

“הוי גולה למקום תורה”

“Exile Yourself to a Place of Torah:”

Visions of Education and Identity in the Babylonian Talmud

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Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says:
"Anyone who teaches their
grandchild Torah, it is as if they
received it directly from Sinai."
אמר ריב"ל:
כל המלמד את בן בנו תורה
מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו קבלה מהר סיני.

Babylonian Talmud, *Kiddushin* 30a

In honour of and gratitude for my Bubbie, Rachel Paikin, a מעין המתגבר, an overflowing fountain of wisdom, who through her love, curiosity, humility, and humour continues to teach me how to be wise in the world.

And in memory of my Zaida, Bubby, and Zaidy....

Wolfe Paikin (1911-2000)

A *mensch*, who cultivated within me a love of חידושים, new things in life

Jeanne Cahan (1925-2011)

Who imbued within me תורה של חסד, the Torah of kindness

Jack Cahan (1923-2015)

Whose wisdom will always lead me toward מעשים טובים, acts of goodness

יהא זכרם ברוך

May their memories be for a blessing

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Square brackets in English translations indicate words outside of the literal translation which are needed to help clarify idiomatic meaning. Parentheses in English translations add additional contextual information where needed.

A note on the gendered language of the Bavli and Tanakh: These texts reflect a historically male authorship and readership. Where appropriate and where it does not radically alter the meaning of the text, I do my best to translate with a gender-neutral orientation. In some instances, this is not possible, and in others, I explicitly choose to keep the gendered translation if it evokes the specific meaning of the text.

Biblical verses are quoted from the New Jewish Publication Society translation, sometimes with edits to clarify the rabbinic reading of these verses.

Biblical and rabbinic references appear in abbreviated form according to the SBL Handbook of Style:

b	Bavli (Babylonian Talmud)		
b.	ben/bar (son of)		
m	Mishnah		
ms	Manuscript		
R'	Rabbi		
t	Tosefta		
y	Yerushalmi (Jerusalem/Palestinian Talmud)		
AZ	<i>Avodah Zarah</i>	Naz.	<i>Nazir</i>
B. Bat.	<i>Bava Batra</i>	Ned.	<i>Nedarim</i>
B. Metz.	<i>Bava Metzi'a</i>	Nid.	<i>Niddah</i>
B. Qam.	<i>Bava Kamma</i>	Pes.	<i>Pesachim</i>
Bekh.	<i>Bekhorot</i>	Kid.	<i>Kiddushin</i>
Ber.	<i>Berakhot</i>	Rosh.	<i>Rosh Hashanah</i>
Beitz.	<i>Beitzah</i>	Shab.	<i>Shabbat</i>
Eruv.	<i>Eruvin</i>	Sanh.	<i>Sanhedrin</i>
Git.	<i>Gittin</i>	Shev.	<i>Shevuot</i>
Hag.	<i>Hagigah</i>	Sot.	<i>Sotah</i>
Hor.	<i>Horayot</i>	Suk.	<i>Sukkah</i>
Ker.	<i>Keritot</i>	Ta'an.	<i>Ta'anit</i>
Ket.	<i>Ketubot</i>	Tamid	<i>Tamid</i>
Mak.	<i>Makkot</i>	Tem.	<i>Temurah</i>
Meg.	<i>Megillah</i>	Yev.	<i>Yevamot</i>
Men.	<i>Menachot</i>	Yoma	<i>Yoma</i>
Mo'ed Qat.	<i>Moed Katan</i>	Zev.	<i>Zevachim</i>

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In the summer after I finished Grade 1, I received a postcard in the mail. It had a horse on one side, and on the back, a hand-written note from my teacher, Shelley. She let me know that she wouldn't be returning to teach at that school again in the fall, but wanted to fill me in on what she was doing, and asked how I was spending my summer. I wrote back to her, and thus began what amounted to over a decade of pen-pal letter writing.

From a very early age, I have been blessed to be able to learn from some spectacular teachers in both Jewish and secular spaces. Like any adolescent, there were teachers with whom I didn't get along, and I am certain that I did my fair part in infuriating some (many?). But for the most part, I always had a sense that teachers were not just professionals of some sort, or disciplinarians, but caring role models and fountains of wisdom. Mr. Bahl, my High School "Modern Western Civilizations" teacher, would often adjure our class to realize that if we had access to the fountain of wisdom, we'd better do more than just take a sip. Sixteen years later, his own wisdom still echoes in my ears.

Parker Palmer, in *The Courage to Teach*, shares that the power of teachers and mentors is "in their capacity to awaken a truth within us, a truth we can reclaim years later by recalling their impact on our lives." It is with deep appreciation and joy that I offer thanks here to those who have had an indelible impact on my ability to write this thesis, and whose wisdom, no doubt, I will be recalling for years to come.

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It has been humbling to immerse myself in Talmudic texts which, among other things, emphasize the importance of studying for its own sake, and not in order to achieve a title... all while I am doing exactly that – studying to become a rabbi. This thesis has been not just an academic endeavour, but a spiritual journey as I inch closer and closer to becoming a rabbi. Having spent the better part of a year soaking up the profound wisdom within these texts, I am convinced more than ever that their transcendent worth is waiting for us, just beneath the surface. All we need to do is dive in.

PART I

THE URGENCY OF LEARNING

INTRODUCTION

A stunning portrait of Jewish education during the *geonic* period¹ is painted by Menachem Meiri, the late-thirteenth, early-fourteenth century Provençal Talmudist, in his seminal work, *Beit HaBechirah*:

The *yeshivot* were great and honoured, and the students were numerous. Torah was their craft – and how much more so [was this the case with] the heads of the great and respected academies and those ordained into the Gaonate, who were not accustomed to leave the tent [of Torah] day or night. And they knew the entire Talmud by heart, or close to it. And the words of all of Torah and Talmud were arranged in their mouths as [it is for us] the passage of *Shema*.²

This is an astounding portrayal of classical Jewish education, particularly in its reverence toward the heads of the academies – scholars who spent day and night immersed in Torah, with a verbatim or near-verbatim memorization of Torah and Talmud (in order!), able to recall passages as easily as one recites the six words of the *Shema*, without the need to consult guides or conduct keyword searches as most do today.

“Thank God I met Rabbi Google,” proclaimed Rabbi Gabriel Negrin, Chief Rabbi of Greece in 2014, just prior to his appointment to the position. Presumably he shared these words tongue-in-cheek, in gratitude for the relative ease with which he was able to find sources of deeper Jewish knowledge on his quest to become a rabbi.³ Humour aside,

¹ The term *Gaon* (plural: *geonim*), an honorific meaning “pride,” or “excellency,” or in modern Hebrew, “genius,” refers to the heads of the two great Babylonian Talmud Academies in Sura and Pumbedita. The word is likely a shortened form of the phrase “*Rosh Yeshivat Gaon Ya’akov*,” (Head of the Academy, Pride of Jacob). The Geonim functioned as rabbinic judges, administrators, legislators, and advisors. The terms *geonic* and *geonate* refer to the coterminous period of rabbinic activity, generally dated circa mid-6th to mid-11th centuries, CE. Exact dating is difficult, as the Geonim themselves created different chronologies of their work. The geonic period is conventionally understood to end in 1038 CE with the death of R’ Hai Gaon.

² Menachem HaMeiri, *Bet ha-Behirah ‘al Massekhet Avot* [Hebrew] (ed. Binyamin Perag, Jerusalem, 1964), 52.

³ Suzanne Selengut, “Breathing New Life Into Greece’s Small But Historic Jewish Community.” No pages. [24 April 2014]. Online: <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/168310/new-greek-chief-rabbi>.

when held up against the former depiction of rabbinic learning, they illustrate a significant chasm in approach to answering the question: how is Jewish learning done? This should not be surprising, as roughly fourteen hundred years span between the Gaonate, Menachem Meiri, and Gabriel Negrin. This gulf is immense not only in time, but in underlying philosophy. The Meiri's retelling of the halcyon days of Talmudic learning is likely idealized, but it does prompt a question for the contemporary Jewish teacher and student: while access to sources of Jewish wisdom has never been easier or more plentiful, is learning with "Rabbi" Google the kind of learning the rabbis of our classical texts envisioned? How might this kind of learning⁴ reflect or push back against models presented in our texts? Put another way, we are trying to uncover what it is that makes Jewish learning "Jewish."

Scholar Moshe Idel has argued that in traditional Jewish learning, the text being studied and the way it is studied fuse together into what he calls a "sonorous community" or "sound community:"

The text is activated by being sounded out orally, loudly vocalized, or sung. In part, this practice rests on the view that language mediates the experience of God, and so words become forms of power. Singing and sounding out the holy texts also creates an external reality bringing together all who study (just as God creates in the Bible by "calling" – *keri'ah* – not by fiat). Jewish learning... is entering an ambience as much as it is an acquiring of knowledge.⁵

A well-known illustration of the place of education in the rabbinic mind is the *ma'aseh*⁶ of the potential convert who approaches Rabbi Hillel with a request to learn the entirety of the Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel's response includes perhaps one

⁴ Often a solo endeavour of searching the internet.

⁵ Susan Handelman, *Make Yourself a Teacher* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2011), 5.

⁶ A practical "incident" or a "case" upon which a *halakhic* principle is derived.

of the most famous rabbinic aphorisms: “זיל גמור / go learn.”⁷ The statement itself prompts further inquiry: When it is time to “go learn,” to whom do we turn for instruction? With whom do we learn? Where do we learn? And of course, what is it that we are meant to learn? Tantalizingly, the Bavli does not provide us with an immediate answer.

Where do we turn to find an answer? If we begin with Torah, searching for words associated with the root למד – connoting both the acts of teaching and of learning – yields only sixteen instances, and exclusively in the book of Deuteronomy.⁸ While the Torah famously commands the act of teaching “these words... to your children / ושננתם לבניך,”⁹ this act is only incumbent upon parents to teach their children. Israel Jacob Yuval argues that this text refers simply to “functional study: a person needs to learn the Torah in order to know how to fulfill it; he needs to teach his sons in order to transmit to them the necessary knowledge.”¹⁰ Indeed, it does not present a pedagogy, comment on the philosophical importance of learning, or legislate a formal system of education.¹¹ Just a few verses later, the Torah sharpens this thought:

ועתה כתבו לכם את־השירה הזאת ולמדה את־בני־ישראל שימה בפיהם למען תהיה־לי השירה
הזאת לעד בבני ישראל:

⁷ bShab. 31a

⁸ Deut. 4:1, 4:5, 4:10, 4:14, 5:1, 5:28, 6:1, 11:19, 14:23, 17:19, 18:9, 20:18, 31:12, 31:13, 31:19, 31:22

⁹ Deut. 6:7

¹⁰ Israel Jacob Yuval, “The Orality of Jewish Oral Law: from Pedagogy to Ideology,” in *Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Course of History: Exchange and Conflicts* (Schriften Des Historischen Kollegs 82, Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2010), 244.

¹¹ bB. Metz. 33a in fact presents a student’s responsibility to their parent and teacher in oppositional terms, in some instances favouring the teacher. See pg. 110-112 for more.

Therefore, write down this poem and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths, in order that this poem may be My witness against the people of Israel.¹²

Here, the act of teaching is limited to the Torah itself – a sort of self-replicating act designed to reinforce the supremacy of God and God’s relationship with Israel. Indeed, the Torah does not go into any significant detail as to what this education entails, aside from committing to fostering the oral memory of a particular text. Writers Amos Oz and Fania Oz Salzberger interrogate this lacuna:

Who were our first Teacher and Pupil? Jewish tradition positions Moses as the teacher of all teachers; but neither Aaron nor Joshua, later tagged as Moses’ students, behaves like a student. Nor do they become great teachers...¹³

Teacher and student, Oz and Oz-Salzberger remind us, are constant figures in Jewish literature up to modern times. But where does Judaism derive its rightful status as a scholarly tradition? To answer this question, we must turn to rabbinic literature in general, and the Talmud in particular.

In contrast to the paucity of material in the Torah, the Talmud’s valorizing of education is breathtaking. Every single *masekhet* of the Bavli – above and beyond merely presenting conversations between teachers and students – discusses learning and teaching. Every single *masekhet* has something to say about the interwoven enterprises of teaching and learning.¹⁴

¹² Deut. 31:19

¹³ Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Jews and Words* (New Haven: Yale University, 2012), 9.

¹⁴ Discussion are located heavily within in *sedarim Zeraim*, *Mo’ed*, *Nashim*, and *Nezikin*, with significantly fewer passages in *Kedoshim* and *Toharot*. This distribution perhaps reflects that the Talmudic view of education is primarily associated with the activities of daily living – both religious and civil – the foci of these *sedarim*.

The Talmud, beyond its status as the ultimate source of an immense corpus of Jewish thought and practice, is valuable for how the document itself models a way of learning. Yes, the term “Talmud” refers to the vast text itself, says scholar Jon Levisohn, but it also refers to a field of study, as well as a *process*. “Learning to read Talmud is surely about learning to read a text,” he reminds, “but it is also, at the same time, learning to engage in a particular *discipline*.”¹⁵ Likewise, Susan Handelman notes that Talmud is “a live, generative teaching, a meeting between teachers and students; it is not only or primarily a ‘text’ sitting on a page... [it is] a mode of learning, one which also involves the deeply personal relation between teacher and student, colleague and colleague.”¹⁶

Examining what the Bavli has to say about education is not merely an academic/critical historical inquiry, nor one which conversely desires to bolster a theologically orthodox approach to Jewish learning.¹⁷ Rather, it serves a practical purpose, prompting us to consider: when we talk about Jewish education in the twenty-first century, what are we talking about?

Professor of Education, Peter M. Appelbaum, presents a typical scenario that helps clarify why asking these questions are crucial:

We are on the education committee for a Jewish Sunday school rewriting the goals and objectives for grades K-9. One of us notes that all of our models for Jewish education originate in secular educational theory. We have taken on over the years the latest in educational theory in order to rid ourselves of the worst of American Jewish education, so often “bad pedagogy” promulgated by people whose sole qualifications were that they knew Hebrew. Now we are modern and use modern methods. But what happened to the idea of a “Jewish”

¹⁵ Jon A. Levisohn. “What We Have Learned about Learning to Read Talmud,” in *Learning to Read Talmud: What It Looks Like and How It Happens* (ed. Marjorie Lehman and Jane Kanarek; Brighton: Academic Studies, 2016), 203-218. 204

¹⁶ Handelman, *Make Yourself a Teacher*, 5.

¹⁷ See Chapter 1.

education? What would be a genuinely Jewish educational encounter?¹⁸

Understanding what the Talmud says about Jewish education provides an opportunity to examine what would be a genuinely Jewish educational encounter. Professor Alan Block argues that this is particularly necessary, not only given potential deficiencies in North American Jewish education, but also because non-Jewish pedagogies might clash with the Jewish ethos:

We live in a culture organized through the eyes of Greco-Roman and Christian culture [and] Jewish educational practice has attempted to assimilate into [that] culture... The basis of the traditional Western view of education as the appropriate training of intellect resides in [the] Socratic position and rests on the assumption that knowledge is timeless and universal... But the opening words of Genesis suggest that only God – not truth – is eternal and omniscient.¹⁹

If the very nature of knowledge and truth is approached differently in Judaism than in surrounding Western thought, what implications does and should this have on how we educate Jewishly? Block's argument is that we should develop Jewish pedagogies with an attunement to the nature of Jewish thought. This awareness mirrors an astute one proposed by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. While Jewish thought has rarely existed within a vacuum, most always responding to its surrounding cultures, Heschel notes that the major premises of Jewish and of Greco-Roman thought represent two distinct ways of thinking: "Israel and Greece not only developed divergent doctrines; they operated within different categories."²⁰

¹⁸ Peter Appelbaum, "Afterword," in Alan. A Block, *Talmud, Curriculum, and the Practical: Joseph Schwab and the Rabbis*; (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 209-220. 219.

¹⁹ Alan. A Block, *Talmud, Curriculum, and the Practical: Joseph Schwab and the Rabbis* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 7, 25.

²⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1976), 14.

Enter the Talmud, whose form and content present a uniquely Jewish approach to the quest for knowledge and truth. “The Bavli,” writes David Kraemer, “makes the imperfect and imperceptible pursuit of truth the very centre of its enterprise. It concerns itself and its student with multiple interpretations of scripture, with multiple opinions in the law, that is, with multiple approaches (but only approaches) to the truth.”²¹

Having grasped the centrality and significance of the Talmud, it must also be stated that succinctly answering the question: “what does the Bavli say about Jewish education?” is not a straightforward matter. A desire to formulate a comprehensive description of any philosophy of the Talmud, argues Hyam Maccoby, implies “too ready an acceptance of the view that the Talmud can be regarded as a unitary literature.”²² Because the Talmud weaves together divergent strands of teachings and often contradicts itself, we find a wide breadth of rabbinic ideas on education – some expansive and liberal in scope, others limiting and conservative. This lack of a unified Talmudic pedagogy must be reinforced as a warning before delving into this material. Levisohn cautions:

The Talmud is not a stable object that is just sitting and waiting for our attention. A book is not a curriculum, nor a subject or discipline. Once we undertake the effort to “curricularize” the Talmud, we operate from within a set of implicit or explicit commitments about our pedagogic purposes (or else we operate from within a set of unconscious or hidden assumptions about purposes). Those purposes then serve as criteria of selection, not just for appropriate teaching practices but for the material itself, the supposedly stable object of study.²³

To be sure, the goal of this work is not to draw out from the Talmud a unified pedagogy – for no such idea exists – but rather, to gather some of the Talmud’s most lucid, consistent

²¹ David Kraemer, *The Mind of the Talmud* (New York: Oxford University, 1990), 189.

²² Hyam Maccoby, *The Philosophy of the Talmud* (New York: Routledge, 2002), ix.

²³ Levisohn, “What We Have Learned about Learning to Read Talmud,” 207.

ideas about education, and to see what we might infer when holding them up together in conversation with one another.

To help frame this analysis, we turn to the influential twentieth century pedagogist Joseph Schwab (1909-1988), who, among his key contribution to the field of education, formed a framework for determining what elements should be involved in curriculum development. Education, for Schwab, is not “an endless collection of objectives.”²⁴ It is not a matter of simply filling one’s head with knowledge. Criticizing the state of education in the 1980s in the United States, he wrote:

Teaching... is largely “telling,” written or oral, with little thoughtful attention to argument and evidence; even less concern with alternatives and their different strengths and weaknesses; still less with consideration by students of what is yet to be known and how it might be sought through enquiry.²⁵

A reader of Talmud cannot but help see the Bavli as an antidote to this critique. It revolves around the introduction of evidence-based argumentation, presentation of multiple alternatives, and the near-constant evaluation of strengths and weaknesses. It prioritizes analysis and innovation, says Moulie Vidas, over memorization and transmission.²⁶

While Schwab himself was Jewish and worked with Jewish educational institutions,²⁷ he is not known for promoting a specifically Jewish pedagogy, nor did he

²⁴ Joseph J. Schwab, “The Practical 4: Something for Curriculum Professors To Do,” in *Curriculum Inquiry* (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1983), 239-265.

²⁵ Joseph J. Schwab, “The Practical 4,” 249.

²⁶ Moulie Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2014), 115.

²⁷ Schwab once addressed a 1973 conference entitled, “Applying Jewish Scholarship to Contemporary Programs of Education,” hosted by the Melton Research Center for Jewish Education of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and the Jewish Studies Program at The Ohio State University. He also played a role in developing the

write about the place of Talmudic thinking in secular education. Rather, he was an astute and persistent critic of the American educational system, advocating systemic reforms attuned to balancing the needs of four constituencies: the student, the teacher, the subject matter, and the learning milieu. Schwab dubbed these his “four commonplaces,” and insisted that any curriculum with integrity must be developed with an equal attention to these four areas.²⁸

The Talmud itself is a meeting-place of Schwab’s four commonplaces: in *sugya*²⁹ after *sugya*, teacher, student, and subject meet together in places of learning, and jump off the page into the reader’s own mind. In Chapter 2, we will explore Schwab’s pedagogy, what each of these commonplaces entails, and how the Talmud might be charted with them in mind. I do not suggest that the Bavli itself fully represents a Schwabian pedagogy, nor that Schwab developed his own philosophy with the Talmud in mind,³⁰ rather that Schwab’s four commonplaces supply a germane paradigm for analyzing what the Bavli has to say about education.

educational program for the Conservative Movement’s Ramah Camping Movement. (Block, *Talmud, Curriculum, and the Practical*, 48-50).

²⁸ Schwab, “The Practical 4,” 241.

²⁹ A *sugya* / סוגיא, meaning “study,” “lesson,” or “subject,” is a distinct unit of focus within the Talmud.

³⁰ This is the argument of Alan A. Block in his text *Talmud, Curriculum, and the Practical: Joseph Schwab and the Rabbis*. His research into Schwab’s pedagogies will be referenced in my work, though an analysis of his own thesis is not within the scope of this paper.

See also David Stein, “Curriculum, Crisis, and Change: Towards a Talmud Curriculum Grounded in Educational Theory.” No pages. [12 January 2017]. Online: <http://www.thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/curriculum-crisis-and-change-towards-a-talmud-curriculum-grounded-in-educational-theory>.

HOW HAVE I APPROACHED THIS WORK?

When the Bavli speaks of learning, teaching, and studying, to what acts and content is it referring? To uncover these answers, I began with keyword searches for terms that would be expected to appear in any discussion on education: תורה (Torah – both the proper name of the text itself, and the term for learning in general), למד (the root connoting learning, studying, and teaching, and the source of the very word Talmud, דרש (expound/interpret – a common term used to introduce a rabbinic interpretation of a source), חכם (wise – along with תלמיד, a term frequently used to refer to students of Torah). Unsurprisingly, searching for these and other common terms yielded a staggering amount of material: the word תורה appears over four thousand times throughout the Talmud. Permutations of the words דרש and למד appear over thirteen hundred times each. The term חכם תלמיד, over two-hundred. As not every instance of the words תלמד or תורה is necessarily occupied with a discussion on learning, I also directed my attention to those *gemaras* where more precise, technical terminology appear, words and phrases such as: טרדו מגירסייהו (sitting and interpreting), דיתב וקא דריש / יושב ודרוש (yeshiva), מתיבתא (interrupted his studies), or פוק תני לברא (go learn it outside). Because of the interwoven nature of the Talmud, searching for texts by keyword frequently yielded parallel texts that either repeat verbatim, or make use of common source material. Where appropriate, these will be indicated.

The Talmudic index המפתח (*HaMaftach* / “The Key”)³¹ was immensely helpful in searching for texts by topic, as were the searchable compendia at the Bar Ilan

³¹ Daniel Retter, ed., *HaMaftach: Talmud Bavli Indexed Reference Guide* (Jerusalem: Koren, 2014).

Responsa Project and Sefaria. Consulting an annotated edition of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah: Hilkhhot Talmud Torah* (Laws of Torah Study) also provided a good overview of relevant sources. The secondary sources referenced throughout this work also pointed to discussions on education in the Bavli. In particular, David Goodblatt's monumental work, *Rabbinic Instruction in Sasanian Babylon*³² was helpful in its highly technical analysis of how terminology is used in the Bavli and how rabbinic academic institutions in Sasanian Babylon functioned.

Together, this querying produced a large library of over two hundred fifty instances spread out over more than three hundred *dapim* throughout the Bavli, where the topic of education is introduced in relationship to one or more of Schwab's four commonplaces. By way of comparison, the Talmud in its standard Vilna printing is 2,711 *dapim*.³³ This is by no means an exhaustive list, though I am confident that it is representative of the most topically contiguous instances where education is discussed, that is, those places where the Bavli engages in a sustained discourse on the role of teachers, students, subject matter, or learning environment.

The breadth and depth of this library precludes an analysis of each and every one of these *gemaras*. Thus, it has been crucial to determine what is in and what is out, when viewed through the four commonplaces. As noted, the Talmudic understanding of education is not pre-packaged for us with a clear definition. Not only are there different

³² David M. Goodblatt, *Rabbinic Instruction in Sasanian Babylonia* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975).

³³ The topic of education thus appears to one degree or another on over 10% of the Bavli's pages. That itself is larger than some of the individual *masekhtot*. One wonders why there is no *masekhet chinukh*, or *masekhet lomdut* (Tractate Education, or Tractate Studying).

conceptions of who is a teacher or who is a student, these are presented to us in different ways: sometimes through explicit statements, other times through richly painted *aggadot* that provide us a picture of teacher-student relationships, at other times through unresolved debates.

In many ways, the Talmud itself has guided the decision-making process. For the purposes of the case studies and in-depth text analysis in this work, I have avoided concentrating on material that is more technical in nature (for example, those *sugyas* that focus on a precise delineation of study materials, or physical arrangement of a learning space), and have turned my focus to those passages which reveal a more profound sense of the underlying values and ideas the Bavli is grappling with. This focus has yielded three main categories of content in the Bavli:

1. Explicit statements on how, what, where, and why one should learn and/or teach
2. *Aggadot* describing how, what, where, and why rabbis and students learned and or taught
3. Aphorisms on the value of education

The first two categories occupy the bulk of my analysis, through where appropriate, cases from the third category will also be examined. Excluded from this examination are more general principles of human interaction that might otherwise map well onto principles of education, but do not have to do explicitly with education.³⁴ Also chiefly beyond the scope of this project, but worth mentioning in brief are the Bavli's own hermeneutics, as well as the stylistic and structural features that demand specific methodologies of study

³⁴ For more on this approach to Jewish education, see: Joel Lurie Grishaver, *Teaching Jewishly* (Los Angeles: Torah Aura Productions, 2007).

(for example: its argumentative style, juxtaposition of different opinions, and use of rhetorical and mnemonic devices). Where appropriate to our analysis, these will be referenced.³⁵

Together, these sources will be analyzed as models of education through the paradigm of Schwab's four commonplaces. Part I examines the transition from the Torah's relatively minor understanding of education to the Bavli's expanded approach, and then provides an overview of Joseph Schwab's pedagogy. Part II dives into the four commonplaces, with two chapters dedicated to each. For each commonplace, I first provide a broad, representative overview of the material throughout the Bavli related to each commonplace, then move into an in-depth text analysis of one *sugya* each as a case study. Part III includes a distillation of the major themes studied, my conclusions, and questions to consider regarding the applicability of this study for current models of Jewish education.

This thesis also more broadly explores what is it that makes Jewish learning "Jewish." Does the Bavli suggest a particular way to learn Jewishly? Does it lean toward the Meiri's vision of *geonic* studiousness, or Rabbi's Negrin's reliance on "Rabbi Google"? Of course, these are only two models. As illuminating as they may be, they do not capture the full breath of classical and contemporary approaches to Jewish education,

³⁵ Susan Handelman argues that the Talmud speak not only *about* education, but introduces "a *way of teaching* through [its] dramatic literary and rhetorical structures... images, metaphors, allusions, enigmas." She paints this as a "deep and self-conscious teaching." (Susan Handelman, *Make Yourself a Teacher*, 21).

For more on how the style and structure of the Bavli demand a certain style of teaching and study, see pg. 167, n9, and also: Jane Kanarek and Jeffrey S. Kress, "The Babylonian Talmud in Cognitive Perspective," in *Journal of Jewish Education* 69:2 (2003): 58-78.

nor even just those embedded within the Bavli. Schwab's commonplaces will assist us in probing some of the most intriguing examples of these sources, and exploring what the Bavli wants its learners to think about when it comes to students, teachers, subject matter, and milieus.

WHAT OTHERS HAVE LEARNED

Compared to the depth and breadth of studies of the historical and philosophical forces which gave rise to the Bavli's formation, stylistic and source critical analyses, and burgeoning research into how Talmud is taught,³⁶ a comprehensive query into what the Talmud itself has to say about education is relatively inchoate. In 2003, scholars Jeffrey S. Kress and Marjorie Lehman studied the pedagogical implications of the Bavli in light of studies into human cognition.³⁷ Observing that the Bavli is constructed in such a way that demands an interpersonal construction of knowledge, Kress and Lehman question: "Do interpersonally-based learning modes constitute a uniquely Jewish approach to pedagogy rooted in a distinct mode of textual construction?"³⁸ Lehman has written extensively on this topic, most notably with Jane Kanarek, in their 2011 paper *Making a*

³⁶ See, in particular: Beth Cousins, ed. *A Text That is Never Resolved: Skills, Knowledge, and Personal Meaning in Students' Experiences of Rabbinic Literature*. (Waltham: Brandeis, and New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2016); Jon A. Levisohn, "What Are the Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature?" in *Turn It and Turn It Again: Studies in the Teaching and Learning of Classical Jewish Texts* (Levisohn and Fendrick, eds., 2013); Jane L. Kanarek and Marjorie Lehman, eds. *Learning to Read Talmud: What it Looks Like and How it Happens*, (Boston: Academic Studies, 2016).

³⁷ Kanarek and Kress, "The Babylonian Talmud in Cognitive Perspective."

³⁸ Kanarek and Kress, "The Babylonian Talmud in Cognitive Perspective," 71.

*Case for Talmud Pedagogy – The Talmud as Educational Model.*³⁹ Noting the infancy of their study, they observe that the Talmud has “largely been overlooked as an educational model,”⁴⁰ a striking lacuna given the primacy Judaism places on education. Their paper analyses two *sugyas* as examples of what the Bavli might reveal about how to teach students to be critical thinkers, “embedded within a particular tradition.”⁴¹

Marc Hirshman’s work in this field⁴² is the most comprehensive analysis to date. While not dedicated exclusively to the Bavli, Hirshman studies the values and methods of education of the classical rabbinic period, exploring “how a small group of, at most, a couple of thousand named scholars and rabbis of the first five centuries of the common era in Roman Palestine and Sasanid Persia, was able to secure and sustain a thriving national and educational culture.”⁴³ With respect to these studies, I try not to duplicate their efforts, and will point to their conclusions and insight where useful.

Elsewhere, others have studied education in the Bavli, but with a narrower perspective on *content*, including Moshe Berger’s inquiry into Rav Hiyya’s vision of education in *masekhet Bava Metzi’a*,⁴⁴ or on *application*, such as Elie Holzer’s treatise on the application of Jewish text study to professional development of educators,⁴⁵

³⁹ Marjorie Lehman and Jane Kanarek, “Talmud: Making a Case for Talmud Pedagogy – The Talmud as an Educational Model,” in *International Handbook of Jewish Education*, (ed. Helena Miller, Lisa D. Grant, Alex Pomson; Springer, 2011), 581-596.

⁴⁰ Lehman and Kanarek, “Talmud: Making a Case for Talmud Pedagogy,” 581.

⁴¹ Lehman and Kanarek, “Talmud: Making a Case for Talmud Pedagogy,” 583.

⁴² Marc Hirshman, *The Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture, 100 C.E.-350 C.E.: Texts on Education and Their Late Antique Context*. (New York: Oxford University, 2012).

⁴³ Hirshman, *The Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture*, v.

⁴⁴ Moshe Berger, “Towards the Development of a Jewish Pedagogy: Rav Chiya’s Vision of Torah Education,” in *Judaism and Education* (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 1998), 109-120.

⁴⁵ Ellie Holzer, “Conceptions of the Study of Jewish Texts in Teachers’ Professional Development,” in *Religious Education*, 97 (2002). 377-403.

Kanarek's study into teaching Talmud in a summer Kollel,⁴⁶ and most recently, my colleague Rachel Marder's research into the teaching of Talmud at Svara, a "Traditionally Radical, Queer Yeshiva" in Chicago.⁴⁷ Against this backdrop, this thesis extends the work of Kanarek and Lehman:

More time needs to be spent studying the Bavli for its pedagogical lessons... We need to think about how the rabbis defined pedagogy and to explore the models of teaching and learning that they set up for us... to develop a better understanding of the nature of Jewish thought and culture... Within the field of Talmud lies a burgeoning field of Jewish pedagogy that bridges the scholarly worlds of Jewish literature and Jewish education.⁴⁸

I hope also that in doing so, I may reflect one of the Bavli's own visions of Jewish learning, sharpening the teaching of the great scholars from whom I have learned:

אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק: למה נמשלו דברי תורה כעץ שנאמר (משלי ג יח) עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה לומר לך מה עץ קטן מדליק את הגדול אף תלמידי חכמים קטנים מחדדים את הגדולים והיינו דאמר ר' חנינא הרבה למדתי מרבתי ומחבירי יותר מרבתי ומתלמידי יותר מכולן.

Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak said: Why are Torah matters compared to a tree, as it is stated: "It is a tree of life to those who cling to it" (Prov. 3:18)? This comes to tell you that just as a small [piece of] wood can ignite a large piece, so too, minor Torah scholars can sharpen great [Torah scholars]. This is why Rabbi Hanina said: "I have learned much from my teachers and even more from my friends than from my teachers, but from my students, more than all of them."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Jane Kanarek. "The Pedagogy of Slowing Down: Teaching Talmud in a Summer Kollel," In *Teaching Theology and Religion*, (2010). 15-34.

⁴⁷ Rachel Marder, "Memorize that Feeling: An Analysis of the Svara Beit Midrash" (MA diss., Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies of American Jewish University, 2017).

⁴⁸ Kanarek and Lehman, "Making a Case for Talmud Pedagogy," 595.

⁴⁹ bTa'an. 7a

CHAPTER 1

FROM TELLING TO TEACHING

How do we get from the Torah's statement, "ולמדה את בני ישראל" (teach it to the people of Israel)¹ to *gemaras* on three hundred *dapim* discussing teachers and students? A wealth of rabbinic thought on education can pour forth from just those four words, as seen in this *gemara* discussing the method of Torah study, from *Eruvin*:

ת"ר כיצד סדר משנה משה למד מפי הגבורה נכנס אהרן ושנה לו משה פירקו נסתלק אהרן וישב לשמאל משה נכנסו בניו ושנה להן משה פירקו... נכנסו זקנים ושנה להן משה פירקו נסתלקו זקנים נכנסו כל העם ושנה להן משה פירקו נמצאו ביד אהרן ארבעה ביד בניו שלשה וביד הזקנים שנים וביד כל העם אחד. נסתלק משה ושנה להן אהרן פירקו נסתלק אהרן שנו להן בניו פירקו נסתלקו בניו שנו להן זקנים פירקו נמצא ביד הכל ארבעה.

מכאן א"ר אליעזר חייב אדם לשנות לתלמידו ארבעה פעמים וקל וחומר ומה אהרן שלמד מפי משה ומשה מפי הגבורה כך הדיוט מפי הדיוט על אחת כמה וכמה.

ר"ע אומר מניין שחייב אדם לשנות לתלמידו עד שילמדנו שנאמר (דברים לא, יט) ולמדה את בני ישראל ומניין עד שתהא סדורה בפיהם שנאמר שימה בפיהם...

The sages taught: What was the order of teaching (*mishnah*, lit. "repetition")? Moses learned directly from the mouth of the Almighty. Aaron entered, and Moses taught (*shanah*, lit.: "repeated") him his lesson. Aaron moved, and sat to the left of Moses. Aaron's sons entered and Moses taught (*shanah*) them their lesson... The elders entered and Moses taught (*shanah*) them their lesson. The elders moved aside. The entire nation entered and Moses taught (*shanah*) them their lesson. Therefore, Aaron learned it (lit.: "it was in Aaron's hand") four times, his sons learned it three times, the elders learned it two times, and all the people learned it once. Moses left, and Aaron taught (*shanah*) his lesson to others. Aaron left and his sons taught (*shanu*) their lesson to others. His sons left and the elders taught (*shanu*) their lesson to others. We find that everyone learned it (lit.: "had it in their hands") four times.

From here, Rabbi Eliezer said: "A person is obligated to teach (*lishanot*) their student four times. And if Aaron – who learned from Moses, and Moses from the mouth of the Almighty – [learned] this [way], all the more so an ordinary [student learning] from the mouth of an ordinary [teacher must repeat their studies four times]."

Rabbi Akiva said: "From where [do we know] that a person is obligated to teach their student until they learn?" As it says: "Teach it to the children of Israel" (Deut. 31:19). And from where [do we know that a person must teach

¹ Deut. 31:19

their student] until it is arranged in their mouths?” As it is says: “Put it in their mouths” (Deut. 31:19).²

Here, biblical characters are positioned as the scholars of Oral Torah, repeatedly teaching their lessons orally, in an unbroken chain of tradition stretching back to Sinai. The verse from Deuteronomy that R’ Akiva comments on refers only to teaching “it” – that is the closing poem of Torah (or, more generously to the entire Torah) – to the children of Israel. But he expands this concept to a more general academic principle, introducing a new pedagogic approach: one is required to teach their student over and over again³ until they have sufficiently mastered the material, so that they themselves can do the same.

We can get a sense of why the rabbis associated learning with oral repetition, and at the same time see the forces in play that resulted in the development of the Talmudic text as we have it today. Marc Hirshman notes the following:

For at least some of the Jewish sages, the words of Torah were essentially divine. God’s words were part and parcel of God’s essence. This is why they are both represented as fire. The goal of the sage is to attach one’s self and to cleave to these divine words... The words of scripture and the words of the oral law were not second-best, inadequate representatives of God’s will and essence. They were God’s faithful emissaries. It was in speech that God was revealed and those “concrete” words were to be interpreted in every possible manner. This view of language and speech distinguishes the rabbinic appreciation of speech from that of both Plotinus and Origen... For the rabbinic sages, understanding was consummated in speech.⁴

Hirshman argues that the rabbis’ meta-pedagogy of learning as an act of speech grows from its early state of anxiety at preserving a native culture under foreign influence (leading to an intense focus on rote memorization), toward a more self-aware and self-

² bEruv. 54b

³ It is notable that while the Torah uses the word “למד” (teach / cause to learn), this *gemara* uses the word “שנה” (repeat) to refer to teaching, as it is one of the classical rabbinic terms, giving us the very term “Mishnah.”

⁴ Hirshman, *The Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture*, 30.

confident, “flourishing” model, focusing on complex arguments and more diverse skills acquisition.⁵ The rabbis take the seeds planted in the Torah, and give “new meaning to the act of study. It is no longer study merely for the sake of knowledge, but... become[s] a value in its own right.”⁶

A critical historical approach to Talmud study – seeking to deconstruct the variant strands, assigning names and dates to voices⁷ – would want to interrogate what caused this shift, what led to a more self-aware state, what foreign influence manifests itself in the rabbis’ minds, and how that diversity of forces coalesced in the text we have today. To my mind, while historically relevant and intellectually stimulating, such an approach is less appropriate for a contemporary pedagogical assessment of the Bavli. In general, and particularly for the purposes of this thesis, I am moved by Moulie Vidas’s argument that understanding the Bavli’s monumental and revolutionary focus on education solely by dint of space or time – either as simply one stage in the development of rabbinic thought, or a regional quirk of Babylonian culture – is not sufficient. The “urgency of these passages,” he suggests, “indicates that the issues are still very much alive.”⁸

It is this self-consciousness, this sense of urgency, this preoccupation of the Bavli with what it means to learn and to teach that I explore in this work.

⁵ Hirshman, *The Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture*, vi.

⁶ Israel Jacob Yuval, “The Orality of Jewish Oral Law: from Pedagogy to Ideology,” 244.

⁷ For more on the stratification of the Bavli’s voices, see David Weiss Halivni, *The Formation of the Babylonian Talmud*, (trans. J. Rubenstein; New York: Oxford University, 2013). For more on how that approach to studying the text impacts theories of education and identity, see: Hirshman, *The Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture*, and Martin S. Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism 200 BCE-400 CE*, (New York: Oxford University, 2001).

⁸ Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud*, 117.

I seek an approach that embraces the critical understandings modern scholarship has provided, yet is not satisfied with a detached, scientific analysis of the text. I am equally dissatisfied with an approach that (anecdotally) I believe is pervasive in many liberal Jewish educational settings, of using the Talmud to substantiate already held philosophies or pedagogies by mining the text for pithy quotes and inspirational stories that (on surface) fit comfortably within a contemporary, liberal mindset.⁹ I agree with Daniel Gordis, who argues that our study and use of text “must be rooted in a broad read of the Jewish canon, not in sound-bites thereof... Jewish discourse must not devolve into ‘pin the tail on the rabbinic aphorism.’... Ideas, not ‘greatest hits,’ are what matter.”¹⁰

It is these ideas that we will encounter, up close. How might these sources serve as models of Jewish learning? When the Bavli presents to us images of teachers and students in relationship, what does it want us to know? Is the Bavli only interested in self-preservation, or is there a wider vision of education present? Put another way: Is there a transcendent vision, and if so what is it, and what claim does it hold on us?

It is my belief that the Bavli continues to offer insight and wisdom that is relevant for Jewish learning today. I believe, in words shared by Sarra Lev in her inquiry into a self-reflective study of the Talmud, that Bavli exists “to help us achieve holiness... by impelling us to interact with the text. It is a text that pushes our buttons and by which we

⁹ For more on different orientations to teaching rabbinic literature, including an in-depth analysis of those that I have referred to here, see: Jon A. Levisohn, “A Menu of Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature,” *Journal of Jewish Education* 76:1 (2010): 4-51

¹⁰ Daniel Gordis, “A Responsibility to Speak,” *The Times of Israel*, No pages. [November 26, 2012]. Online: <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/on-the-absence-of-outrage>.

can be pushed to become ever more reflective, understanding, empathetic, discerning, and expansive.”¹¹

¹¹ Sarra Lev, “Talmud that Works Your Heart: New Approaches to Reading,” in *Learning to Read Talmud: What It Looks Like and How It Happens* (ed. Marjorie Lehman and Jane Kanarek; Brighton: Academic Studies, 2016), 175-202. 177.

CHAPTER 2

JOSEPH SCHWAB AND THE FOUR COMMONPLACES

Amidst a discussion in Bava Kama questioning who is greater: one who is commanded and performs a mitzvah, or one who is not commanded yet still performs it (itself part of a larger *sugya* on the repayment of damages between Jews and non-Jews), the Bavli strays from the rabbinic debate into a highly imaginative *aggadah*:

ת"ר וכבר שלחה מלכות רומי שני סרדיוטות אצל חכמי ישראל. למדונו תורתכם. קראו ושנו ושלשו. בשעת פטירתן אמרו להם דקדקנו בכל תורתכם ואמת הוא חוץ מדבר זה שאתם אומרים שור של ישראל שנגח שור של כנעני פטור של כנעני שנגח שור של ישראל בין תם בין מועד משלם נזק שלם.

ממ"נ. אי רעהו דוקא אפילו דכנעני כי נגח דישאל ליפטר. ואי רעהו לאו דוקא אפילו דישאל כי נגח דכנעני לחייב ודבר זה אין אנו מודיעים אותו למלכות.

Our sages taught: The Roman government once dispatched two military officers to the sages of Israel. [They said to them]: “Teach us your Torah.” [The officers] read, and repeated it, and repeated it a third time. At the time they left, they said to [the sages]: “We have examined all of your Torah, and it is true, except for this [one] thing that you say – [that the owner of] an ox owned by a Jew that gored an ox of a Canaanite¹ [is] exempt [from paying damages, while an ox owned] by a Canaanite that gored an ox of a Jew – whether [it was] presumed to be gentle or hostile – [is liable to] pay the entire [cost of] damages.

[This law is difficult] whichever way you look at it.² If ‘of another’³ [refers] precisely [to the owners of both oxen being Jewish], then even if [an ox owned by] a Canaanite,⁴ gores [an ox owned by] a Jew, [the non-Jew should be] exempt [from paying damages]. But if ‘of another’ does not [refer] precisely [to the owners both being Jewish], then even if [an ox owned by] a Jew gores [an ox owned by] a Canaanite, [the Jewish owner should be held] liable [to pay damages]. But in this matter, we will not inform the government.”⁵

Immediately, we are drawn in to the *aggadah* by the sense of drama crafted by the authors: military officers confront a group of Rabbis and challenge them on home turf, as

¹ i.e. a non-Jew.

² Steinsaltz clarifies: no matter which side of the dilemma one adopts, an unacceptable conclusion follows.

³ Now, the Roman officers are quoting from the Torah, whereas earlier, they were quoting from the Mishnah.

⁴ i.e. a non-Jew.

⁵ bB. Qama. 38a

it were. Why did the Roman government send them? What are their intentions? How is it that they are able to learn *all* of the Torah in just three “lessons”? How and why do the Romans determine that all of the Torah is true? Why is the example they give the only one that is determined to not be true? Is it a goal of the sages to make the Roman offers complete believers in Torah? And what do we make of the cryptic ending?

The story itself is not a historical account, nor does it purport to be one. The characters are all anonymous, and the authors clearly craft it in service of the immediate *makhloket*. On its own, it does not even provide a conclusive answer to the *halakhic* question in play. But through the imagination of the rabbinic authors, we catch some glimpses – though not fully-fleshed out – of what the authors’ view of learning might look like. Indeed, in just this one brief *aggadah*, the Bavli engages with the very four factors we are considering: who can study? Who can teach? What can be learned, and where may it be learned?

The Student: This *gemara* raises questions of who is permitted to be a student of Jewish law and thought. It suggests that in the eyes of the rabbis, non-Jews might not only have interest in, but be capable of studying Jewish text. Elsewhere, both discomfort in and prohibitions on rabbis teaching non-Jews are common,⁶ but here no such objections are raised. Indeed, just earlier in this *sugya* (not quoted here), the Bavli states that non-Jews who study Torah are considered as if they are like the Israelite High Priest!

⁶ See, for example, bHag. 13a, which explicitly prohibits the teaching of Torah to non-Jews: “Rabbi Ami said further: The words of Torah may not be transmitted to a Gentile...” See also bSanh. 59a, which takes the prohibition even further with a debate over whether non-Jews who study Torah are liable to receive the death penalty.

The Teacher(s): Who are our teachers, and how do they teach? They are identified as חכמי ישראל, “the wise ones of Israel,” or more colloquially, “sages.” The text curiously leaves out any description of the sages’ actions or thoughts. Indeed, the only active characters are the Romans. But what about our sages? Did they teach willingly or begrudgingly? What kind of attention did they pay to their Roman students? The method of study appears to be rote repetition – consistent with this text’s classification as a *baraita*.

The Subject Matter: The Roman officers demand that the sages teach “your Torah,” which they then study by repetition three times. While they report believing that the “Torah” is true, the exceptional case they bring is not from the Torah, but from the *mishnah* in discussion earlier in the *sugya*.⁷ This is a curious anomaly. The text suggests that not only have the Romans learned both Torah and Mishnah (in three sittings!) but they are immediately able to engage in a critical analysis of their learning material, parsing individual words. When held up against other listings in the Bavli of appropriate curricula,⁸ the Romans are given access to a surprising wealth of knowledge!

The Milieu: At first glance, there does not seem to be any mention made of where this episode takes place, however the word choices indicate there may be intentional thought present: The Roman government is said to have “שלחה”

⁷ bB. Qam. 37b

⁸ See, for example bSuk. 28a, bB. Metz. 33a-b, and bB. Bat. 134a for overviews of the knowledge attributed to great scholars.

(dispatched) the two officers to the sages, indicating that the exchange takes place in the rabbis' home environment, rather than vice versa. Indeed, the text indicates that the officers come to: "אצל חכמי ישראל," (the place of the sages). The word אצל functions similarly to the term "*chez*" in French. Finally, the climax is reached "בשעת פטירתן" (at the time of their *departure*). All of this gives the impression of the Roman officers coming to a place that is foreign to them and domestic to the rabbis. Elsewhere we will discover more explicit statements *vis-à-vis* what characterizes an appropriate learning environment, but here the message is simple: learning may take place in a space where there are students and teachers together.

What at first glance appears to be a folktale marshalled in service of a separate argument in the field of tort law now appears sharper: it is also a concise examination of rabbinic learning. As we shall come to see, when read in conjunction with other Bavli texts on education, this *baraita* raises significant questions about how the rabbis understand education. Stepping back from the content of the text itself, it also helps us see the limits and open spaces of our examination. Louis E. Newman draws attention to a teaching by American jurisprudential scholar Karl Llewellyn, that "every legal precedent has not one value, but two; it can be interpreted either broadly, so as to encompass many new cases, or narrowly, thus restricting its impact on future decisions."⁹ In our case, the range of values might be understood as follows:

⁹ Louis E. Newman, "Woodchoppers and Respirators: The Problem of Interpretation in Contemporary Jewish Ethics" in *Modern Judaism* 10:1 (1990): 17-42.

- *The Student*: Can anyone be a student of Jewish text, or are there specific requirements?
- *The Teacher*: Is חכמי ישראל a professional title, or an honorific? How does one become one of חכמי ישראל, and does that alone enable and/or entitle one to teach?
- *The Subject Matter*: What is learned between teacher and student? What is meant by “Torah”? Does the nature of the subject matter impact the mode of study? What kinds of materials are out of bounds (or less appropriate)?
- *The Milieu*: Can Jewish learning take place anywhere?

Our *baraita* could be remarkably liberal, and invite a broad interpretation: It might suggest that anyone can be a student of Jewish text; that one either does not need to be a professional teacher in order to teach, or that some of the most learned sages of Israel would occupy themselves instructing foreign military officers; that Torah and Mishnah are accessible bodies of knowledge, and that learning can take place anywhere.

Alternatively, this may be seen as a more conservative text, demanding a restricting eye: It could suggest that the Roman officers are only permitted to study text because they have military authority and the teachers have no other say in the matter. Torah and Mishnah are learned, but the style of learning known as *gemara*,¹⁰ the highest discipline, is out of the question. And while no environment is specifically mentioned, the learning does not take place in the most obvious of locations: the *beit midrash*; perhaps they are elite institutions, out of bounds for these students.

On its own, this *baraita* is clearly not substantial enough to be held up as a distinct model of rabbinic education, however, as noted, it does present an entrée into the

¹⁰ Not the Gemara/Talmud itself, but the form of study known as *gemara*. See pg. 132.

field of pedagogy, inviting questions that help establish the parameters we must consider when approach other texts. One of the fascinating things one discovers when unpacking how other Bavli texts discuss education is how similar they are to this one in their capaciousness. While there are numerous episodes scattered throughout the Bavli specifically about teachers and teaching or students and learning, and where and what this entails, a noticeable majority of instances discussing education comment on two or more of our pedagogical commonplaces *together*. The Bavli seems to be saying to us: it is not enough to merely detail the qualities of a good teacher or a good student, or to present a list of what counts as Jewish fluency. It is not enough to lay out “a set of vague general principles and maxims.”¹¹ Rather, Jewish education, in the eyes of the Bavli, must give thoughtful consideration to teacher, to student, to subject, and to the place of learning together.

Joseph Schwab would be pleased. “Curriculum is not an endless collection of objectives,”¹² he insists. Schwab inveighs against any approach to education which dissects the learning as well as the teachers’ and students’ thinking about it. He advocates strenuously that the four commonplaces of education are of intrinsically equal importance.¹³ While individual circumstances may demand prioritizing one commonplace over another, broadly speaking, no one of them is the “fountainhead of decision and choice.”¹⁴ We see a similar approach reflected in the Bavli when examining it through the paradigm of the four commonplaces: while there are instances where the

¹¹ Kanarek and Lehman *Talmud: Making a Case for Talmud Pedagogy*, 583.

¹² Schwab, “The Practical 4,” 240.

¹³ Schwab, “The Practical 4,” 240.

¹⁴ Schwab, “The Practical 4,” 240, 241.

Bavli dissects its approach – speaking only of the importance of teachers, students, or the learning material – broadly speaking, education is treated as a comprehensive activity, without exclusively privileging one commonplace over another. As we examine each of the four, it will be intriguing to see how and for what reasons the Bavli might focus on one over another, and what this indicates about its larger ideas of education.

Schwab was writing against the backdrop of American educational systems that had privileged pedagogies which sought to “place” cultural literacy within the heads of students through lecturing, rote memorization, and examinations. Teaching, he laments, “is largely ‘telling,’ written or oral, with little thoughtful attention to argument and evidence; still less with consideration by students of what is yet to be known and how it might be sought through enquiry.”¹⁵ An approach to student learning focused on “professional recital, memorization, and re-recital” was insufficient.¹⁶ One cannot help but see the Bavli – with its move away from mishnaic rote repetition, and its hyper-focus on debate, search for evidence, counterpoint presentation of views, and maintenance of minority opinions – as exactly this desired approach; the perfect salve for Schwab’s diagnosis.

Indeed, Schwab himself argues for a radically different approach to education, where discussion, deliberation, and critical thinking are viewed not only as tools for acquiring external knowledge, but as essential components of education itself.¹⁷

“Curriculum decision has been so commonly based on subject-matter considerations

¹⁵ Schwab, “The Practical 4,” 250.

¹⁶ Schwab, Joseph. *College Curriculum and Student Protest* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1969), 20.

¹⁷ Block, *Talmud, Curriculum, and the Practical*, 6.

alone,”¹⁸ he writes. At times, it might also focus on political considerations of teachers, or on the needs of students, but only on these at the expense of, or without consideration for, the matrix of commonplaces. By placing discussion and deliberation at the forefront of his pedagogy, we can see how the four commonplaces come into being. Fostering discussion demands consideration of more than one party: we need both student and teacher and a sense of the abilities and needs of both parties. It demands consideration of the subject: what are the boundaries of the discussion? What kinds of questions and debate adequately address the subject matter? And it demands consideration of the milieu – both the physical and tonal characteristics of the learning space: not simply what environmental setup is most conducive to acquiring knowledge, but how to construct a learning space that encourages both parties to contribute to discussion and inquiry.

For Schwab, these considerations are not a matter of partisan philosophy, but an eminently practical matter. He demanded that those who develop curricula consider all four commonplaces because:

No one person adequately commands the concrete particularities of all the commonplaces. What should be taught, how teaching should run, who is available to do it, which students most need the change in question, are each matters requiring their own expertise of experience.¹⁹

Schwab’s pedagogical approach to curriculum development prompts many of the same questions as does our earlier *gemara* from *Bava Kama*. We will use these to guide the analysis of *sugyas* in the course of this project:

¹⁸ Schwab, “The Practical 4,” 241.

¹⁹ Ibid., 244.

The Student: What does it mean to be a student? Is it to develop intelligence?²⁰ To ask questions and seek answers?²¹ To be a passive learner, or to be socialized into an ongoing, “participative rhetorical and dialectical” process of enquiry?²²

The Teacher: Who should be permitted to teach? What is the nature of a teacher’s relationship to their student²³ – is it merely to impart topic-specific knowledge, or

²⁰ Block, *Talmud, Curriculum, and the Practical*, 10.

²¹ Block, *Talmud, Curriculum, and the Practical*, 10.

²² Joseph Schwab, “Inquiry and the Reading Process,” *The Journal of General Education* 11:2 (1958): 72-82. 158.

²³ Note must be made here that in Talmudic parlance, it is more difficult to differentiate between the formal roles of student and teacher as understood in Western education systems. In the Bavli (and indeed, in Jewish tradition writ large), a תלמיד חכם – a wise student – can be both a student scholar and a teacher for others. A lucid example of the need to clarify this is found in bKid. 32 where we find a debate over whether one who is a young, but wise student, might be considered akin to an elder teacher and thus deserving of a higher degree of honour:

איכא בינייהו יניק וחכים ת"ק סבר יניק וחכים לא רבי יוסי הגלילי סבר אפילו יניק וחכים

There is [a debate between Rabbi Yossi HaGalili and an anonymous *Tanna* regarding a student who is] young and wise. The anonymous *Tanna* reasons that a young, wise student is not [considered an elder]; Rabbi Yossi HaGalili reasons that even a young, wise student [is deserving of honour].

The *gemara* resolves this debate by agreeing that honour is achieved by virtue of wisdom, not age, and that even one who is young and wise is called an elder: “אפי' יניק וחכים”

The Bavli also homiletically notes the overlap between teaching and learning roles in technical terms: “אמר מר זוטרא קרי ביה למען ילמדו רב אשי אמר ודאי למען ילמדו” (Mar Zutra said [that one should] read into [the verse]: ‘That they may *teach*’ [(*yelamudu*)], instead of ‘that they may learn’ (*yilmedu*) (Deut. 31:12)]. Rav Ashi said: ‘Certainly, [it should be read] ‘That they may *teach*’” (bHag. 3a, emphasis mine).

And similarly: “ולמדתם ולמדתם” (“You shall *teach* (*velimadtem*)” (Deut. 11:19) [can also be read as]: “you shall *study* (*ulmadtem*)” (bKid. 29b, emphasis mine).

Elsewhere, we read of rabbis who attend the *yeshiva* to learn as students with greater rabbis and teachers quoted along with their own teachers, establishing a long chain of teachers whose very identities are bound up as students. This characterization is poetically evoked in the earlier quoted passage from bTa’an. 7a: “והיינו דאמר ר' חנינא הרבה”

to reflect upon education as a whole (what Schwab describes as “ends as well as means”)?²⁴ What systems does teaching involve – how do we balance “lectures, lecture notes, prescribed readings, and examination” with “deliberation... mutual criticism... [and] diversities of experience and insights”?²⁵

The Learning Material: What counts as a worthy subject matter and how much influence should it have over other educational considerations? What is the balance between theory and practice; between the search for truth and the construction meaning?²⁶ To what extent is cultural literacy sufficient when held up against developing critical thinking and analytical skills?²⁷

The Milieu: Is the learning environment a distinct space dedicated to knowledge acquisition, or a space for experimentation?²⁸ What occurs within the space that we call a classroom, and is anything that transpires in that space automatically

למדתי מרבותי ומחבירי יותר מרבותי ומתלמידי יותר מכולן / Rabbi Ḥanina said: ‘I have learned much from my teachers and even more from my friends than from my teachers, but from my students, more than all of them.’”

Students of Talmud should be attuned to this overlap in the role of a scholar, and note that much of what can be said of how students learn also applies to teachers.

²⁴ Schwab, “Inquiry and the Reading Process,” 148.

²⁵ Joseph Schwab, “The Practical: A Language for Curriculum,” *The School Review* 78:1 (1969): 1-23.

²⁶ Schwab, “The Practical: A Language for Curriculum,” 21.

²⁷ Schwab, “The Practical: A Language for Curriculum,” 16.

²⁸ Joseph Schwab, “Testing and the Curriculum,” in *Science, Curriculum, and Liberal Education* (ed. Ian Westbury and Neil J. Wilkof; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), 148.

deemed education?²⁹ What degree of structure and control are required in establishing a learning environment?³⁰

In balancing these four commonplaces and the questions they prompt, Schwab advances a paradigm that prompts educators to think holistically about what counts as education, so that a multivocal discourse may be translated into practice. Others have argued that in this way, Schwab's very approach itself is that of the Talmud's.³¹

At this point, it is worth repeating the distinction between Schwab's development of his commonplaces and my use of them here. For Schwab, they were a succinct and lucid solution to what he deemed a problem endemic to the American-style education of his time. My use of them is not meant to "solve" a singular problem with Jewish education, nor to argue that Schwab developed his pedagogy with the Talmud in mind, but rather, to explore the Talmudic conception of education itself to understand what it is that makes Jewish learning "Jewish."

²⁹ Block, *Talmud, Curriculum, and the Practical*, 69.

³⁰ Block, *Talmud, Curriculum, and the Practical*, 83.

³¹ Block, *Talmud, Curriculum, and the Practical*, 16.

PART II

THE FOUR COMMONPLACES

CHAPTER 3

“משיחי ובנביאי”

“ANOINTED ONES AND PROPHETS:”¹

STUDENTS AND SCHOLARS

¹ bShab. 119b

Schwab, we have seen, developed his pedagogy of the Four Commonplaces largely as a critique of an American approach to education which saw students as empty receptacles that could be filled with knowledge. While the Bavli does characterize students as vessels for knowledge in several places,² its general view of students is much more nuanced, addressing many of the same questions that Schwab asks: What does it mean to be a student? Is it to develop intelligence?³ To ask questions and seek answers?⁴ To be a passive learner, or to be socialized into an ongoing process of enquiry?⁵ In considering these and other factors, the Bavli pays close attention to the emotional, behavioural, cognitive, physical, and social characteristics of students.

We can characterize what the Bavli has to say about being a student into four categories:

1. *Identity*: Who is and is not a student?
2. *Relationship*: What are the ideal modes of interaction with others?
3. *Value*: What is the value of being a learner?
4. *Practice*: What are the different practical approaches to learning?

איזהו תלמיד: WHO IS A STUDENT?⁶

The first *perek* (chapter) of the *masekhet Ta'anit* (2a-15a) discusses at what point during the year one should begin the set prayers for rain as part of the Amidah, as well as

² bSuk. 46a-b; bSanh. 99b

³ Block, Talmud, Curriculum, and the Practical, 10.

⁴ Block, Talmud, Curriculum, and the Practical, 10.

⁵ Joseph Schwab, "Inquiry and the Reading Process," *The Journal of General Education* 11:2 (1958): 72-82. 158.

⁶ bTa'an. 10b

when individual and communal fasts should be instituted in the event of drought. It is here, in a *baraita*, that we find a lucid and succinct answer to the question: “who is a student?”

תנו רבנן: אל יאמר אדם: תלמיד אני איני ראוי להיות יחיד. אלא כל תלמידי חכמים יחידים. אי זהו יחיד ואיזהו תלמיד יחיד כל שראוי למנותו פרנס על הצבור תלמיד כל ששואלין אותו דבר הלכה בלמודו ואומר ואפילו במסכת דכלה.

The Sages taught *baraita*: A person should not say: I am only a student, and consequently I am unworthy to be considered an individual (who fasts, according to the Mishnah). Rather, all Torah scholars are [considered to be] individuals (and therefore, required to fast). Who is an individual and who is a student? An individual is anyone who is [learned in Torah] and fitting to be appointed leader over the community. A student is anyone who is asked a matter of *halakhah* in their studies and says [the correct answer], even if [they only know] the tractate of the *kallah* (that is, the tractate that the community studied together that year).⁷

Intriguingly, this question is not asked as part of a general attempt to describe any and all students, but rather as part of a situational examination of upon whom these petitionary fasts are obligatory. In doing so, we get a quick insight into how a student is not merely someone who learns, but is a much broader category that carries with it social and religious connotations. In this *sugya*, the Mishnah in discussion examines the obligations imposed upon individuals to fast when rain is absent. In response, the Bavli brings a *baraita* to sharpen the definition of the יחידים (individuals) in question, and introduce the category of תלמידי חכמים (students) as comparison.

Here we get a sense of how the Bavli suggests that a student is not merely a descriptive title for one who happens to be learning, but something more akin to a distinct social class. That is, not every person can necessarily be a student, and being a student

⁷ bTa'an. 10b

carries with it certain privileges and obligations.⁸ This *gemara* identifies that there is a minimum amount of knowledge required to be considered a student, but it is not entirely prohibitive – anyone who can demonstrate a grasp of *halakhah*, even if only of the most immediate lessons learned – enjoys the status of student. The fact that to be considered a student, one must already have some knowledge helps distinguish Bavli's unique view of discipleship – here and elsewhere, it is not speaking about elementary learning, where it would be reasonable to claim a lack of knowledge. Moreover, being a student is not to be seen in a diminutive light. Students (male students) carry the same obligations as those who have completed their formal studies.

In laying out a view of student as identity, the Bavli is concerned with defining (a) the character of learners – age,⁹ sex,¹⁰ national/religious identity,¹¹ physical ability,¹² spiritual condition (ritual purity),¹³ social status,¹⁴ cognitive ability¹⁵ (studiousness and prior knowledge), and (b) an extensive code of behaviour¹⁶ (paying particular attention to how little or how much humility and ego is desired,¹⁷ and deeds guided by the very

⁸ For example, bKid 40b, where one who doesn't study Bible or Mishnah is legally disqualified from serving as a witness.

⁹ bEruv. 28b; bSuk. 28a; bHag. 14a; bKid. 29, 30a, 50a; bB. Bat. 2a, 21a-22a; bAZ 19b

¹⁰ bEruv. 27a; bKid. 29b, 30a, 34a, 34b-35a

¹¹ bShab. 31a; bMeg. 15a; bB. Qam. 38a

¹² bHag. 3a

¹³ bBer. 22a; bMo'ed Qat. 15a

¹⁴ bMo'ed Qat. 15a, bKet. 28a-b; bHor. 13a

¹⁵ bShab. 104a, 114a; bEruv 53a, bEruv 54a; bTa'an 10b; bSuk 42a, 46a-b; bHag. 13a, 14a; bSanh. 36a-b, 99b, 101a

¹⁶ bBer. 18b, 43b; Shab. 63a, 114a, 145b; bPes. 49a, 54b, 112a; bYom. 72b; bTa'an. 41, 20b, 30b; Meg. 32a; bHag 15a-b; bYev. 96b; bNed. 37b and Rashi ad loc; bKid 30a; bB. Metz. 33b; bMak. 10a; bNid. 16b and Rashi ad loc, 20b

¹⁷ bShab 119b; bEruv. 53b; bSuk. 49b and Rashi ad loc; bTa'an. 7a, 20b; bMeg. 22a; bMo'ed Qat. 16a; bKet. 25b; bNed. 62a; bSot 5a, 47b; bB. Metz. 23b and Rashi ad loc; bSanh. 88b; bAZ 19a-b; bHor. 13a; bTem. 16a

material being learned¹⁸).

The Bavli also delineates those who are not obligated or are prohibited to learn, utilizing many of the same parameters (age,¹⁹ sex,²⁰ national/religious identity,²¹ spiritual condition,²² and social status²³). It also addresses (rather judgmentally) the category of *Am Ha'aretz* (those who do not follow rabbinical laws punctiliously, loosely translated as “ignoramuses”),²⁴ and those who do not learn, neglect, or abandon their studies.²⁵

This focus on the identity of learners in this manner contributes to the aforementioned sense that being labelled a student is not merely on account of a commitment to study, but is a signifier of a distinct social, religious, and legal group: there are those who are deemed learners, and those who aren't. While it is this very focus on identity that contributes to the Bavli's robust and holistic approach to education, there is a strong critique to be levelled here about the oft-exclusivist nature of these definitions. Joseph Winkler reminds us well in this respect that while the Talmud offers wisdom and guidance, it is also “a frequently prohibitive document of cruelty, of misogyny, of racism... and exclusion.”²⁶

¹⁸ bYom. 72b; bHag. 15a-b; bYev. 109b; bSot. 21b; bAZ 19a-b and Rashi ad loc

¹⁹ bKid. 29b, 50a; bB. Bat. 21a

²⁰ bHag. 3a; bSot. 21b; bKid. 29b, 30a; bHor. 13b

²¹ bHag. 13a; bSanh. 59a

²² bMo'ed Qat. 15a

²³ bMo'ed Qat. 15a; bMak. 10a

²⁴ bBer. 47b; bPes. 49b; bKet. 11b; Sot. 21b-22a; bB. Metz. 33b; bB. Bat. 20b-22a. For more on the category of *Am Ha'aretz*, see Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Elitism: The Sages and the Amei ha'arets*, in “The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud,” 123-142.

²⁵ bShab. 119b-120a; bEruv. 55a; bPes. 49b, 110a; bYoma 19b, 71a; bMeg. 29a; bHagg 5b, 9a-10a, 10 and Rashi ad loc; 14a; bNed. 32a; bSot. 10a, 21b-22a; bKid. 40b; bB. Metz. 84b, 11b bB. Bat. 22a; bSanh. 99a-100a; bAZ 3b, 18b; bHor. 13b-14a

²⁶ Joseph Winkler, “Reading David Foster Wallace Led Me Back to Studying the Talmud.” No pages. [10 February, 2014]. Online. <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/159711/david-foster-wallace-talmud>.

ברזל ברזל IRON SHARPENS IRON:²⁷ RELATIONSHIPS

Beyond establishing social mores and general behavioural codes, the Bavli specifically highlights the desired interpersonal relationships between (a) students and each other, (b) students and their teachers, and (c) students and other groups.

In a famous *gemara*, the beneficial relationship between scholars is poetically evoked:

אמר רבי חמא (אמר רבי) חנינא מאי דכתיב ברזל ברזל יחד לומר לך מה ברזל זה אחד מחדד
את חברו אף שני תלמידי חכמים מחדדין זה את זה בהלכה.

Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina said: What is [the meaning of] that which is written: “Iron sharpens iron” (Prov. 27:17)? This tells you that just as with iron, one sharpens the other, so too two Torah scholars sharpen one another in *halakhah*.²⁸

The dependency of one learner on another is highlighted here, indicating that learners must support one another in their learning not only out of what might be deemed basic human decency, but because the very act of learning is elevated by the relationship present.

The relationship among scholars is one that might be further narrowed into two fields: What is the ideal tenor of learning together? And how does the Bavli describe situations when the rabbis fall short? Apparently, while the Bavli aspires to a respectful and mutually supportive learning relationship, this was not always the case.²⁹ This is

²⁷ BTa’an. 7a

²⁸ bTa’an. 7a

²⁹ bTa’an. 20b; bYev. 62b, 105b; bB. Kam 117a-b; bB. Metz. 20b; bSanh. 24a. See also, “Shame and the Late Babylonian Academy” in Jeffrey Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2003), and Gilla Ratzersdorfer Rosen, “Empathy and Aggression in Torah Study: Analysis of a Talmudic Description of Havruta Learning,” in *Wisdom from All My Teachers: Challenges and*

particularly noticeable in the distinctions made between the scholars of Babylonia and those of Eretz Yisrael.³⁰ Notwithstanding this caveat, the thrust of the Bavli's idealized pedagogy is clearly one of collective improvement that pushes for scholars to lift each other up in their learning,³¹ and to treat each other with honour, dignity, and respect.³²

Likewise, while the relationship between a student and teacher is a serious one based on honour, respect, and the gravity of the learning material, generally speaking, it is distinctly intimate and supportive.³³ The Bavli discusses (a) the approach to finding a teacher,³⁴ (b) the general respect that a student should display,³⁵ as well as (c) the student's responsibilities to their teacher's status *qua* teacher.³⁶ Attention is notably paid to (d) how students should be physically present (their proximity, to where they should direct their attention, and when they should journey to be with their teacher).³⁷ The Bavli also addresses (e) the unique ways in which students help and benefit their teachers,³⁸ and

Initiatives in Contemporary Torah Education, edited by Susan Handelman and Jeffery Saks, (Jerusalem: Urim Press, 2003), 249-263.

³⁰ bShab. 145b; bPes. 34b; bYoma 57a; bMeg. 28b; bB. Kam. 118a-b, bB. Metz. 33a-b, 85a; bSanh. 24a; bMen. 52a

³¹ bShab. 63a; bTa'an. 7a, 7b-8a; bHag. 3b

³² bShab. 34a; bPes. 118b-119a; bMeg. 28a; bB. Metz. 33a-b; bSanh. 24a; bHor. 13a

³³ Beyond the material referred to here, see also the concept of a רב מובהק – one's primary teacher – and the requisite honour due to them. See pg. 119-120, and also: bKid. 33a; bSot. 46b; bSanh. 68a, and the תלמיד חכם relationship (bBer. 27b; bEruv. 63a; bB. Bat. 158b)

³⁴ bEruv. 47a-b, 53a, 55a; bHag. 15a-b; bMo'ed Qat. 17a; bB. Metz. 33a-b; bAZ 19a-b; bHor. 14a

³⁵ bBer. 7b, 63b; bYoma 78a; bHag. 5a; bMo'ed Qat. 25a; bYev. 105b; bKid. 25a, 30a; bB. Kam. 117a-b; bB. Bat. 75a; bSanh. 99b, 100a; bHor. 13b-14a

³⁶ bEruv. 63a; bTa'an. 9a-b; bPes. 108a; bYoma 53a; bRosh. 31b; bYev. 96b, 97a; bSanh. 90b, 100a; bBech. 31b

³⁷ bBer. 27b-28a, 62a; bEruv. 28b; bPes. 117a; bYoma 37a, 53a-b; bSuk. 10b, 26a, 27b; bRosh. 16b; bMeg. 28a; bHag. 5b; bKid. 33a-b; bSot. 46b; bB. Metz. 59b; bSanh. 68a; bHor. 12a, 13b; bHul. 91a; bKer. 6a

³⁸ bTa'an. 7a; bB. Metz. 97a

the (f) expectation that they not act as passive learners, but as active questioners and challengers.³⁹

This intimacy among students and teachers does not come without expense. In discussing the relationship between students and others, the Bavli notes the tendency of students to neglect other relationships for the sake of study, and warns of the implications of doing so.⁴⁰ Attention is also paid to the general community's obligations to support scholars financially, arguing that those who support others in study are honoured as though they, themselves, have studied.⁴¹

A significant body of material is spent on painting the contours of these relationships, giving us the distinct sense that the Bavli views learning not as a solitary effort,⁴² nor as an endeavour between two arbitrary parties. We see an emphasis on learners not being empty vessels to be filled⁴³ (or foxes to be stuffed by a taxidermist), but as human beings with three-dimensional characteristics, deserving careful attention. For the Bavli, there is thus no one-size-fits-all approach to being a student and learning.⁴⁴

³⁹ See also the role of questioning, in section #4 of this chapter, pg. 51.

⁴⁰ bBer. 22a; bEruv. 21b-22a; bKet. 61b-63a

⁴¹ bShab. 114a, 151b; bPes 53b; bYoma 72b; bKet. 11b; bB. Bat. 21a; bSanh. 92a, 99a

⁴² See the debate on this at bBer. 6a; bEruv. 55a; bMeg. 3a-b, 29a; bTa'an. 7a; bMak. 10a; bAZ 17b-18a)

⁴³ Indeed, the Bavli specifically notes that if learners are compared to empty vessels, they are an entirely different conception of vessel, one which bends the laws of physics (at least, metaphorically): Normally, a vessel needs to be empty to fill it. But the divine understanding of education is different, and God is said to fill with knowledge only those who are *already* full, and that those who are empty will not be filled at all (bSuk. 46a-b).

⁴⁴ See more on this at pg. 106, where we gain a sense of the Bavli's own approach to what we now call individualized instruction.

תלמוד תורה כנגד כולם THE STUDY OF TORAH IS EQUAL TO THEM ALL:⁴⁵
THE VALUE OF BEING A LEARNER

In two *sugyas* discussing the value of performing various *mitzvot* and the accompanying reward in this world and the World-to-Come, we find the famous Tanaaitic aphorism “תלמוד תורה כנגד כולם,” noting that the study of Torah is equal in weight to these other prime *mitzvot*.⁴⁶ Elsewhere, the Bavli lists other rewards for studying,⁴⁷ and argues the extent to which one should go to study Torah⁴⁸ (perhaps as far as risking one’s life⁴⁹). In articulating the supreme value of study, the Bavli also dwells on how much time one should dedicate to study,⁵⁰ paying particular attention to the merits of arriving early and departing late from the *beit midrash*, and of awakening early and going to bed late, so as to maximize the time available for learning.⁵¹ While the text clearly valorizes learning as among the most noble of pursuits, it is not unequivocal in this matter. “How much is too much?” is a question also picked up by the text. Debates abound as to just how much studying is incumbent upon students (e.g. are you permitted to leave the *beit midrash* early?⁵² When and for what reasons is it appropriate to interrupt

⁴⁵ BShab. 127a, bKid. 40a

⁴⁶ bShab. 127a, bKid. 40a

⁴⁷ bBer. 6b and Rashi ad loc; bPes. 22b; bHag. 3a; bAZ 19a-b; bMen. 29b

⁴⁸ bYoma 22b, 77b; bEruv. 47a-b; bNed. 8a; bSot. 21b; bKid. 40b; bB. Qam. 113a

⁴⁹ bAZ 17b-18a

⁵⁰ bBer. 16b-17a, 18b; bEruv 54a-55b; bShab. 119b; bPes. 110a, 113a; bYoma 19b; bBeitz 24b; bTa’an. 21a; bMeg. 29a; bHag. 5a, 9a-b; bNed. 32a; bSot. 10a, 49a-b; bKid. 30a; bAZ 19b

⁵¹ For more on the Bavli’s degree of devotion to learning, see: bBer. 64a; bShab. 127a; bEruv. 18b, 21b-22a; bSuk 28a; bBeitz. 15b; bTa’an. 21a; 31a; bMeg. 3a-b, 15b, 27b; bNed. 8a; bB. Bat. 10a; bAZ 3b

⁵² bTa’an. 21a; bSuk. 28a; bBeitz. 15b

Torah study?⁵³) and whether other pursuits are permitted or might even be endorsed (e.g. are you permitted to leave your studies to earn a living?⁵⁴).

Notwithstanding this debate, there is a scarlet thread running through the Bavli's emphasis on the significance of learning: it is relevant not only for its practical usage (e.g. learning how to fulfill *mitzvot*), its intellectual value (e.g. learning how to discern the reasoning behind various *halakhot*), or for fulfilling ideological commitments (i.e. that education is seen as an intrinsically noble endeavour), but also for its transcendent, eternal, value. In a plethora of *sugyas*, learning and education are said to have something akin to a cosmic impact upon the learners, the teachers, and human existence itself. For the rabbis, the "world of learning," and the actual physical world were coextensive, and, as Rubenstein notes, learning "played a critical role in the structure of the universe."⁵⁵

Here, there is a uniquely Jewish ritualization to the Bavli's approach to learning. Torah study is said to offer spiritual protection and redemption,⁵⁶ make immanent God's presence,⁵⁷ bring about supernal and earthly peace,⁵⁸ and bring particular honour in the world-to-come.⁵⁹ Indeed, for the Bavli, this extends beyond being simply a metaphor to convey the depth of seriousness with which learning is approached; the very existence of the world hinges upon there being students engaged in the act of learning.⁶⁰

⁵³ bShab. 119b; bPes 110a; bYoma 19b; bMeg. 29a; bNed. 32a; bSot. 10a

⁵⁴ bBer. 16b-17a, 18b; bPes. 113a; bTa'an. 21a; bSot. 49a-b

⁵⁵ Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, 31.

⁵⁶ bBer. 8a; bShab. 119b; bEruv. 53b; bMeg. 28a; Mo'ed Qat. 28; bKid. 29b, 30b; bMak. 10a

⁵⁷ bBer. 6a, 8a; bYoma 28b; bSuk. 28a; bHag. 5b; bTem. 16a

⁵⁸ bBer. 64a; bSanh. 99b; bKer. 28b

⁵⁹ bShab. 127a; bHag. 15a-b; bMo'ed Qat. 29a; bKid. 39b-40a; bB. Metz. 33a; bSanh. 91b-92a, 99a-101a; bAZ 3b

⁶⁰ bShab. 114a, 119b; bTa'an. 4a; bSanh. 99b and Rashi ad loc

Moshe Idel notes this approach to study, characterizing it as a form of “performative religiosity,” where practical knowledge is not the ultimate goal of learning, rather learning in and of itself is a transformative experience, reaching beyond the intellectual level.⁶¹ Susan Handelman argues that this paradigm – which I describe as an orientation to learning that is intrinsically Jewish – has been marginalized from most contemporary Jewish education, in part due to the impact of the German intellectual culture out of which academic Jewish studies were born.⁶² Aware of this, it raises a question for those engaged in the study and teaching of Talmud as to where, how, and if this lacuna should be addressed.

While the Bavli’s lack of a uniform pedagogy has been raised, the relative consistency with which the text raises questions regarding the identity of learners, their conduct, and the value of learning is nonetheless also notable.

עשה אזניך כאפרכסת וקנה לך לב מבין
MAKE YOUR EARS LIKE A FUNNEL,
AND ACQUIRE AN UNDERSTANDING HEART:⁶³
PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO LEARNING

It would be challenging to distill an all-encompassing “how-to” guide to Talmudic learning that maintains internal consistency, however we *can* note five areas where the Bavli focuses its attention with regularity and intensity:

Broadly speaking, when it comes to the act of learning, the Talmud is concerned with (a) memorization and preventing forgetting,⁶⁴ even going so far as to record the opinion

⁶¹ Susan Handelman, *Make Yourself a Teacher*, 5.

⁶² Susan Handelman, *Make Yourself a Teacher*, 5.

⁶³ bHag. 3b

⁶⁴ bShab. 90b; bPes. 49a; bMeg. 28b; bAZ 19a-b; bHor 13b-14a; bMen. 99a-b

of Reish Lakish, who suggested that forgetting one word of studies transgresses a negative commandment in the Torah.⁶⁵ This is an unsurprising concern, given the oral nature of Mishnaic learning.⁶⁶ In response to this unease, the text (b) exhorts learners *ad nauseam* to review their studies.⁶⁷

This review (and all learning) demands (c) a rigorous, indeed a strenuous, dedication to learning.⁶⁸ The Bavli expounds the degree of intensity with which one is meant to approach their studies with gravitas, marshalling intense metaphors and hyperbole to emphasize the arduous dedication mandated for Torah study: one should physically exert one's entire body in studying Torah,⁶⁹ even symbolically "killing" oneself over Torah,⁷⁰ and one should also devote considerable emotional resources for the sake of study.⁷¹ In places, this physical and emotional toil is cast in militaristic imagery, painting scholars – even fathers and sons – as warring over their respective interpretations.⁷² Troubling as this hawkish tone may be, in one visionary example, the Bavli insists that these

⁶⁵ bMen. 99a-b

⁶⁶ Hirshman notes how orality is not a means to an end to prevent forgetting, but that the sages saw Torah learning as an intrinsically speech-based process, mirroring God's use of speech to enact the twin process of creation and revelation. (Hirshman, *Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture*, 21, 26). See also bBer. 15b, 16b-17a; bEruv. 53b-54a

⁶⁷ bBer. 5a; bEruv 54a-b; bSuk. 29a; bTa'an. 7b-8a; bMeg 32a; bHag. 9b; bNed. 41a; bKid. 13a, 30a; bB. Qam. 38a, 117a-b; bSanh. 99a-101a; bAZ 19a-b and Rashi ad loc; bHor. 12a; bKer. 6a

⁶⁸ bShab. 147b; bSuk. 28a; bMeg. 28b; bSot. 21b; bKid. 33a; bSanh. 99b

⁶⁹ bBer 63b; bEruv. 21b-22a, 53b-54a, 55a; bMeg. 28b; bKet. 50a; bB. Metz. 84a, Rashi ad loc; bSanh. 24a, 99a-100a, 100b; bHor. 14a

⁷⁰ bBer. 63b; bShab 83b

⁷¹ bBer. 5a, 22a; bTa'an. 4a, 7a; bHag. 14a; bMo'ed Qat. 15a; bSot 21b; bGit. 43a

⁷² bBer. 27b-28a; bMeg. 15b; bKid. 30b; See also Rubenstein, *Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, 61-64.

“enemies” in study “do not leave their studies until they love one another.” “ואינם זויים”⁷³ “משם עד שנעשים אוהבים זה את זה

The direction of this intensity (**d**) is also a consistent matter of enquiry for the Talmud: Should the approach to learning be on understanding law as it is intended to be practiced (הלכה), or on the logic and reasoning underlying that law (סברא).⁷⁴ This pedagogical *makhloket* is also framed as being between a broad appreciation of the canon (ביקיות) and an incisive, in-depth analysis of the texts in study (בעיון),⁷⁵ or between extensive recitation of text (מגרס) and intensive speculation (עיוני).⁷⁶ Put another way, this mirrors the introductory “debate” in this thesis between the *geonim* – who had a broad and memorized grasp of sources – and the ability of Rabbi Gabriel Negrin to ask “Rabbi Google” specialized questions in matters of *halakhah*. For the Bavli, this debate reflects questions as to the very identity of students: are they to be seen as repositories for practical knowledge, or as intellectual beings with distinct personalities and opinions? Both approaches – the general and the specialized – are seen as having merits; both approaches bring one closer to the sacred material being studied. But agonizingly, while staking out competing claims, the Bavli leaves this particular debate unresolved.⁷⁷ Perhaps it is unresolved, due to the tension that Kanarek and Lehman observe within the Bavli, between “the development of critical thinking skills and the commitment to the authority of a tradition.”⁷⁸ How one navigates this tension, then, relies on both the

⁷³ bKid. 30b

⁷⁴ bBer. 6b; bEruv. 60a; bSot. 21b-22a; bAZ 19a-b; bHor. 13b-14a and Rashi ad loc; bZev 96b

⁷⁵ bBer. 63b; bAZ 19a-b; bHor. 13b-14a

⁷⁶ bSuk. 29a, bAZ 19a-b. See also Hirshman, *Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture*, 118.

⁷⁷ bHor. 14a.

⁷⁸ Kanarek and Lehman, “Talmud: Making a Case for Talmud Pedagogy,” 585.

cultivation of the critical thinking skills detailed above, as well as a “sense of reverence for tradition that is crucial to strong Jewish identity.”⁷⁹ I suggest that finding a balance between these two poles is not just a historical concern of the Amoraim or Stamaaim, but should be a present concern for all those committed to teaching Jewish thought and practice.

Central to navigating this tension for the Bavli is (e) the role of questioning. The Bavli encourages students to ask questions,⁸⁰ even to point out their teachers’ errors,⁸¹ though does also interrogate if this approach is appropriate at all times.⁸²

These five strands seem to be the most concrete things we can say about the Talmud’s practical approach to the act of learning. While there is significant debate, and thus not a singular pedagogy embedded within the five, when woven together, they present a cohesive image of the orientation one should bring to the act of learning:

- a. A concern for retaining the material
- b. The importance of review
- c. The rigour demanded of study
- d. An awareness that study has to be oriented both broadly toward practical implications, and narrowly, toward theoretical inquiry
- e. The use of questioning as a tool in service of learning

⁷⁹ Kanarek and Lehman, “Talmud: Making a Case for Talmud Pedagogy,” 585.

⁸⁰ bBer. 63b; bShab. 49a; bMo’ed Qat. 5a-b; bB. Qam. 17a-b, 117a-b

⁸¹ bMo’ed Qat. 5a-b; bB. Metz. 44a, 84a; bSanh. 6b; bShev. 31a

⁸² bHag. 13a; bNaz 59b; bKid. 30a, 52b

Elsewhere, the Bavli addresses other practical matters relating to learning, including the makeup of the learners (learning alone or in a group),⁸³ the attention and focus required of learners,⁸⁴ whether learners should sit or stand while learning,⁸⁵ and the openness to dissent one should cultivate.⁸⁶

What emerges out of this material is a sense of the student as a distinct Jewish identity – not merely a descriptor of one who goes to school, but of a specific kind of person with defined attributes, desired behaviours, and a devoted relationship to an eternal project of great worth. Of course, there is plenty of debate as to the exact boundaries of these definitions (may women or non-Jews study? May one leave one's studies to engage in professional work? Which is the preferable mode of learning – jurisprudential process, or *halakhic* outcome?), however the Bavli sustains an orientation around them, contributing to the primacy of student as identity. While there is a diversity of answers, there is a consistency of questions.

In the next chapter, we can see how the Bavli takes up these questions and robustly examines the nature of being a student through a case study of an extended *sugya* in *masekhet Sanhedrin*.

⁸³ bBer. 6a; bEruv. 55a; bTa'an. 7a; bMeg. 3a-b, 15b, 29a; bHag. 3b, 11b; bAZ 17b-18a; bMak. 10a

⁸⁴ bBer. 63a; bEruv. 60a, 64a-5a; bTa'an. 4a; bB. Metz. 33a-b; bSanh. 99a-100a; bAZ 19a-b

⁸⁵ bMeg. 21a

⁸⁶ bHag. 3b

CHAPTER 4

“כולהו גופי דרופתקי נינהו”

“ALL HUMAN BEINGS ARE LETTER CARRIERS FOR GOD:”¹

A CASE STUDY ON THE STUDENT IDENTITY

(*SANHEDRIN* 99a-101a)

¹ bSanh. 99b

The eleventh *perek* of *masekhet Sanhedrin* (90a-113b) concerns the question of those who do and do not merit a share in *Olam Haba* (the World-to-Come). The tractate outlines categories of people who do not merit such a place, as well as heretical behaviour (word and deed) that precludes one from being rewarded with a place in the afterlife.² Within this discussion is an extended treatment (folios 99a-101a) of the role of students and their approach to learning. By including a sustained focus on learning in this particular *perek*, the Bavli suggests the critical degree to which this enterprise is held: it is an endeavour of importance not only to the individual and the community, but to the entire ontology of rabbinic Judaism; in the rabbinic mindset, it extends beyond the earthly lifespan, and has transcendent implications.

Our *sugya* also addresses areas not related to education, as well as related foci that are not explicitly about the student, including appropriate learning material, the role of the teacher, and the value of education at large. Together, this *sugya* paints a vivid picture of the student as one engaged in an identity-shaping process of paramount importance which demands an assiduous focus and reverence. But this is not a cold, text-book approach to education. The Bavli here also speaks poetically, addressing the entire scope of the human condition: giving birth, entering into the Jewish covenant, raising children, finding God, and contending with death. It contextualizes learning in a remarkably humane way, impressing upon the reader the sense that learning *matters*, and that one should want to be a part of this sacred community.

Before we dive into the text in detail, it is helpful to sketch an outline of this

² For more on the place of *Olam Haba* in rabbinic thought, see Max Kadushin, “The Rabbinic Mind,” Index, s.v. *Olam ha-Ba; World to Come*. (New York: Block, 1972).

extended *sugya*. Our text can be divided into eight major sections:

1. A collection of *baraitot* attempting to define the category of “דבר ה' בזה” – one who despises the word of God³
2. A focus on retaining one's studies
3. An injunction against teaching flawed interpretations
4. A series of Amoraic and Tanaaitic statements developing the theme of the value of education
5. *Makhlokot* on defining the categories of אפיקורוס (heretic) and מגלה פנים בתורה (one who interprets Torah incorrectly)
6. A focus on those who will be rewarded with a place in *Olam HaBa*, including those who labour intensely over their studies
7. A treatment of ספרים החיצונים (external literature) – inappropriate learning material
8. A discussion of different categories of scholars based on their subject of expertise, and of the emotional impact of their scholarship

SECTION 1

דבר ה' בזה: ONE WHO DESPISES THE WORD OF GOD

והאומר אין תורה מן השמים וכו': תנו רבנן (במדבר טו, לא) כי דבר ה' בזה ומצותו הפר הכרת תכרת זה האומר אין תורה מן השמים ד"א כי דבר ה' בזה זה אפיקורוס.

ד"א כי דבר ה' בזה זה המגלה פנים בתורה ואת מצותו הפר זה המפר ברית בשר הכרת תכרת הכרת בעולם הזה תכרת לעולם הבא מכאן אמר רבי אליעזר המודעי המחלל את הקדשים והמבזה את המועדות והמפר בריתו של אברהם אבינו והמגלה פנים בתורה שלא כהלכה והמלבין פני חבריו ברבים אף על פי שיש בידו תורה ומעשים טובים אין לו חלק לעולם הבא.

תניא אידך כי דבר ה' בזה זה האומר אין תורה מן השמים ואפילו אמר כל התורה כולה מן השמים חוץ מפסוק זה שלא אמרו הקדוש ברוך הוא אלא משה מפי עצמו זהו כי דבר ה' בזה ואפילו אמר כל התורה כולה מן השמים חוץ מדקדוק זה מקל וחומר זה מגזרה שוה זו זה הוא כי דבר ה' בזה.

³ Num. 15:31

תניא היה רבי מאיר אומר הלומד תורה ואינו מלמדה זה הוא דבר ה' בזה רבי נתן אומר כל מי שאינו משגיח על המשנה ר' נהוראי אומר כל שאפשר לעסוק בתורה ואינו עוסק.

רבי ישמעאל אומר זה העובד עבודת כוכבים מאי משמעה דתנא דבי ר' ישמעאל כי דבר ה' בזה זה המבזה דבור שנאמר לו למשה מסיני (שמות כ, ב) אנכי ה' אלהיך לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים וגו'.

(Among those who have no share in the World-to-Come include): One who says: Torah [did] not [originate] from Heaven. The Sages taught [that the verse]: “Because he has despised the word of the Eternal and has violated God’s commandment; that person shall be cut off” (Num. 15:31), this is a reference to one who says: Torah [did] not [originate] from Heaven. Alternatively, [one can say]: “Because he has despised the word of the Lord”; this [refers to] an *apikoros*.

Another interpretation: “Because he has despised the word of the Eternal” [refers to] one who interprets the Torah inappropriately. “And has breached God’s commandment” [refers to] one who breaches the covenant of flesh. (In the phrase) “Shall be excised (*hikkaret tikkaret*),” “*hikkaret*” [refers to being excised] in this world; “*tikkaret*” [refers to being excised] from the World-to-Come. From here Rabbi Elazar HaModa’i says: “One who desecrates consecrated [items], one who treats the Festivals with contempt, one who breaches the covenant of Abraham our forefather, one who reveals aspects in the Torah that are not according to *halakhah*, and one who humiliates another in public – even if they have to their credit Torah [study] and good deeds – they have no share in the World-to-Come.

It is taught [in] another [*baraita*]: “Because he has despised the word of the Lord”; this is a reference to one who says Torah [did] not [originate] from Heaven. And even if one says the entire Torah [originated] from Heaven except for this [one] verse, [suggesting] that the Holy Blessed One did not say it but Moses [said it] on his own, this [person] is [included in the category of]: “Because he has despised the word of the Eternal.” And even if one says the entire Torah [originated] from Heaven except for this inference [or except] for this *a fortiori* [inference], or except for this verbal analogy, this [person] is [included in the category of]: “Because he has despised the word of the Lord.”

It is taught [that] Rabbi Meir would say: one who studies Torah and does not teach it – this [person] is [included in the category of]: “He has despised the word of the Eternal,” Rabbi Natan says: Anyone who does not pay attention to the Mishna [is included in this category]. Rabbi Nehorai says: Anyone for whom it is possible to engage in Torah but does not engage [is included in this category].

Rabbi Yishmael says: This [verse: “Because he has despised the word of the Eternal,” refers to] an idol worshipper. [From] where [in the verse is that] inferred? [From a verse] that the school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: “Because he has despised the word [*devar*] of the Eternal”; this [refers] to one who treats a statement [*dibbur*] that was stated to Moses at Sinai with contempt: “I am the Eternal your God... You shall have no other gods” (Ex. 20:2–3).⁴

Our *sugya* opens with a callback to the Mishnah, focusing on the idea that one who says the Torah is not *min hashamayim* (did not originate from heaven, i.e. is not of divine authorship) will not receive a place in *Olam HaBa*. The *baraita* brings a verse from Numbers regarding one who “despises the word of the Eternal,”⁵ and introduces a number of interpretations of what constitutes a דְּבַר ה' בִּזְוָה: (a) one who says the Torah is not *min hashamayim*, (b) an אִפְקִיּוּרוֹס, and (c) מַגְלָה פָּנִים בְּתוֹרָה.⁶ The *baraita* continues with an intriguing connection between the *mitzvah* of *brit milah*, and the biblical verse: “הַכֶּרֶת תִּכְרֹת” It is significant that here, upholding the sanctity of Torah and an appropriate method of Torah study is juxtaposed with *brit milah*. The role of *milah* as a foundational religious obligation, and a prime identity marker of Jews carries great weight here. It perhaps suggests that just as *milah* plays a crucial role in determining one’s religious identity (and thus membership in a community associated with various obligation), so too does (proper) Torah study. Both are religious obligations, and both are signifiers of a covenantal relationship.

The Bavli continues to flesh out this theme, as the *baraita* concludes with an enumeration attributed to R’ Elazar HaModa’i (a fourth generation *Tanna*) of other improper acts which remove one from a place in *Olam HaBa*: (a) rendering ritual objects

⁴ bSanh. 99a

⁵ Num. 15:31

⁶ See pg. 74-81 for an examination of the category of מַגְלָה פָּנִים בְּתוֹרָה.

impure, (b) treating intermediate festival days with contempt, (c) breaching the covenant with Abraham, (d) revealing aspects of Torah not in accordance with *halakhah*, and (e) humiliating another in public. There is a holistic nature to this list, covering ritual matters of space and time, interpersonal relations, religious covenant, and proper learning. Just as earlier, study here is also portrayed as in the same category as ritual and covenantal obligations, giving a distinct impression of learning as a sacred, particularistic task.

It is significant that this discussion is found within a wider focus on the World-to-Come. While elsewhere, the question of heretical behaviour or inappropriate learning is treated from a more pragmatic paradigm (for example, what kind of learning is not permitted within the *beit midrash*),⁷ here the conversation is treated from a spiritual paradigm: a student who follows the rules of appropriate study is part of a covenant of learners and teachers; should they violate this code, they are expunged not just from a classroom, or from the physical community, but from a sacred, eternal community – the very community which the Mishnah in question suggests all of Israel has a portion.⁸

Importantly, this *baraita* concludes with a caveat: “אף על פי שיש בידו תורה ומעשים” – Even if one has to their credit Torah [study] and good deeds, they have no share in *Olam HaBa*. For R’ Elazar, while learning Torah is required, it is not sufficient; this short *baraita* emphasizes the identity associated with Torah study, and suggests that one who studies inappropriately is outside of the normative bounds of the community.

A second *baraita* further refines the argument that a דבר ה' בזה is one who says the

⁷ See pg. 160-161, and 188.

⁸ bSanh. 90a

Torah is not from heaven, now including even someone who says only one verse is not of divine origin, or one who says the interpretations of the rabbis are not of divine origin.

The third *baraita*, which concludes this section, mirrors the first. We read four sequential statements articulating who is a דבר ה' בזה (a) one who studies Torah and doesn't teach it to others, (b) one who doesn't pay enough attention to learning Mishnah, (c) one who can but does not study Torah, and (d) an עובד כוכבים (idol worshiper). As in the first *baraita*, three statements detailing inappropriate learning are followed by a matter of ritual or religious significance. R' Meir's statement regarding one who studies Torah but does not teach is notable, as it emphasizes the connection between studying and teaching: both acts are linguistically, philosophically, and pedagogically intertwined.⁹

Within this *baraita* is another indicator of the religious significance of study: while R' Meir's uses the phrase "הלומד תורה," (to learn Torah), R' Nehorai uses the phrase "לעסוק בתורה" (to busy oneself/occupy oneself with Torah). Is this a subtle, yet intentional reference to the blessing for Torah study (לעסוק בדברי תורה)¹⁰ further highlighting the ritualization of study?

Apropos ritual, in both the first and third *baraitot*, the ritual matter (*milah* and idol worship) is also one of identity, articulating who is in and who is out. Improper education is portrayed in one case as being on the same level as not being *inside* the Israelite covenant via *milah*, and in another case as being *outside* the covenant due to idol worship. This is a stark definition of the boundaries of Jewish peoplehood in the minds of the rabbis.

⁹ See pg. 34, n23.

¹⁰ bBer. 11b

SECTION 2

RETAINING ONE'S STUDIES

The second thematic section picks up from within the third *baraita* previously addressed, but switches focus to develop the idea of retaining one's studies. Two short but highly evocative sub-sections here make notable use of metaphor and simile to educe the need for students to actively engage in this task:

רבי יהושע בן קרחא אומר כל הלומד תורה ואינו חוזר עליה דומה לאדם שזורע ואינו קוצר רבי יהושע אומר כל הלומד תורה ומשכחה דומה לאשה שיולדת וקוברת.

רבי עקיבא אומר זמר בכל יום זמר בכל יום אמר רב יצחק בר אבודימי מאי קרא שנאמר (משלי טז, כו) נפש עמל עמלה לו כי אכף עליו פיהו הוא עמל במקום זה ותורתו עומלת לו במקום אחר.

אמר רבי אלעזר כל אדם לעמל נברא שנאמר (איוב ה, ז) כי אדם לעמל יולד איני יודע אם לעמל פה נברא אם לעמל מלאכה נברא כשהוא אומר כי אכף עליו פיהו הוא אומר לעמל פה נברא ועדיין איני יודע אם לעמל תורה אם לעמל שיחה כשהוא אומר (יהושע א, ח) לא ימוש ספר התורה הזו מפיו הוא אומר לעמל תורה נברא והיינו דאמר רבא כולו גופי דרופתקי ניהו טובי לדוכי דהוי דרופתקי דאורייתא.

(משלי ו, לב) ונאף אשה חסר לב אמר ריש לקיש זה הלומד תורה לפרקים שנאמר (משלי כב, יח) כי נעים כי תשמרם בבטן יכונן יחדיו על שפתיך.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korha says: Anyone who studies Torah and does not review it is comparable to a person who sows and does not reap. Rabbi Yehoshua says: Anyone who studies Torah and forget it is similar to a woman who gives birth and buries [her newborn child].

Rabbi Akiva says: Sing every day, sing every day. Rav Yitzhak bar Avudimi says: [From] what verse [is this derived?] As it is says: "The hunger of the labourer labours for him; for his mouth presses upon him." (Prov. 16:26) One labours in this place, and their Torah labors for them in another place.

Rabbi Elazar says: Every person was created for labor, as it is stated: "Humans are born for toil" (Job 5:7). I do not know whether he was created for toil of the mouth, whether he was created for the toil of labor. When [the verse] states: "For his mouth presses upon him" (Prov. 16:26), you must say he was created for toil of the mouth. And still I do not know whether it is for the toil of Torah or for the toil of conversation. When [the verse] states: "This Torah scroll shall not depart from your mouth" (Joshua 1:8), you must say that he was created for the toil of Torah. And that is [the meaning of] what Rava said: All bodies

are like receptacles. Happy is one who is privileged, who is a receptacle for Torah.

“He who commits adultery with a woman lacks understanding” (Prov. 6:32) Reish Lakish says: This is [refers to] one who studies Torah intermittently, as it is stated [about Torah:] “For it is a pleasant thing if you keep them within your belly; let them be established on your lips”. (Prov. 22:18)¹¹

The first sub-section presents three Tanaaitic statements on two of the key educational concerns of the Bavli we noted earlier: a fear of forgetting knowledge, and the role of review in mitigating this.¹² “Anyone who studies but does not review is like a person who sows (seeds) but does not reap (the harvest),” says R’ Yehoshua ben Korha, in the first statement. This agricultural motif also appears elsewhere,¹³ and emphasizes the idea that while learning does have practical, immediate purposes, the long-term implications must also be considered.

The second statement reflects a similar future-orientation, with R’ Yehoshua arguing that one who forgets one’s studies is like a woman who gives birth and then buries her new child. The jarring jump from the comparatively tame agrarian imagery of the first statement to the disturbing imagery here of infanticide masks a more sublime message: forgetting one’s studies is like cutting off a creative part of oneself that was meant to flourish.¹⁴ The motif associating education and pregnancy¹⁵ further develops the idea that learning, for the Bavli, is not simply lifelong (birth to death), but existence-long:

¹¹ bSanh. 99a-b

¹² By way of example, Reish Lakish was said to individually review his studies forty times before learning with his teacher (bTa’an. 8a)

¹³ bEruv. 54a-b; bTa’an. 4a; bHag. 3b

¹⁴ Hirshman playfully calls forgetfulness “the great nemesis of the oral tradition.” (Hirshman, *Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture*, 53).

¹⁵ bSanh. 91-92a; bAZ 19b; bNid. 30b

it is portrayed as an endeavour that can take place *in utero*,¹⁶ as well as one that extends into the afterlife.¹⁷ The Bavli here, drawing on a parallel source from Tosefta *Ahilot* 16:8, presents scholars from multiple generations “reflecting on the evanescence of learning,”¹⁸ and emphasizes the need to labour to preserve one’s studies. The stakes are grave: knowledge has a liveliness to it, and forgetting it is akin to removing it from existence, what Marc Hirshman describes as burying and eradicating the fertility of learning.¹⁹

Contemporary Jewish institutions and movements across the entire religious spectrum often refer to the notion of “Lifelong Jewish Learning,”²⁰ as providing consistent educational opportunities at all stages of life, but here, we see the expansiveness of how the Talmud treats this approach to learning. Thus, the power of R’ Yehoshua’s statement becomes clearer: forgetting one’s studies is not merely a logistical or temporary matter to be resolved by later remembering what was forgotten, it is an interruption in one of the foundational components of human existence.

The connection between the first two statements now becomes clearer: agriculture and human procreation are both necessary tasks for the continuation of human existence.

¹⁶ bNid. 30b

¹⁷ That this statement appears within a wider discourse on meriting a place in *Olam Haba* adds weight to this concept. See extensive comments earlier on the relationship of learning with *Olam Haba*.

¹⁸ Hirschman, *Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture*, 27

¹⁹ Hirschman, *Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture*, 28.

²⁰ See, for example, the Union for Reform Judaism’s 1999 Resolution on “Lifelong Jewish Learning” (<https://urj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/lifelong-jewish-learning>); the Conservative Movement’s Rabbinical Assembly 2003 Resolution on “Continuing Learning” (<https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/resolution-continuing-learning>); Chabad of Stamford’s “Lifelong Learning Division” (http://www.mysaje.org/templates/articlecco_cdo/aid/983673/jewish/About-Us.htm); or non-denominational congregation B’nai Jeshurun’s statements and initiatives on Lifelong Learning (<http://www.bj.org/learning>).

Both require a creative vision beyond the immediate present, and both demand an active presence on the part of the farmer/parent. Linguistically, they are also related, with the term זרע meaning both a botanical seed, as well as semen. We see here a poignant example of how, for the Bavli, a learner is not just a student in a classroom acquiring knowledge, but one engaged in a more transcendent project. The comparison, then, of learning to these endeavours is apt: not retaining one's studies is akin to putting the effort into creating life, and then not following through on cultivating and reaping that vitality.

The pedagogical solution is an almost fanatical dedication to review. We saw the importance of this earlier for R' Yehosha ben Korha, and this idea is now poetically reinforced in the third statement through R' Akiva's doubled metaphor: “זמר בכל יום, זמר” (sing every day, sing every day). Rashi comments on this, teaching that the meaning is to review one's studies as if they were a song; arranging them like lyrics in the appropriate order in one's head.²¹ A proof-text from Proverbs adds heft to the existence-long (both this corporeal world, and the next) educational trope running through this argument: “נפש עמל עמלה לו כי אכף עליו פיהו” (The hunger of the labourer labours for him; for his mouth presses upon him).²² The *gemara* interprets this proverb to mean “הוא עמל במקום זה ותורתו עומלת לו במקום אחר” (he labours over Torah in this world, and Torah labours over him in another world (i.e. *Olam HaBa*)).

A statement attributed to R' Elazar emphasizes this role of labour, bringing a proof-text from Job: “כי אדם לעמל יולד” (For man is born for toil).²³ The Bavli seems keenly aware here of the power of metaphor. Note again the birth/pregnancy imagery, as

²¹ Rashi on bSanh. 99b, s.v. זמר בכל יום

²² Prov. 16:26

²³ Job 5:7

the *gemara* interrogates the specific type of labour: is it physical labour or is it the metaphoric labour of speech? And if a metaphor, is it about Torah study, or normal conversation?²⁴ With a text from Joshua – “לא ימוש ספר התורה הזה מפִּיךָ”²⁵ (this Torah scroll shall not depart from your mouth) – the *gemara* concludes that indeed, the labour referred to here is that of Torah study, and that humans were born to toil over Torah (לעמל תורה נברא). The Bavli associates this argument with a statement from Rava: “כולהו גופי דרופתקי נינהו. טובי לדזכי דהוי דרופתקי דאורייתא.” (All bodies are like *darufitkei*. Happy is the one who is privileged, who is a *darufitkei* for Torah). The term *דרופתקי* (*darufitkei*) is commonly translated as “receptacle,” perhaps an unsurprising metaphor given the Tanaaitic focus on rote memorization. But Rava is a fourth generation Babylonian Amora, who would not be satisfied with an approach to learning that amounted solely to filling up a receptacle with knowledge. Unpacking the meaning of the term will help us determine the kind of learning that Rava is speaking about, and its close connection to the other metaphors in this section of the *sugya*.

דרופתקי is a compound word, combining “to carry” and “a bag for official documents,”²⁶ thus a translation that better captures the nuances of this statement might be: “All human beings are letter-carriers for God,” or as Marcus Jastrow translates: “All human bodies are mail bags carrying the decrees of the Lord.”²⁷ Thus, describing a student as a *דרופתקי* relates not to the passive filling of a receptacle, but to a process

²⁴ One wonders, here, what it is about שיחה – conversation – that the rabbis find would find laborious, given their oral verbosity.

²⁵ Josh. 1:8

²⁶ Marcus Jastrow, “A Dictionary of the Targumim, The Talmud Babli and Yerhushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature.” (New York: The Judaica Press, Inc., 1992), 322, s.v.

דרופתקי. See also mShab 10:4.

²⁷ Jastrow, “Dictionary of the Talmud,” 322 s.v. *דרופתקי*.

entailing the active participation of the learner: the words must be received, but they must also be delivered and acted upon. Note here the implicit connection made to R' Meir's earlier statement regarding one who studies Torah and does not teach it to others.

This section concludes with a comment from Reish Lakish that one who studies intermittently is like an adulterer. Why the adultery simile? This hearkens back to R' Yehoshua's statement concerning killing a newborn child: committing adultery is viewed rabbinically as criminally akin to murder.²⁸ It is also an interruption of a desired and sacred process (human life in the earlier statement, and marriage here). Of course, the connection between marriage and birth is also pointed. Here, the argument is that one who is not regular in one's studies – jumping from focus to focus – is like one who jumps from sexual partner to sexual partner. Both are unfaithful to a covenantal relationship. As proof of his argument, Reish Lakish brings the following text from Proverbs: “כי נעים כי”²⁹ (For it is a pleasant thing if you keep them within your belly; let them be established on your lips). Reading this in light of the immediately preceding biblical verse makes clear what it is that the biblical author (and Reish Lakish) want internalized: “הט אזנך ושמע דברי חכמים ולבך תשית לדעתי” (Incline your ear and listen to the words of the sages; Pay attention to my wisdom). This text from Proverbs quite clearly relates to the earlier metaphor of a sacred mail bag – the words of the Sages must be kept safe (in a carrying bag, or in one's belly), but they must also be transmitted (as delivered mail, or established on one's lips). Jastrow observes that distinction is made even more explicit in the Munich Manuscript version of this text, as it excludes the

²⁸ bSanh. 74a

²⁹ Prov. 22:18

statement by Reish Lakish:

והיינו דאמר רבא כולהו גופי דרופתקי נינהו טובי לדזכי דהוי דרופתקי דאורייתא, שנאמר כי נעים כי תשמרם בבטןך יכונן יחדיו על שפתך.

And that is [the meaning of] what Rava said: All bodies are like receptacles. Happy is one who is privileged, who is a receptacle for Torah, as it is stated: “For it is a pleasant thing if you keep them within your belly; let them be established on your lips.” (Prov. 22:18)³⁰

With our awareness already attuned to the use of multiple levels of metaphor in this section, we can also ask: for what else are human bodies receptacles? What else is kept within the belly? The experience of reading these two expertly interwoven metaphors – of studiously labouring over Torah, and of birthing labour – together is profound. While it is not possible to say if these precise allusions were intended by the redactors of this *sugya*, to the contemporary reader the connection is potent. The text proposes that studying is like becoming pregnant with learning, and necessitates the same kind of care and attention befitting the incubation of a human being.³¹ All of the associated imagery of marriage, laborious effort, and of being the messenger of a sacred material powerfully bolsters this message. Stepping back and considering the image that the Bavli paints here of a student’s role, we are left with the distinct impression that there is something about studying which sustains one existentially and spiritually, an idea that is bolstered by the many other instances where the Bavli emphasizes the sustaining power of learning.³²

³⁰ Jastrow, “Dictionary of the Talmud,” 322 s.v. דרופתקי.

³¹ Despite various assertions that women are prohibited or not obligated to learn and teach (bEruv 28a; bKid 29b, 82a), this is a distinctly feminine ability. That the Bavli uses an explicitly feminine image in this way to emphasize the importance of study is noteworthy and suggests how ingrained learning was in the conception of a natural human lifecycle.

³² This notion will be picked up again within this *sugya*, and appears elsewhere at: bBer. 8a; bShab. 119b; bEruv. 53b; bMeg. 28a; bMo’ed Qat. 28; bKid. 29b, 30b; bMak. 10a

Thus, the implication of not reviewing one's studies is pointedly driven home: it is akin to cutting off the possibility to continue living; a kind of spiritual murder.

SECTION 3

TEACHING FLAWED INTERPRETATIONS: יושב ודורש בהגדות של דופי

Our *sugya* now turns to its own case study, a *baraita* involving the seventh century BCE Judean King Manasseh, whom the Tanakh views in a rather poor light due to his heretical behaviour.³³ While this section is about teaching more than being a student, it is worth mentioning here due to its inclusion in the broader discussion on education.

ת"ר (במדבר טו, ל) והנפש אשר תעשה ביד רמה זה מנשה בן חזקיה שהיה יושב ודורש בהגדות של דופי. אמר וכי לא היה לו למשה לכתוב אלא (בראשית לו, כב) ואחות לוטן תמנע ותמנע היתה פלגש לאליפז (בראשית ל, יד) וילך ראובן בימי קציר חטים וימצא דודאים בשדה יצאה ב"ק ואמרה לו (תהלים נ, כ) תשב באחריך תדבר בבן אמך תתן דופי אלה עשית והחרשתי דמית היות אהיה כמוך אוכיחך ואערכה לעיניך ועליו מפורש בקבלה (ישעיהו ה, יח) הוי מושכי העון בחבלי השוא וכעבות העגלה חטאה מאי כעבות העגלה א"ר אסי יצר הרע בתחלה דומה לחוט של כוביא ולבסוף דומה לעבות העגלה.

The Sages taught: “But the person who acts high-handedly,” (Num. 15:30), this [refers to] Manasseh ben Hezekiah, who would sit and teach flawed [interpretations of Torah] narratives.

[Manasseh] said: But did Moses need to write only [insignificant parts of Torah that teach nothing, for example]: “And Lotan’s sister was Timna” (Gen. 36:22), “And Timna was concubine to Eliphaz,” (Gen. 36:12), “And Reuben went in the days of the wheat harvest and found mandrakes in the field” (Gen. 30:14)? A Divine Voice emerged and said to him: “You sit and speak against your brother; you slander your own mother’s son. These things you have done, and should I have kept silence, you would imagine that I was like you, but I will reprove you, and set the matter before your eyes.” (Ps. 50:20–21)

And about [Manasseh ben Hezekiah] it is stated explicitly in the tradition (Prophets): “Woe unto them who draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as with a cart rope” (Is. 5:18). What [is the meaning of] “as with a cart rope”?

³³ 2Kgs. 21:1-9

Rabbi Asi says: the evil inclination. Initially, it seems like spinning a thread and ultimately it seems like a cart rope.³⁴

The Bavli recounts that Menasseh argued the Torah included statements that do not teach us anything. About the King, the Bavli says: “שהיה יושב ודורש בהגדות של דופי” (He would sit and teach flawed [Torah] narratives). Here, the text anachronistically ascribes to Manasseh the phrase “יושב ודורש,” a term highly particular to the teachers of the rabbinic academies.³⁵ This formula helps contextualize this in the rabbinic mind: even someone who ascends to a high level of leadership is not automatically assumed to be worthy of emulation. Just as there are bad kings, there are also bad teachers.³⁶ This is predicated on a similar argument to that of the second *baraita* in the first section – the idea that the Torah is whole and complete, and that every piece has relevance, even if not immediately apparent. In arguing that all of Torah is germane, we might say that it is thus a student’s responsibility to extend the level of effort toward retention articulated in the previous section, even if its immediate relevancy is not apparent.

From here, the Bavli digresses away from our main area of focus to examine the verses which Manasseh critiqued. We will pick up where it returns to speak about study.

³⁴ bSanh. 99b

³⁵ For more on the *ישב ודרש* formula, see Goodblatt, “Rabbinic Instruction in Sasanian Babylonia,” 221-259. See also other Talmudic uses at bBer. 27b; bEruv. 45a; bPes. 26a; bBeitz. 15b; bYev. 72b, 96b; bB. Bat. 119b; bSanh. 99b, 107b).

³⁶ Intriguingly, the only time in Tanakh where the words *ישב* and *דרש* appear in proximity is in Isaiah 16:5, speaking about the desired just leadership of a monarch: “והוכן בהסד כסא: וישב עליו באמת באהל דוד שפט ודרש משפט ומהר צדק:” (A throne will be established in goodness, and on it will sit in truth, in the tent of David, a judge who pursues justice and is zealous for righteousness). The text here is clearly not speaking about teaching, but in its prophetic vision of good leadership, there is a noticeable contrast to that of Manasseh’s poor reign, portrayed in chapter 21 of II Kings. In drawing the character of Manasseh into its narrative and using the words *ישב* and *דרש* to describe him, is the Bavli alluding to Isaiah’s idealized vision of leadership, subtly suggesting that the rabbis of the academy have inherited the mantle of the ancient monarchies?

Section 4. The Value of Education

א"ר אלכסנדרי כל העוסק בתורה לשמה משים שלום בפמליא של מעלה ובפמליא של מטה שנאמר או יחזק במעוזי יעשה שלום לי שלום יעשה לי: רב אמר כאילו בנה פלטרין של מעלה ושל מטה שנאמר ואשים דברי בפיו ובצל ידי כסיתיך לנטוע שמים וליסד ארץ (אמר ריש לקיש) [רבי יוחנן אמר] אף מגין על כל העולם כולו שנאמר ובצל ידי כסיתיך ולוי אמר אף מקרב את הגאולה שנאמר ולאמר לציון עמי אתה.

אמר ריש לקיש כל המלמד את בן חברו תורה מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו עשאו שנאמר ואת הנפש אשר עשו בחרן ר' (אליעזר) אומר כאילו עשאו לדברי תורה שנאמר ושמרתם את דברי הברית הזאת ועשיתם אותם רבא אמר כאילו עשאו לעצמו שנאמר ועשיתם אותם אל תקרי אותם אלא אתם אמר רבי אבהו כל המעשה את חברו לדבר מצוה מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו עשאה שנאמר ומטך אשר הכית בו את היאר וכי משה הכהו והלא אהרן הכהו אלא לומר לך כל המעשה את חברו לדבר מצוה מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו עשאה:

Rabbi Alexandri says: Anyone who engages in Torah for its own sake introduces peace into the entourage above and into the entourage below, as it is stated: "Or let him take hold of My stronghold [*ma'uzi*], that he may make peace with Me; and he shall make peace with Me" (Is. 27:5). Rav says: [It is] as though he built a palace of above and of below, as it is stated: "And I have placed My words in your mouth, and I have covered you in the shadow of My hand, to plant the heavens and lay the foundations of the earth" (Is. 51:16). Rabbi Yohanan says: [One who engages in Torah] also protects the entire world, as it is stated: "And I have covered you in the shadow of My hand." And Levi says: He also advances redemption, as it is stated: "And say to Zion, you are My people."

Reish Lakish said: anyone who teaches Torah to the son of another, the verse ascribes them [credit] as though they formed [that student], as it is stated: "and the souls that they formed in Haran." (Gen. 12:5) Rabbi Elazar says: It is as though they fashioned (*as'an*) the words of Torah [themselves] as it is stated: "Observe the words of this covenant, (*va'asitem otam*)," (Deut. 29:8), Rava says: [It is] as though he fashioned himself, as it is stated: "*Va'asitem otam*." Do not read "otam" rather, [read] *atem*,

Rabbi Abbahu says: anyone who causes another to [engage in] a matter of a *mitzvah*, the verse ascribes them [credit] as though they performed it, as it is stated: "and your rod, with which you struck the river," (Ex. 17:5). And Moses struck [the river]? But isn't [it written that] Aaron struck [the river]? Rather, [that verse] says to you: Anyone who causes another to [engage in] a matter of a *mitzvah*, the verse ascribes them [credit] as though they performed it.³⁷

³⁷ bSanh. 99b

The Bavli now introduces two succinct groupings: one of Amoraic *meimrot* on the value of study, and one of Tannaitic and Amoraic statements on the value of teaching. In the first, we encounter Amoraim from the first three generations and both rabbinic communities, whose statements further develop the theme of learning as a venture which has transcendent impact:

Rabbi	Generation and Location	Teaching
R' Alexandri	First, Eretz Yisrael	Studying Torah for its own sake introduces peace into heavens above and earth below
Rav	First, Babylonia	Studying Torah for its own sake is like establishing the heavens and the earth
R' Yohanan	Second, Eretz Yisrael	Torah study protects the entire world
Levi	Third, Eretz Yisrael	Torah study advances the coming of redemption

The concept of תורה לשמה – studying Torah for its own sake – articulated by R' Alexandri and Rav is defined elsewhere in two distinct ways. In the first, two *gemaras* contrast תורה לשמה with תורה שלא לשמה (Torah studied not for its own sake). *Sukkah* 49b pairs תורה לשמה with תורה של חסד (a Torah of kindness), where the same concept is also described as studying Torah with the intent to teach it to others. This is juxtaposed with תורה שלא לשמה as תורה שאינה של חסד (a Torah without kindness), also described as studying Torah *without* the intent to teach it to others. We see again the prominent theme of the importance of learning in order to teach, as well as the blending of the roles of scholar and teacher. Elsewhere, R' Bena'a in *Ta'anit* 7a suggests that תורה לשמה has life sustaining powers as an “elixir of life,” while תורה שלא לשמה will be an “elixir of death.” Commenting on this evocative dichotomy, Rashi argues that תורה לשמה is “משום כאשר צוני” that is, on account of what the Eternal God commanded, and not because he wants to be viewed as a rabbi. This definition fits in well with the Bavli's

wider scope vis a vis ego and status, and its general view that one should not learn with a self-aggrandizing intent.³⁸

In the other approach to תורה לשמה, the phrase appears in Sanhedrin 105b and in six parallel passages,³⁹ with Rav Yehuda arguing in the name of Rav that even Torah studied *not* for its own sake is preferable to no study at all, as it will eventually lead one to studying for its own sake. This is significant, given Rav's assertion here of the value of תורה לשמה, and the stark contrast that is made with תורה שלא לשמה. It presents a remarkable degree of latitude for learners, and suggests an ongoing approach to education that understands the progressing abilities of a learner. It may also point to an understanding of learning as a socializing enterprise: notwithstanding the disdain held for those who use learning for ulterior motives, the value of learning is so supreme, that it is better for one to engage in the process and be surrounded by others doing the same, than to not be a part of the community at all. Bringing this understanding to Rav's statement here in *Sanhedrin* 99b fits in well with localization of the *sugya* in a *perek* about acceptable behaviour and communal norms.

These two *meimrot* coupled with the others reinforce the important tropes of learning in order to teach, learning not for self-aggrandizement or to achieve status, and learning as a spiritual endeavour with transcendent power.

Next, we encounter four more statements that narrow the focus upon the value of teaching. As earlier, while the emphasis is on teaching, insight is also provided on studying and being a student.

³⁸ See pg. 41 and 177.

³⁹ bPes. 50b; bSot. 47a, 22b; bNaz. 23b; bHor. 10b; bArakh. 16b

Rabbi	Generation and Location	Teaching
Reish Lakish	Amora, Second, Eretz Yisrael	Anyone who teaches Torah to the son of another is as if they had created him
R' Elazar	Tanna, Second	Anyone who teaches Torah to the son of another is as though they formed the words of Torah themselves
Rava	Amora, Fourth, Babylonia	Anyone who teaches Torah to the son of another is as though they formed <i>themselves</i>
R' Abbahu	Amora, Third, Eretz Yisrael	Anyone who causes another to engage in a <i>mitzvah</i> is as though they performed the <i>mitzvah</i> themselves

There is an enlightening interplay here between three of Schwab's commonplaces. While the focus in each is on the act of teaching, the importance of the act is shown to have multifaceted resonance.⁴⁰ In the first instance (Reish Lakish), teaching impacts the student; in the second (R' Elazar), the subject matter; and in the third (Rava), the teacher himself. Rava's statement (ועשיתם... אתם, form *yourself*) is predicated on a simple linguistic wordplay with R' Elazar's (ועשיתם אותם, form *them*, i.e. the words of Torah), but is a powerful and moving reminder of the intimate relationship between student and teacher, and of the act that joins them together: one can build oneself up and learn about oneself through the act of teaching another. The process the Bavli describes is remarkably similar to a hermeneutic of text learning advanced by Paul Ricoeur: "The interpretation of a text culminates in the self-interpretation of a reader who henceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself."⁴¹

⁴⁰ All the more noteworthy, given that the kind of teaching here is of one who may be at a disadvantage, in not having a father to teach him himself.

⁴¹ Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II* (*Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy*), (trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson; Evanston: Northwestern University, 2007), 118.

That these statements specifically focus on the teaching of Torah to the son of another is particularly significant, as the Bavli understands the obligation to teach Torah as incumbent upon a father toward his son, and that whoever did not have a father (and presumably, anyone who did not have a father capable of teaching) would not learn.⁴² Thus, to teach another's son is to step into a parental role which has substantial interpersonal and religious resonance, plus pragmatic outcomes:⁴³ the son will now be able to observe Torah, and participate in the community's learning and dialogue. The teacher has granted the student both status and access!

R' Abbahu's statement about *mitzvot* seems out of place – out of the eight statements gathered here, it is the only one that does not have to do with education. However, note that in the earlier discussion about תורה לשמה, an association was already made between Torah study and the performance of *mitzvot*, as the Bavli records R' Yehuda's argument that both study and *mitzvot* not performed for their own sake are preferable to not studying or not performing *mitzvot*. Also note that formula of R' Abbahu's statement is identical to the associated *meimrot*:

כל המעשה את חבירו לדבר מצוה מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו עשה שנאמר	R' Abbahu
כל המלמד את בן חבירו תורה מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו עשה שנאמר	Reish Lakish

Study and *mitzvot*; student and teacher; the earthly world and the heavens above – in these eight brief rabbinic statements, the expansiveness and interconnectedness of learning and teaching are evoked by the Bavli. In between the intensity of section two and the forthcoming section on the אפיקורוס, these pithy statements offer readers

⁴² bB. Bat. 21a and Rashi ad loc

⁴³ Thank you to my advisor, Rabbi Aaron Panken, for pointing this out to me.

something of a momentary pause, retaining the focus on the theme, but allowing us the opportunity to reflect on more easily digestible content.

SECTION 5

WHO IS AN אפיקורוס AND WHO IS מגלה פנים בתורה?

The *gemara* now engages in a lengthy debate attempting to define the categories of אפיקורוס (a heretic)⁴⁴ and מגלה פנים בתורה (one who interprets Torah incorrectly). Both categories are *personae non gratae* and said to have no share in *Olam HaBa*, but the *sugya* will expend energy now trying to determine which behaviours constitute each status. Note that each category is not isolated – the definition of one has an impact on the definition of the other. To help follow the logic, I will provide an outline of the various arguments and refutations following the passage:

אפיקורוס: רב ור' חנינא אמרי תרוייהו זה המבזה ת"ח רבי יוחנן בן ור' יהושע בן לוי אמרי זה המבזה חבירו בפני ת"ח.

בשלמא למ"ד המבזה חבירו בפני ת"ח אפיקורוס הוי מבזה תלמיד חכם עצמו מגלה פנים בתורה שלא כהלכה הוי אלא למ"ד מבזה תלמיד חכם עצמו אפיקורוס הוי מגלה פנים בתורה כגון מאי כגון מנשה בן חזקיה. ואיכא דמתני לה אסיפא מגלה פנים בתורה רב ור' חנינא אמרי זה המבזה ת"ח רבי יוחנן וריב"ל אמרי זה המבזה את חבירו בפני תלמיד חכם.

בשלמא למ"ד המבזה תלמיד חכם עצמו מגלה פנים בתורה הוי מבזה חבירו בפני ת"ח אפיקורוס הוי אלא למ"ד מבזה חבירו בפני תלמיד חכם מגלה פנים בתורה הוי אפיקורוס כגון מאן אמר רב יוסף כגון הני דאמרי מאי אהנו לן רבנן לדידהו קרו לדידהו תנו. אמר ליה אביי האי מגלה פנים בתורה נמי הוא דכתיב (ירמיהו לג, כה) אם לא בריתי יומם ולילה חקות שמים וארץ לא שמתי אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק מהכא נמי שמע מינה שנאמר (בראשית יח, כו) ונשאתי לכל המקום בעבורם.

אלא כגון דיתיב קמיה רביה ונפלה ליה שמעתא בדוכתא אחריתי ואמר הכי אמרינן התם ולא אמר הכי אמר מר רבא אמר כגון הני דבי בנימין אסיא דאמרי מאי אהני לן רבנן מעולם לא שרו לן עורבא ולא אסרו לן יונה. רבא כי הוה מייטי טריפתא דבי בנימין קמיה כי הוה חזי בה טעמא

⁴⁴ For more on the portrayal of the אפיקורוס, see Jenny R. Labendz, "Know what to Answer the Epicurean: A Diachronic Study of the 'Apikoros in Rabbinic Literature,'" *HUCA* 74 (2003), 175-214.

להיתירא אמר להו תחזו דקא שרינא לכו עורבא כי הוה חזי לה טעמא לאיסורא אמר להו תחזו דקא אסרנא לכו יונה.

רב פפא אמר כגון דאמר הני רבנן רב פפא אישתלי ואמר כגון הני רבנן ואיתיב בתעניתא.

לוי בר שמואל ורב הונא בר חייא הוו קא מתקני מטפחות ספרי דבי רב יהודה כי מטו מגילת אסתר אמרי הא [מגילת אסתר] לא בעי מטפחת אמר להו כי האי גוונא נמי מיחזי כי אפקירותא.

רב נחמן אמר זה הקורא רבו בשמו דאמר רבי יוחנן מפני מה נענש גיחזי מפני שקרא לרבו בשמו שנאמר (מלכים ב ח, ה) ויאמר גחזי אדני המלך זאת האשה וזה בנה אשר החיה אלישע.

ייתב רבי ירמיה קמיה דרבי זירא ויתב וקאמר עתיד הקב"ה להוציא נחל מבית קדשי הקדשים ועליו כל מיני מגדים שנאמר (יחזקאל מז, יב) ועל הנחל יעלה על שפתו מזה ומזה כל עץ מאכל לא יבול עלהו ולא יתם פריו לחדשיו יבכר כי מימיו מן המקדש [המה] יוצאים והיה פריו למאכל ועלהו לתרופה א"ל ההוא סבא יישר וכן אמר ר' יוחנן (יישר) אמר ליה ר' ירמיה לרבי זירא כי האי גונא מיחזי אפקירותא.

אמר ליה הא [האי] סיועי קא מסייע (ליה) [לך] אלא אי שמיע לך הא שמיע לך כי הא דיתב רבי יוחנן וקא דריש עתיד הקב"ה להביא אבנים טובות ומרגליות שהן שלשים על שלשים אמות וחוקק בהם עשר ברום עשרים ומעמידן בשערי ירושלים שנאמר (ישעיהו נד, יב) ושמתי כדכוד שמשותך ושעריך לאבני אקדה וגו' לגלג עליו אותו תלמיד אמר השתא כביעתא דצילצלא לא משכחינן כולי האי משכחינן. לימים הפליגה ספינתו בים חזינהו למלאכי השרת דקא מנסרי אבנים טובות ומרגליות אמר להו הני למאן אמרי עתיד הקב"ה להעמידן בשערי ירושלים כי הדר אשכחיה לר' יוחנן דיתב וקא דריש א"ל רבי דרוש ולך נאה לדרוש כשם שאמרת כך ראיתי אמר לו ריקה אם לא ראית לא האמנת מלגלג על דברי חכמים אתה יהב ביה עיניה ועשאו גל של עצמות.

(The *gemara* now begins discussing) an *apikoros*. Rav and Rabbi Hanina both say: This is one who treats a Torah scholar with contempt. Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi say: This is one who treats another with contempt before a Torah scholar.

Granted, according to the one who says that one who treats another with contempt before a Torah scholar is the *apikoros*, one who treats a Torah scholar with contempt is one who interprets the Torah inappropriately, but according to the one who says that one who treats a Torah scholar himself with contempt is the *apikoros*, [who is the one] who interprets the Torah inappropriately? Like what [person is this?] Like Manasseh, son of Hezekiah. And there are those who teach [this] with regard to the latter clause [of the *baraita*]: One who interprets the Torah [inappropriately has no share in the World-to-Come]. Rav and Rabbi Hanina say: This is one who treats a Torah scholar with contempt. Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi say: This is one who treats another with contempt before a Torah scholar.

Granted, according to the one who says one who treats a Torah scholar himself with contempt is [one who] interprets the Torah inappropriately, is none who

treats another with contempt before a Torah scholar is an *apikoros*. But according to the one who says that one who treats another with contempt before a Torah scholar is [one who] interprets the Torah [inappropriately, then who is an] *apikoros*? Like whom [are they]? Rav Yosef says: like those who say: what have the Sages done for us? They read for their [own benefit and] they study Mishna for their [own benefit].

Abaye said to him: That [person is] also [in the category of one] who interprets the Torah [inappropriately], as it is written: “If not for My covenant, I would not have appointed day and night, the laws of heaven and earth” (Jer. 33:25). Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak says: From here, too, conclude [the same] from it, as it is stated: “then I will spare the entire place for their sakes” (Gen. 18:26).

Rather, [the *apikoros* is] like one who sits before their teacher and a *halakha* [they learned] from another place happens to fall [into their mind] and [the student] says: “This is what *we* say there,” and they do not say “This is what *the Master* said.” Rava said: [an *apikoros* is] like those from the house of Binyamin the doctor, who say: what have the Sages done for us? Never have they permitted a raven for us nor have they prohibited a dove for us. (About) Rava: When they would bring a possible *tereifa* (an impure animal with a fatal disease) from the house of Binyamin before him, when he would see in it a reason to permit. [Rava would] say to them: “See that I am permitting a raven for you,” when he would see in it a reason to prohibit [it, Rava would] say to them: See that I am prohibiting a dove for you.

Rav Pappa says: [An *apikorus* is] like one who says: *Them*, our teachers, [with contempt] Rav Pappa forgot [once] and said: Like *them*, our teachers, and he observed a fast.

Levi bar Shmuel and Rav Huna bar Hiyya were mending mantles for the sacred scrolls of the school of Rav Yehuda. When they reached the scroll of Esther they said: This scroll of Esther does not require a mantle. [Rav Yehuda] said to them: [A statement] of that sort also seems like the irreverence [of an *apikoros*].

Rav Nahman says: [An *apikoros*] is one who calls his teacher by his name (and not Rabbi), as Rabbi Yohanan said: Why was Gehazi punished? Due to [the fact] that he called his teacher by his name, as it is stated: “And Gehazi said: My lord the king, this is the woman, and this is her son, whom Elisha revived” (II Kings 8:5).

Rabbi Yirmeya sat before Rabbi Zeira, and sat and said: The Holy Blessed One will cause a river to emerge from the Holy of Holies, and alongside it all sorts of delicacies, as it is stated: “All kinds of trees for food will grow up on both banks of the stream. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail; they will yield new fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the

Temple. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing.” (Ezek. 47:12). A certain elder said to [Rabbi Yirmeya]: Well done, and so Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Well done. Rabbi Yirmeya said to Rabbi Zeira: [Does a statement] of that sort seem like [the] irreverence [of an *apikoros*]?]

[Rabbi Zeira] said to him: But isn’t he supporting you? (i.e. he meant no disrespect). Rather, if you heard [that saying “well done” is irreverent], this [is what] you heard: [It is] like that which Rabbi Yoḥanan sat and taught: The Holy Blessed One is destined to bring precious stones and jewels that are thirty by thirty cubits, and God will bore in them [an opening] ten by twenty in height and place them as the gates of Jerusalem, as it is stated: “I will make your battlements of rubies, Your gates of precious stones, The whole encircling wall of gems.” (Isa. 54:12). A certain student mocked him [and] said: Now we do not find [precious stones] comparable [to] the egg of a palm dove. [Where will] we find [stones] as large as that?

Sometime [later that student’s] ship set sail at sea. He saw the ministering angels cutting precious stones. He said to [them]: For whom are these? [The angels] said: The Holy Blessed One is destined to place them at the gates of Jerusalem. When [the student] returned, he found Rabbi Yoḥanan, who was sitting and teaching. [The student] said to him: My teacher, teach, and it is fitting for you to teach. Just as you said, so I saw. [Rabbi Yoḥanan] said to him: Good-for-nothing (literally: “empty one!”), if you did not see it, you would not believe it? You mock the statements of the Sages. [Rabbi Yoḥanan] directed his eyes toward him and turned him into a pile of bones.⁴⁵

1. Who is an אפיקורוס?

- a. Definition option 1: One who treats a scholar with contempt. (Rav and R’ Hanina)
- b. Definition option 2: One who treats another with contempt *in the presence* of a scholar (R’ Yoḥanan and R’ Yehoshua ben Levi).
- c. The *stam gemara* asks: if the אפיקורוס is one who treats another with contempt in the presence of a scholar (option 2), then one who treats a Torah scholar himself with contempt is מגלה פנים בתורה. But if you say that the אפיקורוס is one who treats a scholar himself with contempt (option 1), then who is מגלה פנים בתורה?
- d. The *stam gemara* answers: Someone like Manasseh, who taught flawed Torah.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ bSan 99b-100a

⁴⁶ Pg. 67-69.

2. Who is מגלה פנים בתורה?

- a. Definition option 1: One who treats a scholar with contempt. (Rav and R' Hanina)
- b. Definition option 2: One who treats another with contempt *in the presence of* a scholar. (R' Yohanan and R' Yehoshua ben Levi)
- c. The *stam gemara* asks: if one who is מגלה פנים בתורה is one who treats a scholar with contempt (option 1), then one who treats another with contempt in the presence of a scholar is the אפיקורוס mentioned in the initial Mishnah. But if you say that a מגלה פנים בתורה is one who treats another person with contempt in the presence of a scholar (option 2), then who is the אפיקורוס?
 - i. Answer option 1: It is like someone who questions the benefit that our teachers (רבנן) provide through their study of Tanakh and Mishnah. (R' Yosef)
 - a. Objection: That person is also in the category of מגלה פנים בתורה. (Abayye)
 - b. R' Nahman bar Yitzhak concurs.
 - ii. Answer option 2: The אפיקורוס is one who sits with one's teacher and does not attribute learning they learned elsewhere to that source.
 - iii. Answer option 3: The אפיקורוס is one who questions the benefit that our teachers (רבנן) provide, arguing that they only teach things that are already explicit in Torah. (Rava)
 - a. Rava refutes the argument of the אפיקורוס in this hypothetical scenario
 - iv. Answer option 4: The אפיקורוס is one who says, "*These*, our teachers (רבנן)," with a condescending tone.⁴⁷ (Rav Pappa)
 - a. Related aggadah of Levi bar Shmuel and Rav Huna bar Hiyya repairing the covers for Megilat Esther. They said that *Megilat Esther* didn't need a scroll, as it wasn't as significant as the rest of Tanakh. Saying "*This scroll*" is like saying "הני רבנן"

⁴⁷ See Rashi on bSanh. 100a, s.v. כגון דאמר הנהו רבנן, for his description of the condescending tone.

- v. Answer option 5: The אפיקורוס is one who calls his teacher by his name, and not the title “rabbi.” (R’ Nahman)
- vi. Answer option 6: The אפיקורוס is like one who is not a scholar saying, “well done” to a scholar, as if they are of the same or greater status.
 - a. R’ Zeira refutes this, and introduces...
- vii. Answer option 7: Aggadah of R’ Yohanan and his student, which teaches that the אפיקורוס is like a student who mocks the teacher or the words of the sages, only believing in what can be seen with one’s own eyes, and not also what is learned from reputable sources. (R’ Zeira)

The debate here may seem pedantic – none of the definitions offered are necessarily mutually exclusive, and at the end of the day, the distinction is not explicitly made clear. Indeed, an אפיקורוס or one who is מגלה פנים בתורה could logically be all of these things together. What they share is a disregard for the authoritative power of the rabbis.⁴⁸ The Bavli seems to be less interested in concretely defining these terms, and more interested in outlining the boundaries of normative behaviour toward and among scholars. These people have brazenly positioned themselves outside of that community.

While discussions on the אפיקורוס appear in several other places in the Talmud, מגלה פנים בתורה appears only in one other usage, in three parallel passages, where the severity of this violation is made clear: it is among the transgressions for which Yom Kippur does not atone.⁴⁹ The term also appears once in the Mishnah, defined as a revealer of things in the Torah that are not acceptable according to *halakhah*.⁵⁰ But the definitions

⁴⁸ Vidas, “Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud,” 133.

⁴⁹ bYoma 85b; bShev. 13a; bKer. 7a

⁵⁰ The term literally means “one who reveals/bares their face to the Torah.” See mAvot 3:11, and the punishment likewise there that such a person has no share in *Olam Haba*, even though they may have acquired learning in Torah.

the Bavli provides here for a מגלה פנים בתורה should leave us puzzled: the text does not articulate what we would logically expect it to, namely what kind of interpretations of Torah are unacceptable, flawed or contradictory of *halakhah*. Rather, the guidelines address the foundations of the student-teacher relationship: trust, attribution, respect, and fidelity to the broader rabbinic teaching enterprise. With regard to this last point, the *gemara* is fairly emphatic here about the role of students within this system: students are in need of sages and teachers (and must honour, trust, and revere them), even if the students can access the learning material on their own.⁵¹

In this light, Moulie Vidas suggests that Rava's assertion is meant to "equate rabbinic honour with rabbinic creativity,"⁵² and points to the prime Amoraic understanding of learning: it is a rejection of the idea of teachers as merely readers/transmitters of what is available in Tanakh or Mishnah and teachers of only "received knowledge or... established laws."⁵³ This suggests a paradigm of discipleship that reaches beyond literacy, and moves toward the interrogative, critical approach to learning. Perhaps this is why the Bavli frames this section as a debate, melding content and style, to encourage enquiry and creativity.

In defining who is an אפיקורוס and who is a מגלה פנים בתורה along the lines of teacher-student-subject matter relationships, the Bavli is ultimately constructing: (a) a tightly-knit ontological argument: existence in this world and the next is defined, *inter alia*, by learning and revering those who learn and teach; (b) an epistemological

⁵¹ This may reflect an Amoraic desire to assert authority of interpretation over the *pshat* Torah text.

⁵² Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud*, 136.

⁵³ Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud*, 136.

argument as to what is worthy knowledge and whom we should believe; and (c) a social argument on desired behaviour. This suggests an intriguing fusion of commonplaces: acting irreverently toward one's teacher or fellow scholar is itself seen as a flawed interpretation of Torah and a heretical deed. Material and lived experiences intertwine, in line with the Bavli's counsel elsewhere to act in accordance with the Torah being learned.⁵⁴

From here, the Bavli engages in another digression away from our focusing on education. We pick back up a few short lines later.

SECTION 6

TOILING OVER TORAH FOR A SHARE IN *OLAM HABA*

דרש ר' יהודה ברבי סימון כל המשחיר פניו על דברי תורה בעולם הזה הקב"ה מבהיק זיויו לעולם הבא שנאמר (שיר השירים ה, ט) מראהו כלבנון בחור כארזים. אמר ר' תנחום בר' חנילאי כל המרעיב עצמו על דברי תורה בעולם הזה הקב"ה משביעו לעולם הבא שנאמר (תהלים לו, ט) יריון מדשן ביתך ונחל עדניך תשקם.

Rabbi Yehuda, son of Rabbi Simon, taught: One who blackens one's face over matters of Torah in this world, the Holy Blessed One, shines their brightness in the World-to-Come, as it is stated: Their countenance is like Lebanon, excellent as the cedars." (SoS 5:15) Rabbi Tanhum, son of Rabbi Hanilai, says: One who starves oneself over matters of Torah in this world, the Holy Blessed One satisfies them in the World-to-Come, as it is stated: "They feast on the rich fare of Your house; You let them drink at Your refreshing stream." (Ps. 36:9).⁵⁵

Our *sugya* now turns away from those who have *no* share in *Olam HaBa*, to those whom it views *do* merit a place. The argument is rather straightforward: one who exerts great bodily effort over Torah during one's lifetime will be rewarded in *Olam Haba*. The

⁵⁴ See Rashi on bAZ 19b, s.v. רשעים and אם פרי יתן בעתו.

⁵⁵ bSanh. 100a

metaphors used are stark – blackening one’s face⁵⁶ and starving oneself while toiling over matters of Torah – but fit in well with the widespread emphasis on strenuous learning.⁵⁷ But are these merely metaphors? Does, perhaps, the Bavli advocate an approach to learning that neglects attending to a student’s biological needs? As noted, there is no conclusive answer to the question of how much studying is too much, and to what extent students should disregard other needs or wants. Other examples are more permissive or even demanding of a wider scope of attention.⁵⁸ That said, the Bavli’s focus on the intensity of time and devotion demanded of students brings to mind the contemporary psychological and pedagogical research into Flow Theory, a state of mind reached during extreme focus on one study or task, where other concerns (eating, sleeping, attending to personal hygiene) do not register.⁵⁹ Perhaps likewise, here the intention is not to universally demand this singular focus, or even to refer to a specific moment when this stage is reached, but to emphasize that those who are predisposed to exert such energy are held in the highest esteem.

There is another brief digression in the *sugya*, to discuss more broadly matters of reward and punishment. Our analysis returns as the text turns back to discussing those who have no share in *Olam Haba* through an educational lens.

⁵⁶ This expression is vague. It carries a distinctly negative connotation, particularly when juxtaposed against the image of Lebanon (note the word play of לבן meaning “white”). David M. Goldenberg notes that the expression “face became black” is commonly found as a figure of speech in post-biblical texts, to indicate distress or sadness. (See David M. Goldenberg, *The Image of the Black in Jewish Culture*, in “Jewish Quarterly Review” 93 (2003) 557-579.

⁵⁷ See pg. 49.

⁵⁸ See, for example: bBer. 35b; bShab. 33b; bTa’an. 24a-b; bKet. 62b-63a

⁵⁹ For more on this, see: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, “Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience,” (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).

SECTION 7

ספרים החיצונים AND INAPPROPRIATE LEARNING MATERIAL

Our *sugya* turns now to focus on ספרים החיצונים (external literature), defined here and in *Sanhedrin* 90a as “books of heretics,” the study of which can bar one from a place in *Olam HaBa*. The Bavli uses the *Book of Ben Sira* as a case study, mining its material for reasons it is considered heretical:

רבי עקיבא אומר אף הקורא בספרים החיצונים וכו': תנא בספרי מינים רב יוסף אמר בספר בן סירא נמי אסור למיקרי א"ל אביי מאי טעמא אילימא משום דכתב [ביה] לא תינטוש גילדנא מאודניה דלא ליזיל משכיה לחבלא אלא צלי יתיה בנורא ואיכול ביה תרתין גריצים. אי מפשטיה באורייתא נמי כתב (דברים כ, יט) לא תשחית את עצה אי מדרשא אורח ארעא קמ"ל דלא ליבעול שלא כדרכה.

ואלא משום דכתיב בת לאביה מטמונת שוא מפחזה לא יישן בלילה בקטנותה שמא תתפתה בנערותה שמא תזנה בגרה שמא לא תינשא נישאת שמא לא יהיו לה בנים הזקינה שמא תעשה כשפים הא רבנן נמי אמרוה אי אפשר לעולם בלא זכרים ובלא נקבות אשרי מי שבניו זכרים אוי לו למי שבניו נקבות.

אלא משום דכתיב לא תעיל דויה בלבך דגברי גיברין קטל דויה הא שלמה אמרה (משלי יב, כה) דאגה בלב איש ישחנה ר' אמי ור' אסי חד אמר ישיחנה מדעתו וחד אמר ישיחנה לאחרים.

ואלא משום דכתיב מנע רבים מתוך ביתך ולא הכל תביא אל ביתך והא רבי נמי אמרה דתניא רבי אומר לעולם לא ירבה אדם רעים בתוך ביתו שנאמר (משלי יח, כד) איש רעים להתרועע.

אלא משום דכתיב זלדקן קורטמן עבדקן סכסן דנפח בכסיה לא צחי אמר במאי איכול לחמא לחמא סב מיניה מאן דאית ליה מעברתא בדיקני' כולי עלמא לא יכלי ליה.

אמר רב יוסף מילי מעלייתא דאית ביה דרשינן...

Rabbi Akiva says: Also one who reads external literature [has no share in the World-to-Come. The Sages] taught: [This refers to] books of heretics. Rav Yosef says: It is also prohibited to read the book of ben Sira, Abaye said to [Rav Yosef]: What is the reason? If we say due to that [which ben Sira] wrote in it: Do not flay the skin of the fish from its ear, so that its skin does not go to ruin, but roast it on the fire and eat with it two loaves of bread, [and you believe this is nonsense, that is not a good enough reason]. If [your difficulty is] from its literal [meaning, that should not be a problem, since] in the Torah, [it is] also written: “You shall not destroy its trees” (Deut. 20:19). If [your difficulty is] from [its] midrashic interpretation, [it] is teaching us proper conduct: [One] should not engage in sexual intercourse in an atypical manner.

Rather, [perhaps it is] because it is written: A daughter is for her father false treasure; due to fear for her he will not sleep at night: During her minority, lest she be seduced; during her young womanhood lest she engage in licentiousness; once she has reached her majority, lest she not marry; once she marries, lest she have no children; once she grows old, lest she engage in witchcraft. Didn't the Sages also say this? [That it is] impossible for the world [to exist] without males and without females [but], happy is one whose children are males and woe unto him whose children are females.

Rather, [perhaps it is] because it is written: Do not introduce anxiety into your heart, as anxiety has killed mighty men. Didn't Solomon [already] say it: "Anxiety in a man's heart dejects him (*yashhena*)" (Prov. 12:25)? [Of] Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Asi, one says he shall remove it (*yesihenna*) from his mind, and one says: he shall tell it (*yesihenna*) to others.

Rather, [perhaps it is] because it is written: Prevent the multitudes from inside your house, and do not bring everyone into your house. But didn't Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] also say it, as it is taught [that] Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] says: A person should never have many friends inside his house, as it is stated: "There are friends that one has to his own detriment." (Prov. 18:24)

Rather, [perhaps it is] because it is written: A sparse-bearded man is clever; a thick-bearded man is a fool. One who blows on his cup is not thirsty. One who said: With what will I eat bread, take the bread from him. One who has a passage in his beard, the entire world is unable to overcome him.

Rav Yosef says: (Even though there are passages in the book that are inappropriate or seemingly irrelevant), we [still] teach the outstanding parts that are in it.⁶⁰

On the surface, the concentration of this unit seems to shift to another of our commonplaces, attempting to define what is outside the bounds of permitted subject matter. However, note that the focus is on the *reader* of the book and their experience of reading such material, and not on the book itself or any immediately apparent heretical material within it. The Bavli is concerned with excoriating one who might *learn* from such a text, and not with banning the text. Several potential reasons why are enumerated: the student does not grasp the *peshat* or *midrashic* meanings, there is a concern that

⁶⁰ bSanh. 100b

certain content will be troubling, or the text is simply nonsensical. In all but the last case, the *gemara* refutes the arguments with a biblical source.

Up until this point, this section's text is essentially asking: if one spends time learning something that has been deemed not worth learning, what does that say about the student? The answer here warns of a potential judgment of heresy. Framed in a more positive light, this part of our *sugya* establishes a relationship between student and material which is empowering toward the learner. It places a responsibility not only on those in formal teaching roles to be faithful to a relevant and approved curriculum, but also on students to use good judgment in directing their focus.

This unit concludes with a surprisingly progressive approach to the subject matter, attributed to R' Yosef. He argues that notwithstanding the problematic parts of *Ben Sira*, we still can teach מילי מעלייתא (the superior/outstanding parts of the text). Rashi expands this further, noting that the acceptable parts of a heretical text are even taught during the *pirke* lecture, and in public to the "whole world."⁶¹ The term מילי מעלייתא appears elsewhere, usually referring to a rabbi asking another to teach a noteworthy teaching, or in response to a particularly astute or praiseworthy judgment.⁶² The implication here seems to be that if a heretical text has even one iota of didactic material, it is acceptable to teach. This matter will be discussed further in Chapters 7 and 8 on the subject matter of learning.

The *gemara* provides further examples of material from the otherwise heretical *Book of Ben Sira*, which is deemed acceptable to learn. We pick back up with the conclusion of

⁶¹ Rashi on bSanh. 100b, s.v. דרשין

⁶² See bBer. 8a; bShab 138b; bEruv. 102a; bBeitz. 28a; bTa'an. 20b; bB. Qam. 20a; bB. Bat. 51a; bZev. 2b; bHul. 51a

this *sugya*.

SECTION 8

SCHOLARS AND THEIR EXPERTISE: בעלי מקרא, בעלי משנה, בעלי תלמוד

Our *sugya* began with an examination of the appropriate behaviour of students, solidifying the idea of “student” as an identity, and now returns to that orientation. This section makes a number of distinctions between and among two groups of people: the “בעלי” (masters) of different subject matters (Tanakh, Mishnah, Talmud, Halakhah, Aggadah), and “לצים” – those who scorn study. The *sugya* dramatically concludes with a stunning and terse *baraita*, dwelling on the appropriate pedagogy involving these groups:

אמר ר' זירא אמר רב מאי דכתיב (משלי טו, טו) כל ימי עני רעים אלו בעלי תלמוד וטוב לב משתה תמיד אלו בעלי משנה. רבא אמר איפכא והיינו דאמר רב משרשיא משמיה דרבא מאי דכתיב (קהלת י, ט) מסיע אבנים יעצב בהם אלו בעלי משנה (קהלת י, ט) ובוקע עצים יסכן בהם אלו בעלי תלמוד...

Rabbi Zeira says Rav says: What [is the meaning of that] which is written: “All the days of the poor are terrible” (Prov. 15:15)? These are masters of *talmud*. “And for the good-hearted it is always a feast”? These are masters of Mishna.

Rava says the opposite [is true]; and this is what Rav Mesharshiyya said in the name of Rava: What [is the meaning of that] which is written: “One who quarries stones shall be saddened by them” (Qoh. 10:9)? These are masters of Mishna. “And he who chops wood shall be warmed by it”? These are masters of *talmud*.⁶³

The *makhloket* that follows returns to the earlier discussed theme of effort required in study, but now connects it directly to the material being learned with several critiques. Interpreting two verses from Proverbs and Kohelet,⁶⁴ the Bavli inquires: (a) what is the difference between the kind of work a learner needs to do in studying Mishnah and

⁶³ bSanh. 100b

⁶⁴ Note the intentional choice of Wisdom Literature as the sources from which the rabbis draw.

Talmud; (b) to what degree does one need to exert oneself, and (c) to what degree does one need to reap the benefits of one's exertions, for the learning process to have been worthwhile?

The common characters through this debate are the בעלי תלמוד (Masters of Talmud) and בעלי משנה (Masters of Mishnah). Rav, via R' Zeira, argues that these בעלי תלמוד are the “poor and terrible” referred to in the Proverbs 15:15 proof-text. Rashi elucidates, arguing that it is because of how these Talmudic scholars labour over the difficulties within the text, an almost Sisyphean task.⁶⁵ Rava, via R' Mesharshiyya stakes an opposing view, arguing that while the mastery of Talmud may require great effort (he uses the metaphor of chopping wood from Kohelet 10:9), one is ultimately able to enjoy the benefits of this labour afterward, being warmed by the academic effort.⁶⁶

“No,” say, Rava and R' Mesharshiyya – the real labour to lament is that of the בעלי משנה, who are like stone quarriers,⁶⁷ never able to reap the reward of their work (that is, they may know how to recite *halakhot*, but do not understand the underlying principles).⁶⁸ Note that this is a highly poetic evocation of the ongoing debate between סברא and הלכה – the rote memorization of *halakhot* and the intense examination of the underlying principles – that we examined earlier. In this light, Rav's disparaging of the בעלי תלמוד is puzzling, given that all of the rabbis involved in this *makhloket* are Amoraim and what we know about the general hierarchy of Talmud study over Mishnaic study

⁶⁵ Rashi on bSanh. 100b, s.v. בעלי תלמוד

⁶⁶ There is a nice metaphoric parallel here to the image painted at bTa'an 7a of one scholar igniting another as one piece of wood ignites another.

⁶⁷ The image of rocks, stone, and crushing appears frequently in association with the theme education. See more on the metaphors used for Torah at pg. 154-155.

⁶⁸ Rashi on bSanh. 100b, s.v. רבא אמר איפכא

amongst this cohort.⁶⁹ This is also surprising, given how we have seen the Bavli's almost universal idealizing of a strenuous approach to study.⁷⁰

Indeed, when these two rabbis argue that the בעלי משנה are the “good-hearted,” who are always at a feast,⁷¹ we should be left stunned. Is it possible that they would elevate mishnaic scholarship above talmudic? True, the בעלי משנה are described as good-hearted, but the image of a feast is one where everything is pre-prepared, with no effort on the part of the feasters. Beneath the positive veneer of the proverb, there seems to be more than a subtle dose of sarcasm and arrogance, as these rabbis look-down upon their peers. The reward of Mishnah scholarship is a feast – sustenance, but only temporarily so. R' Zeira and Rav ultimately draw greater attention to the perceived gap in effort between them and those who engage in Mishnah study.

This debate, however, is left unresolved. Between Talmud and Mishnah, הלכה and סברא, long-term and immediate benefits, theoretical and practical knowledge, and difficulty and ease, the rabbis have staked out their competing claims, but we are left in the space between them. What are we to make of how this portrays these scholars? Given what we know of the Amoraic view of rote learning, it would be too easy to say that the Amoraim here (or the Stammaitic portrayal of them) are simply advocating an approach where both sets of foci are equally valuable. What seems to be at stake is not a hierarchical focus on pedagogy or curriculum (though elsewhere, that is certainly fair

⁶⁹ For more on these categories and the hierarchy therein, see Vidas, “Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud,” 116-118, and elsewhere in the Talmud: bEruv. 21b and 54a

⁷⁰ See pg. 49.

⁷¹ Prov. 15:15

game),⁷² but rather a focus on the scholars themselves and an understanding of the human element involved: What are the physical, spiritual, and emotional conditions involved in these two kinds of scholars? Yes, the Bavli says, significant effort is required in study, but now we see the impact of that on the students themselves: poverty, badness, and sadness.⁷³

The Bavli digresses briefly here for further exegesis on the verses from Proverbs and Kohelet, then returns to introduce a *baraita* that discusses the different “Masters” of scholarship:

תנו רבנן הקורא פסוק של שיר השירים ועושה אותו כמין זמר והקורא פסוק בבית משתאות בלא זמנו מביא רעה לעולם מפני שהתורה חוגרת שק ועומדת לפני הקב"ה ואומרת לפניו רבונו של עולם עשאוני בניך ככנור שמנגנין בו לצים

The Sages taught: One who reads a verse from *Shir HaShirim* and renders it a form of a song, and one who reads a verse at a banquet house, not at its [appropriate] time introduces evil to the world, as the Torah girds [herself with] sackcloth and stands before the Holy Blessed One, and says before Him: Master of the Universe, Your children have rendered me like a harp on which clowns play.⁷⁴

This *baraita* opens with a prohibition against reading a verse from *Shir HaShirim* as if it were a song. This is surprising, given R' Akiva's emphatic assertion earlier in this *sugya*: “זמר בכל יום, זמר בכל יום,”⁷⁵ that one should sing their studies every day to help commit them to memory. The injunction against singing is even more astonishing, given the primary text in question: Song of Songs! Rashi flatly acknowledges this peculiarity:

⁷² bEruv. 54b. Vidas notes that when the creators of the Talmud thought of what made them the “masters of *talmud*,” they thought of themselves in opposition to those who focused on transmission (Vidas, “Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud,” 116-117.)

⁷³ Elsewhere, the Bavli also discusses the impact on such dedication on those closest to scholars. See bBer 22a; bEruv 21b-22a; bKet 61b

⁷⁴ bSanh. 101a

⁷⁵ bSanh. 99b

“...it is from *Shir HaShirim*, and its essence is song.”⁷⁶ Rather, this is not a blanket ban on all songs, Rashi states, only on those with “different melodies” that are not indicated by the Masoretic text.⁷⁷ In other words, only the accepted rabbinic method of recitation is permitted, not a foreign or heretical form. Underlying this *baraita*’s enforcement of cultural boundaries is an important statement on content guiding the form of one’s studies: a more conservative approach is advocated, requiring learners to check their assumptions before engaging with the text.

A second prohibition accompanies the first, against those who read any verse from Tanakh during a festive meal at an inappropriate time. The consequence meted out for those who transgress these prohibitions is blunt: they are said to *מביא רעה לעולם* (introduce evil into the world). The Bavli will go on to contrast these abhorrent behaviours with those that are desired, but it is worthwhile pausing here to note the magnitude of this statement. Amidst a discussion of pedagogy, one might think that a more appropriate response would be to correct the errors of the offender, to require them to perform an act of repentance, or even to label such a person as an *אפיקורוס* or a *מגלה* (one who reveals secrets). Indeed, the latter seems most appropriate given the context of this *sugya*, and the focus here on foreign influence. Instead, we encounter a more ontological statement, similar to the arguments of the transcendent value of learning made earlier. Transgressive learning, argues the Bavli, introduces evil into the world, while appropriate learning (outlined below) is said to *מביא טובה לעולם* (introduce goodness into the world). We see a

⁷⁶ Rashi on bSanh. 101a, s.v. *הקורא שיר השירים ועושה אותו כמין זמר*

⁷⁷ The Masoretic punctuation and cantillation marking of the Tanakh text is seen as being a key component of understanding of verses and an integral part of Torah study (bNed. 36b-37a).

focus less on a logistical or clerical error in approach to the material, and more of a blanket statement about the worthiness of the individual in question. Again, the Bavli is crafting an image of scholars not only in terms of their acts, but in terms of identity. The world is divided into stark, almost Manichaean terms: there are those who introduce evil into the world, and those who introduce goodness into the world. The Talmud seems to be goading us on: “Among which group do you want to be found? At your core, who are you as a person in relationship to the world?”

The extent to which the Bavli goes to make this point is astonishing. The Torah – offended at the transgression – is anthropomorphised as being in mourning, dressing in sackcloth before God, the Master of the Universe. Testifying against humanity, the Torah speaks, and casts the offenders as **לִיצִים** – an important term. Meaning “scorners,” the term is found elsewhere to describe similar frivolous attitudes toward study,⁷⁸ as well as undesirable foreign culture.⁷⁹ However, the most significant uses of **לִיצִים** elsewhere are in Sotah 42a, and just ahead of our *sugya* in a parallel passage from Sanhedrin 103a:

א"ר ירמיה בר אבא ארבע כיתות אין מקבלות פני שכינה כת ליצים וכת חניפים וכת שקרים
וכת מספרי לשון הרע. כת ליצים דכתיב (הושע ז, ה) משך ידו את לווצים

...

Rabbi Yirmeya bar Abba says: Four classes of people will not greet the *Shekhinah*: The class of scorners, the class of hypocrites/flatterers, the class of liars, and the class of slanderers. "The class of scorners, as it is written: "God draws His hand from scorners." (Hos. 7:5) ...⁸⁰

Here, **לִיצִים** is a categorical definition that places one into a distinct societal class (and a highly undesirable one at that). When the Torah in our *sugya* calls God's children "**לִיצִים**," it carries these heavy overtones of social and religious discrimination. She (the Torah) is

⁷⁸ bKid. 41a

⁷⁹ bAZ 18b, 19a

⁸⁰ BSot. 42a

not merely calling out inappropriate behaviour, but is labelling as “outsiders” those who do not approach the material with appropriate reverence. There is also a rhythmical bookending of the *sugya*, as near the beginning, we learned of the מגלה פנים בתורה – one who inappropriately reveals their face to (i.e. interprets) the Torah. The Bavli now poetically exhorts: if you reveal your face inappropriately, you will not merit the radiance of God’s face. If you do not advocate for Torah, the Torah will advocate against you.

In the face of such dark possibilities, the Bavli now makes an astounding suggestion: God turns to the Torah and asks for advice:

אמר לה בתי בשעה שאוכלין ושותין במה יתעסקו אמרה לפניו רבונו של עולם אם בעלי מקרא
הן יעסקו בתורה ובנביאים ובכתובים אם בעלי משנה הן יעסקו במשנה בהלכות ובהגדות ואם
בעלי תלמוד הן יעסקו בהלכות פסח בפסח בהלכות עצרת בעצרת בהלכות חג בחג העיד רבי
שמעון בן אלעזר משום רבי שמעון בן חנניא כל הקורא פסוק בזמנו מביא טובה לעולם שנאמר
(משלי טו, כג) ודבר בעתו מה טוב:

[The Holy Blessed One] says to [the Torah]: My daughter, during the time that they are eating and drinking, in what should they be engaged? [The Torah] says before God: Master of the Universe, if they are masters of the Bible, let them engage in the study of the Torah, Prophets, and Writings. If they are masters of Mishna, let them engage in Mishna, in *halakha*, and in *aggada*. And if they are masters of *talmud*, let them engage in the *halakhot* of Pesach on Pesach, in the *halakhot* of Shavuot on Shavuot, and in the *halakhot* of *Sukkot* on *Sukkot*. Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar testified in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Hananya: Anyone who reads a verse at its [appropriate] time introduces good into the world, as it is stated: “And a word in its season, how good is it.” (Prov. 15:23)⁸¹

There are several immediately fascinating things about this brief *aggadah*, and what it says about the relationship between learners, teachers, and knowledge: God asks the Torah for help, and the Torah has the answer (an epistemological statement if there ever was one). The role of questioning in learning is emphasized, (if the Creator of the universe participates in the process, all the more so should we), and the question God

⁸¹ bSan 101a

poses to the Torah is significant: “בשעה שאוכלין ושותין במה יתעסקו” (during the time that they are eating and drinking, with what should [people] be occupied?) Using the verb עסק here is almost begging the question – we encountered the term in our initial *baraita*, and noted the relationship of the word to Torah study and to the blessing for study. Presumably God – the character in this *aggadah* – is well aware of the blessing used for Torah study, and in using similar language, is pointing to a desired answer.

The Torah is portrayed as God’s daughter, a significant placing of a female character in the role of teacher, when compared to other prohibitions against women from teaching.⁸² There is also a unique power inversion here, with the child (the typical student figure) taking on a teaching role, another sign of the blended roles of teacher and student. Her answer reintroduces the categories of בעלי, the Masters of various fields of knowledge: Miqra (Tanakh), Mishna, and Talmud. The answer presents an idealized vision of knowledge: the hypothetical children of God at a hypothetical banquet are all masters of the core fields of Jewish knowledge, and the personified Torah suggests that each of these masters should continue occupying themselves with their fields of expertise.⁸³ This evokes a highly learner-oriented approach to education, with a focus on depth over breadth. There is something both conservative in this approach, in that it potentially limits one’s own educational progress beyond a narrow field, yet also liberal, in that it (like the attention paid to the Masters’ emotional wellbeing at the beginning of this section) also acknowledges the individuality of each learner. Note again the

⁸² bEruv. 28a; bKid. 29b, 82a

⁸³ Vidas argues that “the deliberate drawing of boundaries... make it likely that the Bavli here is staking a position in a real conversation with other ideological positions and perhaps also other groups within the academy.” (Vidas, “Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud,” 117).

connection to education-as-identity through the titular approach of Master.⁸⁴ These are not people who happen to be good at Tanakh versus Mishnah, but the בעלי of each field.

The subject of learning is further refined for the בעלי תלמוד: as an example of appropriate study subject during festive meals, the personified Torah recommends the *halakhot* of the *shalosh regalim*, the three Pilgrimage Festivals (Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot). Here we note that the answer provided here refines the one we first encountered. While the *baraita* initially introduced the idea that reading biblical verses at a banquet outside of their appointed time was inappropriate, now the Torah and R' Shimon ben Elazar (in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Hananya) teach that discussing (appropriate) biblical verses is permissible, and moreover, introduces good into the world.⁸⁵

Drawing heavily on metaphor, personification, and symbolism, this closing *baraita* poetically impresses upon us a strong sense of the scope of learning the Bavli is grappling with in the wider *sugya*: questions of the identity of learners and teachers, of appropriate milieus and times for learning, and of relevant subject matter are all raised. Indeed, in this highly evocative final section, the material itself is personified as a teacher, and the Master of the Universe as a student. The text freely weaves these discussions together in a way that – while disorienting at times – emphasizes the interconnectedness of the Bavli's understanding of education.

⁸⁴ See also at bEruv. 21b, 54b; bHag. 14a; bB. Metz. 33b; bB. Bat. 8a, 145b

⁸⁵ See also Rashi on bSanh. 101, s.v. הקורא פסוק בבית המשתאות בלא זמנו

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Returning to the framing questions from Chapter One, we can now say a few more definitive things about how the Bavli, here, understands the role and responsibilities of a student:

- To be a student is both descriptive of an act (one who learns), but also largely of an identity. It bears a resemblance to social classes, at times with clearly defined boundaries, and at others with more porous edges. It is an active, rather than a passive identity, and demands various behaviours in addition to a continual process of learning.
- A significant amount of material discusses the contours of students' relationship with others: their teachers, their family, and their learner colleagues. A strong argument is made in favour of learning as a group endeavour, with an emphasis on learners not being empty vessels to be filled, but as fully-developed human beings with emotional, physical, and spiritual needs demanding attention.
- The value of being a learner is multifaceted: it has practical value in learning how to fulfill *mitzvot*, intellectual value in how to discern the logic behind *halakhot*, ideological value in upholding education as a worthy enterprise, and transcendent value.
- This, perhaps, represents a singularly Jewish understanding of the role of a student: learning and education have the power to influence both the human physical world and the divine spiritual world, impacting and sustaining the structure of the cosmos.
- Related, learning is idealized as an existence-long endeavour, extending in both

directions beyond the confines of a natural human lifespan (this may be metaphoric vis a vis learning in utero, but seems to be understood concretely vis a vis *Olam HaBa*).

- While there is no unified pedagogy, the Bavli maintains some consistency in its practical approach to learning, including: a concern for retaining material, the importance of review, the rigour demanded of study, an awareness that study has to be oriented both broadly toward practical implications, and narrowly, toward theoretical inquiry, and the use of questioning as a tool in service of learning.

With this picture of the student, we now turn to the teacher, remembering that these two roles overlap significantly.

CHAPTER 5

“כאילו עשאן לדברי תורה”

“LIKE FASHIONING WORDS OF TORAH:”¹

TEACHERS

¹ bSanh. 99b

In the eyes of the Bavli, the relationship between student and teacher is such that many elements of what defines discipleship intersect with the identity of teachers. For our purposes now to sketch out a broad look at what the Bavli considers important to the role of the teacher, when there is a potential overlap, we will look primarily at sources which are approached from the specific perspective of the teacher. As we do, we consider such questions as: Who should be permitted to teach? What is the nature of a teacher's relationship to their student – is it merely to impart topic-specific knowledge, or to reflect upon education as a whole?² For what reasons are teachers respected – their practical value, or a more robust sense of their worth? What systems does teaching involve?³

The material within the Bavli maps out quite nicely onto the same framework we used to evaluate the role of student. Thus, we can characterize what the Bavli has to say about being a teacher into four categories:

1. *Identity*: Who is and is not a teacher?
2. *Relationship*: What are the ideal modes of interaction with others, particularly fellow teachers, and one's own teachers?
3. *Value*: What is the value (for students, society, and the cosmos) of teachers?
4. *Practice*: What are the different practical approaches to teaching?

² Schwab, "Inquiry and the Reading Process," 148.

³ Joseph Schwab, "The Practical: A Language for Curriculum," *The School Review* 78:1 (1969): 1-23.

למי נאה ללמד: WHO IS FIT TO TEACH?⁴
 IDENTITY: WHO IS AND WHO IS NOT A TEACHER?

There is a tension present in the Bavli's approach to defining who is a teacher. On the one hand, as we would naturally expect, there is a concern for the necessary knowledge one must acquire. For example, several *sugyas* indicate the knowledge one must have to teach publicly,⁵ to be appointed head of the *yeshiva*,⁶ to be appointed leader of the community,⁷ or to be appointed Nasi.⁸ Our main *sugya* of focus in the next chapter will ask what is the requisite experience to be considered a teacher for one single individual.⁹ Elsewhere the Bavli wonders whether it is knowledge in particular, or life experience that permits one to issue rulings.¹⁰

On the other hand, there seems to be a considerably greater focus on examining the boundaries surrounding the identity of the teacher that have comparatively little to do with knowledge or experience. For example, among other considerations, the Bavli asks if the following people/groups of people are permitted to teach: women,¹¹ mothers,¹² fathers,¹³ grandfathers,¹⁴ bachelors,¹⁵ those who are excommunicated,¹⁶ those who are

⁴ bMak. 10a

⁵ bMak. 10a

⁶ bBer. 27b-28a; bShab. 114a

⁷ bShab 114a

⁸ bHor. 13b-14a

⁹ bB. Metz. 33a-b

¹⁰ bAZ 19b

¹¹ bKid. 82

¹² bKid. 29b

¹³ bBer. 13b; bPes. 113b; bKid. 29a-b, 30a; bSot. 21b; B. Bat. 21a-22a

¹⁴ bbKid. 30a

¹⁵ bKid, 82a

¹⁶ bMo'ed Qat. 15a

ostracized,¹⁷ a heretic,¹⁸ a *metzora* (one inflicted with a skin/spiritual condition),¹⁹ and one who is in mourning.²⁰

This tension comes to a head in a brief debate in *Avodah Zarah* over what are sufficient qualifications to render legal decisions:

“ועד כמה? עד מ' שנין והא רבא אורי? התם בשוין”

At what point [is one worthy]? At forty years. But didn't Rava render legal decisions [before that age]? There [it is permitted], since they are equal.”²¹

Rashi helps us understand the Bavli's perplexity here, and points to the *gemara* at *Rosh Hashanah* 18a which says that Rava died at the age of forty.²² Clearly he had been issuing rulings before then. Thus, the equality the Bavli is speaking of here, says Rashi, is in knowledge, and that since Rava was unmatched, he was permitted to rise to a position of teacher and legal decisor, even though convention dictated he should not have been permitted.²³

In discussing the desired behaviour of teachers,²⁴ we can find another case of tension between adhering to the traditionally defined boundaries of identity when it comes to teachers, and also acknowledging outstanding circumstances. Examining cases of *גידוי* (temporary excommunication / ostracizing), the Bavli asks:

ההוא צורבא מרבנן דהוו סנו שומעניה א"ר יהודה היכי ליעביד לשמתיה צריכי ליה רבנן לא לשמתיה קא מיתחיל שמא דשמיא.

¹⁷ bMo'ed Qat. 15a

¹⁸ bHag. 15a-b

¹⁹ bBer. 22a, bMo'ed Qat. 15a

²⁰ bMo'ed Qat. 21a

²¹ bAZ 19b

²² Rashi on bAZ 19b, s.v. והא רבא אורי

²³ Rashi on bAZ 19b, s.v. התם בשוין

²⁴ For more on desired and prohibited behaviours, see: bBer. 27b-2a; bShab. 114a; bPes. 113b; bSuk. 28a; bHag. 15a-b; bGit. 62a, 67a; bMak. 10a; bMen. 99a-b

There was a certain Torah scholar who gained a bad reputation. Rav Yehuda said: What should be done? To excommunicate him [is not an option]. The Sages need him (Rashi: since he is a great Torah scholar). Not to excommunicate him [is not an option, since then], the name of Heaven would be desecrated.²⁵

More is at stake here than in the brief *gemara* from *Avodah Zarah*, but it acknowledges a similar problem: because of the great value of education, teachers are in high demand, particularly one of such scholarship. However, fidelity to codes of right conduct is also inviolable. In this instance, the Bavli eventually prioritizes the latter, and follows the repercussions of the anonymous scholar's excommunication. The debate between excommunication and education is profound: even though resolved, it points to a belief that not anyone can be a teacher solely based on their ability to convey knowledge, and of competing philosophies between the pre-eminence of teachers in society, and the importance of adhering to proper behavioural codes. Note that the debate here is not over whether the scholar is permitted to continue serving as a teacher, but over whether they should be expunged (even temporarily) from society – among the most severe of punishments.²⁶ As with a student, the question “who is a teacher” does not only describe an act or a profession, it represents an identity that is both individual to the person, but also inextricably bound up in the community.

²⁵ bMo'ed Qat. 17a

²⁶ Particularly, since the scholar's actual sin is never detailed, and Rashi notes that this entire case may be over a matter of rumours and hearsay. See Rashi on bMo'ed Qat. 17a, s.v. שומעניה.

כל שמצווה ללמוד מצווה ללמד ALL WHO ARE COMMANDED TO LEARN ARE
COMMANDED TO TEACH:²⁷ RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

The immense respect for teachers that the Bavli advocates (addressed in the next section) is not unidirectional from students to teachers, but incumbent upon teachers toward each other as well. Broadly speaking, the Bavli thus demonstrates a twin orientation when considering a teacher's relationships with others: it is mostly concerned with (a) promoting a teacher's concern for their students (illustrated in the example below, and also in the various practical approaches to teaching we will soon see), and (b) emphasizing a relationship among teachers (and between teachers and their own teachers) that upholds the status of rabbis and the rabbinic endeavour.

Among the most pointed elements of a teacher's relationship with others is the repeated insistence on the obligation to teach.²⁸ Learning is not something to be hoarded, but must be shared with others.²⁹ As we shall see in the case study on teachers from *Bava Metzi'a* in the next chapter, there is a *makhloket* over whether quantity or quality is of more importance – particularly in determining the nature of a teacher's relationship with their student – but the bottom line is consistent, as in this *gemara* from *Rosh Hashanah*: “ואמר רבי יוחנן כל הלומד תורה ואינו מלמדה דומה להדס במדבר”³⁰ (R' Yohanan said: Anyone who studies Torah but does not teach it to others is likened to a myrtle in the desert”). In this

²⁷ bKid. 29b

²⁸ bEruv. 53b-54a; bSuk. 49b; bRosh 23a; bMeg 28b; bSot. 21b; bKid 29a-b, 30a; bSanh. 91b-92a, 99a-100a

²⁹ At one point in the ongoing debate in the Bavli between conservative fluency and liberal innovation, two metaphors for learning are used: a cistern and an overflowing stream (bShab. 147b, examined in chapter ten). While representing two distinct pedagogies, what these metaphors share in common is the life-sustaining power of water, and the belief that even a cistern – and its conservative approach to learning – does not just hoard water for the sake of conservation, but to provide nourishment to others.

³⁰ bRosh. 23a

rabbinic version of the “if a tree falls in the forest...” thought experiment, learning which is not shared is argued to be of no value at all. It is as if to say that a teacher who has no students is not a teacher at all.

Indeed, this reveals one of the most foundational principles undergirding the entire construction of the Bavli – citing a teaching in the name of the one who taught it. This principle is emphasized not only as a positive obligation,³¹ but in one instance is reversed to punish those teachers who are disrespectful toward one another, by expunging their names from the record.³² While advocating collegiality, the Bavli also seems to understand that the heightened competitive nature of rabbinic academia may lead to a range of interpersonal experiences among teachers. On the one hand, we see the tradition’s aspirations: Come and see how much the sages love each other, – “בא וראה כמה”³³ – urges one *gemara*. Yet elsewhere, we learn of the stratified character of the *beit midrash*,³⁴ the reality of jealousy amongst teachers, and the sense of competition between teachers of higher and lower calibre.³⁵

The breadth of these attitudes may reflect the understanding that rabbis are not just individual teachers, but are representatives of an entire way of life, with an investment in the preservation of their own interpretive power.³⁶ On the one hand, there is a basic aversion toward treating each other disrespectfully or cruelly which applies to all. At the same time, the individual needs of teachers may be secondary to the larger rabbinic enterprise.

³¹ bPes. 104b; bMeg. 15a; bYev. 96b; bNid. 19b bHul. 104b

³² bHor. 13b-14a

³³ bSanh. 24a

³⁴ See Chapter 9

³⁵ bB. Bat. 21-22a

³⁶ For more on this topic, see Michael S. Berger, *Rabbinic Authority: The Authority of the Talmudic Sages* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1998).

מביאו לחיי העולם רבו... THEIR TEACHER BRINGS THEM TO ETERNAL LIFE:³⁷
THE VALUE OF TEACHING

The value of this enterprise is without question for the Bavli. The need for teachers and their pre-eminence is asserted throughout the text,³⁸ to the extent that at one point, R' Eliezer ben Hyrkanus is even referred to metaphorically as a *sefer Torah* – the scroll itself!³⁹ This merging of animate and inanimate bespeaks both the understanding that Torah is a living entity – in the minds of the rabbis quite literally sustaining existence – as well as the primacy of rabbinic teachers. It is as if the wisdom of R' Eliezer came from the Torah itself. Certainly, this is a particularly noteworthy honorific not applied to all, though it is reflective of the wider orientation.

The implications of this orientation extend in two notable directions: as a calling of the highest value, teaching – similarly to the descriptions we saw earlier of learning – is portrayed in multiple *sugyas* as having transcendent value.⁴⁰ But for those who engage in teaching as an occupation, it is also a part of quotidian life, and so the Bavli discusses it as having fiscal value as well, outlining various professional considerations.⁴¹

³⁷ bB. Metz. 33a

³⁸ bEruv. 28b; bYoma 71b; bMeg. 29a; bHag. 5b; bKet. 17a-b; bSot. 49b; bNed. 41a; bKid. 33b; bB. Bat. 8b; 21a-22a; bB. Metz. 33a-b, 84b; bSanh. 17b, 19b, 99b, 101a; bAZ 3b; bHor. 13a, 13b-14a; bKer. 28a

³⁹ bSanh. 101a

⁴⁰ bBer. 21b; bPes. 113a; bKet. 17a-b; bSot. 4b, 10a; bKid. 30a; bB. Metz. 33a, 85a; bSanh. 91b-92a, 99b, 101a; bTem. 16a; bNid. 20b

⁴¹ bTa'an 24a; bNed. 36b-37b; bB. Metz. 21a, 21b, 22b, 97a, 109a-b; bBech 29a

התלמידים בהתלמידים SHARPEN THE MINDS OF STUDENTS:⁴²
PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO TEACHING

Similar to the caveat noted earlier on the practice of learning, if one were to distill the entirety of the Bavli into a how-to-guide to teaching, it is conceivable that little learning would get done. The sheer diversity of opinions on and models of how to teach would make such an endeavour of questionable pedagogic value. Having said that, there is a certain degree of consistency of *concern*, and we can paint a picture of some eight categories the Bavli considers in articulating theories of teaching:

1. *Specialized subject areas*: Different teachers have different degrees of specialization, and the Bavli recognizes that some only teach the *halakhot* of their field of expertise.⁴³ For some, this seems to be based not only on the teacher's knowledge, but on public demand for one kind of learning over another.⁴⁴
2. *The importance of review*: As noted, the Bavli displays an immense fear of students forgetting their learning, and the role of the teacher in fostering review is accentuated.⁴⁵ Alon Goshen-Gottstein posits that the goal is not only the preservation of information, but also the preservation of the form of creativity and

⁴² bEruv 13a

⁴³ bShab. 114a; bEruv. 21b, 54a; bYoma 38a-b; bB. Metz. 97a; bSanh. 67b, 100b, 101a; bHor 13b-14a. See also Steven Fraade, *Legal Fictions: Studies of Law and Narrative in the Discursive Worlds of Ancient Jewish Sectarians and Sages* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 27-31.

⁴⁴ See, for example, the *aggadah* of R' Abbahu and R' Hiyya bar Abba, who teach *aggadah* and *halakhah*, respectively, and the comparative popularity of R' Abbahu over R' Hiyya. (bSot. 40a)

⁴⁵ bShab. 104a; bEruv. 54a-b; bPes. 3b; bSuk. 20b; bTa'an 9a; bKet. 103b; bKid. 30a; bB. Qam. 117a-b; bB. Metz. 85b; bB. Bat. 22a; bHor. 13b-14a; bHul. 63b

sharp analysis characterized by the rabbinic enterprise.⁴⁶

3. *The avoidance of errors:* The Bavli strenuously warns against flawed interpretation – including heresy – as well as generic errors. What exactly counts as an error seems to be contextual, and the rabbis themselves debate the validity of interpretations ad infinitum, however there is a broad commitment to precision of intellectual understanding and *halakhic* practice, and teachers are thus urged to be meticulous in their teaching to this goal.⁴⁷
4. *Literacy versus creativity:* In an unresolved debate that stretches through the entire Bavli, we encounter different interpretations of whether teachers should instruct students in *halakhic* conclusions so that students will know the law as practiced, or if they should encourage creativity through an understanding of jurisprudential principles.⁴⁸
5. *Individualized instruction:* For the most part, in navigating our four commonplaces, the Bavli pays significant attention to the individual needs of students, pondering what ages are best for various disciplines,⁴⁹ how to teach to the individual intelligence of each student,⁵⁰ and how to respond to students who have difficulty learning.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac: The Rabbinic Invention of Elisha ben Abuya and Eleazar ben Arach* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2000) 381, n81.

⁴⁷ bEruv. 60a; bPes. 112a; bYoma 66b; bYev. 41a; bGit. 43a; bKid. 25a, 30a; bB. Bat 21a-b; bB. Sanh 5a, 99a-100a; bZev. 12b-13a and Rashi ad loc

⁴⁸ bBer. 28b; bEruv. 13a and Rashi ad loc, 54a-b; bKet. 50a; bB. Bat. 21a; bZev. 96b

⁴⁹ bKid. 29b-30a, 50a; bB. Bat. 21a-22a, bAZ. 19b

⁵⁰ bEruv. 40b; 53a, 54a-b; bPes. 116a; bTa'an 4a; bB. Bat. 21a; bSanh. 68a

⁵¹ bPes. 113a; bTa'an 7a, 7b-8a

6. *Discipline*: This includes both typical questions of how to discipline troublesome behaviour, as well as addressing the question of what teachers should do if their students are ostracized or excommunicated.⁵²
7. *Physical Presence*: The Bavli demonstrates an awareness of how a teacher's physical presence in relation to their students might affect the learning between them.⁵³
8. *Demeanour*: Finally, the Bavli presents a considerable awareness of how a teacher's conduct can influence a student's ability to learn, most often advocating an open and joyful presence.⁵⁴

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This broad take on the Bavli's attention to teaching does not amount to a unified guide to teaching, but it does reveal certain trends the text considers important to consider when teaching: learning in order to teach and the imperative to instruct others in a life of Torah; the value of teachers as professionals and as leaders committed to inculcating others in a project of transcendent value; a fidelity to the perceived integrity of the canon; the importance of honouring fellow teachers; and the importance of questioning the individual needs of students.

⁵² bMo'ed Qat. 17a; bYev. 105b; bGit. 36a; bB. Bat 21a; bMak. 8a, 10a, 16b, 22b; bHor. 13b-14a

⁵³ bYom. 77b; bSuk 28a; bMeg. 21a; bSot. 46b; bB. Qam. 117a-b

⁵⁴ bBer. 63b; bShab. 30b, 119a; bEruv. 13b; bPes. 113a, 117a; bYoma 69a, bTa'an 7b-8a, 24a; bHag. 5a; bB. Metz. 84a; bBech. 29a

Our next chapter examines a *sugya* from *masekhet Bava Metzi'a* as a case study on how these trends are woven together in the Bavli's presentation of what it means to be a teacher.

CHAPTER 6

“רבו שלמדו חכמה”

“HIS TEACHER WHO TAUGHT HIM WISDOM:”¹

A CASE STUDY ON TEACHERS

(*BAVA METZI’A* 33a-b)

¹ bB. Metz. 33a

Right from the outset of our *sugya*, we are immersed in a high stakes conversation about familial loyalty, negotiating hostage situations, entrance into the afterlife, and the nature of wisdom. This *sugya* concludes the second *perek* of *Bava Metzi'a*, by analyzing a *mishnah* about who takes precedence when returning lost items or assisting someone in need: oneself, one's father, or one's teacher. As the wider chapter and *masekhet* deal with questions of financial matters – of property value and ownership, usury, employment, and commerce – one might be surprised to find that matters of education are discussed in any detail at all here. Indeed, there are other *sugyas* throughout the Bavli that more closely expound upon the professional duties of a teacher. This chapter is concerned with clearly defining various parties from a legal standpoint so that questions of property and ownership can be answered with as little ambiguity as possible. But it is exactly this precision in defining, *inter alia*, who a teacher is, that makes it quite appropriate and illuminating for our analysis.

Our *sugya* will sharpen the identity of the teacher, paying particular attention to the relationship between a teacher and a student, how a teacher differs from a father (who is also obligated to teach), the relationship of a teacher to the subject matter, the nature of wisdom, as well as a discussion of some of the classes of בעלי that we saw earlier in our *sugya* on students from *Sanhedrin*. The *sugya* progresses quite clearly through six thematic and structural units:

1. The opening *mishnah* introducing the matter of property law, and the hierarchy of a teacher, over a father, over a student/son
2. A brief comment on the hierarchy of the parties involved
3. A first attempt to define what kind of teacher the *mishnah* is speaking about

4. A brief *aggadah* on the need that teachers and students have for each other
5. Returning to the discussion from §3, a continued attempt to define who a teacher is, and what counts as wisdom
6. A polemic against perceived lesser forms of learning

SECTION 1

של רבו קודמת: HIS TEACHER COMES FIRST...

מתני' אבדתו ואבדת אביו אבדתו קודמת אבדתו ואבדת רבו שלו קודם. אבדת אביו ואבדת רבו של רבו קודמת שאביו הביאו לעולם הזה ורבו שלמדו חכמה מביאו לחיי העולם הבא ואם אביו חכם של אביו קודמת. היה אביו ורבו נושאים משאוי מניח את של רבו ואחר כך מניח את של אביו היה אביו ורבו בבית השבי פודה את רבו ואחר כך פודה את אביו ואם אביו חכם פודה את אביו ואח"כ פודה את רבו:

If [one finds] his lost item and his father's lost item [at the same time], [possessing] his [own] lost item takes precedence. [If one finds] his lost item and his teacher's lost item, [possessing] his [own] takes precedence. [If one finds] his father's lost item and his teacher's lost item, [returning] his teacher's takes precedence, as his father brought him into this world, and his teacher, who taught him wisdom, brings him life in the world-to-come. And if his father is a scholar, [returning] his father's [item] takes precedence. If his father and his teacher were carrying a load [and he wants to help them, first] he places his teacher's [load down], and then places his father's [load down]. If his father and his teacher were in captivity, [first] he redeems his teacher, and then redeems his father. And if his father is a scholar, [first] he redeems his father and then redeems his teacher.²

The *mishnah* sets the stage by introducing the main parties that will be considered:

oneself, one's father, and one's teacher. Setting up a distinction (to be discussed immediately by the *gemara*), the *mishnah* informs us that while securing one's own property takes precedence over one's father or teacher, when it comes to a choice between the father and the teacher, the teacher takes priority (unless the father is also a חכם – a sage/scholar).³ The reason is poetic, and rooted in concepts already familiar to us:

² bB. Metz. 33a

³ A parallel *mishnah* at bKer. 28a argues the same.

while a father plays a biological role in bringing the child into the physical world, a teacher plays a spiritual role in bringing the child into *Olam HaBa*. Two additional hypothetical scenarios following the same rule are described, involving assisting the two parties with a weighty burden, or redeeming them captivity. Since a father is also obligated to teach his children,⁴ the prioritization is important, as it helps us see that a teacher is not just someone who engages in the act of teaching (otherwise the father should also be seen in that same light), but someone with a distinctive role – an identity that carries with it certain privileges. Indeed, the caveat that if the father is a *חכם*, he takes precedence, indicates that it is *this* element that determines one's status. A teacher *qua* teacher is assumed to be a *חכם*, but others can also be a *חכם*. Just what exactly this term entails is one of the main foci of this *sugya*, and we will see soon how it seeks to define the meaning of *חכם*.

Perhaps we should first know that the *mishnah*'s distinction between father and teacher itself may be surprising or off-putting, given the supreme focus on respect and honour for parents demanded by the Torah and the Bavli.⁵ How it is that a teacher could be of relative higher status than one's own father? R' Joseph Soloveitchik, one of the most influential modern Talmudists and Jewish thinkers, provides some psycho-philosophical insight on how the text can come to make such an assertion:

The act of a master teaching Torah to his students is a wondrous metaphysical fact of the revelation of the influencing personality to the one influenced by it. This revelation is also the cleaving of teacher and student to each other. The student who understands the concept cleaves to the intellect that transmits the

⁴ bSot. 21b; bKid. 29a-b; bB. Bat 21a-22a

⁵ See Ex. 20:12; Lev. 19:3; b. Kid. 30a and Rashi ad loc, See also a *gemara* which supports our *sugya*'s emphasis, at bMeg. 16b: אמר רבה אמר רב יצחק בר שמואל בר מרתא גדול תלמוד תורה יותר מכבוד אב ואם (Rabba said that Rav Yitzhak bar Shmuel bar Marta said: Studying Torah is greater than honouring one's father and mother).

concept. If he grasps the teacher's logic, then he becomes joined to the teacher in the unity of the conceiving intellect [*maskil*] and the conceived ideas [*muskal*].

Within this fundamental principle is hidden the secret of the Oral Torah... "Oral Torah" means a Torah that blends with the individual's personal uniqueness and becomes an inseparable part of man. When the person then transmits it to someone else, his personal essence is transmitted along with it.⁶

R' Soloveitchik draws heavily on biblical language⁷ to suggest that a student's relationship with their teacher is akin to a marriage,⁸ and the transferring of ideas a kind of psycho-sexual union.⁹ As we have seen, the idea of a unique union shared between a teacher and student – one (potentially) more transcendent and significant than that of a parent-child – is common to the Bavli's understanding of education. While this particular *mishnah* does not explicitly evoke the idea of Oral Torah observed by Soloveitchik, it operates against the backdrop of such an understanding. Teachers and students share an intimate relationship, centred on the bestowal and sharing of wisdom, which demands certain filial duties.

⁶ Handelman, *Make Yourself a Teacher*, 6.

⁷ על־כֵּן יַעֲזֹב־אִישׁ אֶת־אָבִיו וְאֶת־אִמּוֹ וְדָבַק בְּאִשְׁתּוֹ וְהָיוּ לֶבָשָׁר אֶחָד: (Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh). Gen. 2:24

⁸ See also Daniel Boyarin, "Homotopia: The Feminized Jewish Man and the Lives of Women in Late Antiquity" in *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. 7.2 (Summer 1995).

⁹ For more on homoerotic aspects of the Rabbi-Student relationship, see: Michael Satlow, "'They Abused Him like a Woman': Homoeroticism, Gender Blurring, and the Rabbis in Late Antiquity." *JHS* 4 (1994), 1-25; Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California, 1997); and Daniel Boyarin, "Are There Any Jews in 'The History of Sexuality'?" *JHS* 5 (1995), 333-5.

SECTION 2

...BUT YOUR PROPERTY TAKES PRECEDENCE

The *gemara* begins with a brief jurisprudential interrogation of this specific law, before moving into a discussion on teachers and wisdom. The *stam gemara* seems perplexed by an inherent tension in the *mishnah*: if a teacher takes precedence over one's own father for spiritual reasons, how can it be that one's own property is of higher importance than both of theirs?

גמ' מנא הני מילי אמר רב יהודה אמר רב אמר קרא (דברים טו, ד) אפס כי לא יהיה בך אביון
שלך. קודם לשל כל אדם. ואמר רב יהודה אמר רב כל המקיים בעצמו כך סוף בא לידי כך:

From where are these matters [derived]? Rav Yehuda says Rav says the verse states: “Only so that there shall be no needy among you” (Deut. 15:4). [Meaning], your [property] takes precedence [over the property] of any [other] person.

And Rav Yehuda says Rav says: one who overzealously fulfills this this with regard to their [property] ultimately comes to that [same fate].¹⁰

R' Yehuda's initial answer, in the name of Rav, is pragmatic and clear. Anyone who has travelled by airplane is familiar with the same idea, expressed in the pre-flight warning regarding oxygen masks: in the event they are needed, a passenger should always secure his or her own mask first before helping others. We see a proto-version of this logic in play here, as the *gemara* explains that one's own livelihood takes precedence over others', so that a cycle of poverty and dependency will not be instigated. However, there is something of an internal *makhloket* expressed by R' Yehuda, as following this lucid statement, he immediately recognizes the tension in the *mishnah*. Again in the name of Rav, he argues further that while this is technically the *halakhah*, anyone who is too

¹⁰ bB. Metz. 33a

ardent in taking advantage of this principle will come to experience the very loss they wanted to avoid.

This distinction sets some of the boundaries of our understanding of the teacher-student relationship. While the Bavli is undeniably deferential to the honour owed to teachers on both a societal and cosmic level,¹¹ it is also cognizant (as we saw in the previous chapters) of the individuality of students, and tempers the privileges of a teacher with an attention to the needs of students.¹²

SECTION 3

רבו זה הוא רבו: WHO IS HIS TEACHER?

Our *sugya* now turns to a three-part attempt to define who counts as one's teacher. Through this *makhloket*, we gain some insight into how the Bavli understands the boundaries of this discussion. Given that a father can also be a teacher, and that a student might have more than one teacher, the text here wants to ensure both that this person is properly defined, and how that definition impacts the possessive relationship. That is, what makes teacher specifically רבו – “his” teacher:

היה אביו ורבו נושאין משאוי וכו': תנו רבנן רבו שאמרו רבו שלמדו חכמה ולא רבו שלמדו מקרא ומשנה דברי ר' מ' רבי יהודה אומר כל שרוב חכמתו הימנו רבי יוסי אומר אפילו לא האיר עיניו אלא במשנה אחת זה הוא רבו.

If one's father and one's teacher were carrying a burden... The Sages taught: One's teacher, whom [the mishnah] stated [takes precedence], is one's teacher who taught wisdom, and not the teacher who taught Bible or Mishnah, [this is] the statement of Rabbi Meir. Rabbi Yehuda says: [The reference is

¹¹ See bEruv. 28b; bYoma 71b; bMeg. 29a; bSanh. 99b, 100a; bHor. 13b-14a; bKer. 28a

¹² For example, see also the Bavli's focus on teaching a student until they fully understand the material, even if it takes four hundred lessons (bEruv. 54a-b); teaching in a concise manner (bPes. 3b; bHul. 63b), when to withhold teaching Torah for the sake of a student's needs (bBer. 63a), as well as teaching students who have difficulty learning (bPes. 113a; bTa'an. 7a-8a).

to] any [teacher] from whom [one learned] most of their knowledge. Rabbi Yossi says: Even if [the teacher] enlightened one in only one *mishna*, that is one's teacher.¹³

In this first sub-unit, the text outlines four potential definitions of what counts as “*his*” teacher, each of which can be categorized as being either qualitative (what is the substance of the education provided), or quantitative (how much knowledge must be taught). The anonymous voice of the *baraita*, similar to the opening *mishnah*, indicates that (a) the defining aspect of what qualifies one as a teacher in this regard is whether or not *הכמה* was taught. Mysteriously, while the Bavli aims for precision in defining who the teacher is, exactly what counts as *הכמה* here is left vague. In the common term *תלמיד חכם*, the term is more readily definable, indicating a student of a wise individual. However, here, it is more elusive. The Bavli seems to understand *הכמה* as a countable, yet abstract, substance – something that can be thought and talked about, taught, and measured.

R' Meir tries to narrow the definition, explicating that (b) whatever *הכמה* may be, it is not Tanakh or Mishnah. As we have seen, these two fields are frequently minimized as received knowledge against the Bavli's focus on a critical understanding of *halakhah*. So, R' Meir is likely pointing to the more intensive *עיוני* approach to learning. R' Yehuda's argument is both maximalist: rejecting these qualitative arguments and opening the definition to any teacher, unlimited by field of study, as well as minimalist: narrowing the definition to (c) the single rabbi who taught *most* of the student's *הכמה*. Again, *הכמה* is left undefined, but we have a tighter sense of the specific teacher through R' Yehuda's definition. Closing this first unit, R' Yossi takes a maximalist approach in opposition to

¹³ bB. Metz. 33a

R' Yehuda, arguing that “his” teacher is (d) any teacher who has “enlightened his eyes” through even a single *mishnah*.

Rabbi	The teacher is one who taught...	Type of Argument
<i>Tanna Kamma</i>	הכמה	Qualitative
R' Meir	Not מקרא or משנה	Qualitative
R' Yehuda	Most of הכמה	Quantitative
R' Yossi	Any enlightening piece of משנה	Quantitative

Much of the debate here centres around the role of הכמה and how it is transmitted from teacher to student, however we are not provided with more details on what exactly הכמה is. The Bavli, in section five of this *sugya*, recognizes this, and will ask itself: “מאי הכמה? What is wisdom?”¹⁴ But here, no such question is asked. Rashi himself seems to acknowledge the frustrating ambiguity of this unit, feeling the need to elucidate every single one of the definitions provided, even when we might assume there should be no need (for example, he defines מקרא, one of the most basic and universally understood terms, as “Torah, Prophets, and Writings”).¹⁵ Attempting to delineate the one who teaches הכמה, Rashi argues that it refers to one who explains the meaning behind the Mishnah; how to understand hidden meanings; and teaches the laws of prohibited, permitted, obligated, and exempt behaviour; and that all of this study is referred to as גמרא – *gemara*.¹⁶ Further, he understands “most of הכמה” to refer holistically to an understanding of Tanakh, Mishnah, and *gemara* together.¹⁷ Rashi’s understanding of

¹⁴ For a brief primer on the concept of wisdom in the Talmud, see: David S. Shapiro, “Wisdom and Knowledge of God in Biblical and Talmudic Thought,” *Tradition* 12:2 (1971).

¹⁵ Rashi on bB. Metz. 33a, s.v. מקרא

¹⁶ Rashi on bB. Metz. 33a, s.v. שלמדו חכמה

¹⁷ Rashi on bB. Metz. 33a s.v. כל שרוב חכמתו הימנו

what wisdom is for this *gemara* (unsurprising, given his project) is thus closely associated with literacy and fluency.

Other ideas of what counts as חכמה will be raised in Section Five, where we will further examine how this *sugya* attempts to define the elusive term, and look where else we might turn to for insight to answer the pertinent questions raised here: What determines the status of a teacher? Is it fluency in a received canon? The teaching of an abstract skill known as wisdom? The depth of quality in the relationship with a student? Or a quantitative assessment of breadth of impact? For now, it is enough to say that through these four attempts to define the teacher in question, we see how being a teacher is not only a professional title or a casual description of one who has taught something. We see how the hierarchy of subject matter can have an impact on the status of a teacher, and how teacher, student, and subject matter are all intimately related, each having a significant impact together on defining one's role.

The second unit flows directly out of the first. Rava and Shmuel provide examples from their own lives of who counts as the teacher in question:

אמר רבא כגון רב סחורה דאסברין זוהמא ליסטרון שמואל קרע מאניה עליה ההוא מרבנן
דאסבריה אחד יורד לאמת השחי ואחד פותח כיון.

Rava said: For example, Rav Sehora [is my teacher], as he explained to me *zuhamā listeron*. Shmuel rent his garment over one of the Sages who explained to him (the meaning of a mishna that describes keys that opened a compartment in the Sanctuary): One (key for the inside lock. He would insert his arm) up to his armpit (and reach) down (and open the lock). And [the other] one which [the priest] opened directly.¹⁸

For Rava, such a teacher is Rav Sehora, who explained to him the meaning of the highly technical *mishnaic* term ליסטרון (a kitchen tool combining a spoon and a

¹⁸ bB. Metz. 33a

fork).¹⁹ For Shmuel, it is an anonymous teacher who explained a *mishnah*²⁰ about how a priest would open a door in the Temple complex. Here, the Bavli is taking a position in line with R' Yossi, that one who teaches even one small *mishnah* counts as the teacher in question. We see a picture of the important relationship these two rabbis had with their own teachers, of formative moments that led Shmuel, for example, to mourn the loss of his teacher as a child would mourn their parent or a spouse would mourn their partner.²¹ Here, again, the teacher's identity as a quasi-spouse/life-partner emphasizes the familial nature to their relationship. But the *mishnayot* that qualified their teachers to achieve this status are, in fact, quite obscure. They are highly precise, technical topics with seemingly little immediate relevance for either of the Rabbis in question,²² and little chance that they would have had a lasting impact on their lives, given that neither lived during the time of Temple worship.²³ But it is precisely the fact that one might consider these to be insignificant lessons that gives them heft. Even teaching the most questionable or obscure *mishnah* qualifies one to be considered one's teacher – that is how powerful the act of teaching is.²⁴

¹⁹ mKelim 13:2

²⁰ mTamid 3:6

²¹ On the importance of mourning the loss of one's teacher, see also bMo'ed Qat. 25a.

²² This is purely speculative on my part, but the only other appearance of the term זוהמא ליסטרון in the Bavli is in a *baraita* at bHor 13b, which also happens to be found in a *sugya* discussing education. There, it is said that eating meat from a זוהמא ליסטרון is among ten factors that make studying difficult. Here, in our *sugya*, I wonder if Rava is said to be grateful for Rav Sehora's instruction on the appropriate use of this utensil, particularly because of its superstitious association with proper study.

²³ These *mishnayot* come from *Kodashim* and *Toharot*, the final two *sedarim* of the *Mishnah* dealing with the laws mostly or only applicable during the time of the Temple. See pg. 6, and 126-127 for further discussion on the relationship of these orders to the discussion of wisdom and knowledge.

²⁴ Rabbi Aaron Panken has suggested to me that what qualifies one to be considered one's teacher may also include here the elements of deep knowledge and the solving of

The final unit of this third section includes a teaching from Ulla that tries to refine the definition of the teacher in question:

אמר עולא תלמידי חכמים שבבבל עומדין זה מפני זה וקורעין זה על זה ולענין אבדה במקום אביו אינן חוזרין אלא לרבו מובהק.

Ulla says: The Torah scholars who are in Babylonia rise before one another and rend [their garments] over one another's [death]. But with regard to a lost item where one's father [and one's teacher lost an item], one returns [the lost item] only to his most significant teacher.²⁵

Ulla points to a practice where all of the scholars of Babylonia would rise out of respect for one another²⁶ and would mourn each other when one another died, not just reserving the practice for their own teachers. However, in the case of returning the lost item of the *mishna*, Ulla argues that between one's father and one's teacher, in choosing to whom he should first return an object, he chooses only his רב מובהק – his “distinguished” or “most significant teacher. This is something of an astounding suggestion. Performing *k'ria* – the tearing of clothes in mourning – is only incumbent upon immediate family members.²⁷ For all of the sages of Babylonia to perform this act for each other, but to reserve returning a lost object first for a certain class of teacher, indicates the remarkable degree to which this kind teacher was held.

The term רב מובהק appears only in two other instances in the Bavli, which can further sharpen our understanding of who this distinguished teacher is. A רב מובהק, says Abaye, is a teacher deserving of extra reverence above and beyond others. Ordinarily,

annoying questions that others were not able to answer, indicating both care for the student's questions and a reservoir of understanding that is profound.

²⁵ bB. Metz. 33a

²⁶ On standing in the presence of one's teacher, see bBer. 27b-28a; bEruv. 28b; bKid. 33a-b; bHor. 13b

²⁷ bMo'ed Qat. 26b

one stands only within four *amot* (cubits) of one's teacher, but for a רב מובהק, one must stand whenever they are within eyesight.²⁸ Similarly, the Bavli indicates that while a student should accompany an ordinary teacher on a journey up to a *parsa* (a historical Persian unit of measurement), they should accompany their רב מובהק up to three *parsaot*.²⁹ These three definitions are descriptive rather than determinative. They do not tell us how one comes to be considered a רב מובהק, only that the role exists, and that it enjoys certain privileges indicating a higher esteem. Rashi's opinion in our *sugya* is that it refers to the teacher from whom a student gleaned most of their חכמה, for example, the head of a *yeshiva*.³⁰ In addition to describing a hierarchy of potential teacher-student relationships, what seems to be significant about this term is its relationship to measurements of distance and physical proximity to one's teacher. Elsewhere, the Bavli also focuses on this aspect of the teacher-student relationship,³¹ indicating an awareness of the intimacy, both proximal and spiritual, of the relationship between the two parties.

The third section of our *sugya* helps shape the various boundaries of the teacher's role and how it is evaluated, with particular attention to the teacher-student relationship. While the content of this section attempts to achieve precision in definition (what determines the possessive element of רבו, i.e. what counts as *his* teacher; what is חכמה?), ultimately, no conclusions have yet been reached. But the *values* behind the *sugya* permeate through and through. Indeed, the specific content presented here seems to be secondary to the underlying principles. We are presented with critical questions facing

²⁸ bKid. 33a

²⁹ bSot. 46b

³⁰ Rashi on bB. Meṣ. 33a, s.v. לרבו מובהק

³¹ See bYoma 37a, 53a-b; bMeg. 28a; bB. Metz. 59b; bSanh. 68a; bHul. 91a

any teacher: is success based on general knowledge imparted to a student, or fidelity to a particular curriculum?³² Is it measurable, based on the quantity of knowledge taught? Must the material learned have immediate, practical worth? Or are these metrics less helpful, with the ideal teacher-student relationship being determined only by whether a teacher has taught any knowledge at all? We will see how these questions continued to be tackled, as the *sugya* rounds out its consideration of what it means to be a teacher.

SECTION 4

תלמיד וצריך לו רבו: HIS TEACHER NEEDS HIM

The fourth section of our *sugya* presents a brief *aggadah* about R' Hisda and R' Huna and their scholarly relationship. It is a story of mistaken identity, almost humorous in nature, were it not for the gravity of emotion felt by each of the rabbis:

קבעי מיניה רב חסדא מרב הונא תלמיד וצריך לו רבו מאי אמר ליה חסדא חסדא לא צריכנא לך את צריכת לי עד ארבעין שנין איקפדי אהדדי ולא עיילי לגבי הדדי יתיב רב חסדא ארבעין תעניתא משום דחלש דעתיה דרב הונא יתיב רב חסדא ארבעין תעניתא משום דחשדיה לרב חסדא.

Rav Hisda raised a dilemma before Rav Huna: [If there is] a student, and his teacher needs him, what [is the order of precedence? Rav Huna] said to him: Hisda, Hisda, I do not need you, you need me for forty years! [They grew] angry with each other, and each did not enter to [visit the] other. Rav Hisda observed forty fasts due to [the fact] that Rav Huna was offended. Rav Huna observed forty fasts due to [the fact] that he suspected Rav Hisda [was referring to their relationship].³³

R' Hisda's question inverts the orientation to our *mishnah*. Up until now, the assumption of the *gemara* has been that given their respective roles, it is a student who owes something to their teacher (rights of precedence, honour, respect, etc.). R' Hisda, in an

³² This very question is picked up throughout the Bavli, as it considers various approaches to curricular design and what counts as literacy. Chapters seven and eight examine this topic.

³³ bB. Metz. 33a

attempt to further clarify the order of precedence of returning lost objects, asks a pointed question: “What if the teacher needs something from the student?” That is, what if, as a result, the teacher then owes something to the student – would that impact the level of deference owed? Our *sugya* is prompting us to consider: what if the traditional power structure is inverted? It suggests that the relationship between a teacher and student is not solely unidirectional, but, like other intimate relationships, might benefit both parties. Certainly, this is an idea not unfamiliar to the Bavli.³⁴

The exact nature of this need, however, is left undefined. While for R’ Hisda this seems to be a purely hypothetical question, albeit one with practical implications, R’ Huna is not impressed. Mistakenly, he assumes that R’ Hisda was talking about him, and in his fury, asserts that he has no need for R’ Hisda, and furthermore that it is the opposite which is true. R’ Hisda is taken aback, and the two enter into a cycle of anger, each avoiding the other. While disturbing and saddening given the personal history of these two rabbis,³⁵ this moment is also remarkably human, shedding light on the fragility of ego, and its impact on a teacher’s ability to teach and a student’s ability to learn.³⁶ This destructive interaction also raises constructive questions about the nature of teaching:

- What level of self-reflection is required by a teacher of their own needs from their students?

³⁴ bTa’an. 7a; bB. Metz. 97a

³⁵ The rabbis of our *aggadah* were initially both students of Rav, and together known as הסידי דבבל – the righteous of Babylonia (bTa’an. 23b). After Rav’s death, R’ Huna ascended to lead his academy.

³⁶ For a contemporary examination of the role of ego in teaching, and the teacher’s desire to be liked by their students, see Adam Greteman and Kevin J. Burke, *The Pedagogies and Politics of Liking* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

- Notwithstanding the nature of the student-teacher relationship that has already been presented, to what extent is a student dependent upon their teacher, and in what ways?
- As a corollary, to what degree should a teacher perceive their student as dependent upon them?
- What is sufficient evidence that a student has mastered their studies and graduated from needing their teacher as an instructor? The text suggests an astounding forty years of study – clearly an embellishment, given other descriptions of courses of study the Bavli posits.³⁷
- What obligations do students and teachers have to maintain the functioning of their relationship? Note that here, while R' Hisda and R' Huna both observe fasts of contrition, they are not recorded as apologizing face-to-face.³⁸
- Just how resilient does a teacher need to be when students do things that are hurtful? If the growth of the student is the goal, how much do the feelings of the teacher matter, and when should a teacher just let something painful go instead of retaliating?

Perhaps this brief *aggadah* is included in our *sugya* not only because of the potential implications on the question of property law that R' Hisda raises, but also because of its association with the pedagogical question: “who is one’s teacher?” R' Hisda and R' Huna

³⁷ bKet. 50a; See bKid. 29b-30a; b.B Bat. 21a-22a

³⁸ The Bavli notes that following the incident recorded here, R' Hisda still maintained respect for his colleague-turned-teacher-turned-rival, and refrained from issuing *halakhic* decisions out of deference to him (bEruv. 62b, and see more on this practice at bSanh. 24a). Likewise, R' Huna insisted that his son, Rabba, attend R' Hisda’s lectures (bShab. 82a).

shared a teacher in Rav, and now R' Huna is R' Hisda's teacher. The disruption in their relationship opens up a new question not yet considered in this *sugya*: "who is *not* (or, no longer) one's teacher?" That is, what is the impact on a teacher and a student of *not* recognizing or fulfilling one's role as a teacher? Put another way: What happens when the relentless pursuit of knowledge and wisdom erodes the very framework through which that pursuit is meant to occur? Here (and elsewhere),³⁹ the Bavli treats this question not from a legalistic paradigm, but from a distinctly human perspective, and so it stands out starkly from the surrounding *halakhic* arguments. We see R' Hisda and R' Huna without an idealized veneer, naked in their humanity – angry and sad at each other, alone without each other.

This section, a brief narrative aside in the flow of our *sugya*, presents crucial questions as to the understanding of the role of a teacher. It poses them both practically, relating to pedagogy, and humanely, relating to a teacher's own awareness of their role and identity. We have seen the effort that the Bavli expends to emphasize the unique and significant nature of the relationship between a teacher and their students. Here, we encounter a test of that relationship. The distinct impression one gets from its inclusion in this *sugya* is an awareness that if this relationship is as significant as it has been portrayed, all the more so must it be nurtured with care and attention.

³⁹ See Jeffrey Rubenstein's "The Violence of Debate" (54-66), and "Shame" (67-79) in *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*.

SECTION 5

מאי חכמה: WHAT IS WISDOM?

Our *sugya* now returns to the *makhloket* from Section Three, and quickly begins to narrow the debate as to the identity of the teacher in question:

איתמר רב יצחק בר יוסף אמר ר' יוחנן הלכה כרבי יהודה רב אחא בר רב הונא אמר רב ששת הלכה כרבי יוסי. ומי אמר רבי יוחנן הכי והאמר רבי יוחנן הלכה כסתם משנה ותנן רבו שלמדו חכמה מאי חכמה רוב חכמתו.

It was stated Rav Yitzhak bar Yosef [says that] Rabbi Yoḥanan says: [The] *halakhah* [is] in accordance with Rabbi Yehuda. Rav Aḥa bar Rav Huna [says that] Rav Sheshet says: [The] *halakhah* [is] in accordance with Rabbi Yosi.

And did Rabbi Yoḥanan say that? But doesn't Rabbi Yoḥanan say: [The] *halakhah* [is always] in accordance with an unattributed *mishnah*; and we learned: His teacher, who taught him wisdom. What [is the meaning of] wisdom? [It means] the majority of his wisdom.⁴⁰

R' Yitzhak bar Yosef and R' Aha bar R' Huna defend respectively the minimalist and maximalist positions from earlier in this debate. Interrogating these two side, the *gemara* draws on its own hermeneutical principle that in the case of a *makhloket*, the *halakhah* is decided according to the anonymous voice of the Mishnah (הלכה כסתם משנה).⁴¹ We finally have our (supposedly) definitive answer: רבו is the teacher who taught חכמה. Immediately, the Bavli wants to understand what counts as חכמה, and defines it as רוב חכמתו – most of his wisdom. The Bavli clearly understands this to be a quantitative rather than a qualitative question. Intriguingly, however, the next section moves the discourse to a qualitative analysis of different curricula, establishing a hierarchy of study, but in doing so, only tangentially addresses חכמה. For the time being, we are frustratingly still left with

⁴⁰ bB. Metz. 33a

⁴¹ See also bShab. 156; bBeitz. 37b

a significant question: what counts, qualitatively, as wisdom? Without a definitive answer here, it is necessary to examine some other sources which can help shed light on the term.

Five representative examples from across the Bavli describe what חכמה might entail. Though not definitive, they help us grasp the diversity of interpretation that makes it difficult to define the term qualitatively. Most broadly, חכמה can be (a) an all-encompassing term for a body of knowledge, functioning much the same way that “wisdom” does in English. We can see this in its use in the term חכמה יוונית (Greek Wisdom).⁴² This example is particularly helpful as a counterpoint to our *sugya* from *Bava Metzi’a*, as it indicates that חכמה is not an exclusively Jewish concept, and can have a meaning beyond a technical, *halakhic* term.

חכמה might be (b) mastery of a more particular body of knowledge. A very helpful *gemara* from *masekhet Shabbat*, itself part of a wider discussion on pedagogy,⁴³ takes up the same question we are asking:

אמר ר"ל מאי דכתיב (ישעיהו לג, ו) והיה אמונת עתיד חוסן ישועות חכמת ודעת וגו'. אמונת זה סדר זרעים עתיד זה סדר מועד חוסן זה סדר נשים ישועות זה סדר נזיקין חכמת זה סדר קדשים ודעת זה סדר טהרות.

Reish Lakish said: What is the meaning of that which is written: “Faithfulness to Your charge was [her] wealth, wisdom and devotion [her] triumph...” (Isaiah 33:6)? “Faith” is the order of *Zera’im* (Seeds), “Your times” is the order of *Mo’ed* (Festivals), “Strength” is the order of *Nashim* (Women). “Salvation” is the order of *Nezikin* (Damages), “Wisdom” is the order of *Kodashim* (Consecrated Items), and “Knowledge” is the order of *Toharot* (Purities).⁴⁴

⁴² bSot. 49b; bB. Qam; bMen. 64b

⁴³ This example, analyzed exhaustively, is perhaps the most famous discourse on education in all of the Bavli, about the convert who comes to Rabbis Hillel and Shammai and asks for them to teach Torah while he stands on one foot.

⁴⁴ bShab. 31a

Examining a verse from Isaiah, Reish Lakish's answer, full of metaphor, ascribes a different *seder* of Mishnah to each of these terms. According to him, חכמה is equated with *seder Kodashim*, which deals with the laws of consecrated items. It is fascinating that both חכמה and דעת are assigned to what are traditionally understood to be the two most difficult orders of Mishnah, suggesting that they are associated with particularly esoteric and challenging thinking.

There is also an interesting dichotomy in play for Reish Lakish, for the Amoraim, and for us, with this association. These are the same two *sedarim* mentioned earlier in association with Rava and Shmuel.⁴⁵ Like before, on the one hand, their content is among the least immediately practical, given their relationship to the non-existent Temple.⁴⁶ On the other hand, it is this very association which makes them especially noteworthy. Rava and Shmuel indicated earlier that their most significant teachers are the ones who taught them material from these very *sedarim*. Here, we learn that this material is associated with the essence of wisdom and knowledge. The actual content, focusing on ritual purity and Temple rites, points to a relationship with a desired future redemption. Viewed against the Bavli's emphasis on the transcendent power of learning and teaching,⁴⁷ we get the sense that חכמה refers both to a specific mastery of a body of knowledge, and also to behaviours that might hasten the spiritual and physical redemption of the Jewish people.

חכמה might have applicability as (c) a pedagogical term describing a way of speaking. An extended *sugya* in *masekhet Eruvin*⁴⁸ discusses students and learning at

⁴⁵ See pg. 118

⁴⁶ These are also the two *seders* that the Bavli dwells the least on when it comes to matters of learning and education.

⁴⁷ See bBer. 8a; bSanh. 99b

⁴⁸ bEruv. 53a-55a

great length, and there, we encounter the phrase לשון חכמה,⁴⁹ literally meaning “language of wisdom,” but translated variously as “speaking enigmatically,” or “cryptic, allusive language and wordplay,”⁵⁰ Rashi understands the term to mean speaking in a way that other will not understand.⁵¹

Elsewhere, חכמה is (d), an even narrower term describing the practical knowledge of how to do something, a concrete skill, such as blowing a shofar.⁵² Finally, another *gemara* attributed to Rava narrows the definition of חכמה further to describe (e) a virtue that is the *outcome* of study:

מרגלא בפומיה דרבא תכלית חכמה תשובה ומעשים טובים שלא יהא אדם קורא ושונה ובוועט באביו ובאמו וברבו ובמי שהוא גדול ממנו בחכמה ובמנין ...

Rava had a habit of saying: The objective of wisdom is repentance and good deeds, so that one should not read Tanakh and study Mishnah, [and then] and spurn his father and his mother and his teacher and one who is greater than he in wisdom or in the number [of their students] ...⁵³

Rava’s understanding is markedly different than the idea of חכמה presented in our *sugya* from *Bava Metzi’a*. Here, חכמה is not a curriculum of study or quantifiable knowledge (in fact it is presented in opposition to this: a student might possess knowledge of Tanakh and Mishnah, but have no wisdom), nor a practical skill that one learns. Instead, it is a more abstract mindset, attitude, or orientation to the wider world, one directed toward repentance and good deeds.⁵⁴ It is also something that, as observed earlier, can be measured. In keeping with Rava’s attunement to humility,⁵⁵ this *gemara* is also

⁴⁹ bEruv. 53b. See also Hirshman, *Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture*, 150, n 25.

⁵⁰ Hirshman, *Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture*, 56

⁵¹ Rashi on bEruv 53b, s.v. בלשון חכמה

⁵² bShab. 117b

⁵³ bBer. 17a

⁵⁴ The ideas of חכמה and תשובה ומעשים טובים are also twinned at bNed. 32b

⁵⁵ bMo’ed Qat. 28a

particularly cognizant of the risk of arrogance associated with intense study,⁵⁶ and presents a vision of learning that mitigates against this.

Thus we have five new ideas of what חכמה might entail:

- a) A generic term for a body of knowledge
- b) Mastery of a specific body of knowledge
- c) A pedagogical term describing a way of speaking
- d) A practical skillset
- e) A virtuous orientation

It may also be that leaving חכמה under-defined may actually allow for a broader understanding of what is included in the necessary learning, plus permit some fluidity for that definition to change over time and place.⁵⁷ Whatever specific definition or definitions of חכמה the redactors of our *sugya* had in mind, it is worth mentioning as a concluding note to this section that through this *sugya*, the Bavli understands both a teacher and wisdom to be things that can be possessed or things with which one can be in relationship (חכמתו and רבו). However, in this case, the text, conceptually, is concerned exclusively with defining who the teacher is and not what the wisdom is. Yes, the Bavli asks מאי חכמה, but understands this to be a question of numbers, not of philosophy. In this instance, חכמה is more of a technical term with which to evaluate the teacher in question, rather than a pedagogical concept useful for developing a curriculum.⁵⁸ Perhaps the Bavli

⁵⁶ See the account at bTa'an. 20b of a rabbi who descends from *Migdal Geder* (the walled tower, a figurative "ivory tower," and condescends those who he deems of lesser intelligence than him.

⁵⁷ Thank you to my advisor, Rabbi Aaron Panken for suggesting this interpretation.

⁵⁸ Rashi, too, seems perplexed by the lack of definition, suggesting that חכמה here is relative: if one studies Tanakh, then it is Tanakh; if one studies Mishnah, then it is Mishnah. (Rashi on bB. Meş. 33a, s.v. רוב חכמתו)

is suggesting that wisdom and knowledge, while among the most important pursuits in the Talmudic worldview, are not to be hoarded. Yes, חכמה is something that can be had, stored within the brain, but the Bavli here is less concerned with defining the possession of חכמה and much more concerned with the relationship with a teacher that made that possession possible in the first place. Indeed, the Bavli repeatedly emphasizes learning *in order* to teach, and exhorts against learning without teaching.⁵⁹ Teacher and students may enter into remarkably intimate and possessive relationships, but the things they learn, theoretically, belong to everyone.⁶⁰ Teachers and scholars are extolled as being among the most valuable members of a community, and honoured to an extraordinary extent, yet the very thing which makes them valuable cannot, in theory, be exclusively possessed.⁶¹

Thinking broadly of our four commonplaces, this evokes an orientation where student, teacher, and subject matter are intricately interwoven. Depending on how one views their relationship, the subject matter (חכמה) may be most significant, as it transcends the boundaries of human relationships, or it may be comparatively the least significant, lacking a precise definition.

⁵⁹ bEruv. 53b-54a; bSuk. 49b; bRosh 23a; bMeg. 28b; bKid. 29b; bSanh. 99a-100a

⁶⁰ At least all those who are entitled to study and are considered within the normative boundaries of the learning community (see chapters three and four).

⁶¹ Having said this, note also that the Bavli records that there were specialist teachers who had knowledge in areas, including of particularly challenging topics, that others did not (see bShab. 114a; bYoma 38a-b; b.B Metz. 97a; bSanh. 67b, 68a, 101a; bHor. 13b-14a. See also Jeffrey Rubenstein's chapter on "Elitism" in *Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, 123-142.

SECTION 6

גמרא אין לך מדה גדולה מזו: THERE IS NO GREATER VIRTUE THAN GEMARA

Having devoted itself thus far to defining the teacher-student relationship, the final unit of our *sugya* culminates in a debate about what kind of learning should take place within that union.

ת"ר העוסקין במקרא מדה ואינה מדה במשנה מדה ונוטלין עליה שכר גמרא אין לך מדה גדולה מזו ולעולם הוי רץ למשנה יותר מן גמרא. הא גופא קשיא אמרת בגמרא אין לך מדה גדולה מזו והדר אמרת ולעולם הוי רץ למשנה יותר מן הגמרא אמר רבי יוחנן. בימי רבי נשנית משנה זו שבקו כולא עלמא מתניתין ואזלו בתר גמרא דדר דרש להו ולעולם הוי רץ למשנה יותר מן הגמרא.

The Sages taught: [Those] who engage in Bible, [it is] a virtue but not [a complete] virtue. [Those who engage] in *mishnah*, [it is] a virtue and they receive reward for it. [Those who engage] in *gemara*, you have no virtue greater than that. And always pursue [study] of *mishnah* more than *gemara*.

This itself [is] difficult, [since] you said: you have no virtue greater than *gemara*. And then you said: And always pursue [study] of *mishnah* more than *gemara*. Rabbi Yohanan says: During the era of Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi], this *baraita* was taught. [As a result, everyone abandoned *mishnah* and pursued *gemara*. Then [Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi] taught: and always pursue [study] of *mishnah* more than *gemara*.⁶²

We return to three familiar educational terms from the *sugya* in our previous chapters:

מקרא, משנה, and גמרא. In three successive statements, a hierarchy is built up where מקרא and משנה are each said to be a מדה – a virtue – however one with caveats. Tanakh study is virtuous, but not fully so. Mishnah study is virtuous, and merits one rewards, but it is גמרא which is said to have no virtue greater than it. These terms and their relationship to each other will be unpacked shortly, but for the time being, it is important to consider their description of each as a מדה.

⁶² bB. Metz. 33a-b

The term *מדה*, translated here as “virtue” can also mean a character trait or personality attribute,⁶³ or alternatively a value of measurement.⁶⁴ Note here the similarity to the English term “value,” which can either be a conceptual, ethical term (e.g. “I have many values”), or a numerical, evaluative term (e.g. “What is that object’s value?”). The *Bavli* seems to be playing homiletically on the qualitative/quantitative debate which has extended throughout our *sugya*,⁶⁵ and is asking us: what “counts” as being one’s teacher? Is it a specifically quantifiable amount of learning (as the *sugya* has intimated thus far), or is it learning that has qualitative value based on the subject or the method of study? Is it the breadth of one’s instruction, or the depth? By using the term *מדה* – which has both qualitative and quantitative connotations – in this *sugya* about what counts as one’s teacher, the *Bavli* tightens its argument, suggesting that it is *both* the quantitative amount of *חכמה* that is taught, but also the relative *value* of the *חכמה* that is taught. This is reflective of the wider debate between valuing the broad knowledge of *halakhah*, compared to a deep understanding of its jurisprudential principles. This debate, in fact, is about to rear its head once more.

The use of *מקרא*, *משנה*, and *גמרא* here has the potential to be confusing. While *מקרא* refers to the study of Tanakh and *משנה* to the rote study of Mishnah, *גמרא* refers not to the entire text of the *Bavli*, but to a particular type of Torah study – “the analytical, dialectical kind of Torah study, the examination of the reasoning behind both Scripture

⁶³ See bBer. 54a, 60b or bEruv. 100b

⁶⁴ See bEruv 29b; bPes 32a

⁶⁵ Note also that *מידות* is a tractate of the Talmud and Mishnah in *seder Kodashim*. The relationship here to the earlier connections to *Kodashim* may not be anything other than purely coincidental. But perhaps, given the association explored earlier, this *baraita*’s inclusion is an intentional “name-drop” on the part of the editors.

and tradition”⁶⁶ – that is at the apex of a curricular hierarchy. Rashi, thematically weaving this unit with those that came before, observes that גמרא here refers to a style of learning that helps one understand the hidden meaning of the Mishnah, and understand how to resolve contradictions, and to know the words of the Tannaim and their disputes, and that one who has this ability is known as a חכם.⁶⁷ The argument that חכמה in the first *baraita* parallels גמרא in this *baraita*,⁶⁸ is thus a less explicit definition of the term we went to great lengths to try to define, but one that helps resolve the protracted exploration.

Yet while גמרא clearly occupies the most noble level of study, the *baraita* insists that משנה, or the rote *mishnaic* style of study, should be pursued more. This is perplexing. The Bavli itself is aware of this self-contradiction, and immediately interrogates it: R’ Yohanan argues that at the time of R’ Yehuda HaNasi, the study of Mishnah had become diminished, and thus while the גמרא style of learning was preferred, Mishnaic learning was encouraged as a stopgap against its demise. Vidas, amazed by this phenomenon, casts the Bavli’s use of this *baraita* as “outrageous,” as it “interprets the last part of the *baraita*, which recommends משנה over גמרא, as a self-serving teaching of the Mishnah’s

⁶⁶ Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud*, 120. See also bEruv. 60a and bGit. 6b for more on this distinction.

⁶⁷ Rashi on bB. Metz. 33a, s.v. גמרא. This is remarkably similar to his definition at bB. Metz. 33a, s.v. שלמדו חכמה. See pg. 116.

⁶⁸ Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud*, 118-119.

author.”⁶⁹ Thus, while potentially audacious, the Bavli can absolve itself of presenting an ideology that advocates a “lesser” form of learning.⁷⁰

There is a clear polemic here against the pre-Talmudic form of learning. As a dialectical form of learning, גמרא here is explicitly oral, and presented in opposition to the rote learning of Mishnah, which by this point had been written down. We see here evidence of the shift in pedagogical goals from the Tanaaitic to Amoraic periods,⁷¹ and the new emphasis the Amoraim or Stammaitic redactors want to place on the appropriate form of instruction.⁷² For the latter Sages, the written tradition was seen as separating the crucial link between teacher and student, and fomenting disengagement and distancing.⁷³ This was antithetical to the Amoraic/Stammaitic project, given the quasi-marital nature of the relationship between teacher and student. Instead, the dialectic so prized by the Amoraim and Stammaim fostered “a cognitive closeness and unparalleled internalization of the text recited.”⁷⁴

This argument sharply “redraws the boundaries of rabbinic identity,”⁷⁵ and works to solidify the definition of who counts as one’s teacher as the one who teaches גמרא.

⁶⁹ Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud*, 126. Vidas has an excellent analysis here of this *sugya* from a source-criticism perspective, where he seeks to unravel the various textual strands that might have redacted together. His analysis is supremely helpful in decoding the ambiguity and paradoxes within this *sugya*, however offers less of a thematic analysis of the content.

⁷⁰ This, of course, begs the questions why the redactors included this text in the first place. Aaron Amit notes that this is perhaps due to the *baraita* being of composite structure, and that the statements were not originally taught together. (Aaron Amit, “The Homilies on Mishnah and Talmud Study at the Close of *Bavli Bava’ Metsi’a 2* and *Yerushalmi Horayot 3: Their Origin and Development*,” *JQR* 102 (2012).

⁷¹ Hirshman, *The Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture*, vi.

⁷² See also bGit. 60b for the tension within the Bavli between written and oral tradition

⁷³ Kanarek and Lehman, *Learning to Read Talmud*, 168.

⁷⁴ Kanarek and Lehman, *Learning to Read Talmud*, 168.

⁷⁵ Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud*, 126.

Vidas concludes: “Only the rabbi who initiates one in this creative kind of study (*talmud*, or wisdom), in contrast with the one who teaches oral tradition (Mishnah) counts as one’s rabbi.”⁷⁶ Ultimately, the relationship between teacher, student, and subject matter here suggests an evolving pedagogy: yes, only the rabbi who teaches a particular kind of study counts as one’s teacher, but we see how that kind of study evolved over time, and was responsive to the needs of the local community.⁷⁷

The Bavli’s Isaiah proof-text for its argument that there is no greater virtue than *gemara* returns us to the dichotomy between תלמידי חכמים and עמי הארץ, and reinforces a strong moral hierarchy and class distinction:

מאי דרוש כדדריש רבי יהודה ברבי אלעאי מאי דכתיב (ישעיהו נח, א) הגד לעמי פשעם ולבית יעקב חטאתם. הגד לעמי פשעם אלו תלמידי חכמים ששגגות נעשות להם כזדונות ולבית יעקב חטאתם אלו עמי הארץ שזדונות נעשות להם כשגגות והיינו דתנן ר' יהודה אומר הוי זהיר בתלמוד ששגגת תלמוד עולה זדון.

[On] what interpretation [was it said that there is no virtue greater than *gemara*? It] is as Rabbi Yehuda, son of Rabbi Elai, interpreted homiletically: What [is the meaning of that] which is written: “declare to My people their transgression and to the house of Jacob their sins” (Isa. 58:1). “Declare to My people their transgression,” these are the Torah scholars, whose unintentional [transgressions] become for them tantamount to intentional [transgressions]. “And to the house of Jacob their sins,” these are the *am’ei ha’aretz*, whose intentional [transgressions] become for them tantamount to unintentional [transgressions] And that is [why] we learned [that] Rabbi Yehuda says: Be careful in *talmud*, as a [transgression based on] an unintentionally [incorrect] study is considered an intentional [transgression].⁷⁸

תלמידי חכמים are revered and held to a higher standard that has *halakhic* implications beyond the pedagogical, to the extent that even their accidental transgressions are

⁷⁶ Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud*, 120-121.

⁷⁷ Of course, it is unlikely, given their vociferous commitment to their pedagogy and their belief in its eternally transcendent value, that the Amoraim or Stammaitim would argue that this form of study could change again.

⁷⁸ bB. Meṣ. 33a-b

considered intentional, as they should have known better.⁷⁹ Conversely, עמי הארץ – the “others *par excellence*,”⁸⁰ are assumed to be ignorant of the law, such that their transgressions, even if intentional, are considered unintentional. The stringencies and leniencies advocated here suggest on the one hand a rather rigid social hierarchy, but pedagogically, might be generously said to represent a significant attention to the individual abilities of students. Notwithstanding this generosity toward the text, the class distinction is certainly palpable here – one’s learning has an impact not just on one’s esteem in the eyes of the community, but one’s legal status as well. There is a strong argument here regarding the responsibility a teacher must simultaneously have toward the subject matter, the students, and the wider community.⁸¹ Thus, the *sugya*’s marshalling of a pointed *mishnah* from Avot to drive the implications home: הוי זהיר בתלמוד (be careful in your study).⁸² The Bavli argues that teacher and learners must be particularly precise in their focus and use of text, lest they bring punishment upon themselves and others.⁸³

⁷⁹ For more on the distinction between intentional and unintentional transgressions, see bYom. 36b, 86b; bHag. 5a, bSanh. 61b-62a; bShev. 2b, 12b, 28b 31b

⁸⁰ Vidas, “Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud,” 124.

⁸¹ Compare to the discussion on what merits one to become head of a *yeshiva* at bBer. 27b-28a; bShab. 1114a)

⁸² mAvot 4:13

⁸³ I am reminded of Daniel Gordis’ aphorism quoted on page 23 of this thesis, warning against “pinning the tail on the rabbinic aphorism” as an educational model, as well as the following teaching relayed to me by my own teacher, Rabbi David Wilfond: “Teachers are more dangerous than doctors. A doctor can only harm one patient at a time, but a teacher can harm a room full of students all at once.” Of course, the more positive inverse is also equally true: while a doctor can save only one life at a time, a teacher can save a room full of lives all at once. Perhaps this is this underlying philosophy behind the Bavli’s inclusion of teachers among a list of professions (including bloodletters, tree planters, ritual slaughterers, and town scribes) which are considered in the class of “מותרין ועומדין דמי” – those who are forewarned as being responsible for the restitution of any losses (later understood as including fines, wage-docking, or summary dismissal) that are incurred in the line of their work. See bB. Bat 21b and bB. Metz. 109a-b).

Our *sugya* concludes with a further investigation of a verse from Isaiah, and once again returns the conversation to questions of identity, bringing together many of the groups we have discussed this far: תלמידי חכמים, בעלי מקרא, בעלי משנה, עמי הארץ, and עובדי כוכבים:

דרש ר' יהודה בר' אלעאי מאי דכתיב (ישעיהו סו, ה) שמעו דבר ה' החרדים אל דברו אלו תלמידי חכמים [אמרו] אחיכם אלו בעלי מקרא שנאיכם אלו בעלי משנה מנדיכם אלו עמי הארץ. שמא תאמר פסק סברם ובטל סיכויים ת"ל ונראה בשמחתכם שמא תאמר ישראל יבושו תלמוד לומר והם יבושו עובדי כוכבים יבושו וישראל ישמחו:

Rabbi Yehuda, son of Rabbi Elai, interpreted [a verse] midrashically. What [is the meaning of that] which is written: “Hear the word of the Eternal, you who tremble at God’s word,” these are Torah scholars; “your brothers...have said,” these are masters of the Bible, “that hate you,” these are masters of Mishnah, “that ostracize you,” these are *am’ei ha’aretz*.⁸⁴

This final section, through a *drash* on Isaiah, establishes clear distinctions between groups based on their learning and the subjects of their learning:

- תלמידי חכמים are those who tremble before God
- בעלי מקרא are their brothers, who study a lesser curriculum (Tanakh), but are apparently not viewed as pejoratively as others
- בעלי משנה are said to be haters (note the wordplay, as observed by Rashi,⁸⁵ between משנה and שנא – to hate)
- עמי הארץ are said to ostracize themselves due to their ignorance and distance from learning

Clearly, the *Bavli* is moving far beyond the intended meaning of the biblical text to advance its argument. As earlier, the *Bavli* argues from an identity-based perspective by

⁸⁴ bB. Metz. 33b

⁸⁵ Rashi on bB. Metz. 33b, s.v. שנאיכם אלו בעלי משנה

focusing its polemic on distinctly named groups of people, rather than only on the approaches to learning associated with them. Underneath the surface is a discussion on what is an appropriate curriculum of study, but the *sugya* here focuses intensely on boundaries of identity, going to the extreme of portraying those who study Mishnah as those who hate God, and placing them in the same camp with עמי הארץ.⁸⁶

Our *sugya* began with a question as to who qualifies as one's teacher, and now concludes with an argument extolling the analytical method of study associated with גמרא and the תלמידי חכמים affiliated with this mode.⁸⁷ In doing so, the Bavli "effectively denies rabbinic identity to all other types of scholars, who stand here in distinction with the sages just like 'am ha'arets.'⁸⁸ Vidas' structural analysis of this *sugya* provides a crisp synopsis of the argument that has run throughout:

Already in the first *baraita*, which discusses lost property, the Bavli began the process of identifying "wisdom" with "*talmud*" by adding the word *mishnah* to R' Meir's definition of what does not count as "wisdom." Since the name for rabbis or sages, *hakhamim*, is derived from the same root as wisdom, *hokhma*, the definition of the former, achieved by middle of the *sugya*, obviously prepares the definition of the latter. The creators of our *sugya* clearly identify with the "masters of *talmud*"; they present them not only as superior but as the "real rabbis," the only ones worthy of the name "sages." Those occupied with other kinds of Torah study are not only excluded from this category but are equated with non-rabbinic Jews.⁸⁹

And yet, the Bavli concludes this *sugya* (and the *perek* itself) with a surprising turn away from its hypercritical segregationist approach to education. In what seems like a last-

⁸⁶ Vidas notes that this *drasha* on Isaiah is not found in any other classical rabbinic works, and as it serves the rabbis' self-promotional agenda so well, it is likely to have been composed by the Bavli's creators. (Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud*, 128).

⁸⁷ See bMeg. 28b, bSot. 22a, and bKid. 49a-b for other examples of when תלמידי חכמים are presented in opposition to בעלי מקרא and בעלי משנה.

⁸⁸ Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud*, 127-128.

⁸⁹ Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud*, 131.

minute attempt to redeem those it has spent considerable time demeaning, the text draws upon the latter half of the verse from Isaiah it has just quoted, to set up a new dichotomy between Jews and non-Jewish idol-worshippers. In a final, terse statement that closes the entire *perek*, the Bavli argues: עובדי כוכבים יבושו וישראל ישמחו - idol worshippers will be ashamed and Jews will be joyous. This new identity-based division suggests that while the Bavli's redactors here view certain groups of Jews (בעלי מקרא, בעלי משנה, and עמי הארץ) as neglecting the most important kinds of learning, and thus distancing themselves societally, philosophically, and pedagogically, there is an outer boundary that they have not yet crossed. This hopeful vision perhaps speaks to the perceived redemptive power of education referred to at the very beginning of our *sugya's mishnah*, and elsewhere throughout the Bavli:⁹⁰ If a teacher can bring a student into the world-to-come, all the more so might they be able to redeem those who have transgressed societal norms on earth.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Through what appeared to be a straightforward attempt to discuss חכמה, we entered into a wide-ranging analysis of what makes one considered one's teacher. Some strong common themes emerge:

- Both quality and quantity of learning contribute together to determine who counts as one's teacher.
- A teacher is not only a professional title or a casual description of one has taught something, but a highly specific term that implies a relationship both to material studied, and to the learner whom one is teaching.

⁹⁰ See also bB. Metz. 85a; bSanh. 101a

- The teacher is viewed simultaneously as one who has transcendent powers to usher students into *Olam HaBa*, but is also imminently personal and intimate, bearing some characteristics of a spouse.
- This contributes to the strong sense that a teacher is seen as worthy of honour, even more than one's own father (who is, ideally, himself one's teacher). Like the student in chapter four, this contributes to a vision of the teacher as a distinct identity, surrounded by strong ideological and pedagogical boundaries.
- A hierarchy of subject matter and associated methods to learning impacts the status of a teacher (idealizing גמרא as the highest of approaches).
- The Bavli also presents crucial questions for any teacher to consider:
 - What should one's focus be as a teacher? Fostering fluency in a particular received canon, teaching skills, or imparting general wisdom?
 - Is quality or quantity of learning more important?
 - How does one assess the depth or breadth of a student's learning?
 - What sense of students' needs should a teacher have, and to what degree are they in need their students, themselves?
 - What proximity should one have to one's students – Physically? Spiritually?
 - What counts as wisdom?

Having journeyed through the Bavli's arguments as to what qualifies one to be one's teacher, we can step back and compare this definition with a few others that shed light on how tremendously our text views the importance of the teacher-student relationship. In one instance, the Bavli inquires: “למי נאה ללמד בהמון מי שכל תבואה שלו” (literally: “For whom is it appropriate to teach an abundance of people? One for whom all

that can be brought in, belongs to him”), essentially meaning: “who can teach many people? One who has investigated Tanakh, Mishnah, Halakhot, and Aggadot.”⁹¹ Note the marked distinction in quality and quantity to our *sugya*. While in order to be considered one’s teacher, one must have taught one’s student most of their knowledge, and in a particular fashion (גמרא), this text from *Makkot* is remarkably open in its definition of who is permitted to teach (and to a large, public group, no less!). It focuses on breadth over depth, and on the specific subject matter, rather than on the relationship to the community.

Elsewhere, the Bavli asks:

איזהו ת"ח שממנין אותו פרנס על הציבור זה ששואלין אותו דבר הלכה בכל מקום ואומר ואפי' במסכת כלה.

Who is a Torah scholar who can be appointed leader of the community? This is one who, if asked [about] matters of *halakhah* on any topic, they [are able to] answer, even [if they are asked about the] tractate [of the current] *Kallah*.⁹²

This teacher-leader must be prepared to answer any *halakhic* question from anywhere in the Mishnah, even if it is the topic currently being learned at the *Kallah*.⁹³ Here again, the focus is solely on subject matter (again, breadth over depth), over any relationship with student or approach to study, as the defining fact in determining one’s fitness to lead.

In this same *sugya*, the Bavli asks who else is fit to be a communal leader, and answers that even one who knows only one *masekhet* of Mishna may be appointed a local leader, and that one who is an expert in all of their learning is fit to be appointed head of

⁹¹ bMak. 10a and Rashi ad loc, s.v. שכל תבואה שלו

⁹² bShab. 114a

⁹³ For more on the nature of the *kallah*, see Goodblatt, *Rabbinic Instruction in Sasanian Babylonia*, 155-170.

a *yeshiva*: “בחדא מסכתא באתריה אי בכוליה תנויה בריש מתיבתא.”⁹⁴ Elsewhere, the qualifications for head of the *yeshiva* are said to be based on wisdom, wealth, and familial lineage, without any serious degree of interrogation as to what these credentials entail.⁹⁵ Compared to our *sugya*, there is a conspicuous dearth of focus in these instances on what merits one needs for such a significant position. In many ways, comparatively, they suggest that positions of institutional leadership – while clearly important – are more tied to intellectual knowledge, while the specific position of being one’s teacher, as we have seen, weaves tightly together questions of material, pedagogy, and relationship.

Our *sugya* masterfully approaches the question of who is a teacher in a surprising way. The initial fiscal concerns that open the *perek* are, as Dr. Marjorie Lehman observes, “merely the foundation for a larger and more significant discussion about loss in general – the loss of the authority of Torah, the loss of prophecy, the loss of the Temple, the loss of honesty, the loss of a Jewish community, and the loss of rabbinic authority.”⁹⁶ This holistic focus on Torah, community, and authority will also be addressed in the next two chapters, as we examine how the Bavli views subject matter.

⁹⁴ bShab. 114a

⁹⁵ bBer. 28b-28a

⁹⁶ Marjorie Lehman, *For the Love of Talmud: Reflections on the Teaching of Bava Metzia, Perek 2* (Journal of Jewish Education, 68:1, 2006), 89 and 101, n6-11.

CHAPTER 7

“אורחות חיים”

“THE PATHS OF LIFE:”¹

THE SUBJECT MATTER

¹ bBer. 28b

In some ways, the question of what the Bavli says about subject matter is a simple one. Clearly, the Bavli's chief focus is interrogating the Mishnah and interpreting Torah. These are the subject matters par excellence. But of course, it is more than that, as Mishnah and Torah are the launching ground for great discourses on the plethora of matters deemed interesting or relevant by the Amoraim and Stammaim. The Bavli's understanding of what counts as knowledge and wisdom has already been touched on in the previous commonplaces, and now we can explore some of the more explicit ideas of what it is that should be learned, and what kind of questions should be asked in considering this. Schwab's questions in this regard help frame our examination: What counts as a worthy subject matter? What is its nature? How much influence should it have over other educational considerations? What are the boundaries of what is acceptable learning material? What is the balance between the search for truth and the construction meaning?² Between theory and practice? To what extent is cultural literacy sufficient when held up against developing critical thinking and analytical skills?³ (These last two questions were largely addressed already through examining the role of the student). In considering these questions, the Bavli pays particular attention to fleshing out a vision of what the material, by its very nature, demands of us.

We can characterize what the Bavli has to say about subject matter into five major categories:

1. *The Canon*: Lists of what material is learned
2. *Extracanonical Learning*: Material and experiences outside of the primary canon

² Schwab, "The Practical: A Language for Curriculum," 21.

³ Schwab, "The Practical: A Language for Curriculum," 16.

3. *The Nature*: What is the subject matter like?
4. *The Demand*: What claims does the material hold on us?
5. *Forbidden Knowledge*: What is outside of the boundaries of normative learning?

Note that some of these categories noticeably overlap. For example, a metaphor on the nature of the Torah emphasizing its high esteem may simultaneously establish certain demands on students, teachers, or the learning environment (as we will see in the *sugya* from *Hagigah* examined in the next chapter).

HE DID NOT NEGLECT: THE CANON לא הניח

One of the most comprehensive lists of what the Bavli views as relevant subject matter appears toward the end of the second *perek* of *masekhet Sukkot*, amidst a wider discussion on idealized students, noble character traits of teachers, and the role of the *beit midrash*. If we want to parse what the Bavli deems as a worthy syllabus, this is an excellent launching point:

אמרו עליו על רבן יוחנן בן זכאי שלא הניח מקרא ומשנה גמרא הלכות ואגדות דקדוקי תורה ודקדוקי סופרים קלים וחמורים וגזרות שוות תקופות וגימטריאות שיחת מלאכי השרת ושיחת שדים ושיחת דקלים משלות כובסין משלות שועלים דבר גדול ודבר קטן. דבר גדול מעשה מרכבה דבר קטן היות דאביי ורבא...

[The Sages] said about Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai: he did not neglect Tanakh, Mishnah, Gemara, *halakhot* and *aggadot*, subtleties of the Torah and subtleties of the scribes, *a fortiori* inferences and verbal analogies,⁴ [the calculation of the] seasons, *gematria*,⁵ the conversation of ministering angels, the conversation of demons, and the conversation of palm trees,⁶ parables of

⁴ These are two of the hermeneutical principles the Talmud uses to interpret Torah. See pg. 167, n9.

⁵ Numerology.

⁶ These esoteric matters are indeed baffling. Rashi flatly declares: “I don’t know what these are” (Rashi on bSuk. 28a, s.v. שיחת מלאכי השרת שיחת שדים שיחת דקלים). For more,

launderers, parables of foxes,⁷ a great matter and a small matter. A great matter [is, for example,] the Design of the Chariot,⁸ a small matter [is, for example], the disputes of Abaye and Rava.⁹

This list is germane for framing our study of the rabbinic canon, as it reflects one of the dominant ways the Bavli understands learning material: there are specific texts which are meant to be studied, and there is an intimate relationship between the subject and the methods of analyzing it. In this instance, we can see the Bavli's attempt to set noticeably wide boundaries to frame the relevance of that material (great, transcendent matters and small, routine matters), and the inclusion of particularly esoteric matters. The field of study, for Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, is comprehensive, including the key Jewish texts, practical matters, hermeneutics, as well as matters which are otherwise viewed as *verboten*. Its breadth and depth enable us to ask: is this the ideal syllabus of study? Is it what counts as wisdom for the Bavli? Or is it a presentation of a particularly rare and high level of knowledge, something to which others might aspire?

Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger observe the eclecticism of this list and note that what Yohanan ben Zakai does here is “what the Talmud often does to the Bible:

see: Burton L. Visotzky, “The Conversation of Palm Trees,” in *Tracing the Threads: Studies in the Vitality of Jewish Pseudepigrapha* (Ed. John C. Reeves, SBLEKKL 6, Atlanta: Scholars 1994), 205-214 and John C. Poirer “The Tongues of Angels: The Concept of Angelic Languages in Classical Jewish and Christian Texts,” (WUNT 2, Heidelberg: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 120-131

⁷ See another reference to parables of foxes at bSanh. 38b-39a. For more on these folktales, see: Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2009), 261-262.

⁸ This refers to Ezekeiel's vision of the divine chariot (Ezek. 1:4-28), part of a particularly reserved body of knowledge.

⁹ bSuk. 28a.

transforming Proverbs' concept of wisdom – legal, political, and practical – to a Talmudic sort of wisdom, bookish. Many books. All manner of books.”¹⁰

Indeed, this is a particularly wide view of the canon; it is not entirely definitive or normative (aside from Tanakh and Mishnah), and we will see other examples that are narrower, including only one or two elements of this list, as well as others that indicate other subject matter not included here.

Broadly, when speaking of the canon, we can divide the Bavli's focus into two spheres: (a) lists of or references to specific texts which are to be learned,¹¹ and (b) references to subjects which appear within those texts.¹² The first sphere features the key formative sources of Jewish thought and practice for the Bavli: Torah, Tanakh, and Mishnah, as well as collections of other rabbinic material (*Tosefta*, *Sifra*, *Sifrei*), and more generic collections (*Halakhah*, *Aggadah*). When considering these texts, note that the very names of some of the subjects – מקרא (that which is read), and משנה (that which is repeated) – are influenced by the understanding of how they are meant to be studied. Attention to the nomenclature in its native language is thus particularly important, as Handelman notes:

...the Hebrew term which would be equivalent to the English word “Scripture” is not “Torah” but “*Mikra*” - meaning “what is put in writing in order to be read.” One needs to be precise and not confuse “Torah” and “*Mikra*,” a distinction which is lost when these words are translated into other languages and culture.

Jews...“are not the People of the Book... and God did not choose a people of readers, nor of libraries... [Rather, they are] the people of the word of One who

¹⁰ Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Jews and Words*, 22.

¹¹ bBer. 8a, 11b; bSuk. 28a; bMeg. 28b; bHag. 3a; bKet. 17a, 33a-b, 50a, 82a; bKid. 30a, 33a, 49a-b; bB. Metz. 33a-b, 84a; bB. Bat. 134a; bSanh. 24a, 99a-101a

¹² bShab 31a; bEruv. 28b; bPes. 6a-b; bSuk 21b, 28a, 42a; bRosh 7a, 16a and Rashi ad loc.; bMeg. 29b; bHag. 6a, 12a, 15a-b; bAZ 19a-b

gave this ‘word’ to be put in writing in a book.” [This] distinction is subtle but important. It is also a warning to guard against the “idolatry” of writing and the kind of teaching and learning which that would imply.¹³

The second sphere includes a greater diversity of subjects, ranging from the *halakhic* (e.g. *mitzvot d’rabbanan*),¹⁴ to the explicitly non-legal (e.g. the non-*halakhic* conversations of Torah scholars),¹⁵ to subjects that appear to be only tangentially related to the canon (e.g. counting the letters of the Torah),¹⁶ to subjects that seemingly have no practical purpose.¹⁷ There does not appear to be any internal coherence here, aside from the relationship to the primary texts and the primary respected leaders and their actions.

There are also several instances which can be grouped in with the first sphere, but deserve special mention, where the Bavli outlines texts to be studied, with a particular historical awareness of what was studied in the past compared to the its present. For example, a comment by Rav Pappa to Abaye that appears in a number of parallel sources throughout the Bavli notes that while earlier generations learned only *Seder Nezikin*, their generation (fifth generation Babylonian Amoraim) learns all six *sedarim* of Mishnah.¹⁸

I think it is worth commenting briefly here (and in greater detail in section four of this chapter) on the status of this canon *qua* canon. Does the Bavli view the study of all of these enumerations of texts and subjects for normative legal reasons, or as a formative, culturally enriching body? Moshe Halbertal’s distinction between these two orientations is helpful:

A text’s canonical status has various layers. It may have a binding status,

¹³ Handelman, *Make Yourself a Teacher*, 8.

¹⁴ bHag. 6a

¹⁵ bSuk. 21b

¹⁶ bHag. 15a-b

¹⁷ bZev 45a

¹⁸ See: bBer. 20a; bTa’an. 24a-b; bSanh. 106b

establishing what the law is and how one should act... Another sort of canonization – which we shall call “formative” – has a broader cultural significance, establishing the educational structure of a given community. A formative canon contains the texts to which members of a community are exposed in their schools and recreational activities. The formative canon generates the community’s collective memory and makes it possible to speak and write in a manner that presumes unmediated familiarity with a collection of texts. In effect, it establishes the terms in which people understand themselves and one another. The formative canon is interpreted and taught; and in the Jewish world, in which the study of Torah is a core value, the diligent and rigorous engagement with the formative literature bears powerful spiritual significance.

Not every canonical text performs both functions – normative and formative – simultaneously... Within the Jewish world, the Talmud acquired a dual role, both normative and formative. It serves not only as a normative text, telling one how to behave, but also as a text worthy of constant reflection – some would say exclusive reflection – that provides its students their language and manner of thought.¹⁹

Halbertal’s comment on how the Talmud itself has come to be viewed as both formative and normative is didactic, but it is the applicability of these two frames to the canon proposed by the Bavli itself that is interesting to consider, as we read more of the nature of the subject matters, and question how the material itself places a claim upon its teachers and students. The Bavli itself seems to be aware of the need to define precisely the syllabus of study, and to know what each text entails. In one instance, a *sugya* interrogates “איזו היא משנה?” (what is entailed by Mishnah?) and “מאי תורה?” (what subjects are meant by the term Torah?)²⁰ Elsewhere, the Bavli specifically delineates the term מקרא as applying only to Torah, and not *Nevi'im* or *Ketuvim*.²¹ We have also seen the hierarchy of disciplines and approaches to study present in the Bavli,²² and a *sugya* in

¹⁹ Moshe Halbertal, *Maimonides: Life and Thought* (Trans. Joel Linsider; Princeton: Princeton University, 2014), 184-185.

²⁰ bKid. 49a-b

²¹ bKid. 30a

²² See pg. 86-89

Hagigah makes explicit that even though a canon may include multiple texts together, those texts may enjoy different status: “אמר רב כיון שיוצא אדם מדבר הלכה לדבר מקרא שוב אין” (Rav said: Once a person leaves [the study of] *halakhah*, [even] for [the study] of Torah, he will no longer have peace).²³

These representative examples demonstrate how for the Bavli, even though the text may at times present a unified canon, the subject matter within contains different formative and normative status. We will see more of these distinctions in section four of this chapter.

תורה היא וללמוד אני צריך: THIS (TOO) IS TORAH, AND I MUST LEARN:²⁴
EXTRA CANONICAL LEARNING

A famous *sugya* in *Berakhot* graphically details the kind of learning that might take place in the most unsuspected of places: in bathrooms, and, in this excerpt, beneath a marital bed:

רב כהנא על גגא תותיה פורייה דרב שמעיה דשח ושחק ועשה צרכיו אמר ליה דמי פומיה דאבא כדלא שריף תבשילא א"ל כהנא הכא את פוק דלאו אורח ארעא אמר לו תורה היא וללמוד אני צריך.

Rav Kahana entered and lay beneath [his teacher] Rav's bed. He heard [Rav] talking and laughing with his wife, and seeing to his needs, (i.e., having sex). [Rav Kahana] said to [Rav]: The mouth of Abba, (Rav), is like [one whom] has never tasted this dish, (a euphemism meaning that his behavior was lustful). [Rav] said to him: Kahana, you are here? Leave, as [this] is an undesirable mode of behavior. [Rav Kahana] said to him: This is Torah, and I must learn.²⁵

²³ bHag. 10a

²⁴ bBer. 62a

²⁵ bBer. 62a

Rav Kahana's defence after being called out is at once startling and illuminating: rather than apologizing for acting uncouthly,²⁶ he brazenly declares "תורה היא וללמוד אני צריך" (This is Torah, and I must learn). The story ends there, with no rejoinder from Rav or his wife, indicating some degree of acceptance of this answer, both by the characters internal to the story, as well as by the *sugya's* redactors.²⁷

This *sugya* has been studied extensively,²⁸ but suffice it to say, beyond its inherent dramatic allure, it is particularly revealing when considering what counts as learning material (and also what is an appropriate learning milieu, as will be discussed in chapter ten). Boyarin observes that the most crucial moment in the story is Rav Kahana's labeling of his teacher's sexual intercourse as Torah, and his justifying his behaviour as coming from a place of a desire to learn. Torah here, as Boyarin argues, "is not the written word, not Scripture, but the behavior of the rabbi/master. The rabbinic project is to subsume everything under the control of Torah..."²⁹ Indeed, the euphemism used to describe Rav's having sex – "ועשה צרכיו" (seeing to his needs), is associated closely with Rav Kahanah's description of his need to learn: "אני צריך."³⁰

²⁶ See bNid. 16b-17a on the prohibition from having sex in front of others.

²⁷ The Bavli does pick up again on this story briefly in bHag. 5b, but offers no critique of Rav Kahana's behaviour.

²⁸ See, for example: Gail Labovitz, "Is Rav's Wife 'a Dish'? Food and Eating Metaphors in Rabbinic Discourse of Sexuality and Gender Relations," *Studies in Jewish Civilization* 18 (Creighton University, 2008); Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*, (rev. ed.; Berkeley: University of California, 1995), 122-127; Daniel Boyarin, "Women's Bodies and the Rise of the Rabbis: The Case of Sotah," in *Jews and Gender: The Challenge to Hierarchy*, (Jonathan Frankel, ed.; Oxford: Oxford University, 2000), 94-95; and Jonathan Wyn Schofer, *Confronting Vulnerability: The Body and the Divine in Rabbinic Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2010), 66 n 22, and 63-67.

²⁹ Boyarin, *Women's Bodies and the Rise of the Rabbis*, 94.

³⁰ Rabbi Lisa Gruschow, "This, Too Is Torah," in *The Sacred Encounter: Jewish Perspectives on Sexuality* (ed. Lisa Gruschow; New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2014), xxi

What does this tell us about how the Bavli views learning? For one, the boundaries of what is deemed valid subject material extend far beyond the Jewish textual canon. The acts of rabbis also constitute a kind of Torah, since they are (presumably) based upon Torah. Recall the remarkable labelling of R' Eliezer ben Hyrkanus himself as a *sefer Torah*.³¹

Furthermore, Rav Kahana's statement suggests that the very definition of Torah, at least figuratively, is malleable. It is not just that learning about intimate matters *in situ* from one's teacher is valid above and beyond the traditional canon, but that it is subsumed into an already valid, existing category, called Torah.

This is perhaps the most extreme example of redefining the canon, though other examples of this kind of observational subject matter exist,³² as well as a surprising comment that had the Torah not been given, people would still be able to learn certain fundamental Toraitic commandments just by observing the natural world.³³ Finally, there is a discernable focus by the Bavli within this category on trades as an important subject of study – not for intellectual purposes, but for livelihood. The text approaches this from a distinctively pedagogical stance, not just advocating employment, but emphasizing the responsibility to *teach* children a vocation.³⁴

This survey of non-canonical learning demonstrates some peculiar, though enlightening approaches to education by the Bavli. For all of the emphasis on devoting

³¹ See pg. 104 and bSanh. 101a.

³² bBer. 7b; bTa'an 24a-b; bHag. 5b (the previous two examples prior to the one quoted here)

³³ bEruv. 100b

³⁴ bBer. 35b, 63a; bShab. 33b; bKid. 29a-b, 30a; 82a-b; bB. Metz. 30b; bMak. 8b

extraordinary time and energy to more formal religious study,³⁵ we see that the boundaries around what counts as something valid to learn are more expansive than might be expected. Likewise, there are certain topics which appear to override other fairly clear (at least in the contemporary world) rubrics on teacher-student relationships. Finally, in the text that we briefly examined here, we see that the construction of meaning can be firmly in the hands of the student, who is able to declare to his teacher (who is likely both literally and figuratively caught naked), “This is Torah! You might not think it is, and the Torah itself might not, but I do. I find it valuable and meaningful, and I am laying claim to this educational experience!”

למה נמשלו דברי תורה WHY WERE MATTERS OF TORAH COMPARED TO...:³⁶
THE NATURE OF THE SUBJECT MATTER

Answering the question “what is the subject matter like?” of course depends on what subject matter one is speaking of, and the Bavli, as we have seen, addresses multiple materials. Our next chapter deals with this question in particular, so by way of introduction, we will cover a broad overview of the representative material here. Of course, when considering what is learned, Torah is paramount. There is an abundance of sources that describe what Torah and other material are like, which I have broadly delineated into three categories: (a) comments on the stylistic/structural features of texts,

³⁵ See pg. 49

³⁶ bEruv. 54a-b

and their implication on studying,³⁷ (b) emphasis on the status of the material (which is primarily, but not exclusively Torah),³⁸ and (c) metaphors for Torah.³⁹

In addition to the Bavli's argumentative style and use of poetic devices, Rabbi Ethan Tucker notes that the stylistic features of the Bavli itself almost always naturally direct students to an awareness of challenges within the text. He particularly addresses its logical structure, and notes that a "pedagogy of looking for problems," may be encoded within the text itself.⁴⁰ It is not just what the Bavli says, but *how* it presents these arguments, that carries weight.

Within the stylistic realm, metaphors occupy a remarkable amount of attention in the Bavli, often serving as vantage points for the rabbis or editors to assemble other arguments on the status and/or requirements of Torah and its study. The Bavli draws frequently on features of the natural world, as well as objects that people would be familiar with from their daily lives, presumably in an attempt to comment on the universal applicability and life-sustaining powers of Torah. Notable examples include multiple comparisons of Torah to water,⁴¹ to agriculture,⁴² and to positive abstract

³⁷ See pg. 167, n9

³⁸ See bBer. 22a; bEruv. 63b; bPes. 49b, 122a; bYoma 19b, 37b-38a; bTa'an. 27b; bMeg. 3a-b, 27a; bHag. 9a-10a; bNed. 62a; bGit. 60a-b; bB. Metz. 33a-b; b.Sanh 49b; 91b-92a; 99a-100a, 101a; bAZ 17b-18a

³⁹ For more on the role of metaphors in Bavli, see: Gail Labovitz, *Marriage and Metaphor: Constructions of Gender in Rabbinic Literature* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009); Lynn Kaye, *Time in the Babylonian Talmud: Natural and Imagined Times in Jewish Law and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2018), 88-89; Hirshman, *Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture*, 184, s.v Educational Metaphor; Rubenstein, *Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, 220, s.v. Metaphors.

⁴⁰ Ethan Tucker, *Looking for Problems: A Pedagogic Quest for Difficulties*, in "Learning to Read Talmud," 35-56.

⁴¹ bTa'an. 7a; bHag. 3a; bKid. 30a; bAZ 19a-b; bTem. 16a

⁴² bEruv. 54a-b; bTa'an 7a; bHag. 3b; bSanh 107a

concepts, such as kindness, goodness, or truth.⁴³ These metaphors in particular suggest that for the rabbis, the Torah not only sustains life, but sustains a particularly *good* life.

קבע ואל תעשם WORDS OF TORAH MUST BE PERMANENT,
NOT TEMPORARY:⁴⁴ THE DEMAND

The Bavli's understanding of the nature of subject matter often bears weight directly upon how it is meant to be studied and taught. There is both an awareness of what a student or teacher needs to bring to studying and teaching, but also what the subject being studied can do to the student. Jon Levisohn, sharing the words of an undergraduate Talmud student, illustrates this idea:

“When it comes to Talmud study, the point is to interact with the Torah in a special way, to see the beauty in many different perspectives, and to understand the thought processes involved in arriving at those perspectives.” What this student is proposing... is that reading Talmud is a matter of context-sensitive encounters... more than the acquisition of knowledge.⁴⁵

Sometimes the ideas on the way a text is meant to be studied have profound pedagogical implications that open up the subject matter, as in the *sugya* from *Hagigah* in the next chapter. Conversely, sometimes they reflect an identity-based approach to education, and a desire to reinforce boundaries of certain protected material.⁴⁶ At other times, the demands seem, *prima facie*, to have no immediate educational relevance. A brief example from *masekhet Shabbat* illustrates this. Here, amidst a wider discourse on the same topic, we encounter three rabbis discussing their virtuous character traits, and who

⁴³ bBer. 5b; bSuk. 49b; bB. Metz 30b; bAZ 19b

⁴⁴ bYoma 19b

⁴⁵ Jon Levisohn, *What We Have Learned about Learning to Read Talmud*, in “Learning to Read Talmud,” 212.

⁴⁶ This is addressed in the next section of this chapter. See also, for example, the discussion at bHag. 14a as to who is permitted to learn “the Secrets of Torah.”

might be most worthy of reward. While the immediately surrounding conversations follow a similar formula, they focus primarily on ritual matters or personal piety. Here, our attention is caught by the noticeable and distinctive shift in subject to include students and teachers:

ואמר אביי תיתי לי דכי חזינא צורבא מרבנן דשלים מסכתיה עבידנא יומא טבא לרבנן אמר רבא תיתי לי דכי אתא צורבא מרבנן לקמאי לדינא לא מזיגנא רישי אבי סדיא כמה דלא מהפיכנא בזכותי אמר מר בר רב אשי פסילנא ליה לצורבא מרבנן לדינא מ"ט דחביב עלי כגופאי ואין אדם רואה חובה לעצמו.

Abaye said: May I receive [my reward because] when I see a young Torah scholar who has completed [studying] a tractate, I make a feast for the teachers.

Rava said: May I receive [my reward] because when a young Torah scholar comes before me for judgment, I do not rest until I seek his merits.

Mar bar Rav Ashi said: I am disqualified to judge a young Torah scholar. What is the reason? Because [the Torah scholar] is as beloved to me as myself, and a person does not find fault in himself.⁴⁷

Each element of this trifecta shares at least two of our commonplaces: all have a student and a teacher, while Abaye's scenario also introduces subject matter. The element upon which the narrative hinges in each scenario is a different commonplace, which I believe may be an intentional decision on the part of this *sugya's* editors. Let us move backwards through each to see how they compare: for Mar bar Rav Ashi, the defining factor is himself – the teacher – and his own self-awareness. Yes, he displays profound love for his student, but the text specifically indicates that this love emerges from a self-love, rather than from any particular characteristics within the student. The focus is squarely on the teacher. Note how this is markedly different from our middle scenario. Here, Rava exhausts himself to seek out every possible merit in his students, so that they will not be

⁴⁷ bShab. 118b-119a

judged unfairly. The focus here shifts to the student and their own worth. In the first scenario, Abaye selflessly celebrates a student's learning. What on the surface thus appears to be an example of Abaye's own virtues – as he shows respect to the teachers and celebrates the young student's learning – may in fact be a deeper statement on the pull of the subject matter itself. Note that Abaye's feast is not for the student but for their teachers, and while this feast is meant to commemorate the student's completion of a unit of learning and the teachers' roles in it, it is only the *masekhet* itself that determines the occasion of this celebration – not any particular effort on the part of the student or the teachers.

The distinction among these three compact scenarios is key: each puts forth a situation where one of our commonplaces is the determining factor in the potential reward, and it is in the first instance, which brings together student, teacher, *and* subject matter, where there is the most obvious distinction. We know nothing of this educational interaction aside from the fact that the student completed a study unit. I believe this points to an understanding of the particular relationship of the subject matter to its students and teachers, and to the claim it places upon them.

These claims vary wildly depending on the text and the context, however one notices that in its attempts to define and set the parameters for a body of knowledge, the Bavli also has in mind certain demands⁴⁸ that the corpus is meant to place on the community surrounding it.

⁴⁸ In particular, as we have seen, advocating a rigorous course of study.

אָרױר אַדעם שײלמאָד לבנו חכמת יוֹנִית
CURSED IS THE ONE WHO
TEACHES HIS SON GREEK WISDOM:⁴⁹ FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE

Much of our examination has demonstrated how the Bavli wants to empower students through learning. Now, as we consider the subjects of that learning, we also encounter the Bavli's awareness that certain matters are out of bounds. The Bavli devotes considerable attention to establishing boundaries of identity around students and teachers (sometimes flexible, sometimes firm), and when it comes to forbidden knowledge, there are frequently intersections between identity and material. The Bavli understands knowledge to have power, so it is understandably protective or afraid of that power, depending on whether it is internal or external to the canon. Broadly speaking, the category of forbidden knowledge can be easily divided in two: Jewish material and non-Jewish knowledge. Within each category, there are then varying degrees of prohibitions: some material is expressly forbidden to all, some has limits placed on when, how, and where it may be studied, while other kinds of knowledge are reserved for certain types of people (usually a privileged few).

The question of blanket bans, for example, can be seen in an ongoing debate throughout the Bavli on whether or not Greek Wisdom⁵⁰ is a permissible body of knowledge. In some instances, it is outright prohibited, while in others, there is a leniency expressed.⁵¹ One example from *Sotah* demonstrates the range of parameters, where the Bavli questions: is a given subject matter permissible if it falls outside the boundaries of

⁴⁹ bSot. 49b

⁵⁰ And more broadly, any non-Jewish literature (see, for example, bHag. 15a-b; bSanh. 100b)

⁵¹ bHag. 15a-b; bSot. 49b; bB. Qam. 82b-83a; bMen. 64b, Men 99a-b

the normative canon? What if there are compelling reasons to permit it? How firm or porous are the lines drawn?

ארור אדם שיגדל חזירים וארור אדם שילמד לבנו חכמת יונית... איני והאמר רבי בא"י לשון סורסי למה אלא אי לשון הקודש אי לשון יונית ואמר רב יוסף בבבל לשון ארמי למה אלא או לשון הקודש או לשון פרסי. לשון יונית לחוד וחכמת יונית לחוד.

Cursed is the person who raises pigs, and cursed is the person who teaches his son Greek wisdom... Is that so? But didn't Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] say: In Eretz Yisrael, why [should people speak] the tongue of Syriac (the dialect of Aramaic spoken in Eretz Yisrael? Rather, [they should speak] either the sacred language, (Hebrew), or the Greek language. And Rav Yosef said: In Babylonia, why [should they speak] the (vernacular) language Aramaic? Rather, [they should speak] either in the sacred language, or the Persian language.

(The Bavli now notes the difference between the two cases, with the former being permitted, but not the latter): Greek language is discrete and Greek wisdom is discrete.⁵²

The comparison of Greek wisdom⁵³ to pigs is a sharp example of one extreme of just how *verboten* Greek wisdom was – entirely outside of the realm of normative Jewish behaviour, quite literally *treyf* (un-kosher, that is, unfit). “What the pig is to Jewish ritual,” observes Simon Goldhill, “Greek wisdom is to intellectual and social life.”⁵⁴ And yet, the Bavli notes that despite this antipathy, the ban was not complete: Greek language was actually spoken.⁵⁵ Indeed, a sense of pragmatism wins the day. Rashi comments that one of the reasons these rabbis permitted Greek

⁵² bSot. 49b

⁵³ For more on forbidden knowledge, and the status and influence of Greek wisdom in the eyes of the Bavli's rabbis, see: Sacha Stern, *Jewish Identity in Early Rabbinic Writings* (AGJU, 23; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 176-182; Jacob Howland, *Plato and the Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2011); and Moulie Vidas, “Greek Wisdom in Babylonia,” in Vol. 1 of *Envisioning Judaism: Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*. (ed. R. Boustán, et al.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 287-305.

⁵⁴ Simon Goldhill, *Who Needs Greek?: Contests in the Cultural History of Hellenism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2002), 1.

⁵⁵ Indeed, the Bavli is suffused with Greek terminology!

to be spoken in the Land of Israel was its proximity to Greece, and the fact that the Greek language was “beautiful.”⁵⁶

Elsewhere, firm boundaries are enforced and closely tied to questions of identity. For example, two of the most arcane topics within all of Jewish thought,⁵⁷ מעשה מרכבה (the account of the prophet Ezekiel’s vision of God’s chariot), and מעשה בראשית (the mystical account of the creation of the cosmos) have strict limits placed on what elements are permissible to learn, who (and how many people) are permitted to study them, and how they must be taught.⁵⁸ They are collectively referred to as סתרי תורה (the Secrets of Torah), and the Bavli demonstrates a concern over them that is both about the nature of the material itself – too sacrosanct, potentially too dangerous – but also on how students and their teachers interact with each other surrounding that material.

One last conception of forbidden knowledge is worth mentioning. In several scenes throughout the Bavli set in the *beit midrash*, a rabbi uses the phrase פוק תני, meaning “go teach it outside,”⁵⁹ to dismiss the discussion of material deemed unfit for learning within the *beit midrash*. In each of these scenarios, the rabbis do not try to quash its teaching in general, but instead indicate only that it must be taught elsewhere. This unwillingness to debate is highly uncharacteristic of the rabbis. They are not portrayed as engaging in a *makhloket*, searching, as they

⁵⁶ Rashi on bSot. 49b, s.v. או לשון יוני

⁵⁷ See also: Adam Kirsch, “The Talmud’s Mysticism Is Too Mindblowing Even for Its Students.” No pages. [23 September 2014] Online: <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/185014/daf-yomi-99>

⁵⁸ See bPes. 119a; bHag. 11b; 13a-14a

⁵⁹ bShab. 106a; bEruv. 9a; bYoma 43b; bBeitz. 12b; bYev. 77b; bB. Qam. 34b; bSanh. 62a, 62b

normally would, for a more binding proof-text. Instead, they categorically reject the substance of the argument from the outset. It is noteworthy that in every one of these instances, the prohibited subject matter is a *baraita*. Perhaps the authorities in the *beit midrash* were uncomfortable with the content of the *baraita*, but did not want to cast the Tannaim in a poor light.⁶⁰ Certainly, as we have seen, there are plenty of examples where the rabbis discard undesirable material as heretical. But that it is not the case here. The implication seems to be a two-way understanding of the nature of the subject matter in question: it may be inappropriate in this context and may need to defer to the weightier needs of the learning milieu, but it carries enough status not to be rejected outright as forbidden.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

These five spheres present a representative look at how the Bavli understands the material that is (or isn't) learned and taught. The canon is wide and deep, and perhaps with the exception of the place of Torah and Mishnah, there are few declarations, explicit or implicit, on what the Bavli definitively views as worthy subject matter. Broadly speaking, though, certain trends emerge which present a degree of consistency in how the Bavli understands the substance and nature of subject matter:

- Boundaries of what is acceptable learning material and who can study it are established firmly, but often demonstrated to be somewhat porous.
- These boundaries are frequently related to identity in addition to intellect.

⁶⁰ There is only one certain instance where the Bavli sides with a *baraita* opposing the Mishnah's argument. For more on this and the relative authority of *baraitot*, see Marcus Jastrow and Louis Ginzberg, "Baraita; Authority of the Baraita," JE 2:513-516.

- These boundaries (for both valid and invalid material) extend far beyond the Jewish textual canon.
- In terms of frequency of content, the Bavli seems more concerned with emphasizing the esteem of Torah than articulating a specific syllabus.
- Likewise, relative to other discussions on the subject matter, the Bavli spends a great deal of time using metaphor to convey opinions on the nature of Torah.
- There is an interrelatedness of educational commonplaces to a significant degree; the esteem and nature of Torah are not merely platitudes, but carry significant weight in determining how, where, and by whom Torah is meant to be studied and taught, and on the nature of knowledge in general.

In the next chapter, we will examine a *sugya* from *Hagigah* that deftly demonstrates each of these factors, and pays very close attention to the nature of Torah and its direct impact on the lives of those who occupy themselves with it.

CHAPTER 8

"דרבונות, מסמרות נטועים, נטיעה"

"GOADS, WELL-FASTENED NAILS, AND PLANTS:"¹

A CASE STUDY ON SUBJECT MATTER

(*HAGIGAH* 3a-b)

¹ bHag. 3bb

Aside from the Bavli's paramount focus on Torah and Mishnah, we have seen an overview of the other materials and curricula that the Bavli deems worth learning. In earlier chapters, we have also seen the significant debate that permeates the Bavli between the broad habitual memorization of this subject matter, and the *b'iyyun* emphasis on a deep understanding of the underlying principles. In this more focused examination of what the Bavli has to say about subject matter, we will (mostly) set this debate aside, and instead focus not just on *what* is learned and *how* it is learned, but on the nature and perceived relevance of the subject matter. That is, we will try to understand why the Bavli advocates learning *this thing* (i.e. Torah) over something else.

Our *sugya* examining what the Bavli says about subject matter comes from the first *perek* of *masekhet Hagigah* (2a-11b), which deals broadly with the *shalosh regalim* and the associated sacrificial offerings that pilgrims were meant to bring to the Temple in Jerusalem. The first chapter addresses the *mishnah*'s descriptions of who is obligated and exempt from bringing the *ראייה* (the burnt offering) and the titular *הגיגה* (festival peace offering). Our *sugya* veers sharply away from the focus of the *mishnah* and of the *gemara*'s discussion thus far,² and turns to discussing a *ma'aseh* that explores the themes of the nature of Torah, the specific demands it places upon its learners, as well as the

² A tenuous connection between the *mishnah* and this *sugya* might be in the discussion here on the *הקהל*, which is obligatory for the entire community. Just as the *gemara* earlier investigates the nature of who is obligated and exempted from the Festival offerings, including women and minors, here it investigates why various groups (including women and children) are present at the *הקהל*.

Note also that earlier, bHag. 3a *does* include a fascinating interrogation of whether one must be physically/biologically capable of hearing in order to learn, as well as the *drash* earlier referenced (see pg. 34), of Mar Zutra noting the close linguistic relationship between teaching and learning.

relationship with the setting in which it is learned. It can be followed easily through three thematic sections:

1. A *baraita* introducing the *ma'aseh* and the importance of חידושים (rabbinic *novellae*/innovations)
2. A first drash of the nature of Torah
3. A second example of the nature of Torah

SECTION 1

אי אפשר לבית המדרש בלא חידוש

THERE IS NO *BEIT MIDRASH* WITHOUT A *HIDDUSH*

The opening *baraita* is dense, and contains within it many indicators of how the Bavli views the process of learning:

ת"ר מעשה ברבי יוחנן בן ברוקה ורבי אלעזר (בן) חסמא שהלכו להקביל פני ר' יהושע בפקיעין אמר להם מה חידוש היה בבית המדרש היום אמרו לו תלמידך אנו ומימך אנו שותין אמר להם אף על פי כן אי אפשר לבית המדרש בלא חידוש. שבת של מי היתה שבת של ר' אלעזר בן עזריה היתה ובמה היתה הגדה היום אמרו לו בפרשת הקהל ומה דרש בה.

The Sages taught: [There was] an incident involving Rabbi Yohanan ben Beroka and Rabbi Elazar ben Hisma, when they went to greet Rabbi Yehoshua in Peki'in. [Rabbi Yehoshua] said to them: What *hiddush* was [taught] today in the study hall? They said to him: We are your students and we drink your water! He said to them: Even so, there cannot be a *beit midrash* without a *hiddush*. [He asked them]: Whose Shabbat was it, [They said to him]: It was Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya's week. [He asked]: And on what [subject] was the lecture today? They said to him: [It was] about the [Torah] portion on "assembly." [Rabbi Yehoshua asked]: And what did he interpret midrashically with regard to [this]?³

Opening by introducing a story of R' Yohanan ben Beroka, R' Elazar ben Hisma, and R' Yehoshua, we immediately find an example of one of the elements of the teacher-

³ bHag. 3a

student relationship outlined in chapter five,⁴ with the two visiting rabbis going to “להקביל” (greet) their teacher.⁵ Eschewing pleasantries, R’ Yehoshua’s greeting draws us in quickly to the substance of the conversation, as he wants to know what חידוש was taught in the *beit midrash*. The students are stunned: how could it be that their teacher would want to learn from his students something that he didn’t already know? The deference that the students display toward their teacher is sharp, and we sense their gobsmacked reaction.⁶ They are unable to respond directly to their teacher’s request, other than to affirm their status as students. Their reply – “תלמידך אנו ומימך אנו שותין” (we are your students, and from *your waters*, we drink) – draws on a prevalent metaphor of Torah as water,⁷ and articulates one of the ideas of what the subject matter is akin to: a life-giving substance, which can be bestowed from one person to another, or by one celestial being to all the earth. This trope is intimately related to the other examples we have seen of learning as an organic (in the biological sense) process⁸ which is said to embody life itself as well as have the ability to give life. This theme will be picked up again with an agricultural metaphor later in section two of this *sugya*.

What follows is an exemplar of one of the sides of the dichotomy played out in chapter six between rote literacy and innovative understanding. R’ Yehoshua’s response is an emphatic declaration in favour of the ongoing relevancy of Torah and the need for innovation: “אי אפשר לבית המדרש בלא חידוש” (It is impossible for there to be a *beit midrash*

⁴ See b.Suk 10b, 26a, 27b; bRosh. 16b

⁵ This *sugya* also presents the idea that learning can take place in multiple environments – at the *beit midrash* and at home, and that one educational experience might extend through them. More on this topic will be explored in chapters nine and ten.

⁶ See also Rashi on bHag 3a, s.v. תלמידך אנו

⁷ See bTa’an. 7a; bKid. 30a; bB. Qam. 17a, 82a; bAZ 19a-b; bTem. 16a; bHor. 12a

⁸ See pg. 66 and bSanh. 99a-b

without innovations). The role of the חידוש is picked up throughout the Bavli, but nowhere is it more unequivocally advocated than here. The implication bears epistemological weight, signifying that the knowledge within Torah is understood to be capacious and – within the wider constraints imposed by rabbinic thought⁹ – evolving. It also informs our understanding of the relationship between teacher, student, and subject matter, suggesting that knowledge does not exist only within a fixed canon, waiting to be mined, but within the intellect of those who labour within that canon.

In this *sugya*, the Bavli might also be presenting an argument on the religious and spiritual nature of learning via חידושים. As noted, discussions on חידושים appear throughout the Bavli. While elsewhere the rabbis display a marked degree of temperance toward their use, here in *masekhet Hagigah*, R' Yehoshua (and later, and R' Eliezer) is overly enthusiastic in his advocacy. Perhaps this singular example is not a coincidence. Our *ma'aseh* focuses on two rabbis who come to visit their esteemed teacher.¹⁰ Rashi

⁹ What counts as valid exegesis in the Bavli is based upon a number of principles, including (but not entirely limited to) the seven hermeneutical principles of Hillel, the thirteen hermeneutical principles of Rabbi Yishmael, and the thirty-two exegetical principles of Rabbi Eliezer ben Yosi HaGelili (also known as the Baraita on the Thirty-two Rules). See: tSan 7:5 and Sifra 1:1-17, as well as bEruv. 2b; bPes. 3b; bSuk. 28a; bBeitz. 4a; bNed. 36b-37a, 52a; bB. Bat. 134a; bB. Metz 38a; bSanh. 68b; bTam. 29a

Intriguingly, the principles associated with Rabbi Eliezer's *baraita* open with a parallel phrase from bHul. 89a already familiar to us: עשה אונן כאפרכסת. These are the only two instances of this phrase in the Bavli.

For more on these hermeneutical principles, see: Daniel Boyarin, *Sparks of the Logos: Essays in Rabbinic Hermeneutics*, (Leiden: Brill Academic, 2003); Gerald Burns, *Hermeneutics: Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale University, 1992); and H. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (trans. Markus Bockmuehl; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 38-39, 205. Helpful overviews can also be found in Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, *Reference Guide to the Talmud* (Rev. ed.; ed. Joshua Schreier; New Milford: Koren, 2014), 211-232; Wilhelm Bacher and Jacob Zallel Lauterbach, "Talmud Hermeneutics," JE 12:30-33.

¹⁰ The root designating this visit (קבל) appears repeatedly throughout the *sugya*, lending coherence to the story (Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, 94).

argues that this is not a happenstance visit, but one that takes place specifically on the Yom Tov of a festival, as required in *Rosh Hashanah* 16b.¹¹ This *perek* focuses on the sacrificial offerings incumbent upon festival pilgrims. Suddenly, the seemingly incongruent place of this *sugya* within the *perek* aligns more clearly: the two travelling rabbis parallel the festival pilgrims of ancient Jerusalem. R' Yehoshua's demand for a חידוש is not merely a request for the students to teach him something he did or didn't already know, but a "sacrificial" demand; the rabbis-cum-pilgrims must bring an offering to that which sustains them: their teacher. Indeed, the parallel between study and sacrifice recurs throughout the Bavli, with the understanding that learning has replaced sacrifice as the ritual which sustains the cosmos.¹² Thus, the חידוש of our *sugya* is more than a pearl of wisdom, it is an offering of the greatest value. The parties mirror each other: R' Yehoshua sustains his students with his metaphoric water, while the students sustain their teacher with their חידוש.

Elsewhere, חידושים are often held up against what might be otherwise determined logically (the eternal סברא debate rears its head again!). And while these innovative interpretations are commonly accepted,¹³ there is a strong hesitancy on the part of the rabbis about drawing general *halakhic* principles from them.¹⁴

¹¹ Rashi on bHag. 3a s.v. להקביל פניו

¹² See Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, 31, as well as: bBer 17a; bEruv. 63b; bMeg. 3a-b; bSan. 49b; bMen 110a,

¹³ See bShab. 69b; bPes. 44b; bYev. 17b; bKet. 35b, 38a; bNed. 4a; bNaz. 37a-b; bKid. 21b; bB. Qam. 72b, 73a; bB. Metz. 61a; bSanh. 27a; bShev. 26b; bAZ 68b; bZev. 70a; bBekh. 6b; bArakh. 32b; bTem. 23b

¹⁴ Questioning the ongoing role of חידוש in *halakhah* is not a discussion limited to the Bavli. See also a brief analysis and translation by Michael Broyde of a responsum by Rav Moshe Feinstein which tackles the question, "When should a *posek* (a Jewish legal decisor) rely on his own novel understanding of the *halacha* against the consensus": Michael J. Broyde, "The Role of Chiddush: The View of One Paragraph in Iggerot

Note also the inextricable connection between the subject matter and the learning environment as proposed by R' Yehoshua's statement. The material itself sets the contours of the milieu, such that the *beit midrash*, more than a physical description of a building, becomes a metonym for the very specific kind of learning and people doing that learning that take place within its walls.¹⁵

A few insightful details appear just before the students relay details on the חידושים to their teacher. First, R' Yehoshua's follow-up question, "שבת של מי היתה" (whose Shabbat was it?) links¹⁶ us thematically to the division of leadership in the *beit midrash* between R' Elazar ben Azarya and Rabban Gamliel after Rabban Gamliel was reinstated following his unceremonious deposition, reported at bBer. 28a.¹⁷ We also catch a glimpse of the form of instruction, learning of the הגדה היום – a daily narrative/lecture.

The students now offer their teacher the חידוש, relaying to him the details of the הגדה היום:

Moshe YD 1:101, and His Explanation for the Modesty of Zecharya ben Avkulas," No pages. [10 August 2008]. Online: <http://hirhurim.blogspot.com/2008/08/role-of-chiddush.html>.

¹⁵ Coupled with the earlier note on the "sacrificial" character of the חידוש, the *beit midrash* becomes akin to the Jerusalem Temple itself.

¹⁶ Rubenstein argues that while the two texts as redacted present themselves as otherwise, our *Hagigah* text actually predates the *Berakhot* text, and that here, the question "whose Shabbat was it?" does not refer to the power-sharing agreement between R' Elazar and Rabban Gamliel, but is simply a straightforward question: "who was teaching on this Shabbat?" For more on this, see Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, 111 and 264, n61.

¹⁷ Though space precludes analyzing it in depth here, the account at *Berakhot* is worth reading and considering against the background of our discussion, as it includes many details on the nature of the *beit midrash*. It has also been examined in great detail elsewhere, see: Moshe Simon-Shoshan, "Creators of Worlds: The Deposition of R. Gamliel and the Invention of Yavneh," *AJSR* 41:2 (November 2017), 287-313.; Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, 77-90; Rubenstein, *Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, 138-142; David Goodblatt, "The Monarchic Principle: Studies in Jewish Self-Government in Antiquity" (*TSAJ*: 38, 1994), 251-253.

(דברים לא, יב) הקהל את העם האנשים והנשים והטף אם אנשים באים ללמוד נשים באות לשמוע. טף למה באין כדי ליתן שכר למביאייהן אמר להם מרגלית טובה היתה בידכם ובקשתם לאבדה ממני. ועוד דרש (דברים כו, יז) את ה' האמרת היום וה' האמירך היום. אמר להם הקב"ה לישראל אתם עשיתוני חטיבה אחת בעולם ואני אעשה אתכם חטיבה אחת בעולם אתם עשיתוני חטיבה אחת בעולם דכתיב (דברים ו, ד) שמע ישראל ה' אלהינו ה' אחד ואני אעשה אתכם חטיבה אחת בעולם שנאמר. (דברי הימים א יז, כא) ומי כעמך ישראל גוי אחד בארץ.

[They said to him that Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya interpreted the following verse]: “Assemble the people, the men and the women and the little ones” (Deut. 31:12). If men come to learn, [and] women, come to hear, why do the little ones come? In order [for God to] give a reward to those who bring them [Rabbi Yehoshua] said to them: [This] good pearl was in your hands, and you tried to conceal it from me?!

[They said to him]: Additionally, [Rabbi Elazar] midrashically interpreted: “You have affirmed, this day, the Eternal, and the Eternal has affirmed you, this day.” (Deut. 26:17–18) [Rabbi Elazar explained:] The Holy Blessed One, said to Israel: You have made Me a single entity in the world, and I will make you a single entity in the world, you have made Me a single entity in the world, as it is written: “Hear, O Israel, the Eternal our God, the Eternal is One.” (Deut. 6:4). And I will make you a single entity in the world, as it is stated: “And who is like Your people, Israel, one nation in the land?” (1 Chr. 17:21).¹⁸

R' Elazar ben Azarya's first teaching is on the הקהל, the commandment at Deuteronomy 31:12 to assemble the entire community of Israel once every seven years (on Sukkot,¹⁹ during the *sh'mitah* year) to hear “את־כל־דברי התורה הזאת” (all the words of this teaching). He asks why young children are commanded to attend, given that they are not of obligatory age and may not comprehend the teaching,²⁰ and his חידוש answers that the presence of children brings a reward to their parents. This hearkens back to our earlier

¹⁸ bHag. 3a-b

¹⁹ Again, another thematic connection to the Festival pilgrimage. See mSot 7:8 for the Mishnah's understanding of this commandment.

²⁰ R' Elazar ben Azarya also insinuates that women attend, even though they may not understand the words of Torah, certainly a highly problematic assertion for most contemporary, egalitarian students of Torah. He is operating within the same identity-boundaries that we examined earlier, in chapter three. Surprisingly, however, *Tosafot* on this passage comment that precisely because of this teaching, a man is obligated to teach his daughter Torah (*Tosafot* on bHag 3a, s.v. נשים לשמוע).

examination of the individual identity of the student of Torah and how it is shaped by factors such as sex and age,²¹ as well as to the rewards that are outlined for teaching a child.²² Here, it also potentially points to an understanding of learning as an experiential event, something that can happen by osmosis without directly encountering the subject matter in a formal learning space. Rubenstein posits that this interpretation “exhibits a loose thematic connection to the narrative context in the idea of being present at the place of Torah. Just as there was reason for everyone to be present at Moses’s discourse, so too was there good reason for the students to be at the house of study.”²³

R’ Yehoshua, impressed by the חידוש, describes it as a “מרגלית טובה” (a good pearl),²⁴ a metaphor akin to the English “pearl of wisdom.” Bolstered by their teacher’s acceptance, they now offer a second teaching from R’ Eleazar (much less related to the rest of the thematic focus), that is followed by a third *drash* which will comprise our second thematic unit.

SECTION 2

דברי חכמים, דברי תורה: WORDS OF THE WISE, WORDS OF TORAH

The *stam gemara* presents a third *drash* by R’ Elazar ben Azarya, which represents the first of two much larger discourses on the nature of Torah. Here, expounding on a text from Kohelet, R’ Elazar submits that matters/words of Torah are

²¹ See pg. 41.

²² bShab. 127a

²³ Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, 95.

²⁴ See a similar use of this term at bB. Bat 123b, as well as the comparison of a צדיק (a righteous person) to a מרגלית at bMeg. 15a.

compared to three objects: דרבונות (goads), מסמרות נטועים (well-fastened nails), and נטיעה (a plant):

ואף הוא פתח ודרש (קהלת יב, יא) דברי חכמים כדרבונות וכמסמרות נטועים בעלי אסופות נתנו מרועה אחד למה נמשלו דברי תורה לדרבן לומר לך מה דרבן זה מכוין את הפרה לתלמיה להוציא חיים לעולם אף דברי תורה מכוונין את לומדיהן מדרכי מיתה לדרכי חיים אי מה דרבן זה מטלטל אף דברי תורה מטלטלין ת"ל מסמרות. אי מה מסמר זה חסר ולא יתר אף דברי תורה חסירין ולא יתירין ת"ל נטועים מה נטיעה זו פרה ורבה אף דברי תורה פריין ורביין.

And [Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya] also opened and taught: “The words of the wise are like goads, and those that are composed in collections are like well-fastened nails are; they are from one shepherd.” (Qoh. 12:11) Why are matters of Torah compared to a goad? To tell you [that] just as this goad directs the cow to her furrow to bring forth [food for] life to the world, so too the words of Torah direct those who study them from the paths of death to the paths of life. If [this is] so, [you could also say]: Just as this goad is movable, so too matters of Torah are movable. [Therefore], the verse states: “Nails.”

If [this is] so, [you could also say]: Just as this nail is diminished and does not expand [over time], so too matters of Torah are diminished and do not expand. [Therefore], the verse states: “Well fastened (*netuim*).” Just as this plant (*neti'a*) flourishes and multiplies, so too matters of Torah flourish and multiply.²⁵

The text from Kohelet (12:11) in fact compares דברי חכמים (words of the *wise*), however, as we saw in our previous chapter, “rabbinic hermeneutics typically understand biblical references to wisdom and sages in terms of Torah and rabbis, hence the ‘words of the wise’ becomes the Oral Torah of the rabbis.”²⁶ This transmogrification of Kohelet’s words draws attention to the significance of using this particular text as a didactic source for this discussion. Among the most famous of verses from Kohelet is the insistence that “אין כל־חדש תחת השמש” (there is nothing new under the sun).²⁷ Here we have a *sugya* insisting on the importance of חידושים, that draws upon a source from wisdom literature

²⁵ bHag. 3b

²⁶ Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, 96.

²⁷ Qoh. 1:9

which seems to insist the exact opposite. We will see how these two ideas reconcile, but for now, we can note Rashi's commentary on this verse from Kohelet, where he, too, draws pedagogical insight:

בְּכָל־מָה שֶׁהוּא לִמָּד ... אֵין בּוֹ חֲדוּשׁ; לֹא יֵרָאֶה אֵלָּא מָה שֶׁהָיָה בְּכָר, שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְּשִׁשֶּׁת יָמִי בְּרֵאשִׁית. אֲבָל הַהוּגָה בַּתּוֹרָה, מוֹצֵא בָּהּ תָּמִיד חֲדוּשֵׁי טַעֲמִים, כְּעֵנֶן שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר, "דִּדְיָה יִרְוּדָה בְּכָל־עֵת". מָה הַדָּד הַזֶּה, כָּל־זְמַן שֶׁהִתִּינוּק מִמֶּשֶׁשׁ בּוֹ מוֹצֵא בּוֹ טַעַם, אֵף דְּבָרֵי תּוֹרָה כֵּן.

In whatever he learns... there is nothing new. He will see only what there already was, which was created during the six days of creation. But one who engages in the study of Torah constantly finds new insights therein, as the matter is stated, "her breasts will satisfy you at all times." (Prov. 5:19) Just as this breast, whenever the infant feels it finds a taste in it, so are the words of Torah...²⁸

Keeping in mind Rashi's teaching as we progress through our *sugya*, let us take up the three objects that R' Elazar has introduced: goads, well-fastened nails, and a plant.

In this well constructed *drashah*, richly full of similes, the Bavli progresses through an interrogation on what Torah is like: is it pliant and adaptable to circumstances as they change, or is it permanent? Is it a static canon, or does it grow over time? R' Elazar first advocates that Torah is like goads (דִּרְבִּינֹת), in that it prods you the right direction,²⁹ but the *stam gemara* counters: *no*, if that were the case, then you also have to accept that the Torah is movable (i.e. impermanent). Thus, the reasons for the second simile. But this is not without interrogation either. The *stam gemara* argues that while a nail is permanent, over time it diminishes whatever it has been nailed, and does not expand. Therefore,

²⁸ Rashi on Qoh. 12:11, s.v. מָה שֶׁהָיָה הוּא שִׁיחִיָּה וְגו'. The conclusion of Rashi's commentary here points readers to an example supposedly found in *masekhet Hagigah*, though this is an error, as the incident he describes is actually found at bEruv. 54a-b. Regardless of this error, it is enlightening that Rashi is aware of the interesting juxtaposition between these two sources on the idea of חֲדוּשִׁים. The idea being that when studying Torah, even the things we consider to be new were implanted within the material from the beginning; it is only our experience of them that that seems new.

²⁹ See bYoma 72b; bAZ 19b and Rashi ad loc.

Torah cannot be likened to well-fastened nails (מסמרות נטועים). Rather – in an ingenious wordplay – the Torah is like a plant (נטיעה), well rooted, but fertile. Now, the Bavli is able to argue without debate that Torah is a substance which is “פרה ורבה” (is fruitful and multiplies). This metaphor is laden with meaning. Note the explicit connection to the first commandment in the Torah (פריה ורביה)³⁰ regarding biological fertility, as well as to the agricultural themes already noted. The Bavli understands Torah as a learning material which itself is alive, which sustains life, and which requires its students to maintain it with the diligence and care that one would maintain any other living being.

The focus of our *sugya* on חידושים also takes on resonance here, as these innovations all sprout forth from one verdant source. It is a unique proposition: an infinitely multivalent tradition rooted firmly in a singular locus. Thus, the genius of these metaphors that, in the words of Menachem Fisch, describe the Torah as “partly [goat]-like, partly nail-like, and partly plant-like, but wholly resemble[ing] none of them.”³¹ The pedagogical implication is encapsulated in the *sugya*’s following *drashah* on the phrase בעלי אסופות:

בעלי אסופות אלו תלמידי חכמים שיושבין אסופות אסופות ועוסקין בתורה הללו מטמאין והללו מטהרין הללו אוסרין והללו מתירין הללו פוסלין והללו מכשירין. שמא יאמר אדם היאך אני למד תורה מעתה תלמוד לומר כולם נתנו מרועה אחד אל אחד נתנו פרנס אחד אמרן מפי אדון כל המעשים ברוך הוא דכתיב (שמות כ, א) וידבר אלהים את כל הדברים האלה. אף אתה עשה אזניך כאפרכסת וקנה לך לב מבין לשמוע את דברי מטמאים ואת דברי מטהרים את דברי אוסרין ואת דברי מתירין את דברי פוסלין ואת דברי מכשירין בלשון הזה אמר להם אין דור יתום שר' אלעזר בן עזריה שרוי בתוכו.

³⁰ Gen. 1:28. Torah study and the commandment to be fruitful and multiply are also closely linked in parallel passages at bEruv. 27a and bKid. 34a in lists of מצות עשה שהזמן גרמא - positive, time-bound commandments; and at bShab. 31a, in the famous teaching by Rava on the six questions one is asked upon reaching the afterlife. It is interesting that these are also two acts which the Bavli uses the verb “עסק” (to occupy oneself) to describe fulfilling (see bBer. 10a; bShab. 31a; bYev 63b).

³¹ Menachem Fisch, *Rational Rabbis: Science and Talmudic Culture*, (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1997), 90.

“Those that are composed in collections”: These are Torah scholars who sit in many groups and engage in Torah [study]. These [scholars] render [an object or person] ritually impure and these [others] render it pure; these [scholars] prohibit [something] and these [others] permit it; these deem [something] invalid and [others] these deem it valid.

Lest a person say: Now, how can I study Torah [when it contains so many different opinions]? The verse states they are all “given from one shepherd.” One God gave them; one leader, said them from the mouth of the Blessed Master of all creation, as it is written: “And God spoke all these words.”

So too you, make your ears like a funnel and acquire for yourself an understanding heart to hear both the statements of those who render [objects] ritually impure and the statements of those who render them pure; the statements of those who prohibit [actions] and the statements of those who permit them; the statements of those who deem [items] invalid and the statements of those who deem them valid. [When Rabbi Yehoshua heard this *hiddush*, he] said to them in these words: No generation [is] orphaned, (i.e. without a leader), if Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya dwells among it.³²

NJPS translates בעלי אסופות as “prodding sticks,” though notes that the exact meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain.³³ Perhaps riffing on this uncertainty, the Bavli engages in more clever wordplay, explicitly comparing בעלי אסופות to תלמידי חכמים, and thus implicitly connecting the בעלי אסופות³⁴ to the “masters” we encountered earlier: בעלי בעלי מקרא, בעלי משנה, תלמוד.³⁵ These תלמידי חכמים, now “masters” of collecting, must study by gathering up all of the fruitful and multiplying teachings of Torah, all of the חידושים that emerge from study. While R’ Yehoshua clearly values חידושים, the *gemara* now raises a question lurking in the background: if there is an infinite number of innovative

³² bHag. 3b

³³ JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh, (Philadelphia: JPS, 2003), 1784, s.v. o-o.

³⁴ Rabbi Aaron Panken has proposed to me that there is a richly meaningful ambiguity here: these could also be related to “masters of collections,” i.e., authors who bring together the collections of prior material (like, e.g., Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi or others). Thus, this could imply being a sort of editor of wisdom sayings or *halakhot*. It could also refer to those who preside over assemblies of students, i.e., teachers.

³⁵ See pg. 86-89.

yet contradictory interpretations which can emerge from the Torah, how is one to study Torah at all!? This is not merely a question of practical learning. Rabbi Daniel Lehman describes the weightiness of the matter:

The hypothetical question in this Talmudic passage is rooted in a deep religious need for certainty and clarity. The assumption often made is that Torah, as guide for living in response to God's will, should give us a definitive direction, lead us down a proven path so that we walk in God's way. The tradition's indeterminate debates, the many contradictory claims made by our sages, make it difficult, if not impossible, to discern a clear way forward. The religious purpose of our rabbinic discourse seems to be undermined by the radical rejection of consensus and the celebration of diverse, even dissonant ideas.³⁶

Indeed, Rubenstein dubs this moment in the *sugya* a “practical, exegetical, and ideological crisis of confidence.”³⁷ The Bavli's solution is to accentuate the argument that Rashi drew discussing Kohelet 12:11: the diversity of meaning and law found within Torah is encoded within the text itself, a divine master program (potentially) mitigating this concern. The pragmatic approach, then, is to do as the Bavli advises: attune one's ears and heart to understand these diametrically opposing statements, and thus come to learn the widest scope of Torah possible.

It seems to me that while this understanding may address the exegetical and ideological crisis, depending on the breadth of one's studies, it may not be a particularly practical solution, as it places an enormous demand upon teachers and students. But here we encounter another uniquely Jewish idea of education within the Bavli: the subject matter itself, by its very nature, carries particular weight and demands certain orientations toward its study. Openness to חידושים does not imply a free-for-all where any casual

³⁶ Daniel Lehman, “Perspective on Jewish Education: Educating Toward Inconclusive Multiplicity,” *Jewish Educational Leadership Journal* 13:1, (Winter, 2014).

³⁷ Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, 96.

interpretation is immediately accepted, nor does it absolve students from working to achieve a serious depth in learning, since each and every (appropriate) interpretation must be considered. What חידושים actually demand is humility. Creativity and innovation are encouraged, but one should not forget that the ultimate source of the knowledge, as understood by the Bavli, emerges from the material itself and its divine author. We noted the importance for the Bavli of humility in learning, and see now just how relevant it is considering the nature of the subject: the goal of learning, as demanded by the text itself, is not only practical, nor is it a matter for personal enrichment or public praise. While we have seen the degree to which teachers are meant to be honoured, significant *sugyas* firmly discourage arrogance and egotism.³⁸

The Bavli is intimately aware of the impact of this tension between innovation (requiring one to think oneself capable of gleaning new wisdom from the Torah) and humility (requiring one to acknowledge that they are not the actual source of that wisdom). Thus, the Bavli pointedly teaches that a Torah scholar must carry within them two competing beliefs: “בשמתא דאית ביה ובשמתא דלית ביה” (one who has [arrogance] should be excommunicated, and one who does not have [any arrogance at all] should be excommunicated).³⁹

The closing of this section of our *sugya* demonstrates the care and attention with which it was crafted. The metaphor of the ear as an אפרכסת (a grain harvesting hopper/funnel) is a bookend to the agricultural theme of earlier, as well as a thematic connection to other *gemaras* which associate learning with harvesting and the subject

³⁸ bEruv. 53b, bSuk. 49b; bTa’an. 7a, 20b; bNed. 62a; bB. bSot.47b; Metz. 23b; bSanh. 88b

³⁹ bSot. 5a; bTem. 16a

matter with agricultural produce.⁴⁰ And R' Yehoshua's final statement in support of this paradigm of Torah, praising R' Elazar ben Azarya, also echoes the theme of teacher as parent seen earlier. It is a poetic and poignant end to a rather weighty discussion – perhaps among the heftiest – that asks about the very nature of Jewish revelation and what is ultimately knowable. This section prompts us to consider: is Torah an open, expansive canon, or a single, stable tradition? The answer weaves together the perceived connection between the subject matter, and the role of student and teacher, with Rubenstein noting that “given this fertile, pluralistic and multivalent Torah, the challenge for the student is to master the conflicting positions and to *understand* the foundations of all of them, rather than to adjudicate between them in a quest for the absolute Truth.”⁴¹ In this way, this *sugya* directly responds to Schwab's question on the purpose of subject matter, and whether it is meant to provide fodder for the search for truth, or for the construction of meaning.⁴² Indeed, this is the very question that the *sugya* as a whole grapples with, as we see an entirely different example of what might be reported back to one's teacher, and what that says about the nature of Torah and what it demands.

SECTION 3

כך מקובלני: THIS IS WHAT I RECEIVED

The third and final section of our *sugya* offers less immediate content on the nature of Torah, but provides relevant insight when juxtaposed against the section we just analyzed. It opens by questioning why R' Yohanan ben Beroka and R' Elazar ben Hisma

⁴⁰ bEruv. 54a-b; bTa'an. 7a; bSanh. 99a-100a, 107a and Rashi ad loc.

⁴¹ Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, 96.

⁴² Schwab, “The Practical: A Language for Curriculum,” 21.

didn't immediately offer R' Yehoshua the חידושים that they had learned, and provides an answer through a flashback of sorts, conveying the דורמסקית בר' יוסי בן דורמסקית (the incident of R' Yosi ben Durmaskit):

ולימרו ליה בהדיא משום מעשה שהיה דתניא מעשה בר' יוסי בן דורמסקית שהלך להקביל פני ר' אלעזר בלוד אמר לו מה חידוש היה בבהמ"ד היום. א"ל נמנו וגמרו עמון ומואב מעשרין מעשר עני בשביעית .

אמר לו יוסי פשוט ידיך וקבל עיניך פשט ידי וקבל עיניו בכה ר' אלעזר ואמר (תהלים כה, יד) סוד ה' ליראיו ובריתו להודיעם. אמר לו לך אמור להם אל תחושו למניינכם כך מקובלני מרבן יוחנן בן זכאי ששמע מרבו ורבו מרבו הלכתא למשה מסיני עמון ומואב מעשרין מעשר עני בשביעית מה טעם הרבה כרכים כבשו עולי מצרים ולא כבשו עולי בבל.

מפני שקדושה ראשונה קדשה לשעתה ולא קדשה לעתיד לבא והניחום כדי שיסמכו עליהן עניים בשביעית. תנא לאחר שנתיישרה דעתו אמר יהי רצון שיחזרו עיני יוסי למקומן וחזרו.

But [Rabbi Yohanan ben Beroka and Rabbi Elazar ben Hisma] should have told [Rabbi Yehoshua this hiddush] directly. [Why did they hesitate at first?] Due to an incident that occurred. As it is taught: an incident involving Rabbi Yosi ben Durmaskit, who went to greet Rabbi Eliezer in Lod. [Rabbi Elazar] said to him: What *hiddush* was [taught] today in the study hall?

[Rabbi Yossi ben Durmaskit] said to him: [The Sages assembled], counted, and concluded [that regarding] Ammon and Moab, one separates the poor person's tithe in the Sabbatical Year.

[Rabbi Elazar] said to him [angrily]: Yosi, extend your hands and catch your eyes. He extended his hands and caught his eyes. Rabbi Elazar wept and said: "The counsel of the Eternal is with those who fear God; and God's covenant, to make them know it." (Ps. 25:14)

[Rabbi Elazar] said to [Rabbi Yossi]: go say to [the Sages in the study hall]: Do not be concerned [with regard] to your counting! This is [what] I received from Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, who heard from his teacher, and his teacher from his teacher: It is a *halakhah* [transmitted] to Moses from Sinai [that] Ammon and Moab one separates the poor person's tithe in the sabbatical year. What is the reason? Those who ascended from Egypt conquered many cities, and those who ascended from Babylonia did not conquer them. (This difference is important), because the first consecration [of Eretz Yisrael caused] it [to be] sanctified [only] for its time, and not sanctified forever. And [those who came from Babylonia] left those [cities and did not consider them part of Eretz Yisrael. But they would harvest in these places in the sabbatical year], so that the poor could rely upon [that harvest] in the sabbatical year.

[It was] taught: after [Rabbi Elazar's] mind was put at ease, he said: May it be [God's] will that Rabbi Yosi's eyes should return to their place. And [his eyes] returned.⁴³

The incident⁴⁴ that follows begins in a similar manner to the previous, with an itinerant rabbi going to visit his teacher, who then asks what חידוש was taught in the *beit midrash*. But following this, it bears little resemblance to the account that opened our second section. Instead of rich, poetic *drashot* with significant communal upshots or reflections on the nature of God and Torah, R' Yossi offers his teacher a mundane *halakhic* matter with little human-to-human impact. R' Elazar is furious, and orders that R' Yossi return to the *beit midrash* and demand the rabbis there to stop teaching, for this matter wasn't a חידוש at all, but a well-established law.⁴⁵ This provides the background to the incident from the very beginning of our *sugya* involving R' Yohanan ben Beroka and R' Elazar ben Hisma, and why they initially demurred from sharing חידושים with R' Yehoshua, out of fear of a similar reprisal.

The presentation of how R' Elazar states that he already knew this *halakhah* is significant in its interpretation of the nature of Torah: he establishes that it was received via a שלשלת הקבלה – a chain of tradition – stretching back through generations of teachers, all the way back למשה מסיני – to Moses from Sinai. In other words, this teaching was the farthest possible thing from a חידוש. While the Torah in the first *drashot* is the

⁴³ bHag. 3b

⁴⁴ Rubenstein notes that the formula “משום מעשה שהיה” (because of an incident that occurred) is a distinctly Babylonian term (See bHag. 22b; bYoma 28a), and reflects the strong editorial hand of the Bavli on this *sugya*. (Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, 260, n24).

⁴⁵ R' Eleazar also demands that R' Yossi remove his eyes in penance for his error. See Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, 97-98 for theories on the figurative and literal meaning of this bizarre request.

source of “multiple contradictory and novel interpretations,”⁴⁶ the Torah here is rigid and singular, un-interpreted through all the generations back to its revelation. Unlike our first example, there is no growth or fruitfulness in wisdom here, no innovation, and no vision of the expansiveness of Torah.

The fantastical image of R' Yossi's eyes popping out of his head is laden with metaphoric meaning: חידושים are important, but without a grounding in tradition to guide innovation, we quickly lose sight (!) of what is important. On the one hand, a *beit midrash* isn't worthy of the name without innovation. But on the other hand, the world cannot be just an assemblage of novelties, particularly those that masquerade as being innovative, when they merely regurgitate already held knowledge. This imagery advocates a more balanced, centrist approach and is a corrective to too much flexibility.⁴⁷

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The actual *halakhic* matter at hand (a question of border demarcations and their impact on taxes) seems to matter less to the Bavli than the comparative point it is trying to make. The *sugya* asks us: what is the nature of Torah? Is it multivalent, all-encompassing, and open to חידושים, or is it static through the ages? In juxtaposing these two views of Torah and the demands placed upon us as learners and teacher, it leans strongly toward the former: a prosperous view of Torah as flourishing and growing that shares much more in common with other presentations on the nature of Torah throughout the Bavli. But the graphic story of R' Yossi's eyes falling out reminds us that innovation

⁴⁶ Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, 97.

⁴⁷ My thanks to Rabbi Aaron Panken for pointing out an interpretation of this stunning imagery.

is always in tension with tradition, and that this tension is part and parcel of Jewish education.

Rubenstein views this *sugya* primarily as a vivid case study on the “dangers of insulting or shaming one’s master, and the importance of taking every possible precaution to honor a teacher.”⁴⁸ This certainly reflects the paramount importance of this ideology, as we have already seen. However, the fact that this argument is framed through a discussion on the nature of Torah and what it demands should not be minimized. It seems to me that the question of honour and respect operates less explicitly, in the background, and that the student-teacher relationship is used as a vehicle to discuss the nature of their shared focus: Torah.

Yes, as Rubenstein notes, a teacher and student cannot learn together without respect and honour, but the Bavli here also makes explicit a series of views on the nature of Torah, and the idea that a *beit midrash* cannot exist without חידושים. Indeed, the focus on חידושים throughout relates to the main thematic focus of this *sugya*: an understanding of Torah not only as a body of permanent relevance that one is meant to be fluent in, but as something that is meant to influence one’s life, that demands an active presence in an ongoing project of interpretation and reinterpretation. This is, perhaps, an answer to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter: Why does the Bavli advocate learning *this thing* (i.e. Torah) over anything else? Because Torah gives us life (a theme saturating this *sugya*), and enables us to grow, but it also requires *us* for *it* to grow.

Of course, these interpretations are not mutually exclusive. This *sugya*’s composition is a fine example of the seriousness with which the *Bavli* takes learning as

⁴⁸ Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, 98.

an enterprise demanding consideration of teacher, student, material, and milieu together (indeed, all four of Schwab's commonplaces are determinative factors here). It captures the expansiveness of the questions considering subject matter posed in chapter one: What is learned between teacher and student? What is meant by "Torah"? Does the nature of the subject matter impact the mode of study? What kind of material is out of bounds (or less appropriate)?

CHAPTER 9

“בכל מקום מותר להרהר בדברי תורה”

“ONE CAN MEDITATE ON TORAH EVERYWHERE:”¹

THE LEARNING MILIEU

¹ bBer. 24b

In the mind of the Bavli, the classical sites of institutional Jewish learning –the *beit midrash* and the *yeshiva* – are mysterious, energetic, fantastical places. In addition to the quotidian study that takes place there, the Bavli bestows upon them highly imaginative qualities: demons are said to inhabit them.² Sometimes one is built upon a grave.³ One might make you physically ill,⁴ but also have magical healing powers.⁵ They can defeat the *yetzer hara*.⁶ Time travel takes place there.⁷ For all this creativity, writ large, it is challenging to speak to the significance of these characterizations. Have the rabbis simply transposed folk tales, superstitions, and legends onto their primary site of focus? Or do they reveal deeper pedagogical insight into how the Bavli understands the relevance of sites of learning?

Compared to the other commonplaces we have examined, the Bavli's attention to the learning milieu is not as discriminating. We find portraits (sometimes richly painted) of the places where learning takes place, but it seems that there are fewer broad indications of what makes a learning environment appropriate. Rubenstein observes that there is a great deal of learning going on, but:

comparatively little description of the setting in which discussions took place. Various forums are mentioned - private house, *bet midrash*, *be midrasha*, *bet vaad*, *yeshiva*, *be rav*, *aliya* (upper story), but few details are preserved about their structure. How large were these frameworks? How many sages and students gathered together?⁸

We catch glimpses of what these sites look like, as well as instances where the Bavli

² bBer. 6a, bKid. 29b

³ bB. Qam. 16b-17a

⁴ bB. Metz. 84b

⁵ bEruv. 26a

⁶ bSuk. 52b, bKid. 30b

⁷ bMen. 29b

⁸ Rubenstein, *Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, 16.

pushes boundaries and describes non-institutional learning environments. But for the most part, there is far less of a sustained engagement with delineating the ideal characteristics of a learning space. We are left wondering: for the Bavli, is the milieu an arbitrary place, where learning just happens to take place? Or is there a concerted sense of what is needed for fruitful learning?

The goal in this chapter and the next is not to historically reconstruct the *beit midrash*, *yeshiva*, or other learning spaces. Comprehensive historical and philological research into the nature and historicity of these institutions, and the meaning of the terms which refer to them, has been conducted, primarily by Goodblatt, in his monumental *Rabbinic Instruction in Sasanian Babylonia*, with additional insight in Rubenstein's *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*. Rather, inspired by Schwab's suggestion that the milieu itself "needs to be taken into account as a coequal factor"⁹ that constitutes part of a pedagogy – no less than the student, teacher, and subject matter – the goal is to sketch out a broad look at where the Bavli describes productive learning taking place, and where it cautions against environments detrimental to learning.

This representative examination can be divided into the following four categories:

1. What is the *beit midrash* like? Selected snapshots of the depictions of this space.
2. Where else can study take place?
3. Where shouldn't one learn?
4. The distinction between Babylonia and Eretz Yisrael

⁹ Burton I. Cohen, "An Application of Schwab's Educational Commonplaces: Examining One Aspect of the Milieu Commonplace as Reflected in a Synagogue in a Florida Retirement Community," (Shofar, 11:3, Spring 1993), 75.

WHAT IS THE *BEIT MIDRASH* LIKE?

Who enters into the *beit midrash*? Should it be akin to an elite academy, granting admittance only to the most successful students and teachers who excel in their studies? Should it charge a tuition or admittance fee? Or should it be a public institution, open to all to further their studies? Such is a debate within the Bavli itself.¹⁰ In two instances: after R' Hillel abolished an entrance fee,¹¹ and following Rabban Gamliel's deposition as head of the *beit midrash*,¹² there is a noticeable democratization. In the latter case, stringent admission requirements were lessened, and the Bavli records a significant uptick in those who entered the *beit midrash*, to the extent that extra room had to be made.

This debate perhaps relates to the sense of gravity associated with a site of great learning. In *Megillah*, we encounter a debate as to whether a synagogue or a *beit midrash* is of a higher status. The Bavli concludes that it is the *beit midrash*, emphasizing the sanctity of the place and describing it as “בית גדול” (a great house).¹³ Just a few *dapim* later, the Bavli calls the same space a “מקדש מעט” (little sanctuary).¹⁴ Rather than contradictory, both of these terms relate to the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, and point to the belief that in the absence of a sacrificial system of worship, the house of study has taken its place. In this merism of sorts, describing the *beit midrash* as both a “great house” and a “little sanctuary” captures the immensity of its role in rabbinic life. It is both larger than life, but also a site of personal learning.

¹⁰ bBer. 28a; bYoma 35b

¹¹ bYoma 35b

¹² bBer. 28a

¹³ bMeg. 27a

¹⁴ bMeg. 29a

With such an orientation, it is not surprising that, as we have seen previously, the Bavli depicts rabbis as being deeply committed to an intensity of study and a fear of forgetting. The notion of בטול בית המדרש (disrupting the *beit midrash*)¹⁵ was taken quite seriously, and we find various instances of the measures taken to prevent interruption of study,¹⁶ including the concept of פוק תני לברא (go and teach it outside) introduced earlier,¹⁷ a reference to material which was deemed irrelevant to the present study.¹⁸

A final note on the character of the *beit midrash*: related to its status as a substitute site of worship, the *Bavli* records examples of prayers that were said by students when they left, including the following:

כי הוו מפטרי רבנן מבי ר' אמי ואמרי לה מבי ר' חנינא אמרי ליה הכי עולמך תראה בחיך ואחריתך לחיי העולם הבא ותקותך לדור דורים לבך יהגה תבונה פין ידבר חכמות ולשונך ירחיש רגנות עפעפך יישירו נגדך עיניך יאירו במאור תורה ופניך יזהירו כזוהר הרקיע שפתותיך יביעו דעת וכליותיך תעלוזנה מישרים ופעמך ירוצו לשמוע דברי עתיק יומין.

When the Sages took leave of the study hall of Rabbi Ami, and some say [it was] the study hall of Rabbi Hanina, they would say to him the following:

May you see your world in your lifetime, and may your end be to life in the World-to-Come, and may your hope [exist] for many generations. May your heart meditate on understanding, your mouth speak wisdom, and your tongue be moved to praises. May your eyelids look directly before you, your eyes shine in the light of Torah, and your face radiate like the brightness of the sky. May your lips speak knowledge, your kidneys rejoice in the upright, and your feet run to hear the words of the Ancient of Days (God).¹⁹

We see here an evocation of many of the themes we have already explored which are central to the Bavli's idea of education: the transcendent relationship of teaching and

¹⁵ bBer. 53a; bShab. 126b, 127a; bBeitz 29a, 35b, 36a; bSanh 62a

¹⁶ bNaz. 49b-50a; bKid. 52b; bB. Bat. 23b

¹⁷ See pg. 160.

¹⁸ bShab. 106a; bEruv. 9a; bYoma 43b; bBeitz 12b; bYev 77b; bB. Qam. 34b; bSanh. 62a, b

¹⁹ bBer. 17a

learning to the afterlife, a focus on longevity and the intergenerational impact of learning, the oral aspects of teaching and learning, and the motif of illuminating others with wisdom. Note in particular the depiction of wisdom and praises in the plural (חכמות and רננות). Having already seen the capaciousness of the Bavli's take on wisdom, there seems to be an acknowledgement displayed here of the breadth of learning held by those in positions of leadership.

Absent a comprehensive depiction of the nature of the *beit midrash*, we can still assemble some salient ideas that represent what the Bavli understands as important to a preeminent site of learning: it has some characteristics of an elite institution, though it is open to learners of all levels; it has significant spiritual symbolism as a site where students enact their covenantal relationship with God, via study as a substitute for sacrifice; and it is a site of intensity of study and dedication, susceptible to distraction, with great emphasis placed on maintaining focus.

WHERE ELSE CAN LEARNING TAKE PLACE?

Comparatively speaking, the Bavli not only spends more time outlining other learning environments, but also goes into greater detail on the significance of those sites. We can get a sense of the vastness of places that have didactic value, beginning with the belief that while certain formal places of study exist, Torah can be studied everywhere.²⁰ This is not an exaggerated statement; the Bavli describes learning taking place in such diverse locations as: among the natural world and animals, as a hypothetical substitute

²⁰ bBer. 24b.

had the Torah not been given;²¹ in a bathhouse or bathroom;²² sitting in the street;²³ at home in the morning before attending *beit midrash*;²⁴ accompanying a teacher on their journey;²⁵ next to a flowing river;²⁶ on a pile of garbage;²⁷ and in a cave, naked, under a pile of sand.²⁸ By no means is this either an exhaustive list or a suggestion that all places are fair game for learning. To be sure, many of these sites prompt debates as to how appropriate or permissible they are. However, we get a distinct sense that learning is not something always confined to physical educational institutions.

Indeed, not only is learning not thus confined to physical locations, the Bavli has a sense of the temporal expansiveness of education as well, suggesting that learning might take place as early as in the womb,²⁹ as late as at the very moment of death,³⁰ and, as we have seen, reaching far into *Olam HaBa*. Are these exaggerated visions of an appropriate milieu, or do they represent an understanding for the Bavli that just as any place *might* be fitting for study, so too any time?

WHERE SHOULDN'T ONE LEARN?

The caveat, *might*, is important. Not all places are fit for learning. The Bavli displays a particular aversion to studying in places of filth, foul odour, and spiritual

²¹ bEruv. 100b

²² bBer. 24b, 62a; bShab. 40b, 150a, bHag. 5b; bKid. 30a, 33a; bZev. 102b

²³ bPes. 26a

²⁴ bKid. 30a

²⁵ bHag. 15a-b

²⁶ bHor. 12a

²⁷ bHor. 12a

²⁸ bShab. 33b

²⁹ bSanh. 91b-92a; bNid. 30b

³⁰ bShab. 83b; bMo'ed Qat. 28a

impurity;³¹ and in busy places, where one is liable to get distracted.³² For similar reasons, the Bavli is ambivalent about studying while travelling, due in part to the heightened fear of danger while travelling between cities, but also reflective of the increased possibility of distraction and lack of time to properly dedicate to study.³³ But it is precisely because of this fear of danger, that in some instances, the Bavli advocates studying while travelling, due to the perceived protective powers. Ultimately, this is an unresolved debate. The Bavli also brings a moral orientation to determining where one shouldn't study, arguing that one should not learn in the presence of an עַם הָאֶרֶץ, so as not to shame or demean *them*, due to one's own superior intellect.³⁴ Where we might expect this prohibition to be due to some of the reasons explored in Chapter 4, here, the Bavli suppresses its antipathy towards those who are less punctilious in their study and displays a modicum of emotional concern.

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN BABYLONIA AND ERETZ YISRAEL

Lastly, the Bavli reflects its own historical context, frequently noting the difference in academic culture between Eretz Yisrael and Babylonia.³⁵ A particularly harsh example of this can be seen in this *gemara* from *Sanhedrin*:

מאי בבל א"ר יוחנן בלולה במקרא בלולה במשנה בלולה בתלמוד (איכה ג, ו) במחשכים הושיבני
כמתי עולם אמר ר' ירמיה זה תלמודה של בבל:

What [is the meaning of the word] Babylonia? Rabbi Yohanan says: [It means] mixed with Bible, mixed with Mishnah, and mixed with *talmud*. (Other

³¹ bBer. 24b, 25a; bSuk. 28a; bTa'an. 20b; bMeg. 28a; bHor. 13b

³² bPes. 112a; bMo'ed Qat. 16a-b; bNid. 16a

³³ bEruv. 53b-54a, 55a; bTa'an. 10b; bSot. 46b, 49a

³⁴ bPes. 112a

³⁵ bShab. 145b; bPes. 34b; bYoma 57a; bMeg. 28b, 29a; bMo'ed Qat. 25a; bB. Qam 117a-b; bB. Metz. 33a-b, 85a; bSanh. 24a; bMen. 52a

Sages had a different opinion on, and suggested that Babylonia is better described as: “He has made me dwell in dark places, as those that have been long dead” (Lam. 3:6), Rabbi Yirmeya says: This is the *talmud* of Babylonia.³⁶

R’ Yohanan (a second generation *Amora* of Eretz Yisrael) is much more deferential to his Babylonian colleagues, praising their grasp of important subject matter. R’ Yirmeya (a third generation *Amora* of Eretz Yisrael), on the other hand, brings a particularly grim view of the kind of *talmud* (i.e. learning, not the text) that takes place in Babylonia.³⁷ The use of the passage from Lamentations reflects common associations between light and learning (which we will also see in the next chapter), and the association with death is particularly poignant, given the life-sustaining properties of learning. R’ Yirmeya’s polemic against Babylonia essentially suggests that their style of studying has none of its transcendent qualities, unable to sustain intellectual or spiritual life.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Perhaps one of the most conclusive things that might be said about the Bavli’s understanding of where education should take place is that learning takes place in environments where it has the potential to be successful. While our other commonplaces have revealed deeper philosophical, pedagogical, epistemological, and ontological understandings of education, the Bavli is less proactive when it comes to learning spaces. There are fewer prescriptions advising how to assemble a site of learning, but many descriptions of environments where fruitful learning happens to take place. Ultimately,

³⁶ bSanh. 24a

³⁷ For more on the distinction between the two communities, see Rubenstein, *Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, 16-38, and Goodblatt, *Rabbinic Instruction in Sasanian Babylonia*, 263-272.

what seems to be most important is that a learning milieu should have the presence of a community of teachers and learners and be distraction free. This is largely in keeping with other repeated tropes we have encountered thus far.

In our case study in the next chapter, we will see how the Bavli takes up some of these themes, and differentiates between a place conducive to learning, and one detrimental to the endeavour.

CHAPTER 10

“גולה למקום תורה”

“EXILE YOURSELF TO A PLACE OF TORAH:¹”

A CASE STUDY ON THE LEARNING MILIEU

(*SHABBAT* 147b)

¹ bShab. 147b

Our examination into what the Bavli says about students, teachers, and subject matter has revealed a remarkable degree of attention to the distinctive identities of each of these commonplaces. Key questions we have grappled with so far have interrogated who is and who is not a student and teacher, what is Torah like, as well as where boundaries are drawn around each of these identities, and how permeable they are. While we are now moving clearly into the realm of the inanimate (contrast with the Bavli's understanding of Torah as a living, flourishing substance), we can still ask similar questions of the spaces where learning takes place: What is the character of the milieu? Can Jewish learning take place anywhere, or are there sharply defined boundaries (both literal and figurative)? Is the learning environment a distinct space dedicated to knowledge acquisition, or a space for experimentation?² What degree of structure and control are required in establishing a learning environment?³ We will see how these questions are deftly addressed in a small, but engaging and richly woven *aggadah* about R' Elazar ben Arakh from the twenty-second *perek* of *masekhet Shabbat* (143b-148a).

This chapter broadly concerns the rules of preparing food on Shabbat, but also touches on what is permitted and prohibited when it comes to washing and anointing oneself. In the midst of questioning whether it is permissible on Shabbat to attend a public bath (here called a *deyomsit*) at a hot-spring in the Anatolian region of Perugaita (Phrygia), the Bavli makes a sharp digression, using the reference to the Perugaita as a springboard for our *aggadah*. Because the story is so brief, I will present it here in full, then outline its contents, and move into discussing its relevance.

² Joseph Schwab, "Testing and the Curriculum," 148.

³ Joseph Schwab, "Testing and the Curriculum," 148.

אמר רבי חלבו חמרא דפרוגייתא ומיא דדיומסת קיפחו עשרת השבטים מישראל .

רבי אלעזר בן ערך איקלע להתם אימשיך בתרייהו איעקר תלמודיה כי הדר אתא קם למיקרי בספרא בעא למיקרא (שמות יב, ב) החדש הזה לכם אמר החרש היה לבם בעו רבנן רחמי עליה והדר תלמודיה.

והיינו דתנן ר' נהוראי אומר הוי גולה למקום תורה ואל תאמר שהיא תבא אחריך שחברייך יקיימוה בידך ואל בינתך אל תשען.

תנא לא ר' נהוראי שמו אלא ר' נחמיה שמו ואמרי לה ר' אלעזר בן ערך שמו ולמה נקרא שמו ר' נהוראי שמנהיר עיני חכמים בהלכה:

Rabbi Helbo said: The wine of Perugaita and the water of the *deyomsit* deprived Israel [of the] ten [lost] tribes.

Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh happened [to come] there (to Perugaita), he was drawn to them, [and] his learning was uprooted. When he returned, he stood to read from a (Torah) scroll [and] was supposed to read the verse: “This month shall be for you (*haḥodesh hazeh lakhem*)” (Ex. 12:2), [but instead he read]: Have their hearts become deaf [*haḥeresh haya libbam*]. The Sages asked for [God to have] mercy on him, and his learning was restored.

And that is [what] we learned Rabbi Nehorai says: “Exile yourself to a place of Torah and do not say that it will follow you, as [if] your colleagues will establish it in your hands, and ‘do not rely on your understanding [alone].’” (mAvot4:14, quoting Prov. 3:5)

It was taught: Rabbi Nehorai was not his name, rather Rabbi Neḥemia was his name; and some say Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh was his name. And why was he called Rabbi Nehorai? Because he would illuminate [*manhir*] the eyes of the Sages in *halakha*.⁴

This *aggadah* is deceptively lush, despite its brevity. There is a substantial backstory to R' Elazar ben Arakh's character, which is played out in parallel texts throughout rabbinic literature,⁵ and will be examined shortly, though we already get a

⁴ bShab. 147b

⁵ Excellent reconstructions of R' Elazar's full narrative can be found in Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac*, 233-265; in Nachman Levine, “R. Elazar B. Arach: The ‘Overflowing Spring,’ the Emmaus Hot Spring, and Intertextual Irony,” in *JSJ* 33:3, 2002), 278-289; and in Itay Marienberg-Milikowsky, *Exile Yourself to a Place*

dramatic sense of the importance of this rabbi and his story. I have outlined the text into four units, which align theme and structure quite naturally:

1. A prequel about the significance of the region of *Perugaita*
2. The body of the *aggadah* as R' Elazar travels to Perugaita and loses his knowledge
3. The moral of the story, quoting from Mishnah *Avot*
4. A coda on the identity of R' Elazar

SECTION 1

קִיפּחוֹ עֶשְׂרֵת הַשְּׁבֵטִים מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל: DEPRIVING ISRAEL OF THE TEN TRIBES

This one-line prequel of sorts sets the stage for the significance of what follows. Historically, Perugaita had a large population of Jews, Jewish Christians, and Christians, and Paul of Tarshish was said to have visited there.⁶ William M. Ramsay notes that this was a heavily assimilated Jewish community, and that the Jewish residents had lost their connection to the Land of Israel, to Hebrew, and to Jewish education (compared to their Alexandrian brethren). As a result, “they were much more readily converted to Christianity.”⁷ R' Helbo's attack that the waters of the bathhouse there instigated the disappearance of the ten (lost) tribes may reflect a historical awareness of the assimilation and apostasy of Jews there, or may be a poetic counterpoint to the association otherwise

of Torah? Independence, Marginality, and the Study of Torah in Rabbinic Depictions of R. Elazar ben Arach, [Hebrew] (Bar Ilan University, *Jewish Studies, Internet Journal* 13, 2015), 1-25.

⁶ Acts 16:6-10

⁷ William Mitchell Ramsay, *The Cities and Bishoprics of Phrygia: Pt. I. The Lycos Valley and South-Western Phrygia* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1897), 674.

of water with nourishing Torah learning (a motif we will see extends into this story).⁸

Rashi bares his antipathy for this Hellenization without reserve, commenting: “שהיו בעלי” (They were hedonists (lit: “masters of pleasure”), and occupied themselves with that, rather than occupying themselves with Torah, and they went out to an evil culture).⁹ Note Rashi’s use of the traditional word for engaging with Torah: עוסקים and the clear distinction between the two approaches here.

In Perugaita, ideological and geopolitical boundaries align; right from the outset of this *aggadah*, we understand that the Bavli looks upon Perugaita and its bathhouses as beyond the pale.¹⁰

SECTION 2

אֵיעֶקֶר תְּלִמוּדִיהָ: HIS LEARNING WAS UPROOTED

Our second section can be followed through three narrative sub-units: (a) Our introduction to R’ Elazar and his travels to Perugaita; (b) his returns to the Eretz Yisrael and loss his of his education; and (c) the Sages’ prayers for him, and restoration of his learning. A brief look at R’ Elazar’s life as portrayed elsewhere helps round out our understanding of his role in this story: A second generation Tanna, R’ Elazar is the subject of several well-known *mishnahs* in *Avot*:

חמשה תלמידים היו לרבן יוחנן בן זכאי. ואלו הן רבי אליעזר בן הורקנוס. ורבי יהושע בן חנניה. ורבי יוסי הכהן. ורבי שמעון בן נתנאל. ורבי אלעזר בן ערך. הוא היה מונה שבחן. רבי אליעזר בן הורקנוס בור סיד שאינו מאבד טפה. רבי יהושע אשרי יולדתו. רבי יוסי חסיד. רבי שמעון בן נתנאל ירא חטא. ורבי אלעזר בן ערך מעין המתגבר. הוא היה אומר אם יהיו כל חכמי ישראל בכף מאזנים, ואליעזר בן הורקנוס בכף שניה מכריע את כולם. אבא שאול אומר משמו. אם יהיו

⁸ See pg. 102.

⁹ Rashi on bShab. 147b, s.v. קפחו עשרת השבטים

¹⁰ For more on the history of the *deyomsit* and bathhouses, and their portrayal in rabbinic literature, see Julius Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine* (Ed. and Trans. Fred Rosner; Lanham: Jason Aronson, 2004), 535-536.

כל חכמי ישראל בכף מאזנים. ורבי אליעזר בן הורקנוס אף עמהם ורבי אלעזר בכף שניה מכריע את כולם:

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai had five students: Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanus, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya, Rabbi Yosi the Priest, Rabbi Shimon ben Netanel, and Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh. He would recount their praises: Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanus is a cistern covered in plaster that does not lose a drop. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya – happy is the one who gave birth to him! Rabbi Yosi the Priest is pious. Rabbi Shimon ben Netanel fears sin. And Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh is an overflowing spring. [Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai] used to say: If all the sages of Israel were on one side of a scale, and Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanus were on the other side, [Rabbi Eliezer] would outweigh them all. Abba Shaul said in his name that if all the sages of Israel, including Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanus, were on one side of a balance scale, and Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh were on the other side, [Rabbi Elazar] would outweigh them all.¹¹

Among the rabbis listed, note that R' Eliezer ben Hyrkanus and R' Elazar ben Arakh are presented in opposing metaphors: R' Eliezer is a waterproof cistern, while R' Elazar is an overflowing spring. We are already familiar with the significant association between water and Torah, which is mapped metaphorically onto these two rabbis. The juxtaposition of these two rabbis, notes Goshen-Gottstein, represents a confrontation between two pedagogies of Torah study:

One is the plastered cistern that does not lose a drop but preserves the tradition that is transmitted from one generation to the next; R' Eliezer took pride in never paying anything that he had not heard directly from his teacher.¹² According to this ideal, the sage who studies Torah contains the traditions of his teacher without changing anything. On the other hand, R' Eleazar ben Arach is described as the overflowing spring, one in whom everything wells up inside. He is an innovator drawing on creative force and argumentative power to enhance his learning. The sage who engages in the study of Torah is likened to a spring, overflowing with torrents of water.¹³

This beautifully captures the multifaceted debate we have tracked through other sources

¹¹ mAvot 2:8

¹² See bBer. 27b

¹³ Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac*, 235.

between rote study and *b'iyyun* understanding of *halakhic* logic; between encyclopedic memorization and creative innovation. R' Elazar's travels to Perugaita, known for its hot spring bathhouse, is laden with poetic meaning – the מעין המתגבר (overflowing spring) himself, headed off to a hot spring that seems as though it should be off limits.

But why is he going there in the first place? Beyond its historical infamy, Perugaita has additional thematic relevance, which is seen in parallel versions of this story in *Avot deRabbi Natan* and *Kohelet Rabbah*.¹⁴ Presented below, respectively, they reveal a slightly different version of events from that in *Shabbat*:

...הוא אמר אלך לדמסית למקום יפה ומים יפים ונאים והם אמרו נלך ליבנה למקום שתלמיד חכמים מרובים אוהבים את התורה הוא שהלך לדמסית למקום יפה ומים יפים ונאים נתמעט שמו בתורה הם שהלכו ליבנה למקום שת"ח מרובים אוהבים את התורה נתגדל שמו בתורה.

[R' Elazar ben Arakh] said: "I will go to Dumsit (Deyomset), to a beautiful place with beautiful and pleasant waters. They (his fellow sages) said: "Let us go to Yavneh, to a place with many scholars who love Torah." The one who went Dumsit – to a beautiful place with beautiful and pleasant waters – his name was diminished in Torah. The ones who went to Yavneh – to a place with many scholars who love Torah – their names became great in Torah."¹⁵

* * *

הלכו ליבנה, והלך רבי אלעזר בן ערך אצל אשתו לאמאוס, מקום מים יפים ונאים יפה, המתין להם שיבואו אצלו ולא באו.

They (his fellow sages) went to Yavneh and R' Elazar went after his wife to Emmaus,¹⁶ a place with beautiful waters and a beautiful view. He waited for them to come after him, but they did not come.¹⁷

¹⁴ See Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac*, for a source-criticism analysis and comparison of these sources, and Levine, "R. Elazar B. Arach," for more of a literary study.

¹⁵ Avot d'Rebbe Natan 14:6

¹⁶ Similar to the Hebrew חמת, meaning a hot spring.

¹⁷ Qoh. Rab. 7:2

While in our *aggadah* from *Shabbat*, R' Elazar only “happens upon” Perugaita,¹⁸ in these other versions, he actively chooses to travel there. Between a life of sagacity in Yavneh, the most magnificent site of Jewish learning, or a life influenced by Hellenistic hedonism, R' Elazar chooses Perugaita, thus portrayed as the antithesis of Jewish learning.¹⁹

Returning to our *sugya*, we now have a deeper understanding of the significance of this location, and of R' Elazar's character. The dramatic event upon which the story now hinges is the erasure from his mind of all of his learning. The text portrays R' Elazar as being “drawn to” Perugaita, drawn to this site antithetical to the entire rabbinic enterprise. We sense the power, the magnetic pull of the foreign culture there, and in an instant, his knowledge is gone. The crafting of the *aggadah* hammers the point home: three staccato couplets of two words each emphasize the power and rapidity of this foreign locale: he happened by, he was dragged in, and his learning was uprooted. Rashi, like our parallel sources, argues that perhaps this catastrophe was not so passive, and that R' Elazar ran after the wine that was there (the same wine that deprived Israel of ten of its historical tribes).²⁰ Nonetheless, the polemic against the foreign culture and its negative impact on learning is clear.

The term used to describe the loss of R' Elazar's learning is quite significant. Most literally, we can understand אֵינְקָר to mean “uprooted,” or “torn out,” thus, “his

¹⁸ The Bavli uses the passive words “אֵינְקָר,” (happened upon) and “אֵינְמָשִׁי,” (drawn to) rather than a more active (and *much* more common) verb such as אָזַל (to go).

¹⁹ Of course, this begs the question: if R' Elazar ben Arakh is among the greatest of sages in the eyes of Yohanan ben Zakkai, why is it that he would not choose to travel to Yavneh? See pg. 210 for more on this peculiarity and the historicity of his character.

²⁰ Rashi on bShab 147b, s.v. אֵינְמָשִׁי בְּתַרְיִיהוּ. The term also appears throughout the Bavli, in some instances referring to being drawn toward prohibited substances, or away from God. See bEruv. 42a; bPes. 108a; bSuk. 3a.

learning was uprooted,” but the either way, the important aspect to note is the passivity of the term. This is an event that happened *upon* R’ Elazar, due to the character of the milieu. The poignancy of this moment is elevated when we see that איעקר can also refer to barrenness or impotence.²¹ Against this meaning, we might translate תלמודיה איעקר as “his learning became barren,” or “his learning was made impotent.” The meaning functions well, rather tragically, each way: either he loses his ability to incubate and nurture life or to (figuratively) fertilize others with learning. Note the connection to the *sugya* from *Sanhedrin* 99a that we examined in Chapter 4, which also drew an explicit connection between fertility, agricultural rootedness, and learning Torah.²² Rashi’s comment here helps round out the power of the moment. He suggests that two distinct, but related, events happen: first R’ Elazar’s knowledge was uprooted (again, emphasizing the passivity of the moment), and *then* he forgot everything.²³

Percolating beneath the surface is a critique on the dual approaches to study emphasized by the *mishnah* from *Avot*: “While the ‘sealed cistern,’²⁴ does not lose a drop,” writes Rabbi Yoseph Hayyim, “the overflowing spring loses all its water when distanced from the sages of Israel.”²⁵ Milieu and student intertwine with devastating consequences. Whether or not R’ Elazar intentionally immersed himself in this off-limits

²¹ See bShab. 63b; bPes. 101a; and bYev. 64b (where, interestingly the opposite of this scenario, one becomes important from sitting through too many lectures).

²² See pg. 60-61.

²³ Rashi on bShab 147b, s.v. איעקר תלמודיה

²⁴ Alluding to the prominent theme of forgetting and memory, Goshen-Gottstein observes: “Perhaps the fear of forgetting is more pronounced for the path of study represented by R’ Eleazar ben Arach. The preservation of Torah is not simply the preservation of information; it is the preservation of the open-hearted, full-flowing method of innovation that characterizes the sage.” (Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac*, 381 n81).

²⁵ Levine, “R. Elazar B. Arach,” 283.

foreign culture, the sense of violation and loss is palpable, as the Bavli emphasizes just how restricted this environment should be.

The second sub-unit continues with R' Elazar's return to Eretz Yisrael, the land of his fellow scholars. As R' Elazar ascends to read from a Torah scroll, the narrative portrays the consequences of his loss of wisdom with form matching content to brilliant effect. The verse he intended to read: "החדש הזה לכם" (Ex. 12:2) comes out "החרש היה לכם," as, barely remembering how to read Hebrew and to distinguish between letters that look similar, R' Elazar confuses a ך with a ך, a י with a ז, and a ב with a כ. Thus, the Torah's sentence "This month shall be for you," is rendered "Have their hearts become deaf?" Goshen-Gottstein observes the intentionality behind the crating of this *aggadah*, as חדש – literally meaning month, but also conveying newness and innovation – is replaced by חרש (deafness).²⁶ The dexterity of the Bavli here is impressive: it shows the potential hazards of R' Elazar's focus on חידושים with his inability to retain knowledge when compared to the reservoir-like knowledge of R' Eliezer ben Hyrkanus, and simultaneously laments the loss of the חידוש due to deafness. An unspoken resolution to the debate which has followed us through the Bavli may be present here: perhaps the debate isn't a debate at all, but a holistic approach to learning. Both cisterns and overflowing springs have their merits; both canonical literacy and innovations are valuable.

The content of this misread verse is not inconsequential or arbitrary. It is the subject of great commentary, being the verse that Rashi suggests should have logically commenced the Torah, as it contains first commandment given directly to the entire

²⁶ Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac*, 253

community of Israel.²⁷ The commandment that R' Elazar cannot remember is not only a well-known one, but one whose very meaning is attributed to it by the role that community plays. The contrast with R' Elazar leaving his community of learners is stark.

The misreading itself carries meaning, as well. R' Elazar speaks – erroneously, but no less significantly – of hearts that have become deaf. Another *mishnah* featuring R' Elazar has him teaching the virtues of a good heart.²⁸ This motif of synesthesia also touches on the same theme we saw in the *sugya* from *Hagigah* in chapter eight, which adjures students of Torah to make their ears like funnels and to acquire an understanding heart, in order to hear from all.²⁹ Both notions evoke a sense of learning as a holistic and active process that requires us to be attuned both to the words and emotions of others. Far from home and his community of learners, R' Elazar is not able to do this – there are no others for him to learn from. His question, “have their hearts become deaf?” may as well have been directed at himself! But it is precisely because he is now back in an appropriate milieu that the story may resolve happily.

R' Elazar's fellow teachers pray to God for his intellectual and mental well-being. As a result, just as quickly as he lost his knowledge, it returns to him. The clipped narrative presents a distinct mirroring here of the opening of R' Elazar's journey:

Opening	Closing
איקלע להתם ¹ \ אימשיך בתרייהו ² \ איעקר תלמודיה ³	בעו רבנן ¹ \ רחמי עליה ² \ והדר תלמודיה ³
He happened by ¹ / he was dragged in ² / and his learning was uprooted ³	The sages prayed ¹ / for mercy upon him ² / and his learning returned ³

²⁷ Rashi on Gen. 1:1, s.v. בראשית

²⁸ mAvot 2:9

²⁹ bHag. 3b, see pg. 175.

The first clause establishes a relationship with space and people: in the former passage, the space is a foreign land with a foreign people; in the latter, the space is his home community with fellow sages. The second clause adds momentum and a sense of ontological/theological direction: in the former passage, he is dragged away, down towards potential heresy. In the latter, God's mercy comes down upon him from on high. The final clause emphasizes the results, which poetically mirror each other to drive the point home: learning can only happen amongst a community of fellow learners of a manifestly similar identity.

There is also an explicit connection here between R' Elazar's act of returning to the proper place and his knowledge returning, as the text parallels itself (note that the root *בע* connotes both to want/desire something, and to pray):³⁰

כי הדר אתא קם למיקרי בספרא בעא למיקרא	When he returned , and stood to read from a scroll, he wanted to read the verse...
בעו רבנן רחמי עליה והדר תלמודיה	The sages prayed for mercy upon him, And his learning returned

The speed of R' Elazar's forgiveness is also notable, given other instances where similar reading and scribal errors are said to have drastic consequences.³¹ Here, there is no chastising or correction of the error, just a prayer for mercy,³² and the return of R'

³⁰ See also Levine, "R. Elazar B. Arach," 284.

³¹ The *aggadah* involving King David, Yoav, and Yoav's teacher at bB. Metz 21a-b, involves a teacher mistranslating a word while teaching, and as a result, Yoav learns incorrect *halakhot*. In retaliation, he (possibly) kills his teacher. See also bEruv. 13a for the importance in being meticulous in scribal work, and the assertion that even an error involving one letter would destroy the world. As a counterpoint, elders who forget their learning due to circumstances beyond their control are still afforded the honour as if they were still teachers (bBer. 8b).

³² The rabbis' prayer for mercy, along with the elaborate hand of the editor and use of parallelism in this *sugya* makes me wonder if the notion of mercy here (רחמי) is being

Elazar's learning. While the Torah has significance, and would normally demand greater deference, the Bavli prioritizes focus here on the milieu in its polemic against environments that are dangerous to learning. For a moment, the subject matter takes a backseat.

SECTION 3

הוי גולה למקום תורה: EXILE YOURSELF TO A PLACE OF TORAH

The story reaches its dénouement, and a strong moral is offered through a passage from Mishnah *Avot* attributed to R' Nehorai (whose identity will shortly become vital). Commenting on the idea of exile to a place of Torah, Rashi encapsulates the thesis of our entire text: "If you are a Torah scholar, do not live anywhere but in the place of a fellow scholar, and do not say 'they are students, they will come to me, and it is enough for me in that, so why should I be exiled?'"³³ Having examined the parallel texts which juxtapose R' Elazar against his colleagues, and show him waiting futilely for them to arrive, we can appreciate the injunction against such idle behaviour. An idea somewhat foreign to contemporary formal education, individual teachers, our text says, must play an active role in cultivating their student body.

Community, as we have seen, is key. Not just for defining appropriate learning spaces, but for defining the kind of learning that can happen within them. The *mishnah* here closes by quoting a text from Proverbs, directing learners not to trust their

deployed intentionally to parallel the earlier portrayal of R' Elazar as אֵיֶקֶר. As noted, the term can also mean barren, while the root רָחַם also refers to a womb (see bB. Batra 16b and bHul. 70a). Is the editor poetically suggesting that the rabbis are also beseeching God to make their compatriot fertile with Torah once again?

³³ Rashi on bShab. 147b s.v. הוי גולה למקום תורה

understanding alone. This is the ideology underpinning our *sugya* and many others throughout the Bavli,³⁴ and the idea and practice of *havruta* learning.³⁵ It was reflected in the closing to the *sugya* from *Hagigah* in chapter eight, and is one of the backbones of the entire classical rabbinic corpus: Jewish learning is a communal endeavour.³⁶

This is a strong argument for a homogenous culture of learning, strongly predicated on the Jewish identity of the learners. It views the identity of learning spaces as defined both by the dominant culture as well as by a critical mass of “people like me.” Elsewhere, the Bavli devotes attention to practical aspects of learning spaces outside of the *beit*

³⁴ bBer. 6a; bEruv. 55a; bMeg. 3a-b; 29a; bTa’an 7a; bMak 10a; bAZ 17b-18a

³⁵ For more on the history of *havruta* and its implications on contemporary pedagogy, see Eli Holzer and Orit Kent, *A Philosophy of Havruta: Understanding and Teaching the Art of Text Study in Pairs* (Brighton: Academic Studies, 2013).

³⁶ I have avoided commenting thus far on contemporary application of the Bavli’s philosophies of education. The conclusion of this thesis contains general observations and questions to consider in this light, but with regard to the ideology the Bavli presents here, it seems germane to raise a relevant contemporary issue, namely that of online supplementary Jewish education programs. Given the insistence on a communal setting, free of foreign influence, with the ability to rely on the understanding of another person, it is intriguing to ponder if the recent rise in elementary Jewish distance-learning represents a significant departure from the philosophy presented here, and what that might say about the Jewish character of online learning.

For more on this phenomenon, see: Shaya First, “Webcams in Halachah.” No pages [2015] Online: <https://staff.ncsy.org/education/education/material/4xED8Q9PZ1/webcams-in-halachah>; Julie Wiener, “For Hebrew Learning, The Skype’s The Limit.” No pages [26 May 2010]. Online: <http://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/for-hebrew-learning-the-skypes-the-limit>; Vanessa Morese, “How Skype Helps This Southern Jewish Family Stay in Sunday School.” No pages. [18 September 2015] Online: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/southern-and-jewish/sunday-school-skype-style>; Johanna Ginsberg, “School offers alternative Hebrew lessons via Skype.” No pages [11 September 2013] Online: <http://njewishnews.com/article/18427/school-offers-alternative-hebrew-lessons-via-skype#.WmnJTzMZMXo>

midrash, adjuring against distractions³⁷ and impurities,³⁸ but here, as in our other commonplaces, the focus is squarely on the *identity* of the space.

SECTION 4

עיני חכמים מנהיר: HE ILLUMINATED THE EYES OF THE SAGES

Our case study closes with an intriguing twist. The identity of R' Nehorai from the quoted *mishnah* is suddenly questioned, and the Bavli suggests that he is not who we think he is. Two alternatives are proposed: perhaps, he is actually R' Nehemia, a poetically appropriate option, given the shared meaning of his name and the focus on רחמים (mercy) we have already noted. Or, perhaps he is R' Elazar ben Arakh, our itinerant rabbi! Why would the Bavli make such an audacious suggestion? The *mishnah* immediately preceding the one which appears at the conclusion of this *aggadah* is one whose themes conspicuously appear throughout our tale: “הוי זהיר בתלמוד ששגגת תלמוד עולה זדון. רבי שמעון אומר שלשה כתרים הם. כתר תורה. וכתר כהונה. וכתר מלכות. וכתר שם טוב. עולה על גביהן” (Be careful when teaching, for your errors in teaching are considered as intentional transgression. Rabbi Shimon said: There are three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood and the crown of the monarchy - but the crown of a good name outweighs them all.)³⁹ Perhaps the awareness of this *mishnah* serves as a thematic corrective, offering a good name to R' Elazar following his redemption.

Alternatively, Goshen-Gottstein offers a convincing historical analysis:

³⁷ bMo'ed Qat. 16a-b

³⁸ bBer. 24b, 25a; bSuk 28a; bTa'an. 20b; bMeg. 28; abHor. 13b

³⁹ mAvot 4:13

One possibility is that R' Nehorai's statement assumes autobiographical value. It is understood in light of a true event and expresses the wisdom that the sage acquired following that event... However, there is a second possibility... Identifying R' Eleazar ben Arach with R' Nehorai proves how far removed later tradition is from the historical perspective. This approach amounts to a counterclaim against all the non-historical adaptations previously mentioned. The claim is that R' Eleazar ben Arach was a famous sage. If he was, why are there no traditions in his name? Because his traditions were handed down in another name, which expresses his relationship with other rabbis... This technique of identifying figures is customary in the biblical exegesis of the sages... The need to defend R' Eleazar ben Arach and the method he represents is the catalyst for the use of this technique... Being detached from historical fact paradoxically is helpful in returning to a more balanced perspective on R' Eleazar ben Arach.⁴⁰

Indeed, for a rabbi praised by R' Yohanan ben Zakkai as being among the elite, there are very few teachings attributed to R' Elazar ben Arakh.

Few, but not none. One prominent example is related to concepts that we are already intimately familiar with: “רבי אלעזר אומר הוי שקוד ללמוד תורה. ודע מה שתשיב.” (R' Elazar says: ‘be diligent in learning Torah. And know how to answer an אפיקורוס’).⁴¹ We began our inquiry into the Bavli's understandings of education by examining the role the idea of the אפיקורוס plays in forging student identity. The אפיקורוס is entirely out of the bounds of normative Jewish behaviour in the eyes of the Bavli, and is condemned to spiritual exile, with no share in *Olam HaBa*. What these two *sugyas* share is an awareness of boundaries: of space, of identity, and of ideology.

We end our study here with an entirely different understanding of exile, one that is actually advocated! The Bavli suggests that wherever one might be going in life, it should be to a place of Torah. *If* that place is not Yavneh (literally, or as a figurative representation of a place of study), one should be certain to still be surrounded by other

⁴⁰ Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac*, 255

⁴¹ mAvot 2:14

Torah scholars. Not being in a community of serious learners is seen as a form of spiritual/academic exile that is liable to cause one to forget one's learning. The *aggadah*, in exhorting one not to passively expect one's students to arrive, also advocates a powerful sense of humility and responsibility to a greater community beyond oneself.

All told, this engaging *aggadah* raises some critical questions (and some firm answers) about what the Bavli deems important for a learning milieu:

- *What is the "identity" of the ideal milieu?* This *sugya* does not delineate a specific physical space of learning. Elsewhere, as we have seen, we are painted a picture of the characteristics of the *beit midrash*, or of elementary schools. But here, we are shown, explicitly, the identity of a place where there is no learning, and implicitly, the identity of a place where learning can flourish. For the Bavli, it is homogeneous in the religious makeup⁴² of its participants, but heterogeneous in its emphasis on needing varying sources to reach understanding. It is a place where God's presence can be manifest, and where the spiritual significance of the learning can be felt.
- *Can Jewish learning take place anywhere, or are there sharply defined boundaries?* There are clear boundaries of ideology and identity which are mapped out (literally) onto geopolitical boundaries. The very notion of a *מקום תורה* necessitates that there are places that are *sans*-Torah, clearly an option anathema to the rabbis. In our example, one physical space (the bathhouse and the region in which it is situated) is clearly beyond the pale, while one (Eretz Yisrael) is valorized.

⁴² And, presumably, the gendered makeup, though this is not a feature of this discussion.

- *Is the learning environment a distinct space dedicated to knowledge acquisition, or a space for experimentation?* There is tension here, as there is throughout the Bavli, between acquisition and conservation (represented by the cistern metaphor), and innovation (represented by the flowing stream). What is intriguing here is the direct connection between these pedagogies and their applicability in different physical spaces. R' Elazar's approach to studying Torah was not appropriate for the environment in which he found himself.
- *What degree of structure and control are required in establishing a learning environment?* There is a remarkable emphasis on the need for attention to detail, but also on empathy and compassion (through the Sages' prayer for R' Elazar). To a degree, this *aggadah* approaches the notion of inclusivity in learning spaces as well – it questions what happens when someone no longer has the requisite knowledge or learning abilities to occupy a space of learning, and prompts us to consider what obligations one has to create a space where they can still learn.
- The role of community and its relationship with a learning environment is of paramount importance. On the one hand, any milieu might be appropriate for learning, so long as there is a critical mass of fellow Sages. On the other, the encroaching foreign influence limits what spaces are in play.

Aside from its dramatically enlightening examination of a learning milieu and the thematic connection to some of the other material we have examined, this compact *aggadah* is notable in that it packs in commentary on all four of our educational commonplaces. It proposes significant ideas on responsibilities of students and teachers,

the relative status of the subject matter, and what makes a learning space viable. We are ultimately treated to two scenarios here: when they are out of balance (when the milieu is wrong or the student does not take the correct responsibility), the results are shown to be disastrous. But, as at the end, when all four work together, at their best, the result is that the student does not just become enlightened himself through his learning, but can enlighten others.

PART III

TRANSCENDENT LEARNING

CHAPTER 11

CONCLUSION

FINDING A PLACE OF TORAH

Wherever one might be going in life, our final *sugya* from *masekhet Shabbat* shares, it should be to a מקום תורה, a place of Torah. It is a beautiful goal, and one that underpins much of Jewish thought and practice. But the Bavli as a whole has wildly different ideas about how to get there. This is at once frustrating, tantalizing, and enthralling. While, conceivably, it would be easier to have a *pro forma* plan detailing how to bring one toward the Torah's wisdom, getting there, I suspect, would be less satisfying. Instead, the Bavli provides us with an extensive collection of rabbinic thought, *halakhic* discourse, *aggadic* models, and a plethora of debates – both resolved and unresolved – that draws us into the process of charting our own map over its landscape.

I have tried to do some of my own mapping through the four *sugyas* of the educational commonplaces. These are only four, and yet we get a sense of how they reflect the vastness of this rabbinic terrain. Having examined these texts and some of the material underpinning them, can anything definitive be said about this collection? This is the very question we began with. We heeded the warnings of scholars who reminded us that the stratified and multivalent nature of the text makes this nearly impossible. To suggest otherwise would certainly be disingenuous. Indeed, we have seen that much of what the Bavli says about education focuses on debating and navigating boundaries, and determining the scope of a conversation, rather than imposing a singular perspective. Daniel Boyarin reminds us of the practical implications of drawing wisdom from this body:

Any view or interpretation that is undercut by another in the same canonical work unsettles, almost by definition, its own use as a foundation for cultural and social practice... Thus a view will often enough be quoted as if typical

of rabbinic Judaism when in fact it has been cited in the Talmudic text only to be discredited or at any rate undermined by a counter-text.¹

What, then, are we to do? If Boyarin is correct, to what degree can the Bavli be a foundation for cultural and social practice? In this respect, and with regard to the material we have studied, I tend to lean more toward the view of Hyam Maccoby, who argues that, “while many distinctions and acknowledgments of development and change need to be made... there is an underlying unity in the whole corpus, arising from the community of scholarship and thought that it represents.”² Maccoby perhaps overplays his hand – given recent scholarship, we gain the sense that the unity of the whole corpus is questionable. But his perspective does address a lingering question that has accompanied me through this study: if all we are left with at the end of the day is a collection of texts that cannot be integrated together to provide a very real cultural, social, and religious foundation, is this endeavour all for nought?

I have to believe that this is not the case. Moulie Vidas’ general argument³ serves as a counterpoint to Boyarin’s, suggesting that the redactors of the Bavli’s *sugyas* desperately had something that they wanted to convey. This urgency, this desire to reach out and influence others, I believe, does provide the foundation Boyarin is perhaps looking for. What was it that they wanted us to feel urgently? These issues indeed are alive, reflected in the insistence of the passages on the transcendent value of the educational project. When we read of Roman soldiers studying Mishnah,⁴ students hiding

¹ Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 28.

² Hyam Maccoby, *The Philosophy of the Talmud*, ix.

³ Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud*, 117.

⁴ bB. Qama 38a

under their rabbi's marital bed to learn about the Torah of sex,⁵ rabbis' eyes falling out,⁶ God seeking advice from a personified Torah,⁷ knowledge evaporating from one's mind,⁸ and education sustaining the very fabric of the cosmos,⁹ we get the distinct sense that there is something powerful at stake here. These issues are very much alive for the rabbis, and can be for us, as well.

When we filter these teachings through the paradigm of the four commonplaces, we see how they can speak to and amplify one other. It is true that the *sugyas* I have chosen to study here could conceivably be examined from different commonplaces. The story from *Hagigah* 3a-b about the nature of Torah could just as easily be read, as Jeffrey Rubenstein does,¹⁰ as a lesson about the importance of honouring one's teacher, or alternatively, about the learning environment and what is demanded by a *beit midrash*. But I believe that the power of the texts is not only to be found in an attempt to isolate their original sources and intent, but in bringing them together in conversation. When we do, we see that to a remarkable degree, they share an orientation around many of the same concerns: who are teachers and students, and what are their responsibilities to each other and to their shared project? What is the nature of the Torah as a document of knowledge, wisdom, and truth, and how should it be studied? Where are the most nourishing places for learning to take place? Not every *sugya* on learning in the Bavli represents this kind of fusion of focus. But many do.

⁵ bBer. 62a

⁶ bHag. 3b

⁷ bSanh. 101a

⁸ bShab. 147b

⁹ bSanh. 99b

¹⁰ Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, 98.

Vidas suggests each *sugya* was composed intentionally with a sense of urgency on the part of its redactors. This, I believe, is the power of reading these texts together. What happens when the urgency of each teaching amplifies the others? Particularly when they share a common concern for learning, the sense of urgency and the cosmic importance grows. We can visualize stones dropping into a pond, or sound waves ricocheting off one another. While each has its own source, they grow stronger together and amplify each other as they meet.

WHAT CAN WE SAY?

Here, then, are the salient pieces that I believe the Bavli presents us with that can be held up together – not as an example of a unified pedagogy on the part of the Bavli’s redactors, but as part of shared commitment to the project of learning. The point is not to list them as the “greatest hits of the Talmud,” but to see, when held up together, what is calling out to us. Put another way by returning to one of our initial questions: Is there a transcendent vision of learning, and if so what is it, and what claim does it hold on us? In laying out these ideas, as noted, we find a diversity of answers, but, perhaps, a uniformity of questions beneath them.

- Being a student and being a teacher are, in part, **identities** that are bound up in each other. Learning is not something to be hoarded, but something to be shared, and the expectation is that learners become teachers, and teachers continue to learn.

- The **relationship** between teacher and student is not merely transactional for the imparting of knowledge, but is a deeply intimate bond. This relationship has the characteristics at times of that between a parent and child, or between two spouses. The ability for a student to learn from the character traits of others as a *sine qua non* for learning, argues Hirshman, is remarkable.¹¹
- Learning is broadly viewed as a **group process**, for both practical and ideological/identity reasons, but the Bavli also displays an emphasis on learners as individuals. In particular, students are, for the most part, seen not as empty vessels to be filled, but as fully-developed human beings with emotional, physical, and spiritual needs demanding attention and care.
- Torah – in the broad sense of the word – is said to be **something that can be learned anywhere**, but there are limits placed on that expansiveness, and places where its gravity is more powerfully experienced and absorbed. The places most germane to study often seem to be characterized less by the physical character of the space, and more by whom one is with within that space.
- The supreme value of Torah is upheld, but there are ongoing, and largely unresolved, debates about **how best to inculcate a knowledge of Torah** that addresses the *halakhic* concerns of the day:
 - Is a broad knowledge of the *halakhah* as practiced most important, or should one have a deep appreciation of its jurisprudential principles?

¹¹ Hirshman, *Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture*, 118-119

- Underlying this debate is another one between learning directed toward preservation and learning toward innovation.
- This, itself, is predicated on a debate as to the very nature of Torah: is it static and unchanging through the ages, or is it multivalent, all-encompassing, and open to חידושים?
- Is a teacher to be evaluated based on qualitative or quantitative standards?

The diversity of the Bavli in this respect invites us in to embrace this capaciousness, and to consider when one methodology is needed over another, rather than which should be seen as the exclusive opinion.

- Practically speaking, this awareness of the depth and breadth of wisdom accompanies (a) a visceral fear of **forgetting one's knowledge**, (b) the **paramount value of review** to combat that fear, and (c) a remarkable emphasis on the **physical and mental intensity** required of learning.
- Education is idealized as an **existence-long endeavour**, extending in both directions beyond the confines of a natural human lifespan.
- The **value of education** is ultimately multifaceted: it has practical value in teaching and learning how to fulfill *mitzvot*, intellectual value in how to discern the logic behind *halakhot*, ideological value in upholding education as a worthy enterprise, and transcendent value in its relationship to the divine. This transcendent element perhaps represents a singularly Jewish understanding of the role of a student: learning and education have the power to influence both the

human physical world and the divine spiritual world, impacting and sustaining the structure of the cosmos.

It is this final point on the transcendent value of education that resonates the most loudly for me. It is one of the most salient themes that has emerged through this study, and if anything can be said with consistency about the Bavli, it is that it understands learning and teaching to have cosmic significance. This is not meant to be a cliché or a quaint aphorism to adorn a classroom, but a profound statement on the underlying philosophy of the Bavli, and one that can have significant implications on how the text can impact our lives.

ON TRANSCENDENCE AND SPIRITUALITY

Parker Palmer notes a particular challenge facing many involved in the field of education, what he calls the “pain of disconnection.”¹² He observes that the focus in many educational institutions¹³ on achievement and on constantly trying to teach material and skills that will be perceived as having contemporary relevance takes its toll on educators. To mitigate pain and disconnection, he advocates a spiritual approach to education, that looks toward emphasizing the educational journey over the practical end of it. He observes:

A spirituality of ends wants to dictate the desirable outcomes of education in the life of the student. It uses the spiritual tradition as a template against which the ideas, beliefs, and behaviours of the student are to be measured. The goal

¹² Parker J. Palmer, Parker J. *To Know as we are Known. Education as a Spiritual Journey*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), x

¹³ Here, he is speaking of secular schooling, though his critique is familiar to anyone who has worked in Jewish educational settings.

is to shape the student to the template by the time his or her formal education concludes.

But that sort of education never gets started; it is no education at all. Authentic spirituality wants to open us to truth – whatever truth may be, wherever truth may take us. Such a spirituality does not dictate where we must go, but trusts that any path walked with integrity will take us to a place of knowledge.

Such a spirituality encourages us to welcome diversity and conflict, to tolerate ambiguity, and to embrace paradox. By this understanding, the spirituality of education is not about dictating ends. It is about examining and clarifying the inner sources of teaching and learning, ridding us of the toxins that poison our hearts and minds.¹⁴

Palmer's philosophy does not map one-to-one onto the Bavli's. As we have seen, our text wrestles deeply with questions of where boundary lines are drawn, and does not conclude that *any* "path walked with integrity will take us to a place of knowledge." Indeed, the Bavli is quite fearful of some places of knowledge (consider what happened to R' Elazar ben Arakh when he ventured to the public baths at Perugaita).¹⁵ But Palmer's insistence on a spiritual approach to education that welcomes diversity, conflict, ambiguity, and paradox resonates remarkably with what we have encountered in our texts. Indeed, he advocates an approach to education that emphasizes teachers and learners in covenantal relationship with each other and with God, "as members of a community of creation that depends on us and on which we depend."¹⁶

There is something remarkably Jewish about this approach (Palmer himself is a Quaker). Consider one of R' Abraham Joshua Heschel's own critiques of Jewish education as often approached:

The Hebrew term for education means not only to train but also to dedicate, to consecrate... The survival of the Jewish people is our basic concern. But

¹⁴ Palmer, *To Know as We are Known*, xi.

¹⁵ bShab. 147b

¹⁶ Palmer, *To Know as We are Known*, 10.

what kind of survival, we must continually ask, and for what purpose? Many questions come to mind when one analyzes the ideology underlying the content and composition of contemporary textbooks... Let us remember that it is not enough to impart *information*. We must strive to awaken *appreciation* as well.

Our goal must be to enable the pupil to participate and share in the spiritual experience of Jewish living.¹⁷

There are some who suggest the Bavli is a text concerned more with coldly delineating *halakhot* that have no bearing on our life today, than in presenting an engaging spirituality that addresses our eternal needs. I believe the opposite is true, and hope that this examination through the eyes of Schwab's commonplaces in part demonstrates that. This is particularly relevant for those who share the concerns articulated by Palmer and Heschel, and seek an approach to education that addresses them.

QUESTIONS ON WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

The question, then, is on the applicability of the Bavli's orientation to current models of Jewish education. To that end, I suggest the following questions for consideration that all fall under a more general question: what if we asked the same questions that the Bavli asks?

What would it mean for students in Jewish educational programs to learn in environments where their identity as students was emphasized, valorized, and elevated? Where from an early age, it was communicated in words and deed that being a student of Torah was not just something that happened from nine o'clock

¹⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 236.

to five o'clock each day (as in a day school setting) or from six o'clock to eight o'clock on Wednesday evenings (as in a supplementary synagogue program), but part and parcel of their identity as Jews? What factors would we need to consider to effect such a change?

What would it mean to create a culture where teachers could best understand themselves as occupying positions of honour and immense responsibility? How might we address the challenges posed by fee-for-service communities, and instead cultivate a sense of deep appreciation for the relational role that teachers play in the lives of their students? And in such a world, what conditions would we need to create to balance between the importance of *kavod*, and the human drive to satisfy its ego? A non-Jewish version of this question I have often heard puts it this way: "What would it be like if teachers were allowed to board airplanes first, along with military officers?"

What would it mean if we understood the material we learned and taught to not only be utilitarian in value (such as teaching Torah trope and liturgy for *b'nai mitzvah*), or only about creating meaning by relating to contemporary issues (Consider the many "what does Judaism say about..." models), but something of transcendent, eternal value? This, perhaps, is the most significant challenge in aligning the worldview of the Bavli with a contemporary pedagogy.

Contemporary Jewish youth movements often call their weekend retreats by a Talmudic term: *kallot*. At some point in recent history, this naming decision was made, though I wonder how many leaders today are aware of its origins, and if the education that takes place there reflects its name. What might it look like to emphasize the importance of considering the spaces in which we learn as having equal importance to the teachers, students, and subject matters that inhabit them?

What would it mean to embrace with integrity the spaciousness that the Bavli brings to the debate between preservation and innovation, and between the permanence and expansiveness of Torah, without reducing Jewish teachings to one or the other?

How one will seek answers to these questions has much to do with what orientation one brings to the text itself.¹⁸ But no matter the orientation, it seems to me that these are questions eminently crucial to how we teach Judaism today. The last question is among the most pressing for me. Shulem Deen has observed what he sees as a frequent flaw in contemporary non-Orthodox learning environments, that:

...often reduces the vast body of our traditional literature to proverbs and aphorisms unearthed from deep within, so deep that their context is often unknown, their original meanings replaced with a vapid overlay of modern sensibilities, fashionably recasting ancient rabbis... We do this with good intentions – and with profound ignorance.¹⁹

¹⁸ See: Levisohn, “A Menu of Orientations to the Teaching of Rabbinic Literature.”

¹⁹ Shulem Deen, “Why Talmud is the Way to be Jewish Without Judaism.” No pages. [9 June 2016] <https://forward.com/my-heretical-year/342171/why-talmud-is-the-way-to-be-jewish-without-judaism>.

Deen's proposed solution is, I believe, an elegant reflection of Parker Palmer's and Abraham Joshua Heschel's quest for the transcendent and spiritual within our sacred text:

We have to grapple with ways of thinking that are so far from our own, and still find the resonant chords; make sense of a logical system whose premises are archaic and confounding and dogmatic, but still see its elegance; imagine a world in which life's mysteries and uncertainties are nearly unimaginable to our modern minds, and still see, in those who lived with them, the same human impulses as ours.²⁰

When we do this, when we traverse the at times confounding terrain of the Bavli, when we attune ourselves to the sense of urgency of the rabbis, we open ourselves to searching for that place of great importance: *מקום תורה*, a place of Torah, in the fullest sense.

The journey is one that takes great effort – lifting mountains over our heads, in the minds of the Bavli. But in doing so, we take part in a voyage of transcendent worth. It is one that can enlighten generations to come; one that can create more understanding and compassion; one that can stitch together the very words of Torah themselves. Indeed, it is one that might maintain the very fabric of the universe.

²⁰ Deen, "Why Talmud is the Way to be Jewish Without Judaism."

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