



# Talmud that Works Your Heart: New Approaches to Reading

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## The Philosophy: Reading for What?

Michaelson asks: “Of what value are sorrow and tears? How can one put them to use for purposes of a life politics?” Let me try to answer what is perhaps intended to be nothing more than a rhetorical question, a question for which no answer is really desired. . . . Call it sentimental, call it Victorian and nineteenth century, but I say that anthropology that doesn’t break your heart just isn’t worth doing any more.<sup>1</sup>

Some years ago, a rabbinical student who was several weeks into his first semester of Talmud study approached a colleague of mine and said, “When you teach me Talmud, you are assuming this is the *first* time that I am studying it.” My colleague was stunned, and as the student paused for effect, he thought, “I *have* been thinking this is the first time that my students are learning these texts. Have I been underestimating them? Should I be shooting higher?” The student then continued, “This is not the *first* time I am studying Gemara . . . this is the *last* time. I will never open this book again. So, you’d better teach me what you want me to know.” Setting aside, for the moment, the tone with which the student expressed himself, there is something important to be learned here. At best, this student feels that the Talmud

1 Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 176-77. Behar cites Scott Michaelsen, from David E. Johnson, Scott Michaelsen, *Anthropology’s Wake: Attending to the End of Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press) 2008.

cannot be harmonized with his values and, at worst, that it is downright immoral. This student is not alone. Every semester, there is at least one student who enters my class already hating the Talmud.

These students echo feelings that I myself have had on reading certain passages, and yet, I am compelled by the Talmud—by its depth and by the *way* in which it is traditionally studied. So, I ask myself, “Can we read Talmud to create a kinder, more compassionate, empathetic, and self-reflective society?” English professor Ihab Hassan once asked his student teachers, “Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?”<sup>2</sup> That is the question that this reading system addresses. *Can we read Talmud so that people stop killing each other?*

Usually, a student will leave my beginners’ Talmud class able to identify the parts of an argument; understand how those parts relate to one another; know what the keywords are that produce the argument; recognize how the argument fits into the greater context; and know the named rabbis, as well as some information about the text’s historical relevance. But over recent years, I have been asking, “Is this enough?”

“Reading to work the heart” is far less clear-cut than other reading methods. I could say to the students, “I want you to be able to translate all the words” or, “I want you to be able to tell the earlier layers from the later ones”—but this would only address a small part of my ultimate goal. Rather, I am asking them to read Talmud by addressing its moral (and immoral) issues. I want to teach them how to read *all* of the stories, including those in which the rabbis reject saving a non-Jew’s life if it would mean transgressing Shabbat;<sup>3</sup> those in which they debate the mechanics of sex with a three year old girl;<sup>4</sup> and those in which they (on more than one occasion) even commit murder.<sup>5</sup> I want to provide students the opportunity to use their encounters with rabbinic texts to deepen themselves in multiple ways: as individuals, in their relationships with others, and in their relationship with the material itself. And so, I premiered the course Talmud Through a Moral Lens to investigate a mode of reading Talmud that

2 Mary Rose O’Reilly, *The Peaceable Classroom* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1993), 9.

3 M. Yoma 8:7.

4 B. Niddah 45a.

5 See, for example, B. Yoma 22a-23b and B. Bava Kamma 117a.

both excites and scares me. I wanted to know: “Is there a way to read Talmud that will help us grow, even when the Talmud *itself* does not reflect our values? What qualities can we cultivate in ourselves through encounters not only with the Talmud’s “friendly” sides but even (or perhaps, particularly) with its “unfriendly” ones? In short, I wanted to know if there is a way to read Talmud that not only “works the brain,” but also “works the heart.”

The way I determined to set about this was to treat the Talmud as a new genre<sup>6</sup>—which I will call “summons.”<sup>7</sup> By that, I mean to treat the texts of the Talmud as if they exist to help us achieve holiness, not by telling us what is or what should be, but by impelling us to interact with the text. It is a text that pushes our buttons and by which we can be pushed to become ever more reflective, understanding, empathetic, discerning, and expansive.

## Methodological Background

The idea of reading to “work the heart” draws largely from Hans Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, in which the interaction with a text is an I-Thou encounter. From this perspective, the text itself is an “Other” with whom the reader is in conversation. The primary purpose of that encounter is for the reader to develop self-understanding. The text is historically situated, but so too is the reader, who is “prejudiced” by the lens of her own historical moment.<sup>8</sup> Although “understanding” is never achievable, the encounter itself has ethical “significance”:

[T]he understanding of the Other possesses a fundamental significance.  
 ... In the end, I thought the very strengthening of the Other against myself would, for the first time, allow me to open up the real possibility

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6 For more on the question of rabbinics and genre, see Julia Watts Belser, “Between the Human and the Holy: The Construction of Talmudic Theology in Massekhet Ta’anit” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2008), 36-43; Barry S. Wimpfheimer, *Narrating the Law: A Poetics of Talmudic Legal Stories*, 1st ed., Divinations, Rereading Late Ancient Religion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); David Charles Kraemer, *Reading the Rabbis: The Talmud as Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3-9, 142-50.

7 I did not have this word at the time I was teaching the course but feel that it best describes the work I was doing.

8 Prejudice is not a derogatory term for Gadamer, but simply a given condition of all understanding.

of understanding. To allow the Other to be valid against Oneself—and from there to let all my hermeneutic works slowly develop—is not only to recognize in principle the limitation of one’s own framework, but is also to allow one to go beyond one’s own possibilities, precisely in a dialogical, communicative, hermeneutic process.<sup>9</sup>

Gadamer is insistent that the meeting of Oneself with the Other must take place through truly seeing the Other in that “Other’s” fullness and not as a mirror reflection of ourselves. Filled with unfamiliar characters making choices we ourselves would not make, plus a foreign language and a foreign culture, the Talmud here plays the role of paradigmatic “Other.”

If the Gemara becomes the Other that must be “valid against Oneself,” then the self has the opportunity to grow through the encounter with the Gemara, whether or not one likes (or even “accepts”) what the Gemara seems to be saying. The encounter with the Gemara as summons excites self-reflection, making us more ethical human beings—not through being told or shown, but through offering us an encounter with the wholly “Other.”<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the heavy influence that Gadamer’s philosophy has had on my work, while teaching and writing I stumbled across the theory of transformative learning (TL):

Transformative education involves experiencing a deep structural shift in the basic premises of our thoughts, feelings and action. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves an understanding of ourselves and our self-locations, our relations with other humans and with the natural world . . . our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy.<sup>11</sup>

TL does not stop at increasing knowledge or developing skills. It also changes the learners’ understanding of themselves, of other people, and of the world

9 Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity, Subject and Person,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 33, no. 3 (2000): 284.

10 See also Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). Nussbaum advocates teaching literature in order to “cultivate humanity.”

11 Edmund O’Sullivan, Amish Morrell, and Mary Ann O’Connor, *Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning: Essays on Theory and Praxis*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 18.

and opens the mind and heart wider. At the same time, TL does not do away with the need for mastery of content. On the contrary—that mastery is essential; but so too is the possibility for transformation that emerges from the encounter with the material. The result is a learning experience that directly employs the theories of Gadamer.

The philosophies of Gadamer and TL are truly inspiring, but they offered only theory and provided little practical advice on how to apply that theory. To begin with, particularly with Gadamer, material on *how* teachers implemented these philosophies in the classroom was hard to come by. In addition, I found no TL material to address the teaching of religious texts, particularly those with complicated value systems. I was suggesting an entirely new enterprise that required reading the Talmud, not as we have traditionally, but as a new genre, as it were—a genre whose intent was to awaken us and to summon us to become our best selves.

## Course Background

I taught Talmud Through a Moral Lens at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, once a week for fourteen weeks. I could give the students no mandatory homework by the rules of the Yeshivah. The participants were ten college-educated students in their later twenties to thirties. Most considered themselves progressive Jews. They had a wide range of experience with Talmud, from those who knew almost no Hebrew or Aramaic, to those who had spent three years in rabbinical school and had significant exposure and some proficiency with understanding the texts. With these different levels of experience, I decided to present each text in both the original and in translation.

On one hand, the students were unique in their disposition for this work. All of them had taken a year of their lives to move to Jerusalem and to study at the Conservative Yeshiva, an institution tailored to teach only religious subjects. Simply by virtue of this, they were already invested and responsive to a reflective experience. Some articulated that they were searching for the meaning in their own tradition that they had found in the religious traditions and texts of other cultures and religions. On the other hand, while halakhic Jews study the Talmud as a religious practice and seek to understand it in the context of their daily lives, this would not necessarily be the case for

progressive, non-halakhic Jews. For them, the texts have no intrinsic legal-practical value, and they have no pre-defined or natural connection to these texts. Could non-halakhic liberal Jews read texts that differed vastly from their own value systems and ways of thinking with the goal of becoming better human beings? With this question, I entered the semester.

## Personal Challenges

There are two challenges in teaching how to read “Talmud as summons” that I realize are particular to my personality, but I believe they are worth mentioning as they do inform my pedagogy. To begin with, I had to overcome my discomfort with the hubris of saying, “I use these texts to be self-reflective, and I’m going to show you how to do that.” It was difficult for me to find words to explain what it was that I wanted them to do without (inadvertently) suggesting to a class of wonderful students, many of whom I had not met before, that they are not yet “kind enough,” “empathetic enough,” or “self-reflective enough,” and that I wanted them to learn or improve those skills through our reading.

The second challenge was that, while teaching this class I learned much about my own fear of venturing into the world of emotional reactions and “the work of the heart” in the context of a classroom. While I knew the only way to read the Talmud as summons was to enter the sphere of the personal, I feared invading my students’ privacy in general and, specifically, of pushing them too hard, demanding vulnerability from them without knowing them well, asking them to do something beyond “ordinary Talmud study” in a Talmud class, and as well, displaying my own vulnerability in order to model the behavior I sought from them. I feared asking any number of questions that pushed *too far*, or having a conversation drift *too far* into the emotional—I was afraid of losing them in the process of helping them to find themselves. My journal as I prepared for the sixth class shows my concern for these issues:

I am afraid of asking the difficult questions. I am afraid I don’t know what those questions are. I keep giving-up on the writing exercises and just doing the text. Last week, I told the story [of the Mittler Rebbe]<sup>12</sup> ...

I should have asked my students, “Have any of you ever done that? Ever

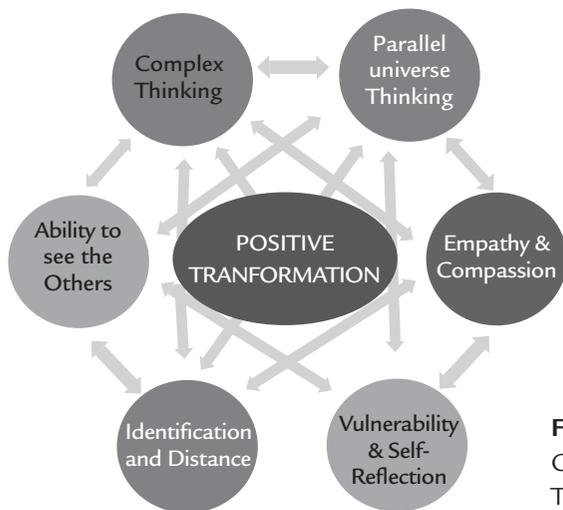
12 See below 191 for story of the Mittler Rebbe.

tried to find that place inside when someone says something you can't believe they are saying?" But I didn't do that. I was not brave in the moment. So we did other things in class. Good things. But not *that*.

Where this discomfort most often played out was in transitions from the very intense textual analysis that served as the base for the personal work and the personal work itself. My journal after the first class read, "What I most wonder about is how I am going to transition in class from our intensive work on the Talmud text to the question of what this means about us as human beings. I want to do that organically, but I do not know how."

## Methods and Techniques

This process defied linearity, at every step requiring skills *a fortiori* that we were to learn as we went through the process itself.<sup>13</sup> Included in these competencies were the performance of complex analyses; the ability to stand in the "Other's" shoes; the awareness that the Other is *not* the same as me; proficiency in thinking outside of the box; facility in considering options rather than jumping to immediate conclusions; and heavy doses of empathy, compassion, and kind-



**Figure 1** The Network of Competencies for Positive Transformation.

<sup>13</sup> My thanks to Rabbi Toba Spitzer for her assistance in articulating this aspect of skill acquisition.

ness.<sup>14</sup> The process is, in Gadamer’s words, “dialogical.” One cannot place one of these goals before the other (see Fig. 1). For example, in order to acquire empathy, we need to learn to engage in “parallel universe thinking,”<sup>15</sup> which requires complex thinking and the ability to see the Other. The ability to see the Other, in turn, requires empathy. Gadamer’s recognition that reading in this way “is to allow one to go beyond one’s own possibilities” is true, both in terms of process and outcome. That is, in order for me to engage, I must allow myself to go beyond my current possibilities as I perceive them. And this opens me further to even more possibilities. In other words, there is no “first step.” The only way to acquire these skills, habits, and character traits, is to jump right in.

Stage 1 of my methodology was to do a close reading of the text in order to foster complexity and build some of the aforementioned skills. This would lay the groundwork for Stage 2, which involved reading the text as “summons” and would reinforce certain of the skills, as well as engage some of the others. The techniques I used in this first stage to cultivate uncertainty and foster complex readings were as follows:

1. Choosing material that would allow the students to be critical but could also push them to understand and empathize with the Other
2. Leaving ambiguity or multivalence in my translations
3. Putting the text “on stage”
4. Providing information about unfamiliar concepts and making available aids to understanding our text, when necessary
5. Providing historical context and employing “*historical thinking*,”<sup>16</sup> in order to dislodge assumptions or preconceived notions
6. Examining the text in literary context

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14 The fields of TL and social justice divide into three basic foci of transformation; my interest primarily is in the outcomes of the third: “a theory of existence, which views people as subjects, not objects, who are constantly reflecting and acting on the transformation of their world so it can become a more equitable place for all to live.” See Heather L. Stuckey, Edward W. Taylor, and Patricia Cranton, “Developing a Survey of Transformative Learning Outcomes and Processes Based on Theoretical Principles,” *Journal of Transformative Education* 11, no. 4 (2013).

15 The practice of exploring multiple explanations to explain a person’s behavior.

16 Samuel S. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*, Critical Perspectives on the Past (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

By the time we reached Stage 2, most of the “real” work had already been accomplished. We had repeatedly challenged ideas about right and wrong, judgments about what was happening in the text and ideas about what the text intended to convey, as well as calling into question the students’ own personal relationships to the text. Stage 2 carried through some of the techniques of stage 1 (primarily cultivating uncertainty), but the goal of stage 2 was to read the text as summons (although, at the time, I was not framing it that way). In order to do so, the added techniques I used in class were:

1. Framing my approach to understanding the self through poetry and story
2. Remaining complex: techniques to avoid reductionism
  - a. Staying close to the text
  - b. Asking questions about the text that bridge between it and ourselves
  - c. Asking questions about ourselves that reflect back on the text
3. Encouraging and exhibiting vulnerability and self-reflection

## Stage 1: Fostering Complexity—Balancing Intimacy and Alienation

When I have taught Talmud in the past, I have noticed two opposite ways that students experience the text—for some, it feels remote and alien, while for others, it feels intimate, sacred, and infallible.<sup>17</sup> The first student will reject the texts. The second will run circles around the texts to make them conform to what he/she believes the text should say or wants it to say,<sup>18</sup> ultimately opening the text to presentism, ethnocentrism, and egocentrism. Neither group’s response allows for complex analysis.

Both my choice of texts and my teaching require a careful balance between making the strange familiar and making sure that the familiar is not *too* familiar. Although the idea of cultivating uncertainty in a classroom may

17 An equal but opposite manifestation of intimacy occurs when a student feels so identified with the text that she must utterly reject it, so as not to be implicated by its problematic aspects.

18 This phenomenon creates what Paulo Freire refers to as “circles of certainty.” Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000), 38-39. For the relationship between uncertainty and social justice education, see Doris Santoro, “Teaching to Save the World: Avoiding Circles of Certainty in Social Justice Education,” *Philosophy of Education Yearbook* (2009).

seem incongruous, it is essential to my teaching. In my methodology, “disequilibrium,” Piaget’s theory of resolving new information into current schemas, which he believed was vital to the development of logical thought, is a prerequisite to seeing the “Other” in our relationships.<sup>19</sup> If a reader is convinced that her way of understanding is the only way, it is likely that this will translate to her life as well. The uncertainty of the skillful reader with a refined approach is what helps her to continually reassess as new information is introduced or greater understanding is achieved.

“Working the heart” is meant to cause a disruption in what Paulo Freire calls “circles of certainty,”<sup>20</sup> by identifying (and dispelling) responses to a text that are entirely based on what we *think* we know. But, while trying to dispel the predisposition to “know and judge,” I also want to keep my students close enough so that reading Talmud *matters*. How can they truly meet the Other, if they do not feel at all attached to the text? Reading the Talmud as “summons” demands the ability to hold both enough distance to quell our assumptions and enough familiarity to feel something, to create meaning. I want the students to grow through *getting to know* a text that is laden with religious meaning, is entirely foreign, and yet, they can claim as their own. As I see it, this has to take place on several levels, some that support familiarity, some that support healthy distance, and some that maintain a balance of both simultaneously.

**Where Do We Begin? Framing.** Both what I do in the classroom and how I prepare for the classroom is directly affected by these considerations. In my preparation, this is reflected in what materials I choose to teach, and in how I translate that material. To preserve the balance between familiarity and healthy distance, I feel texts that might disrupt the students’ equilibrium would likely facilitate deep discussion and engagement. Thus, for this class, I chose texts in which the message (and many times the plot itself) was unclear, and they could legitimately be read in a number of ways and on multiple levels. In part, classroom discussion involved sifting out possible readings of the Talmud text from unlikely ones, still allowing for multiplicity. I wanted to provide for indeterminacy, while not slipping into moral or literary relativism,

19 See, Jean Piaget, *The Equilibration of Cognitive Structures: The Central Problem of Intellectual Development*, trans. Terrance Brown and Kishore Julian Thampy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 10.

20 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

or sentimentalism. At the same time, for today's liberal reader, the Talmud does little to promote identification with the characters and more often evokes estrangement (and sometimes derision). Hence, I chose texts that could bridge between this altogether different reality, the Other, and the students' own cultural reality, and offer access to the familiar as well as the strange. Additionally, if a text had elements with which the students might disagree, that friction itself could stimulate conversation. I did not want to alienate them entirely with "terrible texts" merely to provoke discussion and regress into sensationalism, and yet, I wanted to deal head-on with highly problematic material. Ultimately, my basic organizing principle for choosing my texts was to present texts that were as complex as the Talmud itself.

My final criterion for choosing texts was that they had to be engaging and interesting. In what follows in this chapter, I will use B. Yoma 23a, a story about a priestly murder that we studied during the semester. The story had intricacies that could lead to in-depth conversations, and was both familiar (murder) and strange (Temple practice) at the same time:

Our Rabbis taught: It once happened that two priests were tied as they ran and ascended the ramp. One of them ran ahead into his colleague's "four cubits of the altar," He took a knife and thrust it into his heart. R. Tsadok stood on the steps of the Hall and said: "Our Brothers of the House of Israel, listen! Behold it says [in Torah], 'If a corpse is found in the land then your elders and judges shall go out . . . ' (Deut 21:1) For whom shall we bring the heifer whose neck is to be broken? On [behalf of] the city or on [behalf of] the Temple Courts?" All the people burst out weeping. The father of the boy came and found him while he was still in convulsions. He said, "May he be your atonement. My son is still in convulsions and the knife has not become impure." [His remark] comes to teach that the purity of their vessels was graver for them than the shedding of blood.<sup>21</sup>

**Translating the texts.** It was not only the materials I chose, however, that went into my preparation. On the most basic level, if my readers were to have any investment in these materials, they needed, first, to be able to simply

21 For an extended analysis of this passage, see Marjorie Lehman, "Imagining the Priesthood in Tractate *Yoma*: Mishnah *Yoma* 2:1-2 and BT *Yoma* 23a," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues* 28 (Spring 2015): 88-105.

decipher the text. Since few of them had a mastery of Hebrew and Aramaic, a translation was necessary.<sup>22</sup> However, given that exploring multiple meanings is a key element in a complex reading, I could not use a translation that “answers” a question before the readers ever realized there *was* a question. Thus, in order to challenge students to interrogate their own judgments through an encounter with the “wholly Other,” I created and distributed translations that preserved the multivocality and ambiguity of that Other—the talmudic text.<sup>23</sup> This meant maintaining the terse and ambiguous style of the original text, sometimes leaving an ambiguous word or phrase untranslated (substituting a transliteration), and sometimes dealing with translation issues in the classroom, as we did with the above Yoma text.

Choosing an appropriate text would set the stage for this method of reading, but it was during the classroom discussion of that text that the primary work took place. There, I needed to create the relationship that Gadamer advocates: a balance between the distance that ensures careful critique and the intimacy that allows for a full knowing of the Other, (in this case, the talmudic text). This challenge was heightened by the short amount of time we had to cultivate a relationship with the texts as a whole.

The primary way to disrupt understanding, while allowing students access to the texts, was through translations *in class*. In texts where I left words transliterated, I located other contexts in which the word or phrase appeared and reviewed those in class, giving students multiple meanings with which to work. We then used these to determine possibilities for how *our text* might be contextualizing that word or phrase. In the Yoma text, however, the ambiguity that I wished to highlight lay in the father’s response (*harei hu kaparatkhem ve-adayin beni mefarper ve-lo nitmeah sakin*) and was difficult to transmit in a written handout. Thus, after reading the above translation in class, I listed on the board other options for the meaning of the father’s statement:

1. The first half of the statement:
  - a. May he be your atonement
  - b. May this be your atonement

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22 I always included the original text alongside the translation for those who wanted to refer back to it.

23 I translated with an eye toward staying close to the language of the original Hebrew and Aramaic.

- c. Behold, he is your atonement
  - d. Behold, this is your atonement
2. The second half of the statement:
- a. My son is still in convulsions and the knife has not become impure
  - b. *And* my son is still in convulsions and the knife has not become impure
  - c. *That* my son is still in convulsions and the knife has not become impure

I then had the students read various combinations of the father's statement in a variety of tones of voice, asking them to experiment with different emotions behind the tones expressed. Some students read the father's words (1a, 1b) somberly, as a wish or a hope for the priestly clan that either his son, the (still pure) knife, or some other "this" should atone for the murder. Others read them (1c, 1d) as didactic. Some students suggested that however one reads the statement, the father is likening his dying son, stabbed with a knife normally used for sacrifice, to a sacrificial animal used for atonement.

A student raised the question, "What does the extra '*and* my son' (2b) contribute to the meaning?" Was the father linking "may he be (or this is) your atonement" to the fact that his son was still in convulsions? Another student read "*that* my son" (2c) to mean, "It is your atonement that my son is still in convulsions and [thus] the knife has not become impure." In this case, the student pointed out that the father offers the purity of the knife *as the atonement* for the murder, rather than offering his son as the equivalent of a sacrifice. One student suggested that the father was like Aharon at the death of his sons, not truly responding emotionally. Another suggested that he was responding like a proud father who extols his son for hanging on to life until the sacred knife is removed from his body, so as not to defile the knife. At the end of the discussion, I introduced another possibility: "How would he be saying these words if he was angry?" This elicited a discussion of whether the father might ultimately be speaking sarcastically, critiquing, rather than cleaving to the cult of purity.

Did the father care more about the purity of the knife than his son's death? Were his words ironic or sincere? Was his voice breaking or was he indifferent and unmoved by his son's death? Was he included in those who cared more for their vessels or was he reprimanding them? Without veering

from the text in any way, multiple interpretations emerged from this exercise. The more that new options for reading were introduced, the less certain students became of their original readings, responses, and judgments; and the less likely they were to extract simplistic moral lessons from the text.

**Situating the Text in Historical and Literary Context.** Cultivating uncertainty or balancing between familiarity and distance also came into play when thinking about our story relative to its context, and not only when working with multiple translation options. This meant learning more about how the text was situated historically and textually, clarifying entirely foreign concepts, but also investigating what assumptions we brought to the texts, both about the texts themselves and about our own values. Sam Wineburg tells us:

The narcissist sees the world—both past and present—in his own image. Mature historical knowing teaches us to do the opposite: to go beyond our own image, to go beyond our brief life, and to go beyond the fleeting moment in human history into which we have been born.<sup>24</sup>

Even with translation, unfamiliar concepts can make the text impenetrable. I began each unit, therefore, by explaining these blatantly foreign concepts in advance, using a “things you must know to understand this text” introduction. For example, Rabbi Tzadok’s direct challenge to the priests, asking them, “For whom shall we bring the heifer whose neck is to be broken?” is unintelligible to anyone unfamiliar with the ceremony of the *eglah arufah* (heifer whose neck is to be broken), which takes place upon finding a murdered corpse in an open field (Deut 22). The ritual is performed when the murderer remains unknown and is carried out by the elders of the nearest town. Only upon understanding the ritual, did students realize that Rabbi Tzadok’s question was not what it appeared, given that the case concerned a *known* murderer and took place on the grounds of the Temple. Once the students understood this, a discussion ensued about what Rabbi Tzadok was *really* asking about, if not the logistics of the ritual. Likewise, I brought in a picture of the ramp and the altar for the students, which allowed

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24 Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*, 24. Wineburg also relies on “the tension between the familiar and the strange” and, likewise, depends on this tension as a method of “humanization.” See, in particular, *ibid.*, introduction and chapter 5.

them to visually imagine a stage for the story. Later, when I asked questions such as, “How would this look on a stage?” or “What would you do to direct this production?” the visual background to the story was essential.

A more insidious, ensnaring problem than the blatantly unfamiliar, however, is that which *appears familiar*, or known. The students’ familiarity with rabbis of today or with the orthodox Jews of today, for example, was far too easily projected onto the rabbis of the Talmud. Students assumed that the rabbis would be unwilling to critique their own religious system and that rabbis and priests worked in harmony. B. Yoma 23a, however, must be understood in the context of the historically *tense* relationship between the rabbinic and priestly communities. This rabbinic text reports on a priestly murder and critiques the institution of priesthood. So too, Rabbi Tzadok’s dual roles as both priest and rabbi, spanning two communities with complicated relationships, heightens the complexity of the scene. Likewise, at the outset of our discussion, for example, one student commented that the priests racing up the ramp was a debasement of the Temple, missing entirely the fact that this was a practice established *by* the priests. The student applied current perceptions of decorum to the Temple cult. The realization that they could not simply map their own reality onto the text gave them pause and opened space for more questions about historical context.

Interpreting both the unfamiliar and the seemingly familiar as products of historical development offered a deeper “knowing” of the text, and, at the same time, an “un-knowing.” The latter curtailed the impulse to hang onto their assumptions about the motivations or choices of the characters and restrained presentism (applying their own historical position to the text).

Not only the historical context of the text but also the literary context, in which the later sages use this story, is relevant to our own understanding. Thus, after discussing the story on its own terms, we returned to the mishnah that preceded it. Unlike the tannaitic<sup>25</sup> story that we told above, which appears in the Gemara, the mishnah that parallels this story ends by addressing the issue of competition. Coupling the two texts opened up the question of what these texts are *about* and what critique is being offered. Are the parallel stories about competition? Purity? Or, perhaps, it is something else entirely that binds them together?

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25 Belonging to the same historical period as the Mishnah.

## Stage 2: Translating Our Reading into a Summons

Achieving a balance of differentiating between ourselves and the Other, while still understanding and empathizing with the Other, would not emerge from solely intellectually analyzing the text. We needed a process to shape the nature and extent of that encounter. The more we pulled at the material, in order to know the texture of every thread, the more we exercised that skill, and the more we were able to translate it into our understanding of *many different* “Others.” But pulling at the threads is only one essential aspect of this process. *How* we pulled was equally essential. While the reader must come to know and understand the text on its own terms, she must also cultivate an ability to see herself in those who appear within the pages of the Talmud and in their circumstances. Once we had accomplished the complex analysis of the text, we needed to take the reading to the next stage—understanding how the text summons us to become our best selves.

**Where Do We Begin? Framing.** Some of the outside tools that I introduced to frame this very complex and unfamiliar reading process in the classroom included two poems and an old Hassidic story. Each of these demonstrated skills for understanding the Other (whether person or text) in all his/her/its complexity and viewing her/him/it with compassion.

Thich Nhat Hanh’s poem “Call Me by My True Names”<sup>26</sup> focuses on the philosophy that we each embody all possibilities for right action, for wrongdoing, for both victim and perpetrator. Creating changes in our thinking requires identifying these places in ourselves and having compassion and a will to change:

I am the twelve-year-old girl,  
 refugee on a small boat,  
 who throws herself into the ocean  
 after being raped by a sea pirate.  
 And I am the pirate,  
 my heart not yet capable  
 of seeing and loving...

Please call me by my true names,  
 so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once,

26 Nhất Hạnh Thich, *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991).

so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,  
so I can wake up  
and so the door of my heart  
could be left open,  
the door of compassion.

For Thich Nhat Hanh, a renowned Buddhist monk and spiritual guide, only when we acknowledge *all* of who he is are we “calling him by his true names.” I wanted the students to understand and apply this teaching: that we all have within us that which we tend to condemn in others.

Yehudah Amichai’s poem, “From the Place Where We Are Right,” echoes Gadamer’s call to recognize the failings of our own framework and to radically open ourselves to the Other. Amichai calls on us to let go of “the place where we are right” and to question our convictions and behavior in order to make room for a place where “flowers will grow.”<sup>27</sup>

Finally, the story of the Mittler Rebbe, Dov Ber Schneuri, ends as the Rebbe explains to one of his chassidim that he is only able to advise his parishioners to repent for their wrongdoings by first seeking the place inside of *himself* that would commit that particular wrongdoing. I explained that this story had changed me profoundly as a young adult and that it embodies the process that I seek when we are reading the Talmud: to take on the words or actions of a particular rabbi or of the “narrator” (if only for a brief time), whether or not we like them, in order to seek the way in which we may do *teshuvah* (repentance) for that wounded place inside of ourselves.

These particular ways of seeing the world are not self-evident nor are they normally understood as prerequisites for studying Talmud. Thus, it was important to introduce them explicitly early on in the course so that they would be front and center during the second stage of the process.

**Avoiding Reductionism.** Reductionism is one of the main pitfalls of a project designed to take complicated material and have students apply it to their lives. In planning for my fourth class, I wrote the following in my journal:

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<sup>27</sup> Amichai, Yehudah, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 34.

The most difficult thing has been to figure out a way to get them to use the text to self-reflect, while still keeping to the text itself, rather than just say to them “OK, now you’re Moses. How do you feel?”<sup>28</sup> Identifying the elements that make this a more complex process than that—*that* is the challenge.

I did not want the text to become a jumping off point from which to just talk about ourselves or to flatten the text’s depth by glibly applying our own experiences to it. Avoiding reductionism and cultivating the above skills and characteristics, first and foremost, required keeping the discussion close to the text, even while self-reflecting. In order to maintain depth and complexity, we did this while reading the text and through class discussions.<sup>29</sup> Maintaining the variety of perspectives we had accumulated in stage 1 allowed the students more entry points into the material *and* offered them much richer material for analyzing their own behaviors. Hand in hand with this range of perspectives, I sought to apply “parallel universe thinking” to the text, “challenging oneself to identify the many alternatives to the interpretations to which we may be tempted to leap, on insufficient information.”<sup>30</sup> I wanted my students to understand that while perhaps they *could* judge the text the way they originally had (whether positive or negative), they must not *necessarily* do so. Indeed, in each text, we took time to question particular judgments based on elements in the text and to introduce alternative and equally plausible readings.

In addition to staying close to the text, I tried to ask searching questions. The types of questions that would elicit discussions leading us down the path of self-reflection varied greatly from text to text. I asked the students,

28 My thanks to Rabbi Susan Silverman for this phrasing.

29 See, for example, Nel Noddings, *Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 70-72; Jacques Derrida, “The ‘World’ of the Enlightenment to Come (Exception, Calculation, Sovereignty),” *Research in Phenomenology* 33, no. 1 (2003); Steven I. Meisel and David S. Fearon, “‘Choose the Future Wisely’: Supporting Better Ethics through Critical Thinking,” *Journal of Management Education* 30, no. 1 (2006); Tara Fenwick, “Responsibility, Complexity Science and Education: Dilemmas and Uncertain Responses,” *Studies in Philosophy & Education* 28, no. 2 (2009).

30 See Jean Koh Peters and Susan J. Bryant, “Five Habits for Cross-Cultural Lawyering,” in *Race, Culture, Psychology, & Law*, ed. Kimberly Barrett and William George (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005). The authors used this method to challenge their students’ negative responses to clients of different cultures.

for example, what it might have been like to have lunch with the priest who did the stabbing on the day before the incident. What did they imagine about his character? Would they necessarily have noticed anything about him that was “different”? My goal here was to draw attention to the fact that the text presented no indication that the perpetrator was in any way different than his compatriots; rather, it attributed the disaster to a systemic issue—that of the priesthood’s emphasis on competition. Imagining possibilities for who he was and what brought the murderer to stab a fellow priest challenged the perpetrator/victim reading, and opened a conversation about institutional pressures and instances in which we ourselves have failed individuals by conforming to values or practices of an institution. Even as we engaged in this self-reflection, we remained closely anchored to the text as our base, moving back and forth from personal experience to text, rather than allowing for a stream of consciousness conversation that left the text behind.

My purpose throughout was to cultivate an encounter that views the text as summons, a call to look within, not only by leading with bridging questions (such as that above), but by *explaining* the types of questions that this approach requires as we apply the text to our own lives: “What is it that I am not understanding about these opinions or behaviors?” “What information do I need to collect to understand more?” “How can I read this differently if I approach it with compassion?” “What will I learn about myself if I meet this text without beginning at a place where I am right?” All of these questions serve to bridge between the text and the reader, not by *leaving* the text and *moving* to the reader, but by applying parallel methods to understanding ourselves as readers and to understanding the text itself.

### **Taking the Path of Most Resistance: Inventing Vulnerability and Self-Reflection.**

N. Elias reminds us that summoning ourselves is no easy task:

It is hard for human beings to get away from preconceived ideas about themselves and the world and when philosophers suggest “Know thyself” most people are likely to respond “no thanks, we don’t want to know that much.”<sup>31</sup>

31 Quote from N. Elias, *Le Sociedad De Los Individuos* (Barcelona: Peninsula, 1990), 96. Translated to English in Martha Traverso-Yeppez, “Examining Transformative Learning Amidst the Challenges of Self Reflection,” in *Narrating Transformative Learning in Education*, ed. Morgan Gardner and Ursula Anne Margaret Kelly (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 157.

Reading the text as summons requires us to see the struggles, decisions, opinions, and behaviors of those in the texts as connecting with and relevant to our own lives, even when those behaviors or opinions do *not* seem to reflect our own. The skills that are required to truly come to know (that is, to understand and to feel for) the characters of the text necessitate a certain level of vulnerability. It is certainly not a given that adult students taking a class in Talmud, usually a highly intellectual exercise, will be willing to make themselves vulnerable enough in front of classmates and teachers to self-reflect. It was my hope, however, that I could find ways to make that happen aloud in class. I did this both by asking particular questions that required them to be vulnerable and by pushing myself to be vulnerable with them.

Creating a classroom atmosphere of kindness and compassion (which I hoped would allow them a place to be vulnerable) was easy with this particular group. Nevertheless, I myself struggle with both my own and my students' vulnerability in the classroom. I felt this discomfort acutely when managing transitions from textual analysis (Stage 1) to the discussion of how it impacted our lives (Stage 2). I overcame that discomfort by asking my students outright to engage in this experiment with me, making it a joint effort. I also felt it was important to let them know that whatever they were thinking about, they were not alone in their concerns or fears. In class, after studying the story in Yoma, I told them that when I first read this text I had recorded the following thoughts:

"I cannot believe that this is our religious text." I went into it with an incredible amount of judgment about this being the "thing" that we're supposed to be looking at in order to figure out how to be Jews. . . . And for me what happens is when I take it apart like this, it helps me go from "How could that possibly be the story?" to "Wow, that's really the story. It's the story all over the place. It's the story that I'm in. It's the story that everybody else is in." And then the question is—how do we deal with that story?—as opposed to—*how could they ever have done that!* I asked myself—"[referring to a story a student told]. . . . What are the moments when I am so completely submerged in the life of something "bigger," like the institution, or whatever it is, that I cannot see past that?" And that is a story that we are all in. So, it just helps me to feel like this story is actually telling me something; this is actually pulling me somewhere, and I have to look at this.

But, while I could *say* that the story was universal, *showing* it is ultimately more powerful. To do this, I tried modeling what I wanted them to do by exposing outright my own encounters with the text. I myself did each exercise that I assigned to the students and then posted my writings for them. While this did allow me to *model* the process, I also hoped that my own vulnerability would invite them to follow suit.<sup>32</sup> This approach also eased my reticence to ask them to share their own vulnerability and my concerns about the hubris of the enterprise. If during class I was able to demonstrate areas where I myself needed to grow, I was somewhat more comfortable asking them to do so. I wanted my own participation to open a space for them to be able to do the same.

One very straightforward way in which I asked for their vulnerability was through personal questions. Of course, they could choose not to answer, but the questions made room for the personal to be a part of the class. Toward the end of the unit on Yoma, I asked them to consider the underlying transgressions in the story. A selection of those the students suggested included: caring more about ritual and religion than about people (the murderer and the father); putting the institution above the individual (the father and the priests); and competing for “holiness” (the priests, the murderer, the murdered priest). I had them consider whether they themselves had ever been guilty of such transgressions. Could they understand the obsession with ritual that allowed other human beings to become secondary? Had they ever felt ritually competitive? Albeit, in the Yoma text, these impulses resulted in murder and, perhaps (depending on how we read the father’s response), an indifference to the death of a loved one. By reading the text “to work the heart,” I was looking for students to identify with the character’s impulse itself and not necessarily with its outcome in the story. After we had brainstormed the transgressions, I asked, “If you choose one of these—if one of these people or groups of people came to you and said, ‘I did this,’ and you were the Mittler Rebbe, how would you suggest that they do *teshuvah* (repent)? And then the question is, how did you get there?”

I also ended some units with an in-class writing exercise, in which I asked a question prompting students to examine their lives in light of our discussion about the text. The first unit’s writing exercise simply asked, “Is there anything in this text that spoke to your life, made you think differently

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32 I also encouraged them to post to our blog board, though none did.

about yourself, made you question something, or helped you learn something about yourself?” Answering these questions produced a bridge from the material to their very personal experience.

## Evaluating: The Past and the Future

My primary method of assessing this reading process was to ask the students two types of questions: those that would evoke the types of readings that I wanted them to get to (below) and direct and transparent questions about whether the process I described was working for them. An example of the latter occurred toward the end of the course, when I asked whether they thought they had changed as a result of any of what we did (see series of responses below). Whether (and how) we were able to achieve complex thinking and to grow to see the “Other” was reflected in the responses to these questions. After studying Yoma, one student spoke of how this reflective process opened his eyes to the complexity of the text and his own biases:

I think the one thing that might be a little different for me is just reading the text . . . It’s hard not to read it with your own kind of presupposition of what you think the text is going to be saying about what is good and bad, as opposed to then pulling it apart in this way to see the twelve different permutations of what the father says and how that can really influence what the moral judgment is about what it is in the text.

The exercise in which we interpreted the father’s exclamation about his murdered son, introduced into our discussion both the nuance and the uncertainty that reading the Talmud as summons demands. No longer could the student remain with his pre-judgments.

All of these methods—supplying more than one translation, complicating the reading using historical context, and rarely giving an unequivocal answer to a “factual question”—fostered a feeling that the totality of our “knowing” must be examined and re-examined. At the same time as students were accruing more “data” to stand on, they were feeling that accretion of information shifting uncertainly beneath their feet. This made it difficult to map their own assumptions and preconceptions onto the text, and opened

multitudes of possibilities. Paradoxically, these processes served to bring students closer to the text, as one aptly demonstrates:

I think that, like a lot of rabbinic texts, coming into it and looking at the social picture that it's painting . . . initially coming into the text, it looks very alien and kind of blocky (inaudible), and it's like a thing that was happening out there separate from me. And it's really hard to really understand what human stuff is going on underneath all the alien pageantry. But this conversation helped me really . . . If I'm going back and reading the story again, I'll be seeing the characters as much more human, acting in ways that I can intellectually understand where they are coming from and less as dolls strutting across the rabbinic puppet stage.

My journal entry from February 25th records a student's comment to me that was made outside of class:

G told me that he has never considered poetry in the context of Talmud before, and that the two exercises . . . were great for him . . . That they made him think more deeply about the complexity.

A third student said that it was the modeling I had done that helped him "to see . . . this as relevant and meaningful in our day-to-day lives. Things we can actually relate to."

It was your email that talked about your retreat and this conversation<sup>33</sup> that really helped me see the relevance of this text to modern life. And I'm still trying to figure it out. What I'm taking away is something along the lines of the theme we discussed in class, like don't be too righteous. But this specifically deals with institutions, and as L was saying—understanding the individual and detaching yourself from institutional values—so, I'm playing with that. Seeing this as relevant and meaningful in our day-to-day lives. Things we can actually relate to as opposed to a guy stabbing another guy on the altar.

In each of these responses, one specific technique can be identified (the conversation, the exercises, or my personal post) as having served to trigger a

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33 Referring to my post that week. See pp. 194-195.

change in the student. For the first and third students, the utterly alien text is no longer “separate from” the student—it is “much more human” or “relevant and meaningful in our day-to-day lives.” In the second example, the student changed his way of reading the particular text so that his response was no longer as simple as it had seemed to him at first. In all of these writings, however, I believe that the change could not have taken place without all of those elements being present. I am still pondering how to ask *self-reflection questions* that are multi-dimensional and mirror the complexity of the text, as well as how to produce exercises that might evoke these types of changes. For example, the question, “How would you feel if you were in that position?” is not as compelling if the complexity of the position itself is not explored. I asked myself, “How do I begin to ask the kinds of questions that can change a person’s life?”

The students’ varied responses taught me that the work takes place differently for different people and that reading in this way may require many techniques simultaneously. Of course, this is the case with all reading but here that was heightened by the fact that the students were required to take the extra unfamiliar step of “reading as summons.”

Regarding the ability of students to be vulnerable and to self-reflect, while classes for the first two-thirds of the semester contained *moments* of self-reflection, they primarily consisted of more impersonal intellectual conversations about the text. It was quite a while into the semester before students showed vulnerability. Because of my own discomfort moving between the intellectual and the personal, I worked up to being quite transparent about the transition from examining the material’s content to reading the material as “meaning maker.” I told them directly that I was interested in their reflecting on their own culpability for transgressions they had related to in the text. I was moved when a student took on the challenge directly and began to tell a story about himself in relation to the text. That student opened up the space for others to talk about situations that they had been in where they themselves had made these types of choices.

A few examples of what students spoke about demonstrate the range of ways in which they related to the story in Yoma. One student spoke about a close relative dying just after she had converted and being haunted still by her choice to follow a halakhic opinion not to say kaddish over that non-Jewish relative—making a choice to adhere to the authority of the institutional and ritual

establishment, at the expense of her own intuition. Another spoke about a decision to follow the institutional rules and to fail a student for a late paper without querying the circumstances that had led to the delay. A third student spoke about watching to see if others performed all the motions during prayer correctly, sometimes to check himself against others and sometimes to check if they “knew what they were doing.” A fourth student spoke of being shamed precisely for an attempt to pray every word, when one time it had taken him longer to finish than the rest of the group. Overlaid onto these stories was a conversation about repentance and how we would counsel the transgressor (or ourselves) to repent. But what was more significant was the active interweaving into our personal stories of references back to the text itself. In one case, a new interpretation of the father’s response to his son’s death emerged from our reflections about ourselves in response to the text. In another, a student offered a suggestion for the type of *teshuvah* that the priests might take upon themselves.

If a part of my goal was to effect a change in their view of the text, the students’ comments above reflect that objective was met. Did the text effect a transition of the heart? I do not know. At the same time, I think back on times in my life when an event, a statement, or something I learned has profoundly changed me. Did I realize it then or later? Did I claim it or merely ponder it internally?

There are some lessons that I have learned during this first attempt, this experiment of teaching “Talmud to work the heart,” and I consider them here briefly. I believe these lessons will significantly improve my methods and approach for the next time I teach this course.

**Methods of Evaluation.** We did discuss the initial comprehension of texts in class, but it would have been useful to have taken the time to really register initial *reactions* and to *write them down*, in order to have better noticed our own transitions. At the time, I believed this was a poor use of precious time, but it would have allowed us to compare these responses to post-discussion responses. I realized this late in the course, and so, although we sometimes asked these questions informally, I regret not having been more methodical. This would have allowed the class to have a shared sense of whether the process itself was merely adjusting our intellectual readings of the text, or it was also changing our emotional reactions at the beginning of the process, cultivating empathy with positions we had not originally held.

**Time.** It is difficult to tell why it was not until more than halfway through the semester when I felt we had succeeded in “reading the text as summons.” Do I need to explain more clearly? Was it my discomfort with the possible hubris of the project or with the vulnerability it required?<sup>34</sup> Or is it realistically a matter of “personal growth takes time?”

What is certain is that the amount of time allotted to the course was insufficient for the task. My teaching journal reads, “I wish I had more time with them. If I had this to do again, I would insist on more time in the week.”<sup>35</sup> I believe that thoroughly familiarizing the students with the material, allowing for a complex reading, and reading the text as summons is a weighty task for a single semester if one wishes to engage with more than one or two texts.

**Familiarizing the Strange.**<sup>36</sup> In these texts, the rabbi, the father, the murderer, Rabbi Tzadok, the priests, the community, and the *Talmud text itself*—all of these—are our “Other.” I know in the next round of this “adventure of the heart,” I would spend more time on the redactional layer. After analyzing the story of Yoma, I asked the students, “Do you feel like [the text] is trying to grapple with the question of how this [incident] could have happened?” One student answered with a strong critique of the text:

This is, for me at least, the thing that makes it difficult to read the Talmud, more than any other aspect of the Talmud. I think it’s pretty clear that the rabbis have a lot emotionally invested in what they are doing. But the method by which they go about discussing it seems to be calculated to hide all of those emotional, personal, moral issues behind this sort of façade of technicality. This sort of polite fiction of what we’re actually engaged in is a technical discussion, and we are kind of magisterially viewing this system and making sure that we’ve got all the details right. There’s very rarely points in the Talmud where the rabbis really seem to be like . . . where you can really detect their jaws dropping open and them saying “something really significant just happened here—we need to do

34 See also pp. 194-195.

35 Teaching Journal, Jan. 21, 2014.

36 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.

something about it.” Which I think for me at least is the most morally problematic part of the Talmud, because the rabbis seem to be constantly denying their own personal, emotional involvement in what they’re talking about, even though it’s constantly breaking through.

This student expresses difficulty with the Talmud’s cold, technical reasoning in the face of the tragic or appalling. In this class, we did not enter into the realm of the calculated reasoning (which does follow the story). I feel it would have been beneficial to interrogate this phenomenon as “summons” as well. What does it mean to ignore or miss the importance of the “burning issue” (whatever it is in that particular text) in favor of those technical conversations? Without allowing the *text itself* (rather than just the *characters* in the text) to have a place as “Other,” the process of familiarizing the strange cannot be entirely successful. If one successfully reads Talmud as summons, the way the redactors of the text respond to issues should also call to us to become our better selves.

**Framing.** The type of personal self-reflection that I am looking for requires getting used to and is not taught by the Talmud itself. For this reason, I brought in poems and a story at the beginning of the course in order to frame the process. While these were an asset, reading the poems without discussing them was a mistake. Traditionally, reading Talmud is a process that calls intensely on logic—and rarely on emotion. As I was teaching using the poem texts, I slipped back into “reading” in all of the ways I had previously taught reading.<sup>37</sup> There was so little time to spend on the texts that I did not want to divert our attention to the poems. Reading Talmud as summons, however, *demands* of us to draw upon reading skills and materials from other disciplines and to develop those particular skills in addition to the traditional skills specific to the field of rabbinics. Just as “reading Talmud to work the heart” is not intuitive, neither are the messages of these poems. We can read the poems and even agree with them, but that is different from internalizing them. This was a process that needed to be taught as well. In addition, what I lost by choosing not to discuss the poems was the ability to then connect the content of the poems back to our process of reading of the Talmud texts. The question, “Why do you think I brought in these two poems?” would have been helpful, both to a conversation about the goals of reading and

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37 See my introductory remarks.

to the actual analysis. I could have then used that discussion throughout the semester to think about how these poems might inform our readings of the texts.

In addition, the mechanism I used to find and ask relevant questions was based largely on the story that I had told them of the Mittler Rebbe. Because I felt that his interior journey was an excellent example of self-reflection, I used the terms of that story to ask them about the talmudic texts, using concepts such as “the transgressions that you find in the text” and “the *teshuvah* that you would advise.” At the time that I was teaching the course, I was not yet using the terms “summons” or “awakening” to describe the reading process. I think the framing for the next time I teach this course will include less discussion on a model of transgression (theirs and mine) and more on a model of using the text as a summons to become our best selves.

**Assumptions.** Along with interrogating the *students’* assumptions, I learned a good deal about *my own* assumptions. Dori Levine, a long-time educator and teacher trainer (and also, my mother) taught me that one responsibility of a good educator is to anticipate. In this class, I failed to anticipate that the differences in values would appear not only between the students and the text, but between my students and *me*, or between one group of students and another. At times, I had to think on my feet, having expected an entirely different response to the text. This reminded me that a critical reading of the text requires me to do a critical reading of *all* possible responses and not only those I expect will be the popular response.

My journal entry after the first class read, “How do we ask questions that will ensure passion and insight?” Ensuring passion and insight requires us to leave open the possibility that there is “something even better” ahead, and to strive for that something in all that we learn. It is when we read Talmud not as legal discourse, as history, or as a source of decisive resolutions, but as summons to self-reflect that we have the potential for a holy process of growth—for that “something better” that we seek. To recast Ruth Behar, with whom I opened my paper—Talmud that doesn’t break your heart just isn’t worth doing any more. *Through* its problematic, complex, and sometimes painful content, the Talmud can break our hearts. It is *precisely this* that holds the potential to open to us the door of self-reflection. What remains is to invite one another to go through that door.