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***Rabbis Studying Rabbinic Texts About Rabbis:
An Exploration of Text, Context and Subtext***
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“We have seen...what is involved in reading a text. Of course, the reader before whose eyes the great book of world history simply lies open does not exist. But neither does the reader exist who, when he has his text before him, simply reads what is there. Rather, all reading involves application, so that a person reading a text is himself part of the meaning he apprehends. He belongs to the text that he is reading. The line of meaning that the text manifests to him as he reads it always and necessarily breaks off in an open indeterminacy. He can, indeed, he must, accept the fact that future generations will understand differently what he has read in the text.”

Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 340

The “Map” for Teaching Bible (Barry Holtz, *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and Practice* (New York: JPS, 2003), pp. 92-94)

1. ***The Contextual Orientation*** – determine the meaning of the texts *within its own times* as best we can
2. ***The Literary Criticism Orientation*** – literary readings of the texts using tools of modern criticism
3. ***The Reader-Response Orientation*** – (subset of literary approach) focuses on the reader’s experience in encountering a text
4. ***Parshanut, the Jewish Interpretive Orientation*** – teacher is concerned with the way that various classical commentators understand the text
5. ***The Moralistic-Didactic Orientation*** – discerning the “message” (or messages) that specific texts offer for our own lives
6. ***The Personalization Orientation*** – also aims at the contemporary meaning of the text, but in a less didactic and directive fashion (political, psychological, spiritual orientation)
7. ***The Ideational Orientation*** – views Jewish sources as a kind of “philosophical” text in which are embedded key moral and theological ideas
8. ***The Text Leads to Action Orientation*** – learn in order to observe *mitzvot*
9. ***The Decoding, Translation and Comprehension Orientation*** – basic comprehension of the text, including memorization

Deuteronomy 25:5-10 ^{WTT} כִּי־יֹשְׁבוּ אַחִים יַחְדָּו וּמֵת אֶחָד מֵהֶם וּבֶן
אֵין־לוֹ לֹא־תִהְיֶה אִשְׁת־הַמֵּת הַחוּצָה לְאִישׁ זָר יִבְמָה יִבֵּא
עָלֶיהָ וּלְקַחָהּ לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַיִּבְמָהּ⁶ וְהָיָה הַבְּכוֹר אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵד
יִקּוּם עַל־שֵׁם אָחִיו הַמֵּת וְלֹא־יִמָּחַה שְׁמוֹ מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל⁷ וְאִם־לֹא
יִחְפֹּץ הָאִישׁ לְקַחַת אֶת־יְבָמָתוֹ וְעָלְתָה יְבָמָתוֹ הַשְּׂעָרָה
אֶל־הַזְּקֵנִים וְאָמְרָה מֵאֵין יְבָמִי לְהַקִּים לְאָחִיו שֵׁם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל
לֹא אָבָה יְבָמִי⁸ וְקָרְאוּ־לוֹ זְקֵנֵי־עִירוֹ וּדְבָרוּ אֵלָיו וְעָמַד
וְאָמַר לֹא חָפְצָתִי לְקַחְתָּהּ⁹ וְנָגְשָׁה יְבָמָתוֹ אֵלָיו לְעֵינֵי הַזְּקֵנִים
וְחָלְצָה נַעֲלוֹ מֵעַל רַגְלוֹ וַיִּרְקָה בְּפָנָיו וְעָנְתָה וְאָמְרָה כָּכָה
יַעֲשֶׂה לְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִבְנֶה אֶת־בַּיִת אָחִיו¹⁰ וְנִקְרָא שְׁמוֹ
בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל בֵּית חָלוּץ הַנֶּעֱלָ ס

5) When brothers dwell together and one of them dies and leaves no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married to a stranger, outside the family. Her husband's brother shall unite with her: he shall take her as his wife and perform the levir's duty. 6) The first son that she bears shall be accounted to the dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out in Israel. 7) But if the man does not want to marry his brother's widow, his brother's widow shall appear before the elders in the gate and declare, "My husband's brother refuses to establish a name in Israel for his brother; he will not perform the duty of a levir." 8) The elders of his town shall then summon him and talk to him. If he insists, saying, "I do not want to marry her," 9) his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, pull the sandal off his foot, spit in his face, and make this declaration: "Thus shall be done to the man who will not build up his brother's house!" 10) And he shall go in Israel by the name of "the family of the unsandaled one."

Yerushalmi Yevamot 12:6, 13a 'א' - 'ג' א' תלמוד ירושלמי מסכת יבמות פרק יב' הלכה ו' - 'ג' א' רקה דם רבי בא בשם רבי יהודה רבי זריקן מטי בה רבי ירמיה בשם אבא בר אבא רבי זעירא מטי בה בשם שמואל אם יש בו צחצוחית של רוק כשר הגידמת במה היא חולצת בשיניה בני סימונייא אתון לגבי רבי אמרין ליה בעא תתן לן חד בר נש דריש דיין וחזן ספר מתניין ועבד לן כל צורכינן ויהב לון לוי בר סיסי עשו לו בימה גדולה והושיבוה עליה אתון ושאלון ליה הגידמת במה היא חולצת ולא אגיבון רקה דם ולא אגיבון אמרין דילמה דלית הוא מרי אולפן נישאול ליה שאלון ליה דאגדה אתון ושאלון ליה מהו הדין דכתיב אבל אגיד לך את הרשום בכתב אמת אם אמת למה רשום ואם רשום למה אמת ולא אגיבון אתון לגבי דרבי אמרון ליה הדין פייסונא דפייסנתך אמר לון חייכון בר נש דכוותי יהבית לכון שלח אייתיתיה ושאל ליה אמר ליה רקה דם מהו אמ' ליה אם יש בו צחצוחית של רוק כשר הגידמת במה היא חולצת אמר ליה בשיניה אמר ליה מהו הדין דכתיב אבל אגיד לך את הרשום בכתב אמת אם אמת למה רשום ואם רשום למה אמת אמ' לי' עד שלא נתחתם גזר דין רשום משנתחתם גזר דין אמת אמר ליה ולמה לא אגיבתינן אמר ליה עשו לי בימה גדולה והושיבו אותי עליה וטפח רוחי עלי וקרא עליו אם נבלת בהתנשא ואם זמות יד לפה מי גרם לך להתנבל בדברי תורה על שנישאת' בהן עצמך

“She spit blood.” Rabbi Ba in the name of Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Zerikan caused (the chain of tradition) to arrive; Rabbi Yermiyah in the name of Abba bar Abba, Rabbi Zeira caused (the chain of tradition) to arrive in the name of Shmuel: If there is a drop of spit within it, it is valid.

A woman without arms, how does she perform *halitzah*? With her teeth.

The people of Simonia came to Rabbi (Judah the Prince) and said: “give us one person who will be a preacher, a judge, a *hazzan*, a teacher of Bible and Mishnah, and will fulfill all our needs.” He gave them Levi bar Sisi.

They made him a large platform and sat him upon it. They came and asked him: “how does an armless woman perform *halitzah*?” He did not answer them. “(What is the law in the case of) a woman who spat blood?” He did not answer them.

They said: perhaps he is not a master of law. Let us ask him about lore. They came and asked him: what is (the correct interpretation of) that which is written: (Daniel 10:21): “But I will tell you what is inscribed in the book, in truth.” If it is truth, why is it described as inscribed? And if it is inscribed, why is it described as truth? He did not answer them.

They went back to Rabbi and said: “is this the sort of leader we wanted?” He said: “(I swear) by your lives, I have given you a person like myself!”

Rabbi then called Levi bar Sisi and summoned him and asked him. He said to him: “If the woman spit blood, what is the law?” He answered him: “if there is a drop of spit in it, it is valid.” “A woman without arms - how does she perform *halitzah*?” He said to him: “with her teeth.”

He said to him: “What is the meaning of the following verse, as it is written -- ‘But I will tell you what is inscribed in the book, in truth?’” If it is truth, why is it described as inscribed? And if it is inscribed, why is it described as truth? He said to him: “before a decree is sealed, it is described as inscribed. Once it is sealed, it is described as truth.”

He (Rabbi) said to him (Levi bar Sisi): “Why did you not answer the people of the village?” He (Levi bar Sisi) said (to Rabbi): “They made me a large platform and sat me upon it, and my spirit swelled.”

Rabbi applied the verse to him (Proverbs 30:32): “If you have been foolish, exalting yourself, or if you have been devising evil, put your hand on your mouth.” What caused you to make a fool of yourself in regard to teachings of Torah? It was because you exalted yourself through them.

Outline

A) Halakhic opening: Two arcane halakhic issues –

- 1) spit blood - chain of tradition then halakhic answer
- 2) *halitzah* of an armless woman – anonymous answer

B) Aggadic section –

- 1) Simonia's rabbinical search
 - a) communal statement of desire for leadership
 - b) enumeration of perceived roles of a rabbi
 - c) Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's (Rabbi, henceforth) placement of Levi Bar Sisi
- 2) The Test
 - a) people of Simonia sit Levi on a large platform
 - b) question on "spit blood"
 - c) Levi's failure to answer
 - d) question on "armless woman's *halitzah*"
 - e) Levi's failure to answer
 - f) community adjusts its expectations (=Levi's last chance)
 - g) question on Daniel 10:21 – truth and inscriptions/impressions
 - h) Levi's failure to answer
 - i) people of Simonia complain to Rabbi
 - j) Rabbi exclaims that Levi is just like him
- 3) The Retest
 - a) Rabbi summons Levi and asks him three questions
 - 1) spit blood – Levi answers correctly
 - 2) armless woman – Levi answers correctly
 - 3) Daniel 10:21 – truth and impressions – Levi answers correctly
- 4) Reflection
 - a) Rabbi asks why Levi did not answer the people
 - b) Levi answers: they made me a large platform and sat me on it, and my spirit swelled
- 5) Conclusion/Moral Learning
 - a) Rabbi applies Proverbs 30:32 to Levi, to teach lesson
"If you have been foolish, exalting yourself, or have been devising evil, put your hand to your mouth."
 - b) Lesson: use Torah to exalt yourself, you will look like a fool in the end

Matrix of Some Possible Approaches to Elements in PT Yevamot Text

<i>Text</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>Subtext</i>
	Halakhic section (A)	
“She spit blood” (A1)	Arcane, perhaps even hypothetical halakhic topic, values halakhic thinking, interprets unclear or incomplete base texts and sets law	Rabbis’ ability to function when confronted with complex, challenging, irregular questions
Rabbi Ba...in the name of Shmuel (A1)	Rabbinic respect for and preservation of chain of tradition and transmission, retains source of halakhic reasoning to allow evaluation	Place of contemporary Rabbis within that chain of tradition, transmission and innovation; how to evaluate prior links in that chain
<i>Halitzah</i> of woman without arms (A2)	Second arcane, perhaps hypothetical halakhic topic	Feminist concerns, issues of powerlessness and treatment of those with disabilities
	Aggadic Section (B)	
Simonia’s desire for rabbinical leadership (B1a)	Community’s stated desire for rabbinical leadership, and inherent validation of rabbinical leadership	Contemporary relationship between Rabbi and community, evaluation of communal willingness to be led and personal abilities
Simonia’s expression of perceived communal needs (B1b)	Communal expression of perceived roles of rabbinical leadership during Tannaitic period	Contemporary roles of the rabbi—acceptable, appropriate, achievable?
דריש preacher (B1b)	Interpreter of Scripture, speaker in public settings, represents authentic interpretation	Torah knowledge, aptitude for interpretation, public speaking skills, authenticity
דיין judge (B1b)	Response to actual court cases brought before communal rabbinical leader	Judgment, mediation, decision-making, management
חזן <i>hazzan</i> (B1b)	Sexton – official who managed service/worship	Understanding of music/art/ other affective and inspirational aspects of Judaism
ספר scribe/Bible teacher (B1b)	Teacher of Bible to children	Pedagogy, approach to diverse educational audiences, text knowledge

מתניין teacher of Tannaitic tradition (B1b)	Teacher of Tannaitic tradition	Extension of teaching past Bible to broad whole of Jewish tradition
עבד לן כל צורכינן will meet all our needs (B1b)	Multi-faceted and not completely defined list of needs	“Other tasks as assigned;” how to define anew the role of the rabbi in contemporary Jewish society; responding to panoply of needs
Rabbi’s placement of Levi Bar Sisi (B1c)	Authority of Rabbi, power over his students	Rabbinical placement system; control over own destiny in career
The Platform (B2a)	Levi’s elevation, physically and status-wise	Contemporary respect for the rabbi; fishbowl
The Test (B2b-h)	Examination of suitability of Levi Bar Sisi for leadership position; silence in the face of questioning; powerlessness	Meeting or exceeding expectations; failure; evaluation by non-professionals; truth vs. impression
The Complaint (B2i-j)	Surprise, disappointment of failure, Rabbi’s denial of problem as Levi is “just like him,” one of his students	Dealing with failure of colleagues and students; denial of difficulty, pride; community vs. rabbi; professional reviews
The Retest (B3)	Proof of Rabbi’s position and Levi’s suitability	Poor performance under pressure, action vs. inaction at key moments that matter
Reflection (B4)	Rabbi probes Levi’s difficulty, discovers his large platform problem	Seeking guidance from experienced colleagues, elders; self-reflection after failure
Conclusion/Moral Learning (B5)	Verse as appropriate medium for teaching moral lesson, humility above all	Use of tradition at “teachable moments;” humility in a modern context; avoiding use of position or Torah to self-aggrandize