On Motivation Before Method: Helping Students Get a Foot in the Door Through the Use of Academic Scholarship in the Teaching of Rabbinic Texts

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ABSTRACT

Academic scholarship can serve the endeavor of teaching rabbinic texts by providing both selections of texts and approaches to them that address questions of interest to students. Using a variety of examples, the author argues that what we teach is less important than finding what students are willing to learn, and that Jewish students of almost all types can easily become interested and invested in learning about the world of the Rabbis. This paper explores ways that academic articles (and even works of fiction) can provide comfortable points of entry into what otherwise might seem a completely foreign culture, strengthening students’ anthropologist-like immersion in that culture.

Soon, Fun With Dick and Jane will resonate only as a movie title. Those of a certain age, however, still remember when there was also a book of similar name, used to teach reading. By taking simple words and stringing them into sentences—“See Dick run. Run, Dick, run. See Jane run,”—the book gently guided beginning readers in sounding out words, building from the simple to the complex. But Dr. Seuss rendered that book, and those like it, almost immediately obsolete with his more entertaining pursuit of the same goals. Finding out that Dick and Jane run, walk, or throw paled in comparison to hopping on Pop and other such amusements.

This example is relevant to the endeavor of teaching rabbinic literature, and points out a flaw in our approach to the question itself. We speak of how best to teach rabbinic literature, when the question we should be asking first is how best students will come to study or learn rabbinic literature. The distinction is probably vital in every subject. Too often, educators assume that passionate and engaged teaching can bring students to involvement in the topic. While this is true for the top students in any group—perhaps ten to fifteen percent of the population—the vast majority of students, in a setting

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where studying rabbinic texts is mandatory or nearly so, need a clearer or more effective motivator than a teacher’s passion.

For some, the threat of poor grades and other extrinsic motivations can substitute for intrinsic interest. That is less true for rabbinic texts, material that students sense is not as crucial (to their career or, often, to their lives) as that which they study in subjects common to society at large. The truth is that, even in those core subjects, many educators, such as Howard Gardner and David Perkins, argue that we should be selecting curriculum and structuring study in a way that builds student motivation and moves to thoughtful engagement with the subject matter at hand.

In *Smart Schools*, for example, Perkins makes a number of points relevant to our question; his thinking is well situated in a broader consensus of scholars of education. I will review below his points most salient for our purpose, in order to enumerate the ways in which careful use of academic scholarship can improve or assist the teaching of rabbinic texts.

Perkins begins by noting the fragility of knowledge produced by much of teaching, across disciplines. He defines fragile knowledge as the state of children not remembering, understanding, or being able to actively use ideas and facts they have already learned. This fragility can come in several forms, which he calls inert knowledge, naïve knowledge, and ritual knowledge.

Inert knowledge is knowledge students *have*, but are only able to access when asked questions that go directly to the material they have learned. Naïve knowledge highlights the resistance students often demonstrate towards developing a more complicated or nuanced picture of subjects they have studied, and ritual knowledge is the knowledge of procedures only in the form in which they were taught.

All these and more beset the teaching of rabbinic texts. My experience in various Jewish educational settings and acquaintance with many adults who came out of those settings strongly suggests that the vast majority of students do not retain even the most basic background about rabbinic texts, even as inert knowledge, beyond the immediate setting in which it was learned. Were we to poll graduates of Jewish educational systems (other than the most traditionalist, where the situation might be better, for reasons I address below), I believe we would find that the vast majority do not know basic facts about rabbinic texts, such as when they were written, the types of rabbis who were involved in writing them, how they are organized, and what topics they cover.

Perkins has a daunting array of ideas for how to improve the situation; most involve changes of a scope (and necessitate an investment of time, effort, and resources) beyond my purview here. How-

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1This worry is less relevant to adult students, who only take courses in which they are interested; I claim that taking the approach mentioned here would be more likely to attract such adult students as well.


3Perkins, 20-25.
ever, two of them call more than anything else for adjustments of attitude and choice of curriculum, and point us, I believe, in the direction of academic scholarship.

Perkins advances what he calls Theory One, “a rough-hewn, first-order approximation to the conditions that foster learning.” Theory One states: “People learn much of what they have a reasonable opportunity and motivation to learn.” The “reasonable opportunity” side of that equation might already be covered in the educational settings we are considering today. It includes such items as clear information, thoughtful practice (giving students real opportunities to use what they learn, an issue we will have reason to return to below), and informative feedback (giving the students a good sense of where they have succeeded and where they still need to improve, and the factors that fueled both their successes and failures).

But motivation? Therein lies the rub. Too often, approaches to teaching rabbinic texts reflect the orientation the educator believes the students ought to have towards the texts being studied. Teachers of Talmud, Mishnah, or Jewish law, will often enter a classroom and begin teaching the text at hand, as if they can, by force of their enthusiasm, energy, or skillful approach, secure students’ “buy-in” to the value of studying these texts. That buy-in, of course, is a sine qua non for retention of what they have learned. Such teachers might do well to tell a joke that leads into the discussion, pose a moral dilemma and show how the Talmud answers it, ask a question about Jewish practice leading into an analysis of texts that address that question, or otherwise try to connect the students to the text.

But without such effort, automatic buy-in only happens routinely, as I noted above, for a small group of learners—whether they are habitually comfortable following those more expert than themselves in order to achieve an understanding of the topic at hand, or simply react well to the experience of learning from a particular teacher. Most students, of whatever age or level of observance, do not share that perspective. For them, motivation is paramount, and will not come simply because the school’s curriculum committee decided these are worthwhile Judaic texts to study. This is especially true in the case of rabbinic texts because of the many hurdles required of those who would study them.

First, there is the problem of translation, the hurdles of language and context. We can attempt to avoid the problem by studying these texts in the student’s native language, but there is still the question of their essential foreignness, as David Kraemer has reminded us.\(^5\) To students who are not yet immersed in these texts—and even to some who already are—the world of the rabbis is strange, odd in an off-putting way. These rabbis made assumptions about how to construct knowledge different than our own, and inhabit a world of laws and ideas that are often distressingly “other”.

An essential question in teaching rabbinic texts, then, is how to do it in such a way that students choose to enter the world of these texts, to encounter it long and deeply enough to develop knowl-

\(^4\)P. 45.

\(^5\)See below, note 15.
edge that is both active, sophisticated, and goes beyond memorization. By elaborating a key aspect of what I understand to be the root cause of these difficulties—the fact that rabbinic texts occupy a cultural space that is not part of most students’ ordinary lives—we can finish laying the groundwork for the suggestion that academic scholarship is poised to help.

In a study of literacy development, Victoria Purcell Gates and colleagues found that the greatest determinant of success was the extent to which that literacy was activated in students’ lives outside of the educational environment.\(^6\) Once a home culture incorporated literacy, students developed it more quickly as well. This is one of the great advantages (regarding the study of rabbinic texts) held by students in traditionalist Orthodox settings. Since the people in their cultural surroundings—parents, siblings, teachers and rabbis, friends’ parents, etc.—are all themselves involved in these texts and the worldview that extends from them, literacy achievement is not that much different than for any child in his or her home language and culture. Outside of that world, most teachers are dealing with students who lack this connection between rabbinic texts and their lives.

To bring our students into the world of rabbinic texts, especially if we are attempting to give them anything approaching cultural literacy in them (whether in English or Aramaic/Hebrew), we need to be clear about the challenge we face. Our students do not function in a culture where rabbinic texts are as alive as other subjects, and do not have enough inherent motivation to make the effort necessary to immerse themselves in that culture.\(^7\)

A second complicating factor is the sheer magnitude of the rabbinic corpus. Under the best of circumstances, students will likely only encounter an insignificant fraction of the literature as a whole. Teachers in classes that take on tractates, whether reading consecutively or by topic, do not consider have the opportunity to meaningfully cover a great deal of material. Seven folio pages of a tractate of Talmud, split up however one might want, is not enough to give a student a sense of that tractate; 28 such folios over a high school career—if that—is negligible.

A related problem is that the information students do absorb is rarely brought into any kind of unified framework. Consequently, too many students experience rabbinic texts as a hodgepodge of whatever they happen to come across during their years in Jewish education. What we seek here is an overall guiding perspective that students can keep in mind as they engage with this or that piece of rabbinic literature. Were they to have an understanding of how this knowledge fits into a long-term project that does have meaning for them, they would likely be more motivated to take on even relatively small pieces of that project.\(^8\)

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\(^7\)This is true even of many students who are halachically observant, since practice is determined by discussions that extend beyond the original rabbinic text. Dedicated students can understand that rabbinic texts are the *beginning* of that conversation, but most of the texts they study will yield only nuggets of direct relationship to students’ lives.

\(^8\)Some might suggest that the goal of “knowing Torah” suffices, from any of several of the other orientations under discussion at this conference. I suspect, though, that such a diffuse and ill-defined goal is beyond most students.
It is in response to these challenges that I invoke here the utility of Clifford Geertz’s “thick description.” Geertz was struggling with how to analyze other ways of life without imposing oneself or one’s assumptions on them; instead of anthropologists seeing in primitive societies what they wished to see or were predisposed to see, he wanted a way to get at the cultures themselves. For our purposes, the key aspect of his solution is that the anthropologist seeks first to describe the culture being studied as fully as possible. This description is made not in terms of how the anthropologist sees it, but in terms of how that culture experiences itself, its symbols, and its rituals.

Analysis comes only after having collected enough information to allow the researcher to believe that s/he will be presenting that culture’s picture of itself. In a recent restatement of his basic proposition, Geertz notes: “The study of other people’s cultures (and of one’s own as well, but that brings up other issues) involves discovering who they think they are, what they think they are doing, and to what end they think they are doing it.”

Applied to the world of rabbinic texts, this method offers both a motivation to which Jewish students of all types can quickly relate and a way of organizing students’ study. With the possible exception of non-Jewish students (who have in any case already shown their interest by choosing to attend a class in rabbinic texts), virtually all students of rabbinic texts understand on some level that they are somehow related to those long-ago figures who produced rabbinic literature. Their interest can be largely antiquarian, with a curiosity for finding the exotic skeletons in the family closet, or can be broader, stemming from a desire for a general familiarity with the classical framers of the Judaism they know. Wherever on the continuum students’ own feelings lie, presenting the Rabbis to them in the context of studying a culture that is both foreign and familiar can more effectively and immediately hurdle the problem of motivation than many other methods.

This framing of our study of rabbinic texts obligates us to insure that we indeed present those texts in a manner sensitive to these concerns. It is fine to invite students to study how the Rabbis thought and lived, but if they are then chiefly required to plow through a mass of texts, even if it does eventually lead to some insight into the Rabbis’ world, the students’ experience of distance will still be largely the same.

It is here that academic scholarship comes into play. For reasons inherent in their own disciplines and interests, scholars pose questions to rabbinic texts that result in pieces of thick description, and that, coming from contemporary minds, has the potential to appeal to other such minds. Bringing students to these kinds of questions and showing them the answers that result increases the likelihood that students will want to learn what their teacher teaches. In that context, the teacher’s skillful (and context-specific) text-centered pedagogy can be brought to bear.\(^9\)


\(^10\)Even excellent teaching is fruitless with students who are not interested in engaging the subject, but once a student’s base-level interest has been ignited, good solid teaching can have an impact. What I am proposing is that, rather than reinventing the teaching wheel, we primarily need to recognize the challenges that have to be met before good teaching can be effective.
The teacher needs to digest the scholarly arguments before presenting them to students, since few academic articles are written invitingly enough for students to take up outside of academic settings. But by studying the cited original texts with students, and then comparing their results with those of the article or book, the teacher can walk the students through a process of discovery, stepping in the author’s footprints, their trek through rabbinic texts now following an easier, pre-trodden path.\footnote{The teacher will also inherently encourage thoughtful practice, another aspect of Perkins’ Theory One.}

A few examples will clarify how this process can work. I chose these articles largely at random, looking up the publications of some of the academics listed as attendees at the conference for which this paper was originally written. Judging only by title, I chose the most promising and easily available articles. I could certainly have chosen others of their writings, as well as other academic research with equal profitability; my point is not the utility of these particular articles in teaching rabbinic texts, but of these types of articles.

For a first example, let us take Steven Fraade’s “Rabbinic Polysemy and Pluralism Revisited: Between Praxis and Thematization.”\footnote{Steven D. Fraade, “Rabbinic Polysemy and Pluralism Revisited: Between Praxis and Thematization” AJS Review 31:1 (2007), 1-40.} It might not seem promising as a way of making the study of rabbinic texts easier or more inviting; it uses words most adults do not encounter, let alone students, and by and large Prof. Fraade’s concern is an internal academic one, debating Daniel Boyarin’s thesis that polysemy and pluralism came fairly late to rabbinic culture.

Minimal digging clears away those worries. Fraade defines his terms on pages 3 and 4. More importantly, while ordinary readers might not fully share his interest in the exact history of rabbinic acceptance of multiple meanings of texts—or in debating Professor Boyarin’s claims—the issue of polysemy itself, and the texts adduced to prove the point, goes to an issue at the heart of the rabbinic view of text and interpretation.

In our time, when Western culture promotes pluralism, tolerance, and related versions of multiple truths, the idea that the Rabbis assumed texts could have many legitimate meanings (while still rejecting some readings as unacceptable) is an immediately accessible one. Especially given the Rabbis’ strangeness, encountering this seemingly modern aspect of their thought puts the question of the students’ relation to this aspect of their history onto the table\footnote{The idea of multiple truths, or relativism is thoroughly embedded in contemporary American culture. The vision of tolerance we promote, and that they have absorbed from almost all of their cultural influences, presumes some version of multiple truths, or even relativism (depending on who is saying it). Even if—or especially because—this is not something students of which are always consciously aware (precisely because it is so embedded in their assumptions), a teacher in a given setting might choose to unpack it for students as part of the contemporary landscape as a way of making an explicit link with the kinds of issues Fraade is raising.}.

In reading Fraade’s article, the teacher can first simply extract the texts he cites, offer them to the students, and invite analysis, to see whether students reach similar conclusions to Fraade regarding the question of multiple meaning, as well as that of whether permitting multiple interpretations was simply what the Rabbis de facto did, or was already an “ideologically upheld value” in these texts.
Even if the teacher wishes to do no more research, this set of texts can lead to other important conversations that offer students insight into rabbinic texts and the culture in which they are embedded. Teachers might make students aware of further and related questions, such as which texts the rabbis assumed were open to such readings,\textsuperscript{14} the ramifications of such an attitude, how it would affect the way the rabbis experienced debate and how it shaped their view of the practice of those who chose readings other than their own. The question of limits becomes relevant as well—why were the Rabbis comfortable with ongoing debates in some areas, but viewed others as outside the pale of acceptable interpretation, and how did they set those limits?

The teacher might even assign small research projects to allow students to take the discussion further. Or, s/he might undertake to read Boyarin’s presentation, offering some of his counter-texts (from the later periods), to investigate how and whether those later texts indeed differ qualitatively from the ones Fraade adduced. And so on and so on; we could make the mistake of getting so caught up in this rich topic that we (or the teacher) invest scarce hours in research that is precisely what these articles help us avoid. The point here is not to give students definitive answers to interesting questions about the rabbinic period; it is to entice them into the questions themselves.

Continuing with articles that take on broad issues of rabbinic culture and/or worldview, David Kraemer’s “The Formation of Rabbinic Canon: Authority and Boundaries”\textsuperscript{15} introduces us to the question of when and how the rabbis came to think of their own literatures as a canon, when the Oral Law came to be seen as almost equivalent to the Written, when the Mishnah became more authoritative than other contemporary texts, how the Yerushalmi differed from the Bavli in that regard, and how these issues played out in terms of the permissibility of writing these Laws, Oral and Written.

In this case, less initial “translation” is needed than with our first article; most students will recognize that some engagement with legalities is crucial to the understanding of any society. In the particular case of rabbinic culture, regardless of students’ own adherence to, or even commitment to, what the Rabbis saw as Jewish law, we can be sure that we have not begun to understand their world, have not come close to a “thick description” of their culture, unless and until we have some notion of their view of the Oral and Written laws.

While certainly the Rabbis did more than make legal decisions and pronouncements, their experience of themselves as legists is central to a full understanding of their world. For students whose buy-in goes as far as being curious about how the Rabbis set up their world, and who would not make the effort to slog through texts other than those that speak directly to that interest, we have a scholar offering us exactly such texts and references. Bringing students to his supporting texts, we can simplify their access to fundamental questions of how to picture rabbinic culture.

\textsuperscript{14}While the correct answer for rabbinic texts is probably Scripture, with some level of difference between the Pentateuch and the rest, the fifteen century in Spain saw an expansion of such polysemy and a related phenomenon, omnisignificance, to rabbinic and medieval texts.

Kraemer has several similar articles, such as his discussion of the characteristics of the assumed audience of the Bavli, or his and Isaiah Gafni’s contributions to a book he edited on the Jewish family. In each case, the writer’s insight into the Rabbis’ worldview helps students move forward in the process of finding and defining their sameness and difference from the Rabbis.

Academic scholarship is rich with such resources. I will take up one more set of examples, since they show another facet of the academic literature. Until now, I have chosen examples that take on broader questions of the rabbinic world, since it is those that are, I would argue, likely to stimulate the interest of the greatest number of students. Teachers working with students with a prior commitment to the study of texts might choose to delve into some more technical issues, essential to a truly thick description of the rabbinic world.

Among the many possibilities, let me note Christine Hayes’ work. In “Authority and Anxiety in the Talmuds: From Legal Fiction to Legal Fact,” Hayes argues that “some early legal fictions are... actively and intentionally eliminated, or at least crippled, by later rabbinic authorities.” She points to several examples of legal fictions, such as whether to accept witnesses who testify to physical facts about the appearance of the new moon that could not have occurred, but whose overall timing of the appearance of that moon matches the judges’ expectations, or how to deal with mamzerim, people whose sinful conception would leave them significantly disadvantaged as members of the Jewish polity if the law were followed to its letter. Hayes argues through her examples that, as time goes on and societies change, maintaining legal fictions becomes increasingly difficult. For her, this means the Rabbis themselves betray a certain discomfort with the most extreme expressions of rabbinic authority.

Hayes’ articles give us a sense of the greater difficulty, and the richness, of her approach. Analyzing technical halachic discussions, she takes on such large questions as: the nature of halakhah le-Moshe mi-Sinai, vital for any consideration of how the Rabbis balanced their belief in the Written and Oral Laws, with the halakhah le-Moshe mi-Sinai taking an intermediate space; how later generations

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18Jeffrey Rubenstein’s writings, for another example, also go directly to questions of culture and its presentation. His Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture (Johns Hopkins U. Press: Baltimore, 2003) offers several extended Talmudic narratives with extensive cultural, literary, and ideological discussion. His The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud (Johns Hopkins U. Press: Baltimore, 2005) is also obviously helpful work in these terms.
20P. 130.
21Laws that the Talmud does not purport to find in the Torah itself, but sees as having been legislated at the same time as the giving of the Torah, during Moses’ stay atop Sinai after the Revelation of the Decalogue.
of rabbis grappled with texts that had, over time, become incomprehensible,\textsuperscript{23} and the rabbinic attitude towards non-Jews and their ritual purity or impurity (a piece of the more general question of how the Rabbis related to the non-Jews around them).\textsuperscript{24}

Educators could use her writings in a variety of ways, depending on students’ willingness and ability to engage with seeming technicalities. Teachers might find a class already interested in developing a thick description of rabbinic culture (whether or not they are familiar with Geertz’s phrase), yet not to the point that they would study vast tracts of rabbinic texts in order to fully engage that culture. Each of the technical points Hayes raises fosters discussion and analysis—building, as she does in her own work, to a larger point. For students less motivated to grapple with so many details or texts, teachers can select one or two examples, and engage students in the question of whether those texts ratify Professor Hayes’ contention.

This approach to taking pedagogic advantage of academic scholars’ work can be implemented by individual instructors, but would work even better with some systematic organization of resources to benefit a wide range of teachers. As we have seen even in the few examples discussed in this paper, academics study all aspects of rabbinic culture, and the resulting articles can be grouped according to topic matter and approach. An organized index to the literature—produced, for example, by a graduate student studying for comprehensive exams—arranged coherently and with brief summaries of each article or book, would facilitate educators’ access to and use of the material.

Such an index would also ease the way to a coherent and intentional curriculum. Schools or school organizations could promulgate edited lists of such articles, designated by topic matter and approach. A well-rounded education in rabbinic texts would involve insuring that students are exposed to a critical mass of each kind. In this way, students might through their course of study realize a meaningful and systematic exposure to rabbinic culture as a whole.

Let me close by noting that fiction is another genre that can prove helpful in a similar vein. Although works such as Professor Louis Finkelstein’s \textit{Akiba} or Rabbi Milton Steinberg’s \textit{As a Driven Leaf} are well known, perhaps even well read, their potential as tools for facilitating the study of rabbinic texts seems to me to have thus far been neglected. Each of these scholars—and others who write in a similar vein, whether using rabbinic or medieval texts—gathered the relevant classical literature, di-


gested it, and then translated it into a form that is particularly calculated to attract readers’ interest. Having read and discussed these works of fiction, the teacher can track down the author’s sources and study them with the students, whose interest in them will already have been established.

While there is, obviously, a great deal more academic work on rabbinic texts, what the two types of literature (both produced by scholars) share is a deep engagement with rabbinic texts and culture, articulated in a fashion that has the potential to meet students’ pre-existing interests and concerns. It is this match that I think of as essential in the teaching of rabbinic texts, finding a way not just to teach important information or material, but to come as close as possible to insuring that our students are interested in learning—and, consequently, able to actually learn what we are teaching.

I have, myself, authored two such works. *Murderer in the Mikdash* (Booksurge, 2005) is a murder mystery set in the times of a Third Temple in Jerusalem. Similar to modern society in most ways, this society has seen the advent of the Messiah, rebuilding of the Temple, and the institution of Jewish law as the law of the State. In the course of solving the mystery, the protagonist—and reader—is engaged in a consideration of what a benevolent theocracy might look like, and the challenges it would face. I have placed a study guide for *Murderer* online at http://atid.org/resources/murderer.asp. *Cassandra Misreads the Book of Samuel* (Booksurge, 2008), seven stories and a novella, takes Biblical incidents or characters and puts them in situations that allow major themes of their works to be more explicit. The opening story, “You Can’t Change Human Nature,” for example, imagines the Sin of the Golden Calf as a three-generational family of the time might; “Prophet Seeks Agent” imagines the trouble the prophet Hosea might have had finding literary representation; “Last One Out, Turn Out the Lights” takes on the anxiety the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi might have felt as they tried to graduate from a Master’s Program in Prophecy; and so on.