

# “A TEXT THAT IS NEVER RESOLVED”

SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE, AND PERSONAL  
MEANING IN STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES  
OF RABBINIC LITERATURE

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## **About the Mandel Center**

The Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education, a partnership between the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Foundation and Brandeis University, develops and promotes scholarship on teaching and learning in Jewish education. Our work inspires Jewish educators and policy makers to think, talk, and act more effectively, in order to make a deep and lasting difference in the lives of learners and the vibrancy of the Jewish community.

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As part of The Jewish Theological Seminary, The Leadership Commons at The Davidson School cultivates talented thinkers, doers, and visionaries in Jewish education, preparing them to inspire and guide the Jewish world. We provide intensive leadership training, build collective wisdom through research, and weave together diverse perspectives from all corners to revitalize Jewish learning. Our alumni span the continent, leading day schools, Jewish communal organizations, early childhood centers, and more. Included in the Leadership Commons is The Davidson School's Research Center, which provides educational leaders with practical wisdom and innovative resources to create an inspiring future for Jewish education across denominations and throughout North America by developing research, hosting collaborative symposia, and producing publications to help leaders explore—and transform—the evolving landscape of Jewish education.

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## Preface

What have alumni of Jewish day schools learned, in the field of rabbinics? What do they understand about Talmud and other rabbinic literature? How do they think about its significance and meaning, and how do they feel about their learning?

While the study of rabbinic literature is a central component of the Jewish day school curriculum in both liberal and Orthodox schools, we know almost nothing about what students have learned, what they understand, or how they think. Educators and researchers therefore lack the empirical basis to articulate sound educational goals for this subject.

Given this situation, the two authors of this preface created a partnership between our two institutions, the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University, and the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. The goals of the partnership are twofold: first, to develop a knowledge base for the field of rabbinics education in general, and second, to support the ongoing development of standards and benchmarks in rabbinics, as part of the Jewish Day School Standards and Benchmarks Project at the Davidson School.

We recruited Dr. Beth Cousens to carry out the initial, exploratory phase of the project. This work, which we have come to call “Phase I” of the project, was conducted in the summer and fall of 2015, as described in the report below. We are grateful to Dr. Cousens for her diligence and expertise, to the interviewers whom she recruited, to the other subject-matter experts consulted on the project, and especially to the 13 students who made time to participate and spoke openly about their understandings and attitudes. Charlotte Abramson and Rabbi Sheryl Katzman, Director and Initiative Leader, respectively, of the Jewish Day School Standards and Benchmarks Project, have also provided invaluable input and guidance.

We are pleased to share this Phase I report, and we look forward to a continued partnership between our two institutions, to deepen and broaden our knowledge of students’ understanding of rabbinics, in the service of more effective teaching and deeper and more meaningful learning.

Jon A. Levisohn and Jeffrey S. Kress

# Introduction

This report is an overview of findings from the Students' Understanding of Rabbinics study (August-November, 2015).

In the past decades, Talmud study has become more prevalent in American Jewish life: Day school enrollment expanded in the 1990s and adult education has similarly expanded, each bringing more learners to Talmud study. Simultaneously, scholarship in Jewish education has become increasingly sophisticated. Yet we continue to have very few studies of the teaching and learning of sacred Jewish texts, either from the teachers' or especially from the students' perspectives.

This project endeavored to create an initial presentation of Talmud study from the students' perspectives, looking very specifically not at their experience of their classes but at what they know from their lessons. The study was constructed in order to support an applied project, the Standards and Benchmarks project of the William Davidson Graduate School of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, which offers a set of standards around which day school teachers of Rabbinics construct their classes. As a result, the study focused on the ideas of high school students, particularly recent high school graduates, as opposed to adult learners or children. The study sought to illuminate what students actually do learn through their high school Rabbinics (Talmud) experiences, so as to inform the development of a set of standards for teaching and learning that schools might adopt for their use.

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Working within this context—the focus on recent day school graduates and their understandings of Talmud—we developed a grounded study that used a semi-structured interview that asked a variety of open-ended questions of students in order to develop hypotheses about the subject. “Grounded theory” suggests that theory is developed through the systematic gathering and analyzing of data in order to produce an idea or set of ideas. The researcher begins with a general area of focus and research question rather than a specific hypothesis, then engages in study, allowing ideas to come from the data, with data points building as the research is conducted. “Grounded theories,” Strauss and Corbin write, “are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action.”<sup>1</sup> Grounded theorists approach their work with the capacity to see through words to understand the concepts behind them, synthesize information to be reported to others, gather specific ideas from abstract ideas, and sensitively hear respondents.<sup>2</sup> Specifically because we know so little about what students know about

Talmud, and know so little from the frames of the students themselves, we entered this study prepared to probe the subject from a variety of perspectives in order to develop foundational ideas drawing from the interview research. The interview guide included exploration of two pieces of Talmud, one a midrashic narrative and one a complex legal text. With students who had robust answers, the interview could take just over an hour.

To recruit respondents, the lead researcher:

- Contacted day school Talmud teachers and asked them to email their recent graduates, asking them if they might be interested in participating in this (anonymous) study. About half of the participants came to the study this way.
- Posted information about the study on Facebook and asked colleagues to do the same. The other half of the participants came to the study through this method.

In total, 13 students participated in the study. They:

- Graduated from a range of schools located throughout North America. Some student respondents were from the same schools, although we do not know if they had the same teachers (and nothing about their schools was referenced in their interviews).
- Included both men and women.
- Included students of different ages, from those who graduated just months before the interview to those who graduated a year or two in the past.
- Varied in their religious observance and in the extent to which Judaism is important to them, including two currently studying in Orthodox yeshiva, a student beginning the joint Columbia-JTS program, and students in college who engage infrequently in Jewish life.

The interviews were conducted by a team of graduate students and recent graduate students engaged in qualitative research and in Jewish education. They were trained in an introductory meeting and supported by a primary researcher.

To analyze the data, the researcher used methods typical to the analysis of qualitative data. First, interviews were read. Themes and ideas among interviews were identified. These themes and ideas were translated into a set of codes that were used to sort the data into categories. The codes formed a tree, with primary and secondary (“child”) codes. These codes directly informed the outline of the interview findings, the main ideas shared here.

The codes were used in a qualitative data software package, where each interview was entered and then coded appropriately. After each interview was coded, the compilation of data within each code was examined for themes, for the main ideas expressed by interviewees within each code category. Comparisons were made among interviews<sup>3</sup> and the researcher tried to understand the meaning that different interviewees might have been trying to express.

Quotations from interviewees are provided in the report for texture, when they illustrate one of the ideas shared or when they represent the ideas of other stakeholders as well.

## Findings

This research benefits from the development of the manuscript *Learning to Read Talmud: What It Looks Like and How It Happens*,<sup>4</sup> which came to fruition as this study's data were being collected. Jon Levisohn's synthesis essay in that text ("Postscript: What We Have Learned about Learning to Read Talmud") is particularly relevant. Levisohn closes the essay with a call for research on the textured process of the learner's focus on Talmud and for, evolving out of that study, a typology of stages and steps involved in the study of Talmud:

Imagine if we were able to isolate specific component elements of learning to read Talmud, and then to observe how students become better at those particular skills or develop those particular dispositions not just over the course of one semester, but over the course of several years. Imagine if we were able to develop, out of that data, an understanding of the typical or common challenges in reading Talmud and how they are overcome over time. Learning to read Talmud may never be susceptible to the kind of systematic analysis that has been accomplished in second-language acquisition, where scholars are able to define specific stages of learning in great detail, as well as to describe the standard trajectories of learning from one stage of proficiency to the next. But at the moment, we lack even the basic categories to describe the differences between novices and experts.

With 13 respondents, this study is a first step. In relating these findings, I offer concepts that might begin a typology. Moreover, that we identify concepts at all—as they are expressed by the students themselves—means that we can ask, are these our most desired learning outcomes? Are students experiencing what we as teachers might hope that they experience?

To begin to craft a typology, the findings follow a process that students experience:

- What draws students into study? What excites them about study? (That is, in the study process, what marks the beginning of their process?)
- What turns students away from study? What stops students from learning? (That is, in the study process, where does it go awry?)
- What do students learn? (That is, in the study process, what is the result?)

In correspondence with these questions, the research reveals the following.

## WHAT DRAWS STUDENTS INTO STUDY? WHAT EXCITES THEM ABOUT STUDY?

First, the text is relevant; more specifically, the Talmud informs their lives. It is directly instructive, directly applicable, and meaningful to who they want to be. Sophie, for example, describes learning a text—“*Lo titgodedu*”—and then quoting it “obsessively” for months afterwards. (“*Lo titgodedu*” refers to not dividing into factions or groups.) It meant something to her as a teenager who finds her way daily through shifting cliques. It seemed relevant to her life and meaningful to her that the Talmud, the authoritative Jewish source, suggested this constructive “social norm.” Similarly, Hayley enjoyed learning about balancing “*chesed, emet, tzedek, and shalom*” (kindness/care, truth, justice, and peace) and thinking about the role that finding such balance among them plays in Judaism. Sophie also defined relevance as being concrete or applicable to her life, as when she learned about women’s obligation related to prayer garments. When she learned why women weren’t obligated to wear tallit or tefillin, she decided that because the reason no longer holds, the opposite should be true today: Because there is no longer a reason women aren’t obligated, women are obligated, and so she started wearing tallit and tefillin.

*There are some sugiyot that we learn that I’m not really sure relate to my life now... But, some of them were for sure relevant and made me think about what kind of choices I want to make.*

*... I just loved the idea that that was a law... that was a rule that we shouldn’t split up into factions.*

—Sophie

Some of the students interviewed (about half) discussed the importance of Judaism in their lives. They encountered their tradition every day at their day schools and its celebration still dominates their free time. The Talmud becomes relevant when and because **it speaks to their very sense of self**, as when it becomes intertwined with their adolescent, developing selves—developing humanly (as when they divide into factions) or Jewishly (as when they make choices about ritual and commandedness). They’re compelled to its study because it’s relevant, because it speaks to the core of who they are.

*It’s who I am and I just love that, so I just keep it close to me.*

—Hayley

Students for whom Judaism is deeply integrated into their senses of self appreciate the Talmud as a **window into Judaism**. The understanding of the evolution of *halacha* that it offers them helps them to see depth in Judaism and in *halacha*. They get a sense of Judaism’s history from Talmud, which they value and want to explore.

*It’s where everything comes from basically in Judaism. All of our traditions and minhags and laws that we have today. Personally, I don’t want to go through life just doing things. I want to know why and how they came to be that way. — Jason*

They also value seeing the evolution of law. Knowing Talmud helps them **know and understand the why** behind laws, to own an interpretation and to identify with rationales, rather than merely accepting what they're told. Knowing the why behind a law helps them to feel empowered and to be prepared to live independently as Jews, to make decisions using their own knowledge. They're compelled by the opportunity to learn about and understand something that's important to them.

Students also enjoy Talmud study, or are compelled to it, because of its **complexity**. They are comfortable, even intrigued by its mess. For some, its complexity makes it a problem that needs to be solved. Sarah explains, "I really, really enjoy the satisfaction of finally understanding a discussion after sometimes a week of going over the same couple of lines and not making any headway." Maurice agrees. "There's a bit of a puzzle there. ... It's challenging mentally, but that's part of the reward, I'd say." These students appreciate a challenge, are not afraid to dive into something that doesn't guarantee success, and enjoy the trying involved in a task. That it requires so much effort makes it worthwhile.

*If you're doing it right, you're flipping through not only the text, but the Rashi on it and the Tanach on it. ... It could take hours easily. And to do it well, days maybe. I really like the rewarding feeling when you're able to win that fight. —Jason*

Relatedly, students believe—their teachers tell them and they conclude this themselves—that studying Talmud helps them with their **capacities to puzzle through logic and argument**, capacities that will help them in college and beyond. They see these orientations and skills as translating to the "real world," as being helpful whatever their life choices and college focus will be. The opportunity to sharpen their minds is compelling to them; they continue Talmud study because they value this opportunity.

Some students continue to study Talmud not because of the Talmud itself but because of **their experience in their Talmud class**. They value their relationship with their Talmud teacher, or they enjoy the way that their teacher teaches, or the class is easy because of the way it is taught and how they are tested. Jason described his Talmud teacher as seeing "a lot of potential" in him, as helping him with his "growth," and he acknowledges that this motivated him to become a certain kind of student. Alex is "proficient in Hebrew," and he found the tests—where they were given the text directly during the test—easy. They continue to take Talmud and enjoy its study because of aspects of the class experience not inherent to the subject.

## WHAT TURNS STUDENTS AWAY FROM STUDY?

Similar themes appear in the reasons that students are pushed away from studying Talmud.

Some students, for example, appreciate the text's complexity. Others find it **too complex** to understand. The structure of the text is a turn-on for some, a turn-off for others. They can't follow the arguments and don't find the text satisfying. They want resolution that the text doesn't offer. Maurice explains, "The structure of the text ... You have all these different interlocutors. And it's unclear sometimes where things stop and end and when somebody makes a comment exactly what they're referring to and maybe you can't tell what the pronoun refers to. It can... be kind of ambiguous." That ambiguity is too challenging and, consequently, unpleasant for some students.

*I read a text that is never resolved... So I just don't understand. There is no ending. It's just the middle of an argument that I feel like I've walked in on. —Alexandra*

For many students, the complexity includes a kind of theological complexity that is repelling. The text is **too dense**. Aaron, for example, has trouble with "*Lo bashamayim bee; eilu v'eilu divrei Elokim chayim.*" (It is not in Heaven; these and those are the words of the living God.) He explained, "It's hard sometimes to understand exactly what's meant there." The text's philosophical vagueness and need for interpretation get in the way of students' appreciation. Some students enjoy that vagueness, seeing it as a challenge to be overcome. Others find it annoying or frustrating.

*Instead of just giving us the law, it's not always clear what the law is. Oftentimes, multiple opinions are given. ... And instead of just giving it and that's it, there's a whole discussion as to why this meaning is this. Questioning things ... asking questions. It's a lot more of an intellectual process than just law. —Ezra*

While some students find personal meaning and relevancy in the text, others focus on the extent to which the text is **foreign to modernity**. They see it as a product of a group of people who are fundamentally different from them. Gender issues dominate their reading of the text. Moreover, that the text deals with so many issues that are not relevant to our lives today—because society functioned in fundamentally different ways—makes even those issues that are relevant in the text too hard to access, and the text seems to have nothing to say to students. The rabbis' relationship to religion and practice of Judaism seems radically different from students'; it is too hard for students to relate to the authors of the text and the decisions they make.

*I think it's sometimes hard for students to have a connection with their Tanach and Talmud classes, because it just seems so antiquated and so irrelevant to our practices today. We practice religion very differently than the rabbis did. —Hayley*

In the best example of this, one student described her experience and memories of a text and of the related conversation in her class, which was filled with doubt, distaste, and anger at the Talmud. Regardless of what actually happened in the class, or what the text actually means to convey, her memory is one that gets in the way of her positive attachment to Talmud:

*It was called Pat Akum. We still talk about it in my grade. It started with, if someone was in a field, and there's a baker, and a girl shows up and he gives her unkosher bread, it could lead to intermarriage. Really, just from a piece of bread? It just seemed totally unbelievable. As opposed to the other things which seemed more believable.*

—Tali

No students mentioned finding the Aramaic attractive (such as, they enjoyed learning the language or the act of translation) but some students certainly found **the language** more challenging than others, and for some students, it's an outright block. These may be the students for whom all language acquisition is more difficult than for others. It's hard and, because it's hard, it's boring. They don't see a magic or anything interesting in the act of translation itself or in accessing the nuance of the meaning that can be found in the original language.

*I really struggle with language. It's not my strongest subject, I guess. ... Even if you're fluent in modern Hebrew it doesn't always translate. And I think having to learn a very technical vocabulary just to understand what it's saying is challenging.*

—Ellie

Some students did not enjoy **the way that their class was taught**. The class's emphasis on aspects of the text that they did not enjoy—the original language, or the text's complexity—made the text additionally inaccessible to them. They craved discussion of the text's meaning. Left on their own, without class discussion, they found little meaning in the text or they found it too dense, as described.

*Talmud is a little dry, especially... how we learn it in school, by lecture or in hevruta.*

—Ellie

It's worth noting that the students in the study—about half of them—who did not enjoy studying Talmud were also those who did not perform as well when asked to read Talmud with the interviewer. Their interpretation was less thick, less interesting. It may be that they are not as proficient in the capacities required for Talmud study, or that their lack of appreciation of the class means that they spend less time in it, which means that they become less skilled at it, and so they are less comfortable engaging in it.

There may be a kind of tautological phenomenon happening for students who don't like Talmud. Most of the time they spend studying Talmud they spend in translation—or, that is their experience of class—which is something that they don't enjoy or appreciate. If their Talmud experience had a different focus, they might have wanted to spend more time in Talmud study, become more skilled in it, and enjoyed it. There may be a synergistic combination of less aptitude in the capacities required for this work (language acquisition, logical analysis), a less than positive experience in their classroom, and a weaker passion for the subject (or for Judaism) itself.

TABLE 1: Relationship to Talmud Study	
Attracted to Study	Pushed Away from Study
Relevant and meaningful	Irrelevant
Complex and therefore interesting	Complex and therefore difficult
Appreciate the language	Dislike/Not adept at language
Experience in class emphasizes the above	

## WHAT DO STUDENTS LEARN?

Students learn from their Talmud experience a combination of ideas, skills, and knowledge of what the Talmud says.

### Mental Model

Students develop a mental model of what Talmud is. Some of this is **factual**. That is, students learn to articulate that Talmud comprises Mishnah and Gemara and they can explain the relationship between the two. (They do not, it's worth noting, describe in great detail the tannaim, amoraim, relationship between these two, or other details about the Talmud's structure. A few students admitted that they recognize they "should" remember these details but do not; only one student mentioned them in the interviews.)

Some of their mental model is **conceptual**. They see it as **intricate**, for example, describing it as a long argument, "layered and complex." It "asks more questions than it answers." Some students see its complexity. Other students hear that it is complex from their teachers. They are told that they should value its complexity, that it will help them develop skills in logical reasoning that will then be helpful in other areas of their lives. That the Talmud is complex and requires analytical reasoning to understand is central to their understanding of what the Talmud is, in part because their teachers repeat it so much to them. It becomes reified, something they learn because they hear it more than they experience it, something that might be true because they hear it and not because they experience it.

Occasionally, students discussed the passing on of tradition and the role that Talmud plays in **preserving tradition**. Their mental model also touches on the **relevance** of the Talmud and the role it played in Jewish society at the time of its writing and today. At the

time, the rabbis of the Talmud “created new laws for evolving times,” in Alex’s words. The laws were needed, the students recognize, because of the loss of the Temple: guidelines were needed as a map of how to live. They were also needed because the Mishna was “shorthand,” too cryptic, and so a commentary explains each commentary. Several students touched on the importance of **explication** and the role of **human interpretation** in the Talmud, noting that an important aspect of the Talmud is that human beings played a significant role in creating it, or that the human role is intentional, that God left it to human beings.

*We took a look at the Tanach, the Torah, all the rules ... what was given to us at Har Sinai and then ... made it more applicable to us and really [took] possession of it and made it our own and a more applicable code of law. ... I remember reading something the other day about how God has sort of left the Torah and Halachic process really in the hands of the Jewish people. ...* **Rabbinics is studying how we have accepted the Torah and what we’ve made of it over the past two thousand years.**  
—Ezra

All students touched on various aspects of these interrelated ideas. At the same time, only a few students mentioned the concept of human interpretation in Talmud. Moreover, only Ezra summarized the idea of the role of human interpretation and the relationship between Talmud and other commentaries with such precision and insight: “Rabbinics is studying ... what we’ve made of [the Torah] over the past 2000 years.”

While only some students found the Talmud relevant, many of them talked about the Talmud as intending to provide “**morals**” for Jews today. Hayley, who enjoyed studying Talmud but who found it antiquated, still sees it as “values and ideas that we should believe in and live by.” She didn’t talk about the relationship between her rejection of some of the Talmud’s ideas and her seeing it as intending to give life instruction; neither did other students who suggested similar ideas.

### **How the Talmud Works (Text in Context)**

Students also learn how the Talmud works, or about the text in its context. For example, while studying texts together during the interview, interviewers asked students if they saw the text’s editor in the texts. Some did. They saw different kinds of editors’ notes. They saw that:

- An editor wove together into one conversation different comments from different rabbis over time:

*Rav is not actually speaking. This was extrapolated from a ruling that he made. So someone must have gone back... Someone must have written down what Rav said.*  
—Alexandra

- An editor added comments about the quality or import of varied ideas shared:

*The last line ... seems to be coming from the editor and seems to praise or elevate Rabbi Hiya above Rabbi Hanina's response to this issue. ... Obviously, Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Hiya weren't the ones who said that.* —Maurice

- An editor sharpened stories, adding details that call back to texts or ideas or facts about the texts.

*'I taught the Six Orders of the Mishna to six children.' He could have just said 'I taught every order of the Mishna, each to an individual child.' Probably would have been easier, but no, six and six. I think that especially when you match that with the Five Books and the five children, Six Orders and six children. That just seemed a lot like an editor for this thing.* —Austin

No students saw the same evidence of the editor: Across interviews, the same observations about the roles of the editor or editors were not made. Moreover, only about one-quarter of the students noticed an editor at all. Most students did not show an understanding of how the text was constructed (or that the text was constructed), either in response to direct questions or more generally throughout their interviews.

Similarly, only a few students showed recognition that the same rabbis appear repeatedly throughout the text and that we can **learn about the rabbis' personalities** from evidence shared in the Talmud. Sarah's idea shared here is, literally, unique among the interviews.

Students displayed a general understanding of **the text's context**, that the Temple was destroyed and the Talmud born. A very few students showed a deeper understanding of the context and, specifically, of the relationship between the text's context and what the rabbis were doing. While all knew that the Temple was destroyed; only a few talked about how this destruction might have influenced the rabbis' talk and actions. Alexandra, one of these students, displayed an understanding of the historical events that surrounded the Talmud's development. Ellie notes the importance of the rabbis' "homelessness" for the text. While she doesn't give examples, she indicates an understanding of what it might have been like for the people to have lost their sovereignty.

In total, then, some students displayed some elements of understanding of the text in its context but most did not display depth or details in this area.

### Texts Themselves

Sometimes, students learned some stories and some law. This happened most frequently when studying Talmud involved **the making of meaning** for students. Texts challenged students' senses of the way their worlds work or acted as social commentaries on their worlds. In some cases, texts resulted in behavior change for students, speaking directly to their Jewish practice.

*Some of [the texts] were for sure relevant and made me think about what kind of choices I want to make. Or, choices I had made and whether I should change my mind. ...*

*When I learned why women aren't obligated to wear a tallit and tefillin or whatever. It doesn't really connect to who I am today. I think that women should be equal. And obviously in those times they weren't. It follows that I should be obligated to wear a tallit. So, I started doing that.* —Sophie

When texts spoke to students and helped them make personal meaning of the world, students **remembered the texts**, the **law** that they might practice, the **relationship** between the law and decisions about their practice, or the **story** that helped to shape their sense of who they are. This didn't happen frequently; only about half the students named only one or two texts that stuck with them. This kind of meaning-making was part of some students' experience but not always an extensive part, nor did it touch on larger issues of morals or ethics related to how students understand their purpose in the world.

### **Process of Translation**

The dominant experience for students interviewed, and the dominant lessons learned for students, relate to the process of studying Talmud with their classes, which was a process and project of translation for most students. Many described a sort of definitive process of starting with the Aramaic, using highlighters to identify certain kinds of words and key phrases, looking up words in their dictionaries, adding punctuation. This process is dominant in their minds. It characterizes their experience. They spoke the most easily and with the most confidence when they spoke about their experience of translation. Some hated the process: They found it tedious, difficult, and a waste of time. Still, it is something that they learned from their classes.

*If I were in school and had my Frank and my havruta and all my other books I would look at the Hebrew and I would start by separating the text, putting it into separate lines where I think the text breaks up. And I'd put in punctuation like question marks, commas, exclamation points. I'd highlight the technical terms, define them using the Frank, and then work on translating as best I could. And we'd meet as a class and then go over it.*

*I would probably highlight—I don't like charts. I would probably highlight all the different opinions and color code them in a way that all the opinions that agree with each other would be one color just so I can understand the structure of the text. And then I'd make sure I understand what each rabbi thinks. And then I'd try to understand the conclusion.* —Hayley

While their dominant experience and learning from their classes relates to translation, all of the students felt much **more comfortable with the English** translation than they did with the Aramaic and only some students felt that they could develop a translation independently from the original text. Some do use the Aramaic; when they studied the texts during their interviews, a few students turned to the original text to check certain terms. Ellie demonstrates how this happened for a few students.

*I kind of skimmed the Hebrew first looking for... key words or phrases that I'm familiar with or that mean something. And then I just read the English to get the full understanding. But, I don't know ... it's nice to have them next to each other and to be able to go back and forth a little bit. Because as you're reading in the English you see something and you're like "Oh, I think that's that" because sometimes translations are funny and so... in the first one when it was finding that "how great are the deeds of ..." at the end. And I was like, "okay," and I went back to the Hebrew and it talks about "ma'asei gedolim" and I was like, that makes sense to me.*

—Ellie

Ellie demonstrates an understanding that the translation is limited as well as motivation to use the Aramaic to complement her reading. Only a few students displayed similar knowledge.

Among all of these lessons, perhaps most significantly, about half of the students displayed a deep capacity to **study a text independently and produce meaning** from it. This is a fairly subjective area: How do we judge if a student can interpret a text? It can be seen in the extent to which students comment on the texts, in how many insights they make about a text, in the variety in these insights, and in the uniqueness of their insights. Did they repeat the text's plot, like a simple book report? Or did they add something new to what they read? Did they have questions for the rabbis or writers, and how many questions?

Here, we have to keep in mind that, while the interview protocol was consistent, the implementation of that protocol inevitably varied in subtle ways from interview to interview. Some interviewers spent more time probing the subjects for their understanding, or shifted their framing the questions. It is likely that at least some of the differences in the responses are attributable to methodological issues. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that about half of the students displayed what might be called a "thick" response to the text, speaking with texture about the texts, demonstrating that they can pick up a Talmud and interpret the text on its surface and its deeper meaning. The others read and summarized the texts, putting the plot of each text into their own words, generating few to no independent questions or comments about each text.

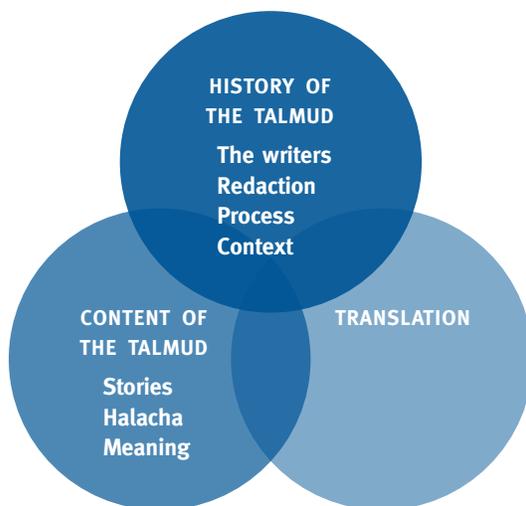
## Conclusions and Implications

We could want a wide variety of things for students who learn Talmud:

We could want students to learn Jewish history from the Talmud and to learn the history of the Talmud, to understand the process of redaction, to recognize the layers of history and the Jewish experiences embedded in the text we see today.

We could want students to be able to read the original text independently, to be able to embark on a process of translation, to know how to use dictionaries, to know how to parse this text that has no punctuation and no instructions, to know clue words that repeat and give guidance.

**FIGURE 1:**  
Three Areas of Rabbinic Classroom Work



We could want students to understand what they read, to know its implications, to be able to apply the ideas in the text to present-day situations and to make personal meaning from the text.

We can borrow here from Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon and think about the difference between factual, evaluative, and interpretive questions and observations. Students make factual observations when they note things that happen in the text or make connections between things that happen in the text. They evaluate when they make observations or draw conclusions about the happenings within a text, such as about characters' motivations.

They make interpretive conclusions when they reflect on what they learned. In a Jewish context, we might also say that they make interpretive conclusions when they apply what they have learned to their own Jewishness or make another kind of meaning of what they studied.<sup>5</sup>

They also make “meaning” of their study. The concept of meaning is hard to pin down; it is, particularly in this context, personally defined and therefore difficult to describe in aggregate. Still, we can say about students' Talmud study that their engagement with these three areas of work and with the Talmud as a whole sometimes results in their making different kinds of personal meaning from the text. They:

- Develop a new understanding of a Jewish practice in which they were already engaged (e.g. reading Torah);
- Change their personal Jewish practice; and
- Explore an idea that influences the way they understand their world.

And yet, students' common experience of study and, for some of them, the experience that dominated their Talmud study, is the process of translation. The extent to which they can, actually, succeed in creating a strong translation depends on their comfort with Aramaic. Even students with the weakest language skills and knowledge of other aspects of Talmud seem to understand how to sit with a Talmud and begin a process of translation.

“Learning to read Talmud,” then, has become something very concrete for students, suggesting a series of steps that they go through with dictionaries and highlighters, involving the technical skills of learning to read. For some or many of them, this process overshadows the rest of the process. They had a few experiences of personal meaning-making, or they remember a few halachot. Some can describe the editors of the text or historical circumstances. Their experience, though, is not characterized by these conversations. And personal meaning-making happens the least frequently. (We can learn here from the work of Katherine G. Simon, who observed that in teaching literature, we also focus on the structure of the piece and not on the “moral and existential questions” that a piece raises.)<sup>6</sup>

Most specifically, while this text is replete with stories that we might think of as involving morals—a Jewish Aesop's Fables, perhaps—these texts do not seem to be of primary importance for teenagers, who are in the thick of moral, ethical, and human development. Meaning-making seems to happen accidentally and not as a deliberate result of teachers' focus. (This is impossible to know, of course, without interviewing the teachers themselves and understanding their intentions, but students do not suggest that they focused extensively on such meaning-making texts.)

We return, then, to the original question: What do we want for students who study Talmud? What do we want them to make of the Talmud? What role do we hope it plays in their Jewishness? What does it mean for them to know Talmud, and what are the different kinds of “know”?

From these few students' experiences, we learn that teachers spend significant time devoted to the process of translation, and that exams may emphasize the same. How can we parse and identify what we want students to learn, be deliberate about their potential experiences, and devote classroom activities to desired outcomes? Even more important, how can we maximize the role that (not only the structure but) the content of this extraordinary text plays in the lives of Jewish students?

## NEXT STEPS

- **IF YOU ARE A TEACHER:** What does it mean to you for students to know Talmud? What is the potential role that Talmud study can play in the life of a curious Jewish child or teenager? How do we help students immerse themselves in all that the Talmud has to offer? How can classroom activities help them get to know the text?
- **IF YOU ARE A RESEARCHER:** What kinds of interviews can flesh out the ideas in this report? How can further interviews or, perhaps, observation focus on the experience of meaning-making in a Talmud classroom, or the experience of the learning the text in its context, or the mental models of the Talmud that students develop, in order to learn more about these student experiences and understandings? Can interviews yield a true framework for students' learning of Talmud, helping us to better understand how to parse student remarks about their lessons? This set of observations rests on interviews with just 13 students. The study begs for more interviews to flesh out hypotheses raised by this study.

A final note: “Understanding” is a deeply complex thing, a web of layers of ideas and personal reactions to ideas and interpretations. While the dataset for this project is small, each interview is very rich. Future research and analysis can reflect on even the existing data using academic frameworks that share insight about human understanding, focusing on what students learn as described in the categories shared here.

## Appendix: Additional Text (Transcript) Supports

It is complicated to talk about what a few students “know.” (What does it mean to “know” something?) This report tried to put forth a set of observations without judgment and without emotion. At the same time, it is also important to share a researcher’s intuition that only some students displayed a “thick” understanding of the text, an understanding that offers a diverse and rich sense of the Talmud and what it represents.

So as to allow the reader not to take my word for it, I provide here some excerpts from interviews that demonstrate thick understandings of the text and responses to the interview’s text study.

I also include several texts on the concept of “meaning.” As noted, some students found the text meaningful—but there are different kinds of meaning. These excerpts demonstrate the kinds of meaning that students do find and, in doing so, also show the opportunity for additional meaning exploration.

### THICK UNDERSTANDINGS

*Sarah has interesting and diverse questions and observations as she starts to read the text.*

**Interviewer:** Okay. What questions do you have so far about the text?

**Sarah:** Well, it seems rather general. There’s sort of no explicit relationship between the *shomer* and the person who is asking the *shomer* to guard an object. And it seems like that relationship should be taken into account. Especially if, I don’t know... it seems like even if someone was unpaid, there are certain people that the person who was requesting the *shomer*... there are certain people that he or she would trust more or less. Familial relationships or other things. Or if there is a past history— if the *shomer* is returning a favor. Or also, what counts as payment? Is it just monetary? Could it be other items? Could it be time? Or another favor?

*Jason offers an interpretation of the text, using his own experience to reflect on it. He then asks a few sharp questions about the text, showing that he is paying attention to each word.*

**Interviewer:** What is this text about? And you can go back and reread to yourself.

**Jason:** I like it. A couple of things. First off, it’s the difference that he can make. The first (inaudible) he trapped the deer so that he could feed the orphans—that’s pretty cool. But then, beyond that the big theme here is the importance of learning with a

*havruta*—learning with a learning partner. That he sees the value of ... okay, it's really hard for everyone to grasp every idea and every concept by themselves. So, you become a master in this area and you become a master in that area and when you work together you'll become a master in the greater oral tradition. I like it. I definitely see with my *havruta* that I'm stronger in certain aspects—maybe I'm better at understanding words or something like that, while my friend might be better at finding the breaks or something like that. So, it's the partnership of learning together that really makes a more balanced learning approach.

**Interviewer:** Great. What questions does this text raise for you?

**Jason:** Obvious question about—What do you mean you prevented it from being forgotten? Even if these eleven kids didn't learn Torah—what do you mean the Torah would have been forgotten completely? I don't really see the connection between the flax and the deer. Maybe the deer were attracted to the flax in some way. But definitely the being forgotten from amongst the Jewish people—what is that supposed to mean?

*Aaron has a number of questions about the text. He digs into it.*

**Interviewer:** What questions does this text raise for you?

**Aaron:** I wonder if the Gemara stops here. Do we really come to the conclusion that Rav's opinion is no good? Or do we come up with a way that Rav actually might make sense? That's just a question. What other questions? I mean, I think I'm still unclear exactly what the case is. Why would a *shomer chinam* give it to another *shomer sachar* because according to Abaye that's the case or that's the case we're looking at with Rabbi Yochanan a *shomer chinam* giving it to a *shomer sachar* which at least on a simple understanding that means that the second guy has to be paid. Why pay the second guy? Why not? If you're a *shomer chinam* give it to another *shomer chinam*. Though maybe that doesn't work, so that's maybe even though you're the same level of *shmira* according to Rabbi Yochanan just the extra risk of giving it over to someone else means you have to elevate the level of *shmira* by paying the guy and turning him into a *shomer sachar*.

*Here, Aaron shows that he understands the context in which the Talmud is written and how it interplays with the content of the text itself.*

**Interviewer:** Why would the Talmud include this text?

**Aaron:** Maybe to show how you need to pass down the Jewish tradition.

**Interviewer:** What questions does this text raise for you?

**Aaron:** Maybe what's the value of *pilpul*? What's the value of sort of arguing? I'm really not sure.

**Interviewer:** Do you see any of the rabbis' context in this text?

**Aaron:** Do I see any what?

**Interviewer:** Of the rabbi's context. Their, kind of, historical context.

**Aaron:** Specifically the rabbis' historical context—no. General rabbinical historical context—yeah. They were living in a time when the Torah was beginning to be forgotten because you had all the other countries ruling the Jews and that's why they wrote it down in the first place. They really tried... Yavneh... they're doing what they can do to really try to prevent Torah from being entirely forgotten. So it's amazing actually that we're here right now learning Torah.

**Interviewer:** Do you see the text's editor in this text at all?

**Aaron:** “*Hainu di'amar rebbe.*” (This is what Rebbe said.)

**Interviewer:** And how is that the editor?

**Aaron:** I mean it's not a conversation. It's someone who puts in this discussion that we just mentioned is what Rebbe in this other place was referring to when he said this.

## THIN(NER) INTERPRETATION

*In this piece, Hayley shows less initial interest in and reflection on the text that she has just read. The text picks up immediately after Hayley read a longer legal text with multiple opinions. It is not a completely thin interpretation/reflection, but she shows less probing of the text than do the other students.*

**Interviewer:** Great. What do you think?

**Hayley:** So where do I go from here? So in the end I think what it's saying basically is that Rav is incorrect in general. For that specific case he was fine but not in general. I mean Abaye is putting much more ... he's giving him hopes of a lot more credit to himself. He's saying everyone is capable of doing such a job so it doesn't really matter who you give it to. It doesn't matter if you diminish its the level of care or elevate it. Probably what I'd do is either I would make a chart or highlight. I would probably highlight—I don't like charts. I would probably highlight all the different opinions and color code them in a way that all the opinions that agree with each other would be one color just so I can understand the structure of the text. And then I'd make sure I understand what each rabbi thinks. And then I'd try to understand the conclusion which I think what I said is correct. But if it's not, then not cool. Embarrassing for me.

**Interviewer:** But certainly for an initial read, you're entitled to just give it a stab and see what happens.

**Hayley:** Yeah. So what Rav Hisda is saying is he's saying that what Rav is saying is speaking more towards specific cases because in this one specific incident, yes what Rav said

is correct but not necessarily true in all cases. It's a more narrow ruling and whereas—what's the other rabbi—it's not Rav—it is Yochanan has more ubiquitous implications. That's probably what I would come up with if I was sitting in class and then I would probably be told that I was wrong. But you know that's what I would do.

## ABOUT MEANING

*This excerpt demonstrates that students do find personal meaning in their Talmud study. Here, it was important to Sophie's interest in Talmud and to her Jewishness—or, maybe to her 21st century identity— that the Talmud talked about such a contemporary issue.*

*Sophie does not suggest, though, that these ideas were talked about in class. She implies that this was something that she thought about personally and privately. She was able to have a personal experience through her study but it was serendipitous, unrelated to her formal study.*

**Interviewer:** Can you remember a really interesting class that you had in Rabbinics?

**Sophie:** Yeah. I took a class on abortion. It wasn't just on Rabbinics, but Rabbinics was a part of it. Though we looked at all the sources in Rabbinics about anything to do with abortion or miscarriage or stuff. And it was really fascinating—like what they thought of and how they described events or things and their opinions. Because they did talk about abortion really. Their opinions on that even though they didn't know what to call it though.

**Interviewer:** What does it mean to you that they talked about it? Why is it interesting to you?

**Sophie:** Because I think of it as such a modern thing that I never thought that anyone in that time would even consider that.

*In this excerpt, Ezra talks about the kind of meaning he found in Talmud study. He demonstrates that meaning isn't absent from the students' Talmud study but it isn't the kind of moral or existential meaning that Katherine Simon describes in *Moral Questions in the Classroom*. Their Talmud study interacts with their Jewishness, but it doesn't necessarily inform their larger sense of their ethics or sense of how they might lead their world.*

**Ezra:** I wouldn't say that it necessarily characterizes rabbinic literature, but I do remember this one text which I remember reading... actually learned it for my yeshiva interview last year. And part of the reason it was applicable was it was discussing why we read the Rosh HaShana Torah reading the way we do... Rosh Chodesh Torah reading. So, it was very applicable without having to do... Just at face value it was very applicable. And also for me, because I do enjoy reading Torah and especially Rosh Chodesh.

## Endnotes

1 Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (California: Sage Publications, 1998), 12.

2 Strauss and Corbin, *Qualitative Research*, 7.

3 Strauss and Corbin, *Qualitative Research*, 78.

4 Jane L. Kanarek and Marjorie Lehman, *Learning to Read Talmud: What it Looks Like and How it Happens* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016).

5 *Learning to Teach Through Discussion: The Art of Turning the Soul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

6 *Moral Questions in the Classroom: How to Get Kids to Think Deeply About Real Life and Their Schoolwork* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).



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