Learning to Read Talmud: What it Looks Like and How it Happens, edited by Jane L. Kanarek and Marjorie Lehman, Boston, Academic Studies Press, 2016, xxviii + 229 pp, ISBN: 978-1-61811-513-3.

A colleague who teaches education once told me, half seriously and half jokingly, that the only set induction that she had ever seen in a Talmud class was something along the lines of, “Open the Gemara to Baba Metsia 22a.” I have to confess that much of what I experienced as a student and as a young instructor confirmed her remark. As someone who has spent decades teaching Talmud, the earliest of those years with little pedagogical guidance, I am pleased and grateful that Talmud instruction is now a more intentional endeavor. Learning to Read Talmud is just one of the most recent attempts to think about what it means to teach a challenging ancient text to contemporary students. The book offers the serious educator a window into the minds of eight Talmud instructors, each of whom is wrestling with ways to help students make sense and meaning of the Talmud.

In their introduction, the editors, Jane Kanarek and Marjorie Lehman, contextualize their work and that of their colleagues. They note the expansion of the settings in which Talmud is taught, and the many audiences for Talmud study. The settings include secular universities where students may have no assumptions about the nature of the Talmud, or may have assumptions vastly different from those of more traditional learners. This has led to deeper conversations among academics about “how teachers teach their students to read and how students learn to read the Talmud” (p. viii). The book focuses on three questions: (1) What does it mean for students to learn to read Talmud? (2) How do we, as teachers, help them learn to read? (3) What does learning to read look like when it happens? (ix). The eight contributors to the book teach in a variety of settings to a variety of learners; what unites them is a commitment to reflective teaching practices.

In Chapter 1, Beth Berkowitz describes how her study guides, once intended to help students with no background in Talmud navigate the unfamiliar, became a vehicle for encouraging students who had studied Talmud previously to see what they thought was familiar as unfamiliar. Berkowitz’s experience will sound familiar to anyone who has taught Talmud to students who cut corners when preparing. Her study guides, when used as intended, forced students to slow down and use dictionaries and other reference works, rather than rely on their previous study or guesses. Berkowitz reminds us that one of the first steps in teaching students to read the Talmud is helping them realize that the Talmud is not simply read but engaged; students must learn to make meaning of the text.

Ethan Tucker works with a very different student population, students who are already experienced learners. In Chapter 2, Tucker describes his goal as helping students confront and work through problems that they find even after they have prepared the text, problems that they might be tempted to ignore or dismiss, especially if they are uncomfortable with the issues raised in the text. His approach involves three steps: (1) determining what the text says, the surface meaning of the passage; (2) identifying the problems in the text; (3) studying the Rishonim, not so much to solve the problems that the students have identified, but to refine their understanding of those problems and even to identify other problems. This approach is not meant to solve all students’
problems; rather Tucker hopes that students will appreciate that finding problems in and raising questions about the Talmud is a normative and desirable act.

Secondary readings are often intended to provide background for class sessions. In Chapter 3, Jane Kanarek proposes that scholarly articles can also be used to “enable students to learn how to access the richness of the Bavli’s multiple layers” (p. 57), contributing to skills building and a rich reading of the primary text. Kanarek also recognizes something many of us bemoan: even graduate-level students may need to learn how to read scholarly articles; she offers techniques for helping students acquire this skill through organizing, writing, and discussion. Kanarek’s piece offers new ways for teachers to think about selecting and employing secondary literature in a text course.

In Chapter 4, Marjorie Lehman writes about her struggle to help her undergraduates approach texts more critically. Using selections from the Mishnah that discuss the Temple and the priests, Lehman tried to move her students from seeing the Mishnah as a report of what happened to understanding it as a window into the world as the rabbis wanted it to be. Lehman writes honestly about her successes and disappointments; her experience is a reminder of how difficult it can be to convince students to let go of one way of thinking and fully integrate a new way of thinking.

The fifth and sixth chapters of the book focus on teaching Talmud in secular universities to students with no background in rabbinics. Beyond the challenge of teaching Talmud in translation, the work of Gregg Gardner and Elizabeth Shanks Alexander involves “making the strange familiar” and convincing students that Talmud is worth studying. Unlike the settings described in other chapters, these settings also require an instructor to design learning experiences that might well be the only exposure a student ever has to rabbinic literature. In Chapter 5, Gardner discusses how he seeks to demonstrate the importance of Talmud for the study of Judaism, his reasons for focusing on narrative rather than legal material, and his sense of student learning as demonstrated by their research projects. In Chapter 6, Alexander opens with the question, “How do undergraduates with superficial or no previous exposure to Judaic texts learn to read Talmud in translation within the context of a liberal arts education?” (p. 137). She describes how she shifted her emphasis from teaching students how to read Talmud to helping them see why they should read Talmud in the first place. In Alexander’s class, students learned not only to read Talmud but also about learning in a broad sense. Alexander offered students the opportunity to assess and refine their reading of primary texts and secondary sources. Additionally, assignments encouraged the students to understand themselves better as learners. In the end, Talmud became a vehicle through which Alexander’s students gained familiarity not only with the text but also the process by which each of them learns.

In Chapter 7, Jonathan Milgram considers the role of oral recitation in the educational contexts of the tannaim, amoraim and geonim, and then asks whether these pedagogies might be transferrable to the modern classroom. Although acknowledging that we cannot reproduce ancient or medieval methods in contemporary classrooms, he advocates for the use of “choral reading” in teaching. The class he describes comprised students who had studied Talmud previously but had never engaged in group oral recitation. Milgram would read portions of the Talmudic passage being studied and the students would recite it back to him together. His own reading “included enunciation and inflection, emphasis on the proper pronunciation of each word in the text, and a stress on the technical role of each term and statement in the sugya” (p. 165). After reading a section, Milgram would translate it and explain its function in the sugya. Milgram’s reading replaced what in many classrooms would be reading and translating by individual students, ensuring that the first time the class heard the text it was properly pronounced and stressed; his approach also removed the anxiety some students, particularly those with weaker language skills, feel when called on to read in class. Milgram also believes that the choral reading gave the students a sense of ownership and improved their
understanding of the language of the Talmud over the semester. What started for some as an awkward exercise had a positive impact on the students’ experience.

Most of the chapters in this book assume that our task as Talmud teachers is to make the strange familiar and/or to complicate the familiar. In the eighth and final chapter, Sarra Lev raises what to me seems like the greatest challenge facing those of us who teach rabbinic literature to students who come to Talmud afraid or convinced that its values are inimical to their own. What does one do when one realizes that, “[e]very semester, there is at least one student who enters my class already hating Talmud” (p. 176) or, at the very least, with a hermeneutic of deep suspicion? In response, Lev introduced “Talmud through a Moral Lens”, a course that asks if there is “a way to read Talmud that will help us grow, even when the Talmud itself does not reflect our values” (p. 177). Lev describes with unfailing honesty the challenge of asking students to encounter the text of the Talmud as an Other that deserves to be understood even if the student finds the Other’s worldview alien and deeply disturbing. Lev’s willingness to be vulnerable to her students, something that their writing indicates was an important ingredient in the success of the course, reminds us that we do not teach text alone, but, consciously or unconsciously, teach ourselves as well.

Learning to Read Talmud is a treasure trove for teachers of Talmud, regardless of their audience or setting. Whether a teacher is looking for a new way to think about shaping study guides or in-class reading, struggling to convey Talmud in translation, or wondering how to address the ethical or structural complexity of a given sugya, this book offers new ways to think about the craft. The theme that runs through most of the essays in this book – that as Talmud teachers we strive to make accessible that which is unfamiliar and to make what the students see as familiar more complicated – applies to our pedagogy as well as the experience of our students. The reflective practice of the contributors to this book should inspire every teacher of Talmud, if not every teacher, to be open to rethinking how she approaches her work.

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