

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

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ABSTRACT

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

INTRODUCTION

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

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE LANGUAGE OF SLOWING DOWN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Fishbane 2002)

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

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

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

WHAT SLOWING DOWN DOES NOT ENTAIL

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

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

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

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

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

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

COMPONENTS OF SLOWING DOWN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Teacher: *Keritut* [corrects pronunciation].

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

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

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

Teacher: Okay.

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

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

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

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

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

Student 2 continued:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Teacher: Okay.

Student 2: I read it as two.

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

Student 2: It seems like one follows.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Teacher: Very nice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Student 2: Sure.

(class transcript, 7/20/07)

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

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

Other students also wanted to respond to my initial question.

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

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

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

Student 4: I'm not sure.

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

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

[Pause.]

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

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

The students continued:

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

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

[Pause.]

Student 1: I don't remember.

Student 3: The other property?

Teacher: Okay, so where have seen other property?

Student 3: In the other mishnahs?

Teacher: Okay.

Class: Oh!!!

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

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

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

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

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

[Pause and rustling of paper].

Right. So look at your *mishnayot*.

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

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

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

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

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

Teacher: Okay.

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

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

Teacher: Okay.

Student 3: Why three?

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

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

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

Student 2: Exhaustive.

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

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

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

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

¹⁵A coin of minimal worth.

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

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

ASSIGNMENT SHEET

Rashi

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

Tosafot

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

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

Ritva

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

Finally, try and compare all three of these commentators.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Students: Ohh.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

POTENTIAL OF THE PEDAGOGY OF SLOWING DOWN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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