The Pedagogy of Slowing Down: Teaching Talmud in a Summer Kollel

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Abstract. This article explores a set of practices in the teaching of Talmud called “the pedagogy of slowing down.” Through the author’s analysis of her own teaching in an intensive Talmud class, “the pedagogy of slowing down” emerges as a pedagogical and cultural model in which the students learn to read more closely and to investigate the multiplicity of meanings inherent in the Talmudic text, thus bridging the gap between an ancient text and its contemporary students. This article describes the specific techniques in the pedagogy of slowing down, and the ways in which this teaching practice contributes both to students’ becoming more attentive readers and to the ongoing development of their religious voices.

Introduction
This article describes a set of practices in Talmud teaching that I call “the pedagogy of slowing down.” The name and the articulation of these practices emerged through reflecting on my own teaching in an intensive Talmud class at the Northwoods Kollel of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. I analyzed my teaching because I wanted to better comprehend my classroom practices – what I do when teaching Talmud and why. In addition to describing the techniques of slowing down, the article presents some potential effects of this pedagogy. This article thus introduces another example of a mode of Talmud pedagogy and so belongs to the growing literature on this topic (Friedman, Hayman 1997, Kress and Lehman 2003, Lehman 2002, Lehman 2006).

Background and Context
The Northwoods Kollel is a program that brings four to six college-age students to Camp Ramah in Wisconsin for a nine-week intensive learning program. A five-morning a week Talmud class forms the core of the program. In the afternoons, students have classes in Jewish law (halakhah), midrash, hasidic thought, and contemporary religious philosophy. Two nights a week, the students have guided study where they pursue their

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2 Camp Ramah in Wisconsin is one of the camps of the National Ramah Commission, the camping arm of Conservative Judaism, and is affiliated with the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.
own projects. In addition to their studies, Kollel members are responsible for teaching one period of general Judaica to campers five days a week.

The program is not geared towards beginners. Kollel members have had prior experience learning Talmud as well as some knowledge of modern Hebrew. Previous Talmud exposure ranges from informal study with peers to a year spent in yeshivah, a religious institution for the study of Jewish texts. Hebrew language ability ranges from a few years of college-level Hebrew to native fluency. Talmud study is therefore not focused on decoding words or understanding the basic structure of Talmudic arguments. While I seek to reinforce and strengthen those skills, I expect students to use those skills to move towards deeper readings, to interrogate the multiple meanings possible in a Talmudic text. Another component of the program is its strong commitment to an ideology of observant and egalitarian Judaism. Students in the Kollel are exploring, or even already committed to, this world. The Kollel program aims to combine intensive study of sacred Jewish texts in an intellectually open and rigorous environment explicitly committed to traditional-egalitarian Judaism. While located in a summer camp, the Kollel is an academically rich program which approaches the type of program one would find in a yeshivah or a seminary.

For three summers (2005, 2006, and 2007) I have spent approximately a month teaching Talmud in the Northwoods Kollel. This article emerges from my Kollel teaching during one summer period, July 2007. That summer, the Kollel was composed of three men and three women, four more-advanced students and two less-advanced students. To analyze my pedagogy, I kept a Teaching Journal throughout the summer and made audio recordings of each class. While the journal and the audio recordings form the primary basis for my data and analysis, teaching notes as well as notes from conversations with students provide additional resources.

Composed in Babylonia between the third and eighth centuries CE, the Babylonian Talmud (Bavli) is the central text of rabbinic Judaism. The Bavli is structured as commentary on the Mishnah, a text edited in the land of Israel in approximately 220 CE. The Bavli is divided into six orders and within these orders into tractates. A sugya (plural, sugyot) is the literary unit of discourse, and it can range from a few sentences to a few pages of a tractate. In class, we studied selected sugyot from the first chapter of tractate Kiddushin of the Babylonian Talmud. One of the main topics of tractate Kiddushin is betrothal for marriage, and the chosen sugyot all centered on the issue of a man’s betrothing a woman with money.

Talmud study was divided between hevruta (study with a partner) and class time. Students generally spent one to one-and-a-half hours in hevruta and one-and-a-quarter to one-and-a-half hours in class. Twice a week, we had an extra half-hour of class before they began hevruta. This time division was dictated by the camp schedule.

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3 When I refer to the Mishnah as a document in its entirety, I capitalize “Mishnah.” When I refer to an individual clause of the Mishnah, I use the lower-case (“mishnah”).

4 Rabbinic marriage has two main components – betrothal (‘erusin or kiddushin) and marriage (nissu’in or huppah). Mishnah Kiddushin 1:1 legislates that betrothal can be effected by the man through three means: money, document, or sexual intercourse. Once betrothal has taken place, the woman is forbidden to have sexual relations with all men, including her husband. Should the couple dissolve their relationship at this point, the woman needs a bill of divorce (get). The marriage portion of the ceremony permits the couple, inter alia, to have sexual intercourse.
The Language of Slowing Down

During our closing conversation at the end of the summer, I asked the students to assess their learning experience in Talmud. One way in which the students described their pedagogical experience was “slowing down.” When I examined my teaching journal, I saw that the phrase “slowing down” also recurred in my observations. I wrote: “Another teaching challenge is slowing down some of the students as they read. Fast reading is a knowledge marker in certain parts of the Talmud world, and I need to figure out strategies to get the students to slow down” (Teaching Journal, 17 July 2007).

It also became clear that “slowing down” was part of my learning process as a teacher. Towards the end of the first week of class I wrote:

I still misjudge the amount of time it will take to complete material. I had thought we would finish the Tos. [Tosafot] and the Rashba⁵ today but we only got through one Tos. And this is with students who are good readers. Tomorrow we will start with shiur [class] at 9:30. But I may want to start making shiur longer, definitely starting at 12:30, or maybe even a little earlier. I will see. Timing is still an issue I am working with. I think that part of what surprises me is my ability to get them to slow down in class. (Teaching Journal, 19 July 2007)

This comment did not reflect on the speed of the students’ reading. Instead, it reflected the challenge of calibrating class time as I slowed down the students.

Many of the Kollel students had previously studied Talmud in environments where the marker of being a good learner was how quickly a person could read the Talmud’s text. At the beginning, I found that their translations often elided aspects of a sugya, the meaning of words as well as stages in the argument. They sacrificed precision for speed of reading the assigned material. Their use of speed as an indicator of success often had the effect of shutting down opportunities for questions – questions both about the content of the text and the intricacies of its structure. Once they had finished reading the text, their analysis was complete.

As I reflected on my teaching and the recurring language of slowing down, I realized that slowing down is not only a teaching technique. Slowing down is a cultural move. When I began teaching the class, I knew that I wanted to teach a rigorous course that would help students who already possessed a good grasp of how to translate and explain a sugya’s structure identify other markers for success. I wanted to help them move more deeply inside the textual world of the Bavli. I came to understand that one of my larger teaching goals that summer was to provide an alternative cultural model, a model where success in learning is measured more by the content of what is said than the speed in which those answers are reached.

The emphasis on content in the pedagogy of slowing down is similar to the type of in-depth Talmud study known as ‘iyun. ‘Iyun is commonly contrasted with bekiut, study that emphasizes broad content knowledge instead of depth of understanding. Like ‘iyun, slowing down emphasizes depth and seeks out multiple readings. However, while ‘iyun is distinguished by the use of medieval and modern commentaries and will often shift

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⁵ Tosafot refers to the Tosafists, 12th and 13th century Franco-German Talmudic commentators. Rashba is the acronym for the Spanish commentator Rabbi Solomon the son of Abraham Adret (c. 1235–1310).
its primary focus to analyzing these commentaries instead of the Talmudic text, the methodology of slowing down does not necessitate the use of commentaries. When commentaries are utilized, they are chosen to deepen a particular aspect or aspects of a sugya, to further elucidate the Talmudic text itself. The commentaries are not chosen because they themselves are interesting (although this may be true) but because they open additional issues in the Talmudic text for attentive reading and discussion.

Michael Fishbane speaks powerfully to the notion of attentive reading as enabling people to enter more fully into the ancient textual world:

Martin Buber once said that the task of the translator is to overcome “the leprosy of fluency” – that disease of the spirit whereby one presumes to know from the outset what one is reading and therefore blithely reads past the text and its distinctive meaning. The effective translator must therefore reformulate the words of the text so as to produce a new encounter with its language and thus facilitate a new hearing and understanding. I would add that the spiritual task of the commentator is likewise to mediate and influence the pace of reading, so that the reader can be addressed anew by the innate power of the text. (2002, xxxii)

Fishbane’s description of the tasks of the translator and the commentator is equally apt for the classroom (or summer camp) teacher. Just as the translator and commentator reveal new meanings through their formulations and expliciations of the text, so too a teacher should aid students in reaching new understandings. As the commentator shifts the pace of reading by the addition of words, so too the teacher can shift the pace of learning by the kinds of questions she asks and the ways in which she asks students to probe a text’s distinctive language. The challenge for a teacher, a kind of commentator, lies in encouraging students to articulate the words of the text so that they move beyond the two admittedly essential steps of turning Hebrew and Aramaic words into English and explaining the progression of an argument. The teacher must also help the students to become translators of the Bavli, people who have learned new ways of hearing and understanding such that they can find new meanings and power in the text. Slowing down, then, is a pedagogical practice through which the teacher helps the students to read more closely, to investigate the multiplicity of meanings inherent in a text, and thus to bridge the gap between this ancient text and these contemporary students of its words. As such, the pedagogy of slowing down can also be adapted to a range of teaching contexts.

Other educators have noted how the practice of slowing down has far-reaching implications. Chip Wood describes the ways in which schedule and curriculum at the elementary and junior high level rush teachers and children. He contends that this hurriedness often hinders learning. Wood argues for a cultural shift in the use of time, a change in the pace of school and the pace of teaching in order to improve the rhythm of learning. This shift results in a new set of the “3 R’s”: “Rigor, Recreation, and Reflection” (Wood 1999, 267). Rigor does not connote inflexibility but instead accuracy and precision in the classroom. Rigor requires that students learn to ask difficult questions thoughtfully and respectfully and that teachers consciously choose and prepare the language they utilize in the classroom. Recreation and reflection provide generative time, a space in which students can learn how to interact with one another and their environment as well as reconsider the day’s experiences. The result – students and teachers slow down and learn in a considered and deep manner.
What Slowing Down Does Not Entail

Slowing down does not mean a lack of rigor or tailoring the class to the weakest students, in this case those who have the hardest time mastering a sugya’s structure. It does not necessitate asking students to read more slowly (although at times that may be needed). In listening to recordings of my teaching, I noticed that the tempo of conversations was quick. I responded to students’ answers to my questions quickly, whether by asking another question or by re-stating what they had said. It does not mean teaching only a very limited amount of material. Over the course of this three-and-a-half week period (approximately eighteen hours of classroom time), we studied five different units. While the emphasis remained on a deeper analysis of the selected material, the class still progressed, moving forward through material.

To achieve progression and depth in the course, I had previously selected which sugyot would be studied as well as the ways in which they fit into a larger framework. Questions I considered were: What are the central ideas that I think should emerge from the study of this particular Talmud text? Do these sugyot come together into a larger picture and if so, what is it? Are there any threads that unite these sugyot? What are they?6 While I anticipated that new ideas would emerge in the course of discussion, I also knew that clarity regarding what I wanted to illustrate through my chosen material would help prevent discussions from turning to overly marginal issues and support students to ask better questions.

The discussion was not free ranging. When we read texts, I did not ask for volunteers but instead called on students. Doing so helped me to control the pacing of the class, to make sure that discussion was not dominated by a particular student, to balance different skill levels, and to focus on specific areas where individual students needed to improve their technical skills. My approach differed from that described by Tova Hartman and Moshe Halbertal, where a “usual class in the Yeshiva will quickly turn from a well-ordered presentation of the teacher into a lively and sometimes chaotic exchange between a few bright students and their teacher” (Halbertal and Hartman Halbertal 1998, 459).

My hypothesis is that all of these components – preselecting material, controlling the discussion, not tailoring class to the weakest students, keeping a fast conversation tempo, and not teaching a limited amount of material – are central to this practice’s success. Together they help to balance different students’ levels and needs. The tempo of the class and the amount of material challenges stronger students; calling on students ensures that weaker students are not lost in the material or the discussion. In the case of the Kollel, I had the advantage of being present for hevruta, students studying in pairs. As a result, I could give students tailored pointers, extra support, or additional questions. For example, I encouraged one hevruta to rewrite the sugya in their own handwriting, dividing its words into very short phrases. At first they worried that this would “slow them down too much.” However, three days later one of the students approached me and

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6 Since this class was not operating under the yeshivah model of a year-long course, choosing relevant sugyot from one chapter was central to my teaching. The point was not simply to see what the Talmud says and to progress linearly through as much of a chapter as we could. In addition, I did not want to construct an edited approach to a topic by self-selecting sugyot from the whole Bavli. Instead, by remaining within a chapter and selecting from it alone, I aimed to give the students sugyot that, while reinforcing their textual skills, would also raise interesting ideas that could be joined into a coherent whole.
said that this was the first time she had totally understood a sugya and that she understood everything in class (Teaching Journal, 19 July 2007).

**Components of Slowing Down**

The first component of the pedagogy of slowing down is precision. Precision begins with accurate reading and translation of Hebrew and Aramaic. In students’ preparation for class, this entailed use of the Jastrow and Frank dictionaries as well as the Frank grammar (Frank 1994, Frank 1995, Jastrow 1996). A student’s claim, “I know what the argument means; I just can’t translate it,” was inadequate. My teaching assumption was that if a person could not translate properly, he did not properly understand the sugya.

In addition to precision in translation, I required precision in explaining the text’s argument. Students had to describe clearly how the argument moved from one stage to the next. This included translating and identifying the function of technical terminology that serves as markers for different types of sugya structures (terms like ’ibaye lehu, u-reminhu, and so forth).7 I also asked for as much precision as possible in issues of redaction, such as identifying the different layers of the Talmudic text – tannaitic (refers to texts from the period of the tannaim, ca.70 CE–ca.220 CE), amoraic (refers to texts from the period of the amoraim, c.220 CE–c.500 CE), and anonymous (refers to texts from the anonymous editorial strata) – and recognizing parallel sources from other rabbinic texts.8

The second component of this pedagogical practice is thinking about meaning. I asked students to consider how particular words or phrases might open multiple interpretive possibilities and to look for ideologies and tensions in a sugya, fault lines where the dominant ideology might break down.9 As students considered these interpretive questions, I insisted that they ground their opinion in the words of the assigned texts. In preparing my teaching notes, I considered where I wanted to ask these interpretive questions. While at times I first had the students translate and parse the entire argument, more often I interwove meaning questions as we moved through the sugya. Although the placement of meaning questions varied, the fact of my asking them did not.

The third component of slowing down is the use of medieval Talmudic commentators, the rishonim (singular, rishon).10 While the interpretive methodologies of rishonim vary from one school to another, my goal was not for the students to master these differences; I was not teaching rishonim as an independent literary genre. Instead, I aimed to

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7 ’Ibaye lehu means “it was asked of them.” It introduces a question about a legal matter. U-reminhu means “throw them [against one another].” It introduces a contradiction between two sources, commonly of equal authority (Frank 2003, 10 and 240).

8 Admittedly, identifying the layers of a sugya with complete accuracy is a difficult task and one that cannot always be done with complete precision and certainty. However, as the Bavli is a redacted text composed of different historical strata, it was important that students have knowledge of basic criteria for separating the layers of a sugya and be able to accomplish this task with reasonable accuracy. See Shamma Friedman on criteria for distinguishing these layers (Friedman 1977).

9 In asking these questions, I am influenced by the work of Charlotte Fonrobert who argues for a methodology of “reading against the grain” when analyzing gender ideologies (Fonrobert 2000, 9).  

10 The term rishonim refers to those scholars living from the mid-11th century to the 15th century (Ta-Shema 2007, 339–43).
use *rishonim* to help the students further open a *sugya*’s interpretive possibilities and to help them become part of the ongoing conversation about the Bavli’s meaning. Therefore, when I chose *rishonim* for a particular *sugya*, I was careful to make sure that they revolved primarily around one issue. Although I did not demand the same level of precision as I did with the Bavli, students still had to accurately translate and then summarize the arguments of a particular *rishon*. Again, “I know what the words mean; I just can’t translate them,” was an inadequate claim. In reading these medieval commentators, I focused on the ways in which they presented different meanings for one phrase, juxtaposed one *sugya* with another, or recontextualized a particular issue.11

The fourth component involves putting together the big picture. At the end of each unit, I circled back to the beginning of the *sugya*, articulating links between the different components we had studied. These links included making more explicit points of thematic continuity or highlighting disagreements and the meaning of those disagreements. In addition, I tied the current unit to previous units, trying to illustrate a continuity of issues investigated. I asked students to see whether any ideological issues or tensions we had uncovered earlier also manifested themselves in this material.

**Pedagogical Practices**

This section concretizes and more closely explores the above pedagogical practices through an examination of selections from class transcripts. Although I describe the four components of slowing down in a linear fashion, the teaching transcripts reveal that more often these components were interwoven with one another.

In the very first class, I began introducing students to these practices of precision and multiple reading possibilities. We started our discussion by examining Deuteronomy 24:1–4, verses that lay the legal foundation for much of the rabbinic discussion about marriage and that are central to the opening *sugyot* of tractate Kiddushin:

Teacher: Let’s start with the *pesukim* [verses]. I’d like to start with the general question, what are the different things – let’s just list them – that we actually learn from these *pesukim* from *Devarim*, *perek kaf-daled* [Deuteronomy chapter 24]?
Student 1: We learn about getting divorced and when you can’t get back together, but really nothing about how you actually get married in the first place.
Teacher: Okay, so be specific about what we learn about divorce.
Student 1: All we learn about it is part of prompting reasons for divorce if you find ‘ervat davar [nakedness of a thing]’ which is unclear in itself. Then you write this *sefer keritot* [book of divorce].
Teacher: Is ‘ervat davar the only thing that we find that is the reason?

11 Since this paper is based on research into my own teaching practices, I have included *rishonim* as part of the pedagogy of slowing down. However, I can imagine teaching a beginning Talmud class that utilized many of the other techniques described. One would emphasize translation and the mastery of technical terms and deemphasize these more advanced skills. Still, it remains important to ask “meaning” questions with beginners. Meaning questions help to keep beginners interested in skill acquisition by showing them how central mastery of the technical aspects of Talmud is to a serious discussion of content. In addition, training students to ask meaning questions from the outset encourages them to train themselves to read deeply and to see skills and meaning as intertwined with one another.

12 I have intentionally used a literal translation in order to convey the ambiguity of this phrase (Brown 1979, 789).
In this opening discussion, I immediately introduced the students to the requirement of reading precision. When student 1 mispronounced “keritut” as “keritot,” I corrected his pronunciation. When the student answered my first question about what we learn from Deuteronomy 24:1–4 with a general sentence, I quickly asked him to refine his answer, to “be specific about what we learn about divorce.” When he gave a more specific response about ‘ervat davar, I again challenged him to refine that statement further. When he gave an answer based on the words, “If she does not find favor in his eyes,” I challenged him yet again to give a more precise reading of the verse by breaking it down into its constituent clauses.

This continued sequence of rapid questions that I directed towards the student was an important aspect of teaching the group that they must each, as individuals, be able to support their opinions. By concentrating on one student and not asking questions of anyone else or letting them jump into the conversation, I set a precedent that each student needs to be able to support his or her answer independently. Therefore, only when I felt I had pushed this student sufficiently did I invite others to join in, with invitations such as: “Okay, someone else jump in, continue with the divorce material.” But even in asking another student to give his answer, I used my invitation to direct attention to the part of the conversation I wanted continued. Attention focused on one student is important in showing students that they have to have thought about what they say before they speak; I will ask them to support their answers.

As the conversation proceeded, I continued to ask students to support their answers. In addition, I started to frame questions that helped link this biblical material to the later rabbinic texts. Because I knew that rabbinic sources would formulate both physical action and verbal statement as elements of the betrothal ritual, I asked students to consider whether they might see any verbal component hinted at in the biblical text. Although I did not make those connections between biblical and rabbinic material explicit at this point in the class, I tried to encourage the students to extract as much information as they could from these Deuteronomic verses.

Student 2 continued: In the divorce material, when she is divorced she is sent from his home, which means that she is living in his home.
Teacher: Okay, great. So that tells us something about what happens with marriage, as well. There is something about [the man as the] center.

Student 2: Right, he takes her. Jumping off from that point, he takes her, ki yikha 'ish 'ishah [when a man takes a woman]. So, again, the active party here is the 'ish [man]. And also in short order ve-hayetah le-'ish aher [and she will be to another man]. It seems like it is the general course of affairs that she will get married soon after or at least that is what the text is supposing is a likely possibility of what’s happening.

Teacher: Okay. And in this whole divorce procedure it also seems like we have a concrete action that’s defined here. There’s some kind of sefer keritut and then there’s an action as well. There’s a book and there’s also an act, [and the book] has to go into her hand. . . . There’s a writing of a document and then a physical action that happens as well. Are there any verbal actions that you would see here?

Extrapolating from these verses, students started to frame the social context of marriage. In this series of questions and response, they began to articulate the idea that marriage centers on the man’s home, that he is the active party, and that the divorce ritual has different components. As much as I challenged them to read what was present in the text, I also asked them to be attentive to its gaps. After the conversation continued for a few more statements, student 2 remarked, “It’s odd that we’re getting so much material, so much general material, out of so specific a case. This is a really specific casuistic law.” While the student framed his comment as one about the nature of casuistic law, he had commented strikingly on the amount of information we had been able to infer from a close reading of these verses.

Continuing on, I asked the students to begin a discussion that focused explicitly on the betrothal aspect of these verses. Students named the verbs lakah [take] and ba’al [to have sexual relations] as important to understanding betrothal. Using their comments, I framed a question:

Teacher: Do you read lakah, the verbs lakah and ba’al as two separate actions or [as referring to] one action, that they’re both part of the process of what’s happening?

Student 3: I read it as one, but [student 6] read it as two.

Teacher: Okay.

Student 2: I read it as two.

Student 6: We’re already informed by the mishnah.

Student 2: It seems like one follows.

Teacher: Wait, wait. I want each of you to argue your sides. So, [student 3], why did you read it as one?

Student 3: I don’t think it was as much a conscious thing as it was just that was my peshat [simple] reading. That’s how I interpreted it.

14 The verbal root lakah also has the meaning, “to take in marriage” (Brown 1979, 543).

15 The verbal root ba’al also has the meanings, “to marry, rule over, possess” (Brown 1979, 127). Robert Alter translates this phrase from Deuteronomy 24:1 as follows: “When a man takes a wife and cohabits with her . . .” (Alter 2004, 996). NJPS translates as: “A man takes a wife and possesses her” (Tanakh 1985, 1624).
Teacher: Okay, how did you get to that as your *peshat* reading?
Student 3: [Pause]. I guess because maybe they [the two verbs] come so close together and it’s almost like this is the unit that makes you married and then . . . what happens ‘*im*’ [if] something else [happens afterwards]. . . .
Teacher: Very nice.
Student 3: And then if something else happens, something else happens.

In this instance, I did not direct my question to one student in particular. In answering my question, student 3 told the class about her opinion and her *hevruta*’s [student 6] disagreement. Two other students jumped into the discussion, and then I intervened. Once again, I wanted to teach the students that they had to be able to provide a reason for their answers. When student 3 told me that her reading was not particularly thought out – what she terms a “*peshat* reading” – I challenged her to try and articulate further what she meant by her statement. Whether she succeeded in defending her answer was almost beside the point. I wanted this student to learn that she needed to be reflective about her readings. Only when student 3 had answered, did I turn to the other student in the *hevruta* pair and ask her to state why she thought they are two separate actions. I did not want the other students jumping in with their answers so that student 6’s position got lost. From the outset of the class, I tried to teach the students that close and thoughtful reading of even a short text can elicit a range of possibilities.

I continued to emphasize precise translation throughout the course. However, I also asked integrative questions, questions that challenged the students to link together material we had already studied with the current *sugya*. For example, Bavli Kiddushin 3a-b (*minyana*’ *de-resha* *le-ma’utei mai* – *ve-’ein davar* *‘aher kortah*) begins by asking a question about the mishnah’s mention of three methods that effect betrothal (money, document, and sexual intercourse) and the two methods that dissolve a marriage (divorce document and death of the husband). The transcript begins after student 2 had read half of the *sugya* and begun to translate it. It opens with my correction of his mistranslation:

Teacher: The number of the *reisha*’ [the opening clause of Mishnah Kiddushin 1:1 concerning betrothal] – what does it come to exclude?
Student 2: And the number of the *seifa*’ [the final clause of Mishnah Kiddushin 1:1 concerning divorce] – what does it come to exclude?
Teacher: So why is the *gemara*’ [Talmud] asking this question [about the number listed in the opening clause]?
Student 2: Because it’s acknowledging the arbitrary, no, the specific nature of the three things listed which means: what is it not going to accept . . . ?
Teacher: You’re understanding it [the Talmud] as asking a question about which characteristic of the mishnah?
Student 2: About its . . . arbitrariness.
Teacher: You’re focusing on how it could have picked five. Why does it pick three?
Student 2: Sure. (Class Transcript, 20 July 2007)

In this section, I paused the student’s translation to ask him to think of reasons why the Talmud might be asking this question. In his initial answer, the student was undecided about what the Bavli addressed, specificity or arbitrariness. I asked the student to refine
his answer further, and the student focused on the seeming arbitrariness of the mishnah’s language. I then translated the student’s answer into my own words: the Bavli assumes that the mishnah did not have to choose three methods for betrothal. It could have chosen five.

Two teaching practices are reflected here. The first is the continued focus on one student, and the second is the translation of the student’s answer into clearer language. I reformulated the student’s answer both to encourage him about his comment and to give other students a specific point to which they could respond. Translation is only the beginning of understanding a sugya.

Other students wanted to respond to my question about the opening clause’s wording.

Teacher: I saw a couple of hands. [Student 4]?
Student 4: Maybe the fact that it davka [regardless] take[s] pains to say be-shalosh derakhim [in three ways]. It says the number [three] and then it lists them [the ways]. It could have just said kesef, shetar, and bi’ah [money, document and intercourse].
Teacher: So it could have just said, kesef, shetar, and bi’ah. It doesn’t need to say “three.” What would be proof that the “three” is superfluous in addition to the fact that [the mishnah] lists the three things?
Student 4: I’m not sure.
Student 3: In addition to the fact that it lists them?
Teacher: In addition [to the fact] that it lists three things. What might be proof that you’re onto something?

Student 4 focused on a seeming redundancy in the mishnah’s language as lying behind the Talmud’s question. She noticed that the mishnah states, “A woman is acquired in three ways and acquires herself in two ways. She is acquired by money, by document, and by sexual intercourse...” (Mishnah Kiddushin 1:1). The number three, though, is superfluous. If the mishnah had just stated the trio of money, document, and sexual intercourse, we would have been able to infer the number three from this list. This literary observation is not the end of the story. I wanted student 4 (as well as the other students) to bring additional evidence for the accuracy of this literary observation. Through the practice of continued questioning, I directed the students to search for support for their assertions. So in response to a student’s question about my original question, I restated that I was looking for an answer that moves beyond that of the list in our mishnah.

The students continued:

Student 1: Somewhere else it lists things but it doesn’t give a number?
Teacher: Where else does it list things and not give a number?
[Pause.]
Student 1: I don’t remember.
Student 3: The other property?
Teacher: Where have we seen other property?
Student 3: In the other mishnahs?
Teacher: Okay.
Class: Oh!

Student 1 began by stating the conceptual framework: perhaps I was asking them to think of another example of a place where there is a list without a number. I moved the
discussion forward by affirming this and asking for the citation of that source. When student 1 could not name such a source, another student joined in the discussion with a suggestion: other places where we have seen property discussed. I then prompted her forward with yet another question. She answered, with the intonation of a question, “in the other mishnahs.” Student 3 refers to the mishnayot (plural, of mishnah) of the first chapter of tractate Kiddushin, mishnayot that we had studied in the first two classes. When I affirmed her answer, the class, in unison, made a sound of recognition.

In this exchange, it would have been quicker for me to simply give them the answer. However, by asking a series of questions that enabled them to make the link between the Talmud’s question and the first chapter of the Mishnah, I modeled a process of inquiry. In their hevruta pairs, I wanted them to begin to ask similar questions of the material: questions about the Bavli’s literary formulations and links between one sugya and other material they have already studied. In other words, I wanted them to see that sugyot are connected with one another, and that they should conceptualize the material as linked.

I had formulated this point about the literary uniqueness of Mishnah Kiddushin 1:1 in advance of the class. I also knew that I wanted the students to arrive at this point through my asking a series of questions. By questioning the students, I could better choose when to integrate different students into the conversation. In addition, because I already had the larger literary concept in mind, I could better integrate student comments into this framework and refine and modify my original ideas in light of their insights.

Prompted by this connection, the students jumped in with further observations. Once they looked at their copies of the mishnah, they saw that the only mishnah that has a number along with a list is Mishnah Kiddushin 1:1.

Student 2: Yevamah is not listed with a number the way she’s acquired and acquires herself.
Teacher: Great. If we go back to our mekorot [sources], to our first sheet, you had the mishnayot of [tractate] Kiddushin for example. So look at your mishnayot. [Pause and rustling of paper].
Student 3: Yes, [in a] case like ‘eved kena’ani nikneh be-kesef [a Canaanite slave is acquired by means of money], we don’t get the number.
Teacher: Great. So the only place we actually have a number is in our opening mishnah. Now you could say that’s because it’s a literary style. [But] it does sharpen the Talmud’s ability to ask the question about that “three” because the other mishnayot just list the things and don’t give a number.

I pointed out that while one could say that the first mishnah simply provides us with an opening flourish and therefore names the number three, the fact that the rest of the mishnayot in the first chapter do not do so sharpens the Bavli’s question. Why does our mishnah state the number three? Again, my question directed the students back towards earlier material we had studied earlier, encouraging them to understand sugyot as conceptually linked.

\[16\] A yevamah is a woman whose husband has died without children. She is required to marry her husband’s brother and their child is accounted as the husband’s. See, for example, Deuteronomy 25:5–20, Ruth 4:1–15, and Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Yibum and Halitzzah 1:1.
Perhaps prompted by this idea that one sugya is linked with another, student 3 made another observation about the word “three.” She remarked on the fact that this sugya is continuing a literary trend we saw in the opening sugya (2a–b) where the sugya interrogates the feminine form of the word “three.”

Student 3: We’re in the mindset of questioning the shalosh [three]. It’s just continuing to question the same number. We’re just questioning something else about it.
Teacher: Okay.
Student 3: Why three specifically, as opposed to why three negative . . . why three female? Why three male?
Teacher: Okay.
Student 3: Why three?
Teacher: Okay. Great. So it’s continuing that trend we’ve seen already, about focusing in closely on small details. [Student 2], if we follow your [question] up about why three, why not five, where else could we push that kind of question?
Student 2: One would think maybe it’s not an exhaustive list . . . or that the three things listed are general categories under which other things fall.
Teacher: So one way to frame [the issue] is: is the mishnah’s list exclusive? Is it only these three methods and no others that can be used?
Student 2: Exhaustive.
Student 3: And they’re reading it as yes [it is an exhaustive list].

After student 3 had formulated another connection between this sugya and the material we had previously studied, I wanted to return to [student 2’s] initial observation, to make sure that we did justice to it. Knowing that I wanted to use his statement to make a point about lists in the Bavli, I reframed student 2’s answer about the Bavli’s choice of the number three. This reframing enabled me to introduce the students to a mode of the Bavli’s reading of mishnaic lists. When they encountered another list, they should ask themselves: is this list inclusive or exclusive? What could be extrapolated from a close examination of its wording? In addition, reframing a student’s words enabled me to act as bridge between different opinions, demonstrating how two different students could both have plausible arguments.

In this same sugya on Bavli Kiddushin 3a-b, we also studied a number of rishonim. We focused on the issue of why barter (halifin) is not a permissible method of betrothing a woman. As a reason for disqualifying barter the sugya states, “Barter has validity [when performed] with less than the equivalent of a perutah (a coin of minimal worth), and a woman for less than a perutah will not cause herself to be acquired (la’ makniya’ nafshah).” I asked the students to learn specific comments of Rashi17 (s.v. la’ makniya’ nafshah), Tosafot (s.v. ve-’ishah be-pahot mi-shaveh perutah la’ makniya’ nafshah), and Ritva18 (s.v. salka’ da’takh ’amina mah sadeh mikanya’ be-halifin ’af ishah nami mikanya’ be-halifin). They were instructed also to look at Ramban19 (s.v. le-ma’ute

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17 Rabbi Shlomo the son of Yitzhak, 1040/1–1105.
18 Rabbi Yom Tov the son of Abraham Ishbili, c. 1250–1330.
19 Rabbi Moses the son of Nahman (Nahmanides), c. 1194–1270.
halifin ve-khu’) if they had additional time. The assigned rishonim centered around three words in the sugya: la’ makniya’ nafshah ([a woman] does not cause herself to be acquired). On the assignment sheet, I ask students to compare the positions of Rashi, Tosafot, and Ritva. Below are my questions:

**Rashi**
1. What does Rashi say the reason behind the phrase la’ makniya’ nafshah is?
2. What is the halakhic [legal] point he makes in the second part of his comment concerning halifin?

**Tosafot**
2. What is his version of the text of the gemara?
3. Why, according to Tosafot, doesn’t the gemara ask here about the possibility that kiddushin could be done with shetar [document] or hazakah [legal presumption]?

Once you think you have figured out what Tosafot is saying, try and read his explanation of the gemara back into the text. This is a good way to test if you have understood his perush [interpretation] and if it is a convincing read of the sugya.

**Ritva**
1. What difficulties does the Ritva have with the proposal that kinyan ishah [acquiring/betrothing a woman] also be permitted through halifin?
2. How does he explain why halifin isn’t a method of kinyan ishah?
3. How does he explain the version in the printed text la’ makniya’ nafshah? How is the explanation the same as or different from that of Rashi?

Finally, try and compare all three of these commentators.

I gave the students these questions in order to direct them to specific comparative issues and to guide them in the process of studying rishonim. By instructing them to read Tosafot’s understanding of the sugya back into the Talmud itself, I wanted the students to begin to see how Tosafot engages in close textual explication. An ability to recognize and articulate the multiple reading possibilities that medieval commentators present aids these students’ explorations of different readings.

As the students studied these medieval commentators, they discovered that Rashi and Tosafot have two different versions of our text. While Rashi reads “la’ makniya’ nafshah” (feminine singular active causative participle) Rabbenu Tam, one of the Tosafists, reads “la’ mikanya’” (feminine singular passive/reflexive participle). Focusing on the subjectivity of the word “herself,” Rashi explained that barter is not a valid method of betrothal because it is derogatory towards the woman (gen’ai hu’ lah). Rabbenu Tam, however, emended the text and removed the word “herself.” In his opinion, the invalidity of barter as a method of betrothal is not dependent on the woman’s stringency about her degradation but rather on barter’s not being in the category of money.

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20 Rabbi Yaakov the son of Meir Tam, c.1100–1171.

21 Aryeh Cohen has written about this textual emendation (Cohen 1999, 126–7).
The Pedagogy of Slowing Down

The next transcript begins after I told the students how extant manuscript traditions of this sugya do not support Rabbenu Tam’s reading; manuscripts contain the word “herself.”

Teacher: Let’s also look at the language here. It says le-khein nir’eh le-Rabbenu Tam. Not “Rabbenu Tam had the version,” but “therefore it seemed, it appeared to Rabbenu Tam” that we should read the text this way.

Students: Oh.

Teacher: Which I think strengthens the point that he’s making a reading choice [about] the correct reading based on a certain ideological or legal concern he has about wanting to define categories.

Student 3: Oh. Desire to keep the woman as the object.

Teacher: Let’s keep that as one possibility, that it may be a desire to keep the woman as the object.

Student 2: I just don’t know . . . Two things. One is that we all read superimposing our own values on texts. Fundamentally we can’t even avoid that, so it’s not like . . . that’s a special thing per se. I guess it makes it more explicit because Tosafot is telling us to leave out reading a word. But it’s a totally tricky thing to try to get at the rationales behind the people who are doing something like this.

Teacher: Great. So we may not be able to get at the rationale, but we could ask, what are the effects of the move that he’s making and the move that Rashi’s making? One possible way of looking at the effects is saying, [Rabbenu Tam is] removing the woman’s subjectivity. I think there’s another way we can also look at the effects of what he’s doing, which we’ll circle back to. (Class Transcript, 22 July 2007)

I began by pointing to textual support for my contention that Rabbenu Tam actively emended the sugya. I was trying to teach the students that they should pay attention to what the text actually says rather than what they want it to say. Second, I named the fact that I think this reading choice was ideologically based. I did not hide this assumption I made about reading. Third, when student 3 stated that behind this reading lies a desire to objectify the woman, I accepted that opinion but named it as one possibility. I thus affirmed her interpretation as well as opened the door to other opinions about Rabbenu Tam’s reading.

Student 2 returned to the question of ideological reading. While he affirmed the ideological nature of Rabbenu Tam’s reading, he also questioned whether we do, in fact, have the ability to understand the rationale behind a particular reading. Student 2’s statement resulted in my reformulation of a question and integration of student 3’s statement into that reformulation. While we may not be able with certainty to get at the rationale, we can still ask questions about the effects of various readings. In other words, we can ask, “What is at stake?” in choosing one reading over another.

I took this idea a step further in the continuing discussion about this sugya.

Teacher: Tosafot is moving us away from the idea of da’at [intention] and moving us back to and introducing us to the idea of taking kesef [money] and putting it at the center. What are the pluses and minuses of Rabbenu Tam’s move of removing da’at, even though there’s not really girsa’ [textual reading] proof of that in the gemara? What are the pluses and minuses of putting kesef at the center and not da’at?
Student 1: Well, he’s avoiding the subjectivity of [betrothal]. If this woman doesn’t feel it as gen’ai [degradation] because she’s getting this [small] amount [of money then potentially she could be betrothed]. Or maybe some people would feel gen’ai for getting a perutah [and wouldn’t be betrothed]. He’s taking away that whole subjective element [and replacing it] with the fixed standard of money and therefore there’s no question of how she feels about it.

Teacher: Okay, great. That’s exactly what he does. Plus and minus of doing that?

Student 1: It creates a universal standard that you don’t have rich or poor women feeling different or that there should be any sort of different gen’ai between them or something like that. But on the other hand, it reduces [betrothal] to a monetary standard that is a sort of set amount and focuses it as more an alliance of kinyan [acquiring] than anything else.

Teacher: Nice. So those are two paradigms we’re working with. One was also something that [student 3] brought out earlier – this idea that it takes away from the subjectivity of the woman and just turns it purely into kinyan and monetary transaction. On the other hand, Rabbenu Tam codifies in law this idea that we’re not working by a subjective standard and kinyan is not to turn on the issue of gen’ai or not gen’ai. It’s one standard. It’s kesef.

Student 2: It’s similar to the rationale behind minimum wage. . . .

As I stated above, Tosafot (or Rabbenu Tam) placed money at the center of betrothal. A woman must be betrothed with money, and because halifin does not fall into the category of money, it is invalid as a method of betrothal. That, and not Rashi’s suggestion of derogation and the women’s intention, explains why halifin cannot be used. At this point, I asked the students to consider both the positive and negative aspects of Rabbenu Tam’s move. Student 1 successfully articulated how Rabbenu Tam’s perspective can be viewed as creating a universal standard (positive) or as emphasizing how betrothal is like a monetary purchase (negative). Again, I tied student 1’s articulation into student 3’s earlier statement, validating her perspective, but also illustrating how careful examination reveals that it is not the only way to approach the issue. Student 2 then connected this discussion to the contemporary issue of minimum wage. While I did not generally emphasize drawing parallels between these older discussions and modern politics, student 2’s leap nicely illustrated how nuanced readings can help students connect the world of the Talmud with contemporary issues.

A number of pedagogical values are illustrated in the discussion of these commentators. The first is the importance of reading precision, learning to read the words themselves carefully and accurately. The second is the simultaneous affirmation of one interpretive perspective while opening the door for other possibilities. The third is a willingness to reformulate one’s ideas. Through the combination of these techniques, I challenged the students to examine an issue rigorously and from a number of perspectives. I required them to ground their ideas in the text, listen to each other, and constantly push themselves to delve more deeply into the interpretive possibilities of the Talmud.

Potential of the Pedagogy of Slowing Down

While I knew at the beginning of the summer that I wanted to help my students become stronger, more attentive, and deeper readers of the Bavli, I have come to a fuller appreciation of how the process of slowing down played a significant role in enabling this to
occur. Slowing down contributed to the students becoming more attentive readers and better questioners. It also contributed to stronger class dynamics and the ongoing development of students’ religious voices.

The turn to precision helped students to identify what they were having trouble understanding and, equally important, why they were having difficulty. Students could more readily define whether the stumbling block was a dictionary problem (a word they could not find), a logic problem (a construction they had not yet mastered), or whether the text in question held multiple interpretive possibilities. In addition, the requirement that they be alert to parallel texts and weave in older material with what was currently being studied aided significantly in parsing an argument.

The methods with which rishonim sought to ground their readings in the Bavli text reinforced my challenge to the students that they do the same. Through studying the close readings of the rishonim, students saw the possibilities that arose through attentive, detailed, and creative reading and thinking. The use of rishonim also facilitated the students’ abilities to identify tensions in the text, to see places where the dominant ideology might break down. I challenged them to ask, “What is at stake in these different readings?” Students could compare their ideas about the sugya with those of medieval commentators and evaluate how their perspectives were similar to or different from those of the commentators. In addition, since many of the rishonim were difficult to understand, integrating them into the class had the added affect of further slowing down the students.

Most significant was an increased ability on the part of each student to find more interpretive possibilities in the sugya. I observed that the marker of success became not so much speed of reading and preparation of material, but more what a student could articulate about the text. This shift to quality over quantity had some important corollaries. First was an increased opportunity for me, as a teacher, to better bridge the different class levels. Slowing down enabled me to more clearly see which strategies would best help individual students to acquire necessary skills in reading and interpretation. I could then integrate these observations into class and suggestions for hevruta preparation.

Second, I observed a striking shift in the ways in which different hevruta pairs prepared for class. At the beginning of the summer, stronger students completed the assigned material significantly more quickly than weaker students. However, by the end of the summer this gap had lessened (though not entirely closed). I noted in my teaching journal: “I am definitely not having a moving too fast issue now. Class has acted to slow down the hevrutot [study pairs] because they are now interested in seeing how much they can see in the sugya” (Teaching Journal, 25 July 2007). I believe that the lessening of the gap resulted not only from the weaker students’ increasing their comfort with the Talmudic texts but also from the stronger students no longer racing through the material as quickly as possible in hevruta. Stronger students shifted to extracting as much meaning from the text as possible. Marking success in the class by what was said, not how much was said, redirected students to spend more time thinking and articulating ideas in hevruta preparation.

22 If the gaps between student levels are too wide, for example beginners to advanced, slowing down will not help in meeting the different students’ needs. I imagine that all the students will be frustrated!
Third, I perceived an increasing patience, even with potentially ethically difficult texts. The chosen material’s emphasis on betrothal as a man “acquiring” a woman raises troubling questions about the nature of Jewish marriage and women’s status in Jewish law. I explicitly articulated to my students throughout the class that I wanted to hear their opinions, reactions, and even anger, about this material. At the same time, as I reinforced my desire to hear them speak, I also reinforced my requirement that they ground their opinions about what the text was saying in the words of the text. While I was explicit with the students that I wanted to know what they thought about the text and to hear their opinions about the issues it raised, I was also explicit that they first demonstrate they could translate and explain the text. As the students became closer readers of the Bavli, they learned to support their ideas more strongly. In turn, they discovered that this strengthened reading capacity resulted in the ability to better express their opinions. My choice to be explicit about both of these points – reading and opinion – meant that even if I asked a student momentarily to hold back, each student could trust that we would circle back to her or his opinion. My hypothesis is that because students knew they would have time to express their opinions, they were less anxious about making sure they said everything at the beginning. Because they could trust that they would have this time, they were better able to build their skills as they explored ethical tensions in the texts. Then, as their skills grew, they found that they could insert more of their voice into the text itself. Again, this developed because I deliberately made room for them to take the time to express questions and offer different readings.

This emphasis on taking time to express grounded opinions was also bound up with the Kollel’s larger ideology of supporting and exploring observant-egalitarian Judaism. The process of encouraging the students to carefully articulate textual values paralleled the process we wanted them to undertake in their own religious introspection and growth. Just as the students learned to read, analyze, and think about a text, they could learn to read, analyze, and consider their own Jewish lives. They could consider and discuss with one another issues about Jewish practice, including ritual observance and egalitarianism, with the same depth, openness, and considerateness as they did in Talmud class. Through finding a voice in the study of Talmud, I aimed to help students find a similar voice in Jewish practice.

I strove to open up a space for reading and thinking, to create a place of simultaneous intellectual openness and reading rigor. By pushing the students to articulate their opinions while grounding them in the text and by exposing them to the interpretive tradition of the rishonim, showing them how others had interpreted the Bavli and how the Bavli’s meaning is not static, I intended to give them tools to become insiders in our tradition. With their increased abilities, I found, came increased joy in the process of learning Talmud.

Conclusion
Fishbane conceptualizes the commentator’s spiritual task as “to mediate and influence the pace of reading, so that the reader can be addressed anew by the innate power of the text.” In providing a cultural model of Talmud study that slowed down the reading and interpretive process by emphasizing accurate translation and rigor in thinking about

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23 Rachel Adler has written a critique of the traditional Jewish marriage ceremony and kiddushin in particular (Adler 1998, 169–207).
meaning, my goal as teacher and commentator was to give all my students a sense of accomplishment and an ability to begin to internalize these texts, and so our tradition. Creating a space for conversations based on precise translation and explanation that open into realms of multiple opinions and interpretive possibilities facilitated the process of students becoming translators of the Bavli, people who have learned new ways of understanding. One of my students said that the class had given him: “Voice in the tradition by learning and mastering the rabbis – then agree or disagree.” Finding that voice through careful study of this ancient text was the fruit of both the practices and the goals of the pedagogy of slowing down.

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