

I Like to Learn Talmud the Way I Learn Shakespeare



Whenever someone asks me if I like to study Talmud, I usually say that I don't. The truth is more complex. It's easier for me to say I don't like studying Talmud at all than to tell someone I don't like the way that they study it.

Traditional Talmud education tends to focus on minute textual nuances, comprehending the flow of *hava aminot* (hypotheses), and identifying the *maskanot* (conclusions) of a subject. The method is often analyzing the text in a lawyer-like fashion, intensely focusing on the specifics of the law, or covering as much material as possible, rather than focusing on the themes and systems.

This never really spoke to me.

My relationship with Talmud study began in fifth grade in a yeshiva with a rigorous, Talmud-centric education system. Our school heralded Torah study as the most important mitzvah, with the Talmud as its ideal and most enjoyable form. Talmud class was the most important part of our day, and by high school, we spent at least three hours a day, six days a week, learning and reviewing the day's class.

I never fully connected to Talmud study during this time. There were moments of satisfaction, such as finally understanding a complicated discussion of damage liabilities in public property or developing my own *sevara* (logical insight) on why we don't blow shofar on Shabbat. But my rebbeim's promise—that if I tried hard enough, eventually I would begin to enjoy Talmud—evaded me. I dreaded going to class and often spaced out or fell asleep. Many friends lamented the same dilemma to me. They said they studied to receive good grades, be popular, and make our rebbeim proud. It was not because they enjoyed it.

I had a similar problem with Shakespeare. I initially did not enjoy his works when I first read them in high school. Our teacher would select famous sections of Shakespeare's work and examine his use of poetry, prose, and word choices. Only later, when we took a bird's-eye view of Shakespeare's plays, focusing on the moral questions that he addresses in, say, *Hamlet*—revenge, agency, and moral grayness, to name a few—did I start to appreciate his writings. I appreciated them because they felt relevant. His moral commentary addressed my interests, made me question the world around me, and invited me to think deeply about my own life.

It took a couple of more years for me to realize that the same could apply to Talmud. During my year of yeshiva in Israel, I learned from a rabbi who did just this. In his shiur, we spent time understanding each step of the Talmud through the lenses of psychology, sociology, and philosophy. We used these lenses to understand how the proponents of each opinion, *hava amina*, and *maskana* thought about these topics by drawing them out from the text and its commentary. These topics felt relevant to my life, to the questions I grapple with, and I grew interested in learning what the Talmud might say about them.

This style worked well for me. Instead of studying *what* the positions are, I was drawn to *why* the positions are. Why is this conversation in the Talmud placed here? What lesson is it trying to tell us? Are there philosophical, sociological, or historical differences behind the Rabbis' disagreements? What larger themes are present in the subtext? What can we draw out about our relationship to God, our communities, each other? I prefer systems and themes. Details, less so.

A topic I studied in high school can demonstrate the different approaches. Within *Tractate Yevamot*—which centers around the laws of levirate marriage between a childless widow and her brother-in-law—there is a concept called “*zika*” (lit. relational bond) that refers to a potential bond between a widow and her brother-in-law before they perform levirate marriage. Two opinions in the Talmud debate whether *zika* exists and whether the widow and brother-in-law have any sort of legal bond. In high school, we jumped into complicated cases about *zika*, favored for their complex logic. We sought to understand the specifics of what exactly *zika* is, what its parameters are, and how each opinion would rule in a given case.

If I had studied this topic with the style I had in my yeshiva in Israel, we would explore what *zika* says about our innate relationships to other people. We would consider what this concept says about the human condition in context of other humans, and how bonds begin and develop.

In many ways, Talmud study is similar to Shakespeare. Both take specific skills to understand, requiring language skills in Aramaic and Old English. Each has a distinct flow: *shakla vetaria* (back-and-forth discussion) for Talmud, and iambic pentameter for Shakespeare. Both are great works, shedding insight well past their specific “genres.” Personally, it took the right kind of teacher for me to appreciate them in their own ways.

I wish we could all study Talmud the same way we study Shakespeare—by exploring both its minute details and its broader themes. I acknowledge this would require a large undertaking; Talmud discusses everything under the sun, and it requires knowledge of another discipline to pick up on external, worldly themes. This requires interest, education, and knowledge of the general world. Our teachers would have to leave the beit midrash to study other disciplines—we should encourage them to do so. When they return, they can teach Talmud through the lens of their disciplines. We could then have tracks in our schools that are not ranked by level but by students’ preferred style. Traditional Talmud classes can be offered alongside sociological- and philosophical-focused Talmud classes, with teachers whose styles and interests are suited to complement them.

This is not a criticism of the traditional approach to Talmud study. It's a challenge to create more educational options for those who don't connect with that method but still want to engage with the text. Think of it like this: An environmental scientist might zoom out, studying chemical reactions on a global scale over millions of years. A chemist, on the other hand, would zoom in, focusing on those same reactions at a molecular level over a short period. Both are interested in the same topic, but approach it differently and for different reasons.

I don't want us to stop studying Talmud in the traditional way; I want to expand upon it. Adding new methods of study will keep students like me engaged and help them connect to our text and tradition. This approach also creates interest for those who have not been classically trained in Talmud. A lecture exploring a sociological theme in Talmud could appeal to someone who likes sociology, allowing them to appreciate the material even if they aren't experts in Talmud. The same is true for other fields. By offering students a fresh perspective on what Talmud can add to their interests, we can open another door to its appreciation.
