Talmud Study: From Proficiency to Meaning

By: YEHUDA BRANDES

This article presents a method of teaching and studying Gemara,[1] beginning with the most basic steps of reading and understanding the text and ending with strategies for more in-depth study. Three points of focus are emphasized in this method, with special attention paid to maintaining a proper balance between them. The first—"*Miqra*"—consists of a complete understanding of the text being read. The second—"*Mishnah*"—consists of consolidating the knowledge gleaned from study and retaining it. The third—"*Talmud*"—involves studying the text in a variety of creative manners, going beyond basic understanding and review. The aforementioned structure is based on the assumption that in-depth study without basic understanding of the text is flawed, that study that does not also set as a goal knowing and remembering the material is unstable and weak and that study based only on reading and reviewing the text is unsatisfactory. The third point of focus—"*Talmud*"—demands that Gemara study not end with a simple interpretation of the material being learned, but rather that an additional layer of deeper study be added, one that can introduce students to the worlds of meaning latent in the text of the Gemara, going far beyond the labor of simply decoding a passage.

What is *Talmud?*—Maimonides' Categories of Study

Maimonides in his laws of "The Study of Torah" divides Torah study into three parts: Written Torah, Oral Torah and *Talmud*. He elaborates, explaining how one should allocate one's study time between these categories, showing that this division is not only theoretical but also very practical:

> It is a duty to divide the time for study into three parts, one third for the Written Torah, one third for the Oral Torah and one third to understand things completely, and deduce one from another, and to

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[1] For clarity, throughout this article the word *"Gemara"* will refer to the book, the Babylonian or Jerusalem *Talmud*, and the word *Talmud* to a method of study.

Yehuda Brandes is president of Herzog College in Gush Etzion. He is the former head of the Beit Midrash at Beit Morasha in Jerusalem and the author of many books and articles on Talmud, Jewish law, education and Jewish philosophy.

compare one thing with another, and to know the rules by which the Torah is expounded until one grasps the principle of the rules and knows which things are forbidden which are permitted and which are learned by tradition. This study is known as *Talmud.*[2]

One who wishes to understand this distinction between Oral Torah and Talmud, and why Maimonides chose to distinguish between these two categories instead of simply using the usual twofold division of Written Torah and Oral Torah, will find an explanation in the following paragraph, in which Maimonides explains how one should divide one's day of learning:

> To give an example, an artisan busies himself with his work for three hours each day and spends nine hours in study. Of the nine hours, for three he ought to read the written law, for three the oral law and for three investigate [with] his knowledge and understanding of matters one from another.[3]

One can see that according to Maimonides both Written Torah and Oral Torah are to be studied by "reading." The study of Talmud, however, is different and is an act of "investigating [with] his knowledge." At the end of that same paragraph Maimonides explains what is included in each one of these categories, presenting his ideal daily curriculum, and clarifying his understanding of these three methods of study and the distinctions between them:

> Traditional matters[4] are included in the Written Torah and their explanations[5] are in the Oral Torah. The subjects relating to the *Pardes*[6] are included in the *Talmud*.
> When do these rules apply? When a man begins to study. However when he has acquired knowledge and he has no need to study the Written Torah or to busy himself with the Oral Torah, he should then read the Written Torah and the Oral Torah at fixed times so

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2. Maimonides, *The Study of Torah*, 1:11 [based on] *The Book of Knowledge, From the Mishneh Torah of Maimonides*, trans. H.M. Russel and Rabbi J. Weinberg (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1983), 52.

3. Ibid. 12 (Maimonides, *The Book of Knowledge*, 52)

4. This refers to the books of the Prophets and Writings, which in rabbinic literature are called "matters of tradition."

5. He is referring to commentaries on the Tanakh or the task of Biblical interpretation in general.

6. When Maimonides refers to *Pardes* (orchard) he means non-halakhic topics: sciences, theology and philosophy. These are what he calls "The Account of Genesis" and the "The Account of the Chariot." See: Twersky (1967) pp. 95–118.

that he may not forget any of the laws of the Torah and devote all his days to the *Talmud* alone according to the capacity of his heart and the equanimity of his mind.[7]

Maimonides believes that the difference between these three fields of study is not a matter of specific books and their contents but rather related to *method*. He includes in the category of Written Torah—*Miqra,* i.e., the Biblical text, which must be read and understood on a basic level—equivalent to what we call today "reading comprehension." The higher level of scriptural interpretation is included in the category of "Oral Torah." The Oral Torah is the "tradition." It is Torah knowledge that must be learned and memorized. When the Oral Torah was actually studied orally, it had to be recited by heart, whereas now, when it has been committed to writing—and even printed—and is studied from a text, one can also refer to it as a form of "reading." However, it is not enough to just read and understand. One must also review material in order to remember and retain it. The clearest proof that there is a defined, closed body of knowledge included in the "Oral Torah" is Maimonides' belief that a wise man need not spend his time studying the Oral Torah but rather "should then read the written Torah and oral Torah at fixed times so that he may not forget any of the laws of the Torah." This approach was realized in practice by Maimonides in the writing of *Mishneh Torah.* Maimonides believed that one who memorized Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's Mishnah did not fulfill his obligation to know the oral Torah, because the Oral Torah had been subsequently expanded and supplemented by talmudic, Geonic and other literature, and he therefore wrote the *Mishneh Torah* to serve as a sort of updated summa of the Oral Torah of his day. Thus, one who studied the Written Torah and the *Mishneh Torah* would fulfill his obligation to learn the first two parts of study, and would be able to spend the rest of his time engaging exclusively in *Talmud.*[8]

But what is *Talmud? Talmud* differs from the first two types of study primarily in terms of style and method. Studying *Talmud* is not an act of reading comprehension, nor is it the retention of knowledge through review. To study *Talmud* is "to investigate with his knowledge, and deduce one from another"—in other words, analysis of the information acquired in the first two divisions of study according to one's abilities. Therefore it makes sense that Maimonides included the fields of study that he refers

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7   Maimonides, *The Study of Torah*, 1:12 (Maimonides, *The Book of Knowledge*, 52).
8   See Brandes 1999. And see Halbertal's comprehensive discussion of Maimonides' goals in his *Peirush HaMishnah* (pp. 88-91) and his *Mishneh Torah* (145-170) (Halbertal 2009). Twersky (2003) pp. 47–94, Blidstein (1990) 167-182, and Blidstein 1973.

to as "*Pardes*" (orchard) in the category of Talmud. The study of philosophy and the sciences is not just a matter of reading and memorizing but requires insight, critical thinking and extensive reasoning—skills belonging to the field of *Talmud.*

Because Maimonides' threefold division of study pertains not only to the book or subject matter of study, but also to method, it is possible to simultaneously engage in all three divisions of study. Thus for example, one who reads the first two chapters of Genesis is learning *Miqra*, when one reads commentaries and *midrashim* and reviews them he is learning *Mishna*, and when discussing hermeneutical, philosophical and theological questions that arise from the study of these chapters and their commentaries, one is learning *Talmud.* The same applies to halakhic study: When one studies the laws of *Shemitta* in *parshat Behar* one engages in *Miqra*, when studying the commentaries and *midrashim* on the *parashah* one engages in Oral Torah study, and when analyzing the differences between the *Shemitta* passage in *parshat Behar* and parallel passages in Exodus and Deuteronomy, and the Halachic implications of these contrasts, one is engaging in *Talmud.*[9]

What is *Talmud?*—Rashi's Divisions of Study

Rashi interprets the three rabbinic categories of study similarly to Maimonides, and it is worth discussing his views on the matter in order to glean further insights on our subject.

Maimonides' threefold division of Torah study already appears in rabbinic literature. *Hazal* distinguish between *Miqra*, *Mishnah* and *Talmud.* Sometimes these divisions can be further split into subcategories such as *Midrash*, *Halakha* and *Aggada*.[10] In rabbinic literature one can see that there exists a parallelism between *Miqra*, *Mishnah* and *Talmud* on the one hand and *Miqra*, *Mishnah* and "serving rabbinical scholars" on the other. Rashi concluded from this that *Talmud* is identical to "serving rabbinical scholars" and explains this topic a number of times in his commentary. In one place he explains the passage in the *Gemara* that says that one who has

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[9] An interpretation of the threefold division of *Miqra-Mishnah-Talmud* as three cognitive levels and three types of consciousness can be found in the writings of the Maharal of Prague: "These three matters are three types of apprehension. *Miqra* is partial apprehension but not clear and complete. *Mishnah* however is clear knowledge and *Talmud* is understanding something not found in the Mishnah at all (*Derekh Ha-Ḥayyim,* Chapter 5, Mishnah 21). And see his *Ḥiddushei Aggadot* on *Sukkah* 44a, s. v. *hakhen ba-ḥuts melakhtekha*; *Qiddushin* 30a, s. v. *'al tikrei ve-shinantem 'ela ve-shilashtem.'*

[10] See A. Finkelstein (1961) 28–47, S. Abramson, 1977 (23–44).

read and reviewed but not attended Torah scholars is referred to as a "a cunning, evil person":

> **One who read** scripture and studied *Mishnah* **but did not serve rabbinical scholars**—to study the logic of the Gemara to understand the reasons of the Mishnah. **He is evil**, for his Torah is not well established, and one should not learn from him. Because through [an understanding] of the reasons of the Mishnah one can distinguish between forbidden and permitted, in financial cases between the one who owes and the one who is exempt from paying, and in purity cases between pure and impure. As is written [in the Gemara] in many places, "Why did this Rabbi say this and that Rabbi say that," and it will ask, "What is the difference between them" and answer, "The difference between them is such and such." And he is called cunning because one who listens to his teaching of *mishnayot* will think that he is an expert in their reasoning and he will be treated with the respect accorded to a rabbinical scholar.[11]
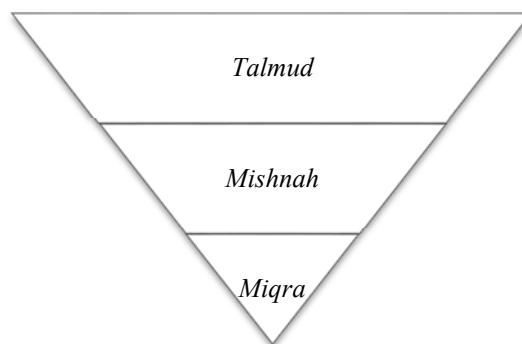
Rashi distinguishes between reading *Miqra*, memorizing Mishnah and studying the Gemara's understanding of the Mishnah's reasoning. Like Maimonides Rashi focuses not on the book or topic being studied but rather on the method of study: *Miqra*–reading, *Mishna*–memorizing, and *Talmud*–understanding. According to Rashi it is clear that someone who studies Gemara without further in-depth study, even if he knows the text perfectly, is still not considered a rabbinical scholar and, if we are to use the Gemara's harsher language, is considered a "cunning sinner" because he does not understand reasoning and logical distinctions. Clearly one can continue to apply this to someone who knows by heart all of the *Shulḥan 'Arukh* and its commentaries; the knowledge acquired from reading and review is not considered understanding. Even reviewing books that contain logical analysis is still nothing but review unless one internalizes the subject matter, understands the rationales, distinctions and arguments contained in the study material and knows how to apply these principles intelligently. Rashi implies that one who has not attended rabbinic scholars, only studying books and failing to receive the tools to analyze and understand the material contained therein, does not deserve the title of a rabbinic scholar, because the tools of analysis can be acquired only by studying under a teacher who assists the student in developing his analytical skills.[12]

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[11] Rashi, *Sota* 22a.

[12] Experts of this sort in Vilna were referred to by the verse "God understands its way and he knows its place." (Job 28:23) See Ben Zion Dinur's story about his acceptance exam in Telz Yeshiva (Dinur 2004).

We can go further and better understand Rashi's understanding based on the parallel discussions in his commentary. Thus for example he defines the category of one who "repeats *halakhot*," a level close to that of a "rabbinical scholar," as follows: "**one who repeats *halakhot***—meaning even if he did not attend rabbinic scholars [to learn from them] Talmud and Gemara but only learned from them *mishnayot* and *baraitot*."[13] It follows that one who did not learn the text of the book of the Talmud itself, but attended rabbinic scholars learning *mishnayot* and *baraitot* from them, is equivalent to a rabbinic scholar because he engaged in in-depth study and understanding and not simply review and memorization.[14] In another place Rashi explicitly identifies Talmud with "serving rabbinic scholars": "**and served rabbinic scholars**—who explained to him difficult passages in the Mishnah and its reasoning, which is called '*Talmud.*'"[15]

The following diagrams demonstrate the relationship between the three types of study as defined by Rashi and Maimonides:

This diagram shows the three stages of study as one atop another. The first level is the "five years of age for the study of *Miqra*," afterwards "ten years of age for the study of *Mishna*" and finally "fifteen years of age for the study of *Talmud*."[16] This ordered structure represents not just the intellectual development of a child but also the correct order to study any topic, at any age: first reading and understanding,[17] then *Mishna*—summarizing and reviewing the study material, and at the end "talmudic" analysis
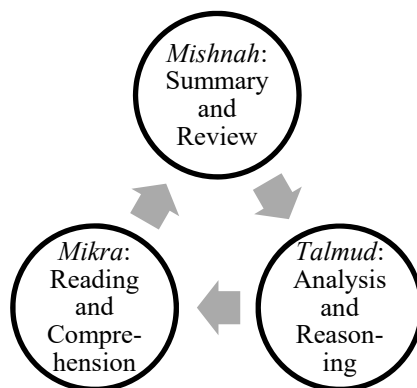
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13 Rashi, *Megilla* 26b.
14 For further explanation of the terms *Miqra*, *Mishnah* and *Talmud* as understood by Rashi see Fraenkel (1980) pp. 16–32.
15 Rashi, *Shabbat* 13b.
16 *Avot* 5, 21.
17 See (Fuchs 1994).

of the material studied in the first two stages. We can also represent the relationship between these three types of study with a circular schema:

This diagram shows not a one-way progression from *Miqra*, through *Mishnah* and to *Talmud* but rather a self-reciprocating circular motion.[18] One begins with a basic, preliminary understanding of the sources, then one proceeds to mentally organize them in order to review and properly remember them, finally one reaches the level of *Talmud*: in-depth analysis and reasoning, understanding of rationales and deduction. After this the student rereads the original source material with a new point of view, finding new nuances and explanations that he did not see during the first round of reading, then reorganizes and reviews the material once again, finds more new explanations, then rereads a third time and so on. It is clear that one can follow this process in any form of study and that it does not depend on the book that the student happens to be learning.[19] This process could occur while studying Gemara[20] but also while learning

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[18] Or as the Maharal puts it "All of these three, *Miqra*, *Mishnah* and *Talmud*, are not completely divided like the others, *Miqra* is useful in studying *Mishnah* and *Mishnah* is useful in studying Talmud". (*Derekh Ha-Ḥayyim*, Chapter 5, Mishnah 21) See also Maharal's *Ḥiddushei 'Aggadot* on *Qiddushin* 30a, s. v. *'al tikri ve-shinantem 'ela ve-shilashtem*; *Ḥiddushei 'Aggadot* on *Avoda Zara* 19b, s. v. *yeshalesh shenotav*.

[19] This is called in modern pedagogical literature "the spiral approach" influenced by Jerome Bruner (Bruner 1960).

[20] This could be the deeper meaning of Rabbenu Tam's position that one fulfills one's obligation to study all three fields when one studies the Babylonian Talmud, because the issue is not one of books but of methods—and therefore one can certainly fulfill all three by studying Gemara (*Tosafot, Qiddushin* 30a, s. v. *lo tsrikha le-yomei*). See the responsum of Rabbi Natronai Gaon (Brody's Edition 1994) *'Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 39, who preceded Rabbenu Tam in saying this. The Gaon

Tanakh, "Moreh Nevukhim," "Mishneh Torah," "Shulḥan 'Arukh," Liqutei Mo-
haran or "The Lonely Man of Faith."

Order of Study

This look at the commentaries of the *Rishonim* on *Hazal's* division of
fields of knowledge in study explains the Mishnah's discussion in *Pirqei*
'Avot of the appropriate age to begin each type of study.[21] Five years of
age for the study of *Miqra*—this is the stage in the child's development in
which one can begin to teach him to read; in these years one should focus
on teaching *Miqra* according to the cognitive and emotional abilities of
the child.[22] Ten years of age for the study of *Mishna*—this is a stage in a
child's development in which he is capable of reviewing knowledge and
retaining it. This is after he has already acquired basic skills of reading
comprehension in the first years of elementary school. Fifteen years of
age for the study of *Talmud*—this is a stage of emotional and cognitive
development in which it is appropriate to begin dealing with analysis, crit-
ical thinking, and in-depth study. As pointed out by many scholars who
dealt with the curriculum in institutions of Jewish learning, study which
does not follow this order, and which is not tailored to the specific level
and abilities of the individual student, is inefficient and even harmful.[23]
Misunderstanding these different skills adds an additional problem: Stu-
dents who begin studying the "Oral Torah," in other words the Mishnah,
at too young an age, find themselves studying *Miqra* instead of *Mishna*h.

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     attributed the focus on Gemara to a lack of financial ability to dedicate the entire
     day to study, and justified this using the Midrashic statement "'All rivers go to
     the sea': This is *Miqra*, *Mishnah* and *Midrash*" (See *Midrash Mishlei*, 10, Buber p.
     34). The Gaon's responsum was known in Rashi's school (It is quoted in *Maḥzor*
     Vitri 47; *Siddur Rashi* 62; *Sefer Ha-Sedarim Rashi* 47) and perhaps it also influenced
     Rabbenu Tam's own view.

[21] *Avot* 5, 21. It is interesting to note the addition of the Alshich (Torah Commen-
     tary, Leviticus 27): "From the age of twenty onwards he studies all three."

[22] There is an ancient tradition to begin teaching reading at the age of three. The
     Meiri on the Mishnah in '*Avot* distinguishes between teaching how to read letters
     at the age of three and organized instruction of *Miqra* at age five. For further
     discussion see Glick (2004).

[23] Particularly famous is the Maharal's criticism of the curriculums of his time and
     his desire to reform them. See for example Gur Aryeh on the Torah, Deuteron-
     omy 6:7. See the article of A. Gross (Gross 2004) on the parallelism between the
     structure of cognitive development in the Maharal's thought and in that of Pia-
     get, and in Kleinberger's book on the pedagogical thought of the Maharal
     (Kleinberger 1962).

Because their skills of reading comprehension are still underdeveloped, the teacher and students spend their time reading and understanding the text of the Mishnah only on the most basic level, and do not succeed in summarizing, reviewing and remembering the material. This is even more problematic when discussing the study of Gemara—most efforts in the first years of studying Gemara are dedicated to *Miqra,* basic reading comprehension, or *Mishna,* review of the material, but they never result in true *Talmud* learning, the understanding of logic, rationales, and deduction.

Many great people have tried to change and reorganize children's Torah curriculums in order to make them fit both the cognitive development of students and the curriculum prescribed in '*Avot*; they did not generally succeed. Many have tried to explain the success of this distorted method of learning, in which the study of Gemara, in the form of *pilpul* and intellectual sharpness,[24] is moved up to a stage when students are supposed to be learning how to properly read and acquire knowledge that they could then later use in their talmudic study. Some say that this is a result of teachers who saw no value in learning the basics and therefore unfairly pulled students up to a higher level, to the world of Yeshiva study, to which they themselves were accustomed. Others say that society as a whole saw the talmudic scholar as a role model, and therefore pressured teachers to train children and young men to demonstrate their talmudic acumen, before establishing a basic foundation of knowledge, the latter a far less impressive feat. Finally some say the students themselves preferred `*iyun* and *pilpul* based on intellectual talent and brilliance, over endless reading and review, which require effort and Sisyphean repetition.[25] Whatever the case, this type of curriculum is pedagogically harmful. It causes reading ability to be lacking, and this deficiency can be seen at the highest levels of learning, when a student lacking basic learning skills has trouble properly understanding the books of *Rishonim* and '*Aḥaronim*, or commentaries and books of Halakhah. Lacunae in knowledge are even more pronounced in *'iyun*-style learning, which is based on few sources and many scholastic arguments and baseless explanations that lack grounding in sources. Moreover, when talmudic skills—analysis, logic and

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[24]   Young students are not yet able to study Talmud and cannot really engage in *pilpul.* They are only quoting *pilpul* literature and talmudic novella that they hear from their teachers. They are like reciters of *Gemara,* not learners of *Talmud.* But older, more experienced learners, even when they learn Mishnah, will require their rabbis to delve deeper, and thus become *Talmud* learners, even if the Talmud Bavli is not in front of them. This is like Rashi's statement about those who "repeat *halakhot.*"

[25]   For a collection of sources about *pilpul* and its detractors see Rappel 1979.

deduction—are taught defectively at a young age, they cannot always be rectified later; often the student will continue to think that the way he studied Gemara in his youth is the correct—and only—way to study Gemara.[26]

These types of problems are not exclusive to study of Gemara. They can be found in all fields of study, and experts of pedagogy, didactics and method have been dealing with them and attempting to rectify them for hundreds of years.[27] The fact that the Jewish people continues to produce prodigious Torah scholars, experts and geniuses, is not a challenge to our criticism. There exists a thin elite of students who due to their exceptional talents reach impressive accomplishments in Torah study in spite of the failings in their education. The vast majority of the Jewish people in earlier generations did not become scholars, nor even succeed in acquiring the skills necessary to properly study Gemara independently. Today, when every child in Israel (in the religious school system) studies Torah and Gemara, and when the economic and societal possibilities to excel in Torah learning have reached an unequaled level, it is becoming more obvious how a system that does not deal with Torah study correctly fails to bring students to reasonable levels of achievement in their learning abilities—whether in *Miqra*, *Mishnah* or *Talmud*—despite the many hours and excessive resources dedicated to this effort.[28]

Stages of Gemara Study

Just as studying *Talmud* before *Miqra* and *Mishnah* is undesirable, so too the sole study of *Miqra* and *Mishna*, during a stage designated for *Talmud,* is problematic. The drawback is twofold: First, studying only *Miqra* and *Mishna*, as we saw in the Gemara and Rashi's commentary, is a deficient form of learning. One whose learning is based solely on reading and review misses the most important part of reasoning and achieving in-depth understanding and misses the opportunity to develop skills of deduction. This problem still exists even if the book being studied is a Gemara. One

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[26] See Responsa *Ḥavot Yair* 124.

[27] Some of the greatest authors of *Mussar* literature: Rabbenu Baḥya in his *Ḥovot Halevavot* and Rav Moshe Ḥayyim Luzzato in his *Messilat Yesharim,* complain that erudite learners neglect the study of "duties of the heart"—beliefs, doctrines and ethics—because they think there is no space for *pilpul* or in-depth study, and they think it is not worth wasting time on studying these subjects in depth. These ethicists argued that there is need to study *Mussar* with just as much depth as halakhic Talmud study.

[28] For an original study of methods of teaching Mishnah and Talmud in Israel see Yehuda Schwartz's doctorate (Schwartz 2002).

whose Gemara study is nothing more than reading and memorization is not really learning *Talmud*; he is doing nothing but reading and memorizing a *book* of Gemara. Moreover, when a student is ready for the study of *Talmud*, intellectually and emotionally (fifteen years old for Talmud), and spends his time studying only on the level of *Miqra* and *Mishna*, he will soon experience frustration. He will be unsatisfied and his study will lack vivacity and enthusiasm. This could be one of the main reasons that the religious high school education system in Israel has been mostly unsuccessful in teaching Gemara. Most of the effort is dedicated to reading and understanding the text of the Gemara, and tests are one of two varieties—either a test on an unseen passage meant to examine to what extent the student is able to read and understand Gemara, or a knowledge test, meant to examine the student's ability to memorize information—none of these examining the student's ability to deduce or make an argument. As a result, teachers and lesson plans are directed to focus on the level of *Miqra* and *Mishnah* even if the official name of the subject and the primary book being studied is the Talmud.[29] The reason for this is that due to incomplete study, students reach high school, the age of fifteen for Gemara, without having acquired in previous years sufficient training in reading comprehension, and without receiving a sufficiently comprehensive knowledge of the Mishnah. With no oil, the candle will not be lit and the miracle cannot take place. The students spend most of their time in high school learning these basic skills, never reaching the level of true *Talmud* study. This creates estrangement from and contempt for Gemara study. Intellectual and emotional needs are not met by this type of learning, and students consequently detest it. This can be compared to learning a foreign language: How many years can one spend learning grammar, without enjoying the main reward of learning a language—using the language effectively when needed?[30] In the case of Gemara study this issue is many times more serious, because students fail to benefit from the blessings and value of talmudic thinking and its contribution to building their spiritual

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[29]   See Rabbi David Fox's criticism (Fox 2004).

[30]   As Uziel Fuchs says, "The current situation, in which a high school student spends most of his time just trying to understand the text, leads to much frustration. This student who studies mathematics, physics and history on a high level; the experienced student who grapples with questions about the mysteries of creation spends many hours every week over a difficult text, mostly dealing with only the preliminary aspect of it—generally linguistic—of reading comprehension, thus leading to frustration. It is certainly difficult for him to understand the religious value, or the intellectual depths which can be found in Talmud" (Fuchs 1997) p. 55.

worlds. They are used to thinking that the main value of Gemara study is the hard work involved, and that reward is given for the labor itself. While this is certainly a value of Gemara study and Torah learning in general, it certainly cannot be the only value, especially if it results in the exclusion of important substance gleaned from study that can be used to keep *mitsvot* and serve G-d.[31]

Because of these problems, *Talmud* teachers should be required to exert an exceptional amount of effort to help their students feel a fondness for *Talmud* study, turning this Torah subject into something central and important in their lives. They have to teach their students basic learning skills—reading and memorization—and at the same time give them a real taste of *Talmud* study, the main goal of their Gemara lessons in school and yeshiva. In the rest of this article I will try to explain how one should go about accomplishing this task.

The Skill of *Miqra*—Reading Comprehension

The age-old method of giving students skills in Gemara reading and comprehension is immersion. If we were to discuss language instruction as a parallel to this, then the system is implemented through immersion in a society speaking the language. This could be through an extended stay in a country that speaks this language, or concentrated study of the language over a certain period of time while speaking the language consistently and constantly. Similarly, a student who comes to yeshiva is thrown into the study hall, joining a community of older students, learning with a study partner more experienced than him, and over time acquires the talmudic language. Just as one who uses this method to learn a language does not learn the rules of grammar but still learns to speak correctly, like a child learning his mother tongue, so too a student in a traditional yeshiva does not know anything about the rules of the language, neither Aramaic nor fundamental principles of talmudic logic, but nevertheless can participate properly in talmudic discourse. This method, while effective in a traditional yeshiva, cannot work in an institution in which the number of hours of Gemara study per day or per week is limited. No one would ever entertain the idea of teaching English as a second language in high school

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31   When I speak to teachers who consider hard work the highest value of Gemara learning, and therefore justify their prohibition of using interpretive tools such as Steinsaltz and ArtScroll, I recommend that they abandon printed editions entirely and go back to studying from manuscripts as was always the custom. Then one can also work hard just trying to decipher the letters of the text in order to read it. They will certainly get much reward both for their hard work and for their preservation of the traditional learning style of the earliest *Rishonim*.

by opening up an ancient copy of Shakespeare's plays and beginning to read, assuming that with the time the students would acquire the language. If the number of hours dedicated to study is limited, one simply cannot base a teaching method on immersion; one must learn Gemara as a "foreign language." This comparison between studying Gemara and studying a foreign language is certainly focused not on any comparative "foreignness" of Gemara study, but rather on the traditional method of teaching a language to students who do not use it as their daily spoken tongue: teaching the tools of the language in a structured, gradual and systematic manner.

However this is not enough. Because the structure of a given language is essentially secondary, the primary goal of mastering a language being to speak about other matters, it is sufficient to employ the method of immersion.

However one who wishes to study the language as a subject, or a field, such as in the study of literature, requiring a deep familiarity with the language and its rules, cannot continue to study the language through immersion, and must also engage in the professional, organized and formal element of language learning. It is clear that one who studies Gemara needs to similarly master this language on a high level requiring systematic study.[32]

In training of teachers and rabbis, our method is to divide the tasks of "fluency," which must be completed by the beginner in order to achieve a basic understanding of the text, into six: 1. Vocabulary, 2. Terminology, 3. Concepts, 4. Syntax, 5. Give and Take, 6. Conclusions.[33]

Vocabulary: Translation of the words into a language understood by the students. First translate the Aramaic and foreign words found in the Talmud. However, one must also translate and explain rabbinic Hebrew,

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[32] Great talmudic scholars who did not learn systematically, acquired their proficiency in "talmudic language" independently, from the breadth of their knowledge. However, at times one can encounter embarrassing lacunae in people's basic talmudic knowledge because they do not have access to important tools of talmudic language, both in the field of language and terminology, and in understanding the structure of the talmudic give and take. Great scholars have already objected to this. See for example the argument between the Rama and the Maharshal regarding the question of which disciplines are necessary for a rabbinic scholar. (Responsa *Rama*, 6-7, and editor's notes in A. Ziv edition.)

[33] For an example of implementing this style of teaching, see the introduction to Amiram Domovits' text book (Dumovits 2000). The use of a set structure assists learners, both teachers and students, in keeping track of the goals they need to reach, and the steps needed to complete the study of a given *sugya*.

which is often very different from the modern Hebrew understood by the students.[34]

Terminology: Besides a simple, literal translation, it is important to create a familiarity with the unique terminology of the Talmud. "*Tanu Rabbanan*" [the Rabbis taught] and "*u-reminhu*" [and they threw them]—it is not enough to simply translate these terms; one must explain their function in the talmudic dialogue: an introduction to a quote from a Tannaitic source, and a difficulty rising from a contradiction between two Tannaitic sources, respectively.[35]

Concepts: Like terminology, these are also expressions that require more than just a literal translation. However they also require knowledge of the background and sources to which they allude. One who begins to study the second chapter of *Bava Metsia* must know what a *metsia* (a found object) is, must understand the *mitsva* of returning lost objects and must know the sources for these concepts in the Torah. The types of information needed to serve as background to a talmudic *sugya* are many and varied. This category includes the Biblical foundations of the topic, halakhic concepts such as *ye'ush* (abandonment) and *hefqer* (ownerless property),[36] and even the names of rabbis and places. Proper knowledge of

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34 These skills are not only critical for a beginner, but important during every stage of study. Clarification of difficult words was already practiced by rabbinic scholars in the age of the Tannaim and Amoraim, who would collect the explanations of words from sailors and Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi's maidservant, a tradition that continues to be practiced by the greatest scholars and lexicographers today.

35 This question is also necessary for both beginners and advanced students, on different levels as required by the level of the "spiral" they are on. The discussion of the rabbinic Hebrew terminology of the Mishnah was already practiced by the Amoraim, who determined the meaning of every mention of "*be-'emet 'amru*" [they truly said] and "*ba-me devarim 'amurim*" [when are these words said], a practice continued until today, for example in Leib Moskowitz's work on the terminology of the Jerusalem Talmud. Even scholars experienced in the study of the Babylonian Talmud sometimes need to return to these six basic skills when they begin to seriously study the Jerusalem Talmud. Experience shows that paying special attention to study according to these six categories helps yeshiva students used to studying the Babylonian Talmud to start studying the Jerusalem Talmud, as it helps young students who are beginning studying the Babylonian Talmud. (Moscovitz 2009) pp. 3–11.

36 Clarifying concepts is part of the essence of Talmud study. One must distinguish between the first stages of understanding the concept and more advanced steps. The words *ye'ush* and *hefqer* have produced entire libraries, but even to read basic sentences in some talmudic *sugyot* one needs to have some kind of lexical definition of the term.

whether a certain scholar was a *Tanna* or an '*Amora*, or from an earlier generation or a later generation, is vital in order to have the most basic understanding of a *sugya*.[37]

Friends and students have suggested adding two more categories to this list, in addition to concepts already mentioned:

Sources: Identifying the sources in a *sugya*, locating them and when possible looking them up in context. This includes Biblical verses, quotations from the Mishnah and fragments of *sugyot* from other places in the Gemara. How deeply one studies these sources will change according to learning level, ranging from very general, superficial understanding to a rigorous study of the sources, before returning to the *sugya* at hand. [38]

Personalities: A familiarity with the historical figures mentioned in the Talmud, *Tannaim* and '*Amoraim*. This can be accomplished using biographical books that describe the lives and historical contexts of these scholars. As with the other categories in this list, this can be accomplished on different levels. One can simply know the name of the scholar, his time and his place (e.g., Rav Huna, Babylonian *Amora*, second generation), or one can delve deeper and familiarize oneself with his character by reading a book about the history of talmudic scholars.[39]

Syntax: The syntax of a talmudic sentence is very different than that of today's prose. It is often difficult to know when it begins and when its ends or even to identify the subject and the predicate of the sentence. Someone just reading the words will not succeed in reading a paragraph of Gemara. Looking at the modern commentaries and translation of the Gemara, such as the Steinsaltz and Schottenstein editions, one cannot help noticing the large number of words needed to "translate" a short talmudic sentence into a complete and comprehensible sentence in a modern language.

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[37] Jerusalem Talmud, Shabbat 1, 2; 3, 1: "Gidul said, whoever says a statement in the name of the one who said it should see the statement's author standing before him." One can realize this by familiarizing oneself with the character of a scholar as known from books. I heard this from Rabbi Israel Friedman ben Shalom (Admor Pashkan, Rosh Yeshiva in Netivot and a Doctor of Jewish History). See Fisch, 2006 pp. 34–37.

[38] For an example of a method of study in which following sources plays a central role see the article by Rabbi Y. Shilat (Shilat 2013).

[39] Even more important is to familiarize oneself with the spiritual character of a rabbi and what he represents in Aggada, as is known of famous personalities such as Hillel and Shammai, Rabbi Akiva or Ben Dosa, but is also true of other sages.

Structure or **Give and Take:** the Gemara is structured not as straight-forward prose but as dialectical give-and-take, sometimes consisting of a complicated array of questions and answers, proofs and counterarguments. These arguments are not presented in a linear progression but are combined with discussions of the Mishnah, interpretive comments on sources quoted during the discussion, and the like. The student must, as it is called by yeshiva students, "hold his head," and know at every stage where he is in the discussion. One needs to know the structure of the *sugya*, the details of the back-and-forth and the function of each argument in the larger structure of the passage.[40]

Conclusions: An additional part of the most basic interpretation of a *sugya*, often skipped even by the most experienced students, is deriving conclusions from the *sugya*. After reading the *sugya*, the student has no organized picture of the topic discussed—only a series of questions and answers, challenges and rebuttals, secondary discussions and side-topics. In order to get a clear picture of the *sugya*, one needs to look at it again with an overview and systematically organize all the data raised in the discussion, define the topics, the opinions, proofs and counterproofs and secondary topics discussed in the *sugya* and their details.[41]

Only after this stage can one say that the student understands the *sugya* in the same way one understands a chapter of Tanakh or a newspaper article when one finishes reading it, allowing one to begin the next stage of "processing" the data, according to all the different methods and goals of study: reaching halakhic conclusions, studying all different kinds of talmudic commentaries, '*iyun* and *pilpul*, simply and in depth, in the *sugya* at hand and in parallel *sugyot* in other parts of the Gemara.

This list of categories is important because it encompasses everything needed to understand a *sugya* on the level of basic reading comprehension. These categories are usually employed, albeit unconsciously, by experienced scholars. By using this format, the student, whether beginner or experienced, receives a detailed list of tasks that have to be accomplished

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[40] The structure of a *sugya* is an issue that also occupies advanced learners. For a discussion of the impressive peaks of ingenuity and sophistication used in these discussions in the school of Sefardic *iyun* and in Ashkenazi *pilpul* at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Modern Period see Dimitrovsky 1975.

[41] Rabbenu Hananel's interpretation of Talmud and after him the method of Isaac Alfasi, are based on this approach, stressing the main points of the *sugya* without focusing on the give and take. It was further developed in Rabbi Menaḥem ha-Meiri's *Beit HaBeḥira,* and its influence can be seen in the Sefardic style of hala-khic ruling, especially in Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*. See Fuchs (2001).

in order to have a basic understanding of a page of Gemara. The teacher and students know what is required, what needs to be examined, the correct order of operations and what an absent student needs to make up.

This list, however, is not only for novices. It also sketches the basic tasks of interpretation on the highest levels. Even Rashi and *Tosafot* needed to explain words, terms and concepts, to analyze the give and take and basic functions of a *sugya*'s different stages, as well as understand the *sugya*'s conclusions. In each one of these categories, a dispute may erupt between interpreters, influencing the understanding of the *sugya* and the practical conclusions arising from it.[42]

Often a teacher will think that because he has finished these tasks, and because the students understand the *sugya* well, can explain it and summarize it, he has finished teaching the *sugya* and can move on. However at this stage he has only finished the stage of *Miqra*, having done nothing in the field of *Talmud*; the student still doesn't understand the rationales and reasons for things, and has certainly not begun to study the *sugya* in depth nor begun to use deductive logic.

A Talmud teacher must after these stages move on to *Mishnah* and *Talmud. Mishnah*, when discussing a single *sugya*, refers to the clear understanding of the Gemara.[43] *Talmud* is the deeper stage of study based on this knowledge and understanding. It should be noted that, when studying Tanakh and Mishnah, it is far easier to reach the stage of *Talmud* than when learning Gemara! When one studies Tanakh and Mishnah, reading comprehension is much easier, and therefore one can begin, relatively quickly, to discuss the meaning and interpretations of the material at hand. When studying Gemara, however, the effort required just to reach a basic understanding of the text is so much, that sometimes no motivation, time or patience is left to delve deeper, and one moves forward to the next page, satisfied that finally he has "understood" the Gemara, but done nothing else.

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[42] For a methodical discussion of the tasks faced by a talmudic interpreter, see Israel Ta-Shma's introduction. (Ta-Shma 1999 pp. 22–25.)

[43] An effective exercise: at the end of a lesson the teacher should ask one of the students to summarize, in his own words, the *sugya*, while answering the following questions: a. What is the topic being debated? b. What are the different opinions on this issue? c. What are the proofs brought to support each view? d. Is there a conclusion and what is it? One can assign this short task as written classwork at the end of every unit of study. It is important to require the students not to simply repeat the language of the Talmud but rather to say things in their own words—in such a way that someone who had never learned the topic would be able to understand them.

Therefore a Gemara teacher must divide resources and time, as suggested by the Gemara and Maimonides. The teacher should calculate time according to the number of lessons available and dedicate a third of the time to reading and understanding, a third to *Mishnah*—summary and review in order to absorb the knowledge learned—and a third for deeper study. Perhaps just as the Gemara reduced *Pirqei 'Avot*'s three stages of life to a threefold division of one's day, so too we can further reduce the division to a single lesson: A lesson of an hour and half can be split into a half hour of reading and understanding, a half hour of organizing knowledge and internalizing it, and a half hour of in-depth "talmudic" study. In early stages one can slightly change the division of time, dedicating more time to reading comprehension and less to in-depth study, but one cannot completely give up *Talmud* when studying Gemara. This division of time can effectively help the teacher define the size of a unit of study that can be squeezed into one lesson: a section that can be read and understood in the first third of a lesson.

The Skill of *Mishna*—Recital, Review and Retention

Traditional sources often discuss the value and importance of review. When the Oral Torah was actually learned orally, it was absolutely necessary to review and recite the Mishnah until one knew it perfectly, because without this one could not study Mishnah at all, neither on the level of knowing nor on higher levels of understanding and interpreting. A student who didn't know the Oral Torah by heart was analogous to a student today who lacks books or a computer. Even after they had memorized the Mishnah completely, they could never stop reviewing it, because even something a person knows by heart will eventually be forgotten if not reviewed.[44]

Ever since the Oral Torah was committed to writing, and even more so with the invention of print, when sources are readily available, there is much less of a need to memorize texts, and the resources of review and memorization can be turned to the task of gaining a knowledge and command of the sources.[45] The traditional method of oral recitation—endless recitation and repetition of the text—can move aside for other types of

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[44] This is the reason for the oft-repeated demands in different styles of Hazal and those after them to never stop reviewing and reciting one's learning. See in I. Zussman's article about studying the Mishnah orally and how it was first written down in the time of the *Geonim* (Zussman 2005).

[45] The age of computerized databases represents an additional historical stage, influencing the nature of human memory in general and specifically the concept talmudic *beqiut*. This topic requires its own study.

review. Because the precise wording of the text can be easily looked up, more effort can be dedicated to conceptually organizing material and knowing it well.

In the past the human memory was often compared to a storeroom into which one had to deposit knowledge. In order that the knowledge be available and useable, one needs to organize it. It needs to be set up in such a way that one knows how to get to it and where to find it, easily withdrawing information as needed. This physical analogy of organizing a storeroom can be replaced today with the imagery of organizing Internet databases. The structure of the virtual world of the Internet is much closer to the structure of human knowledge, and the challenges faced by website and database designers are very similar to those faced for many generations by scholars who wished to mold their memory and preserve the knowledge they had acquired—in their brains.

For some reason, education systems, both in yeshiva and generally, have not dedicated sufficient time or resources to teach methods of review and memorization methodically and systematically, only stressing the basic idea of reading material as many times as possible.[46] This is a skill that some students acquire by themselves, through trial and error, and many don't acquire it—leading them to forget their learning. Obviously there are some prodigious individuals with exceptional memories, some of these becoming renowned rabbinic leaders, but here we are discussing a system meant for all students, not one for the exceptionally gifted who climb the ladder of greatness in spite of the system and not because of it.

Methods of review and memorization are many, and no one method should be given precedence; every person adopts the style of memorization that best fits him and the structure of his thinking.[47]

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[46] Alongside *beqiut* study as part of the *daf yomi* program, recent years have seen the rise of programs based on *beqiut* tests in Gemara and halakha. These programs offer review plans before tests and one can see this as a positive development. As far as I know, there has not yet been a systematic and critical review of these review programs.

[47] One can see similar discussions in the realm of Halakhah. This field requires a large amount of practical knowledge alongside deep understanding. One can take some ideas that arise in the instruction of Halakhah to teach *Mishnah*. On the one hand is dealing with problems of review, retention and acquiring knowledge, on the other hand the phenomenon of shifting the focus in the teaching of Halakhah from *Mishnah* to *Talmud*—meaning more in-depth study. For a systematic discussion and many sources see Yehuda Schwartz's article (Schwartz 2012).

From the analogy of the storeroom we can derive another important insight about memory and review. Organizing the storeroom does not begin with depositing things in it. First one must categorize, pack, mark and catalogue the items being stored. Without this preliminary process it will become impossible to organize the storeroom effectively, making it impossible to withdraw specific items as needed. Book cataloging is an entire field to itself, and there are many different systems, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. It is a field that is constantly changing in step with developments in the world of books, information and methods of organization. Data organization is a burning issue in an age flooded by virtual information. It is possible to use the accumulated wisdom from these fields to help develop the abilities of Torah learners to memorize information.[48]

Based on these analogies, one can easily understand that the preparation before review and memorization, like preparation for a test, begins not at the end of study but rather at its beginning. Teachers should impart to their students methods of learning, understanding and organizing material being studied, so that, when the time comes, at the end of study, it will be easy for them to familiarize themselves with organization of material before its review and memorization.

The Last Category—Meaning

The essence of *Talmud* study, as Rashi and Maimonides have explained, is not the understanding of the text of the Babylonian or Jerusalem Talmuds, but rather, asking questions, deduction, investigation, analysis logic and in-depth study. Whenever one relearns something that has been previously understood this is to a certain extent studying *Talmud*. In this sense, learning Mishnah a second time, in more depth, would be considered *Talmud*, whereas simply learning the basic meaning of the Gemara (*beqiut*) would be considered *Mishnah*. The same is true in regard to the study of commentaries and Halakhah: understanding the basic words of *Tosafot* is *Miqra*, review and remembering is *Mishna*, and only a discussion

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[48]   For a discussion of technological changes and their influence on the study of Torah see Havlin: "The invention of printing and its impact on learning and human thought" (Havlin 2012), pp. 492–494. See also Rabbi Benny Lau's discussion of learning in the age of the Internet (Lau 2004). For a series of articles discussing the influence of technological innovation on learning, review and retention, beginning with the invention of the print until the Internet, see Avraham Poupko (Poupko 2010) (Poupko 2013) and additional sources cited in the notes.

of their words, and a contrast between their opinion and the opinion of Rashi and explaining why they disagree, would turn the study into *Talmud*.

One of the main reasons for the difficulty experienced by students learning Gemara at a young age is that they are not learning *Talmud* at all even though they are "fifteen years of age for Talmud." They are reading and reviewing a *book* of Talmud and nothing more. A vital task after finishing the six categories of reading and understanding is to complete the learning by adding a layer of meaning, i.e., actual talmudic learning.

There are many ways in which the study of Gemara can be turned into a meaningful enterprise, and they require their own comprehensive discussion.[49] Types of meaning are varied and different. There is analysis, and theoretical discussion on different levels of interpretation, according to different schools, changing over the generations and in different Torah centers. There is the field of reaching practical, halakhic and ethical conclusions.[50] There is also the field of spiritual experience and incorporation of the ideas raised in the *sugya* into the soul of the student. The famous words of Nachmanides in his letter to his son, "When you arise from your learning, reflect carefully on what you have studied in order to see what in it you can put into practice," refer not only to halakhic rulings, but also to the practical and existential lessons one can take away from study. The pedagogical requirements rising from the need to develop meaningful talmudic study after the completion of *Miqra* and *Mishnah* will be discussed in the following paragraphs:

Adding Meaning to Discipline

The demand of every spiritual movement and the basis of every advance in the service of G-d is not to simply live religious lives out of habit, but to supplement obedience and discipline, themselves important dimensions of religion, with reasoning and spiritual meaning. A teacher should not start teaching a class tractate *Qiddushin* without raising the feminist

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[49] After field work conducted about the attitude towards Gemara studies in yeshiva high schools, a deliberation was convened in 1989 by M. Barlev and S. Weizer, which included teachers holding senior positions in the religious education system. After the study and the controversy following it, an official committee was commissioned by the education ministry to examine teaching methods in yeshiva high schools as described in Barlev's and Weizer's article (Barlev and Weizer 1990).

[50] A yearly curriculum aimed at following various paths of meaning can be found in Brandes (2000). For a four-year high school curriculum see Rabbi Tzvi Pittinsky, "Habits of Mind for Gemara," and see also the proposals of Hagai Ben Artsi (Ben Artsi, 1995:1 1995:2).

question of what it means to "acquire a woman," nor teach tractate *Gittin* without discussing the question (which actually is raised in the last *sugya* of the tractate) of why people get divorced. Fearing questions of meaning, most teachers prefer to meticulously focus on the methodology of reading the text. The latter task is important, but in no other intellectual discipline would anyone consider just stopping there.[51]

Relevance and Relating to Current Events

A truly living Torah must speak in the language of the learner, in the here and now. The key question that the fathers of *Ḥassidut* asked in their commentaries to the *parshiyot* of the Torah—how is this *parsha* meaningful to the learner in his particular time and place?[52]—should be asked of every *sugya* of Gemara. Sometimes this is halakhically practical, at other times philosophically. One must learn how to do this and how to pass on this skill to students. For example one could include tractate `*Avoda Zara* into the curriculum, as it discusses our relationship to the non-Jewish world,[53] or explain the relevance of the slave laws appearing in *Qiddushin* when there is no more formal slavery but there still exist employer-employee relationships that bear certain similarities to slavery.[54] In the past, yeshiva education taught teachers to teach in a detached manner, the interest in study being "a priori and ideal," as Rabbi Soloveitchik said: "When halakhic concepts do not correspond with the phenomena of the real world, halakhic man is not at all distressed."[55] However students of Gemara in our day often deeply regret this, and soon the teacher also begins to share this sentiment, or at least regret that the students are not interested in learning from him.[56] Philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Rav

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[51] See Rav Shagar's writings on the topic: Rozenberg 1995, Rozenberg 2009 and Rav D. Berkovits's commentaries on the Talmud *ha-daf ha-qiyumi* (Berkovits 2013). Also see the articles of A. Walfish (Walfish 2003) and A. Gold (Gold 2005). A variety of responses to Rav Shagar were printed in *netuim* 2011 (volume 17).

[52] See Brandes, 2003.

[53] See Brandes, 1998.

[54] See Brandes, 2013.

[55] Soloveitchik 1983 p. 23. And see the entire chapter's discussion of the halakhic man's approach to reality (19–29).

[56] For a discussion of two approaches to turn Talmud study into something timely and relevant, see the debate between Rabbi Shimon Levi (Levi 2003) and Professor Yehuda Eisenberg (Eisenberg 2003).

Shagar stressed the need for relevant study, i.e., study applicable to contemporary spiritual needs, not just as a pedagogical tactic but also as an existential need of individual Jews and Judaism as a whole.[57]

Catering to Different Styles of Thinking

It is not possible that the entire Talmud be studied according to one style or method of thinking. Someone limited to one pattern of learning will skip *sugyot* that do not fit his method. The halakhist will skip '*Aggada*, the devotee of `*iyun* will eschew practical halakhic ruling and the philologist will focus on text, language and history. Talmud has many different demands: '*Aggada* should be studied within the context of philosophy, literature and poetry, using appropriate analytical tools. Halakhah should be taught with the methods of legal theory, and within the context of sociological and legal considerations. The libraries of Halakhah and `*iyun*, '*Aggada* and history, law and society, ethics and philosophy are all different. Both teachers and students must learn to recognize these different approaches and be able to decide, for themselves, what they would like to focus on, and what they would like to study in less depth (though not skip entirely, in order to round out their knowledge).[58]

Teaching on an Appropriate Intellectual Level

The belief that students don't want to study and that in the Internet age there is no longer motivation for learning is mistaken. Students are intelligent and curious as ever. The problem is that we cannot continue trying to preserve the same level and style of Gemara instruction from the past. We have to raise the level of our Gemara learning. The assumption that Gemara is too difficult is an excuse, not a reason. In Vilna, students sat in lessons catering not to professors of physics and computer programmers, but to coachmen and tar-workers. If they could study, so can we. The same students who are uninterested in Gemara manage somehow to study advanced sciences, and write term papers that in the past would have been demanded only as final theses for Bachelor's degrees. Therefore, the level of a Gemara lesson must be on a level much higher than ever before. Some make the mistake of thinking that a high level and difficulty are similar things, and therefore think that the endless efforts dedicated to deciphering the Aramaic text, often without proper tools, constitute high-

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[57] Rosenberg 2009. Levinas also discussed this in his *Nine Talmudic Readings* (Ben-Pazi 2010).

[58] For a discussion about the difficulties of moving from "one Talmud to another" see B. Ish-Shalom (Ish-Shalom 1995), Hanna Kehat (Kehat 2006).

level learning, others conversely think that *iyun* learning on a high level is
too difficult. This is not the case. Difficult theoretical questions and sen-
sitive and complex emotional questions can be asked in clear and accessi-
ble language, as is the case in other fields of humanities: Tanakh and Jew-
ish thought on the one hand and literature and social sciences on the
other.[59]

"Scientific" Thinking

Humans as well as Torah learners live in a world with a certain type of
thinking patterns. Scientific and critical thinking is part of the discourse
and culture in which we live, and it is also shared by our students. One
cannot simply leave aside any approach with the slightest hint of academic
thinking, because of old disputes with the *Haskala* and the Reform move-
ments. In every age, learning styles change in response to new patters of
thinking. The Tosafists, the Spanish theorists, and the pilpulists of Poland
all innovated revolutionary approaches to learning, and in every case his-
torians can point to the spirit of the time and the way this echoed within
the study hall and influenced methods of learning. Even Rav Ḥayyim of
Brisk and his students were revolutionaries, and their approach elicited
opposition from more conservative elements. In time this itself became
the new "traditional" style of learning to be vehemently defended by con-
servatives.[60] Brisk, however, does not need to be the last revolution.[61] One
of the requirements of our generation is the encouragement of study that
uses scientific, philological and historical tools, within the study hall, in a
holy way.[62]

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[59] For a further discussion about the possibilities of teaching Talmud on a high
      school level, see Rabbi Lichtenstein's article, Brandes' discussion of his ideas
      and his response in Lichtenstein and Brandes 2007.
[60] See Breuer (Breuer 2004) pp. 166–230 for a discussion of innovations in learning
      throughout the ages.
[61] See Lictenstein 2003.
[62] This is a process taking place on a wide scope in Tanakh studies. See for example
      the collection of articles *hi siḥati* (Reiss 2013), (Carmy 2006), (Helfgot 2014) and
      (Carmy 1996). The question of incorporating critical approaches into Talmud
      study has been discussed for many years now while changes are taking place
      within the yeshiva world itself. See for example the articles of Kahana (Kahana
      1990) and Sperber (Sperber 1995).

Halakhah and *Aggada*

'Aggada is part of the Torah and is a consistent element of Gemara study. Many still see *'Aggada* as a sort of pause between one serious *sugya* and the next. However *'Aggadata* is unserious only if it is taught un-seriously. If it is taught wholeheartedly, it can serve as a basis for the cultivation of religious beliefs. Even the great halakhist Maimonides said that he preferred interpreting one piece of *'Aggada* over all of interpretations of Halakhah that constitute the majority of his commentary.[63] Every day there are more secondary sources, articles and books that expand our knowledge and our ability to learn *'Aggada* in depth, and these should be used to teach Talmud.[64] Discussions of *'Aggada* appear not only in completely aggadic *sugyot* but also in very halakhic ones. When we don't ignore passages of *'Aggada* they can cast additional light on the halakhic *sugya*.[65]

Religious Experience

Learning is not just an intellectual enterprise even if that is its basis. The experience of the study hall goes beyond intellect. Even though Rav Soloveitchik theoretically portrays the experience of the Halakhic man as an intellectual experience, one cannot ignore the intensity of the emotional experience that his learning entailed. Especially impressive is his childhood experience of hearing his father teaching in the next room, hearing Maimonides viciously attacked by students, and running to his mother who comforts him that Dad will save Maimonides. Or his description of feeling the almost physical presence of Rashi or Maimonides behind his shoulder as he learned. These were not just childish experiences,

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[63]   *Moses Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishnah: Introduction to the Mishnah and Commentary on Tractate Berakhot,* trans. by Fred Rosner (New York: Feldheim), Chapter 9, Mishnah 7, 230 "...my intent is to expound a little wherever an allusion to the topic of faith occurs, because it seems more important to me to teach a fundamental principle of our laws and faith than else I might teach." Maimonides' view that *'Aggada* constitutes the source of *Hazal*'s doctrines and beliefs appears in his introduction to *Zeraim* and his introduction to *Pereq Heleq* of *Sanhedrin.*

[64]   For example: Efrata college in Jerusalem offers Master's Degree studies in *'Aggada* instruction: "'*Aggada* and its Instruction from a Multidisciplinary Point of View." Yeshivat Ahavat Torah in Netivot publishes an annual called "'*Asufot*'" that contains a selection of articles about *'Aggada* from the tractate being studied in the yeshiva that year.

[65]   In *'aggada le-ma`ase* see the introductions to chapters, and the examples of *sugyot* of different areas and types (Brandes 2005–2012).

because Rav Soloveitchik said that he regretted that Chareidi yeshiva education, and even his own yeshiva, failed to bequeath these feelings to older students.[66]

Experience also needs to be refreshed and updated. When the *shtender* is replaced by a computer, it could be that the emotional experience of a young student in our age will take place in new places. It could be in an internet forum, guided by a teacher, about whether women can say *sheva berakhot,* or while perusing a collection of pictures on the Internet portraying different mishnaic ovens, or finding answers using the Bar Ilan Responsa project to discuss the laws of *qiddushin* made in jest. Instead of disparaging the value of experience and sanctifying pure intellectualism, teachers need to learn how they can influence their students to have Torah experiences.[67]

Variety

A good teacher does not demand that his students all follow his line of thought, but rather arranges the lesson in such a way that each student will find something interesting in the lesson according to his own individual path. There are different methods of teaching heterogeneous groups, and there is no lack of accessible tools available to teachers today allowing them to supplement areas of knowledge in which they are less than experts. This is the area in which students can become active participants in the learning process. They can raise questions and suggest which parts of the *sugya* they would like to focus on more, even going as far as assisting their teachers in finding the material needed for this deeper study, making intelligent use of the many Internet databases at their disposable. When studying Talmud, the main role of the teacher is to stimulate thought, lead the discussion, and guide the students where to find the answers—though he should not be "all knowing." This type of study is not some post-modern innovation; this was how lessons were taught in the old *Beit Midrash.*[68] Most of the time the students would sit among themselves studying, asking questions and investigating, and the teacher's role in the lesson was relatively limited. Even when the teacher did lecture, he didn't just spoon-

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[66]   In his article (Soloveitchik 1976) pp. 406-421.

[67]   See Rav Daniel Guttenmacher (Guttenmacher 2000).

[68]   There is a congruence between the free and open learning of the old *Beit Midrash* and some basic ideas of postmodern education. For a discussion of postmodernism and the possibilities it opens up for the religious education system, see Oded Shermer (Shermer 2002) and Tzvi Kanarik (Kanarik 2003).

feed his thoughts to the students, but exposed his interpretations to strict examination and an open discussion.[69]

Conclusion

The Jewish world has never experienced such a flourishing of Torah and specifically Gemara study as today. Even in generations that saw the production of an impressive legacy of Torah literature, this was only the work of a small class of men of means or dedicated individuals willing to live lives of poverty in order to allow themselves the time to engage in intensive study. In spite of this, or perhaps because of this, there seems to exist today a constant sense of crisis and difficulty when discussing Gemara learning. Many articles dealing with Gemara instruction nowadays begin with a discussion about crises and difficulties.[70] There is a reason I decided to analyze in this article the unique challenges of Gemara study—in general and specifically in our time. This is because the many comprehensive discussions about the proper ways to study Torah in our day are products of success, not crisis. The many students, the variety of communities and types of people participating in study[71] and the massive changes in methods and tools of study, in this time period in all cultures, require us to reexamine traditional methods of study and offer new paths that fit an age marked by the flourishing of Torah study. A discussion of methods of study should take place from a perspective of happiness and appreciation of all the amazing kindnesses that G-d has bestowed upon our people in this last generation. We are very fortunate to live in a generation of salvation—some even say the beginning of redemption—a time the Jewish people has returned to its land, rebuilding it in every respect—economy, security, settlement, and science—and at the same time a time of personal security and well-being for the majority of diaspora Jewry. In addition to all of this amazing progress, we are also seeing steps towards the objective

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[69] See Stampfer, (Stampfer 1995) pp. 90–95; 105–114; Breuer (Breur 2004) pp. 231–238.

[70] These are usually articles written in the Modern Orthodox and Religious Zionist circles. This is not to say that there are not problems in the chareidi world, only that they have different methods of dealing with them. On unmonitored internet forums one can find descriptions of no less problematic, if not more serious, phenomena in the Chareidi yeshiva world.

[71] In this article I haven't discussed at all the incorporation of women into the circle of Gemara learners in our generation. Everything said here is equally, if not more, applicable to women's Gemara learning. There needs to be a separate discussion about whether women's *batei midrash* can provide a unique contribution to Gemara study and what that contribution is.

of "for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of G-d, as the waters cover the sea." Maimonides points to the main aim of the Messianic era:

> The Sages and Prophets did not long for the days of the Messiah that Israel might exercise dominion over the world, or rule over the heathens or be exalted by the nations, or that it might eat and drink and rejoice. Their aspiration was that Israel be free to devote itself to the Law and its wisdom with no one to oppress or disturb it, and thus be worthy of life in the world to come. [72]

Maimonides did not formulate a curriculum for a time in which all of Jewry would have time to study Torah, and so the responsibility for this task is borne by our generation and our descendants, and we should undertake this task with joy and rejoicing. ∞

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[72] Maimonides, Kings 12:14. Translation from *The Code of Maimonides: Book Fourteen–The Book of Judges*, trans. by Abraham M. Hershman (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1949), 242.

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