The Pedagogy of Slowing Down: Teaching Talmud in a Summer Kollel
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Introduction

This chapter describes a set of practices in Talmud teaching that I have come to call “the pedagogy of slowing down.” It reflects an effort to more deeply understand my own practices in teaching Talmud through a close of examination of an intensive Talmud class at the Northwoods Kollel of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. I wanted to better comprehend my classroom practices—what I do when teaching Talmud, and why. Below, I will describe the techniques of slowing down that emerged from research into and reflection on my own pedagogy in the Kollel, and present some potential effects of the pedagogy of slowing down. My aim is to present another example of a mode of Talmud pedagogy, to contribute to the growing literature on this topic.

1 Camp 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.

Background and Context

The Northwoods Kollel brings four to six college-age students to Camp Ramah in Wisconsin for a nine-week intensive learning program. A Talmud class five mornings a week forms the core of the program. In the afternoons, students have classes in halakha, midrash, hasidic thought, and contemporary religious philosophy. Two nights a week, the students have guided study in which 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 toward 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 a yeshiva in Israel. Hebrew language ability ranges from a few years of college-level Hebrew to native fluency, so we do not focus on decoding words or understanding the basic structure of talmudic arguments. I seek to reinforce and strengthen students’ skills, so they can use them to move toward deeper readings and consider fully the multiple meanings possible in a sugya. The Kollel aims to combine intensive study of sacred Jewish texts in an intellectually open and rigorous environment with an explicit commitment to traditional-egalitarian Judaism. Finally, while located in a summer camp, the Kollel is an intellectually rigorous program, close to the type of program one would find in a yeshiva setting.

For three summers (2005, 2006, and 2007), I spent approximately one month each year teaching Talmud in the Kollel. This paper examines my 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 form the primary data for my 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 in the Babylonian Talmud. The sugyot all center on the topic of marriage, and more specifically the issue of a man’s betrothing a woman.
with money.\textsuperscript{3} Talmud study was divided between havruta (study with a partner) and class time. Students generally spent one to one-and-a-half hours in havruta 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 havruta. 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 several students described their pedagogical experience was “slowing down.” When I examined my teaching journal, I saw that the language of “slowing down” also recurred in my own 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 own 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 havruta 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\textsuperscript{4} today but we only got through one Tos. And this is with

\textsuperscript{3} Rabbinic marriage has two main components—betrothal (erusin or kiddushin) and marriage (nisu’in or huppah). 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 any man, including her future 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.

\textsuperscript{4} Tosafot refers to the Tosafists, twelfth- and thirteenth-century Franco-German Talmudic commentators. Rashba is the acronym for the Spanish commentator Rabbi Solomon the son of Abraham Adret (c. 1235-1310).
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students who are good readers. Tomorrow we will start with shiur at 9:30. But [after tomorrow] 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)

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, since as I wrote, these students “are good readers.” Instead, I was surprised by “my ability to get them to slow down in class.”

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, missing the meanings 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 their own success often had the effect of shutting down opportunities for their own questions—questions both about the content of the text and the intricacies of its structure. Once they had finished reading and translating the text, they believed their analysis was complete.

As I reflected on my teaching and the recurring language of slowing down, I realized that in my teaching, “slowing down” is not only a pedagogic technique but also a cultural move. When I began teaching this 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 other markers for success. I wanted to help them move more deeply inside the textual world of the Babylonian Talmud. I came to understand over the course of the summer that one of my larger teaching goals 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 the answers were reached.

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 (bekiut) 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.\(^5\)

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’s methods 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 Babylonian Talmud, people who have learned new ways of hearing and understanding such that they can find new meanings and power in the text. The phrase “the pedagogy of slowing down” is therefore a

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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 the ancient text and its contemporary students.

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.⁶ Wood describes the ways in which schedule and curriculum rush teachers and children and contends that this hurriedness often hinders learning. He 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.”⁷ He envisions “‘3 Rs” as shaping schools for the next generations: “Rigor, Recreation, and Reflection.”⁸ 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.”⁹ 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 my pedagogy of slowing down, I begin with a negative description—what slowing down does not entail. First, it does not mean tailoring the class to the weakest students, in this case those who

⁷ Ibid., 32.
⁸ Ibid., 267.
⁹ Ibid., 268.
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 our 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?¹⁰ New ideas, of course, should and will emerge in the course of discussion. However, a teacher’s awareness of what she wants to try to illustrate through her choice of material helps prevent discussions from turning to overly marginal issues and supports the students in asking better 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 Moshe and Tova Hartman Halbertal, in which “[a] usual class in the Yeshiva will quickly turn from

¹⁰ Since this class was not operating under the yeshiva 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 Babylonian Talmud. 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.
a well-ordered presentation of the teacher into a lively and sometimes chaotic exchange between a few bright students and their teacher.”

These three negative components are central to my approach 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. In the case of the Kollel, I had the advantage of being present for havruta study, during which I could also challenge stronger students and support the learning of less advanced students by giving them tailored pointers, extra time, or additional questions. For example, I encouraged one havruta 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. The sheer frequency of this term prompted me to look at my data through a new lens, isolating particular teaching strategies and practices that reflect the pedagogy of slowing down. In the following section, I enumerate and describe these strategies and practices, and then provide and analyze examples from class transcripts.

The first component of the pedagogy of slowing down is **precision**. Precision begins with the 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. A student’s claim that “Well, I know what the argument means; I just can’t trans-

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late 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 serves as markers for different types of sugya structures (terms like ibaye lehu, u-reminhu, etc.). I also asked for as much precision as possible in issues of redaction, such as identifying the different layers of the talmudic text—tannaic (texts from the period of the tannaim, c. 70–220 CE), amoraic (texts from the period of the amoraim, c. 220–550 CE), and anonymous (texts from the anonymous editorial strata)—and recognizing parallel sources from other rabbinic texts.

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. As students considered these interpretive questions, I insisted that they ground their opinions 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

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

14 Admittedly, 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 Babylonian Talmud 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. On criteria for distinguishing these layers, see Shamma Friedman, “Perek Ha-‘Ishah Rabbah Ba-Bavli,” in *Mehkarim U-Mekorot*, ed. H. Dimitrovsky (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1977), 277-441.

15 In 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, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000], 9).
interwove questions on the meaning as we moved through the sugya. Although the moments 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.16 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 students further open a sugya’s interpretive possibilities, as part of the ongoing conversation about the Talmud’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 Talmud itself, 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 considered 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.17

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 make more explicit points of thematic continuity, or highlight disagreements and the meanings of those disagreements. In addition, I tied the current unit in with previous units, trying to illustrate a con-

16 The term rishonim refers to those scholars living from the mid-eleventh century to the fifteenth century.
17 Since 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.
tinuity of the 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 Practice**

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

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:

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

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

JK: 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],\(^\text{18}\) which is unclear in itself then you write this sefer keritot [book of divorce].

JK: Okay, is ervat davar the only thing that we find that is the only reason?

\(^\text{18}\) I have intentionally used a literal translation in order to convey the ambiguity of this phrase.
Student 1: Well, *im lo timtza hen be’einav* [if she does not find favor in his eyes; Deut. 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*.

JK: *Keritut* [corrects pronunciation].

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

JK: Okay, and do you read *im lo timtza hen be’einav ki matza bah ervat davar* [if he does not find favor in her eyes because he has found in her nakedness of a thing; Deut. 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 bah ervat davar* as being part of the *lo timtza hen* so I would see it as being part of it.

JK: Okay.¹⁹

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

¹⁹ Class transcript, 7/13/07. Some of the language (here and below) has been smoothed out.
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 proceeded, 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: With the divorce material, when she is divorced she is sent from his home which means that she is living in his home.

JK: Okay, great. So that tells us something as well about what happens with marriage, right. There is something about [the man as the] center.

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

JK: Okay. And 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 responses, they began to articulate the idea that marriage centers on the man’s home, that he is the active party, and that the divorce ritual has different components. 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 also commented on the striking 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 betrothal aspect of these verses. Students named the verbs *lakah* [take] and *ba’al* [to have sexual relations] as important to understanding betrothal. Using their comments, I then framed a question:

JK: Do you read *lakah*, the verbs *lakah* 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.

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20 The verbal root *lakah* also has the meaning, “to take in marriage,” according to Francis Brown, et al., *The New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979), 543.

JK: Okay.

Student 2: I read it as two.

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

Student 2: It seems like one follows.

JK: Wait, wait. I want each of you to 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.

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

Student 3: [Pause]. I guess because maybe they [the two verbs] come so close together and it’s almost like this is the unit that makes you married and then … what happens you know “im” [if] something else [happens afterward]....

JK: 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 havruta’s (Student 6’s) 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 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 turn to the other student in the havruta 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 cause Student 6’s position to get lost. From the outset of the class, I tried to teach the students that a 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, in Kiddushin 3a-b (minyana de-reisha le-ma’utei mai—ve-ein davar aher 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:

JK: The number of the reisha [the opening clause of Mishnah Kiddushin 1:1 concerning marriage]—what does it come to exclude?

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

JK: 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...?

JK: 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.

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

Student 2: Sure.22

22 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 Talmud 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.

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

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

JK: Okay, so it could have just said, kesef, shetar, and bi’ah. It doesn’t need to say “three.” What would be proof that 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?

JK: Yeah, in addition [to the fact] that it lists three things. What might be proof that you’re onto something?

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 in-
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tercourse…” (Mishnah 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?

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

[Pause.]

Student 1: I don’t remember.

Student 3: The other property?

JK: Okay, so where have seen other property?

Student 3: In the other mishnahs?

JK: 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 havrutot, I wanted them to begin to ask similar questions of the material: questions about the Talmud’s literary formulations and the 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 Mishnah 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 Mishnah Kiddushin 1:1.

Student 2: Yevamah is not listed with a number the way she’s acquired and acquires herself.

JK: 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].

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23 A yevamah is a woman whose husband has died without children. She is required to marry her husband’s brother and their child is considered to be the husband’s. See, for example, Deut. 25:5-20, Ruth 4:1-15, and Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Yibum and Halitzah 1:1.
Right. So look at your mishnayot.

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

JK: 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 Gemara’s question. Why does our mishnah state the number three? Again, I have directed the students back toward 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.

JK: Okay.

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

JK: Okay.

Student 3: Why three?

JK: 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?
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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.

JK: 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), which 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 it. I knew that I wanted to use his statement to make a point about lists in the Gemara. I reframed Student 2’s answer about the Gemara’s choice of the number three. This reframing enabled me to introduce the students to a mode of the Gemara’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 Kiddushin 3a-b, we also studied a number of rishonim. We focused 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 perutah24 and a woman for less than a perutah will not cause herself to be acquired (la makniya nafshah).” I asked the students to learn specific comments of Rashi25 (s.v. la makniya nafshah), Tosafot (s.v. ve-ishah be-pahot mi-shaveh perutah la makniya nafshah), and Ritva26 (s.v. salka da’takh amina mah sadeh mikanya be-

24 A coin of minimal worth.
25 Rabbi Shlomo the son of Yitzhak, 1040/1-1105.
26 Rabbi Yom Tov the son of Abraham Ishbili, c. 1250-1330.
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halifin af ishah nami mikanya be-halifin). They were instructed to also look at Ramban27 (s.v. le-ma’ute halifin ve-khu) if they have additional time. The assigned rishonim focused on three words in the sugya: la makniya nafshah ([a woman] does not cause herself to be acquired). On the assignment sheet, I asked students to compare the positions of Rashi, Tosafot, and Ritva. Below are my questions:

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

Tosafot
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 hazakah [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 ishah [acquiring a woman] also be permitted through halifin?
2. How does he explain why halifin isn’t a method of kinyan ishah?
3. How does he explain the (our) version la makniya nafshah? How is the explanation the same as or different from that of Rashi?

Finally, try and compare all three of these commentators.

27 Rabbi Moses the son of Nahman (Nahmanides), c. 1194-1270.
28 Rabbi 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 nafshah*” (feminine singular active causative participle), Rabbenu Tam, one of the tosafists, reads “*la mi-kanya*” (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 lah*). Rabbenu Tam, however, emended the text and removed the word “herself.” 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 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, but contain the word “herself.”

JK: Well, let’s also look at the language here. It says *le-khen 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.

JK: Which again I think strengthens the point that he’s making a reading choice of what the correct reading is of the *girsas* [textual

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29 On this textual emendation, see Aryeh Cohen, “This Patriarchy Which Is Not One: The Ideology of Marriage in Rashi and Tosafot,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 70 (1999), 126-27.
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.

JK: 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.

JK: 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.

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 or might assume that it says. Second, I stated 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 named it as one possibility. I thus affirmed her interpretation while opening the door to other opinions about Rabbenu Tam’s reading.

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30 Class transcript, 7/22/07.
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.

JK: ... 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 centering 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 girsa proof of that in the Gemara, but making the girsa 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 perutah. 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.

JK: 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.

JK: 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 (and Rabbenu Tam) place 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. To them, this, 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 own 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 that 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 Gemara, I believe that the process of slowing down—a process I only fully understood after the fact—played a significant role in enabling this to occur. Slowing down not only contributed to the students becoming more attentive readers but also to stronger class dynamics and the ongoing development of their religious voices.

The precision that is possible in slowing down 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 possibilities. 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 rishonim sought to ground their readings in the Gemara 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 close readings of the rishonim, students could see the possibilities that arose from attentive, detailed, and creative reading and thinking. The use of rishonim 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?” The fact that many of the rishonim were difficult to understand was actually of pedagogic benefit, as it helped facilitate the process of—and foster the value of—slowing down.

Most significant was an increased ability on the part of each student to find a range of interpretive possibilities in the sugya. I observed that the marker of success in this class over time became not so much
speed of reading and preparation of material, but 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. 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 havruta preparation.

Second, I observed a striking shift in the ways in which different havruta 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 havrutot 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 because of the weaker students’ increasing comfort with the Talmudic texts, but also because 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 generated rather than speed meant more time spent thinking and articulating ideas in havruta preparation.

Third, I perceived an increasing patience in reading, 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. However, I made explicit to my students throughout the class that I wanted to hear their opinions, reactions, and even anger about this material. However, at the same time as I reinforced my desire to hear them speak

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31 If 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!

32 Rachel Adler, Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), 169-207, has written a critique of the traditional Jewish marriage ceremony and kiddushin in particular.
their minds, I also reinforced my requirement that they ground their opinions about what the text was saying in the words of the text, first demonstrating that they could translate and explain it.

As the students became closer readers of the Gemara, 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 perspective. I believe 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 the ethical tensions in a text. Then, as their skills grew, they found that they not only had permission to but were more capable of inserting their own perspective into the text itself, expressing questions and concerns and offering 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 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, rigor, and consideration toward one another 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.

In sum, I strove to open up a space for reading and thinking characterized simultaneously by intellectual openness and reading rigor. By pushing students to articulate their opinions while grounding those opinions in the specific words of the text, and exposing them to the interpretive tradition of the rishonim (demonstrating that the Gemara’s meaning is not fixed or static), I wanted to give them tools to become insiders in our tradition. And with their increased abilities, I found, came increased joy in the process of learning Talmud itself.
Conclusion

As cited above, Fishbane conceptualizes the commentator’s spiritual task as “... 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 of 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.