Studying the Talmud: 400 Repetitions and the Divine Voice

By Henry Abramson

Excellence in the Academy Awards

Art of Teaching

> *Rabbi Hanina said:*
> *from my teachers I learned much,*
> *from my colleagues still more,*
> *but from my students most of all.*[1]

I received my introduction to the Talmud during my senior year as an undergraduate.

In subsequent years, while I was completing graduate course work, taking comprehensive exams, and writing my dissertation in Jewish history, I developed an intense and abiding love for ancient and medieval Rabbinic texts, with their alternate universe of rigorous but unconventional logic, enigmatic statements of sweeping metaphysical import, and subtle humor reserved for the initiated.

By the time I received my first tenure-track position, I was fortunate to have spent several years alternating between working on my academic career and intense Talmudic study in Ohr Somayach yeshivahs in America and Israel. The time spent immersed in Talmudic studies had a profound effect on my understanding of the delicate art of teaching.

The record of thousands of arguments of hundreds of rabbis set to writing sometime during the sixth century in Babylon, the Talmud is a sweeping commentary on the Mishnah, a third-century compendium of Jewish law.[2] The primary purpose of this massive document was to discuss and clarify the ambiguities inherent in the Mishnah.

Information in the Talmud is divided into two basic categories: legal material, dealing with a gamut

***Henry Abramson** is an assistant professor in the history department and the program of Holocaust and Judaic Studies at Florida Atlantic University. He is the author of* A Prayer for the Government: Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times, 1917-1920 *(Harvard, 1999). He has received numerous research and teaching awards, including the FAU Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Education and the Kathleen Raymond Award for Excellence in Education, and he was named the Distinguished Professor of the year by the Phi Alpha Theta History Honors Society.*

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of regulation, from minutiae of how to return lost objects to how to examine witnesses in capital cases, and miscellaneous material called *aggadata* that treats Jewish metaphysics, incidents in the lives of ancient rabbis, recipes and popular sayings of the non-Jewish Babylonians.

The material is organized in a distinctly non-Western fashion, as sort of a long stream-of-consciousness discussion with tenuous links connecting the payment of damages for a cow that has been gored by an ox, to reflections on the ultimate purpose of human existence, to the various lessons one may derive from the behavior of a cat.

Besides its unusual structure and expansive subject matter, the Talmud is written in a virtually opaque fashion, requiring long and intensive training to master the coded nature of the Aramaic text.

Unfettered by punctuation, for example, any given Talmudic text can be read in radically dissimilar ways, several of which may be possible readings but most of which will result in error.

To give you an example of how this skill is internalized by yeshivah students, one of the institutions I attended had a large population of students from the recently collapsed Soviet Union. Perhaps fearing that the yeshivah was precariously funded (most are), these students had a bad habit of going through the cafeteria line for free second and even third portions, and taking the extra food up to their rooms to ensure that they would not go hungry in case the cafeteria ever failed to open.

As I walked into the cafeteria for lunch one day, I noticed the following sign:

> THE YESHIVAH PROVIDES FOOD FOR ONE PORTION ONLY
>
> NO STUDENT IS PERMITTED TO STAND IN LINE FOR SECOND PORTION

When I walked out of the cafeteria half an hour later, I noticed that someone had altered the sign in a subtle, Talmudic manner:

> THE YESHIVAH PROVIDES FOOD FOR ONE PORTION ONLY?
>
> NO! STUDENT IS PERMITTED TO STAND IN LINE FOR SECOND PORTION!

A significant portion of a student's time in yeshivah is spent developing sensitivity to these variant readings, and one who masters these readings and their implica-

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tions is referred to as an *oker horim* —"one who uproots mountains."[3]

There is a popular story—most likely apocryphal, but nevertheless telling—of a certain law professor in a midwestern university who often has several yeshivah students enrolling in his large introductory survey course. The story goes that at the end of the first lecture, he calls down the six or seven yeshivah students for a private conversation, telling them "you leave me alone—and I'll leave you alone."

Although the yeshivah has intellectual roots in ancient Israel and medieval Europe, North Africa and Central Asia, the dominant pedagogical style of contemporary yeshivahs is based on a model developed in 19th-century Lithuania, and in particular the yeshivah of Volozhin, where learning took place 24 hours a day.[4]

Education in adult yeshivah is radically different from that in the university. There are no grades, for example—no exams, no graduation, no hierarchical arrangement of students based on age or years spent in education.[5]

Most study is conducted communally in a large hall called a *beis medresh*, with students divided into pairs called *hevrusas* ("friends" or "colleagues" in Aramaic). The classic forms of study in the university—students isolated in library carrels silently absorbing the written word, or sitting in darkened lecture halls as a single professor drones on for 50 uninterrupted minutes—are largely absent in the yeshivah.

Walk into the *beis medresh* and you will be confronted with a cacophony—some 300 students sitting opposite each other and arguing passionately, defending their delicately nuanced readings of the Talmudic text that lies before each of them.

Rather than spending their time preparing copious notes for their lectures, the teachers research the texts and design questions for the students themselves to answer, while other teachers weave their way through the gesticulating students, correcting a slight misreading here and offering guidance on unfamiliar concepts.

A typical day for an advanced adult student would begin around 7:00 a.m. with communal prayers lasting about 45 minutes, followed by breakfast. The students would then meet their *hevrusa* in the *beis medresh* and spend several hours analyzing the assigned material together.

Sometime around 11:00 a group of about 12 students would meet with a rabbi, sitting around a table in a seminar-like setting, and go over the text as a group. The rabbi's role would primarily be that of

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moderator, guiding the discussion and managing the debate of the students rather than exclusively presenting his own analysis. After approximately two hours of passionate argument, the groups would reassemble in the *beis medresh* for collective prayer followed by lunch.

The early afternoon period is the least structured, with students reviewing material, studying other texts, or simply running errands.

Around 3:00 p.m. students gather in the *beis medresh* for another round of study, but this time with different *hevrusas* and usually looking at a different tractate of the Talmud.[5]

Often the morning is dedicated to detailed study of a text in depth (*be-iyun*), while the afternoon session spent covering more text for broad, survey-like knowledge (*bekius*). The afternoon session is interrupted by a brief evening prayer and dinner, and the evening program is similar to the afternoon, continuing until approximately 10:00 p.m.

The main emphasis of the day is on the text studied in the morning, which is shared by the entire student body, regardless of ability. The afternoon and evening texts are typically elective in nature, with different levels of students looking at texts geared to their strengths.

To be sure, the pedagogy of the yeshivah is difficult to reconcile with the systems used in today's university setting. Besides the fact that Talmudic study is based upon and supported by a strong religious faith, it is also highly androcentric, with men studying texts written by men for men.[6]

Nevertheless, there are many elements of the educational philosophy of the yeshivah that have enhanced my own teaching style.

From my teachers at yeshivah, I learned how to love learning itself. This is of course intrinsic to traditional Jewish culture. At the age of three, for example, a child begins his or her introduction to learning by being presented with a clean board covered in honey. The parent takes the child's finger and slowly traces out the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, allowing the child to lick his or her finger after each letter, demonstrating that "learning is sweet."

This philosophy reaches its apex at the yeshivah, where learning *lishmah*—roughly translated as "for its own sake"—is considered the highest goal. There are no grades, and students do not automatically switch to a more intense study group with the passage of a term—"advancement" (the term itself is problematic) is based on a *gestalt*-like decision made by

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the administration after considering the student's mastery of the text, personality, and individual needs.

Graduation is not considered the goal; rather, a student only leaves the yeshivah because of the pressing economic demands of providing for a growing family. Even after leaving full-time study the student will have a strong relationship to the institution as an alumnus, participating in evening sessions and financially supporting the yeshivah.[7]

The rabbis who guided my yeshivah experiences were the very embodiment of this philosophy. Their primary concern was to help us develop independence and self-motivation in our studies. Their teaching and their research were largely identical, and they exuded a palpable joy when we demonstrated our growing ability to master the assigned material.

Of course, we were intimidated by our teachers, but without grades or exams it was not for the fear of punishment (*yiras ha-onesh*). We stood in awe of them because of our fear that we would not live up to the expectations they placed on us (*yiras ha-romemus*). This is an empowering kind of fear—a respect that inspires excellence and precisely the attitude I try to project to my students.

Grades are essential to tertiary education. I would not be comfortable, for example, being treated by a physician who received his medical degree by the consensus of his professors in medical school without formal examination. Nevertheless, in our dollar-driven world, I find that many students lose sight of the fundamental purpose of an education, particularly in the humanities, because of their blinkered blindness to anything but the almighty grade. I have to assign grades, and assign them meaningfully, but my yeshivah teachers continually demonstrated how to inculcate a love of the material studied itself, and not merely its external, secondary reward.

Perhaps the most significant anthropological artifact that illustrates this love of learning is the title bestowed on the most advanced faculty members: *talmid hakham*, or "wise student." The title "Rabbi" is less significant—many of the adult students have already received the title, and in fact it is so common that when meeting a stranger with a beard, one usually politely addresses them as "Rabbi."

On the other hand, few reach the level where they are known as a *talmid hakham*. Not "wise teacher," but "wise student." Teacher and student are, after all, merely on different points of the

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same continuum.

In the university, respect for professors is motivated in large part because of the tangible power differential between student and teacher, an inevitable byproduct of the grading-and-graduating system. Respect earned through admiration is a far more valuable commodity, won by placing emphasis on the fact that students and teachers are brought together in the classroom by our common interest in a subject of study.

Yet, intimidation has its place. The Talmud describes the ideal teacher-student relationship as one in which the teacher "pushes away with the left hand while the right draws close" (*Sotah* 47a). The right hand, which in Talmudic as in western thought is symbolic of greater strength and dexterity, "draws close" in the sense that teachers should develop a warm, caring relationship with students.

The left hand, which is weaker, should at the same time preserve a sense of distance between teacher and student. Some teaching styles require a professor to "push away with both hands." Students in this situation often feel misunderstood and resentful. Other teaching styles "draw close with both hands." Students become disoriented when these boundaries are blurred, with potentially disastrous results, both academically and legally.

The most important element of the learning in yeshivah is the time spent with one's *hevrusa* (study partner). A great amount of emphasis is placed on finding the right *hevrusa* and maintaining a positive relationship with that person, so much so that the terms usually associated with marriage are often used in this context.

"A *hevrusa* or death," proclaims the Talmud (*Ta'anit* 23a). More than this, "students who sit alone and study become stupid" (*Berakhot* 63b). The particular quality that is especially valued in a *hevrusa* is the ability to disagree sharply with one's partner, admitting defeats with dignity and accepting victories with grace.

Tellingly, when one *hevrusa* proves his interpretation of a disputed point, the bested *hevrusa* pronounces the blessing *barukh she-kivanta* upon him: "blessed are you for having understood."

This kind of collegial relationship is difficult to achieve in a university setting, which generally does not lend itself to learning in small groups or pairs. Most academicians engage in lonely pursuit of their scholarly interests, and many jealously guard their territory by overly narrow specialization and even selective character assassination, building their reputations on

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the rubble of others.

Are we really surprised when our students engage in plagiarism and other forms of cheating? I remember well how one undergraduate in a large class would actually razor out important articles from library copies of journals in a vain, destructive attempt to keep the information to himself. Is this so different in character from much of what we faculty are often guilty of, albeit with greater subtlety?

Despite the obstacles presented by the current culture of learning in the academy, striving to establish a level of mutual respect among students should be one of our primary goals. If learning is sweet, it is still sweeter when the experience is shared with others.

This is not to say that academic competition is to be minimized—quite the opposite. The Talmud teaches, "jealousy among scholars increases wisdom" (*Bava Batra* 21a). This kind of jealousy allows a student to rejoice in the success of another, while spurring him or herself on to greater efforts.

The Greek model of education that animates the university is primarily one in which the teachers provide the students with information. This transaction takes place in an almost commercial fashion: we know certain things, or how to do certain things, and for a price, we will give this knowledge to the students. The Socratic method is merely a variation on this theme, in which we help students realize that which they could have known had they received training in proper thinking.

The Talmud, however, asserts that learning is not a type of transaction in which goods are exchanged. The student and teacher are locked in a symbiotic relationship, from which the teacher gains the most from the activity of the student.

It is related that when Reish Lakish died, his teacher and *hevrusa* Rabbi Yohanan was exceptionally distraught. Rabbi Elazar ben P'dat tried to take the place of the deceased Reish Lakish—and for whatever statement Rabbi Yohanan made, Rabbi Elazar ben P'dat found supporting proofs. Rabbi Yohanan said to him, "Do you suppose you are like the son of Lakish? The son of Lakish—whenever I would say anything, he would pose 24 difficulties, and offer 24 counter arguments, and thus the matter was clarified. You, on the other hand, want to bring *proofs* for my statements?!?" (*Bava Metsia* 84a).

Indeed, the Mishnah lists 48 qualities necessary for a person to acquire the wisdom of Torah, and one of them is "cross-examination by students" (*Avot* 6:6).

Good students keep us honest.

The energy and thirst for knowledge that students infuse in the relationship is a constant inspiration.

They demand that we know what we are talking about—and since we have to explain it clearly, we have to understand it clearly as well. Students don't expect perfection, but they don't want their questions to be dismissed or dodged. The Mishnah lists seven qualities of a wise person, and one of them is "regarding that which he has not understood, he says, 'I have not understood'." (*Avot* 5:9).

It's not so much what the student knows that makes the difference, as we all rejoice in bright, motivated undergraduates just as much as we do with a sharp Ph.D. candidate. It is rather the attitude to learning that the students infuse in the relationship—their energy and thirst for knowledge is a constant inspiration, and can make us remember that teaching is a calling as well as a profession.

One of my most favorite stories from the Talmud describes the special teaching style of Rabbi Preida (Eruvin 54b):

> Rabbi Preida had a student whom he would teach [a given topic] 400 times, and the student would learn it. One day they needed Rabbi Preida for a certain matter. He taught the student, but the student did not learn.
>
> [Rabbi Preida] said to [the student], "What is different today?"
>
> [The student] replied, "From the moment they said to the master [i.e., Rabbi Preida] that there was a matter of religious import to attend to, my mind was distracted, and I said to myself every moment, 'now the master will leave, now the master will leave.'"
>
> [Rabbi Preida] said to him, "Pay attention and I will teach you."
>
> He taught him another 400 times.
>
> A Divine Voice called out, saying to Rabbi Preida, "Would you prefer to live 400 years or have your entire generation merit the World to Come?"
>
> He answered, "That I and my generation merit the World to Come."
>
> The Holy One who is Blessed answered, "Give him both."

Several elements of this classic piece of *aggadata* are important for our purposes. As professional educators, of course, we cannot but be impressed with Rabbi Preida's incredible dedication to a student that most of us would have sent to the remedial center long before the 40th, let alone 400th, repetition.

It is this unswerving devotion to the learning process that allowed Rabbi Preida to merit a year for each of the repetitions. (The medieval commentary of Tosafot, *s.v.* "*t'nu lo zo ve-zo*," points out that the Talmud attributes his unusual longevity to the fact that he was always the first person to arrive in the study hall every morning.)

But, on a more sophisticated level, note what prevented the student from learning: *He felt that Rabbi Preida did not want to be there.* He said to himself, "Now the master will leave, now the master will leave."

This is a profound insight into the psychology of learning. As teachers, we must exude the love of learning that we hope to inculcate in our students. We must want to be there, even if we have taught History of World Civilization 399 times over 20 continuous semesters.

Furthermore, note that Rabbi Preida was offered a choice of reward: He could live for 400 years, and accumulate a tremendous amount of merit for his life in the World to Come.

Yet he elects to use the merit he has earned by teaching this student to benefit his entire generation.[8] Despite—or perhaps because of—his self-sacrifice, he is given *both* long life *and* brings great benefit to the generation.

In some ways, I would like to think that we educators participate in this decision of Rabbi Preida. Certainly the years spent in graduate school, particularly in most fields of the arts and humanities, would have earned far more this-worldly benefit for ourselves had we devoted our scholarly energies to more lucrative pursuits.

We nevertheless chose to engage in the field of education—and thereby, like Rabbi Preida, we have the potential of conferring benefit on an entire generation of students. ■

Endnotes

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Professor John O'Sullivan, former Chair of the Department of History at Florida Atlantic University: a dear senior colleague, wise mentor, and true Christian. He is sorely missed.

[1] *Ta'anit* 7a. All citations are from the standard Babylonian Talmud; translations are my own.

[2] A useful English-language introduction to the Talmud is Zebi Hirsch Chajes, *The Student's Guide Through the Talmud*, London: East and West Library, 1952.

[3] Hebrew and Aramaic admit of several styles of pronunciation. I have elected to transliterate citations with the scholarly standard of Israeli pronunciation (Ta'anit, not taynis), but will employ Ashkenazic transliteration for colloquial usage (*beis medresh*, not *beit midrash*).

[4] For a detailed treatment of the genesis of the modern yeshivah movement, see Shaul Stampfer, *Ha-yeshivah ha-Lita'it be-hithavutah* Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar le-Toledot Yisrael, 1995. A more popular English

treatment may be found in Berel Wein, *Triumph of Survival: The Story of the Jews in the Modern Era*, 1648-1990 Brooklyn, NY: Shaar Press, 1997.

[5] It is important to note at this point that these comments do not properly apply to Yeshiva University, a major degree-granting research university in New York City. Yeshiva University represents an attempt to unite the traditional methods of yeshiva study, employed widely in their Rabbinical school, with a strong program in Jewish studies and a full secular curriculum including a medical and a law school. For an English-language treatment more reflective of traditional yeshivahs, see William Helmreich, *The World of the Yeshiva: An Intimate Portrait of Orthodox Jewry* New York: Free Press, 1982.

[6] Several yeshivahs for women exist, primarily in Israel and New York. They are a 20th-century innovation, however, since formalized education for Jewish women has lagged centuries behind that of men. These women's yeshivahs borrow heavily from university-style pedagogy, and are broadly similar to undergraduate degree-granting institutions.

[7] Please note that I am speaking here about yeshivahs for adults, i.e., post high-school. Most yeshivahs in America for boys under 18 incorporate a secular high school curriculum in the afternoon hours, using the familiar methods of pedagogy and age-based advancement.

[8] I am grateful to Rabbi Yaakov D. Homnick for this interpretation.