3 What Are the Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature?¹

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A. Introduction

We use the language of “subjects” in education all the time. We talk about the subject of math, or English, or indeed rabbinic literature. In higher education, we typically talk about “disciplines,” but we mostly mean the same thing. We have departments of history, composed of people who call themselves historians, who practice something that we call the discipline of history. But what do we mean when we talk about a subject or a discipline? What holds a discipline together? What makes a subject a subject? What is any particular subject about?

We might be tempted to say that an academic discipline shares a particular methodology. But as we get closer to any particular discipline—chemistry or sociology or philosophy—and notice the multiple procedures of inquiry in use, any initial confidence in that formulation evaporates. In fact, getting clear about what constitutes a subject or a discipline is quite difficult. Instead, “subjects should be taken to represent ... centers of intellectual capacity and interest radiating outward without assignable limit.”²

Subjects and disciplines are also fields of *teaching*, not just fields of inquiry. And when we turn to the teaching of a subject, we likewise find deep internal diversity. The teaching of history, for example, is carried out very differently in different contexts. Sam Wineburg and Suzanne

¹ This chapter is a condensed and revised version of a longer article: Jon Levisohn, “A Menu of Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature,” *Journal of Jewish Education* 76:1 (2010): 4-51.

² Israel Scheffler, “University Scholarship and the Education of Teachers,” in his *Reason and Teaching* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), 89. First published in *Teachers College Record* 70:1 (1968): 1-12.

Wilson³ demonstrate this point in a simple and elegant way: they show the reader not one but two teachers of history, both skilled and knowledgeable, both generating intense engagement, and both contributing to deep and meaningful learning. But the two teachers approach the teaching of their subject in fundamentally different ways. The contrast dramatically illustrates that just as the study of history is not one thing, so too the teaching of history is not one thing.

Similarly, Pamela Grossman documents the diversity among novice teachers of English, who approach their subject with fundamentally distinct understandings of the subject and hence with distinct pedagogic practices.⁴ To make sense of that diversity, Grossman superimposes a taxonomy, borrowed from literary theory, of three approaches to literary interpretation. She emphasizes the seriousness and depth of these orientations. “More than a casual attitude towards the subject matter, an orientation towards literature represents a basic organizing framework for knowledge about literature.”⁵ Grossman does not claim that her three orientations cover the full range of possibilities, and observes, moreover, that they can be combined in the practices of particular teachers.

About ten years later, Barry Holtz⁶ applies Grossman’s idea of teaching orientations to the teaching of Tanakh. While freely acknowledging his debt to Grossman, Holtz expands her three orientations to teaching English to eight orientations to the teaching of Bible. The following chart compares these orientations.⁷

³ Sam Wineburg and Suzanne Wilson, “Models of Wisdom in the Teaching of History [1988],” in *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*, ed. Sam Wineburg (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

⁴ Pamela Grossman, “What Are We Talking About Anyway? Subject-Matter Knowledge of Secondary English Teachers,” in *Advances in Research on Teaching*, Vol. 2, ed. Jere Brophy (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1991), 245-264.

⁵ Grossman, “What are We Talking About Anyway?,” 248.

⁶ Barry Holtz, *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and Practice* (New York: JTS Press, 2003), chapter 3, revised and republished as chapter 2 in this volume. Note that, through his thought experiment about two different teachers of Torah (David and Sarah), Holtz accomplishes something similar to Wineburg and Wilson in their more comprehensive empirical analysis, showing the reader how the subject can be approached in fundamentally different ways.

⁷ Among his revisions to his 2003 text, Holtz reduces the number of orientations from nine (in his original chapter) to eight (in the present version).

<i>Pam Grossman: Orientations to the Teaching of English</i>	<i>Barry Holtz: Orientations to the Teaching of Bible</i>
Reader Orientation Text Orientation Context Orientation	1. Contextual Orientation 2. Literary Criticism Orientation 3. <i>Parshanut</i> , the Jewish Interpretive Orientation 4. Moralistic-Didactic Orientation 5. Personalization Orientation 6. Ideational Orientation 7. Bible Leads to Action Orientation 8. Decoding and Translation Orientation

B. The Concept of a Teaching Orientation

Building on Grossman and Holtz, this chapter will lay out a taxonomy of orientations to the teaching of rabbinic literature.

Before proceeding further, however, the concept of an orientation needs closer attention. Grossman writes that an orientation is “more than a casual attitude towards the subject matter.”⁸ For his part, Holtz defines an orientation as

a description not of a teacher’s “method” in some technical meaning of the word, but in a deeper sense, of a teacher’s most powerful conceptions and beliefs about the field he or she is teaching. It is the living expression of the philosophical questions.... What is my view of the aims of education [in this subject], and how as a teacher do I attain those aims?⁹

First, then, a negative definition: an orientation is not a casual attitude, and it is not a pedagogic method or technique. For example, “studying a Talmudic tractate sequentially” is a technique, not an orientation. (Whether to study a *masekhet* sequentially or whether to select topics—teaching “thematically”—is certainly an important pedagogic choice, but that choice itself is not comprehensive enough to be an orien-

⁸ Grossman, “What Are We Talking About Anyway?,” 248.

⁹ Holtz, *Textual Knowledge*, 48-49.

tation and is compatible with multiple orientations.¹⁰) Other techniques, such as using computer applications or graphic organizers to display the logic of a *sugya*, are also not orientations. (There may well be certain orientations—those that emphasize technical halakhic discussions—for which graphic organizers are more helpful, and others for which they are not.) Instead, an orientation is broader and deeper than the techniques a teacher employs. Even *havruta*, paired study, which should be understood as a practice¹¹ rather than a technique, is not an orientation, because it can be associated with a range of conceptions of the purposes of studying rabbinic literature—and in fact, can be pursued outside of rabbinic literature as well.

The teachers' conceptions to which Holtz refers are conceptions about what a subject is all about, its boundaries, its central challenges, and especially its purposes—why it is worth teaching and learning. However, an orientation is not a conception of *ultimate* purposes, nor does it flow directly or necessarily from an ideological or religious stance towards the subject. This may seem counter-intuitive, because many assume that the most significant pedagogical fault line lies between those who treat classical texts as sacred (in some sense) and those who do not, between devotional readings and critical ones, between a hermeneutics of trust and a hermeneutics of suspicion.¹² This assumption is incorrect. In the study of Jewish texts, an abstract conception of sacredness, even a stance on divine origins, may be theologically meaningful but pedagogically inert. The affirmation that one is encountering the word of God (in some sense) provides little pedagogic guidance. Likewise, the

¹⁰ Anecdotally, this issue receives a great deal of time and energy among practitioners, but arguments for or against teaching a tractate sequentially or teaching thematically ought to be pursued in terms of a larger conceptual model of teaching rabbinic literature, rather than being pursued as a question of technique outside of any orientational context.

¹¹ See Orit Kent, "A Theory of Havruta Learning," chapter 12 below. Also see Elie Holzer and Orit Kent, "Havruta: What do we know and what can we hope to learn from Studying in Havruta?," in *International Handbook of Jewish Education*, ed. Helena Miller, Lisa D. Grant, and Alex Pomson (Springer, 2011), 407-418, and earlier work cited there.

¹² The phrase "hermeneutics of suspicion" first appears in Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 32, to refer to a mode of interpretation in which the interpreter assumes that the surface or naïve meaning of a text masks a deeper (especially political or sexual) meaning.

idea that one is encountering a text that is *not* the word of God is also compatible with a very wide range of pedagogic practices.

Something similar is the case regarding the teaching of other subjects, too. A passionate instructor of mathematics might wax poetic about the astonishing beauty of mathematics; she might defend its role as a fundamental language of the universe; she might expound on the centrality of a sophisticated understanding of number systems to her conception of human flourishing. But none of these convictions alone will help us understand how such a teacher teaches, what she emphasizes, what mathematical capacities she tries to nurture in students and how she tries to do so—and why. I do not mean to denigrate the pursuit of abstract conceptions of the disciplines, including theological conceptions, but it is inevitable that the more abstract, the loftier, the more ultimate one's conception, the less it will guide pedagogy.

Thus, an orientation combines a set of teachers' (a) conceptions and goals and (b) characteristic practices, which hang together in a coherent way. The former is essential, because an orientation is not merely technique. The latter is essential, because an orientation is not a theory of the subject but a *theory of practice*. Moreover, while some orientations are associated with certain pedagogic practices, they are not reducible to those practices. Orientations are also subject-specific in a way that method or technique, which can be employed in multiple subjects, is not. We might say that an orientation to the teaching of a subject is like a conceptual model of (at least some instances of) the teaching and learning of that particular subject for a particular context.

So the first definitional point is to distinguish an orientation from a technique, on the one hand, and from an ideology on the other. The second definitional point is to distinguish an orientation from a research methodology. This is an important point to emphasize, because of a tendency to multiply orientations by making finer and finer distinctions. We ought to resist that temptation: not every methodological distinction makes a pedagogical difference.

A third definitional point about orientations is that there is no hierarchy of orientations, and as Grossman notes about her orientations to literature, "one could find examples of both excellent and mediocre teaching within each."¹³ Some instructors, when they first encounter a

¹³ Grossman, "What Are We Talking About Anyway?," 263.

range of orientations, immediately approve of some and disapprove of others, but the theory of orientations emerges from a pluralistic stance: there are multiple responsible ways of teaching a particular subject at any level—not good ways and bad, not educative ways and miseducative, but representatives of a genuine diversity of purposes.

This does not mean that we cannot debate those purposes. We certainly can do so, and should do so. (Indeed, one benefit of articulating orientations is precisely to focus on the range of possible purposes, and thus to provide nuanced and responsible language for that debate.) But we ought to debate them in terms of particular settings and particular sets of students, and we ought to think carefully, when we are debating, about whether we are imagining the best possible version of the orientation.

Fourth, and most fundamentally, there is a basic conceptual question about orientations. Are they mutually exclusive and immutable categories (let us call this the “strong” view of orientations)? Or are they instead a rough approximation of a collection of ideas about the purposes and practices of teaching the subject that typically, but do not necessarily, hang together (the “weak” view)? According to the strong view, each orientation should have some essential quality distinct from every other; each orientation should offer distinct answers to basic questions of purpose and methodology. Holtz’s rhetoric of a “map” of orientations (see chapter 2 above) implicitly endorses the strong view. On a map, a clear border marks each country as separate from every other. According to the weak view, on the other hand, orientations are historically contingent rather than fixed and eternal, and the relationship between orientations need not be one of mutual exclusivity.¹⁴

The weak view is more compelling. Despite his use of the metaphor of a map, Holtz himself inclines toward the weak view: “the concept of orientation is in essence a heuristic device, not a definitional surety.”¹⁵ Thus, Holtz’s work on orientations is not the discovery of natural kinds or of some deep structure of the discipline. Instead, when we think about identifying orientations, we ought to think about identifying a cultural practice, along with the knowledge and beliefs that support that practice.

¹⁴ The issue here is *conceptual* mutual exclusivity, not practical. After all, even on the strong view, particular teachers might usefully combine orientations in their practice. I return to this point at the end of the chapter.

¹⁵ Barry Holtz, “Response to the Suite of Articles on Teaching the Bible,” *Journal of Jewish Education* 74:2 (2008): 233.

Instead of the metaphor of a map, orientations are more like cuisines: each cuisine uses a set of common ingredients, culinary techniques, and tastes, but none of these is necessarily exclusive to that cuisine.¹⁶ Orientations, too, can overlap in the teacher's beliefs about the purpose of the subject, about the kinds of questions that are worth asking, and about what constitutes a compelling answer, as well as in terms of pedagogic and interpretive practices. None of these is exclusive to a particular orientation. Nevertheless, we still know what we mean when we talk about Chinese or Mexican cuisine. So, too, we know what we mean, roughly, when we talk about a teaching orientation. Instead of a "map" of orientations, let us instead talk about a "menu."

To summarize: what is an orientation to teaching? An orientation is not a technique or method of teaching, and not merely an attitude held by the teacher, and not an approach to *studying* a subject. Instead, a teaching orientation is a conceptual model of teaching that subject. It is a teacher's fundamental stance toward a particular subject that encompasses the teacher's conception of the purposes of teaching that subject and a set of paradigmatic teaching practices. These purposes and practices hang together; an orientation has internal coherence. An orientation can be pursued well or it can be pursued poorly; an orientation is not, itself, good or bad. As part of our understanding of an orientation, we assume that any subject can have multiple orientations—but we do not assume that these orientations are mutually exclusive (in either their purposes or their practices). Nor do we assume that orientations are fixed and eternal. On the contrary, our menu below represents the range of pedagogic stances to the subject that we have identified as currently in use.¹⁷

D. The Orientations to Teaching Rabbinic Literature

What, then, are the orientations to teaching rabbinic literature? The following menu of ten orientations represents our best current understanding, informed by hundreds of colleagues in dozens of institutions.

¹⁶ I owe this idea to Susan P. Fendrick (personal communication, October 2007).

¹⁷ I discuss the methodology that leads to the development of the orientations in the longer version of this chapter, Jon Levisohn, "A Menu of Orientations Towards the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature," *Journal of Jewish Education* 76:1 (2010): 4-51. That article also contains more complete discussions of each of the ten orientations than the brief treatments that I provide in the next section of this chapter.

1. *Torah/Instruction Orientation*

Rabbinic literature generates the forms of Judaism that we know today. In this sense, rabbinic literature is prescriptive of behavior and sometimes belief too—or at least, it tries to be. But more generally, rabbinic literature is also a kind of sacred literature, which is to say it has been treated as sacred by Jews for centuries. It is Torah, not only in the sense of being an “oral Torah” that, in the traditional conception, accompanies the written Torah, but in the more specific, etymological sense of being a source of teaching. The encounter with this sacred literature has the potential to be illuminating, or inspirational, or instructive.

Instruction, in the sense in which it is being used here, is not the same as direct prescription of behavior (which is why the Torah Orientation is compatible with a wide range of ideological stances, from extremely traditionalist through extremely liberal¹⁸). Some rabbinic texts, of course, do prescribe behavior, but much of rabbinic literature is not prescriptive in this way. Nevertheless, both aggadic and halakhic texts can function as a source for instruction or a location of inspiration. Classical liturgical texts can function in this way as well. Passages from the Talmud or midrashic literature or the Siddur are taught because the instructor believes that, under the right conditions, a patient encounter with this material can promote increased awareness of truths about the world, human nature, or the divine, leading to inspiration, guidance, or enlightenment.

An instructor working within the Torah Orientation will typically select texts—often aggadic material but sometimes halakhic material as well, or as noted above liturgical material—that have the potential to illuminate, to inspire, or to guide, often in indirect ways that emerge only through a patient encounter under the right conditions. The instructor thus assumes responsibility for creating those conditions. Sometimes this means a certain kind of preliminary discussion, prior to encounter-

¹⁸ This parenthetical remark is intended to emphasize the point made above about the inadequacy of ideology as an analytical lens through which to understand pedagogy. The standard dichotomies (traditional versus liberal, or academic versus devotional, or historical-critical versus religious) do not get us very far. I do not mean to suggest that religious ideology is irrelevant to pedagogy. However, each one of the ten orientations is compatible with a range of ideological commitments.

ing the text. Sometimes it means employing a text as a trigger, a means to the end of discussing an emotionally or ideologically weighty topic. Sometimes instructors will create the conditions for students neither to accept a text nor to reject it, but to engage it in meaningful and generative dialogue. Teaching within this orientation aims to help Jews to understand, or at least slow down enough to explore, the potential significance of rabbinic literature in their lives.

Teachers may wish to inspire greater commitment to certain ideals: service, perhaps, or justice, or compassion. Alternatively, teachers may wish to inspire greater commitment to Judaism in general. The Torah Orientation can be a prominent mode used in adult education classes, especially in one-off sessions that do not aspire to develop textual-analytic abilities but do hope to foster meaningful engagement.¹⁹ It may also be used with K-12 students, particularly in informal settings²⁰ but also through what Scot Berman calls “value analysis.”²¹ Analogously, teaching that focuses on the purported philosophical ideas behind the rabbinic text (often associated with the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem or the approach to Talmudic interpretation offered by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas) may be thought of as part of this orientation, since the purpose of developing those ideas is to propose them as powerful guides for the lives and moral choices of students. Often, teaching within this orientation will focus on one particular text or a small number of texts, although topically- or thematically-organized courses can also fit this orientation (for example, a course that focuses on rabbinic texts on relationships).

¹⁹ Adult education does not usually focus on cultivating textual-analytic skills, but may sometimes have a different skill in mind—namely, the skill of responsibly mining texts for meaning. See the discussion of the Skills Orientation below.

²⁰ One educator writes: “We have found ... that much of our informal teaching centers around rabbinic texts.... We are developing a curriculum of concepts, morals, messages we want to get across over a four-year high school experience.”

²¹ Scot Berman, “So What!?!: Talmud Study Through Values Analysis,” *Ten Da’at; A Journal of Jewish Education* X:1 (1997). Some consider aggadic material to be particularly suited to the promotion of values, ideals, or philosophical insights. However, one can also argue for other orientations to teaching aggada as well (most obviously, the Literary Orientation and the Cultural Orientation, but others too).

Now, if asked about the ultimate purposes of teaching and learning their subject, many or most instructors might endorse the characterization used above for the Torah Orientation, the idea that “a patient encounter with this material can promote increased awareness of truths about the world and human nature.” What is uniquely characteristic of the Torah Orientation, however, is the way in which that purpose becomes the dominant and guiding principle for pedagogic decisions. A teacher within this orientation is focused on and holds herself responsible for the students’ experience, primarily. She may use literary analysis or historical context or jurisprudential categories, but her primary focus is creating the moment of encounter. By way of contrast, a teacher of a semester-long Talmud class in a yeshiva may likewise hope to foster “increased awareness of truths about the world or about human nature,” but on a daily or weekly basis, pedagogic decisions are driven more by a concern for exploring the themes of the particular tractate being studied, or for developing the students’ skills.

2. Contextual Orientation

The Contextual Orientation lies at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Torah Orientation—not necessarily in terms of their purposes (which, as noted, are not mutually exclusive) but in terms of setting. Where the Torah Orientation is typically (although not exclusively) pursued in one-off adult Jewish educational sessions, the Contextual Orientation is more typical of semester-long university courses. In fact, references to “academic” or “modern” Talmud study usually refer to the Contextual Orientation. Within this orientation, teachers are primarily interested in understanding the original contexts of rabbinic texts, including how the texts came to assume their final form, and how understanding that context illuminates their meaning. This is because they possess an overriding concern for *peshat*, for discerning the plain sense of the text as they see it.²² Typically, teachers within this orientation will employ comparisons of parallel texts within the traditional

²² I owe this point to Barry Wimpfheimer (personal communication, February 2009); see also Yaakov Elman, “Progressive *Derash* and Retrospective *Peshat*: Nonhalakhic Considerations in Talmud Torah,” in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. Shalom Carmy (New York: Jason Aronson, 1996), 251 ff.

canon (e.g., comparing the Mishnah or the Babylonian Talmud with the Tosefta or Jerusalem Talmud, or using variant manuscripts) and without (using Greek or Latin texts). In some settings and with certain texts, archeological or other material sources may also be introduced into the classroom as teaching resources.²³ In other settings and with other texts, it will be particularly important to compare rabbinic literature to early Christian literature.

As noted, teaching within this orientation is compatible with extended learning opportunities, such as semester-long courses in high schools or universities. Even outside the university, the motivation behind the Contextual Orientation is often linked to a belief that academic scholarship reveals significant truths about the text. Teachers within the Contextual Orientation are concerned that students understand the complexity and multivocality of the texts. They may emphasize the strata of the texts, as well as other “academic” issues, such as problems of attribution, the work of redactors to construct the received text, and the presence of competing traditions within the text. In terms of student learning, they focus on the students’ capacities to discern those strata and those issues on their own as important learning outcomes, and may construct learning opportunities to develop those capacities.

Clearly, there are many traditionalist settings in which the Contextual Orientation is considered anathema or at least inappropriate, because of what some would call an implied “lack of respect” for the text and its transmitters, particularly the amoraic interpreters of earlier traditions. Nonetheless, a number of traditionalist educational theorists argue on behalf of the Contextual Orientation.²⁴ In any case, it seems clear that

²³ See, e.g., Daniel Sperber, “On the Legitimacy, or Indeed, Necessity, of Scientific Disciplines for True ‘Learning’ of the Talmud,” in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. Shalom Carmy (New York: Jason Aronson, 1996), and Yaron Eliav, “Archeology and the Study of Rabbinic Literature” (unpublished).

²⁴ See, e.g., Beverly Gribetz, “Historical Perspectives in Teaching Talmud,” in *Wisdom From All My Teachers: Challenges and Initiatives in Contemporary Torah Education*, ed. Jeffrey Saks and Susan Handelman (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2003); David Bigman, “Finding a Home for Critical Talmud Study,” *The Edah Journal* 2:1 (2002); and Pinchas Hayman, “Methodology and Method in the Teaching of Tannaitic Literature,” in *Teaching Classical Rabbinic Texts: Studies in Jewish Education*, Vol. 8, ed. Asher Shkedi and Marc Hirshman (Jerusa-

the more specific concerns—familiar to us from the teaching of the Bible—about internal contradictions within the text are less relevant. The motivation to harmonize disparate texts certainly does exist in the field of rabbinic literature, but on the other hand *mahloket*, the principled dispute between rabbis, is present on every page of the Talmud! So it seems fair to say that the Contextual Orientation to the teaching of rabbinic literature is less ideologically fraught than its counterpart in Bible. Moreover, teachers within the Contextual Orientation may pursue the historical-critical investigation of rabbinic texts not in order to challenge the authority of the rabbis but to explore their remarkable legal and cultural creativity.

3. *Jurisprudential Orientation*

Within this orientation, rabbinic literature is treated as the product of a legal system, rather than as a literary text, a historical text, or even (primarily) a text that ought to trigger a wide-ranging exploration of truths about human nature or the world. Legal argument, *shaqla vetarya* (“give and take”), debates about legal concepts and rulings—these are the heart of the subject. As the manifestation of a legal system, rabbinic literature is appropriately examined through categories of legal analysis, sometimes (in some settings) in comparison with other legal systems (e.g., Roman law) and sometimes with categories developed internally within the Jewish tradition of talmudic interpretation. This Jurisprudential Orientation shares some aspects with the Halakhic Orientation, to follow, but is not primarily concerned with practical legal implications.

This is the case whether the Jurisprudential Orientation is carried out by scholars of comparative law, teaching students of law, or traditionalists in the yeshiva, mediating among apparently contradictory texts and encouraging students in the exercise of *hiddush*, innovative insight. In either situation, academic or traditional, the intellectual experience of exploring the legal system takes precedence over the determination of

lem: Magnes Press, 2002). By way of contrast, Sperber, “On the Legitimacy,” argues for the indispensability of historical-critical scholarship to the pursuit of traditionalist goals of discerning halakhic implications. In other words, in his case, historical study is in support of teaching and learning within the Halakhic Orientation (see below), rather than representing the Contextual Orientation.

any actual legal ruling. Rabbinic law obeys its own logic and employs its own concepts; the Jurisprudential Orientation seeks to understand that logic and to immerse the students in that conceptual universe.

The Jurisprudential Orientation may be found in law schools, where texts are selected in order to explore a certain legal issue or jurisprudential theme, and where teachers and students are accustomed to the exploration of legal concepts and arguments, often without regard for final legal rulings (sometimes called “black letter law”). The field of *Mishpat Ivri*, the label used for the academic study of Jewish law, is also quite obviously concerned with rabbinic texts as products of a jurisprudential system, so courses in *Mishpat Ivri* are also located within this orientation. But beyond these settings, almost all study in traditional Ashkenazi (especially Lithuanian-style) yeshivot in North America and in Israel seems to fit within this orientation.²⁵

Naturally, the characterization offered here does not do justice to the diversity of traditionalist interpretive strategies, *darkei ha-limmud*. But this is one of the occasions when it is important to remember that not every interpretive distinction makes an orientational difference; as significant as those distinctions among interpretive strategies may be (in terms of determining what constitutes a good answer to a question and, even more importantly, what constitutes a good question), they are not manifest as dramatic differences in pedagogic purposes and practices.²⁶ In general, teachers within the Jurisprudential Orientation

²⁵ Michael Rosenzweig, focusing not on pedagogy but on “methodology,” emphasizes that contemporary *yeshivot* conform to the pattern established over the last century and a half. “This is noteworthy,” he adds, “given the fact that access to a plethora of historical material ... might conceivably have challenged the continuity in *yeshivah* study by redirecting the focus away from the classical, ahistorical emphasis that has long prevailed”—*might* have, but in fact did not (Michael Rosenzweig, “The Study of the Talmud in Contemporary Yeshivot,” in *Printing the Talmud: From Bomberg to Schottenstein*, ed. Sharon Liberman Mintz and Gabriel M. Goldstein (New York: Yeshiva University, 2005), 113.

²⁶ This assessment is based on an understanding that, differences among *darkei ha-limmud* notwithstanding, traditionalists teaching within the Jurisprudential Orientation share important features: they tend to select tractates (rather than specific texts) and follow the order of the tractate or the chapter within it; the tractates tend to be the “yeshivish” ones that are heavy on jurisprudential concepts and debates; they bracket or avoid altogether both the practical-halakhic implications of the texts and the personal-spiritual implications; to

may aspire to help students understand the legal complexity of the system for its own sake, or to achieve other pedagogical goals relating to the understanding of law across cultures. In traditionalist settings, the Jurisprudential Orientation may be motivated by the need to do a kind of conceptual “basic research”; like basic research in the physical sciences, there is no expectation of immediate payoff, and the pursuit of the truths of nature are their own reward.

The pursuit of the Jurisprudential Orientation may be motivated by the sense that this orientation places debate and argument at its center—and that an emphasis on (engaging in, understanding, and appreciating) debate and argument is culturally healthy, distinctively Jewish, and perhaps even theologically significant.²⁷ But for some, the motivation is even more fundamental: they believe that the Jurisprudential Orientation is not merely the preferred pedagogic option but rather the *only* real or authentic way to engage with these texts.²⁸ That is, accurately or not, some believe that the Jurisprudential Orientation—and more specifically, a sequential exposure to only certain selected tractates rich in jurisprudential material—reflects the way that Talmud has always been studied at the highest level.

But instructors committed to the Jurisprudential Orientation may in fact instead select a legal topic, a *sugya*, which is discussed in multiple texts across a diverse set of tractates. Alternatively, they may select

the extent that they are focused on the development of the skills of textual analysis, those skills are heavily jurisprudential (understanding Talmudic argument rather than, for example, understanding literary tropes); and, as mentioned above, teaching and learning is conceptualized not just as an occasion for understanding the text and its difficulties but especially as an occasion for *hiddush*, innovation in the resolution of textual difficulties. At the same time, the differences among *darkei ha-limmud* are surely deep and significant. As Elman notes in “Progressive *derash* and retrospective *peshat*,” 253, the field would benefit greatly from straightforward, non-polemical comparative analyses of the various approaches.

²⁷ See Yehuda Brandes and Aharon Lichenstein, “From Discipline to Meaning: More on Teaching Gemara: A Response,” in their *Talmud Study in Yeshiva High Schools* (ATID, 2007), for a contemporary expression of this view.

²⁸ See Aliza Segal and Zvi Bekerman, “What is Taught in Talmud Class: Is it Class or is it Talmud?,” *Journal of Jewish Education* 75:1 (2009): 27, who quote a teacher asserting that Tractate Sanhedrin, with its complicated jurisprudential discussions, is “actual real classic gemara.”

multiple legal topics to explore a particular jurisprudential phenomenon, what Schreiber calls a “meta-sugya.”²⁹ Within this orientation, the boundaries between the text and its later commentators may be blurred—not that the opinion of a medieval *rishon* (early commentator) is conflated with the Talmudic text, but that they are regarded, in some sense, as part of one ahistorical conversation. After all, the commentaries are, for the most part, efforts to elucidate legal concepts, so drawing upon them is entirely consistent with the Jurisprudential Orientation. Indeed, one of the motivations for teaching within the Jurisprudential Orientation—for traditionalists—is to immerse the students (not only within the rabbinic legal world but also) within that tradition of interpretation. For non-traditionalists, on the other hand, the motivation may be less focused on the tradition of interpretation, and more focused on a principled conception of the subject: at its heart, some will argue, Talmud is a diverse set of complex, constructed legal debates.

4. Halakhic Orientation

Rabbinic texts—especially the legal texts, of course, but in some cases non-legal texts as well—are the primary sources for understanding the development of halakha, the Jewish legal tradition. Teachers within this orientation aspire to help students understand halakha in its complexity as a legal tradition and system. Typically, the emphasis will be on Mishnah and Talmud, although in some contexts this orientation will be served by a focus on midrash halakha. Rabbinic material may or may not be juxtaposed with pre-rabbinic (biblical) material, but it will often be juxtaposed with later legal layers, i.e., the commentators, responsa literature, and legal codes that build on the classical rabbinic texts as the legal tradition develops over time.

We can imagine an investigation into topics such as the laws of cooking on Shabbat, or the laws relating to the payment of workers, or the laws of marriage and divorce. Such an investigation would begin with the biblical sources and proceed through the development of the halakhic

²⁹ Doniel Schreiber, “The Brisker Derech Today: Are We Pursuing the ‘Path’ Envisioned by Reb Hayyim?” in *Wisdom from All My Teachers: Challenges and Initiatives in Contemporary Torah Education*, eds. Jeffrey Saks and Susan Handelman (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2003), 234.

tradition in the Talmud, codes, and commentators, perhaps including contemporary responsa on the topic. There is a variety of criteria of selection for appropriate topics. Some topics might be chosen as appropriately representative of some principles of halakhic argumentation. Others might be chosen to explore the way in which the halakhic tradition adheres to the rulings of earlier sages, who are granted greater authority than later sages while room is also left for logical argumentation about the application of those precedents and rulings. Others might be chosen as case studies that represent points on an ideological spectrum between halakha as an enterprise that seeks to preserve a prior way of life and halakha as a location of cultural innovation.

Thus, teaching within this orientation need not entail a dry transmission of facts about legal rulings (although perhaps that is the particular pathology of the Halakhic Orientation at its worst). Instead, the Halakhic Orientation can be as challenging and intellectual engaging as any other nuanced, complex study of intellectual history, and the thoughtful instructor can surely identify an aspirational set of subject- and orientation-specific goals for her students. Those goals may be as relevant in a liberal setting as they are in a traditional one.

Whatever the topics chosen, however, what is distinctive here is the focus on halakhic topics in a way that is different from the Jurisprudential Orientation. This is not to say that the Jurisprudential Orientation never focuses on halakhic matters, of course. But when the Jurisprudential Orientation focuses on halakha, it is interested in the logic or the concepts more than in the ruling itself. And the Jurisprudential Orientation will rarely trace the development of a *sugya* into the contemporary period, as the Halakhic Orientation might.

This is an appropriate occasion, therefore, to mention the ambiguity of the category of “rabbinic literature.” Central texts such as the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud elicit little controversy, but what else is included? We have already had occasion to mention midrashic collections, texts such as Tosefta and the Jerusalem Talmud, and the Siddur, and to note that within the Jurisprudential Orientation there is a natural tendency to extend forward to the commentaries on Talmud. So where are the boundaries? Are geonic texts included in “rabbinic literature” as well? What about medieval commentaries, or early modern halakhic texts, or contemporary responsa? The malleability of the boundaries is another indication of the diversity of orientations; in one teaching

context, the relevant material includes early Christian texts, while in another, recent Jewish ones. There is little point in trying to determine what “counts” as rabbinic literature, in the abstract, because there are no available criteria that are neutral across orientations.

5. *Literary Orientation*

In addition to whatever else it is, rabbinic literature (both legal and non-legal) is also *literature*, consciously crafted compositions that employ their own literary forms, structures, and patterns in the service of their literary objectives. Where the Contextual Orientation focuses on diachronic analysis, the Literary Orientation focuses on synchronic analysis, taking the text as a (redacted) unified whole and attending to the literary features and devices embedded within that whole. Teachers within this orientation will typically choose texts (again, both legal and non-legal) upon which literary analysis can be performed to great effect, and will aspire to foster their students’ capacities to do so as well. It is easy to think about treating rabbinic narratives in this way—searching for word play or character development—but legal passages or larger textual units (e.g., whole chapters of Mishnah) can also serve as rich teaching material within this orientation.³⁰

Of course, if literary analysis presumes to generate insight into the meaning of a text on the basis of literary features, then potentially it has a role to play wherever one engages in textual interpretation. This may make it hard to see the distinction between the Literary Orientation and others, and raises again the way in which orientations function like cuisines. There are two ways to think about this. One way is to say that when one uses literary analysis while also pursuing, say, Torah as instruction, one is blending two different orientations, the Literary Orientation and the Torah Orientation. There are surely occasions where this occurs. However, just as we said above that instructors may endorse the idea that the encounter with rabbinic texts should lead to illumination or instruction without necessarily participating in the Torah Orientation, we may need to say something similar here: instructors may use literary analysis as one of the tools in their interpretational toolkits without necessarily participating in the Literary Orientation.

³⁰ Elman, “Progressive *Derash* and Retrospective *Peshat*,” 261-276.

The Literary Orientation, instead, comprises not only the interpretational tool—that is, not just the use of literary analysis by the instructor—but a cluster of other characteristic practices as well. In this orientation, literary analysis is foregrounded and made the explicit focus of discussion or inquiry. The instructor may select texts that are literarily rich and generative (or, conversely, may determine that the Literary Orientation is called for when she encounters a particular text). She may devote time and attention to developing the students' own capacity to interpret with a literary lens. However, we need not go so far as to say that the Literary Orientation cares about literary analysis “for its own sake,” in the manner of New Criticism in literary theory; after all, we can easily imagine a teacher who focuses on the literary structures of the Mishnah not because they are beautiful or elegant in themselves but because they reveal important insights into the thinking of the editors of the Mishnah. Or consider Walfish's argument for the Literary Orientation to the teaching of Mishnah, as a pedagogic solution to the problem of Mishnah as a text that is both terse and hence difficult and yet not difficult enough (as compared to Talmud) and hence undervalued.³¹ For Walfish, the Literary Orientation is not a matter of studying Mishnah as literature “for its own sake”; there are other reasons for employing literary analysis. But for Walfish or others who advocate or employ a Literary Orientation, the attention given to literary analysis is sufficiently prominent, in terms of instructional time and priorities that it tends to crowd out explicit attention to other purposes.

6. Cultural Orientation

Studying rabbinic literature provides a window into rabbinic culture, the wellspring of Judaism as it developed over time. The tools used to understand that culture are the analytical and conceptual tools of the cultural anthropologist, reading texts as products and markers of culture. The questions that we ought to ask of the texts, from this perspective, are questions such as the following. What cultural assumptions lie behind the text (whether or not we ascribe those assumptions to the author of the text)? What cultural dynamics are described or enacted

³¹ Avraham Walfish, “Teaching the Mishnah as a Literary Text” [Hebrew], in *Teaching Classical Rabbinic Texts: Studies in Jewish Education*, Vol. 8, eds. Asher Shkedi and Marc Hirshman (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2002).

in the text? What cultural values are defended or promoted? Teachers within this orientation will typically select texts that are particularly significant in the understanding of rabbinic culture or of Judaism more generally from aggadic texts or halakhic texts. (Liturgical texts may find a place here too.) Some will teach in an effort to raise an awareness of the ways in which rabbinic culture is historically situated in its time and place, in which case the Cultural Orientation may share certain assumptions with the Contextual Orientation. Others, however, will construct a trans-historical conception of the rabbinic culture that they want their students to encounter and, perhaps, the norms of which they want their students to adopt. Within this orientation, certain kinds of feminist readings of texts raise awareness of the dynamics of gender as they are expressed in rabbinic culture and in Judaism more generally. As Charlotte Fonrobert writes, in one particular example, “The goal of reading gender in talmudic aggadah here is first and foremost to understand in all its complexity the cultural imagination of the talmudic editors who carefully weave the fabric of the talmudic *sugyot*.”³²

The Cultural Orientation is usually more text-focused than student-focused, but not in all cases. For example, Gidon Rothstein imagines an instructional approach that aspires to overcome the gap between the cultural norms and assumptions of the students and the cultural norms and assumptions of the rabbis, in an effort to make the strange familiar.³³ Lehman echoes this in her study of her own teaching in rabbinical school: “My goal each semester is to find a means of connecting the world in which my students live with that of the rabbis.”³⁴ On the other hand, it may be more common to find instructors leaning in the opposite direction, committed to helping students understand the ways in which the rabbis, constructing Judaism in their time and place, are very different than we are—in other words, making the familiar strange. David Kraemer argues that instructors ought to acknowledge

³² Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, “When the Rabbi Weeps: On Reading Gender in Talmudic Aggadah,” *Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies and Gender Issues* 4 (2001): 57.

³³ Gidon Rothstein, “Helping Students Get a Foot in the Door: Geertz’s ‘Thick Description’ and the Use of Academic Scholarship in the Teaching of Rabbinic Texts” (unpublished).

³⁴ Marjorie Lehman, “For the Love of Talmud: Reflections on the Teaching of Bava Metzia, Perek 2,” *Journal of Jewish Education* 68:1 (2002), 89.

the strangeness of rabbinic culture as a first step to overcoming it: “noticing, naming, describing the strangeness of the rabbinic text will allow the student to affirm what he or she experiences and begin the task of cultural translation.”³⁵ Each of these stances assumes that rabbinic culture should be located historically, rather than construed as trans-historical. Moreover, each reflects an implicit claim about the way that the Cultural Orientation can contribute to the intellectual-spiritual perspective of the student.

As already noted, in situations where rabbinic culture is understood primarily as an historical category (rather than, for example, as a trans-historical category), there may be a close connection between the Cultural Orientation and the Contextual Orientation. Both tend to establish a certain critical distance from rabbinic texts, and both are focused on the meaning of the texts in their original context. Some instructors may well blend both orientations. Still, the questions that they ask are distinct. The Contextual Orientation asks questions that begin in the text, seeking answers in its cultural context(s), but with a primary desire to hear and understand the different historical voices in the text. The Cultural Orientation asks questions about culture, seeking answers in the texts (texts that are taken to reveal central aspects of culture), but also implicitly or explicitly facilitating an encounter between the culture of the rabbis and the culture of the students. Furthermore, unlike the Contextual Orientation—but in this respect like the Literary Orientation—the Cultural Orientation is more concerned with the rabbinic texts, as we find them, rather than their component parts and the process of their redaction, only turning to other materials as background or supplements to contribute to our understanding of the rabbis’ cultural project.

7. Historical Orientation

Rabbinic literature provides evidence for the social, intellectual and political history of the Jewish communities of late antiquity. Who were these people—not just the rabbis but the whole set of communities—and what did they do with their lives? How were they affected by empires, armies, political movements, material conditions, and cultural

³⁵ David Kraemer, “Welcoming the Strange in Rabbinic Literature” (unpublished).

developments? In some settings, these questions are considered to be irrelevant or even distracting; consider the derisive quip that “some people care about what Abaye and Rava *said* and some people care about what they *wore*.”³⁶ But in other settings instructors are committed to exploring that history, and the texts are means to that end. They are windows into the past, and like real windows, they work best when they are transparent and when they do not obstruct our view of the landscape.

There is always the thorny question of whether we can take rabbinic texts at face value (and contemporary academic historiography tends to assume that we cannot). So the window is never truly transparent; the glass always distorts our view of what lies beyond it, even as it enables that view. How can we compensate for the inevitable bias of the authors of these texts, the rabbis, who (like any author) had their own ideological purposes—either as leaders of a community or as a self-appointed elite that aspired to leadership—in writing about historical events and the world around them? Yet, even if we adopt a hermeneutics of suspicion rather than a hermeneutics of trust, these texts are often the only window into the past that we have.

The preceding sentences suggest that the Historical Orientation shares a kind of skeptical stance with the Contextual Orientation (as well as with some versions of the Cultural Orientation). But their focus is different. In the Contextual Orientation, the goal is understanding the text—the window itself, as it were—in its original context. In the Historical Orientation, on the other hand, the goal is to peer *through* the window at some aspect of the historical landscape beyond, either the historical setting depicted in the text or, more skeptically, the historical setting of the redaction of the text.

Thus, the goal of teaching within the Historical Orientation is the development of an appropriate understanding of some aspect of the history of the Jews in late antiquity, or the development within students of historiographical sensibilities appropriate to the study of that history. Instructors will select texts and construct learning opportunities that illuminate that history or central interpretive questions about it.

³⁶ Sperber, “On the Legitimacy,” and Barry Wimpfheimer, “The Shiva,” in *Why Study Talmud in the Twenty-First Century?*, ed. Paul Socken (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).

8. *Bekiut* Orientation

In certain settings, rabbinic literature is taught and learned in order to foster students' encounter with a maximum quantity of material, in a sequential fashion, with as little pre-arranged focus as possible. This is sometimes called "*bekiut*" or "*bekius*," which translates literally as "mastery," but is more accurately translated in this context as "coverage." The purpose of studying Talmud or Mishnah *biv'kiut* (in a *bekiut* way) or *liv'kiut* (for the purpose of *bekiut*) is to cover ground. Like coverage goals elsewhere in education, here too the demand for coverage often crowds out competing concerns for depth of understanding or perhaps even longevity of retention. Nevertheless, there is a certain educational logic to the enterprise. We can imagine the argument: just as students will absorb the literary norms associated with the modern novel even if they forget the details of the novels that they read, so here too a sequential, immersive exposure to the texts may foster an apprehension of rabbinic norms, a facility with rabbinic logic, and a familiarity with rabbinic concepts, even as the details quickly slip from the mind.

One paradigm of the *Bekiut* Orientation is a kind of anti-theoretical reaction against the sometimes fanciful pursuit of conceptual explanations for textual difficulties (within the Jurisprudential Orientation, as practiced in some Ashkenazi yeshivot). Knowledge of the texts is the primary goal, not understanding, not *hiddush*, and certainly not personal growth or spiritual development. A familiar paradigm of *bekiut* is the program known as *Daf Yomi*, the "daily page," the standardized schedule of study of one folio of Talmud per day, around which has grown a cottage industry of classes, study guides, and audio-recorded lessons.³⁷ The breakneck pace of *Daf Yomi* highlights an additional component to the *Bekiut* Orientation, namely, the ritualization of teaching and learning. This is obviously present in *Daf Yomi*, where the required speed blurs the line between study as intellectual engagement and study as liturgical recitation. But it is often present in other *bekiut* study as well, which may be a ritualized performance as much as it is an intellectual pursuit.

So the claim advanced above, that the purpose of studying Talmud *biv'kiut* is to cover ground, is only partially accurate; one might also say that, at a deeper level, the purpose of study within the *Bekiut* Orien-

³⁷ The Day Yomi program was publicly initiated in 1923 by Meir Shapira, at the Agudas Yisroel convention in Vienna.

tation is simply *torah lish'ma*, Torah for its own sake. Setting aside any mastery of content, setting aside the benefits of immersion in a particular body of literature, simply occupying oneself in the study of Talmud is, for some, an activity with religious purpose and intrinsic value.³⁸ One aspect of that religious attitude is a kind of submission to the text—not in the sense of a suspension of critical evaluation of arguments, and not necessarily in terms of a commitment to carry out the text's prescriptions, but rather in the sense of a commitment to listen patiently and non-selectively to what the text has to say. Thus, the instructor within the Bekiut Orientation emphasizes the students' face-to-face encounter with the text as it presents itself, with little editorial selection, "interesting" and "relevant" passages studied along with those that are less so.

9. Interpretive Orientation

In contrast to other classical literature, much of rabbinic literature is constructed as interpretation of other texts, both biblical texts and texts from earlier in the rabbinic period. These interpretations proceed according to their own norms, sometimes playful and pluralistic, sometimes rigidly argumentative. The Interpretive Orientation takes this quality of the text to be its defining characteristic, the (or at least a

³⁸ Teasing apart the concept of *torah lish'ma* is notoriously difficult. We can easily identify the opposite of *torah lish'ma*, namely, study for extrinsic purposes such as career advancement or practical guidance or scholarly reputation. But what does it mean to study something for its own sake? What if one studies for the sake of becoming a more adept student—is that *torah lish'ma*? Or for the sake of heightened self-consciousness or moral attunement? In some views, even study for the purpose of religious enlightenment—"cleaving to God"—violates the strict standard of *torah lish'ma* (although, according to other views, that is precisely the correct meaning of *torah lish'ma*). The classic study of *torah lish'ma* is Norman Lamm, *Torah Lishmah: Study of Torah for Torah's Sake in the Work of Rabbi Hayyim Volozhin and His Contemporaries* (New York: Ktav, 1989); see also Michael Rosenak, *Roads to the Palace: Jewish Texts and Teaching* (Providence, RI: Bergahn Books, 1995), 231-234. Note, here, that while the Bekiut Orientation is often pursued in the context of an ideological commitment to *torah lish'ma*, the latter commitment is not by any means *limited* to the Bekiut Orientation. The adult students who arrive at a synagogue for a text study session in which the teacher is committed to the Torah Orientation, are surely engaged in *torah lish'ma*, and would be no less committed to that ideal if the instructor decided to adopt the Literary Orientation or any other.

primary) answer to the question of what the subject of rabbinic literature is about.

The interpretational strategies of rabbinic texts are sometimes (or often) the source of pedagogic dissonance. Within the Interpretive Orientation, then, teachers will focus in particular on the interpretive moves that are made in particular texts or by particular rabbis within those texts, or perhaps on the rabbis' assumptions about the prior texts that are interpreted and the rabbis' beliefs about the nature of interpretation itself. Once we adopt the Interpretive Orientation, we can avoid the implicit or even explicit devaluation of midrashic literature as secondary to, and poorly derived from, biblical literature. However, an instructor might also employ the Interpretive Orientation with an eye toward the way in which later strata of rabbinic literature employ earlier teachings, sometimes in radically new ways. In that case, they may teach a tractate sequentially and work on the interpretive issues as they emerge.

In either case, the instructor will frame an inquiry into the interpretive process represented by the text—asking how that interpretive process works—in order to help students understand and appreciate the generative interpretive culture of the rabbis. (So in this respect, there is a close connection between the Interpretive Orientation and the Cultural Orientation.³⁹) But instructors may also choose this orientation in an effort to help students become more aware of their *own* interpretive processes, and perhaps to open up the cultural space for students to carry out the creative work of interpretation themselves.

10. Skills Orientation

In certain settings and certain conditions, teachers of rabbinic literature are primarily focused on helping students acquire the textual-analytic and linguistic skills to master rabbinic literature, or at least access it independently. Initially, this may seem unworthy of the label of “orientation”; after all, nearly all of the orientations can be said to be (potentially) concerned with helping students acquire skills of one sort or another. The Literary Orientation typically intends to foster appreciation

³⁹ See Lehman, “For the Love of Talmud,” for an example of a conscious combination (what I call, in the conclusion to this chapter, a “principled eclecticism”) of the Cultural Orientation, the Contextual Orientation, and the Interpretive Orientation.

of and capacity for literary analysis. The Cultural Orientation intends to promote a kind of anthropological sensibility, in which students learn to ask certain kinds of questions about why the rabbis would say what they say and believe what they believe. The Historical Orientation intends to cultivate a set of historiographical capacities, specifically focused on the issues and problems of the history of the Jews in late antiquity. Even the Torah Orientation, which is often pursued in adult education settings that we do not normally associate with the acquisition of skills, can be pursued toward an increasingly expanded capacity (on the part of students) to appreciate the instructional potential of the texts or to discern that instruction for themselves. These are all skills or capacities or subject-specific habits of mind, and we may assume that most thoughtful teachers who have the opportunity to construct an extended learning experience are concerned with the development of such skills. So why should we identify a Skills Orientation distinct from other orientations?⁴⁰

Nevertheless, just as we noted above in the case of the Literary Orientation that there are times and settings where the focus on literary analysis dominates the pedagogic space, so too here we may note that the Skills Orientation emerges because there are times and settings where the focus on skills dominates the pedagogic space. There are times and settings where this focus on skills is not, significantly, a focus on the kinds of orientation-specific skills identified in the previous paragraph, but rather on what we might call “basic skills” or “foundational skills,” skills of access to the basic meaning of the text in its original language. And there are times and settings where this focus crowds out other purposes and practices to a significant extent, where teachers teach and students learn with the express purpose of mastering the secret code.

This happens, in part, due to the nature of the texts themselves, which are terse and obscure, and which regularly employ technical terms that assume a great deal of background knowledge. But in addition, the focus on skills also occurs for a culturally specific reason, namely the enor-

⁴⁰ This issue is taken up by several of the respondents in a symposium on the longer version of this chapter, published in the *Journal of Jewish Education* 76:2 (2010). My further discussion is published as “Do We Know an Orientation When We See It? Continuing the Conversation about the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature,” *Journal of Jewish Education* 76:3 (2010): 272-283.

mous cultural capital that accrues (in certain environments) to those who are able to access these texts. We may think, first, of the Orthodox world, where the ability to decipher—not to insightfully interpret but just to decipher—these obscure texts is a kind of rite of passage among boys and men.

This is not to say, however, that the teaching and learning among men in the Orthodox community is carried out within the Skills Orientation. Typically, it is not. In the male Orthodox world, the acquisition of skills happens (if it does) as a by-product of teaching within other orientations, especially within the Jurisprudential Orientation. Instead, good examples of the Skills Orientation are to be found elsewhere—among liberal Jewish educational programs (where facility with classical rabbinic texts also imparts significant cultural capital) and especially among Orthodox women's yeshivot (where students and teachers are acutely aware that access to the texts is a tool of empowerment, a key that opens up many doors). Teachers committed to the Skills Orientation place an emphasis on teaching technical terminology, providing direct instruction on standard forms of talmudic argumentation, making explicit the cultural assumptions and the historical background, even employing a developed sequential curriculum,⁴¹ all in order to accelerate the acquisition of the desired skills. Teaching and learning within this orientation sometimes has a certain impatient quality, especially when young adults imagine themselves making up for lost time and when teachers try to help them do so. Orientations, I claimed above, are sets of purposes and practices that hang together in the actual teaching and learning of a particular subject. In identifying this orientation, we are calling to mind images of real educational environments, real teachers and real students engaged in an aspirational endeavor, where the challenge of learning to access the texts of rabbinic literature is sometimes wearisome and sometimes frustrating but also, ultimately, empowering.

⁴¹ Pam Grossman and Susan Stodolsky, "Content as Context: The Role of School Subjects in Secondary School Teaching," *Educational Researcher* 24:8 (1995): 5-11, 23, call attention to the way that teachers of some subjects (e.g., languages and math) believe that one must first study *a* followed by *b* and then *c*, but teachers of other subjects (e.g., social studies) seem to place less importance on sequentiality. Talmud typically has little sequentiality—except for some instructors within the Skills Orientation.

E. Conclusion: How To Use a Menu

These ten orientations to the teaching of rabbinic literature, then, constitute the menu. (See the chart below.) They certainly do not encompass every instance of the teaching of these texts. They do not encompass, for example, the use of rabbinic texts in the teaching of *other* subjects (e.g., comparative religion or the history of Jewish thought), the intentional integration of rabbinic literature with other literatures, or more casual uses of rabbinic texts for reflective or devotional purposes.⁴² It may be that they do not appropriately represent the teaching of rabbinic literature in the ultra-Orthodox world, especially in Israel. But they represent ten coherent, developed conceptions of what the subject of rabbinic literature is all about, as a subject of teaching and learning, each with its associated, characteristic pedagogical practices.

<i>Orientations to Teaching English</i>	<i>Orientations to Teaching Bible</i>	<i>Orientations to Teaching Rabbinic Literature</i>
Reader Orientation Text Orientation Context Orientation	1. Contextual Orientation 2. Literary Criticism Orientation 3. <i>Parshanut</i> , the Jewish Interpretive Orientation 4. Moralistic-Didactic Orientation 5. Personalization Orientation 6. Ideational Orientation 7. Bible Leads to Action Orientation 8. Decoding and Translation Orientation	1. Torah/Instruction Orientation 2. Contextual Orientation 3. Jurisprudential Orientation 4. Halakhic Orientation 5. Literary Orientation 6. Cultural Orientation 7. Historical Orientation 8. <i>Beki'ut</i> Orientation 9. Interpretive Orientation 10. Skills Orientation

⁴² I have in mind, here, instances wherein instructors choose a rabbinic text to teach, but the choice might have been otherwise. The instructor might have chosen a text from Maimonides, or from Yehuda Amichai, or something else entirely. I do not mean to denigrate the teaching or learning that occurs under these conditions, but it seems unavoidable that these are not instances of

Readers who have persevered to this point might now wonder why this exercise is worth pursuing: the “so what?” question. There are three good answers, and one poor one.

First, the menu of orientations provides a kind of theoretical framework for the field of rabbinic literature, as a field of teaching and learning. Second, the specificity of the menu of orientations enables new questions and new inquiries, across orientations or within a particular orientation. And third, there may be a more practical benefit for instructors of rabbinic literature, for whom encountering the menu of orientations is like holding up a mirror to their practice. Is this what I do? Is this what I believe? Relatedly, the metaphor of a menu of orientations implies *choices*: practitioners may come to see more options in the teaching of rabbinic literature, a greater range of purposes and practices, than they had previously recognized.

Here, however, we come to the poor answer to the “so what” question. There is a way in which the metaphor of a menu is potentially misleading. When we are faced with a menu, we usually choose one option (or, one main option). We might imagine therefore that our purpose, in thinking about orientations to the teaching of rabbinic literature, is to make sure that we are firmly embedded in one and only one orientation. But this would be a mistake. In the case of orientations, there is no particular reason to think that teaching within one orientation is always preferable to employing multiple orientations.

In some circumstances, we can imagine that orientational purity is indeed beneficial. A teacher who restricts herself to one orientation imposes a kind of discipline on her teaching, focusing consistent attention on the desired pedagogic goals, continually reinforcing them while avoiding idiosyncratic distractions. However, in other circumstances, the pedagogic goals of an institution (or even an individual teacher) may not be well served by specialization or orientational purity. Instead, a school might benefit from a principled eclecticism in the teaching of rabbinic literature—consciously choosing to employ not one but multiple specific orientations in order to provide a broader perspective on

teaching the subject of rabbinic literature. So while these instances of teaching may well appear, in some respects, like the Torah Orientation, the absence of pedagogic commitment to rabbinic literature *as a subject* is significant. Jon Spira-Savett helped me clarify this point.

the field.⁴³ Principled eclecticism is not the same as indefensible idiosyncrasy.

Careful and critical attention to the orientations can nurture the former and help avoid the latter. As a heuristic device, the menu of orientations can open up new possibilities. It can enable teachers to ask questions about what kinds of knowledge are important in this field, and enable teacher educators, too, to ask questions about what kinds of knowledge are important for teachers to have. It can even serve as a framework for discussion *among* teachers about the practices of teaching rabbinic literature—discussion that is more nuanced and more specific, that is less ideological and more pedagogical, than it might otherwise have been. Indeed, in my experience exploring the orientations with teachers over the last several years, it has already played these roles.

⁴³ Barry Holtz, *Textual Knowledge*, 52 ff, suggests that it is the mark of a good teacher to combine multiple orientations, and cites Gail Dorph in favor of this claim as well (see Gail Zaiman Dorph, “Conceptions and Preconceptions: A Study of Prospective Jewish Educators’ Knowledge and Beliefs about Torah,” Ph.D. diss., Jewish Theological Seminary, 1993). Thus, they endorse what I am calling here “principled eclecticism” as a form of flexibility that is desirable in all teachers. But why should it be the case that the instructor who employs multiple orientations is necessarily a better teacher than the one who employs a single orientation well? In other words, while the importance of flexible subject matter knowledge is clear (see G. Williamson McDiarmid, Deborah Loewenberg Ball, and Charles W. Anderson, “Why Staying One Chapter Ahead Doesn’t Really Work: Subject-Specific Pedagogy,” in *The Knowledge Base for Beginning Teachers*, ed. Maynard Reynolds (Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press, 1989), it is not clear to me whether and why flexibility must necessarily entail, specifically, *orientational* flexibility.