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A Menu of Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature

JON A. LEVISOHN

Following the work of Grossman (1991) in the teaching of English literature and Holtz (2003) in the teaching of Bible, this article develops a menu of orientations for the teaching of rabbinic literature. First, the author explores and clarifies the idea of orientations. Then, each of ten orientations to the teaching of rabbinic literature is described and discussed: the Torah Orientation; the Contextual Orientation; the Jurisprudential Orientation; the Halakhic Orientation; the Literary Orientation; the Cultural Studies Orientation; the Historical Orientation; the Be kiut Orientation; the Interpretive Orientation; and the Skills Orientation. Finally, the conclusion identifies some purposes for developing this menu.

We use the language of “subjects” in education all the time. We talk about the subject of math, or English, or rabbinic literature. In higher education, we talk about “disciplines,” 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? What is any particular subject—such as rabbinic literature—about?

We might be tempted to say that an academic discipline shares a particular methodology, that the practitioners of a discipline share a set of rules or...
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procedures that govern the conduct of their inquiry. But as we get closer to any particular discipline—chemistry, sociology, philosophy—and notice the multiple procedures of inquiry in use, any initial confidence in that formulation evaporates. In fact, getting a clear idea about what constitutes a subject or a discipline is quite difficult. Instead, as Israel Scheffler 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 1968/1989, p. 89). Subjects represent historically contingent marriages of convenience, bounded by common questions, frameworks, or modes of inquiry.

Subjects and disciplines 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.1 The teaching of history, for example, is carried out very differently in different contexts. Wineburg and Wilson (1988/2001) demonstrate this point in a simple and elegant way: they show the reader not one but two teachers of history, both skilled and knowledgeable, both generating intense engagement, and both contributing to deep and meaningful learning. But the two teachers approach the teaching of their subject in fundamentally different ways. The contrast dramatically illustrates that just as the study 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 documented the diversity among novice teachers of English, who approached their subject with fundamentally distinct understandings of the subject and, hence, with distinct pedagogic practices (see Grossman, 1991).2 To make sense of that diversity, Grossman superimposed a taxonomy, borrowed from literary theory, of three approaches to literary interpretation. She calls these three approaches a “text orientation,” a “reader orientation,” and a “context orientation,” and she emphasizes the seriousness and depth of these orientations. “More than a casual attitude toward the subject matter, an orientation toward literature represents a basic organizing framework for knowledge about literature” (p. 248).

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1Naturally, this is not to deny that there are also significant commonalities. Grossman and Stodolsky (1995) argue that efforts to understand and change secondary school often founder because of a lack of awareness of subject subcultures, the way that the work of teaching math is (in certain respects) unlike the work of teaching history.

2Wineburg, Wilson, and Grossman all initiated 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, namely, research on subject-specific (rather than subject-neutral) pedagogy (Shulman, 1986, 1987). Thus, in an echo of Shulman’s manifesto, Grossman (1991) writes: “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” (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” (Grossman, 1991, 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 different conceptions contribute to different pedagogic practices. And so, the concept of a teaching orientation was born.3

Grossman does not claim that her three orientations 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 is the way that different experiences—studying a subject in college, 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. However, about 10 years later, Barry Holtz (2003) saw the potential significance of the idea of orientations for the teaching of Tanakh.

Holtz freely acknowledges his debt to Grossman, but he builds on Grossman in two ways. First, Holtz expands her 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 Table 1).

The expansion of the number of orientations should not be misinterpreted as a claim that the teaching of Bible is more complex 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.

Consider, for example, Holtz’s ideational orientation, which focuses on reading biblical texts in order to discern their big ideas. This makes sense in contexts where the text is presumed to present such a big or complex idea or set of ideas (e.g., the study of Bible in certain Jewish educational settings). More significantly, it makes sense because Holtz had in front of him

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3I do not mean to suggest that the idea of orientations sprang forth fully formed in 1991. In “Teachers of Substance,” Grossman, Wilson, and Shulman (1989) employ an 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 coauthored by Grossman, dating back several years (e.g., Grossman, Reynolds, Ringstaff, & Sykes, 1985).
examples of Bible curricula that made the study of the big ideas behind the biblical text their focus, and examples of teachers who taught toward those big ideas. He knew what such teaching looked like. 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, and in helping them become more conscious of their implicit conceptions of the subject matter. Her point is that teachers’ pedagogical choices are influenced not just by their knowledge, but by their beliefs—and not just by their beliefs in general, but by their beliefs about teaching this particular subject. This is why the taxonomy itself is not centrally important for Grossman. In fact, in her 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 using the typology of orientations and without the linkage between conceptions and characteristic pedagogical practices associated with those conceptions. Holtz, however, develops his map of orientations with an eye toward its use in the professional development of teachers. 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 article 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.

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4 What emerges from our work,” Grossman and her colleagues (1989) 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” (p. 32).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Pam Grossman: Orientations to the teaching of English</th>
<th>Barry Holtz: Orientations to the teaching of Bible</th>
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<td>Reader orientation</td>
<td>1. Contextual orientation</td>
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<td>Text orientation</td>
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THE CONCEPT OF A TEACHING ORIENTATION

Grossman (1991) writes that an orientation is “more than a casual attitude toward the subject matter” (p. 248). For his part, Holtz (2003) 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 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? (pp. 48–49)

First, then, a negative definition: An orientation is not a casual attitude, and it is not a pedagogic method or technique. For example, “studying a tractate sequentially” is a technique, not an orientation. (Whether to study a masekhet sequentially or whether to select topics—teaching “thetically”—is certainly an important pedagogic choice, but that choice itself is not comprehensive enough to be an orientation and is compatible with multiple orientations.5) Other techniques, such as using computers or graphic organizers to display the logic of a sugya, are also not orientations. (There may well be certain orientations—those that emphasize technical halakhic discussions—for which graphic organizers are more helpful, and others for which they are not; speculation about whether graphic organizers are “good” are meaningless in the absence of articulated pedagogic objectives within the subject.6) Instead, an orientation is broader and deeper than the techniques a teacher employs. Even hevruta, paired study, which should be understood as a practice (Holzer, 2006; Kent, 2006) rather than 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 to which Holtz refers are conceptions about the subject’s boundaries, its central challenges, and its purposes. They are

5Anecdotally, this issue receives a great deal of time and energy among practitioners. But I am suggesting that these discussions may be occurring without sufficiently robust conceptions of the teaching of rabbinic literature. Indeed, one measure of the success of my argument in this article might be that practitioners will argue for or against teaching a tractate sequentially or teaching thematically in terms of a larger conceptual model of teaching rabbinic literature, rather than merely arguing about the technique outside of any orientational context.

6See Amid (2001) and Kanarek (2002). Also see Hayman’s (1997) dismissive stance toward technological innovations in teaching Talmud: “Flowcharts, sophisticated technologies, computer simulations and hypertext applications, even more-effective teachers, cannot solve today’s crisis in Talmud study because the crisis is not fundamentally didactic . . . didactic creativity cannot adequately compensate for fundamental methodological misconceptions.” I would not endorse Hayman’s use of “misconceptions,” because there are multiple potentially appropriate conceptions, but I agree with his general point: the challenge is not primarily a technical one but a conceptual one.
conceptions of what the subject is about and why it is worth teaching and learning. However, an orientation is not a conception of ultimate purposes, nor does it flow directly or necessarily from an ideological or religious stance toward the subject. This may seem counterintuitive because many assume that the most significant pedagogical fault line lies between those who treat classical texts as sacred (in some sense) and those who do not, between devotional readings and critical ones, between a hermeneutics of trust and a hermeneutics of suspicion. But in the study of Jewish texts, such an abstract conception may be theologically meaningful but pedagogically inert. The affirmation that one is encountering the word of God (in some sense) provides little pedagogic guidance. Likewise, the idea that one is encountering a text that is not the word of God is also compatible with a very wide range of pedagogic practices. Something similar is the case with other subjects, too. A passionate instructor of mathematics might wax poetic about the astonishing beauty of mathematics; she might defend its role as a fundamental language of the universe; she might expound on the centrality of a sophisticated understanding of number systems to her conception of human flourishing. But none of these convictions alone will 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, including theological conceptions, but it is inevitable that the more abstract, the loftier, the more ultimate one’s conception, the less it will guide pedagogy.

Thus, an orientation combines a set of teachers’ conceptions and characteristic practices that hang together in a coherent way. The former is essential because an orientation is not merely technique; the latter is essential 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 this article.) 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. We might say that an orientation to the teaching of a subject is like a conceptual model of the teaching and learning of that particular subject.7

7See Israel Scheffler’s (1965/1989) well-known essay, “Philosophical Models of Teaching,” in which he suggests that ‘models do not so much aim to describe teaching as to orient it, by weaving together a coherent picture out of epistemological, psychological, and normative elements. Like all models, [models of teaching] simplify, but such simplification is a legitimate way of highlighting what are thought to be important features of the subject’ (pp. 67–68). It is important to note, here, that while I am clearly building on earlier work in developing my conception of a teaching orientation, there are other usages within the educational research literature—or more specifically, within the literature on the teaching of Jewish studies—that differ slightly from my own. I should mention, first, the work of Inbar Galili Schachter (2002, 2009). In her empirical study of 12 teachers of Jewish thought in Israel high schools, Galili Schachter (2002) generated five pedagogic hermeneutic orientations—five distinct conceptions of the nature of textual interpretation and the respective roles of the teacher and student in the process. While there are interesting connections between the orientations to the teaching of Jewish thought and
So the first definitional point is to distinguish an orientation from a technique, on the one hand, and from an ideology on the other. The second definitional point is to distinguish an orientation from a research methodology. This is an important point to emphasize because of an inclination to proliferate finer and finer grained orientations. 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 under one orientational roof. Consider the orientation to the teaching of Bible that Holtz labels the contextual orientation. 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 (2003) writes, “It views the Bible as a record of an ancient civilization, and it hopes to make that world intelligible to students of today” (p. 92). But the idea of “context” is actually ambiguous. Does it refer to the meaning of the original author or authors of the text? Or the meaning as understood by the original audience or audiences? Or the meaning as understood by the redactor, or the audience at the time of redaction? These are obviously significant

the orientations to the teaching of rabbinic literature developed in this article, methodologically, Galili Schachter is more interested in teachers’ conceptions of the interpretive process and less interested in their conceptions of the subject matter (in her case, Jewish thought). On the other hand, given that teachers of rabbinic literature are in the business of textual interpretation, her findings are informative; see the discussion below of the Torah orientation. A second usage is found in Shkedi (2001), who identifies four orientations toward the “cultural understanding of the Biblical text and its place in [the] world [of teachers and students]” (p. 334). These stances toward the text are significant, to be sure, but they are orientations toward the specific subject (Bible) rather than toward the teaching of the subject. As such, they may provide a useful lens through which to examine teachers’ beliefs and conceptions (especially relative to the students’ beliefs and conceptions, which is what Shkedi does in this article), but they do not encompass a set of pedagogic practices. Finally, Y. Schwartz’s (2002) study of rabbinics curricula in Israel generates six approaches to the study of Mishnah in state-religious schools, six approaches to the study of Mishnah in state-secular schools, six approaches to the study of Talmud in state-religious schools, and seven approaches to the study of Talmud in state-secular schools. As in Shkedi’s orientations, ideological issues are paramount. So while the categories are both thought-provoking and useful, they are focused exclusively on the conceptualization of the subject (e.g., what Mishnah is about and especially why it is worth studying) rather than encompassing the practices of teaching.

I discuss the contextual orientation in greater detail in Levisohn (2008), from which this paragraph is adapted.
questions that go to the heart of what it means to interpret biblical texts. So we might be tempted to proliferate orientations, proposing contextual1, contextual2, and so on. We ought to resist that temptation. As important as it is to pursue the question of what we mean by “context” for the purposes of conceptual clarity (and this conceptual clarity is essential when we attempt to teach the subject), nevertheless, the differential impact on our pedagogical practice is relatively minor, 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 hierarchy of orientations, and as Grossman (1991) notes about her orientations to literature, “one could find examples of both excellent and mediocre teaching within each” (p. 263). 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 impossibly antiquarian while others dismiss the personalization orientation as hopelessly naïve. Alternatively, some might assume that a particular orientation is appropriate for younger students, before one “graduates” to another orientation. But the theory of orientations emerges from a pluralistic stance: There are multiple responsible ways of teaching a particular subject at any level—not good ways and bad, not educative ways and miseducative, but a genuine diversity of purposes.

This does not mean that we cannot debate those purposes. (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.) However, when we debate the purposes of teaching a particular subject we ought to do so in terms of particular settings and particular sets of students, and we ought to think carefully about whether we are imagining the best possible version of the orientation. Each orientation can be pursued blindly or with little regard for student learning. Each orientation may have its own characteristic pathology. But poor pedagogy should not be taken 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 and with attention to whether and what the students are learning. So, if we find ourselves inclined to reject particular orientations, we should pause to consider whether the orientation as a whole is inappropriate (and if so, why) or whether perhaps we are reacting to a particular pedagogic pathology within that orientation.

Fourth, and most fundamentally, there is a basic conceptual question about orientations. Are they mutually exclusive and immutable categories (let us call this the “strong” view of orientations)? Or are they instead a rough approximation of a collection of ideas about the purposes and practices of teaching the subject that typically, but not necessarily, hang together (the “weak” view)? According to the strong view, each orientation should have some essential quality that is distinct from every other; each orientation
should offer distinct answers to basic questions of purpose and methodology. Holtz’s (2003, pp. 61 ff.) rhetoric of a “map” of orientations implicitly endorses the strong view. On a map, a clear border designates each country one from every other. According to the weak view, on the other hand, orientations are historically contingent rather than fixed and eternal, and the relationship between orientations need not be one of mutual exclusivity.

The weak view is more compelling. Despite his use of the metaphor of a map, Holtz himself inclines toward the weak view, noting “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. Instead, when we think about identifying orientations, we ought to think about identifying a cultural practice, along with the knowledge and beliefs that support that practice. The work of identifying orientations, in this sense, is simply a process of observing and identifying the variety of ways that we tend to teach and learn this subject, here and now. Thus, it is not at all problematic to encounter overlap and interrelationship, not just eclecticism in actual teaching practice (although that is common, too—a point to which we will return) but fuzziness in distinguishing orientations.

To take an example from Bible, consider the ideational orientation, in which the teaching of Bible focuses on “big ideas.” This orientation functions more as a criterion of selection among meanings rather than an answer to the question of how meaning is determined. Subtle grammatical distinctions are less important, for example, than major themes and messages. But how should we discover those big ideas? One teacher might 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 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 both

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9This does not mean that every era has its own (single) orientation, but rather that the set of orientations that we discover in our own time and place is not necessarily the set that we might find in another time and place.

10The issue here is conceptual mutual exclusivity, not practical. After all, even on the strong view, particular teachers might usefully combine orientations in their practice. I return to this point at the end of the article.

11On the “structure of a discipline,” see Schwab (1961/1978), who introduced the idea that disciplines have both a syntactic and a substantive structure, and Hirst (1965), who argued that the several disciplines represent “forms of knowledge,” each of which is “a distinct way in which our experience becomes structured” (p. 128). The work on orientations undermines the idea that a discipline or subject has one, unified syntactic and substantive structure. But Schwab himself was careful to avoid this claim: “few, if any, disciplines have a single structure” (p. 239). Hirst at least qualified the claim by acknowledging that alongside the “forms of knowledge” are other groupings that he called “fields of knowledge”. Furthermore, Holtz notes (2003, p. 46) that 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).
of these, but not in a mutually exclusive way. Orientations can be integrated, not just in an eclectic style of teaching but actually in noncontradictory combination. Thus, the strong view seems untenable.\footnote{One might wonder why, if two orientations seem to happily coexist, 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, orientations are more like cuisines. Each individual cuisine uses a set of common ingredients, culinary techniques, and tastes, but none of these is necessarily exclusive to that cuisine.\footnote{I owe this idea to Susan P. Fendrick (personal communication, October 2007).} Orientations, too, can overlap in the teacher’s beliefs about the purpose of the subject, about the kinds of questions that are worth asking and about what constitutes a compelling answer, as well as in terms of pedagogic and interpretive practices. None of these is exclusive to a particular orientation. Nevertheless, we still know what we mean when we talk about Chinese or Mexican cuisine. So, too, we know what we mean, roughly, when we talk about a teaching orientation. Instead of a “map” of orientations, let us instead talk about a “menu.”

To summarize: What is an orientation to teaching? An orientation is not a technique or method of teaching, and not merely an attitude held by the teacher, and not an approach to \textit{studying} a subject. Instead, a teaching orientation is a conceptual model of teaching that subject. It is a teacher’s fundamental stance toward a particular subject that encompasses a conception of purposes (of teaching that subject) and a set of paradigmatic practices. These purposes and practices hang together; an orientation has internal coherence. An orientation can be pursued well or it can be pursued poorly; an orientation is not, itself, good or bad. As part of our understanding of an orientation, we assume that any subject can have multiple orientations—but we do not assume that the multiple orientations are mutually exclusive (either in their purposes or their practices). Nor do we assume that orientations are fixed and eternal. On the contrary, the menu represents the range of stances that, we claim, are present at this moment in this place.

\section*{CONSTRUCTING THE MENU}

Given that orientations are collections of purposes and practices that happen to hang together, the process of identifying a set of orientations in a particular area should be subject to a pragmatic criterion. We might think of this as “constructing the menu” rather than discovering the deep structure of a discipline (especially when the “discipline” in question is actually a whole set of books). But, turning from our discussion of the idea of an orientation to the intentional construction of a menu of orientations to the teaching of
rabbinic literature, how might we pursue this work in a responsible way? And how would we know if we’ve got the menu right?

Unlike Grossman’s work, this menu of orientations does not emerge directly from a taxonomy of the field. And unlike Holtz’s orientations, this menu was not built from a scan of the fields (of scholarship and of teaching). Instead, it was initially generated from a set of focus groups in June 2006, in which a diverse set of thoughtful instructors of rabbinic literature were asked to generate different orientations. How, where, and why is rabbinic literature taught? What are the diverse approaches? The first version of the menu emerged from the analysis of that data; that version was then developed on the basis of input from a broad range of other instructors of rabbinic literature and from a review of literature in the field, in a process of continual refinement.¹⁴

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 single 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.¹⁵

What, then, underwrites the menu of orientations? What might give us confidence that we’ve got them right? One answer to that question is

¹⁴The diversity of the initial focus groups was limited by the fact that the instructors all identified as Jews and moreover as American Jews. So while they taught in schools and universities, yeshivot and synagogues, to children and adults, in ideologically diverse settings, and while some had familiarity with the teaching of rabbinic literature in various institutions in Israel or to non-Jews (e.g., in university settings), the initial menu of orientations was surely shaped by that limitation. Moreover, the vast majority of the secondary literature that informed the development of the orientations was focused on North America as well. This is not to say that the pedagogic practices in Israel or elsewhere would necessarily constitute a divergent set of orientations. At the same time, it does seem clear that the menu of orientations that I present here is contingent not only historically (i.e., it is characteristic of this particular time) but also geographically. See Segal and Bekerman (2009) for references to studies of the teaching of rabbinic literature in Israel, and see especially Y. Schwartz (2002) for a comprehensive review and categorization of approaches to the teaching of rabbinic literature in Israel in the twentieth century. See, as well, note 66 below.

¹⁵See Holtz (2003, p. 52 ff.), where he cites Dorph’s (1993) argument in favor of this claim as well. Wineburg and Wilson (1988/2001) say the same thing, interestingly enough, at the end of “Models of Wisdom.” 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 why 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; it should not be considered synonymous with “capacity to employ multiple orientations.”
genealogical: we 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 teach-
ing commitments.\(^{16}\) The process of patient exploration and consultation
should bolster our confidence in the menu of orientations.

But a second answer to the question is pragmatic. Are they useful? Do
they illuminate the practice of teaching 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 sepa-
rate,” 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 dis-
confirmation to which we ought to attend and which must in some way be
acknowledged.\(^{17}\) If, on the other hand, practitioners say, “While I would not
necessarily want to restrict myself to any one of these orientations, I do rec-
ognize my practice in (one or more of) these descriptions, and moreover
the menu helps me think about what I do, and why, and how I might do it
differently,” that is the kind of empirical validation that matters.\(^{18}\)

\(^{16}\)The total number of teachers of rabbinic literature with whom I have shared the menu of orienta-
tions, 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 discus-
sions of individual orientations below—and I cannot conclude that most would endorse the menu as it
stands. But see note 18 for a more optimistic perspective.

\(^{17}\)Of course, how to acknowledge that response is always a matter of interpretive judgment. Per-
haps a practitioner has identified a genuine lacuna in the menu of orientations. Alternatively, perhaps
her own pedagogy is idiosyncratic and nonrepresentative 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. See note 66 below.

\(^{18}\)These orientations were introduced at the Conference on Teaching Rabbinic Literature at Brandeis
University in January 2008, in front of over 200 people—university instructors, day school teachers, rab-
bis, and others. When the conference evaluations were analyzed, the idea of orientations frequently
came up among the highlights. Subsequently, a number of schools have reported using the menu of ori-
entations for professional development purposes among their faculty. One correspondent wrote that the
menu “helped teachers speak more definitively about the reading strategies they were undertaking, and
in some cases to contrast two readings with each other and analyze that very experience.” This suggests
that, whether or not all the details are correct, the menu of orientations is a helpful conceptual tool.
THE ORIENTATIONS TO TEACHING RABBINIC LITERATURE

Having discussed the idea of a teaching orientation and the method for generating a responsible set of them, let us turn at long last to the menu, which includes 10 distinct orientations.

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, which is to say, it has been treated as sacred (in one or another sense of the word “sacred”) by Jews for centuries. 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.\(^{19}\) Thus, the encounter with this sacred literature has the potential 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 (which is why the Torah orientation is compatible with a wide range of ideological stances, from extremely traditionalist through extremely liberal\(^{20}\)). Some rabbinic texts, of course, do prescribe behavior—halakhic passages dictate when to say the Shema or who owns the rights to a found object—and the function of rabbinic texts as a source of halakha will figure prominently in a different orientation. But much of rabbinic literature, including of course the assortment of stories and interpretations and philosophical excurses that are grouped under the category of “aggada,” is not prescriptive in this way. Nevertheless, both aggadic and halakhic texts can function as a source for instruction or a location of inspiration. Classical liturgical texts can function in this way as well. Passages from the Talmud or midrashic literature or the siddur are taught because the

\(^{19}\)See the discussion of this point, made by “Moshe,” in Levisohn (2008).
\(^{20}\)This parenthetical remark is intended to emphasize the point made above about the inadequacy of ideology as an analytical lens through which to understand pedagogy. I do not mean to suggest that religious ideology is irrelevant to pedagogy, of course. I do mean to suggest, however, that the standard dichotomies (traditional versus liberal, or academic versus devotional, or historical-critical versus religious) do not get us very far. They may conceal more than they reveal. (See Kahana, 1990, which the author notes is based on an earlier version from 1977, for an example of an overly simplistic comparison of academic and traditional study based on highly schematic and stereotyped dichotomies. The yeshiva is educational, the university is inquiry based; the yeshiva is closed while the university is intellectually open; the university is oriented toward the past whereas the yeshiva is oriented toward the present and future; etc.). Instead, I will argue that each one of the 10 orientations is compatible with a range of ideological commitments. I appreciate the questions of an anonymous reviewer, which have helped me articulate this point.
instructor believes that, under the right conditions, a patient encounter with this material can promote increased awareness of truths about the world or human nature or the divine, leading to inspiration or guidance or enlightenment.21

There is a connection, here, to Holtz’s (2003) personalization orientation, which focuses on creating a personal connection to the biblical text—because in both, 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, on what the text “means to me” as it is sometimes put. Furthermore, it is also worth noting, in a second connection to other research, that the Torah orientation does not necessarily entail what Pomson (2002) has labeled the “teacher-as-rebbe,” that is, a model of teaching in which the character of the teacher is the primary subject matter. To be sure, there may be teachers in that mode who naturally embrace the Torah orientation—there may be a kind of elective affinity between teachers-as-rebbes and this orientation—but teachers-as-rebbes may equally adopt other orientations. Conversely, professionalized teachers (Pomson’s alternative to the teacher-as-rebbe) may adopt the Torah orientation without losing their “professionalized” focus on their academic subject.

An instructor working within the Torah orientation will typically select texts—often aggadic material but sometimes halakhic material as well, or as noted above liturgical material—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 instructors will create the conditions for students neither to accept a text nor to reject it, but to engage it in 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 greater commitment to certain ideals—service, or justice, or compassion.22 Alternatively, teachers may wish to

21This formulation raises questions about the interpretive encounter between the student and the text that, alas, I cannot focus on here. But I might mention, again, Galilli Schechter (2002, 2009), who uncovers five distinct conceptions of textual interpretation among teachers of Jewish thought in Israeli high schools (where “Jewish thought” is taught primarily via a Torah orientation-like encounter with classical texts).

22Consider the focus on rabbinic texts on Tefillin in a class of seventh grade boys who will be engaging in the practice of Tefillin daily (Segal & Bekerman, 2009), motivated by a sense that engagement with these texts will (not only provide practical guidance but also) make their practice of Tefillin more meaningful. However, given what we learn about the actual instruction in that setting, the Torah orientation does not appear to be the dominant orientation.
inspire 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 but do hope to foster meaningful engagement. It may also be used with K–12 students, particularly in informal settings but also through what Scot Berman calls “value analysis” (Berman, 1997). Analogously, teaching that focuses on the purported philosophical ideas behind the rabbinic text (often associated with the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem or the approach to Talmudic interpretation offered by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas) may be thought of as part of this orientation, since the purpose of developing those ideas is to propose them as powerful guides for the lives and moral choices of students. 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 (e.g., a course that focuses on rabbinic texts on relationships).

Before moving on, we might wonder about the characterization of this orientation—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 this not be said about any of the orientations to teaching rabbinic literature? Isn’t that the way that every teacher of Talmud feels? For that matter, any devoted teacher of Shakespeare or Homer would likewise endorse this idea. Nor is the point limited to the humanities: passionate teachers of math or biology would, likewise, claim that 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. It is certainly the case that, if asked about the ultimate

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23 Adult education does not usually focus on cultivating textual-analytic skills, but may have a different skill in mind—namely, the skill of responsibly mining texts for meaning. See the discussion of the skills orientation below.

24 One educator writes: “We have found . . . 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.”

25 On “teaching Jewish values,” see Rosenak (1986). Those who are committed to teaching a tractate in sequence sometimes wonder how (and whether) to deal with aggadic material. A common defense of aggada—in terms of its capacity to promote values, ideals, or philosophical insights (Blau, 2005)—assumes the propriety of the Torah orientation for teaching aggada. However, one can also argue for other orientations to teaching aggada as well (most obviously, the literary orientation and the cultural orientation, but others too).

26 There is a connection, therefore, between the Torah orientation to rabbinic literature and the ideational orientation to Bible. Why not simply reuse the same orientational label? 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.

27 Beverly Gribetz and Meesh Hammer-Kossoy helped clarify my thinking on this issue.
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 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, pedagogic decisions are driven more by a concern for surfaced the themes of the particular tractate or for developing the students’ skills.

The portrayal of Aryeh Ben David in Hammer-Kossoy (2001) is a case in point. On the one hand, Ben David teaches a 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 the texts and the legal 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). Should we conclude, then, that Ben David teaches primarily within the Torah orientation? Hammer-Kossoy would say no. Despite Ben David’s obvious and sincere 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). Her attentive observation of Ben David’s practice indicates that the Torah orientation does not fit.

Contextual Orientation

The contextual orientation lies at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Torah Orientation—not necessarily in terms of purposes (which, as noted, are not mutually exclusive) but in terms of setting. Where the Torah orientation is typically (although not exclusively) pursued in one-off adult Jewish educational sessions, the contextual orientation is more typical of semester-long university courses. In fact, references to “academic” or “modern” Talmud study (e.g., Carmy, 1996) usually refer to the contextual orientation. Within this orientation, teachers are primarily interested in understanding the original contexts of rabbinic texts, including how the texts came to assume their final form, and how understanding that context illuminates their meaning—and they do so because of an overriding concern for peshat, for discerning
the plain sense of the text as they see it. Typically, teachers within this orientation will employ comparisons of parallel texts, within the traditional canon (e.g., comparing the Mishnah or the Babylonian Talmud with the Tosefta or Yerushalmi, or using variant manuscripts) and without (using Greek or Latin texts). In some settings and with certain texts, archaeological or other material 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. Even outside the university, the motivation behind the contextual orientation is often linked to a belief that academic scholarship reveals significant truths about the text (Hayman, 1997, 1999). Teachers within the contextual orientation are 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 Wineburg (1991) has labeled the “sourcing heuristic,” the habit among academic historians of immediately wondering about and looking for evidence of the source of a particular text in order to locate its perspective. They may emphasize the strata of the texts, as well as other “academic” issues such as problems of attribution, the work of redactors to construct the received text, and the presence of competing traditions within the text. In terms of student learning, they focus on the students’ capacities to discern those strata and those issues on their own as important learning outcomes, and may construct learning opportunities specifically in order to develop those capacities.

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, 1996; Elman, 1996; and Shapiro, 2005, for a discussion

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28I owe this point to Barry Wimpfheimer; see also Elman (1996, p. 251 ff). Also see Halivni (1979) for a cogent explanation of what he calls “dialectical criticism,” an approach to the text that can fairly be categorized within the contextual orientation and which he defends in terms of the authenticity of its reading of the text.


30Wineburg’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. In the case of rabbinic literature, the same sourcing heuristic is displayed in the tendency of rabbinics 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. Whether it is possible to determine that historical provenance reliably, or whether we cannot do so, is of course a matter of scholarly debate.
of some of the issues). But Gribetz (2003) argues that the contextual orientation (what she calls “the use of historical material and methods”) (passim) is indispensable when confronting certain texts; the text itself, as it were, generates historical questions to which the responsible teacher must be prepared to respond. Bigman (2002) endorses the contextual orientation (“critical Talmud study”) as the approach that is most attentive to the real voices of the rabbis in the tradition. And, the methodology and curriculum developed for Orthodox Jewish day schools by Hayman (1997, 1999, 2002) fits comfortably within the contextual orientation. Hayman argues that what he calls “scientific-academic approaches” to the text, which his curriculum attempts to represent, “are the more original and accurate approaches to the text” (1999, p. 383). They are, in his view, both consonant with traditionalist sensibilities and affirming of traditional goals of study.31

In any case, while it is reasonable to wonder about the religious consequences of a stance of critical distance from the text, it also seems clear that the more specific concerns—familiar to us from the teaching of Bible—about internal contradictions within the text are less relevant. The motivation to harmonize disparate texts certainly does exist in the field of rabbinic literature, and indeed underlies much traditional commentary. In fact, contemporary traditionalist Talmud study is marked by harmonization across generations and across methodological schools of interpretation (see Rosenzweig, 2005, who gently critiques this phenomenon). However, the motivation to harmonize hardly carries the same theological weight in rabbinic literature 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 that its counterpart in 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.32

31By way of contrast, Sperber (1996) argues for the indispensability of historical-critical scholarship to the pursuit of traditionalist goals of discerning halakhic implications. In other words, in his case, historical study is in support of the halakhic orientation (see below). What this shows is that not every use of historical-critical scholarship in teaching, necessarily represents an example of the contextual orientation. Purpose matters.

32This 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. 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. (On the comparison between methodology in Bible and in Talmud, see Halivni, 1979, p. 200, n. 16.)
Jurisprudential Orientation

Within this orientation, rabbinic literature is taken to be the product of a legal system—not a literary text, not an historical text, not even (primarily) a text that ought to trigger a wide-ranging exploration of truths about human nature or the world. Legal argument, *shaqla ve-tyara* (“give and take”), debates about legal concepts and rulings—these are the heart of the subject. As the manifestation of a legal system, rabbinic literature is appropriately examined through categories of legal analysis, sometimes (in some settings) in comparison with other legal systems (e.g., Roman law) and sometimes with categories developed internally to the Jewish tradition of talmudic interpretation. This jurisprudential orientation shares some aspects with the halakhic orientation below, but it 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 students who, for their part, are expected to try to anticipate the *hiddush* 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—but almost always within a jurisprudential frame.) In either situation, academic or traditional, the intellectual experience of exploring the legal system takes precedence over the determination of any actual legal ruling. 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.33

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*, the label used for the academic study of Jewish law, is also quite obviously concerned

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33The use of the language of “concepts” and “conceptual” here is not meant to indicate a preference (within the jurisprudential orientation) for what is sometimes called the “conceptual approach” or elsewhere is called the “Brisker method” of Talmud study (see Blau, 2005), the method that focuses on clarification of central legal concepts—and clarification of divergent views about those concepts—as the key to understanding discordant texts. In fact, the jurisprudential orientation encompasses both the Brisker method and other competing approaches as well. The method of *pilpul*, for example, which arguably characterizes much contemporary haredi Talmud study (and which is sometimes criticized for its substitution of originality as the interpretive ideal, rather than truth), also entails an engagement with the Talmud’s conceptual universe. See the discussion of the interpretive orientation.
with rabbinic texts as products of a jurisprudential system, so courses in *Mishpat Ivri* are also located within this orientation. But beyond these settings, almost all study in traditional Ashkenazi (especially Lithuanian style) yeshivot in North America and in Israel seems to fit within this orientation.34

Lichtenstein (1996/2007), for example, after noting the importance of *aggadah* (rabbinic narratives and theological reflections), expresses a standard traditionalist view:

> But it is clearly *halakhah* [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 . . . (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 divine legal corpus.35 Lichtenstein’s reference to “*halakhah* that stands at the center” should not be misunderstood as referring to practical legal implications; a bit later on (pp. 13–14), Lichtenstein explicitly contrasts Talmud with post-Talmudic legal compendia that are concerned to communicate *halakhic* rulings. What is important here is the process of study, the encounter, not the product. This is a traditionalist expression of the jurisprudential orientation.36

Naturally, the characterization offered here does not do justice to the diversity of traditionalist interpretive strategies, *darkei ha-limmud*. It does not attend to the differences between the Brisker method of Talmud study (the “conceptual approach”; Blau, 2006) and the approaches that are more common in haredi yeshivot, for example. But this is one of the occasions when it is important to remember that not every interpretive distinction makes an orientational difference; as significant as those distinctions among interpretive strategies may be (in terms of determining what constitutes a good answer to a question and even more importantly what constitutes a good question), they are not manifest as dramatic differences in pedagogic

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34Michael Rosenzweig (2005), focusing not on pedagogy but on “methodology,” emphasizes that contemporary *yeshivot* conform to the pattern established over the last century and a half. “This is noteworthy,” he adds, “given the fact that access to a plethora of historical material . . . . . . might conceivably have challenged the continuity in *yeshivah* study by redirecting the focus away from the classical, ahistorical emphasis that has long prevailed” (p. 113)—*might* have, but, in fact, did not.

35Also see the discussion in Hammer-Kossoy (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 conviction is clearly present for Lichtenstein. But the point here is that, in order for the ideological conviction to make sense, we must first understand Talmud as, paradigmatically, a *legal* text.

36See also Lichtenstein (2003, p. 43 and ff), where he expresses a commitment to the jurisprudential orientation and a rejection of the historical and literary orientations (although of course he does not use those terms).
purposes and practices.\textsuperscript{37} 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 (1996) formulation, “The goal of conceptual analysis is . . . to formulate the principles inherent in the word of God” (p. 191).\textsuperscript{38}

The pursuit of the jurisprudential orientation may be motivated by the sense that this orientation 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 \textit{shaqla v’tarya} [i.e., debate] as a Jewish mode of thinking, in order to encourage participation in the Jewish cultural enterprise.”\textsuperscript{39} But for some, the motivation is even more basic, and more exclusive. That is, for some, the jurisprudential orientation is not merely the preferred pedagogic option, but rather the \textit{only} real or authentic way to engage with these texts. Thus, Rav Yoav, the subject of Segal and Bekerman’s (2009) study, defends the selection of Tractate Sanhedrin—a tractate rich in the

\textsuperscript{37}This assessment is based on an understanding that, differences among \textit{darkei ha-limmud} notwithstanding, traditionalists teaching within the jurisprudential orientation share important features: They tend to select tractates (rather than specific texts) and follow the order of the tractate or the chapter within it; the tractates tend to be the “yeshivish” ones that are heavy on jurisprudential concepts and debates; they bracket or avoid altogether both the practical-halakhic implications of the texts and the personal-spiritual implications; to the extent that they are focused on the development of the skills of textual analysis, those skills are heavily jurisprudential (understanding Talmudic argument rather than, for example, understanding literary tropes); and, as mentioned above, teaching and learning is conceptualized not just as an occasion for understanding the text and its difficulties but especially as an occasion for \textit{hiddush}, innovation in the resolution of textual difficulties. At the same time, the differences among \textit{darkei ha-limmud} are surely deep and significant. As Elman notes (1996, p. 253), the field would benefit greatly from straightforward, non-polemical comparative analyses of the various approaches. (For some efforts in this direction, see Halivni, 1979; Rosenzweig 2005; Shapiro, 2005; and, as already noted, on the Brisker method specifically, see Blau, 2006.)

\textsuperscript{38}To outsiders, the use of a phrase like “word of God”—or even “the embodiment of the will of God” (Schreiber, 2003, p. 232)—to refer to rabbinic texts may seem surprising. After all, the statements and discussions in these texts are attributed to specific human figures on every page. But, within a particular religious context, these phrases are unproblematic, indeed unremarkable. Those who use these phrases do not believe that rabbinic literature has been divinely revealed word for word. Precisely what, then, do they believe? That is a centrally important question, not only for ideological reasons but for pedagogical ones—but such an inquiry is outside the scope of this article.

\textsuperscript{39}Also see Brandes (2007) for another contemporary expression of this view. However, Kress and Lehman (2003) focus on the dialogical and argumentative nature of the text of the Babylonian Talmud as a pedagogical resource more broadly; they do not appear to limit themselves to the jurisprudential orientation.
kind of debates that form the grist for the mill of the jurisprudential orientation—in a manner that is familiar to those with experience in the yeshiva world. Sanhedrin, he asserts, is “actual real classic gemara” (p. 27).

This is not to say that the jurisprudential orientation is only relevant to those tractates traditionally studied in Ashkenazi yeshivot, where they are studied sequentially. 40 Instructors within this orientation may select a legal topic, a sugya, which is discussed in multiple texts across a diverse set of tractates. Alternatively, they may select multiple legal topics to explore a particular jurisprudential phenomenon, what Schreiber (2003, p. 234) calls a “meta-sugya.” 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, in some sense, as part of one ahistorical conversation. After all, those commentators 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. 41 For nontraditionalists, on the other hand, the motivation may be less focused on the tradition of interpretation, and more focused on a principled conception of the subject: at its heart, some will argue, Talmud is a diverse set of complex, constructed legal debates.

Halakhic Orientation

Rabbinic texts—especially the legal texts, of course, but in some cases non-legal texts as well 42—are the primary sources for understanding the development of halakha, the Jewish legal tradition. Teachers within this orientation aspire to help students understand halakha in its complexity as a legal tradition and system. Typically, the emphasis will be on Mishnah and Talmud,

40Rosenzweig (2005, p. 116) points out that there are “notable exceptions”—for example, Tractate Shabbat is typically studied beginning in the middle of the seventh chapter (folio 73a)—but these exceptions prove the rule that tractates are studied not only sequentially but beginning at the beginning (either of a tractate or, sometimes, a chapter).

41Based on her research on contemporary teachers and students, Hammer-Kossoy (2001) 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” (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, in other orientations, it is less compelling.

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 commentators, responsa literature, and legal codes 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 Lichtenstein (1996/2007). We saw that his presentation of a traditionalist position seems to fit within a jurisprudential orientation. However, that presentation appears in the context of a lament about the 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:

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 halakhah 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, 1996/2007, 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 argument—our concern here is not to debate the merits of the orientations but to understand each43—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

43Lichtenstein (1996/2007) 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 nontraditional 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 in favor of another, or might one rather experiment with a different pedagogy within that orientation? Interestingly, writing several years later, Lichtenstein (2003, p. 57) is no less concerned about the state of Talmud study—but now concludes with a rejection of any proposal (like his own in 1996) that deviates from the jurisprudential orientation.
orientation, with a focus on the selection of halakhic topics and attention to their development over time.\textsuperscript{44}

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. Such an investigation would begin with the biblical sources and proceed through the development of the halakhic tradition in the Talmud, codes, and commentators, perhaps including contemporary responsa on the topic. As Lichtenstein notes, there are a variety of criteria that we might use to select appropriate topics. Some might be chosen for a "balance between principles and details," that is, topics that are appropriately representative of some principles of halakhic argumentation. Others might be chosen to explore the tension between "authority and logic," the way in which the halakhic tradition adheres to the rulings of earlier sages who are granted greater authority than later sages while also leaving room for logical argumentation about the application of those precedents and rulings. Others might be chosen for a balance between "conservatism and momentum," that is, 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.

I have taken the time to spell out these phrases from Lichtenstein because of the way that they suggest a robust conception of the halakhic orientation. Teaching within this orientation need not entail a dry transmission of facts about legal rulings (although perhaps that is the particular pathology of the halakhic orientation at its worst). Instead, the halakhic orientation can be as challenging and intellectually engaging as any other study of intellectual history, and the thoughtful instructor can surely identify an aspirational set of subject- and orientation-specific goals for her students. Those goals may be as relevant in a liberal setting as they are in a traditional one.

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. The jurisprudential orientation, when it focuses on a theme or a topic, will embrace a theme or topic that is conceptual in nature (e.g., a principle of halakhic reasoning such as \textit{kim lei be-de-rabba 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

\textsuperscript{44}Lichtenstein (1996/2007) 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.
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 of the category of “rabbinic literature.” Central texts such as the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud elicit little controversy, but what else is included? We have already had occasion to mention midrashic collections, and texts such as Tosefta and the Yerushalmi, and the siddur, and to note that, within the jurisprudential orientation, there is a natural tendency to extend forward to the commentaries on Talmud. So where are the boundaries? Are geonic texts included in “rabbinic literature” as well? What about medieval commentaries or early modern halakhic texts or contemporary responsa? The malleability of the boundaries are another indication of the diversity of orientations; in one teaching context, the relevant material includes early Christian texts, while in another, recent Jewish ones. 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.

Finally, there is one more point about the relationship between the halakhic orientation and religious ideology. 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 the ideology of the teacher, the students, and the educational setting. In some contexts, historical evolution may provide grist for the mill of contemporary debates over halakhic change (either in general or in specific cases). In other contexts, however, teaching within the halakhic orientation may be not subversive, but 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. At the same time, it seems likely that any instructor, within the halakhic orientation, will expect that the legal tradition that is the focus of study is authoritative in some sense, that is, that its norms have some kind of authoritative claim, direct or indirect, overt or subtle, on the practice of the students.

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. Where the contextual orientation focuses on diachronic analysis, the literary orientation focuses on synchronic analysis, taking the text as a (redacted) unified whole and attending to the literary features and devices embedded within that whole. Teachers within this orientation will typically choose texts (again, both legal and non-legal) on 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 character development—but legal passages or larger textual units (e.g., whole chapters of Mishnah) can also serve as rich teaching material within this orientation.45

Of course, if literary analysis presumes to generate insight into the meaning of a text on the basis of literary features, then potentially 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,” in the manner of new criticism in literary theory; 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. Or consider Walfish’s (2002) argument for the literary orientation to the teaching of Mishnah, as a pedagogic solution to the problem of Mishnah as a text that is both terse and hence difficult but yet not difficult enough (as compared to Talmud) and hence undervalued. For Walfish, the literary orientation is not a matter of studying Mishnah as literature “for its own sake”; there are other reasons for employing literary analysis. But for Walfish or others who advocate or employ a literary orientation, the attention given to literary analysis is sufficiently prominent—in terms of instructional time and priorities—that it tends to crowd out the explicit attention to other purposes.

We have just noted that the literary orientation is not necessarily accompanied by a commitment to the teaching of rabbinic literature “for its own sake,” and also noted Walfish’s (2002) argument for the use of the literary orientation to the teaching of Mishnah, specifically. Why else might one endorse the literary orientation? More recently, Walfish (2008) has argued that the literary orientation to rabbinic literature—not just Mishnah but Talmud and Tosefta as well—builds on features of the text (such as word play) that are readily accessible to students; that it is conducive to an interactive pedagogy in which teachers and students are partners in inquiring into the meaning of a text; that it enables a natural pedagogic transition from studying a text in order to understand its meaning to engaging with that meaning (including the values expressed by the text); and that it provides a critical, academic methodology that is at the same time palatable to traditionalists. These are large claims, to be sure, but 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.” Perhaps the most persuasive of Walfish’s arguments on behalf of the literary orientation is that it may have the capacity to lower the barriers to entry for students—we might think, for example, of adults with limited Jewish educational backgrounds—and provides a mode of engagement which is familiar, comfortable, and potentially meaningful. After all, most college-educated adults have some practice at literary analysis.46

However, in an echo of debates in the field of Bible (where a literary approach tends to assume a unified text), a detractor worries 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 undervaluing 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 (and teachers) is its very essence.

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

46Rubenstein (2008) makes a similar argument.
The cultural orientation is usually more text focused than student focused, but not necessarily. For example, Rothstein (2009) imagines an instructional approach that aspires to overcome 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. Lehman (2002) echoes this in her study of her own teaching in rabbinical school: “my goal each semester is to find a means of connecting the world in which my students live with that of the rabbis” (p. 89). On the other hand, it may be more common to find instructors 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. Kraemer (2008) argues that

47Alongside 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, February 22, 2009) for this point and others related to the cultural orientation.

48Hasan-Rokem (2000) frames the relationship between feminism and rabbinic literature in the following way. “Feminist assumptions encourage two main types of critical reading [. . .]: on the one hand, exposing patriarchal trends in the text while pointing to the oppression and discrimination of women; on the other hand, pointing to anti-patriarchal elements within the text, as well as to women’s voices and other subversive elements” (pp. 109–110; I was pointed toward this passage by a post on academictalmud.blogspot.com). This indicates the way that different kinds of feminist inquiry in rabbinic literature represent different 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 studies of the evolving status of women in halakha. Also see Lehman (2006).
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” (p. 1). Similarly, a participant at the Conference on Teaching Rabbinic Literature wrote that this 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—assumes that rabbinic culture should be historically located, rather than construed as transhistorical. Moreover, each reflects an implicit claim about the way that the cultural orientation can contribute to the intellectual-spiritual perspective of the student.

As already noted, in situations where rabbinic culture is understood primarily as an historical category (rather than, as a transhistorical category, where the changes over time are superficial rather than substantive), there may be a close connection between the cultural orientation and the contextual orientation. Both tend to establish a certain critical distance from rabbinic texts, and both are focused on the meaning of the texts in their original context. Some instructors may well blend 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 contexts 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’ cultural project.

Historical Orientation

Rabbinic literature provides evidence for the social, intellectual and political history of the Jewish communities of late antiquity. Who were these people—not just the rabbis but the whole 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.”49 But in other

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settings, instructors are committed to exploring that history, and the texts are means to that end. They are windows into the past, and like real windows, they work best when they are transparent and when they do not obstruct our view of the landscape beyond.

There is always the thorny question of whether we can take rabbinic texts 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?\(^\text{50}\)

Yet, 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 contextual 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 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 is 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 communication, February 10, 2009). Thus, a fifth-century narrative about a first-century event may tell us more about the fifth century than about the first.

Still, we might 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, we might say, tries to construct a narrative about historical events or the historical development of a community. For example, a course 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, aspires to construct a narrative about the text itself, and the cultural orientation aspires 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

\(^{50}\)See S. 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.
the Jews in late antiquity, or the development within students of historiographical sensibilities appropriate to the study of that history. Instructors will select texts and construct learning opportunities that illuminate that history, or that illuminate central interpretive questions about that history.

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 prearranged focus as possible. This is sometimes called “bekiut” or “bekius,” which translates literally as “mastery,” but is more accurately translated in this context as “coverage.” The purpose of studying Talmud or Mishnah bi’kiut (in a bekiut way) or liv’kiut (for the purpose of bekiut) is to cover ground. Like coverage goals elsewhere in education, here, too, 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: Just as students will absorb the literary norms associated with the modern novel, even if they forget the details of the novels that they read, so too here, the sequential, immersive exposure to the texts may foster an apprehension of rabbinic norms, a facility with rabbinic logic, and a familiarity with rabbinic concepts, even as the details quickly slip from the mind.

One paradigm of the bekiut orientation is a kind of antitheoretical reaction against the sometimes fanciful pursuit of conceptual explanations for textual difficulties (within the jurisprudential orientation, as practiced in some Ashkenazi yeshivot). Thus, Eliezer Shach, among the 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 seforos. Don’t do what they call iyun, in depth study. Study to cover ground and review a great deal.” Going slowly, in this view, is associated with perseverating over insoluble textual problems, losing sight of simpler and more attainable goals of study. Knowledge of the texts is the primary goal (and not a temporary goal but a permanent one, hence, the admonishment to “review a great deal”), not understanding, not biddukh, and certainly not personal growth or spiritual development.

A more familiar paradigm of bekiut is the program known as Daf Yomi, the “daily page,” the standardized schedule of study of one folio of Talmud per day, around which has grown a cottage industry of classes, study

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51This is quoted on the Dei’ah veDibur Web site, which reports on a eulogy for Rabbi Shach by Gershon Eidelstein: http://chareidi.shemayisrael.com/archives5766/lech/olechlch66.htm. Naturally, I cannot vouch for the accuracy of the account, but the very fact that it is reported is significant regardless.
guides, and audio-recorded lessons. The 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, a ritualized performance as much as an intellectual pursuit.

So the claim advanced above, that the purpose of studying Talmud bi’ukiut 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 simply Torah lish’mah, Torah for its own sake. Setting aside any mastery of content, setting aside the benefits of immersion in a particular body of literature, simply occupying oneself in the study of Talmud is, for some, an activity with religious purpose and intrinsic value. 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 text’s prescriptions, but rather in the sense of a commitment to listen patiently and nonselectively 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.

Interpretive Orientation

In contrast to other classical literature, much of rabbinic literature is constructed as interpretation of other texts, both biblical and earlier rabbinic

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52 The Day Yomi program was publicly initiated in 1923 by Meir Shapiro, at the Agudas Yisroel convention in Vienna.

53 See, for example, Heilman (1987) for an extensive description and analysis of a regular, informal Talmud class for adult Orthodox men. In an earlier article, Heilman (1981) argues that “the Talmud . . . . is regularly studied as part of the ritual and religious life of all Orthodox Jews” (p. 228–229). His assessment of its universality may be contested. For our purposes, however, it is worth noting that the framework of regular (weekly) Talmud classes typically conforms to a bekiut orientation. More generally, Heilman (1981) emphasizes, rightly, that a class is never just one thing: it may be a teaching moment, and a social occasion, and a religious act, and an opportunity for self-reflection, and so on (p. 240).

54 Teasing apart the concept of Torah Lish’mah is notoriously difficult. We can easily identify the opposite of Torah Lish’mah, 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’mah? 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’mah (although, according to other views, that is precisely the correct meaning of Torah Lish’mah). The classic study of Torah Lish’mah is Lamm (1989); also see Rosenak (1995, pp. 231–234). Note, here, that while the bekiut orientation is often pursued in the context of an ideological commitment to Torah Lish’mah, the latter commitment is not by any means limited to the bekiut orientation. Other orientations may also be pursued lish’mah.
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 only implicitly.) Those interpretations proceed according to their own norms, sometimes playful and pluralistic, sometimes rigidly argumentative. The interpretive orientation takes this quality of the text to be its defining characteristic, the (or at least a primary) answer to the question of what the subject of rabbinic literature is about. As Boyarin (1990) 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” (p. 5). So, what is the paradigmatic mode of rabbinic literature? If we answer “shaqla ve-tarya,” the technical thrust-and-parry, then we will lean toward the jurisprudential orientation. But if we answer that the paradigmatic mode of rabbinic literature is the rereading of texts, with Boyarin, then we will lean toward the interpretive orientation.

Holtz, it may be recalled, includes an interpretation orientation to the teaching of Bible, which he labels the parshanut orientation. However, Holtz is focused there 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—is more closely aligned with the jurisprudential orientation, which is concerned with the legal logic and concepts which the classical interpreters of the text discussed. By contrast, the focus (within the interpretive orientation) on exploring the interpretational strategies of the rabbis themselves does not necessarily incline the teacher or student to the later works that interpret the Talmud, but rather orients them to specific aspects of the rabbinic text itself. In doing so, it represents a project that is not antithetical to the tradition, necessarily, but is certainly nontraditional.

The interpretational strategies of rabbinic texts 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. In Sigel’s (2009) study of midrash in elementary schools, she documents the assumption by students that midrash is “childish” (p. 59). The encounter with the text—arguments in the Talmud that distort the plain sense of their prooftexts or aggadic texts that explain a biblical text via an imaginative insertion of new information—is thereby potentially alienating. For some instructors, this experience itself is warrant for making the analysis of rabbinic interpretation the primary and explicit focus of instruction.

Within the interpretive orientation, then, teachers will focus in particular on the interpretive moves that are made in 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—what Gillis (2008) calls “midrash as interpretive performance” (p. 259). Sigel’s (2009) methodology for teaching midrash to elementary school children “aims to raise students’ awareness of the motivations and characteristics of midrash so that they can begin to problematize, to understand, and to explore the ancient rabbis’ approach to Torah” (p. 50); “the students and teacher analyze the midrash text in order to gain insight into the interpretive process that is the basis of the midrash” (p. 51). Gillis argues further that “regarding midrash as the performance of interpretation can modify our view of the apparent conflict and hierarchy between peshat and derash that is prevalent in much of the academic literature and the educational discussion of the teaching of midrash” (p. 261). In other words, once we adopt the interpretive orientation, we can avoid the implicit or even explicit devaluation of midrashic literature as secondary to, and poorly derivative from, biblical literature.

Sigel’s (2009) “interpretive process” and Gillis’ (2008) “performance of interpretation” clearly refer to the rabbis’ process of interpreting the biblical text. For them, midrashic texts that interpret biblical verses or passages are the primary material for teaching within this orientation, and they will often be selected (in a nonsequential fashion) for their value in displaying interpretive moves or controversies and examined for that purpose. However, an instructor might also employ the interpretive orientation with an eye toward the way in which later strata of rabbinic literature employ earlier teachings, sometimes in radically new ways; in that case, they may teach a

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57To be sure, Sigel (2009) also discusses the children’s encounter with “Jewish values” that comes about through the study of midrash (pp. 71–72), and she affirms that the ultimate purpose of studying midrash is the cultivation of Jewish identity (p. 72). But her primary and overwhelming pedagogic focus is on developing an understanding of midrash as interpretive literature.

58See, too, “Rachel,” one of the subjects in Reiss Medwed (2005, p. 146 ff.), who rejects the idea of introducing rabbinic literature through mishnah and instead focuses on midrash as the paradigmatic “language of the rabbis.”
tractate sequentially and work on the interpretive issues as they emerge. (In order to do so, of course, the instructor may well want to work with students on identifying those strata; in this respect, the interpretative orientation may appear similar to, and be combined with, the contextual orientation.) 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. (So in this respect, there is a close connection 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.

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 rabbinic literature, or at least access it independently. Initially, this may seem unworthy of the label of “orientation”; after all, nearly all of the orientations can be said to be (potentially) 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. The historical orientation intends to cultivate a set of historiographical capacities, specifically focused on the issues and problems of the history of the Jews in late antiquity. Even the Torah orientation, which is often pursued in adult education settings that we do not normally associate with the acquisition of skills, can be pursued toward an increasingly expanded capacity (on the part of students) to appreciate the instructional potential of the texts or to discern that instruction for themselves. These are all skills or capacities or subject-specific habits of mind, and we should hope that most thoughtful teachers who have the opportunity to construct an extended learning

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59 See Lehman (2002) for an example of a conscious combination (what I call, in my conclusion to this paper, a “principled eclecticism”) of the cultural orientation, the contextual orientation, and the interpretive orientation.

60 See Kaunfer (1992) on teaching midrash as a creative activity. Note, however, a distinction between his focus on the creative work of interpretation as a means to the end of students’ understanding of classical midrash, and my suggestion that some teachers may use the interpretive orientation toward classical midrash as a means to the end of the creative work of interpretation. The means in Kaunfer (creative interpretation) is the end in my suggestion, and the end in Kaunfer (understanding of classical midrash) is the means in my suggestion.
experience are concerned with the development of such skills. So why should we identify a skills orientation distinct from other orientations?

Nevertheless, as noted above in the case of the literary orientation, there are times and settings where the focus on literary analysis dominates the pedagogic space; here, too, here we may note that the skills orientation emerges because there are times and settings where the focus on skills dominates the pedagogic space. There are times and settings where this focus on skills is not, significantly, a focus on the kinds of orientation-specific skills identified in the previous paragraph, but rather on what we might call “basic skills” or “foundational skills,” skills of access to the basic meaning of the text in its original language. There are times and settings where this 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 are terse and obscure, and which regularly employ technical terms that assume a great deal of background knowledge. But in addition, the focus on skills also occurs for a culturally specific reason, namely, the enormous cultural capital that accrues (in certain environments) to those who are able 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 distributed in all segments of the Orthodox community, may earn one the highly informal title of yode’a sefer, loosely translatable as “one who is comfortable in the conceptual and terminological world of rabbinic literature.”

This is not to say, however, that the teaching and learning among men in the Orthodox community is carried out within the skills orientation. Typically, it is not. In the male Orthodox world, the acquisition of skills happens (if it does) as a byproduct of teaching within other orientations, especially within the jurisprudential orientation. Instead, good examples of the skills orientation are to be found elsewhere—among liberal Jewish educational programs (where facility with classical rabbinic texts also imparts significant cultural capital) and especially among Orthodox women’s yeshivot.

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61Thus, Goldsmith (2002) offers an analysis of the Talmud using the lens of reading and discourse research, identifying the obstacles to comprehension that students must develop the textual skills to overcome.

62Finkelman (2003) argues, in effect, that the vast majority of shiurim (Talmud classes) in modern Orthodox men’s yeshivot in Israel, where American students spend a year or more of post-high school study, are committed to the jurisprudential orientation (with its particular pathologies), while a small minority of shiurim in those yeshivot employ a skills orientation (and he helpfully delineates six aspects of those “skills-oriented classes”). Whereas the latter have a reasonable chance of teaching the skills that the instructors claim to value, the former have little hope of doing so. He argues, further, that this educational mystery can be explained by the socialization function that the more traditional, jurisprudential orientation classes perform.
(where students and teachers are acutely aware that access to the texts is a 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, even employing a developed sequential curriculum, all in order to accelerate the acquisition of the desired skills. Teaching 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.

Some readers may wonder whether the picture painted here is a caricature. To be sure, students of rabbinic literature are rarely ruthless pursuers of cultural capital, at the expense of all meaning, spiritual insight, or religious purpose. But some instructors affirm that a commitment to the development of skills, in certain settings, does preclude or at least dampen any exploration of rabbinic culture, of literary techniques, of interpretive strategies, of the nuances of legal concepts, or of spiritual truths. Some instructors 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,” they might say, “let’s all make sure we understand what’s going on in this text.” 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. When asked why this was important, she declared, only half-jokingly, “I want power.”

It is worth contrasting the skills orientation to teaching rabbinic literature with Holtz’s (2003) decoding, translation, and comprehension orientation to teaching Bible (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.” He can barely contain his antipathy to an

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63 In Israeli secular educational settings, there is a parallel phenomenon where rabbinic literature—or sometimes the “Jewish bookshelf”—is taught in order to reclaim it from the Orthodox establishment, to redeem it for a secular Jewish identity. This occurs both in Israeli secular public schools (see, e.g., Shkedi, 2002, for a discussion of three teachers who perceive their teaching in this way) and especially in adult education settings. However, while the rhetoric of access and empowerment is familiar from these Israeli secular settings, it is unclear to me whether teachers in these settings enact these purposes by employing the pedagogic practices that are characteristic of the skills orientation. I suspect, rather, that teaching in these settings is typically located within the Torah orientation.

64 Grossman and Stodolsky (1995) cite “sequentiality” among significant variables of subject subcultures, the way that teachers of some subjects believe that one must first study a followed by b and then c. Languages and math have greater perceived sequentiality; social studies and history have less. Talmud typically has little sequentiality—except for some instructors within the skills orientation.
orientation that robs the study of Bible of its potential for significant intellectual and spiritual engagement. Why is my description of the skills orientation to rabbinic literature more positive than Holtz’s description of the decoding orientation to Bible? Why is the paradigm for the skills orientation to rabbinic literature an adult seeking empowerment, while the paradigm for the decoding orientation to Bible is a child suffering through hopeless tedium?

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. One can open (most parts of) the Hebrew Bible in translation and understand the plot of the narrative or the basic meaning of the law; opening up the Babylonian Talmud in translation without preparation leads to confusion and frustration. 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 the definition of an orientation.

Orientations, I claimed above, are sets of purposes and practices that hang together in the actual teaching and learning of a particular subject. In the case of Bible, Holtz believes (with good reason) that settings exist where teachers teach decoding in a mind-numbing and tedious way. These instructors have forgotten what the enriching exploration of the biblical text could be, or perhaps they never knew, and the result is a narrow-minded and non-ambitious focus on 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 learning to access the texts of rabbinic literature is sometimes wearisome and sometimes frustrating but also, ultimately, empowering.

CONCLUSION: HOW TO USE A MENU

These 10 orientations to teaching rabbinic literature, then, constitute the menu. (See Table 2.) They certainly do not encompass every instance of the teaching of the subject; they do not encompass, for example, the use of rabbinic texts in the teaching of other subjects (e.g., comparative religion or the history of Jewish thought) or the intentional integration of rabbinic literature with other literatures (see Zisenwine, 1989) or more casual uses of rabbinic
texts for reflective or devotional purposes. It may be that they do not appropriately represent the teaching of rabbinic literature in the ultra-Orthodox world, especially in Israel. But they represent 10 coherent, developed conceptions of what the subject of rabbinic literature is all about, as a subject of teaching and learning, each with its associated, characteristic pedagogical practices.

Readers who have persevered to this point might now wonder why this exercise is worth pursuing—that is, so what? There are three good answers, 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 article opened with a discussion of the internal diversity within any subject. The idea of orientations

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<th>Orientations to teaching English</th>
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<td>Reader orientation</td>
<td>1. Contextual orientation</td>
<td>1. Torah/instruction orientation</td>
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<td>Text orientation</td>
<td>2. Literary criticism orientation</td>
<td>2. Contextual orientation</td>
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<td>5. Moralistic-didactic orientation</td>
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<td>7. Ideational orientation</td>
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<td>8. Bible leads to action orientation</td>
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<td>9. Decoding, translating, and comprehension orientation</td>
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<td>10. Skills orientation</td>
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I have in mind, here, instances where instructors choose a rabbinic text to teach—but the choice might have been otherwise. The instructor might have chosen a text from Maimonides, or from Yehuda Amichai, or something else entirely. I do not mean to denigrate the teaching or learning that occurs under these conditions, but it seems unavoidable that these are not instances of teaching the subject of rabbinic literature. So while these instances of teaching may well appear, in some respects, like the Torah orientation, the absence of pedagogic commitment to rabbinic literature as a subject is significant. Jon Spira-Savett helped me clarify this point.

I have tried to refrain from claiming that the menu is exhaustive, while arguing for its basic comprehensiveness (at least within a specific historical and geographic location). Colleagues have offered proposals for other orientations: a mystical orientation; an existential orientation; a vocational orientation (in which the study of rabbinic texts is oriented toward an ongoing, lifelong career of studying the texts); a biblical orientation (in which the study of rabbinic texts is subordinate to the larger objective of studying the biblical text); or a pilpil orientation (in which the objective is to harmonize texts, regardless of the implausibility of the solution). In each case, after exploring the issue, I concluded that the proposed orientation does not meet the criteria that I set for an orientation to teaching rabbinic texts, or that it is appropriately encompassed by another orientation, or (as in the case of the proposed mystical orientation) that I am simply not familiar enough with this practice to be able to judge. It is also noteworthy that none of these proposals came from individuals who claim to practice the orientation themselves; a principled articulation of a new orientation would be more compelling if the presenter were to describe her own practice.
is an attempt to make sense of that diversity—both recognizing the diversity while also recognizing that there is something that is shared, something that holds the orientations 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 (like the Bible), and referring to a set of books begs the question of which books are included. What is it, then? As a field of teaching and learning, it is what Scheffler (1968/1989) called a “center of intellectual capacity and interest” (p. 89)—a set of intellectual traditions and cultural practices—that are manifest, in our present historical moment, in these 10 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 on, inevitably, to theorize. We are called on to examine the philosophical foundations of the subject, to locate it in the context of other subjects, to ask questions about purposes. The menu of orientations is, in other words, what Seymour Fox called a “theory of practice.”67 Or consider the relevance of the following lines from 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, and so on. Like his description of philosophy of science, the present article has aspired to describe and codify a practice, to understand it, and implicitly to critique 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—at any level—will benefit from the present effort to pursue an intellectual project that we might call “philosophy of teaching rabbinic literature.”

Scheffler’s perspective incorporates as well the second answer to the “so what” question, in his metaphor of a theory emerging from practice and

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67See, for example, Fox (2000, p. 36 ff). Holtz (2008, p. 228) uses this phrase to describe his orientations work as well.

68See Gribetz (2003), who argues against a misperception that the teaching of rabbinic literature to novices or the young can safely avoid complicated issues of history and methodology.
“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. 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: Practitioners may come to see more options in the teaching of rabbinic literature, a greater range of purposes and practices, than they had previously recognized. Whether they choose to pursue any of these options will depend on a variety of factors—whether they and their colleagues and their institutions find them compelling for the particular contexts in which they teach—but the identification of options may (one hopes) increase the consciousness and thoughtfulness of the choices that are made. In a field with hardly any well-developed curricula, where new day school teachers typically find themselves starting each year from scratch with no guidelines other than the name of a tractate, where instructors in yeshivot have only their own education on which to base their practice, where discussions of “methodology” or darkei ha-limmud hardly ever consider pedagogic practices, the menu of orientations holds the potential to raise the level of pedagogic discourse.

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 orientation is necessarily preferable to employing multiple orientations. We have noted, repeatedly, that orientations are not necessarily mutually contradictory. Here, we should

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69See Holtz (2003, p. 50), for a parallel discussion of the ways that orientations can contribute to practice. And see Levisohn (2009, p. 313, n. 4) for a brief discussion of other literature that embraces, implicitly or explicitly, the idea that awareness of methodological choices will contribute to the improvement of pedagogy. As I note there, this hypothesis—while reasonable—deserves a patient, critical examination.

70On the state of discourse in the field, consider a finding in Reiss Medwed (2005): “None of the teachers [in this study] expressed a sense of being part of a larger tradition of teaching and learning Talmud and Rabbinics, a larger tradition of content pedagogy” (p. 177). Blau (2006), a delightful collection of articles about the “conceptual approach” to Talmud study (i.e., the Brisker method) by a set of distinguished modern Orthodox practitioners of the approach, does not consider pedagogic practice at all.
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. Such a teacher is never at the mercy of the latest idea that floats into her field of vision; she never posts messages on e-mail lists asking someone, anyone, for a lesson plan on a particular text that she is compelled to teach. When a colleague does suggest an innovative approach to a particular text, she is resolute: “That’s a nice lesson,” she might politely say, “but it doesn’t quite suit my purposes in teaching this class.” We can imagine that this kind of clarity might greatly benefit students’ learning. Moreover, a focus on one orientation may enable some teachers to develop a 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 kind of knowledge that is 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.71 Alternatively—following the example of Lehman (2002), who analyzes the multiple orientations that inform her own teaching, or the example of Walfish (2003), who argues for a combination of the Torah orientation, the literary orientation, and the interpretive orientation72—we can imagine an individual instructor or a particular institution adopting a more limited principled eclecticism, consciously selecting a small set of orientations to guide the pedagogic practice of its instructors. We can also imagine a school intentionally hiring teachers

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71 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.

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.  

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 or institution. Principled eclecticism is not the same as indefensible 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; 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 teachers over the last several years, it has already played these roles.

But it is not only an exploration 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 article 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. It might pursue Grossman’s (1991) original concern about what educational (or professional) experiences contribute to which orientations, as well as the question of how a teachers’ orientation

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73As noted above, in footnote 15, Holtz and Dorph endorse what I am calling “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.
might be altered or range of orientations expanded. It might explore students’ experiences with different orientations, and how they make sense of those experiences. 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 policymakers direct funds toward 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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A Menu of Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature


