Stop Making Sense: Using Text Study Guides to Help Students Learn to Read Talmud

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What do you do when the students who appear in your classroom are not the ones you expect? That is to say, how does an instructor adjust carefully laid plans when the actual students are different from the ones they had imagined teaching when they planned the course? I encountered this problem when I taught an Introduction to Talmud Text Study course in the spring semester of 2014 at Barnard College.

It was my second year teaching at Barnard after having spent a number of years teaching Talmud to undergraduate and rabbinical students at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) across the street. At JTS, a major goal of my teaching had been helping students acquire technical skills for reading Talmud in the original languages, but at Barnard I was Chair of Jewish Studies and responsible for teaching broad survey courses such as Introduction to Judaism and Introduction to the Hebrew Bible. I developed such courses in my first year of teaching at Barnard, but by the time my second year arrived, I wanted to return to teaching Talmud text skills in the way that I had at JTS. I thought back to myself as a college student who knew Hebrew but had never studied Talmud and would have appreciated an introductory Talmud text course. My aim was to identify such students at Barnard and to open up the world of Talmud to them, just as I had strived to do for the students at JTS.

One can imagine my surprise then, on the first day of the semester at Barnard, when I read through the slips of paper on which the students had described their backgrounds and found that all the students with the

exception of one had gone to Jewish day schools since they were children. Some had recently returned from a year of yeshiva study in Israel. I had announced the course as an introductory course for those who knew Hebrew but had little to no experience in Talmud study, yet virtually all the students who registered had been studying Talmud for years. Did they enroll because they expected it to be easy? Were they dissatisfied with the Talmud instruction they had received so far? Were they looking for a distinctively academic approach to Talmud?¹ Could some students simply not get enough Talmud? I had thought that I would be playing the role of tour guide for a group of first-time visitors, but I realized that instead I would be holding a master class.

Why Weren't the Students Acing the Study Guides?

How the Same Assignment Works Differently for Different Students

I did what I think most instructors would do in this situation; I would use the materials I already had and change whatever I needed as I went along. The biggest problem was my text study guide. Each year teaching Talmud at JTS, I realized afresh how impenetrable a text the Talmud is. It is composed in two languages, Hebrew and Aramaic, that are mixed together on almost every line. Like legal contracts and medical handbooks, the Talmud uses technical terminology that takes years of training to acquire. Like the Bible, it is composed of literary layers that span centuries and empires and that must be carefully disentangled from each other. Its argumentation is famous for its logical twists and turns. Its primary commentator, Rashi, translates strange talmudic words into equally strange medieval French.² The solution

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- 1 For an overview of the major questions in the academic study of Talmud, see Richard Kalmin, "The Formation and Character of the Babylonian Talmud," in *Cambridge History of Judaism Volume IV: The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. Steven Katz (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 840-876. For exercises in applying academic methods to particular sugyot, see Joshua Kulp and Jason Rogoff, *Reconstructing the Talmud: An Introduction to the Academic Study of Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Mechon Hadar, 2014).
 - 2 Rashi is the acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040-1105). On Rashi's commentary on the Talmud, see Jonah Fraenkel, *Rashi's Methodology in His Exegesis of the Babylonian Talmud* [In Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975).

I had developed to help students face these myriad challenges was a text study guide.

The guide is designed around a small “chunk” of Talmud text, no more than a paragraph, which is cited at the start of the guide (Figure 1):

Study Guide 7 for B. Sukkah 23a-b
Berkowitz, Barnard, Introduction to Talmud Text Study

בפיל קשור כולי עלמא לא פליגי דאי נמי מיית יש בנבלתו י' כי פליגי בפיל
 שאינו קשור למאן דאמר שמא תמות לא חיישין למאן דאמר גזרה שמא
 תברח חיישין למאן דאמר גזרה שמא תמות נחוש שמא תברח אלא
 בפיל שאינו קשור כולי עלמא לא פליגי כי פליגי בבהמה קשורה למ"ד
 גזרה שמא תמות חיישין למ"ד גזרה שמא תברח לא חיישין ולמאן דאמר
 גזרה שמא תברח נחוש שמא תמות מיתה לא שכיחא והאיכא רווחא
 דביני ביני דעביד ליה בהוצא ודפנא ודלמא רבעה דמתיחה באשלי מלעיל
 ולמאן דאמר גזרה שמא תמות נמי הא מתיחה באשלי מלעיל זמנין דמוקים
 בפחות משלשה סמוך לסכך וכיון דמייתא כווצא ולא אדעתיה

Figure 1 Example of a study guide. This particular study guide is the last of seven that I distributed to the students in Introduction to Talmud Text Study at Barnard. This excerpt shows the study guide’s initial quotation of Talmud text.

The study guide takes the student through a series of steps whose ultimate objective is a precise and multi-layered understanding of the selected passage. First comes translating and explaining technical terminology and expanding abbreviations into their full form. This is followed by translating and parsing the grammar of all Hebrew-language words, and then doing the same for all Aramaic-language words. The next step is to translate biblical verses that appear in the passage, to explain relevant halakhic concepts, and to identify the generation and provenance of named rabbis. These steps culminate in translating the text unit as a whole. The student then outlines the text unit’s argument and answers questions about its logic. In the last step, the study guide poses questions that invite the student to engage in

reflection on the passage. This procedure begins all over again with Rashi's commentary, for which the student goes through most of the same steps.³ It is a laborious slog, as one can imagine, but the students at JTS, many of whom who had been made miserable by the complexities of the Talmud text, had thanked me over the years for throwing them this life raft. The study guide did not provide any answers, but it helped students to ask the right questions.

I worried, however, that my experienced Barnard students would not need the sense-making device I had spent years developing at JTS. They would know the right questions to ask without being told. They would be able to differentiate between Hebrew and Aramaic on their own, and they would be familiar with the technical terminology—or, at least, they would know that this is what they needed to know in order to read the text. The study guide would feel like tiresome busy work to them. But that was my main teaching tool, and I did not have the time to come up with a new one. I posted my first study guide on Courseworks (Columbia's on-line course platform) and hoped that the students would not stage a revolt.

What I found, inexplicably, is that the Barnard students did so poorly on the study guides that I felt compelled to let them correct and resubmit them. The students' work in the guides was careless, with mistakes littering every section and swaths simply left blank. If the Barnard students did have significant background studying Talmud, why did they perform more poorly than the JTS students, many of whom had little background and some none at all? On the one hand, I was happy to see that my study guides were still useful in my teaching at Barnard, but, on the other, I was puzzled that they were.

A Hypothesis about Sense-Making

For the remainder of this essay, I offer a hypothesis for why the study guides were still useful and for why the Barnard students did not ace them, at least initially. I then want to talk about the study guides in more detail and to

3 Because of space constraints, I will not discuss certain sections of the study guide (abbreviations, biblical verses, halakhic concepts, named rabbis, and Rashi) in this essay.

look at some of the student work in them, drawing on other evidence from the course, either explicitly or implicitly, including my teaching journal, reflection papers, the final exams, and a video recording of one session. I will use that collective evidence to explore how the study guides operate in practice. As I go along, I will reflect on the principles and objectives behind the study guides since I developed them intuitively over a long period of time and did not articulate for myself what theories might be driving them. I will close with some reflections on what does not work very well with the study guides and what I hope, nevertheless, the study guides accomplish, especially in the broader personal development of each student. I will suggest that, at its best, learning to read Talmud helps us to understand ourselves as simultaneously makers of meaning and creatures of context whose imaginations are constrained by who we are and by the worlds we live in.

First is my hypothesis about why the study guides were challenging to my experienced Barnard students. Many of the students with Jewish day school backgrounds were able to build up sense from the text on their own. They could sight-read and translate without having seen that particular text before. Some owned copies of Marcus Jastrow's *Dictionary* and Frank's *Practical Talmud Dictionary* and knew how and when to use them.⁴ The students recognized halakhic terms and had heard of the named rabbis. They were familiar with the concerns of the text from their own lives of Jewish observance. All this familiarity, however, was precisely the problem. They had enough information to try to fill in the gaps in their understanding, so much so that they stopped being aware of those gaps. In the spirit of good guesswork, my students used what they knew to guess at what they did not.

But, in fact, most of the students seemed not to have been trained—either because their exposure was at a high school level or because it was a traditional setting where perhaps these concerns loom less large—to distinguish Hebrew from Aramaic, to parse the grammar of the words, to translate with precision, or to outline the logical arguments. They were able to fudge

4 Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), <http://www.tyndalearchive.com/tabs/jastrow/>; Yitzhak Frank and Ezra Zion Melamed, *Practical Talmud Dictionary* (New York: Feldheim, 1991). Both dictionaries are also referred to in this essay as the “Jastrow” and “Frank,” respectively.

these matters as they went about their sense-making. If a noun was singular or plural, a verb active or passive, a rabbi a second or fourth-generation amora, a biblical verse from Exodus or Leviticus—what real difference did it make? My conviction—a product of my academic training and intellectual orientation—is that it makes a big difference, for reasons I will elucidate further into the chapter. The study guide, rather than allowing the students to make sense of the text as it had done for the JTS students, required the Barnard students to *stop* making sense, but this was in order for them, ultimately, to make *better* sense. The study guide halted their process of sense-making, forcing them not to guess—but to know. I was not the tour guide for first-time visitors, it was true, but as a master for the already initiated, I found that the same steps proved just as important. While I had designed my study guide at JTS to make the strange familiar, at Barnard, my study guide had the opposite but just as salutary effect—the study guide made the familiar strange.⁵

The Course Plan

Before discussing the study guides and student work in greater detail, let me first give some of the background of the Barnard course. At JTS, a new rabbinical school curriculum had required me to teach materials from tractate Sukkah, so I had developed an introductory level course oriented around those materials. Using these materials again at Barnard seemed to make sense. In the JTS course, I had adopted a slow pace that I had at first feared the students would find torturous, but in fact, they, like me, seemed to enjoy luxuriating in the intricacies of the texts.⁶ I therefore had taught only two

5 On making the familiar strange and the strange familiar, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xiii; Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 383, 389.

6 On teaching Talmud at this pace, see Jane Kanarek, “The Pedagogy of Slowing Down: Teaching Talmud in a Summer Kollel,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 13, no. 1 (January 2010): 15–34; reprinted as “The Pedagogy of Slowing Down: Teaching Talmud in a Summer Kotel,” in *Turn It and Turn It Again: Studies in the Teaching and Learning of Classical Jewish Texts*, ed. Jon A. Levisohn and Susan P. Fendrick (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013).

sugyot over the course of the semester: the first sugya in the tractate that discusses the maximum height for a sukkah, and a later one in the second chapter about the permissibility of “mobile” sukkahs, that is, sukkahs built on top of various vehicles.⁷

As I had done with the JTS course, I decided with the Barnard course to supplement the study of the talmudic texts with contemporary scholarship about rabbinic literature, rabbinic history, and rabbinic perspectives on the sukkah. I interspersed the scholarly readings with Aramaic grammar paradigms. For each session, the Barnard students would prepare a “chunk” of talmudic text with the study guide and either a scholarly reading or a grammar paradigm. I discussed the scholarly readings and grammar paradigms usually at the start of class and did not discuss the study guide directly but would draw on information from it as we read and interpreted the day’s Talmud text. Before we began using the Talmud study guides, I dedicated several sessions to studying passages from the Torah relevant to Sukkot as well as the first Mishnah and parallel Tosefta of the tractate.

Study Guide Section on Technical Terms

As mentioned above, the study guide starts with the text unit itself. At the beginning of the semester, the unit consists of only a few lines of text. As the semester progresses, the units reach the size in the sample above. I present the text unit to the students in as undifferentiated a way as possible, without any line breaks, punctuation, or vocalization (Figure 1).⁸ I do this because the passage appears on the traditional printed Talmud page in a similar way, and my goal is for the students to study comfortably from such a page. It is also because I want to start with something that looks like “word soup,” where no assumptions about meaning have been made and the job of

7 This second sugya was of particular interest to me because it discusses a sukkah built on top of an animal, and my current research concerns animals in the Talmud. I discuss the material about sukkahs built on the top of animals in “Revisiting the Anomalous: Animals at the Intersection of Persons and Property in Bavli Sukkah 22b-23b,” in *Festschrift for Steven Fraade*, ed. Christine E. Hayes, Tzvi Novick, and Michal Bar-Asher Siegal (Göttingen, Ger.: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, forthcoming).

8 The complete study guide can be found in the appendix to this article.

producing meaning lies fully ahead. The text presentation is meant to stir up an air of mystery and perhaps even frustration.

I present the section on technical terms first because identifying and understanding each one is essential to understanding the sugya as a whole. These terms are the scaffolding on which the sugya is built. The student's task for each term that I have pulled from the text "chunk" is to copy its translation from the entry in Frank's *Practical Talmud Dictionary*, and if there is a description of function, to copy that too. In the first few study guides of the semester, I make explicit in the instructions that the student should look up the terms in Frank, but I omit that instruction in later guides. While copying a dictionary entry verbatim may seem like less than inventive pedagogy, in my view, the technical terms are so important that the value of getting them exactly right outweighs the rote educational experience. Moreover, the very notion of a technical term can feel quite alien—the idea that a word does not just mean what it means but embeds within it an entire network of argumentation. So, in many ways, the main objective of this study guide section is to introduce and naturalize the idea of a technical term. Finally, there is something to be said for starting with a task that is almost mindless, since it can act as a warm-up for the more challenging sections that follow. I found that students performed the task in this section more or less exactly as they were expected to, even the weakest students, and that the students were able to recapitulate almost all of this material on the final exam. Only a few students made mistakes or omitted content in this section, and I was always surprised (and exasperated) when they did.

I will give examples from two of the weakest performing students in the class, since their work best illustrates the pitfalls of the assignment. The two students, whom I will call Mara and Jamie, performed poorly for different reasons. Mara was slow in absorbing the language of the text and in grasping its logic, but she worked assiduously at it. She frequently asked questions after class either in person or by email, and she discussed with me other projects she was working on as well as larger life goals. Jamie, on the other hand, had spotty attendance and, when she did come, she sat in the back with one or two of her friends. None of them participated much, and Jamie participated least of all.

In the last of the seven study guides of the course (at which point the students were or should have been well-versed in the routine), in the entry for *ki pligi*, Jamie's translation was "when do they disagree" (Figure 2). Jamie's

Technical Terminology

Term	Translation	Function
כולי עלמא לא פליגי	all would agree	n/a
כי פליגי	when do they disagree	
אי נמי	even if	introduces new solution to problem <i>yes, but not here</i>
מאן דאמר	according to the one <i>who says</i>	n/a
חיישינן	concerned	n/a
ניחוש	let him be concerned	n/a
שכיחא	common	n/a
איכא	there is	n/a
ביני ביני	between	n/a

Figure 2 The section on technical terminology in the study guide. Jamie's work is shown here.

translation is more or less accurate, but it implies that *ki pligi* is an interrogative statement, which it is not, and her translation would have been better without the helping verb “do.” Many students who, unlike Jamie, did get the translation correct in their study guides (“when they disagree”), ultimately got it wrong on the exam in the same way that Jamie did, thinking it was interrogative rather than declarative. My guess is that what snags the students about *ki pligi* is, first, that speakers of modern Hebrew know *ki* to mean “because” instead of “when,” which means they are facing a familiar word being used in an unfamiliar way and, second, perhaps more on point, people associate the English word “when” more with its interrogative sense than with its declarative: “When are you working on your study guide?” rather than “When I work on my study guide, I look up every word in the dictionary.” Jamie neglected to write the function of the phrase—it restricts the scope of a rabbinic dispute—even though the Frank dictionary provides a description. My presumption is that Jamie did not consult the Frank dictionary entry, despite the explicit instructions to do so, and relied on her base of knowledge to guess at the translation instead. She must not have had enough knowledge to describe the term's function and perhaps thought that this was one of the terms in the section that did not have a distinctive technical function. The diligent Mara, by contrast, copied the Frank entry verbatim and had the correct answers for both translation and function, though there was a typo in her transcription (Figure 3).

Jamie seemed to have looked up other words in the dictionary, however, and my presumption is that these were words with which she was not familiar

Technical Terminology		
Term	Translation	Function
כולי עלמא לא פליגי	all agree / all don't disagree	n/a
כי פליגי	in these circumstances [did] they differ	This formula defines the scope of a controversy that was previously quoted
אי נמי	or alternatively; even if	usually introduces alternative solution to a problem

Figure 3 The section on technical terminology in the study guide. Mara’s work is shown here.

and did not have a base of knowledge from which to guess their meaning. But Jamie made mistakes even in those instances. For the rather uncommon term *beyney-veyney*, which according to Frank means “in the meantime” or “in-between” (the latter meaning fit our sugya), Jamie instead wrote “between,” which is the meaning given for the previous entry in the dictionary, the related but simpler and much more common term *beyney* (Figure 2). Jamie seems to have stopped at the first entry (or, possibly, she relied on her knowledge of the Hebrew word *beyn*). The difference when comparing “between” and “in-between” is subtle, and it would have been possible to translate our text also with “between,” so I (or, in this case, the teaching assistant, whose corrections are handwritten) did not take off points for her answer. But I did note that her selection of definition was part of a broader pattern of uneven dictionary work and, beyond that, uneven attendance. Jamie, in short, used what she knew to guess at what she did not and gave imprecise answers as a result. Mara, by contrast, took the stance of not knowing (perhaps she did know some of the terms, perhaps she did not) and attained a high level of accuracy. I will return to the question of whether Mara fully absorbed the information, but it is evident that at this initial stage she gave herself access to important information more so than did Jamie.

Study Guide Sections on Grammar

The grammar sections that follow are significantly more challenging for the students for a variety of reasons. I divide the grammar tables into two, Hebrew and Aramaic, because the grammar of the two languages is different and sometimes the meaning is as well, and because the student must look at

different entries in the Jastrow dictionary depending on whether it is one language or the other. Jastrow’s system for differentiating between Hebrew and Aramaic is unfortunate since he indicates Hebrew with the enigmatic abbreviation “b.h.” (which stands for biblical Hebrew and is his term for what is generally called rabbinic Hebrew). Jastrow marks Aramaic with the even more enigmatic “ch.” (short for Chaldean, which is generally called Aramaic).⁹ In the early study guides, I issue explicit dictionary instructions for each grammar section but omit them in later guides (as I do with the technical terms section). I pull out each Hebrew word from the text unit and ask the student to identify part of speech, number if it is a noun or verb, and, if it is a verb, to identify the root, person, and tense. Finally, the student translates the Hebrew word. The student then turns to a similar table for the Aramaic words.

This sounds relatively simple, but I have run into a variety of problems with the grammar tables. For one, different categories apply to different parts of speech. “Number” applies only to nouns and verbs and not to adverbs, infinitives, or prepositions, while “person” and “tense” apply only to verbs. The result is a confusing checkerboard effect, with many boxes requiring the student to write “not applicable.” Figure 4 shows one of the tables where I supplied “n/a” in the appropriate boxes to ease the students’ burden.

If I had divided up the parts of speech initially when I was designing the study guides and created a separate table for each, the inconsistency in

Hebrew Language					
	Root	Part of speech	Number	Verbs: person, tense	Translation of word as is
פיל	n/a			n/a	
קשור				n/a	
נבלתו	n/a			n/a	
גזרה	n/a			n/a	
סמוך				n/a	

Figure 4 The “checkerboard” effect in the grammar table.

9 I could ask the students to use the Sokoloff dictionary instead, but its scholarly orientation makes it a less appropriate choice for introductory students, despite Jastrow’s outdated and non-user-friendly qualities.

categories would dissolve. But I had decided against doing this, not only because it would lead to a profusion of tables but also because I want the students to be able to determine for themselves what part of speech a word is. I am tempted to rationalize that there may well be a pedagogical payoff that offsets the confusion, since the “n/a”-filled boxes may prompt students to consider how parts of speech differ from each other. The student will see from the many “n/a’s” next to the noun *pil* (“elephant”), for instance, that nouns are more static markers of meaning, while the row of empty boxes next to the verb *qashur* (“tied” or “tethered” in this passage) highlights the dynamic quality of verbs.¹⁰

I intentionally leave out a large amount of material from the grammar tables. I omit particular adverbs, prepositions, or conjunctions in the passage that I think the students either already know or can easily figure out. I focus almost exclusively on nouns and verbs, because they are the basic building blocks of a sentence. With verbs, I omit *binyan*, voice, and mood, because I thought an increase in the number of categories would overwhelm the student. With nouns, I ignore pronominal suffixes for the same reason. The study guide, therefore, may give a student the illusion of digging deep into the technicalities of the text while, in truth, there are many dimensions of the language that the study guide simply ignores.

Another problem is that many words can be classified in more than one way. For instance, in the chart (Figure 5), Jamie described *qashur* as an adjective. *Qashur* is used in the relevant text unit to describe an elephant who is tied down or tethered.¹¹ Jamie is correct that the word is used as a descriptor for a

Hebrew Language

	Root	Part of speech	Number	Verbs: person, tense	Translation of word as is
פיל	n/a	noun	singular	n/a	elephant
קשור	קשר	adj	singular	n/a	related to <i>here</i> , literally
נבלתו	n/a	noun	singular	n/a	carcass "tied up"

Figure 5 This is Jamie's work in the section on Hebrew language.

10 As explained below, I inserted “n/a” into the verb column for participles, thinking of them more in terms of their function as adjectives rather than as verbs.

11 I realize that one would not expect to read about a tethered elephant in a line of Talmud and that it merits some comment. The fact that I am not stopping to discuss it points to the suspension of certain kinds of sense-making that must transpire in order for other kinds of sense-making to happen.

noun, so it does have an adjectival use and, moreover, in this case, without having thought about it too much myself beforehand, I placed an “n/a” under the verb column and, therefore, pushed the students in the direction of choosing “adjective” over “verb.” But the word *qashur* comes from the root *q-sh-r* and is, in fact, the passive participle of the verb. As explained in Frank’s dictionary, however, a passive participle is essentially a verb being used as an adjective. So is *qashur* more accurately described as an adjective or a verb? Should I accept both answers? Would it confuse the students if they show each other their papers and find that different answers were both marked as correct? I did not have much to worry about in this particular example, since many students probably knew this relatively common root from modern Hebrew. The problem of classificatory ambiguity was multiplied ten-fold when it came to the Aramaic tables, as the students did not know Aramaic grammar, and I was only gradually introducing the basics over the course of the semester.

A fundamental problem is that I am not particularly expert in grammar myself, nor do I expect the students to be. My assumption is that most students are not trained very well in *English* grammar, much less Hebrew, and certainly not Aramaic. Most of us know how to use words very well even if we cannot say what part of speech they are. So why bother, other than for pedantic reasons, to classify words in a talmudic text? My aim in all this is entirely pragmatic—understanding the particular text we have before us as best we can.

I maintain the conviction that classifying each word is an invaluable strategy for making sense of a text, especially one in a foreign language and from a foreign culture. Classification forces us to think about the role each word is playing and provides vital information about how all the words come together. If we encounter some ambiguities along the way, it does not mean the effort is not worthwhile, nor does it mean that we will not emerge understanding the text pretty well or even better than we would have otherwise. But how do I keep the students from getting tangled up in those efforts, especially when they are being graded for the study guides and are concerned with getting the right answer?

There is a variety of ways in which I try to preempt frustration and to model a workable, non-pedantic relationship to grammar, especially when grammatically ambiguous words come up. These strategies include (1)

consulting grammar tools, providing the most accurate grammatical analysis that I can, and showing relevant sections from grammar guides on PowerPoint® slides during class session; (2) admitting my own ignorance when I cannot make a confident determination and conveying the message that incomplete grammar mastery is not an insurmountable handicap to sense-making, and that it, in fact, can add to their sense of the text's richness; (3) acknowledging that while most people are going to find grammar boring, it remains an indispensable step in getting to know the text; and (4) promising the students I will not test them on grammar per se but will expect them to know grammar only as it is folded into their translations and discussions of the text.¹² By framing the work on grammar in this way, my objective is for the student to use grammar to *deconstruct* the text, but not too much. The questions about grammar should challenge the student but should not hold her back from building new meanings.

Study Guide Section on Translation

While the capstone of the study guide is the translation section, it takes the students a number of study guides to realize that this is the case. The students stop making sense so enthusiastically (they become intent on breaking down each word and figuring out its form and function) that they forget the ultimate goal, which is to make sense of the passage as a whole. The problem begins in the initial study guide sections, where students tend to remain in the abstract world of dictionary entries and must be pushed to build a bridge back to the text unit that lies before them. I tell them that when Frank offers two or three definition options, they should not choose the first one or write them all down; they should choose the one that fits the context best. When Jastrow translates a root, the student should not write down that translation but rather choose the

12 I did break that promise when I decided to include on the final exam a table requiring the students to give the Aramaic past, present, and future tense forms of third-person, masculine singular and plural of the root *k-t-v*. I gave them advance warning that this table would appear, and I explained that knowledge of these basic Aramaic forms would give them much mileage in future Talmud study.

translation for the specific form of the verb that appears in our text. It sometimes takes a while for the students to absorb the nature of this task, and even once they have, it is often difficult for them to find the right definition for the context (unless one strikes a “Jastrow bonus,” where Jastrow cites the same text one is studying). An example of such difficulty (Figure 5) is when Jamie translated *qashur* as “related to,” which is a good translation but not for our text, where the word is used literally to mean “tied up,” as my teaching assistant explained in his comments on her work. A similar occurrence happened with Jamie’s and Mara’s answers for *i nami* in the technical terms section (Figures 2 and 3). My selected text happened to be one of the few cases in the Talmud where the phrase is used literally and does not carry its usual technical function of introducing an alternative solution, as my teaching assistant indicates in his comments on Jamie’s paper.

Ideally, the guide’s sections operate synergistically. The right choice for each word depends on the right choice made for all the other words. The translation section is where the student pulls all the words and phrases together, where she goes back to the earlier sections and reconsiders her translation choices and how they fit into the larger composition, changing her answers in the earlier sections when necessary to accommodate her translation of the passage as a whole. What often happens, though, is that the students start from scratch in the translation section, reinventing their own wheels, translating the passage anew rather than using the translations they had generated in the technical term and grammar sections, as can be seen in the example below.¹³ When Mara translates *kule alma la pligi* in the translation section, she writes “do not disagree” and then in parentheses she writes “agree” (Figure 6). This more or less matches the translation she wrote for the same phrase in the technical terms section, where she had written both “all agree”

13 Easy access to published translations exacerbates the problem since the student ends up building her translation on someone else’s rather than on her own prior work in the study guide. This problem was particularly evident in reflection papers that were due the last day of class, in which students were asked to write about ideas from the text that appealed to them. In her reflection paper, Jamie entirely abandoned the translation work she had done in her study guide and instead relied on a very dated English translation when she cited the Talmud as saying “our eyes do not descry it.”

Translation of Text Unit

In [a case where] a bound elephant [is being used as a sukkah wall], all (Rabbi Zeira and Abaye, the two opinions regarding Rabbi Meir’s position) do not disagree (agree), for even if it dies its carcass [still] has ten [tefahim of height to serve as a sukkah wall]. When they disagree [is] in [the case of] an unbound elephant. According to the one (Abaye) who said lest it die, we are not concerned. According to the one (Rabbi Zeira) who said [it is] a decree lest it flee, we are concerned. According to the one who said [it is a decree] lest it die, let him be concerned lest

Figure 6 Mara’s translation.

and “all don’t disagree” (Figure 3). But when Mara translates *ki pligi*, instead of writing “in these circumstances [did] they differ,” as she does in the technical terms section (Figure 3), she writes “when they disagree.” In fact, I prefer this alternate translation because it more accurately reflects the original Aramaic. But it is not the translation that is found in the Frank dictionary and not what Mara herself had written in the earlier section when she had first been asked to translate the term.

Mara introduces another discrepancy between the sections of her study guide when she translates *man da’amar*. Whereas in the section on technical terms she copies the Frank entry, which translates the phrase as “the one who says” (with the verb in the present tense), in her translation of the passage as a whole she uses the past tense, “the one who said.” In fact, *amar* is the orthographic form for both past and present tenses, so both translations are correct. But I emphasize during the course the importance of consistency in translation when a word is being used the same way, as well as the significance of using early sections in the study guide to help with later ones. So, despite the correctness of both translations that Mara uses, her shift from present to past between the two sections of the study guide reflects a problem in her work, seemingly minor, but perhaps reflecting a broader misunderstanding of the process that the study guide actually is designed to facilitate, which is the continuous building of sense through microanalysis of the words and terms.

The reader may have noticed an unexpected profusion of parentheses and brackets in Mara’s translation (Figure 6). I want to comment on them before I move on to discuss the final sections of the study guide. This mass

of punctuation is not an idiosyncrasy on Mara's part but is a practice that I require of the students. I instruct the students to use parentheses to explain a word in the text whose meaning is unclear, and I instruct them to use brackets when they are filling in words that are necessary to make English sense of the text but do not appear in the original Hebrew or Aramaic. My aim here, and in the course as a whole, is to sensitize the students to their own process of sense-making, to make them aware of what exactly is in the text and what is not, and to encourage them to reflect on the project of translation and how making sense works differently in different languages. The first sentence in Mara's translation (Figure 6) is an excellent example of how the students implement this system. While the original text reads *be-pil kashur*, literally "in a bound elephant," Mara writes "a case where" in brackets, showing that she knows that she filled in these words in order to make sense of the text. On the final exam, however, when asked to translate the same text unit, Mara put the entire opening section in brackets, i.e., [in the case of] (Figure 7), suggesting that she may not have fully understood the bracketing procedure. In the study guide (Figure 6), Mara puts "Rabbi Zeira and Abaye" in parentheses, since the "all" in the talmudic text is vague, and she chooses parentheses here instead of brackets because she is explaining the referent of the text rather than filling in words to make it read smoothly, as she was doing earlier. Mara offered the same parenthetical explanation on her final exam (Figure 7). I might have put her phrase "is being used as a sukkah wall" (which she used in the study guide but omitted entirely on the final exam) in parentheses rather than in brackets, since, in my view, it functions more as an explanation than as a translation tactic. In truth, I am not preoccupied with the distinction as long as I feel that the overall goals of using the parentheses and brackets are being met. Judging from the

[In the case of] a bounded elephant,
they all (Rabbi Zeira and Abaye's hypothesis
of Rabbi Meir) do not disagree that

Figure 7 Mara's translation in the final exam.

comparison between her translation in the study guide and her translation of the same passage on the final exam, I would conclude that Mara has mastered the basic idea of the brackets and parentheses and can sometimes use them correctly but struggles with the subtleties of implementation. She is gaining awareness of her own role in sense-making as she distinguishes between straight translation and elaboration, but she has trouble distinguishing among the different kinds of elaboration that she finds herself producing.

Study Guide Section with Outline

The outline section takes the student full circle back to the beginning of the study guide, where the text unit first appeared in its “word-soup” form. The text unit now reappears in the outlining section, but this time broken down into sentences, with each sentence positioned under an empty box (Figure 8). In the box, the student is asked to describe the function of the sentence within the flow of the discourse of the text unit. When I initially present the text unit in undifferentiated lines, I am encouraging the student to strip down their assumptions about meaning. When I present it now, in outline form, I expect the student to have developed a robust understanding of the text based on the work they have done so far on the technical terms, grammar, and translation. I expect them to use that gathered understanding to grasp the fundamental discursive patterns of the text and to consider how its many micro-elements together produce the voice or voices of the text.

Outline of Structure

בפיל קשור כולי עלמא לא פליגי דאי נמי מיית יש בנבלתוי

כי פליגי בפיל שאינו קשור למאן דאמר שמא תמות לא חיישינן למאן דאמר גזרה שמא תברח חיישינן

למאן דאמר גזרה שמא תמות ניוחש שמא תברח

Figure 8 The outlining section of the study guide.

If it takes the students a while to adjust to the expectations of the translation section, it takes them even longer for the outlining section. In the first study guide, I give lengthy instructions:

In the boxes, describe in concise, abstract terms what is happening in the argument. Examples: “Question about a word in the mishnah”; “baraita contradicting the mishnah”; “an amora’s explanation of the mishnah”; and “a resolution that restricts the scope of the mishnah.”

As with the other sections, I abbreviate the instructions as we get further into the semester. An effective description of the function of a sentence in talmudic dialectic requires deft use of highly abstract terms and just the right amount of detail so that the outline comes to life and does not merely repeat the information in the text. Whereas the answers in the technical terms and grammar sections are relatively fixed, the translation section and, even more so the outlining section, allow for a good deal of individual interpretation.

I model outlining for them in class by speaking of the sugya in structural terms and using terminology of the type I describe in the outline instructions (e.g., the *stam’s* question, the amora’s answer, the *stam’s* challenge to the amora’s answer based on a baraita, etc.). The outlining labels that the students use often reflect the ones I used with them during our discussion. In Study Guide 7, Mara outlined the first two lines of the text unit using my approach to the sugya from class, in which I described three “cases” that are presented by the talmudic editor (Figure 9).

Mara describes here the first two lines of the text by referring to a case 1 and case 2, successfully reflecting our discussion in class. Another strategy I use in class to keep track of the talmudic back-and-forth is to use “smiley faces” to indicate when the Talmud has presented a positive proof or a

Outline of Structure *✓ Nice emoticons!*

Case 1: ☹ the two opinions regarding Rabbi Meir’s position agree on how he would hold

בפיל קשור כולי עלמא לא פליגי דאי נמי מיית יש בנבלתו י

Case 2: ☺ the two opinions regarding Rabbi Meir’s position disagree (for now...) on how he would hold

כי פליגי בפיל שאינו קשור למאן דאמר שמא תמות לא חיישינן למאן דאמר גזרה שמא תברח חיישינן

Figure 9 Mara’s work in the outlining section of the study guide.

satisfactory case and to use “sad faces” for a refutation or a problematic case. Mara here successfully adopts that practice and is complimented for it by the teaching assistant in the handwritten comments. This particular sugya entails a tricky application of smiley and sad faces, since the talmudic editor is looking for cases where two amoraim would disagree about what a tanna would think. The editor is counter-intuitively “happy” when there is disagreement. Mara was not tripped up by this. She also quite elegantly foreshadows in her parenthetical “(for now ...)” that case 2 will be rejected. I would have liked slightly more elaboration, however, on the “two opinions” she mentions. She could have specified that Rabbi Zeira and Abaye are the holders of these opinions. I encourage the students to find the right balance between the specific and the general, and she may have concluded that mentioning the amoras’ names would get her too enmeshed in the details. Mara also could have indicated that each sentence not only presents the opinions but also gives some explanation for one of those opinions (in the first sentence) or both (in the second sentence). I assume Mara knew that the explanation was there and either did not think to mention it or decided it was not important enough to include in her outline. Mara was able to recapitulate these labels in more or less the same form (she used slightly different language and left out the smiley and sad faces) on her final exam, where I divided up the text somewhat differently from on the study guide so that the student could not simply memorize the labels for each line but had to understand how they reflected the particular text with which they were associated. Mara thus showed herself to be capable of conceptualizing the structure of the text at a degree of removal from individual words and syntax. The study guide had taken her from the technicalities of terms and grammar, to the word-by-word work of translation, to a description of the thought patterns within the text.

Study Guide Sections with Questions

The final sections of the study guide consist of questions. The first set is called “Questions about Structure and Argument,” and the second is called “Questions for Reflection.” The questions on structure and argument adhere closely to the outline. If the student was successful in the outline they created,

they should be able to answer every question in this set with perfect accuracy. These questions address what is usually called the *peshat*, or simple meaning, and require the student to know what each line of the Gemara does, how it follows from the previous line, and how it leads to the next one. The questions test whether the student understands the basics of the talmudic discourse. If the student cannot successfully answer these questions, then they have not really understood the sugya. These were some of the “Questions about Structure and Argument” from Study Guide 7:

1. What is the first case the sugya imagines, and what do Abaye and Rabbi Zeira each think Rabbi Meir rules on it?
2. What is the second case the sugya imagines, and how do Abaye and Rabbi Zeira each think Rabbi Meir rules on it?
3. On what basis does the Gemara reject the second case?
4. What is the third case the sugya imagines, and what do Abaye and Rabbi Zeira each think Rabbi Meir rules on it?

The second and more advanced set of questions (Questions for Reflection) includes two basic types. One type represents questions that the rishonim, the classic medieval Talmud commentators like the Tosafot, Rashba, or Ritba, would typically ask. These questions have to do with ambiguities or wrinkles in the text.¹⁴ One question of this sort from Study Guide 7 is, “Think carefully about the flow of the argument and how the challenge about the animal’s leg space fits into it. Whose position is this challenging?” The part of the sugya to which this question refers features a strange editorial patch-up job. It is hard to tell how the final back-and-forth in the sugya (about how exactly one would turn an animal into the wall of a sukkah) relates to the earlier back-and-forth (about when Abaye and Rabbi Zeira would disagree on Rabbi Meir’s ruling on using an animal for the wall of a sukkah). The rishonim debate a number of options, as did my students in

¹⁴ The Tosafot (or tosfists, as they are sometimes known in English) were twelfth- and thirteenth-century Talmud glossators in France and Germany, the earliest of whom were Rashi’s relatives or students. Rashba is the acronym for Solomon Ibn Adret, a Spanish Talmud commentator (1235-1310), and Ritba is the acronym for his student Yom Tov ben Avraham Ishbili (d. 1330). I do not usually show the students passages from the rishonim, but I present the questions in the name of the rishonim if that is where I encountered them.

class. This type of question requires an understanding of the text that goes well beyond the basics and that is sensitive to subtle shifts and textural variations.

The other type of question within the more advanced set requires the student to step back from the sugya altogether and to think about it independently and critically (not in the sense of being negative, but in the sense of being analytical). These questions invite the students to consider the Talmud at the macro-level as an intellectual, cultural, and religious project. An example of this sort from Study Guide 7 asks, “Is the Gemara serious about the tied-up elephant as the wall for a sukkah? Or the hanging, dead animal? What are we to make of these very strange scenarios?” These questions may or may not require the kind of text mastery that the other type does—ideally, the two types of advanced questions complement each other—but the “Questions for Reflection” ask the student to perform a certain kind of reality check. The degree to which the student is capable of this depends on their psychological maturity and intellectual creativity. The initial sections of the study guide (terms and grammar) ask the student to deconstruct the text and to penetrate deep into its details; the intermediate sections (translation and outlining) have the students recombining those details into a satisfying sense. This final section invites the students to reflect on that newly made sense and to explore the gaps and curiosities within it.

Problems with the Study Guides

The value of these questions may be canceled out by the fact that I do not require the students to answer them, and I have to admit the possibility that the questions simply vanish into the ether without the students giving them much thought at all. I have my reasons for not requiring answers: the earlier sections are taxing enough; answers to these questions could produce tomes and tomes; and grading these answers would, in turn, be too burdensome for me and my teaching assistant.¹⁵ This leads me to talk about the problem of grading more generally as well as other problems with the study guides. To be blunt, the study guides are hellish to grade. The refrain in my teaching

15 I draw exam questions from these sections and tell the students to use them for exam preparation, so they do have some practical use for the students.

journal is dismay upon receiving a fresh batch. It is probably as much a hell for the students to fill them out. And that is another serious problem to consider—whether the study guides might just drain too much of the fun out of Talmud text study, even if the student does achieve at the end a richer, deeper, more satisfying reading. The students fill out each study guide once, whereas the teaching assistant and I have to review the same information as many times as there are students in the class. Few teachers enjoy mounds of grading, but grading the study guides feels particularly burdensome in the scheme of grading burdens. I say this not to complain or to get credit but because anything that seriously detracts from a teacher’s teaching experience should be considered a pedagogical problem that has an impact on students, and that other teachers may want to think twice about before adopting.

An additional challenge that every instructor faces is plagiarism, and my study guides are particularly prone to that problem. It is very easy for one student to simply transfer another’s work to their study guide, especially in the earlier sections. The plagiarism potential was further expanded by my decision to permit the students to work in *havruta*, though I tell them on the syllabus and in class that they must write down with whom they worked and on which sections. Even though cooperative work is relatively rare in the humanities, especially at the undergraduate level, I permit it in my text course because there is a tradition of *havruta* study for Talmud, and for some students, it can make study more effective and enjoyable (see my point above about displeasure as a pedagogical problem).¹⁶ But, like all cooperative endeavors, they can easily turn sour, and it is quite possible that in the course of the semester weaker students had copied the work of stronger ones.

A final problem I want to treat leads me to my concluding reflections on the larger theories and goals of the study guides. The principle of the study guides follows the same logic as the well-known children’s song “Bingo.” As you keep singing the song, you take more and more letters away until you have only the music. The idea underlying the use of the study guide is that as you keep studying Talmud, you need the rubrics of the study

¹⁶ For references on the history of Talmud study in *havruta*, see Elie Holzer, “What Connects ‘Good Teaching,’ Text Study, and Hevruta Learning? A Conceptual Argument,” *Journal of Jewish Education* 72, no. 3 (2006): 183–204. *Ibid.*, no. 2: 183.

guide less and less in order to read Talmud accurately and meaningfully. Technical terms start to jump off the page, and you do not need to look most of them up as you progress through the text. Aramaic and Hebrew seem automatically and intuitively different from each other. You do not need to think about parts of speech because you know what they are. You do not need to outline because you know the function of each sentence. If you are unclear on any of these elements in the text, you know what questions to ask and how to get answers. You instinctively start to ask yourself questions about structure, and the same goes for second-order questions for reflection. The students, in short, are weaned off the study guides and become fully formed readers of Talmud without them. But how does this weaning happen, especially in a college setting where I teach students for only one semester? By nurturing them with all the steps, tables, rubrics, outlines, and questions, do I push them into a dependency and make their reading practices a mere replica of my own? Is my study guide a form of “helicopter teaching” (along the lines of helicopter parenting)? As I asked in my teaching journal at one point, “Do I over-teach?”

Conclusion: Learning to Read Ourselves

I might over-teach at times, but if I have to err, I would rather it be on that side than on the side of leaving students to “sink or swim,” especially since many experience the study of Talmud as “sink or swim” and feel that they most decidedly sank. Perhaps some of my Barnard students had that experience in the past, and they came to my course in the hope that this time they would swim.

I call this concluding section “Learning to Read Ourselves” in order to exploit the double meaning of the syntax and, in so doing, to model an act of reading that recognizes and interprets ambiguity in the way that I am aiming for Talmud reading to do. I refer both to learning to read *by* ourselves, which ideally the study guide will foster even if it risks generating dependency, but also to learning to read *ourselves* as though we were a sort of text, as something that can be interpreted and reflected upon. These two meanings criss-cross, since my hope and goal is that we learn to read ourselves in the process of reading texts. As we come to know the text better and better,

we begin to see what is there and what is not, and we are able to see what we are inserting or projecting in order to make compelling sense of it. Our own assumptions and perspectives and procedures of meaning-making emerge in a clearer light, so that as we get to know the text, we also get to know ourselves.

I will close with an example of what I mean. The second sugya I taught in my course provides commentary on M. Sukkah 2:3:

One who makes his sukkah on top of a wagon or on top of a ship, it is fit, and one may ascend it on the festival.

[One who makes his sukkah] on top of a tree or on the back of a camel, it is fit, but one may not ascend it on the festival.

We spent seventy-five minutes in class discussing these two lines. This mishnah presents four types of sukkahs—I call them “sukkahs in strange places,” which include the top of a wagon, ship, tree, and camel—grouped into two, all of which are declared fit, but only the first two can be ascended on the festival. We spent most of our time discussing the following questions: (1) Why *these* four sukkahs? What common feature ties them together? (2) Why might you think that each of these would not be valid, and, then, why does the Mishnah consider them valid despite whatever problems they might have? (3) Why can you ascend the first two on the festival but not the second two, and what is the significance of this distinction? (4) Is there a deeper principle that runs through this mishnah? Is there some more abstract idea it is trying to point to, perhaps having to do with mobility on the holiday?

I posed these questions to the class (verbally and on a PowerPoint® slide), and we found—as I planned we would—that there are any number of possible answers. I noted in my journal that one student explicitly asked why the Mishnah is not clearer about its guiding principles. My answer to the student was that her guess was as good as mine and that while the Mishnah’s terseness may be maddening, we would not have the two Talmuds without it.¹⁷ The in-depth Mishnah discussion was part of my plan for the students

¹⁷ In fact, what I first said is that if we compare the Mishnah to its parallel in the Tosefta, which we had also studied, we find that the Mishnah is actually a little clearer about fundamental concepts, but I admitted that it’s relative, and that neither is disposed toward abstract formulations, at least to the extent that the Talmud (and, specifically, the *stam*) is.

to recognize once we reached the Talmud that the Talmud represents one possible road of interpretation among many and that its perspective on the Mishnah is creatively selective. But then, as we study Talmud, I make similar distinctions within its literary layers, so I am asking the students to appreciate not just the creativity of the Talmud as a whole when juxtaposed with the Mishnah, but also the creativity of one strand within the Talmud when juxtaposed with another—the amoraic when juxtaposed with the tannaitic, the stammatitic when juxtaposed with both. Then the students will go on to see Rashi's interpretive choice as yet one more in a long line of choices before him. Since we studied the relevant biblical texts in a session early on in the semester, all of this rabbinic material is being juxtaposed with the Bible, where the interpretive project seems to have begun. But then I introduce the students to the idea of inner-biblical exegesis and the possibility that one biblical text may have been adapting earlier ones. I want the students to see that the interpretive path never ends. Each text we encounter is negotiating prior ambiguities and then generating new ones, which future texts will then, in turn, negotiate, and so on. We are learning, in the end, to appreciate the creativity of sense-making, and to see that creativity as happening at every moment, for every creature. That creativity is being exercised within the Bible, the Mishnah, the Talmud, and Talmud commentaries, and also within ourselves. When the students face the question in their study guides of whether to insert brackets or parentheses into their translations, when they consider whether a passive participle is an adjective or a verb, when they decide exactly how to label a line of Gemara—they are making interpretive choices akin to choices made within the Talmud when its authors encountered their inherited traditions, and like all the Talmud commentators who faced the same questions that the students and I face in our classrooms today.

My study guides halted the process of sense-making for the Barnard students so that, ultimately, they could appreciate their own sense-making as a creative act. When sense-making is working properly, it becomes invisible, and we do not realize the almost miraculous powers that each of us possesses to create coherence. But appreciation of our own sense-making, as well as that of others, entails experiencing not only our powers but also our limitations. When we recognize the particularity of the Talmud's perspective on

the Mishnah, for instance, and all the roads it does not take, we can begin to see the Talmud as constrained by its place and time, as rooted in a context that makes certain interpretations possible, plausible, and worthwhile and others objectionable or unthinkable, and we begin to see ourselves as having that very same rootedness. We appreciate ourselves, and others, as creatures of both imagination and limitation.¹⁸

18 This kind of appreciation, however, is hard won. I wrote in my journal about the students' reflection papers that "a number of students could not successfully distinguish between Rubenstein (whose article we had read) and the rabbis and the Bible. It was still all a big soup to them, despite the fact that this is all I tried to do all semester!" I would like to think the fault was in my framing of the assignment, which had not sufficiently encouraged them to make such distinctions. The study guide cannot stand alone, however, and if it is to achieve its objective of fostering appreciation of our sense-making powers, then it must work in concert with class discussion, other assignments, and my own ability to articulate coherently and compellingly the vision I have here laid out.

Appendix—Study Guide

Study Guide 7 for Sukkah 23a-b

Berkowitz, Barnard, Introduction to Talmud Text Study

Text Unit

בפיל קשור כולי עלמא לא פליגי דאי נמי מיית יש בנבלתו י' כי פליגי בפיל שאינו קשור למאן דאמר שמא תמות לא חיישינן למאן דאמר גזרה שמא תברח חיישינן למאן דאמר גזרה שמא תמות ניחוש שמא תברח אלא בפיל שאינו קשור כולי עלמא לא פליגי כי פליגי בבהמה קשורה למ"ד גזרה שמא תמות חיישינן למ"ד גזרה שמא תברח לא חיישינן ולמאן דאמר גזרה שמא תברח ניחוש שמא תמות מייתה לא שכיחא והאיכא רווחא דביני ביני דעביד ליה בהוצא ודפנא ודלמא רבעה דמתיחה באשלי מלעיל ולמאן דאמר גזרה שמא תמות נמי הא מתיחה באשלי מלעיל זמנין דמוקים בפחות משלשה סמוך לסכך וכיון דמייתא כווצא ולאו אדעתיה

Technical Terminology (type in or add more space if necessary)

Term	Translation	Function
כולי עלמא לא פליגי		n/a
כי פליגי		
אי נמי		
מאן דאמר		n/a
חיישינן		n/a
ניחוש		n/a
שכיחא		n/a
איכא		n/a
ביני ביני		n/a
דלמא		n/a
לעיל		n/a
הא		n/a
זמנין		n/a
כיון ד		n/a

Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Translation
י	This <i>yud</i> stands for the Hebrew number 10. To what ten does it refer?

Hebrew Language

	Root	Part of speech	Number	Verbs: person, tense	Translation of word as is
פיל	n/a			n/a	
קשור				n/a	
נבלתו	n/a			n/a	
גזרה	n/a			n/a	
סמוך					

Aramaic Language

	Root	Part of speech	Number	Verbs: person, tense	Translation of word as is
מיית					
רווחא	n/a			n/a	
עבד					
הוצא					
דפנא					
רבעה	n/a			n/a	
מתיחה	n/a				
אשלי				n/a	
מוקים					
כווצא					

Translation of Text Unit

Please type here.

Outline of Structure

בפיל קשור כולי עלמא לא פליגי דאי נמי מיית יש בנבלתו י

כי פליגי בפיל שאינו קשור למאן דאמר שמא תמות לא חיישינן למאן
דאמר גזרה שמא תברח חיישינן

למאן דאמר גזרה שמא תמות נוחש שמא תברח

אלא בפיל שאינו קשור כולי עלמא לא פליגי

כי פליגי בבהמה קשורה למ"ד גזרה שמא תמות חיישינן למ"ד גזרה שמא
תברח לא חיישינן

ולמאן דאמר גזרה שמא תברח נוחש שמא תמות

מיתה לא שכיחא

והאיכא רווחא דביני ביני

דעביד ליה בהוצא ודפנא

ודלמא רבעה

דמתיחה באשלי מלעיל

ולמאן דאמר גזרה שמא תמות נמי הא מתיחה באשלי מלעיל

זמנין דמוקים בפחות משלשה סמוך לסכך וכיון דמייתא כווצא ולא אדעתיה

Questions about Structure and Argument

- 1. What is the first case the sugya imagines, and what do Abaye and Rabbi Zeira each think Rabbi Meir rules on it?

2. What is the second case the sugya imagines, and how do Abaye and Rabbi Zeira each think Rabbi Meir rules on it? On what basis does the Gemara reject the second case?
3. What is the third case the sugya imagines, and what do Abaye and Rabbi Zeira each think Rabbi Meir rules on it?
4. On what basis does the Gemara reject the third case?
5. What rebuttal is provided for that rejection?
6. The Gemara next challenges exactly how one would use an animal as a sukkah wall: What is that challenge?
7. How is that challenge addressed?
8. What new challenge is posed to using an animal as a sukkah wall, and how is that addressed?
9. The response itself is now queried regarding Abaye's approach to Rabbi Meir: How does the understanding of the baraita that has just been presented actually satisfy the concern of Rabbi Meir as Abaye understands it?
10. How does the Gemara, in the last step here, revive the problem according to Abaye's version of Rabbi Meir?

Questions for Reflection

1. What is the overall aim of this section vis-à-vis Abaye and Rabbi Zeira's opinion and vis-à-vis the original baraita that they are addressing? What is this whole section trying to figure out?
2. Is the Gemara serious about the tied-up elephant as the wall for a sukkah? Or the hanging, dead animal? What are we to make of these very strange scenarios?
3. Think carefully about the flow of the argument and how the challenge about the animal's leg space fits into it: Whose position is this challenging?

Rashi's Commentary

קשור - דליכא למיחש שמא תברח.

What is the significance of the fact that the animal is tied up, acc. to Rashi?

דכולי עלמא - בין לאביי בין לר' זירא מכשיר ר' מאיר.

Rashi is responding to the fact that *kule alma* is being used in a slightly strange way here. How is Rashi explaining what exactly is the subject of agreement?

דאי נמי מיית - ויפול יש בנבלתו עשרה.

Why doesn't Abaye think that Rabbi Meir would have a problem with a tied-up elephant being used a sukkah wall?

מיתה לא שכיחא - ואפילו ר' מאיר לא פסיל.

Acc. to Rashi, what is the case that according to Rabbi Zeira even Rabbi Meir wouldn't prohibit the animal from being used as a sukkah wall, and why?

והאיכא רווחא - דביני כרעי שהיא פירצה ואפילו כשהיא חיה.

How does Rashi explain the challenge posed here to using an animal for a sukkah wall?

דעביד ליה - גדר בין רגליה.

According to Rashi, how is the Gemara addressing that challenge? What do you have to do to an animal in order to be able to use him or her as a sukkah wall?

בהוצא ודפנא - הוצא - לולבי דקל, דפנא - ענפי עץ שקורין לורי"ר + עץ הדפנה + וגדל בו פרי שקורין באי"ש + פירות עץ הדפנה +.

How does Rashi define the Gemara's words here?

רבעה - רובצת.

How does Rashi define the Gemara's word here?

אשלי - חבלים.

How does Rashi define the Gemara's word here? Notice: if Rashi thinks a word in the Gemara is unfamiliar or being used in an unfamiliar way, he will define it.

הא מתייחא באשלי מלעי - ואם תמות אינה נופלת.

Why would the hanging animal be acceptable as a sukkah wall not only according to Rabbi Zeira's understanding of Rabbi Meir but also according to Abaye's understanding of Rabbi Meir, according to Rashi here?

זימנא דמוקי לה פחות משלשה כו' - פעמים שאין בגובהה של בהמה אלא שבעה ומשהו, וסוכה עשרה דקאי לה בפחות משלשה סמוך לסכך, ואמרין לבוד.

What does this wall look like that the sukkah builder is making, according to Rashi? How does Rashi use the *lavud* concept to describe this wall? See Halakhic Concepts below on what *lavud* means.

וכיון דמייטא כווצא - מתמעט, רטריי"ט, והוה ליה שלשה, ובטיל ליה לבוד,
ואין כאן דופן.

What problem might arise with the wall described in the previous comment? What is the risk of building such a wall? Do you notice anything familiar in Rashi's medieval French translation?

ולאו אדעתיה - אינו נותן לב לתקנה דאינו ניכר

Why does Rabbi Meir, according to Abaye's understanding of him, still prohibit a sukkah wall composed of a hanging animal?

Technical Terminology in Rashi

Term	Translation
ליכא	

Hebrew Language in Rashi

	Root	Part of speech	Number	Verbs: person, tense	Translation of word as is
גדר	n/a			n/a	
רגליה	n/a			n/a	
דקל	n/a			n/a	
ענפי	n/a			n/a	
קורין					
רובצת					
חבלים	n/a			n/a	
מתמעט					

Aramaic Language in Rashi

	Root	Part of Speech	Number	Verbs: person, tense	Translation
למיחש			n/a		

כרעי	n/a			n/a	
פירצה	n/a			n/a	
קאי					
אמרינן					
בטיל					

Halakhic Concepts in Rashi

לבוד	(From <i>The Talmud, The Steinsaltz Edition: A Reference Guide</i>): <i>Joined, connected.</i> A law given to Moses on Mt. Sinai but not specifically mentioned in the Torah, stating that two solid surfaces are considered as connected if there is a gap of less than 3 <i>tefahim</i> between them. The law of <i>lavud</i> is used in reference to the laws of Sabbath boundaries and the laws of the construction of a sukkah.
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