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Transformation and Empowerment: Teaching Talmud to Adult Beginner Learners

INTRODUCTION

In 2010 I began to study Talmud for the first time at Yeshivat Hadar. I was there for a summer, studying with 49 other fellows, and I was the #1 beginner- the person in the room with the least background in, and familiarity with, the Talmud itself and the process of learning it. This was an arduous experience, but also foundational for me in the evolution of my Jewish life, and of my life in general. At the time I don't know how I would have articulated *what* exactly it was that drew me in and hooked me to Talmud learning, but I did get hooked. One afternoon, after a particularly discouraging class in which my classmates had unpacked a sugya at a pace and depth that I could not keep up with, my teacher Rav Jason Rubinstein approached me to talk. He told me the story of Rabbi Akiva (Avot de-Rabbi Natan, 6:2) who began studying Torah late in his adult life. It must have been difficult for Rabbi Akiva to learn how to learn, perhaps even more so than it was for me. One day Rabbi Akiva stumbled upon a spring that ran through a rock. Looking into the hole of the rock, he realized that the water of the spring had, over time, worn through the rock and created an opening. Rabbi Akiva thought to himself: "If something soft (like water) could chisel its way through something hard (like stone), then surely the words of Torah, which are as hard as iron, can penetrate my heart, which is flesh and blood!" The words of Torah he sought to learn were not primarily agents of information. Rather, they were an element of transformation that could reshape his heart. My understanding is that Jason told me this story as encouragement to keep learning: *Rabbi Akiva persisted in his learning when it was difficult, and you can too*. The result of this persistence is not simply better skills acquisition or more knowledge of Torah. Rather, studying is like water that carves a hole into stone, and then flows through. We are altered by our learning, in profound ways.

My six years of rabbinical school have been a continuation of the learning I began that summer. I have spent much of this time thinking about why and how we learn Talmud, what it can mean for learners in their broader lives, and what role it can play in my rabbinate. I look back on that experience as the #1 beginner in a learning setting and wonder about how Talmud education can best serve the needs and goals of new adult learners. I also wonder, why do adults come to the Talmud to learn? What are they seeking, and do

they find it? What was it that hooked me, six years ago? Through my work assistant-teaching and program directing at the Boston Teen Beit Midrash, and on the Talmud faculty at SVARA, I've watched many people be exposed anew to the Talmud and have a wide range of reactions. Usually these reactions, even when mixed with the challenges of study and the pain of confronting patriarchy, include a sense of awe, a hunger to keep learning, and a feeling that something has changed for the learner, that they are somehow different than they were before.

During Shana Daled I received an invitation to teach a workshop on "queer Talmud" at Tufts Hillel, at the request of their Queer Jewish student organization. That same year, the Boston Workmen's Circle asked me teach a Talmud class for their membership, and I joined the SVARA summer Talmud faculty. These settings are spaces for lay-people to encounter Talmud for the first time or to continue their studies without the high-level commitment of a full-time yeshiva. Furthermore, they are spaces where people with particular identities congregate: LGBTQ and queer, secular, radical, progressive, activist, etc. I used to think that Talmud study only happened in Orthodox environments, in high-level graduate programs at universities, and at rabbinical schools. Through working in these other settings, I now see that regular people— liberal and progressive and post-modern and contemporary people, feminists and queer people, teens and adults— really want to know what's in the Talmud and how to study it! The Talmud is relevant to the lives of modern Jews looking for meaning.

This capstone project is dependent on two assumptions: 1) Learning can transform students and it is worthwhile for me as an educator to investigate the transformative potential of my teaching, and 2) the Talmud is a text that can be a vehicle for this transformative learning process. The basis for my reflection comes from my two most recent Talmud teaching experiences: 1) Serving as a “Beit Midrash fairy” (known in a yeshiva context as a *shoel umeshiv*, a person who circulates the beit midrash and assists students when they have questions or need guidance on the text) and the primary instructor for the Beginner’s Shiur at the 2016 SVARA Queer Talmud Camp and 2) Creating and teaching a six-week beginners Talmud class at the Boston Workmen’s Circle. This class was the second in a series called The Secular Talmud, oriented toward the community’s secular Jewish identity, and addressing their curiosity about what studying Talmud can offer them as secular Jews. Though these two learning spaces are distinct from one another in goals and methodology, what they have in common is the creation of a Talmud learning environment for adult beginners. Furthermore, these spaces draw from the premise that learning Talmud is somehow transformative for students, and relevant to their lives as people who identify as progressive, politically oriented, and/or hold marginal identities in society. In both learning environments, my students ranged in age from early 20’s to late 60’s. They had either no prior exposure to the Talmud, or limited exposure, and came to this practice with a curiosity about what the Talmud could offer their Jewish, queer, and political lives.

By researching within the field of Talmud pedagogy, and by exploring my own recent teaching experiences, I hope to engage with the following questions:

- What is transformative education?
- Why do people study Talmud?
- Does studying Talmud transform them in some way? How?
- What are my own goals as a Talmud educator, particularly focused on Talmud education for beginner learners?
- Who are my models for this kind of teaching?
- What does it look like to create a learning environment that is conducive to transformation?
- How do I teach? How do I teach Talmud? What experiences are my students having? How do these experiences impact and change them? What can I do better? What do I still not know or understand?

In this paper, I will first consider the field of Transformative Education in order to better understand my own goals in teaching Talmud. Then I will explore how my students, as well as scholars of Talmud pedagogy, have responded to the question “Why study Talmud?” Lastly, I will reflect on my own goals as a new Talmud instructor, in the hopes of carrying this work forward with more awareness and intentionality.

DEFINING TRANSFORMATION

“If I never came back to Talmud, it still has had a very intense impact on the way I see a lot of things. In and of itself, four days of Talmud were very extremely powerful.” (Queer Talmud Camp participant)

Recently, the world of Jewish education has been abuzz with the goal of creating “transformative” experiences. Programming for both adults and young people is meant to “transform” them in some way. For example, on the website of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, one can visit a page entitled “[Stories of Transformation](#).” On the Hazon website, there is a tab to click for “[Transformative Experiences](#).” But what do we mean when we say “transformation” in an educational context?

In 2010 I participated in Adamah, the Jewish farming fellowship at the Isabella Freedman Center, and studied as a fellow at Mechon Hadar. Afterwards, I described both of these as “transformative” experiences. I meant that these experiences had changed how I lived and how I understood the world around me – each program provided me with a Jewish vocabulary and a deepened Jewish worldview through which to understand my human experience. These “transformations” each had an internal and external component – they impacted my external *doing* (for example: observing Jewish time, learning to daven, learning to farm), and they impacted my internal *knowing/feeling* (for example: I developed a stronger relationship to God, I

cultivated commitments to environmental sustainability and Jewish ethics). I had also, during the same period of time, spent a semester studying at the Drisha Institute in Manhattan, which I would not describe as a transformative experience. Drisha is a yeshiva, and from my time there I learned many things (text skills, Hebrew grammar, better familiarity with liturgy), but the experience did not shake me to the core and impact the way I lived or experienced myself in the world.

Rebbitzin Dena Weinberg is attributed with having said: “Torah is not education. It’s transformation.”¹ Weinberg implies that the two are distinct: education is one thing, but transformation is a deeper and more valuable endeavor, one she associates with Torah, the most sacred kind of study. Is Torah transformative because any encounter with something of such sacred status inherently changes us, or does an educator need to create the conditions for transformation? The contrast between my time at Adamah or Hadar with my time at Drisha confirmed for me that not all religious educational experiences are inherently “transformative.” There had to be more to it, and I wanted to learn how to foster this kind of personal growth for others. I applied to rabbinical school, and wrote on my application “I want to be part of building a Judaism that is inspiring, relevant, creative, and transformative.” I wanted to bring Judaism to people’s lives in a way that profoundly shaped them, that transformed them into better versions of themselves, that cultivated them as better people—kinder, bolder, calmer, more righteous, more humble, more creative, more generous, healing from our individual and collective traumas, and rooted in our own traditions. Having been impacted in this way, I felt confident that Jewish spiritual technologies and paradigms (time, prayer, calendar, halakha, song, ethics and environmentalism, activism, study, etc) are needed by the world and bring out a higher level of being for the people who choose to engage with them. They offer us a “transformative” path, a way to transform into our higher potential as human beings.

In a conversation describing my capstone project, Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari remarked: “Oh yes, I know what transformative education is! It’s when you take someone on a spiritual journey through your teaching.” Here I am reminded of Rabbi Benay Lappe, Rosh Yeshiva of SVARA, who likes to say some version of the following to her students after they have gathered for shiur:

Think back to the hevruta session you just had. How many of you were thinking about your mortgage? Your job? Your troubles? (...waiting to see if hands go up... no hands go up) Nobody? That tells me that you’re *doing it right*. That you were fully present in your learning. This kind of learning is a spiritual practice, it is about being transformed through the process of learning. It is not about transmitting information. If I wanted you to get the information, I would’ve sent you to

¹ Jon A Levisohn, “Two Models of Transformation: Introduction to the Conference on Transformative Jewish Education” The Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University Transformation Project, March 20, 2016, <https://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/pdfs/2016-3-Levisohn-Two-Models.pdf>, 2.

Bartenura and you'd know what the rules are in 3 minutes. And you know what would have happened inside of you? *Nothing*. For the rabbis, it's not really about finding God through prayer. It's about the meditative practice of hevruta learning. That's where they find God, and this is how I meditate and find God, and I offer it to you as a possibility.²

Lappe presents Talmud study in hevruta to her students as a transformative spiritual practice—one that requires so much presence of mind and attention that its effects are likened to meditation. Contemplative practices are meant to clean out the gunk within us – to leave us more open, more clear-thinking, and more spiritually attuned than before. Here, the emphasis is on the *modality* of learning, rather than the content. Lappe does not necessarily care what her students discuss in hevruta³, she cares that the process takes them out of their lives, out of their troubles, and deeply into the focus of study. As Fornari suggested in our conversation, the journey transforms a person, leaving them spiritually impacted and different from before. Perhaps this journey is best characterized as a journey away from the monotony, familiarity, or difficulty of one's own life. Having left one's life temporarily behind, a person is then available to become a higher version of themselves.

In 1999, Diane Tickton Schuster, along with a team of researchers, explored the educational impacts of the Florence Melton School of Adult Jewish Learning. Her research was presented as a foundational model for the 2016 Conference on Transformative Jewish Education at the Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education of Brandeis University. The Mandel Center has initiated The Transformation Project, an attempt to gather voices and resources from the field addressing the questions of what we mean when we say “transformation,” and how to create pedagogies of transformation in Jewish learning. Synthesizing the impactful experiences of the students she interviewed, Tickton Schuster notes:

A consistent dynamic that threads throughout [this research] is that of new *meaning making*: how the interviews revealed shifts in the learners' belief system, activities, or Jewish identity as a result of their learning experiences. Whether or not such shifts are long lasting or measurable over time could only be determined through longer-term follow-up. However, in the short run, it appeared that the Mini-School's systematic structure for helping learners to encounter and reflect on Jewish ideas and

² Benay Lappe, said to her students at Queer Talmud Camp, June 2015.

³ This is not exactly true, because Rabbi Lappe does teach in a very specific method, but the method is more about *how* a hevruta learns, and less about *what* the hevruta discusses.

values had a significant impact on these adults' sense of themselves Jewishly. To that extent, from the learners' vantage point, the learning was transformational.⁴

Her research suggests that if learners' understandings of themselves within a Jewish framework are changed, the experience has been transformative. In this way, transformation is partly about Jewish identity and belonging, and altered or shifted perceptions of ourselves.

In a document they are composing about the potential for Judaism to serve as “a pathway and theory of personal and societal transformation,” Rabbis David Jaffe, Lisa Goldstein, and Jason Kimmelman-Block⁵ explore Judaism as a set of wisdom concepts and accompanying practices that can serve as “life-enhancing practice” for activists engaged in social and societal change. According to their work, Judaism’s “notions of time, priorities, conflict and peace, and moral and spiritual development have been refined over thousands of years in cultures around the world,”⁶ resulting in a deeply honed resource for people whose lives are dedicated to a better, more just society. Their project utilizes a working understanding of transformation that seems rather distinct to me from Tickton Schuster’s. Whereas Tickton Schuster focuses on a changed sense of self, Jaffe, Goldstein and Kimmelman-Block emphasize that transformation leads a person with an established set of values to live an “enhanced” life, a life that can sustain the values that they already have. These are two very distinct understandings of transformation: the former highlights change, while the latter foregrounds a deepened sense of an already existing self.

The distinction between these two frameworks feels essential to me in my own teaching, and specifically in the teaching I have done through SVARA and The Boston Workmen’s Circle. Whereas with youth education, the opportunity to mold and alter a student’s identity is a more reachable goal, my experience of adult learners is that they bring an already defined, rich and enduring sense of self to their learning. As adults we have already decided that we are a certain kind of person. Though some adults will (figuratively or literally) travel far outside of their comfort zone to learn, many will not. Or perhaps some adults are willing, even desiring, to be pushed in a new direction, while still maintaining a general framework for who they are in the world. The students who attended SVARA’s Queer Talmud Camp and my Secular Talmud class at the Workmen’s Circle certainly arrived to these settings because of strong and self-selecting identities they carried: gay, lesbian, trans, queer, secular, frum, radical, progressive, activist, nerd,

⁴ Diane Tickton Schuster, “Assessing Transformative Jewish Learning in Adulthood.” Learning About Learning, last modified May 9, 2016, <http://blogs.brandeis.edu/mandeljewished>.

⁵ Directors of the following organizations, respectively: Kirva, The Institute for Jewish Spirituality, and Bend the Arc Jewish Action.

⁶ Rabbis David Jaffe, Lisa Goldstein and Jason Kimmelman Block, “Inner Life and Social Change,” white paper written in 2016.

etc. My goal of creating a transformative learning environment was not to unsettle or disrupt these identities or values.

What was the goal then? Was it to bring them into a learning environment that affirmed their pre-existing values? Was it to change their sense of “I’m not a person who studies Talmud,” focusing more on their identity as a person who does or doesn’t *do* something as opposed to their system of beliefs? Was it to introduce them to a spiritual practice that could enhance their sense of wholeness and wellness in their lives? Was it to expose them to a spiritual practice that could serve as an ongoing resource for their own change and growth in the long term? On some level, I aspire to teach Talmud to others simply because I love it, both as a literature and as a process. I want to share what I love with other people. But on a deeper level, I want to share it because I believe it has transformative and liberatory potential.

Jon Levisohn, a longtime researcher of Jewish pedagogy, has explored the question of transformative education through the Morton Mandel Center. In his writing, he describes the goals of transformative learning, in which I can recognize my own motivations:

We want some educational programming not just to teach participants certain ideas or certain skills, but to do more. We want to go deeper, to shape their character or their identity. We want to have an influence on how they move through the world. We are thinking not just about what they know or what they can do, but who they *are*... The point of engaging in Torah study is not to become smarter or to accumulate information. The point is to be transformed in the encounter, to become a different kind of person, a *better* person.⁷

According to Levisohn, transformative education comes to bear on our sense of identity – how we perceive ourselves and also perhaps how others perceive us. Levisohn goes on to outline two different models for/definitions of transformation. In the first model, the primary mode of transformation is that our assumptions about ourselves are challenged. Paraphrasing Jack Mezirow, “the researcher most frequently cited in the field of transformative education,” Levisohn describes this model: a person encounters “some experience or intervention that changes one’s frame of reference in some fundamental way.”⁸ In order to be shaken into a new sense of identity, there needs to be a catalyst event. This catalyst can be traumatic, such as the loss of a loved one, or an experience of violence or violation. It can also be an encounter with a text or tradition that moves us such that we are never the same again. Other catalysts include divorce, job changes, life-style changes such as retirement, or simply an eye-opening discussion. Sometimes these experiences are

⁷ Levisohn, *Two Models*, 2.

⁸ Levisohn, *Two Models*, 3.

large and life-defining, other times they are subtle, small, yet impactful. Jack Mezirow elaborates on the process:

Transformative learning is the process of effecting change in a frame of reference. Adults have acquired a coherent body of experience – associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses – frames of reference that define their life world. Frames of reference are the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings. They set our ‘line of action.’ Once set, we automatically move from one specific activity (mental or behavioral) to another. We have a strong tendency to reject ideas that fail to fit our perceptions, labeling those ideas as unworthy of consideration – aberrations, nonsense, irrelevant, weird, or mistaken. When circumstances permit, learners move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience.⁹

In Mezirow’s framework, our frames of reference become entrenched, and our transformative experiences dislodge us from these “stuck” or “familiar” frames. Levisohn explains: “So, for Mezirow, transformation happens when someone moves from a narrower frame of reference, with more limited possibilities, to a more expansive one.”¹⁰ Elsewhere in his work, Mezirow posits that when we encounter something anomalous to our old way of knowing, “critical reflection and transformations”¹¹ can result. These catalysts are incompatible with our limited scope and prior systems of sense-making. In this model of transformation, disorientation is highly positive if it challenges our assumptions and leads us toward a broader, new way of perceiving ourselves in the world.

Levisohn also offers a second model of, or definition for, transformation. In the second model, there is no disorienting encounter, experience, or catalyst. Instead, a person’s sense of identity and knowing in the world is changed gradually. When a person adopts a practice or a set of practices, these practices influence and change the person’s character over time. Levisohn calls this the “Becoming what we do” model, in which: “instead of a sudden shift, the transformation is incremental and perhaps even imperceptible, moment-to-moment. But the outcome is no less significant: becoming a certain kind of person, different than the person was to begin with.”¹² This model is significant because the catalyst is just as important, but

⁹ Jack Mezirow, “Transformative Learning: Theory into Practice,” *New Directions for Adults and Continuing Education* 74, Summer 1997.

¹⁰ Levisohn, Two Models, 4.

¹¹ Mezirow, “How critical reflection triggers transformative learning,” *Fostering critical reflections in adulthood*, 1990, 1-20.

¹² Levisohn, Two Models, 5.

instead of coming to jolt or a shake a person, the catalyst actually includes or embodies the characteristics that the person will eventually take on.

If we consider Torah as an example, according to Levisohn's first model, Torah might be far enough outside of someone's frame of reference that it destabilizes them, widening their scope of reality and transforming them into a new kind of person who can integrate this new scope into their worldview. In Levisohn's second model, the study of Torah involves a set of practices that shape a person gradually over time, and the defining characteristics of Torah study become this person's transformed identity.

Considering Levisohn's two definitions for the process of transformation is helpful to me as an educator who feels a desire to "transform" something about people's lives in the course of teaching them. Instead of Jewish education for the sake of knowledge and information, I aspire to create Jewish educational experiences that have a lasting impact on how people live in the world, conceive of themselves, and relate to others. But as Levisohn specifies, "We don't actually care about transformation *per se*. We don't care about coming up with a precise definition of the term... But we do care about our highest educational aspirations, aspirations to influence character and identity in particular ways."¹³ Reading Levisohn's work, I am left with the question: In what *specific* ways do I want Talmud study to shape and influence the character and identity of learners? I carried this question with me into the Talmud classes I taught as part of this Capstone.

As I read through Tickton Schuster, Levisohn, and Mezirow's scholarship, I couldn't help but notice that these authors do not mention systems of oppression or power in our world. Is transformation a politically neutral idea, with the goal of personal change, regardless of the content of that change? Does transformative learning come to interact with injustice in any way? In addressing this dilemma I found the work of Sarra Lev, a professor of Talmud at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical School, who has sought to concretely apply abstract theories of transformative education to her pedagogy. She describes her motivation:

So I ask myself: 'Can we read Talmud to create a kinder, more compassionate, empathetic, and self-reflective society?' English professor Ihab Hassan once asked his student teachers, 'Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?' That is the question that this reading system addresses. *Can we read Talmud so that people stop killing each other?*¹⁴

For Lev, transformative learning means, specifically, that people become less violent, and more able to see themselves as an integral part of a larger human ecosystem. Transformation is not politically neutral; rather

¹³ Levisohn, Two Models, 2.

¹⁴ Sarra Lev, "Talmud that Works Your Heart: New Approaches to Reading," in *Learning to Read Talmud: What It Looks Like and How It Happens*, edited by Jane Kanarek and Marjorie Lehman (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2016) 176.

the instructor brings her own agenda to it, with a goal of mitigating violence and fostering empathy and compassion in her students.

In an earlier work, Lev addresses her goal of teaching Talmud to rabbinical students in service of creating more ethical leaders: “by ‘teaching ethics’ I mean employing in our study of sacred texts a lens through which we examine ourselves and our values in a manner that can help us act as spiritual leaders in promoting social justice.”¹⁵ She is particularly interested in the tense balance between this kind of ethical self-reflection and the acquisition of skills, “making sure that our students know how to properly decipher and understand the texts as they are.”¹⁶ For Lev, a practitioner of transformative education has two primary goals: 1) to cultivate reading skills in students that will allow them to access the texts on the terms of the texts themselves, and 2) to animate students toward ethical frameworks and critical self-reflection. In identifying her unique orientation¹⁷ to Talmud study, Lev coins a new genre:

... which I will call ‘summons.’ By that, I mean to treat the texts of the Talmud as if they exist to help us achieve holiness, not by telling us what is or what should be, but by impelling us to interact with the text. It is a text that pushes our buttons and by which we can be pushed to become ever more reflective, understanding, empathetic, discerning, and expansive.”¹⁸

In Lev’s vision, “Talmud as summons” seeks to transform the learner by demanding something of us, by summoning us toward a higher version of ourselves. We come closer to this higher version by interacting with the text. Perhaps the student will be altered in unrecognizable ways, but the student may also come into a stronger, more nuanced, more open-hearted embodiment of the values they already hold. I am drawn to Lev’s exploration of Talmud study with an explicit justice orientation, and I find that her scholarship adds a necessary dimension of social responsibility and ethics to the question of transformative education.

WHY TALMUD

Having begun to explore the field of Transformative Education above, I am left with the following questions: Are all subjects equally capable of producing the kind of transformation we might seek to cultivate in students? Are there fields of study that lend themselves more strongly to transformation? And

¹⁵ Sarra Lev, “Teaching Rabbinics as an Ethical Endeavor and Teaching Ethics as a Rabbinic Endeavor,” in *Turn It and Turn It Again: Studies in the Teaching and Learning of Classical Jewish Texts*, edited by Jon Levisohn and Susan Fendrick (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2013) 391.

¹⁶ Lev, *Teaching Rabbinics as an Ethical Endeavor*, 392.

¹⁷ I will write more on “orientations” later in this paper.

¹⁸ Lev, *Talmud that Works the Heart*, 177.

lastly, honing in on my own area of pedagogical growth: What about the Talmud lends itself to transformative learning?

There are many ways to teach the same topic or text. Not all Talmud learning is focused on transformation as a goal. Supporting this understanding of the variety of ways in which one topic can be taught, Jon Levisohn explains that generally in education, we talk about “subjects” or “disciplines,” however there is a deep internal diversity to each subject.¹⁹ The approach a teacher takes is composed of the values, questions, assumptions, and pedagogic choices they bring to a subject. Levisohn critiques teachers of Jewish studies, who “often lack a sense that curricular choices ought to be responsible to some larger framework of purposes.”²⁰ Levisohn urges educators to identify the underlying values that drive their commitment to a particular subject. He problematizes the idea that Jewish textual education is inherently valuable:

What is Tanakh or Talmud, for example, as a subject, beyond a book or set of books? What constitutes an intriguing question or a compelling answer within these subjects? What are the particular skills or intellectual habits that are associated with these subjects? What are the multiple orientations to the subject itself, and how are they importantly different from one each other? What, in the end, do we want students to know and be able to do in the study of these subjects – and why? And what kinds of educational experiences will promote those goals? There must be a conception behind our pedagogic decision-making that is richer and deeper, a conception that allows us to establish and prioritize the goals of teaching and learning this particular subject, a conception of the subject area to which we feel responsible and to which we want to hold ourselves accountable.²¹

As discussed above, I suspect that even a larger framework of “transformation” is still too vague to stand as a legitimate orientation to studying Talmud. Though I think transformation plays an important role, I am left wondering: “Transformation in the service of what?”

With a set of hunches about what makes Talmud study interesting, at least for myself, I set out to teach my own class of beginner Talmud learners, all the while tracking their experience in order to later reflect upon it. My students learned excerpts from Perek Hahovel (see the Curriculum which follows this paper), spending part of each class in hevruta and part of it in larger group discussion. While I may carry strong theories or convictions about the question of “Why study Talmud,” it is powerful and useful for me as

¹⁹ Jon A Levisohn, “A Menu of Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature,” *Journal of Jewish Education* (2009): 5-8. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15244110903534510>.

²⁰ Jon A Levisohn, “What is Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy?” The Initiative on Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy in Jewish Studies, revised Sept 2006, <http://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/projects/bridginginitiative.html>

²¹ Levisohn, What is Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy, 15.

an educator to hear how my students have absorbed, internalized, or rejected my convictions, and what has emerged for them as the heart of their experience studying Talmud. Has it been a transformative process? Do they have a transformed relationship to the text, to themselves, and to the world? What has this transformation been in the service of? These are the questions I sought to address, by interviewing and recording my students in conversation with me and with one another. My hope is that by better understanding the learning experiences of my students, I will better understand myself as an educator, and sharpen my sense of why and how I teach Talmud.

What is the Talmud (round one)

I utilized a number of techniques in order to better understand the experiences my Workmen's Circle students were having in their learning. One technique was to ask them to record their answers to the question "What is the Talmud?" on the first day of class, and again on the last day of class. This exercise allowed me to track the overall framework my students gained of Talmudic literature, their comprehension on a basic facts level, as well as their more conceptual comprehension of the larger rabbinic project. About half of my students entered the class with no real sense of the Talmud, writing answers such as:

I'm honestly not really sure. I've obviously heard a lot about it as a concept in Jewish spaces and I understand the importance of studying religious texts, but I don't actually know what the Talmud really is, other than commentary on the Torah and/or other Jewish texts. And I'm not sure that's really right. As I come more into my Jewish identity I feel like it's important for me to know these things.

Talmud is a commentary by a myriad of people (men) on the Torah.

Honestly I have no idea. It is written by rabbis? It is about Jewish law? It is old? People use it today as a way to wrestle with tradition and make Judaism queer, subversive, and secular?

The other half of my students demonstrated a higher-level understanding of the Talmud, its location in the timeline of Jewish history, its authorship, and its mission, submitting variations of the following answer:

The Talmud is a collection of both the written down oral law of the Jews post destruction of the second temple and then legalistic debates of rabbis on interpretations of this oral law. It is the redefinition of Jewish laws/community during the diaspora.

What is the Talmud (round two)

The answers I collected in our final class demonstrate that every student had developed a correct comprehension of basic orienting facts on the Talmud, as well as a level of conceptual understanding of the Talmud's overall project, articulated with some very nuanced details. Below is an assortment of answers that I think illustrate the progress my students made from the first to the last class:

The Talmud is a compilation of stories, law and ideas that form the basis of Jewish law and rules for Jewish life. It is presented through examination of multiple opinions, which question the moral and ethical authority on which Jewish law is based.

Talmud is a set of texts that try really hard to make rules & guidelines for Jewish people to live by. It is commentary on the Torah and contains the Mishnah and Gemara. They use stories and examples to help explain situations, variations on rules/guidelines, and how they got there.

A collection of discussions of communal norms around practice but also a record of how Jewish communities self govern and, one can infer from studying it, what Jewish values underlie these communities.

Debate. Great, confusing, open-ended, stirring, law-making debates about the arcane and quotidian practices of Jewish people. A maze to train the mind. A Rorschach for one's values and present circumstances. A compendium of legal and moral voices from long ago.

Their responses demonstrate a deepened factual understanding, as well as a new knack for the depth of the rabbinic project undertaken in the Talmud. This move seems like a necessary step in the process of transformative learning: in which one's mind is sharpened, and new information is gained alongside an increased capacity for complexity.

Final Go-Around

In our final class, I asked students the question: "Why study the Talmud as progressive and radical people, as activists, or as secular Jews?" They wrote quietly for about five minutes, and then we went around, each person sharing their answer with the rest of the class. Below is a selection of responses to this question, which offer a range of perspectives on why studying Talmud feels worthwhile to my students:

The Talmud is a text that works out (back and forth) what society should look like and how it should be organized. Because it does this within a context that is old and male and authoritative, it seems like studying Talmud today within our various identities can give us a starting point to imagine the kind of society *we* want. The one that we deserve. The Talmud provides a framework to work out, to question, and does not always have answers. So it gives us permission to do the same now. To find answers that make sense to us, which may in some ways agree with the text, and in some ways not, just like the rabbis are doing in the text.

Social structure, human needs, and peaceful coexistence turns today on many of the same basic principles that it did in Talmudic times. Understanding the competing ideas and listening to the debates from that era help identify societal and governmental needs today.

[Studying Talmud] gives me an opportunity to be in touch with a system of thinking and appreciating moral and legal questions that operates in a framework and context outside that of our current State's. An opportunity for creativity and a model of the rigor and dissent and flexibility needed to govern, rule and support a people.

These comments demonstrate to me that as my students learned Talmud, they were thinking on a macro-level about how societies are structured and what kinds of questions are at play when we think about how people should live. Through the specifics of Perek Hahovel, and the way that I framed this material, they were able to identify these big-picture questions. When asked "Why learn Talmud," most students answered from this big-picture framework, which demonstrated to me that what they most valued about the learning was the opportunity to reflect on these kinds of questions, and the way the minutiae of the sugyot we studied pointed toward larger topics.

Interviews

Another mechanism I used was to interview my students from the Workmen's Circle as well as participants in SVARA's Queer Talmud Camp. I composed a loose set of interview questions, which were not always asked in the same order. The questions I asked were the following:

- Had you learned Talmud before? How/When? How would you describe your level of familiarity prior to this course/retreat?

- Did anything in these texts speak to your life, make you think differently about yourself, make you question something, or help you learn something about yourself? How?
- Was there something about Talmud in particular that spoke to you differently than another type of literature?
- Did learning Talmud feel different than other kinds of learning processes? If so, how?
- Did anything about this learning impact or influence you as an activist?
- What questions did this class/material raise for you?
- Will you keep studying Talmud?

I also tried as much as possible in my interviews to encourage people to be specific in their language, for example if an interviewee used words like “transformative” or “meaning,” I would ask for more information, hoping to uncover the intent behind the term.

I received so much interesting and useful information in these interviews- much more than I can include in this paper. I have tried to distill the responses into categories that reveal some of the major themes my students highlighted about why studying Talmud was impactful and important to them. Below I have created categories for their responses and included one or two quotes from interviews for each category.

Talmud study for Empowerment

In this category, students discussed how the study of Talmud enhanced their sense of personal empowerment –in terms of empowering them with the tools and skills to be Talmudic readers, as well as in a broader sense by empowering them to consider the world differently. Studying Talmud can be a source of motivation and encouragement to consider difficult questions and feel a sense of personal strength in responding to the issues that arise.

“I think it was transformative in that you’re in this entirely different space for that week (SVARA Queer Talmud Camp), where you really leave feeling transformed— at a little bit of a higher level in your thinking and approaching text. It made me feel empowered to do that study and struggle with the text, to read Hebrew and speak out loud in Hebrew. [It was] transformative in that it was empowering – both in terms of how to

study and read Talmud, and also because the things I learned changed how I think about the world a little bit.”

“I’m just really empowered by this tradition, and the treasure-chest of tools that I have to explore and find answers, continue to ask questions and create answers for others. [Talmud] gives me a sense of belonging and gratitude, that my connection to the Jewish community isn’t just among my personal community or the fringe Communist Jewish world I grew up in, it is actually really foundational... Foundational meaning that the way I was taught to be Jewish, the values of my Leftist Judaism are the values I can find in the Talmud.”

Talmud study in an activist framework

The rabbinic project deals with questions of power and authority in a way that can be particularly compelling for activists, who frequently engage with similar questions. Students described their study of Talmud as providing them with tools to challenge power, amplifying for them the need to be active on justice issues, and exposing for them questions they have about integrity and hypocrisy when engaged in struggles for justice.

“I started out this class feeling very disenfranchised from the Jewish religious elite, and this election has made me continue to feel that way. But the way we have examined texts being so different from how I had examined them in religious settings has made me realize that I can take these texts and use them to challenge that power, that I can speak their language, and use the texts that they know, that they are most intimate with, and use it to challenge them.”

“[Studying Talmud] made me more aware of my need to be an activist. Generally I have been a very passive participant in [political/social] movements. The central theme [of Ben Sorer u’Moreh] is that we can’t just accept that this practice is in the past, forget about it and move on from it and say that we’re better now. If we don’t argue this or fight against it, it’s always going to be there. We are responsible for what happened and continues to happen, so we have to think about it as textual activists.”

“The thing that surprised me the most was how much this is like being in law school, and just how universal the questions that the Talmud, at least the ones presented here, seem to be. They are the same kinds of questions that different groups of people who are trying to create a society are grappling with on some level. One fundamental question for me, as someone who went into law school feeling like I wanted to be a radical lawyer, is whether there is also some contradiction inherent in that, because you’re participating in becoming

the power structure... Is there hypocrisy in the rabbis? They are still leaders and powerful people, even if they're chimney sweeps relative to other figures of authority in the community... Can you in fact still be radical when you're entering in to a system of power, or in their case building a system of power? That question... there's no answer, but this made me think about that.”

Talmud study to enhance our own thought-process and creativity

The rabbinic process is one of innovation; a resourceful, playful and deeply wise way of moving into the future using tools both new and old. Students were inspired by Talmud study as a window into the creative process of the rabbis, as well as invited to participate in their own processes of thought and creation.

“I appreciate being able to delve deeply into a model of inquiry, discussion, rigor, creativity, flexibility and dissent that is just culturally and rationally different from our own. It's felt helpful, both in terms of the actual output, to have a different vision of what society could look like, and also the mode of debate is both familiar and also dramatically weird. And that inspires in me a sort of creativity and curiosity.”

“The logic puzzle draws me in. You're trying to explain something, both to understand how to explain it and how these other people explain it. It's higher order thinking: non-linear, not just going from point A to B, but rather because of C, A goes to B which connects to C, or something. It changes the way your mind works, and afterward you feel different as a thinker.”

Talmud study to help us articulate the responsibilities and values of a society

The discussions in the Talmud invite students to consider big-picture questions about the ethical frameworks and value systems of a society. By exploring how these questions were discussed two thousand years ago, students gain insight into the roots of modern Jewish and secular societies, as well as into their own value systems and desires for a just and socially responsible world.

“I knew [the Talmud] was a set of legal rules, but I didn't really understand that it was grappling fully with the basis of life, how decisions get made, how society works, very similarly to our legal system. I was surprised at how much it was like my law school learning. Even though its sources were biblical, it had a really interesting secular application in ways that I hadn't thought of. For example, I liked us using over time this question of how people are compensated for wrongs. For me, that has so many ethical questions in it. Even though the references are biblical, it's really about [the question:] “How do we want to run our society when there is conflict?” The questions of – “What kind of pain do we acknowledge, how do we acknowledge

suffering, does gender play a role, does class play a role”... Even though it’s a small topic of compensating for damages, we can view our whole society through that lens. Legal systems have so much in common, even across such time span and geography. Ultimately a society comes down to asking itself many of the same fundamental questions but within its own cultural perspective.”

“I’ve studied Talmud before but not in terms of the way this class was formatted, with a look at leadership and power and how that impacts fairness. In some ways that was, like, cherry-picking parts of the Talmud, but it actually was a really interesting and engaging way to look at this body of text. What is the Talmud? — Historically to me it felt like a discussion about communal norms, but this class made the conversation about the Talmud’s underlying values a little sharper.”

Seeing ourselves as part of the rabbinic conversation and tradition

Studying Talmud allows students to participate in ancient conversations. Learning these texts is not a passive process. Rather, through close reading, hevruta study and class discussion, students bring their own voices into dialogue with the texts. They expressed surprise and delight at the relevance of rabbinic conversations to their own current-day realities, and a feeling of connection across time and space with these foundational voices in Jewish tradition.

“It was really cool engaging with questions that are millennia old, and the relevance that these questions still hold, even though everything was kind of on a spectrum from ridiculous and irrelevant-seeming to super relevant and always present, and many things were simultaneously both of those things, and that was cool. I have studied some ancient philosophy before, but the Greek stuff that you have to read in school. It feels very different. The open-endedness and the contradictory nature of so many of the arguments [in Talmud] made me feel like I was actually engaging in a debate of many generations, which felt more powerful than just reading one dude’s philosophy. Because we’re reading many people’s philosophies at once, not just one. Well, many dudes’ philosophies I guess.”

“Studying Talmud creates such a line of communication through time. Even the performance of the beit midrash— sitting and studying in the same fashion, in a traditional way. [It] opens up an intergenerational line of communication. [It] doesn’t feel so abstract, it feels very connective and interactive. You don’t expect to feel that connected to such an ancient text, but especially in the way, in SVARA’s philosophy, in the way SVARA teaches the history of how this thinking came to be, it was like learning about myself in a really real way. To the point where, on Tuesday night of the election, I was thinking about the rabbis. They felt it

coming. They had nothing to lose. Their weird stuff is the reason that I'm alive. It kept the Jewish people together. It allowed them to survive a huge amount of oppression and change. It's a queer text. I'm proud of that. I think it's so important the way Benay talks about it, our ownership [of the text] for our own survival, this is the same task we're being called to today."

The process itself of Talmud study as transformative

Talmud study is not easy. Sticking with texts that are difficult to decode, to understand, and to engage with conceptually can be deeply rewarding. The process of studying Talmud, with its unique methodologies and modalities, can itself result in a feeling of transformation and a new-found commitment to the process.

"It's a real challenge – my first feeling about it was feeling really overwhelmed by the challenge, because I really tried to take [hevruta] seriously – I wanted to be responsible for someone else's learning, and also I wanted to learn. With a stranger, it's awkward and difficult, especially when I'm not great at Hebrew, and it's slow, and you don't really know why you're doing it until you know. And then it sneaks up on you, and then you really know in your bones why you're doing it, because it's gotten in...When I say "gotten in" I mean it has an effect on how you think, and you realize you like it, and want to keep doing it."

"The obvious difference [between Talmud and other kinds of literature] is that there is an additional translation aspect. When you're learning Talmud you're not learning a fact, but rather [you are asking]: "What does this fact tell me about the rest of the world, or about how I approach something?" You're not learning it for the sake of the law, but rather for what the law tells you about other things in the world."

Hearing from my students, most of whom were exposed to the Talmud for the first time in this class or on this summer retreat, highlights for me the transformative potential of Talmud study. Their thoughts and reflections affirm for me that even for adult beginner learners, the impactful and engaging elements of Talmud study shine through, especially when taught with an eye toward the kinds of themes they describe above. Even when studying in English translation, and even with such a limited exposure to rabbinic literature, students were able to glean many of the important motifs of this literature. They were able to ask specific questions local to the chapter of Talmud they learned, as well as broad questions about the rabbinic project. They were able to consider the subject matter in terms of its relevance and implications for their own lives and contemporary society. Most of them seemed to feel that this text made some sort of claim on them – asking something of them in terms of their own self-reflection. By interviewing them I am able to see that,

in the ways they articulated above, Talmud study is indeed a field with the potential for transformation, and that adult beginner learners can quickly and profoundly pick up on to the power of Talmud study.

ORIENTATIONS: SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVES ON “WHY TALMUD?”

Having considered the “Why Talmud?” question from the perspective of my students, I also sought to locate the “Why Talmud?” question in the work of scholars of pedagogy. In addition to his scholarship on Transformative Education, Jon Levisohn also publishes work about Talmud pedagogy. An important contribution to the field is his article “A Menu of Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature,” which utilizes Barry Holtz’s system of articulating distinct “orientations” for Torah education, and applies it to rabbinics. Holtz defines what he means by “orientation”:

... a description not of a teacher’s ‘method’ in some technical meaning of the word, but in a deeper sense, of a teacher’s most powerful conceptions and beliefs about the field he or she is teaching. It is the living expression of the philosophical questions... What is my view of the aims of education [in this subject], and how as a teacher do I attain these aims?²²

Teaching with a self-awareness of one’s orientation allows for a transparency that brings to the fore the teacher’s assumptions, priorities, and values. It might also clarify for a teacher their best choice of teaching methods. Levisohn elaborates: “The teacher’s conceptions are conceptions about what any particular subject is all about, its contours, its central issues and challenges, and its purposes – why is it worth teaching and learning.”²³ However, an orientation is not only about ultimate purposes. Levisohn warns that the ultimate purpose for studying a text might be theologically meaningful, but not pedagogically sound. For example, a math teacher might wax poetic about the beauty or fundamental universality of mathematics, “but this will not help us understand how such a teacher teaches, what she emphasizes, what mathematical capacities she tries to nurture in students and how she tries to do so.”²⁴ Distinct from ultimate purposes, orientations “combine a set of teachers’ conceptions and characteristic practices that hang together in a coherent way.”²⁵ An orientation is a cross-section of beliefs and pedagogical methodology, which point toward a central guiding framework for a teacher’s approach to the subject.

²² Barry Holtz, “Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and Practice,” JTS Press 2003, 48-49.

²³ Jon A Levisohn, “A Menu of Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature,” The Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University, June 2009, <https://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/pdfs/2010-Levisohn-Orientations.pdf>, 5.

²⁴ Levisohn, A Menu of Orientations, 5.

²⁵ Levisohn, A Menu of Orientations, 5.

Lastly, it is important to note in Levisohn’s article that there is no hierarchy to orientations. Each orientation contains examples of both excellent and mediocre teaching. Each orientation also contains a compelling case for its relevance and educational potency. Levisohn notes that “the theory of orientations emerges from the conviction that there are, in the world, a variety of responsible ways of thinking about teaching this particular subject—not good ways and bad ways, not educative ways and miseducative ways, but a genuine diversity of purposes.”²⁶ By outlining 10 orientations to rabbinic literature, Levisohn seeks to offer a “menu” to educators. One teacher will likely employ multiple orientations, but by honing in on the specificity of each, Levisohn makes these distinct orientations available to teachers in a new way. The orientations can serve as a toolkit, providing teachers with a heightened level of choice and reflection about their own approach to rabbinic texts in the classroom.

Levisohn’s work is particularly helpful to me as a new teacher of Talmud. Throughout rabbinical school I have been (consciously and unconsciously) observing my mentors and Talmud teachers (Rabbis Benay Lappe, Jane Kanarek, Micha’el Rosenberg, Ebn Leader, and Miriam-Simma Walfish), trying to understand how and why they teach Talmud and what values they impart to their students as they do so. Levisohn’s language about guiding orientations in one’s teaching gives me a way to understand that as I continue to grow, I am both integrating the orientations of my mentors as well as trying to hone in on my *own* orientation – the goals and values that underlie and drive my teaching.

In his “Menu”, Levisohn identifies ten orientations:

1. Torah/Instruction Orientation
2. Contextual Orientation
3. Jurisprudential Orientation
4. Halakhic Orientation
5. Literary Orientation
6. Cultural Orientation
7. Historical Orientation
8. *Beki’ut* Orientation
9. Interpretive Orientation
10. Skills Orientation

In my own pursuit of meaningful Talmud pedagogy, I have encountered two additional orientations that stand out as particularly influential on my teaching, which are not included on Levisohn’s list. Both are conceived of by contemporary queer Talmud educators.

²⁶ Levisohn, A Menu of Orientations, 5.

The first is the work of Rabbi Sarra Lev, which I began to address above. In the following excerpt, Lev answers for herself the questions of “Why Talmud?”

If we accept that the ‘stock of stories’ of the Jewish narrative constitutes us psychologically and spiritually as Jews, then the only way to reconstitute what it means to be a Jew is to visit those narratives and understand how they have done that work on us so that we can then move beyond the limitations of our own narrative.²⁷

For Lev, Jews need to study Talmud in order to understand the roles we’ve been assigned in the world, the way our tradition has shaped us as individuals and as a collective. In part, this is in service of a stronger self-awareness, and in part we need to face our foundational stories in order to transcend them. Having a stronger fluency in our ‘stock of stories’ allows us to ‘move beyond the limitations of our own narrative,’ a process of expanding who and how we are in the world. Here I am reminded of Rachel Adler’s claim for a feminist halakhah:

As a committed Jew, I come to ancient canonical stories, biblical, midrashic or aggadic, with an assumption that I belong to them and they belong to me. I encounter them searching for Torah, that is, for redemptive teaching, and for *zikaron*, for the collective memory that completes me, that binds me to all who ever have or will claim or been claimed by these stories.²⁸

Like Lev, Adler here expresses that Jewish canonical texts have a claim on her. The collective stock of stories has shaped who she is, who she is connected to, and how she understands herself in the world. For both Adler and Lev, this understanding of oneself as bound to Jewish text is not a passive relationship. Rather, this sense of boundedness calls upon a person to engage actively, and even become a producer of textual knowledge and methodology. For Adler, this is expressed through halakhic innovation. For Lev, her theory about the active role that one takes— as a woman, as a queer person, as a postmodern and politically progressive person—regarding the textual tradition evolves as her scholarship advances. Lev uses various terms to describe the essence of her orientation: “Talmud as ethics,” “Talmud as summons” and “Talmud that works the heart.”

In an essay published in the 2013 collection “Turn It and Turn it Again,” Lev focuses on Talmudic study as a way to teach rabbinical students – those entering a role of leadership in the Jewish world – to

²⁷ Lev, “Teaching Rabbinics as an Ethical Endeavor,” 390.

²⁸ Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 1.

better engage with questions of ethics: “Rabbinical students need to learn the tools, as rabbis, to be critical of power relations in the world, because they will be spiritual leaders who will be called upon to confront injustice.”²⁹ She offers numerous specific examples of how to employ this orientation. For instance, the rabbis in the Talmud worked to articulate their own standards for societal norms. When taught with an orientation toward ethics, these texts reveal the limits and boundaries of the rabbis. Lev then turns the critical lens onto her students: “If we are able to see that the rabbis lived within a set of boundaries, it might teach us how to explore our own.”³⁰ When we read for ethics, rabbinic texts can raise questions for us: “where our ethics come from and where those of the rabbinic sages come from, how these rabbis related to the ethics of the Torah and how we relate to theirs, how these rabbis solved their own ethical problems with the issues that came before them, and how we can deal with those which come from the rabbinic texts.”³¹ By bringing our own questions to the ethical themes of the Talmud, we also learn how to engage with questions of ethics, power and justice in our own lives.

In the same essay, Lev quotes her student Caren, who describes another specific example of the way in which Talmud study hones one’s ethical perspective: “I believe the Talmud’s dialogical thinking conveys an important ethical teaching about there being more than one way of looking at truth, non-dogmatism, and honoring of the process of searching for truth, not just the final result.”³² Caren’s statement reflects one of Lev’s criteria for an ethical orientation, in which students do not fall into a trap of binary thinking – neither accepting nor rejecting rabbinic ethics, but rather “making meaning out of them by exploring our own values through them.”³³ The study of Talmud can expand a student’s thinking by creating space for more nuance and complexity, as well as a sharper focus on the ethical systems of the past and one’s own contemporary encounter with ethical questions.

In her more recent work, Lev focuses on Talmud as a “call to look within.”³⁴ An essay written in 2016, published in the collection “Learning to Read Talmud: What It Looks Like and How It Happens” offers this new approach. It is not a radical shift from an ethical orientation, but does update Lev’s main emphasis. In her prior work, she focuses on ethics and power relations. In her most recent work, she has added new components to this orientation, including the vulnerability and empathy of the student. Her updated orientation, now called “Talmud as summons” or “Talmud that works the heart,” is meant to “push our buttons ...by which we can be pushed to become ever more reflective, understanding, empathetic,

²⁹ Lev, “Teaching Rabbinics as an Ethical Endeavor,” 393.

³⁰ Lev, “Teaching Rabbinics as an Ethical Endeavor,” 400.

³¹ Lev, “Teaching Rabbinics as an Ethical Endeavor,” 398.

³² Lev, “Teaching Rabbinics as an Ethical Endeavor,” 408.

³³ Lev, “Teaching Rabbinics as an Ethical Endeavor,” 414.

³⁴ Lev, “Talmud That Works Your Heart,” 193.

discerning and expansive”³⁵ people. Lev’s goal is still for her students to consider power and ethics, but the effort cannot be solely intellectual or analytical. Rather, the Talmud lays claim on the *heart* of a student – their feelings, their intuition, their gut reactions, their compassion.

One way in which Lev achieves this working of the heart is by exploring varying levels of affinity with, and estrangement from, the text itself. She writes:

for today’s liberal reader, the Talmud does little to promote identification with the characters and more often evokes estrangement (and sometimes derision). Hence, I chose texts that could bridge between this altogether different reality, the Other, and the students’ own cultural reality, and offer access to the familiar as well as the strange.... Additionally, if a text had elements with which the students might disagree, that friction itself could stimulate conversation. I did not want to alienate them entirely with ‘terrible texts’ merely to provoke discussion and regress into sensationalism, and yet, I wanted to deal head-on with highly problematic material. Ultimately, my basic organizing principle for choosing my texts was to present texts that were as complex as the Talmud itself.³⁶

I recognize elements from my own recent teaching experience in Lev’s methodology. Reflecting on their study of Talmud, my students expressed surprise at the level of familiarity they felt with rabbinic texts that they had never previously encountered. They sometimes expressed familiarity with the *shakla vetarya* (discussion, give and take) of the Talmud as a characteristically Jewish modality of argumentation that they recognized in their own cultural context. They also expressed familiarity with the content of the Talmud’s debates, finding the issues at play in Perek HaHovel (the eight chapter of Tractate Bava Kama, which we studied in our course) to be relevant and timely in their own lives and society. I also wanted to make sure that students engaged with the unfamiliarity and distance that Lev describes. For example, by spending a long chunk of class time unpacking the idea that a human being’s injury can be measured based on their hypothetical value in the slave market, our class considered their own departure from the ethical and cultural framework of the Talmud, and it was this distance between themselves and the rabbinic value system which allowed for a dynamic encounter with the text.

Lev models her orientation on the I-Thou encounter: the idea that coming into conversation with a distinct “Other” ultimately leads one toward deeper self-understanding. When we encounter this Other, we are destabilized and then ultimately re-stabilized. Our sense of self and certainty can be disrupted, which enables true learning and brings us into a fuller and more open-hearted wisdom. This theory echoes Jon

³⁵ Lev, “Talmud That Works Your Heart,” 177.

³⁶ Lev, “Talmud That Works Your Heart,” 185.

Levisohn's first model of transformation – in which one's sense of self is disrupted and changed. Lev explains the process:

'Working the heart' is meant to cause a disruption in what Paolo Freire calls 'circles of certainty,' by identifying (and dispelling) responses to a text that are entirely based on what we *think* we know. But, while trying to dispel the predisposition to 'know and judge,' I also want to keep my students close enough so that reading Talmud *matters*. How can they truly meet the Other, if they do not feel at all attached to the text? Reading the Talmud as 'summons' demands the ability to hold both enough distance to quell our assumptions and enough familiarity to feel something, to create meaning. I want the students to grow through *getting to know* a text that is laden with religious meaning, is entirely foreign, and yet, they can claim as their own.³⁷

Here too, I recognize some of my own goals as an educator. For each Talmud class I taught, there was an internal part of me crossing my fingers and desperately hoping that students would "buy in," that the invitation to make meaning would not be lost on them, and that the text would engage them enough to lay some sort of claim on them. This is still a mysterious process to me; it is not entirely clear how the "magic" of Talmud study happens, and at what point students get "hooked." In her scholarship, Lev does the work of putting language to this process. Students become involved in an encounter with the Other, and their dialogue with this Other, the text, enables meaning-making. It matters that the text is both close and far from their conceptions of normalcy. The familiarity and the alienation both respectively "work the heart" and "summon" the inner transformation of the reader.

The other Talmud educator whose orientation has deeply inspired my own teaching, and whose particular perspective is left off of Levisohn's menu, is Rabbi Benay Lappe, the founder and Rosh Yeshiva of SVARA. Though Lappe does not name her orientation explicitly, I would categorize it as either "Talmud for empowerment," "Talmud as radical innovation," or "Talmud as a queer text."

Lappe named her yeshiva after the rabbinic legal innovation of *svara*, which allowed the rabbis to grant legitimacy and authority to their own ethical and logical impulses on the same scale as a Torah text. In her essay *The New Rabbis*, Lappe classifies the rabbis of the Talmud as "queer", and explains her thinking:

The visionaries who picked up the pieces of a shattered Judaism two thousand years ago, after the destruction of the Second Temple and the crashing of Biblical Judaism, were courageous,

³⁷ Lev, "Talmud That Works Your Heart," 184.

creative, out-of-the-box thinking, fringy radicals. Queer, if you will. Not in the sense of sexuality or gender, perhaps, but in what *being* those very kinds of people usually makes you: courageous, creative, out-of-the-box-thinking, fringy, and radical. And deeply attuned to that still, small voice inside and confident of the truth it is telling you even when the whole world is telling you something else. These guys called themselves Rabbis. Teachers. They were the architects of a Judaism that would have been virtually unrecognizable to those practicing the Judaism of the Temple era.

... Those queer Rabbis took their outsider insights – their sensitivity to those marginalized and oppressed by the Torah itself, their courage to stand up for them and mess with the Tradition to incorporate them- and declared their informed internal ethical impulse an authentic source of God’s will. They deemed it a source of Jewish legal change as authoritative as a verse in the Torah itself – so much so that a law that they created out of *svara* has the same status as one that appears verbatim in the Torah itself – *d’oraita*. And they went even further than that. They declared that one’s *svara* could even trump a verse in the Torah when the two conflicted.³⁸

Lappe spells out how the invention of *svara* reveals the radical project of these “queer” rabbis. Her yeshiva is built on the idea that every system of logic and meaning eventually falls apart. She calls this her “crash theory.”³⁹ After a system crashes, for example the fall of the Second Temple, a person or a society generally have three options. The first is to walk away entirely from the system, and find a new system of truth. The second is to hold tightly on to the system, even after it has failed. The third option is to integrate the change – not abandoning the system but neither conserving the parts of it that have fallen. Rather, the third option is the creation of something new, utilizing the tools of the old. Lappe maps this theory on to Jewish history, claiming that the rabbis chose option three when the Temple and Biblical Judaism fell and they embarked on the project of the Talmud. She links this model to many moments, both in world history, and in the lifespan of a person. When Jesus was crucified, this was a “crash.” When a queer or transgender person comes out, and realizes they are not who they were socialized to be, this is a “crash.” When a spouse dies, or a person becomes terminally ill, or when someone raised religious realizes that they are an atheist, these and so many moments like them are what Lappe calls the “crash of the master narrative.”

In Lappe’s framework, change is inevitable. Our master narratives shift under our feet, no matter how hard we might try to control them. The role of *svara* in the crash cycle is to empower us to survive the

³⁸ Benay Lappe, “The New Rabbis: A Postscript.” (*Torah Queeries*, Eds. Drinkwater, Lesser & Shneer. New York & London: NY University Press, 2009), 311-312.

³⁹ Benay Lappe, “1, 2, 3, CRASH! How to Navigate Inevitable Change” (Online Video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, Feb 23, 2014. Web. Accessed on May 11, 2015).

change, and to innovate such that we do not have to abandon the past, but rather can work flexibly with it to create something better. *Svara* permits the rabbis to turn to their own life experiences, their own insights, observations and ideas, and to derive authority from these sources. *Svara* highlights and elevates the realm of personal experience. Lappe teaches these texts, containing rabbinic *svara*, at her yeshiva, in an effort to empower learners to understand this Talmudic innovation, and learn to see themselves as harbingers of the liberation our world needs, whether it be queer liberation, economic liberation, anti-racist liberation, etc. She warns about the risks of writing *svara* into the rabbinic system:

... *Svara* allows *any* change—even to the point of uprooting the entire Tradition itself—to create a system that better achieves that Tradition’s ultimate goals. It is a mechanism of change that arguably should be entrusted only to those who are committed stakeholders in the Jewish enterprise. My reading of Talmud also tells me that the Rabbis who came up with this potentially dangerous and potentially chaos-creating source of change required its practitioners to be learned in the Tradition. This cannot be overstated. They did not believe that *svara* was merely one’s uneducated “gut feeling” but that it was one’s moral impulse that was deeply influenced by having been steeped in the intricacies of the values, principles, and concerns of the entire Jewish Tradition as well as by a broad exposure to the world and its people.⁴⁰

The rabbis put careful limits around *svara*, ensuring that only a person who could also claim fluency in the Jewish tradition could bring his own insights to the table. This is why we cannot completely abandon our “master narrative” when change occurs. Rather, by maintaining a strong link to the past, the rabbis granted themselves, and their own deeply intuitive senses of justice and goodness, a high level of authority. For Lappe, “empowerment” happens both through the theoretical framing of rabbinic history, as well as through meticulous text-based methodology. Every single SVARA student, whether they are an advanced learner or have just learned their *aleph-bet*, is required to learn using the same steps of careful word-for-word translation, grammatical mastery of every word on the page, and memorization and recitation of the text. Shiurim are taught at mixed levels, allowing all students to experience a sense of mutual responsibility for, and investment in, one another’s learning. Empowerment happens when everyone, regardless of level, achieves mastery over a text. Lappe ensures that her students will become fluent in the tradition without shortcuts.

Teaching in this way, Lappe has formulated an orientation to Talmud learning based on two priorities: 1. Empowering students with marginalized identities to trust their own ethical intuition and lived

⁴⁰ Lappe, *Torah Queeries*, 312.

experience as a source of authority, and 2. To develop the same skill-set the rabbis utilized, a skill-set of resilience and creative innovation for the sake of justice and liberation.

WORKING TOWARD MY OWN ORIENTATION

On a personal level, studying Talmud has allowed me to better access my own moral, ethical and theological voice, while locating my voice within an echo chamber of ancestral predecessors. In addition to the fact that I simply find Talmud study to be really fun, it has also been an intriguing, illuminating, and rewarding practice, which has sharpened my critical mind and my capacity to think through complexity and paradox. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, studying Talmud has opened up a window for me into the radical nature of Jewish tradition, which has empowered me to feel that I am truly a part of it.

When I say “radical” here, I mean that both in form and in content, the Talmud teaches its readers to think critically about figures of authority, even while its authors engage in the project of constructing their own authority. In the wake of destruction and devastation, the project of rabbinic literature was to enable the rabbis to act boldly, to become agents of creation and builders of a society, shifting consciousness and shifting their world. This marginal group of visionaries responded by creating literature that would empower themselves and their people. In my own ongoing development as a student and teacher of Talmud, I believe that this literature can be read as a blueprint for a Jewish liberation theology. It shows us how survival and change are interwoven processes. The Talmud offers us a template for our own authority and empowerment, which is especially significant and subversive for those of us whose identities have been historically denied authority in the Jewish community and in our society more generally. This authority and empowerment is never without humility. Rather, the Talmud conditions us to question singular truths and to listen to one another. We are encouraged to claim a creative voice and a bold vision, to envision the world we want to live in, while simultaneously becoming better at recognizing the voices of others. The process of studying Talmud, of learning to read the text and think like the text, is the process of queering our relationship to power and to scripture. It is the process of finding ourselves and our values reflected through a difficult and seemingly outdated document, claiming it as our own, and adding our voices to its pages.

Before going further into this framework, which is an attempt to being to articulate my own orientation to Talmud education, it is important to point out the text’s limitations. The authors and redactors of the Talmud are men. The centuries during which these texts were written were centuries of patriarchy – women were kept out of centers of study, and mostly relegated to the domestic domain. Though we do not have much historical evidence of this time period, we know that men dominated nearly every public leadership role in the Jewish society of the time. There are rare and important occasions in the Talmud in

which women's voices are lifted up and their words are recorded. However, the majority of rabbinic texts exclude or denigrate the voices of women. Furthermore, the Talmud writes at length on women's lives, their concerns and needs, and their bodies. In many senses, the Talmud acts just like other ancient (and contemporary) texts, which freely comment and legislate on the lives of women without including women's perspectives or leadership in the process. This critique can be broadened to include other categories of subjugated peoples: the Talmud often includes rabbinic stances that also dehumanize queer people, people of non-normative body types, the disabled, the poor. However the Talmud also eschews a monolithic voice, and we find positions in the text that dignify and value all human lives, making crucial space in the legal system for the rights of those listed above.

Extensive scholarship and cultural activism is being done in this regard today. It is an exciting time to be a queer Jewish woman studying rabbinic texts. There are feminist and queer commentaries being written on the Talmud in the 21st century. There are scholars writing on the intersections of disability justice and Talmud, on intersex people and Talmud, on labor rights in Talmudic literature, and more. By bringing Talmud to spaces and students who would not otherwise be able to access them, I am hoping to broaden this field. Referring back to Sarra Lev's conception of Talmud study in an I-Thou relational framework, I believe that bringing students into relationship with Talmud has a reciprocal effect: the text is transformed by the reader, and the reader is transformed by the text. Talmudic study needs people of these identities to weigh in, to illuminate what has not yet been seen, and to expand the tradition.

When teaching beginners, one of my goals was simply to expose students to the basics of Talmud: What is the Talmud, when was it written, by whom, for whom, and why? When considering the question: "What does it mean to teach Talmud to adult beginner learners who identify as either secular, radical, or progressive," I also hoped to bring some of my own process, in which the Talmud opened up for me the complexity and radical elements of Jewish tradition, to my students. My curriculum reflects this intention: I am interested in asking students questions about authority, about the creative relationship between the rabbi and scripture, about the variety of opinions present within a text, and about the underlying values the text reveals. From listening to my students, it is clear that they picked up on these elements, which I emphasized in my teaching.

As I continue to refine my orientation to Talmud teaching, I hope to strike a balance between attention to reading skills and attention to the values of liberation and justice. My class at the Workmen's Circle was taught in English translation, which felt like a necessary choice given the community and the goals of the class as they were expressed to me. Students did not come to this course in order to learn the skills needed for studying Talmud in the original Hebrew and Aramaic. However, my interest in both rabbis Benay Lappe and Sarra Lev's approaches to Talmud study partly derives from an admiration that they

incorporate both the language skill set and the conceptual frameworks needed to learn on multiple levels and derive deep meaning from the text while also building linguistic mastery.

In my own goals as an educator, I see both of Levisohn's models of transformation at play. The first is a model of total change. I hear my students reflecting back this model when they say things like "I didn't know that Talmud had something for me! And now I do." Some of my students described their encounter with this text as disruptive and jarring to their sense of themselves and of the world, as well as formative of a new approach. They began this learning as people who don't study Talmud, and ended it as people who have begun to incorporate Talmud into their understanding of themselves, their Jewish lives, and their relationships to some of life's biggest questions.

I also see some of my students exemplifying a hybrid of Levisohn's second model of transformation with the idea of transformation proposed by Rabbis Jaffe, Goldstein and Kimmelman-Block in their "Inner Life and Social Change" document. Levisohn characterizes his second model as "gradual change," and "Inner Life and Social Change" identifies transformation as a process of cultivating practices that strengthen and deepen one's pre-existing values. Many of my students brought their existing convictions and identities into our class, and found new material to affirm and encourage them. The Talmud they learned enriched their commitment to certain progressive values – a form of transformation based in synthesis rather than disruption.

In the end, after embarking on teaching my class at the Workmen's Circle and writing this Capstone paper, the terms I would use to describe my orientation are the same as they were when I began: I teach Talmud for the sake of transformation, liberation, innovation, and empowerment. However, through the work of Talmud pedagogy scholars, and the reflections of my students, I now feel that I have a better, deeper, and more precise understanding of what each of these terms can mean.

CONCLUSION

Daniel Boyarin writes "What good can we do for a troubled world by studying ancient texts?"⁴¹ In other words, as someone dedicated to justice and liberation for all peoples, what does my lens bring to this ancient text? And what does the text bring to my religious and political life? Boyarin reflects on his own question:

⁴¹ Boyarin, Daniel. "Rabbinic Resistance to Male Domination: A Case Study in Talmudic Cultural Poetics." *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age*, Ed. Steven Kepnes. (New York & London: New York University Press. 1996), 118.

I desire to empower a change of gender relations within the communities of Jews who are dedicated to maintaining a powerful connection with the Talmudic tradition. This statement, unpacked, demonstrates two motivations: a progressive feminist motivation and a conservative religious and cultural one. I wish to change the practice of Judaism out of a moral, political commitment, but I wish to change Judaism because of another urgency: the need to have a Judaism to hold on to and pass on. Jews (or others) who simply find the memory of Talmudic Judaism irrelevant will not respond to the political force of this inquiry except perhaps vicariously.⁴²

I share Boyarin's dual motivation. My political commitment to justice is radical and feminist, and my religious commitment to the Talmud and other primary sources of Jewish tradition is conservative. For me, "the memory of Talmudic Judaism" is not irrelevant, and so I teach Talmud for myself and others who seek to build bridges between ancient texts and postmodern lives.

I have always wondered, and worried, about how Talmud will continue to be a part of my rabbinate after rabbinical school if I am not primarily living or working in a Jewish community with a high level of Jewish literacy and fluency. What role does Talmud play for lay-people, what can the process of learning it offer to them? And a more anxious question: Will anyone in the wider world ever want to study this with me? What I have learned is that people will indeed want to study this text with me, to probe it for meaning and relevance, and invite it to transform them. Increasingly, in non-Orthodox Jewish communities, the study of Talmud is gaining momentum. New *yeshivot* have formed in the United States, and pre-existing institutions have made new kinds of spaces for Talmud learning. These new institutions and spaces are committed to bringing the study of Talmud to a broader audience of Jews. I hope to be a part of this ongoing wave of renewal, and to teach with as much audacity and skill as the rabbinic project itself has taught me.

⁴² Boyarin, 118-119.

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