HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES IN TEACHING TALMUD

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NOTHING IS AS SIMPLE as it seems in learning and teaching the Talmud. It is often thought that all one needs to study and teach a *sugya* from the Talmud is what the standard editions provide, plus a dictionary. Sophisticated advanced students know that various types of analysis, both traditional (such as comparing the *rishonim* and *aharonim*) and critical (such as comparing text versions and taking a source-critical approach to parallel *sugyot*), can enrich Talmud study immeasurably. Beginners, however, are typically regarded as unripe for such higher forms of analysis.[1] Advanced methods such as the text-critical, the dialectical (source-critical), the conceptual, and the historical are all to be "saved" for later, in this view.[2]

In the present essay I shall demonstrate the need for a teacher – and even a teacher of beginners – to delve into history in order to address a question that will inevitably arise in interpreting a certain *sugya*.[3] "History"

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[1] See, e.g., Adin Steinsaltz, *The Talmud: A Reference Guide* (New York: Random House, 1989), pp. 79–80.

[2] As delineated by David Weiss Halivni, "Contemporary Methods of the Study of the Talmud," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 30 (1979): 192–201.

[3] The present essay is based on a chapter from my Ph.D. dissertation, "On the Translation of Scholarship to Pedagogy: The Case of Talmud" (Graduate School of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1995). I am grateful to my friend Dr. Joel B. Wolowelsky, and my husband, Prof. Edward L. Greenstein, for their editorial counsel. The "beginner" I have in mind is the one I have had experience in teaching for over 25 years, a student aged 12 through adult. Developmental issues in teaching Talmud have not yet been systematically studied. Indeed, nearly all the research that exists is anecdotal, based on the experience of individual educators. The invaluable need for assembling and collating such anecdotal evidence from teachers is underscored by Lee Shulman; see, e.g., "Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform," *Harvard Educational Review* 57 (1987): 1–22. The many claims I make concerning the questions students will ask and the responses they give, as well as several matters of pedagogy that I raise, are part of my anecdotal record.

here refers not only to the history of Jewish practice that lies behind the textual material, but also to the history of the talmudic text and the later use of the Talmud in the Passover *Haggadah*. In the traditional study of classical Jewish sources, the history that is relevant is the narrative that those sources themselves relate. A historical perspective, in which both traditional and external sources are read critically, is sometimes, and in some circles, taken to be destructive of traditional foundations. History, purely applied, may indeed be a thoroughly secular discipline. But the application of a historical outlook in the context of traditional study may also complement, supplement, and enrich our understanding. Questions of an historical nature cannot but be raised in the study of certain texts and topics. Texts such as the *sugya* that will engage us here cry out for historical considerations.

Our *sugya* appears in *Pesahim* 116a; the reader is invited to review that text in advance of proceeding with this essay. In order to demonstrate the need for an historical approach, it will not be necessary to analyze and present a pedagogical method for teaching the entire *sugya*, brief as it is.[4] We shall content ourselves with treating that part of the *sugya* that requires the two previously noted types of historical criticism.

Preparing the *Sugya*: Questions and Guides to Answers

The typical Talmud teacher prepares the text from a printed edition of the entire Talmud, such as the standard Vilna *Shas*. This seemingly trivial observation takes on special significance in the present case. In the *sugya* beginning with the Mishnah on *Pesahim* 116a, the text of the Mishnah that is presented in the Talmud is different from the Mishnah text that appears in a standard edition of the Mishnah alone.[5] The Mishnah describes what takes place at the Passover *seder* when the second cup of wine is filled. A child who sufficiently understands what is going on, and who is sophisticated enough to formulate a question, is meant to ask the famous "Four Questions." The first two questions appear on the Talmud page as they do

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[4] I see no reason that a teacher would not cover the entire *sugya*; but in order to deal with the latter part of the *sugya*, one would have to treat other matters, such as a critical comparison with the nearby passage on *Pesahim* 115b. In our passage, Rav Nahman asks a question of his servant, Daru, while in the nearby passage, Rava asks a question of Abaye. One would naturally wonder whether the situation in our *sugya*, in which a senior scholar asks a question of his servant, might be adapted from the nearby *sugya* in order to show how Rav Nahman exempted himself from reciting *mah nishtanah*.

[5] Another important question to consider is whether to teach the Mishnah separately from the Gemara, or to teach it as part of the running Talmud text; see my dissertation, pp. 30–32. For our present purposes, we shall assume that the teacher begins with the text of the Mishnah as it appears in the Talmud.

in the *Haggadah*, but everyone should immediately notice that the last two questions differ from their familiar formulations.

The third question in the Mishnah (as it appears in the Talmud) is: "On all other nights we eat meat that is roasted or stewed or boiled; tonight we eat only roasted [meat]." That question, of course, is no longer recited at the *seder* and is replaced by a question concerning how we recline. The fourth question in the Mishnah (as it appears in the Talmud) is: "On all other nights we are not obligated to dip even once; tonight we dip twice." This question appears in the *Haggadah*, but its wording is somewhat different. Most significantly, the formulation in the *Haggadah* does not include any terms of obligation, while the Mishnah's formulation (as presented in the Talmud) does. What is more, the *Haggadah* has this fourth question as the third of the Four Questions in the Ashkenazic version and the first in the Sephardic one.[6]

Teachers will already begin to think about some of the pedagogical issues that must be considered in teaching this *sugya*. Chief among the difficulties that students will have, or the questions that students will raise, is the dissonance between the version of the Four Questions found in the Talmud and the version in the *Haggadah*, which is familiar to virtually all students who have reached the point of studying Gemara. The teacher will begin to chart the various versions of the Four Questions.

A class will notice another curious fact about the way the Mishnah is presented in the Talmud. In the printed text, the fourth of the Mishnah's questions, the one concerning dipping, includes two sets of parentheses. Talmud-trained students know that such parentheses are a warning that there is something difficult or controversial about the wording of the text. At this stage, the class, made suspicious by the unexpected version of the Mishnah's formulation of its fourth question, may already compare it to the wording of the Mishnah as it appears in a stand-alone edition. They will discover there yet another version of the question.

We soon see that when the Gemara discusses the Mishnah, the language of the fourth question becomes a point of contention between Rava and Rav Safra. Surely we appreciate here the need to look closely into the nature of the differences among the various formulations of the question – in the Talmud, in the *Haggadah*, and, as we have now seen, in the Mishnah alone.

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[6] Students should be made aware that the Ashkenazic and Sephardic versions differ in various respects, but we shall not explore that topic here.

Furthermore, alert students will notice another odd phenomenon with respect to the language of the fourth question as it is variously formulated in the Talmud. The discussion of this part of the Mishnah in the Gemara is introduced, as usual, by a *dibbur ha-mat'hil* (an introductory quotation from the passage that is being explained or discussed). Ordinarily, the *dibbur ha-mat'hil* reproduces the exact wording of the text being discussed. In this instance, however, the wording of the fourth question that is presented in the *dibbur ha-mat'hil* is not the wording of the Mishnah (as it appears in the Talmud).

History in the Text

All this highlights the fact that the texts of the Talmud, the *Haggadah*, as well as other classical Jewish texts, have a history. Both the peculiarities of the Talmud text at hand and the substance of the Gemara's discussion involve the history of the text. Dealing with textual history must, in a case like ours, be on our curricular agenda for the simple reason that some of the most fundamental questions that will inevitably arise in the study of our *sugya* can be answered only by recourse to historical perspectives.

A class may itself realize, or guess, that the explanation of the twin anomalies – one of the Mishnah's questions does not appear in the Haggadah and the Haggadah contains one question that does not appear in the Mishnah – must have an historical basis. It is reasonable to surmise that the dropping or adding of a question must have a cause, and that that cause has to do with some historical change.

Indeed, the traditional commentaries in this case alert us to an historical explanation. Any standard printed edition of the Talmud will be accompanied by the commentary of Rashbam (R. Samuel ben Meir), who completed his grandfather Rashi's commentary on the Talmud in the mid-twelfth century. The traditional student of Talmud, like any competent student of the text, will routinely seek the guidance of the commentaries of Rashi, and sometimes Rashbam, who tend to provide a *peshat* explanation of the text.[7] In explicating the third question of the Mishnah (as it is presented in the Talmud), Rashbam accounts for the fact that this question is present in the Mishnah's version of the Four Questions but absent from the *Haggadah*'s

[7] *Peshat*, in contrast to *derash*, refers to interpretation based on meaning in context; see Edward L. Greenstein, "Medieval Bible Commentaries," in Barry W. Holtz, ed., *Back to the Sources* (New York: Summit Books, 1984), esp. pp. 215–20. Contrast the more conventional definition of *peshat* as "the plain meaning of the text," e.g., Steinsaltz, *The Talmud: A Reference Guide*, p. 79, with Greenstein's explanation that a *peshat* understanding is often far from plain in any sense.

formulation by reference to a historical change. His comment on "Tonight we eat only roasted (meat)" is: "During the time when the Temple was standing, he (i.e., the son) would ask thus."

We understand that the restriction on eating the meat at the seder cooked any way other than roasted has to do with the Passover offering (*korban Pesah*). That is the way that offerings in the Temple were prepared. After the Temple was destroyed by the Romans, there was no longer any sacrifice, and any type of cooking might have been employed.

Nevertheless, a thoughtful class will still have some questions about the difference between the Mishnah and the *Haggadah*. Jewish liturgy generally tends to preserve ancient formulations and is not inclined to replace them with more up-to-date language. To take an example that is closely related to the case at hand, the *Musaf* service refers to the sacrifices that contemporary Jews will bring to the Temple, even when there is no Temple. Why, we may – and should – ask, was the reference to eating roasted meat dropped from the Mishnah's formulation of the Four Questions and replaced in the *Haggadah* by another question? And why was the question about leaning, which is in no way reflected in the Mishnah or Talmud, added?

To summarize, the class will have identified two sets of historical questions. One involves the history of the text, as it is manifested in the different printed editions (Mishnah, Talmud, *Haggadah*). Another involves the change in the content of the questions, mainly the historical change in which the Mishnah's third question was dropped from the *Haggadah* and was replaced by another question altogether.

These two kinds of questions – the textual and the historical – are somewhat different. The fact that the Mishnah contains a question about eating meat and the *Haggadah* a different question, about reclining, will properly be attached to the question about historical change, with which it is obviously bound up. The textual problem, concerning the Mishnah's fourth question, about dipping, demands a different approach.

With respect to the textual question, the teacher should examine all the available sources. These will include not only the printed editions of the Mishnah and the Talmud, as well as the *Haggadah*, but also the *Tosefta*, manuscript versions of the Mishnah, the Talmud (*Bavli* and *Yerushalmi*), and early documents concerning the *Haggadah*. The teacher should then begin to organize the data by making a chart of the different formulations of the question. A very basic chart will include at least the following:

a. the version in stand-alone editions of the Mishnah;
b. the version in the Mishnah as presented in editions of the Talmud;
c. Rava's version in the Gemara;

d. Rav Safra's version in the Gemara;
e. The version in the *dibbur ha-mat'hil* in the Gemara;
f. The version in the *Haggadah*.

The teacher should read through the primary sources – the Mishnah, Gemara, and *Haggadah* – as well as the standard commentaries on them. In the present case, the discussion in the Gemara provides a rationale for the differences. They turn out to revolve around certain thematic issues that are made explicit in the Gemara.

The Issue in the Gemara

The Mishnah (as presented in the Talmud) presupposes that people normally dip once in the course of a meal. Accordingly, what is special about the *seder* meal is that during it, one dips twice. In the Gemara, Rava (a Babylonian *amora*) challenges the Mishnah's assumption. In his experience, people do not dip at a meal at all. Rava, therefore, alters the formulation of the Mishnah's fourth question to read as follows: "On all other nights we are not obligated to dip even once; tonight [we dip] twice." In this reformulation, however, Rava introduces a new element into the fourth question, or at least makes this element explicit. This is the element, and language, of obligation (*hiyyuv*).

Rav Safra, another Babylonian sage, implicitly agrees with Rava that people do not customarily dip at a meal. But he objects to Rava's introduction of the idea of obligation concerning the Four Questions. In line with the overall context of the questions and their explicit function in the *seder*, the notion of obligation does not belong. It is clear from the Mishnah that the purpose of dipping is to arouse the curiosity of the child, who is meant to ask questions about the unusual behaviors that he[8] witnesses at the *seder*. This understanding of the Mishnah is presented by Rashbam in his comment on our passage in the Gemara: "This is on account of children's awareness, so that (the child) will ask." Accordingly, Rav Safra reformulates the question as follows: "(On all other nights) we do not dip even once; tonight [we dip] twice." In Rav Safra's view, the double dipping is a pedagogical tool for arousing the curiosity of the children present, but it need not carry the halakhic weight of a *hiyyuv*. The class will, of course, recognize that Rav Safra's formulation is the one that is adopted by the *Haggadah* and that it is this familiar formulation that was used by the editor of the Gemara

[8] The Mishnah and later literature specify "the son."

as the basis of the *dibbur ha-mat'hil* that immediately follows this part of the *sugya.*

And so we have an answer at hand to the question of why Rav Safra's formulation was preferred by our tradition to Rava's. The notion of obligation does not belong in the question about dipping. But how will we explain the change in the Gemara and the *Haggadah* from the Mishnah, where the assumption is that dipping once during the meal was the norm? The answer will have to be deduced from the fact that Rav Safra accepts Rava's assumption, holding that people do not dip at a meal.

This question can be answered in more than one way. On the one hand, we can apply a typical talmudic technique of interpretation: the apparent contradiction is not really a contradiction because the two propositions (in this case, formulations) at issue are dealing with two different situations. In this way of thinking, the Mishnah and the *amora'im* Rava and Rav Safra are speaking of two different things. The Mishnah is speaking about the dipping of vegetables during the course of a meal, and the *amora'im* are thinking of dipping not during the meal but prior to the meal proper, as we now do at the *seder.*[9]

The class, which has been sensitized to a historical approach, and which has already felt the need for historical analysis in dealing with the present *sugya* in light of the difference in the content of the Four Questions between the Mishnah and the Haggadah, may seek an historical solution to the question. The difference between the Mishnah's and the Gemara's formulations of the question about dipping boils down, in the end, to a matter of eating customs. The Mishnah assumes that people dip during a meal, while the Gemara assumes they do not. One could surmise that the Mishnah simply reflects a time and place different from those in the Gemara. The Mishnah was produced in the Land of Israel around 200 C.E. The Gemara was produced in Babylonia, beginning only in the century after the Mishnah was completed. One might therefore conclude that in Roman *Eretz Yisrael* Jews were accustomed to dipping during a meal but that in Babylonia Jews were not so accustomed. Thus, some have proposed that Romans dipped vegetables into sauce as the first course of every main meal and that Jews of Roman Palestine unsurprisingly did the same.[10]

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[9] One will find an explanation of this type in the modern commentary on the Mishnah by R. Pinhas Kehati.

[10] Jacob N. Epstein, *Mevo'ot le-Sifrut ha-Tanna'im* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1957), pp. 383–84.

The Substitution of a Question

Now that we have identified and solved the textual puzzles of the *sugya*, concerning the Mishnah's fourth question, we may turn to the historical question of why the Mishnah includes a question about eating roasted meat at the *seder* while the *Haggadah* presents an entirely different question. The reader will recall that the major question has to do with why the reference to eating roasted meat at the *seder* was not preserved after the Temple was destroyed.

To seek an historical solution, we are well advised to look into the historical scholarship of the so-called rabbinic period. One might consult an historical treatment of Passover as it developed from biblical to medieval times, concerned with the history of the ritual and dealing only tangentially with the history that lies behind the rituals.[11] Nevertheless, teachers will find references to the pertinent historical scholarship in his book or in one of the few extensive histories of the Jews in the rabbinic period, such as Gedaliahu Alon's.[12] There, one finds an in-depth discussion of the history of Passover observance among the Jews following the destruction of the Temple by the Romans.

Alon, too, begins from the obvious fact that the Mishnah's description of the Passover ritual contains a reference to the roasted meat of the Temple sacrifices even after the Temple no longer existed. This might be merely a commemoration of the historical past, but – as was said above – such a commemoration would be out of place in this part of the *seder*, in which the child's attention is drawn to the living ritual. Accordingly, Alon combs the available textual sources for some clarification of the rite that is described in Mishnah *Pesahim*. He discovers such a clarification in two *mishnayot* connected with Rabban Gamaliel, the same Rabban Gamaliel whose declaration, "Whoever has not said (i.e., explained) these three things on Passover has not fulfilled his obligation...," is incorporated from the Mishnah (*Pesahim* 10:5) into the *Haggadah*.

In one of these *mishnayot*, it is related that Rabban Gamaliel, who lived after the destruction of the Temple, nevertheless ordered his servant Tabi: "Go out and roast us the *pesah* (i.e., the roast lamb offering) on the grill."

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[11] A good example is Baruch M. Bokser, *The Origins of the Seder* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984).

[12] Gedaliahu Alon, *The Jews in Their Land in the Talmudic Age (70–640 C.E.)*, trans. Gershon Levi (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1980). See also Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, 6 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1965–1970); Isaiah M. Gafni, *The Jews of Babylonia in the Talmudic Era* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1990).

(*Pesahim* 7:2). In other words, it was the custom of Rabban Gamaliel, and anyone else who had the same practice, to roast a lamb on the evening of Passover, even following the destruction of the Temple. Alon is able to shed further light on this practice by adducing Mishnah *Betzah* 2:7, according to which Rabban Gamaliel permitted the preparation of a "helmeted kid" (*gedi mekullas*) on the eve of Passover, while the majority of the sages forbade this practice. The "helmeted kid" is defined in *Tosefta Betzah* 2:11 as a "kid roasted whole, with its head and shanks placed within its entrails."

From these and a few additional references, Alon makes a plausible reconstruction of the issue that lay between Rabban Gamaliel and the Sages. Once the Temple was destroyed, no proper sacrifice could be performed. Sacrifice was permitted only within the Temple. Rabban Gamaliel, however, whose name is associated with the special ancient rituals of Passover in the Mishnah and the *Haggadah*, sought to preserve something of the ancient rite by specially preparing a roasted kid in place of the Passover offering. The helmeted kid served this purpose. But the Sages feared that the practice of roasting a kid on the eve of Passover would smack of sacrifice and become misinterpreted as an allowance of animal sacrifice outside the precincts of the Temple. Accordingly, they forbade this practice. It is this practice of roasting a kid that is rejected in the post-talmudic age, in which the Mishnah's third question, concerning the roasted meat, is dropped, and another question is added (more on which below).

Alon is able to corroborate his hypothesis by adducing some fragments of the Passover eve liturgy discovered in the Cairo Genizah and published in 1898.[13] From these fragments, dating from the post-talmudic age, it is clear that the child asks three, not four, questions at the *seder*, including the question from the Mishnah concerning the roasted meat. As though to reiterate the importance of the roasted meat in this version of the seder, it includes a special blessing that is not part of the Mishnah ritual or the *Haggadah*. In it we bless God for commanding "our ancestors to eat unleavened bread, bitter herbs, and meat roasted on fire...." The Genizah material shows that there continued to be Jews like Rabban Gamaliel for whom roasted meat was an integral part of the seder. The fact that the traditional *Haggadah* eliminated the question concerning the meat, and includes no blessing stating that we are commanded to eat roasted meat at the seder, indicates that the position of the Sages prevailed.

The class, now in possession of a reason that the question about the roasted meat was dropped in the *Haggadah*, must consider the question of

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[13] Ibid., p. 265 with n. 38.

why the *Haggadah* added a fourth question, and why that question deals with leaning at the *seder*. The teacher who has read Alon, or another history of the Passover rituals, will know that there was an option – taken by the rite preserved in the Cairo Genizah and long before that by the *Talmud Yerushalmi*'s version of our Mishnah – of having only three questions in the *seder* rite. What is the purpose, or function, of having four questions? There is probably no one answer to this question, but we may consider a few possible ones.

First, there is the motive of conservation: if one question is to be dropped, another is to be added. Second, aside from the biblically ordained triad of the paschal lamb offering (*pesah*), *matzah*, and bitter herbs (Ex. 12:8), it is not the number three that is used to organize the different parts of the seder; it is, rather, the number four that stands out in the rhetoric and rituals of the *Haggadah*. In addition to the Four Questions, there are four cups of wine, four expressions of redemption, and four sons. The pattern of fours may well follow from the way that the Mishnah structures the seder with respect to the four obligatory cups of wine.

On the other hand, there may be an ideological explanation of the *seder*'s tendency toward four or, more precisely, its aversion toward the number three. Early medieval Judaism was already sensitive to polemics with Christianity. The number three took on a Christian association, on account of the Christian trinity, so that Jewish tradition chose to highlight the number four at the seder. It will be recalled that, in Christian typology, the paschal lamb is a prefiguration of Jesus, the sacrificial offering of God in Christian theology, who was crucified on Passover.[14]

In any event, after considering the question of why another question needed to be added, the teacher may proceed to seek an answer to the riddle of why the question that was added deals with leaning while sitting at the seder. To answer this type of question, one involving the history of practice that is associated with the Talmud's content, well-trained Talmud teachers will turn to a resource that serves them well in this, as in many other matters – the edition and commentary of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz.[15]

There, one will encounter the post-talmudic, geonic version of the *Haggadah* that is described in the ninth-century order (*seder*) of the liturgy by Rav Amram Gaon. The question of both the Mishnah and the Talmud

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[14] I learned this explanation from the late Prof. Moshe Zucker.

[15] This is not to suggest that any but the most elementary Talmud class should use either the Steinsaltz or ArtScroll editions of the text in the classroom. A reference book or resource should not be confused with a *shi`ur* text.

about the roasted meat has already been dropped, and a new fourth question, asking why "we all lean" at the seder, has been added. Steinsaltz here adopts a historical approach, one that responds directly to the teacher's question of why, now, this question is properly made one of the Four. In Roman times – the period of the Mishnah – people routinely reclined during meals. This is taken for granted in the *Tosefta* (*Berakhot* 5:5), which mentions that, "Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel, Rabbi Judah, and Rabbi Yosi were reclining (in Acco) on the eve of a certain Sabbath. The *Tosefta* goes on to mention a situation in which "guests were reclining in a certain householder's (house)." In the time and place of the Mishnah, therefore, when people typically reclined during meals, it would have made little sense to characterize leaning as a distinctive feature of the *seder*. The question concerning reclining at the *seder* would become relevant only at some time after the destruction of the Temple,[16] and perhaps even after the period of the Mishnah.

We are now equipped with an answer to the historical question of why the question of reclining at the *seder* arose relatively late in its evolution. But Steinsaltz raises a further question. According to him, the Four Questions follow a general chronological sequence that corresponds to the order in which things are introduced at the *seder*. Thus, the question concerning leaning should take first place among the Four Questions (as it does in the Sephardic version of the *Haggadah*) because it is the first of those things mentioned in the Four Questions to occur at the *seder*. This, however, is not exactly so. It is true that reclining is mentioned first in Mishnah *Pesahim* 10:1. But dipping, which in the Mishnah is the fourth and last question, is mentioned as a *seder* activity ahead of *matzah* in *Pesahim* 10:3. Steinsaltz's principle does not, therefore, seem to work.

The Teacher's Task of Curricularizing

This, then, may more or less complete our analysis of the *sugya* with respect to the two sets of historical questions that were delineated above – the question of the versions of the Mishnah's fourth question (concerning dipping) and the question of the change from the Mishnah's third question (concerning the roasted meat) to the *Haggadah*'s fourth question (concerning reclining at the meal). The teacher, whose task is to curricularize the material that has been gathered and considered, must plan how to organize the subject matter – with respect to the content and the methods by which

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[16] This somewhat narrow interpretation is the one espoused by Steinsaltz.

the content, as it exists in the fields of philology and history, is organized – into lessons for the class.[17]

The *sugya* with which we are dealing is very rich from a number of perspectives. It discusses a key part of the *seder*, where the ritual is explicitly made into an educational experience by insisting on the asking of questions – even, as the Gemara says, when only scholars are present. It goes on to describe the nature of the narrative that is recited at the *seder*, beginning with the degraded state of our ancestors before they emerged from idolatry and proceeding to the grandeur of God's redemption of Israel from bondage. This alone contains a good deal of stimulating curricular material. Here, however, I shall restrict our treatment of curriculum to the types of historical issues presented above, in keeping with the focus of this essay on the need for historical perspectives in the teaching of Talmud.

It will be recalled that we organized the various historical issues delineated above into two sets. The first set, involving the dropping of the Mishnah's third question in the *Haggadah* and the addition of a different fourth question, is a matter of historical change. We referred to it, by way of shorthand, as the historical issue. The second set of issues involves the various wordings of the Mishnah's fourth question, concerning dipping. It is a matter of textual development, and we referred to it concisely as the textual, or text-historical, issue.

How and to what extent teachers will address the two sets of historical questions we have delineated will depend in part on what other aspects of the *sugya*, and the Passover ritual, they will want to highlight and on the importance to them, or to the ideology their institution represents, of history and historical change in general. As already mentioned, I see the use of history within a framework of traditional Jewish study as complementary, enriching, and sometimes even clarifying, and not at all corroding. And I have chosen this *sugya* as a case in point to illustrate the use of historical scholarship in the teaching of Talmud because I see no way in which a competent teacher can avoid the subject matter of history in dealing with it. On what

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[17] It will be clear to those familiar with curriculum theory that I am drawing here on the seminal work of Joseph Schwab. Schwab, in accord with certain philosophers of science and education, such as Michael Polanyi and John Dewey, stresses that a subject matter comprises not only substantive content but also the way in which a discipline organizes and works with knowledge; curriculum writing therefore requires the input of a specialist who understands and can articulate the underlying principles, conceptual structures, and methods of a discipline. See, e.g., Joseph Schwab, *Science, Curriculum, and Liberal Education*, ed. Ian Westbury & Neil Wilkof (Chicago & London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978). See also Joseph S. Lukinsky, "'Structure' in Educational Theory," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 2 (1970): 15–31.

we have called the historical issue, students will surely recognize the fact that the ritual we use today has changed from what is described in the Mishnah. Similarly, on what we have called the textual issue, students will easily discern the differences between the question about dipping as it is formulated in the Mishnah and as it is formulated in the *Haggadah*. These facts are noted and given historical interpretations in the classical as well as the modern commentaries.

The teacher, then, will need some way to curricularize the history in the *sugya*. A teacher will decide in what context and sequence to address the matter of history, depending on what else the teacher wants to achieve in teaching the *sugya* and according to the teacher's – and the students' – comfort with the topic of historical change. A teacher may, for example, choose to deal first with the less complicated textual issue, particularly because the explanation of the textual differences will be provided by the discussion in the Gemara. Then, having already exposed students to the history of the text, the teacher, in treating the child's question about dipping at the *seder*, can proceed to the issue of historical change in the Passover ritual. The alternative is to teach the issues according to the sequence in which they arise in the course of reading the *sugya*, beginning with the Mishnah.

Teaching the Text in Sequence

My own approach to teaching the *sugya* and the many and diverse topics that may be connected to it is to read the text in sequence and to raise issues and questions as they occur. I do this for three reasons.

First, I regard Judaism as a text-based tradition; accordingly, I am inclined to begin the discussion of any topic (in a Jewish educational setting) with a pertinent textual source.[18] Theoretically, one might begin with a topic of history, or current ritual practice, for example, and then seek the textual sources that might give background or depth to them. It cannot be overstated, however, that each curricular and pedagogical move we make conveys our ideological views about our subject matter and in general. Thus, in keeping with my conception of Judaism and the role of classical texts within it, I would begin not with history or even ritual but with texts.

Second, I would teach the Mishnah, at least at first, without revealing any of the questions or issues that will emerge in the Gemara's discussion, in order that students "discover" at least some of the Gemara's questions –

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[18] Cf., e.g., Gerson D. Cohen, "Preface," in Seymour Fox & Geraldine Rosenfield, eds., *From the Scholar to the Classroom* (New York: Melton Research Center, 1977), pp. ix-x; Michael Rosenak, *Teaching Jewish Values: A Conceptual Guide* (Jerusalem: Melton Centre for Jewish Education in the Diaspora, 1986), p. 72.

and answers, too, perhaps – on their own. Apart from the pedagogical advantage of enlivening classes by allowing students to find and ask their own questions, and the psychological advantage of enabling students to second guess the talmudic masters, allowing students to anticipate the questions and issues of the Gemara by themselves can have the salutary effect of demystifying the Talmud for them, making it more approachable and sensible. This is a virtually universal concern in teaching Talmud, especially to beginners. The Talmud's accessibility and relevance to students is enhanced to the degree that they find the Talmud's questions and issues to be their own.

Third, the Mishnah at hand expresses an extraordinary appreciation of the value of asking questions. Participants in the *seder* must ask questions. The questions arise in the course of the *seder*'s activities, in sequence. The explicit purpose of much of the Passover ritual is to encourage inquisitiveness.[19] It would be a sad irony indeed if a teacher studying our Mishnah with a class would fail to elicit question after question as the text is read with students.

Questions are, in general, prompted by curiosity, which, in turn, is aroused by a sense that we are encountering something unfamiliar, something that, for some reason, appears to be new and different. We do not raise questions about the expected but about the unexpected. The Mishnah begins with an exemplary instance of questioning, and it is with this that I would begin teaching the *sugya*.

The Mishnah opens with what might at first blush seem like an ordinary fact: "They pour him a second cup (of wine)." Yet it is precisely at this moment that the Mishnah stipulates, "the son asks his father" the Four Questions. Why, the teacher may ask the students, does the son ask the questions at this point in the seder? The timing could be attributed to nothing more than coincidence or to the practical matter of having the child ask before he falls asleep. But the prepared teacher will have an answer at the ready, the one that is given by the standard commentaries (Rashi, Rashbam, Rabbi Joseph ibn Haviv (author of *Nimmukei Yosef*, a commentary on Alfasi's Talmud explication), Rabbi Isaiah of Trani (author of *Tosefot Rid*, et al.). The teacher should be able to elicit the "standard" answer to the question before turning the students toward the commentaries.

The question arises out of the dissonance between the ordinary function of a cup of wine at a ritual meal and the lack of an overt purpose for the second cup. The first cup served the distinct purpose of making *kiddush* at the outset of the *seder*. The one cup of wine is part of the ritual at the onset

[19] See further, Bokser, *Origins of the Seder*, pp. 67–71.

of every Sabbath and festival. A second cup might make sense in the context of a meal – if the meal were served at this point. But it is not. One must, therefore, wonder at the purpose of the second cup of wine.

Once the students have articulated the question and answer, one can turn for confirmation and refinement to the commentaries. Rashbam only hints at the answer.[20] One finds more explicit explanations in *Nimmukei Yosef* and *Tosefot Rid.* The latter, for example, comments: "Here the son asks: When he sees that they pour a second cup (of wine) before the food. Normally, they break bread after *kiddush* (the blessing over wine) and here dip a vegetable."

As the teacher and students proceed through the Mishnah, they will find that the first two of the Four Questions do not give rise to matters of history; they hold no surprises. The teacher may choose to dwell on the symbolism of the *matzah* and *maror* and their biblical bases. The teacher may also choose to train the students in close reading by making sure they ponder the fact that the second question does not say, "only bitter herbs," in the manner of the first question's "only *matzah*," but simply "bitter herbs."[21] It is only in examining the third and fourth questions, however, that students will be startled and intrigued.

As was said above, the teacher may choose to delve into the historical issues of the Mishnah's third question only after going into the textual issues of the fourth, which become a topic of discussion in the Gemara. In the approach I have adopted, one will deal with the questions in the sequence in which they are encountered. Accordingly, one will tackle the third question first.

The Question of the Third Question

The issues revolving around the third question (concerning the roasted meat) require the teacher to separate the two key historical issues – why was the Mishnah's question about the roasted meat dropped, and why was a new question about reclining added later – and organize the various pertinent textual sources in accordance with these two issues. In the present instance, the key texts are from the Mishnah and the *Tosefta*, on the one hand, and from the *siddur* of Rav Amram Gaon and the standard edition of

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[20] Rashbam: "Here, at the pouring of the second cup (of wine) the son (if he is wise) asks his father: 'What is different...,' now that a second cup of wine is being poured before the meal."

[21] On this question, compare *Tosafot*'s comment on the words "On this night bitter herbs": "Note that it does not say, 'only bitter herbs,' because we do eat other vegetables at the first dipping."

the *Haggadah*, on the other (see above). The Gemara of our *sugya* does not deal with the historical question of the roasted meat. The entire historical issue can therefore be investigated in the course of studying the Mishnah alone.

Traditionalist[22] teachers may want to do no more than raise the simple historical question – why do we not say the Mishnah's third question anymore? – and content themselves and their students with the answer provided in the commentary of Rashbam.[23] But the teacher who has been informed by Gedaliahu Alon's analysis of the historical question may want to go into a deeper and more nuanced historical analysis. This teacher will, as was said, organize the textual sources according to the two key issues. The teacher may choose to retrace Alon's argument along with the students, sharing with them something of the scholar's method; or the teacher may choose to tease the historical questions out of the students by presenting them with some of the tannaitic sources that indicate that there were Jews who continued to eat roasted meat on the eve of Passover even after the destruction of the Temple. The students' interest will then be piqued by the apparent contradiction between the straightforward explanation of Rashbam and the type of tannaitic sources adduced by Alon. Contrast, for example, Rashbam's explanation with the Mishnah *Pesahim* 4:4: "In places where it was customary to eat roasted (meat) on Passover eve, it may be eaten; where it was not the custom, it should not be eaten."

The teacher may trigger students' questions and guide their search for answers by presenting the diverse pertinent texts, as well as by suggesting possible answers to be examined. Of course, only by means of the teacher providing information, or by being sent directly to Alon's treatment, will students discover the way that the practice of eating roasted meat on Passover eve continued into the geonic period.

Teasing out the Gemara's Issue

With the sources assembled by Alon in hand, the teacher and students will be able to discern the controversy between Rabban Gamaliel and the Sages. In the course of discussing their results, the teacher and students may want to talk about the general issue that lies at the heart of the custom of eating or not eating roasted meat at the *seder*, even after the Temple was

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[22] By "traditionalist" I mean someone who regards Jewish learning as self-contained, who believes that all questions arising in one's study can be answered within the sphere of traditional sources and teachings.

[23] Rashbam: "Tonight we eat only roasted (meat): During the time when the Holy Temple was standing, he would ask thus."

destroyed: Is this ritual – and are rituals in general – an effort to re-enact an historical experience by simulating it (in the way that the roasted meat simulates the Paschal lamb offering in the Temple of old)? Or is this ritual – and are rituals in general – commemorations of the past that give rise to more symbolic and thematic types of meaning? The teacher will surely want to elicit from students various examples of rituals that can be interpreted either as re-enactment or as commemoration, or as both; and relate these rituals and their interpretations to tannaitic and post-tannaitic controversies over whether ancient rites should continue to be performed as much as possible (the position of Rabban Gamaliel) or not (the Sages). In this way it will be seen that the tension between Rabban Gamaliel and his colleagues remains an insoluble conflict of perspectives in trying to interpret the meaning of religious rituals.

In dealing with the second major historical issue – the question of why the *seder* question about reclining was added in the post-talmudic period – the teacher will not need to articulate the problem. Students will know that our *Haggadah* has a fourth question that does not appear in the Mishnah. Here the teacher will have two different tasks. First, the teacher will need to organize the tannaitic (toseftan) material that demonstrates the inappropriateness of our fourth question to the Mishnah and present it to the students so that they themselves can draw the obvious historical conclusion. On the question of why a fourth question needed to be added, again it will probably suffice for the teacher to act as a resource. Suggesting the importance of the number four in the *seder*, the teacher should manage to elicit several examples from the students. On the other hand, the students will probably not realize that having a set of only three questions was an option, both in talmudic and geonic times, without the teacher providing them with the pertinent sources.

For many teachers, the symbolism of reclining at the *seder*, as a token of our freedom, will be the more important lesson to convey. Nevertheless, the fact that Jews have sometimes asked only three questions instead of four (the *Yerushalmi* and Genizah source vs. the Babylonian Talmud and *Haggadah*), or used a somewhat different set of four questions (the Mishnah vs. the *Haggadah*), provokes a sense of curiosity that many teachers might well wish to exploit, and satisfy, in teaching our *sugya*. The teacher who has looked into the history of the Four Questions will simply have more interesting material to present than the teacher who goes little beyond explaining the *peshat* meaning of the text.

The Pedagogical Use of Surprise

In teaching the text-historical issue of the ways that the Mishnah's fourth question underwent reformulation, the teacher's main curricular task is bound up with the pedagogical one. The reasons for the changes in the formulation of the question are apparent, and they are addressed directly in the Gemara. The effective teacher must be careful to generate surprise by permitting the students to discover the different formulations and their rationales by themselves. The teacher need serve only as a guide to the sources and to the textual signals that are embedded in the Talmud. Teachers of this *sugya* must practice the art of reticence, holding back the discoveries they have made and the answers they know in order to cultivate their students' powers of discernment – and not to spoil the surprises on which the *sugya* is itself constructed (such as Rava's reformulation of the question).

The teacher will be able to achieve the goal of delineating the textual variants and allowing the students to discover their interrelations and rationales by taking the students through the text one step at a time and by tracking the variants only as they are encountered.[24] "Taking the students through the text one step at a time" means, in this context, pausing to take note of every formulation of the question and, as was said, charting it on the board; noting every printer's indication of a cross-reference or aid (such as the parentheses mentioned above); and making sure that the students keep the version in the *Haggadah* correctly in mind throughout the investigation.

The teacher may find it necessary to ask the students to think about the reasons behind the changes in formulation; but the teacher should not need to reveal the reasons put forward explicitly in the Gemara until they are encountered there. The one place where the teacher may need to intervene in the students' process of discovery is in the event that the students are "too reverent" toward the talmudic masters, or too shy, to ask the critical question: How could Rava, an *amora*, challenge the assumption of the Mishnah, that people dip their vegetables during a meal?

It is this question that, once raised – by the students, or if necessary by the teacher – leads inevitably to the historical observation that the two *amora'im*, Rava and Rav Safra, share the assumption that people do not or-

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[24] A simple yet effective technique for highlighting the differences within the formulations of the *seder* question is to write each on the board in a different color. Writing on the board and using colors to highlight differences as a visual memory aid would seem to be so obvious a strategy that it should need no mention. However, it is rare to find this technique employed in a Talmud class.

dinarily dip during a meal, while the Mishnah assumes that they do. One need only propose that the difference has to do with the fact that different Jews living in different times and places have different customs. The teacher, however, should be in a position to anticipate this historical solution. Students who have dealt with the historical issue involving the Mishnah's third question, concerning roasted meat, will be disposed toward the relatively uncomplicated type of historical explanation that is called for in the case of the textual issue.

History in the Lesson

The teacher may choose to make the fact of textual change, and the ways such change can be tracked, the heart of the lesson. Alternatively, the teacher can, as in the instance described above in teaching what we have for convenience called the historical issue, relate the example of textual change and the reasons for it that we find here to other instances of textual change in the liturgy or in some other area of Jewish life. It ought to become clear to the student, if it is clear to the teacher, that the kinds of textual and historical change that we can "discover" through the study of our *sugya* are the same kinds of textual and historical change that have occurred throughout the growth of the Jewish tradition.

I believe the example I have presented demonstrates that the use of historical material and methods in a Talmud lesson can greatly add to our understanding. However, our meta-goals obviously include fostering a love of learning and commitment to the religious values of the tradition. In cases where historical study might work counter to those goals I rely on the intelligent teacher or curriculum specialist to act responsibly. This being said, Talmud students should know and use history in order to deepen and broaden their understanding of texts. Teachers should also lead students to appreciate the fact that history is not only then – it is also now. The study of Jewish texts can erect bridges between the historical background of the traditional sources and the contemporary lives of the people who study them.[25]

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[25] For exemplary illustrations, see Barry W. Holtz, *Finding Our Way* (New York: Schocken, 1990); Michael Rosenak, *Tree of Life, Tree of Knowledge: Conversations with the Torah* (Boulder: Westview, 2001).