

Jewish Living Core I: Berakhot
RAB 100
R. Micha'el Rosenberg
Fall 5775 (2014)

Objectives

- 1) To increase facility in reading the text of the *gemara*
- 2) To increase facility in reading the commentary of Rashi and using it as a tool in understanding the *gemara*
- 3) To further ability in understanding the fundamental concerns and values behind statements and debates in the *gemara* and apply those values and concerns sensibly
- 4) To increase knowledge of Rabbinic statements about *tefillah* and achieve greater understanding of Rabbinic notions of *tefillah*

Required Texts

- 1) *Massekhet Berakhot*. You must own a copy of the “Vilna Shas” printing of מסכת ברכות. It is not sufficient to work off of photocopies, downloads from computer programs, websites, or copies of individual פרקים. In addition, though it is not required, you are **strongly encouraged** to own a relatively recent copy of the tractate, for two reasons: a) editions printed in roughly the last 20 years or so will have bold-faced פירושים in the פירוש רש"י, which will make you a much happier student. b) Education scholarship has shown how much students' experience of Talmud is influenced by the material nature of learning; old copies of Talmud, with dry, thin, and/or yellowed pages, affect the way many people think about the content of our study in negative ways. It's thus worth the extra money to buy yourself a copy of the מסכת that you will enjoy touching and looking at.
- 2) Frank, *Practical Talmud Dictionary*. I can think of nothing that will have a more beneficial effect on your learning than owning your own copy of this invaluable resource. The בית מדרש has copies, but you will be constantly waiting for others to finish using it, returning it to others, etc. I will reference this work **constantly**, and even now I regularly use it in my own learning.

Triggers

There's been a lot of talk in education recently about “triggers,” topics that may make a student in a class feel unsafe, especially for students who have had personal experiences that may make them more sensitive to problematic aspects of a text. I personally have mixed feelings about the growing practice of providing “trigger warnings,” advance notice of such a topic in a text (and I'm happy to talk outside of class about why my feelings on this are mixed), but one of my main hesitations is how hard it can be to predict what will trigger someone else. Therefore, I'm trying something new for this course, and I hope you will help me out with this. I have created a google document—you can find it at the following url: <http://tinyurl.com/o5jdlxo>

If there are certain topics that you know make you feel unsafe and for which you'd like warning, I hope that you will feel secure to let me (and/or your classmates) know in one of two ways:

- 1) Anonymously (or not; if it helps you, you could certainly "sign" with your name) put it into the google doc linked above. Just write what your trigger(s) is(are). The advantage of doing this is that not only do I know that someone in the class has this trigger, but so do your classmates, such that all of us know to treat this conversation with even greater kindness and sensitivity if it comes up in classroom conversation
- 2) Email me if you'd like for me to know but are uncomfortable putting it up on a google doc.

This is an experiment for me this year, and I must be honest and admit that I don't know how it will go. I am committed to trying it out, but I will happily hear feedback from you about how to improve this system (or whether to jettison it) as the semester goes on.

Course Requirements

- 1) *Class participation/preparation* (20%). Attendance is required; if you know that you must miss a class, please notify me in advance. When you miss class, you are expected find out what you missed from your *hevruta* and/or me and to submit, within a week of the missed class, one page (or more, if you choose) summarizing your understanding of what was discussed that day. Also, you will be regularly called on, and your ability to read and explain the text will be the primary component of this grade. Please be aware that many people can read fluently without understanding what they are reading, while others may stutter and sound unprepared despite complete comprehension. You will be assessed based on your comprehension and ability to explain, not your charismatic (or uncharismatic) reading style.
- 2) *Vocabulary quizzes* (20%). There will be two vocabulary quizzes over the course of the semester, covering technical terms (i.e. those terms found in the Frank dictionary) that have appeared in our *sugya* until that point. They will be emailed to you following class on: Tuesday 7 October and Tuesday 2 December. They will be due in hard copy prior to the start of the following class (i.e. Monday 13 October and Thursday 4 December respectively). Although these are "take-home" quizzes, they are closed book. You will be asked to translate the technical term into Hebrew (if the term is Aramaic), into English, and to explain what the term does/how it functions in a *סוגיא*.
- 3) *Outlines and other short assignments* (20%). For each *סוגיא*, you will prepare, in English or in Hebrew, an outline to be turned in, in hard copy. These will sometimes be due when you come to class (i.e. before having studied the *sugya* together in class), and sometimes will be due following class. The assignment sheet for each *sugya* will make clear which it is. The outline should paraphrase each step of the *סוגיא* and describe what function that step plays in the larger structure (e.g. attack, resolution, question, etc.). This requirement will likely be unclear to many of you early in the semester, but do the best you can, and as you get these back with my comments, it will become clearer and easier. There will also likely be other short assignments over the course of the semester as well, which will be explained in class.
- 4) *Takehome midterm review* (20%). Our midterm exam will be a take-home examination. It will be handed out following class on Thursday 30 October, and due back in hard copy by the following Thursday 6 November at the start of the class. Though this may change, it will

likely consist of three sections: a) a vocabulary test (of the same sort as the two described above; this is in lieu of a third vocabulary test over the course of the semester); b) a translation and outline of a previously studied sugya; c) a section in which you will be asked to parse a previously unseen sugya. All of these will become more clear as the semester continues.

- 5) *End of semester oral evaluation* (20%). Our final exam will be a one-one-one oral examination with me. We will study 1-3 previously seen *sugyot*, and you will be asked to speak intelligently about what they teach you about prayer and human needs, drawing evidence from both the texts themselves and your own experience. These will take place during the last three days of the semester, Wednesday 17 December-Friday 19 December.

Benchmarks

By the end of this **year** (not necessarily semester) you should:

- 1) Have a reasonably large vocabulary of technical Talmud terms (i.e. those terms found in the Frank dictionary).
- 2) Be able to identify the components of a סוגיא, i.e. מימרות, משיניות, ברייתות, and anonymous sections.
- 3) Be able to identify the following key rabbis with their location and generation: Rabban Gamliel, R. Yehoshua, R. Akiva, R. Yehudah, Rav, Shmuel, R. Yehoshua b. Levi, R. Yohanan, Reish Lakish, Rava, and Abaye. Additionally, you should be able to distinguish between Babylonian and Palestinian sages, even if previously unknown to you, in the Talmud.
- 4) Be able to read confidently סוגיות that feature primarily attributed sources (tannaitic material and מימרות).
- 5) Be able to work independently through anonymous סוגיות, even if with some difficulty, understanding at least the gist of the סוגיא prior to coming to class.
- 6) Be able to speak more thoughtfully about the various human needs that תפילה can potentially meet; the relationship of תפילה to other Jewish forms that might meet those needs (e.g. תלמוד תורה, קרבנות, שירה); and the various aspects of human experience that are relatively highlighted or ignored by each.

Schedule

Please be aware that we will not meet for class on the following days:

- 1) Tuesday, 23 September (Friday morning schedule)
- 2) Thursday, 25 September (Rosh Hashanah)
- 3) Tuesday, 30 September (עשרת ימי תשובה)
- 4) Thursday, 2 October (עשרת ימי תשובה)
- 5) Thursday, 9 October (Sukkot)
- 6) Tuesday, 14 October (Friday morning schedule)
- 7) Thursday, 16 October (Shemini Atzeret)
- 8) Thursday, 27 November (Thanksgiving)
- 9) Tuesday, 16 December (finals week)
- 10) Thursday, 18 December (finals week)

Also, we will be meeting on Monday, 22 September, and Monday 13 October, which are treated as Thursday class schedule.