Academic Study of the Talmud as a Spiritual Endeavor in Rabbinic Training: Delights and Dangers
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Introduction: Academicians and The Spiritual

Academicians today tend to be suspicious of any pedagogy that responds positively to the spiritual motivations students bring to the study of rabbinic sources. Present-day passions and interests might well be expected to distort one’s reading of an ages-old literature. Yet scholars of rabbinics have become the primary purveyors of talmudic and midrashic learning to future rabbis, at least in the progressive movements, so 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 for which all scholars of rabbinics have signed up, and it is not a responsibility that all desire. Many if not most 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. In the process of working on this chapter, a colleague from another institution reported to me that when certain kinds of questions arise in her classes, she tells her students, “You should really speak with your rabbi about that.” That may be an appropriate response in some academic circumstances, but I am training rabbis, so that buck has to stop somewhere.

The conversations that rabbis are meant to be able to have must start somewhere—and I would argue that 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. Consequently, we who teach...
the texts need to be prepared to talk about the big questions, and willing to speak about the issues that these religious sources raise.

That same conversation with a colleague led me to jettison my clumsy effort to define the spiritual in an earlier version of this chapter. Instead, for the purposes of this discussion, we can now define the “spiritual” as being all those things about which an instructor might think to say, “You should really talk with your rabbi about that.”

The same colleague also said, 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 that I do not often feel that the Babylonian Talmud, 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. As a rabbinical school associate dean, 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. While some of my colleagues in academia surely think I have gone over to the dark side—in rabbinic parlance, the sitra achra—of anti-intellectual populism or anachronistic pretensions, in this chapter I explore how fostering talmudic learning as a spiritual element of rabbinic training can be a legitimate pedagogic approach for a scholar. I introduce my own pedagogical choices in that regard, and identify the benefits that arise from those choices in my own experience of teaching in our field.

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

A Scholar’s Training and the Teaching of Rabbis

My focus on the interests and concerns of rabbinical students flows from, rather than against, my own schooling as a critical, analytical, and historical reader of rabbinic texts. My training does not come from the world of the yeshiva, but rather from a secular (if sectarian) Labour-Zionist Hebrew day school, from Brown University, from Hebrew University’s Talmud and Mahshevet Yisrael (Jewish Thought) 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. As a result, 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 the spiritual maturity that comes of acknowledging the human element in the teachings and the texts of Jewish tradition.

Guided by my own fascination with religious creativity, I teach 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 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 workbenches, 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 the discrete parts into something new, to make a previously unheard music.

Rabbinical students can find it tremendously exciting to begin thinking in terms of the formation of rabbinic texts. To use a physics meta-
phor, one might say that a powerful intrinsic energy is released from the sources when the cohesion of their component atoms and molecules is challenged. 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.

The Rabbinical School Context

My own teaching takes place in the larger context of a rabbinical program, at the Hebrew College Rabbinical School, designed with questions of relevance and spirituality very much in mind. As conceived by Arthur Green, the founding dean, 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—liturgy, prayer, Siddur and hilkhot Tefillah (laws of prayer).
- 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, and divorce.
- Fourth year: Nezikin—personal and social responsibility, communal governance.
- Fifth year: Kodashim and Taharot—which we somewhat liberally re-interpret to concentrate especially on theology; and, as a halakha 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 Hamishah Humshei Torah, the five books of the Torah, with students in each year focusing on the interpretive tradition, ancient through contemporary and critical, on each successive book.

The very structure of the textual curriculum at the center of the program signals an orientation toward the concerns of future rabbis.
The curriculum is built to focus on the areas of life in which rabbis will operate, and the cycle of readings—of texts—over which rabbis will meet their communities. (The curriculum also includes a range of other courses, from a sequence of history courses to seminars on other areas of Tanakh, and of course pastoral training.) Our program 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.”

**Prayer in a Learning Community and Learning Prayer**

I teach primarily in the *Berakhot* year, in the *Nashim u-Gevarim* year, and in the final year of our program—years 1, 3, and 5. Here I will focus on the first year—the *Berakhot* year—not only for the sake of economy in this brief exploration, 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 that immediately raise rabbi-worthy questions.

To set the scene, I must say a brief word about the nature of *Tefilot*, of worship, in a trans-denominational rabbinical school. In our very diverse community, we are able to pray together at least once a week as a whole community. *Tefillah* opportunities of differing sorts are available and organized by students throughout the week, but at least 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 experiences a certain level of discomfort from time to time, in return for learning, through experience, about what is important to the various members of our community.

Meanwhile, in my first-year Talmud classroom, toward the end of the first semester, we celebrate a *siyyum* (a concluding celebration) at the end of *perek tefilat ha-shahar*, 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 tefilah: rival accounts of our liturgy’s origins, differing opinions concerning practice, questions of structure and spontaneity, rules and compromises, not to mention stories and recommendations about 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 custom and try to learn and pray together. As Rabbi Nehunya ben Hakanah’s short prayers in the chapter indicate, a bet midrash (traditional house of study) should be entered with a healthy apprehension of the all-too-possible takalot (mishaps) that can happen there, 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 in their shared work of studying the tradition.

Pedagogic Dangers

In the title of this chapter, I promised delights 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—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 don’t want to miss anything. In fact, their zeal to learn arises quite organically and naturally in this environment, so that my job feels like facilitation far more than manipulation.
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 their tradition. I, too, am a participant in this same adventurous community. 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 becomes a part of our ritual community and begins intensive textual study at the same time.

Another academic danger arises in connection with the following talmudic question, which also appears in the fourth chapter of Berakhot: To what do the eighteen (or nineteen) blessings of the Amida (statutory daily prayer) correspond? Do the blessings correspond to eighteen (or nineteen) mentions of the Divine in the recitation of the Shema? Do the blessings correspond to eighteen (or nineteen) mentions of the divine in “havu l-Adonai b’nei elim” (Psalm 29)? Or do they perhaps correspond to eighteen (or nineteen) vertebrae in the spinal column? In other words, the questions on the table are these: 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 instead correspond to an ancestral example of human worship, modeled by the psalmist? Or might the form of the Amida 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 started in on such a conversation? Do you let the discussion run to yoga—especially considering that the very next talmudic line reads: “ha-kore tzarikh she-yikra ad she-yitpakeku kol huliot she’ba-shidrah” (“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 an animated argument 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 pedagogic pay-off for such text-inspired excursions, beyond whatever intrinsic value the conversations have, is a classroom full of first-year rabbinical students who are, again, absolutely committed to the project of acquiring the technical skills to read the next page and the next. The text has entwined with their own personal questions and
experiences—as, I believe, it is meant to. The ancient text on the table
has become the basis for the conversation that is relevant in the present
moment.

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, and consistently mindful of, what is on the page. Text-based
conversations about meaning and relevance that take place in rabbinical
schools are all too often caricatured and dismissed as being of a dilet-
tantish sort, implicitly invoking the authority of talmudic learning but
barely skimming the surface of a traditional text before streaking off
to someplace else. As a teacher, my pedagogy demands a serious and
competent study of each text I teach—its nuts and bolts, in its own
particularity and in its historical context—and only then, on that basis
(and for a balanced amount of time, so that other texts can be similarly
approached) do I make room for the associations and ramifications that
the text can generate.

To be sure, there is always yet another kind of danger lurking: the
hazard of anachronism and of collapsing critical distance. However, with
a minimum of guidance, students can become quite discerning. On the
whole, our rabbinical students learn to be scrupulous and careful about
identifying and distinguishing what comes from them and what they
see on the page itself. Furthermore, as a matter of teaching practice,
it is much easier to contend with and contain students’ passions and
imaginations than to attempt foisting critical interest upon students
who are unenthused.

To put it another way, when one forces rabbinical students through a
dry, technical text-criticism for its own sake, their passion for learning
the skills of reading traditional texts most often withers on the vine,
but if the study of sources is intermeshed with the pressing issues that
actually confront students’ souls in the present moment, the utility of
technical skill and critical scrutiny needs no defending or justifying in
the classroom. The Babylonian Talmud, arguably more than any other
work in the traditional corpus, gives us not just the Jewish but the hu-
man condition, forcing us to confront difficult questions and uncertain-
ties. It 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.
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**Conclusion**

I work very hard to ensure that each 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 encounter with text, and that encounter depends on skills. Through internalizing talmudic text—which is to say, through engaging in meaningful conversations that start in technically competent readings of Talmud—my students make the lifeblood of rabbinic Judaism their own. Without a doubt, some of these future rabbis will inspire another generation of students who will want to apprentice themselves to scholars of rabbinic texts. Meanwhile, if and when any of my fellow scholars of rabbinics do find themselves saying to their 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 with the ability to facilitate the next steps of a spiritual journey that is inspired by serious textual encounter.

**Appendix: Student Observations**

Rabbinical student Sarah Tasman writes:

If I didn’t feel like our academic work was part of my spiritual growth, or integrated somehow, 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 Minna Bromberg, PhD, 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 the teachers at the rabbinical school, 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.
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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 Berachot, 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 Shema. It was completely unanticipated, 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. Text study gives us 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.