A Menu of Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature

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The Initiative on Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy in Jewish Studies

Working Paper No. 14
June 2009

This is a preprint of an article whose final and definitive form has been published in the Journal of Jewish Education © 2009 Taylor and Francis, and is available online at http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15244110903534510

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Abstract

Barry Holtz, in his Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and Practice (2003), following the work of Pamela Groisman, developed what he called a "map" of orientations for the teaching of Bible. These orientations are not pedagogic methods or techniques; rather, they represent significantly different understandings of what the teaching and learning of the subject are all about. This paper builds on Holtz' work in two ways. First, it develops the concept of a teaching orientations and offers some critical clarifications (and argues, as well, that the metaphor of a "map" is more appropriate than the metaphor of a "map"). And second, it proposes and describes a menu of ten orientations to the teaching of rabbinic literature, as it occurs in schools, camps, synagogues, universities and yeshivot.

A. Introduction

We use the language of "subjects" in education all the time. We talk about the subject of history, or Tanakh, or mathematics, or English literature. In universities and colleges, we talk about "disciplines" rather than "subjects," but we mostly mean the same thing. We have departments of History, composed of people who call themselves historians, who practice something that we call the discipline of history. But what do we mean when we talk about a subject or a discipline? What holds a discipline together? What makes a subject a subject? This paper will focus on the specific subject or discipline of rabbinic literature: what is this subject about?

We might be tempted to say that an academic discipline shares a particular methodology. After all, the etymological sense of the term "discipline" suggests that participants in an academic discipline are involved in a common project under shared rules that govern the conduct of their inquiry. But our initial confidence in that formulation evaporates as we get closer to any particular discipline —chemistry or sociology or philosophy—and notice the multiple methodologies in use. In fact, it is quite difficult to achieve conceptual clarity and precision about what constitutes a subject or a discipline. In a recent conversation, philosopher of education Israel Scheffler opined, perhaps in a

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1Ari Ackerman, Wendy Amsellem, Yehuda Ben-Dor, Rahel Berkovits, Susan P. Fendrick, Beverly Gribetz, Barry Holtz, Meesh Hammer-Kossoy, Nati Helfgot, Ido Hevroni, Ben Jacobs, Jane Kanarek, Yehuda Kurtzer, David Schnall, Jon Spira-Savett, Jeff Spitzer, Devora Steinmetz, and Barry Wimpfheimer all contributed to my thinking about orientations, along with many other anonymous instructors of rabbinic literature in various settings. Support for this project was provided by the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University. The errors and omissions are, of course, mine.
moment of levity, that the whole idea of a subject is “goofy.” Scheffler was not denying that we use the idea of a subject and that we ought to continue to use it. Rather he was cautioning us not to assume that the various subjects represent anything more than historically contingent amalgamations of sub-fields, loosely linked by common topics or themes or questions or theories or modes of inquiry or conceptual frameworks. Or as he put it many years ago: “subjects should be taken to represent, not hard bounds of necessity… but centers of intellectual capacity and interest radiating outward without assignable limit.” (Scheffler 1968/1973, p. 89).

Subjects and disciplines, of course, are also fields of teaching, not just fields of inquiry. And when we turn to the teaching of a subject, we likewise find deep internal diversity. The teaching of history, for example, is carried out very differently in different places and different contexts. A well-known paper by Sam Wineburg and Suzanne Wilson, “Models of Wisdom in the Teaching of History” (Wineburg & Wilson, 1988/2001), documents this point in a simple and elegant way: it shows the reader not one but two teachers of history, both skilled, both knowledgeable, both excellent. But the two teachers teach their subject in very different ways, in ways that seem not just stylistically different but fundamentally different. Where one teacher is active, the other is apparently passive; where one is vocal and dynamic, the other seems to fade into the background; where the work of one is visible, asking questions, conducting discussions, conforming to many of our cultural assumptions of what teaching is all about, the work of the other is hidden, buried in the extensive preparation and stage-setting and the creation of an intellectual space for the students to do their work. Both, however, generate intense engagement in the subject, among their students. And based on the observation of the researchers, both contribute to the learning of the subject in deep and meaningful ways. The contrast dramatically illustrates the idea that, just as the study or research of history is not one thing, so too the teaching of history is not one thing.

At about the same time as Wineburg and Wilson were carrying out their research, their colleague Pam Grossman sought to articulate the diversity that she found in her study of teachers of English (see, for example, Grossman 1991). She realized that novice teachers approached the teaching of English literature in ways that seemed to reflect fundamentally diverse understandings of what the subject is all about. These teachers have different purposes, they have different beliefs about their subject, and in part as a result, they do different things in the classroom. And Grossman found that she could make sense of that diversity by superimposing a taxonomy of three fundamentally different approaches to the enterprise of literary interpretation—a taxonomy, that is, borrowed from literary theory. In her article, she calls these three approaches a “text orientation,” a “reader orientation,” and a “context orientation.” “More than a casual attitude towards the subject matter,” she claims, “an orientation towards literature represents a basic organizing framework for knowledge about literature” (Grossman, 1991, p. 248).

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2 Wineburg, Wilson, and Grossman all carried out this research while doctoral students at Stanford University School of Education, working on projects under the directorship of Lee Shulman and heavily influenced by his call for a new paradigm of teacher research, research on subject-specific pedagogy (Shulman 1986 and 1987). Thus, in an echo of Shulman’s manifesto, Grossman writes towards the end of her article as follows: “These orientations become visible in classrooms, however, only by paying close attention to the content of classroom instruction, by looking not only at the number of questions asked, but at the literary implications of those questions, by looking not only at the number of papers assigned, but at the topics of those papers” (Grossman 1991, p. 260).
In the text orientation, the teacher believes that “the reader looks within the text, at literary devices, at the use of language and structure, for clues to its meaning” (p. 248). In the reader orientation, the teacher believes that “reading a text involves an interaction between the reader and the text, as readers connect the text to their own experience and personalize it” (p. 248). And in the context orientation, the teacher believes that “the reader’s interpretation of a literary work is mediated by theoretical frameworks and analytical tools from another discipline, such as psychology or history… The meaning of a text becomes psychological or political, rather than purely literary as in the text-orientation, or personal, as in the reader-orientation” (p. 248). These three fundamentally different conceptions contribute to different pedagogic practices. And so the concept of a teaching orientation was born.³

Grossman does not claim that her three orientations are comprehensive or cover the full range of possibilities. Nor does she claim that every teacher can be located within one orientation. “A specific orientation may predominate,” she writes, “but it is rarely exclusive” (p. 248). What really concerns her, in her work in the late 1980s and early 1990s, is the way that different experiences —experiences studying a subject in college, for example, or taking methods courses in a teacher education program—contribute in different ways to the teaching practices of the novices in her study, and to the differences among those teaching practices. She identifies these examples of three basic orientations to the teaching of English literature to serve this purpose.

However, about ten years later, Barry Holtz (2003) saw the potential significance of the idea of orientations for the teaching of Tanakh. Holtz freely acknowledges his intellectual debt to Grossman, but it is worth noting that he does not merely import this wisdom from general education into Jewish education. This is so, first, because Holtz builds upon and expands on Grossman’s three orientations, through an organic discussion of the possibilities in the field, or fields – that is, both the field of biblical scholarship as well as the field of curriculum and instruction in Bible. Her three orientations become his nine (see the chart).

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<th>Pam Grossman: Orientations to the Teaching of English</th>
<th>Barry Holtz: Orientations to the Teaching of Bible</th>
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<td>Text Orientation</td>
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<td>5. Moralistic-Didactic Orientation</td>
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<td>9. Decoding, Translating, and Comprehension Orientation</td>
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³ I do not mean to suggest that the idea of orientations sprang forth fully formed in 1991. In “Teachers of Substance” (Grossman et al., 1989), Grossman and her co-authors Wilson and Shulman employ the idea of orientations—which they explain as “[teachers’] conceptions of what is important to know [about a particular subject] and how one knows” (p. 31)—and refer to earlier articles emerging from the Knowledge Growth in a Profession Project at Stanford, authored or co-authored by Grossman, dating back to 1985 (for example, Grossman et al., 1985).
The expansion of the number of orientations should not be misinterpreted as a claim that the teaching of Bible is somehow more complicated than English literature. Instead—and this is the second way in which Holtz develops Grossman’s insight, rather than merely copying it—Holtz’s conception of orientations is more attuned to the varieties of practice than Grossman’s conception is.

Consider, for example, Holtz’s “Ideational Orientation,” an orientation that focuses on reading biblical texts in order to discern (or construct) the big ideas that the text is about. The orientation makes sense in a context—the study of Bible in certain Jewish educational settings—where the text may be presumed to have such a big idea (or more than one). But more significantly, it makes sense because Holtz had in front of him examples of Bible curricula that made the study of the big ideas behind the biblical text their focus, and examples of teachers who taught towards those big ideas. He knew what such teaching looked like, the way in which a prior commitment to pursue the big ideas shapes one’s pedagogy. So the Ideational Orientation finds its place on the list not through the imposition of a logical taxonomy but rather by attending to the field of practice.

Even more importantly, Grossman is focused on understanding the small group of teachers in her sample, in thinking about the ways that their educational experiences influenced their approaches to teaching the subject matter, and in helping them become more conscious of their implicit conceptions of the subject matter. She wants to make the point, to the teacher education community, that teachers’ pedagogical choices are influenced not just by their knowledge, but by their beliefs—and not just by their beliefs about teaching but by their beliefs about teaching this particular subject. This is why the taxonomy itself is not centrally important for Grossman. In fact, in Grossman’s book published at around the same time, *The Making of a Teacher* (1990), the idea of orientations does not appear. Instead, she discusses teachers’ “conceptions of their subject” without the typology of her orientations and without the linkage between conceptions and characteristic pedagogical practices that are associated with those conceptions. Holtz, on the other hand, develops his map of orientations with an eye towards its use in the professional development of teachers of the subject. In other words, for Holtz, the map of orientations itself becomes a tool—a conceptual tool to help teachers think about the work that they do, the choices that they make, the alternatives that they might not have considered. The conclusion of this paper will return to this point, in the context of discussing the “so what” question about orientations. Before proceeding any further, however, the concept of an orientation needs closer attention.

### B. What is an Orientation?

Grossman writes that an orientation is “more than a casual attitude towards the subject matter” (Grossman 1991, p. 248). Holtz, for his part, defines an orientation as

> a description not of a teacher’s “method” in some technical meaning of the word, but in a deeper sense, of a teacher’s most powerful conceptions and beliefs about the field he or she

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4 “What emerges from our work,” Grossman and her colleagues argue, “is the notion that prospective teachers’ beliefs about subject matter are as powerful and influential as their beliefs about teaching and learning. Teacher educators must, therefore, provide opportunities for prospective teachers to identify and examine the beliefs that they have about the content they teach” (Grossman et al., 1989, p. 32).
is teaching. It is the living expression of the philosophical questions… What is my view of the aims of education [in this subject], and how as a teacher do I attain those aims? (Holtz 2003, pp. 48-49)

First, then, a negative definition: an orientation is not a casual attitude, and it is not a pedagogic method or a technique. For example, “studying a tractate sequentially” is a technique, not an orientation; while the question of whether to study a masekhet sequentially or whether to select topics is certainly an important pedagogic choice, and one moreover which can be informed by the teacher’s conception of the subject, that choice itself is not comprehensive enough to be an orientation. Other techniques, such as using graphic organizers to display the logic of a sugya, are also not orientations. Instead, an orientation is broader and deeper than the techniques a teacher happens to employ. Even hevruta, paired study, which can be understood as a practice (Kent 2006 and Holzer 2006) rather than merely a technique, is not an orientation, because it can be associated with a range of conceptions of the purposes of studying rabbinic literature – and in fact, can be pursued outside of rabbinic literature as well.

The teachers’ conceptions are conceptions about what any particular subject is all about, its contours, its central issues and challenges, and its purposes – why it is worth teaching and learning. However, it is also important to note that an orientation is not merely a conception of ultimate purposes. In the study of classical Jewish texts, such an abstract conception may be theologically meaningful but pedagogically inert. The idea that one is encountering (in some sense) the word of God, for example, provides very little pedagogic guidance, and is consonant with a very wide range of pedagogic practice. Something similar is the case in the study of other subjects, as well. A particularly passionate and articulate instructor of mathematics might wax poetic about the beauty of mathematics or its role as a fundamental language of the universe or the centrality of a sophisticated relationship to number systems to a conception of the educated human being. But this will not help us understand how such a teacher teaches, what she emphasizes, what mathematical capacities she tries to nurture in students and how she tries to do so. I do not mean to denigrate the pursuit of abstract conceptions of the disciplines. But it is inevitable that the more abstract, the loftier, the more ultimate one’s conception, the less informed by and engaged with pedagogy it will be.

Thus, orientations combine a set of teachers’ conceptions and characteristic practices that hang together in a coherent way. The former is important, because an orientation is not merely technique. The latter is important, because an orientation is not a theory of the subject but a theory of practice. (I will return to this point in the conclusion of the paper.) Moreover, while some orientations are associated with certain pedagogic practices, they are not reducible to those practices. Orientations are also subject-specific in a way that method or technique, which can be employed in multiple subjects, is not.

Second, an orientation is also not the same as a research methodology, which is usually construed more narrowly. This is an important point to emphasize, because of an inclination to proliferate finer and finer grained orientations. To defend the point, consider the following thought experiment. Imagine an academic methodological firebrand, one of those professors of Bible who likes nothing
more than a knock-down, drag-out battle over the fine points of, say, source critical methodology. “When you make that argument,” we can imagine her saying to a colleague following a paper at a conference, “you are no longer pursuing source criticism.” Even that kind of academic, however, becomes more flexible and eclectic in her teaching, because no one believes that her own research is the sum total of what there is to be learned about a particular field. So, “source criticism” is a mode of academic research, but it does not seem right to label “source criticism” as a teaching orientation; not every distinction between research methodologies translates to a distinction between orientations.

The same point can be made by looking at a specific orientation, and noticing the way that it encompasses subtly distinct methodological approaches within one orientational roof. Consider the orientation to the teaching of Bible that Holtz labels the “Contextual Orientation.” In this approach, the teacher strives to present the texts of the Bible in their original context, and to promote the students’ understanding of their original meaning. As Holtz writes, “It views the Bible as a record of an ancient civilization, and it hopes to make that world intelligible to students of today” (Holtz, 2003, p. 92). But the idea of “context” is actually ambiguous. Does it refer to the original meaning of the original author(s) of the text? Or the meaning as understood by the original audience(s)? Or the meaning as understood by the redactor, or the audience at the time of redaction? These are obviously significant questions that go to the heart of what it means to interpret biblical texts. So one might be tempted to proliferate orientations, proposing Contextual\textsubscript{1}, Contextual\textsubscript{2}, and so on. We ought to resist that temptation, however. As important as it is to pursue the question of what we mean by “context,” the impact on our pedagogical practice is slight, and any differences pale in comparison to what all the versions of the Contextual Orientation have in common.

A third definitional point about orientations is that there is no absolute hierarchy of orientations, and as Grossman notes about her orientations to literature, “one could find examples of both excellent and mediocre teaching within each” (Grossman 1991, p. 263). This is an important point to make, because some instructors, when they first encounter a range of orientations, immediately approve of some and disapprove of others. In the case of Bible, for example, some find the Contextual Orientation to be hopelessly antiquarian while others dismiss the Personalization Orientation as impossibly naïve. But the theory of orientations emerges from the conviction that there are, in the world, a variety of responsible ways of thinking about teaching this particular subject – not good ways and bad ways, not educative ways and miseducative ways, but a genuine diversity of purposes.

This does not mean, of course, that we cannot debate those purposes. We certainly can do so, and ought to do so. (Indeed, one benefit of articulating orientations is precisely to focus on the range of possible purposes, and thus, to provide nuanced and responsible language for that debate!) But we ought to debate them in terms of particular settings and particular sets of students. And when we do so, we ought to think carefully about whether we are imagining the best possible version of the orientation. Each orientation can be pursued blindly or stupidly or with little regard for student learning. Each orientation may have its own characteristic pathology (and as we proceed, we will try to imagine how those pathologies present themselves). But poor pedagogy should not be taken

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5 I discuss the Contextual Orientation in greater detail in Levisohn (2008), from which this paragraph is adapted.
as an indictment of the orientation. If the orientation is conceptually coherent, then there must also be a way that it can be pursued thoughtfully, constructively, and with attention to whether and what the students are learning. Thus, if we do find ourselves imagining particular kinds of teaching of our subject that we think are inappropriate, we should pause to consider whether the orientation as a whole is inappropriate (and if so, why) or whether perhaps the thing to which we are reacting is just a particular pedagogic pathology that happens to occur within that orientation.

Fourth, and most fundamentally, there is a basic conceptual question about whether orientations to the teaching of a particular subject are essentially distinct, mutually-exclusive and immutable categories (let us call this the “strong” view of orientations) or whether orientations are a rough approximation of a collection of ideas about the purposes and practices of teaching Bible that typically and contingently, but not necessarily, hang together (the “weak” view). According to the strong view, each orientation should have some essential quality that is conceptually distinct from every other; each orientation offers significantly different answers to certain basic questions of methodology and purpose. The rhetoric of a “map” of orientations (Holtz, 2003, pp. 61 ff.) implicitly endorses the strong view, by suggesting that the territory of Bible teaching may be divided up into regions or districts. On a map, after all, each country or county is divided from each other by a border, a boundary that separates one from the other. According to the weak view, on the other hand, orientations are historically contingent rather than fixed and eternal, and the relationship between orientations need not be one of mutual exclusivity.

The weak view is more compelling. Despite his use of the metaphor of a map, Holtz himself (in personal communication) has inclined towards the weak view. And elsewhere, he has written in a similar vein: “the concept of orientation is in essence a heuristic device, not a definitional surety” (2008, p. 233). Thus Holtz’ work on orientations is not the discovery of natural kinds or of some deep structure of the discipline. Instead, when we think about identifying orientations, we ought to think about identifying sets of cultural practices, along with the knowledge and beliefs that support those practices. Orientations, in this sense, are simply observations about the variety of ways that we tend to teach and learn this subject, here and now. And thus, it is not at all problematic to encounter overlap and inter-relationship – not just eclecticism in actual teaching practice (although that is common too, a point to which we will return) but fuzziness in distinguishing between different orientations.

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6 I do not mean to suggest that every era has its own orientation (which might imply that our goal is to figure out the appropriate one for our era). Rather, the point here is that orientations are products of a particular time and place, as much as they are natural products of the material itself, and there is no reason to think that the set of orientations that we discover in our own time and place is necessarily the set that we might find in another time and place.

7 The issue here is conceptual mutual exclusivity, not practical. After all, even on the strong view, particular teachers might combine orientations in their practice (although we might then worry about coherence or contradiction among purposes).

8 Any discussion of a “structure of a discipline” must acknowledge Joseph Schwab (1961/1978), who introduced the idea that disciplines have both a syntactic and a substantive structure. The work on orientations undermines the idea that a discipline or subject has one, unified syntactic and substantive structure – an assertion which, to be fair, Schwab himself was careful to avoid (“few, if any, disciplines have a single structure,” p. 239). Moreover, as Holtz notes (2003, p. 46), work on orientations is much more concerned with the teachers’ own constructed understanding of the subject than with structure of the discipline in itself (as it were).
To take an example from Bible, consider the Ideational Orientation. The Ideational Orientation functions more as a criterion of selection among meanings rather than an answer to the question of how meaning is determined; it proposes, for the teacher who endorses it, that the teaching of the biblical text ought to seek out and focus on “big ideas.” Subtle grammatical distinctions are less important, for example, than major themes and messages. But how should we discover those big ideas? One teacher might seek to find them by asking about the original context of the biblical text – and thus find herself working, at the same time, within the Contextual Orientation. Another teacher might seek to find them by asking about the reception of the text in the Jewish interpretive tradition – and find herself integrating the Parshanut Orientation. The Ideational Orientation is conceptually distinct from either of these, to be sure, but not in a mutually exclusive way. And thus the orientations can be integrated in practice, not just in an eclectic style of teaching but actually in non-contradictory combination. Because of this example, and others, the strong view seems untenable. (One might wonder why, if two orientations seem to happily co-exist, they ought to be conceptually distinguished from each other. I will have more to say on this issue below.)

Instead of the metaphor of a map, my colleague Susan P. Fendrick has suggested (in personal conversation) that orientations operate like cuisines: each cuisine uses a set of common ingredients, culinary techniques, and tastes, but none of these is necessarily exclusive to that cuisine. Orientations, too, can overlap in the teacher’s beliefs about the purpose of the subject, about the kinds of questions it is worth asking about the subject, and about what constitutes a compelling answer, as well as in terms of pedagogic and interpretive practices; none of these is necessarily exclusive to a particular orientation. Nevertheless, we still know what we mean when we talk about Chinese cuisine or Mexican cuisine. So, too, we know what we mean, roughly, when we talk about teaching orientations. Instead of a “map” of orientations, then, let us instead talk about a “menu.”

C. CONSTRUCTING THE MENU
The previous paragraphs pursued the point that orientations are collections of purposes and practices that happen to hang together, and that identifying these orientations – which is the purpose of this paper, i.e., the identification of orientations to the teaching of rabbinic literature – should be subject to a heuristic or pragmatic criterion. We might think of this as “constructing the menu” rather than discovering the deep structure of some discipline (especially when the “discipline” in question, as in the case of rabbinic literature, is a set of books). But, turning from the review of the work of Grossman and Holtz in their fields to the intentional construction of a menu of orientations to the teaching of rabbinic literature, how can we pursue this work in a responsible way? And how would we know if we’ve got the menu right?

Unlike Grossman’s work, the proposal for a menu of orientations presented here does not emerge from the scholarship in the field – or at least, it does not emerge from the field quite so straightforwardly. And unlike Holtz’s orientations, this menu was not built up organically from a perusal of the fields of biblical scholarship and the teaching of Bible. Instead, it was generated from a set of focus groups in June 2006, in which a diverse set of sophisticated instructors of rabbinic literature, in different settings, were asked to generate different approaches. How is rabbinic literature taught, where, and why? What are the diverse approaches? The initial menu emerged from the analysis of
that data and was then shared, over the next two years, with a broad range of other teachers – critiqued, defended, and supplemented in a process of continual refinement.

This process does not guarantee the empirical validity of the menu of orientations to teaching rabbinic literature, at least not in any formal sense. Then again, it is not clear what it would mean to formally validate the menu, especially given the acknowledged reality that most and perhaps almost all instructors employ multiple orientations in their teaching. So while it is important to the idea of orientations that they incorporate a cluster of beliefs and characteristic practices that appear in the world, no one should imagine that we can walk into any setting and immediately know which orientation the particular teacher is using or subscribing to. After all, we have already noted that many orientations can be happily combined, and in fact Holtz suggests that it is the mark of a good teacher to be able to do so.9

What, then, underwrites the menu of orientations? What might give us confidence that we’ve got them right? One part of the answer to that question is genealogical: we may have confidence in the menu of orientations – confidence that they are more or less representative of the range of teaching practices out in the world – because of how they were generated, drawing on the input of a large number of instructors who were sought out for the diversity of their ideological locations, their institutional affiliations, and their teaching commitments.10 The process of patient exploration and consultation should bolster our confidence in the menu of orientations.

But a second part of the answer to the question is pragmatic. Are they useful? Do they illuminate the practice of pedagogy in this field in a helpful way? Do instructors of rabbinic literature see the conceptual framework provided by the menu as helpful or insightful about their own purposes and practices? This may seem a bit less than sufficiently rigorous. But there’s no truth of the matter that will tell us whether one orientation is really two, or whether two are really one. If practitioners were to say, “Well, I always do both a and b, and in fact, it’s hard for me to see any real strong demarcation between the two, and it doesn’t really help me to think about them as separate,” that is precisely the kind of empirical evidence to which we ought to attend. Likewise, if practitioners were to say, “The kind of teaching that I do doesn’t really match up with any of these orientations, and I’m wondering whether you need to come up with a new one,” that too is the kind of disconfirmation to which we ought to attend and which must in some way be acknowledged.11 And if, on the other hand, practitioners say, “While I would not necessarily want to restrict myself to any one of these

9 See Holtz (2003), p. 52 ff., where he also cites Gail Dorf’s (1995) argument in favor of this claim as well. Wineburg and Wilson say the same thing, interestingly enough, at the end of “Models of Wisdom” (1988/2001). But while the idea of teachers holding deep and flexible subject matter knowledge is compelling – and in particular, there is something intuitively correct about flexibility as an important pedagogic quality, as argued by McDiarmid et al. (1989) — it is not clear to me that the instructor who employs multiple orientations is a better teacher than the one who employs a single orientation well. In other words, the concept of pedagogic flexibility requires some clarification; I do not believe that it should be considered synonymous with “capacity to employ multiple orientations.”

10 The total number of teachers of rabbinic literature with whom I have shared the menu of orientations, in some form, and from whom I have sought feedback approaches 300. Naturally, however, only a fraction of these have actually provided input — I will occasionally introduce that input into my discussions of individual orientations, below — and I cannot conclude that most would endorse the menu as it stands. But see footnote 16 for a more optimistic perspective.

11 Of course, how to acknowledge that response is always a matter of interpretive judgment. Perhaps a practitioner has
orientations, I do recognize my practice in (one or more of) these descriptions, and moreover the menu helps me think about what I do, and why I do it, and what the options are for doing it differently,” that is the kind of empirical validation that matters.\textsuperscript{12}

D. THE ORIENTATIONS TO TEACHING RABBINIC LITERATURE

Having discussed the idea of a teaching orientation and the methodology for generating a responsible set, let us turn at long last to the menu of orientations to the teaching of rabbinic literature, of which there are ten.

1. Torah/Instruction Orientation

Rabbinic literature is the record of the cultural production of a set of people who generated the forms of Judaism as we know them today. In this sense, rabbinic literature is prescriptive of behavior and sometimes belief too—or at least, it tries to be. But more generally, rabbinic literature is also a kind of sacred literature, that is, it has been treated as sacred (in one or another sense of the word “sacred”) by Jews, for centuries, and is so treated by many Jews still. It is Torah, not only in the sense of being an “oral Torah” that, in the traditional conception, accompanies the written Torah, but in the more specific, etymological sense of being a source of teaching.

Thus, the encounter with this sacred literature has the potential, for some people, to be illuminating, or inspirational, or instructive. Instruction, in the sense in which it is being used here, is not the same as direct prescription of behavior. Some rabbinic texts, of course, do prescribe behavior: they dictate when to say the Shema or how tall to build a sukkah. (And of course, rabbinic texts function as a source of halakha more generally, which will figure prominently in a different orientation.) But much of rabbinic literature is not prescriptive in this way. Nevertheless, it can function as a source for, or a location of, inspiration or instruction. Passages from the Talmud or sometimes midrash are taught because the instructor believes that, under the right conditions, a patient encounter with this material can promote increased awareness of truths about the world and human nature, leading to inspiration or guidance or enlightenment.\textsuperscript{14}

identified a genuine lacuna in the menu of orientations. Alternatively, perhaps her own pedagogy is idiosyncratic and non-representative of a larger cultural practice; or perhaps she misunderstands her own practice; or perhaps her observation points to a way in which we need to expand our conception of one of the orientations already on the menu rather than constructing an entirely new one. As in any inquiry, the discovery of contradictory data does not, by itself, tell us how to adjust our theory to accommodate the data, only that we must in some way do so.

\textsuperscript{12} These orientations were introduced at the Conference on Teaching Rabbinic Literature at Brandeis University in January 2008, in front of over 200 people – day school teachers, rabbis, university instructors, and others. When the conference evaluation data were analyzed, it was notable how frequently the idea of orientations came up among the highlights. Subsequently, a number of schools have reported using the menu of orientations for professional development purposes among their faculty. This suggests that, whether or not all the details are correct, the menu of orientations is a helpful conceptual tool.

\textsuperscript{13} See the discussion of this point, made by “Moshe,” in Levisohn (2008).

\textsuperscript{14} There is a connection, here, to Holtz’s (2003) Personalization Orientation, which is characterized by an effort to establish personal connection to the biblical text – because there is a parallel emphasis on what the text has to say to the student, wherever she or he presently is. But the Torah Orientation need not only focus on personal meaning.
An instructor working within this orientation will typically select texts—often rabbinic stories, ag-gadot, but sometimes halakhic material as well—that have the potential to illuminate, to inspire, to guide, often in indirect ways that emerge only through a patient encounter under the right conditions. The instructor thus assumes responsibility for creating those conditions. Sometimes this means a certain kind of preliminary discussion, prior to encountering the text. Sometimes it means employing a text as a trigger, a means to the end of discussing an emotionally or ideologically weighty topic. Sometimes it means creating the conditions for students neither to accept a particular rabbinic text nor to reject it, but to engage it in some kind of meaningful and generative dialogue. Teaching within this orientation aims to help Jews to understand, or at least slow down enough to explore, the potential significance of rabbinic literature in their lives.

Teachers may wish to inspire a greater commitment to certain ideals, such as the ideals of service, of justice, or of compassion. Alternatively, teachers may wish to inspire a greater commitment to Judaism in general. The Torah Orientation can be a prominent mode of adult education classes, especially in one-off sessions that do not aspire to develop textual-analytic abilities among the students but do hope to create moments of meaningful engagement. It may also be used with younger students particularly in informal settings. Teaching that focuses on the purported philosophical ideas behind the rabbinic text, in a way that is often associated with the activities of the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, or in the approach to Talmudic interpretation offered by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, may be considered to be part of this orientation, since the purpose of developing those big ideas is to propose them as powerful guides for the lives and moral choices of the students. Often, teaching within this orientation will focus on one particular text or a small number of texts, although topically- or thematically-organized courses can also fit this orientation (for example, a course that focuses on rabbinic texts on relationships).

Here it must be admitted that the teaching of a particular rabbinic text in a one-off adult education session lies at the margins of the subject that we are calling “rabbinic literature.” This is so not because that setting is educationally less important than other settings, nor because the exploration of personal significance that is triggered by the encounter with the text is somehow illegitimate. This kind of teaching and learning is real, and important, and legitimate; it can be pursued well and with great impact, respecting students’ autonomy while promoting personal and intellectual growth. But in some settings, it seems significant that the choice of a particular text might be otherwise; the instructor might instead teach a text from Tanakh or from medieval Jewish philosophy or from modern Hebrew poetry. This is not to say that the text is meaningless or arbitrary; presumably, the instructor finds a text to teach that has a certain kind of generative potential. But it does mean that the instructor does not feel a primary responsibility to rabbinic literature as a subject, even when she happens to be teaching a rabbinic text. We can imagine settings in which the instructor might have

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15 One day school educator writes about this orientation: “We have found in our high school that much of our informal teaching centers around rabbinic texts… We are developing a curriculum of concepts, morals, messages we want to get across over a four-year high school experience.”

16 There is a connection, therefore, between the Torah Orientation to rabbinic literature and the Ideational Orientation to Bible. Why not simply label this orientation, likewise, the Ideational Orientation to Rabbinic Literature? The label “Torah Orientation” conveys the sense that the commitment to construct opportunities to engage with the text is not limited to a (or even more than one) big idea.
instead chosen to teach a text from Maimonides or Yehuda Amichai, with no loss of integrity or coherence.

Now, to avoid any mis-interpretation, it is not always the case that teaching within the Torah Orientation has this marginal relationship to rabbinic literature as a subject. We can easily imagine or recall examples where this is not the case, where the instructor within the Torah Orientation does feel a responsibility to rabbinic literature as a subject, even as she is also primarily focused on facilitating the meaningful encounter of the students with the material for the purposes of instruction. So it is more appropriate to say that, as we construct our conception of the Torah Orientation, we ought to acknowledge that some kinds of teaching – some instances in which rabbinic texts are used – are located in a kind of grey area where it may not be clear that the instructor is teaching a subject that we would call “rabbinic literature” at all.

Before moving on, we might wonder whether the characterizations of this orientation – most notably, that “under the right conditions, a patient encounter with this material can promote increased awareness of truths about the world and human nature, leading to inspiration or guidance or enlightenment” – could be used about any of the orientations to teaching rabbinic literature. Isn’t that the way that every teacher of Talmud feels, regardless of setting or conception of the subject? For that matter, any devoted teacher of Shakespeare or Homer would endorse it as well. And the point is not limited to the humanities: those who are passionate about math or biology or any other subject would, likewise, claim that the engagement with their subject has the potential to be deeply illuminating. If this is so, then the idea of a distinctive Torah Orientation begins to look suspect.

But this may be a good example of the way in which orientations function like cuisines, with shared ingredients, rather than like a map with discrete regions representing clearly demarcated answers to basic questions about purposes. It is certainly the case that, if asked about the ultimate purposes of teaching and learning their subject, many or most instructors might endorse the characterizations used above for the Torah Orientation. What is uniquely characteristic of the Torah Orientation, however, is the way in which that ultimate purpose – the idea of engagement with the subject for the purpose of instruction or enlightenment – becomes the dominant and guiding principle for pedagogic decisions. A teacher within this orientation is focused on and holds herself responsible for the students’ experience, primarily. She may use literary analysis or historical context or jurisprudential categories, but her primary focus is creating the moment of encounter. By way of contrast, a teacher of a semester-long Talmud class in a yeshiva may likewise hope to foster “increased awareness of truths about the world or about human nature” – but on a daily or weekly basis, her pedagogic decision-making is driven more by a concern for surfacing the themes of the particular tractate that she is committed to covering or for developing the skills of her students.

The portrayal of Aryeh Ben David in Hammer-Kossoy (2001) is an excellent case in point. On the one hand, Ben David teaches an ongoing class organized around the sequential study of a particular tractate of Talmud, and is committed to teaching students the necessary skills to make sense of

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17 Beverly Gribetz and Meesh Hammer-Kossoy helped clarify my thinking on this issue.
the texts and the legal interpretive debates within them. On the other hand, “to Aryeh, the essence of Oral Torah is that it has a living, dynamic quality which says something specific and relevant to every generation” (p. 11). Furthermore, “although the Gemara focuses on small details, Aryeh assumes that these details are not the central message of the sugya [but rather that] the sugya is also leading up to some underlying message” (p. 10). Perhaps we should say, then, that Ben David teaches primarily within the Torah Orientation. But Hammer-Kossoy offers a further observation of Ben David’s practice that indicates otherwise. Regardless of his genuine concern for meaning and inspiration, she writes, “the vast majority of energy [in his teaching] is dedicated to understanding the peshat of the Gemara and attaining the basic skills” (p. 14).

2. Contextual Orientation

The Contextual Orientation lies at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Torah Orientation—not necessarily in terms of purposes (as just noted, their respective purposes are not mutually exclusive) but in terms of setting. Where the Torah Orientation is typically (although of course not exclusively) pursued in one-off adult Jewish educational sessions, the Contextual Orientation emphasizes the kinds of teaching and learning typical within semester-long university courses. In fact, references to “academic Talmud study” or “modern Talmud study” (e.g., Carmy 1991) usually refer to the Contextual Orientation. Within this orientation, teachers are primarily interested in understanding the original contexts of rabbinic texts, including how rabbinic texts came to assume their final form, and how understanding that context illuminates the meaning of the texts—and they do so because of an overriding concern for peshat, for discerning the plain sense of the text as they see it. Typically, teachers within this orientation will employ comparisons of parallel texts, within the traditional canon (e.g., using the Tosefta or Yerushalmi, or using variant manuscripts) and without (using Greek or Latin texts). In some settings and with certain texts, archeological sources may also be introduced into the classroom as teaching resources. In other settings and with other texts, it will be particularly important to compare rabbinic literature to early Christian literature.

As noted, teaching within this orientation is compatible with extended learning opportunities, such as semester-long courses in high schools or universities. Teachers within the Contextual Orientation are often concerned that students understand the complexity and multivocality of the texts. They will typically employ, and may be concerned to nurture in their students, what Sam Wineburg (1991) has labeled the “sourcing heuristic,” the habit (a strong characteristic of the way that academic historians read texts) of immediately wondering about and looking for evidence of the source of a particular text in order to locate its perspective. They may emphasize the strata of the texts, as well as other “academic” issues such as the problems of attribution or the work of the redactors to construct the received text, and may work to develop the students’ capacity to discern those strata.

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18 I owe this point to Barry Wimpfheimer (personal correspondence).

19 Wineburg’s theory is based on empirical research on historians of more recent periods, rather than scholars of classical texts, but it is a reasonable hypothesis (worthy of empirical investigation) that it would apply equally well to the latter as well. In the case of Bible, the sourcing heuristic is displayed in the tendency of Bible scholars to immediately notice the source (J, E, P, D, or H) of a particular text. (See also my related argument that a central aspect of the Contextual Orientation in the teaching of Bible is the establishment of critical distance from the text, in Levisohn 2008.) In the case of rabbinic literature, the same sourcing heuristic is displayed in the tendency of rabbis scholars to immediately attend to the language of the text, the rabbis cited and their dates and locations, and when available, parallel texts, in order to provisionally fix the historical provenance of the text.
and those issues on their own.

Clearly, there are many traditionalist settings where the Contextual Orientation is considered anathema or at least inappropriate, because of what some would call an implied “lack of respect” for the text and its transmitters, including especially the amoraic interpreters of earlier traditions (see Carmy 1991 for a discussion of some of the issues). But while general concerns about critical study are relevant, the more specific concerns—familiar to us from the teaching of Bible—about internal contradictions within the text are less so. The motivation to harmonize disparate texts certainly does exist in the field of rabbinic literature, and indeed underlies much traditional commentary. However, that motivation hardly carries the same theological weight as it does in Bible where the unity of the text itself is, for some, a theological red line. (After all, mahloket, principled dispute between the rabbis, is present on every page of the Talmud!) So it seems fair to say that the Contextual Orientation to the teaching of rabbinic literature is less ideologically fraught that its counterpart in the teaching of Bible. Moreover, teachers within the Contextual Orientation may pursue the historical-critical investigation of rabbinic texts not in order to challenge the authority of the rabbis but to explore their remarkable legal and cultural creativity.

3. Jurisprudential Orientation

Within this orientation, rabbinic literature is considered primarily as the product of a legal system—not as a literary text, not as an historical text, not even (primarily) as a text that ought to trigger a wide-ranging exploration of truths about human nature or the world. Legal argument, debates about legal concepts and rulings, are the heart of the subject. And as the manifestation of a legal system, rabbinic literature is appropriately examined through categories of legal analysis, sometimes (in some settings) in comparison with other legal systems (e.g., Roman law) and sometimes with categories developed internally to the Jewish tradition of talmudic interpretation. This orientation shares something in common with the Halakhic Orientation, to follow, but the Jurisprudential Orientation is not primarily concerned with practical legal implications.

This is so whether the Jurisprudential Orientation is carried out by scholars of comparative law, teaching students of law, or whether it is carried out by traditionalists in the yeshiva, mediating among apparently contradictory texts and encouraging students in the exercise of hiddush, innovative synthesis or insightful conceptual distinction. (The notion of hiddush is central to a certain kind of Talmud pedagogy, in which the instructor is expected to develop his own hiddush to share with the students who, for their part, are expected not just to understand that hiddush but to anticipate it before it is presented and to attack it afterward. In these contexts, the proposed innovation is typically a novel way of resolving a contradiction or of explaining an obscurity in the text – but almost

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20 This is not meant to imply that teachers within the Contextual Orientation to Bible are committed to undermining the authority of the text, either, as they are sometimes caricatured. It is true that the Contextual Orientation stands in tension with traditional conceptions about the authorship and authority of the text, but the personal commitment of the instructor – not to traditional belief or practice but to the disciplined engagement with the text – carries undeniable pedagogical significance. See Levisohn (2008) for a further discussion of this issue. Nevertheless, the ideological issues play out differently in the two cases. We might say that the catchword of the historical-critical instructor of Bible is pluralism: she is attuned to and committed to nurturing sensitivity to the pluralism of the disparate sources within the received text. The catchword of the historical-critical instructor of rabbinic literature, on the other hand, is creativity: she is attuned to and committed to nurturing sensitivity to the cultural creativity of the rabbis.
always within a jurisprudential frame.) In either situation, academic or traditional, the intellectual experience of exploring the legal system takes precedence over any practical concerns for arriving at an actual legal ruling for the purposes of implementation. Rabbinic law obeys its own logic and employs its own concepts; the Jurisprudential Orientation seeks to understand that logic and to immerse the students in that conceptual universe.

The Jurisprudential Orientation may be found in law schools, where texts are selected in order to explore a certain legal issue or jurisprudential theme, and where teachers and students are accustomed to the exploration of legal concepts and arguments often without regard for final legal rulings (sometimes called “black letter law”). The field of *Mishpat Ivri* is, quite obviously, also concerned with rabbinic texts as products of a jurisprudential system, so courses that explore some aspect of *Mishpat Ivri* are also located within this orientation. But beyond these settings, almost all study in traditional yeshivot seems to fit within this orientation.

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

> But it is clearly *balakhah* [Jewish law] that stands at the center of the world of the Oral Law, leaving its mark on the entire corpus. Its study constitutes, first and foremost, an encounter with the Giver of the Torah, He who commands and obligates…

*(Lichtenstein 1996/2007, p. 10)*

The ideological conviction here – the sanctity of Talmud study as an encounter with the divine – is rooted in the text’s status as a legal corpus, in some sense a divine legal corpus. Lichtenstein’s reference to “*balakhah* that stands at the center” should not be misunderstood as referring to practical legal implications; later on (pp. 13-14), he explicitly contrasts Talmud with post-Talmudic legal compendia that are concerned to communicate *halakhic* rulings. This is a traditionalist expression of the Jurisprudential Orientation.

Naturally, the characterization offered here does not do justice to the diversity of traditionalist interpretive strategies, *darkei ha-limmud*. But this is one of the occasions when it is important to remember that not every interpretive distinction makes an orientational difference. In general, teachers within the Jurisprudential Orientation may aspire to help students understand the legal complexity of the system for its own sake, or to achieve other pedagogical goals relating to the understanding of law across cultures. In traditionalist settings, the Jurisprudential Orientation may be motivated by the need to do a kind of conceptual “basic research”; like basic research in the physical sciences, there is no expectation of immediate payoff, and the pursuit of the truths of nature are their own reward. In Carmy’s (1991) formulation, “The goal of conceptual analysis is … to formulate the principles inherent in the word of God.” It may also be reinforced by a sense that the Jurisprudential Orientation is

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21 Also see the discussion in Hammer-Kossoy (2001), p. 54 ff. Some might wonder whether we ought to say, instead, that the status of the text is rooted in the ideological conviction of God as He who commands. That is surely also the case for Lichtenstein. But the point here is that, in order for the ideological conviction to make sense, we must first understand of Talmud as a legal text.
the orientation that places debate and argument at its center—and that an emphasis on (engaging in, understanding, and appreciating) debate and argument is culturally healthy, distinctively Jewish, and perhaps even theologically significant. Thus, one instructor framed a primary goal in teaching rabbinic literature in this way: “to help students acquire the rabbinic mode of questioning and shaqila v’tarya [i.e., debate] as a Jewish modes of thinking, in order to encourage participation in the Jewish cultural enterprise” (see also Brandes 2007 for another contemporary expression of this view).

Instructors within this orientation may select legal topics, sugyot, from multiple texts, or may select multiple legal topics to explore a particular jurisprudential phenomenon—or, as is usually the case in traditional yeshivot, they may employ the Jurisprudential Orientation as they encounter texts in a sequential study of a particular tractate. Within this orientation, the boundaries between the text and its later commentators may be blurred—not that the opinion of a medieval rishon (early commentator) is conflated with the Talmudic text but that they are regarded as, in some sense, part of one conversation. After all, those commentaries are, for the most part, efforts to elucidate legal concepts, so drawing upon them is entirely consistent with the Jurisprudential Orientation. Indeed, one of the motivations for teaching within the Jurisprudential Orientation—for traditionalists—is to immerse the students (not only within the rabbinic legal world but also) within that tradition of interpretation.22

4. Halakhic Orientation

Rabbinic literature—especially the legal texts, of course, but in some cases non-legal texts as well—is the primary source for understanding the development of halakha, the Jewish legal tradition. Teachers within this orientation aspire to help students understand halakha in its complexity as a legal tradition and system. Typically, the emphasis will be on Mishnah and Talmud, although in some contexts this orientation will be served by a focus on midrash halakha. Rabbinic material may or may not be juxtaposed with pre-rabbinic (biblical) material, but it will often be juxtaposed to later legal layers—the medieval commentators, responsa literature, etc., that build on the classical rabbinic texts as the legal tradition develops over time.

As a way of clarifying the distinction between the Jurisprudential Orientation and the Halakhic Orientation, let us return to the article by Aharon Lichtenstein cited above. We saw that his characterization of a traditionalist position seems to fit within a Jurisprudential Orientation. Notably, however, that characterization appears in the context of a lament about the contemporary condition of Talmud study, an attenuation of commitment that he attributes to (among other things) a culture that emphasizes individualism and instant gratification, and a parallel weakening of the “fear of Heaven” that might help keep the students’ noses to the grindstone. In response to this situation, and with a heavy heart, he offers the following bold proposal:

22 Based on her research on contemporary teachers and students, Hammer-Kossoy frames this point in religious terms: “Perhaps the most tangible and accessible religious experience identified by students and teacher alike is the power of studying something that has been studied for generations, joining in the dialogue between [the Talmudic rabbis] Abaye and Rava, the [medieval commentator] Ritva and [the modern commentator] Rav Hayim. This sense of continuity often inspires many students to dedicate themselves to Talmud study” (Hammer-Kossoy 2001, p. 6). This observation makes sense within the Jurisprudential Orientation, where “Talmud study” means, specifically, plumbing the depths of the legal arguments that are carried forward from generation to generation. Outside of the Jurisprudential Orientation, it is less compelling.
Even if the scope of [the student’s] knowledge of Gemara will be exceedingly restricted, it is important that he be familiar with the way of the Torah, its nature and development, in order that he value and respect it. To this end, it is necessary to conduct several deep drillings—to learn several topics from the foundation to the attic, from the scriptural verses to the final rulings, in such a way that the character and quality of halakhah will be clearly exemplified. Topics may be chosen—some close to the world of the student, and some, explicitly, distant from it—in the development of which there will be felt a balance between principles and details, authority and logic, conservatism and momentum.

(Lichtenstein 1997/2008, pp. 20-21)

What Lichtenstein envisions here, captured in his phrase “several deep drillings,” is a series of investigations of particular halakhic topics. Setting aside the particulars of his argument23—our concern here is not to debate the merits of one orientation over another but to understand each—Lichtenstein is advocating a shift from the Jurisprudential Orientation, with its emphasis on understanding the legal categories, concepts, and debates of the Talmud, to the Halakhic Orientation, with a focus on the selection of halakhic topics and attention to their development over time.24

We can imagine topics such as the laws of cooking on Shabbat, or the laws relating to the payment of workers, or the laws of marriage and divorce. These investigations would begin with the biblical sources and proceed through the development of the halakhic tradition, perhaps even including contemporary responsa. As Lichtenstein notes, there a variety of criteria of selection for these topics. Some might be chosen for a “balance between principles and details,” i.e., topics that are appropriately representative of some principles of halakhic argumentation. Others might be chosen for a balance between “conservatism and momentum,” i.e., case studies that represent points on a ideological spectrum between halakha as an enterprise that seeks to preserve a prior way of life and halakha as a location of cultural innovation.

Whatever the topics chosen, however, what is distinctive here is the focus on halakhic topics in a way that is distinct from the Jurisprudential Orientation. This is not to say that the Jurisprudential Orientation never focuses on halakha matters, of course. But when the Jurisprudential Orientation focuses on halakha, it is more interested in the logic or the concepts than the ruling itself. Where the Jurisprudential Orientation, when it focuses on a theme or a topic, will embrace a theme or topic that is conceptual in nature (for example, a principle of halakhic reasoning such as kim lei be-de-rabba

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23 Lichtenstein is motivated by his awareness of the unfortunately corrosive effects of traditional Talmud study in contemporary Orthodox schools and his hope that a shift to an engagement with halakhic material might serve better to accomplish his religious goals: “If we manage to implant a connection to Torah [using this non-traditional approach], the hope exists that we will succeed to embed the most precious of all, yirat shamayim, the fear of Heaven” (p. 21). It is worth recalling, however, that any orientation can be pursued poorly or well. The question then becomes: even if one assumes that a certain kind of religious devotion (which may be helpful in supporting a particular pedagogy) is increasingly rare among one’s students, should one abandon the orientation or should one rather develop a different pedagogy within that orientation?

24 Lichtenstein himself frames his proposal in terms of a shift from an emphasis on the study of Talmud to an emphasis on the study of Mishnah. But it is not clear to me how the “deep drillings” to which he refers, studying topics “from the foundations to the attic,” might be accomplished by a study of Mishnah (exclusively or even primarily). I therefore assume that Mishnah, in his essay, is used as a kind of shorthand for study that avoids the intricacies of Talmudic argumentation while placing greater emphasis on the development of the halakhic tradition.
minei, “when a more serious punishment applies, the lesser punishment is waived”), the Halakhic Orientation will focus on practical legal themes such as the ones mentioned above. And the Jurisprudential Orientation will rarely trace the development of a sugya into the contemporary period, as the Halakhic Orientation might.

This is an appropriate occasion, therefore, to mention the ambiguity at the heart of the category of “rabbinic literature.” Central texts such as the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud elicit little controversy, but what else is included in the mix? We have already had occasion to mention texts such as Tosefta and Yerushalmi (the “Palestinian Talmud”), and to note that, within the Jurisprudential Orientation, there is a natural tendency to extend forward to the classical commentaries on Talmud. Where, we might wonder, are the boundaries? Are geonic texts included in “rabbinic literature” as well? What about medieval commentaries or early modern halakhic texts or contemporary responsa? It seems clear that the appropriate boundaries are another indication of the diversity of orientations; in one teaching context, the relevant material may include early Christian texts, while in another, contemporary Jewish ones. But there is little point in trying to determine what “counts” as rabbinic literature, in the abstract, because there are no available criteria that are neutral across orientations.

Teaching within the Halakhic Orientation sometimes will focus on a particular legal matter, tracing its evolution over time, the “deep drillings” to which Lichtenstein referred. However, the understanding of the significance of that historical evolution will vary depending on ideology. That is, in some contexts, historical evolution may implicitly or explicitly provide grist for the mill of contemporary debates over halakhic change in general or over specific halakhic matters in particular. In other contexts, however, teaching within the Halakhic Orientation may not be subversive at all but rather conservative: students will simply be expected to acquire a deeper understanding of the way that the law has come to be. It may even be presumed that familiarity will breed affection. But it seems likely that any instructor, within the Halakhic Orientation, will expect that the legal tradition is authoritative in some sense, that is, that its norms have some kind of authoritative claim on the practice of the students.

5. Literary Orientation

In addition to whatever else it is, rabbinic literature (both legal and non-legal) is also literature, consciously crafted compositions that employ their own literary forms, structures, and patterns in the service of their literary objectives. Teachers within this orientation will identify those literary devices, typically choosing texts (again, both legal and non-legal) upon which literary analysis can be performed to great effect, and will aspire to foster their students’ capacities to do so as well. It is easy to think about treating rabbinic narratives in this way—searching for word play or certain kinds of character development—but legal passages can also serve as rich teaching material within this orientation.

Of course, if literary analysis presumes to generate insight into the meaning of a text on the basis of literary features, then it has a role to play wherever one engages in textual interpretation. This may make it hard to see the distinction between the Literary Orientation and others, and raises again the
way in which orientations function like cuisines. There are two ways to think about this. One way is to say that when one uses literary analysis while also pursuing, say, Torah as instruction, then one is blending two different orientations, the Literary Orientation and the Torah Orientation. There are surely occasions where this occurs. However, just as we said, above, that instructors may endorse the idea that the encounter with rabbinic texts should lead to illumination or instruction without necessarily participating in the Torah Orientation, we may need to say something similar here: instructors may use literary analysis, as one of the tools in their interpretational toolkit, without necessarily participating in the Literary Orientation.

The Literary Orientation, instead, is comprised not just by the interpretational tool—that is, it is comprised not just by the use of literary analysis by the instructor—but by a cluster of characteristic practices. In this orientation, literary analysis is foregrounded and made the explicit focus of discussion or inquiry. The instructor may select texts that are literarily rich and generative (or, conversely, may determine that the Literary Orientation is called for when she encounters a particular text). She may devote time and attention to developing the students’ own capacity to interpret with a literary lens. We need not go so far as to say that the Literary Orientation cares about literary analysis “for its own sake;” after all, we can easily imagine a teacher who focuses on the literary structures of the Mishnah not because they are beautiful or elegant in themselves but because they reveal important insights into the thinking of the editors of the Mishnah. Nevertheless, within a Literary Orientation, literary analysis is not just a technique and not just a mode of interpretation. Instead, the attention given to literary analysis is sufficiently prominent—either in terms of time or in terms of priorities—that it tends to crowd out the explicit attention to other purposes.

Why might one endorse the Literary Orientation? One participant in the Conference on Teaching Rabbinic Literature offered the following anonymous endorsement (in an exercise in which participants wrote comments about the orientations): “This is an orientation that has proven itself to have legitimacy. It permits ongoing engagement with the text and the making of personal and communal meaning.” In the view of this advocate, the Literary Orientation lowers the barriers to entry for students—we might think, for example, of adults with limited Jewish educational backgrounds and language abilities—and provides a mode of engagement which is familiar. After all, most college-educated adults have some practice at literary analysis. Furthermore, literary engagement comfortably co-exists with personal meaning-making—in a way that historical analysis, say, might not.25

However, in an echo of debates in the field of Bible (where a literary approach tends to assume a unified text), a detractor worried about the tendency to see literary unity everywhere in rabbinic texts: “Does this assume a higher level of ‘craftedness’ than might be warranted? Might it end up glossing over disjunctions or conflicts that should be acknowledged as such?” If teaching and learning focuses on literary analysis of blocks of text, it runs the risk of under-valuing not only the historical layers of the text but even the shaqla ve-tarya, the give and take of rabbinic debate, that for some scholars is its very essence.

25 See Rubenstein (unpublished) for an argument along these lines.
6. Cultural Orientation

Studying rabbinic literature provides a window into rabbinic culture, the wellspring of Judaism as it developed over time. The tools used to understand that culture are the analytical and conceptual tools of the cultural anthropologist, reading texts as products and markers of culture. The questions that we ought to ask of the texts, from this perspective, are questions such as these: What cultural assumptions lie behind the text (whether or not we ascribe those assumptions to the author of the text)? What cultural dynamics are displayed in the text? Who is powerful, who is anxious, and why? What cultural values are defended or promoted? Teachers within this orientation will typically select texts that are, in their judgment, particularly significant in the understanding of rabbinic culture or of Judaism more generally. Some will teach in an effort to raise awareness of aspects of that culture that are distinct from contemporary culture, in which case the Cultural Orientation may share certain assumptions with the Contextual Orientation. Others, however, will construct a trans-historical conception of the rabbinic culture that they want their students to encounter and, perhaps, the norms of which they want their students to adopt. And within this orientation, certain kinds of feminist readings of texts raise awareness of the dynamics of gender as they are expressed in rabbinic culture and in Judaism more generally. (Of course, other kinds of feminist readings of text would fall into other orientations—the Historical Orientation, for example, in the case of readings that attempt to uncover women’s experiences, or the Halakhic Orientation, in the case of readings that focus on the evolving status of women in halakha.)

The Cultural Orientation is typically more text-focused than student-focused – but this is not necessarily the case. For example, Gidon Rothstein (unpublished) imagines an instructional approach that identifies, as its primary goal, overcoming the gap between the cultural norms and assumptions of the students and the cultural norms and assumptions of the rabbis, in an effort to make the strange familiar. On the other hand, it may be more common to find instructors within this orientation leaning in the opposite direction, committed to helping students understand the ways in which the rabbis, constructing Judaism in their time and place, are very different than we are – in other words, making the familiar strange. David Kraemer (unpublished), for example, argues that instructors ought to acknowledge the strangeness of rabbinic culture as a first step to overcoming it: “noticing, naming, describing the strangeness of the rabbinic text will allow the student to affirm what he or she experiences and begin the task of cultural translation.” Similarly, a participant at the Conference on Teaching Rabbinic Literature wrote that the Cultural Orientation is “most valuable when it enables the student to revisit and reflect upon the strangeness of their own cultural context.” Each of the stances described in this paragraph—making rabbinic culture familiar, making it strange, or making the student’s own culture strange—reflects a claim about the role of the Cultural Orientation in the formation of the intellectual and spiritual perspective of the student.

As already noted, in situations where rabbinic culture is understood primarily as an historical cat-

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26 Alongside the tools of the cultural anthropologist, the Cultural Orientation may also employ the related tools of the academic folklorist, focusing in particular on narratives that fit the paradigms of folklore, as Bialik and Ravnitzky did in their Sefer ha-Aggadah. I am indebted to Barry Wimpfheimer (personal communication) for this point and others related to the Cultural Orientation.
egory (rather than, for example, as a trans-historical category), there may be a close connection between the Cultural Orientation and the Contextual Orientation. Both tend to establish a certain kind of critical distance from rabbinic texts, and both are focused on the meaning of the texts in (some version of) their original context. We can certainly imagine instructors blending both orientations. Still, the questions that they ask are distinct. The Contextual Orientation asks questions that begin in the text, seeking answers in its cultural context(s) but with a primary desire to hear and understand the different historical voices in the text. The Cultural Orientation asks questions about culture, seeking answers in the texts (texts that are taken to reveal central aspects of culture) but also implicitly or explicitly facilitating an encounter between the culture of the rabbis and the culture of the students. Furthermore, unlike the Contextual Orientation—but in this respect like the Literary Orientation – the Cultural Orientation is more concerned with the rabbinic texts, as we find them, rather than their component parts and the process of their redaction, only turning to other materials as background or supplements to contribute to our understanding of the rabbis’ projects.

7. Historical Orientation

Rabbinic literature, alongside other literatures, provides evidence for the social, cultural, intellectual and political history of the Jewish communities of late antiquity. Who were these people—not just the rabbis but the whole community or set of communities—and what did they do with their lives? How were they affected by empires, armies, political movements, material conditions, and cultural developments? In some settings, these questions are considered to be irrelevant or even distracting; consider the derisive quip that “some people care about what Abaye and Rava said and some people care about what they wore.” But in other settings, instructors are committed to exploring that history, and the texts are means to that end. They are windows, and like real windows, they work best when they are transparent and when they do not obstruct our view of the landscape beyond.

Of course, there is always the thorny question of whether we can take rabbinic texts about history or about contemporaneous events at face value (and contemporary academic historiography tends to assume that we cannot). So the window is never truly transparent; the glass always distorts our view of what lies beyond it, even as it enables that view. How can we compensate for the inevitable bias of the authors of these texts, the rabbis, who (like any author) had their own ideological purposes – either as leaders of a community or as a self-appointed elite that aspired to leadership – in writing about historical events and the world around them? (See Schwartz 2002 for a rich discussion of the history of the historiography of the rabbinic period, which surfaces many of the conceptual fault lines between various historiographical approaches.) Still, even if we adopt a hermeneutics of suspicion rather than a hermeneutics of trust, these texts are often the only window into the past that we have.

The preceding sentences suggest that the Historical Orientation shares a kind of skeptical stance with the Contextual Orientation (as well as some versions of the Cultural Orientation). But their focus is different. In the latter orientation, the goal is understanding the text – the window itself, as it were – in its original context. In the Historical Orientation, on the other hand, the goal is to peer

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27 I was reminded of this quip by Wimpfheimer (forthcoming).
through the window at some aspect of the historical landscape beyond. Of course, it may well be that
the historical landscape in which we are interested in not the one depicted in the text; rather than
“using the texts as historical records of the … data that they discuss, [we might instead be interested in]
looking at the texts as evidence for the contemporary world in which the texts are produced”
(Yehuda Kurtzer, personal correspondence). Thus, a fifth century narrative about a first century
event may tell us more about the fifth century than about the first. Still, we can characterize the
difference between the Historical Orientation and the Contextual Orientation in terms of the kinds
of stories that they want to tell.

The Historical Orientation wants to construct a narrative about historical events or the historical
development of a community. For example, a course within the Historical Orientation might employ
rabbinic texts in order to tell the story of the evolution of Jewish practice from a temple-centered
religion to a text-centered religion. A one-off adult education session might mine rabbinic stories
about rabbinic academies for what we can discern about the study practices of the composers of
those stories. The Contextual Orientation, on the other hand, wants to construct a narrative about
the text itself, and the Cultural Orientation wants to tell some (inevitably incomplete) story about
the culture of the rabbis.

Thus, the goal of teaching within the Historical Orientation is the development of an appropriate
understanding of some aspect of the history of the Jews in late antiquity, among students, or the
development of historical sensibilities appropriate to the study of that history. And instructors will
select texts and construct learning opportunities that illuminate that history, or that illuminate cen-
tral interpretive questions about that history.

8. Bekiut Orientation
In certain settings, rabbinic literature is taught and learned in order to foster students’ encounter
with a maximum quantity of material, in a sequential fashion, with as little pre-conceived or pre-ar-
ranged focus as possible. This is sometimes called “bekiut,” which translates literally as “mastery” or
“expertise,” but is more accurately translated in this context as “coverage.” That is, the purpose of
studying Talmud b’bekiut (in a bekiut way) or l’bekiut (for the purpose of bekiut) is to cover ground,
to encounter quantities of material. Like coverage goals elsewhere in education, so too here the
demand for coverage often crowds out competing concerns for depth of understanding or perhaps
even longevity of retention. Nevertheless, there is a certain educational logic to the enterprise. We
can imagine the argument, for example, that students absorb literary norms even if they forget the
details of the novels that they are asked to read. Here, too, the sequential, immersive exposure to the
texts may foster an apprehension of rabbinic norms, a facility with rabbinic logic, and a familiarity
with rabbinic concepts, even as the details of the arguments quickly slip from the mind.

One paradigm of the Bekiut Orientation is a kind of atheoretical reaction against the sometimes
fanciful pursuit of conceptual explanations for textual difficulties. Thus, Eliezer Shach, among the

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28 This is based on the Dei’ah veDibur website, which reports on a eulogy for Rabbi Shach by Gershon Eidelstein:
A Menu of Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature (Brídging Initiative Working Paper No. 14) • 23

leading bareli scholars of the previous generation, is reputed to have offered the following advice: “Don’t learn slowly. Don’t look for complex explanations and sevoros. Don’t do what they call iyun, in depth study. Study to cover ground and review a great deal.” Going slowly, in this view, is associated with perseverating over insoluble textual problems, losing sight of simpler and more attainable goals of study.

A more familiar paradigm of bekuiut is the program known as Daf Yomi, the “daily page,” the standardized schedule of study of one folio page (two sides) of Talmud per day, around which has grown a cottage industry of classes, study guides, and audio-recorded lessons. The accelerated, breakneck pace of Daf Yomi highlights an additional component to the Bekiut Orientation, namely, the ritualization of the teaching and learning. This is obviously present in Daf Yomi, where the required speed blurs the line between study as intellectual engagement and study as liturgical recitation. But it is often present in other bekuiut study as well, at a less accelerated pace: within this orientation, teachers and students understand the study of Talmud as a religious obligation or a practice with religious or spiritual significance.

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So the claim advanced above, that the purpose of studying Talmud biv’kiut is to cover ground, is only partially accurate; one might also say that, at a deeper level, the purpose of study within the Bekiut Orientation is Torab liob’ma, Torah for its own sake. Setting aside any mastery of content, setting aside the benefits of immersion in the close study of a particular body of literature or the development of skills, simply occupying oneself in the study of Talmud is, for some, an activity with religious purpose and intrinsic value. One aspect of that religious attitude is a kind of submission to the text – not in the sense of a suspension of critical evaluation of arguments, and not necessarily in terms of a commitment to carry out the actions that the text seems to mandate, but rather in the sense of a commitment to listen patiently and non-selectively to what the text has to say. Thus, the instructor within the Bekiut Orientation emphasizes the students’ face-to-face encounter with the text as it presents itself, with little editorial selection, “interesting” and “relevant” passages along with those that are less so.

9. Interpretive Orientation

In contrast to other classical literature, much of rabbinic literature—especially those sections known as midraḥ of various kinds—is constructed as interpretation of other texts, both biblical and earlier rabbinic texts. (While the case can certainly be made that all literature interprets the tropes and ideas of preceding literature, rabbinic literature frequently carries out the work of interpretation explicitly, not implicitly.) Those interpretations proceed according to their own norms, sometimes...

I cannot (and have no desire to) vouch for the accuracy of the account, but the very fact that it is reported is significant, regardless.

29 Teasing apart the concept of Torab Liob’ma is notoriously difficult. We can easily identify the opposite of Torab Liob’ma, namely, study for extrinsic purposes such as career advancement or practical guidance or scholarly reputation. But what does it mean to study something for its own sake? What if one studies for the sake of becoming a more adept student – is that Torab Liob’ma? Or for the sake of heightened self-consciousness or moral attunement? In some views, even study for the purpose of religious enlightenment – “cleaving to God” —violates the strict standard of Torab Liob’ma (although, according to other views, that is precisely the correct meaning of Torab Liob’ma). The classic study of Torab Liob’ma is Lamm (1989). Note, here, that while the Bekiut Orientation is often pursued in the context of an ideological commitment to Torab Liob’ma, the latter commitment is not by any means limited to the Bekiut Orientation.
playful and pluralistic, sometimes rigidly argumentative. The Interpretive Orientation takes this quality of the text to be its defining characteristic, the answer to the question of what the subject of rabbinic literature is about. As Daniel Boyarin writes, “We will not read midrash well and richly unless we understand it first and foremost as reading, as hermeneutic, as generated by the interaction of rabbinic readers with a heterogeneous and difficult text, which was for them both normative and divine in origin” (Boyarin 1990, p. 5).\(^{30}\)

Holtz, it may be recalled, also includes an orientation to the teaching of Bible that focuses on interpretation, which he labels the Parshanut Orientation, but the Interpretive Orientation to rabbinic literature is different than Holtz’s Parshanut Orientation to Bible. Holtz is focused on the a priori commitment, among some instructors, to teach the classical medieval interpreters of Bible. In the case of rabbinic literature, that kind of traditionalism—a commitment to immerse the students in the conversation as it has played out over generations—actually resonates more with the Jurisprudential Orientation, which is concerned with the legal logic and concepts that the classical (especially medieval and early modern) interpreters of the text have traditionally focused upon. By contrast, the focus on exploring the interpretational strategies of the rabbis within the Interpretive Orientation does not necessarily incline the teacher or student to the later works that (e.g.) interpret the Talmud but rather orients them to the interpretational qualities of the rabbinic text itself. In doing so, it represents a project that is actually quite un-traditional.

Those interpretational strategies are sometimes (or often) the source of pedagogic dissonance, which itself provides a rationale for the Interpretive Orientation. After all, one way of establishing pedagogic priorities is by assessing what is hard about a particular subject. In the case of rabbinic literature, what is hard for many students—both conceptually and emotionally— is the range of interpretive moves that the rabbis make, or sometimes the very idea that the moves that they make are interpretive in nature. For some instructors, this experience itself is warrant for making the analysis of rabbinic interpretation the primary focus of instruction.

Within the Interpretive Orientation, then, teachers will focus in particular on the interpretive moves that are made by particular texts or by particular rabbis within those texts—their assumptions about the prior texts that are interpreted and about the nature of interpretation itself. Midrashic texts (that interpret biblical verses or passages) are the primary material for teaching within this orientation, and they will often be selected for their value in displaying interpretive moves or stances or controversies. But an instructor might also employ the Interpretive Orientation with an eye towards the way in which later strata of rabbinic literature employ early teachings, sometimes in radically new ways. In either case, the instructor will frame an inquiry into the interpretive process represented by the text—to ask how that interpretive process works—in order to help students understand and appreciate the generative interpretive culture of the rabbis. In this way, there is a close connection

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\(^{30}\) Citing Boyarin in this context may raise the question, for some readers, of how to distinguish the Interpretive Orientation from the Cultural Orientation (which might we might assume Boyarin would be associated). My response, here as elsewhere, is to turn from theory to practice: in the Interpretive Orientation, questions about how the rabbis read (which are discussed in the following paragraphs) will tend to crowd out other questions about culture. Of course, many instructors may smoothly integrate the Interpretive Orientation and the Cultural.
between the Interpretive Orientation and the Cultural Orientation. But instructors may also teach within this orientation in an effort to help students become more aware of their own interpretive processes, and perhaps too to open up the cultural space for students to carry out the creative work of interpretation themselves.

10. Skills Orientation

In certain settings and certain conditions, teachers of rabbinic literature are primarily focused on helping students acquire the textual-analytic and linguistic skills to master, or at least access independently, rabbinic literature. Initially, this may seem unworthy of the label of “orientation”; after all, nearly all of the orientations can be said to be concerned with helping students acquire skills of one sort or another. The Literary Orientation typically intends to foster appreciation of and capacity for literary analysis. The Cultural Orientation intends to promote a kind of anthropological sensibility, in which students learn to ask certain kinds of questions about why the rabbis would say what they say and believe what they believe. These are all skills or capacities or subject-specific habits of mind, and we may assume that most thoughtful teachers who have the opportunity to construct an extended learning experience are concerned with the development of skills. So why should we identify a Skills Orientation distinct from other orientations?

Nevertheless, the Skills Orientation emerges because, as we noted above in the case of the Literary Orientation, there are times and settings where the focus on skills dominates the pedagogic space, where that focus crowds out other purposes and practices to a significant extent, where teachers teach and students learn with the express purpose of mastering the secret code. This happens, in part, due to the nature of the texts themselves, which can be terse to the point of obscurity and which regularly employ technical terminology that assumes a great deal of background knowledge. But in addition, this happens for a culturally specific reason, namely, the enormous cultural capital that accrues (in certain environments) to the possessor of the technical ability to access these texts. We may think, first, of the Orthodox world, where the ability to decipher—not to insightfully interpret but just to decipher—these obscure texts is a kind of rite of passage among boys and men. That ability, which of course is not universally held in all segments of the Orthodox community, earns one the highly informal title of yode’a sefer, loosely translatable as “one who is comfortable in the conceptual and terminological world of the Talmud.”

This is not to say, however, that the teaching and learning of rabbinic literature is carried out within the Skills Orientation among men in the Orthodox community. Typically, it is not. In the male Orthodox world, the acquisition of skills happens (if it does) as a by-product of teaching within other orientations, especially within the Jurisprudential Orientation. Instead, the best examples of the Skills Orientation are to be found elsewhere—among liberal Jewish educational programs (where facility with classical rabbinic texts, while less common, still possesses significant cultural capital) and especially among Orthodox women’s yeshivot (where students and teachers are acutely aware that access to the texts is tool of empowerment, a key that opens up many doors). Teachers committed to the Skills Orientation place an emphasis on teaching technical terminology, providing direct instruction on standard forms of Talmudic argumentation, making explicit the cultural assumptions and the historical background, all in order to accelerate the acquisition of the desired skills. Teach-
ing and learning within this orientation sometimes has a certain impatient quality, especially when young adults imagine themselves making up for lost time and when teachers try to help them do so.

The reader may wonder whether the picture painted here is perhaps a caricature. To be sure, teachers and students of rabbinic literature are rarely ruthless pursuers of cultural capital, at the expense of all meaning, spiritual insight, or religious purpose. But the Skills Orientation does operate, in certain settings, to dampen or defer exploration of rabbinic culture, of literary techniques, of interpretive strategies, of the nuances of legal concepts, or of spiritual truths. Instructors may teach not with a goal of insight, but rather with an eye on the prize of facilitating the growth of independence among the students. “First,” instructors within this orientation might say, “let’s all be sure we understand what’s going on in this text.” And for students eager to acquire the keys to unlock the door, that pedagogic tradeoff is perfectly acceptable. I recall one student of rabbinic texts, a committed liberal Jew who happily attended an Orthodox women’s yeshiva despite the poorness of ideological fit. Her motivation was to gain access to the classical texts in order, she admitted only half-jokingly, to gain power.

It is worth contrasting the Skills Orientation to teaching rabbinic literature with Holtz’s Decoding, Translation, and Comprehension Orientation to teaching Bible (Holtz 2003, p. 94). Holtz calls this orientation “elementary” and its typical pedagogy “rote”, and describes it as “simply the basic comprehension of the text.” He acknowledges that, at its best, this orientation can lead to comprehensive knowledge, but worries that, “at its worst, it can be mind-numbing and tedious.” It is clear that Holtz can barely contain his antipathy to an orientation that robs the study of Bible of its potential for significant intellectual and/or spiritual engagement. Why is the description of the Skills Orientation to rabbinic literature so much more positive than the Decoding Orientation to Bible?

One reason may be the sense of how difficult—how technical, how intricately argued—rabbinic texts can be; thus, developing the skills to read them inevitably involves intellectual engagement with its arguments, in a way that simply recounting the plot of a biblical narrative does not. Another reason may be the cultural capital that, as discussed, accrues to those with the capacity to access rabbinic texts, in a way that does not occur with (inherently more accessible) biblical texts. But beyond these important factors, there’s another issue to keep in mind, which brings us back to what an orientation is.

Orientations, I claimed above, are collections of purposes and practices that happen to hang together in the teaching and learning of a particular subject. In the case of Bible, Holtz believes (with good reason) that settings exist where teachers teach in such a mind-numbing and tedious way. These instructors have forgotten what the enriching and rigorous exploration of the biblical text could be, or perhaps they never knew, and the result is a narrow-minded and non-ambitious focus on decoding and translation. The Skills Orientation to the teaching of rabbinic literature, on the other hand, is different. It is certainly possible to pursue the teaching of skills in a mind-numbing and tedious way; we ought to acknowledge that as a potential pathology of the Skills Orientation. But in identifying this orientation, we are also calling to mind images of real educational environments, real teachers and real students engaged in an aspirational endeavor, where the challenge of accessing the text is
sometimes wearisome and sometimes frustrating but also, ultimately, empowering.

**E. Conclusion: How To Use A Menu**

These ten orientations to teaching rabbinic literature, then, constitute the menu. (See the chart below.) They do not necessarily encompass every instance of the teaching of the subject. But they represent ten conceptions of what the subject of rabbinic literature is all about, as a subject of teaching and learning, along with some of their associated, characteristic pedagogical practices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientations to the Teaching of English</th>
<th>Orientations to the Teaching of Bible</th>
<th>Orientations to the Teaching Rabbinic Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reader Orientation</td>
<td>1. Torah/Instruction Orientation</td>
<td>1. Contextual Orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text Orientation</td>
<td>2. Contextual Orientation</td>
<td>2. Literary Criticism Orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Parshanut, the Jewish Interpretive Orientation</td>
<td>4. Halakhic Orientation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5. Moralistic-Didactic Orientation</td>
<td>5. Literary Orientation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>7. Ideational Orientation</td>
<td>7. Historical Orientation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>8. Bible Leads to Action Orientation</td>
<td>8. Beki’ut Orientation</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>10. Skills Orientation</td>
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Readers who have persevered through the identification and description of these ten orientations to the teaching of rabbinic literature might now wonder why this exercise is worth pursuing: the “so what?” question. There are three good answers to this question, and one poor one.

The first answer to the question of “so what” is that the menu of orientations provides a kind of theoretical framework for the field of rabbinic literature, as a field of teaching and learning. This paper opened with a discussion of the internal diversity within any subject. The idea of orientations is an attempt to make sense of that diversity – both recognizing the diversity while also recognizing that, diversity notwithstanding, there is something that is shared among them, something that holds them together such that talking about them as one subject continues to make sense. “Rabbinic literature” is not a discipline, certainly not in any methodological sense. It is not even a book, in the way that the Bible is, and referring to a set of books begs the question of which books are included. What is it? As a field of teaching and learning, it is a “center of intellectual capacity and interest” (Scheffler 1968/1973, p. 89)—a set of intellectual traditions and cultural practices—that are manifest, in our present historical moment, in these ten ways.

But the menu of orientations is not, one hopes, just a catalog. If we aspire to make conceptual sense of the subject, then we are called upon, inevitably, to theorize—that is, to examine the philosophical foundations of the subject, to locate the subject in the context of other subjects, to ask questions about purposes. It is, in other words, what Seymour Fox called a “theory of practice.”

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31 See, for example, Fox (2000), p. 36 f. Holtz uses this phrase to describe his orientations work as well. See, for example, Holtz (2008), p. 228.
Consider the relevance of the following lines from Israel Scheffler’s “Philosophy and the Curriculum” (1970/1989), describing philosophy of science:

[Its philosophical work] takes its departure from scientific practice itself, striving to describe and codify it, and to understand and criticize it from a general epistemological standpoint… Philosophy of science thus springs from scientific practice, but its descriptive and explanatory effort, like all second-order reflection on practice, has the potentiality of closing the circle, of feeding back into practice and altering it. (p. 35)

In his article, Scheffler’s claim is that teachers, unlike other practitioners, are inevitably compelled to become theorists of their subject, as they select among its ideas and develop appropriate explanations. He therefore advocates study of “philosophies-of” for those preparing to teach—philosophy of science, philosophy of history, etc. Like his description of philosophy of science, the present paper has aspired to describe and codify a practice, to understand it, and implicitly to criticize those forms of it that do not meet their own, internal criteria. And like his claim about “philosophies-of”, we might hope that those engaged in the practice of teaching rabbinic literature will benefit from the consideration of the present effort to do something that we might call “philosophy of teaching rabbinic literature.”

Thus, Scheffler’s perspective incorporates as well the second answer to the “so what” question, in his metaphor of a theory emerging from practice and potentially closing the circle back to practice and in his claim about the benefits of studying “philosophies-of”. This second answer moves from the general intellectual benefit, for those who are interested in the field, to a more practical benefit, for instructors of rabbinic literature for whom encountering the menu of orientations is like holding up a mirror to their practice.32 Is this what I do? Is this what I believe? As a theory of practice, the menu of orientations attempts to articulate what was previously implicit, and that articulation may provide the spark for critical reflection. Relatedly, the metaphor of a menu of orientations implies choices. This points to the way in which practitioners might come to see more options in the teaching of rabbinic literature—a greater range of purposes, a broader array of pedagogic practices—than they had previously recognized. Whether they choose to pursue any of these options will depend on whether they find them compelling, and on a variety of external constraints, but the identification of options may (one hopes) increase the consciousness and thoughtfulness of the choices that are made.

Here, however, we should pause to consider the poor answer to the “so what” question. There is a way in which the metaphor of a menu is potentially misleading. When we are faced with a menu, we usually choose one option (or, one main option). When we are assembling a meal, we assume that it should be either a Chinese meal, or a Mexican meal, or something else equally coherent. We might imagine therefore that our purpose, in thinking about orientations to the teaching of rabbinic literature, is to make sure that we are firmly embedded in one and only one orientation—because otherwise, we risk inconsistency of message or incoherence of purpose. But this would be a mistake. In the case of orientations, there is no particular reason to think that teaching within one orienta-

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32 See Holtz (2003), p. 50, for a parallel discussion of the ways that orientations can contribute to practice.
tion is necessarily preferable to employing multiple orientations. We have noted, repeatedly, that orientations are not necessarily mutually contradictory. Here we should state, even more strongly, that in certain circumstances, there may be a benefit to the pedagogic equivalent of culinary fusion, a kind of principled eclecticism.

How? In some circumstances, we can imagine that orientational purity is indeed beneficial. A teacher who restricts herself to one orientation imposes a kind of discipline on her teaching, focusing consistent attention on the desired pedagogic goals, continually reinforcing them while avoiding idiosyncratic distractions. “That’s a nice lesson,” she will say to a colleague who suggests a way to approach a particular text, “but it doesn’t quite suit my purposes in teaching this class.” Moreover, a focus on one orientation may enable some teachers to develop a kind of specialized pedagogic expertise, the value of which may be quite significant to their own practice and as a model or source of pedagogic knowledge for others. Just as we prize specialization in research, because of the kinds of knowledge that are only generated by those who are immersed in a certain bounded intellectual terrain for an extended period of time, so too we might prize specialization in teaching.

However, in other circumstances, the pedagogic goals of an institution (or even an individual teacher) may not be well served by specialization or orientational purity. We can imagine a Jewish day school, for example, encouraging teachers to adopt and develop a principled eclecticism in the teaching of rabbinic literature — consciously choosing to employ not one but multiple specific orientations, in order to provide a broader perspective on the field. We can imagine a yeshiva adopting principled eclecticism because of a commitment to teaching Talmud in a sequential fashion, and letting the text itself dictate which orientation is appropriate. Alternatively, we can imagine a school intentionally hiring teachers for orientational diversity—not to be confused with ideological diversity, with which it is not necessarily co-extensive—or constructing a curricular scope-and-sequence so that students encounter orientational diversity over the course of their years in the school, even if any one course is orientationally specific.

We should not imagine, therefore, that the clarification of orientations ought to lead to the selection of one and only one for any particular teacher. Principled eclecticism is not the same as idiosyncrasy. Careful and critical attention to the orientations can nurture the former and help avoid the latter. As a heuristic device, the menu of orientations can open up new possibilities; it can enable teachers to ask questions about what kinds of knowledge are important in this field, and enable teacher educators, too, to ask questions about what kinds of knowledge are important for teachers to have;

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33 A commitment to teaching a tractate sequentially need not necessarily imply a corollary commitment to principled eclecticism, of course. Above I noted that the Bekiut Orientation, in particular, adopts the former commitment, but obviously not the latter. So whereas the Bekiut Orientation also emphasizes sequential coverage, the kind of principled eclecticism that I have in mind, here, is associated with a more in-depth engagement with the text. For each sugya, the instructor will ask which orientation seems most appropriate, and pursue that orientation for that particular sugya – implicitly expressing a conviction not only about the richness of the text but also about the appropriateness of multiple forms of engagement. I am indebted to Rahel Berkovits for this point.

34 As noted above, in footnote 9, Holtz and Dorph endorse what I am calling here “principled eclecticism” as a form of flexibility that is desirable in all teachers. It is unclear to me whether and why flexibility must necessarily entail, specifically, orientational flexibility.
and it can even serve as the framework for discussion among teachers—more experienced or less experienced teachers—about the practices of teaching rabbinic literature. Indeed, in my experience exploring the orientations with practitioners, it has already played those roles.

But not only among teachers—and here we come to the third and final purpose of pursuing the menu of orientations. It is common, in fact cliché, to conclude an academic paper with a call for more research, but the reason that we so often do so is that the knowledge that we have gained in the course of a particular inquiry has served to open up new, more finely grained and more nuanced questions. The field of research into the teaching of classical Jewish studies is in its infancy. One benefit that might emerge from this presentation of a menu of orientations to the teaching of rabbinic literature is that it may enable new questions and new inquiries. New research might generate new understanding that calls the menu into question, in whole or in part. Even more intriguingly, new research might now be not only subject-specific but orientation-specific, avoiding the conflation of pedagogic practices that are actually quite distinct. Alternatively, new research might be subject-specific but, equipped with the concepts and language that I have proposed, comparative across orientations.

Thus, if it is true that there are significant differences between orientations, then empirical or conceptual inquiry might focus on understanding the practices within one or another, or typical challenges within one or another. It might focus on the kinds of knowledge that teachers need and use within one or another, or student experiences in and understandings of one as compared to another. The menu of orientations enables these inquiries, and the new insights that emerge from them. This is not the kind of research that will demonstrate impact of a particular method or approach. It is not the kind of research that will help policy makers direct funds towards certain programs or away from others. But it might be the kind of research that, as we develop better and nuanced ways of thinking and talking about the teaching of rabbinic literature, is even more useful for practice.

Works Cited


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