

## Syllabus

### **Introduction to the Study of Talmud**

Hebrew College, Fall 2010, RAB 520, Online.

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In this course, we will work together to develop and refine our skills at decoding and analyzing Talmudic texts, primarily halakhic but some aggadic texts as well.

We will harness the power of the on-line environment to achieve our goals. In other words, this course will not be a clone of a 'bricks and mortar' course. I de-emphasize the teacher's traditional role as the source of information, but instead see my role as enabling and empowering you to approach the text independently. If at any time, you feel that I have not provided enough background information to meet your particular needs or learning style, please let me know by email. You can also feel free to turn to my colleague Rabbi Peretz Rodman, who will be running the virtual Beit Midrash component of this course.

#### WHICH TEXT WILL WE STUDY?

Our text will be Chapter 4 of Berachot. Chapter 4 is devoted to the Amidah. In the standard pagination of the Talmud, this chapter runs from Berachot 26a through 30b. The title of the chapter is the first two words of its opening mishnah-paragraph, namely פרק תפלת השחר. Some introductory courses in Talmud take the 'Greatest Hits of the Talmud' approach, and try to expose the new student to brief selections from as many different tractates as time allows; I have come to believe that sticking with a single chapter will make best use of the strengths of the on-line environment. We will have the opportunity to note how the Talmud moves from one topic to another, and how it transitions from halakhic concerns to aggadic ones. We will divide Berachot Chapter 4 into manageable units. Within each unit, we will try to learn as much as we can about the unit in particular and about the Talmud in general. We will always try to take note of the aspects of the text that are potential road-blocks to our ability to parse the text.

#### WHERE WILL WE GET THE TEXT?

You will be able to download an electronic version of each text that we will study from the course website. An important exercise will be learning to highlight various aspects of the electronic text.

#### TWO IMPORTANT GROUND RULES

##### FIRST Ground Rule:

Because our goal is building skills, I ask each of you to commit to refrain from using any of the various translations of the Talmudic text for the duration of the course. Although this policy seems tough, students in the past have invariably found it to be a good policy. This ground rule means that you will be working extensively with the various dictionaries, particularly Frank and Jastrow [see below] and with Rashi's commentary. For Rashi's commentary, you will again need to use these dictionaries.

##### SECOND Ground Rule:

When you post a response to questions that I raise in the Discussion Board, post your own response before reading the responses of those of your classmates who have already responded.

### REASON FOR THESE GROUND RULES

A genuine understanding of the Talmud and its inner structure can come only through struggling with the text directly, without anyone having told you what the text should mean. This means that it is inevitable that you will go through several iterations of understanding the text. Your first few iterations may be partially right, or totally wrong, or something in between. But only by experimenting with these iterations, by sitting with the many difficulties in the text, will the Talmud begin revealing its secrets to you. What may seem like a false start is never a waste of time, when it comes to Talmud study.

### MULTIPLE GOALS AS WE PROCEED THROUGH פרק תפלת השחר

Because פרק תפלת השחר itself will provide us with continuity from week to week, we will be able to look for a number of things simultaneously in our weekly unit of text:

1. Talmudic structures and thinking patterns. This includes the flow of questions and answers. How can we tell when a question has ended and an answer has started? At a later point, we will also want to try to discover why the Gemara take the particular path it takes. Why ask this question and not another?
2. Language. we seek to gain competence in the Aramaic that is needed for understanding the Gemara, and more importantly competence in that mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic that is the backbone of Rabbinic Hebrew, and to a large degree of modern Hebrew.
3. Technical terms - a subset of our language concerns. I like to call these words 'traffic words', words that have a very specific meaning, signaling to us not just their own meaning, but what type of material will follow.
4. Generations of Tannaim and Amoraim. We want to gain a comfort level in identifying easily at least the key players named so often in the Talmud.
5. Talmudic composition, Awareness of different generations of speakers is the first step toward identifying layers of the Talmud. We are concerned not only with different generations of speakers, but also different generations of editors.
6. Rashi's commentary. Rashi is our best friend, but we must earn his friendship by improving our language skills so that we can focus on his precise formulations, particularly the multiple ways in which he uses language to make the Talmudic text accessible. We will also take note of when he chooses to help out and when he is silent.
6. Formatting the electronic text of the Talmud in order to gain insight into structural issues.
7. Use of key dictionaries, primarily Frank, but also Jastrow.

### VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH

An important component of this course is our virtual beit midrash. Please be sure that you spend at least an hour per week in Chavruta study in the Virtual Beit Midrash. Chavruta study is a

powerful experience, particularly with a text as sparse as the Talmud. Your 'Chavruta/study partner' is another member of our class with a similar level of skills to your own.

Peretz Rodman will work with you to coordinate both a Chavruta-study partner and a mutual workable time slot for you. This time may be spent either in preparing talmudic texts that are the focus of the upcoming Unit or reviewing texts from preceding units.

#### REQUIRED TEXT— PURCHASE:

Frank, Yitzhak, *The Practical Talmud Dictionary*. Feldheim Publishers 1991.

Although this dictionary is not a full scale dictionary of the Talmud, the words that do appear on its pages are the ones that appear over and over in the Talmud. The dictionary is particularly useful for identifying the traffic words of the Talmud. I recommend that you highlight each entry with a yellow marker as you come across it in your studies. This is an effective way to make yourself responsible only for those terms which you have actually experienced in a text, and to defer the other entries for another day.

#### HIGHLY RECOMMENDED, BUT NOT REQUIRED

Melamed, Ezra Zion, *Aramaic-Hebrew-English Dictionary*, Feldheim, 2005.

This dictionary, long available as Aramaic-Hebrew, is fortunately now available with English as well. The value of this dictionary is that it lists forms exactly as they appear in the Talmud, thus relieving you of the need to figure out the root.

#### AVAILABLE ON-LINE

Jastrow, Marcus. *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, 1903 numerous reprints.

You need not purchase Jastrow at this time. A usable on-line version of Jastrow can be found at the website of [Tyndale House \(Cambridge, UK\)](http://www.tyndalehouse.com).

The Jastrow dictionary, now over 100 years old, is still unsurpassed. It is however, difficult to use. For verbs, you must know [or guess] the root, before you can use Jastrow but see my comment on the Ezra Zion Melamed Dictionary (above).

#### AN ADDITIONAL HIGHLY USEFUL RESOURCE [not required]

Feigenbaum Yitzchak, *Understanding the Talmud: A Systematic Guide to Talmudic Structure and Methodology*. Feldheim (Darche Noam Publications), 1988,

A good introduction to 'traffic words'

#### BACKGROUND READINGS [not required]

Strack, H. and Stemberger, G. *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 2nd edition, Fortress Press, 1996.

This very useful book is a total rewrite of Strack's pioneering *Introduction to the Talmud*. Contains brief summaries of the current state of scholarship on a great number of issues. Brief biographies of tannaim and amoraim.

Brody, Robert, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture*, Yale University Press, 1998 A thorough discussion of the period during which the Babylonian Talmud gained ascendancy in the Jewish world.

Gafni, Isaiah, "Babylonian Rabbinic Culture" in Biale, David (Ed.) *Cultures of the Jews*, Schocken Books, 2002. Available electronically through Hebrew College Library in e-brary.

Goldenberg, Robert. Talmud, pages 129-143, In Holtz, Barry (Ed.) . *Back to the Sources*. Simon and Schuster, 1984.

Hauptman, Judith. *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice*. Westview Press, 1998,

Margaliyot, Mordechai, *Encyclopedia leChakhme haTalmud*, 2nd Edition, Yavneh Publishing, 1998 (Hebrew)  
Very readable entries on each of the Tannaim and Amoraim. Relies on an uncritical reading of Talmudic sources, but still very useful.

Rubenstein, Jeffrey L. *Rabbinic Stories*, Paulist Press, 2002  
Anthology of most important Talmudic aggadic narratives together with useful notes.

Steinsaltz, Adin. *The Talmud: A Reference Guide*, Random House, 1989

Steinsaltz, Adin, *The Essential Talmud*, Basic Books 1976  
Rabbi Steinsaltz' books, while useful, lack the perspective offered by modern Talmudic scholarship.