



Learning to Read Talmud: What It Looks Like and How It Happens

Kanarek, Jane L. and Lehman, Marjorie, eds.
Academic Studies Press, 2016

Book Review

Tags: student learning | teaching sacred texts | teaching Talmud

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The subtitle says it all. This is not a how-to book that will teach one how to read the Talmud, but a book on how to teach others to read the Talmud. It is part of a “growing field of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), a field that seeks to expand the research agendas of scholars in a particular discipline to include research into the teaching or learning of that discipline or both” (xii). Each chapter is written by a different instructor of Talmud, all of whom have various methods and goals for teaching Talmud to their students. While the title might sound like it severely restricts its audience to those who teach Talmudic students, it doesn’t. Insofar as the book examines various methods for teaching a text that is both ancient and in a foreign language, the book could be useful for anyone who teaches primary texts, especially primary texts that involve a foreign or dated language.

The book does not advocate a particular method of teaching or approach to reading the Talmud, recognizing that the best method and approach would depend on the goals of the class and the students’ previous exposure to Hebrew in general and the Talmud in particular. Some of the instructors focus more on the technicalities of the languages, such as Berkowitz and Tucker. Others, such as Gardner and Alexander, focus more on how one teaches the text to non-specialists. Kanarek examines the role of using secondary readings to understand the primary text in teaching. Whatever one’s style of teaching or goal for a primary text in a foreign language, one can find various ideas for how to implement them in the classroom.

Each chapter gives a brief background as to the intent and assumptions of the instructor, specific examples of what was done, student feedback or responses, as well as post-class reflections. Berkowitz discusses the usefulness of study guides for assisting students in asking

the right questions about grammar and vocabulary to aid their understanding and make technical terms seem less alien. Tucker exemplifies in his approach how to help students appreciate and not gloss over difficulties in the texts. Kanarek examines how different types of secondary readings can help students in different ways discover and appreciate issues in the texts. Gardner considers how explaining the narratives and surrounding culture aids non-specialists in understanding and appreciating the texts. Alexander structures her class to help students appreciate the possibility of more than one answer. All in all, this book offers some very practical ideas on teaching original and foreign texts.

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