Dusting Off the Jastrow: A Reflection on Going Back to the Basics in Teaching Rabbinic Literature

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Once again, the school year has come to a close, and I find myself reflecting on what worked, and what did not, in my classes. I currently teach at a Schechter-affiliated Jewish high school on the East Coast. For the majority of the twenty-six years since ordination, I have been teaching Talmud, Midrash, and halakhah to high schoolers in two similar schools. I regularly assess my classroom successes and missteps to refine my approach for the coming year, but every so often, I consider a complete overhaul. After many years of fine-tuning my current grade curricula, this feels like one of those years. Surprisingly, what I am considering an "overhaul" may bring me back to my earliest years of teaching.

As a newly minted rabbi, I came to my department head to learn the curriculum for what would be my first real job. I was handed two volumes of the Steinsaltz Talmud—Sanhedrin for ninth grade and Bava Metzi'a for eighth—and told, "there's your curriculum." A bit deflated but not entirely unprepared, as I had already spent years as an after-school teacher, I braced myself for the hardest year in any teacher's career: the first one.

Back then, students had no laptops, and I had no Sefaria at my disposal. I laid out my source sheets manually, using CD-ROMs (remember those?), and even wrote out my own translations when necessary. I handed out Jastrow dictionaries and introduced them as their "new best friend!" I was developing my own set of tools, including something I called ATTWYFACP—Aramaic Tricks to Wow Your Friends at Cocktail Parties—and would create worksheets for the students to keep guided notes. The students were simply fascinated with everything I taught, because it was the "good old days."

Oh, excuse me while I wake up from my own fever dream.

In teaching Talmud and halakhah, it has always been a struggle to get students to see the value in excavating the past in order to understand modern Judaism. My classroom has always had students of varying levels of religious

observance and knowledge; some were living observant lifestyles, others only vaguely aware that Shemini ʻAtseret is a holiday. As a student and fan of Midrash, I would begin with the idea of drash as a basic unit to help them learn who the rabbis were and see rabbinic methods of interpretation as essential units of their methodology. One of the reasons I began there is that it helped students see that the rabbis treasured yet still challenged biblical texts as they balanced their own conflicted understandings of what God wanted from the Jewish people.

As the years have gone by, many of my colleagues have felt a shift in the student body, as it has become less observant or decreasingly familiar with a basic understanding of the relevance and workings of halakhah. Indeed, we have begun to notice that there are fewer and fewer students who are familiar with Shabbat or even High Holiday liturgy and practices. More concerning is that students seem to feel that rabbinic Judaism is a relic of a distant, irrelevant past. I have found this most difficult, as my entire job is to help them see themselves as very much part of this living, breathing, and ever-adapting system. So I decided to revise the curriculum to be more forward facing, inspired by my stint on the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS). The ninthgrade curriculum, for example, was refashioned to engage with the ethical and halakhic struggles of *today's* Jewish community, and to help my students see that Jews still turn to Torah to negotiate these struggles. Judaism is dynamic and will continue to adapt to the many technologies around it, and they, too, will need to adapt. After all, their future will be far more like The Jetsons than my own 1980s upbringing. (I still want a hover-car.)

What this looked like depended on the years, but here are a few examples:

1. We studied Nevinsʻs lab-grown meat *teshuvah* as grounds to review the basics of kashrut. Students created their own Op-Docs—an opinion-based mini-documentary piloted by the *New York Times* in 2011—that had to answer the question of whether kashrut would be a relevant construct in a world where meat was grown in a lab.

2. We learned the thirty-nine *melaʾkhot* of Shabbat, *pikuaḥ nefesh*, *kelaʾḥar yad*, *pesiq reisha*, and other concepts that laid the groundwork for discussing how and when using electricity and other technology was problematic on Shabbat, and where concepts like *grama* or *pikuaḥ nefesh* might apply. Students then presented their own chosen piece of modern technology, ranging from Roomba vacuums and

glucose monitors to advanced artificial limbs.

3. In a business ethics course, I put halakhic concepts such as *hasagat gevul* ("unfair competition") and *ona'at mamon* ("monetary oppression") into dialogue with everyday business practices that surround them every day. Students choose contemporary business issues to explore how they believe the rabbis might respond to modern situations such as the arms industry, college admissions practices, or fast fashion.

My goal was to show students that however distant the Mishnah and Talmud may feel, the rabbis model adaptation—anchored in tradition, yet responsive to reality. Technology is rapidly changing our daily lives and includes unavoidable things like keyless-app entry to dorms, automated faucets, and even self-driving cars. I especially appreciated my time on the CJLS because I could bring what we were discussing into my classrooms. It was not particular *teshuvot* that inspired me but the model of engaging with a living tradition, with an eye toward the future.

I often joke that I live in the past (and that the middle ages were too modern for me), but my students do not. They live in a world that *does* have Sefaria, immediate translation technology, apps that start cars remotely, food cooked by robots—indeed, we ordered from the kosher Korean robot-cooking one in our neighborhood this week!—and myriad other examples of technologies that change lives for better and for worse. If we do not address the ever-changing world in which we all live, students will either ignore the Jewish perspective on these issues or turn by default to the most stringent voices. My goal is neither to promote nor dissuade, but to present different views and equip them with the tools to see how differing perspectives are reached. This has not always succeeded in every class that I have taught, but that it has been my intention.

I still believe in this approach, so where does the overhaul come in?

Nearly every year since I began teaching, I have noted that I tend to lose the forest for the trees. In my department office at work, I call this "going down the rabbit hole." My colleagues know it means I went on a deep dive that led me to four or five crazy tangents while the original question was left hanging. In a classroom, I may be better about going back to the original question, to not lose my students. In the past few years, however, I have wondered about the cost of spending so much time on the finer details of

issues like how cultivated meat is developed, when I have students who have forgotten who Rambam was. I teach the same basics each and every year in my day school classes, yet the students have difficulty distinguishing the Tannaim from the Amoraim. I am growing concerned that without a real grasp of the beauty of the halakhic system and the respect that the rabbis had for it, there will (sadly) be no real reason to worry about the students engaging with it in the future. The questions that remains are: What *really* matters in a Talmud or halakhah class? How do we leave space and inspire understanding of and respect for the methodology of halakhah? How do we encourage our students to consider how halakhah might adapt as things like AI and brain-computer interfaces take root in our everyday lives? We obviousy need a balance, but we also need to consider what our true goals are. The rest of this article lays out the goals on which I intend to base my classes in the next year.

The Value of Accessing Texts in the Original Hebrew

My father *z"l* has been gone for twenty-one years, but I will always have his voice and his deep love of Hebrew in my head. Like many, I have subscribed to the rather gendered phrase attributed to Hayyim Nahman Bialik: "Reading the Bible in translation is like kissing your new bride through a veil." Students miss so much nuance when relying on outside translations, and, frankly, the translator wields too much power in relaying the intentions of the rabbinic authors. I love Sefaria and other rabbinic texts/translations available online, but I have found many mistakes in their crowd-sourced translations. Many of us have also had moments in professionally published translations where the English favors a much more recent commentary or does not adequately relay the point that was clear in the original language. In the best of all possible worlds, my students would not rely on those translations, which semiconsciously influence their reading of a text. However, I have only fifty minutes with these students, three times a week. Is that enough time to essentially sacrifice the possibility of accessing a wider breadth of texts for my students so that they can struggle to translate a couple of lines of text? At the risk of incurring the wrath of the experienced day school teachers out there, I would ask if they consider the Hebrew level of their students to be on par with what it was twenty years ago. (Remember, I have been teaching for twenty-five!) There are multiple reasons for what my colleagues and I have been experiencing regarding Jewish observance but also for the level of Hebrew fluency, so do we not owe it to our students to

meet them where they are? There are so many new resources that were not readily available when I was younger, and my students can find them with a few taps. In addition, once I have four or five students who have learning plans that require them to use laptops, how do I keep them and their *ḥevrutot* away from those translations? In my department, we feel deeply the loss of student facility with translation in both Tanakh and rabbinics classes and have decided on a department-wide initiative of dedicating five minutes of every class to working deeply on translating even one or two core lines of text closely, at every grade level, and at every level of Hebrew. We have found that insisting on a whole day of translation causes students to lose interest quickly, while dismissing translation completely leaves students disenfranchised and alienated from ownership of these texts as their own. We do not yet know if this approach will work, but we are ready to work to find the right balance as we go.

Back to Basics

Like many teachers, I sometimes wonder if I am losing my mind. I am not exaggerating when I tell you that I teach and reteach the basics every single year. Before I delve into the details of such matters as kashrut, Shabbat, or lending at interest, I cover the time period of the rabbis, the development of Mishnah and Talmud, how drash works, and a rough timeline of rabbinic works. This is my primary motivation for reconsidering my curricula this year: teaching students the basics in the beginning is not enough. Students need context for *every single text* so that they can understand the factors to which the rabbis are responding, both inside and outside the rabbinic world. Those of you who are currently muttering "obviously" under your breath right now cannot underestimate how hard this is to do in real life for students, every single day. I have a pet project in my mind that I have not yet translated into reality: a living timeline. I am envisioning a huge (think hallway-sized) physical timeline with both Jewish and non-Jewish markers on them, to which the students can add all year so that they can get a clearer sense of what is happening in the world around each text and its author. I believe that our STEM lab will begin actively avoiding me this year, because I will be using them to help make this a reality!

Students Still Crave Practical Knowledge

As department chair of a school that offers electives on many aspects of Judaism, including Yiddish language and literature, lesser-studied biblical books like Daniel and Judges, Midrash, and philosophy, I have learned a few things about which classes are the most popular choices among our students. Surprisingly, practical halakhah classes always run. The classes that fill up first are those that cover in Jewish life cycle, business ethics and bioethics, a deep dive into kashrut (*basar beḥalav*), and other topics within Jewish practice—these are the classes that fill up first. We have found that wherever students find themselves on the spectrum of religious observance, they are consistently interested in the practicalities of how Jews doJudaism. With this in mind, it has made me wonder if I have spent too much time on complex things like cultivated meat (especially as some states and foreign countries have been banning its development for political reasons) and not enough on truly understanding the ins and outs of how kashrut works even today. I still believe in having classic Jewish texts dialogue with modern concepts—for example, the current issue of banning artificial dyes could lead to more use of carmine in foods—but perhaps my balance needs to be shifted back to the ancient world.

Flexibility is Key

Maybe it is because I would get bored teaching the same thing every year, but I have always changed some texts, assessments, and even whole units in my classes. As a result, the overhaul that I am proposing for this year may not seem dramatic, but it still represents a mental shift, as I return to those basics that I worried would bore my students in an increasingly digital world. I asked them this year if they could not stand to think about lab-grown meat any more, and I was surprised to hear that they thought it was actually an interesting topic, but maybe too long of a unit. This may mean shorter, more focused units on contemporary topics, and tighter laptop restrictions in class. (Sorry, Sefaria.) It will definitely mean keeping my eye on student needs and interests and pivoting when necessary. It has always been my belief that I can teach the rabbis—their methods, ideology, and theology—no matter the text or topic, so I will remain flexible in order to pique students'I nterest and try to stay attuned to where I can fill gaps in their Jewish literacy.

This may not feel like an overhaul at all for some of you reading this, and

perhaps that is my point. Students may change in every generation, with new realities and new technologies, but I must adjust, the way I know the rabbis did in their time. *I* will adapt so that my students may come to realize that *Judaism* will continue to adapt to the whirlwind of the life surrounding us—halakhically, ethically, and ideologically. Adaptation can also mean going back to what worked in the past. I do not yet know what will work, but in the meantime, I will dust off my Aramaic tricks (ATTWYFACP) and get ready to help my students see that rabbinic Judaism is not ancient history—it is a living conversation, one that they are invited to join.

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