

MASECHET TA'ANIT
A BLOOD-LETTER, AN OVERGENEROUS *TZADDIK*,
AND TORAH STUDY IN THE TALMUD

Rachel Ellen Ackerman

**Papers Submitted as Part of a Text Immersion in Partial
Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination**

**Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
School of Rabbinic Studies
Los Angeles, California**

**Date: 2011
Adviser: Dr. Dvora Weisberg**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	2
Synopsis.....	4
Blood-letting and Dentistry: Unexpected Spiritual Endeavors.....	6
The <i>Tzaddik</i> Who Gave Too Much.....	13
<i>Divrei Torah</i> : The Talmudic Imperative to Study.....	20
Bibliography.....	47

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have finally completed my first tractate of Talmud. After many months spent in the *beit midrash*, in cafés, in living rooms and dining rooms, even some study sessions via Skype, I have completed *Masechet Ta'anit*. The ending is bittersweet, the feeling of great accomplishment and the sadness of knowing that what was essentially *Torah lishmah*, Torah study for its own sake, will likely never again be a “requirement”. The responsibility of independent study is now solely my own.

I am incredibly indebted to all those who provided me with the opportunity, guidance, and support in this text immersion. First and foremost I express my deepest gratitude to my *chevruta*, Jordi Schuster Battis. Without her asking me to join her on this endeavor, I never would have immersed in this text. Studying with her over the past several years has been a gift, and completing a tractate of Talmud together has been a wonderful culmination of our rabbinic studies.

Second, I want to thank Dr. Dvora Weisberg who not only served as our adviser for this text immersion, but who was my first Talmud teacher at the Hebrew Union College. Her courses laid both the foundation and the inspiration to continued study of rabbinic literature. To the professors, mentors, friends, and colleagues who have supported me along the way, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I particularly want to extend thanks to Rabbi Ruth Sohn for her support as Jordi and I studied in the *beit midrash* as well as the senior staff of Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles who provided me with the opportunity to give the sermons submitted in this document at Shabbat services.

I also cannot extend enough gratitude to the text itself, whose words constantly provide lessons to be uncovered, whose wisdom paints a picture, and whose antiquity still holds relevance today.

Again, the end is bittersweet, but as we said when we completed the final words of the tractate, “*Hadran alach*, we will return to you, *Masechet Ta'anit*.”

SYNOPSIS

Over the past year, my *chevruta*, Jordi Schuster Battis, and I began our study of *Masechet Ta'anit*, a tractate of Talmud found in *Seder Moed*. *Masechet Ta'anit* is named for the fasting that was decreed on the Jewish community when there was insufficient rainfall.

Ta'anit is divided into four *prakim*, four chapters and is approximately 30 *dapim* in length. Much of the material is *halakhic*, focusing on rain: when to fast for it, what prayers to say, the blowing of the *shofar* in connection to rain, how much rain is or is not enough, and much more. In addition, *Masechet Ta'anit* boasts a great deal of *aggadic* material, ranging from stories about miracle workers, including Honi HaMa'agal, (Honi the Circle Drawer) whose presence would merit the rain to fall. It also includes the story of Nachum Ish Gamzu, a man who always said, "*Gam zeh l'tovah*," "This is also for good," no matter how dire the circumstances.

I have written three papers in conjunction with this text immersion. Two of them are sermons based on *aggadic* material in *Ta'anit*. I had the opportunity to deliver both of these sermons at my internship at Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles. The second paper is on five passages found throughout the Babylonian Talmud that make twelve different comparisons of the phrase "*divrei Torah*" to various objects in Biblical imagery.

The first sermon is about a blood-letter in *Ta'anit* named Abba Umana. Blood-letters, those who drew blood as a form of healing, gain a bad reputation in the Talmud. Abba Umana overcomes the negative portrayals of blood-letters. He turns the work that he does into a spiritual endeavor, prevailing over the obstacles and temptations that come with his profession. The work we engage with in our contemporary lives can often become rote, but

we can learn from Abba Umana how to infuse our daily lives with holiness. This sermon is intended for Shabbat, but is not based on a weekly Torah portion.

The second sermon is about a man named Elazar Ish Birta. Elazar is a man who is extremely generous. He is so generous that *tzedakah* collectors hide from him because he gives all of his money for *tzedakah*, often to his own detriment. His excessive generosity seems to be lauded in the text, and God rewards him with abundant wheat, which he also sets aside for charity. Elazar, however, seems to give at the expense of his family—an idea the text alludes to, but does not denounce. This sermon examines Elazar’s actions in light of *parshat Vayakhel*, and need to balance of *nedivut lev* (generosity) and *chachmat lev* (wisdom).

The third piece of writing for this text immersion studies the Talmudic concern with Torah study and the way it is lauded over nearly all other pursuits in the Babylonian Talmud. The paper is based on five passages found throughout the Babylonian Talmud, one of which occurs in *Ta’anit*, where “*divrei Torah*,” are compared to various objects found in Biblical imagery. The rabbinic authorities expound on the verses, focusing on the extreme importance of *divrei Torah* and, ultimately, Torah study. This piece also examines rabbinic pedagogy in of study and the contemporary implications of these methods.

It is my hope that these pieces provide thought-provoking materials and ideas based on Talmudic texts for Jewish professionals to incorporate into their teaching, sermons, study, and presentations. Talmudic texts not only provide us with challenging and fascinating pieces to study, but can also help us think through pressing issues in contemporary Jewish life.

BLOOD-LETTING AND DENTISTRY UNEXPECTED SPIRITUAL ENDEAVORS

This is not a typical Friday night sermon. It is not about this week's Torah portion, but it is within the realm of Shabbat. It is about an exploration of our values through the lens of our textual tradition.

By a show of hands, how many of you get nervous before going to the dentist?

Thanks to cinema portrayals and our own phobias, dentists have gained a bad reputation.

I, like many of you, feel slightly uneasy about going to the dentist. But, I adore my dentist.

I adore him, not only because of the work he does on my mouth, but because he cares deeply about his patients, asks them about their lives, sees most of the students at my school as a service to the community, and revels in his profession.

One day I was running.

I ungracefully lost my footing, fell, and hit the ground. The fall landed me, of all places, at the dentist.

Aside from the injury itself, I also arrived at the dentist with a newfound fear of needles coming toward my mouth.

I was terrified. Every time the needle got close to my face, I would yell, "Wait!" as I turned my face to the side, stopping him. Patients continued to stream into the office, but my dentist sat by my side, patiently, calmly and with great care.

He lost a lot of time that morning for something that unlikely had much financial benefit. He would have been justified in leaving and returning later, rescheduling the

appointment, or pushing me to open my mouth so we could get over it over with. But, as I lay vulnerable in that chair, he was present.

My dentist's caring, his warm personality, and his going above and beyond his call of duty is what elevates his profession from a job to a spiritual endeavor. He could easily be a successful dentist without this care and these character traits, but would the work be as fulfilling?

I recently met someone like my dentist. His name is Abba Umana and he's not your typical doctor. He's actually a blood-letter.

Yes, a blood-letter. In the pre-modern world, when illness was thought to be caused by an overabundance of blood, blood-letting was an essential tool in the practice of medicine. I met Abba Umana this year while I was studying *Ta'anit*, a tractate of Talmud. He lived about 1500 years ago.

But before we learn his story, we need to know a little about his profession. Blood-letters get a bad reputation in the Talmud.

In the Talmud, we learn that the rabbis considered blood-letters extremely problematic individuals who were thought to use the power they had over the vulnerable for their own benefit. The rabbis believed they were conceited, miserly, and were to be suspected of adultery, robbery, and bloodshed.¹

They were suspected of adultery because they were treating vulnerable, half-clothed women. They were suspected of robbery because they could charge an unreasonable amount of money for a procedure that a patient felt compelled to pay because his or her life was at

¹ *B. Kiddushin* 82a.

stake. And they were suspected of bloodshed because if they drew off too much blood or none at all, the patient might not live.

The job of a blood-letter was to, very literally, sap people of their life-source, draining them of their blood. It was believed that the physical act of their profession was mirrored by their personality. Therefore, while blood-letters had the power to take away one's life-source, their demeanor could deplete one's soul.

The Talmud teaches that one who publically shames another is like a murderer, as the blood drains from the face of the shamed individual, leaving him or her appearing pale and lifeless.² Blood-letters had the power to kill, both physically and emotionally.

Despite all of this, the rabbis of the Talmud also taught that a scholar may not live in a community that did not have: a synagogue, a charity fund, a school, a bath house, and a blood-letter.³

Were blood-letters actually sadistic individuals? We only have the rabbis' words to go by. However, even if individual blood-letters weren't cruel or corrupt, word of mouth likely preceded them, and visits to them were accompanied with much anxiety and fear.

But Abba Umana did not fit this profile. He was a righteous blood-letter. In fact, Abba Umana was visited by the Heavenly Academy every day. According to Rashi, a medieval commentator, this meant a *Bat Kol*, or the voice of God, came down to him and said, "*Shalom aleicha*," "Peace be unto you."⁴

Abaye, who was a great scholar, was only visited on Shabbat by the Heavenly Academy. He was distressed that a great scholar like himself was only visited weekly, while a *blood-letter* was visited daily.

² *B. Bava Metzia* 58b.

³ *B. Sanhedrin* 17b.

⁴ Rashi on *b. Ta'anit* 21b.

Why, Abaye wanted to know, was Abba Umana more worthy of these visits than he, a great scholar? It was because of Abba Umana's many merits. They were:

- 1) He separated his male patients from the female ones—he maintained an atmosphere of modesty.
- 2) For women, he created a covering with a slit by the shoulder so that he could do his work without their bodies being exposed—he preserved their dignity.
- 3) He kept a container for collecting fees in an area hidden from public view. Those who could afford the fee placed it in the container while those who were unable to pay were not publically shamed—he let no one leave embarrassed.
- 4) When students came in for a consultation, not only did he perform the procedure pro bono, but he also sent them off with a little money to get a meal to regain their strength.⁵

In the rabbis' minds, the critical job of a blood-letter came with many temptations: adultery, swindling money, taking advantage of patients. Abba Umana, however, turned every moment of temptation into a virtue. Faced with vulnerable patients, he protected them.

Like dentistry, Abba Umana's profession often got bad press. But, like my dentist, Abba Umana took individuals who were in vulnerable places and created a space where one's dignity could still be maintained.

This involved a huge risk. Abba Umana had to accept that by diminishing others' vulnerability, he became the one who was vulnerable and who could be taken advantage of. When he placed a container for payment out of site so as not to embarrass those who could not afford it, he knew very well that there may be some who could afford it and still decided

⁵ *B. Ta'anit* 21b.

not to pay. Becoming susceptible to this vulnerability is risky and it makes most of us think twice before becoming more altruistic in our work.

But, Abba Umana resigned to give benefit of the doubt, to believe that people are generally good, and to assume that if someone who could afford to pay did not, there was a good reason.

Because of this, we are taught that God visited Abba Umana every day. But perhaps it wasn't that God regularly visited Abba Umana so much as his work ethic enabled him to access God more easily. By slowing down, enhancing the ethical nature of his work, and recognizing the *tzelem Elohim*, image of God in his patients, Abba Umana was spiritually elevated.

Abaye was jealous that God visited Abba Umana every day, while he, a brilliant scholar, was only visited on Shabbat. People responded to Abaye, "It is because Abba Umana does things that you cannot." Perhaps this answer goes beyond the *p'shat*, the simple meaning of this text, that Abaye could not do what Abba Umana did because Abaye, himself, was not a blood-letter. Perhaps the actual reason Abaye was not visited as often as Abba Umana was because Abaye did not take the personal investment in his students that Abba Umana did for his patients. Perhaps he did not consciously transform a classroom environment, which can be a place of embarrassment, shame and fear, into a safe-space with a caring culture. Abaye needed to make the conscious effort to transform his work from important to meaningful. By transforming our work environments, we enable deeper connections to exist amongst our colleagues and constituents, and, so too, with God.

The consequences for this in the physical realm can be overwhelming: the cost can be greater than the pay, it can take longer, we may be spending more hours at work—but we must ask ourselves, are we spiritually fulfilled by the work that we do?

Do we find our interactions meaningful or rote?

Are we enhancing people's lives or giving them *tsurres*, stress?

Are we going through a checklist of tasks or are we engaging in a spiritual endeavor?

Are we suspect of every need that comes our way, or do we allow for our interactions to elevate both ourselves and those with whom we engage?

Abba Umana teaches us that it is essential that we strive to put aside our suspicions and give the benefit of the doubt, because shaming someone is far worse for our soul than loss of income.

This is our charge, and it is threefold:

- 1) We must not let the negative aspects of our vocation's reputation shape us. Neither dentists nor blood-letters are inherently sadistic—but they are both professions, like many of ours, in which the professional has a great deal of power over vulnerable clientele. The potential for abuse of power is there, but so is the potential for use of power to create safe, sacred, and spiritual spaces.
- 2) We must evaluate how we engage with those who are vulnerable and consider ways to minimize the sense of loss of control. We must take students who are struggling and help them excel instead of giving up on them, take anxious patients and sit with them until their anxieties quell... simply take the time to be kind and caring, even though time is scarce.

- 3) We must recognize that if we allow the material consequences to always weigh us down, we will never find the fulfillment we need to be spiritually elevated. We must give ourselves the gift of spiritual nourishment. Abba Umana may not have been a scholar, but by caring for students and giving them some money, he ensured that the chain of tradition continued *l'dor v'dor*, from generation to generation—and this was a piece of his spiritual endeavor.

This Shabbat, let us take the opportunity to reflect on the work we do, the power we hold, the people we interact with on a day-to-day basis, and how our professions occasionally cause us to act in less than ideal ways. Then, let us consider how we can *quell* anxieties, *reduce* vulnerabilities, and *elevate* our work into a spiritual experience.

May we find as much spiritual fulfillment in the work we do as my dentist and Abba Umana.

Shabbat Shalom.

THE TZADDIK WHO GAVE TOO MUCH

When I was minding my spice stand in the marketplace the other day, I saw a man purchasing some items for his daughter's wedding. Along came two other men who were collecting *tzedakah*. When they saw the first man, they hid from him.

"Why are you hiding?" I asked.

"That man," they explained, "is Elazar of Birta. Every time we see him, he gives us everything he has for *tzedakah*! He gives above and beyond what is appropriate, and we know his daughter has a wedding coming up. We just can't accept his generosity."

Elazar spotted us talking and ran over.

"What are you men collecting for today?" he asked.

"Oh, we're collecting for a wedding," they replied with hesitation.

"Whose wedding is it?"

"It's the wedding of two orphans."

"Oh! Well this *certainly* takes precedence over my daughter's wedding!"

I then watched as he emptied his pockets and dispensed all but one *zuz*, one coin, to the men for *tzedakah*.

He walked off and purchased a little grain with the remaining *zuz*.

What an amazing *tzaddik*, I thought to myself. He gives so much, despite the need to provide for his daughter.

I heard that when he deposited his small amount of wheat into the granary it multiplied immensely—a true miracle! This was God's acknowledgment of Elazar's

generosity. And not only that, but he set aside the newly abundant grain as *hekdesh*, as something to be used as charity.¹

This story, an interpretation of one found in *Ta'anit*, a tractate of the Talmud, portrays Elazar of Birta as a righteous man who gives of himself wholly, who cares deeply for those whose means are even more scarce than his own. He is *nediv lev*, generous of heart, a quality that we learn about in this week's Torah portion, *Vayakhel*.

The building of the *mishkan*, the Tabernacle, has been commissioned, and Moses tells the people that they ought to bring gifts to contribute to the sanctuary. All who have generous hearts, he explains, shall bring gifts.² Generosity is not a commandment; rather, it is a disposition. It comes from deep within us.

The heart guides us, nagging and motivating us to act in different ways. Sometimes we act with *nedivut lev*, full generosity of the heart such that we give completely of ourselves, as if nothing else in the world exists. This is what Elazar does. Just as the Israelites with generous hearts brought contributions of precious fabrics, metals, and jewels, so too does Elazar bring forth gifts without question. And for this he is rewarded.

I am inspired by Elazar's generosity, but I am also troubled. Being *nediv lev* has its place, but our actions do not happen in a vacuum. We see how someone in the marketplace might have viewed Elazar's actions, but there's another perspective:

I asked my daughter what her father brought back from the marketplace.

She looked at me, exasperated, trying to hide her teary eyes, and said, "He brought back a small amount of wheat and stored it in the granary."

¹ *B. Ta'anit* 82a

² Exodus 35:5

I had a feeling this would happen. Every time I send my husband, Elazar of Birta, to the marketplace, out of the generosity of his heart, he gives everything away. I sent him today to make sure he bought all the things we need for our daughter's wedding, and he came back with only a few stalks of wheat.

We went to the granary to see the measly stalks, but to our surprise, the granary was overflowing with wheat, so much so, the door wouldn't close! It was a miracle!

I sent my daughter to get her father from the *beit midrash* the house of study, to show him what happened.

She brought him back to the storehouse. "Father! Look at what God, the One you love, has done for you!"

Her father smiled at the miracle, and looked at our daughter and said, "Yes, but we do not benefit from miracles. This is to be set aside as *hekdes*, as charity, and you are entitled to only as much as a poor Jew would have."

My righteous husband walked away, back to the *beit midrash*, back to his studies, back to his relationship with God.

My righteous husband turned away before he saw my daughter's face. A daughter who was proud of her father for always giving deeply of himself, but a daughter who was heartbroken that she never received from him.

This is a side of the story that the rabbis of the Talmud do not consider. I am torn between *nedivut lev*, the full generosity of Elazar's heart, and what this means for Elazar's family. Elazar maintains that the orphans' wedding is more important than his own daughter's. He gives of himself so much so that his own daughter will not have what she

needs to get married. And even when God rewards him for this generosity, his daughter does not benefit from the reward. She is to remain a poor bride.

There is another concept in this week's Torah portion. While the Israelites who brought offerings were said to be *nediv lev*, generous of heart, we also learn that there were Israelite *builders* who collected all of the donations and built the Tabernacle. In the text, they are called "*chacham lev*," wise of heart.³ They take the generous donations of the people and, using their wisdom, they create something remarkable: a dwelling place for God, a portable sanctuary where the community can gather. This takes more than generosity. Wisdom requires discernment, the ability to think about a larger picture. But *chachmat lev*, or wisdom, alone, can be too methodical, too systematic, and too focused on the specific task at hand such that we forget that the space we are creating is for a larger purpose. It is not merely a beautiful tabernacle, but a dwelling place for God that can only exist when people give of themselves to create it.

Although *nedivut lev* and *chachmat lev*, generosity and wisdom, are attributed to two distinct groups of people in our Torah portion, they are in a symbiotic relationship. Existing alone, their effects can be detrimental; existing in relationship they have the potential to create amazing spaces.

Nedivut lev caused an over-abundant contribution of gifts.⁴ There were too many gifts and no use for all of them. Too many gifts, so that those who were *chacham lev*, wise of heart, had to ask Moses to instruct the people to stop bringing them.⁵ If there were only *nedivut lev*, there would have been a pile of beautiful offerings with no way to assemble them

³ Ibid. 35:10

⁴ Ibid. 36:5

⁵ Ibid. 36:6

into a sanctuary. If there were only *chachmat lev*, there would be a sanctuary constructed, but without the aspects that made it truly communal.

Elazar's *nedivut lev*, brought him blessings, but because he did not use *chachmat lev*, this was at a great expense. His abundant generosity allowed for a wedding for two orphans, but he did not use his wisdom to consider that this was at the expense of his own daughter's wedding.

Chachmat lev and *nedivut lev* compete for our attention. *Nedivut lev* in its most extreme form is our inclination to give above and beyond what is expected without regard for the consequences our generosity might have on others, like our families.

Chachmat lev in its most extreme form is the wisdom that informs us how to create, but does not give us the desire to create. It is the realization that there are *ways* to address the needs of others, but *without* putting forth the means to do so.

Elazar models *nedivut lev*. He teaches us that it is not only good to give *tzedakah*; it is good to give generously. He does not, however, model *chachmat lev*, and therefore he misses the larger picture. It is a *mitzvah* to give *tzedakah*, it is a *mitzvah* to provide the means necessary for orphans to marry, *but*, it is also a *mitzvah* to raise your daughter, to provide for your family, and to enable them to become self-sufficient so that they, too, can care for those less fortunate than themselves.

In fact, our later rabbinic sources teach us about the importance of first providing for those closest to us before providing for those further outside of our immediate circles. In *Tur*, *Yoreh Deah*, *Hilchot Tzedakah*, a 14th Century compilation of Jewish law by Jacob ben Asher, we learn, "A poor person in one's own *household* takes precedence over the poor person in his *city*, and a poor person in his *city* takes precedence over the poor person of

another city.”⁶ This text delineates our circles of obligation, starting with those closest to us and extending outward.

The tragedy was not only that Elazar’s daughter did not have the means necessary for her wedding; the tragedy was that she might look at her father and think, “I’m not going to be like my father and neglect his family,” and she may decide not to give *tzedakah* at all.

I am not suggesting that we should not exercise *nedivut lev* in order to counteract or avoid Elazar’s excessive giving. Nor am I suggesting that we, as individual members of a larger community, practice *nedivut lev* over *chachmat lev*. I, like many of us, can be better at times at practicing *nedivut lev*.

What I am proposing, however, is that we take these two aspects of our hearts, generosity and wisdom, and we help them beat in sync. We need to allow these two qualities to converse with one another. When *nedivut lev* and *chachmat lev* merge, we create a tabernacle, a dwelling space for God. *Nedivut lev* alone allows for an excessive pile of gifts that no one knows what to do with, and *chachmat lev* alone allows for excellent blueprints, but nothing tangible with which to build. In conversation, they create something remarkable.

If *chachmat lev* and *nedivut lev* were exercised together, the story might have gone something like this:

One day, a man named Elazar of Birta was walking through the marketplace searching for some items necessary for his daughter’s wedding. As he was walking, two *tzedakah* collectors spotted him and turned the other way and hid because Elazar often gave all that he had to his own detriment. Nevertheless, Elazar spotted them and ran over.

“What are you collecting for today?”

⁶ *Tur, Yoreh Deah, Hilchot Tzedakah*, 241.

“We’re collecting for the wedding of two orphans. But we know that your daughter is marrying and that you must spend money on her wedding as well.”

“Ah, but two orphans,” he replied, “they are *as important* as my daughter in terms of their need to marry. I still have some things I need to purchase for the wedding, but I won’t need quite as much as I anticipated. Let me give some of what I have to *tzedakah*.”

With the remaining money, he purchased what he needed for her wedding.

When he came home, his daughter said, “Father, what did you get today?”

“I got all of these wonderful things for your wedding. I know that there were a few other things that you wanted, but today I learned that there are two orphans about to marry and it is important that we provide for them. I gave them some money, but the rest is going toward you, my daughter, who is grown and ready to marry. I hope that you too will do the same, act with generosity and with wisdom in all of your endeavors.”

This scenario not only portrays Elazar as *nediv lev* and *chacham lev*, but it also models the passing of *nedivut lev* from one generation to the next. Modeling the fine balance between wisdom and generosity by buying *at least* what is necessary *and* also giving of ourselves ensures that successive generations might do the same.

And when we do this, when we balance both *nediv lev* and *chacham lev*, we will create sacred spaces where God can dwell.

Shabbat Shalom.

DIVREI TORAH

THE TALMUDIC IMPERATIVE TO STUDY

The study of Torah, or *talmud Torah*, is a prominent theme in the Babylonian Talmud. The word “Torah,” in this sense, is used broadly, to include not only *TaNaKH*, but also *all* genres of rabbinic literature. Because the rabbis of the Talmud were professional teachers *and* students, they were very concerned with how one ought to study, best practices of studying, as well as with the rewards for study and the punishments for failure to study.

The rabbis of the Talmud understood Torah study, or *talmud Torah*, to be a lifetime obligation. The obligation of Torah study required that individuals studied texts over and over again, continuously gleaning new wisdom and insights. Studying a text 100 times was not as good as studying it 101 times, and 101 times was not as praiseworthy as 102. Torah was central not only in the *beit midrash*, house of study, but Jews of the Talmudic time-period were constantly immersed in Torah through the central role it played, and still does play, in liturgy, Shabbat rituals (Torah and Haftarah readings), and holiday observances (reading *megillot*, etc.).¹

In the Babylonian Talmud, in contrast to the Palestinian Talmud, *talmud Torah* seems to trump all other obligations. In *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, Jeffrey Rubenstein attributes this difference to the “general shift in Jewish piety from the temple and priestly cult to Torah and the rabbinic tradition.”² He illustrates this point by noting the differences between a story about Honi the Circle Drawer in the Palestinian Talmud to that of the Babylonian. In both narratives, Honi falls asleep for seventy years. In the Palestinian

¹ Simon Greenberg, “Lifetime Education as Conceived and Practiced in the Jewish Tradition.” *Religious Education* 68:3 (May-June 1972), pp. 343, 345.

² Jeffrey Rubenstein. *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003, p. 27.

Talmud, after awakening, people said to him that they heard that when he would go into the Temple courtyard it would light up.³ In the Babylonian Talmud, however, this light shifts from the Temple into the study house.⁴ Students said, “Our traditions are as light today as in the days of Honi, for when he entered the study-house he would solve all the sages difficulties.”⁵

Rubenstein notes, “The physical light that shone when Honi entered the temple courtyard is transformed into intellectual light that shone when Honi entered the study-house.”⁶ The physical location and religious reality of the redactors of the Babylonian Talmud shifted the ritual focus from the temple to the house of study. In lieu of sacrifices, there was study. Rubenstein notes that there is an unparalleled concentration of sources in the Palestinian Talmud that focus on the centrality of Torah as a blueprint for the world, a foundation on which the world stands, and without which the world would not exist.⁷ Many of the texts that focus on the importance of Torah study, suggest that life without Torah is not a life worth living, taking priority even over performing commandments, prayer, and moral activity.⁸

Not only is there a focus on the centrality of Torah study in the Babylonian Talmud, but there is also a focus on *how* one ought to study. Repeated study of texts, often in dialectics, is a common theme. Studying for the pursuit of mastery of a particular body of text was not the idealized mode of study, rather study was a repeated process, turning over the same texts time after time, arguing over the intricacies to become one step closer to truly

³ *P. Ta'anit* 3:10, 66d.

⁴ *B. Ta'anit* 23a.

⁵ Rubenstein, p. 27.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

uncovering its meaning. Simon Greenberg in his article, “Lifetime Education as Conceived and Practiced in the Jewish Tradition” sets this up as a dichotomy of a Talmudic understanding of education and study, study being the rabbis’ main pursuit:

Education...implies acquiring knowledge or skills. Once a specific body of knowledge or skills is mastered, one goes on to some new body of knowledge or new skills. Study of Torah as a lifetime pre-occupation implies that one never really masters the Torah as a body of knowledge. Education implies activity “in preparation for the work of life.” Study of Torah implies that is *the work of life*...Education implies that the acquisition of knowledge is subsidiary to some more desired goal. Talmud Torah implies that knowledge of and meditation upon the Torah are their own highest end... Education implies a mastery of a subject matter adequate for a given purpose. Study implies such complete mastery of subject matter so that it becomes a veritable component or building block, as it were, of one’s total personality on both the conscious and the subconscious level of one’s being.⁹

The study of Torah in dialectical argumentation is lauded in the Babylonian Talmud in a way that it is not in the Palestinian Talmud.¹⁰ One mode to achieve this type of study was through the use of *chevruta*, a study partner.¹¹ The back and forth between study partners allowed for sages to push one another deeper into the material, not merely by supporting one another, but through argumentation.

Throughout the Babylonian Talmud, there are five passages in the Talmud in which twelve comparisons are made between *divrei Torah*, literally “words of Torah”¹² and objects drawn from Biblical verses, amongst them: fig trees, goads, thighs, breasts, and fire. While comparisons are made between *divrei Torah* and these other objects, the passages tend to focus on Torah study and how one engages with Torah, not merely on the words themselves. There is a great deal of concern with ongoing study, studying modestly, and studying with others. This paper aims to discuss the purpose of Torah study as portrayed in these comparisons by describing the structure of the passages where *divrei Torah* are compared to

⁹ Greenberg, pp. 341-2.

¹⁰ Rubenstein, pp. 42, 45.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 51.

¹² Throughout these passages, *divrei Torah* refers to the verses in Written Torah, although in the rabbis’ expounding, it encompasses the study of both Written and Oral Torah.

various objects derived from Biblical verses, examining the context in which the passages are found, looking at the Biblical verses they quote, analyzing each passage, and discussing the contemporary implications they have for Torah study.¹³

STRUCTURE

The structure for each of the comparisons is fairly similar. There are four parts that appear in nearly every instance, although somewhat interchangeably, and there are two parts that appear less frequently:

In every case:

I. Introduction of rabbinic authority: *Amar/Rabbi X said:*

Steps II and III might also appear in the reverse order:

II. Parable: *Lamah nimshalu divrei Torah...*/Why are the words of Torah compared to A?

III. Verse: *Sh'ne-amar...*/As it says, “[verse from TaNaKH].”

IV. Explanation: *Lomar l'cha, mah A...af divrei*/This is to tell you, just as A does..., so too words of Torah...

In some cases:

V. Additional proof from a rabbinic source: *V'haynu* or *K'd-amra*/As said Rabbi Y

VI. Alternative Explanation: *Davar Acher: Mah A...af divrei Torah...*/Another possibility: Just as A does..., so to words of Torah do...

¹³ Because Torah study in the Babylonian Talmud was primarily a male-oriented endeavor, in all except the last section on contemporary implications, the masculine form is used to describe the passages. The use of the masculine form is also particularly important regarding some of the passages, particularly those where *divrei Torah* are compared a hind and breasts.

WHERE THE METAPHORS APPEAR IN THE TALMUD

There are five passages in the Babylonian Talmud where *divrei Torah* are compared to various things found in *TaNaKH*. Three of these passages contain multiple comparisons and all of them are found in *Seder Moed*. The comparisons are found on *Shabbat* 88b, *Eruvin* 54a-b, *Sukkah* 49b, *Ta'anit* 7a-b, and *Chagigah* 3b.

Multiple occurrences of comparisons occur in *Eruvin*, *Ta'anit*, and *Chagigah*. In *Ta'anit* there are four occurrences of these comparisons, all attributed to different rabbis. There are four comparisons in *Eruvin*, one attributed to R. Chiyya b. Abba in the name of R. Yochanan and three attributed to R. Shmuel b. Nachmani. They occur consecutively and are based on one verse, which he then expounds in different ways. Likewise, there are two comparisons made in *Chagigah*, where R. Eleazar b. Azaria¹⁴ is explaining a single verse. In *Eruvin* and *Chagigah*, the comparisons attributed R. Shmuel b. Nachmani and R. Eleazar b. Azaria can each be consolidated into one larger comparison because they are commenting on the same verse, however in this paper they are separated because the implications of the imagery are vastly different.

CONTEXT

It is important to note the context in which these metaphors occur as it gives us a sense as to the impetus for the comparisons and why Torah study may have been relevant in these sections of the Talmud. In *Shabbat*, the metaphor occurs in a discussion of the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai.¹⁵ The discussion continues with the views of various rabbinic authorities' regarding Exodus 25:7 when the Israelites say, "*Na'aseh*

¹⁴ The text does not explicitly note who is talking, but Rashi suggests that it is R. Eleazar b. Azaria.

¹⁵ *B. Shabbat* 86b.

v'nishma,” “We will do and we will listen.”¹⁶ The section begins with R. Simlai expounding upon this verse, explaining that ministering angels placed two crowns upon each of the Israelites, one for *na'aseh* and one for *nishma*. This is followed by explanations by R. Eleazar, and R. Chama b. R. Chanina as well as a story about Raba and a Sadducee, which all cite this same verse. From there, the use of “*na'aseh v'nishma*” ceases, and the rabbinic authorities present a metaphorical explanation of some of the incidences regarding Sinai. Finally, this section is brought to a close by our passage of concern, which deals with the comparison of *divrei Torah* to a king, concluding with God connecting two crowns to each word in the Torah. This piece and R. Simlai’s opening serve as bookends to the larger discussion by utilizing the image of the two crowns. What will be of particular interest in the scope of this paper, however, is the comparison of *divrei Torah* to a king.

In *Eruvin*, the passages that we are concerned with are embedded in several *dapim* discussing learning Torah: the uses of mnemonic devices, the Judeans’ learning compared to that of the Galileans, the use of enigmatic speech, the volume at which Torah should be studied aloud, the retention of learning, and the passage of Oral Law through Moses.¹⁷ Our passages utilize two verses, one regarding a fig tree and the other regarding a hind, doe, and breasts. This imagery is used to suggest that any time one searches these things (for figs, sexual pleasure, and sustenance, respectively) he will be rewarded. The entire section is loosely related to the study of Torah, retention of learning, and most effective learning tools for study; thus our passages fit very nicely in with this section.

The passage in *Sukkah* comes in a section discussing the water libations made by the priests. It includes a reference to the pits where the wine flowed after libations were made

¹⁶ Ibid, 88a

¹⁷ *B. Eruvin* 53a-54b.

and Song of Songs 7:2 is brought in as a proof-text by Raba b. b. Chana. There is a continuation of the discussion regarding wine-libations offered after committing a trespass, which leads into a statement by Raba that describes how a scholar ought to drink wine. The text then shifts from its concern with wine and expounds again on Song of Songs 7:2. The School of R. Anan further expounds on this verse in the section of which we are concerned, where the question is raised as to why a “thigh” is compared to *divrei Torah* and R. Eleazar explains that Torah study is an endeavor that ought to take place privately. This allows for another transition from R. Eleazar’s statement regarding the privacy of Torah study to a series of pieces where he discusses *gemilut chasadim*, acts of lovingkindness. In context, the comparison of *divrei Torah* to a thigh mostly serves as a means to transition the flow of the text from one subject matter to another via the connection of R. Eleazar.¹⁸

Ta’anit boasts the greatest number of comparisons of Biblical imagery to *divrei Torah*. There is an extensive *halakhic* discussion regarding the different types of rainfalls (early, late, first, second, and third). The text focuses on when it ought to fall, when one needs to pray for it and fast for it, what constitutes each of the rains, and how much rainfall is or is not sufficient.¹⁹ Continuing on the theme of rainfall, the text transitions into R. Abbahu’s statement that, “The day when the rain falls is greater than the day of the revival of the dead...,” followed by a similar statement by R. Judah, who says, “The day when rain falls is as great as the day that the Torah was given.”²⁰ Thus begins a conversation about the giving of the Torah and about Torah study.

It is in the discussion about Torah study where we learn about the importance of Torah study and particularly studying in *chevruta*. The first two comparisons in *Ta’anit*

¹⁸ *B. Sukkot* 48b-49a.

¹⁹ *B. Ta’anit* 6a-b.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 7a.

regarding *divrei Torah* are R. b. Chana's comparing *divrei Torah* to fire and R. Nachman b. Isaac comparing the study of Torah to a tree. These texts are less about the Torah itself and more about the importance of *chevruta* study. These two comparisons set the groundwork for the other two, that of R. Chanina b. Ida comparing *divrei Torah* to water and R. Oshaya comparing *divrei Torah* to water, wine, and milk.²¹ The text then transitions back into several examples of the earlier pattern, "the falling of rain is as great as the day of..." Of all of the comparisons to *divrei Torah*, the four in *Ta'anit* are perhaps the only ones that emerge in direct relationship to the content and material already being discussed in that particular section of the tractate. They are not merely transitional pieces, but appear in several pages very concerned with Torah study.

The beginning of *Chagigah* considers who is not required to visit the Temple during the pilgrimage holidays. There is a detailed discussion as to what a *cheresh* is (usually translated as a deaf person) and whether a *cheresh* is required to appear at the Temple.²² R. Tanchuma is cited discussing the concept of *cheresh* as well as discussing the concept of one who is lame. The text transitions to a new topic regarding water via another statement of R. Tanchuma. After R. Tanchuma discusses a pit without water, there is another passage about water where R. Yochanan b. Beroka and R. Eleazar Hisma visited R. Joshua at Peki'in. They told Rabbi Joshua that they were there to drink his water, but he first wanted them to teach him a piece of Torah. They recalled a teaching of R. Eleazar b. Azaria, which is the text of our focus.²³ R. Eleazar b. Azaria refers to Ecclesiastes 12:11 and likens the words of Torah to a goad.²⁴ The next several passages go on to expound this teaching and its relevance to Torah

²¹ *Ta'anit* 7a.

²² *Chagigah* 2b-3a.

²³ *Ibid*, 3a.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 3b.

study before moving back into the original focus of the text concerning those who are exempt from appearing at the Temple during pilgrimage festivals.

PROOFTEXTS

All of the prooftexts used in the various comparisons are found in *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim*, interestingly, none of them come from Torah. Why this is the case is unclear, although we might consider it an indication that the concept of *divrei Torah* expands far beyond the Five Books of Moses, into the broader corpus of Written and Oral Torah. Six of the references come from Proverbs (3:18, 8:6, 27:18 and 5:19), all cited by R. Shmuel b. Nachmani. There are two references to Isaiah 55:1, one attributed to R. Chanina b. Idi and the other attributed to R. Oshaya, and one reference to Ecclesiastes 12:11. There is one reference to Song of Songs 7:2, and one to Jeremiah 23:29. None of these prooftexts explicitly mention “*divrei Torah*.” Despite the fact there is no explicit use of the words, “*divrei Torah*,” we will see that many of these verses refer to commandments, a king, fruitful beings or objects (a wife, fig tree, breasts), and other imagery that indicate value and abundance. They will be discussed in greater detail in the analysis section of this paper, but below there is a cursory look at the verses that are used in the comparisons.

Proverbs 3 begins with, “My son, do not forget my teaching, and your heart shall retain my commandments.” Thus, when we reach 3:18, “It is a tree of life to them that hold it tight and all if its supporters are happy,” we learn that one who holds fast to God’s teaching and commandments will merit happiness. *Divrei Torah* are God’s commandments and teachings, they are to be held fast, and drawn close.

Proverbs 8:1 says, “It is Wisdom is calling.” The rabbis of the Talmud associate Wisdom with Torah, thus this opening sets the tone for the chapter. In *Shabbat*, the comparison is drawn between *divrei Torah* and a *naggid*, a king. The rabbis draw this comparison from Proverbs 8:6 where Wisdom says, “Listen, for I will speak noble things.” Thus Torah (Wisdom) is speaking, “*n’gadim*” “noble things,” or as it is expounded upon “*naggid*,” “king.” Since Torah speaks *divrei Torah*, *divrei Torah* are likened to a king.

Proverbs 5:19 describes “the wife of your youth.” The wife of one’s youth is understood to be something the rabbis engaged with very deeply and intimately: *divrei Torah*. Proverbs 5:19 says, “As a loving hind and graceful doe, her breasts will satisfy you at all times, and you will be unable to walk straight from her love.” Thus, *divrei Torah* here are compared here to a hind, a doe, and breasts.

Proverbs 27:18 draws a parallel between tending to a fig tree and caring for one’s master; both result in reward: “One who tends a fig tree will eat of its fruit, and one who guards his master will be honored.” It seems as though the rabbis were arguing that the master is understood to be God, and that guarding God entails seeking and examining Torah. Important to note here, is that for the rabbis, *divrei Torah* are not merely the words themselves, but active engagement with them.

Song of Songs 7:2 reads, “...The curves of your thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of your craftsman.” Here the rabbis understand the craftsman to be God, and the work of God to be *divrei Torah*. Thus thighs here are equated with *divrei Torah*.

The prooftexts for Jeremiah and Ecclesiastes are similar to Proverbs 8:6 which directly references speaking or God’s word. Thus they are the ones that are the closest to explicitly mentioning Torah. Jeremiah 23:29 reads, “Behold, my word is like fire, declares

Adonai.” The rabbis understand the Torah be God’s word. Ecclesiastes 12:11 says, “The words of the wise are like goads, and masters of these collections are like planted nails, they are given by one shepherd.” The rabbis understand the shepherd to be God, and the words to be *divrei Torah*.

In Isaiah 55:1, God is speaking, thus the rabbis understand the water, wine, and milk (God’s provisions) to be, not literal, but rather, metaphorical. Human beings draw from God’s provisions, and God provides *divrei Torah*.

ANALYSIS OF METAPHORS

This section of the paper will analyze each of the metaphors individually, beginning with a translation of the passage²⁵ and an analysis of the structure, the use of Biblical verses, and the way they are understood by the rabbis.

R. Chananel b. Papa said: What is the meaning of what is written, “Listen, for I will speak noble things (*n’gidim*) [and the opening of my lips shall be right things]” (Proverbs 8:6)? Why are words of Torah compared to a king (*naggid*)? To tell you: Just as a king has the power of death and life, so too do words of Torah have in them the power of death and life. Thus Raba said, “To those who go to the right of it [Torah], it is an elixir of life, to those who go to the left of it [Torah], it is a deathly poison. Another interpretation: “noble things” (*n’gidim*), each and every word that goes out from the mouth of the Holy One, Blessed be He, connects to it (each word) two crowns.—*Shabbat* 88b

This text compares *divrei Torah* to a king. R. Chananel b. Papa cites Proverbs 8:6, “Listen, for I will speak noble things (*n’gidim*).” According to R. Chananel’s reading, God speaks *divrei Torah*. The *divrei Torah* here are *n’gidim*, noble things. The word *n’gidim* has the same root as *naggid*, king. Thus the question, “Why are the words of Torah compared to a king?” The answer given is “Just as a king has the power over death and life, so too do the

²⁵ All translations of Talmudic texts are the author’s, unless otherwise indicated.

words of Torah have in them the power over death and life.” A king yields a great deal of power, often deciding the fate of those in his kingdom. Likewise, *divrei Torah* have power over life and death.

This begs the question, how exactly does Torah yield this power? Raba’s statement is particularly helpful in addressing this question: “To those who go to the right of it, it is an elixir of life, to those who go to the left of it, it is a deathly poison.” Unlike many of the other examples we will encounter, this seems to imply that the significance of *divrei Torah* lies in ones’ observance of the law and *mitzvot* of the Torah. In some ways, this echoes the system of rewards and punishments set up in Deuteronomy in terms of adherence to the Law. In both Deuteronomy and in this passage, for those who engage with Torah properly, by following its ways and rules, it will be life-giving, and to those who engage with it improperly, it will be a death sentence. There is not a clear sense of the importance of engaging deeply in the study of Torah, as is a frequent theme in many of the other passages we will analyze, rather this passage focuses on the strict following of *mitzvot*. This understanding also fits nicely with the larger context of the comparison, which is a lengthy discussion about the giving of the Ten Commandments and “*na’aseh v’nishmah*,” “we will do and we will listen.”

The *davar acher* goes on to state that *n’gidim*, implies, “each and every word that goes out from the mouth of the Holy One, Blessed be He, connects to it (each word) two crowns.” This passage is probably placed in this section of Shabbat for precisely the *davar acher*. It alludes back to the passages beginning on *Shabbat* 86b regarding crowns for *na’aseh* and *nishma*, and therefore is thematically associated with this section. Words of Torah are likened to *n’gidim*, multiple kings, each with a crown; the rabbis understand the plural to refer to two crowns attached to every word that comes forth from God’s mouth. The

davar acher reinforces not only the importance of God's words, as indicated by the crowns on the words, but also the excessive glory of these words because each word has two crowns.

R. Chiyya b. Abba said that R. Yochanan said: What is the meaning of what is written, "The one who tends the fig tree shall eat of its fruit..." (Proverbs 27:18)?
Why are words of Torah compared to a fig tree?
Just as with a fig tree, all the time that a man spends searching in it, he will find in it figs, so too with words of Torah, all the time that a man spends studying them, he will find pleasure in them." — *Eruvin* 54a-b

Like the previous passage, this passage utilizes a verse from Proverbs. Rabbi Chiyya son of Abba in the name of Rabbi Yochanan presents Proverbs 27:18, "The one who tends the fig tree shall eat of its fruit," and then asks why *divrei Torah* are compared to a fig tree. The rabbis understand the fig tree to be *divrei Torah*, and the person tending it is a learner.

The metaphor is explained: as long as one searches a fig tree, he will find figs, and, similarly all the time that man spends studying *divrei Torah*, he will find pleasure in them. Thus, pursuing and studying *divrei Torah* yield great reward. This comparison begs the question as to the parallels between finding more figs and studying *divrei Torah*. The fig tree, according to the rabbis, is ever fruitful, the more one searches the more one finds. So too is the Torah ever fruitful. The more one seeks, the more one will uncover, and there will always be something new. Uncovering something new is not merely about acquisition of intellect, it is about finding pleasure in what one finds. The fruits of the tree and of Torah are both life-sustaining, but also, they will lead to a joyful life. With study the most esteemed ritual in the Babylonian Talmud, the rabbis portray engaging with this ritual as something that will provide one with pleasure. While the passage from Shabbat explains how engaging in the *mitzvot* is a necessity for life, this passage illuminates the joy and reward one will receive for studying. If one continues to hone his skills and care for and engage and reengage in Torah

study, he will always learn something new and find some new piece of fruit. *Divrei Torah* need to be actively sought out and examined, but the process, no matter how many times one searches the texts, will merit reward.

R. Shmuel b. Nachmani said: What is the meaning of what is written: “As a loving hind and a graceful doe, [her breasts will satisfy you at all times, you will be unable to walk straight from her love]” (Proverbs 5:19)?

Why are words of Torah compared to a hind?

To tell you: Just as a hind has a narrow womb, and is beloved by its mate at each and every hour just as the first hour, so too are words of Torah beloved by all its learners for each and every hour just as the first.—*Eruvin* 54b

This metaphor from *Eruvin* uses another proof-text from Proverbs. Proverbs 5:19 says, “As a loving hind and a graceful doe, her breasts will satisfy you at all times, you will be unable to walk straight from her love.” The latter part of this verse will be utilized in the next metaphor directly following this passage in *Eruvin*. The rabbis’ utilization of this verse and the comparison they draw indicates that they viewed Torah study as having erotic elements. The verse in its own context follows Proverbs 5:18 which refers to the “wife of your youth” and how to engage with her. The rabbis ask why *divrei Torah* compared to a hind, but taken in context *divrei Torah* are not only compared to a hind, but also to the beginning of a marriage, a time that they viewed as wrought with sexual pleasure.

This erotic nature of engaging with *divrei Torah* is stated clearly by the explanation of the stated comparison: “Just as a hind has a narrow womb,²⁶ and is beloved by its mate at each and every hour just as the first hour, so too are the words of Torah beloved by all its learners for each and every hour just as the first.” The imagery indicates sex with a virgin, which indicates newness, possibility, and exhilaration. Rubenstein points out:

²⁶ Rubenstein translates “narrow womb” as “tight vagina,” which indicates why the rabbis would find pleasure in Torah study as if each engagement had the erotic nature of having sex with a virgin. (118)

Not only is the analogy between study and sex made explicit, but Torah study compares to the best type of sex (at least according to this common male fantasy)... Whenever a sage probes the Torah he encounters “virgin” territory, as the Torah possesses an infinite capacity to yield new insights. Given Torah’s eternal youth, fertility, and virginity, we can perhaps understand why sages tended to neglect their wives.²⁷

Just as the hind’s mate, one who studies Torah is completely infatuated and yearns for a highly erotic encounter with *divrei Torah*. Because of the amount of time learners were engaged in Torah, the rabbis’ could not make this engagement more appealing. One might question whether their description is prescriptive or descriptive. Either way, it makes study incredibly enticing, always as enjoyable as one’s first encounter with Torah. Torah study, here, is incredibly rewarding. In *Shabbat*, *divrei Torah* are analogized to the need to follow the commandments in order to live, but here there is no threat, rather great reward. This is similar to the fig tree imagery, which indicates that one who continues to search for its fruits will continue to be delighted with its reward. This motif will be seen throughout several more of the comparisons.

[And why are words of Torah compared to] “a graceful doe (*v’ya-alat*) (Proverbs 5:19)”?
[Because words of Torah] raise (*sh’ma-alat*) grace on those who study them.—*Eruvin* 54b

The rabbis continue to expound on the previous verse. Why, they ask, are *divrei Torah* compared to a graceful doe? The word *v’ya-alat* is a doe, however, the rabbis use a word play here taking this word, *v’ya-alat* and relating it to the word *ma-alah*, meaning “to raise.” Thus, they answer, *divrei Torah* raise (*sh’ma-alat*) grace, or more idiomatically, “bestow grace” on those who study it. This comparison differs from many of the previous ones because while this passage still discusses study, this is the first time that *divrei Torah* act on the individual studying them. It is not only that study will merit reward, but also *divrei Torah* themselves, will bestow grace on an individual. *Divrei Torah*, in this sense are

²⁷ Rubenstein, p. 119.

animate. This gives a new insight into the power of the words themselves; they have the ability to engage the person, not only does the individual engage with them.

“Her breasts will satisfy you at all times” (Proverbs 5:19).

Why are words of Torah compared to a breast?

Just as with a breast, any time that a baby searches in it, it will find milk, so too with words of Torah, any time a man spends studying them, he will find pleasure in them.—*Eruvin* 54b

The third passage from *Eruvin* expounds on the third part of Proverbs 5:19, “Her breasts will satisfy you at all times.” The question is asked: Why are *divrei Torah* compared to breasts? We receive an answer similar to that which we receive in regards to the fig tree, “Just as with a breast, any time that a baby searches in it, it will find milk, so too with words of Torah, any time a man spends studying them, he will find pleasure in them.” Again we learn that if you seek, you will find. So long as one searches in the fig tree and so long as a baby seeks his mother’s breast, pleasure will be realized. This is also similar to the imagery given for the first part of this verse regarding the hind. Both indicate that seeking will merit reward. *Divrei Torah* are, in a sense, gifts that continue to give. This particular passage indicates that it requires little work to receive reward, as long as a baby seeks his mother’s breast, milk will be there, so too with words of Torah. One may put forth little effort to experience pleasure. Although not quite so harsh that it will result in death, this passage is similar to our first one from *Shabbat* as it indicates the life-giving nature of *divrei Torah*. Just as milk sustains a baby, *divrei Torah* sustain a person. One significant difference here, however, is that the passage does not explicitly state that the milk is life-sustaining, rather it states that one will always find pleasure in *divrei Torah*. The imagery both implies a sense of eroticism as the baby is actually the learner, a grown man, who is finding pleasure in a breast, as well as the implicit suggestion that *divrei Torah* are both life-sustaining and full of

fruitfulness due seemingly never-ending supply of milk. Rubenstein sums it up clearly when he writes, “The analogy to the breast shifts the figuration slightly from eroticism to fecundity by focusing on lactation, which points to the richness of experience of study.”²⁸ With this understanding, it seems that the rabbis suggest might suggest that what one needs to live can also provide great joy.

The House of R. Anan taught: What is the meaning of what is written, “the curves of your thighs” (Song of Songs 7:2)?
 Why are the words of Torah compared to a thigh?
 To tell you: Just as a thigh is hidden, so too are words of Torah hidden.
 And this was as R. Elazar said: What is the meaning of the verse: “It has been told to you, man, what is good and what Adonai requires of you: that is to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk modestly with your God.” “do justice,” this is justice, “to love mercy,” this is acts of loving kindness, “and to walk modestly with your God,” this is to accompany the dead [to burial] and to bring the bride to the marriage canopy. And [considering] these things, all the more so, if in matters that are done publically, the Torah says “walk humbly,” in matters that are done in private, all the more so.—*Sukkah* 49b

In *Sukkah*, the concern shifts from the pleasure and life-giving force received from *divrei Torah* to the nature of study. The House of R. Anan brings forth a piece of Song of Songs 7:2, “the curves of your thighs,” and questions why *divrei Torah* are compared to a thigh. The verse continues, “...The curves of your thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of your craftsman.” As mentioned in the prooftexts section of this paper, it seems the rabbis understand the craftsman to be God, and the work of God is *divrei Torah*.

The answer given to the question is, “just as the thigh is hidden, so too *divrei Torah* are hidden.” At first, this seems to imply that it is difficult to seek *divrei Torah*, or it is difficult to seek their true meaning. This is counter to what our previous metaphors have implied, which is that accessibility to the text is not particularly difficult, but one must continuously engage with them to be fulfilled.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 118.

R. Elazar's words, however, does not indicate that *divrei Torah* are difficult to find, rather they must be studied modestly. R. Elazar expounds on Micah 6:8, noting that "to walk modestly with your God" refers to accompanying the dead and bringing the bride to the *chuppah*. R. Elazar explains that if these *public* ceremonies are to be done modestly, all the more so Torah study, a *private* act, must be done modestly. Rubenstein suggests that this is not simply modesty for the sake of being humble (as will be seen in *Ta'anit*), rather modestly because of the previously mentioned erotic nature of Torah study. The description of thigh (particularly uncovering a thigh) is sensual one, and because Torah study is erotic, it must be done in private, just as any other sexual act.²⁹

Rabba b. b. Chana said: Why are the words of Torah compared to fire, as it is written: "'Behold, my word is like fire,' declares Adonai" (Jeremiah 23:29)? To tell you, just as fire is not kindled alone, so too words of Torah do not stand alone. This is what R. Yosi son of Chanina said, "What is the meaning of the verse, 'A sword is upon the lonely, they will be made fools [v'*noalu*]...' (Jeremiah 50:36)? A sword is upon those scholars who study Torah alone, and not only this, but they are fools [*m'tapshin*] as it says "v'*noalu*" [fools]. And not only this, but they are sinners, as it is written here "fools" [v'*noalu*] and there it is written, 'That which we have done foolishly [*noalnu*] and that which we have sinned' (Numbers 12:11). Or, if you want, say it comes from here, "The nobles of Zoan have been fools...they have caused Egypt to go astray" (Isaiah 19:13)." —*Ta'anit* 7a

This passage from *Ta'anit* adds a new element to the rabbis' understanding of the importance of engaging with *divrei Torah*. This passage is embedded in a section regarding *chevruta* study and the comparison reflects this. Rabba b. b. Chana asks why *divrei torah* are compared to fire based on his reading of Jeremiah 23:29, "'Behold, my word is like fire,' declares Adonai." God's word is understood by the rabbis to mean *divrei torah*. The answer given is, "Just as fire is not kindled alone, so too words of Torah do not stand alone." Thus,

²⁹ Ibid, p. 118.

studying alone will not allow *divrei Torah* to ignite. This imagery evokes a sense of the people brushing against each other in heated debate and study until sparks ignite.

This point is strengthened by R. Yosi b. Chanina's expounding on Jeremiah 50:36, "A sword is upon the lonely, they will be made fools [*v'noalu*]." He explains that those who study alone are fools, and furthermore they are sinners. He justifies calling them sinners through a *gezera shava* connecting the word *v'noalu* in Jeremiah 50:36 to either *noalnu* in Numbers 12:11, "That which we have done foolishly and that which we have sinned" or to Isaiah 19:13, "The nobles of Zoan have been fools...they have caused Egypt to go astray." The rabbis reiterate in a fairly harsh way, not only that studying with others is the preferred method of study, but that it the *only* way one ought to study. The emphasis of studying with others occurs only in the Babylonian Talmud, not in the Palestinian Talmud, and this emphasis may be a reflection of the import attributed to dialectics in the Babylonian Talmud.³⁰ Studying alone will not ignite a fire, and furthermore it will cause one to be foolish and sin.

R. Nachman b. Yitzchak said: Why are words of Torah compared to a tree, as it is written, "It is a tree of life to them that hold fast to it..." (Proverbs 3:18)?

To tell you, just as a small tree may ignite a larger one, so too it is with *talmidei chachamim*, small ones sharpen the great ones.

This is as R. Chanina says: "I have learned much from my teachers, and from my colleagues more than from my teachers, and from my students most of all."—*Ta'anit* 7a

This passage from *Ta'anit* is similar to the previous one in its emphasis on learning from others, however the previous passage focused on *chevruta* study while this passage emphasizes learning from one's colleagues, as well as one's students and teachers. R. Nachman asks why *divrei Torah* are compared to a tree based on Proverbs 3:18, "It is a tree of life to them that hold fast to it..." As noted in the section on prooftexts, the "tree of life"

³⁰ Ibid, pp. 51, 53.

refers to God's laws and commandments." The answer given is, "just as a small tree may ignite a larger one, so too it is with *talmidei chachamim*, small ones sharpen the great ones."

This text implies the importance of learning from those who are not as advanced or "large." This can be applied to *chevruta* being done with two students of different levels, but R. Chanina's teaching brings this a step further, into the realm of learning from one's students: "I have learned much from my teachers, and from my colleagues more than from my teachers, and from my students most of all." This passage compliments those about deriving pleasure from always learning something new in Torah study, implying that one can (and should) learn from those on all levels because even those "smaller" than you will further your own learning. If one can always learn from his students, he has never fully mastered Torah study, and it continues to be a life-long endeavor. Furthermore, this concept gives agency to and places responsibility on the student of Torah. He is not merely a recipient, absorbing his teacher's knowledge, rather he must question, push, and ignite his teacher. He becomes responsible for sustaining his teacher.

R. Chanina b. Idi said: Why are words of Torah compared to water, as it is written, "Ho! All who are thirsty, come to the water..." (Isaiah 55:1)?
To tell you: Just as water flows from a high place to a low one, so too do words of Torah exist only in one whose knowledge is humble.—*Ta'anit* 7a

In this passage from *Ta'anit*, R. Chanina b. Idi asks why *divrei Torah* are compared to water citing Isaiah 55:1. It is unclear what the explicit connection is between *divrei Torah* and water. The comparison is explained, "Just as water flows from a high place to a low one, so too words of Torah exist only in those whose knowledge is humble." Similar to the passage in *Sukkah*, this passage has a theme of humility. However, in *Sukkah* humility and modesty were identified as necessary attributes of one who studies Torah because of the

erotic nature of Torah study. This passage emphasizes humility as the way to receive Torah. Water is necessary in order to live. Although water, a necessity of life, comes from above (both from the sky and also flowing downhill from high land), in order to gather water, one must seek it at a low place.

This comparison suggests that Torah is necessary to live. Even though it comes from above, from God, one can only gather it if he is low and humble. One who is willing to act with modesty can receive this life-giving force. One who is above the water source will not benefit from it, and one who is haughty will not be able to master Torah. It is only when one lowers himself that he is able to gather knowledge. The ability to go down and to lower oneself indicates that it is not necessary that the person's typical mode is one of modesty, but he has the agency (and must utilize the agency) to humble himself to study. Tied to the other passages in *Ta'anit*, the values of *chevruta* study, learning from anyone around you, and learning in a modest way paint a picture of the Talmudic guidelines for study and conduct in the *beit midrash*.

And R. Oshaya said: Why are words of Torah compared to these three liquids: to water, and to wine, and to milk," as it is written, "Ho! All who are thirsty, come to the water..." and it is written, "...come buy and eat, come and buy milk and wine without money and without cost" (Isaiah 55:1)?

To tell you: Just as these three drinks can only exist in the least of vessels, so too can words of Torah only exist in those whose knowledge is humble.

This is as it says about the daughter of the Roman emperor to R. Yehoshua b. Chanania: "Oh, wise distinguished one in an ugly vessel!"

He said to her, "Your father keeps wine in earthenware vessels."

She said to him: "Where should he keep them?"

He said to her: "You who are important should keep it in vessels of gold and silver."

She went and said this to her father. He had the wine put in vessels of gold and silver, and it became sour. They (who transferred the wine) came and told him.

He said to his daughter, "Who told you to do this?"

She said to him: R. Yehoshua b. Chanania."

He called to him and said to him, "Why did you tell her to do this?"

He said to him, "Because as she spoke to me, I spoke to her."

He said to him, "Aren't there learned people who are beautiful?"

[He answered him]: "If they were ugly, they would be [more] learned."

Another interpretation: Just as these three liquids only become unfit if they are left too long without being thought about, so too is it with words of Torah, they are only forgotten if they are left too long without being thought about.—*Ta'anit* 7a-b

This final passage from *Ta'anit* uses the same proof-text from the previous metaphor, as R. Oshaya asks why *divrei Torah* are compared to water, wine, and milk as it says in Isaiah 55:1, “Ho! All who are thirsty, come to the water, come buy and eat, come and buy milk and wine without money and without cost.” R. Oshaya does not give the same reasoning as R. Chanina son of Idi, but the implications of his reasoning are the same. He explains, just as wine, water, and milk can only exist in the least of vessels, so too can words of Torah only exist in those whose knowledge is humble.

It is questionable whether water (and perhaps wine or milk) spoils in vessels of great worth, but this seems to be the tradition that the rabbis’ are purporting. If we follow this theory, then the meaning of our passage is that water, wine, and milk cannot be preserved in vessels of gold or silver, and must be kept in simple earthenware vessels. So too is it with the knowledge of Torah, it can only exist in those who are simple vessels.

There are two ways to understand the meaning of this knowledge residing in simple vessels. The first way to understand this is that one who is modest and humble as opposed to haughty, can receive Torah. This is very similar to the previous passage from *Ta'anit*. The *aggadah* that follows, however, implies a somewhat more physical understanding of “simple vessels.” The daughter of the Roman emperor told R. Yehoshua b. Chanina that he was a “wise, distinguished one in an ugly vessel.” He retorted that her father keeps his wine in simple earthenware vessels and explains that if she is so concerned with the vessel then her father should keep his wine in gold and silver vessels. She had the wine put into these vessels and it spoiled. When the emperor found out what had happened, he summoned R. Yehoshua b. Chanina and asked him why he had his daughter do this. He explained, “as she spoke to

me, I spoke to her,” using her own reasoning against her. The king then asked if there were learned people who were beautiful, to which R. Yehoshua b. Chanina explained that they would be even more learned if they were ugly.

This indicates that some rabbis really felt that outward appearance was a sign of one’s intellectual capacity and likely one’s modesty as well. The rabbis seem to be suggesting that one cannot be blessed with both looks and learning. The implications for this can be rather severe; one cannot control one’s natural appearance, and therefore, one may also have no control over his intellectual capacity. Perhaps another way to read this is that one who is naturally beautiful will find that he has other distractions that face him due to his beauty, while one who is unattractive will not face these same distractions and can commit that time to study.

A slightly different understanding of the verse is given in a *davar acher* which explains, “Just as these three liquids only become unfit if they are not thought about, so too is it with words of Torah, they are only forgotten if not thought about.” Thus, we are taught an important rule of Torah study here: one’s studies must be constantly honed and tended. One who fails to review will lose what he has learned. Taken in context with some of the other comparisons we have seen, this implies that not only will one continue to glean and learn new things from continued study, but if one stops studying, he will lose all that he has learned.

And he [R. Eleazar b. Azaria] opened up and expounded: “The words of the wise are like goads, and masters of these collections are like planted nails, they are given by one shepherd” (Ecclesiastes 12:11).

Why are the words of Torah compared to goads?

To tell you: Just as goads guide the cow along the furrow to bring life to the world, so too do words of Torah guide their learners from ways of death to ways of life.

If you were to say, just as goads are moveable, so too words of Torah are movable, this is why the verse says, “nails.”

If you were to say, just as nails are made less and not increased, so too words of Torah are made less and not increased, this is why the verse says “planted.” Just as a plant is fruitful and multiplies, so too are words of Torah fruitful and they multiply.—*Chagigah* 3b

The final comparison of *divrei Torah* appears in *Chagigah*. It is not quite clear who is making the comparison, but Rashi attributes it to R. Eleazar b. Azaria, who expounds upon Ecclesiastes 12:11, “The words of the wise are like goads, and masters of these collections are like planted nails, they are given by one shepherd.” It seems that R. Eleazar b. Azaria understands the shepherd to be God, and thus the “words of the wise...given by one shepherd” are God’s words, or *divrei Torah*. He then asks why *divrei Torah* are compared to goads, and explains that, “Just as goads guide the cow along the furrow to bring life to the world, so too do words of Torah guide their learners from ways of death to ways of life.” This is a nice bookend to our opening metaphor from Shabbat, which explained that *divrei Torah* are life-giving. Realizing that this is a rather narrow and imperfect metaphor, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaria expounds upon the rest of the verse. Even though goads are moveable, one cannot say that Torah is moveable; that is why Ecclesiastes 12:11 also mentions nails, which keep things from moving around. Nails, however, are also imperfect, as they become smaller (that is, less visible) when you nail them into something, therefore, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaria explains that the verse also says, “planted,” because, “Just as a plant is fruitful and multiplies, so too are words of Torah fruitful and they multiply.”

Thus, this passage not only implies the life-giving force that Torah study provides, but also that Torah is fruitful and multiples. While the words are firmly planted, new lessons and teachings are constantly being cultivated. This also ties in nicely with the metaphor in *Eruvin* concerning the fig tree.

IMPLICATIONS IN A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

These passages give us great insight into the Talmudic era, particularly about the value of study and Torah in Babylonia. Jeffrey Rubenstein suggests that the exaggerated emphasis on Torah study in the Babylonian Talmud is a reflection of the Stammain. The Palestinian sages and Babylonian Amoraim greatly valued Torah study, but the Stammain arranged and compiled the Babylonian Talmud with such emphasis on study that it took precedence over any other practice and even became the main reason to live.³¹ The Babylonian Amoraim and Palestinian sages also valued prayer and performance of the commandments, but the Stammain exalted study above all else.³² This might explain why a majority of the passages reviewed in this paper focused on *divrei Torah* as study, and very few emphasized following of the commandments and the power of the words themselves on the people. Study was a way of life, gathering together, learning from a teacher and in *chevruta*. The erotic descriptions and intimacy of study make study seem incredibly attractive, and the sustenance received from study is also presented as essential. Thus the image of study in the Babylonian Talmud as displayed through these passages is something that provides one with some of life's necessities: sustenance, companionship, and intimacy.

Seeking contemporary relevance for Talmudic texts is always a challenge, particularly due to the nature of study, learning, religion, and education today. Today, measuring one's intellectual capacity based on one's appearance is frowned upon and we do not (at least, vocally) seek eroticism from our studies. And yet, even our contemporary stereotypes, particularly on television, in cinema, and as portrayed in magazines, suggest that one who appears bookish is smarter and one who has great beauty is less wise. Furthermore,

³¹ Ibid, p. 33.

³² Ibid.

the Talmudic educational pedagogy of learning from and with ones peers is something we highly value today, as is the concept that teachers are still students and life-long learning is an essential endeavor. In fact, contemporary studies show that continued study has many health benefits, which follows quite nicely with the passages we have studied.

Jewish professionals are constantly seeking ways to connect Jews to their Judaism, to connect Jews to their ancestors, to find meaningful ways to teach and engaging ways for students to learn. The principles that these passages about Torah study teach can be valuable tools for contemporary Jewish educational pedagogy. Implementation of some of these values in our synagogues, classrooms, and organizations can help others find meaning and connection to their community through engagement with text and engagement with one another.

Five principle lessons about Torah study can be drawn from these texts for contemporary usage:

1. The more one studies Torah, the more he or she will find in it. One can never complete the study of Torah, as there is always more to learn, even from texts with which we have already engaged. (*Eruvin* 54a-b, *Chagigah* 3b)
2. Torah study is to be done with great modesty. One who is humble in his or her studies will become more learned than one who is not (*Sukkah* 49b, *Ta'anit* 7a).
3. Torah study is best done with others. Studying alone does not challenge a person to the same degree, or yield the same results, as studying in *chevruta*. We learn from both those who are more and less advanced than ourselves. Furthermore, teaching allows one's learning to become even deeper. (*Ta'anit* 7a)
4. Torah study cannot be done episodically. In order to retain knowledge and to improve in one's skills and studies, it must be a lifelong endeavor. (*Ta'anit* 7a-b)
5. Torah study (and, to a degree, observance of the commandments) will nourish one's soul and is a life-giving force. (*Chagigah* 3b)

These implications are not particularly novel given our contemporary understandings of education, religion, and Torah study. However, the fact that these concepts existed during Talmudic times and are still relevant today, despite all of our advances in education and pedagogy, is quite powerful. By bringing elements of Talmudic styles of study into our contemporary Jewish educational settings, and by showing how we follow many of the Jewish educational models that were purported centuries ago, we have the opportunity to instill a sense of learning from generations past, leading to deep connection, and subsequently, meaningful relationship.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Greenberg, Simon. "Lifetime Education as Conceived and Practiced in the Jewish Tradition."
Religious Education 68:3 (May-June 1972), pp. 339-347.

Rubenstein, Jeffrey. *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.