

What Sugyot Should An Educated Jew Know?

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What are the Talmudic sugyot (topics or discussions) that every educated Jew ought to know, the most famous or significant Talmudic discussions? Beginning in the fall of 2008, about 25 responses to this question were collected: some formal Top Ten lists, many informal nominations, and some recommendations for further reading.

Setting aside the recommendations for further reading, 82 sugyot were mentioned, with (only!) 16 of them duplicates, leaving 66 distinct nominated sugyot. This is hardly a Top Ten list; while twelve sugyot received multiple nominations, the methodology does not generate any confidence in a differentiation between these and the others. And the criteria clearly range widely, with the result that the nominees include both aggadic and halakhic sugyot, and sugyot chosen for their theological and ideological significance, their contemporary practical significance, or their centrality in discussions among commentators. Or in some cases, perhaps simply their idiosyncrasy. Presumably because of the way the question was framed, they are all sugyot in the Babylonian Talmud (although one response did point to texts in *Sefer ha-Aggadah*).

Furthermore, the framing of the question tended to generate sugyot in the sense of specific texts, rather than sugyot in the sense of centrally important rabbinic concepts; in cases of the latter, the cited text is sometimes the locus classicus but sometimes just one of many. Consider, for example, *mitzvyot aseih she-ha-zeman gerama* (time-bound positive mitzvoth, no. 38).

The resulting list is quite obviously the product of a committee, via a process of addition without subtraction or prioritization. It is hard to imagine that *anyone* would actually believe that these 67 sugyot are “what a Jew should know.” Nevertheless, with all of those caveats, the list represents an interesting set – and there has been abundant interest in the results.

Note: I have not confirmed the location or the appropriateness of the titles of each of these.

The Collated List (Alphabetically, by Tractate)

1. Avoda Zara 3a: the one who is obligated is greater than the one who acts unbidden
2. Avoda Zara 17b-18b: the execution of Hanina ben Tradyon (**mentioned 2x**)
3. Beitzah 4a: retroactively determining an item's legal status
4. Berakhot 2a: when do we read Sh'ma
5. Berakhot 3b: praying from the ruins
6. Berakhot 5a-b: sickness and suffering (**2x**)
7. Berakhot 16a-16b: Rabban Gamliel's personalized halakhic practice
8. Berakhot 19b-20a: When divine commands threaten human dignity (**2x**)
9. Berakhot 27b-28a: dethronement of Rabban Gamaliel

10. Berakhot 30a-b: how should we pray
11. Berakhot 32b-33a: prayer and poisonous lizards
12. Berakhot 35a: blessings as permission to partake of God's world **(2x)**
13. Berakhot 35b: Should Torah study be combined with earning a living? **(2x)**
14. Bava Batra 2b: right to privacy and damage by looking
15. Bava Batra 3b: Herod the Great (or not so great)
16. Bava Kamma 27a: a man falls off a ladder... (the craziest legal case)
17. Bava Kamma 55b-56a: exempt, but still liable before God
18. Bava Kamma 83b-84a: rabbinic interpretation of "eye for an eye"
19. Bava Kamma 98-99: acting beyond the requirements of the law?
20. Bava Metzia 3a: what to do about money that is under dispute
21. Bava Metzia 21a-22b: Is it possible to acquire lost property? **(2x)**
22. Bava Metzia 48b: What is the Jewish attitude toward verbal deception?
23. Bava Metzia 59b: Tanur shel Akhnai, the Akhnai Oven **(3x)**
24. Bava Metzia 84a: R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish
25. Eruvin 13b: Elu ve'elu: these and those are the words of the living God **(3x)**
26. Gittin 55b-56a: the story of the destruction of the Temple (Kamtza and bar Kamtza)
27. Gittin 56a: the escape of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai **(3x)**
28. Gittin 60a-b: how was the Torah given, scroll-by-scroll or all at once?
29. Hagiga 4b-5a: rabbinic perspectives on the time to die
30. Hagiga 10a: rabbinic law is like a mountain hanging by a thread
31. Hagiga 14b: four entered the Pardes **(2x)**
32. Ketubot 7b-8a: the seven wedding blessings
33. Ketubot 9a: double doubt in the case of a claim about a bride's non-virginity
34. Ketubot 22a: "the mouth that forbids is the mouth that permits"
35. Ketubot 31a: when a more serious punishment applies, the lesser punishment is waived
36. Ketubot 62b-63a: when too much Torah gets a rabbi killed
37. Kiddushin 29a: time-bound positive mitzvot
38. Kiddushin 31a-32b: honoring parents
39. Kiddushin 39b: what is the reward for observing the commandments?
40. Makkot 23b-24a: how many mitzvot are there, really?
41. Megilla 12a-b: Vashti and her banquet
42. Megilla 25a: Forbidden Torah: Verses that are written but should not be read
43. Menahot 29b: Moshe at the back of Rabbi Akiva's class
44. Menahot 44a: when your fringes hit you in the face: the power of tzitzit
45. Pesahim 66a: Hillel and the Passover sacrifice
46. Pesahim 108a, 116a: The Passover Seder **(2x)**
47. Pesahim 119b-120a: What exactly is the afikomen that we eat at the seder?
48. Rosh Hashana 25a: Violating Yom Kippur to prove a point
49. Rosh Hashana 28b: Do commandments require kavvanah (intention)?
50. Rosh Hashana 33b-34a: Why do we sound the shofar the way we do?
51. Sanhedrin 71a-71b: The rebellious son, a paradigmatic difficult text
52. Sanhedrin 74a-b: Three cardinal sins requiring self-sacrifice **(2x)**
53. Shabbat 21b: What is Hanukkah all about, anyway?
54. Shabbat 33b: Solitary confinement or solitary refinement?
55. Shabbat 37-38: The perplexing plata
56. Shabbat 43a and 46b: Davar she'eyno mitkaven – Questions of Intent
57. Shabbat 88a: holding the mountain over Israel like a barrel (the validity of the covenant)
58. Shabbat 119a: Joseph who honors Shabbat
59. Shabbat 156b: The principle of Ein Mazal beYisrael, Israel has no astrological sign
60. Shekalim 14b: Moses and money
61. Sukkah 29b-30a: Can one perform a mitzvah with something stolen?
62. Ta'anit 21-22: What ordinary people do to earn a place in the World to Come
63. Ta'anit 23a: Honi the Circle-Drawer
64. Yevamot 24b: What is the status of a conversion for the sake of marriage?

65. Yevamot 62b: how 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva suddenly died
66. Yoma 23a: Kohanim gone wild: When blood is spilled at the altar

Other Recommendations

“David Kraemer teaches a course at JTS, Key Sugyot for Conservative Rabbis, including multiple sugyot on each of the major holidays, on major lifecycle events, on gender, and on theodicy.”

“Rabbi Daniel Wolf, who teaches in the Gush, has a list of 100 sugyot that an educated ben yeshiva ought to know. He teaches them on a 3-4 year cycle and published a book with his outlines of the sugyot from seder nashim. These are sugyot in the Brisker sense, topics in gemara/halakhah and not sections of talmud per se. His book is called *Minba le'Abaron*.”

“You may want to take a look at Gershon Schwartz’s book, *Swimming in the Sea of Talmud* (JPS, 1998) that presents several dozen texts with light, informal commentary.”

“See Rabbi Louis Jacobs, *The Talmudic Argument* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), which contains a great list of such sugyot together with a masterful exposition of each in clear English.”

“You might want to take a look at Leib Moscovitz's book *Talmudic Reasoning* (Paul Mohr Verlag, 2002) since he selects many of the classically interesting sugyot there.”