Textual Study as a Spiritual Endeavor in Rabbinic Training: Delights and Dangers

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The Initiative on Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy in Jewish Studies

Working Paper No. 20
December 2009

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Abstract

Rabbinical students come to the study of classical sources spiritually motivated, seeking practical relevance and personal connection to tradition through Talmudic study. Teachers of future rabbis are answerable not only for intellectual standards but also for the future of Talmudic conversation as a factor in the continuing life of Judaism. In this paper, the author draws upon the experience of introducing rabbinical students to Talmudic study in four rabbinical schools to reflect upon curricular and pedagogical choices that arise from recognizing that spiritual development is at stake in the very same classrooms where teachers cultivate the development of technical and analytical skills.

Academicians today tend to be suspicious of pedagogy that responds positively to the spiritual motivations that students bring to the study of rabbinic sources. After all, at play are present-day passions and interests, which might well be expected to distort one’s view of an ages-old literature. On the other hand, one might argue that since scholars of rabbinics have become the primary purveyors of Talmudic and midrashic learning to future rabbis—at least in the progressive movements—those of us who teach in rabbinical schools are, in fact, answerable to much more than the future of an academic discipline. We are responsible also for the ways in which classical rabbinic literature will figure in lived Judaism and in Jewish spirituality.

This is not a role that all scholars of rabbinics have signed up for or desire. Many scholars of rabbinic sources did not take up this discipline with the aim of shepherding people on spiritual journeys or training them as Jewish leaders.

Just a day before this writing, a colleague from another institution told me that when certain kinds of questions arise in her classes she tells her students, “You should really speak with your rabbi about that.”

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I think we should all be prepared to talk about the big questions, willing to speak about the issues that these religious sources raise. Yet even if “You should really talk with your rabbi about that” is an appropriate response in some circumstances, I am training rabbis, as are many of us—so that buck has to stop somewhere. The conversations that rabbis are meant to be able to have must start somewhere. One of the things that actually makes rabbinical students into rabbis is that their training to engage with the thorniest questions of life takes place, in large part, over and around and through these classical texts.

That same conversation with a colleague—at the very conference for which I was drafting these reflections—led me to jettison my clumsy effort to define the spiritual here, and to say instead that, for the purposes of this paper, the “spiritual” is defined as: all those things about which a teacher might think to say, “You should really talk with your rabbi about that.”

The same colleague said to me, about the yearnings and searches that sometimes bring students to her university classes on Judaism, “It’s not my job to make it nice for them.” That is to say, she does not see it as her task to allay doubts, dissipate fears, and facilitate tidy theologies. My response was to say that I do not often feel that the Talmud Bavli, for example, is inclined to “make it nice” for my rabbinical students in those ways—and so I do not see that as my job either. Classical rabbinic texts have canny ways of putting us right in the thick— or sometimes in the terrifying thin— of things, and that is exactly where rabbis need to be.

Having taught in several rabbinical schools, I have certainly observed the phenomenon of scholars taking umbrage at the notion—usually pressed upon them by rabbinical school deans—that they should shape their teaching with the spiritual development of rabbinical students in mind. Meanwhile I have become an associate rabbinical school dean, and I am very glad to teach in a program that seeks to have the study of classical sources also be a living conversation about present experience and a Jewish future. I take delight in seeing insights from the Talmud classroom play out in the real life of our school’s community, and experiences from our communal life and from our students’ various pursuits being brought to bear in the classroom. Some might say this means I have gone over to the dark side—in rabbinic terminology to a *sitra achra*—of anti-intellectual populism or anachronistic pretensions. I think not. In this paper I explore ways in which it can be a legitimate pedagogic approach for a scholar to celebrate Talmudic learning as a spiritual element of rabbinic training. I introduce my own pedagogical choices in that regard, and I speak of the benefits that arise from these choices in my own experience of teaching in our field.

Since this involves a discussion of students’ experiences, I incorporate the voices of actual students as an appendix at the end of this brief paper—testimonials that a few of my rabbinical students, during the academic year 2007-2008, volunteered when I asked what might be important for teachers of rabbinic literature to hear from students on the topic of textual study as a spiritual endeavor.

I have found it possible to focus on the interests and the concerns of rabbinical students in a way that builds upon rather than goes against the grain of my own training as a critical, analytical and historical reader of rabbinic texts. My training does not come from the world of the yeshivah, but
rather from a secular (if sectarian) Labour-Zionist Hebrew day school, from Brown University, from Hebrew University’s Talmud and Machshevet Yisrael (Jewish philosophy) departments, and from Columbia University, with a good deal of New York University and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in the mix as well. When I speak of acknowledging Talmud-study as a spiritual endeavor, I do not mean emulating a traditional yeshivah-mode of teaching, whatever that might be. My students imbibe a critical sensibility and critical methodologies from me part and parcel with whatever else comes across in my teaching. They come with an eagerness to experience textual study as part of their spiritual journey toward the rabbinate, and I encourage them to consider critical awareness and critical questioning as essential on that journey. Not only should rabbis not be naïve, they should have a spiritual maturity that comes of acknowledging the human element in the teachings and the texts of our tradition.

I am personally fascinated with religious creativity, and I want my students to appreciate the development of our tradition as a great creative process and as a series of decisions set in history. I was also trained by a pioneering scholar of Talmudic textual criticism, David Weiss Halivni (who incidentally also has written about the importance of analytical study in his own spiritual development). So a great deal of what happens in my classrooms has to do with disassembling Talmudic expositions into their component pieces, figuring out what the composers of the text had on their work-bench, so to speak, from previous generations, and then discussing what it was they may have been trying to do in their tweaking and elaborating and assembling of the discrete particles into something new to make a previously unheard music.

In my experience, rabbinical students can find it tremendously exciting to begin thinking in terms of the formation of rabbinic texts. To use a physics metaphor, one might say that a powerful intrinsic energy is released from the sources when the cohesion of their component atoms and molecules is challenged. What I mean is that in seeing the various pieces of a text broken apart from one another students can become attuned to the creative forces that brought the elements together – which is important for students striving toward their own productive and inventive syntheses of inherited teachings.

My own teaching takes place in the larger context of a rabbinical program designed with questions of relevance and of spirituality very much in mind. As conceived by Rabbi and Professor Arthur Green, the core courses of the rabbinic text program in our rabbinical school are structured thematically, following, in a creative way, the themes of the shisha sidrei Mishnah, the six orders of the Mishnah:

- **First year:** Berakhot – topics of liturgy, prayer, siddur and hilkhote tefilah.
- **Second year:** Mo’ed – the year cycle and Shabbat.
- **Third year:** Nashim u-Gevarim – the life cycle, birth to death and mourning, along with personal status, sex and gender, marriage, divorce.
- **Fourth year:** Nezikin – personal and social responsibility, communal governance (and this is, poignantly, also the year in which our students spend time in Israel).
Fifth year: Kodashim and Taharot – which we somewhat liberally re-interpret to concentrate especially on theology; and, as a balakha course in that final year, Hullin, which is to say, kashrut (a traditional rite of passage in rabbinic training).

The other major strand of our core text curriculum follows the chamishah chumshei Torah, the five books of the Torah, with students in each year focusing on the interpretive tradition, ancient through contemporary and critical, around each successive book.

The very structure of the textual curriculum at the center of our school signals an orientation toward the concerns of future rabbis. The curriculum is built to focus upon the areas of life in which rabbis will operate, and the cycle of readings – of texts – over which rabbis will meet their communities. Of course, our curriculum also includes a range of other courses, from a sequence of history courses to seminars on areas of Tanakh beyond Chumash, and of course pastoral training. But my point here is that our curriculum, in the area of traditional textual sources, signals to our students in its very structure that they should expect core textual studies to relate to those things that “you should really ask your rabbi about.”

I teach primarily in the Berakhot year, in the Nashim u-Gevarim year, and now also in the final year of our program – years 1, 3, and 5. For this discussion, I will focus on the first year – the Berakhot year – not only for the sake of economy, but also because: (a) this is the year in which our students are initiated into intensive textual study as it is practiced in our program, and (b) the topic of prayer and liturgy is very much related to the day-to-day life of our school’s community in ways that our entering students immediately experience and which immediately raise rabbi-worthy questions.

Since prayer is a central subject of study in the first year, I will also say a brief word about the nature of tefillot, of worship, in a trans-denominational rabbinical school. In our very variegated community, we are able to daven together – at least once a week as a whole community. Tefillah of various sorts is available and organized by students throughout the week; but once a week we come together as a whole community and allow the prayer-leaders of the day to take us through their own traditions or experiments. This means that everyone accepts experiencing a certain level of discomfort from time to time, in return for learning, by experience, about what is important to the various members of our learning community.

Meanwhile, in my first year Talmud classroom, toward the end of the first semester, we celebrate a siyum (a concluding celebration) at the end of Perek Tefilat Ha-Shachar, the fourth chapter of the Babylonian Talmud’s tractate Berakhot. This means that at the same time as, outside the classroom, my students are acclimating to the experience of prayer in our ritually multifarious community, inside the classroom the issues on the table are issues of prayer: origins, practices, questions of structure and spontaneity, rules and compromises, not to mention prayer in less than comfortable circumstances. The fourth chapter of Berakhot also includes the archetypical narrative of a house of study rocked by a dispute that begins with a difference of liturgical opinion, in the famous story of Rabban Gamaliel and Rabbi Yehoshua (known as “bo bayom”). The chapter itself does not let us get away from the truth that the stakes are high when we meet one another across differences of opinion.
and try to learn and pray together. As Rabbi Nechunyah ben Hakanah’s short prayers in the chapter indicate, a bet midrash should be entered with a healthy apprehension of all-too-possible takalot (mishaps); and care in that regard can increase the chances of exiting the bet midrash with a sense of gratitude for the privilege of taking part in the grand conversation of our tradition. When Rabbi Eliezer’s students ask him, on his deathbed—as narrated in this same chapter—to teach them “paths of life” by which they can “merit the life of the world to come,” the sage’s very first admonition is, “Take care to honor your colleagues.” Every year I see my students take that teaching very much to heart as they experience their differences from one another around issues of prayer as well as their shared work of studying the tradition.

In the title of this paper, I promised delight and dangers. Perhaps analytically oriented, academic scholars can all too well imagine the dangers when the text on the table is so relevant to present religious experiences in students’ lives—so relevant to issues with which students are experimenting and sometimes struggling. A cynic might say that I use the energy and fascination that comes from such synergy between text-study and life to trick my students into quickly acquiring technical skills and critical competence, because they want to know what happens next and they don’t want to miss anything. The students acutely feel the need for traditional categories and considerations to bring to bear on their activities outside the classroom, and they need to ground their experiences in a conversation that starts somewhere deep within tradition. Yet I am not a cynic, and I, too, participate in this same adventurous community with my students. The themes of the Talmudic chapter, familiar as they may be to me, are also ones that I experience anew, with each new group of students, every time a new cohort both becomes a part of our ritual community and begins intensive textual study at the same time.

One might say that an academic “danger” arises in connection with the following Talmudic question, which appears in the fourth chapter of Berakhot: To what do the eighteen (or nineteen) blessings of the ‘Amidah (statutory daily prayer) correspond? Do the blessings correspond to eighteen (or nineteen) mentions of the Divine in the recitation of the Sh’mi’a? Do the blessings correspond to eighteen (or nineteen) mentions of the divine in “hava l’Adonai b’nei elim” (Psalm 29)? Or perhaps to eighteen (or nineteen) vertebrae in the spinal column? In other words, the discussion on the table is this: Are the rabbinically-ordained blessings of our prayer modeled on a divine pattern revealed through Moses according to the Torah? Does the statutory form of prayer perhaps correspond to an ancestral example of human worship, modeled by the psalmist? Or does the form of the ‘Amidah relate to something deeply encoded in our own bodies and selves?

Why are these questions “dangerous” in a rabbinical school classroom? Let me answer that question with another: How can one stop a class of first-year rabbinical students when they have got themselves started on such a conversation? Do you let the discussion run to yoga—especially considering that the very next Talmudic line reads: “ba-kore tzarich obe-yikra ad obe-yitpakeku kol ebulot obe-ba-sbi-drah” (“One must bow so that all the vertebrae of the spinal column stand out”)? And, then—if one does let the conversation range in that direction—how far do you let a discussion about material body and spiritual experience continue into present-day issues of science and religion before you rein students back in to the text on the page?
The pay-off for such text-inspired excursions, beyond whatever intrinsic value they may have, is a classroom full of first-year rabbinical students who are absolutely committed to the project of acquiring the technical skills to read the next page and the next, because the text has become entwined with their own personal questions and experiences—as, I believe, it is meant to.

I have a pedagogical commitment to having the ancient text on the table be the basis for the conversation that needs to happen in the present moment. That commitment might be considered a suspect and dubious priority from all kinds of academic perspectives—yet I believe exactly this commitment is the essence of rabbinic Judaism.

I should emphasize at this point that in order to facilitate worthwhile conversations that jump off the Talmudic pages, one has to be seriously expert in what is on the page. I have very little patience for fanciful holdings-forth that sketchily imply a basis in rabbinic teachings, or invoke the authority of Talmudic learning while barely skimming the surface of a traditional text before streaking off to someplace else. Text-based conversations about meaning and relevance that take place in rabbinical schools are all too often caricatured and dismissed as being of such a dilettantish sort. As a teacher, I am committed to serious and competent study of each text I teach—nuts and bolts, in its own particularity and in its historical context—and then I make room for the associations and ramifications to which such study can lead.

To be sure, there are always the dangers of anachronism and of collapsing critical distance, but with a minimum of guidance, students become quite discerning. I mean that, on the whole, our rabbinical students are quite scrupulous and careful about wanting to identify and distinguish what comes from them and what they see on the page itself. Furthermore, I would much rather contend with students’ passions and imaginations than try to foist critical interest upon students who are unenthused. In most cases, if one forces rabbinical students through a dry, technical, text-criticism for its own sake, their passion for learning the skills of reading traditional texts will wither on the vine.

On the other hand, if the study of sources is intermeshed with the pressing issues that actually confront students’ souls in the present moment, then the utility of technical skills needs no defending or justifying in the classroom. Conveniently—even blessedly, as far as this synergy of academe and spirit is concerned—the Talmud Bavli, perhaps more than any other work I have ever met, gives us not just the Jewish but the human condition, forcing us to confront difficult questions and uncertainties. The Talmud does so in an almost merciless way that is very appropriate to the training of those who have an impulse to stand with their fellow human beings in life’s moments of crisis, large and small, in the midst of life’s mysteries and its enduring questions.

This observation about Talmudic discourse leads me to my final point. (My students’ voices will have the last word here.) I work very hard to ensure that every one of my first-year rabbinical students has a positive experience of hard work that leads to comprehension and real attainment. The work I do as a teacher is based on a love of rabbinic literature and of its audacity that I want my students to share. That love can only be shared in the real experiencing of the text, and that experience depends on skills. I believe, and I see anew every year, that through internalizing the experience of Talmud
– which is to say, through engaging in meaningful conversations that start in technically competent readings of Talmud – my students make the life-blood of rabbinic Judaism their own. Perhaps that will mean that some of these future rabbis will inspire another generation of students who will want to apprentice themselves to scholars of rabbinic texts. Meanwhile, if any of the readers of this paper, fellow teachers of rabbinics, ever do find themselves saying to students, “You should really talk with your rabbi about that,” I want the rabbis I am training to be ready – not with pat answers and pabulum theologies, but truly ready to facilitate the next steps of the spiritual journey.

APPENDIX: STUDENT TESTIMONIALS

Rabbinical student Sarah Tasman writes:

“If I didn’t feel like our academic work was part of my spiritual growth, or integrated some how, or if I felt as though my teachers could not understand my need for this, I am honestly not sure I would have the constitution for this material and for an environment so intense, if it were purely academic and unfeeling.”

Rabbinical student Dr. Minna Bromberg writes:

“I still find myself coming back to that over-used Thoreau quote from the conclusion of Walden: “If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.” For those of us who come to serious Jewish learning as adults, and even more so for those of us who come with a background in Judaism primarily as a spiritual path, technical skills-building can be as much a labor of love as anything else. One of my favorite occurrences in rabbinical school is when I come upon a text in my studies that I have heard quoted out of context dozens of times. Suddenly, I turn the corner and a sweet little phrase or story that I had always been told was “from the Talmud” is right there on the page in front of me. This time though, I encounter it in Aramaic and in its context and it takes on a new richness. More than a deepening in the meaning of the tidbit itself is my own opportunity to approach it with a greater sense of authenticity and ownership. It goes from being an uplifting refrigerator magnet that I repeated with embarrassment to being a sweet fruit on a living tree. And it is technical skill building that makes this possible.”

Rabbinical student Margie Klein, paraphrasing the words of Rabbi Ebn Leader, another of our teachers, writes:

“I could be anywhere right now. Organizing for fair wages or sailing on a Greenpeace boat. But I’m here because I think this is the most important way I can positively influence the world. I’m here to understand these texts so that these texts can help me transform the world through my teaching and my actions.”
Sarah Tasman again:

“I felt I had become so close with perek revi’i - there were parts I understood easily, parts I struggled with, parts I tore at and picked apart, parts I settled into comfortably, parts I fought my way into. It was one of the most intense and multifaceted relationships I have ever had. When we finished, it really was a feeling of saying goodbye to the chapter but knowing we would see each other again – and it felt so viscerally, not just metaphorically. I would call this feeling ‘Divine,’ for lack of a better way to describe something that feels so real, so human, but so entirely something else. For even 1/1000 of a feeling like this, I am grateful.”

Rabbinical student Tamar Grimm writes:

“At this point in my studies, the aspect of study that seems most deeply connected to spirituality is learning text in the Beit Midrash. This is especially so when the texts are in some ways about dialog and lovingly wrestling with another. So, the pursuit is spiritual for me to the extent that it encourages and guides me in seeing the divine in my study partner and, through that work, in the text. The word that comes most to mind here is “engagement” —with text, with other, with self.”

And she also offers:

“In a women’s Rosh Chodesh group I met with this week, we made artistic representations of our sources of growth and spiritual nourishment. One of the first things I included was Talmud study. Learning Gemara is similar to rock climbing or other challenges that when done in pairs require a great deal of trust, communication, self-awareness – and the experience creates a spiritual connection among the people who share it. The way we learn Gemara at Hebrew College gives us a voice in religious conversations that have been going on for centuries. We study Talmud not only as a means of acquiring knowledge or improving our text skills – we study to engage with the big questions of life and challenge ourselves, and the tradition, to figure out how to live on this earth. If that’s not a spiritual endeavor I don’t know what is.”

Finally, rabbinical student Daniel Berman writes:

Jonah, you probably don’t remember, but when I had just started school and we were studying Mishnah Brachot, I went for a run at sunrise and as the sun rose I could start to make out the colors, and I stopped in my tracks and recited the Sh’ma. It was completely un-anticipated, and one of the most beautiful moments in my life, and I shared this story in our Talmud class and then I asked you the same question that you are asking us now: how is this study a spiritual pursuit? And you answered my question by starting to sing the Mishnah, bringing the words into a radically different realm with melody and emotion, and my deep love for text study was fully born…
What text study gives us is an opportunity to express a part of the self that has no other means of expression. Text study becomes deeply personal. It allows us to be vulnerable, and courageous. It connects us to an historical trajectory and opens up possibilities for future identity that we could have never imagined.