bi-lingual self-esteem when their primary language is validated in the classroom. This valuation can occur as teachers incorporate teaching practices that honor diversity, resisting the conventional tendency to maintain dominator values in higher education.

Certainly as democratic educators we have to work to find ways to teach and share knowledge in a manner that does not reinforce existing structures of domination (those of race, gender, class, and religious hierarchies). Diversity in speech and presence can be fully appreciated as a resource enhancing any learning experience. In recent years we have all been challenged as educators to examine the ways in which we support, either consciously or unconsciously, existing structures of domination. And we have all been encouraged by democratic educators to become more aware, to make more conscious choices. We may unwittingly collude with structures of domination because of the way learning is organized in institutions. Or we may gather material to teach that is non-biased and yet present it in a manner that is biased, thus reinforcing existing oppressive hierarchies.

Without ongoing movements for social justice in our nation, progressive education becomes all the more important since it may be the only location where individuals can experience support for acquiring a critical consciousness, for any commitment to end domination. The two movements for social justice that have had the most transformative impact on our culture are anti-racist struggle and feminist movement. Understanding that the movement for activism often slows down once civil rights

are won, both these movements worked to created locations for academic study precisely so that an unbiased approach to scholarship and learning would not only be legitimized in school and university settings, but would act as a catalyst to transform every academic discipline. Learning would then serve to educate students for the practice of freedom rather than the maintenance of existing structures of domination.

All the progressive study of race and gender taking place in university settings has had meaningful impact way beyond the academic classroom. Democratic educators who championed bringing an end to biased ways of teaching bridged the gap between the academic and the so called “real” world. Long before progressive scholars became interested in race or gender and diversity or multiculturalism, big business recognized the need to teach workers—particularly the deal makers, whose task was to create new markets around the world—about difference, about other cultures. Of course the foundation of this approach was not teaching to end domination but rather teaching to further the interests of the marketplace, but conservatives and liberals alike clearly recognized the necessity of teaching students in this nation perspectives that included a recognition of different ways of knowing. In the wake of this shift, generated by capitalist concerns to maintain power in a global marketplace, anti-racist and anti-sexist advocates were able to lobby successfully for challenging the ways imperialist notions of white supremacy, of nationalism, had created biases in educational material and in the teaching styles and strategies of educators.

Academic discourse, both written and spoken, on the subject of race and racism, on gender and feminism, made a major intervention, linking struggles for justice outside the academy with ways of knowing within the academy. This was really revolutionary. Educational institutions that had been founded on principles of exclusion—the assumption that the values that uphold and maintain imperialist white-supremacist

capitalist patriarchy were truth, began to consider the reality of biases, and to discuss the value of inclusion. Yet many people supported inclusion only when diverse ways of knowing were taught as subordinate and inferior to the superior ways of knowing informed by Western metaphysical dualism and dominator culture. To counter this distorted approach to inclusion and diversity, democratic educators have stressed the value of pluralism. In the essay “Commitment and Openness: A Contemplative Approach to Pluralism,” Judith Simmer-Brown explains: “pluralism is not diversity. Diversity is a fact of modern life—especially in America. There are tremendous differences in our communities—ethnically, racially, religiously. Diversity suggests the fact of such differences. Pluralism, on the other hand, is a response to the fact of diversity. In pluralism, we commit to engage with the other person or the other community. Pluralism is a commitment to communicate with and relate to the larger world—with a very different neighbor, or a distant community.” Many educators embrace the notion of diversity while resisting pluralism or any other thinking that suggests that they should no longer uphold dominator culture.

Affirmative action was aimed at creating greater diversity and it was, at least in theory, a positive practice of reparations, providing access to those groups who had previously been denied education and other rights because of group-based oppression. Despite its many flaws, affirmative action successfully broke barriers to gender and racial inclusion, benefiting white women especially. As our schools became more diverse, professors were often challenged to the core of their being. Old ideas of studying and learning other people’s work in order to find our own theories and defend them were and are being constantly challenged. Judith Simmer-Brown offers the useful insight that this mode of learning does not allow us to embrace ambiguity and uncertainty. She contends: “As educators, one of the best things that we can do for our students is to not force them into holding theories and solid concepts but

rather to actually encourage the process, the inquiry involved, and the times of not knowing—with all of the uncertainties that go along with that. This is really what supports going deep. This is openness.” While I was working with professors at a leading liberal arts college to help them unlearn dominator models of education, I heard white males voice their feelings of fear and uncertainty about giving up models they knew. The males were willing to accept the challenge to transform and yet were fearful because they simply did not know what would be the source of their power if they were no longer relying on a racialized gendered notion of authority to maintain that power. Their honesty helped all of us imagine and articulate what the positive outcomes of a pluralist approach to learning might be.

One of the most positive outcomes is a commitment to “radical openness,” the will to explore different perspectives and change one’s mind as new information is presented. Throughout my career as a democratic educator I have known many brilliant students who seek education, who dream of service in the cause of freedom, who despair or become fundamentally dismayed because colleges and universities are structured in ways that dehumanize, that lead them away from the spirit of community in which they long to live their lives. More often than not, these students, especially gifted students of color from diverse class backgrounds, give up hope. They do poorly in their studies. They take on the mantle of victimhood. They fail. They drop out. Most of them have had no guides to teach them how to find their way in educational systems that, though structured to maintain domination, are not closed systems and therefore have within them subcultures of resistance where education as the practice of freedom still happens. Way too many gifted students never find these subcultures, never encounter the democratic educators who could help them find their way. They lose heart.

For more than thirty years I have witnessed students who do not want to be educated to be oppressors come close to graduation—and then sabotage themselves. They are the students who turn away from school with just one semester or one course to finish before they graduate. Sometimes they are brilliant graduate students who just never write their dissertations. Afraid that they will not be able to keep the faith, to become democratic educators, afraid that they will enter the system and *become* it, they turn away. Competitive education rarely works for students who have been socialized to value working for the good of the community. It rends them, tearing them apart. They experience levels of disconnection and fragmentation that destroy all pleasure in learning. These are the students who most need the guiding influence of democratic educators.

Forging a learning community that values wholeness over division, disassociation, splitting, the democratic educator works to create closeness. Palmer calls it the “intimacy that does not annihilate difference.” As a student who came to undergraduate and graduate education by way of the radical movements for social justice that had opened space that had been closed, I learned to take community where I found it, bonding across race, gender, class, religious experience in order to save and protect the part of myself that wanted to stay in an academic world, that wanted to choose an intellectual life. The bonds I forged were with the individuals who, like myself, valued learning as an end itself and not as a means to reach another end, class mobility, power, status. We were the folks who knew that whether we were in an academic setting or not, we would continue to study, to learn, to educate.

THE PEDAGOGY OF SLOWING DOWN: TEACHING TALMUD IN A SUMMER KOLLEL

Jane Kanarek¹

ABSTRACT

This paper explores a set of practices in the teaching of Talmud that the author calls “the pedagogy of slowing down.” Through the author’s analysis of her own teaching in an intensive Talmud class, “the pedagogy of slowing down” emerges as a pedagogical and cultural model in which students learn to read more closely and to investigate the multiplicity of meanings inherent in the Talmudic text, thus bridging the gap between an ancient text and its contemporary students. This article describes the specific techniques in the pedagogy of slowing down, and the ways in which this teaching practice contributes both to students’ becoming more attentive readers and to the ongoing development of their religious voices.

INTRODUCTION

This article describes a set of practices in Talmud teaching that I call here “the pedagogy of slowing down.” It represents an attempt at a deeper understanding of my own practices of teaching Talmud, an analysis that surfaced from a close examination of an intensive Talmud class at the Northwoods Kollel of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin.² The paper began as a way to better comprehend my classroom practices—what I do when teaching Talmud and why. This paper has two main purposes. The first is to describe the techniques of slowing down as they emerged from research into and reflection on my own pedagogy in the Kollel. The second is to present some potential effects of the pedagogy of slowing down. This paper thus aims to present another example of a mode of Talmud pedagogy to contribute to the growing literature on this topic (Friedman, Hayman 1997, Kress and Lehman 2003, Lehman 2002, Lehman 2006).

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Northwoods Kollel is a program that brings four to six college-age students to Camp Ramah in Wisconsin for a nine-week intensive learning program. A five-morning a week Talmud class forms

Jane Kanarek is Assistant Professor of Rabbinics at Hebrew College, where she teaches Talmud and halakha in the Rabbinical School. An alumna of the Wexner Graduate Fellowship, she received a B.A. from Brown University, rabbinic ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary, and a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. She is the past co-director of the Northwoods Kollel, a full-time summer learning program at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. She is currently writing a book on biblical narrative and rabbinic law.

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²Camp Ramah in Wisconsin is one of the camps of the National Ramah Commission, the camping arm of Conservative Judaism, and is affiliated with the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

the core of the program. In the afternoons, students have classes in Jewish law (*halakhah*), midrash, hasidic thought, and contemporary religious philosophy. Two nights a week, the students have guided study where they pursue their own projects. In addition to their studies, Kollel members are responsible for teaching one period of general Judaica to campers five days a week.

The program is not geared towards beginners. Kollel members have had prior experience learning Talmud as well as some knowledge of modern Hebrew. Previous Talmud exposure ranges from informal study with peers to a year spent in yeshivah in Israel. Hebrew language ability ranges from a few years of college-level Hebrew to native fluency. Talmud study is therefore not focused on decoding words or understanding the basic structure of Talmudic arguments. While I seek to reinforce and strengthen those skills, I want them to use those skills to move towards deeper readings, to interrogate the multiple meanings possible in a sugya (a Talmudic unit of discussion). Another component of the program is its strong commitment to an ideology of observant and egalitarian Judaism. Students in the Kollel are exploring, or even already committed to, this world. The Kollel program aims to combine intensive study of sacred Jewish texts in an intellectually open and rigorous environment explicitly committed to traditional-egalitarian Judaism. While located in a summer camp, the Kollel is an academically rich program closest to the type of program one would find in a yeshivah, a religious institution for the study of Jewish texts, or a seminary.

For three summers (2005, 2006, and 2007) I have spent approximately a month teaching Talmud in the Northwoods Kollel. This paper examines my Kollel teaching during one summer period, July 2007. In order to analyze my pedagogy, I kept a teaching journal throughout the summer and made audio recordings of each class. While the journal and the audio recordings will form the primary basis for my data and analysis, teaching notes as well as notes from conversations with students will provide additional resources.

In 2007, the Kollel was composed of three men and three women, four more-advanced students and two less-advanced students. In Talmud class, we studied selected sugyot from the first chapter of tractate Kiddushin of the Babylonian Talmud (*Bavli*). The sugyot all center on the topic of marriage, and more specifically the issue of a man's betrothing a woman with money.³ Talmud study was divided between *bevruta* (study with a partner) and class time. Students generally spent one to one-and-a-half hours in *bevruta* and one-and-a-quarter to one-and-a-half hours in class. Twice a week, we had an extra half-hour of class before they began *bevruta*. This time division was dictated by the camp schedule.

THE LANGUAGE OF SLOWING DOWN

During our closing conversation at the end of the summer, I asked the students to assess their learning experience in Talmud. One way in which the students described their pedagogical experience

³Rabbinic marriage has two main components—betrothal (*erusin* or *kiddushin*) and marriage (*nisu'in* or *huppah*). Mishnah Kiddushin 1:1 legislates that betrothal can be effected by the man through three means: money, document, or sexual intercourse. Once betrothal has taken place, the woman is forbidden to have sexual relations with all men, including her husband. Should the couple dissolve their relationship at this point, the woman needs a bill of divorce (*get*). The marriage portion of the ceremony permits the couple, *inter alia*, to have sexual intercourse.

was “slowing down.” When I examined my teaching journal, I saw that the language “slowing down” also recurred in my observations. For example, I wrote: “Another teaching challenge is slowing down some of the students as they read. Fast reading is a knowledge marker in certain parts of the Talmud world, and I need to figure out strategies to get the students to slow down” (teaching journal, 7/17/07). The term “the pedagogy of slowing down” thus emerged as a descriptive term in an after-the-fact analysis of my teaching.

It also became clear that “slowing down” was part of my learning process as a teacher. After the first class I wrote, “I am not yet sure what the pace of the *shiur* [class] will be and how that will balance with *hevruta* time” (teaching journal, 7/13/07). Almost a week later I wrote:

I still misjudge the amount of time it will take to complete material. I had thought we would finish the *tos. [tosafot]* and the *rashba*⁴ today but we only got through one *tos.* And this is with students who are good readers. Tomorrow we will start with *shiur* at 9:30. But I may want to start making *shiur* longer, definitely starting at 12:30, or maybe even a little earlier. I will see. Timing is still an issue I am working with. I think that part of what surprises me is my ability to get them to slow down in class. (teaching journal, 7/19/07)

And even after the second-to-last class I commented: “Again, I am surprised by how long it takes to read through a *sugya*” (teaching journal, 7/30/07). These comments were not reflections on the speed of the students’ reading. As I wrote, these students “are good readers.” Instead, I was surprised by, “my ability to get them to slow down in class” (teaching journal, 7/19/07).

Many of the Kollel students had previously studied Talmud in environments where the marker of being a “good learner” is how quickly a person can read the Talmud’s text. At the beginning, I found that their translations often elided aspects of a *sugya*, the meaning of words as well as stages in the argument. They sacrificed precision for speed of reading the assigned material. Their use of speed as a marker of success often had the effect of shutting down opportunities for questions—questions both about the content of the text and the intricacies of its structure. Once they had finished reading the text, their analysis was complete.

As I reflected on my teaching and the recurring language of slowing down, I realized that “slowing down” is not only a teaching technique. Slowing down is a cultural move. When I began teaching the class, I knew that I wanted to teach a rigorous course that would help students who already possessed a good grasp of how to translate and explain a *sugya*’s structure identify others markers for success. I wanted to help them move more deeply inside the textual world of the Bavli. I came to understand that one of my larger teaching goals this summer was to provide an alternative cultural model, a model where success in learning was measured more by the content of what was said than the speed in which those answers were reached.

⁴Tosafot refers to the Tosafists, 12th and 13th century Franco-German Talmudic commentators. Rashba is the acronym for the Spanish commentator Rabbi Solomon the son of Abraham Adret (c. 1235-1310).

The emphasis on content in the pedagogy of slowing down is similar to the type of in-depth Talmud study known as *‘yun*. Like *‘yun*, it emphasizes depth over breadth (*beki’ut*) and seeks out multiple readings. However, while *‘yun* is distinguished by the use of medieval and modern commentaries, the methodology of “slowing down” does not necessitate this practice. When commentaries are utilized, they are chosen to deepen a particular aspect or aspects of a sugya, to further elucidate the Talmudic text itself. The practice of slowing down emphasizes that no matter what is studied, Mishnah or medieval commentaries, students must read and interpret attentively.

Michael Fishbane speaks powerfully to this notion of attentive reading as enabling people to enter more fully into the ancient textual world:

Martin Buber once said that the task of the translator is to overcome “the leprosy of fluency”- that disease of the spirit whereby one presumes to know from the outset what one is reading and therefore blithely reads past the text and its distinctive meaning. The effective translator must therefore reformulate the words of the text so as to produce a new encounter with its language and thus facilitate a new hearing and understanding. I would add that the spiritual task of the commentator is likewise to mediate and influence the pace of reading, so that the reader can be addressed anew by the innate power of the text.
(Fishbane 2002)

Fishbane’s description of the tasks of the translator and the commentator is equally apt for the classroom (or summer camp) teacher. Just as the translator and commentator reveal new meanings through their formulations and explications of the text, so too a teacher should aid students in reaching new understandings. As the commentator shifts the pace of reading by the addition of words, so too the teacher can shift the pace of learning by the kinds of questions she asks and the ways in which she asks students to probe a text’s distinctive language. The challenge for a teacher—a kind of commentator—lies in encouraging students to articulate the words of the text so that they move beyond the two admittedly essential steps of turning Hebrew and Aramaic words into English and explaining the progression of an argument. The teacher must also help the students to become “translators” of the Bavli, people who have learned new ways of hearing and understanding such that they can find new meanings and power in the text. The terminology “the pedagogy of slowing down” is therefore a descriptive title for a practice through which the teacher helps the students to read more closely, to investigate the multiplicity of meanings inherent in a text, and thus to bridge the gap between this ancient text and these contemporary students of its words.

While the requirements of elementary education may appear to be far from those of college students, Chip Wood’s writing about elementary and junior-high school is helpful in furthering the conversation about the pedagogy of slowing down. Wood describes the ways in which schedule and curriculum rush teachers and children and contends that this hurriedness often hinders learning. Wood argues for a cultural shift in the use of time, a change in the pace of school and the pace of teaching in order, “...to improve the pace of learning” (Wood 1999, 32). He envisions “3 Rs” as shaping schools for the next generations: “Rigor, Recreation, and Reflection” (Wood 1999, 267). Rigor connotes not inflexibility but “ ‘scrupulous accuracy; precision’ in classroom practice....” It involves the

ways in which students learn, engaging in “thoughtful, respectful, and difficult questions,” as well as the ways in which teachers prepare and instruct, rehearsing and elevating “their use of language in the classroom” (Wood 1999, 268). Recreation and reflection provide generative time, a space in which students can learn how to interact with one another and their environment as well as reconsider the day’s experiences. For Wood, these three “Rs” join together in giving students and teachers the ability to slow down and learn in a considered and deep manner. As in Wood’s program, as we will see, the pedagogy of slowing down in Talmud instruction engages teacher and students in both rigor and reflection.

WHAT SLOWING DOWN DOES NOT ENTAIL

As I move to a description of the teaching techniques that I have identified as elements in the pedagogy of slowing down, I begin with a negative description—what slowing down does not entail. First, it does not mean a lack of rigor, or tailoring the class to the weakest students, in this case those who have the hardest time mastering a sugya’s structure. Second, it does not necessitate asking students to read more slowly (although at times that may be needed). In listening to recordings of my teaching, I noticed that the tempo of conversations was quick. I responded to students’ answers to my questions quickly, whether by asking another question or by re-stating what they had said. Third, it does not mean teaching only a very limited amount of material. Over the course of this three-and-a-half week period (approximately eighteen hours of classroom time), we studied five different units. While the emphasis remained on a deeper analysis of the selected material, the class still had a sense of progression, of moving forward through material.

To accomplish these dual goals of progression and depth, before I began teaching, I had decided which sugyot would be studied as well as the ways in which the chosen sugyot fit into a larger framework. Questions I considered were: What are the central ideas that I think should emerge from the study of this particular Talmud text? Do these sugyot come together into a larger picture and if so, what is it? Are there any threads that unite these sugyot? What are they?⁵ New ideas should and will emerge in the course of discussion. However, in constructing the lesson a teacher’s knowledge of what she wants to try and illustrate through her choice of material helps prevent discussions from turning to overly marginal issues and in helping the students to ask questions.

The discussion in these shiurim, therefore, was not free ranging. When reading texts, I did not ask for volunteers but instead called on students. Calling on students helped me to control the pacing of the class, to make sure that discussion was not dominated by a particular student, to balance different skill levels, and to focus on specific areas where individual students needed to improve their technical skills. This is different than the approach described by Tova Hartman and Moshe Halbertal where, “[a] usual class in the Yeshiva will quickly turn from a well-ordered presentation

⁵Since this class was not operating under the yeshivah model of a year-long course, choosing relevant sugyot from one chapter was central to my teaching. The point was not simply to see what the Talmud says and to progress linearly through as much of a chapter as we could. In addition, I did not want to construct an edited approach to a topic by self-selecting sugyot from the whole Bavli. Instead, by remaining within a chapter and selecting from it alone, I aimed to give the students sugyot that, while reinforcing their textual skills, would also raise interesting ideas that could be joined into a coherent whole.

of the teacher into a lively and sometimes chaotic exchange between a few bright students and their teacher” (Halbertal and Hartman Halbertal 1998, 459).

My hypothesis is that these three negative components are central to this practice’s success because they help to balance different students’ levels and needs. Stronger students should feel challenged and weaker students should not feel lost in the material. It is possible that the tempo of the classes helps compensate for students’ worries about whether we are covering a sufficient amount of material. In the case of the Kollel, I had the advantage of being present for *hevvruta* study. As a result, I could give students tailored pointers, extra support or additional questions. For example, I encouraged one *hevvruta* to rewrite the sugya in their own handwriting, dividing its words into very short phrases. At first they worried that this would “slow them down too much.” However, three days later one of the students approached me and said that this was the first time she had totally understood a sugya and that she understood everything in class (teaching journal, 7/19/07).

COMPONENTS OF SLOWING DOWN

In analyzing the data from my class, the repeated occurrence of the words “slowing down” was striking. Prompted by the frequency of this term, I re-examined my data, isolating particular teaching practices that define the pedagogy of slowing down. In the following section, I will enumerate and describe these strategies, and then provide and analyze examples of these techniques from class transcripts.

The first component of the pedagogy of slowing down is precision. Precision begins with accurate reading and translation of Hebrew and Aramaic. In students’ preparation for class, this entailed use of the Jastrow and Frank dictionaries as well as the Frank grammar (Frank 1994, Frank 1995, Jastrow 1996). A student’s claim, “Well, I know what the argument means; I just can’t translate it,” was inadequate. My teaching assumption was that if a person could not translate properly, he did not properly understand the *sugya*.

In addition to precision in translation, I required precision in explaining the text’s argument. Students had to describe clearly how the argument moved from one stage to the next. This included translating and identifying the function of technical terminology that serve as markers for different types of sugya structures (terms like *’ibaye lebu*, *u-reminbu*, etc.).⁶ I also asked for as much precision as possible in issues of redaction, such as identifying the different layers of the Talmudic text—tannaitic (refers to texts from the period of the tannaim, c.70 CE - c.220 CE), amoraic (refers to texts from the period of the amoraim, c.220 CE - c.550 CE), and anonymous (refers to texts from the anonymous editorial strata)—and recognizing parallel sources from other rabbinic texts.⁷

⁶*Ibaye lebu* means “it was asked of them.” It introduces a question about a legal matter. *U-reminbu* means “throw them [against one another].” It introduces a contradiction between two sources, commonly of equal authority. (Frank 2003, 10 and 240).

⁷Admittedly, identifying the layers of a sugya with complete accuracy is a difficult task and one that cannot always be done with complete precision and certainty. However, as the Bavli is a redacted text composed of different historical strata, it was important that students have knowledge of basic criteria for separating the layers of a sugya and be able to accomplish this task with reasonable accuracy. See Shamma Friedman on criteria for distinguishing these layers (Friedman 1977).

The second component of this pedagogical practice is thinking about meaning. I asked students to consider how particular words or phrases may open multiple interpretive possibilities, and also to look for ideologies and tensions in a sugya, fault-lines where the dominant ideology may break down.⁸ As students considered these interpretive questions, I insisted that they ground their opinion in the words of the assigned texts. In preparing my teaching notes, I considered where I wanted to ask these interpretive questions. While at times I first had the students translate and parse the entire argument, more often I interwove meaning questions as we moved through the sugya. Although when I asked meaning questions varied, the fact of my asking them did not.

The third component of this practice is the use of medieval Talmudic commentators, the *rishonim*.⁹ It is important to state that I was not teaching *rishonim* as an independent literary genre. While the interpretive methodologies of *rishonim* vary from one school to another, my goal was not for the students to master these differences. Instead, I aimed to use *rishonim* to help the students further open a sugya's interpretive possibilities. I wanted them to become part of the ongoing conversation about the Bavli's meaning. Therefore, when I chose *rishonim* for a particular sugya, I was careful to make sure that they revolved primarily around one issue. Although I did not demand the same level of precision here as I did with the Bavli, students still had to accurately translate and then summarize the arguments of a particular *rishon*. (Again, "I know what the words mean; I just can't translate them," was inadequate.) In reading these medieval commentators, I focused on the ways in which they presented different meanings for one phrase, juxtaposed one sugya with another, or re-contextualized a particular issue.¹⁰

The fourth component involves putting together the big picture. At the end of each unit, I circled back to the beginning of the sugya, articulating links between the different components we had studied. These links can be making more explicit points of thematic continuity or highlighting disagreements and the meaning of those disagreements. In addition, I tied the current unit in with previous units, trying to illustrate a continuity of issues investigated. I asked students to see whether any ideological issues or tensions we had uncovered earlier also manifested themselves in this material.

PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

In this section of the paper, I aim to concretize and more closely explore the above pedagogical practices through an examination of selections from class transcripts. Although I have described the four components of slowing down in a linear fashion, as the teaching transcripts will show, more often these components were interwoven with one another. Specifically, I did not necessarily complete stage one (precision) and then continue on to stage two (meaning).

⁸In asking these questions, I am influenced by the work of Charlotte Fonrobert who argues for a methodology of "reading against the grain" when analyzing gender ideologies (Fonrobert 2000, 9).

⁹The term *rishonim* refers to those scholars living from the mid-11th century to the 15th century (Ta-Shema 2007, 339-43).

¹⁰Since this paper is based on research into my own teaching practices, I have included *rishonim* as part of the pedagogy of slowing down. However, I can imagine teaching a beginning Talmud class that utilized many of the other techniques described. One would emphasize translation and the mastery of technical terms and de-emphasize these more advanced skills. Still, it remains important to ask "meaning" questions with beginners. Meaning questions help to keep beginners interested in skill acquisition by showing them how central mastery of the technical aspects of Talmud is to a serious discussion of content. In addition, training students to ask meaning questions from the outset encourages them to train themselves to read deeply and to see skills and meaning as intertwined with one another.

In the very first class, I began introducing students to these practices of precision and multiple reading possibilities. We started our discussion by examining Deuteronomy 24:1-4, verses that lay the legal foundation for much of the rabbinic discussion about marriage and that are central to the opening sugyot of tractate Kiddushin:

Teacher: Let's just start with the *pesukim* [verses]. Where I'd like to start is with the general question, what are the different things—let's just list them—that we actually learn from these *pesukim* from Devarim, *perek kaf-daled* [Deuteronomy chapter 24]?

Student 1: We learn about getting divorced and how when you can't get back together but really nothing about how you actually get married in the first place.

Teacher: Okay, so be specific about what we learn about divorce.

Student 1: So all we learn about it is part of prompting reasons for divorce if you find *'ervat davar* [nakedness of a thing]¹¹ which is unclear in itself then you write this *sefer keritot* [book of divorce].

Teacher: Okay, is *'ervat davar* the only thing that we find that is the only reason?

Student 1: Well, *'im lo' timtza' ben be'ainav* [if she does not find favor in his eyes; Deuteronomy 24: 1] like so if he finds some sort of problem with her so it's coming from his point of view, um, then he writes her this *sefer keritot*.

Teacher: *Keritut* [corrects pronunciation].

Student 1: *Keritut*. And that's the majority of like what we have in terms of the basis for divorce.

Teacher: Okay, and do you read *'im lo' timtza' ben be'ainav ki matza' bab 'ervat davar* [if he does not find favor in her eyes because he has found in her nakedness of a thing; Deuteronomy 24:1] as one reason, two separate reasons, how would you read that? Is it a clause that's all linked to each other?

Student 1: I'd see it as *ki matza' bab 'ervat davar* as being part of the *lo' timtza' ben* so I would see it as being part of it.

Teacher: Okay.

Student 1: Um, from that to narrow it or as being part of an example.
(class transcript, 7/13/07)

¹¹I have intentionally used a literal translation in order to convey the ambiguity of this phrase (Brown 1979, 789).

In this opening discussion, I immediately introduced the students to the requirement of reading precision. When student 1 mispronounced “*keritut*” as “*keritot*,” I corrected his pronunciation. When the student answered my first question about what we learn from Deuteronomy 24:1-4 with a general sentence, I quickly asked him to refine his answer, to “...be specific about what we learn about divorce.” When he gave a more specific response about *‘ervat davar*, I again challenged him to refine that statement further. When he gave an answer based on the words, “If she does not find favor in his eyes,” I challenged him yet again to give a more precise reading of the verse by breaking it down into its constituent clauses.

This continued sequence of rapid questions that I directed towards the student was an important aspect of teaching the group that they must each, as individuals, be able to support their opinions. By concentrating on one student and not asking questions of anyone else or letting them jump into the conversation, I was setting a precedent that each student needs to be able to support his or her answer independently. Therefore, only when I felt I had pushed this student sufficiently did I invite others to join in. I said, “Okay, someone else jump in, continue with the divorce material.... Yeah, [student 2].” But even in asking another student to give his answer, I continued to direct him to the part of the conversation I wanted him to continue. Focused attention on one student is important in showing the students that they have to have thought about what they say; I will ask them to support their answers.

As the conversation goes on, I continued to ask students to support their answers. In addition, I started to frame questions that helped link this biblical material to the later rabbinic texts. Because I knew that rabbinic sources would formulate both physical action and verbal statement as elements of the betrothal ritual, I asked students to consider whether they might see any verbal component hinted at in the biblical text. Although at this point in the class, I did not make those connections between biblical and rabbinic material explicit, I was trying to encourage the students to extract as much information as they could from these Deuteronomic verses.

Student 2 continued:

Student 2: With the divorce material, when she is divorced she is sent from his home which means that she is living in his home.

Teacher: Okay, great. So that tells us something as well about what happens with marriage, right. There is something about his him, his center.

Student 2: Right, he takes her. Jumping off from that point, he takes her, *ki yikab ish isbah* [when a man takes a woman]. So, again, the active party here is the *ish* [man], um, and also in short order *ve-hayetab le-ish aber* [and she will be to another man]. It seems like it is the general course of affairs that she will get married soon after at least afterwards or at least that is what the text is supposing is a likely possibility of what’s happening.

Teacher: Okay. And, um, in this whole divorce procedure it is also seems like we have a concrete action that’s defined here. There’s some kind of *sefer keritut* and then there’s an action as well, right, so there’s a book and there’s also an act that has to go into her hand. So

there's a physical action. There's a writing of a document and then a physical action that happens as well. Any verbal actions that you would see here?

Extrapolating from these verses, students started to frame the social context of marriage. In this series of questions and response, they began to articulate the idea that marriage centers on the man's home, that he is the active party, as well as the different components that may make up the divorce ritual. As much as I challenged them to read what was present in the text, I also asked them to be attentive to its gaps. After the conversation continued for a few more statements, student 2 remarked, "It's odd that we're getting so much material, so much general material, out of so specific a case. This is like a really specific casuistic law." While the student framed his comment as one about the nature of casuistic law, he had strikingly commented on the amount of information we had been able to infer from a close reading of these verses.

Continuing on, I asked the students to begin a discussion that focused explicitly on the marriage aspect of these verses. Students named the verbs *lakab* [take]¹² and *ba'al* [to have sexual relations]¹³ as important to understanding marriage. Taking their comments, I then framed a question:

Teacher: Great. Do you read the *lakab*, the verbs *lakab* and *ba'al* as two separate actions or both one action, that they're both part of the process of what's happening?

Student 3: I read it as one, but [student 6] read it as two.

Teacher: Okay.

Student 2: I read it as two.

Student 6: We're already informed by the mishnah.

Student 2: It seems like one follows.

Teacher: Wait, wait. I want each of you to kind of argue your sides. So, [student 3], why did you read it as one?

Student 3: I don't think it was as much a conscious thing as it was just, uh, that was just my *pesbat* [simple] reading. That's how I interpreted it.

Teacher: Okay, how did you get to that as your *pesbat* reading?

¹²The verbal root *lakab* also has the meaning, "to take in marriage" (Brown 1979, 543).

¹³The verbal root *ba'al* also has the meanings, "to marry, rule over, possess" (Brown 1979, 127). Robert Alter translates this phrase from Deuteronomy 24:1 as follows: "When a man takes a wife and cohabits with her..." (Alter 2004, 996). NJPS translates as: "A man takes a wife and possesses her" (Tanakh 1985, 1624).

Student 3: [Pause]. Um, I guess because maybe they come, they come so close together and it's almost like this is the unit that makes you married and then you have, you know, oh but then what happens you know "in" [if] something else that they clearly are the same activity. Like you do these and then you uh...

Teacher: Very nice.

Student 3: And then if something else happens, something else happens.

In this instance, I did not direct my question to one student in particular. In answering my question, Student 3 told the class about her opinion and her *hevruta's* [student 6] disagreement. Two other students jumped into the discussion, and then I intervened. Once again, I wanted to teach the students that they had to be able to provide a reason for their answers. When student 3 told me that her reading was not particularly thought out—what she terms a "pesbat reading"—I challenged her to try and articulate further what she meant by her statement. Whether she succeeded in defending her answer was almost beside the point. I wanted this student to learn that she needed to be reflective about her readings. Only when student 3 had answered, did I then turn to the other student in the *hevruta* pair and ask her to state why she thinks they are two separate actions. I did not want the other students jumping in with their answers to mean that student 6's position got lost. From the outset of the class, I tried to teach the students that close and thoughtful reading of even a short text can elicit a range of possibilities.

As the course progressed, I continued to emphasize precise translation. However, I also asked integrative questions, questions that asked the students to link together material we had already studied with the current sugya. For example, B. Kiddushin 3a-b (*minyana` de-resba` le-ma`utei mai — ve`ein davar `aber korta`*) begins by asking a question about the mishnah's mention of three methods that effect betrothal (money, document, and sexual intercourse) and the two methods that dissolve a marriage (divorce document and death of the husband). The transcript begins after the student has read half of the sugya and begun to translate it. It opens with my correction of his mistranslation:

Teacher: The number of the *reisha`* [the opening clause of M. Kiddushin 1:1 concerning marriage]—what does it come to exclude?

Student 2: And the number of the *seifa`* [the final clause of M. Kiddushin 1:1 concerning divorce]—what does it come to exclude?

Teacher: So why is the *gemara`* [Talmud] asking this question?

Student 2: Because it's acknowledging the arbitrary, no, the specific nature of the three things listed which means that what is it not going to accept...?

Teacher: Okay, so in that understanding you're understanding it as asking a question about what characteristic of the mishnah?

Student 2: About its, I mean, the arbitrariness.

Teacher: Okay, so you're focusing on it could have picked five. Why does it pick three?

Student 2: Sure.

(class transcript, 7/20/07)

In this section, I paused the student's translation to ask him to think of reasons why the Talmud might be asking its question. In his initial answer, the student was undecided about what the Bavli addressed, specificity or arbitrariness. I asked the student to refine his answer further, and the student focused on the seeming arbitrariness of the mishnah's language. I then translated the student's answer into my own words: the gemara assumes that the mishnah did not have to choose three methods for betrothal. It could have chosen five.

Two teaching practices are reflected here. The first is the continued focus on one student; the second is the translation of the student's answer into clearer language. I reformulated the student's answer both to encourage him about his comment and to give other students a specific point to which they could respond. Translation is only the beginning of understanding a sugya.

Other students also wanted to respond to my initial question.

Teacher: Sure. I saw a couple of hands. [Student 4]?

Student 4: Um, maybe the fact that why does it *ḏavka* [regardless] take pains to say *be-shalosh derakhim* [in three ways]. Like it says the number and then it lists them. It could have just said *keseḥ*, *shetar*, and *bī'ab* [money, document and intercourse].

Teacher: Okay, so it could have just said, *keseḥ*, *shetar*, and *bī'ab*. It doesn't need to say "three." Um, what would be proof that, um, the "three" is superfluous in addition to the fact that it lists the three things?

Student 4: I'm not sure.

Student 3: In addition to the fact that it lists them?

Teacher: Yeah, in addition that it lists three things. What might be proof that you're onto something?

[Pause.]

Student 4 focused on a seeming redundancy in the mishnah's language as lying behind the Talmud's question. She noticed that the mishnah states, "A woman is acquired in three ways and acquires herself in two ways. She is acquired by money, by document, and by sexual intercourse..." (M. Kiddushin 1:1). The number three, though, is superfluous. If the mishnah had just stated the trio

of money, document, and sexual intercourse, we would have been able to infer the number three from this list. This literary observation is not the end of the story. I wanted student 4 (as well as the other students) to bring additional evidence for the accuracy of this literary observation. Through the practice of continued questioning, I was directing the students to search for support for their assertions. So in response to a student's question about my original question, I restated that I was looking for an answer that moves beyond that of the list in our mishnah.

The students continued:

Student 1: Somewhere else it lists things but it doesn't give a number?

Teacher: Okay, where else does it list things and not give a number?

[Pause.]

Student 1: I don't remember.

Student 3: The other property?

Teacher: Okay, so where have seen other property?

Student 3: In the other mishnahs?

Teacher: Okay.

Class: Oh!!!

Student 1 began by stating the conceptual framework: Perhaps I am asking them to think of another example of a place where there is a list without a number. I moved the discussion forward by affirming student 1's statement and asking for the citation of that source. When student 1 could not name such a source, another student joined in the discussion with a suggestion: other places where we have seen property discussed. I then prompted her forward with yet another question. She answered, with the intonation of a question, "in the other mishnahs." Student 3 refers to the *mishnayot* of the first chapter of tractate Kiddushin, *mishnayot* that we had studied in the first two classes. When I affirmed her answer, the class, in unison, makes a sound of recognition.

In this exchange, it would have been quicker for me to simply give them the answer. However, by asking a series of questions that enabled them to make the link between the gemara's question and the first chapter of the mishnah, I was modeling a process of inquiry. In their *hevrutot*, I wanted them to begin to ask similar questions of the material: questions about the Bavli's literary formulations and links between one sugya and other material they have already studied. In other words, I wanted them to see that sugyot are connected with one another, and that they should conceptualize the material as linked.

I had formulated this point about the literary uniqueness of M. Kiddushin 1:1 in advance of the class. I also knew that I wanted the students to arrive at this point through my asking a series of questions. By questioning the students, I could better choose when to integrate different students into the conversation. In addition, because I knew this larger point, I could better integrate student comments into this framework, and refine and modify my original ideas in light of their insights. Prompted by this connection, the students jumped in with further observations. Once they looked at their copies of the mishnah, they saw that the only mishnah that has a number along with a list is M. Kiddushin 1:1.

Student 2: *Yevamah*¹⁴ is not listed with a number the way she's acquired and acquires herself.

Teacher: Great. Um, so if we go back to our *mekorot* [sources]—right—if we go back to our first sheet we you had the *mishnayot* of [tractate] Kiddushin for example.

[Pause and rustling of paper].

Right. So look at your *mishnayot*.

Student 3: Yeah, case like *'eved kena'ani nikneh be-kesef* [a Canaanite slave is acquired by means of money], we don't get the number.

Teacher: Great. So the only place we actually have a number is in our opening mishnah. Now you could say, okay, that's cause it's a literary style. We're opening with that fancy... It does sharpen the Talmud's ability to ask the question about that three because it's actually the other *mishnayot* just list the things and don't give a number.

I pointed out that while one could say that the first mishnah simply provides us with an opening flourish and therefore names the number three, the fact that the rest of the *mishnayot* do not do so sharpens the Bavli's question. Why does our mishnah state the number three? Again, I have directed the students back towards earlier material we had studied, encouraging them to understand *sugyot* as conceptually linked.

Perhaps prompted by this idea that one *sugya* is linked with another, student 3 made another observation about the word "three."

Student 3: It's also we're sort of in the mindset of questioning the *shalosh* [three]. Like, you know, like it's just continuing to question the same number. We're just questioning something else about it.

Teacher: Okay.

¹⁴A *yevamah* is a woman whose husband has died without children. She is required to marry her husband's brother and their child is accounted as the husband's. See, for example, Deuteronomy 25:5-20, Ruth 4:1-15, and Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of *Yibum* and *Halitzah* 1:1.

Student 3: Like, why three specifically, as opposed to like why three negative...why three female? Why three male?

Teacher: Okay.

Student 3: Why three?

Teacher: Okay. Great. So it's continuing that kind of trend we've seen already about focusing in closely on small details. [Student 2], if we follow yours up a little bit of why 3, why not 5, um where else could we push that kind of question?

Student 2: Um [pause]. Well, it...one would think maybe it's not an exhaustive list...or that the 3 things listed are general categories under which other things fall.

Teacher: Okay. So one way to frame that is: is the mishnah's list exclusive? Is it only these three methods and no others that can be used?

Student 2: Exhaustive.

Student 3: And they're reading it as yes.

Student 3 remarked on the fact that this sugya is continuing a literary trend we saw in the opening sugya (2a-b) where the sugya interrogates the feminine form of the word "three." She had formulated yet another connection between this sugya and the material we had previously studied.

After this discussion, I wanted to return to [student 2's] initial observation, to make sure that we did justice to his original observation. I knew that I wanted to use his statement to make a point about lists in the Bavli. I reframed student 2's answer about the Bavli's choice of the number three. This reframing enabled me to introduce the students to a mode of the Bavli's reading of mishnaic lists. When they see another list, they should ask themselves: is this list inclusive or exclusive? What can we extrapolate from a close examination of its wording? In addition, reframing a student's words enabled me to act as bridge between different opinions, demonstrating how two different students can both have plausible arguments.

On this same sugya on B. Kiddushin 3a-b, we also study a number of *rishonim*. We focus on the issue of why barter (*balifin*) is not a permissible method of betrothing a woman. As a reason for disqualifying barter, the sugya states, "Barter has validity [when performed] with less than the equivalent of a *perutah*,¹⁵ and a woman for less than a *perutah* will not cause herself to be acquired (*la` makniya` nafshab*)." I ask the students to learn specific comments of Rashi¹⁶ (s.v. *la` makniya`*

¹⁵A coin of minimal worth.

¹⁶Rabbi Shlomo the son of Yitzhak, 1040/1-1105.

nafshab), Tosafot (s.v. *ve-ishab be-pahot mi-shaveh perutah la`makniya`nafshab*), and Ritva¹⁷ (s.v. *salka`da'takb`amina mah sadeh mikanya`be-halifin`af`ishab nami mikanya`be-halifin*). They are instructed also to look at Ramban¹⁸ (s.v. *le-ma'ute halifin ve-khu`*) if they have additional time. The assigned *rishonim* centered around three words in the sugya: *la`makniya`nafshab* ([a woman] does not cause herself to be acquired). On the assignment sheet, I ask students to compare the positions of Rashi, Tosafot, and Ritva. Below are my questions:

ASSIGNMENT SHEET

Rashi

1. What does Rashi say the reason behind the phrase *la`makniya`nafshab* is?
2. What is the halakhic point he makes in the second part of his comment concerning *halifin*?

Tosafot

1. How does Rabbenu Tam¹⁹ disagree with Rashi and his understanding of *la`makniya`nafshab*? Why? Break down his reasoning.
2. What is his version of the text of the gemara?
3. Why, according to Tosafot, doesn't the gemara ask here about the possibility that kiddushin could be done with *shetar* [document] or *bazakab* [legal presumption]?

- Once you think you have figured out what Tosafot is saying, try and read his explanation of the gemara back into the text. This is a good way to test if you have understood his *perush* [interpretation] and if it is a convincing read of the sugya.

Ritva

1. What difficulties does the Ritva have with the proposal that *kinyan ishab* [acquiring a woman] also be permitted through *halifin*?
2. How does he explain why *halifin* isn't a method of *kinyan ishab*?
3. How does he explain the (our) version *la`makniya`nafshab*? How is the explanation the same as or different from that of Rashi?

Finally, try and compare all three of these commentators.

¹⁷Rabbi Yom Tov the son of Abraham Ishbili, c. 1250-1330.

¹⁸Rabbi Moses the son of Nahman (Nahmanides), c. 1194-1270.

¹⁹Rabbi Yaakov the son of Meir Tam, c.1100-1171.

I gave the students these questions in order to direct them to specific comparative issues and to guide them in the process of studying *rišhonim*. By instructing them to read Tosafot's understanding of the sugya back into the gemara itself, I wanted the students to begin to see how Tosafot engages in close textual explication. An ability to recognize and articulate the multiple reading possibilities that medieval commentators present aids these students' explorations of their own different readings.

As the students studied these medieval commentators, they discovered that Rashi and Tosafot have two different versions of our text. While Rashi reads "*la`makniya`nafšbab*" (feminine singular active causative participle) Rabbenu Tam, one of the tosafists, reads "*la`mikanya`*" (feminine singular passive/reflexive participle). Focusing on the subjectivity of the word "herself," Rashi explained that barter is not a valid method of betrothal because it is derogatory towards the woman (*gen`ai hu`lah*). Rabbenu Tam, however, emended the text and removed the word "herself."²⁰ In his opinion, the invalidity of barter as a method of betrothal is not dependent on the woman's stringency about her degradation but rather on barter's not being in the category of money.

The next transcript begins after I have told the students how extant manuscript traditions of this sugya do not support Rabbenu Tam's reading; manuscripts contain the word "herself."

Teacher: Well, let's also look at the language here. It says *le-kbein nir`eh le-Rabbenu Tam*, not "Rabbenu Tam had the version," but "therefore it seemed, it appeared to Rabbenu Tam" that we should read the text this way.

Students: Ohh.

Teacher: Which again I think strengthens the point that he's making a reading choice of what the correct reading is of the *girsa`* [textual version] based on a certain ideological or legal concern he has about wanting to define categories.

Student 3: Oh. Desire to keep the woman as the object.

Teacher: Well, let's keep that as one possibility, that it may be a desire to keep the woman as the object. Okay, let's keep that as one possibility. [Student 2]?

Student 2: I just, I just, I don't know.... Two things. One is that like we all, we all read superimposing our own values on texts. Fundamentally, you know, we can't even avoid that, so it's not like...that's a special thing per se. But I guess it just makes it more explicit because he's, because Tosafot is telling us to leave out reading a word. Uh, no, but also, you know it's also, it's a totally tricky thing to try to get at the rationales behind the people who are doing something like this.

²⁰Aryeh Cohen has written about this textual emendation (Cohen 1999, 126-7).

Teacher: Great. So we may not be able to get at the rationale, but we could ask, what are the effects of the move that he's making and the move that Rashi's making? So one possible way of looking at the effects is saying, removing the woman's subjectivity. I think there's another way we can also look at the effects of what he's doing as well, um, which we'll kind of circle back to. So, um, a couple more words. [Student 5...]. (class transcript, 7/22/07)

I began by pointing to textual support for my contention that Rabbenu Tam actively emends the sugya. I was trying to teach the students that they should pay attention to what the text actually says rather than what they want it to say. Second, I named the fact that I think this reading choice is ideologically based. I did not hide this assumption I make about reading. Third, when student 3 stated that behind this reading lies a desire to objectify the woman, I accepted that opinion but name it as one possibility. I thus affirmed her interpretation as well as opening the door to other opinions about Rabbenu Tam's reading.

Student 2 returned to the question of ideological reading. While he affirmed the ideological nature of Rabbenu Tam's reading, he also questioned whether we do, in fact, have the ability to understand the rationale behind a particular reading. Student 2's statement resulted in my reformulation of a question and integration of student 3's statement into that reformulation. While we may not be able with certainty to get at the rationale, we can still ask questions about the effects of various readings. In other words, we can ask, "What's at stake?" in choosing one reading over another.

I took this idea a step further in the continuing discussion about this sugya.

Teacher: ...Tosafot is moving us away from the idea of *da'at* [intention], um, from the idea of *da'at*, and moving us back to and entering us on the idea of taking *kesef* [money] and putting it at the center. And kind of, what are the pluses and minuses of Rabbenu Tam's move of removing *da'at*, even though there's not really *girsa* proof of that in the gemara, but making the *girsa* read that. What are the pluses and minuses of putting kesef at the center and not *da'at*?

Student 1: Well, he's avoiding the subjectivity of it. Well, if this woman doesn't feel it as *gen'ai* [degradation] because she's getting this amount or maybe some people would feel *gen'ai* for getting a *perutah*. Like, he's taking away that whole subjective element to put it in with the fixed standard of money and therefore there's no question of like how she feels about it. Like, yeah.

Teacher: Okay, great. That's exactly what he does. Plus and minus of doing that?

Student 1: It creates a universal standard that you don't have rich or poor women, like, feeling different or that there should be any sort of different *gen'ai* between them or something like that. But on the other hand, it reduces it to a monetary standard that is a sort of set amount and focuses it as a more an alliance of *kinyan* [acquiring] than anything else.

Teacher: Okay, nice. So those are kind of our two paradigms we're working with. One was also something that [student 3] brought out earlier—this idea of it takes away from the subjectivity of the woman and just turns it purely into *kinyan* and monetary transaction. On the other hand, Rabbenu Tam codifies in law this idea that, um, we're not working by a subjective standard and *kinyan* is not to be done with, um, is not to turn on the issue of *gen`ai* or not *gen`ai*. It's one standard. It's *kesef*.

Student 2: It's similar to the rationale behind minimum wage...

As I stated above, Tosafot (or Rabbenu Tam) places money at the center of betrothal. A woman must be betrothed with money, and because *halifin* does not fall into the category of money, it is invalid as a method of betrothal. That, and not Rashi's suggestion of derogation and the women's intention, explains why *halifin* cannot be used. At this point, I asked the students to consider both the positive and negative aspects of Rabbenu Tam's move. Student 1 successfully articulated how Rabbenu Tam's perspective can be viewed as creating a universal standard (positive, from our point of view) or as emphasizing how betrothal is like a monetary purchase (negative). Again, I tied student 1's articulation into student 3's earlier statement, validating her perspective, but also illustrating how careful examination reveals that it is not the only way to approach the issue. Student 2 then connected this discussion to the contemporary issue of minimum wage. While I did not generally emphasize drawing parallels between these older discussions and modern politics, student 2's leap nicely illustrated how nuanced readings can help students connect the world of the Talmud with contemporary issues.

A number of pedagogical values are illustrated in the discussion of these commentators. The first, as always, is the importance of reading precision, learning to read the words themselves carefully and accurately. The second is the simultaneous affirmation of one interpretive perspective while opening the door for other possibilities. The third is a willingness to reformulate my ideas. Through the combination of these techniques, I challenged the students to examine an issue rigorously and from a number of perspectives. I required them to ground their ideas in the text, listen to each other, and constantly push themselves to delve more deeply into the interpretive possibilities of the Talmud.

POTENTIAL OF THE PEDAGOGY OF SLOWING DOWN

In the section that follows, I will articulate more fully the potential of the pedagogy of slowing down through reflections emerge from my investigation of my Kollel teaching. While I knew at the beginning of the summer that I wanted to help my students become stronger, more attentive, and deeper readers of the Bavli, I believe that the process of slowing down played a significant role in enabling this to occur. Slowing down not only contributed to their becoming more attentive readers but also to stronger class dynamics and the ongoing development of their religious voices.

The turn to precision helped students to identify what they were having trouble understanding, and equally important, *why* they were having difficulty. Students could more readily define whether the stumbling block was a dictionary problem (a word they cannot find) or a logic problem (a construction they have not yet mastered), or whether the text in question holds multiple interpretive pos-

sibilities. In addition, the requirement that they be alert to parallel texts and weave in older material with what was currently being studied aided significantly in parsing an argument.

The methods through which *rishonim* sought to ground their readings in the Bavli text reinforced my challenge to the students that they do the same. Students could compare their ideas about the sugya with those of later commentators, seeing both similarities and differences in their respective ideas. Through studying the close readings of the *rishonim*, I wanted the students to see the possibilities that arose through attentive, detailed, and creative reading and thinking. The use of *rishonim* also facilitated the students' abilities to identify tensions in the text, to see places where the dominant ideology may break down. I challenged them to ask, "What is at stake in these different readings?" In addition, since many of the *rishonim* were difficult to understand, integrating them into the class had the added affect of further slowing down the students.

Most significant was an increased ability on the part of each student to find more interpretive possibilities in the sugya. I observed that the marker of success became not so much speed of reading and preparation of material, but more what a student could articulate about the text. This shift to quality over quantity had some important corollaries.

First was an increased opportunity for me, as a teacher, to better bridge the different class levels.²¹ Slowing down enabled me to more clearly see which strategies would best help individual students to acquire necessary skills in reading and interpretation. I could then integrate these observations into class and suggestions for *hevruta* preparation.

Second, I observed a striking shift in the ways in which different *hevruta* pairs prepared for class. At the beginning of the summer, stronger students completed the assigned material significantly more quickly than the weaker students. However, by the end of the summer this gap had lessened (though not entirely closed). I wrote: "...I am definitely not having a moving too fast issue now. Class has acted to slow down the *hevrotot* because they are now interested in seeing how much they can see in the sugya" (teaching journal, 7/25/07). I believe that the lessening of the gap can be explained not only through the weaker students' increasing comfort with the Talmudic texts. In *hevruta*, the stronger students no longer raced through the material as quickly as possible. Instead, they wanted to extract as much meaning from the text as possible. Marking success by what was said simply meant more time spent thinking, articulating ideas, in *hevruta* preparation.

Third, I perceived an increasing patience, even with potentially ethically difficult texts. The chosen material's emphasis on betrothal as a man "acquiring" a woman raises troubling questions about the nature of Jewish marriage and women's status in Jewish law.²² However, I explicitly articulated to my students throughout the class that I wanted to hear their opinions, reactions, and even anger, about this material. At the same time as I reinforced my desire to hear them speak, I also reinforced

²¹If the gaps between student levels are too wide, for example beginners to advanced, slowing down will not help in meeting the different students' needs. I imagine that all the students will be frustrated!

²²Rachel Adler has written a critique of the traditional Jewish marriage ceremony and kiddushin in particular (Adler 1998, 169-207).

my requirement that they ground their opinions about what the text was saying in the words of the text. While I was explicit with the students that I wanted to know what they thought about the text and to hear their opinions about the issues it raises, I was also insistent that they first demonstrate that they could translate and explain the text. As the students became closer readers of the Bavli, they learned to support their ideas more strongly. In turn, they discovered that this strengthened reading capacity resulted in the ability to better express their opinions. My choice to be explicit about both of these points—reading and opinion—meant that even if I asked a student to momentarily hold back, he trusted that we would circle back to his opinion. My hypothesis is that because students knew they would have time to express their opinions, they were less anxious about making sure they said everything at the beginning. Once they trusted that they would have this time, they were willing to build their skills as they explored these ethical tensions. Then, as their skills grew, they found that they could insert more of their voice into the text itself. Again, this is because I explicitly made room for them to take the time to express questions and offer different readings.

This emphasis on taking time to express grounded opinions was also bound up with the Kollel's larger ideology of supporting and exploring observant-egalitarian Judaism. The process of encouraging the students to carefully articulate textual values paralleled the process we wanted them to undertake in their own religious introspection and growth. Just as the students learned to read, analyze, and think about a text, they could learn to read, analyze, and consider their own Jewish lives. They could consider and discuss with one another issues about Jewish practice, including ritual observance and egalitarianism, with the same depth, openness, and considerateness as they did in Talmud class. Through finding a voice in the study of Talmud, I aimed to help them find a similar voice in Jewish practice.

I strove to open up a space for reading and thinking, to create a place of simultaneous intellectual openness and reading rigor. By pushing the students to articulate their opinions while they grounded them in the text, and exposing them to the interpretive tradition of the *rishonim*, showing them how others had interpreted the Bavli and how the Bavli's meaning is not static, I hoped to give them tools to become insiders in our tradition. With their increased abilities, I found, came increased joy in the process of learning Talmud.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I'd like to return to Fishbane's conceptualization of the commentator's spiritual task "...to mediate and influence the pace of reading, so that the reader can be addressed anew by the innate power of the text." In providing a cultural model of Talmud study that slowed down by emphasizing accurate translation and rigor in thinking about meaning, I hoped to give all my students a sense of accomplishment and an ability to begin to internalize these texts, and so our tradition. Creating a space for conversations based on precise translation and explanation that open into realms of multiple opinions and interpretive possibilities facilitated this process of becoming a translator. One of my students said that the class had given him "[a v]oice in the tradition by learning and mastering the rabbis—then [I can] agree or disagree." It is finding that voice through traditional text study that I found to be central to both the practices and the goals of the pedagogy of slowing down.

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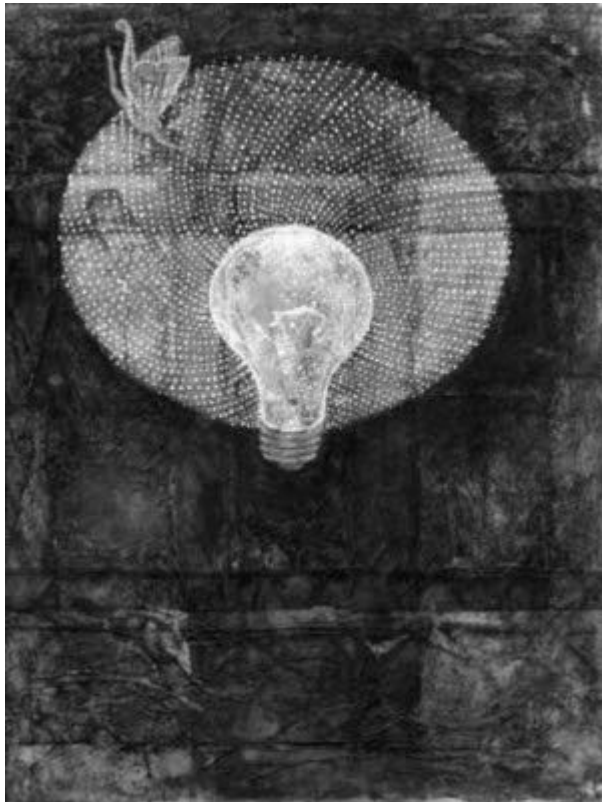
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The Twisted Wick: Talmud Study as Spiritual Practice for Post-Modern Jews

Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla



I found God hanging out innocuously on a page of my Talmud within an obscure legal debate over whether or not a twisted wick is still suitable for kindling Shabbat lights. I glimpsed God slipping between a convoluted argument in a passage about the specific width and length of willow fronds used as a part of a ritual that no longer exists in a holy Temple that no longer stands. I even caught a peek of God hanging out on a page of Talmud that went over the minutiae of how to remove infant feces from your house on Shabbat.

The Talmud is the compendium of Jewish oral law and folklore that was composed between the 2nd and 7th Centuries of the Common Era. There is a Talmud of the Jews of Babylon (which is more commonly studied) and a Palestinian Talmud from the Land of Israel. From the first moment

that I encountered the Talmud's squat letters and bizarre logic, I have found traditional Jewish text study more spiritually gratifying than any other religious practice. And I had a lot to compare it with. I was raised Tibetan Buddhist by parents who were cultural Jews, who exposed me to meditation, chanting, yoga postures, Hindu devotions and spiritual pilgrimages all before the age of six! I was always something of a holy roller and enjoyed all of these activities, but it wasn't until I encountered Talmud study in my early twenties that I first felt a sense of spiritual fulfillment.

I am obviously not alone. For hundreds of years, Jews in every historical period and geographical location have devoted hours upon hours, weeks upon weeks, years upon years, to the study of the Talmud. It is said that poring over the Talmud has sustained our spirits through centuries of oppression. Traditional text study is held to be as important as all the rest of the *mitzvot* (religious commandments) combined. Today, however, Talmud study is often rejected or at least regarded

with some suspicion by \ post-modern, progressive Jews because it is, and has always been, an elite activity.

Talmud study requires an array of linguistic, educational, and social tools which in the past were widely available to well-to-do Orthodox men, but to few others. Today it is still difficult for women, transgender people and queers to even find the teachers and tools to engage in text study, and nearly impossible for poor folks who cannot afford this highly specialized instruction.

As a newly ordained rabbi working in progressive communities, I often find it very difficult to explain why we should even try to invest the time and energy that is necessary to study the Talmud ourselves and to strive to open the door to Talmud study to those in our communities who are currently excluded from text study. The usual reason, that Talmud is our heritage, doesn't work. An inheritance is only valuable if there is some content to it; something that can continue to speak to and enrich contemporary lives.

Talmud, unlike the sacred texts of other traditions, does not deal with exalted topics and grand narratives. Unlike the Bible, there are no stories of escaping slavery or journeying through the wilderness. In fact, God's proper name is never mentioned. Instead, the Talmud is entrenched with the nitty-gritty details of life, and discusses those details in a manner that to many progressive Jews is frustrating at best, offensive at worst.

As a student of Talmud and a teacher of progressive Jews, it is my goal to "open" the dusty tomes and reveal their relevance to my community. To do that, I have found we have to change the way we think about learning.

One of the difficulties for modern people first encountering traditional Jewish learning is that all of us 21st century people were educated to see learning as goal oriented. We discovered in elementary school that you learn biology in order to find out how plants and people are made, you learn English in order to know more about great authors and their insights into human nature, and you learn history in order to understand the events and trends that have shaped our world. Early in our educational lives we learned what learning is: a means to acquiring facts and accruing information. Some of this information might inspire us to live better lives, create beautiful things and contribute to the world. But learning itself, no matter how exalted it is, is still largely viewed as a means to an end.

Jewish learning on the other hand is an end in itself. Our tradition teaches us that religious study ought to be "*lishma*," for its own sake. Judaism cautions us against using the Torah as an ax to dig with. In other words, we must not learn as a way to reach a goal, even if that goal is a worthy one. In Hebrew sacred study, *limmud*, is distinct from goal-oriented education, *hinuch*.

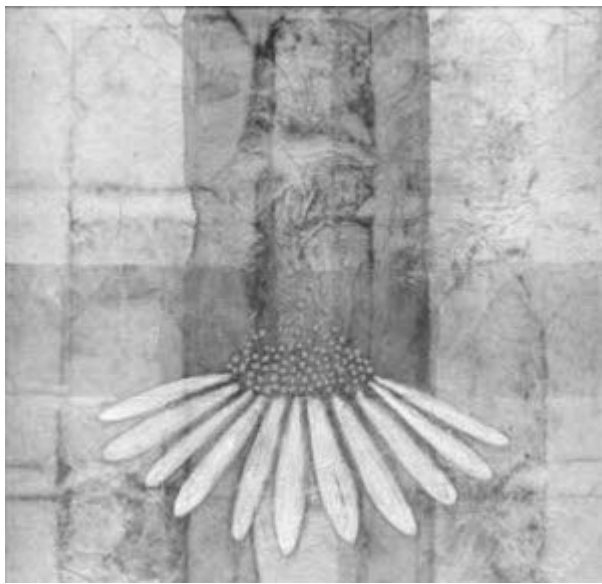


If we approach the Talmud expecting to learn *from* it as opposed to *with* it we will be disappointed. As a source of information, the Talmud is remarkably poor. If I were to line up all the facts I have gleaned from hours upon hours of Talmud study I would come up with a pretty motley list: a rag used for scrubbing toilets is still susceptible to ritual impurity if it is kept in a box but not if it is thrown in the trash, we dug pits and covered up our feces in the desert when we were on the way to the Promised Land, the altar used for daily animal sacrifices in the ancient Temple was only washed once a year...

Certainly some of the information that I have learned has been sublime (unicorn skins were used in the building of the Tabernacle) or inspirational (we must not do to our fellow what is hateful to us). However, the information in the Talmud is also often offensive (a wife can be purchased through money, sex or a written document.) Although I have learned many interesting things about Judaism from Talmud study that is not what motivates me to return to the table day after day. I learn Talmud in order to simply learn, not to learn *about* something. It is the *process* of learning that fills my mind and nourishes my soul. Like prayer or meditation, Jewish learning is a spiritual experience in and of itself.

Learning Talmud is a spiritual experience that can enrich the lives of postmodern Jews for a number of reasons. First of all, Talmudic texts are so complex and intricately woven together that just following the flow of the arguments takes total concentration in the present moment. I spent years trying to meditate and struggling to find mindfulness in the midst of intrusive thoughts from the past and nagging worries about the future. But when I sit down to learn a page of Talmud I am wholly in the present – there is simply no room in my mind for past or future concerns. I am utterly caught up in the complex and strangely beautiful flow of the arguments. The Talmud follows the "order of the heart" not the "order of the mind." Thus to follow its flow it must be read from deep within our own hearts, a post-cognitive place where the past and the future slip away. To translate

this experience into the language of my New Age childhood: Talmud study finally showed me how to "be here now."



The complexity of the Talmud is due in part to the fact that it is filled with a cacophony of voices representing divergent opinions and spanning generations. Each page is chock full of people, each one of whom is unique, named, and

respected. In order to even begin to understand a page of Talmud, I must first strive to listen to the voice of each of the luminaries on the page. When I learn Talmud I am called upon to traverse the boundaries of time, place and gender and truly listen to the perspective of a Rabbi from 6th Century Babylon or 2nd Century Palestine. Furthermore, Talmud is traditionally learned in *chevruta*, with a living study partner, whose voice I must also be attentive to and whose reading I must struggle to comprehend. Talmud study is a model for ethical encounter in any context – it begins with listening. Many of us would rather not listen. We would prefer to forget our vulnerability towards other people and the demands they make upon us, but Talmud study as a religious obligation reminds us that a spiritual life is a life spent paying close attention to one another.

If I truly listen to each of the voices embedded within Talmudic texts I might hear things that I would miss if I don't pay close and respectful attention. For example, if we listen to the voice of each disputant in the debate surrounding the prosaic issue of the twisted wick we can hear surprising things. The Rabbis in this text want to know to what extent a garment can be twisted into a wick and still retain its essence as a garment. Underlying this question there are a number of deep psychological and social concerns. How and when is the old transformed into something wholly new? What are the boundaries around continuity and innovation? How much twisting/transforming can we sustain and still retain *our* identities as individuals or as a people?

In addition to forcing me to listen to the voices of other people, Talmud study as spiritual practice teaches me to pay close attention to the world that surrounds me. A page of Talmud is not just filled with other people. It is also filled with *things*: twisted wicks, insignificant rags, millstones, willow branches, animal skins, scattered fruits, freshly laid eggs, pickled fish and precious stones. In order to understand a page of Talmud I must be paying close attention to the world: to the angle that willows grow in, the shape of a twisted lamp wick and the moment when a rag is no longer useful. This is the stuff of Jewish sacred text and Jewish sacred living, the everyday details that surround us. Talmud study as spiritual practice is not just about being in the present and listening to other people, it is also about the sanctity of the mundane. The holiness that resides in dirty rags and infant feces!

There is yet one more reason why I believe that Talmud study can be a spiritual practice that is meaningful for postmodern Jews. In order to understand an argument I need to mimic the Rabbis of the Talmud and explore infinite possible solutions. In order to understand the Talmud's debate concerning whether or not a twisted wick is suitable for kindling Shabbat lights, I had to consider that they were actually discussing a case when the wick has been twisted out of a garment that is exactly three by three fingerbreadths, and the Sabbath under scrutiny happened to also be a

Festival. To hit upon such extreme specificities, one must first explore universal possibilities. In other words, it hinges upon openness to infinity.



A few years ago I was in the audience watching a master acrobat perform. Suddenly she appeared to tumble down from a height of ten meters, hurtling towards the floor, yet spinning elegantly all the way. The audience held its breath in suspense. But shortly before she hit bottom she froze a few centimeters from the ground. At that moment it became clear to us that she was actually suspended on a wire, held safely within an external structure. Talmud study as spiritual practice gives me the same feeling in my mind as this acrobat achieved with her body – it allows me to freely explore the infinite possibilities of my world, to elegantly spin through space, and at the same time know that I am actually safely connected to the "wire" of Jewish sacred tradition.

The debate about a twisted wick, came down to trying to discover whether or not it was suitable for kindling Shabbat lamps. In other words, was it an appropriate way to bring *kedusha*, holiness, into the world? Although God is rarely discussed explicitly in the Talmud, the texts are filled with holiness: the holiness of the moment; the sacredness of everyday objects; the sanctity of the voice of another person; the divinity within our encounters with infinity. Each time I open my Talmud I learn to see more holiness in the people and things that surround me. I find God in a twisted wick, in a tattered rag, in the opinions of my teachers and study partners and in the voices of the street filtering in through the window of my study all.

The Seeker and Shunyata (Emptiness) by Mary DeVincentis.

Lower Talmud page from an edition printed by Holocaust survivors immediatly after their liberation.

Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla is the rabbi of the Danforth Jewish Circle in Toronto, Canada. A writer and community organizer for more than a decade, Elliot's writing on Judaism and social justice appears in numerous magazines and is widely anthologized. Elliot was ordained by Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles in 2006.

LEARNING
TO
READ TALMUD

What It Looks Like
and How It Happens

taking notes⁴⁷ based on the class lecture and discussion, could submit their notes as a record of what was said to the instructor for “certification” that the contents are accurate. Indeed, the relationship of students’ notes to the information and analysis provided by instructors is of significant concern to contemporary educational researchers, since the students’ knowledge acquisition and methodological training depends not only on the professor’s presentation, but also on the students’ capable summarization for later consultation. As recently noted by Jaques van der Meer, professors should not assume that contemporary students come to the college classroom knowing how to take notes properly, and new methods for assisting student note-taking should be explored and implemented. Van der Meer emphasized that the inherent issues are not resolved by learning support structures implemented in institutions of higher education, since, often, note-taking is field specific.⁴⁸ Developing appropriate note-taking for Talmud classes, therefore, is essential.

Partnering with our students on their note-taking—while arguably for some a seeming reinvention of how university instructors would approach teaching—can become an opportunity to better guide our students in developing skills necessary to master comprehension of rabbinic texts. Teachers requiring and then checking students’ outlines and summaries of *sugyot*⁴⁹ is, certainly, an advance in this regard. The challenge remains, however, to find a way to incorporate a running abbreviated commentary to the Talmud text in the outlines as well.⁵⁰ Perhaps this problem could be resolved with the use of educational technology that would allow for an outline in electronic form, with links to windows that would then briefly explain the contents of a statement in the Talmud, a matter worthy of further consideration.

⁴⁷ Whether electronically or in writing.

⁴⁸ Jaques van der Meer, “Students’ Note-taking Challenges in the Twenty-first Century: Considerations for Teachers and Academic Staff developers,” *Teaching in Higher Education* 17, no. 1 (February 2012): 13–23 (and, for our discussion, especially 13–16).

⁴⁹ See, for example, the discussion of outlines in Marjorie Lehman’s “And No One Gave the Torah to the Priests: Reading the Mishnah’s References to the Priests and the Temple” chapter 4 of this volume.

⁵⁰ To be sure, some instructors require students to indicate in their outlines when the *sugya* records a tannaitic vs. an amoraic statement or where in the text a question vs. answer is provided. This does not constitute commentary in the classical sense of the word; as well, it does not, usually, include an explanation of the contents of the statements by the sages or questions and answers given.

Talmud That Breaks Your Heart: New Approaches to Reading

Sarra Lev

The Philosophy: Reading for What?

Michaelson asks: “Of what value are sorrow and tears? How can one put them to use for purposes of a life politics?” Let me try to answer what is perhaps intended to be nothing more than a rhetorical question, a question for which no answer is really desired. . . . Call it sentimental, call it Victorian and nineteenth century, but I say that anthropology that doesn’t break your heart just isn’t worth doing any more.¹

Some years ago, a rabbinical student who was several weeks into his first semester of Talmud study approached a colleague of mine and said, “When you teach me Talmud, you are assuming this is the *first* time that I am studying it.” My colleague was stunned, and as the student paused for effect, he thought, “I *have* been thinking this is the first time that my students are learning these texts. Have I been underestimating them? Should I be shooting higher?” The student then continued, “This is not the *first* time I am studying Gemara . . . this is the *last* time. I will never open this book again. So, you’d better teach me what you want me to know.” Setting aside, for the moment, the tone with which the student expressed himself, there is something important to be learned here. At best, this student feels that the Talmud

¹ Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 176–77. Behar cites Scott Michaelsen, from David E. Johnson, Scott Michaelsen, *Anthropology’s Wake: Attending to the End of Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press) 2008.

cannot be harmonized with his values and, at worst, that it is downright immoral. This student is not alone. Every semester, there is at least one student who enters my class already hating the Talmud.

These students echo feelings that I myself have had on reading certain passages, and yet, I am compelled by the Talmud—by its depth and by the way in which it is traditionally studied. So, I ask myself, “Can we read Talmud to create a kinder, more compassionate, empathetic, and self-reflective society?” English professor Ihab Hassan once asked his student teachers, “Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?”² That is the question that this reading system addresses. *Can we read Talmud* so that people stop killing each other?

Usually, a student will leave my beginners’ Talmud class able to identify the parts of an argument; understand how those parts relate to one another; know what the keywords are that produce the argument; recognize how the argument fits into the greater context; and know the named rabbis, as well as some information about the text’s historical relevance. But over recent years, I have been asking, “Is this enough?”

“Reading to work the heart” is far less clear-cut than other reading methods. I could say to the students, “I want you to be able to translate all the words” or, “I want you to be able to tell the earlier layers from the later ones”—but this would only address a small part of my ultimate goal. Rather, I am asking them to read Talmud by addressing its moral (and immoral) issues. I want to teach them how to read *all* of the stories, including those in which the rabbis reject saving a non-Jew’s life if it would mean transgressing Shabbat;³ those in which they debate the mechanics of sex with a three-year-old girl;⁴ and those in which they (on more than one occasion) even commit murder.⁵ I want to provide students 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. And so, I premiered the course Talmud Through a Moral Lens to investigate a mode of reading Talmud that

2 Mary Rose O’Reilly, *The Peaceable Classroom* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1993), 9.

3 M. Yoma 87.

4 B. Niddah 45a.

5 See, for example, B. Yoma 22a-23b and B. Bava Kamma 117a.

both excites and scares me. I wanted to know: “Is there a way to read Talmud that will help us grow, even when the Talmud *itself* does not reflect our values? What qualities can we cultivate in ourselves through encounters not only with the Talmud’s “friendly” sides but even (or perhaps, particularly) with its “unfriendly” ones? In short, I wanted to know if there is a way to read Talmud that not only “works the brain,” but also “works the heart.”

The way I determined to set about this was to treat the Talmud as a new genre—which I will call “summons.”⁷ 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.

Methodological Background

The idea of reading to “work the heart” draws largely from Hans Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, in which the interaction with a text is an I-Thou encounter. From this perspective, the text itself is an “Other” with whom the reader is in conversation. The primary purpose of that encounter is for the reader to develop self-understanding. The text is historically situated, but so too is the reader, who is “prejudiced” by the lens of her own historical moment.⁸ Although “understanding” is never achievable, the encounter itself has ethical “significance”:

[T]he understanding of the Other possesses a fundamental significance.

... In the end, I thought the very strengthening of the Other against myself would, for the first time, allow me to open up the real possibility

6 For more on the question of rabbinics and genre, see Julia Watts Belser, “Between the Human and the Holy: The Construction of Talmudic Theology in Massekhet Ta’anit” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2008), 36-43; Barry S. Wimpfheimer, *Narrating the Law: A Poetics of Talmudic Legal Stories*, 1st ed., Divinations, Rereading Late Ancient Religion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); David Charles Kraemer, *Reading the Rabbis: The Talmud as Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3-9, 142-50.

7 I did not have this word at the time I was teaching the course but feel that it best describes the work I was doing.

8 Prejudice is not a derogatory term for Gadamer, but simply a given condition of all understanding.

of understanding. To allow the Other to be valid against Oneself—and from there to let all my hermeneutic works slowly develop—is not only to recognize in principle the limitation of one's own framework, but is also to allow one to go beyond one's own possibilities, precisely in a dialogical, communicative, hermeneutic process.⁹

Gadamer is insistent that the meeting of Oneself with the Other must take place through truly seeing the Other in that "Other's" fullness and not as a mirror reflection of ourselves. Filled with unfamiliar characters making choices we ourselves would not make, plus a foreign language and a foreign culture, the Talmud here plays the role of paradigmatic "Other."¹⁰

If the Gemara becomes the Other that must be "valid against Oneself," then the self has the opportunity to grow through the encounter with the Gemara, whether or not one likes (or even "accepts") what the Gemara seems to be saying. The encounter with the Gemara as summons excites self-reflection, making us more ethical human beings—not through being told or shown, but through offering us an encounter with the wholly "Other."¹⁰

In addition to the heavy influence that Gadamer's philosophy has had on my work, while teaching and writing I stumbled across the theory of transformative learning (TL):

Transformative education involves experiencing a deep structural shift in the basic premises of our thoughts, feelings and action. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves an understanding of ourselves and our self-locations, our relations with other humans and with the natural world . . . our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy.¹¹

TL does not stop at increasing knowledge or developing skills. It also changes the learners' understanding of themselves, of other people, and of the world

9 Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity, Subject and Person," *Continental Philosophy Review* 33, no. 3 (2000): 284.

10 See also Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). Nussbaum advocates teaching literature in order to "cultivate humanity."

11 Edmund O'Sullivan, Amish Morrell, and Mary Ann O'Connor, *Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning: Essays on Theory and Praxis*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 18.

and opens the mind and heart wider. At the same time, TL does not do away with the need for mastery of content. On the contrary—that mastery is essential; but so too is the possibility for transformation that emerges from the encounter with the material. The result is a learning experience that directly employs the theories of Gadamer.

The philosophies of Gadamer and TL are truly inspiring, but they offered only theory and provided little practical advice on how to apply that theory. To begin with, particularly with Gadamer, material on *how* teachers implemented these philosophies in the classroom was hard to come by. In addition, I found no TL material to address the teaching of religious texts, particularly those with complicated value systems. I was suggesting an entirely new enterprise that required reading the Talmud, not as we have traditionally, but as a new genre, as it were—a genre whose intent was to awaken us and to summon us to become our best selves.

Course Background

I taught Talmud Through a Moral Lens at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, once a week for fourteen weeks. I could give the students no mandatory homework by the rules of the Yeshiva. The participants were ten college-educated students in their later twenties to thirties. Most considered themselves progressive Jews. They had a wide range of experience with Talmud, from those who knew almost no Hebrew or Aramaic, to those who had spent three years in rabbinical school and had significant exposure and some proficiency with understanding the texts. With these different levels of experience, I decided to present each text in both the original and in translation.

On one hand, the students were unique in their disposition for this work. All of them had taken a year of their lives to move to Jerusalem and to study at the Conservative Yeshiva, an institution tailored to teach only religious subjects. Simply by virtue of this, they were already invested and responsive to a reflective experience. Some articulated that they were searching for the meaning in their own tradition that they had found in the religious traditions and texts of other cultures and religions. On the other hand, while halakic Jews study the Talmud as a religious practice and seek to understand it in the context of their daily lives, this would not necessarily be the case for

tried to find that place inside when someone says something you can't believe they are saying?" But I didn't do that. I was not brave in the moment. So we did other things in class. Good things. But not *that*.

Where this discomfort most often played out was in transitions from the very intense textual analysis that served as the base for the personal work and the personal work itself. My journal after the first class read, "What I most wonder about is how I am going to transition in class from our intensive work on the Talmud text to the question of what this means about us as human beings. I want to do that organically, but I do not know how."

Methods and Techniques

This process defied linearity, at every step requiring skills *a fortiori* that we were to learn as we went through the process itself.¹³ Included in these competencies were the performance of complex analyses; the ability to stand in the "Other's" shoes; the awareness that the Other is *not* the same as me; proficiency in thinking outside of the box; facility in considering options rather than jumping to immediate conclusions; and heavy doses of empathy, compassion, and kind-

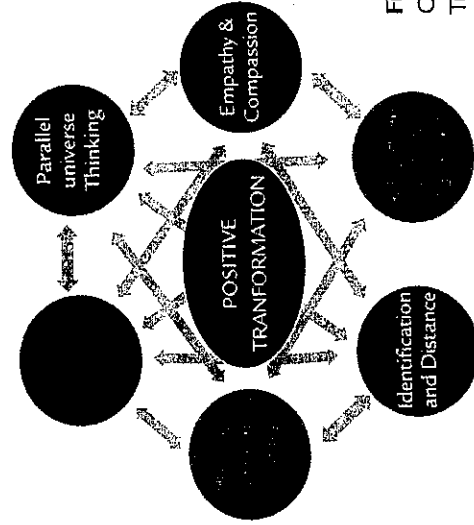


Figure 1 The Network of Competencies for Positive Transformation.

¹³ My thanks to Rabbi Toba Spitzer for her assistance in articulating this aspect of skill acquisition.

progressive, non-halakhic Jews. For them, the texts have no intrinsic legal-practical value, and they have no pre-defined or natural connection to these texts. Could non-halakhic liberal Jews read texts that differed vastly from their own value systems and ways of thinking with the goal of becoming better human beings? With this question, I entered the semester.

Personal Challenges

There are two challenges in teaching how to read "Talmud as summons" that I realize are particular to my personality, but I believe they are worth mentioning as they do inform my pedagogy. To begin with, I had to overcome my discomfort with the hubris of saying, "I use these texts to be self-reflective, and I'm going to show you how to do that." It was difficult for me to find words to explain what it was that I wanted them to do without (inadvertently) suggesting to a class of wonderful students, many of whom I had not met before, that they are not yet "kind enough," "empathetic enough," or "self-reflective enough," and that I wanted them to learn or improve those skills through our reading.

The second challenge was that, while teaching this class I learned much about my own fear of venturing into the world of emotional reactions and "the work of the heart" in the context of a classroom. While I knew the only way to read the Talmud as summons was to enter the sphere of the personal, I feared invading my students' privacy in general and, specifically, of pushing them too hard, demanding vulnerability from them without knowing them well, asking them to do something beyond "ordinary Talmud study" in a Talmud class, and as well, displaying my own vulnerability in order to model the behavior I sought from them. I feared asking any number of questions that pushed *too far*, or having a conversation drift *too far* into the emotional—I was afraid of losing them in the process of helping them to find themselves. My journal as I prepared for the sixth class shows my concern for these issues:

I am afraid of asking the difficult questions. I am afraid I don't know what those questions are. I keep giving-up on the writing exercises and just doing the text. Last week, I told the story [of the Mitrler Rebbe]¹² ... I should have asked my students, "Have any of you ever done that? Ever

¹² See below 191 for story of the Mitrler Rebbe.

ness.¹⁴ The process is, in Gadamer's words, "dialogical." One cannot place one of these goals before the other (see Fig. 1). For example, in order to acquire empathy, we need to learn to engage in "parallel universe thinking,"¹⁵ which requires complex thinking and the ability to see the Other. The ability to see the Other, in turn, requires empathy. Gadamer's recognition that reading in this way "is to allow one to go beyond one's own possibilities" is true, both in terms of process and outcome. That is, in order for me to engage, I must allow myself to go beyond my current possibilities as I perceive them. And this opens me further to even more possibilities. In other words, there is no "first step." The only way to acquire these skills, habits, and character traits, is to jump right in.

Stage 1 of my methodology was to do a close reading of the text in order to foster complexity and build some of the aforementioned skills. This would lay the groundwork for Stage 2, which involved reading the text as "summons" and would reinforce certain of the skills, as well as engage some of the others. The techniques I used in this first stage to cultivate uncertainty and foster complex readings were as follows:

1. Choosing material that would allow the students to be critical but could also push them to understand and empathize with the Other
2. Leaving ambiguity or multivalence in my translations
3. Putting the text "on stage"
4. Providing information about unfamiliar concepts and making available aids to understanding our text, when necessary
5. Providing historical context and employing "historical thinking,"¹⁶ in order to dislodge assumptions or preconceived notions
6. Examining the text in literary context

14 The fields of TL and social justice divide into three basic foci of transformation; my interest primarily is in the outcomes of the third: "a theory of existence, which views people as subjects, not objects, who are constantly reflecting and acting on the transformation of their world so it can become a more equitable place for all to live." See Heather L. Stuckey, Edward W. Taylor, and Patricia Cranton, "Developing a Survey of Transformative Learning Outcomes and Processes Based on Theoretical Principles," *Journal of Transformative Education* 11, no. 4 (2013).

15 The practice of exploring multiple explanations to explain a person's behavior.

16 Samuel S. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*, Critical Perspectives on the Past (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

By the time we reached Stage 2, most of the "real" work had already been accomplished. We had repeatedly challenged ideas about right and wrong, judgments about what was happening in the text and ideas about what the text intended to convey, as well as calling into question the students' own personal relationships to the text. Stage 2 carried through some of the techniques of stage 1 (primarily cultivating uncertainty), but the goal of stage 2 was to read the text as summons (although, at the time, I was not framing it that way). In order to do so, the added techniques I used in class were:

1. Framing my approach to understanding the self through poetry and story
2. Remaining complex: techniques to avoid reductionism
 - a. Staying close to the text
 - b. Asking questions about the text that bridge between it and ourselves
 - c. Asking questions about ourselves that reflect back on the text
3. Encouraging and exhibiting vulnerability and self-reflection

Stage 1: Fostering Complexity—Balancing Intimacy and Alienation

When I have taught Talmud in the past, I have noticed two opposite ways that students experience the text—for some, it feels remote and alien, while for others, it feels intimate, sacred, and infallible.¹⁷ The first student will reject the texts. The second will run circles around the texts to make them conform to what he/she believes the text should say or wants it to say,¹⁸ ultimately opening the text to presentism, ethnocentrism, and egocentrism. Neither group's response allows for complex analysis.

Both my choice of texts and my teaching require a careful balance between making the strange familiar and making sure that the familiar is not too familiar. Although the idea of cultivating uncertainty in a classroom may

17 An equal but opposite manifestation of intimacy occurs when a student feels so identified with the text that she must utterly reject it, so not to be implicated by its problematic aspects.

18 This phenomenon creates what Paulo Freire refers to as "circles of certainty." Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000), 38-39. For the relationship between uncertainty and social justice education, see Doris Santoro, "Teaching to Save the World: Avoiding Circles of Certainty in Social Justice Education," *Philosophy of Education Yearbook* (2009).

seem incongruous, it is essential to my teaching. In my methodology, “disequilibrium,” Piaget’s theory of resolving new information into current schemas, which he believed was vital to the development of logical thought, is a prerequisite to seeing the “Other” in our relationships.¹⁹ If a reader is convinced that her way of understanding is the only way, it is likely that this will translate to her life as well. The uncertainty of the skillful reader with a refined approach is what helps her to continually reassess as new information is introduced or greater understanding is achieved.

“Working the heart” is meant to cause a disruption in what Paulo Freire calls “circles of certainty,”²⁰ by identifying (and dispelling) responses to a text that are entirely based on what we *think* we know. But, while trying to dispel the predisposition to “know and judge,” I also want to keep my students close enough so that reading Talmud *matters*. How can they truly meet the Other, if they do not feel at all attached to the text? Reading the Talmud as “summons” demands the ability to hold both enough distance to quell our assumptions and enough familiarity to feel something, to create meaning. I want the students to grow through *getting to know* a text that is laden with religious meaning, is entirely foreign, and yet, they can claim as their own. As I see it, this has to take place on several levels, some that support familiarity, some that support healthy distance, and some that maintain a balance of both simultaneously.

Where Do We Begin? Framing. Both what I do in the classroom and how I prepare for the classroom is directly affected by these considerations. In my preparation, this is reflected in what materials I choose to teach, and in how I translate that material. To preserve the balance between familiarity and healthy distance, I feel texts that might disrupt the students’ equilibrium would likely facilitate deep discussion and engagement. Thus, for this class, I chose texts in which the message (and many times the plot itself) was unclear, and they could legitimately be read in a number of ways and on multiple levels. In part, classroom discussion involved sifting out possible readings of the Talmud text from unlikely ones, still allowing for multiplicity. I wanted to provide for indeterminacy, while not slipping into moral or literary relativism,

19 See, Jean Piaget, *The Equilibration of Cognitive Structures: The Central Problem of Intellectual Development*, trans. Terrence Brown and Kishore Julian Thampy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 10.

20 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

or sentimentalism. At the same time, for today’s liberal reader, the Talmud does little to promote identification with the characters and more often evokes estrangement (and sometimes derision). Hence, I chose texts that could bridge between this altogether different reality, the Other, and the students’ own cultural reality, and offer access to the familiar as well as the strange. Additionally, if a text had elements with which the students might disagree, that friction itself could stimulate conversation. I did not want to alienate them entirely with “terrible texts” merely to provoke discussion and regress into sensationalism, and yet, I wanted to deal head-on with highly problematic material. Ultimately, my basic organizing principle for choosing my texts was to present texts that were as complex as the Talmud itself.

My final criterion for choosing texts was that they had to be engaging and interesting. In what follows in this chapter, I will use B. Yoma 23a, a story about a priestly murder that we studied during the semester. The story had intricacies that could lead to in-depth conversations, and was both familiar (murder) and strange (Temple practice) at the same time:

Our Rabbis taught: It once happened that two priestesses were tied as they ran and ascended the ramp. One of them ran ahead into his colleague’s “four cubits of the altar.” He took a knife and thrust it into his heart. R. Tsadok stood on the steps of the Hall and said: “Our Brothers of the House of Israel, listen! Behold it says [in Torah], ‘If a corpse is found in the land then your elders and judges shall go out . . .’ (Deut 21:1) For whom shall we bring the heifer whose neck is to be broken? On [behalf of] the city or on [behalf of] the Temple Courts?” All the people burst out weeping. The father of the boy came and found him while he was still in convulsions. He said, “May he be your atonement. My son is still in convulsions and the knife has not become impure.” [His remark] comes to teach that the purity of their vessels was graver for them than the shedding of blood.²¹

Translating the texts. It was not only the materials I chose, however, that went into my preparation. On the most basic level, if my readers were to have any investment in these materials, they needed, first, to be able to simply

21 For an extended analysis of this passage, see Marjorie Lehman, “Imagining the Priesthood in Tractate Yoma: Mishnah Yoma 2:1-2 and BT Yoma 23a,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies and Gender Issues* 28 (Spring 2015): 88-105.

decipher the text. Since few of them had a mastery of Hebrew and Aramaic, a translation was necessary.²² However, given that exploring multiple meanings is a key element in a complex reading, I could not use a translation that “answers” a question before the readers ever realized there *was* a question. Thus, in order to challenge students to interrogate their own judgments through an encounter with the “wholly Other,” I created and distributed translations that preserved the multivocality and ambiguity of that Other—the talmudic text.²³ This meant maintaining the terse and ambiguous style of the original text, sometimes leaving an ambiguous word or phrase untranslated (substituting a transliteration), and sometimes dealing with translation issues in the classroom, as we did with the above Yoma text.

Choosing an appropriate text would set the stage for this method of reading, but it was during the classroom discussion of that text that the primary work took place. There, I needed to create the relationship that Gadamer advocates: a balance between the distance that ensures careful critique and the intimacy that allows for a full knowing of the Other, (in this case, the talmudic text). This challenge was heightened by the short amount of time we had to cultivate a relationship with the texts as a whole.

The primary way to disrupt understanding, while allowing students access to the texts, was through translations *in-class*. In texts where I left words transliterated, I located other contexts in which the word or phrase appeared and reviewed those in class, giving students multiple meanings with which to work. We then used these to determine possibilities for how *our text* might be contextualizing that word or phrase. In the Yoma text, however, the ambiguity that I wished to highlight lay in the father’s response (*harei hu kaparahkhem ve-adajin beni mefarper ve-lo nitmedh sakin*) and was difficult to transmit in a written handout. Thus, after reading the above translation in class, I listed on the board other options for the meaning of the father’s statement:

1. The first half of the statement:
 - a. May he be your atonement
 - b. May this be your atonement

²² I always included the original text alongside the translation for those who wanted to refer back to it.

²³ I translated with an eye toward staying close to the language of the original Hebrew and Aramaic.

- c. Behold, he is your atonement
 - d. Behold, this is your atonement
2. The second half of the statement:
 - a. My son is still in convulsions and the knife has not become impure
 - b. *And* my son is still in convulsions and the knife has not become impure
 - c. *That* my son is still in convulsions and the knife has not become impure

I then had the students read various combinations of the father’s statement in a variety of tones of voice, asking them to experiment with different emotions behind the tones expressed. Some students read the father’s words (1a, 1b) somberly, as a wish or a hope for the priestly clan that either his son, the (still pure) knife, or some other “this” should atone for the murder. Others read them (1c, 1d) as didactic. Some students suggested that however one reads the statement, the father is likening his dying son, stabbed with a knife normally used for sacrifice, to a sacrificial animal used for atonement.

A student raised the question, “What does the extra ‘and my son’ (2b) contribute to the meaning?” Was the father linking “may he be (or this is) your atonement” to the fact that his son was still in convulsions? Another student read “that my son” (2c) to mean, “It is your atonement that my son is still in convulsions and [thus] the knife has not become impure.” In this case, the student pointed out that the father offers the purity of the knife *as the atonement* for the murder, rather than offering his son as the equivalent of a sacrifice. One student suggested that the father was like Aharon at the death of his sons, not truly responding emotionally. Another suggested that he was responding like a proud father who extols his son for hanging on to life until the sacred knife is removed from his body, so as not to defile the knife. At the end of the discussion, I introduced another possibility: “How would he be saying these words if he was angry?” This elicited a discussion of whether the father might ultimately be speaking sarcastically, critiquing, rather than cleaving to the cult of purity.

Did the father care more about the purity of the knife than his son’s death? Were his words ironic or sincere? Was his voice breaking or was he indifferent and unmoved by his son’s death? Was he included in those who cared more for their vessels or was he reprimanding them? Without veering

from the text in any way, multiple interpretations emerged from this exercise. The more that new options for reading were introduced, the less certain students became of their original readings, responses, and judgments; and the less likely they were to extract simplistic moral lessons from the text.

Situating the Text in Historical and Literary Context. Cultivating uncertainty or balancing between familiarity and distance also came into play when thinking about our story relative to its context, and not only when working with multiple translation options. This meant learning more about how the text was situated historically and textually, clarifying entirely foreign concepts, but also investigating what assumptions we brought to the texts, both about the texts themselves and about our own values. Sam Wineburg tells us:

The narcissist sees the world—both past and present—in his own image. Mature historical knowing teaches us to do the opposite: to go beyond our own image, to go beyond our brief life, and to go beyond the fleeting moment in human history into which we have been born.²⁴

Even with translation, unfamiliar concepts can make the text impenetrable. I began each unit, therefore, by explaining these blatantly foreign concepts in advance, using a “things you must know to understand this text” introduction. For example, Rabbi Tzadok’s direct challenge to the priests, asking them, “For whom shall we bring the heifer whose neck is to be broken?” is unintelligible to anyone unfamiliar with the ceremony of the *eglah arifab* (heifer whose neck is to be broken), which takes place upon finding a murdered corpse in an open field (Deut 22). The ritual is performed when the murderer remains unknown and is carried out by the elders of the nearest town. Only upon understanding the ritual, did students realize that Rabbi Tzadok’s question was not what it appeared, given that the case concerned a *known* murderer and took place on the grounds of the Temple. Once the students understood this, a discussion ensued about what Rabbi Tzadok was *really* asking about, if not the logistics of the ritual. Likewise, I brought in a picture of the ramp and the altar for the students, which allowed

²⁴ Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*, 24. Wineburg also relies on “the tension between the familiar and the strange” and, likewise, depends on this tension as a method of “humanization.” See, in particular, *ibid.*, introduction and chapter 5.

them to visually imagine a stage for the story. Later, when I asked questions such as, “How would this look on a stage?” or “What would you do to direct this production?” the visual background to the story was essential.

A more insidious, ensnaring problem than the blatantly unfamiliar, however, is that which *appears familiar*, or known. The students’ familiarity with rabbis of today or with the orthodox Jews of today, for example, was far too easily projected onto the rabbis of the Talmud. Students assumed that the rabbis would be unwilling to critique their own religious system and that rabbis and priests worked in harmony. B. Yoma 23a, however, must be understood in the context of the historically *tense* relationship between the rabbinic and priestly communities. This rabbinic text reports on a priestly murder and critiques the institution of priesthood. So too, Rabbi Tzadok’s dual roles as both priest and rabbi, spanning two communities with complicated relationships, heightens the complexity of the scene. Likewise, at the outset of our discussion, for example, one student commented that the priests racing up the ramp was a debasement of the Temple, missing entirely the fact that this was a practice established *by* the priests. The student applied current perceptions of decorum to the Temple cult. The realization that they could not simply map their own reality onto the text gave them pause and opened space for more questions about historical context.

Interpreting both the unfamiliar and the seemingly familiar as products of historical development offered a deeper “knowing” of the text, and, at the same time, an “un-knowing.” The latter curtailed the impulse to hang onto their assumptions about the motivations or choices of the characters and restrained presentism (applying their own historical position to the text).

Not only the historical context of the text but also the literary context, in which the later sages use this story, is relevant to our own understanding. Thus, after discussing the story on its own terms, we returned to the mishnah that preceded it. Unlike the tannaitic²⁵ story that we told above, which appears in the Gemara, the mishnah that parallels this story ends by addressing the issue of competition. Coupling the two texts opened up the question of what these texts are *about* and what critique is being offered. Are the parallel stories about competition? Purity? Or, perhaps, it is something else entirely that binds them together?

²⁵ Belonging to the same historical period as the Mishnah.

Stage 2: Translating Our Reading into a Summons

Achieving a balance of differentiating between ourselves and the Other, while still understanding and empathizing with the Other, would not emerge from solely intellectually analyzing the text. We needed a process to shape the nature and extent of that encounter. The more we pulled at the material, in order to know the texture of every thread, the more we exercised that skill, and the more we were able to translate it into our understanding of *many different* "Others." But pulling at the threads is only one essential aspect of this process. *How* we pulled was equally essential. While the reader must come to know and understand the text on its own terms, she must also cultivate an ability to see herself in those who appear within the pages of the Talmud and in their circumstances. Once we had accomplished the complex analysis of the text, we needed to take the reading to the next stage—understanding how the text summons us to become our best selves.

Where Do We Begin? Framing. Some of the outside tools that I introduced to frame this very complex and unfamiliar reading process in the classroom included two poems and an old Hassidic story. Each of these demonstrated skills for understanding the Other (whether person or text) in all his/hers complexity and viewing her/him/it with compassion.

Thich Nhat Hanh's poem "Call Me by My True Names"²⁶ focuses on the philosophy that we each embody all possibilities for right action, for wrongdoing, for both victim and perpetrator. Creating changes in our thinking requires identifying these places in ourselves and having compassion and a will to change:

I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean
after being raped by a sea pirate.
And I am the pirate,
my heart not yet capable
of seeing and loving...

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once,

²⁶ Nhat Hanh Thich, *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991).

so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up
and so the door of my heart
could be left open,
the door of compassion.

For Thich Nhat Hanh, a renowned Buddhist monk and spiritual guide, only when we acknowledge *all* of who he is are we "calling him by his true names." I wanted the students to understand and apply this teaching: that we all have within us that which we tend to condemn in others.

Yehudah Amichai's poem, "From the Place Where We Are Right," echoes Gadamer's call to recognize the failings of our own framework and to radically open ourselves to the Other. Amichai calls on us to let go of "the place where we are right" and to question our convictions and behavior in order to make room for a place where "flowers will grow."²⁷

Finally, the story of the Mirtler Rebbe, Dov Ber Schneuri, ends as the Rebbe explains to one of his chassidim that he is only able to advise his parishioners to repent for their wrongdoings by first seeking the place inside of *himself* that would commit that particular wrongdoing. I explained that this story had changed me profoundly as a young adult and that it embodies the process that I seek when we are reading the Talmud: to take on the words or actions of a particular rabbi or of the "narrator" (if only for a brief time), whether or not we like them, in order to seek the way in which we may do *teshuvah* (repentance) for that wounded place inside of ourselves.

These particular ways of seeing the world are not self-evident nor are they normally understood as prerequisites for studying Talmud. Thus, it was important to introduce them explicitly early on in the course so that they would be front and center during the second stage of the process.

Avoiding Reductionism. Reductionism is one of the main pitfalls of a project designed to take complicated material and have students apply it to their lives. In planning for my fourth class, I wrote the following in my journal:

²⁷ Amichai, Yehudah, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 34.

The most difficult thing has been to figure out a way to get them to use the text to self-reflect, while still keeping to the text itself, rather than just say to them "OK, now you're Moses. How do you feel?"²⁸ Identifying the elements that make this a more complex process than that—*that* is the challenge.

I did not want the text to become a jumping off point from which to just talk about ourselves or to flatten the text's depth by glibly applying our own experiences to it. Avoiding reductionism and cultivating the above skills and characteristics, first and foremost, required keeping the discussion close to the text, even while self-reflecting. In order to maintain depth and complexity, we did this while reading the text and through class discussions.²⁹ Maintaining the variety of perspectives we had accumulated in stage 1 allowed the students more entry points into the material *and* offered them much richer material for analyzing their own behaviors. Hand in hand with this range of perspectives, I sought to apply "parallel universe thinking" to the text, "challenging oneself to identify the many alternatives to the interpretations to which we may be tempted to leap, on insufficient information."³⁰ I wanted my students to understand that while perhaps they *could* judge the text the way they originally had (whether positive or negative), they must not *necessarily* do so. Indeed, in each text, we took time to question particular judgments based on elements in the text and to introduce alternative and equally plausible readings.

In addition to staying close to the text, I tried to ask searching questions. The types of questions that would elicit discussions leading us down the path of self-reflection varied greatly from text to text. I asked the students,

28 My thanks to Rabbi Susan Silverman for this phrasing.

29 See, for example, Nel Noddings, *Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 70-72; Jacques Derrida, "The 'World' of the Enlightenment to Come (Exception, Calculation, Sovereignty)," *Research in Phenomenology* 33, no. 1 (2003); Steven L. Meisel and David S. Fearon, "Choose the Future Wisely: Supporting Better Ethics through Critical Thinking," *Journal of Management Education* 30, no. 1 (2006); Tara Fenwick, "Responsibility, Complexity Science and Education: Dilemmas and Uncertain Responses," *Studies in Philosophy of Education* 28, no. 2 (2009).

30 See Jean Koh Peters and Susan J. Bryant, "Five Habits for Cross-Cultural Lawyering," in *Race, Culture, Psychology, & Law*, ed. Kimbely Barrett and William George (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005). The authors used this method to challenge their students' negative responses to clients of different cultures.

for example, what it might have been like to have lunch with the priest who did the stabbing on the day before the incident. What did they imagine about his character? Would they necessarily have noticed anything about him that was "different"? My goal here was to draw attention to the fact that the text presented no indication that the perpetrator was in any way different than his compatriots; rather, it attributed the disaster to a systemic issue—that of the priesthood's emphasis on competition. Imagining possibilities for who he was and what brought the murderer to stab a fellow priest challenged the perpetrator/victim reading, and opened a conversation about institutional pressures and instances in which we ourselves have failed individuals by conforming to values or practices of an institution. Even as we engaged in this self-reflection, we remained closely anchored to the text as our base, moving back and forth from personal experience to text, rather than allowing for a stream of consciousness conversation that left the text behind.

My purpose throughout was to cultivate an encounter that views the text as summons, a call to look within, not only by leading with bridging questions (such as that above), but by *explaining* the types of questions that this approach requires as we apply the text to our own lives: "What is it that I am not understanding about these opinions or behaviors?" "What information do I need to collect to understand more?" "How can I read this differently if I approach it with compassion?" "What will I learn about myself if I meet this text without beginning at a place where I am right?" All of these questions serve to bridge between the text and the reader, not by *leaving* the text and *moving* to the reader, but by applying parallel methods to understanding ourselves as readers and to understanding the text itself.

Taking the Path of Most Resistance: Inventing Vulnerability and Self-Reflection.

N. Elias reminds us that summoning ourselves is no easy task:

It is hard for human beings to get away from preconceived ideas about themselves and the world and when philosophers suggest "Know thyself" most people are likely to respond "no thanks, we don't want to know that much."³¹

31 Quote from N. Elias, *Le Societaat De Los Individuos* (Barcelona: Peninsula, 1990), 96. Translated to English in Martha Traverso-Yepes, "Examining Transformative Learning Amidst the Challenges of Self Reflection," in *Narrating Transformative Learning in Education*, ed. Morgan Gardner and Ursula Anne Margaret Kelly (New York: Falgrave Macmillan, 2008), 157.

Reading the text as summons requires us to see the struggles, decisions, opinions, and behaviors of those in the texts as connecting with and relevant to our own lives, even when those behaviors or opinions do *not* seem to reflect our own. The skills that are required to truly come to know (that is, to understand and to feel for) the characters of the text necessitate a certain level of vulnerability. It is certainly not a given that adult students taking a class in Talmud, usually a highly intellectual exercise, will be willing to make themselves vulnerable enough in front of classmates and teachers to self-reflect. It was my hope, however, that I could find ways to make that happen aloud in class. I did this both by asking particular questions that required them to be vulnerable and by pushing myself to be vulnerable with them.

Creating a classroom atmosphere of kindness and compassion (which I hoped would allow them a place to be vulnerable) was easy with this particular group. Nevertheless, I myself struggle with both my own and my students' vulnerability in the classroom. I felt this discomfort acutely when managing transitions from textual analysis (Stage 1) to the discussion of how it impacted our lives (Stage 2). I overcame that discomfort by asking my students outright to engage in this experiment with me, making it a joint effort. I also felt it was important to let them know that whatever they were thinking about, they were not alone in their concerns or fears. In class, after studying the story in Yoma, I told them that when I first read this text I had recorded the following thoughts:

"I cannot believe that this is our religious text." I went into it with an incredible amount of judgment about this being the "thing" that we're supposed to be looking at in order to figure out how to be Jews. . . . And for me what happens is when I take it apart like this, it helps me go from "How could that possibly be the story?" to "Wow, that's really the story. It's the story all over the place. It's the story that I'm in. It's the story that everybody else is in." And then the question is—how do we deal with that story?—as opposed to—*how could they ever have done that!* I asked myself— [referring to a story a student told]. . . . What are the moments when I am so completely submerged in the life of something "bigger," like the institution, or whatever it is, that I cannot see past that?" And that is a story that we are all in. So, it just helps me to feel like this story is actually telling me something; this is actually pulling me somewhere, and I have to look at this.

But, while I could *say* that the story was universal, *showing* it is ultimately more powerful. To do this, I tried modeling what I wanted them to do by exposing outright my own encounters with the text. I myself did each exercise that I assigned to the students and then posted my writings for them. While this did allow me to *model* the process, I also hoped that my own vulnerability would invite them to follow suit.³² This approach also eased my reticence to ask them to share their own vulnerability and my concerns about the hubris of the enterprise. If during class I was able to demonstrate areas where I myself needed to grow, I was somewhat more comfortable asking them to do so. I wanted my own participation to open a space for them to be able to do the same.

One very straightforward way in which I asked for their vulnerability was through personal questions. Of course, they could choose not to answer, but the questions made room for the personal to be a part of the class. Toward the end of the unit on Yoma, I asked them to consider the underlying transgressions in the story. A selection of those the students suggested included: caring more about ritual and religion than about people (the murderer and the father); putting the institution above the individual (the father and the priests); and competing for "holiness" (the priests, the murderer, the murdered priest). I had them consider whether they themselves had ever been guilty of such transgressions. Could they understand the obsession with ritual that allowed other human beings to become secondary? Had they ever felt ritually competitive? Albeit, in the Yoma text, these impulses resulted in murder and, perhaps (depending on how we read the father's response), an indifference to the death of a loved one. By reading the text "to work the heart," I was looking for students to identify with the character's impulse itself and not necessarily with its outcome in the story. After we had brainstormed the transgressions, I asked, "If you choose one of these—if one of these people or groups of people came to you and said, 'I did this,' and you were the Mirtler Rebbe, how would you suggest that they do *teshuvah* (repent)? And then the question is, how did you get there?"

I also ended some units with an in-class writing exercise, in which I asked a question prompting students to examine their lives in light of our discussion about the text. The first unit's writing exercise simply asked, "Is there anything in this text that spoke to your life, made you think differently

³² I also encouraged them to post to our blog board, though none did.

about yourself, made you question something, or helped you learn something about yourself?" Answering these questions produced a bridge from the material to their very personal experience.

Evaluating: The Past and the Future

My primary method of assessing this reading process was to ask the students two types of questions: those that would evoke the types of readings that I wanted them to get to (below) and direct and transparent questions about whether the process I described was working for them. An example of the latter occurred toward the end of the course, when I asked whether they thought they had changed as a result of any of what we did (see series of responses below). Whether (and how) we were able to achieve complex thinking and to grow to see the "Other" was reflected in the responses to these questions. After studying Yoma, one student spoke of how this reflective process opened his eyes to the complexity of the text and his own biases:

I think the one thing that might be a little different for me is just reading the text . . . it's hard not to read it with your own kind of presupposition of what you think the text is going to be saying about what is good and bad, as opposed to then pulling it apart in this way to see the twelve different permutations of what the father says and how that can really influence what the moral judgment is about what it is in the text.

The exercise in which we interpreted the father's exclamation about his murdered son, introduced into our discussion both the nuance and the uncertainty that reading the Talmud as summons demands. No longer could the student remain with his pre-judgments.

All of these methods—supplying more than one translation, complicating the reading using historical context, and rarely giving an unequivocal answer to a "factual question"—fostered a feeling that the totality of our "knowing" must be examined and re-examined. At the same time as students were accruing more "data" to stand on, they were feeling that accretion of information shifting uncertainly beneath their feet. This made it difficult to map their own assumptions and preconceptions onto the text, and opened

multitudes of possibilities. Paradoxically, these processes served to bring students closer to the text, as one aptly demonstrates:

I think that, like a lot of rabbinic texts, coming into it and looking at the social picture that it's painting . . . initially coming into the text, it looks very alien and kind of blocky (inaudible), and it's like a thing that was happening out there separate from me. And it's really hard to really understand what human stuff is going on underneath all the alien pageantry. But this conversation helped me really . . . If I'm going back and reading the story again, I'll be seeing the characters as much more human, acting in ways that I can intellectually understand where they are coming from and less as dolls strutting across the rabbinic puppet stage.

My journal entry from February 25th records a student's comment to me that was made outside of class:

G told me that he has never considered poetry in the context of Talmud before, and that the two exercises . . . were great for him . . . That they made him think more deeply about the complexity.

A third student said that it was the modeling I had done that helped him "to see . . . this as relevant and meaningful in our day-to-day lives. Things we can actually relate to."

It was your email that talked about your retreat and this conversation³³ that really helped me see the relevance of this text to modern life. And I'm still trying to figure it out. What I'm taking away is something along the lines of the theme we discussed in class, like don't be too righteous. But this specifically deals with institutions, and as L. was saying—understanding the individual and detaching yourself from institutional values—so, I'm playing with that. Seeing this as relevant and meaningful in our day-to-day lives. Things we can actually relate to as opposed to a guy stabbing another guy on the altar.

In each of these responses, one specific technique can be identified (the conversation, the exercises, or my personal post) as having served to trigger a

³³ Referring to my post that week. See pp. 194-195.

change in the student. For the first and third students, the utterly alien text is no longer “separate from” the student—it is “much more human” or “relevant and meaningful in our day-to-day lives.” In the second example, the student changed his way of reading the particular text so that his response was no longer as simple as it had seemed to him at first. In all of these writings, however, I believe that the change could not have taken place without all of those elements being present. I am still pondering how to ask *self-reflection questions* that are multi-dimensional and mirror the complexity of the text, as well as how to produce exercises that might evoke these types of changes. For example, the question, “How would you feel if you were in that position?” is not as compelling if the complexity of the position itself is not explored. I asked myself, “How do I begin to ask the kinds of questions that can change a person’s life?”

The students’ varied responses taught me that the work takes place differently for different people and that reading in this way may require many techniques simultaneously. Of course, this is the case with all reading but here that was heightened by the fact that the students were required to take the extra unfamiliar step of “reading as summons.”

Regarding the ability of students to be vulnerable and to self-reflect, while classes for the first two-thirds of the semester contained *moments* of self-reflection, they primarily consisted of more impersonal intellectual conversations about the text. It was quite a while into the semester before students showed vulnerability. Because of my own discomfort moving between the intellectual and the personal, I worked up to being quite transparent about the transition from examining the material’s content to reading the material as “meaning maker.” I told them directly that I was interested in their reflecting on their own culpability for transgressions they had related to in the text. I was moved when a student took on the challenge directly and began to tell a story about himself in relation to the text. That student opened up the space for others to talk about situations that they had been in where they themselves had made these types of choices.

A few examples of what students spoke about demonstrate the range of ways in which they related to the story in Yoma. One student spoke about a close relative dying just after she had converted and being haunted still by her choice to follow a halakhic opinion not to say kaddish over that non-Jewish relative—making a choice to adhere to the authority of the institutional and ritual

establishment, at the expense of her own intuition. Another spoke about a decision to follow the institutional rules and to fail a student for a late paper without querying the circumstances that had led to the delay. A third student spoke about watching to see if others performed all the motions during prayer correctly, sometimes to check himself against others and sometimes to check if they “knew what they were doing.” A fourth student spoke of being shamed precisely for an attempt to pray every word, when one time it had taken him longer to finish than the rest of the group. Overlaid onto these stories was a conversation about repentance and how we would counsel the transgressor (or ourselves) to repent. But what was more significant was the active interweaving into our personal stories of references back to the text itself. In one case, a new interpretation of the father’s response to his son’s death emerged from our reflections about ourselves in response to the text. In another, a student offered a suggestion for the type of *teshuvah* that the priests might take upon themselves.

If a part of my goal was to effect a change in their view of the text, the students’ comments above reflect that objective was met. Did the text effect a transition of the heart? I do not know. At the same time, I think back on times in my life when an event, a statement, or something I learned has profoundly changed me. Did I realize it then or later? Did I claim it or merely ponder it internally?

There are some lessons that I have learned during this first attempt, this experiment of teaching “Talmud to work the heart,” and I consider them here briefly. I believe these lessons will significantly improve my methods and approach for the next time I teach this course.

Methods of Evaluation. We did discuss the initial comprehension of texts in class, but it would have been useful to have taken the time to really register initial *reactions* and to *write them down*, in order to have better noticed our own transitions. At the time, I believed this was a poor use of precious time, but it would have allowed us to compare these responses to post-discussion responses. I realized this late in the course, and so, although we sometimes asked these questions informally, I regret not having been more methodical. This would have allowed the class to have a shared sense of whether the process itself was merely adjusting our intellectual readings of the text, or it was also changing our emotional reactions at the beginning of the process, cultivating empathy with positions we had not originally held.

Time. It is difficult to tell why it was not until more than halfway through the semester when I felt we had succeeded in “reading the text as summons.” Do I need to explain more clearly? Was it my discomfort with the possible hubris of the project or with the vulnerability it required?³⁴ Or is it realistically a matter of “personal growth takes time?”

What is certain is that the amount of time allotted to the course was insufficient for the task. My teaching journal reads, “I wish I had more time with them. If I had this to do again, I would insist on more time in the week.”³⁵ I believe that thoroughly familiarizing the students with the material, allowing for a complex reading, and reading the text as summons is a weighty task for a single semester if one wishes to engage with more than one or two texts.

Familiarizing the Strange.³⁶ In these texts, the rabbis, the father, the murderer, Rabbi Tzadok, the priests, the community, and the *Talmud text itself*—all of these—are our “Other.” I know in the next round of this “adventure of the heart,” I would spend more time on the redactional layer. After analyzing the story of Yoma, I asked the students, “Do you feel like [the text] is trying to grapple with the question of how this [incident] could have happened?” One student answered with a strong critique of the text:

This is, for me at least, the thing that makes it difficult to read the Talmud, more than any other aspect of the Talmud. I think it's pretty clear that the rabbis have a lot emotionally invested in what they are doing. But the method by which they go about discussing it seems to be calculated to hide all of those emotional, personal, moral issues behind this sort of façade of technicality. This sort of polite fiction of what we're actually engaged in is a technical discussion, and we are kind of magisterially viewing this system and making sure that we've got all the details right. There's very rarely points in the Talmud where the rabbis really seem to be like . . . where you can really detect their jaws dropping open and them saying “something really significant just happened here—we need to do

³⁴ See also pp. 194–195.

³⁵ Teaching Journal, Jan. 21, 2014.

³⁶ Jonathan Z. Smith, introduction to *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xiii; Jonathan Z. Smith, “God Save This Honourable Court: Religion and Civic Discourse,” *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 383, 389.

something about it.” Which I think for me at least is the most morally problematic part of the Talmud, because the rabbis seem to be constantly denying their own personal, emotional involvement in what they're talking about, even though it's constantly breaking through.

This student expresses difficulty with the Talmud's cold, technical reasoning in the face of the tragic or appalling. In this class, we did not enter into the realm of the calculated reasoning (which does follow the story). I feel it would have been beneficial to interrogate this phenomenon as “summons” as well. What does it mean to ignore or miss the importance of the “burning issue” (whatever it is in that particular text) in favor of those technical conversations? Without allowing the *text itself* (rather than just the *characters* in the text) to have a place as “Other,” the process of familiarizing the strange cannot be entirely successful. If one successfully reads Talmud as summons, the way the redactors of the text respond to issues should also call to us to become our better selves.

Framing. The type of personal self-reflection that I am looking for requires getting used to and is not taught by the Talmud itself. For this reason, I brought in poems and a story at the beginning of the course in order to frame the process. While these were an asset, reading the poems without discussing them was a mistake. Traditionally, reading Talmud is a process that calls intensely on logic—and rarely on emotion. As I was teaching using the poem texts, I slipped back into “reading” in all of the ways I had previously taught reading.³⁷ There was so little time to spend on the texts that I did not want to divert our attention to the poems. Reading Talmud as summons, however, *demand*s of us to draw upon reading skills and materials from other disciplines and to develop those particular skills in addition to the traditional skills specific to the field of rabbinics. Just as “reading Talmud to work the heart” is not intuitive, neither are the messages of these poems. We can read the poems and even agree with them, but that is different from internalizing them. This was a process that needed to be taught as well. In addition, what I lost by choosing not to discuss the poems was the ability to then connect the content of the poems back to our process of reading of the Talmud texts. The question, “Why do you think I brought in these two poems?” would have been helpful, both to a conversation about the goals of reading and

³⁷ See my introductory remarks.

to the actual analysis. I could have then used that discussion throughout the semester to think about how these poems might inform our readings of the texts.

In addition, the mechanism I used to find and ask relevant questions was based largely on the story that I had told them of the Mirtler Rebbe. Because I felt that his interior journey was an excellent example of self-reflection, I used the terms of that story to ask them about the talmudic texts, using concepts such as “the transgressions that you find in the text” and “the *teshuvah* that you would advise.” At the time that I was teaching the course, I was not yet using the terms “summons” or “awakening” to describe the reading process. I think the framing for the next time I teach this course will include less discussion on a model of transgression (theirs and mine) and more on a model of using the text as a summons to become our best selves.

Assumptions. Along with interrogating the *students’* assumptions, I learned a good deal about *my own* assumptions. Dori Levine, a long-time educator and teacher trainer (and also, my mother) taught me that one responsibility of a good educator is to anticipate. In this class, I failed to anticipate that the differences in values would appear not only between the students and the text, but between my students and *me*, or between one group of students and another. At times, I had to think on my feet, having expected an entirely different response to the text. This reminded me that a critical reading of the text requires me to do a critical reading of *all* possible responses and not only those I expect will be the popular response.

My journal entry after the first class read, “How do we ask questions that will ensure passion and insight?” Ensuring passion and insight requires us to leave open the possibility that there is “something even better” ahead, and to strive for that something in all that we learn. It is when we read Talmud not as legal discourse, as history, or as a source of decisive resolutions, but as summons to self-reflect that we have the potential for a holy process of growth—for that “something better” that we seek. To recast Ruth Behar, with whom I opened my paper—Talmud that doesn’t break your heart just isn’t worth doing any more. *Through* its problematic, complex, and sometimes painful content, the Talmud can break our hearts. It is *precisely this* that holds the potential to open to us the door of self-reflection. What remains is to invite one another to go through that door.

What We Have Learned about Learning to Read Talmud

Jon A. Levisohn

What does it mean to “learn to read”? Typically, we think about learning to read simple texts in one’s native language at an early age, in those societies & cultures that support universal literacy across all of their social classes. “Learn to read Talmud” is more than a special case of this general phenomenon; it an enterprise that is dramatically different in significant ways. Even for native Hebrew speakers, the language of the Talmud is—or more precisely, languages are—foreign. The syntax is challenging, the issues somewhat obscure, the logic often torturous. In the general case of “learning to read,” typically happens for most people (although of course not all) in literature studies with gentle interventions by parents and educators. In the specific case of learning to read Talmud, it happens only through the most strenuous effort.

To be sure, there are still many people who learn to read Talmud at an early age. It would be fascinating to examine that process. How does it happen? What challenges do those children face? What are they actually doing and at what point? But the studies in this book focus on a different demographic, the “emerging adult” (or sometimes slightly older student). How does that population learn to read Talmud in colleges and seminaries? Some of the students whom we meet in these chapters have had significant experience with Talmud, such as Berkowitz’s students at Barnard and Tuck students at Mechon Hadar. Some have had less extensive experience, such as Kanarek’s students at Hebrew College, Milgram’s and Lehman’s students at Jewish Theological Seminary and Lev’s students at the Conservative Yeshiva. Others have had little or no experience, such as Gardner’s students at the University of British Columbia and Alexander’s students at the University of Virginia. All however are engaged in the process of “learning to read

A MENU OF ORIENTATIONS TO THE TEACHING OF RABBINIC LITERATURE

Jon A. Levisohn¹

ABSTRACT

*Barry Holtz, in his *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and Practice* (2005), following the work of Pamela Grossman, developed what he called a “map” of orientations for the teaching of Bible. These orientations are not pedagogic methods or techniques; rather, they represent significantly different understandings of what the teaching and learning of the subject are all about. This paper builds on Holtz’ work in two ways. First, it develops the concept of a teaching orientations and offers some critical clarifications (and argues, as well, that the metaphor of a “menu” is more appropriate than the metaphor of a “map”). And second, it proposes and describes a menu of ten orientations to the teaching of rabbinic literature, as it occurs in schools, camps, synagogues, universities and yeshivot.*

A. INTRODUCTION

We use the language of “subjects” in education all the time. We talk about the subject of history, or Tanakh, or mathematics, or English literature. In universities and colleges, we talk about “disciplines” rather than “subjects,” but we mostly mean the same thing. We have departments of History, composed of people who call themselves historians, who practice something that we call the discipline of history. But what do we mean when we talk about a subject or a discipline? What holds a discipline together? What makes a subject a subject? This paper will focus on the specific subject or discipline of rabbinic literature: what is this subject about?

We might be tempted to say that an academic discipline shares a particular methodology. After all, the etymological sense of the term “discipline” suggests that participants in an academic discipline are involved in a common project under shared rules that govern the conduct of their inquiry. But our initial confidence in that formulation evaporates as we get closer to any particular discipline — chemistry or sociology or philosophy — and notice the multiple methodologies in use. In fact, it is quite difficult to achieve conceptual clarity and precision about what constitutes a subject or a discipline. In a recent conversation, philosopher of education Israel Scheffler opined, perhaps in a

Jon A. Levisohn is assistant professor of Jewish education at Brandeis University, where he is also assistant academic director of the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education and directs the Initiative on Bridging Pedagogy and Scholarship in Jewish Education.

¹Ari Ackerman, Wendy Amsellem, Yehuda Ben-Dor, Rahel Berkovits, Susan P. Fendrick, Beverly Gribetz, Barry Holtz, Meesh Hammer-Kossoy, Nati Helfgot, Ido Hevroni, Ben Jacobs, Jane Kanarek, Yehuda Kurtzer, David Schnall, Jon Spira-Savett, Jeff Spitzer, Devora Steinmetz, and Barry Wimpfheimer all contributed to my thinking about orientations, along with many other anonymous instructors of rabbinic literature in various settings. Support for this project was provided by the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University. The errors and omissions are, of course, mine.

moment of levity, that the whole idea of a subject is “goofy.” Scheffler was not denying that we use the idea of a subject and that we ought to continue to use it. Rather he was cautioning us not to assume that the various subjects represent anything more than historically contingent amalgamations of sub-fields, loosely linked by common topics or themes or questions or theories or modes of inquiry or conceptual frameworks. Or as he put it many years ago: “subjects should be taken to represent, not hard bounds of necessity... but centers of intellectual capacity and interest radiating outward without assignable limit.” (Scheffler 1968/1973, p. 89).

Subjects and disciplines, of course, are also fields of *teaching*, not just fields of inquiry. And when we turn to the teaching of a subject, we likewise find deep internal diversity. The teaching of history, for example, is carried out very differently in different places and different contexts. A well-known paper by Sam Wineburg and Suzanne Wilson, “Models of Wisdom in the Teaching of History” (Wineburg & Wilson, 1988/2001), documents this point in a simple and elegant way: it shows the reader not one but two teachers of history, both skilled, both knowledgeable, both excellent. But the two teachers teach their subject in very different ways, in ways that seem not just stylistically different but fundamentally different. Where one teacher is active, the other is apparently passive; where one is vocal and dynamic, the other seems to fade into the background; where the work of one is visible, asking questions, conducting discussions, conforming to many of our cultural assumptions of what teaching is all about, the work of the other is hidden, buried in the extensive preparation and stage-setting and the creation of an intellectual space for the students to do their work. Both, however, generate intense engagement in the subject, among their students. And based on the observation of the researchers, both contribute to the learning of the subject in deep and meaningful ways. The contrast dramatically illustrates the idea that, just as the study or research of history is not one thing, so too the teaching of history is not one thing.

At about the same time as Wineburg and Wilson were carrying out their research, their colleague Pam Grossman sought to articulate the diversity that she found in her study of teachers of English (see, for example, Grossman 1991).² She realized that novice teachers approached the teaching of English literature in ways that seemed to reflect fundamentally diverse understandings of what the subject is all about. These teachers have different purposes, they have different beliefs about their subject, and in part as a result, they do different things in the classroom. And Grossman found that she could make sense of that diversity by superimposing a taxonomy of three fundamentally different approaches to the enterprise of literary interpretation—a taxonomy, that is, borrowed from literary theory. In her article, she calls these three approaches a “text orientation,” a “reader orientation,” and a “context orientation.” “More than a casual attitude towards the subject matter,” she claims, “an orientation towards literature represents a basic organizing framework for knowledge about literature” (Grossman, 1991, p. 248).

² Wineburg, Wilson, and Grossman all carried out this research while doctoral students at Stanford University School of Education, working on projects under the directorship of Lee Shulman and heavily influenced by his call for a new paradigm of teacher research, research on subject-specific pedagogy (Shulman 1986 and 1987). Thus, in an echo of Shulman’s manifesto, Grossman writes towards the end of her article as follows: “These orientations become visible in classrooms, however, only by paying close attention to the content of classroom instruction, by looking not only at the number of questions asked, but at the literary implications of those questions, by looking not only at the number of papers assigned, but at the topics of those papers” (Grossman 1991, p. 260).

In the text orientation, the teacher believes that “the reader looks within the text, at literary devices, at the use of language and structure, for clues to its meaning” (p. 248). In the reader orientation, the teacher believes that “reading a text involves an interaction between the reader and the text, as readers connect the text to their own experience and personalize it” (p. 248). And in the context orientation, the teacher believes that “the reader’s interpretation of a literary work is mediated by theoretical frameworks and analytical tools from another discipline, such as psychology or history... The meaning of a text becomes psychological or political, rather than purely literary as in the text-orientation, or personal, as in the reader-orientation” (p. 248). These three fundamentally different conceptions contribute to different pedagogic practices. And so the concept of a teaching orientation was born.⁵

Grossman does not claim that her three orientations are comprehensive or cover the full range of possibilities. Nor does she claim that every teacher can be located within one orientation. “A specific orientation may predominate,” she writes, “but it is rarely exclusive” (p. 248). What really concerns her, in her work in the late 1980s and early 1990s, is the way that different experiences — experiences studying a subject in college, for example, or taking methods courses in a teacher education program — contribute in different ways to the teaching practices of the novices in her study, and to the differences among those teaching practices. She identifies these examples of three basic orientations to the teaching of English literature to serve this purpose.

However, about ten years later, Barry Holtz (2003) saw the potential significance of the idea of orientations for the teaching of Tanakh. Holtz freely acknowledges his intellectual debt to Grossman, but it is worth noting that he does not merely import this wisdom from general education into Jewish education. This is so, first, because Holtz builds upon and expands on Grossman’s three orientations, through an organic discussion of the possibilities in the field, or fields — that is, both the field of biblical scholarship as well as the field of curriculum and instruction in Bible. Her three orientations become his nine (see the chart).

<i>Pam Grossman: Orientations to the Teaching of English</i>	<i>Barry Holtz: Orientations to the Teaching of Bible</i>
Reader Orientation	1. Contextual Orientation
Text Orientation	2. Literary Criticism Orientation
Context Orientation	3. Reader-Response Orientation
	4. <i>Parshanut</i> , the Jewish Interpretive Orientation
	5. Moralistic-Didactic Orientation
	6. Personalization Orientation
	7. Ideational Orientation
	8. Bible Leads to Action Orientation
	9. Decoding, Translating, and Comprehension Orientation

⁵ I do not mean to suggest that the idea of orientations sprang forth fully formed in 1991. In “Teachers of Substance” (Grossman et al., 1989), Grossman and her co-authors Wilson and Shulman employ the idea of orientations—which they explain as “[teachers’] conceptions of what is important to know [about a particular subject] and how one knows” (p. 31) —and refer to earlier articles emerging from the Knowledge Growth in a Profession Project at Stanford, authored or co-authored by Grossman, dating back to 1985 (for example, Grossman et al., 1985).

The expansion of the number of orientations should not be misinterpreted as a claim that the teaching of Bible is somehow more complicated than English literature. Instead—and this is the second way in which Holtz develops Grossman’s insight, rather than merely copying it—Holtz’s conception of orientations is more attuned to the varieties of practice than Grossman’s conception is.

Consider, for example, Holtz’s “Ideational Orientation,” an orientation that focuses on reading biblical texts in order to discern (or construct) the big ideas that the text is about. The orientation makes sense in a context – the study of Bible in certain Jewish educational settings—where the text may be presumed to have such a big idea (or more than one). But more significantly, it makes sense because Holtz had in front of him examples of Bible curricula that made the study of the big ideas behind the biblical text their focus, and examples of teachers who taught towards those big ideas. He knew what such teaching looked like, the way in which a prior commitment to pursue the big ideas shapes one’s pedagogy. So the Ideational Orientation finds its place on the list not through the imposition of a logical taxonomy but rather by attending to the field of practice.

Even more importantly, Grossman is focused on understanding the small group of teachers in her sample, in thinking about the ways that their educational experiences influenced their approaches to teaching the subject matter, and in helping them become more conscious of their implicit conceptions of the subject matter. She wants to make the point, to the teacher education community, that teachers’ pedagogical choices are influenced not just by their knowledge, but by their *beliefs*—and not just by their beliefs about teaching but by their beliefs about teaching this particular subject.⁴ This is why the taxonomy itself is not centrally important for Grossman. In fact, in Grossman’s book published at around the same time, *The Making of a Teacher* (1990), the idea of orientations does not appear. Instead, she discusses teachers’ “conceptions of their subject” without the typology of her orientations and without the linkage between conceptions and characteristic pedagogical practices that are associated with those conceptions. Holtz, on the other hand, develops his map of orientations with an eye towards its use in the professional development of teachers of the subject. In other words, for Holtz, the map of orientations itself becomes a tool—a conceptual tool to help teachers think about the work that they do, the choices that they make, the alternatives that they might not have considered. The conclusion of this paper will return to this point, in the context of discussing the “so what” question about orientations. Before proceeding any further, however, the concept of an orientation needs closer attention.

B. WHAT IS AN ORIENTATION?

Grossman writes that an orientation is “more than a casual attitude towards the subject matter” (Grossman 1991, p. 248). Holtz, for his part, defines an orientation as

a description not of a teacher’s “method” in some technical meaning of the word, but in a deeper sense, of a teacher’s most powerful conceptions and beliefs about the field he or she

⁴ “What emerges from our work,” Grossman and her colleagues argue, “is the notion that prospective teachers’ beliefs about subject matter are as powerful and influential as their beliefs about teaching and learning. Teacher educators must, therefore, provide opportunities for prospective teachers to identify and examine the beliefs that they have about the content they teach” (Grossman et al., 1989, p. 32).

is teaching. It is the living expression of the philosophical questions... What is my view of the aims of education [in this subject], and how as a teacher do I attain those aims? (Holtz 2003, pp. 48-49)

First, then, a negative definition: an orientation is not a casual attitude, and it is not a pedagogic method or a technique. For example, “studying a tractate sequentially” is a technique, not an orientation; while the question of whether to study a *masekhet* sequentially or whether to select topics is certainly an important pedagogic choice, and one moreover which can be informed by the teacher’s conception of the subject, that choice itself is not comprehensive enough to be an orientation. Other techniques, such as using graphic organizers to display the logic of a *sugya*, are also not orientations. Instead, an orientation is broader and deeper than the techniques a teacher happens to employ. Even *hevruta*, paired study, which can be understood as a practice (Kent 2006 and Holzer 2006) rather than merely a technique, is not an orientation, because it can be associated with a range of conceptions of the purposes of studying rabbinic literature – and in fact, can be pursued outside of rabbinic literature as well.

The teachers’ conceptions are conceptions about what any particular subject is all about, its contours, its central issues and challenges, and its purposes – why it is worth teaching and learning. However, it is also important to note that an orientation is not merely a conception of ultimate purposes. In the study of classical Jewish texts, such an abstract conception may be theologically meaningful but pedagogically inert. The idea that one is encountering (in some sense) the word of God, for example, provides very little pedagogic guidance, and is consonant with a very wide range of pedagogic practice. Something similar is the case in the study of other subjects, as well. A particularly passionate and articulate instructor of mathematics might wax poetic about the beauty of mathematics or its role as a fundamental language of the universe or the centrality of a sophisticated relationship to number systems to a conception of the educated human being. But this will not help us understand how such a teacher teaches, what she emphasizes, what mathematical capacities she tries to nurture in students and how she tries to do so. I do not mean to denigrate the pursuit of abstract conceptions of the disciplines. But it is inevitable that the more abstract, the loftier, the more ultimate one’s conception, the less informed by and engaged with pedagogy it will be.

Thus, orientations combine a set of teachers’ conceptions and characteristic practices that hang together in a coherent way. The former is important, because an orientation is not merely technique. The latter is important, because an orientation is not a theory of the subject but a *theory of practice*. (I will return to this point in the conclusion of the paper.) Moreover, while some orientations are associated with certain pedagogic practices, they are not reducible to those practices. Orientations are also subject-specific in a way that method or technique, which can be employed in multiple subjects, is not.

Second, an orientation is also not the same as a research methodology, which is usually construed more narrowly. This is an important point to emphasize, because of an inclination to proliferate finer and finer grained orientations. To defend the point, consider the following thought experiment. Imagine an academic methodological firebrand, one of those professors of Bible who likes nothing

more than a knock-down, drag-out battle over the fine points of, say, source critical methodology. “When you make that argument,” we can imagine her saying to a colleague following a paper at a conference, “you are no longer pursuing source criticism.” Even that kind of academic, however, becomes more flexible and eclectic in her teaching, because no one believes that her own research is the sum total of what there is to be learned about a particular field. So, “source criticism” is a mode of academic research, but it does not seem right to label “source criticism” as a teaching orientation; not every distinction between research methodologies translates to a distinction between orientations.

The same point can be made by looking at a specific orientation, and noticing the way that it encompasses subtly distinct methodological approaches within one orientational roof. Consider the orientation to the teaching of Bible that Holtz labels the “Contextual Orientation.”⁵ In this approach, the teacher strives to present the texts of the Bible in their original context, and to promote the students’ understanding of their original meaning. As Holtz writes, “It views the Bible as a record of an ancient civilization, and it hopes to make that world intelligible to students of today” (Holtz, 2003, p. 92). But the idea of “context” is actually ambiguous. Does it refer to the original meaning of the original author(s) of the text? Or the meaning as understood by the original audience(s)? Or the meaning as understood by the redactor, or the audience at the time of redaction? These are obviously significant questions that go to the heart of what it means to interpret biblical texts. So one might be tempted to proliferate orientations, proposing Contextual₁, Contextual₂, and so on. We ought to resist that temptation, however. As important as it is to pursue the question of what we mean by “context,” the impact on our pedagogical practice is slight, and any differences pale in comparison to what all the versions of the Contextual Orientation have in common.

A third definitional point about orientations is that there is no absolute hierarchy of orientations, and as Grossman notes about her orientations to literature, “one could find examples of both excellent and mediocre teaching within each” (Grossman 1991, p. 263). This is an important point to make, because some instructors, when they first encounter a range of orientations, immediately approve of some and disapprove of others. In the case of Bible, for example, some find the Contextual Orientation to be hopelessly antiquarian while others dismiss the Personalization Orientation as impossibly naïve. But the theory of orientations emerges from the conviction that there are, in the world, a variety of responsible ways of thinking about teaching this particular subject – not good ways and bad ways, not educative ways and miseducative ways, but a genuine diversity of purposes.

This does not mean, of course, that we cannot debate those purposes. We certainly can do so, and ought to do so. (Indeed, one benefit of articulating orientations is precisely to focus on the range of possible purposes, and thus, to provide nuanced and responsible language for that debate!) But we ought to debate them in terms of particular settings and particular sets of students. And when we do so, we ought to think carefully about whether we are imagining the best possible version of the orientation. Each orientation can be pursued blindly or stupidly or with little regard for student learning. Each orientation may have its own characteristic pathology (and as we proceed, we will try to imagine how those pathologies present themselves). But poor pedagogy should not be taken

⁵ I discuss the Contextual Orientation in greater detail in Levisohn (2008), from which this paragraph is adapted.

as an indictment of the orientation. If the orientation is conceptually coherent, then there must also be a way that it can be pursued thoughtfully, constructively, and with attention to whether and what the students are learning. Thus, if we do find ourselves imagining particular kinds of teaching of our subject that we think are inappropriate, we should pause to consider whether the orientation as a whole is inappropriate (and if so, why) or whether perhaps the thing to which we are reacting is just a particular pedagogic pathology that happens to occur within that orientation.

Fourth, and most fundamentally, there is a basic conceptual question about whether orientations to the teaching of a particular subject are essentially distinct, mutually-exclusive and immutable categories (let us call this the “strong” view of orientations) or whether orientations are a rough approximation of a collection of ideas about the purposes and practices of teaching Bible that typically and contingently, but not necessarily, hang together (the “weak” view). According to the strong view, each orientation should have some essential quality that is conceptually distinct from every other; each orientation offers significantly different answers to certain basic questions of methodology and purpose. The rhetoric of a “map” of orientations (Holtz, 2003, pp. 61 ff.) implicitly endorses the strong view, by suggesting that the territory of Bible teaching may be divided up into regions or districts. On a map, after all, each country or county is divided from each other by a *border*, a boundary that separates one from the other. According to the weak view, on the other hand, orientations are historically contingent rather than fixed and eternal,⁶ and the relationship between orientations need not be one of mutual exclusivity.⁷

The weak view is more compelling. Despite his use of the metaphor of a map, Holtz himself (in personal communication) has inclined towards the weak view. And elsewhere, he has written in a similar vein: “the concept of orientation is in essence a heuristic device, not a definitional surety” (2008, p. 233). Thus Holtz’ work on orientations is not the discovery of natural kinds or of some deep structure of the discipline.⁸ Instead, when we think about identifying orientations, we ought to think about identifying sets of cultural practices, along with the knowledge and beliefs that support those practices. Orientations, in this sense, are simply observations about the variety of ways that we tend to teach and learn this subject, here and now. And thus, it is not at all problematic to encounter overlap and inter-relationship – not just eclecticism in actual teaching practice (although that is common too, a point to which we will return) but fuzziness in distinguishing between different orientations.

⁶I do not mean to suggest that every era has its own orientation (which might imply that our goal is to figure out the appropriate one for our era). Rather, the point here is that orientations are products of a particular time and place, as much as they are natural products of the material itself, and there is no reason to think that the set of orientations that we discover in our own time and place is necessarily the set that we might find in another time and place.

⁷The issue here is *conceptual* mutual exclusivity, not practical. After all, even on the strong view, particular teachers might combine orientations in their practice (although we might then worry about coherence or contradiction among purposes).

⁸Any discussion of a “structure of a discipline” must acknowledge Joseph Schwab (1961/1978), who introduced the idea that disciplines have both a syntactic and a substantive structure. The work on orientations undermines the idea that a discipline or subject has one, unified syntactic and substantive structure – an assertion which, to be fair, Schwab himself was careful to avoid (“few, if any, disciplines have a single structure,” p. 239). Moreover, as Holtz notes (2003, p. 46), work on orientations is much more concerned with the teachers’ own constructed understanding of the subject than with structure of the discipline in itself (as it were).

To take an example from Bible, consider the Ideational Orientation. The Ideational Orientation functions more as a criterion of selection *among* meanings rather than an answer to the question of how meaning is determined; it proposes, for the teacher who endorses it, that the teaching of the biblical text ought to seek out and focus on “big ideas.” Subtle grammatical distinctions are less important, for example, than major themes and messages. But how should we discover those big ideas? One teacher might seek to find them by asking about the original context of the biblical text – and thus find herself working, at the same time, within the Contextual Orientation. Another teacher might seek to find them by asking about the reception of the text in the Jewish interpretive tradition – and find herself integrating the Parshanut Orientation. The Ideational Orientation is conceptually distinct from either of these, to be sure, but not in a mutually exclusive way. And thus the orientations can be integrated in practice, not just in an eclectic style of teaching but actually in non-contradictory combination. Because of this example, and others, the strong view seems untenable. (One might wonder why, if two orientations seem to happily co-exist, they ought to be conceptually distinguished from each other. I will have more to say on this issue below.)

Instead of the metaphor of a map, my colleague Susan P. Fendrick has suggested (in personal conversation) that orientations operate like cuisines: each cuisine uses a set of common ingredients, culinary techniques, and tastes, but none of these is necessarily exclusive to that cuisine. Orientations, too, can overlap in the teacher’s beliefs about the purpose of the subject, about the kinds of questions it is worth asking about the subject, and about what constitutes a compelling answer, as well as in terms of pedagogic and interpretive practices; none of these is necessarily exclusive to a particular orientation. Nevertheless, we still know what we mean when we talk about Chinese cuisine or Mexican cuisine. So, too, we know what we mean, roughly, when we talk about teaching orientations. Instead of a “map” of orientations, then, let us instead talk about a “menu.”

C. CONSTRUCTING THE MENU

The previous paragraphs pursued the point that orientations are collections of purposes and practices that happen to hang together, and that identifying these orientations – which is the purpose of this paper, i.e., the identification of orientations to the teaching of rabbinic literature – should be subject to a heuristic or pragmatic criterion. We might think of this as “constructing the menu” rather than discovering the deep structure of some discipline (especially when the “discipline” in question, as in the case of rabbinic literature, is a set of books). But, turning from the review of the work of Grossman and Holtz in their fields to the intentional construction of a menu of orientations to the teaching of rabbinic literature, how can we pursue this work in a responsible way? And how would we know if we’ve got the menu right?

Unlike Grossman’s work, the proposal for a menu of orientations presented here does not emerge from the scholarship in the field – or at least, it does not emerge from the field quite so straightforwardly. And unlike Holtz’s orientations, this menu was not built up organically from a perusal of the fields of biblical scholarship and the teaching of Bible. Instead, it was generated from a set of focus groups in June 2006, in which a diverse set of sophisticated instructors of rabbinic literature, in different settings, were asked to generate different approaches. How is rabbinic literature taught, where, and why? What are the diverse approaches? The initial menu emerged from the analysis of

that data and was then shared, over the next two years, with a broad range of other teachers – critiqued, defended, and supplemented in a process of continual refinement.

This process does *not* guarantee the empirical validity of the menu of orientations to teaching rabbinic literature, at least not in any formal sense. Then again, it is not clear what it would mean to formally validate the menu, especially given the acknowledged reality that most and perhaps almost all instructors employ multiple orientations in their teaching. So while it is important to the idea of orientations that they incorporate a cluster of beliefs and characteristic practices that appear in the world, no one should imagine that we can walk into any setting and immediately know which orientation the particular teacher is using or subscribing to. After all, we have already noted that many orientations can be happily combined, and in fact Holtz suggests that it is the mark of a good teacher to be able to do so.⁹

What, then, underwrites the menu of orientations? What might give us confidence that we've got them right? One part of the answer to that question is genealogical: we may have confidence in the menu of orientations – confidence that they are more or less representative of the range of teaching practices out in the world – because of how they were generated, drawing on the input of a large number of instructors who were sought out for the diversity of their ideological locations, their institutional affiliations, and their teaching commitments.¹⁰ The process of patient exploration and consultation should bolster our confidence in the menu of orientations.

But a second part of the answer to the question is pragmatic. Are they useful? Do they illuminate the practice of pedagogy in this field in a helpful way? Do instructors of rabbinic literature see the conceptual framework provided by the menu as helpful or insightful about their own purposes and practices? This may seem a bit less than sufficiently rigorous. But there's no truth of the matter that will tell us whether one orientation is really two, or whether two are really one. If practitioners were to say, "Well, I always do both a and b, and in fact, it's hard for me to see any real strong demarcation between the two, and it doesn't really help me to think about them as separate," that is precisely the kind of empirical evidence to which we ought to attend. Likewise, if practitioners were to say, "The kind of teaching that I do doesn't really match up with any of these orientations, and I'm wondering whether you need to come up with a new one," that too is the kind of disconfirmation to which we ought to attend and which must in some way be acknowledged.¹¹ And if, on the other hand, practitioners say, "While I would not necessarily want to restrict myself to any one of these

⁹ See Holtz (2003), p. 52 ff., where he also cites Gail Dorph's (1993) argument in favor of this claim as well. Wineburg and Wilson say the same thing, interestingly enough, at the end of "Models of Wisdom" (1988/2001). But while the idea of teachers holding deep and flexible subject matter knowledge is compelling – and in particular, there is something intuitively correct about flexibility as an important pedagogic quality, as argued by McDiarmid et al. (1989) – it is not clear to me that the instructor who employs multiple orientations is a better teacher than the one who employs a single orientation well. In other words, the concept of pedagogic flexibility requires some clarification; I do not believe that it should be considered synonymous with "capacity to employ multiple orientations."

¹⁰ The total number of teachers of rabbinic literature with whom I have shared the menu of orientations, in some form, and from whom I have sought feedback approaches 300. Naturally, however, only a fraction of these have actually provided input – I will occasionally introduce that input into my discussions of individual orientations, below – and I cannot conclude that most would endorse the menu as it stands. But see footnote 16 for a more optimistic perspective.

¹¹ Of course, how to acknowledge that response is always a matter of interpretive judgment. Perhaps a practitioner has

orientations, I do recognize my practice in (one or more of) these descriptions, and moreover the menu helps me think about what I do, and why I do it, and what the options are for doing it differently,” that is the kind of empirical validation that matters.¹²

D. THE ORIENTATIONS TO TEACHING RABBINIC LITERATURE

Having discussed the idea of a teaching orientation and the methodology for generating a responsible set, let us turn at long last to the menu of orientations to the teaching of rabbinic literature, of which there are ten.

1. *Torah/Instruction Orientation*

Rabbinic literature is the record of the cultural production of a set of people who generated the forms of Judaism as we know them today. In this sense, rabbinic literature is prescriptive of behavior and sometimes belief too—or at least, it tries to be. But more generally, rabbinic literature is also a kind of sacred literature, that is, it has been treated as sacred (in one or another sense of the word “sacred”) by Jews, for centuries, and is so treated by many Jews still. It is Torah, not only in the sense of being an “oral Torah” that, in the traditional conception, accompanies the written Torah, but in the more specific, etymological sense of being a source of teaching.¹³ Thus, the encounter with this sacred literature has the potential, for some people, to be illuminating, or inspirational, or instructive.

Instruction, in the sense in which it is being used here, is not the same as direct prescription of behavior. Some rabbinic texts, of course, do prescribe behavior: they dictate when to say the Shema or how tall to build a sukkah. (And of course, rabbinic texts function as a source of halakha more generally, which will figure prominently in a different orientation.) But much of rabbinic literature is not prescriptive in this way. Nevertheless, it can function as a source for, or a location of, inspiration or instruction. Passages from the Talmud or sometimes midrash are taught because the instructor believes that, under the right conditions, a patient encounter with this material can promote increased awareness of truths about the world and human nature, leading to inspiration or guidance or enlightenment.¹⁴

identified a genuine lacuna in the menu of orientations. Alternatively, perhaps her own pedagogy is idiosyncratic and non-representative of a larger cultural practice; or perhaps she misunderstands her own practice; or perhaps her observation points to a way in which we need to expand our conception of one of the orientations already on the menu rather than constructing an entirely new one. As in any inquiry, the discovery of contradictory data does not, by itself, tell us how to adjust our theory to accommodate the data, only that we must in some way do so.

¹² These orientations were introduced at the Conference on Teaching Rabbinic Literature at Brandeis University in January 2008, in front of over 200 people – day school teachers, rabbis, university instructors, and others. When the conference evaluation data were analyzed, it was notable how frequently the idea of orientations came up among the highlights. Subsequently, a number of schools have reported using the menu of orientations for professional development purposes among their faculty. This suggests that, whether or not all the details are correct, the menu of orientations is a helpful conceptual tool.

¹³ See the discussion of this point, made by “Moshe,” in Levisohn (2008).

¹⁴ There is a connection, here, to Holtz’s (2003) Personalization Orientation, which is characterized by an effort to establish personal connection to the biblical text – because there is a parallel emphasis on what the text has to say to the student, wherever she or he presently is. But the Torah Orientation need not only focus on personal meaning.

An instructor working within this orientation will typically select texts—often rabbinic stories, *aggadot*, but sometimes halakhic material as well—that have the potential to illuminate, to inspire, to guide, often in indirect ways that emerge only through a patient encounter under the right conditions. The instructor thus assumes responsibility for creating those conditions. Sometimes this means a certain kind of preliminary discussion, prior to encountering the text. Sometimes it means employing a text as a trigger, a means to the end of discussing an emotionally or ideologically weighty topic. Sometimes it means creating the conditions for students neither to accept a particular rabbinic text nor to reject it, but to engage it in some kind of meaningful and generative *dialogue*. Teaching within this orientation aims to help Jews to understand, or at least slow down enough to explore, the potential significance of rabbinic literature in their lives.

Teachers may wish to inspire a greater commitment to certain ideals, such as the ideals of service, of justice, or of compassion. Alternatively, teachers may wish to inspire a greater commitment to Judaism in general. The Torah Orientation can be a prominent mode of adult education classes, especially in one-off sessions that do not aspire to develop textual-analytic abilities among the students but do hope to create moments of meaningful engagement. It may also be used with younger students particularly in informal settings.¹⁵ Teaching that focuses on the purported philosophical ideas behind the rabbinic text, in a way that is often associated with the activities of the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, or in the approach to Talmudic interpretation offered by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, may be considered to be part of this orientation, since the purpose of developing those big ideas is to propose them as powerful guides for the lives and moral choices of the students.¹⁶ Often, teaching within this orientation will focus on one particular text or a small number of texts, although topically- or thematically-organized courses can also fit this orientation (for example, a course that focuses on rabbinic texts on relationships).

Here it must be admitted that the teaching of a particular rabbinic text in a one-off adult education session lies at the margins of the subject that we are calling “rabbinic literature.” This is so not because that setting is educationally less important than other settings, nor because the exploration of personal significance that is triggered by the encounter with the text is somehow illegitimate. This kind of teaching and learning is real, and important, and legitimate; it can be pursued well and with great impact, respecting students’ autonomy while promoting personal and intellectual growth. But in some settings, it seems significant that the choice of a particular text might be otherwise; the instructor might instead teach a text from Tanakh or from medieval Jewish philosophy or from modern Hebrew poetry. This is not to say that the text is meaningless or arbitrary; presumably, the instructor finds a text to teach that has a certain kind of generative potential. But it does mean that the instructor does not feel a primary responsibility to rabbinic literature *as a subject*, even when she happens to be teaching a rabbinic text. We can imagine settings in which the instructor might have

¹⁵ One day school educator writes about this orientation: “We have found in our high school that much of our informal teaching centers around rabbinic texts... We are developing a curriculum of concepts, morals, messages we want to get across over a four-year high school experience.”

¹⁶ There is a connection, therefore, between the Torah Orientation to rabbinic literature and the Ideational Orientation to Bible. Why not simply label this orientation, likewise, the Ideational Orientation to Rabbinic Literature? The label “Torah Orientation” conveys the sense that the commitment to construct opportunities to engage with the text is not limited to a (or even more than one) big idea.

instead chosen to teach a text from Maimonides or Yehuda Amichai, with no loss of integrity or coherence.

Now, to avoid any mis-interpretation, it is not *always* the case that teaching within the Torah Orientation has this marginal relationship to rabbinic literature as a subject. We can easily imagine or recall examples where this is not the case, where the instructor within the Torah Orientation does feel a responsibility to rabbinic literature as a subject, even as she is also primarily focused on facilitating the meaningful encounter of the students with the material for the purposes of instruction. So it is more appropriate to say that, as we construct our conception of the Torah Orientation, we ought to acknowledge that *some* kinds of teaching – *some* instances in which rabbinic texts are used – are located in a kind of grey area where it may not be clear that the instructor is teaching a subject that we would call “rabbinic literature” at all.

Before moving on, we might wonder whether the characterizations of this orientation – most notably, that “under the right conditions, a patient encounter with this material can promote increased awareness of truths about the world and human nature, leading to inspiration or guidance or enlightenment” – could be used about any of the orientations to teaching rabbinic literature.¹⁷ Isn’t that the way that every teacher of Talmud feels, regardless of setting or conception of the subject? For that matter, any devoted teacher of Shakespeare or Homer would endorse it as well. And the point is not limited to the humanities: those who are passionate about math or biology or any other subject would, likewise, claim that the engagement with their subject has the potential to be deeply illuminating. If this is so, then the idea of a distinctive Torah Orientation begins to look suspect.

But this may be a good example of the way in which orientations function like cuisines, with shared ingredients, rather than like a map with discrete regions representing clearly demarcated answers to basic questions about purposes. It is certainly the case that, if asked about the ultimate purposes of teaching and learning their subject, many or most instructors might endorse the characterizations used above for the Torah Orientation. What is uniquely characteristic of the Torah Orientation, however, is the way in which that ultimate purpose – the idea of engagement with the subject for the purpose of instruction or enlightenment – becomes the dominant and guiding principle for pedagogic decisions. A teacher within this orientation is focused on and holds herself responsible for the students’ experience, primarily. She may use literary analysis or historical context or jurisprudential categories, but her primary focus is creating the moment of encounter. By way of contrast, a teacher of a semester-long Talmud class in a yeshiva may likewise hope to foster “increased awareness of truths about the world or about human nature” – but on a daily or weekly basis, her pedagogic decision-making is driven more by a concern for surfacing the themes of the particular tractate that she is committed to covering or for developing the skills of her students.

The portrayal of Aryeh Ben David in Hammer-Kossoy (2001) is an excellent case in point. On the one hand, Ben David teaches an ongoing class organized around the sequential study of a particular tractate of Talmud, and is committed to teaching students the necessary skills to make sense of

¹⁷ Beverly Gribetz and Meesh Hammer-Kossoy helped clarify my thinking on this issue.

the texts and the legal interpretive debates within them. On the other hand, “to Aryeh, the essence of Oral Torah is that it has a living, dynamic quality which says something specific and relevant to every generation” (p. 11). Furthermore, “although the Gemara focuses on small details, Aryeh assumes that these details are not the central message of the sugya [but rather that] the sugya is also leading up to some underlying message” (p. 10). Perhaps we should say, then, that Ben David teaches primarily within the Torah Orientation. But Hammer-Kossoy offers a further observation of Ben David’s practice that indicates otherwise. Regardless of his genuine concern for meaning and inspiration, she writes, “the vast majority of energy [in his teaching] is dedicated to understanding the peshat of the Gemara and attaining the basic skills” (p. 14).

2. Contextual Orientation

The Contextual Orientation lies at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Torah Orientation —not necessarily in terms of purposes (as just noted, their respective purposes are not mutually exclusive) but in terms of setting. Where the Torah Orientation is typically (although of course not exclusively) pursued in one-off adult Jewish educational sessions, the Contextual Orientation emphasizes the kinds of teaching and learning typical within semester-long university courses. In fact, references to “academic Talmud study” or “modern Talmud study” (e.g., Carmy 1991) usually refer to the Contextual Orientation. Within this orientation, teachers are primarily interested in understanding the original contexts of rabbinic texts, including how rabbinic texts came to assume their final form, and how understanding that context illuminates the meaning of the texts—and they do so because of an overriding concern for *peshat*, for discerning the plain sense of the text as they see it.¹⁸ Typically, teachers within this orientation will employ comparisons of parallel texts, within the traditional canon (e.g., using the Tosefta or Yerushalmi, or using variant manuscripts) and without (using Greek or Latin texts). In some settings and with certain texts, archeological sources may also be introduced into the classroom as teaching resources. In other settings and with other texts, it will be particularly important to compare rabbinic literature to early Christian literature.

As noted, teaching within this orientation is compatible with extended learning opportunities, such as semester-long courses in high schools or universities. Teachers within the Contextual Orientation are often concerned that students understand the complexity and multivocality of the texts. They will typically employ, and may be concerned to nurture in their students, what Sam Wineburg (1991) has labeled the “sourcing heuristic,” the habit (a strong characteristic of the way that academic historians read texts) of immediately wondering about and looking for evidence of the source of a particular text in order to locate its perspective.¹⁹ They may emphasize the strata of the texts, as well as other “academic” issues such as the problems of attribution or the work of the redactors to construct the received text, and may work to develop the students’ capacity to discern those strata

¹⁸ I owe this point to Barry Wimpfheimer (personal correspondence).

¹⁹ Wineburg’s theory is based on empirical research on historians of more recent periods, rather than scholars of classical texts, but it is a reasonable hypothesis (worthy of empirical investigation) that it would apply equally well to the latter as well. In the case of Bible, the sourcing heuristic is displayed in the tendency of Bible scholars to immediately notice the source (J, E, P, D, or H) of a particular text. (See also my related argument that a central aspect of the Contextual Orientation in the teaching of Bible is the establishment of critical distance from the text, in Levisohn 2008.) In the case of rabbinic literature, the same sourcing heuristic is displayed in the tendency of rabbinic scholars to immediately attend to the language of the text, the rabbis cited and their dates and locations, and when available, parallel texts, in order to provisionally fix the historical provenance of the text.

and those issues on their own.

Clearly, there are many traditionalist settings where the Contextual Orientation is considered anathema or at least inappropriate, because of what some would call an implied “lack of respect” for the text and its transmitters, including especially the amoraic interpreters of earlier traditions (see Carmy 1991 for a discussion of some of the issues). But while general concerns about critical study are relevant, the more specific concerns—familiar to us from the teaching of Bible—about internal contradictions within the text are less so. The motivation to harmonize disparate texts certainly does exist in the field of rabbinic literature, and indeed underlies much traditional commentary. However, that motivation hardly carries the same theological weight as it does in Bible where the unity of the text itself is, for some, a theological red line. (After all, *mabloket*, principled dispute between the rabbis, is present on every page of the Talmud!) So it seems fair to say that the Contextual Orientation to the teaching of rabbinic literature is less ideologically fraught than its counterpart in the teaching of Bible. Moreover, teachers within the Contextual Orientation may pursue the historical-critical investigation of rabbinic texts not in order to challenge the authority of the rabbis but to explore their remarkable legal and cultural creativity.²⁰

3. *Jurisprudential Orientation*

Within this orientation, rabbinic literature is considered primarily as the product of a legal system—not as a literary text, not as an historical text, not even (primarily) as a text that ought to trigger a wide-ranging exploration of truths about human nature or the world. Legal argument, debates about legal concepts and rulings, are the heart of the subject. And 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. This orientation shares something in common with the Halakhic Orientation, to follow, but the Jurisprudential Orientation is not primarily concerned with practical legal implications.

This is so whether the Jurisprudential Orientation is carried out by scholars of comparative law, teaching students of law, or whether it is carried out by traditionalists in the yeshiva, mediating among apparently contradictory texts and encouraging students in the exercise of *hiddush*, innovative synthesis or insightful conceptual distinction. (The notion of *hiddush* is central to a certain kind of Talmud pedagogy, in which the instructor is expected to develop his own *hiddush* to share with the students who, for their part, are expected not just to understand that *hiddush* but to anticipate it before it is presented and to attack it afterward. In these contexts, the proposed innovation is typically a novel way of resolving a contradiction or of explaining an obscurity in the text – but almost

²⁰ This is not meant to imply that teachers within the Contextual Orientation to Bible are committed to undermining the authority of the text, either, as they are sometimes caricatured. It is true that the Contextual Orientation stands in tension with traditional conceptions about the authorship and authority of the text, but the personal commitment of the instructor – not to traditional belief or practice but to the disciplined engagement with the text – carries undeniable pedagogical significance. See Levisohn (2008) for a further discussion of this issue. Nevertheless, the ideological issues play out differently in the two cases. We might say that the catchword of the historical-critical instructor of Bible is *pluralism*: she is attuned to and committed to nurturing sensitivity to the pluralism of the disparate sources within the received text. The catchword of the historical-critical instructor of rabbinic literature, on the other hand, is *creativity*: she is attuned to and committed to nurturing sensitivity to the cultural creativity of the rabbis.

always within a jurisprudential frame.) In either situation, academic or traditional, the intellectual experience of exploring the legal system takes precedence over any practical concerns for arriving at an actual legal ruling for the purposes of implementation. Rabbinic law obeys its own logic and employs its own concepts; the Jurisprudential Orientation seeks to understand that logic and to immerse the students in that conceptual universe.

The Jurisprudential Orientation may be found in law schools, where texts are selected in order to explore a certain legal issue or jurisprudential theme, and where teachers and students are accustomed to the exploration of legal concepts and arguments often without regard for final legal rulings (sometimes called “black letter law”). The field of *Mishpat Ivri* is, quite obviously, also concerned with rabbinic texts as products of a jurisprudential system, so courses that explore some aspect of *Mishpat Ivri* are also located within this orientation. But beyond these settings, almost all study in traditional yeshivot seems to fit within this orientation.

Aharon Lichtenstein, for example, after noting the importance of *aggadah* (rabbinic narratives and theological reflections), expresses a standard traditionalist view:

But it is clearly *halakhab* [Jewish law] that stands at the center of the world of the Oral Law, leaving its mark on the entire corpus. Its study constitutes, first and foremost, an encounter with the Giver of the Torah, He who commands and obligates...
(Lichtenstein 1996/2007, p. 10)

The ideological conviction here – the sanctity of Talmud study as an encounter with the divine – is rooted in the text’s status as a legal corpus, in some sense a divine legal corpus.²¹ Lichtenstein’s reference to “*halakhab* that stands at the center” should not be misunderstood as referring to practical legal implications; later on (pp. 13-14), he explicitly contrasts Talmud with post-Talmudic legal compendia that are concerned to communicate *halakbic* rulings. This is a traditionalist expression of the Jurisprudential Orientation.

Naturally, the characterization offered here does not do justice to the diversity of traditionalist interpretive strategies, *darkei ba-limmud*. But this is one of the occasions when it is important to remember that not every interpretive distinction makes an orientational difference. In general, teachers within the Jurisprudential Orientation may aspire to help students understand the legal complexity of the system for its own sake, or to achieve other pedagogical goals relating to the understanding of law across cultures. In traditionalist settings, the Jurisprudential Orientation may be motivated by the need to do a kind of conceptual “basic research”; like basic research in the physical sciences, there is no expectation of immediate payoff, and the pursuit of the truths of nature are their own reward. In Carmy’s (1991) formulation, “The goal of conceptual analysis is ... to formulate the principles inherent in the word of God.” It may also be reinforced by a sense that the Jurisprudential Orientation is

²¹ Also see the discussion in Hammer-Kossov (2001), p. 34 ff. Some might wonder whether we ought to say, instead, that the status of the text is rooted in the ideological conviction of God as He who commands. That is surely also the case for Lichtenstein. But the point here is that, in order for the ideological conviction to make sense, we must first understand of Talmud as a legal text.

the orientation that places debate and argument at its center—and that an emphasis on (engaging in, understanding, and appreciating) debate and argument is culturally healthy, distinctively Jewish, and perhaps even theologically significant. Thus, one instructor framed a primary goal in teaching rabbinic literature in this way: “to help students acquire the rabbinic mode of questioning and *shaqla v’tarya* [i.e., debate] as a Jewish modes of thinking, in order to encourage participation in the Jewish cultural enterprise” (see also Brandes 2007 for another contemporary expression of this view).

Instructors within this orientation may select legal topics, *sugyot*, from multiple texts, or may select multiple legal topics to explore a particular jurisprudential phenomenon—or, as is usually the case in traditional yeshivot, they may employ the Jurisprudential Orientation as they encounter texts in a sequential study of a particular tractate. Within this orientation, the boundaries between the text and its later commentators may be blurred—not that the opinion of a medieval *rishon* (early commentator) is conflated with the Talmudic text but that they are regarded as, in some sense, part of one conversation. After all, those commentaries are, for the most part, efforts to elucidate legal concepts, so drawing upon them is entirely consistent with the Jurisprudential Orientation. Indeed, one of the motivations for teaching within the Jurisprudential Orientation—for traditionalists—is to immerse the students (not only within the rabbinic legal world but also) within that tradition of interpretation.²²

4. Halakhic Orientation

Rabbinic literature—especially the legal texts, of course, but in some cases non-legal texts as well—is the primary source 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 (biblical) material, but it will often be juxtaposed to later legal layers—the medieval commentators, responsa literature, etc., that build on the classical rabbinic texts as the legal tradition develops over time.

As a way of clarifying the distinction between the Jurisprudential Orientation and the Halakhic Orientation, let us return to the article by Aharon Lichtenstein cited above. We saw that his characterization of a traditionalist position seems to fit within a Jurisprudential Orientation. Notably, however, that characterization appears in the context of a lament about the contemporary condition of Talmud study, an attenuation of commitment that he attributes to (among other things) a culture that emphasizes individualism and instant gratification, and a parallel weakening of the “fear of Heaven” that might help keep the students’ noses to the grindstone. In response to this situation, and with a heavy heart, he offers the following bold proposal:

²² Based on her research on contemporary teachers and students, Hammer-Kossov frames this point in religious terms: “Perhaps the most tangible and accessible religious experience identified by students and teacher alike is the power of studying something that has been studied for generations, joining in the dialogue between [the Talmudic rabbis] Abaye and Rava, the [medieval commentator] Ritva and [the modern commentator] Rav Hayim. This sense of continuity often inspires many students to dedicate themselves to Talmud study” (Hammer-Kossov 2001, p. 6). This observation makes sense within the Jurisprudential Orientation, where “Talmud study” means, specifically, plumbing the depths of the legal arguments that are carried forward from generation to generation. Outside of the Jurisprudential Orientation, it is less compelling.

Even if the scope of [the student's] knowledge of Gemara will be exceedingly restricted, it is important that he be familiar with the way of the Torah, its nature and development, in order that he value and respect it. To this end, it is necessary to conduct several deep drillings—to learn several topics from the foundation to the attic, from the scriptural verses to the final rulings, in such a way that the character and quality of *halakhab* will be clearly exemplified. Topics may be chosen—some close to the world of the student, and some, explicitly, distant from it—in the development of which there will be felt a balance between principles and details, authority and logic, conservatism and momentum.
(Lichtenstein 1997/2008, pp. 20-21)

What Lichtenstein envisions here, captured in his phrase “several deep drillings,” is a series of investigations of particular halakhic topics. Setting aside the particulars of his argument²³—our concern here is not to debate the merits of one orientation over another but to understand each—Lichtenstein is advocating a shift from the Jurisprudential Orientation, with its emphasis on understanding the legal categories, concepts, and debates of the Talmud, to the Halakhic Orientation, with a focus on the selection of halakhic topics and attention to their development over time.²⁴

We can imagine topics such as the laws of cooking on Shabbat, or the laws relating to the payment of workers, or the laws of marriage and divorce. These investigations would begin with the biblical sources and proceed through the development of the halakhic tradition, perhaps even including contemporary responsa. As Lichtenstein notes, there a variety of criteria of selection for these topics. Some might be chosen for a “balance between principles and details,” i.e., topics that are appropriately representative of some principles of halakhic argumentation. Others might be chosen for a balance between “conservatism and momentum,” i.e., case studies that represent points on an ideological spectrum between halakha as an enterprise that seeks to preserve a prior way of life and halakha as a location of cultural innovation.

Whatever the topics chosen, however, what is distinctive here is the focus on halakhic topics in a way that is distinct from the Jurisprudential Orientation. This is not to say that the Jurisprudential Orientation never focuses on halakhic matters, of course. But when the Jurisprudential Orientation focuses on halakha, it is more interested in the logic or the concepts than the ruling itself. Where the Jurisprudential Orientation, when it focuses on a theme or a topic, will embrace a theme or topic that is conceptual in nature (for example, a principle of halakhic reasoning such as *kim lei be-de-rabba*

²³ Lichtenstein is motivated by his awareness of the unfortunately corrosive effects of traditional Talmud study in contemporary Orthodox schools and his hope that a shift to an engagement with halakhic material might serve better to accomplish his religious goals: “If we manage to implant a connection to Torah [using this non-traditional approach], the hope exists that we will succeed to embed the most precious of all, *yirat shamayim*, the fear of Heaven” (p. 21). It is worth recalling, however, that any orientation can be pursued poorly or well. The question then becomes: even if one assumes that a certain kind of religious devotion (which may be helpful in supporting a particular pedagogy) is increasingly rare among one’s students, should one abandon the orientation or should one rather develop a different pedagogy within that orientation?

²⁴ Lichtenstein himself frames his proposal in terms of a shift from an emphasis on the study of Talmud to an emphasis on the study of Mishnah. But it is not clear to me how the “deep drillings” to which he refers, studying topics “from the foundations to the attic,” might be accomplished by a study of Mishnah (exclusively or even primarily). I therefore assume that Mishnah, in his essay, is used as a kind of shorthand for study that avoids the intricacies of Talmudic argumentation while placing greater emphasis on the development of the halakhic tradition.

minei, “when a more serious punishment applies, the lesser punishment is waived”), the Halakhic Orientation will focus on practical legal themes such as the ones mentioned above. And the Jurisprudential Orientation will rarely trace the development of a *sugya* into the contemporary period, as the Halakhic Orientation might.

This is an appropriate occasion, therefore, to mention the ambiguity at the heart of the category of “rabbinic literature.” Central texts such as the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud elicit little controversy, but what else is included in the mix? We have already had occasion to mention texts such as Tosefta and Yerushalmi (the “Palestinian Talmud”), and to note that, within the Jurisprudential Orientation, there is a natural tendency to extend forward to the classical commentaries on Talmud. Where, we might wonder, are the boundaries? Are geonic texts included in “rabbinic literature” as well? What about medieval commentaries or early modern halakhic texts or contemporary responsa? It seems clear that the appropriate boundaries are another indication of the diversity of orientations; in one teaching context, the relevant material may include early Christian texts, while in another, contemporary Jewish ones. But there is little point in trying to determine what “counts” as rabbinic literature, in the abstract, because there are no available criteria that are neutral across orientations.

Teaching within the Halakhic Orientation sometimes will focus on a particular legal matter, tracing its evolution over time, the “deep drillings” to which Lichtenstein referred. However, the understanding of the *significance* of that historical evolution will vary depending on ideology. That is, in some contexts, historical evolution may implicitly or explicitly provide grist for the mill of contemporary debates over halakhic change in general or over specific halakhic matters in particular. In other contexts, however, teaching within the Halakhic Orientation may not be subversive at all but rather conservative: students will simply be expected to acquire a deeper understanding of the way that the law has come to be. It may even be presumed that familiarity will breed affection. But it seems likely that any instructor, within the Halakhic Orientation, will expect that the legal tradition is authoritative in some sense, that is, that its norms have *some* kind of authoritative claim on the practice of the students.

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 identify those literary devices, typically choosing texts (again, both legal and non-legal) upon which literary analysis can be performed to great effect, and will aspire to foster their students’ capacities to do so as well. It is easy to think about treating rabbinic narratives in this way—searching for word play or certain kinds of character development—but legal passages can also serve as rich teaching material within this orientation.

Of course, if literary analysis presumes to generate insight into the meaning of a text on the basis of literary features, then it has a role to play wherever one engages in textual interpretation. This may make it hard to see the distinction between the Literary Orientation and others, and raises again the

way in which orientations function like cuisines. There are two ways to think about this. One way is to say that when one uses literary analysis while also pursuing, say, Torah as instruction, then one is blending two different orientations, the Literary Orientation and the Torah Orientation. There are surely occasions where this occurs. However, just as we said, above, that instructors may endorse the idea that the encounter with rabbinic texts should lead to illumination or instruction without necessarily participating in the Torah Orientation, we may need to say something similar here: instructors may use literary analysis, as one of the tools in their interpretational toolkit, without necessarily participating in the Literary Orientation.

The Literary Orientation, instead, is comprised not just by the interpretational tool—that is, it is comprised not just by the use of literary analysis by the instructor—but by a cluster of characteristic practices. In this orientation, literary analysis is foregrounded and made the explicit focus of discussion or inquiry. The instructor may select texts that are literarily rich and generative (or, conversely, may determine that the Literary Orientation is called for when she encounters a particular text). She may devote time and attention to developing the students’ own capacity to interpret with a literary lens. We need not go so far as to say that the Literary Orientation cares about literary analysis “for its own sake;” after all, we can easily imagine a teacher who focuses on the literary structures of the Mishnah not because they are beautiful or elegant in themselves but because they reveal important insights into the thinking of the editors of the Mishnah. Nevertheless, within a Literary Orientation, literary analysis is not just a technique and not just a mode of interpretation. Instead, the attention given to literary analysis is sufficiently prominent—either in terms of time or in terms of priorities—that it tends to crowd out the explicit attention to other purposes.

Why might one endorse the Literary Orientation? One participant in the Conference on Teaching Rabbinic Literature offered the following anonymous endorsement (in an exercise in which participants wrote comments about the orientations): “This is an orientation that has proven itself to have legitimacy. It permits ongoing engagement with the text and the making of personal and communal meaning.” In the view of this advocate, the Literary Orientation lowers the barriers to entry for students – we might think, for example, of adults with limited Jewish educational backgrounds and language abilities – and provides a mode of engagement which is familiar. After all, most college-educated adults have some practice at literary analysis. Furthermore, literary engagement comfortably co-exists with personal meaning-making—in a way that historical analysis, say, might not.²⁵

However, in an echo of debates in the field of Bible (where a literary approach tends to assume a unified text), a detractor worried about the tendency to see literary unity everywhere in rabbinic texts: “Does this assume a higher level of ‘craftedness’ than might be warranted? Might it end up glossing over disjunctions or conflicts that should be acknowledged as such?” If teaching and learning focuses on literary analysis of blocks of text, it runs the risk of under-valuing not only the historical layers of the text but even the *shaqla ve-tarya*, the give and take of rabbinic debate, that for some scholars is its very essence.

²⁵ See Rubenstein (unpublished) for an argument along these lines.

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 anthropologist, reading texts as products and markers of culture.²⁶ The questions that we ought to ask of the texts, from this perspective, are questions such as these: What cultural assumptions lie behind the text (whether or not we ascribe those assumptions to the author of the text)? What cultural dynamics are displayed in the text? Who is powerful, who is anxious, and why? What cultural values are defended or promoted? Teachers within this orientation will typically select texts that are, in their judgment, particularly significant in the understanding of rabbinic culture or of Judaism more generally. Some will teach in an effort to raise awareness of aspects of that culture that are distinct from contemporary culture, in which case the Cultural Orientation may share certain assumptions with the Contextual Orientation. Others, however, will construct a trans-historical conception of the rabbinic culture that they want their students to encounter and, perhaps, the norms of which they want their students to adopt. And within this orientation, certain kinds of feminist readings of texts raise awareness of the dynamics of gender as they are expressed in rabbinic culture and in Judaism more generally. (Of course, other kinds of feminist readings of text would fall into other orientations—the Historical Orientation, for example, in the case of readings that attempt to uncover women’s experiences, or the Halakhic Orientation, in the case of readings that focus on the evolving status of women in halakha.)

The Cultural Orientation is typically more text-focused than student-focused – but this is not necessarily the case. For example, Gidon Rothstein (unpublished) imagines an instructional approach that identifies, as its primary goal, overcoming the gap between the cultural norms and assumptions of the students and the cultural norms and assumptions of the rabbis, in an effort to make the strange familiar. On the other hand, it may be more common to find instructors within this orientation leaning in the opposite direction, committed to helping students understand the ways in which the rabbis, constructing Judaism in their time and place, are very different than we are – in other words, making the familiar strange. David Kraemer (unpublished), for example, argues that instructors ought to acknowledge the strangeness of rabbinic culture as a first step to overcoming it: “noticing, naming, describing the strangeness of the rabbinic text will allow the student to affirm what he or she experiences and begin the task of cultural translation.” Similarly, a participant at the Conference on Teaching Rabbinic Literature wrote that the Cultural Orientation is “most valuable when it enables the student to revisit and reflect upon the strangeness of their own cultural context.” Each of the stances described in this paragraph—making rabbinic culture familiar, making it strange, or making the student’s own culture strange—reflects a claim about the role of the Cultural Orientation in the formation of the intellectual and spiritual perspective of the student.

As already noted, in situations where rabbinic culture is understood primarily as an historical cat-

²⁶ Alongside the tools of the cultural anthropologist, the Cultural Orientation may also employ the related tools of the academic folklorist, focusing in particular on narratives that fit the paradigms of folklore, as Bialik and Ravnitzky did in their *Sefer ha-Aggadah*. I am indebted to Barry Wimpfheimer (personal communication) for this point and others related to the Cultural Orientation.

egory (rather than, for example, as a trans-historical category), there may be a close connection between the Cultural Orientation and the Contextual Orientation. Both tend to establish a certain kind of critical distance from rabbinic texts, and both are focused on the meaning of the texts in (some version of) their original context. We can certainly imagine instructors blending both orientations. Still, the questions that they ask are distinct. The Contextual Orientation asks questions that begin in the text, seeking answers in its cultural context(s) but with a primary desire to hear and understand the different historical voices in the text. The Cultural Orientation asks questions about culture, seeking answers in the texts (texts that are taken to reveal central aspects of culture) but also implicitly or explicitly facilitating an encounter between the culture of the rabbis and the culture of the students. Furthermore, unlike the Contextual Orientation—but in this respect like the Literary Orientation—the Cultural Orientation is more concerned with the rabbinic texts, as we find them, rather than their component parts and the process of their redaction, only turning to other materials as background or supplements to contribute to our understanding of the rabbis' projects.

7. Historical Orientation

Rabbinic literature, alongside other literatures, provides evidence for the social, cultural, intellectual and political history of the Jewish communities of late antiquity. Who were these people—not just the rabbis but the whole community or set of communities—and what did they do with their lives? How were they affected by empires, armies, political movements, material conditions, and cultural developments? In some settings, these questions are considered to be irrelevant or even distracting; consider the derisive quip that “some people care about what Abaye and Rava said and some people care about what they *wore*.”²⁷ But in other settings, instructors are committed to exploring that history, and the texts are means to that end. They are windows, and like real windows, they work best when they are transparent and when they do not obstruct our view of the landscape beyond.

Of course, there is always the thorny question of whether we can take rabbinic texts about history or about contemporaneous events at face value (and contemporary academic historiography tends to assume that we cannot). So the window is never truly transparent; the glass always distorts our view of what lies beyond it, even as it enables that view. How can we compensate for the inevitable bias of the authors of these texts, the rabbis, who (like any author) had their own ideological purposes—either as leaders of a community or as a self-appointed elite that aspired to leadership—in writing about historical events and the world around them? (See Schwartz 2002 for a rich discussion of the history of the historiography of the rabbinic period, which surfaces many of the conceptual fault lines between various historiographical approaches.) Still, even if we adopt a hermeneutics of suspicion rather than a hermeneutics of trust, these texts are often the only window into the past that we have.

The preceding sentences suggest that the Historical Orientation shares a kind of skeptical stance with the Contextual Orientation (as well as some versions of the Cultural Orientation). But their focus is different. In the latter orientation, the goal is understanding the text—the window itself, as it were—in its original context. In the Historical Orientation, on the other hand, the goal is to peer

²⁷ I was reminded of this quip by Wimpfheimer (forthcoming).

through the window at some aspect of the historical landscape beyond. Of course, it may well be that the historical landscape in which we are interested in not the one depicted in the text; rather than “using the texts as historical records of the ... data that they discuss, [we might instead be interested in] looking at the texts as evidence for the contemporary world in which the texts are produced” (Yehuda Kurtzer, personal correspondence). Thus, a fifth century narrative about a first century event may tell us more about the fifth century than about the first. Still, we can characterize the difference between the Historical Orientation and the Contextual Orientation in terms of the kinds of stories that they want to tell.

The Historical Orientation wants to construct a narrative about historical events or the historical development of a community. For example, a course within the Historical Orientation might employ rabbinic texts in order to tell the story of the evolution of Jewish practice from a temple-centered religion to a text-centered religion. A one-off adult education session might mine rabbinic stories about rabbinic academies for what we can discern about the study practices of the composers of those stories. The Contextual Orientation, on the other hand, wants to construct a narrative about the text itself, and the Cultural Orientation wants to tell some (inevitably incomplete) story about the culture of the rabbis.

Thus, 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, among students, or the development of historical sensibilities appropriate to the study of that history. And instructors will select texts and construct learning opportunities that illuminate that history, or that illuminate central interpretive questions about that history.

8. Bekiut Orientation

In certain settings, rabbinic literature is taught and learned in order to foster students’ encounter with a maximum quantity of material, in a sequential fashion, with as little pre-conceived or pre-arranged focus as possible. This is sometimes called “*bekiut*,” which translates literally as “mastery” or “expertise,” but is more accurately translated in this context as “coverage.” That is, the purpose of studying Talmud *biv’kiut* (in a *bekiut* way) or *liv’kiut* (for the purpose of *bekiut*) is to cover ground, to encounter quantities of material. Like coverage goals elsewhere in education, so too here the demand for coverage often crowds out competing concerns for depth of understanding or perhaps even longevity of retention. Nevertheless, there is a certain educational logic to the enterprise. We can imagine the argument, for example, that students absorb literary norms even if they forget the details of the novels that they are asked to read. Here, too, the sequential, 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 of the arguments quickly slip from the mind.

One paradigm of the *Bekiut* Orientation is a kind of atheoretical reaction against the sometimes fanciful pursuit of conceptual explanations for textual difficulties. Thus, Eliezer Shach, among the

²⁸ This is based on the De’ah veDibur website, which reports on a eulogy for Rabbi Shach by Gershon Eidelstein: <<http://74.125.47.132/search?q=cache:qRrZrz26qQIJ:chareidi.shemayisrael.com/archives5766/lech/olechlch66>>

leading *haredi* scholars of the previous generation, is reputed to have offered the following advice: “Don’t learn slowly. Don’t look for complex explanations and *sevoros*. Don’t do what they call *iyun*, in depth study. Study to cover ground and review a great deal.”²⁸ Going slowly, in this view, is associated with perseverating over insoluble textual problems, losing sight of simpler and more attainable goals of study.

A more familiar paradigm of *bekiut* is the program known as Daf Yomi, the “daily page,” the standardized schedule of study of one folio page (two sides) of Talmud per day, around which has grown a cottage industry of classes, study guides, and audio-recorded lessons. The accelerated, breakneck pace of Daf Yomi highlights an additional component to the Bekiut Orientation, namely, the ritualization of the teaching and learning. This is obviously present in Daf Yomi, where the required speed blurs the line between study as intellectual engagement and study as liturgical recitation. But it is often present in other *bekiut* study as well, at a less accelerated pace: within this orientation, teachers and students understand the study of Talmud as a religious obligation or a practice with religious or spiritual significance.

So the claim advanced above, that the purpose of studying Talmud *biv’kiut* is to cover ground, is only partially accurate; one might also say that, at a deeper level, the purpose of study within the Bekiut Orientation is *Torah lish’ma*, Torah for its own sake. Setting aside any mastery of content, setting aside the benefits of immersion in the close study of a particular body of literature or the development of skills, simply occupying oneself in the study of Talmud is, for some, an activity with religious purpose and intrinsic value.²⁹ One aspect of that religious attitude is a kind of submission to the text – not in the sense of a suspension of critical evaluation of arguments, and not necessarily in terms of a commitment to carry out the actions that the text seems to mandate, but rather in the sense of a commitment to listen patiently and non-selectively to what the text has to say. Thus, the instructor within the Bekiut Orientation emphasizes the students’ face-to-face encounter with the text as it presents itself, with little editorial selection, “interesting” and “relevant” passages along with those that are less so.

9. Interpretive Orientation

In contrast to other classical literature, much of rabbinic literature – especially those sections known as *midrash* of various kinds – is constructed as interpretation of other texts, both biblical and earlier rabbinic texts. (While the case can certainly be made that all literature interprets the tropes and ideas of preceding literature, rabbinic literature frequently carries out the work of interpretation explicitly, not implicitly.) Those interpretations proceed according to their own norms, sometimes

htm+<http://chareidi.shemaisrael.com/olechlch66.htm&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=us&client=safari>>. I cannot (and have no desire to) vouch for the accuracy of the account, but the very fact that it is reported is significant, regardless.

²⁹ Teasing apart the concept of *Torah Lish’ma* is notoriously difficult. We can easily identify the opposite of *Torah Lish’ma*, namely, study for extrinsic purposes such as career advancement or practical guidance or scholarly reputation. But what does it mean to study something for its own sake? What if one studies for the sake of becoming a more adept student – is that *Torah Lish’ma*? Or for the sake of heightened self-consciousness or moral attunement? In some views, even study for the purpose of religious enlightenment – “cleaving to God” –violates the strict standard of *Torah Lish’ma* (although, according to other views, that is precisely the correct meaning of *Torah Lish’ma*). The classic study of *Torah Lish’ma* is Lamm (1989). Note, here, that while the Bekiut Orientation is often pursued in the context of an ideological commitment to *Torah Lish’ma*, the latter commitment is not by any means *limited* to the Bekiut Orientation.

playful and pluralistic, sometimes rigidly argumentative. The Interpretive Orientation 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. As Daniel Boyarin writes, “We will not read midrash well and richly unless we understand it first and foremost as *reading*, as hermeneutic, as generated by the interaction of rabbinic readers with a heterogeneous and difficult text, which was for them both normative and divine in origin” (Boyarin 1990, p. 5).³⁰

Holtz, it may be recalled, also includes an orientation to the teaching of Bible that focuses on interpretation, which he labels the *Parshanut* Orientation, but the Interpretive Orientation to rabbinic literature is different than Holtz’s *Parshanut* Orientation to Bible. Holtz is focused on the a priori commitment, among some instructors, to teach the classical medieval interpreters of Bible. In the case of rabbinic literature, that kind of traditionalism—a commitment to immerse the students in the conversation as it has played out over generations—actually resonates more with the Jurisprudential Orientation, which is concerned with the legal logic and concepts that the classical (especially medieval and early modern) interpreters of the text have traditionally focused upon. By contrast, the focus on exploring the interpretational strategies of the rabbis within the Interpretive Orientation does not necessarily incline the teacher or student to the later works that (e.g.) interpret the Talmud but rather orients them to the interpretational qualities of the rabbinic text itself. In doing so, it represents a project that is actually quite un-traditional.

Those interpretational strategies are sometimes (or often) the source of pedagogic dissonance, which itself provides a rationale for the Interpretive Orientation. After all, one way of establishing pedagogic priorities is by assessing what is hard about a particular subject. In the case of rabbinic literature, what is hard for many students—both conceptually and emotionally—is the range of interpretive moves that the rabbis make, or sometimes the very idea that the moves that they make *are* interpretive in nature. For some instructors, this experience itself is warrant for making the analysis of rabbinic interpretation the primary focus of instruction.

Within the Interpretive Orientation, then, teachers will focus in particular on the interpretive moves that are made by particular texts or by particular rabbis within those texts—their assumptions about the prior texts that are interpreted and about the nature of interpretation itself. Midrashic texts (that interpret biblical verses or passages) are the primary material for teaching within this orientation, and they will often be selected for their value in displaying interpretive moves or stances or controversies. But an instructor might also employ the Interpretive Orientation with an eye towards the way in which later strata of rabbinic literature employ early teachings, sometimes in radically new ways. In either case, the instructor will frame an inquiry into the interpretive process represented by the text—to ask how that interpretive process works—in order to help students understand and appreciate the generative interpretive culture of the rabbis. In this way, there is a close connection

³⁰ Citing Boyarin in this context may raise the question, for some readers, of how to distinguish the Interpretive Orientation from the Cultural Orientation (which might we might assume Boyarin would be associated). My response, here as elsewhere, is to turn from theory to practice: in the Interpretive Orientation, questions about how the rabbis read (which are discussed in the following paragraphs) will tend to crowd out other questions about culture. Of course, many instructors may smoothly integrate the Interpretive Orientation and the Cultural.

between the Interpretive Orientation and the Cultural Orientation. But instructors may also teach within this orientation in an effort to help students become more aware of their *own* interpretive processes, and perhaps too to open up the cultural space for students to carry out the creative work of interpretation themselves.

10. Skills Orientation

In certain settings and certain conditions, teachers of rabbinic literature are primarily focused on helping students acquire the textual-analytic and linguistic skills to master, or at least access independently, rabbinic literature. Initially, this may seem unworthy of the label of “orientation”; after all, nearly all of the orientations can be said to be concerned with helping students acquire skills of one sort or another. The Literary Orientation typically intends to foster appreciation of and capacity for literary analysis. The Cultural Orientation intends to promote a kind of anthropological sensibility, in which students learn to ask certain kinds of questions about why the rabbis would say what they say and believe what they believe. These are all skills or capacities or subject-specific habits of mind, and we may assume that most thoughtful teachers who have the opportunity to construct an extended learning experience are concerned with the development of skills. So why should we identify a Skills Orientation distinct from other orientations?

Nevertheless, the Skills Orientation emerges because, as we noted above in the case of the Literary Orientation, there are times and settings where the focus on skills dominates the pedagogic space, where that focus crowds out other purposes and practices to a significant extent, where teachers teach and students learn with the express purpose of mastering the secret code. This happens, in part, due to the nature of the texts themselves, which can be terse to the point of obscurity and which regularly employ technical terminology that assumes a great deal of background knowledge. But in addition, this happens for a culturally specific reason, namely, the enormous cultural capital that accrues (in certain environments) to the possessor of the technical ability to access these texts. We may think, first, of the Orthodox world, where the ability to decipher—not to insightfully interpret but just to decipher—these obscure texts is a kind of rite of passage among boys and men. That ability, which of course is not universally held in all segments of the Orthodox community, earns one the highly informal title of *yode’a sefer*, loosely translatable as “one who is comfortable in the conceptual and terminological world of the Talmud.”

This is not to say, however, that the teaching and learning of rabbinic literature is carried out within the Skills Orientation among men in the Orthodox community. Typically, it is not. In the male Orthodox world, the acquisition of skills happens (if it does) as a by-product of teaching within other orientations, especially within the Jurisprudential Orientation. Instead, the best examples of the Skills Orientation are to be found elsewhere—among liberal Jewish educational programs (where facility with classical rabbinic texts, while less common, still possesses significant cultural capital) and especially among Orthodox women’s *yeshivot* (where students and teachers are acutely aware that access to the texts is tool of empowerment, a key that opens up many doors). Teachers committed to the Skills Orientation place an emphasis on teaching technical terminology, providing direct instruction on standard forms of Talmudic argumentation, making explicit the cultural assumptions and the historical background, all in order to accelerate the acquisition of the desired skills. Teach-

ing and learning within this orientation sometimes has a certain impatient quality, especially when young adults imagine themselves making up for lost time and when teachers try to help them do so.

The reader may wonder whether the picture painted here is perhaps a caricature. To be sure, teachers and students of rabbinic literature are rarely ruthless pursuers of cultural capital, at the expense of all meaning, spiritual insight, or religious purpose. But the Skills Orientation does operate, in certain settings, to dampen or defer exploration of rabbinic culture, of literary techniques, of interpretive strategies, of the nuances of legal concepts, or of spiritual truths. Instructors may teach not with a goal of insight, but rather with an eye on the prize of facilitating the growth of independence among the students. “First,” instructors within this orientation might say, “let’s all be sure we understand what’s going on in this text.” And for students eager to acquire the keys to unlock the door, that pedagogic tradeoff is perfectly acceptable. I recall one student of rabbinic texts, a committed liberal Jew who happily attended an Orthodox women’s yeshiva despite the poorness of ideological fit. Her motivation was to gain access to the classical texts in order, she admitted only half-jokingly, to gain power.

It is worth contrasting the Skills Orientation to teaching rabbinic literature with Holtz’s Decoding, Translation, and Comprehension Orientation to teaching Bible (Holtz 2003, p. 94). Holtz calls this orientation “elementary” and its typical pedagogy “rote”, and describes it as “simply the basic comprehension of the text.” He acknowledges that, at its best, this orientation can lead to comprehensive knowledge, but worries that, “at its worst, it can be mind-numbing and tedious.” It is clear that Holtz can barely contain his antipathy to an orientation that robs the study of Bible of its potential for significant intellectual and/or spiritual engagement. Why is the description of the Skills Orientation to rabbinic literature so much more positive than the Decoding Orientation to Bible?

One reason may be the sense of how difficult—how technical, how intricately argued—rabbinic texts can be; thus, developing the skills to read them inevitably involves intellectual engagement with its arguments, in a way that simply recounting the plot of a biblical narrative does not. Another reason may be the cultural capital that, as discussed, accrues to those with the capacity to access rabbinic texts, in a way that does not occur with (inherently more accessible) biblical texts. But beyond these important factors, there’s another issue to keep in mind, which brings us back to what an orientation is.

Orientations, I claimed above, are collections of purposes and practices that happen to hang together in the teaching and learning of a particular subject. In the case of Bible, Holtz believes (with good reason) that settings exist where teachers teach in such a mind-numbing and tedious way. These instructors have forgotten what the enriching and rigorous exploration of the biblical text could be, or perhaps they never knew, and the result is a narrow-minded and non-ambitious focus on decoding and translation. The Skills Orientation to the teaching of rabbinic literature, on the other hand, is different. It is certainly possible to pursue the teaching of skills in a mind-numbing and tedious way; we ought to acknowledge that as a potential pathology of the Skills Orientation. But in identifying this orientation, we are also calling to mind images of real educational environments, real teachers and real students engaged in an aspirational endeavor, where the challenge of accessing the text is

sometimes wearisome and sometimes frustrating but also, ultimately, empowering.

E. CONCLUSION: HOW TO USE A MENU

These ten orientations to teaching rabbinic literature, then, constitute the menu. (See the chart below.) They do not necessarily encompass every instance of the teaching of the subject. But they represent ten conceptions of what the subject of rabbinic literature is all about, as a subject of teaching and learning, along with some of their associated, characteristic pedagogical practices.

<i>Orientations to the Teaching of English</i>	<i>Orientations to the Teaching of Bible</i>	<i>Orientations to the Teaching Rabbinic Literature</i>
Reader Orientation	1. Contextual Orientation	1. Torah/Instruction Orientation
Text Orientation	2. Literary Criticism Orientation	2. Contextual Orientation
Context Orientation	3. Reader-Response Orientation	3. Jurisprudential Orientation
	4. <i>Parshanut</i> , the Jewish Interpretive Orientation	4. Halakhic Orientation
	5. Moralistic-Didactic Orientation	5. Literary Orientation
	6. Personalization Orientation	6. Cultural Orientation
	7. Ideational Orientation	7. Historical Orientation
	8. Bible Leads to Action Orientation	8. <i>Beki'ut</i> Orientation
	9. Decoding, Translating, and Comprehension Orientation	9. Interpretive Orientation
		10. Skills Orientation

Readers who have persevered through the identification and description of these ten orientations to the teaching of rabbinic literature might now wonder why this exercise is worth pursuing: the “so what?” question. There are three good answers to this question, and one poor one.

The first answer to the question of “so what” is that the menu of orientations provides a kind of theoretical framework for the field of rabbinic literature, as a field of teaching and learning. This paper opened with a discussion of the internal diversity within any subject. The idea of orientations is an attempt to make sense of that diversity – both recognizing the diversity while also recognizing that, diversity notwithstanding, there is something that is shared among them, something that holds them together such that talking about them as one subject continues to make sense. “Rabbinic literature” is not a discipline, certainly not in any methodological sense. It is not even a book, in the way that the Bible is, and referring to a set of books begs the question of which books are included. What is it? As a field of teaching and learning, it is a “center of intellectual capacity and interest” (Scheffler 1968/1973, p. 89)—a set of intellectual traditions and cultural practices—that are manifest, in our present historical moment, in these ten ways.

But the menu of orientations is not, one hopes, just a catalog. If we aspire to make conceptual sense of the subject, then we are called upon, inevitably, to theorize—that is, to examine the philosophical foundations of the subject, to locate the subject in the context of other subjects, to ask questions about purposes. It is, in other words, what Seymour Fox called a “theory of practice.”³¹ Or con-

³¹ See, for example, Fox (2000), p. 36 ff. Holtz uses this phrase to describe his orientations work as well. See, for example, Holtz (2008), p. 228.

sider the relevance of the following lines from Israel Scheffler’s “Philosophy and the Curriculum” (1970/1989), describing philosophy of science:

[Its philosophical work] takes its departure from scientific practice itself, striving to describe and codify it, and to understand and criticize it from a general epistemological standpoint... Philosophy of science thus springs from scientific practice, but its descriptive and explanatory effort, like all second-order reflection on practice, has the potentiality of closing the circle, of feeding back into practice and altering it. (p. 35)

In his article, Scheffler’s claim is that teachers, unlike other practitioners, are inevitably compelled to become theorists of their subject, as they select among its ideas and develop appropriate explanations. He therefore advocates study of “philosophies-of” for those preparing to teach—philosophy of science, philosophy of history, etc. Like his description of philosophy of science, the present paper has aspired to describe and codify a practice, to understand it, and implicitly to criticize those forms of it that do not meet their own, internal criteria. And like his claim about “philosophies-of”, we might hope that those engaged in the practice of teaching rabbinic literature will benefit from the consideration of the present effort to do something that we might call “philosophy of teaching rabbinic literature.”

Thus, Scheffler’s perspective incorporates as well the second answer to the “so what” question, in his metaphor of a theory emerging from practice and potentially closing the circle back to practice and in his claim about the benefits of studying “philosophies-of”. This second answer moves from the general intellectual benefit, for those who are interested in the field, to a more practical benefit, for instructors of rabbinic literature for whom encountering the menu of orientations is like holding up a mirror to their practice.³² Is this what I do? Is this what I believe? As a theory of practice, the menu of orientations attempts to articulate what was previously implicit, and that articulation may provide the spark for critical reflection. Relatedly, the metaphor of a menu of orientations implies *choices*. This points to the way in which practitioners might come to see more options in the teaching of rabbinic literature – a greater range of purposes, a broader array of pedagogic practices – than they had previously recognized. Whether they choose to pursue any of these options will depend on whether they find them compelling, and on a variety of external constraints, but the identification of options may (one hopes) increase the consciousness and thoughtfulness of the choices that are made.

Here, however, we should pause to consider the poor answer to the “so what” question. There is a way in which the metaphor of a menu is potentially misleading. When we are faced with a menu, we usually choose one option (or, one *main* option). When we are assembling a meal, we assume that it should be either a Chinese meal, or a Mexican meal, or something else equally coherent. We might imagine therefore that our purpose, in thinking about orientations to the teaching of rabbinic literature, is to make sure that we are firmly embedded in one and only one orientation—because otherwise, we risk inconsistency of message or incoherence of purpose. But this would be a mistake. In the case of orientations, there is no particular reason to think that teaching within one orienta-

³² See Holtz (2003), p. 50, for a parallel discussion of the ways that orientations can contribute to practice.

tion is necessarily preferable to employing multiple orientations. We have noted, repeatedly, that orientations are not necessarily mutually contradictory. Here we should state, even more strongly, that in certain circumstances, there may be a benefit to the pedagogic equivalent of culinary fusion, a kind of principled eclecticism.

How? In some circumstances, we can imagine that orientational purity is indeed beneficial. A teacher who restricts herself to one orientation imposes a kind of discipline on her teaching, focusing consistent attention on the desired pedagogic goals, continually reinforcing them while avoiding idiosyncratic distractions. “That’s a nice lesson,” she will say to a colleague who suggests a way to approach a particular text, “but it doesn’t quite suit my purposes in teaching this class.” Moreover, a focus on one orientation may enable some teachers to develop a kind of specialized pedagogic expertise, the value of which may be quite significant to their own practice and as a model or source of pedagogic knowledge for others. Just as we prize specialization in research, because of the kinds of knowledge that are only generated by those who are immersed in a certain bounded intellectual terrain for an extended period of time, so too we might prize specialization in teaching.

However, in other circumstances, the pedagogic goals of an institution (or even an individual teacher) may not be well served by specialization or orientational purity. We can imagine a Jewish day school, for example, encouraging teachers to adopt and develop a principled eclecticism in the teaching of rabbinic literature — consciously choosing to employ not one but multiple specific orientations, in order to provide a broader perspective on the field. We can imagine a yeshiva adopting principled eclecticism because of a commitment to teaching Talmud in a sequential fashion, and letting the text itself dictate which orientation is appropriate.³³ Alternatively, we can imagine a school intentionally hiring teachers for orientational diversity — not to be confused with ideological diversity, with which it is not necessarily co-extensive — or constructing a curricular scope-and-sequence so that students encounter orientational diversity over the course of their years in the school, even if any one course is orientationally specific.³⁴

We should not imagine, therefore, that the clarification of orientations ought to lead to the selection of one and only one for any particular teacher. Principled eclecticism is not the same as idiosyncrasy. Careful and critical attention to the orientations can nurture the former and help avoid the latter. As a heuristic device, the menu of orientations can open up new possibilities; it can enable teachers to ask questions about what kinds of knowledge are important in this field, and enable teacher educators, too, to ask questions about what kinds of knowledge are important for teachers to have;

³³ A commitment to teaching a tractate sequentially need not *necessarily* imply a corollary commitment to principled eclecticism, of course. Above I noted that the Bekiut Orientation, in particular, adopts the former commitment, but obviously not the latter. So whereas the Bekiut Orientation also emphasizes sequential coverage, the kind of principled eclecticism that I have in mind, here, is associated with a more in-depth engagement with the text. For each *sugya*, the instructor will ask which orientation seems most appropriate, and pursue that orientation for that particular *sugya* — implicitly expressing a conviction not only about the richness of the text but also about the appropriateness of multiple forms of engagement. I am indebted to Rahel Berkovits for this point.

³⁴ As noted above, in footnote 9, Holtz and Dorph endorse what I am calling here “principled eclecticism” as a form of flexibility that is desirable in all teachers. It is unclear to me whether and why flexibility must necessarily entail, specifically, *orientational* flexibility.

and it can even serve as the framework for discussion *among* teachers—more experienced or less experienced teachers—about the practices of teaching rabbinic literature. Indeed, in my experience exploring the orientations with practitioners, it has already played those roles.

But not only among teachers—and here we come to the third and final purpose of pursuing the menu of orientations. It is common, in fact cliché, to conclude an academic paper with a call for more research, but the reason that we so often do so is that the knowledge that we have gained in the course of a particular inquiry has served to open up new, more finely grained and more nuanced questions. The field of research into the teaching of classical Jewish studies is in its infancy. One benefit that might emerge from this presentation of a menu of orientations to the teaching of rabbinic literature is that it may enable new questions and new inquiries. New research might generate new understanding that calls the menu into question, in whole or in part. Even more intriguingly, new research might now be not only subject-specific but orientation-specific, avoiding the conflation of pedagogic practices that are actually quite distinct. Alternatively, new research might be subject-specific but, equipped with the concepts and language that I have proposed, comparative across orientations.

Thus, if it is true that there are significant differences between orientations, then empirical or conceptual inquiry might focus on understanding the practices within one or another, or typical challenges within one or another. It might focus on the kinds of knowledge that teachers need and use within one or another, or student experiences in and understandings of one as compared to another. The menu of orientations enables these inquiries, and the new insights that emerge from them. This is not the kind of research that will demonstrate impact of a particular method or approach. It is not the kind of research that will help policy makers direct funds towards certain programs or away from others. But it might be the kind of research that, as we develop better and nuanced ways of thinking and talking about the teaching of rabbinic literature, is even more useful for practice.

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Teaching with Tenderness

Toward an Embodied Practice

BECKY THOMPSON

TRANSFORMATIONS: WOMANIST, FEMINIST,
AND INDIGENOUS STUDIES

Edited by AnaLouise Keating



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Introduction

A human mind is small when thinking of small things.
It is large when embracing the maker of walking, thinking and
flying.

—Joy Harjo, *A Map to the Next World*

We are not all that is possible. None of us has ever really
experienced justice. None of us has known enough tenderness.

—June Jordan, "Outside Language"

We still do not know what a body can do.

—Elsbeth Probyn, "Teaching Bodies: Affects in the Classroom"

In one of the many talks June Jordan gave before her untimely passing in 2002, the poet and writer said that none of us has known enough tenderness.¹ This recognition hit me hard partly because as children, many of us did not get the degree of tenderness that we needed. Her insight also made me wonder what it would take to ensure that tenderness be a studied practice in our classrooms as well. I don't mean a kind of "anything goes, coo at all of the answers, take it easy on the number of assigned books and papers" kind of tenderness. By tenderness I mean an embodied way of being that allows us to listen deeply to each other, to consider perspectives that we might have thought way outside our own worldviews, to practice a patience and attentiveness that allow people to do their best work, to go beyond the given, the expected, the status quo. Tenderness makes room for emotion; offers a witness for experiences people have buried or left unspoken; welcomes silence, breath, and movement; and sees justice as key to our survival. I found myself asking, what might a pedagogy of tenderness require of us and make possible that we don't often see in the classroom, in activist circles, in our lives?

Googling “tenderness” doesn’t exactly lead to a number of websites on teaching. You’re more likely to end up in the online grocery aisle for meat tenderizers and grades of veal than on a site for teaching. So I began to reflect, when have I felt tenderness in the classroom? What does it take? What do students have to say on this subject?² I started to understand that the softness and receptivity that I yearn for in the classroom are qualities that are hard to document and ineffable when they arrive. Tenderness assumes a presence of the body in the classroom, which, as it turns out, can be scary to talk, write, and think about. What I discovered is that while there is a growing literature on theories of embodiment, there is very little about what bodies actually do in the classroom.³ And there are all kinds of reasons this is true. I also came to discover that while there is substantial writing by teachers about what they teach, we have been disciplined not to include our bodies and emotions in our stories and analysis.

While this troubles me on many levels, I think what upset me most was realizing the bind that this absence puts “us” in. By “us” I mean those of us who teach about historical accounts of suffering and resistance—slavery, genocide, colonization, and social upheavals. We are in need of a pedagogy that takes into account students’ whole selves—their minds, bodies, emotions, spiritual lives—since accounting for all these levels is necessary for the topics we teach to be most deeply understood. While there is much writing on teaching about injustice—made possible to a large extent by the liberation movements of the past fifty years—we still need to know more about how to teach this material.⁴ It is as if we expect students to hold their bodies the same way, have the same emotions, whether they are studying tax law or genocide in Rwanda, whether they are studying calligraphy or Renaissance literature. Our attention to process has not caught up with our focus on content. The power of attention to embodiment is its ability to link form with content, link our bodies to the lyrics of a freedom song.

My yearning for a pedagogy of tenderness has led me in multiple directions—to multiracial feminist pedagogy for its serious attention to how gender, race, sexuality, religion, disability, nationality, and other social identities manifest in the classroom; to contemplative scholarship for its work on mind-body-spirit connections; and to trauma scholarship for its care in understanding injury and resilience. Each exploration encouraged me to consider what we might learn if these pockets of scholarship were in conversation with each other. And how, in our highly technological and often segregated culture, practicing tenderness in the classroom has become essential for teaching, for our lives.

From Half to Full Moon

MULTIRACIAL FEMINIST PEDAGOGY

Part of what has made a pedagogy of tenderness hard to name is that the resources for such an approach have been scattered across disciplines, space, and time. Not like it used to be, but still. When I started graduate school in the 1980s, interdisciplinarity was still cordoned off to outlier fields—women’s studies, African American studies, and ethnic studies. Specialization in one’s discipline was still the name of the game. Depth was more valued than breadth. The sheer intellectual power of these fields has played a huge part in changing that perspective. Edward Said, Cornel West, Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, June Jordan, Robin Kelley, and many other publicly minded scholars helped lift artificial barriers between disciplines right off their moorings.⁵ Now the disciplines are talking to each other in ways they didn’t before. There are also visionaries outside of the academy whose expansive minds have bridged all kinds of unnecessary gaps in knowledge and understanding. The Dalai Lama’s work to bring together practitioners of meditation with neuroscientists is an exciting example of this bridge work.⁶

Certainly, feminist scholarship on teaching has helped us understand what nurtures and blocks learning in the classroom and the potential of teaching to foster social justice.⁷ Feminist teaching has centered on seeing the classroom as a community of learners (rather than treating faculty as the ultimate and only experts). Learning can be based on cooperation and collaboration, rather than on a star system and competition. Learning doesn’t have to be serious all of the time. Laughter and ease in our bodies can help us be honest about the reading and own lives. Since many topics that are raised in feminist classrooms directly relate to people’s lived experiences in the world, students need to be able to talk about how they relate to the course content.

Feminist pedagogy also recognizes the classroom as a location of power—that inequalities in the larger society manifest themselves in classroom dynamics. Inequalities require us to be specific about the social forces that twist how we hold our bodies in the classroom; who gets to cry, and not; who sits in the front and who sits in the way back; whose hand is most likely to fly up at the beginning of a discussion and whose will likely stay down through the semester. We learn to notice who takes the elevator and who takes the stairs, who buys all of the books new at the beginning of the semester and who borrows one book at a time from the library, and which students have to keep visiting the registrar’s office when class lists include the wrong gender, semester after semester.⁸ This movement teaches us to notice who writes

down what they say before speaking (to protect against losing English words when they are nervous or people are impatient); which students become close with custodial and cafeteria staff, knowing their names, their family members; and why it is important to include Ramadan and Yom Kippur on the syllabus along with Thanksgiving and Christmas.

As a white, able-bodied, English-speaking teacher who came up through the multiracial feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s, I was taught that grappling with the complexities of privilege is crucial if I want a classroom where honesty can be practiced. Lorraine Bethel's "What Chou Mean We, White Girl; or, The Cullud Lesbian Feminist Declaration of Independence (Dedicated to the Proposition That All Women Are Not Equal, i.e., Identically Oppressed)" became a clarion call that a culture of belonging is not automatic. The poem by Black lesbian feminist Pat Parker "For the White Person Who Wants to Know How to Be My Friend" taught us to find an intellectual and emotional space that neither ignores nor belabors race. She opens the poem with "The first thing you do is to forget that I'm Black / Second, you must never forget that I'm Black." From this honest and brave poem, Parker spoke out about what bell hooks labeled "appropriation" and "eating the other" and what Native American Wendy Rose (Hopi) later called "white shamanism"—the white misuse of culture that Black/Native people create and sustain.⁹ Parker expressed, "You should dig Aretha, / But don't play her every time I come over." And "if some Black person insults you . . . Please don't apologize to me . . . it makes me wonder if you are foolish."

Parker's poem and other writing of the 1970s and '80s became a template for many feminists attempting to turn white privilege on its head. From this intense and crucial period in multiracial feminism, I saw that I could not expect women of color to be my educators. After twenty years of white-centered education, I needed to do much of my own catch-up work. I needed to learn about the histories of African American, Latina, Asian, and Native American women as well as the struggles of South Asian, African, Mexican, Central American, Arab, Muslim, and Buddhist women. History, culture, imperialism, region, and sexuality meant that a monolithic concept of women of color made little sense. I needed to listen to the anger of women of color; it is informed by centuries of struggle. And I needed to look to my own history for signs of heresy and rebellion.

I remember in the late 1980s poet Kate Rushin encouraging me to explore the history of struggle of Mormon women, in keeping with Alice Walker's ethic—"in search of our mother's gardens."¹⁰ I recall saying to her, "What about if there was no garden, only weeds" at that point in my life, not know-

ing if there was anything salvageable about such a regressive religion and culture. Kate just looked at me with her big eyes, cajoling me to dig deep, to move forward. From years of mentoring by Jacqui Alexander, I also learned that the "ivory tower" can cost you your life without sustained connection to a living community of dissent, that civil disobedience and hunger strikes deepen what it means to be human, and that hosting Angela Davis, Papusa Molina, Sistren, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and other luminaries to speak on campus will include strenuous, life-affirming conversation and the making of joy long into the night. From Jacqui I learned that activism is a seat of love, rigorous scholarship sustenance for the body and soul.

Alongside the crucial writing and activism about racism and race consciousness (nationally and internationally) of the late 1970s and early 1980s came pivotal writing about disability, class, sexuality, and religion—each helping us to see the classroom as a living space, capable of sparking a revolution or reproducing the very inequalities we claim to oppose.¹¹ From multiracial feminist writing and activism, we saw ways that teaching can shut people down, close their minds, and reinforce their preconceived ideas, or it can give students a real experience of talking as equals across divides they were taught to uphold. I started to get glimpses that in a feminist classroom, tenderness comes when people can sit together and really learn from those they have been taught to drop their gaze around, be intimidated by, and avoid. Tenderness comes from being willing to hold in one's mind more complexity, paradox, and community than was previously thought possible. Tenderness, a fleeting, illuminating reminder that we all belong to each other. A willingness to travel together, to reach into the mysterious, the unknown, where tenderness lives within us. A pedagogy of tenderness: those spontaneous, planned, and found rituals of inclusion that lean us toward justice, that rest on rigorous study, that treat the classroom as a sacred space, that coach each other into habits of deep listening, that treat "memory as an antidote to alienation," that multiply joy.¹²

A pedagogy of tenderness asks us to expand ways to talk about the complexity of identity, to open ourselves to new conceptual frameworks, as Kate Rushin had instructed in "The Bridge Poem": "Stretch or drown / Evolve or die." What the Combahee River Collective first named as the "simultaneity of oppression" in 1977, a concept reflected in political grassroots organizing in Boston to protest the uninvestigated murders of twelve Black women, took on the name "intersectionality" in the late 1980s.¹³ Both concepts alerted us that people's multiple identities cannot be cut apart.¹⁴ When Audre Lorde named herself a Black, lesbian, poet, mother, cancer survivor, and warrior,

she insisted that people not be asked what oppression is more injurious than other, that no one should be asked to leave out essential aspects of themselves (in organizing, in the classroom, in the bed). The shifting, hybrid quality of many identities asked us to reach beyond binaries—as poet Max Wolf Valerio, who identified as “Anita” in the first edition of *This Bridge Called My Back*, called themselves “he” in *Bridge*’s fourth edition; and my chosen daughter’s queer, Southern Ute, African American identity made ridiculous the little tiny boxes on census forms.¹⁵

Terms including Anzaldúa’s *planetary citizen*, Analouise Keating’s *post-oppositional politics*, and Layli Maparyan’s *womanist idea* reflected a movement wanting to see and feel ourselves in ways that are not set in stone.¹⁶ These terms did not tether one’s politics solely to one’s race or gender or sexuality. Anzaldúa asserted that you could be a feminist and a man, a third (or fifth) gender that feels more expansive and expressive than “male” or “female,” a white woman with a women-of-color consciousness.¹⁷ In the classroom, these shifts moved some of us to teach racial identity models as a way to understand trajectories of racial consciousness alongside more fluid models, including Anzaldúa’s *conocimiento*, seven cyclical, nonlinear stages of self- and collective transformation.¹⁸

Among the shifts that feminist pedagogy is incorporating has been transgender insistence on a range of pronouns—he-she-they-them-hir-ze—that unlock patriarchy-centered centuries of tight gender designations, modeling bigger ways of understanding ourselves. Where the body leads, language can follow. The anthology *Pinned Down by Pronouns* became an anthem for transgender organizing in the first decade of the twenty-first century, as had *This Bridge Called My Back* for multiracial feminism in the 1980s. Gender bending, hate crimes against LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex) people, renamed bathroom signs, media attention to Caitlyn Jenner and Janet Mock, people wearing slinky dresses and full beards became public iconography, hashtags, organizing principles, and representatives for the transgender movement. With this embodied stretching, intersectionality has begun to look more like a lively boulevard in Cairo or New York City than a right-angled juncture in a road.

This expansiveness has asked teachers to facilitate cacophonous, lively, and sometimes confusing discussions where people can witness each other’s intellectual and political questions. Keating’s nonoppositional politics invited us to nurture vital discussions about gender expression and identity that draw people together rather than pull them apart.¹⁹ So, for example, religious students who observe clear distinctions between men and women and

transgender activists (with their multiple pronouns) know, in their bones, the threat of hate crimes against people they love. Pairing *We Are all Suspects Now* with *Transgender Warriors* with *The Colors of Jews* provides analysis for how oppressions are interrelated.²⁰ This stretching saves us from postage-stamp discussions stuck in ranking privileges to a bigger place. It asks us to visualize and manifest concerted struggle against Islamophobia, Christian supremacy, and transphobia, that this work is intimately linked.

In these moments, a pedagogy of tenderness makes room for intimacy and vulnerability alongside deep study of guiding texts. It allows people to question each other’s assumptions while still holding everyone in regard. It sometimes can be felt when truth telling, often in the form of personal story, leads to a quiet hush, eyes soft with respect for each other. A pedagogy of tenderness makes room for imagination, for dropping a script and spontaneously trying to teach in a new way, making time for *savasana*, when students come to the class exhausted followed by stretching and dancing together to raise the energy again.

CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES

With the need to facilitate discussions that keep people’s hearts and minds open to each other, feminist faculty have found ourselves searching for rituals of inclusion that can nurture safety and receptivity. Most of us had not been trained to see learning as embodied—that a quiet, receptive mind is connected to a still and relaxed body. The increasing interest in contemplative practices—including mindfulness, meditation, and yoga—in the past twenty years reflects an awareness of the classroom as a living, breathing space. People tend to be most willing to consider alternative ways of seeing issues when they can listen deeply, see each other as whole people, and share a commitment to creating justice.²¹ The high-tech driven feeling that the world is spinning too fast to keep up with, the numbing distance that many faculty feel in the face of bureaucratic policy, and the epidemic of violence in U.S. society are just three of many reasons why more faculty are now turning to contemplation—in their own lives and in the classroom.²²

While the 1974 founding of Naropa University in Colorado by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche is an early example of this renewed interest in contemplative education in the United States, by the 1990s links between the two could be seen in multiple venues—conferences, retreats, fellowships, and pedagogy journals. Highlights from this work include the historic Investigating the Mind conference at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2003 (where a distinguished group of Buddhist scholars and monks and

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well-known psychologists and cognitive scientists spoke about the dramatic changes that meditation makes in the brain), the emergence of more than 250 mindfulness centers linked to medical schools across the world, and the founding of training for faculty interested in mindfulness and meditation.²³

This early work linking contemplation to higher education was nurtured by the 1997 founding of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society in Northampton, Massachusetts. This center offers retreats and workshops for people in law, business, government, and higher education who want to incorporate spiritual practice and social justice into their work. About these efforts, physicist and former center director Arthur Zajonc writes, "The university is well-practiced at educating the mind for critical reasoning, critical writing, and critical speaking, as well as for scientific and quantitative analysis. But is this sufficient? In a world beset with conflicts, internal as well as external, isn't it of equal if not greater importance to balance the sharpening of our intellects with the systematic cultivation of our hearts?"²⁴ Although not formally affiliated with any college or university, the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society serves as a watering hole for faculty. In addition to hosting conferences and providing fellowship support for teachers incorporating contemplation into their pedagogy, the center has also made links between contemplation and racial justice—of seeing contemplation as integral to activism.

One of the most innovative and unique contributions from the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society has been its handbook *The Activist's Ally: Contemplative Tools for Social Change*, written by a multiracial, multifaith group of activists and scholars, that offers specific practices from multiple traditions to encourage social justice activism. This handbook recognizes seven branches of what they call the "Tree of Contemplative Practices"—approaches that extend way beyond traditional monastic forms to include relational practices (such as dialogue, deep listening, storytelling, and council circles), ritual practices (Shabbat/Sabbath, sweat lodges, building an altar), and activist practices (vigils, bearing witness, work).²⁵ With this tree, contemplation extends beyond the realm of Eastern traditions, to include practices among African Americans, Native Americans, and Euro-Americans; the ecstatic world of Rumi's poetry; African praising of ancestors; and hip-hop soul chanting. With this expansiveness, the handbook makes the half moon (where social justice work is cordoned off to one venue, while contemplative work takes place in another) whole, linking meditation with racial justice activism, treating multiracial community development as key to contemplative work.

The Activist's Ally's recognition of yoga as a contemplative practice that can support social justice anticipated the increasing practice of yoga in education.²⁶ For those of us already appreciative of mindfulness and meditation as key ways of inviting calm and focus into the classroom, yoga became another welcome tool, a moving meditation based on listening to the body as a source of memory, wisdom, and awareness.

While research on these practices in higher education is in its infancy, those who have been incorporating yoga philosophy and practice are showing intimate connections between the mind and body in the learning process.²⁷ As yoga scholar Stephen Cope explains, the mind and the body are "made of the 'same stuff': Mind and body simply lie along different points in the spectrum of subtlety. The body is a gross form of consciousness. The mind is a more subtle form of consciousness."²⁸ Yoga philosophy (and increasingly neuroscience) considers the mind a highly intricate network of chemical and electrical connections that exist inside and outside of the body (not only in the brain).²⁹ This network is linked to energy centers in the body (brain, immune system, muscles, heart, and chakras). The mind is capable of observing itself, particularly in moments of stillness, and in resting in vastness.³⁰ The mind seeks contrasts and polarities, as does the body in motion. Practicing yoga asana can calm the mind and body through finding alignment amid polarities.

This alignment becomes helpful in teaching about injustice since discussions about difficult subjects require that we grapple with multiple perspectives. The classroom becomes a holding space for working with polarities, what critical race theorist Mari Matsuda calls "bipolar discourse," a method of consistently being willing to bring in alternative perspectives to encourage deeper discussion and solutions.³¹ Such deepening can feel threatening for students and teachers who come with fixed ideas. Yoga teaches us to work with resistance, to find relaxation in our bodies even when that might feel difficult. Attention is on finding comfort and ease in postures (even difficult ones) through breathing and concentration. This ability, when practiced somatically, is what we are also aiming for in the classroom—to know it is possible to survive discomfort, to move through it.

Yoga and other contemplative practices offer ways to enliven and encourage students, to go deeper than words, to practice silence that allows people to try on new ideas, to take risks with their bodies and minds. These practices can help people to move beyond delusion (denial) and aversion (pushing ideas and awareness away).³² Delusion and aversion are the land where racism and sexism live. These injustices are grand delusions that we have been

taught to accept. Segregated churches, schools, neighborhoods, families, and graveyards are all built on the delusion of racism. The epidemic of violence against women is built on the delusion of sexism. Aversion to the truth means pushing away our lived experience and awareness of these oppressions. All of us know, at the level of the body and mind (since consciousness includes both), that these injustices are taking place all around us.³³ Yoga and meditation, in concert with justice-seeking curriculum, can intervene on states of delusion and aversion before they are translated into action, opening people to feel and speak in ways that might otherwise stay buried.

TRAUMA STUDIES

Another emergence that is integral to a pedagogy of tenderness is the work done by trauma specialists who offer insight into how the human mind and body react to living through or witnessing trauma or both. While this field of study gained renewed interest in response to the unprecedented number of soldiers who returned alive but deeply wounded after the Vietnam War, the field has gained momentum as each subsequent war has brought more vets home who, unlike those in World War II and previous wars, survived physically but not without devastating psychic wounds. Feminist therapists further developed the work on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), showing that the epidemics of child abuse, sexual violence, and crimes against Muslims, Black people, and LGBTQI people are homegrown wars, leaving many of those targeted with traumatic symptoms as well.³⁴ This reality raises questions about the *post* part of PTSD, since many traumas are ongoing.

While the primary treatment for trauma has been within therapeutic contexts, insights from this area have enormous applicability in academic settings. Recent discoveries made in neuroscience have stimulated substantial work on the impact of trauma on thought, emotion, and memory sequencing in the brain.³⁵ Teachers who focus on themes of injustice and its causes are, in many ways, on the front lines in dealing with it. To be effective teachers, we often need to know the direct experiences of violence that students bring to the classroom.

Trauma theory can help teachers understand that when students have a trauma history (both named and not), this reality can leave them shut down, overwhelmed, and disengaged in their studies. "Trauma can act like an eraser," leaving depression and loneliness in its wake.³⁶ This depression may manifest in students' physical bodies (looking down, keeping eyes averted, being afraid to talk in class), in their level of motivation (wanting to be engaged but not knowing how to be), or not being able to feel the rush of really

learning. On the flip side, students who have been traumatized can also be those most willing and able to understand the depth of the course material, to take their experience and extrapolate it to understand other traumatized groups.

Students bring to the classroom the social traumas they have collectively survived. Part of our job involves recognizing that what stands in the way of practicing gentleness and compassion in the classroom mirrors what stands in its way outside of the classroom. As a culture, we have not begun to deal with the astronomical social upheavals in the past two decades that have taken place on top of each other—the 9/11 attacks, the Abu-Ghraib prison abuses, school massacres, police brutality, the rise of Islamophobia, attacks on immigrants, the Katrina and Haiti disasters, and the refugee crisis.³⁷ These are assaults on humanity that students walk into the classroom carrying, whether consciously or not. The impact of this violence translates into our ways of being with each other and how students learn.

While trauma theory helps us more fully work with students, it also gives us ways to see the classroom as a location for healing. One of the essential characteristics of trauma is what Dori Laub has named "a collapse of witnessing."³⁸ By definition, a traumatic event (whether it be sexual abuse, witnessing a murder, or a collective trauma) involves the inability fully to witness the event as it occurs or the ability to witness the event fully only at the cost of witnessing oneself.³⁹ Following trauma you may blank out on what happened or see it only in fragments, like a film strip that was spliced, which may leave you with a haunting sense that something important is missing. Or you may have access to every detail, bringing vigilance to all that happens around you, but then have little awareness of your internal life. Sometimes trauma results in a combination of these protective reactions, all of which can leave you with a disoriented sense of self and belonging.

Recuperation requires the creation of a witness. This reality helps us see the potential healing made possible when assignments help create witnesses. Writing about trauma, then, is not only about developing certain analytical and organizational skills but also about creating a paper trail, a tangible record that an event did, in fact, occur, while attaching emotion to the event, transforming pain into beauty.⁴⁰

Creating witnesses asks us to see that how trauma is experienced and processed is not universal, how trauma is embodied depends upon whose bodies we are talking about. The power of Martín Espada's poem "Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100" pivots on its naming of immigrants from "Ecuador, México, República Dominicana / Haiti, Yemen, Ghana, Bangladesh" who

could “squint and almost see their world” before they lost their lives in the World Trade Center attacks. The profundity of Espada’s poem lies in its specificity, in honoring the alliteration of courage, the union workers who died and their family members who survived, still loving them. “First Writing Since,” by Suheir Hammad, a Palestinian American New Yorker, also speaks to the specificity of trauma as an embodied experience, as well as to the complexity and insanity of the attacks.⁴¹

These two poems offer us ways to teach that begins with specificity, that wraps around creativity, that celebrates the human spirit, that does not shy away from the depth of harm humans do to each other, that makes room for pain. When I asked students in a Birth and Death: The Sociology of Joy and Suffering class I taught at Duke University what happened in their classes on the day of the attack, they said, to a person, that classes went on as if nothing had occurred. My mouth dropped open when they said this. Our unplanned free writing for that day became what they remembered, where they were, what reverberates now. They wrote profound pieces, tears streaming, the witnessing of trauma beginning to be unlocked. About the power of writing, bell hooks explains, “It is usually impossible to explain to folks who are not writers that ideas, words, the whole essay itself may come from a place of mystery, emerging from the deep deep unconscious surfacing, so that even the writer is awed by what appears. Writing then is a revelation. It calls up and stirs up. It illuminates.”⁴²

The creation of a community of deep listeners in a classroom is not only about teaching essential communication skills but also a means for students to bear witness to the stories of their lives. Such a witnessing begins at the level of the body—the actual physical process of being with each other, watching each other’s body language, seeing each other’s expressions, and hanging in there together through difficult, exciting, boring everyday discussions.

Tenderness in Silhouette

What feminist teachers, trauma specialists, and contemplative practitioners share is understanding that teaching and learning start with the body—the happy body, the brown body, the young body, the worried body, the hurt body, the curious body, the growing body. In all of these traditions, the body is the starting place for intellectual, spiritual, and political growth. This common ground may be the most powerful reason that these fields have been at the margins of the academy—to speak about the embodied class flies in the

face of centuries-long academic privileging of the mind over the body, the notion that the intellect will, through disciplined study, reign.

For contemplative practitioners, meditation and yoga start with the breath, the body’s breath. For feminist theorists, women’s lives, work, and relationship to the world start with the body. In Native American philosophy, the earth is woman, is the body, from where we have all emerged. For trauma specialists, healing begins with understanding people’s relationships to their bodies, the memories in their bodies, their ability to safely reside in their bodies. For yoga practitioners, practice begins on the mat, in the body, in the breath of the body.

For me, beginning to understand the centrality of the body in the classroom came from realizing somewhere along the line in my academic training that I had left my body. And I wanted it back. That journey has been nurtured by trying to find my own body through sports, dance, and then yoga.⁴³ My own process has helped me see that how students are in their bodies often tells us much more than what they say. Multiracial feminist theory has also helped explain that there is no monolithic body. This reality requires me to be both focused and relaxed in seeing how embodiment manifests itself in classroom dynamics and styles of learning. Yoga and other contemplative practices help us see how to be genuinely present and attentive with each other as we struggle through challenging material. These practices allow us to witness each other’s healing while cultivating abundance and joy. These are the reasons my musing about teaching circles around the body—the students’ bodies, my body, and the collective body that we, imperfectly but regularly, try to inhabit together.

My hope to connect the analytical and somatic dots among trauma theory, contemplative practices, and multiracial feminism has led me to ponder a number of questions: What rituals might we incorporate into teaching that invite the body into the classroom? What is it about the structure of academe that leads us to flee our bodies? How can we find them again? What risks will this take? What truths do we need to tell about our lives and our teaching that we have been hiding from ourselves, or barely whispering? How might inviting bodies into the classroom change how we seek justice in the world?

In the following chapter, “Thatched Roof, No Walls,” I trace multiple factors that have kept feminist teachers, trauma specialists, and contemplative practitioners from learning from each other. I imagine what it might take to heal disciplinary splits and why it might be worth doing so for academic communities.

In the next two chapters, “Inviting Bodies” and “Creating Rituals,” I reckon with what embodiment looks like in the classroom. I chronicle how I was first invited fully into a classroom as a graduate student by the marvelous mentoring of a deep-listening professor and the books I fell in love with and, then, how I stumbled my way through creating syllabi and pedagogy that invited students into the classroom. I ask what it takes to build multiracial communities in a culture where people across race (and language, class, disability) are slated not to see each other and how I needed to stretch to help make the learning possible. I explore how I turned students away from their questioning spirits and what healing I needed to do to change that. I chronicle why sadness, betrayal, mistrust, and guilt become part of the fabric of classroom dynamics and how creating rituals of inclusion can help people keep their hearts open to each other and the material.

In “Why We Flee,” I chronicle multiple reasons we leave our bodies in academic settings. I trace how racism and a backlash against feminist gains to stop sexual harassment have policed our attempts to stay embodied when we teach, compromising our abilities to thrive as orators, as compassionate listeners, as people excited about our research. I give examples of the cues I missed when students could not fully engage with the course material and how understanding trauma can help us become more alert to students’ courage as they grapple with difficult material. I offer examples of how I have relied upon the creative writing by Yusef Komunyakaa, Rafael Campo, Saphire, Edwidge Danticat, and other writers to teach about resilience in the face of war, homophobia, colonialism, and other violations. I also examine what students have taught me about the risks involved in being present in the process. The chapter ends with discussion of the synergistic relationship between the qualities of the mind and the sheaths of the body, in particular how yoga might catapult us to a place of deep connection and joy.

In “To You, I Belong,” I reckon with historical memory as an embodied concept. Teaching asks us to identify and work with memories in our bodies. The memories that we store often defy coherent narratives, require us to patchwork sensation with emotion, an energetic presence with evidence shaken by time.⁴⁴ The presence and insistence of historical memory inevitably ask us to make room for fear, grief, betrayal, confusion, and ambivalence, and sometimes a combination of all of those emotions. Dealing with historical memory isn’t easy—our own or our students’ memories. Working closely with the student life office, counseling services, and other support centers becomes crucial. At the same time, outsourcing emotional work to spaces beyond the classroom runs the risk of separating content from process, the

mind from the body (a symptom of alienated labor in the Marxist sense of the word). This outsourcing can send a message that a teacher is not up to the task of witnessing student journeys. In the chapter, I share some examples of when students were willing to share an embodied presence in the classroom and what they teach through their courage.

In the concluding chapter, I grapple with what bringing tenderness into the world might look like. Student willingness to question medical authorities in order to protect their children, to learn about a family history of living under fascism in Europe, and to become a bridge across generation and ethnicity gives a few of many examples of often unsung, uncelebrated ways that the tenderness can dance into our lives. From truth-telling by students, I turn to tenderness quite unexpectedly showered in my direction when I stood on the shore in Lesbos, Greece, waiting for refugees coming from Syria, Afghanistan, Palestine, Pakistan, and other war-torn countries. As they risked their lives to save their lives on perilous rafts from Turkey to Greece, I witnessed the biggest refugee crisis since World War II that, I came to understand, was also the biggest intergenerational, multiethnic, multifaith peace march in modern history.⁴⁵ Daily I witnessed great acts of tenderness, sometimes in a place of language, sometimes in the air, on a raft, in the water, walking up a mountain pass with children and elders. I am overwhelmed by the dignity I saw. I am overwhelmed by the merciless power of multiple states, the capacity of the human spirit to survive. During the months of walking, talking, and listening, paradox became a constant companion. The sea, a graveyard; the sea, a current to safety; the sea, merciless and beautiful. The strawberry trees lining roads where we walked were skinless and radiant in the summer sun.

While colonialism, militarism, racism, and patriarchy remain structural impediments to tenderness, as teachers we find ourselves digging deep, knowing that, as Angela Davis has written, “without deep, abiding practices of self care, there can be no radical social transformation.” So this is where we start, rethinking our relationship to grading, office hours, faculty meetings, tests. We want to be able to send students off ready to do justice work. Such work may start with examining what Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet has called the “jewel at the left side of your chest.”⁴⁶ Our own jewels in this lifetime.

For You, I Write

As I have imagined those who might be reading this book, I have pictured students who are doing all they can to stay whole even as pressures and educational injuries disregard them. I have pictured teachers in the social

sciences and humanities who, amid the din of bureaucracy and the ache of a bloody world, are trying to nurture liberatory classrooms. I have also written for those in the sciences, partly because my first exposure to practicing freedom in the classroom was as an undergraduate teaching assistant (TA) in an inorganic chemistry class. The professor willed us to work together, insisted that it was our responsibility that everyone understood, and got us moving around the classroom, treating collaborative blackboard work and seeing each other's eyes as key to learning.

I also hope that K-12 teachers will find companionship in the book. I was raised by a public high school teacher whose creativity and ingenuity enlivened thirty years of students but also often left my mother alone in the teachers' lunchroom, exhausted at the end of her days. At twenty-five years old and a single mother of two young girls, Sally Abood fought the school administration in order to teach *Montage for a Dream Deferred* (a multiracial anthology of poems, prose, and art) in an urban high school in Phoenix in the 1960s when the country was on racial fire. And she taught world poetry and art way before the new curriculum curve.

I also write for Shannon Farrington, a poet and former graduate student whose teaching of students with special needs in the Boston public schools bursts with subversive imagination. After Shannon read an earlier version of this book, she said, "K-12 teachers are craving tenderness, especially specific rituals to keep themselves and their students alive to learning." She added, "Everything you identify that professors are up against, we face, but worse. Teachers are not embodied in the classroom, so how can we expect students to be? The teachers who prioritize this are given bad evaluations and usually choose (are forced) to leave teaching altogether." I hope Shannon writes her own book on tenderness, one that will reach deeper than this one. May this book be a holding pattern until Shannon's arrives.

This book was also written for skeptics—those who shake their heads as you read, put the book down, and then maybe pick it up again. I want to learn from your skepticism. I write for yoga teachers who want to bring social justice to the center of their teaching, trauma specialists who work with students as they try to stay whole as they study. For anyone who, in the words of Otis Redding, will "try a little tenderness."

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Thatched Roof, No Walls

The rise of feminist pedagogy, trauma theory, and contemplative practices can all contribute to a more expansive and humane teaching. Yet conversations among people in these fields are just beginning. For the most part, it still feels like teachers carry our minds to one place (to work, the classroom, our desks), our bodies to another (to the gym, yoga studio, or couch), our spirits to another (to church, synagogue, mosque, mountains), our psychic healing to another (to the couch, the bed, to vacations), and our activism to another (to prisons, borders, the streets). Students sense and feel these splits. They are trying to learn amid these splits. And we are, somehow, trying to teach amid these splits.

This is why creating a pedagogy of tenderness requires its own new bridge work that is asking us to think bigger than we have before, to start from a place of imagination and go from there. For starters, I imagine the coming together of people who practice tenderness but have not necessarily been talking with each other. While we would need a big room for such a gathering, I certainly wouldn't want it to be a windowless, overly air-conditioned hotel conference room. Instead, since this is all in my imagination, let's opt for the gathering to be in a warm place where there is a domed, thatched roof but no walls, just open space looking out onto a sea, or mountains, or hills. Let's imagine that there is public transportation to this meeting site—maybe a properly funded Amtrak with a stop close to the thatched gathering. And let's imagine that anyone who wants to come can (which means child care, wheelchair ramps, plenty of different kinds of food, rugs for praying five times a day, and soft chairs for people who need to sit).