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ACADEMIC TALMUD IN THE HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM: A DIALOGUE

Dear Lisa,

I appreciate the opportunity to dialogue with a fellow educator on the methodology of teaching Gemara in high school. Let me begin with what I would argue are the three main goals for a high school Gemara class. Of course, each has to be adjusted to the students in any particular class in terms of intellectual abilities, religious interest, etc. But, broadly speaking, the goals are: for the students to love learning Gemara; to have the skills to do so on their own; and to be inspired to want to live a life of *yirat shamayim*. Now, the last point is *the* larger goal of Orthodox Jewish education and exists independent of the school's Talmud department. But, I believe, we Gemara teachers are uniquely situated to contribute to its achievement. The quest for *yirat shamayim* is, of course, a somewhat amorphous goal, both in terms of how to implement it and in terms of what standards should be used as criteria for success. In all cases, that is a topic for some later discussion.

Let me clarify what I mean by the skills component. Far too often discussions about skills narrowly focus on reading skills. To be sure, those are important, but they are only one component of the skills that we ought to be imparting to our students. Understanding how a *shakla ve-tarya* works (that is, the basic comprehension skill of being able to understand the flow of the “back and forth” of the talmudic discussion), how to analyze the different positions in any talmudic debate (or, for that matter, in a debate among the *Rishonim*), how to understand the methodologies of the *Rishonim* and *Abaronim*, and so many more conceptual skills, are critical to an independent ability to learn Gemara in any real way. I might add, these are higher-order skills needed to make Gemara learning meaningful even for those who rely on the Artscroll or Steinsaltz translations and forgo working on independent reading skills altogether.

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Having qualified that, to my mind, the best way to try to achieve the first two goals is to use a more traditional approach to Gemara. To be sure, there are many approaches that consider themselves “traditional”: Brisker, more classic *Aharonim*, etc. However, all would, I believe, start with reading the Gemara ahistorically, as more of a free flow of ideas, seeing parallel *gemarot* to build a *sugya* and consider what issues challenged the *Rishonim*. I do think it is valuable for teachers to have some understanding of the academic/historical approach to Talmud study, and to be able at times to bring in those approaches as appropriate, but I would caution against using them more than occasionally. (So, on the one hand, students should realize that a conversation in the Gemara might involve participants spanning hundreds of years and they were not actually all talking to each other. On the other hand, I think it would be detrimental if, when learning the *sugya* of *davar she'eno mitkaven*, for example, students decided that the concept of *pesik reisha* was a later invention and therefore disregarded all the discussions applying it to earlier statements.)

Now, the academic approach is multifaceted, so it is oversimplified to reduce it to the following, but I believe that the three major areas where people suggest using it for high school are: 1. Seeing the layers of development of ideas by breaking down what the *Tanna* said versus the *stama de-Gemara* or by looking at earlier sources independently, such as the *Tosefta* or *Midrash Halakha*; 2. Questioning if the Gemara's explanations of what *Tanna'im* meant based on questions is really endeavoring to understand what the *Tanna* meant, or viewing them as new approaches that ignore actual intent; and finally 3. Checking and comparing various manuscripts for alternate versions of the text. (Other aspects of academic Talmud, such as historical, archeological, linguistic, and realia research are beyond the scope of this discussion.) There is value in all of the above and, as academics will point out, *Rishonim* were certainly aware of all these issues. At the same time, the fact that the *Rishonim*, being aware of these issues, considered them peripheral and focused on the Gemara's discussion in the ahistorical way that it is presented in the Gemara, ought to be a model for us as well.

Certainly there will be students who will be troubled by issues for which an academic approach can provide answers, and a teacher's ability to discuss those topics is valuable. And yet, I would caution on putting too much emphasis on those issues for three reasons:

First, they are highly speculative. Teasing out the original intent from the *stama's* addition, supposing which parts of the Gemara are really from the *Savora'im* and the like is usually impossible to pin down 100% and could make students feel empowered to take things many steps further

than even the practitioners would recommend. One could reasonably label many more traditional methods, such as Brisker *lomdus*, speculative as well. However, the answers proffered by an academic approach emanate from a movement that classifies itself as scientific. I think that the conclusions that can be drawn from academic Talmud gone awry are potentially much more theologically troubling than the worst Brisker *hakira*.

Second, the way the Gemara developed, and the way the *Rishonim* analyzed it, serves as the backbone of halakha. I am not arguing that all Gemara learning should be *halakha le-ma'ase* (although the rapidly expanding lacuna of halakha-teaching in Modern Orthodox schools is a phenomenon that deserves its own discussion), but I do think that we do our students a disservice if we present what the Gemara says as not what the *Tanna* thought originally or as superimposing later ideas onto previous statements, and then tell them that all those discussions have no bearing on the halakha. *Lomdus* can at times also run counter to the bottom-line halakha, but the methodology does not inherently contradict in the manner that academic Talmud does.

Finally, learning Gemara is one of the most beautiful links we have between the Modern Orthodox community and our more Haredi or yeshivish counterparts. Being able to discuss a *sugya* with someone of a different religious orientation and find that you enjoy common terminologies and methodologies is sadly unique to Gemara. *Tanakh* study is often based on varying assumptions, but much less so with Gemara. I believe it would be preferable to connect to Talmud study as it has been done for many centuries.

Those are my thoughts. I look forward to hearing yours.

Yaakov



Dear Yaakov,

I am grateful for the opportunity to dialogue with you. I appreciate that you started this conversation by enumerating goals. In response, I'd like to share two thoughts about that. Firstly, we often articulate love of Gemara and textual skills as entirely separate goals, and even as goals that sometimes work at odds with one another. Often it is framed as a question of triage: Should we choose to teach textual skills *or* choose to inspire students? When we do that, we discount the sense of joy and inspiration that comes from hard work in *havruta*, or from feeling that we gained a certain skill that helps us become insiders to the text.

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As educators, we need to talk more about how love of learning can be generated from students working on skills. Secondly, I'd like to add another goal to the list: Helping students understand that Gemara is *relevant* and can speak to important questions that play out in their daily lives. I do not mean that the Gemara discusses cases that might occur today or tomorrow; I mean that the Gemara raises issues that are crucial to how we think about ourselves and our place in the world.

To illustrate, the Mishna in *Bava Kamma* (27a) presents a case of a person who leaves a pitcher in the public space and a second person trips and breaks it. On one level, this case is relevant because we all leave things in public spaces and they can break. Anyone who makes his or her way through the halls of a modern high school, as you and I do daily, will surely attest to this! But more significantly, this case is relevant because the Mishna and Gemara are raising the very important question of how we think about public space and the role of the individual within it. Am I allowed to use public space for my individual needs? What kind of person do I become if I always need to watch where I am going? These are questions currently being debated in public discourse with regard to both our physical and virtual spaces. I want my students to know that the Gemara has something to say in response. Approaching the *sugya* in this way can help shift students' perspective of Gemara, and perhaps even religion in general, so often conceived of as a list of rules and regulations. Suddenly, the Gemara can be understood as a work seeking to refine individuals and society based upon the seemingly most mundane actions, such as where I dump my junk.

A limited academic approach to teaching Gemara can be helpful in achieving this last goal—illuminating the big questions *Hazal* are asking. Yaakov, when I advocate for a limited academic approach I refer mostly to your first point, “seeing the layers of development of ideas.” I want my students to understand that the *Amora'im* were in the challenging but religiously meaningful position of inheriting a fixed text and living with it in new times. I want my students to find religious meaning in the *process* of Gemara—in the process of reinterpreting an old source, or of choosing to stand by it. In order to appreciate when that is happening, they need a sense of historicity, of when a source is earlier or later, when an *Amora* is speaking as opposed to the Gemara itself (I prefer this phrasing over the language of the “*stam*”). What was on the table originally, has it shifted, and if so, why? A few years ago, a number of Gemara teachers at SAR High School collaborated to write a mission statement for the department. We came up with four bullet points, the last of which reads: “Guide students to see the talmudic process as an expression of Modern Orthodox thinking—i.e., an attempt to balance commitment to texts,

values, and real world issues in the hope of internalizing not just the content but the approach itself as a model of living one's life as a Jew." The process of *Hazal*, layer by layer, is an example of navigating commitment to tradition while living in a changing world. This is lost if the Gemara is approached ahistorically.

Allow me to illustrate how this might play out in a classroom by returning to the Mishna I referenced above. The Mishna states that if a person trips and breaks a pitcher left in the public space, the tripper is exempt from payment of damages. The assumption is that one does not have to exercise great caution when walking in public space. The Gemara (*stam*) challenges this assumption and asks "Why is he exempt? He should have watched where he is going." The Gemara then brings in three *okimtot* (limitations of the original case). Each is from an early *Amora*, and each narrows the case of the Mishna to a situation in which the person could not possibly have watched where he or she was going. For example, the first *okimta*, that of Rav, suggests that the Mishna was referring to a case where the entire public space was filled with pitchers, so the person had no choice but to break one. The assumption of the Mishna has now been inverted—a person needs to exercise great caution in the public space, except in a situation where he or she can't. After testing the *okimtot* to see if they conform to the language of the Mishna, the *sugya* quotes an *Eretz Yisrael* tradition that it is not the way of people to watch where they are going (again, as witnessed daily between bells in school halls and stairwells!).

When I teach this *sugya*, I begin by focusing on the *okimtot*. Why do the early *Amora'im* have a totally different assumption about the use of public space than the Mishna? Is this because they individually held different beliefs, because public space functioned differently, or because the Mishna seems to contradict the earlier notion that a person is always responsible for his or her actions (*adam mu'ad le-olam*)? If it is the latter, why is that not spelled out explicitly, as contradictions often are? These questions are more important to me than any particular answer, as my goal is for students to understand Gemara as a process of developing tradition. I focus on the idea of the *okimta* itself as a method of remaining loyal to tradition while allowing it to expand to new possibilities. The words of the Mishna are unchanging and we are responsible to them, but they can also encompass a new worldview.

Then I focus on the *Eretz Yisrael* tradition at the end of the *sugya*. It is presented presumably as a response to the original question of the Gemara: Shouldn't people watch where they are going? However, it reads (in Hebrew as opposed to Aramaic) as an explanation of the Mishna rather

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than an idea that comes from outside of it. Why is the actor in the Mishna exempt from payment for the broken pitcher? Because people don't generally watch where they are going. Read this way, we now have an interesting divergence of views between the early *Amora'im* in Bavel, who assumed we need to watch where we are going in public space, and the Mishna and early *Eretz Yisrael* tradition which assumed we don't. What lies beneath each view of public space? Are these traditions putting forth an ideal view of how we should use public space, or, as the *Eretz Yisrael* tradition seems to assert, a halakha based on how people actually interact within it?

These are wonderfully rich questions to consider with students. An approach which glosses over layers within the *sugya*, or immediately attends to the harmonizing concerns of the *Rishonim* will miss the beauty of what the *okimtot* strive to do, and the opportunity to highlight why there might really be two different views of how to think about public space. I want to highlight that this is a limited academic approach in service of helping students locate relevance, and hence, religious meaning in Gemara. I am not adopting academic methodology whole-hog; I would not have students look at manuscripts or teach this Gemara as disparate sources independent of the *shakla ve-tarya*, because in the case of this *sugya*, it does not serve my end goal. I believe we can, however, utilize the academic lens of distinguishing layers to uncover the significant and relevant questions with which the Gemara is grappling. While I might be intellectually stimulated by academic research around a particular *sugya*, I would only bring it into the classroom if I felt it would help my students appreciate Gemara as relevant and religiously meaningful. (I would add that it is my strong impression that this is true for the overwhelming majority of colleagues who favor the use of academic methods in the yeshiva high school classroom.)

I would like to explicitly address some of your concerns about adopting an academic approach. You state that conclusions from academic Talmud study are highly speculative. In some cases, that is probably correct; in others, less so. Either way, as an educator in a classroom, I am less interested in presenting students with conclusions, and more interested in presenting them with questions. How would they evaluate a particular assertion? The questions, more than the conclusions, help uncover meaning. Regarding the fear that we might communicate to students that "all those discussions have no bearing on halakha," I entirely agree with you. I want my students to understand that Gemara is not a book of practical halakha, but that the discussions therein are the backbone of future halakhic discourse. Helping students understand that the Gemara is composed of layers of traditions in conversation with each other, and isolating those traditions, in no way contradicts that notion. It actually

helps students understand what halakhic discourse looks like. In a similar vein, the limited approach I am advocating does not cut off conversation with the yeshivish community. Students are still learning the Gemara straight through, “*al ha-daf*,” and are familiar with the same terminology and flow of the *sugya*.

I will conclude where I began, by stating that a limited academic approach can help students appreciate Gemara as a process of *Hazal* attempting to figure out how we can best maintain commitment to tradition in an ever-changing world.

I look forward to your response.

Lisa



Hi Lisa,

Thank you for your very thoughtful and nuanced response. The point you raise about the joy of accomplishment when a student has worked through a source is well taken. So as not to get sidetracked from our main discussion, I will leave that as something for future dialogue. I would instead like to focus on your approach of stressing relevance and then using some degree of academic Talmud methodologies to achieve that goal.

Let me begin with a few caveats. I was unclear why one need resort to academic Talmud for the example that you used from *Bava Kamma*. My understanding was that you were looking for the Gemara to present opposing approaches as to how one may view public space and how it can and should be used. The Gemara presents both sides explicitly, what is added by assuming that the Mishna thought one way and then the *okimtot* another, or that it was different in Bavel versus *Eretz Yisrael*? If the goal is to have the students speculate as to the differing societal realities in each area and era, I would venture that the students have very little actual basis upon which to arrive at any conclusion (to be honest, I do not know if I myself know enough to hazard a meaningful guess). Moving to your larger point, I know we agree that every educator should have several approaches at his or her disposal, so I think our disagreements will be more about what should be a *major* focus rather than invalidating an approach or assuming that it ought to always be employed. I know that you are a thoughtful educator who is selective about methodologies, depending on which will be best for arriving at your goal for that particular *sugya*.

When you discuss relevance, I very much appreciated that you made it clear that you were not using the term as it is often used, that we should tailor the Gemara to fit what the students *a priori* consider relevant.

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Rather, you use it to broaden their horizons, to consider bigger issues. Even so, I wonder how that approach would work for tractates such as *Sukka* and *Pesahim*, which deal with the nitty-gritty details of *halakhot* specific to particular *mitzvot*. How would you broaden those discussions? Additionally, I worry about creating an expectation that every *sugya* will be relevant. If the student cannot find relevance in a *sugya* he or she will learn in the future, should they not learn it? Will they be disappointed? Of course, finding relevance is a good thing, but I believe that students need to receive the message that all of Torah is important, even if they do not see the relevance. Finally, I wonder if the halakhic parts of the Gemara are most effective for these broad discussions. I would think that the aggadic sections are the ones better suited for that role (of course, it is unfortunate how little *aggada* is studied in high schools). Those sections are meant to express broader ideas and are intentionally open to varying interpretations (at least that is my opinion; I imagine some may differ).

You also said that you were content with the discussions being open-ended. I certainly see the value in validating students' own approaches in areas such as *Tanakh* or *aggada*, but I worry about too much of that for Gemara. Granted that our discussions in Gemara classes need not have a specific *halakha le-ma'ase* orientation, but I believe that students should still leave with the understanding that ideas need to be rooted in texts and cannot be speculative. Gemara is the source of halakha and allowing students too much room to impose their preconceived values on the Gemara seems dangerous to me. To return to the academic Talmud piece, do we need our students to speculate as to why different societies came to their conclusions? The Gemara as presented, without breaking down the historical layers, will generally allow for ample differing views to create room for the broader discussions for which you are advocating.

Having expressed my concerns, let me conclude by saying that your approach is quite intriguing and one which I need to consider more carefully to include as part of my own classroom (perhaps in a more limited fashion than you might be endorsing). Thank you for the continuing opportunity to think together about our common concerns.

Yaakov



Yaakov—

Thank you for your thought-provoking questions. I will address them in the order they were presented. Firstly, you asked why academic Talmud is needed to present differing points of view with regard to use of

public space. It isn't if the conversation you are having is just about two opposing views of public space. But I am pushing for a conversation that acknowledges that what we have here is not just a disagreement, it is a reshaping. An earlier source staked out a claim; a later source doesn't erase the earlier source, but instead recasts it. There is great religious significance in the methodology of the *okimta*—in declaring that we are bound to an unchanging source, and will remain loyal to it, and yet, there is room for our own creativity and expression within that confine. That is a message that can speak to students, and it is lost if we don't take into account layers of conversation in the Gemara.

Secondly, you asked whether it is possible to apply this notion of relevance to *Sukka* or *Pesachim*, which are more technical in nature and focused around a particular mitzva. I love this question because it forces me to home in a bit more on what I mean by relevance and because my answer is an unequivocal yes. I stated earlier that helping students see Gemara as relevant means helping them understand that Gemara speaks to important questions that play out in their day to day lives. Relevance can be found in the content of Gemara, and it can also be found in the process of Gemara. On the content front, a very technical *sugya* about the measurements of a *sukka* can open up a conversation about what we choose to strictly legislate around and what we leave to individual discretion. In our COVID age, this is a public conversation playing out daily. On the process front, we can ask what might we gain or lose by following the majority opinion, or by deciding to be explicit or implicit about a particular agenda. I want to train my students so that when they encounter a technical *sugya*, even if it is hard to identify content that is relevant, there is always something to be learned from the distinct process of talmudic discussion, as illustrated by the example of the *okimta*.

I strongly agree we should be teaching more *aggada* in our schools. I also strongly believe that if we train students to see only the aggadic, rather than the halakhic sections of Gemara as repositories of religious meaning, that we are preventing them from appreciating the particular type of religious meaning contained in a halakhic conversation.

A caveat to the project of viewing everything as relevant: I believe one can be too free-wheeling in this approach. It is important that the questions we ask stem from a close reading of the text and remain loyal to it. Which brings me to your final question as to whether we should be comfortable having open-ended discussions with students about Gemara. I believe we should be, so long as humility is a cornerstone of our classroom from day one. I am fascinated by the *okimta* because it is both entirely radical and entirely humble at the same time. I am going to hold

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onto what was said before me, accept it as unchanging, and still layer my own thoughts onto it. That is a pretty good model for classroom discourse in general. In this particular *sugya* in *Bava Kamma* that may look like throwing out possibilities for why there might be a shift in views, bringing whatever evidence we can muster to support our opinions, being aware of our own biases, and, ultimately, understanding that we might not emerge with an answer. (One of my favorite classroom mantras is “Don’t talk from your *tuchus*”!) An approach like this actually forces students to examine the text carefully to see what shifted, and to root their ideas in it. It doesn’t allow for sloppy reading, but forces us to be open and honest about the text and what it might say to our lives.

Thank you, Yaakov, for helping to push my thinking around this issue, and I am looking forward to when our students can dialogue around it as well!

Lisa