Shoolman Graduate School of Jewish Education

CG-EDUC-592: Teaching Rabbinic Literature

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Skype Office Hours:
I will not have designated ‘office hours’ but will be available to skype – please email and we can set up a time.

Course Scheduling: Each unit usually begins on Wednesday 7am (EST) and concludes on Tuesday at midnight.

Course Description:
This course in textual teaching explores the relationship between knowledge of rabbinic literature and teaching the texts of our tradition. We will explore a number of domains of teaching rabbinic literature and by doing so offer a variety of pedagogies of text teaching. The teaching of rabbinic literature is a spiritual practice that combines deep insight into the human mind and social condition with a thrilling journey into the historical development of Jewish thought.

Essential Course Questions (to be explored through the semester):
- What is the relationship we seek to nurture between teacher, student and text when teaching rabbinic literature?
- How might we describe our educational philosophy of teaching rabbinic literature using a theory of orientations?
- In what way do the characteristics of various types of rabbinic literature lead to certain pedagogical implications?
- How do we apply our theory to a practical methodology in the learning environment?

Learning objectives:
For students to -
- Reflect on their own personal connections to rabbinic literature.
- Develop their textual literacy by improving their technical skills and knowledge of reading rabbinic literature.
- Reflect on the process of enabling students to read themselves into the dialogue with rabbinic literature and create personal connections to the texts.
- Explore major challenges of teaching rabbinic literature.
- Examine methodologies for teaching rabbinic literature, in particular the use of chavruta, and the impact they have on the role of teacher, student, subject.
• Evaluate their own philosophy of teaching rabbinic literature and critically assess other pedagogies.
• Identify and evaluate the themes that may be drawn out of rabbinic literature.
• Write educational materials using rabbinic literature.

Course Notes
Please note, the instructor is based in England and therefore there will not be an instant response to posts or questions. In general, the instructor will endeavour to respond within 24 hours of viewing correspondence.

Required Texts:
• All primary rabbinic sources will be provided in Hebrew/Aramaic and English translation. A basic ability to identify letters of the Hebrew alphabet is desirable. Students with personal access to the texts are welcome and encouraged to make use of their copy (and translation where relevant), however for the benefit of all students, references to texts should be made via the version provided on Schoology.
• Readings for the course will all be made available on Schoology though, in one or two cases, the link to google books will be supplied.
• Personal reading and former experience of studying texts is an important part of what we bring to our conversation of rabbinic literature and students will be encouraged to bring this learning to our study of the rich Jewish literary heritage. You are also encouraged to expand your library of primary and secondary materials about rabbinic literature.

Students are expected to use an accepted academic system for citations of primary and secondary literature. Wikipedia will not be considered an acceptable source in essays. Students unsure how to reference rabbinic literature or not used to working with these materials should contact the instructor for guidance.

Activities and Assessment
• Activities – On a weekly basis there will be up to three components of our learning:
  o Readings: required reading; Optional reading (usually connected to the rabbinic text we will be studying.
  o A rabbinic text with accompanying materials to explore the discussion about theory.
  o An activity to support our reading and application of theory in practice.
• Assessment – there will be three types of coursework on which the students will be evaluated:
  o Evidence of understanding (20% of grade): These will be the primary form of weekly participation. They include exercises, reflections on readings, on-line activities, group work and discussions.
  o Unit Tasks (70% of grade): These assignments are designed to be more in depth challenges in which students will have the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of theory and practice.
    ▪ UNIT A TASK – Mishnah Rosh Hashanah, online treasure hunt. (10% of grade)
    ▪ UNIT B TASK – Analysis of orientations in students’ educational context (10% of grade)
    ▪ UNIT C TASK – Questioning and Rabbinic Literature (10% of grade)
    ▪ FINAL TASK – Preparation of three lesson plans and 1000 word essay (40%)
• Overall participation and active contributions (10% of grade).
(Students are expected to keep to the word limits, where stated – including on discussion forums.)
Course Accommodations for Disabilities:
Hebrew College is committed to ensuring the full participation of all students in programs. Accordingly, if a student has a documented disability, and as a result, needs a reasonable accommodation to attend, participate or complete course requirements, then he or she should inform the instructor at the beginning of the course. For further information, see the Student Handbook at http://hebrewcollege.edu/sites/default/files/student_handbook.pdf.

If you require course accommodations because of a documented disability or an emergency medical condition, please email your instructor as soon as possible. We are happy to work with you on any issues you have to ensure that you can participate fully in the class and complete the course requirements. Please do not wait until the assignments are due for a retroactive accommodation, but discuss the situation with your instructor before you experience difficulty.

UNIT A – Introductions; Relationships between Teachers, Students and Texts

Session 1 – Introductions to students, teachers and texts - 2/2

Enduring Understanding:
Studying rabbinic literature for any student begins when they reflect on their own connection to the texts.

Key Questions:
• When we hear about rabbinic literature, how often is the agenda for studying it set by the teacher and how is this personal connection helpful and a challenge for students?
• What role does the student have in engaging with the teacher’s own ‘agenda’?

Text: Mishnah Avot 1:6 – Teachers and Students

Reading:
• Article from The Jewish Chronicle about the meaning of the word chavruta: http://www.thejc.com/judaism/jewish-words/chavruta

Optional Reading:
• Video/slideshow Introduction to Mishnah, Talmud and Midrash – for those with less knowledge of the field this is required.

Evidence of Understanding:
As a way of making introductions to this course, in the shared space students will be asked to find an image which they feel reflects their relationship/connectedness (or lack of) to rabbinic literature. They will be asked to caption this with up to 10 words.

Session 2 – Chavruta and teacher/student relationships - 2/11

Enduring Understanding:
A classical model of studying rabbinic literature is to use the model of chavruta. Chavruta study when at the optimum provides a learning approach that is unique and powerful for
constructivist education in which students themselves play an active role in their own creation of meaning.

Key Questions:
- What limitations do our ‘usual’ learning contexts present to us for the use of chavruta learning?
- What are the personal and individual challenges presented by chavruta learning?

**Texts: Mishnah Avot 1:6 in commentary - Avot de Rabbi Natan A Chapter 8; Rambam’s commentary**

**Reading:**

**Optional Reading:**

**Evidence of Understanding:**
Students will be asked to study some of the texts related to Mishnah Avot 1:6 supplied for this session, in chavruta. They will then be asked to submit a personal video (no more than 2 minutes) to share with other students about the experience of working in chavruta – what did they find were the challenges and opportunities from studying in chavruta.

**Session 3 – When the roles work/don’t work – 2/18**

**Enduring Understanding:**
Rabbinic literature has embedded norms about knowledge and modes of interpretation. These norms can sometimes be in tension, for example some may sustain traditional hierarchies of teacher/student, whilst others can change the role of teacher/student/text.

**Key Questions:**
- How do we, as educators, allow space for students to create a sense of connection and understanding to rabbinic literature that may be unfamiliar and about which they may lack critical skills to decode?
- Who do we think holds the power of interpretation in our learning environment?

**Text: Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 2:8-9 – Teachers and Peers**

**Reading:**

**Optional Reading:**

Evidence of Understanding
Drawing on other learning about constructivist approaches to education, students will be asked to share an anecdote about an occasion where the teacher/student relationship has been subverted, gone awry (could be observed or personal), or otherwise unexpected/problematic and describe any ensuing reflections.

UNIT A Task
Using Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 2:8-9 as the core text, students will be asked to prepare an internet based treasure hunt for learning about the issues in the text. There should be no more than 8 steps to the treasure hunt. There is no restriction on which aspect of the text students should make their focus. Accompanying the 8 treasure hunt steps should be a ‘commentary’ on why students were drawn to select the step they did. For example, one step might involve finding out more about the biography of the key figures. The ‘commentary’ might include a reflection on one’s interest in the historical personalities of the rabbinic period.

UNIT B – Orientations to rabbinic literature

Session 4 – First steps to answering ‘why’? – 3/4

Enduring Understanding:
The way that Jewish thinkers have articulated the function of rabbinic literature in the lives of Jews has changed in history. In some communities the role of the text has remained relatively stable and in others it has lost much of its meaning. When we teach rabbinic literature these issues of the texts’ function and familiarity, and students’ skills and knowledge must be evaluated.

Key Questions:
• In what way do competencies to read and interpret rabbinic literature affect our success in teaching them?
• How can the esoteric nature of rabbinic literature be both a challenge for educators but also an opportunity?

Text: Mishnah Baba Metzia 4:10 – Wronging the stranger through words

Reading:
Optional Reading:
- Explanation of Mishnah Baba Metzia 4:10 by Dr Josh Kulp in the USCJ Mishnah Yomit cycle: [http://mishnahyomit.org/bavametziah/Bava%20Metzia%204-9-10.doc](http://mishnahyomit.org/bavametziah/Bava%20Metzia%204-9-10.doc)

Evidence of Understanding
Students will be asked to produce a mind-map of the competencies they think are necessary to study this text and what they perceive to be the experience of ‘alienation’ students may experience from rabbinic literature.

Session 5 – Pedagogical orientations to teaching rabbinic literature – 3/18

Enduring Understanding:
To be accomplished educators we must be self-reflective. This is also true for the way that we approach the teaching of rabbinic literature.

Key Questions:
- Should educators be seeking to broaden their orientations to rabbinic literature or specialise in their natural preference?
- Orientations provide a tool for evaluating oneself and one’s educational environment - how might the two relate if they are not reflective of the same orientation?

Text: B. Baba Metzia 59a-b – The Oven of Achnai, Wrapped in Words

Reading:

Optional Reading:

Evidence of Understanding
Watch G-DCAST video on this text. Students should identify what kind of orientation to Rabbinic Literature they think is prominent in this video. They should compare this to the orientation they think is at work in their ‘Treasure Hunt’ for the UNIT A task and one other lesson plan or educational activity which uses rabbinic literature.

Session 6 – Exercising the orientations – 3/25

Enduring Understanding:
The complex nature of rabbinic literature makes demands on practitioner self-reflection that can lead to greater success in the learning environment.

Key Questions:
- What are the different ways that theories of teaching rabbinic literature are expressed in practice?
- How do tools for categorising certain educational practices enhance and restrict our vision as educators?
Text: B. Baba Metzia 59a-b – The Oven of Achnai, Wrapped in Words cont.

Reading:

Optional Reading:

Evidence of Understanding:
Using one of the eight responses to Levisohn’s ‘Menu of Orientations’ students will be asked to write a short report (up to 250 words) for sharing with other students - summarising the additional contribution the response makes to the original article.

UNIT B Task:
In the educational context in which students work, students will be asked to analyse the orientation to rabbinic literature which they think is dominant. Students will be expected to provide evidence – including documentation, lesson plans, observations (etc) of how this orientation influences the purpose and practice of teaching rabbinic literature.

UNIT C – Pedagogical Nature of the texts; Questioning & Boundaries of the Classroom

Session 7 – No such thing as a stupid question? – 4/1

Enduring Understanding:
When teaching rabbinic literature it can be seen that the texts themselves have characteristics that focus on the nature of questioning and inquiry. The role of the educator is to draw on these characteristics.

Key Questions:
- How can educators use rabbinic literature to enhance the role of inquiry in the learning environment and how does this also enhance the study of rabbinic literature for its own sake?
- In what way do the parameters of the questions we seek define the nature of the learning community we are seeking to create?

Text: B. Baba Batra 23b – Rabbi Jeremiah is thrown out

Reading:
Optional Reading:

Evidence of Understanding

Over the course of this unit, using Voicethread, students will respond, through the text, to the questions:

i. What reflections do you have about the nature of rabbinic literature and its pedagogical character.

ii. Where do the boundaries of your learning community lie? What/Who would put someone outside of the boundaries?

Session 8 – The nature of the texts as the vehicle for pedagogy – 4/15

Enduring Understanding:
The very nature of the Babylonian Talmud with its discursive flow can have strong implications for our pedagogical choices. Other forms of rabbinic literature may have similar implications too for the choices we make about pedagogy.

Key Questions:
- How expert do we have to be as educators in order to be able to feel comfortable engaging in rabbinic literature in this way?
- What implications, if any, does our orientation to rabbinic literature and its nature, have on our vision for our learning community and who is part of it?

Text: B. Baba Batra 23b – Rabbi Jeremiah is thrown out

Reading:

Extension Reading:

Evidence of Understanding:
See above

UNIT C Task
Students will be asked to prepare an activity in the classroom that will encourage and develop students’ questioning, drawing on a rabbinic text – possibly that we have studied in previous weeks.
UNIT D – Reflections on methodology - Teaching Rabbinic Literature

Session 9 – Working with texts that disturb, engage, challenge – 4/22

Enduring Understanding:
Rabbinic literature is challenging and may be noble and disturbing. Educators must find the texts personally engaging – even if the engagement is revulsion, elation or elevation. Engagement can be in the text itself as a literary work or in the themes and ideas it presents to the reader.

Key Questions:
- How do we choose texts to study and teach?
- What is the connection between our engagement and our students’ learning?

Text: Genesis Rabbah 24 – Cain, Abel and the parable of two wrestling athletes

Reading:

Optional Reading:

Evidence of Understanding
Students will be asked to select a (or set of) text(s) which they will use in their Final Task. In this activity they should present the texts and description about why they find the texts personally engaging – this can be done in any medium as long as it is shared with other students.

Session 10 – Concrete methodology – 4/29

Enduring Understanding:
Moving from theoretical ideas to practical methodology can be difficult and educators need to be able to apply systems and processes to rabbinic literature.

Key Questions:
- How is a systematic approach to teaching rabbinic literature something that is (im)possible in all learning environments?
- Is this systematic approach desirable – how does it aid and hinder what you as educators would like to be doing when teaching rabbinic literature?
- What other systems for applying a methodology would you use as an educator?
Text: Your text(s)

Reading:

Evidence of Understanding:
Students will be asked to study their texts four times thinking about:
‘How’ the background ideas and texts are used.
‘What’ the text is saying.
‘Why’ the text states it.
Any further questions they have about the text.

Session 11 – Conclusions: The Jewish experience of text study – from Moses to 21st century - 5/6

Enduring Understanding:
Teaching and learning rabbinic literature is something that has been at the heart of the Jewish imagination for thousands of years. In the last centuries the nature and role of text has changed in the Jewish psyche. This clearly affects the Jewish educator – both in their experience as learner and as educator.

Key Questions:
- What would be the lasting impression you would imagine offering to Moses, Rabbi Akiva and others if they travelled in time to your ‘beit midrash’?
- How and why does rabbinic literature continue to be something important for us as Jews in the 21st century?

Text: B. Menachot 29b – Moses visits Rabbi Akiva’s classroom

Reading

Optional Reading:

Evidence of Understanding:
Students will be asked to revisit their initial choice of ‘image’ in the first week of class in light of learning over the course.
**FINAL Task**

Based on the text chosen to be analysed in UNIT D, students will be expected to prepare three educational sessions which make use of the text. Students should include a 1000 word essay with an analysis of:

- How the theory of orientations might be applied to their educational materials.
- Their methodological approach to the educational sessions and the characteristics of their chosen rabbinic literature which support their methodological approach.
- Expectations of the role of the teacher and description of the relationship between teacher/student/text and context.