

**STUDENTS'
UNDERSTANDINGS
OF RABBINICS**
FINAL REPORT

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Introduction

RESEARCH QUESTION:

WHAT DO JEWISH DAY SCHOOL STUDENTS UNDERSTAND ABOUT RABBINICS?

Rabbinic texts have played a central role in the development of contemporary Judaism. Not surprisingly, these texts also play an important role in Jewish day school curricula, both formal and informal. Despite the importance of rabbinic texts in the history of Judaism and the contemporary day school curriculum, there is little data about what students actually know about or are able to do with these texts, or what sense they make of rabbinics as a whole.

This report shares findings from interviews with students and educators conducted between January 2017 and June 2018. The student interviews were conducted with current high school students from three Jewish day schools. Additionally, educators in a wider range of Jewish day schools were interviewed. While the material below focuses primarily on the students' perspectives, we use the interviews with educators to add more dimension to our portrait of the teaching and learning of rabbinics at the high school level. The interviews with teachers provide texture and context for the student accounts and help enrich our understanding of how Talmud is presented in Jewish day school classrooms.

Several studies consider the teaching and learning of rabbinic texts from the point of view of the educator (see for example, Schwartz, 1983; Lehman, 2002; Kress and Lehman, 2003; Levisohn and Fendrick, 2013; Kanarek and Lehman, 2016). Additionally, several recent studies elucidate students' own understandings of their day school curricula overall (Hyman, 2008), including their readings of historical texts (Zakai, 2018); their development of historical narratives (Hassenfeld, 2018); and interpretive stances towards Tanakh (Hassenfeld 2016). As relates to rabbinics, Moshe Krakowski (2017) argues for the promise of problem-based learning (PBL) in modern Orthodox day school Talmud classes. In the pilot phase of Students' Understanding of Rabbinics, Cousens (2016) conducted an interview study with day school alumni (N=13) which used a snowball sample to probe day school alumni understandings of rabbinics. Cousens's study looked at features of Talmud study that participants reported either attracted them to or pushed them away from engagement with rabbinic text, with attention to student conceptions of the relevance of the text, the complexity of the text, and experience of working with text in the original language.

This, a subsequent phase of research, extends Cousens’s work by probing the understandings of current students in grades 9-12, as opposed to retrospective accounts by alumni. We implemented a more systematic approach to building our sample, allowing for an understanding of the contexts that produced these data. While this phase of study aims to capture a range of student opinions from within selected schools, we cannot know whether there were some opinions unrepresented because of sampling, or how prevalent a particular opinion is in the school in general.

Cousens, in her 2016 study, noted that there were elements of studying Talmud that drew students away from or closer to the text. This report, in part, continues that effort, exploring how current students articulate their main frustrations with the study of rabbinics, and those aspects of the study of rabbinics that students appreciate. Rather than report on whether students “like” or “dislike” rabbinics, we try to probe underlying beliefs about what makes study worthwhile, that shape student preferences.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY UNDERSTANDING?

Understanding as a concept is made up of many facets and theoretical approaches. This complexity required us to choose specific facets to explore in this phase of research. In designing the interview protocol and in conducting the analysis, the research team focused on three dimensions of understanding, each grounded in research related to student subject-specific understandings.

First, what is rabbinics?

Hammer (1994) focuses on students’ conceptions of the content and structure of a specific subject. In the present case, what subject-specific schema and explanatory frameworks do students have for what rabbinics is? How do day school students describe and characterize this material?

Second, how is rabbinics learned?

Saljö (1979) focuses on students’ “conceptions of learning” a particular subject. In the present case, what kinds of skills, knowledge, and cognitive capacities do students believe they need to understand rabbinics? What activities do they report as constituting the study of rabbinics? What sense do they have of their own progress and development as learners of rabbinics?

Third, why learn rabbinics?

Taylor (1981) focuses on students' "educational orientations" to the study of a particular subject. In the present case, why is the student learning rabbinics? What are students' attitudes towards and goals for their study of rabbinics? How do students perceive rabbinics to fit into their school, Jewish community, personal trajectory, and personal vision of the world?

Note that this usage of "orientation" is different from the usage employed by Grossman (1991), and subsequently by Holtz, Levisohn, and others, which is primarily concerned with *teachers'* conception of the subject (including both its pedagogies and its purposes). Whether students' orientations correlate with teachers' orientations is an empirical question that is introduced in this report and is worthy of further investigation.

Study Design

METHODOLOGY

Our research questions were designed to elicit day school students' conceptions about rabbinics. To answer these questions, we designed a four-stage sequential interview study in which data collected in earlier stages informs later stages. Through this iterative process, the research question is continually sharpened, preliminary hypotheses become more developed, and the sample criteria are made clearer.

Data were generated primarily through *interview*, augmented with a review of curricular materials. This methodology, guided by the interview protocol, can ensure that the study's research questions are sufficiently explored while still allowing participant experiences and ideas to jointly shape the parameters of the conversation. This allows for the possibility that study participants will point to new directions that the research team had not anticipated (Seidman, 2006; Gilligan et al 2005).

Outline of Interview Rounds¹

1. Educators (N=10) from ten Jewish day school high schools in North America including community, pluralistic and denominational schools
2. Students (N=20) from two community/pluralistic Jewish high schools in North America. Schools were selected from schools that participated in the teacher interviews.
3. Educators (N=10) from eight Jewish day school high schools and two middle schools in North America including community, pluralistic and denominational schools
4. Students (N=8) from one additional community/pluralistic Jewish high school in North America

¹ There is always a question in interview studies of how many interviews constitute "enough." This question was more urgent as relates to the student interviews, because our research questions are focused on student understandings. At twenty-eight student interviews from three schools we feel we have reached our own threshold for "enough" from the community Jewish day school sector. One approach researchers use to answer this question is the concept of "saturation," that is when researchers begin to hear the same themes again and again and believe that new themes are no longer emerging from additional interviews. Saturation was reached after twenty interviews in two schools. It was at this point that interviews failed to produce new thematic categories. A third school was added to test the assumption that we had reached saturation. Data collected from the third school did allow for a more nuanced understanding and more examples of some of the previously identified codes, but new thematic categories did not emerge.

The reported findings describe the contours of a phenomenon rather than attribute causes or predictors. Our analysis focuses on identifying different conceptions students articulate about their study of rabbinics as guided by the research questions. Interviews were transcribed by two professional transcription services, checked by research assistants for accuracy, and edited to remove identifying details. These cleaned and de-identified transcripts were then uploaded to Atlas.ti (v. 1.6.0), a software tool for analysis of qualitative data. We began with a grounded theory approach to analyze the data (Charmaz & Bryant, 2008). Rather than entering the field with a pre-existing hypothesis to test, we instead sought to develop a set of categories for conceptualizing students' understandings of rabbinics that emerged inductively from our analysis of the data. Codes were based on both the repetition of terms and themes. The initial round of coding produced over 100 codes. These codes were winnowed using guidelines for phenomenographic research outlined by Larsson and Holmstrom (2007) to fewer than 20 codes.

Total Educator Interviews: N=20

Total Student Interviews: N=28

Note: We formally interviewed at least one teacher from each of the schools from which we recruited students. However, and importantly, the student sample was not matched to the teacher sample. Students who participated in the interviews included those currently in that teacher's classroom, those who had the teacher in the past, and some who had never had that teacher. Students were instead selected based on other variables including grade level, gender, Jewish studies track and interest in participating.

Educator Interviews

Ultimately this project is focused on *student* understandings of rabbinics. In seeking insight into what day school students understand about rabbinics we also conducted interviews with teachers. The main purpose of the educator interviews was to provide a wider context for understanding the student interviews. Analysis of the educator interviews was driven by research questions designed to focus on student understandings and experiences. Data from these interviews allow for a richer description of the teaching and learning of rabbinics in Jewish day schools and informs our understanding of why classroom practices look as they do.

In order to recruit participants, the research team first created a list of possible day schools for inclusion based on existing contacts in the field of Jewish day school education and with guidance from The Legacy Heritage Instructional Leadership Institute (formerly Jewish Day School Standards and Benchmarks Project) of the Davidson School at JTS. At the school level we sought diversity on geographic location and denominational affiliation.

Interview subjects were sought from each of the schools on the list. We recruited participants with substantial practical experience related to the teaching and learning of rabbinics in day schools, and first-hand knowledge of how students express their understanding of this content area in the classroom and in other school interactions. Additionally, we sought participation from educators with diverse pre-service preparation for rabbinics education including: study in a seminary or rabbinical school; a doctorate or other academic graduate degree in rabbinics or a related field; a graduate degree in education. We took gender diversity into account.

There were two distinct interview protocols used for the teacher interviews. The first set of interviews focused on how educators who teach or supervise the teaching of rabbinics in Jewish day schools frame student understandings. What do they believe students in their school understand or misunderstand about rabbinics? What features of student understandings of rabbinics do these educators emphasize?

After completion of the student interviews the research team gained a greater appreciation for how teachers' orientations to Talmud and their beliefs about their main priorities in the classroom shape students' learning experiences. The team decided to conduct more educator interviews with a revised protocol, centered around questions of expertise in rabbinics. Educators were asked to nominate

people whom they believed were expert in rabbinics, and name the types of knowledge, capacities, and dispositions that made these nominees expert.

TABLE 1
Educator Participants by Gender

| | |
|--------|----|
| Male | 11 |
| Female | 9 |

TABLE 2
Educator Participants by Degree*

| | |
|--|----|
| Rabbinic Ordination | 12 |
| Degree in Education (Masters or PhD) | 11 |
| PhD (or close to completion) in Rabbinics or Related Field | 8 |
| Other Masters | 4 |

*The total exceeds 20 because in several cases an educator held more than one degree (usually ordination and another degree).

Student Interviews

We designed the student interview protocol to elicit from students the ways that they conceptualize rabbinics as a content area, their perceptions of how rabbinics is studied, and their own personal orientation to the study of rabbinics. Here the interview primarily prompts *conceptual knowledge* (what a student can say or explain) as well as their attitudes toward their learning. The study design does not allow us to systematically address students' procedural knowledge (what the student can do), although these domains are, of course, linked.

RECRUITMENT

The Schools: The research team approached three schools for permission to recruit students for interviews. These schools were selected from the initial group of schools who participated in the educator interviews. These three schools were chosen because they were alike on a few major variables: they are all community/pluralistic schools, are on the same coast, and offer two tracks for rabbinics: what we call in this report an advanced and standard program. Finally, and importantly, these schools expressed enthusiasm for participating in a second phase of study and agreed to support the research team's recruitment efforts. Each school granted permission to recruit students through different avenues. One school shared a recruitment letter with parents. In another school the researcher was invited to briefly address each eligible classroom. And in the final school, teachers shared recruitment information with their own students.

The Students: For the student interviews, the research team sought a purposive sample to provide insight into a larger "shared experience" (Sofaer, 2002) of Jewish community day school rabbinics at the high school level. We sought to include a cross-section of the student body in our study. A short questionnaire was used prior to the interview to screen possible participants on some of key variables. These variables included: gender, grade, denominational affiliation, type of rabbinics course currently enrolled in (advanced or standard). We also relied on student willingness to participate. For some general demographic information of the participants please see the charts below.

Our sample may have been skewed in favor of students with more interest in rabbinics than the general population in their schools. We had three times as many students in the advanced track volunteer to participate in the interview than students in the standard track (21 vs. 7). The proportion of students in each track varied by school. Taking those variations into account the sample is skewed

towards the students in the advanced track. Generally speaking the advanced track (sometimes called Honors, accelerated, or Beit Midrash) presents text in the original language and seeks to build skills so students can independently access these texts.² This class is often seen as geared towards students who have been in Jewish day school since elementary school and have appropriate Hebrew language skills to take on the translation tasks in the classroom. In the standard Jewish Studies class (which was rarely referred to by students with any distinctive name) texts are often presented in translation.

All of the students interviewed had attended Jewish day school for at least some of elementary or middle school. The students we interviewed in the advanced track had all attended Jewish day school for all of their years of formal schooling. The students in the standard track had either entered Jewish day school in later elementary or middle school or elected not to continue in the advanced track. Additionally, over one-quarter (8 out of 28) of the participants had a parent or parents who were Jewish professionals, clergy, or scholars of Jewish studies.

TABLE 3

Student Participants by Gender

| | |
|--------|----|
| Male | 14 |
| Female | 14 |

TABLE 4

Student Participants by Jewish Studies Track

| | |
|--|----|
| Advanced (texts presented in original languages) | 21 |
| Standard (texts presented in translation) | 7 |

² One administrator argued that his school does not have an advanced track and that the program was rigorous across the board, but students were generally aware that one track had more intensive requirements and more advanced language skills.

TABLE 5**Student Participants by Grade***

| | |
|------------|---|
| 9th Grade | 5 |
| 10th Grade | 9 |
| 11th Grade | 9 |
| 12th Grade | 5 |

TABLE 6**Participants by Denomination Raised**

| | |
|-------------------|----|
| Reform | 2 |
| Modern Orthodox | 6 |
| Conservative | 15 |
| Other/No Response | 5 |

*With the exception of three interviews completed in March, interviews were conducted in late spring (May-June) of 2017 and 2018. Some participants had already finished the school year at the time of their interview. These cases are listed by the grade just completed. So, a student listed as a 10th grader will have completed or almost completed 10th grade.

Some educators may be disappointed by how students represent their study of rabbinics in school. In thinking about how students explain their understandings of rabbinics, we should keep in mind how students characterize other subjects they encounter in the classroom. In the context of our interviews we asked students about all the classes they took, and students made claims about many other subjects, such as history, Spanish, etc. that might elicit surprise, consternation, or despair in teachers of those subjects. Rabbinics is not alone in that.

Talmud as a School Subject in Day Schools

WE LOOKED FOR RABBINICS BUT WE FOUND TALMUD

While this project is entitled Students' Understandings of *Rabbinics*, this report mostly addresses student understandings of *Talmud*. From the very first series of interviews it emerged that educators *and* students in Jewish day schools understood open queries about the presentation of rabbinics in their school to mean questions about Talmud as formally studied in the classroom. Unless prompted by the interviewer, almost no one offered examples of where rabbinics might appear outside of formal Talmud classroom settings, in, for example, tefillah, or in the Tanakh classroom, or in the rhythms of the Jewish calendar, etc.

In this report we use the term rabbinics and Talmud somewhat interchangeably.

The term “rabbinics” can describe all rabbinic literature produced through modern times, although as a research team we were interested in focusing on literature produced after the Second Temple period and through Late Antiquity. This leaves open the inclusion of texts beyond Mishnaic and Talmudic literature, such as collections of Midrash. Only three students included these texts in their categorization of rabbinics. In both the student and educator interviews Aggadah was rarely mentioned. When students spoke about what Talmud was and what kind of material it contained they almost always referenced halakhic material.

DAY SCHOOL TALMUD AS A SUBJECT SUBCULTURE

An academic discipline establishes structures for asking a “good” question as well as specific methods for inquiry and analysis. But rabbinics, at least in the secular academy, is an interdisciplinary field, not a discipline. A scholar who studies rabbinic literature might approach the text through the disciplinary approach of history, or comparative literature, or economics, applying different lenses of inquiry to the text. Some scholars employ only one or primarily one method for analysis, and others use multiple approaches. As such, rabbinics is different from many other subjects in the American high school, such as history or math, that may be associated with a particular academic discipline and university department. This association between the school subject and the disciplinary norms of a university department can sometimes reflect shared understandings of the kinds of competencies and skills toward which a high school course should aim.

Lave (1988) distinguishes between “arenas” and “settings.” In this case the Jewish day schools are a local “setting” in which understandings about rabbinics as a subject matter play out. There is also a larger “arena” of rabbinics as a field of higher learning—the yeshiva, the seminary, the university, as well as in the general Jewish community—that in turn shapes the possible activities in day schools around Talmud study. This study found that experiences of studying Talmud in the yeshiva or seminary world, rather than the university, have a greater influence on the pedagogic framework teachers of rabbinics employ in the Jewish day school classroom. The essential questions that educators bring to the text tend to echo the agendas they encounter in these religious and communal institutions, as opposed to, perhaps, the concerns of academic scholars. This is not to say that this is a deficiency or a problem, so much as it is an idiosyncrasy of rabbinics as a school subject.

Stodolsky and Grossman (1995) write about the development of “subject subcultures,” which they define as “characterized by both beliefs about the subject matter that bind teachers together and by norms regarding teaching practice, curricular autonomy, and coordination” (Stodolsky and Grossman, 1995, p. 8). One key determinant of subculture is the academic discipline itself. But the school “subject,” even when shaped by direct correspondence to an academic discipline, rarely maps on it precisely. Other features that shape a subject subculture include the perceived status of the subject (Does it count for college? Does it command school resources? Is it state-mandated and assessed?); sequentiality (is content determined by clear ideas as to what skills or knowledge must come in what order?); scope and coherence (Is only one discipline contained in the subject or are there many disciplines, like social studies? Do the teachers share a similar disciplinary background and idea as to what counts as the subject?). These subcultures, in turn, inform policies and activities for learning such as tracking students by ability level and the development of shared standards and benchmarks.

Rabbinics in non-Orthodox Jewish day schools is often low in status, low in sequentiality and linearity, and large in scope. As such it is a subject likely (according to Stodolsky and Grossman) to have an educator subculture that aligns with more flexibility and negotiability in terms of what texts are taught, how they are taught, when, and in what order. Teachers in these kinds of subject subcultures are often less likely to report coordinating with other teachers, less likely to have strong departmental policies, and are more likely to have difficulty developing shared standards. There may be less consensus about what should be taught, when and in what order it should be taught, and how it should be taught.

Given some of the above features of the teaching of Talmud in day schools, it is noteworthy that our data suggest fairly strong coherence of educator subculture, especially in overarching goals and texts selected, even though there is no clear centralized curriculum or authorizing agency for the teaching of Talmud in Jewish day schools. Educators often have been trained in the same handful of institutions, admire the same set of approaches to explicating rabbinic texts, have similar goals for the central understanding they want to transmit to their students, and, though the corpus of rabbinic text is vast, often teach the same passages (indeed, students from different schools referenced the same *sugyot* in their interviews).

SHARED EDUCATOR GOALS: CREATING ETHICAL DECISION MAKERS

In our first round of educator interviews we asked educators which facets of understanding rabbinics they emphasize for their students. The common concerns were telling. Concerns about relevancy, that is, the degree to which educators imagined the principles generated by a text were applicable to the everyday lives of their students, were at the top of the list for all schools. For example, one teacher explained how his curriculum made issues related to damages and the public arena relevant by connecting it to how students take responsibility for their shared space at school. We heard comparatively less from educators about approaches to building content knowledge and skills, even in schools with benchmarks for these domains or in those that were preparing students for more intensive study of rabbinic texts in the future. This meant that no matter the denominational background of their students, all educators were puzzling out how to elucidate for students what the stakes were in the arguments that figured in the texts.

The educators we spoke with respected the complexity of rabbinic texts and the possibility that one could teach for multiple understandings. Yet when asked what understandings they prioritized in their teaching, almost everyone emphasized promoting an understanding of rabbinics as a model for reasoning and ethical decision making. This was a priority for teachers.

One educator in a community day school explained that she wanted her school's students to understand that "rabbinics is a language of decisions and questioning... It's a way for us to think when we encounter dilemmas. We have a tradition that teaches us what [to] do when we encounter modern dilemmas. In studying rabbinics we learn how Jews think." Another educator in a modern Orthodox day school offered examples of the kinds of dilemmas he hoped his students would be prepared to navigate. He explained "the point... is... to discuss and debate and to think and to act....

So, if we said, ‘Should women become rabbis?’ or ‘What does Judaism think about homosexuality?’ What ought to happen is students should be able to thoughtfully analyze the question without needing to have seen the question before because they have learned the principles of how [rabbinic reasoning] works.”

Through this lens, rabbinic texts are primarily a body of legal discussions that explore how a person should act, or that lay out the process through which a person should decide how to act (often in discussion with others). Some educators offered “secular” moral dilemmas (such as whether to smoke marijuana or separate conjoined twins) and others offered more parochially “Jewish” dilemmas (like those in the paragraph above). The educators shared an interest in looking at the text as a means of inducting students into what they saw as a uniquely Jewish mode of thinking, marked by features such as multivocality, disagreement, use of prooftexts, and favoring complexity over clear resolution.

This approach is no doubt important and thoughtful, but it is only one way to think about what learning rabbinics is for and what modes of thinking an engagement with rabbinic texts provokes. We did not hear much from educators about reading rabbinic texts as a source for personal theology, or as historical documents that illuminate the periods over which they emerged. Few educators mentioned midrash at all, and only one educator discussed the possibility of teaching aggadic and midrashic rabbinic texts through the arts—an approach that would seem to be a fairly atypical presentation of the legacy of the rabbis in most day schools.

Understanding rabbinic texts as a model for ethical decision-making and problem-solving has important ramifications for the way rabbinics are presented in Jewish day schools. It can lead to a multitude of educator choices, from the selection of texts to the activities for learning in the classroom, all of which shape students’ experiences of this vast, diverse, and complex body of literature.

EDUCATOR BELIEFS ABOUT EXPERTISE IN RABBINICS

For the second series of teacher interviews, the research team prompted the educators to participate in a think-aloud protocol that tasked them with naming and describing people they knew or knew of who were expert in rabbinics. The educators were very careful to distinguish between what constituted expertise in the field of rabbinics and the kinds of competencies they wished to instill in their students. Still an understanding of what educators imagine to be the ultimate markers of expertise in their field—the skills and content knowledge expertise entails—illuminates their own orientations to understanding rabbinics and approaches to teaching rabbinics in the classroom.

Overwhelmingly the teachers nominated experts who work in Jewish communal settings, be it a seminary, yeshiva, Jewish school, or other communal institution.

| TABLE 7 | |
|---|-------------|
| Nominated Experts by Professional Setting | |
| SETTING | NOMINATIONS |
| Yeshiva/seminary | 29 |
| (Secular) University | 7 |
| Jewish day school | 6 |
| Other adult Jewish educational setting | 7 |

(There was a notable discrepancy in terms of the gender of nominated experts. Male experts were named almost three times as often as female experts (38 vs 13). Female experts, when nominated, were more likely to be admired for creative approaches to understanding rabbinic texts. Male experts, when nominated, were more likely to be admired for their overall command of the corpus of Jewish canonical literature.)

Understanding Talmud: The Scope of the Web

All of the educators in this second round of teacher interviews, on some level, touched on one key feature of expertise—the capacity to draw connections between rabbinic texts and other literatures. One of the teachers called this the ability to put Talmud into a larger “web of understanding.”

One variation that emerged in the interviews was educator descriptions of the scope of that “web of understanding,” that is the way they imagined rabbinic texts could be brought into generative and meaningful conversation with other texts and disciplines. To illustrate the possible variability in educators’ approaches let’s contrast the webs of understanding that two educators: Nati³ and Shira, laid out in their interviews.

According to Nati, generally an expert is in rabbinics someone with the capacity to

take a text and think about the broader implications of the text. What kind of hashlachot (Heb. lit. implications) does that have to the modern world? How does that make me rethink Second Temple Judaism? How does that make me rethink what the rabbis were thinking about in the Mishna?... I think a person that has real expertise in something

3 All names are pseudonyms.

is that when they're learning something, they're thinking about why this matters... I'm thinking about, 'How does this matter? How does this affect larger theological issues? How does this affect political issues in Judaism? How does this relate to, I don't know, the narrative of Abraham and Sodom as well?' That is, a person who has expertise... (is) able to process a number of areas in Jewish thought at the same time...

For Nati, expertise means the capacity to make connections. But almost all of the connections Nati draws are with other points in Jewish textual tradition: Second Temple Judaism, Mishna, Tanakh, theology (the one exception, perhaps, is “political issues in Judaism” which might literally be about politics in the public arena but also might be about internal religious politics that explicitly rely on Jewish textual tradition). Nati offers us an expert web of connections, but it's a web with a very particular field of interest.

In contrast, Shira described her nominees for experts as making connections to a wider range of people and ideas. Shira told an illustrative example of an academic scholar she admired,

[Her approach is] creative... It's really using lots of different tools to use these texts to think about who the rabbis were. And to think about what... to essentially connect it to the larger question of, What is religion? What is Judaism? What is expression? And what are we going to make of these people and this text and these laws? So, What is law? She asks big questions and she uses the Talmud effectively to answer them.

Shira admires the vast scope of this web which covers not only the core knowledge and skills of her area but connects it to a wide-ranging and broad-based inquiry. Shira then named another expert she admired and described the reach of his web, “If it comes up [in the Talmud]—he's got to know about it. [That's] theoretically everything—agriculture, gold smelting, history, philology, astronomy, anything... literary tropes, law. There are so many different angles.”

As painted by Shira, the web of understanding that might be generated through the study of Talmud is seemingly limitless in its reach, possibly encompassing just about every human experience.

In our interviews we found that more educators offered pictures of expertise that comported with the web Nati outlined, than the webs Shira outlined. Generally, experts in rabbinics were people with a command of Jewish text and understanding of the mechanisms of Jewish legal decision-making process.

Nominated experts who teach or work in seminaries or institutions designed to serve the Jewish community are no less talented than experts who teach in a general university. However, they may be accustomed to addressing a different set of learners coming with different expectations for the kinds of questions an encounter with Talmud elicits. They may have fewer opportunities either to bring rabbinic texts into non-sectarian conversations or to frame rabbinics to speak to concerns beyond Jewish communal interests and practices.

Taken together, the educator interviews offer insight into common approaches to the teaching and learning of rabbinics found in Jewish day schools at the secondary level. Among the key findings are:

1. Day school educators see rabbinic texts as primarily a body of legal discussions that explore how a person should act.
2. The study of Talmud in Jewish communal day schools is primarily shaped by how that body of literature is taught in seminaries.
3. Day school educators believe their main objective as educators is to make the ethical decisions laid out in the text relevant to students by foregrounding contemporary applications.
4. Most teachers of rabbinic texts in day schools admire the expertise of those who teach Talmud in the seminary, yeshiva, and Jewish communal settings.

These observations, based on analysis of the educator interviews, help frame some of the findings we now share from the student interviews.

Student Understandings of Talmud

WHAT IS RABBINICS? STUDENT CHARACTERIZATIONS OF RABBINIC TEXTS

One of the first things we had to establish in the interviews was what students thought we meant by “rabbimics.” Some students recognized the term “rabbimics,” but many did not, and for most it was not their preferred term to use to categorize this body of literature. Most students who were initially unfamiliar with the term “rabbimics” were quickly able to substitute what they understood to be analogous terms to describe this category of literature. There were a variety of words students preferred to use in their interviews including: Talmud, Mishnah, Gemara, Oral Torah, and Torah she be’al Peh/Toshba (Heb. for Oral Torah, and its acronym). Almost all the students were able to talk about their understandings of the literature they saw as constituted by these terms. Most gravitated toward “Talmud.” The preferred vocabulary seemed to be largely school-dependent. Those who had attended an Orthodox day school before high school often preferred to use terminology that was used in their middle schools.

A minority of students could not seem to produce a differentiated category for rabbimics or rabbinic literature in the interviews. These students had a hard time isolating what we meant by rabbinic texts. In their interviews these students did not use language that demonstrated that they had a clear understanding of what texts made up the rabbinic corpus. They knew they had heard terms like Mishnah and Talmud before but weren’t entirely sure how to distinguish these from other Jewish texts they encountered in their Jewish studies classes. For example, Matt, a tenth grader in the advanced track, when asked if he recognized the terms Mishnah, Gemara or Talmud, knew they were familiar but couldn’t say what they were and where they fit in a larger body of Jewish literature. He explained,

I’m kind of forgetting, if I’m being honest, like all the different books and different stuff and kind of getting confused which one’s which. I don’t know.... I feel like the most important thing we would use is the Torah. I obviously know what that is. I think that [is] basically what I used the most or what we use the most. I know the most about which would be [Torah]. Stuff that we get from the Talmud, it’s not really like we talk about what the Talmud is. It’s more just using it and then saying, ‘Oh, it’s from the Talmud,’ which is probably why I don’t know the best way to explain it.

Matt struggles to identify texts in his Jewish studies class beyond the Torah. In his experience, Jewish studies is an encounter with texts as “stuff that we get,” but does not necessarily include understanding a context that produced those texts.

Within our sample, we did not observe that grade level or track (what we call in this report “advanced” or “standard”) was predictive of whether or not students had a category they could access that corresponded with the researchers’ ideas of rabbinics. Again, while in the minority, even students in upper grades were sometimes confused about what rabbinic literature was, and had difficulty accessing any genre-specific knowledge about rabbinic literature that they might have. This may be, in part, an artifact of the interview process which was not designed to show what students could *do* with rabbinic texts. Again, the study of Talmud in school is not unlike the study of other subjects in which students may struggle to consolidate their knowledge into a larger schema or framework.

Student Descriptions of Rabbinic Texts

In contrast to the few students who were unable to articulate an understanding of the category, most students we spoke to offered an account of rabbinic texts that included three key features:

1. That rabbinic texts are an interpretation of, and extension of, the Torah
2. That rabbinic texts concern the explication of Jewish law
3. That rabbinic texts consist of discussions that offer multiple perspectives or points of view.

Almost all students who recognized the category of rabbinics (although they may have called it Talmud or Tashba, etc.) offered the three components above in their explanations of the genre. Students generally reported these elements as key ideas they knew about Talmud, the materials it contains and its relationship to the Biblical text. Additionally, most explained the relationship between the Mishnah and Gemara.

“The Talmud is a compilation of thoughts by the Tannaitic and Amoraic rabbis. It’s the Mishna and then also the Gemara compiled together. So, it’s basically the thoughts and discussions between the rabbis that happened based on the Torah. And the halacha that’s based on that.”—Avital, 10th grade, advanced track

“The commentaries on the Torah and stuff like that. Like the Mishnah is law basically, and Talmud is Mishnah and Gemara together... [It’s] Jewish law, but in the context of different cases. It’s like situations, like you’re in a situation and the rabbis talk about it. Then, discuss what the right answer is.”—Sarah, 12th grade, advanced track

"It's all rabbis debating halakha... Basically there was an Oral Torah, which was eventually written down as the Mishna. And that was very condensed—as small as possible. And the rabbis got together and wrote a second document—I think it was Rabban Gamliel organized it, called the Gemara, which is basically the end-all-be-all of Jewish texts. They discuss pretty much every different kind of Jewish law and every different kind of Jewish practice. And those put together make up the Talmud."—Sam, 9th grade, Advanced Track

As the quotes above demonstrate, most students most were able offer a clear and succinct distillation of what the Talmud is and what it contains. The students bring different degrees of mastery of factual knowledge together in telling the story of what rabbinic texts are and what they are for. For example, in Avital's account she accurately uses the terms "Tannaitic" and "Amoraic" to distinguish between two periods in rabbinic literature. Sam, in his telling, inaccurately presents Rabban Gamliel as the codifier of the Gemara (perhaps confusing him with Yehuda haNasi, who is often attributed with codifying the Mishnah). But both Avital and Sam identify the same basic features of rabbinic literature: that it has a relationship to Torah, that it is concerned with Jewish law, and that it presents multiple rabbinic opinions. The students have absorbed these core ideas about an ancient and complex text.

Style of Rabbinic Texts

Most students saw rabbinic texts as *sui generis*, written in a unique style generally unlike any texts they encountered in other classes. They noted a few stylistic features of rabbinic texts that set them apart:

1. That they hold multiple viewpoints
2. That they are not organized in a linear fashion
3. That the reader has to do some degree of filling in to understand the plain meaning.

Some students drew lively and creative analogies between rabbinic texts and other forms of discourse, to emphasize exactly these features. Their descriptions of their experiences navigating the Talmud show their appreciation for what makes the Talmud distinctive from other texts.

"[Talmud is] like notes from a meeting. Not always very coherent. Or don't always make so much sense. Sometimes it's helpful [but they] get switched around in the middle where they switch languages all of a sudden. So, it's not the most organized..."—Abe, 12th grade, standard track

“It’s definitely not just like a book that you can read and follow, because you’re gonna have so many different opinions on each little sentence that’s written. Usually books... I mean, even books that seem to have multiple narrators or from points of view from multiple different characters, you still can follow which character is speaking at which point. You’re supposed to. It’s supposed to be clear-cut, but the Talmud isn’t like that. If you’re gonna study a page you really have to be all in, in focusing and trying to piece together who’s who.”—Yael, 12th grade, Advanced Track

“If I had to describe the style [of Talmud], I’d probably have to use the term ‘shakla v’tarya’—it’s a give and take... It’s sort of like you’re witnessing a debate club meeting or something like that. It’s ‘here’s our evidence’, ‘here’s our evidence.’ ‘I disagree with you for that.’ ‘Well, that’. And then this and that. And going back and forth...”—Saul, 9th grade, advanced track

How is Rabbinics Learned?: Student Conceptions of Learning Rabbinics

DAY SCHOOL STUDENTS' CONCEPTIONS OF THE STUDY OF TALMUD

Students offered three major categories that constituted approaches to understanding rabbinic texts:

1. Translation and decoding of syntax,
2. Following the logic of the argument, and
3. Making meaning.

Translating and Decoding Syntax

Students in the advanced track encountered the text in their original languages. Students in the standard track were often provided with an English translation. For many of the advanced track students, the work of understanding rabbinic texts in school was primarily an exercise in translation to determine a plain meaning of the text. They described most class periods as being focused on working on translating from Hebrew and Aramaic into English, as well as determining syntax to come up with a reasonably coherent translation. Students in the advanced track explained that translating and adding syntax were both key elements necessary to understanding the plain meaning of the text. This was the most time-consuming piece of accessing the text, taking up a great deal of class time and instructional focus. Sometimes this work was done individually, sometimes with a partner (*hevruta*) or in a small group, and sometimes as a whole class directed by the teacher. This work of translation might be aided by specialized dictionaries, online resources, help from more knowledgeable students, or teacher intervention. Once this work of translation had been accomplished, a simple understanding of the text could be achieved.

Abe, a 12th grader, reflected on the process of uncovering the plain meaning of the text. For him the process induced a kind of meditative flow experience as he became completely absorbed in working through a sugya.

[Studying Talmud is] a way to relax myself and kind of re-center in a way. Especially when it doesn't have anything to do with (class?) or school and it's just to understand and answer a question. And to strengthen my values....You just kind of forget about the other things in life and all of your to-do lists, and you just get in there and, kind of, decoding and taking apart a sugya or a daf and then I'm not thinking about all of the upcoming assignments or things I have to get done... It can be so engulfing that I just don't think about anything else.

Abe was amongst the most enthusiastic of the students we interviewed about the study of Talmud. In contrast to Abe's experience, a common theme which surfaced in the interviews was a desire for less of an emphasis on working the text for plain meaning and more focus on other elements of deeper understanding. According to the students, understanding Talmud in their school seemed to be about understanding the plain meaning of the text, but they, as learners, wanted understanding to mean *more* than that. We will address what kinds of understandings students index as "meaningful" later in the report.

"I have a hevruta, I have a partner that we work together usually. And then we are both familiar with Hebrew, so we translate a bunch of it ourselves. We'll use Jastrow as a source. And if we really don't understand we'll ask the teacher. We'll look up some sort of definition online... When we study Talmud, as I said we're not really studying the meaning, we're more just studying tediously or just text based."—Batya, 9th grade, advanced track

"[To understand Talmud] you need to be able to fill in ideas and words because a lot of the time it's not really full ideas or full sentences that way you would speak... We also did punctuation a lot... "Oh, this is a question, this us an exclamation, this is just a sentence and it ends here so this idea must mean... whatever."—Yael, 12th grade, advanced track

"With the text, we mostly just translate it. We go over it for understanding. What is the actual 'din' on this? Is it 'chayav' or 'patur'? Who is 'chayav', who is 'patur' kind of stuff? But it's really mostly translation. Not even us translating. Just hearing the translation and trying to understand how the argument works."—Naomi, 10th grade, advanced track

Following the Logic of the Argument

Many students in the advanced track, while acknowledging that most of class was spent in translation, saw translation as a preliminary step toward understanding the argument. Students often found this a more rewarding and worthwhile enterprise than the work of translation and adding syntax. Several mentioned this as an endeavor that gave them insight into rabbinic thinking and even influenced their own way of approaching arguments in other contexts (we will return to this later). Understanding the argument included:

1. Identifying the question or problem the text was addressing
2. Distinguishing the pieces of text that represented different points of view and locating where these points of view came from
3. Recognizing the kind of evidence or argument implemented by different points of view

4. Tracing the conversation as it moved from point to point
5. Determining what, if any, decision was reached.

“A lot of what we do in [class] is figure out where are the amoraim, where the beraitas are and then the stam gemara and all the different components that go into it... We’re trying to identify what part of the Gemara they are so that we can understand it better from their point of view. And where they’re bringing it from... Maybe you can understand it better and see the argument that they are having.”—Abe, 12th grade, advanced track

“I think first and foremost [students] need to know how to parse the arguments. How to understand the back and forth. And understand that it is a back and forth and that it’s not just one guy who’s saying all of this. When you can get a translation and when you can parse the arguments like that, I think it’s fairly straightforward to have a basic understanding of what the text is saying... I need to look for the contradiction first. When the argument changes from having one statement to having the question and sometimes that’s when he reads the vocalization so then you can be like “Oh, that’s a question there contradicting it.” And sometimes that has to do with specific words that signify that it’s a question or a contradiction or that they’re bringing in a new beraita to contradict it. And there are certain words or signals that the arguments shifting. And then you can sort of track it with those words.”—Naomi, 10th grade, advanced track

“You have the first statement in the mishnah and there could be a contradiction from somewhere else like another Tanna said something that’s contradictory to it. Or there’s a beraita that’s contradictory to it. Then the back and forth is just trying to make sense of it so you might say one thing about the beraita... But there’s something about the beraita that’s this and that. And then the back and forth is just trying to see how can we explain that the contradiction isn’t a contradiction. So, the back and forth is a way of really trying to get to the purest, most logical answer.”—Saul, 9th grade, advanced track

The quotes above demonstrate what many Jewish day school students in the advance track believe are key tasks in working to understand Talmud, as well as their awareness of signals they look for to guide them in the process. Students in the standard track did not discuss the process of tracing the argument as part of understanding rabbinic text. Nor did students who did not have a differentiated conceptual category for unpacking rabbinic texts as distinct from other Jewish texts. They focused on themes in the texts instead.

Making Meaning

One theme that emerged from the interviews related to student beliefs in the capacity of Talmud study to generate meaning. Students reflected on the degree to which they saw studying rabbinic texts as a process of making meaning, as an opportunity to reflect on existential questions and the human experience generally. The students who saw rabbinic texts as generating insight into these kinds of concerns were mostly in the “standard” Jewish studies track. In these classes English translations of rabbinic texts were often provided to students. As recounted by these students, they spent relatively little instructional time on translation or parsing the argument. Class time focused instead on group discussion about themes in the text and featured activities for learning focused on textual interpretation and generating personal responses to the text they were studying.

For example, Barry, an 11th grader in the standard Jewish Studies track, believed that even rabbinic texts that seemed obscure could be read as a metaphor and generate important meaning. He explained,

There was this text about a donkey and giving it a feedbag. Part of me was just like ‘What? Why even talk about this?’ And then I looked at it and I was like ‘Maybe there’s a deeper meaning. Maybe giving a donkey a feedbag is more like giving... Because donkeys have to, like... torture all day in the sun, walk around, do all this. Maybe it’s like giving somebody who’s suffering some comfort.’ So, on that note, there are a lot of texts that on the surface might appear kind of strange and random, but actually have deeper meanings. It seems that there are a lot of those in the Talmud. I haven’t studied a lot of Talmud. I don’t know all of the text, but that’s what I’ve seen so far.

Barry doesn’t imagine himself as expert in Talmud. In the statement above he describes a process in which at first he is confused by the text. Rather than being put-off or dismissing the text, Barry moves forward in trying to interpret it. This willingness to take another look at the text is based on a belief he has that the seemingly “strange and random” text is likely to lend itself to generating insight that is applicable or generalizable beyond the technical case of the donkey itself. From the text about the donkey Barry extracts meaning related to how we offer comfort to those who suffer.

Maddie, an 11th grader who is also in the standard Jewish studies track, described a process by which the study of rabbinic texts is animated by some overarching question. The plain meaning of the text is a jumping-off point from which students could try and look for deeper implications. They may consult the original Hebrew, or they may not. Maddie explained,

And the unit question is: 'Why do people suffer?' or 'Why do good things happen to bad people?' or things along those lines... [our class will] just really figure out the deeper meaning behind [the text], and that's what we do in a lot of classes.

According to Maddie the study of rabbinic texts in her classroom is framed around enduring questions about the human experience. She sees the discovery of “deeper meaning” in the text as a primary activity in Talmud class.

Willow, an 11th grader in the standard track, claimed that she elected to not be in the advanced track in her high school even though she was eligible to enroll. She expressly chose not to take the advanced course because she didn't like the translation-based approach to text she believed she would find there. She explained,

[My class in 9th grade] was not beit midrash, which means the texts that we look at are translated. I really liked that class... not to have to worry about translating texts because that was one thing that I despised about my Toshba class in middle school... It felt so disjointed. We basically translated word for word the texts and explaining them into English. It took so much time and we ended up going through the dictionary that was meant for translating the Toshba that we were given. It would just take hours of my time to go through that and translate word for word these sentences, and then you'd end up with something that sounds ridiculous, like it made no sense until my teacher explained it and rephrased the entire thing, which wasn't instinctive.

Willow remembered her middle school study of rabbinic texts as being primarily focused on translation, and unsatisfying translation at that. She far preferred the courses she took in her high school's standard track in which the texts are presented in English.

Students who reflected on the study of Talmud as a process of textual interpretation and generating personal meaning tended to be in the standard track. Students in this track, who may have had the least sophistication in their mastery of Talmudic material by the standards of competency with skill sets including translation, grammar, and capacity to link Talmudic passages to other classical Jewish text, were often the most satisfied with their experience of studying Talmud. This satisfaction was related to the sense they had that they were generating meaning in class. This suggests that although the two tracks were generally distinguished by the teachers and students in terms of their emphasis on skills related to translation and decoding, there may be another set of skills related to learning Talmud, related to textual interpretation and meaning-making. These interpretive skills may be more richly developed in the “standard” track.

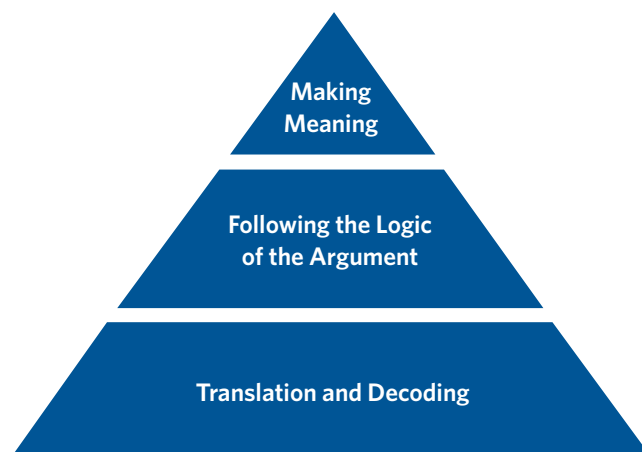
Why Learn Rabbinics?

Student Orientations to Understanding Rabbinics

ARE SOME FORMS OF UNDERSTANDING BETTER THAN OTHERS?

This report does *not* offer a hierarchical assessment of understanding rabbinics, as different educators and communities will want to emphasize different kinds of understanding depending on their own goals for their students. Still, a common theme found across the schools is that students expressed their *own* ideas of a hierarchy of understanding. That is, the students came to the interviews with some implicit sense that there were multiple types of understanding and the belief that some kinds of understanding were more valuable than others. For the students, meaning-making, while not always achieved, often occupied the highest level of understanding. The chart below shows the relationship between the levels as reported by students. It also captures student beliefs about the frequency of encountering said understandings in the classroom.

Chart 1. Students' Hierarchical Assessment of Understanding Rabbinics



The hierarchy presented above is in part a reflection of the fact that students came to their Talmud classrooms having already formulated some ideas of what makes study worthwhile. The modes of understanding Talmud presented in class did not always meet students' own implicit criteria for what text study should accomplish for the learner. These expectations included beliefs about text study as shining a lens on the human experience and the nature of existence, text study as a source of

insight into sacred meaning, text study as a generating insight into one's self and relationships, and text study as conferring some kind of currency, credentialing, or skill of value in the marketplace and adult world.

SEEKING A MEANINGFUL PICTURE

A key theme that emerged in this study is that students often offered a distinction between the understanding that they developed in their class, on the one hand, and what they thought would signify *true* understanding of Talmud on the other. Understandings that addressed only the plain meaning of the text and following the argument often left the learner disappointed.

Certainly, some students in the advanced track found the ongoing classroom analysis of text satisfying, but these students were in the minority. Many more students offered a critique of the limits of understanding generated in their Talmud classrooms.

Avital, a 10th grader, wants to get more meaning from studying Talmud, but she is not entirely sure if it is possible.

I think it's really important [to try and relate the text to our everyday lives]—the way that we're doing it feels a little forced. There could be so much more meaning that I could derive... maybe there can't be. I don't know. But, I feel like I could get more out of it than just the basic understanding of it. How much can you learn or derive from your vessel being dropped in the public domain? But I want there to be something underlying that I can relate... I want the big picture. I feel like we should have more...

Avital seeks “the big picture” and her study of Talmud can leave her frustrated. For her the “big picture” means that there needs to be some wider scope beyond “basic understanding.”

David, an 11th grader in the advanced track, contrasted how he and his classmates read texts in his English class and in his Talmud class,

*We read things in beit midrash. But then in English, we also like are supposed to have our own interpretations... I guess in beit midrash, we never really did anything like that. Maybe in the way we actually looked at texts, it's like the **least** similar to English... I feel like in beit midrash that we would translate for like no purpose. There was no end goal in the translation. It was literally like the translation and then moving on to the next piece [of] text. There wasn't actually like an end that we were supposed to reach. I guess the end was just like finishing the translation.*

David has difficulty seeing what larger understanding or insight this translation work was helping him develop. Importantly he draws on his experience of reading texts in English class to set the criteria for what kinds of insights reading sacred text should generate. He sees Talmud class as focused on generating translations and English class as focused on generating interpretations.

Relatedly, some students in the advanced track were ambivalent about rabbinic texts as a source of personal meaning. They almost all saw rabbinic text as *important* and even necessary—they believed that one needed to understand rabbinic texts in order to understand Judaism and Jewish practice, both of which they were generally quite committed to—but they struggled with whether these same texts could also be *meaningful*. They questioned whether the text was *capable* of producing such meaning.

Several students compared the study of Talmud to the study of Tanakh.

Naomi offered,

Talmud, because I think of it mostly as laws, I don't think that there's a morality that's entrenched in it, versus the Tanakh, which is stories, and which has characters and has a deeper meaning to me. In the same way as some English books would, but more so because it's the Tanakh... To have a greater understanding [of Talmud]? It's hard for me to know because I've never really tried to have a greater understanding. I'm not even sure really what a greater understanding of the Talmud would be, besides knowing what it says. But, for basic stuff—just a translation and knowing who says what, knowing how the argument proceeds.

Naomi questions whether the Talmud, comprised of so many legal discussions fundamentally cannot be as meaningful as the narratives found in Tanakh. She posits that Talmud may only lend itself to what she deems “basic” understanding: translation, syntax, and the tracing of the argument, but *not* “deeper meaning.” Notably, her paradigms (Tanakh as narrative and Talmud as law) ignore both the non-narrative elements in Tanakh and the non-legal elements in Talmud.

Batya, a 9th grader, also compared her study of Talmud to the study of Tanakh, but she believes that Talmud could be studied differently to generate meaning,

When I study Tanakh, I think, there's a sense it's easier. I think it's more straightforward. And when I'm studying [Tanakh], I'm more focusing on the content and the real meaning behind it than worrying about translating it or figuring out the patterns or the formatting. [In Tanakh] I'm not really focusing on just the words, but I'm focusing on the meaning... I like to focus on the meaning more. But in [Talmud] class we really focus more on the words. But, when you're focusing on the words, it's more just working on translating it—and what it literally means.

In the quotes above students use terms like “big picture,” “real meaning,” and “deeper meaning” to express beliefs they have about the kinds of understandings the study of Talmud *should* generate. This interest in “meaning” is different than the plain meaning (*pshat*) of the text or even the “relevance” their teachers often emphasized. The concept of “meaning” for students was often related to larger lessons and enduring insights garnered from the text.

For example David, quoted above, was asked by the interviewer to explain how exactly text study was different in Talmud class and English class. He explained,

[In English] we would discuss [the texts] and understand the meaning behind it... we would talk about just like all of humanity, like how do these things apply for humanity? Like, how is this one situation like a microcosm for like human experience or things like that. That's something that would never come up into actual text of the Gemara that we talk about [in class].

Often students looked to experiences interpreting texts in other classrooms to frame their search for “deeper meanings” in Talmud. Here David shares his expectation that text study will include class discussion that interprets the material through the lens of a universal human experience. These student critiques reveal a shared desire for the study of Talmud to engage them in alternative forms of interpretation and analysis, and an investment they have in finding intellectual and personal satisfaction in their study of Jewish texts.

STUDENT COMPARISONS BETWEEN STUDYING RABBINICS AND OTHER SCHOOL SUBJECTS

In their interviews students reflected on their study of Talmud in their classroom and how this classroom activity related to other institutions in which they were embedded, including: the larger school and its subjects, their families, the Jewish communities they were part of now, Western narratives of the relationship between literature and the human experience, beliefs about the nature of sacred texts and the reader experiences such texts should induce, and the imagined adult communities of practice they were preparing to enter.

Pamela Grossman (1991), in her study of English teachers, argued that teachers operate using orientations to literature which offer “a basic organizing framework for knowledge about literature” (1991, p. 248). Holtz (2003) adapted Grossman’s approach to create a list of orientations for the teaching of *Bible*. Levisohn (2010, 2016) later extended this to the teaching of *rabbinic literature*. Notably these two lists, one for Bible and one for rabbinics, overlap but do not match. Both Holtz’s

and Levisohn’s approaches focus on processes for uncovering what the texts mean within their own disciplinary and religious cultures of interpretation. Each category of texts is best read and understood on its own distinct terms.

Students, when reflecting on their study of Talmud, drew comparisons to how rabbinic texts were read and understood as compared to other texts they encountered in other school subjects. Often students expressed a preference for the interpretive norms they had imbued for the study of other texts in other classrooms. This suggests that students bring expectations to their Talmud study that they have developed in their study of other (usually) classical text and that shape their investments in that learning. Students have ideas about what the study of Talmud should be like, in particular the kinds of meanings it should produce, based on disciplinary norms developed in other subjects.

In the interviews, students, unprompted, often compared Talmud and the processes of learning Talmud in the classroom to other texts and pedagogies they encountered in school. The research team also asked explicitly asked students to draw comparisons between the study of Talmud and the study of other subjects in school. Students most frequently offered that the process of studying Talmud was most like the process of studying texts in English or history. They explained that Talmud, like English and history were text-centered classes. They also often made comparisons between studying Talmud and studying Tanakh. For most students Talmud was least like math class.

TABLE 8

Student Comparisons of Rabbis to Other School Subjects

| SCHOOL SUBJECTS MOST LIKE RABBINICS | SCHOOL SUBJECTS LEAST LIKE RABBINICS |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| English (14) | Math (12) |
| History (10) | Sciences (10) |
| Foreign Language (5) | Foreign Language (2) |
| Chemistry (1) | History (1) |
| Math (1) | |
| Tanakh (1) | |

* Some students offered more than one response to the prompt. Some students did not respond to the prompt.

Noa, a 10th grader in the advanced track, compared the process of understanding rabbinic texts with the process of understanding math.

I think [understanding rabbinics is] the opposite of math, because [in math] everything's set out. And there's not underlying things. There's not an opposite opinion of how to do math because there's one way to do it... I think in math, it's like, 'This is the rule, this is how you do it.' And then when you go to a text of Gemara, it's like 'This is the Gemara, we can read it and try to understand it and there's a lot of different opinions coming from a lot of different places trying to prove the same thing.' Which is different than one way to prove one thing.

In comparing Talmud to math, Noa singles out features that she believes are core to each discipline. While math, for Noa, is about following a rule and arriving at the one correct answer, rabbinics is about coming to understand multiple perspectives. It's worth noting that a mathematician might not approve of Noa's assessment of the discipline of math. This helps remind us that students' understandings are shaped by the activities they do in the classroom and their own interpretation of such activities. They do not always reflect the disciplinary practices and understandings of experts.

This finding, that students believe the study of Talmud is analogous to the way they study historical and literary texts, can elucidate how students evaluate their understanding of Talmud. That is, they often import markers of understanding from English, history, or Tanakh class, and use those as benchmarks against which they measure their own understanding of Talmud. Students may not have a sense of subject-specific benchmarks for the study of Talmud nor have a grasp of how understanding of Talmud might be assessed by a different set of interpretive norms.

ARE THERE COMMUNITIES OF MEANING AROUND TALMUD?

In reflecting on their study of Talmud in school, students also offered insight into their beliefs about how Talmud figured in the world of adults in their current communities, as well as adults in communities they hoped to enter one day.

Eitan, a 9th grader, had switched to his liberal Jewish day school from a centrist Orthodox day school. As a student in his previous school he had been exposed to a world in which Talmud study was valorized. His description of the place of Talmud captured the tension between, on the one hand, its theoretically respected status and, on the other hand, the way it rarely figured in American Jewish life outside of particular Orthodox communities.

Eitan offered that Talmud was “a smart book by smart people” but he also observed that it was little attended to outside a particular sphere. He explained,

[Talmud is] a very important thing to learn and understand, but... very few people ... have the time for it.... At [my centrist Orthodox day school], a lot of my friends would just spend time, every single day, two to three hours a night and just go and learn pieces of the Talmud. My dad is a [high status professional] and he's [at work] a lot of times. My mom doesn't really know Hebrew. I never really went home and learned Talmud with anyone. Most of my Talmud studies is from in class and in school.

As Eitan sees it, Talmud is important, yet in his family no one makes the time for it. Eitan is in many ways exceptional in that he has had exposure to a world in which Talmud study was held in high esteem. For many students Talmud did not exist outside the walls of school.

In many non-Orthodox communities familiarity with the Talmud is neither generally assumed nor necessary for full communal participation. This was reflected in the lives of students. Even those who reported that their families were highly engaged in Jewish life (including parents who were rabbis and Jewish professionals) noted the absence of Talmud in the adult communities they were familiar with.

Batya, the daughter of two Jewish professionals, compared the presence of Talmud to that of Torah in her life. She observed, “I study Torah every week in synagogue when I’m reading the *parasha*. And that’s kind of just something that happens. [Whereas] Talmud, I’m not really in contact with Talmud as often. Except in school...” Batya recognized that Torah was a regular and essential part of her religious community’s ritual life. The reading of the weekly portion formed a core element of her synagogue community’s practice, it was “just something that happens”—a regularity. Talmud, as far as she could see, existed only in school. While Talmud may have shaped her community’s contemporary ritual observance it is largely invisible to her (and perhaps others) in its ongoing practices. She did not note for example, the role of the Talmud in the development of the liturgy and Shabbat practices.

In theory, school exists to prepare children for adult life. But not every subject or skill maps well on to the content knowledge and capacities most adults need to make their way as productive citizens in the world. Talmud is not the only subject that students think they will never use outside of high school. A student may believe strongly that they will never use the principles of trigonometry outside of his high school math class. Still, having passed trigonometry in high school is valuable to students because it signals to colleges that they are high academic achievers.

Students often see the study of Talmud as taught in Jewish day schools as a competency for which there is no currency attached in the world outside of school.

Students received the message that Talmud is something to be transmitted and held onto, but they aren't necessarily clear on what they are supposed to do with it in the adult world. The students know that Talmud is, in some ways high status, "a smart book." Further they understand that Talmud is canonical—it has important historical value and has been held in high esteem as the purview of educated male elites across the centuries.

Allstar,⁴ a 10th grader, noted that, while he may not *like* the subject of history, he could appreciate that basic knowledge of history might be expected of him as an adult. He said, "If I'm in college or someone brings up like a date from the 1800s, I'll be like, 'Oh, I remember learning that.' But I'm not going to be just hanging out with people and someone mentions some random Talmud situation." Notably Allstar is not concerned with how the study of Talmud might help him in the college admission process. Here he thinks about how it might be part of his college social experience and the kinds of people he will want to be in conversation with. He does not see how Talmud will help him communicate with the more diverse set of peers he expects to meet in college.

Sarah, a 12th grader preparing to begin college, saw that Talmud could be important in some *intra*-Jewish conversation. Knowledge of Talmud could provide a common language, but only for speaking with a limited audience. She explained, "[Talmud is] important, but if I'm in a community of Jews that have enough knowledge that I can discuss aspects of Judaism. Whereas on the other hand, in the real world, I'm not going to be with Jews all the time... It's not going to be like that in the real world." To Sarah, Talmud won't be useful once she leaves school for the "real world," a world in which Jewish interests and ideas are not central. Sarah notes that as an adult she may find discussion partners in other Jews, but not within the general "community of Jews" as a whole, and that population must be further qualified. To find discussion partners for a conversation around Talmud would require that the other Jews be educated enough to hold up their end of the conversation. The study of Talmud allows one to enter in conversation only with a minority within a minority: with other Jews who have attended Jewish day school or seminary. Beyond that population American Jews are unlikely to have "enough knowledge" to be conversation partners.

Even students who report they find Talmud interesting find it difficult to imagine it playing a role in their life in the future. Brandon, an 11th grader, explains that Jewish studies is "somewhat interesting." But he rates it "near the bottom" in importance compared to other subjects he studied in school. He explained "It's not that what

4 Students were invited to choose their own pseudonyms, as Allstar did.

I'm learning is not important, it's just the way I'll utilize it later may not be the most useful." Brandon is too respectful of Talmud and his Jewish learning to be entirely dismissive, but from his perspective Talmud has limited utility.

These interviews suggest that Jewish day school high school students believe that an important determinant of the worth of a subject is the degree to which they anticipate the likelihood of finding conversation partners to engage with around the material. In part it may be determined by (cynical) calculations about utility and conferred status, but it's also a powerful observation that Talmud does not seem to be part of the repertoire of competencies required for adult participation in Jewish communal or American civic life. Non-Orthodox Jewish adults have not successfully demonstrated to many of the teens interviewed in this study how the study of Talmud features in their communities' shared intellectual values. Teens observe that, in the worlds in which they circulate (or wish to circulate) Talmud may be esteemed but is also simultaneously ignored or irrelevant.

STUDENT BELIEFS ABOUT THE BENEFITS OF TALMUD STUDY

While the students in our sample often expressed disappointment that the study of rabbinic texts did not help them generate personal meaning, they also expressed an appreciation for the insights they gained into rabbinic thought processes and argumentation. One common theme in the interviews was the idea that the study of Talmud could generalize to more global skills like logical thinking and debating.

"[Rabbinics has shaped me] probably just in the way that logic gets carried out in the Gemara. That's just the thing that I find the most fascinating out of all of it. It's just the way that the Gemara builds its arguments. The way that the rabbis looked at the world, and looked at the Torah particularly.... Also learning how they had their discourse. How they argued that. How they disputed that. How they debated. That's really helpful for learning more logical thinking and learning more about debating.

—Saul, 9th grade, advanced track

"[Studying Talmud] shaped how I think about arguments a lot... You think about arguments in a different way. You think about debates in a different way once you've learned Talmud. And that's just how it is... There are enough opinions in the Talmud that you kind of get a chance to see an argument looked at in every single way. You get a chance to see something interpreted in so many different ways. And it kind of normalizes its creativity in terms of interpreting rules or interpreting instructions. That I don't think people who didn't study Talmud or haven't studied at all, I think are missing out on. And there's a reason why... I think it was Korean schools teach Talmud. Not in a Jewish context. But in a context of learning arguments."—Sam, 9th grade, advanced track

Some students distinguished between understanding the content of Talmud, which they believed had limited transferable value, and understanding the rhetoric of Talmud, which they believed had potential transferable value.

While many students found Talmud to be a very particularistic conversation, so particular it didn't have much to say to them, much less to the larger world, they also felt it had potential to sharpen their cognitive capacities in a way that students valued. Allstar explained,

I think most of [texts] like don't really apply to me... Like, oh, if you find a lost item and this happens, what do you do if it has a sign on it? Or rather like if you're in a public domain and you drop a vase or a jar or something of wine or honey, I remember that's something learning. I don't know, they seem like they don't really apply to me. They just seem, I guess, very situational, very specific.

But Allstar does think that he has gained cognitive skills that he values through his engagement with Talmud. Allstar believes that he is more rational and has better argumentation skills (more effective and also more reasonable) because of Talmud study: "I think it's definitely made me like, maybe a bit of a more rational person. Like before, like I guess when I was younger I'd just be like, oh we're going to do this because why not? But now, after seeing Talmud, it sort of just gets you to understand like, what's the most reasonable and best way to go about this?"

Ezra reflected on whether Talmud was relevant to his life. He decided that the content was not particularly important to him and not of any practical value in terms of how he imagined his life trajectory, but the logic could have some utility. He explained,

I think maybe practically in my life [I would rank Talmud] on the lower end. I don't see myself going into a field... I don't see myself going into Jewish education or anything like that, or I don't see myself becoming a rabbi, but I do think that there's a value in learning how to think and analyze texts or proofs the way that we learned to do in Talmud, so I think that's useful for life, but practically I don't see it really playing out.

Ezra believes that the content of Talmud is not relevant unless he plans on being a rabbi or Jewish educator, but he imagines the schema for analyzing arguments he has acquired through his study of Talmud has utility.

Mara offered also made a distinction between content and schema for argumentation, although she found both important,

I think to being a Jew and understanding the legal system and understanding the values system and understanding what the laws are—very important. I think necessarily being

a human being—it's also important to be able to have that kind of logic. And I think that it definitely helped me think in a different way than some of my friends do necessarily because it's... again it's very logical and it requires you to use skills you don't necessarily build up in other subjects.

Mara distinguishes between the elements of her Talmud education that are interesting for an intra-Jewish conversation: what Jews do, why Jews do those things, what are Jewish values, etc. But she isolates the logic of rabbinic argumentation as the sole element that might have more universal application.

According to day school students, if Talmud produces knowledge that has universal appeal, it's the forms of rabbinic logic that can be applied elsewhere. There seems to be a shared belief that the skills they learn in Talmud could be generalizable to other kinds of settings. Whether the study of Talmud in the day school classroom does indeed advance the development of skills in logic and rhetoric is unknown. However, day school students seem to value this as a possible outcome of their studies.

Reflections

RESPECTFUL CARETAKERS: ON MEANING, RELEVANCE, AND IMPORTANCE

In explaining their attitudes towards the study of rabbinics in school, students used several categories by which they assessed their relationship with the subject matter. We have already touched on the concept of *meaning*, and the degree to which students assessed their engagement with Talmud through their sense of its capacity to produce deeper meaning. In this section we further tease out some of the differences for students between the concepts of *meaning*, *relevance*, and *importance*, to reflect on the relationship students have to the study of rabbinic texts.

The obscurity of the topics in rabbinic texts was often a challenge for students. Willow, an 11th grader in the standard track, explained,

A lot of the randomness and the... I don't know. For example, there are texts on what happens when a garment, there's a dispute over the garment, and that feels like I don't necessarily need that guidance. I think there are other ways to deal with it and I feel like that kind of problem isn't necessarily as present today. I don't know. I don't generally have disputes over a garment with people.

Here Willow uses the word “random” to mean that the cases themselves involve unfamiliar situations that she cannot imagine herself in, a feature of Talmud that she finds off-putting. She argues that a dispute over a garment has very little relationship to her own life. Notably, Willow does not take the example of the garment and extract some kind of larger lesson or principle. She is not able to take the text and apply it to other settings, including those she might find herself in.

David, an 11th grader in the advanced track, was more dismissive. He explained,

For like an actual experience of mine, I've never actually pulled on the Gemara to help me or pull on what I learned there to apply to any situation... I know we learned things. There were a couple of times where we learned things that were, I guess had some value to them, and they talked about ethics and stuff. I remember in 9th or 10th grade, we learned about how you should always pick up your enemies, like [a] donkey that fell off to the side of the road, and I guess like from that, you can talk about the value of being nice to your enemy, even though you hate him, but besides that, and these are things that I already have learned and have valued before my time learning it in Beit Midrash class, so honestly, I don't really know of any actual things that I've learned from Gemara for the first time that have actually affected me in a very impactful or positive way in my life.

David does not always see his own life reflected in the Talmud. He struggles to make a connection between the cases he learns in Talmud class and events in his day-to-day experience. Despite an interest the educators expressed in communicating the *relevance* of the text, by which they mean the capacity of the text to aid ethical decision through application to contemporary situations, students often were unable to make the leap from the specifics of the case in a sugya to their own experiences. In his quote David does hone in on a time he remembers the class discussion addressing “ethics,” a framework he appreciates, but he doesn’t seem to make a leap to considering how the values addressed in that class might also be relevant to his life.

When students were dismissive of Talmud study as an enterprise, they often gave as examples texts that referenced animals. We heard about donkeys, oxen and sheep. Students sometimes used these animal examples as a shorthand to highlight the tremendous gulf between the world of the Talmud and their own life. Students don’t see themselves as living in a milieu in which the care of working animals matters. Students generally did not see texts that highlighted elements of life in a long-gone world as an invitation to think about the human experience in centuries past, in part perhaps because their teachers did not foreground historical or cultural understanding. Nor did they seem to extract perennial principles from these scenarios set in the classical world. Instead many students believed these markers of the ancient world signaled obsolescence.

Yael, a 12th grader in the advanced track, explains that she did not find the rabbinic texts she encountered in school particularly *relevant*, that is, she did not imagine ever finding herself in a situation similar to that in the text, but she thought that this might be an artifact of the design of the curriculum. She believed the teachers chose texts that would give greatest insight into how rabbinic thinking operated, instead of those that would be relevant to their students’ lives.

[We] were more learning about how to understand to the Talmud, so we learned about things breaking in the public domain or if you have an ox and it falls into a hole or if you built a fence and there are thorns in it, things that people don’t really do anymore, but it showed clear outlines of like how the Talmud is written. And it allowed us to be able to learn how to read Talmud. So, it wasn’t really... I think that was the big problem too, that people didn’t feel like taking those classes seriously because it was things that don’t seem really relevant to us anymore.

According to Yael the concept of relevance indexed whether or not a scenario was seen as directly applicable to a student’s day-to-day experience or accurately represented the kinds of situations a student might want assistance navigating in life. Theoretically the scenarios these students studied in their classes touched on larger

principles that could relate to the everyday lives and experiences of students—but often students did not see the text that way. In conducting the interviews, I often wanted to jump in when a student dismissed a scenario as incongruous with the modern world to point out all the ways it might apply to contemporary issues. It does seem that there may be a disconnect between how educators draw connections between scenarios in the texts and present times, and how their students are able to do so.

For many of the students interviewed, however, whether or not Talmud was personally *meaningful* (helping them reflect on enduring questions of life or human relationships) or personally *relevant* (representing situations in which they found themselves), it was still *important*. This distinction is interesting. Most students who participated in the interviews were highly committed to Jewish life and Jewish studies. They often believed that it was important to study rabbinic texts to understand their own contemporary Jewish practice as well as Judaism and the Jewish experience writ large. Some believed that through the study of rabbinic text, one absorbed Jewish values and how to lead a good life.

We asked students to rate their high school classes in terms of how interesting and how important they thought the classes were. Overall students gave rabbinics higher scores on *importance* than on *interest*. Over a third of the students claimed that Talmud was the least or among the least interesting subjects they studied in school. Fewer were willing to say rabbinics wasn't important. They were more comfortable making the claim: Talmud is not interesting, than the claim: Talmud is not important. In the former case (e.g. Talmud is not interesting) their attitudes towards Talmud could be framed as a personal, subjective perspective. The later claim (Talmud is not important) might seem more of a statement of objective worth. So even though, from a student's perspective, rabbinics might not generate the personal meaning and relevance they sometimes desired—insight in to their relationships, themselves, their sense of purpose in the world, addressing the challenges they experienced, etc.—many still valued it as an enterprise. Through the study of rabbinics, they could understand their Jewish practice (which was linked to but different from their personal relationships and interior life). They wanted to lead Jewish lives and they understood that the Talmud had a connection to shaping what a Jewish life was.

"I care about Talmud. Talmud is important to me."—Avital, 10th grade, advanced track

"It's sort of learning how to live life and how to conduct life in the right Jewish way. And so it's important to know that. And to some extent Rabbinics is important to learn to connect with Judaism as a whole and to really understand the heritage and understand why we do what we do."—Naomi, 10th grade, advanced track

“It explains the practices that we do... Why do I keep Shabbat? Why do I keep kosher? Things like that. You can get a pretty good explanation.”

—Noa, 10th grade, advanced track

“Rabbinical texts help to guide the way that you live.”—Maddie, 11th grade, Standard track

“Last year in Talmud we studied Masechet Pesachim. And so, it was about ‘shinui makom’. And then I realized that’s why we all end up saying kiddush at the same room where we eat. And even though at my shul they say kiddush from the bima and everyone else does it to themselves in the room where we have Kiddush.”

—Abe, 12th grade, advanced track

The majority of students interviewed understood the historic importance of Talmud as a foundational text in Judaism. They felt a strong commitment to that project. Yet the students we interviewed often expressed an ambivalence about Talmud. While they struggled to see Talmud as *relevant* or *meaningful*, they also believed it was *important*. Students saw more readily how Talmud informed their understanding of Jewish practice than they did how it enriched their own personal lives in the ways they wanted the study of canonical or sacred texts to do. Talmud was sometimes seen as contributing relatively little value when in conversation with a wider world or in generating personal insight.

One way to think of these students is as *respectful caretakers*, carefully storing the family china (to extend Tali Hyman Zelkowitz’s metaphor of Jewish studies classrooms as china shops). The students know the china is important, and part of their legacy, and cultural heritage. However, they often lack a vision of any table to set it on or an idea of how it would make their meal more enjoyable. Despite the difficulty many students had imagining how the study of Talmud produced any intrinsic or instrumental value, it retained a kind of symbolic value and they felt a sense of care and duty toward it, even as it often frustrated and disappointed.

PUZZLING

One thematic thread that emerged from these data was that many students described the study of Talmud as being similar to working on a puzzle. They reflected on the need to “puzzle” through rabbinic text, in the sense of putting pieces together or working to fill in gaps, or to engage in “figuring out” the plain meaning of the text and the thread of the conversation. Many characterized the text as frustrating and confusing, while some enjoyed and were motivated by the experience of bringing order to the confusion.

Jessica, a 10th grader in the advanced track, explained her relationship with Talmud like this, “I am not typical in that I like Talmud and Tanakh. A lot of kids are like, ‘this Jewish stuff is whack’ and they don’t care. I like hearing all the opinions and how they argue. I like how it’s analytical. It’s like a puzzle and you unpack and suddenly it will click.”

Jessica characterizes Talmud as “analytical” and “like a puzzle” that can “click.” But she acknowledges that it doesn’t click for everyone. She sees her own positive attitude toward Talmud as somewhat exceptional. In recounting the features of Talmud study that Jessica enjoys she highlights the ways in which her study of Talmud is like solving a puzzle and her appreciation for that feature.

Jessica used the word “puzzle” to explain what she likes about studying Talmud. In relating their relationship to the study of Talmud many students highlighted the ways in which it was puzzling, in a more negative sense. Cousens (2016) also noted this in her study of Jewish day school alumni. Importantly, while many students described studying Talmud as being engaged in a puzzle, the puzzle was not always a rewarding one. This was related in part to students’ ideas about why Talmud was puzzling and what kind of puzzle it was. For example, think of the difference between a labyrinth and maze. The former is designed as an uplifting spiritual experience for all who enter; the latter is designed to confound. Some students believed that Talmud was designed as a puzzle they might solve, others believed that it was a puzzle to lock them out.

A common thematic thread was for students to express that Talmud could be puzzling in the sense that it was “confusing”, an experience that many students found frustrating. For example, Noa, a 10th grader in the advanced track, explained, “[Studying Talmud requires] trying to explain things that are confusing... you think that [you understand] the actual meaning and then it’s like ‘No, it’s wrong.’” According to Noa, Talmud is tricky and involves dead ends.

Sarah, a 12th grader in the advanced track, echoed Noa’s sense that studying Talmud meant navigating confusion. For Sarah the confusion is off-putting, as though the Talmud were written to leave her out.

[Talmud is] confusing, like hard to work with... It doesn’t always feel like it’s written for me as the reader, like it’s not written in our time, so it’s sometimes hard, or our language... it’s like a lot of deciphering that you have to do yourself.

Sarah offers that sometimes it feels like the Talmud wasn’t “written for me.” She feels a sense of not being part of the community of imagined readers.

A minority of students saw these puzzling aspects of Talmud as a positive challenge and an invitation to engage. What other students saw as frustrating, these students reported as a pleasurable experience. For example, whereas Sarah saw the complexity of Talmud as a barrier to her engagement, Avital, a 10th grader, saw it an appealing challenge.

I think that the Talmud is a sort of like a puzzle...You have to really get into it and figure it out. And then it won't be that hard. Once you pick up on the cues, and if you're familiar with the Hebrew and the Aramaic, and you read the Rashi. There are so many things on just one daf that are there to help you figure it out. It's not that the rabbis are trying to trick you. They want you to learn it.

Avital identifies working on the “puzzle” as element of Talmud study she appreciates and finds engaging. She trusts that she will find sufficient clues in the text, almost as if the rabbis have intentionally left a trail of bread crumbs to help others on the path. She imagines sympathetic rabbinic authors who want their text to be read by people like Avital in the future.

Sam, a 9th grader, described studying Talmud as unwrapping a present. What others saw as barriers—the language and structure of the text—he interpreted as wrapping paper,

It's fun to- it's cool to see those arguments that the rabbis had. Part of it is that it's almost like unwrapping a present. Because it's in a different language...In addition to trying to understand what they mean because it's in the different language, you have to then understand what they mean... what their argument is and what their points are.

According to Sam, the struggle to understand Talmud could be seen as enhancing the enjoyment of discovering the gift inside. For a minority of students, the challenges in working out the meaning of the text were viewed as ultimately positive and enhancing their engagement. These students shared a concept of Talmud as a rewarding puzzle that was designed to be solved and trusted that with effort clarity could be achieved.

EDUCATORS' COMFORT FOODS ON THE MENU OF ORIENTATIONS

As mentioned earlier, a teacher's orientation (Grossman, 1991) to their subject matter reflects an interpretive stance to the material, including not only knowledge of the subject, but also underlying beliefs about what makes engagement with this subject worthwhile and how it is best taught. Levisohn (2010), adapting Grossman's theory of orientation to the study of rabbinics, proposes ten core educator orientations to the teaching of rabbinics as a menu of educator options.

In their interviews, educators were often concerned with the question of how to make the halakhic project of the rabbis resonant with contemporary questions and concerns. The educators we spoke with almost uniformly conceptualized rabbinics as a body of legal discussions that explained how a person should act, or that lay out the process through which a person should decide how to act. As mentioned earlier, we did not hear much about reading rabbinic texts as literature, or as a repository of ideas about psychology or politics, or even as historical documents that elucidate the periods over which they emerged, or as revealing of the classical world. Almost everyone emphasized inculcating in students an understanding of rabbinics as a model for reasoning and decision-making.

This perspective of rabbinic texts as primarily a body of legal discussions that provide models for ethical decision making and problem solving has important ramifications for the way rabbinics are presented in Jewish day schools. It maps best on to Levisohn's (2010) "Halakhic orientation." The challenge teachers saw that they needed to address in their classroom was how to make the Halakhic process relevant for their students through emphasizing how rabbinic categories and argumentation could be applied to elucidate contemporary halakhic and ethical issues, so that students could approach decision-making through a Jewish lens.⁵ This belief about the aims of rabbinics education in day schools likely leads to a multitude of educator choices for the selection of texts and activities for learning.

The educators we spoke with most frequently framed their goals for own teaching as foregrounding mostly: the "Halakhic orientation" and the "Torah/Instruction Orientation," with some features of the "skills orientation" (varying to some degree based on the institution and "level" of the student).⁶

Many educators (somewhat) begrudgingly admired an intensive skills-based orientation, similar to Levisohn's "skills orientation" and "bekiyut orientation," that gave students facility with Aramaic and Rabbinic Hebrew and also a command of many pages of text, as well as the capacity to recall many pages of text by heart. But they also generally rejected this approach. This was partly for practical reasons; educators understood that most of their learners did not hold a world outlook that enabled the kind of time and effort necessary for a commitment to these approaches. Educa-

5 This is different from the "jurisprudential orientation," which focuses on following the intricacies of the argument and the modes of legal thinking and logic therein.

6 This finding from the interview aligns with findings from a survey of Jewish day schools conducted by Rabbi Ari Segal, Head of School at Shalhevet High School, in cooperation with the Jewish Day School Standards and Benchmarks Project Rabbinics Initiative and as reported in a powerpoint presentation. The top four priorities as reported by the survey respondents who worked with high school students (N of approximately 19) were (in descending order of frequency): independent skills, ethical behavior, contemporary issues and halakha. While the language differs somewhat from that adopted in this report we can see that the priorities expressed by survey respondents echo those of the educators who participated in our study.

tors also rejected this approach on ideological reasons; they associated it with feats of memory and thought it created to rote an understanding of the subject matter.

Importantly, orientations are not the same thing as activities for learning. Similar activities, for example, might be undertaken toward achieving the ends of different orientations. Still some orientations may lend themselves to distinctive activities and can give some insight into the teacher orientations which might be operational in different classrooms. Further activities for learning can be interpreted by students as revealing teacher goals.

Teacher reports of the focus of classroom activities generally mirrored that of the students. In the interviews, students reported that their day schools' rabbinics instruction primarily featured activities which emphasized working towards independent translation and decoding, which might relate to the "skills orientation" (from the perspective of students in the advance track most classroom tasks were focused on tasks related to this orientation). They also identified, in describing classroom tasks and discussions, activities related to elucidating the "Halakhic orientation" (tracing the basic logic of the argument with an eye towards the development of halakha) and the "Torah/Instruction orientation" (discussions about contemporary relevance). Some students (in the standard track) discussed their Talmud class as an opportunity make meaning and infer larger insight into the human experience. Other students, noticing the absence of such a framework in the Talmud classroom, wondered about whether there should be a "personalization orientation" (as per Holtz in the study of Tanakh), to make rabbinics study more "meaningful," which some experienced in English, history, or Tanakh class.

The accounts of the students and the educators largely map on to one another. We can see how the orientations that the teachers seek to emphasize correspond to activities that the students report in their classrooms (e.g. the Skills Orientation can map onto translation and decoding, the Halakhic Orientation can map onto tracing the argument, and the Torah Orientation can map onto discussing relevance). One noticeable misalignment in reports is student and educator perceptions of the prominence given to each orientation/activity. Students in the advance track reported spending almost all of their class time on translation and decoding, with little time devoted to other activities for learning.

But this leaves an important question: What about the other offerings on the menu? Where were the literary orientation, the contextual orientation, the cultural orientation, and the historical orientation and activities that might relate to those frameworks? These data suggest that Jewish day school classrooms favor particular types of engagement with rabbinic texts, leaving other orientations as afterthoughts.

In part this reflects teachers' perceptions of their obligations in the day school setting. Shira, from whom we heard earlier, observed of other teachers of rabbinics in Jewish day schools,

I think a lot of people who teach Talmud don't actually believe in the value of Talmud. They believe in the tradition of... or people who want people to learn Talmud whether it's principals or parents—they just think it's like to be Jewish you have to learn Talmud or learning Talmud will inoculate you against assimilation or something like that. I actually believe in what [Talmud] is and can do for people. That it actually is good for human beings to learn a thing like the Talmud. And I don't know many other things like the Talmud. So, I think it's just useful to learn to engage with the Talmud in a foreign language and in this weird way of thinking that opens up the mind. And I don't care if... I want the product to be the opening of the mind. Not necessarily subservience to this ancient book.

Shira, as you may recall, had perhaps the widest web in terms of what rabbinics is. She noted a tension between the kind of “Jewish identity” work that rabbinics education was often called on to do, and what she saw in the actual rabbinic texts she studied and loved.

Adina, a high school administrator, made a similar observation. She reflected on how her school's students were taught to approach the study of Jewish texts,

[The students are] very sophisticated thinkers—or they think they are. We're teaching them to be. And then at the same time, we're asking them not to apply all of those tools to their limudei kodesh texts, because we want them to have love. We want them to have commitment and connection and we expect them to keep halakha. So, historicizing, there's limits to its usefulness...

Adina suggests that the desired outcomes of the study of rabbinic text in Jewish day high schools aims not towards mastery by the standards of the academy (which might emphasize historicizing the text) but a completely different set of criteria that shape its presentation in day schools. By her account all the tools of sophisticated thinking cannot be brought to bear in the Jewish studies classroom because there is alternative set of goals that take precedence. These goals emphasize love, commitment, community and practice over critical approaches to understanding classical Jewish texts.

Tali Hyman Zelkowitz, in her 2008 study of a liberal Jewish day school made a similar observation. She wrote

In General Studies learning cultures, the world does not come to an end if students do not love math, science, or literature whereas heavy baggage of expectations accompanies Jewish Studies learning cultures. To put it another way, in General Studies class inquiries,

students can only give wrong empirical answers, not wrong affective answers, whereas in Jewish Studies, both wrong empirical and wrong affective answers become possible. (Hyman, 2008, p. 185-186).

As these educators observed in their interviews, the rabbinics curriculum carries a weight that other school subjects like math and English do not. There is a pressure on both teachers and students to access the material in a way that fosters some affective attitudes and not others. Students in Jewish day schools are expected to develop a set of attitudes towards classical Jewish texts that include perhaps love, reverence, and commitment. A student can hate math but what happens if a student hates Tanakh?

When we think about a “menu” of orientations it sounds as though we can order anything. But as the Standards and Benchmarks leadership has noted (personal conversation, April 30, 2018) while they offer participating schools an array of standards that represent a variety of orientations, schools keep picking the same limited group of standards. This raises important questions about which orientations are chosen to emphasize in the classroom, who does the choosing, and how explicit or conscious these choices are.

To return to the earlier discussion of school subjects the concept of “subject subcultures” is helpful, if we stretch the meaning a little beyond what Stodolsky and Grossman may have initially intended. Day school teachers of rabbinics are a subculture of rabbinics readers or interpreters. This means that in spite of how theoretically “loosely” coordinated this subject is compared to others in school, like math, there seems to be a tacit consensus among most teachers about the *most important lens* to shine on this literature. Yes, expertise in rabbinics might involve many kinds of lenses (and educators are quite aware that these possibilities exist). But for Jewish day school teachers and administrators making choices about what and how to teach, that most important lessons that they see it as their task to impart are related to translating and decoding skills, understanding halakhic process, and developing a Torah orientation to ethical decision making. The other orientations to the teaching of rabbinic texts may exist and many educators nod at them as *possibilities*, but few see them as *priorities*.

When we order in a restaurant, we don’t randomly choose an item off the menu. Food’s appeal as appetizing or nourishing or stimulating or comforting is culturally produced. The educators we spoke with name experts they know and educational experiences they have had that shape their idea of what rabbinics is and is for. Their pre-service experiences and networks shape their taste and appetites for what rabbinics should be, and it shapes which dishes they choose off the menu. Some

dishes are rejected outright. Others tantalize but are seen as empty calories, or as an occasional treat or splurge. Some seem fine and are theoretically appealing, but the teacher keeps going back to the old standby anyway. There are some items on the “menu” that are familiar comfort foods or that meet implicit standards for composing a complete, nutritious meal.

Questions for Discussion and Ideas for Future Research

CAN WE PLAY WITH ALTERNATIVE ORIENTATIONS TO TEACHING TALMUD?

If there is any Jewish body of texts that could be a “playground” (Hyman, 2008) that encourage wide-ranging creative exploration, rabbinic texts are a good candidate. They cover vast topics and can seem strange and wild to a modern reader. This study has not gestured toward examining how teachers let students “play” with rabbinic texts, that is, how teachers respond to students’ interpretations of text—especially those that diverge from traditional readings (for this approach to understanding pedagogy in Jewish day school classrooms, see for example Devra Lehmann, 2008, and Ziva Reimer Hassenfeld, 2016).

It’s possible to imagine study of rabbinic text at the high school level that rigorously engages with literary or cultural or historical orientations in way that is true to the text it centers and attuned to the learners intellectual development and even to the concerns about “Jewish identity” commitments some teachers raised. These alternative approaches, it is important to note, are not fundamentally any less grounded in what these texts are and seem to be trying to accomplish on their own terms, because rabbinic texts are about just about everything.

What would it look like for educators to develop other subcultures of reading rabbinic text? Could there be a semester or a year on halakhic process, one on literary analysis of aggadata, one on the material culture of classical Judaism, etc. Are teachers given adequate preparation to teach with these kinds of approaches, and are school stakeholders prepared to give the message that this is the kind of teaching they also value? Is the more limited palate that educators seem to prefer actually doing service to the text and to the students? Are we domesticating these wild complex texts, curtailing their sweeping scope, to read them only or primarily through the pathways later Jewish commentators took? Can alternative orientations live more deeply in classrooms? Can we image rigorous curricula at the high school level created around alternative orientations? Is it the mandate of Jewish day schools (especially community/pluralistic ones) to teach Jewish text towards a particular Jewish identity outcome, that presupposes a halakhic-Torah values orientation as primary? And can educators pick from a menu if they haven’t been exposed to all the tastes, flavors, and cuisines? What types of pre-service education or professional development would help educators develop curricula based on alternative orientations?

Based on the interviews with students some possibilities might include:

Curricula or activities that emphasize rabbinic argumentation: Many students appreciate that Talmud inducts them into rabbinic argumentation, a perspective they find valuable. What might a high school course organized specifically around principles of rabbinic logic and reasoning (rather than say a topic or theme) look like? What might be gained or lost in offering such a course?

Curricula or activities that emphasize the personalization orientation: In their interviews, students shared an interest in mining rabbinic texts for “deeper meaning,” usually the development of personal, spiritual or existential insights. What models are there for such an interpretive lens in the study of Talmud? How might activities and interpretive processes emphasized in the standard track be applied in the advanced track?

These are only two of the many potential directions for curricula or activities that emerged from interviews with students.

TALMUD AS A CASE OF SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION

In the interviews, teachers and students offered comparisons as to what other subject in school rabbinics is most like. In analyzing the interviews, social studies, while rarely offered as a subject for comparison (perhaps because social studies is not usually a high school level course) may be a productive subject analog. In terms of the sweep and scope of what might be included and related concerns about subject’s purpose being tied to the production of “good citizens,” the goals and possible methods of social studies education may come the closest to rabbinics. Social studies is not an academic discipline—it draws on multiple disciplines such as history, economics, anthropology, archeology, law, philosophy, and political science. All of these disciplines are brought to bear to produce an active citizen who is a good participant in community and democratic processes. Consider this statement of purpose from the National Council of the Social Studies website (accessed 4/23/18): “The aim of social studies is the promotion of civic competence—the knowledge, intellectual processes, and democratic dispositions required of students to be active and engaged participants in public life.” Social studies may also carry expectations of affective outcome as well. Social studies classes are often tasked with instilling not only knowledge but attitudes and commitments to democracy, the nation and civic participation. These aims echo many of the ideas advanced by teachers of Talmud. Further research or professional development in the teaching and learning of rabbinics may look to studies in social studies education for generative insights.

IS THERE A PLACE FOR THE STUDY OF MIDRASH IN HIGH SCHOOL RABBINICS?

In the interviews, Midrash (or even aggadic material in Talmud) was rarely mentioned as a component of rabbinics in the day school classroom. A few educators addressed the reasoning behind this pattern. One educator, Moshe, offered that while Midrash might qualify as rabbinics in the academy, in Jewish day school it belonged in the Tanakh department. He explained,

Talmud, Mishna, Jewish Law—they all share the same essential structures—questions, answers, the move... about how you solve problems. None of that is within Midrash. And I think it's because the essential structures of Midrash are common with... with (inaudible) Bible than with Rabbinics—that's why I put it that way, based on the essential structures. I believe that the academy which tends to study historically more than structurally...

Because of the kinds of understandings Moshe seeks to emphasize in the classroom, in this case, the legal decision-making process, Midrash does not fit the educational model of Talmudic text. He acknowledges that, in the context of the academy, which might emphasize historical analysis of these texts, grouping Midrash and Talmud makes sense. This points to how educator beliefs about the core understandings they seek to develop in students shape the how the subject is presented in school.

In her interview Miri nominated two experts who she characterized as “Halakhists.” As she thought about them she began to reevaluate her response,

I would say he has a command of a very large range of rabbinic text. It's interesting...[both nominated experts], I feel like, I think of as Halakhists. People who are fluent in rabbinic literature in the original and can apply it to contemporary situations. And also can follow a decision-making thread through many texts and many centuries and geographical locations. They can pull from a lot of different sources. So there's, for me, a very strong bent towards halakhah, or the halakhic process, like when I think about rabbinics and someone who's an expert in rabbinics, even though, it's funny, even though I know that midrash is a big part of rabbinics, that's not what jumps to mind when you say who's an expert in rabbinics.

In hearing herself talk, Miri wondered why she excluded experts in midrash from her account of expertise in rabbinics. Upon reflection she added Avivah Zornberg to her list. But expertise in midrash was not the first model of expertise that came her to mind.

Another educator, Adina, suggested that midrash was somewhat out of fashion in the Jewish day schools she was familiar with. She offered that she had observed an interest amongst day school educator in uncovering the “pshat” of the text and that

by many midrash was seen as a form of misdirection. In this sense, midrashic glosses obscure students' direct understanding of the original text and its intention. The concerns and interests of authors of midrash were not seen as an avenue for exploration that was necessary in day school classroom.

Two educators spoke about the potential promise of a serious engagement with the study of midrash—one through the lens of the arts, the other through a more academic-oriented approach. One educator, Adina, mentioned above, considered the potential of “really using midrash to understand the world of the rabbis, appreciating the literary artistry, being able to understand the layers of meaning that are encoded in these texts, and not worrying about whether or not this is historical or not.” From her current vantage point she did not see that possibility being enacted in her school anytime soon, because from her perspective, few of her fellow educators appreciated the kinds of insights the study of midrash might generate.

CAN WE INTRODUCE STUDENTS TO CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITIES OF MEANING THAT USE TALMUD?

In the interviews with educators several offered that they wanted students to understand that Talmud was a great historical Jewish “conversation.” Indeed, a distinctive feature of Talmud (which many students noted) is how the text is edited such that people and ideas across several centuries are brought together in debate. However, students of Talmud in the community/pluralistic Jewish day schools in this study don't necessarily come away with an understanding of how Talmud relates to a contemporary conversation. Students often see Talmud study as preparing them to participate in a discourse for which they see no living conversation partners and no appealing community of practice.

While there may be increasing opportunities for adults to study Talmud in non-Orthodox settings in their leisure time, Jewish day school students may not know about these opportunities or imagine them as part of the communities they will be part of in the future. How can educators articulate for students how skills, knowledge, and sensibilities generated through the study of Talmud contribute to conversations happening today, whether in a Jewish setting or beyond? What communities of practice and meaning currently exist that can model for students how Talmud is part of a contemporary Jewish life? How can educators demonstrate how understanding Talmud contributes to their capacity to enter and engage in conversations that are meaningful to them?

For Further Research

Participant Observation The data here are based on self-report. A researcher observing regular on-going rabbinics classroom activities may find that these reports do not match observed practices and draw different conclusions.

Peer observations Educators may work with fellow faculty members to observe one another's classrooms and track what occurs in Talmud class. What are the regular activities? Who speaks? Who asks questions of whom? How much time is allocated to different tasks and forms of meaning making?

Seeking Alternative Cases Are there currently educators who emphasize less-commonly found orientations or forms of textual analysis? Who is currently teaching midrash or aggadah, focusing on historical or literary understandings, or emphasizing a personalization orientation? What understandings do students in these classrooms form about rabbinics? A case study of these approaches could be informative.

What about Denominational Schools? What would a study of high schools associated with a specific Jewish denomination yield? How might the findings be similar or different?

How is rabbinic literature taught in non-sectarian settings? What does the study of Talmud look like in settings that do not presuppose the learner's commitment to Jewish peoplehood or practice? How is rabbinic literature taught when "Jewish identity" is taken off the table as a desirable outcome?

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