Talmud for Non-Rabbis: Teaching Graduate Students in the Academy

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There is an adage in Hebrew, *ha-mevin yavin*, “those who understand will understand.”¹ In order to understand something, you will have had to have already understood it or something very close to it. It implies elite knowledge, insularity, and high barriers to entry for those who are not already in the know. The underlying premise of insularity embedded in this aphorism contrasts sharply with the openness and expansiveness that characterizes Jonathan Z. Smith’s two central tasks in the academic study of religion: to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. The first task, he says, is to make the familiar appear to be strange in order to enhance our perception of the familiar, to see it afresh.² This, Smith writes, is what distinguishes and “prevents the study of religion from being an exercise in the transmission of a religious tradition.”³ For the academic study of rabbinic literature, this requires an audience of students with knowledge of Hebrew and Aramaic, as well as experience in reading rabbinic texts—which is usually gained through traditional venues of Jewish education. These students would

- 1 I thank the workshop participants, Carey A. Brown and Jordan D. Rosenblum for their helpful feedback on this chapter. I also thank my students for their willingness to participate in this project and I dedicate this study to them. I alone am responsible for all remaining errors.
- 2 Jonathan Z. Smith, introduction to *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xiii; Jonathan Z. Smith, “God Save This Honourable Court: Religion and Civic Discourse,” *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 383, 389.
- 3 Smith, “God Save This Honourable Court,” 383.

then be challenged to read the Talmud through an academic lens, which would be strange and new to them in light of their traditional background. Despite this increased interest in Judaic studies and rabbinic literature in particular, very few colleges and universities in North America could regularly fill a classroom with students who possess the background needed to read these texts in their original languages.⁴

The focus for many (if not most) instructors of classical rabbinic literature at colleges and universities is on Smith's second task: to make the strange familiar. Late antique or classical rabbinic texts are indeed strange. They were written by rabbis and for rabbis who lived centuries ago and far away. Their interests (e.g., laws of purity and tithing) and contexts (Roman Palestine and Sasanian Mesopotamia) are very distant and foreign from those of students in North America today. Any single rabbinic discussion, moreover, presumes that the reader has extensive background, not only in the Hebrew Bible but also in all other rabbinic texts. Left to its own device, the field of Talmud study could maintain, reinforce, and perpetuate its own insularity. Needless to say, this would be a great loss to religious studies and the broader liberal arts, as these texts are key to understanding many areas of Jewish studies, and their unique style and features make them especially apt for developing students' critical thinking and analytical skills.⁵ As such, instructors of rabbinics at secular universities are faced with the task of making these strange texts accessible, relevant, and meaningful to students of diverse backgrounds.⁶ They teach Talmud by making the strange familiar

4 On the flourishing of the study of rabbinics at secular universities, see David Stern, "Rabbinics and Jewish Identity: An American Perspective," in *Jewish Thought and Jewish Belief [Hebrew]*, ed. Daniel J. Lasker (Beer-Sheva, Israel: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2012), 10.

5 Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, "Why Study Talmud in the 21st Century: The View from a Large Public University or Studying Talmud as a Critical Thinker," in *Why Study Talmud in the Twenty-First Century? The Relevance of the Ancient Jewish Text to Our World*, ed. Paul Socken (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press, 2009), 11-24; Michael Chernick, "Neusner, Brisk, and the *Stam*: Significant Methodologies for Meaningful Talmud Teaching and Study," 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), 105-07.

6 Ethan Tucker calls this the "democratization" of the Talmud in his forward to *Reconstructing the Talmud: An Introduction to the Academic Study of Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Joshua Kulp and Jason Rogoff (New York: Mechon Hadar, 2014), 9.

to those with little or no prior exposure to rabbinics, Jewish studies, and—very often—religious studies in general.

Little has been written to date on teaching rabbinics at secular universities.⁷ This chapter contributes to our understanding of this issue by exploring the teaching of Talmud to graduate students who have little or no background in rabbinics or late-antique Judaism. The students in this study specialize in classics, archaeology, early Christianity, or other areas of research into the ancient world. Embracing this context, I define learning to read and attaining proficiency in Talmud as the acquisition of the background and skills needed to access and read the texts on one's own for the purpose of integrating rabbinic literature into one's own research project. This broad goal can be broken down into the following subgoals:

1. Relevance and motivation. To students without background in rabbinic literature, it is not always clear what these texts are and how they can be useful for research in classics, ancient history, and early Christianity. The instructor, therefore, needs to provide sufficient background and motivation for students to engage with these texts.
2. Reading and understanding texts in translation. While there are a number of English translations of the Talmud, reading and understanding them is far from straightforward. Guidance by experts is often required in order to gain an understanding of the text's content, structure, and genre. Here, the goal is for students to understand the basic meaning of the text (i.e., *peshat*), as well as to achieve a deeper appreciation of the text's literary features, structure, historical contexts, etc.⁸ The features that lie beneath the surface can be

7 Notable exceptions include Alexander, "Why Study Talmud," 11-24; Michael L. Satlow, "Narratives or Sources? Active Learning and the Teaching of Ancient Jewish History and Texts," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 15, no. 1 (2012): 48-60; Michael L. Satlow, "Teaching Ancient Jewish History: An Experiment in Engaged Learning," in *Turn It and Turn It Again*, Michael L. Satlow, "Teaching Ancient Jewish History," in Levisohn and Fendrick, *Turn It and Turn It Again*, 212-35. Most scholarship, however, has focused on teaching at rabbinic seminaries and Jewish day schools; see the collection of papers in Levisohn and Fendrick, *Turn It and Turn It Again*.

8 This aligns with the "contextual orientation" to teaching rabbinics as discussed by Jon A. Levisohn, "A Menu of Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature," *Journal of Jewish Education* 76, no. 1 (2010): 19-21; Jon A. Levisohn, "What Are the Orientations to

illuminated by connecting the text to the broader study of ancient Judaism and the history of religions.⁹

3. Identification and access. Students should be able to identify primary sources relevant to their interests and access them, even in English translation. Regrettably, the citation methods rabbinic texts are inconsistent and opaque, as systems of transliteration, abbreviation, and citation differ from one scholarly publication to another.
4. Integration into an independent research project. Having accessed, read, and analyzed the texts, I seek to provide students with the skills necessary to integrate classical rabbinic texts into their own research projects. Underlying and motivating this goal is that students would acquire the background needed to navigate and understand these texts, as well as recognize and appreciate the Talmud's significance for the study of religion and the ancient world.

This chapter will explore these goals and issues through a multifaceted and integrative approach to teaching that combines lectures, in-class readings of texts, and student research projects.¹⁰ In reflecting upon and analyzing the students' work and feedback, I find that focusing on rabbinic narratives (*aggadah*; plural: *aggadot*) and texts related to material culture are particularly effective to teach students with little or no background in Jewish studies to learn to read Talmud.

Teaching Context

This study draws upon my experience teaching classical rabbinic literature to graduate students in classics, archaeology, and religious studies at a large public university. Most of these students have training in Greek, Latin, and classical studies. Perhaps two or three had some prior exposure to biblical Hebrew or had read some rabbinic texts in translation in a previous

the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature?" in Levisohn and Fendrick, *Turn It and Turn It Again*, 61-63.

9 Alexander, "Why Study Talmud," 11.

10 Jane Kanarek and Marjorie Lehman, "Assigning Integration: A Framework for Intellectual, Personal, and Professional Development in Seminary Courses," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 16, no. 1 (2013): 18-32.

university course. To be sure, the majority had little or no prior exposure to Jewish studies, let alone rabbinic literature.

In many ways, my teaching context is similar to that described by Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, where Talmud is taught to students of diverse backgrounds within the framework of a broad liberal arts education.¹¹ The intended student audience, moreover, dictates certain requirements and restrictions. Whereas rabbinic seminaries may offer Talmud over the course of multiple years of study, opportunities for learning to read Talmud are more limited at secular universities. There may be a single one-semester upper level undergraduate course that focuses primarily on rabbinic literature or one graduate seminar offered every few years in which rabbinic texts play a significant role. That is, the intricacies of rabbinic literature must often be condensed into a single semester. Very often, Talmud is taught within the context of broader courses in Jewish studies, further limiting the amount of time that can be spent guiding students through the material.¹² While these scenarios pose a number of challenges, they also represent important opportunities to introduce students to the rich corpus that is rabbinic literature. Indeed, this class may be a student's first and only exposure to the Talmud in an academic context. However brief and limited, exposing the students to the material helps address lacunae in an essential area of religious studies.

Relevance and Motivation

Before teaching Talmud, it is first necessary to teach *about* Talmud.¹³ Why study rabbinic literature? What is its use for us as students, scholars, and researchers? Alexander likewise notes the imperative to build students' investment in the material from the outset, "I can't be subtle," she writes, "I need to be very transparent about what they stand to gain."¹⁴ Like Alexander, I do not presume that these students have personal, cultural, or religious motivations

11 Alexander, "Why Study Talmud," 11-19.

12 It is common to have a short unit on rabbinics in a survey class (ibid., 11); Jordan D. Rosenblum, "The Tofu Model: Using Tofu to Teach Introduction to Judaism." *Syllabus* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-8, accessed July 3, 2015, <http://www.syllabusjournal.org/article/view/9981>.

13 Alexander, "Why Study Talmud," 14.

14 Ibid., 14.

for learning to read Talmud.¹⁵ Thus, I endeavor to demonstrate the importance of the Talmud from a number of perspectives. One approach, as outlined by Chernick, is to emphasize the importance of Talmud for the diachronic study of Judaism, articulating that it is “the historical victor in the narrative of the Jewish people.”¹⁶ In this respect, I discuss the Talmud’s centrality to Jewish life from the middle ages to today, touching upon its preeminent status in Jewish law and traditional Jewish education. The popularity of *dafyomi*, the Talmud’s digitization and its accessibility on all types of electronic devices, and the proliferation of translations and commentaries all attest to rabbinic literature’s continued importance to Jews and Judaism today. Having provided this background to students, I next discuss the relevance of classical rabbinic texts specifically for the study of the ancient world, as these texts constitute an important set of primary sources on life in the later Roman Empire and Sasanian Babylonia. As such, rabbinic texts can be useful to scholars of the Near East, classics, early Christianity, and the ancient world.

During my course, I provided the background and motivation for studying rabbinic texts through a lecture that also introduced students to the history of the rabbinic movement. The lecture also gives an overview of the classical rabbinic corpus, discussing dates, genres, and areas of focus. Based on their reactions in class, the students seem to have gained a firm understanding of the significance and background of classical rabbinic texts. It also clarified and sorted out some confusion and misconceptions that they had carried. One student mentioned that after the introductory lecture she was now more aware that there was little agreement on what comprises the rabbinic corpus. “This was confusing at first. I thought I made a mistake in reading things,” she said, referring to the readings assigned for class. Rather, she now sees that there can be variety and multiple understandings of even the basic question of what constitutes the rabbinic corpus.

Reading the Talmud in Translation

In selecting texts for introducing students to rabbinic literature, I gave careful consideration to genre. Even in English translation, legal *sugyot*

15 Cf. the described in Tucker, forward, 9.

16 Chernick, “Neusner, Brisk, and the *Stam*,” 107.

may easily overwhelm first-time readers of rabbinics for a number of reasons. First, the subject matter is often very foreign to modern-day interests. Substantial portions of rabbinic texts are devoted to esoteric topics, such as levirate marriage, offerings to the Temple, and other subjects for which students possess little background.¹⁷ Even seemingly familiar topics, such as support for the poor, are often embedded in contexts (e.g., premodern agrarian societies) that are very distant to North American university students.¹⁸ Second, while all rabbinic texts presume background and fluency in the Hebrew Bible (which non-specialists cannot be expected to have), the high concentration of prooftexts in legal *sugyot* can overwhelm a non-specialist trying to work through the text. Third, the method of legal argumentation is serpentine, with phrasing that is often elliptical and filled with questions, retorts, and unstated assumptions that can be difficult for neophytes to penetrate.¹⁹ Even in translation, rabbinic texts can be sufficiently foreign that students may wonder if it is worthwhile to invest the time and effort needed to understand them.²⁰

Midrash can be equally intimidating. It often makes exegetical assumptions that would be unfamiliar to non-specialists. Midrash also requires a detailed knowledge of Hebrew to understand not only the exegesis but also the underlying textual and linguistic tensions that the exegesis is meant to address.²¹

17 Notably, in his effort to teach rabbinics in ways that make the material applicable to modern life and interests, Jonah C. Steinberg, “Academic Study of the Talmud as a Spiritual Endeavor in Rabbinic Training: Delights and Dangers,” in Levisohn and Fendrick, *Turn It and Turn It Again*, 380, is compelled to “liberally reinterpret” the material in tractates Kodashim and Taharot to concentrate on theology. See also Elie Holzer and Orit Kent, *A Philosophy of Havruta: Understanding and Teaching the Art of Text Study in Pairs* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 208.

18 See, for example, M. Pe’ah 4:10, where provisions for the poor are determined by the precise method by which one reaps a field.

19 Chernick, “Neusner, Brisk, and the *Stam*,” 106; Martin Goodman, introduction to *Rabbinic Texts and the History of Late-Roman Palestine*, ed. Martin Goodman and Philip Alexander (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2010), 1-3.

20 For a similar challenge in liberal seminaries, see Chernick, “Neusner, Brisk, and the *Stam*,” 106–07; Steinberg, “Academic Study,” 377–85.

21 Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, “From History to Literature: The Pedagogical Implications of Shifting Paradigms in the Study of Rabbinic Narratives,” *The Initiative on Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy in Jewish Studies Working Paper No. 26* (2010): 6, accessed April

Holzer, Kent, and Rubenstein have found that narrative texts (*aggadot*) provide a more gradual entry into rabbinics.²² Narratives require less prior knowledge of complex legal concepts and modes of argumentation. Some narratives are relatively short and, therefore, can be studied in full within a limited class period. Holzer and Kent also note the evocative nature of narratives, in that they seem relatively straightforward but also invite closer and repeated examination that reveal new intricacies. As “literary-artistic creations,” *aggadot* allow students to apply methods of literary analysis that they may have acquired or been exposed to from other courses, building their investment in the text and their sense of authority as legitimate interpreters of the text.²³ Narratives are also relatively self-contained and make sense on their own, as the frame of reference can be limited to the text at hand.²⁴ While deeper layers of meaning are surely revealed when one connects a particular *aggadic* text to other rabbinic texts and broader rabbinic concerns, the basic meaning of a narrative and its didactic purpose can often be uncovered without specialized or comprehensive knowledge of the rabbinic corpus.²⁵

Holzer and Kent discuss choosing narratives that address specific themes. For their study of *havruta*, they chose *aggadot* based on the theme of learning.²⁶ For my ancient studies-oriented graduate students, I chose a text containing imagery and themes that might be familiar to them—a siege by the Roman army. The narrative on Jerusalem during the First Jewish Revolt in B. Gittin 55b-56b contains themes and topics that would be familiar and of interest to students of the ancient world. Choosing this text also introduces students to the Talmud’s narrative on the origins of the rabbinic

14, 2015, http://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/pdfs/Bridging_working_papers/Rubenstein_5610.pdf.

22 Holzer and Kent, *Philosophy of Havruta*, 97, 208-11; Orit Kent, “A Theory of *Havruta* Learning,” in Levisohn and Fendrick, *Turn It and Turn It Again*, 293; Rubenstein, “From History to Literature,” 6.

23 Holzer and Kent, *Philosophy of Havruta*, 209; Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 9; Rubenstein, “From History to Literature,” 4-5.

24 *Ibid.*, 5.

25 Holzer and Kent, *Philosophy of Havruta*, 210.

26 *Ibid.*, 208-11.

movement—with Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s famous escape from Jerusalem and request for “Yavneh and its sages.”²⁷ Thus, the students moved from the familiar (a Roman siege) to the strange (rabbinics).

We read the text together in the classroom, where I asked the students to take turns reading passages aloud. I stopped the reader frequently to summarize what he or she just read and to think about how what they were reading fit into the broader narrative.²⁸ This provided an opportunity to correct erroneous connections that students can make on their own. I also challenge students to make connections with other texts, concepts, and ideas discussed at other points during the course and to articulate opinions that are grounded in the source material. I interject at times to provide additional background and to clarify specific terms or turns of phrase. In doing so, I strive to articulate how each word and each detail is “the tip of an iceberg,” a fragment, that with proper and thorough investigation, we can begin to understand and appreciate the size, shape, and contours of the great mass that lies beneath the surface.²⁹ I also prompt the students to think about structure and reoccurring themes.

In continuously provoking the students to think while we are reading, the approach aligns with Keene and Zimmermann’s work on the qualities of proficient readers. Namely, proficient readers activate relevant, prior knowledge (cognitive schema) while they read. When students think about their own reading *while* they read, they think of questions that provoke additional questions. They then make connections (and articulate distinctions) between what they know and what is new information. In short, proficient readers are “metacognitive” in that they think about their own

27 On this text, see Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 139-75; Peter Schäfer, “Die Flucht Johanan b. Zakkais aus Jerusalem und die Gründung des Lehrhauses in Jabne,” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt II.19.2*, ed. H. Temporini and W. Haase (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979).

28 I advocate a slow, deliberate reading that resonates with that discussed by Jane Kanarek, “The Pedagogy of Slowing Down: Teaching Talmud in a Summer Kollel,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 13, no. 1 (2010): 15-34; reprinted as Jane Kanarek, “The Pedagogy of Slowing Down: Teaching Talmud in a Summer Kolel,” in Levisohn and Fendrick, *Turn It and Turn It Again*, 128-57.

29 Alexander, “Why Study Talmud,” 11.

thinking while they read.³⁰ Intensive intervention by the instructor can also foster active learning and serve as a model for working through a text.³¹ The students commented that they appreciated the interjections I made, as these created an atmosphere of openness and connectedness, in which they felt free to interject with their own observations. My overall objective with the students is to transform the classroom into a “living commentary” on the text, whereby the elucidation of the material is a collective enterprise.

This approach proved to be effective, as the students came to understand the straightforward meaning of texts as we worked through them and became attuned to their literary qualities. At the same time, however, a number of other challenges rose to the surface. First, there were difficulties in identifying the referents to particular pronouns—that is, who is the *he* referred to in the text? One student said that she had read the text multiple times to identify the referents to certain pronouns in preparation for class, but with little success. Indeed, this could be classified as a “good problem,” as such ambiguities reflect the character of the text in its original languages. Nevertheless, it constitutes yet another obstacle to accessibility and comprehension for neophytes.

A second challenge was the structure of the narrative. Rabbinic texts are famous for going off on tangents, but it was often unclear to the students where tangential discussions began and ended. Other challenges that the students faced included making sense of parables and metaphors, as well as understanding how prooftexts work. It was not always apparent to them how prooftexts related to the issues at hand. Unlike the ancient rabbis for whom these texts were originally written, the students lacked a comprehensive knowledge of the Hebrew Bible or an ingrained sense of how it is used in classical Jewish texts.

While narratives are surely easier to grasp than legal discussions, *aggadot* also pose their own unique challenges. For example, when Yohanan ben Zakkai went to see Vespasian, students wondered whether the “meeting”

30 Ellin Oliver Keene and Susan Zimmermann, *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997), 22-23.

31 Satlow, “Teaching Ancient Jewish History,” 232. On the importance of teachers as model readers in the classroom, see Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis, *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding* (York, ME: Stenhouse, 2000), 7; Keene and Zimmermann, *Mosaic of Thought*, 22-23.

took place in Jerusalem or Rome. Such questions may suggest the development of reading skills, as proficient readers often create a mental map of the principle characters in order to attain comprehension of the text.³² Here, the question opens a discussion on the nature of rabbinic *aggadah*—namely, how it can be so concerned with some details of the past, yet unconcerned with others. This presented an opportunity to make the point that such details do not necessarily matter to the rabbis. The interests of rabbinic texts may or may not align with the interests (or even values) of modern readers. Indeed, part of gaining proficiency and objectivity is recognizing what is important and unimportant to the authors of an ancient text.

The layered texture of rabbinic literature is new to these students, as they are struck by the all-knowing rabbis who simply interject themselves into an ongoing conversation. More unique qualities of rabbinic narratives are brought out when we read a brief passage from Josephus on how the inhabitants of a besieged Jerusalem hid in tunnels in an attempt to escape the battle.³³ The historiographic texture of Josephus's writings provides a stark contrast with the Bavli's *aggadah*. The narrative section on Emperor Nero produced the most consternation. In B. Gittin 55b-56b, Nero is (initially) pegged as God's instrument of destruction. But then he becomes learned in Torah and converts, and the Talmud identifies him as an ancestor of Rabbi Meir. Students with a background in classics and ancient history know something about Nero and are disturbed by this free rewriting of history.³⁴ In some respects, the students' perplexity is a good sign, as they are trying to connect the new and the strange (in this case, the Talmud) with what they already knew.³⁵ While the students seek to make text-to-text connections between the Bavli's "Nero" and the historical Nero, an inability to do so illuminates the unique texture of rabbinic *aggadah*, which features

32 Harvey and Goudvis, *Strategies That Work*, 7.

33 Josephus, *War* 6.392.

34 Similarly, see Rubenstein, "From History to Literature," 1-2, who also notes that classical sources have no knowledge of Nero setting out to fight Judea or converting.

35 Thereby activating their "schema," which Harvey and Goudvis, *Strategies That Work*, 21, define as the sum total of one's background knowledge and experience that one brings to his or her reading. See also Keene and Zimmermann, *Mosaic of Thought*, 22-23.

occasional cameos by historical figures such as kings and emperors.³⁶ I also use this opportunity to discuss modern scholarly ways to handle the text, distinguishing the “historical kernel” approach pursued by some scholars from holistic and literary approaches by others.³⁷ As we continued to read about Yohanan ben Zakkai’s encounter with Vespasian, the students giggle, recognizing that this is not meant to be interpreted as a historical account. In this way, they began to appreciate the unique texture, genre, and interests of *aggadah*. In learning how to read talmudic texts, they also gained a better understanding of the Talmud’s character.³⁸

Reading these texts also brought up a number of other issues that students face when reading texts in translation. First, while puns and word-play (Qamza, Kalba Sabua, etc.) are often explained in the translation’s footnotes, they predictably lose their intended impact in translation. Second, rabbinic names are foreign to students without background, as they frequently confuse individuals with similar names, such as Yohanan bar Nappaha and Yohanan ben Zakkai. Rabbi Judah (bar Ilai) is confused with Rabbi Judah the Prince. Third is the problem of unusual words, such as *biryoni* and *Sicarii*, for which translators usually provide only minimal explanation. Looking up such words in reference books, moreover, was challenging due to differences in transliteration and spelling.

Identification and Access

There were additional advances in research skills. During the semester, students brought to light a number of technical barriers in identifying and accessing sources. Those students learning to read Talmud for research purposes should be able to identify references to primary sources (as cited in

36 Harvey and Goudvis, *Strategies That Work*, 21, define text-to-text connections as “connections that readers make between the text they are reading and another text, including books, poems, scripts, songs, or anything that is written.”

37 Compare, for example, the approaches to this text by Gedalyahu Alon, *Jews, Judaism, and the Classical World: Studies in Jewish History in the Times of the Second Temple and Talmud*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1977), 269-313; Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 139-75.

38 The challenges of teaching *aggadah* to the uninitiated are also discussed by Rubenstein, “From History to Literature,” 1-8.

a scholarly work) and locate those sources in an English translation, so that they can read them within their broader literary contexts. Students repeatedly indicated that this task was complicated by the multiplicity of methods of citing rabbinic texts, noting that abbreviations and transliterations of the names of rabbinic compilations and tractates differed from one reference work to another. This made it not only difficult for them to look up primary sources, but also to make meaningful connections between texts.³⁹ Similarly, when students encounter rabbinics for the first time and are reading scholarship flooded with transliterations, it is understandable how *ʿAbod. Zar.* (SBL style) could be confused with *Aboth* (Herbert Danby’s *Mishnah*) and *Šeb.* with *Šebu.* (both SBL). The citation of compilations can also be problematic. Note, for example, how the Jerusalem Talmud, also known as the *Yerushalmi*, the Palestinian Talmud, and the Talmud of the Land of Israel; all can be abbreviated as *j.*, *p.*, *y.*, JT, TJ, and PT.

Similarly, as discussed earlier, translations and transliterations of key names and terms vary, making it difficult for students to thematic connections between one text and another. For example, it can be difficult to know that *tsedaqah* in one source should be equated with *sedaka* in another. Similarly, when they see “Akiba” mentioned in one reference work, students understandably do not know to look him up as *ʿAqiva Ben Yosef* in another, or that Jacob, Yaakov, and Yaʿaqob may all refer to the same person. Students have expressed anxiety, both in researching (as they try to determine if two similar-looking words found in different books or articles refer to the same concept) and in their writing, as they are concerned that a small misspelling of a Hebrew word in transliteration may inadvertently refer to a concept that they had not intended to mention.

39 Compare, for example, the abbreviations and transliterated titles in Patrick H. Alexander et al., eds., *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 79-80 (which lists three different ways to cite each tractate); Adele Berlin, ed. “Common Abbreviations Used in This Work,” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion: Second Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), xvii-xviii; Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA and Keter Publishing House, 2007), 1:184-96.

Independent Research Projects

In teaching students how to acquire the skills needed to make use of rabbinic literature for their own research, my goals are similar to those of Martin Goodman and Philip Alexander, who dedicated a volume to making rabbinics more accessible to Roman historians.⁴⁰ Goodman lays out many of the obstacles for non-rabbinicists, such as the uncertain provenance, dating, and transmission of rabbinic texts. Rabbinic texts are written in genres that are unfamiliar to most audiences, as they are characterized by esoteric modes of expression. Translations, Goodman notes, are not always trustworthy.⁴¹ As I have discussed earlier, even accurate translations are not necessarily written in ways that are accessible to readers without background in rabbinics. In addition to problems inherent in the primary sources, Goodman highlights a dearth of scholarship in rabbinics that attempts to transmit a specialist's findings in ways that are accessible to non-specialists. In short, non-specialists looking to use rabbinic literature in their own research face problems both with primary texts and secondary literature that is based heavily on rabbinic sources.

For my graduate course, independent research projects consisted of student presentations and seminar papers, which were aimed to develop skills in presenting one's ideas orally and in writing.⁴² In their papers and presentations, I found that some students demonstrated an ability to access and critically read primary texts on their own. For example, in a discussion of a text on burial practices in tractate Semahot, one student wrote:⁴³ "Does this discussion lead to the conclusion that sheets were not used in secondary

40 Martin Goodman and Philip Alexander, eds., *Rabbinic Texts and the History of Late-Roman Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2010).

41 Goodman, introduction to *Rabbinic Texts*, 1-3.

42 On the importance of writing assignments for teaching classical Jewish texts, see Kanarek and Lehman, "Assigning Integration," 18-32, which seeks to develop seminary students' spiritual connections with the text. My goal is to promote the integration of rabbinics into graduate students' areas of personal research interest—both, I believe, can be categorized as different types of text-to-self connections, as elucidated in Keene and Zimmermann, *Mosaic of Thought*, 21.

43 The title of the external tractate Semahot ("Gladness") is a euphemism for its subject matter, as it addresses laws related to death, burial, and mourning. It has been dated to the third or eighth century CE; see Eyal Ben-Eliyahu, Yehudah Cohn, and Fergus Millar, *Handbook of Jewish Literature from Late Antiquity, 135-700 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2012), 56.

burials? No. The fact that there is a discussion about the role of a sheet in ossuaries insinuates: (1) sheets were used—otherwise, there would be no reason to counsel against them; and (2) there is a difference in opinion concerning proper burial, suggesting various methods were probably employed.” She continued that when the rabbis enact a prohibition, we should be skeptical of the extent to which it was followed. Such prohibitions may also indicate that the rabbis were responding to real practices that were known to them. This demonstrates knowledge of the prescriptive—rather than descriptive—character of rabbinic literature, as well as the early rabbis’ lack of authority and other important current scholarly views of rabbinic literature.⁴⁴

Both the specific challenges of secondary scholarship and the students’ success in overcoming them became apparent through their research. This was evident, for example, in a co-presentation by two students on a scholarly dispute over the interpretation of possible ritual baths found in Jerusalem.⁴⁵ These articles, like many studies on the archaeology of ancient and late antique Israel, draw heavily on rabbinic sources, integrating their concepts and terminology throughout. The students’ first impression was that the authors of the articles presumed that rabbinic literature is *sui generis*, unique, and thus untranslatable to the uninitiated. They noted that many issues were left unexplained in the articles, leaving the students to wonder if the absence of explanation was a product of the authors’ own lack of clarity or that the authors felt no explanation was needed, because the point would be well-known to those in the field.

Illustrative were the students’ handouts that they themselves prepared for other students to better understand the material. One included a glossary of terms, such as *avodah*, *terumah*, *zavim*, etc. Notably, the handout

44 On rabbinic authority, see Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 103–28. On the prescriptive character of rabbinic literature, see Michael L. Satlow, *Tasting the Dish: Rabbinic Rhetorics of Sexuality* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 8.

45 This project contrasted the following studies: Yonatan Adler, “The Ritual Baths Near the Temple Mount and Extra-Purification before Entering the Temple Courts: A Reply to Eyal Regev,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 56, no. 2 (2006): 209–15; Eyal Regev, “The Ritual Baths Near the Temple Mount and Extra-Purification before Entering the Temple Courts,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 55, no. 2 (2005): 194–204.

included *mikveh* together with its plural form *mikva'ot* and two alternative spellings—*mikweh*, *mikweh*—again highlighting the difficulties that differences in transliteration can create for non-specialists. The handouts also included a reconstruction of the layout of the Temple compound, which the scholarly articles had not provided. Here we see the students using visual methods to better understand the texts at hand, both the scholarly literature and the rabbinic material on which it is based. As I noted earlier, creating visual and other sensory images from the text is an important attribute of a proficient reader.⁴⁶ In analyzing the aforementioned discussion of ritual baths, the students also demonstrated an understanding of the kinds of assumptions that each author made with regard to the authority of the rabbinic texts.

That students had developed a good grasp of modern scholarly discourse on rabbinics was also evident in their increased awareness of various methodological problems. For example, in comparing ossuaries to a rabbinic discussion of burial practices, one student pointed out the difficulties in “projecting rabbinical values on archaeological material predating the genesis of the rabbinic period (circa 200 CE)” and “interpreting archaeological data with an anachronistic lens.” Understanding that it was necessary to address the chronological gap, she cited and discussed scholarship that takes the position that early rabbinic texts can reliably preserve traditions from the late Second Temple era. In this particular case, she juxtaposed and analyzed approaches by Catherine Hezser and Jodi Magness, siding with Magness.⁴⁷ Indeed, the student’s awareness of this issue and her ability to argue a particular side of it demonstrate a level and type of proficiency I was seeking to develop—namely, the ability to read and understand scholarship that is based heavily on rabbinics.

Similarly, another student’s research showed an insightful understanding of the methodological issues involved in using M. Middot for research on the Temple Mount, which had been destroyed long before the tractate was

46 Keene and Zimmermann, *Mosaic of Thought*, 22-23.

47 Catherine Hezser, “Correlating Literary, Epigraphical, and Archaeological Sources,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine*, ed. Catherine Hezser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9-27; Jodi Magness, *Stone and Dung, Oil and Spit: Jewish Daily Life in the Time of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

compiled. This project demonstrated a good grasp of studies by Naftali Cohn, Joshua Schwartz, Yehoshua Peleg, and others, as the student had displayed an excellent understanding of the nuances of these scholars' arguments.⁴⁸ The student concluded by highlighting the limitations of using M. Middot as a source for the layout of the Temple compound.

In assessing the independent research projects, there is strong evidence that some students sought out, accessed, read, and analyzed the primary sources on their own. For some students, however, whether this was achieved was more ambiguous. In these cases, it was difficult to determine if the students accessed and read the primary texts on their own or limited their search to texts that were discussed in secondary scholarship. In reassessing my goals, it seems unlikely and perhaps counter-productive for all students whose scholarship does not focus on Jewish studies to be reading these texts without the opinions of specialists in hand. To be sure, even understanding the specialists' opinions in scholarly writings presents obstacles that must be overcome.

The students' research projects also brought to the fore an interesting paradox in teaching Talmud to the uninitiated at the university level. On the one hand, neophytes can understandably confuse terms that may look similar, such as Mishnah and Midrash. And yet, they also had read these texts in a highly critical way and within their late-antique historical contexts, both due to the fact that they were unencumbered by the perspectives and presuppositions that often come with learning to read Talmud in a traditional setting.

Narratives and Material Culture

In assessing my teaching and student performance at the end of the course, I find that narratives and material culture provide especially effective frameworks for teaching students to read rabbinic literature. The effectiveness of introducing rabbinic literature through narratives supports the approaches of Holzer, Kent, and Rubenstein that I discussed earlier. Just as they

48 Naftali S. Cohn, *The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Joshua Schwartz and Yehoshua Peleg, "Are the 'Halachic Temple Mount' and the 'Outer Court' of Josephus One and the Same?" in *Studies in Josephus and the Varieties of Ancient Judaism: Louis H. Feldman Jubilee Volume*, ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen and Joshua J. Schwartz (Leiden, Neth.: E. J. Brill, 2007), 207-22.

demonstrated the effectiveness of narratives as an entry into rabbinics for Jewish educators, in adult education and in other popular educational settings, I find that narratives are effective for introducing rabbinic texts to graduate students at a secular university.⁴⁹ Moreover, whereas Holzer and Kent promote the use of “miniature narratives” of just a few lines long, I add that longer narratives are equally effective.

The very broad range of material culture, from architecture to religious and domestic items, also provided a useful inroad to teaching students to read and use rabbinic texts.⁵⁰ The students who engaged with rabbinic literature the most were those whose research projects focused on material culture. The visibility of material culture presents some advantages for the uninitiated, as visuals can help compensate for a reader’s lack of background knowledge.⁵¹ Material culture can strengthen the students’ understanding of a text by forging tangible and visual connections with the subject matter.⁵²

Those interested in material culture, moreover, have much to gain by learning to read and use rabbinic texts. The rabbis were extensively interested in how laws applied to all aspects of daily life, such as cooking, eating, building, and weaving. This produced discussions that included intricate details on the features and uses of pots and pans, lamps and houses, and clothing and courtyards—all items valuable to cultural historians.⁵³ For example, the ancient uses of ceramic oil lamps found throughout Near Eastern archaeological sites can be illuminated by the discussion of Sabbath laws in M. Shabbat 2:1-3, which includes details on the kinds of materials used for wicks (e.g., cedar fiber, raw silk, flax) and the oils used as fuel (e.g., sesame oil, nut oil, fish oil, olive oil).⁵⁴ Similarly, the potential uses for the baskets found at the Cave of Letters (second

49 Holzer and Kent, *Philosophy of Havruta*, 208-11; Rubenstein, “From History to Literature,” 5-8.

50 The usefulness of archaeology and material culture for teaching rabbinic literature has also been noted by Levisohn, “What are the Orientations,” 62.

51 Harvey and Goudvis, *Strategies That Work*, 7-8.

52 On using different senses to foster meaning and understanding for readers, see *ibid.*, 7, 22; Keene and Zimmermann, *Mosaic of Thought*, 22-23.

53 Leib Moscovitz, *Talmudic Reasoning: From Casuistics to Conceptualization* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 47.

54 For an overview of oil lamps and their importance in the study of late-antique Judaism, see Gregg E. Gardner, “City of Lights: The Lamps of Roman and Byzantine Jerusalem,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 77, no. 4 (2014): 284-90.

century CE) are illuminated by rabbinic discussions of the *quppa*, i.e., a wicker basket.⁵⁵ Yehoshua Brand's massive collection and analysis of rabbinic discussions of ceramic vessels attests to the importance of objects to the rabbis and, in turn, the Talmud's usefulness for modern-day students of material culture.⁵⁶ In short, attention to material culture can provide effective motivation and a useful aid for non-specialist students to learn to read rabbinic literature.⁵⁷

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have explored and reflected upon the application of Jonathan Z. Smith's goal to make the strange familiar in the teaching of Talmud to graduate students at a secular university.⁵⁸ Rabbinic texts *are* strange. Written by and for a small circle of Torah scholars who lived long ago, their language, form, modes of reasoning, and presuppositions make them difficult for non-rabbinicists to penetrate, even in an English translation. All of this makes learning to read the Talmud significantly difficult. However, many of these challenges can be overcome. I have explored how students can learn to read rabbinic literature for the purposes of pursuing their own research.⁵⁹ I have found that narratives and attention to material

55 Gregg E. Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 63-83. While most references to *quppa* in rabbinic texts denote a wicker basket, in a handful of instances *quppa* refers to a communal charity fund.

56 Yehoshua Brand, *Ceramics in Talmudic Literature [Hebrew]* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kuk, 1953); likewise, see the classic work of Samuel Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie*. 3 vols. (Leipzig: G. Fock, 1910-1912). For more recent studies, including methodological assessments for integrating material culture and rabbinic texts, see Yaron Z. Eliav, "Samuel Krauss and the Early Study of the Physical World of the Rabbis in Roman Palestine," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 65, no. 1 (2014): 38-57; Catherine Hezser, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Joshua J. Schwartz, "The Material Realities of Jewish Life in the Land of Israel, C. 235-638," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism: Volume Four: The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 431-56.

57 See further Gregg E. Gardner, "Reading Between the Strata: Teaching Rabbinic Literature with Material Culture," *Teaching Theology and Religion*.

58 Smith, "God Save This Honourable Court," 382-83, 389.

59 One student commented in the evaluations that he or she appreciated the focus on practical research methods, "It's more important for us to learn to research, rather than just

culture can provide effective entry points to learn to read and effectively use rabbinic literature for those who specialize in other areas of the ancient world. By the end of the semester, many students who had never seen nor heard of the Talmud previously could skillfully work their way through secondary scholarship, access and interpret the primary sources (to varying extents), and integrate all of this into a graduate-level research project in fields such as early Christianity, ancient history, archaeology, and classics. If not entirely familiar, I believe that the Talmud was made significantly less strange to my students.

knowing the material.” Similarly, another student wrote, “Perhaps what I found most beneficial from the course was learning how to refine my research skills. . . . This class was more than just knowing the material, but knowing how to question and use the material. This is a skill I will be able to take with me throughout my academic career.”