

Blog Post: Building a Field: the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature

By Jon Levisohn
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The Mandel Center is committed to the study and improvement of teaching and learning in Jewish education in various settings – including higher education, where Jewish studies (both the study of classical Jewish texts and other kinds of Jewish studies) are flourishing. How can we contribute to its improvement? Well, let's focus for the moment on the teaching of rabbinic literature in particular. Here are some things we know about the teaching of rabbinic literature in colleges and universities.

- We know that doctoral programs in general, and Jewish studies programs in particular, do not focus on preparing doctoral students to teach, so that novice instructors often find themselves making it up as they go, teaching as they've been taught.
- We know that colleges and universities in general, and Jewish studies programs in particular, do not value teaching as much as they value research. This does not mean that individuals and institutions do not care about teaching, of course. But it does mean that teaching lacks the structures and systems of intellectual and institutional support that research has.
- We know that the field of rabbinics faces a particular pedagogic challenge, not unique certainly, but still distinctive – namely, that with very few exceptions, the students who take courses in rabbinic literature have neither the linguistic skills nor the extensive cultural background to access the often-confusing materials on their own. So the question of what to do in an introductory level course is a particular kind of challenge.

And then there are some things that we do not know with certainty, but which we do have some reason to believe. For example, based on our experience with the [Conference on Teaching Rabbinic Literature](#) in 2008, which generated so much interest and energy (among teachers in all settings – day schools, synagogues, seminaries, and universities), we have reason to believe that teachers of rabbinics have a great deal of passion about teaching itself, a great deal of concern for the quality of their teaching, and a great deal of interest in substantive pedagogic discussion.

Last month, I learned this lesson yet again, when I convened a roundtable on “The Purposes and Practices of Teaching Rabbinics” at the annual conference of the [Association for Jewish Studies \(AJS\)](#). Together, the panelists and I decided that each of them would present on an introductory level course, opening a window onto the pedagogic choices that they make and the thinking behind them. And since they teach in different settings – undergraduates in a world-class secular university, Master's students in a divinity school, and undergraduates at a

Jewish seminary – the diversity of those settings would serve as a useful point of contrast.

I was delighted with their presentations and the discussions that ensued. Charlotte Fonrobert's course at Stanford uses ancient Rome as a thematic focus, weaving back and forth between Jewish and early Christian texts and concerns. Marjorie Lehman's course at JTS displays her concern for situating rabbinic texts in their historical contexts while attending to the development of the students' textual skills. And Jon Schofer, at Harvard Divinity School, helps his students see the way that rabbinic texts are the sites for serious ethical explorations, in part by pairing those texts with other great works of literature.

But the most significant lesson is how much interest and commitment to teaching there is in the field. On a Sunday morning, at the outset of the AJS conference when many participants had not even arrived, over 50 people – scholars of rabbinics from institutions around the country, including many of the most senior people in the field – joined the conversation. They offered observations and asked questions until we ran out of time, and the conversations continued in the hallways afterwards.

What should we do with this energy and passion? How can we help to facilitate ongoing conversations about teaching that are wanted and needed but which seem to have few if any outlets – and not just conversation, but real progress in the field? What does it mean to build the field of rabbinics pedagogy? These are some of the strategic questions that we are thinking about, as we plan the next steps of our work at the Mandel Center.