Jewish ways of learning

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Traditional Jewish learning has in the main been centred on the study of Jewish sacred texts. The texts are the Bible, midrash, the Talmud, commentaries and codes, as well as philosophical and mystical texts. In time, following the destruction of two Temples in Jerusalem and two exiles of the Jewish people from the land of Israel, these canonical texts became the unifying force that helped maintain the identity of the Jewish people. This paper will describe the classic ways in which Jews have studied these texts and the pedagogic methods that evolved in order to do so.

Traditional Jewish learning

This classical way of studying, which evolved over 2,000 years, is still maintained today. It is the study of sacred texts and commentaries, as written by previous generations, to which subsequent generations have added their own interpretations which in turn are the texts that are read and commented upon today. In other words, it is an exegetical tradition. What is particular is that this form of study is done traditionally in community and that, in addition to the texts being authoritative, they also incorporate ongoing interpretation. In that sense, this method of study is democratic. It also means that Judaism tends to be a non-literalist and non-fundamentalist tradition. In some circles, this traditional way of studying is called *lernen* to distinguish it from learning. Heilman writes that *lernen* is ‘ritualized study’ and ‘a spiritual meditation on and lifelong review of Jewish books’ as opposed to ‘learning, an intellectual acquisition of all knowledge, and for earning, economic and material survival’ (1983: 1).

Purposes of study

In Judaism study for its own sake, known as *Torah Lishmah*, is a religious imperative. It is studying for no other reason than the fulfilment of God’s will and as a divine service, an activity which is akin to prayer or spiritual practice. The process of learning is, therefore, everything. The process equates to the purpose. There are, however, other reasons for study. For many the aim is to uncover the meaning of the texts, particularly as the texts are understood as divine revelation requiring intensive study. They offer the reader a world view. As Steinsaltz writes, texts are ‘a comprehensive guide, the expression of Judaism’s conception of everything in the world’ (1989: 2). Fundamentally, study exists, therefore, to give guidance in religious matters and in people’s lives. This is called *Torah Lena’ase*. The idea is that Jewish learning guides the way in which people
live their lives on a very practical level as well as leading to increased observance, commitment and the carrying out of God’s commandments. Another understanding of the aim of Jewish study emphasizes the ethical and religious dimensions of learning in addition to intellectual or practical ones. In his book, *Duties of the Heart*, Bachya Ibn Pakuda, who lived in eleventh century Spain, called for a spiritual approach to learning and observing the commandments in which the practical duties are subjugated to the inner convictions of devotion, trust and humility that describe the truly pious individual. As can be seen, for Judaism learning is not value neutral. There is an echo of Ibn Pakuda’s exhortation in a twentieth-century comment by Abraham Joshua Heschel (1966) to the effect that students are approached as individuals with rights and tasks. Their rights are linked to their inner goals and aspirations, while their tasks are expressed in the obligations and responsibilities to community and society that Jewish learning promotes.

Interestingly, the word *torah*, which means teachings/knowledge, and in its broad sense refers to all Jewish canonical texts, has the same root as the word *hora’ah* which means instruction or pointing the way.

**What the texts are**

Jewish traditional learning is centred on the interpretation and knowledge of texts of which the Bible (Old Testament) and particularly the Torah – which in its narrow sense refers to the Pentateuch – are the foundation. In addition to the Bible, which is also known as the ‘Written Torah’, there is also a wealth of additional interrelated texts. These texts are called ‘Oral Torah’. They contain generations of interpretations, insights and wisdom from rabbis who studied the Written Torah and interpreted the Mosaic law. Both the Written and Oral Torah are considered by Orthodox Jews to be revelation. Traditionally, Jews believe that the Torah and the law it contains, as well as the Oral Torah were all handed down by God to Moses at Sinai at the same time. Whether one understands the Oral Torah to be progressive revelation given to generations of scholars, or whether one believes it was handed down at the outset and slowly revealed, the Oral Torah contains Jewish wisdom across the ages, including contemporary wisdom.

Central to the Oral Torah is a book called the Talmud which in turn is made up of two texts called the Mishnah and the Gemara. The Talmud is a record of the discussions and dialogues of sages and rabbis who gathered in houses of study, courtrooms and assemblies. Their legal debates were probably developed orally and then subsequently written down and redacted into the Mishnah (circa 160 BCE–250 CE). The Mishnah was the first collection to define and put order into Jewish law within a single volume, in contrast to the various legal codes that had previously been dispersed in different books of the Bible. Simultaneously, the Mishnah incorporated current religious and legal practices as they had evolved and had been adapted to fit the considerations and requirements of the times. (The volumes of the Mishnah include agricultural law, holy day law, family law, civil law, temple law and laws of ritual purity). In addition, the Mishnah also includes homiletic passages such as parables and stories, doctrines and moral exhortations aimed at examining the meaning and values underlying religious life and practice. In time, the Mishnah required more expansion, explanation and interpretation, resulting in the creation of the Gemara (circa 200–500 CE), which is a commentary on the Mishnah. In subsequent periods, additional commentators such as Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac) added their own interpretations to the Bible and the Talmud, and codes such as Maimonides’s *Mishneh Torah* and Joseph Karo’s *Shulchan Aruch* were composed. All these expanded the central body of interrelated Jewish texts called the Oral Torah.

There is one further group of earlier texts included in the Oral Torah which are called midrash. They were written by the rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud and continued to be written in the post-Talmudic phase. Midrash consists of compilations of materials in which the writers investigated, expanded and drew implications from Biblical texts in an ordered and systematic way. Although some accept that the biblical text may contain grammatical and other errors, the underlying idea is that every word in the Bible has significance and that any word or verse in the Bible is explained by using the rest of the Bible as the
context. Strack and Stemberger write: ‘Midrash arises out of Israel’s consciousness of an inalienable solidarity with its Bible; midrash therefore is always also realization, and must discover ever afresh the present significance of the text or of biblical history [...]. The ultimate concern is always to let the Bible be the intellectual and religious milieu in which the Jew lives’ (1996: 237).

There are two types of midrash. Midreshei aggadah are collections of stories, legends, sayings which may be exegetical or homiletical or narrative in nature. The starting point can be a verse or a word, an ambiguity or a lacuna in the Bible, a biblical character or an event, which are used to explore ideas, ethics, values and theology generally. Examples of collections of midrash aggadah are Midrash Rabbah on the books of the Pentateuch and the five scrolls (the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther). There is another type of midrash called midrash halakhah in which laws are extrapolated from or brought into discussion with the Biblical text. Examples are the Mekhilta on Exodus, Sifra on Leviticus and Sifrei on Numbers and Deuteronomy. In addition to being collections of literature, midrash is also the name of the main interpretive system/process used to investigate biblical verse, which offers a way of communicating with the text.

Characteristics of traditional Jewish texts and implications for Jewish learning

There are a number of interesting characteristics of traditional Jewish texts. These include their high level of intertextuality, the requirement for an active reader, the centrality of dialogue and discussion and also the maintenance of a chain of tradition.

- **Intertextuality**: the Bible is intertextual in that books relate to each other within it. For example, the books of Chronicles and those of Samuel and Kings look at the same events through different prisms. As Boyarin writes: ‘The Bible is characterized already by a degree of self-reflexivity, self-citation and self-interpretation’ (1990: 128). Another level of intertextuality is the creation of commentaries by subsequent rabbis who, having taken on board the intertextuality of the Bible, reproduced this in their writings by referring to other holy books.

The rabbis, as assiduous readers of the Bible, developed an acute awareness of these intertextual relations within the holy books and consequently their own hermeneutic work consisted of a creative process of further combining and recombining Biblical verses into new texts, exposing the interpretive relations already in the text, as it were, as well as creating new ones by revealing linguistic connections hitherto unrecognised.

(Boyarin, 1990: 128)

Intertextual literature enabled the rabbis to preserve the authority of scripture, while the commentaries and the permission to interpret meant that the text was not frozen in time, but could remain relevant.

Other characteristics to emerge from the intertextual nature of Jewish canonical texts are that the texts are treated as nonlinear and multivocal. The texts dialogue with each other across time, presenting minority and majority opinion, in a way that is more akin to a spider’s web than a developmental line.

- **Active reader**: the fact that the Bible is full of gaps – incomplete plots and characters and little description – and that it contains apparent inconsistencies and repetitions, means that it requires a dialogical/active reader who can interpret, deduce, make connections, find contrasts, uncover meanings and generally complete the text. Similarly, the relationship between the various texts, commentaries and codes also requires a knowledgeable and active reader able to go back and forth between the texts, making further connections. This means that the Jewish way of reading text is characterized by a plurality of interpretations, perspectives and solutions, since interpretations can differ.
In addition, as already explained above, all this gave rise to the whole system of interpretation called midrash which, while affirming the sanctity of the text by interpreting it closely, also allowed each reader to use the text as a springboard to investigate life and address current concerns.

- **Dialogue and discussion**: learning through discussion and argument is reinforced by the way the Talmud is written. As noted, the Talmud, especially, is an account – probably partly historical and partly creatively redacted – of the dialogues of the scholars who lived at a particular time in history. These dialogues and discussions contain conflicting views, as well as minority and majority opinions. The way Jews traditionally approach these texts is by continuing the process of discussion and argument as a way of study. This is done in community, using a system called havruta – learning in dyads – as will be discussed later. In a nutshell, the Jewish student is entering into a dialogue with individuals across time and space, listening to them and arguing with them, and becoming part of a chain of tradition going back more than three millennia.

- **Chain of tradition**: each generation is seen as having the right to interpret and add its understandings to those that have gone before. This is the idea of the chain of tradition in which each generation receives divine revelation.

**Settings and methods**

In order to study texts, different traditions and methods have evolved which can be said to be Jewish ways of learning. These happen mainly in academic settings such as Orthodox yeshivot (colleges/seminaries for higher learning), as well as in non-orthodox ‘progressive’ colleges and seminaries, although weight is given in the latter to academic approaches to Jewish Studies. Because of the high degree of linguistic and educational skills needed – the original texts are in Hebrew and Aramaic – these traditional ways of learning are modified for use in other settings, often employing translated texts. Other settings include Jewish schools and Jewish youth movements, as well as lifelong/adult education settings such as institutes, havurot (study circles), women’s groups, retreats and so on. Other important settings for study are the Synagogue and the home.

What is interesting to note is that, although no injunction appears against studying on one’s own, the preferred method is a group one. The Talmud states; ‘Torah is acquired only in a group’ (berakhot 63b). The reason for this is that Torah study is seen as a communal activity, satisfying emotional and social needs in addition to intellectual ones. It also provides a model of lifelong learning, helping people to incorporate learning into their lives. Pedagogically, studying with and through others promotes a variety of important skills which will be outlined below. This emphasis on learning in community is characteristic of some of the most distinctive methods used today. These include the *beit midrash* (the house of learning), study in *havruta* (learning in dyads), the *shiar* (lecture) and the *havura/hevra* (study group/fellowship).

- **Beit midrash** is a hall or house of study. This term was in use in Talmudic times to describe a place where people and scholars gathered to study Torah and hear discourse on the law. Israel Goldman states that the ‘Rabbinic tradition claims high antiquity for [the *beit hamidrash*], tracing its beginnings as far back as the patriarchal period and also to prophetic times’ (Goldman, 1975: 23). This institution was considered more important than a synagogue. It continued to operate in the Middle Ages, housing a library which was used for private study as well as public discourse. Today, a *beit midrash* is often found as part of a seminary or *yeshiva* and is also used as a synonym for a *yeshiva*. The concept, however, has also been modified for use in other settings where adults are taught. In essence, the *beit midrash* is a central hall which contains a library of rabbinical literature and other reference books. It is not a quiet place, but one that resonates with the sounds of students reading aloud and studying, in groups or pairs, the portion of the Talmud they are learning for class or other texts of their choice. A Rabbi/teacher sits...
in the hall and is available to answer questions and help in the study. Thus the atmosphere in the hall is a communal one, filled with dialogue and discussion. The students engage with each other, with the teacher and with the texts. The learning encompasses the text itself and how a particular student relates to the text on a personal level. The role of the teacher is to facilitate and/or model the learning, not to deliver a lecture. In other words, a structure is created that encourages intellectual engagement and a culture and atmosphere of study. The responsibility for learning, however, lies squarely on the students’ shoulders. It is the student who is charged with studying alongside others and with accessing help if needed. The process encourages students in independent learning.

- Havruta is an Aramaic word meaning friendship or fellowship. It involves a pair of students helping each other to read and understand the Talmud or Bible and their commentaries. The word refers both to the two partners engaged in the study and also to the process of learning. This method of learning, first mentioned in the Talmud, was also used in the yeshivot of Eastern Europe – particularly in Lithuania in the nineteenth century. To what extent this system was always used and to what extent it was prevalent in the yeshivot is a matter of debate between scholars. (For a discussion about the prevalence of havruta learning, see Aliza Segal’s monograph (2003: 4–5)). What is clear, however, is that it is a way of learning that is enjoying a renaissance today.

According to Gila Ratzersdorfer Rosen (2003), the Talmud describes three types of dynamics involved in havruta. The first is an adversarial form of learning in which the havruta partners sharpen each others’ wits through debate and argument. This, however, should be done with humility. The second dynamic is that of listening with attention to your partner and learning from them, and the third is the idea of collective study.

Today havruta is used in many settings. In more formal contexts like seminaries and yeshivot, the havruta is used as a preparation for the subsequent shiur (lesson) or as a follow-up study and it often takes place within the beit midrash. In adult education, where the havruta is often used as a stand-alone activity, more structure and scaffolding is provided by a facilitator who may select the text for study and add study questions to help the learners. Depending on the situation, students either find themselves a study partner, or are sometimes assigned one. Like the environment of the beit midrash, havruta is a way of learning through dialogue and conversation based on a close reading of a text. It is an active, interactive and interdependent way of learning that can affect social, emotional and spiritual growth in addition to intellectual attainment. The reason for this is that the relationship between the partners is as important as their grappling with the text. The process works through having the dyad collaborate by listening attentively to each other and being critical and challenging, but also supportive of each other, as they develop their understanding and build consensus about the text. Orit Kent who has researched the process of learning in havruta claims that understanding of the text is achieved by developing interpretations together and through opposition. Both strategies help refine the partners’ ideas (2006: 220–21).

Research by Brown and Malkus (2007: 216) and others shows that the conversations between the pairs – particularly those that study regularly together – include discussion of how the study materials resonate with them personally and also extend to reflecting on their lives, their faith and their search for meaning. This process of study is felt to be a form of spiritual practice. Elie Holzer states that ‘this activity has served not only as a method of acquiring knowledge, but also as a devotional activity believed to have a transformative impact on its practitioners in terms of religious practice, beliefs and values [that] learners […] take away from the context of these texts’ (2006: 184). In addition, Brown and Malkus report that such peer learning enhances spirituality, often creating a less competitive atmosphere and one that helps build community through study (2007: 217).

Some of the skills taught by havruta are: thinking by asking questions and by arguing, learning to provide evidence and reasoning, being challenging, critical and analytical, listening, appreciating and weighing a diversity of opinions and interpretations, sharing knowledge, teaching and guiding the partner, and finally
learning to give and receive feedback. All these skills, which require active engagement, encourage deep approaches to learning. *Havruta* has also been likened by some educators to cooperative learning (Segal, 2003: 11–18; Brown and Malkus 2007: 209–26). It enhances interdependence, yet promotes independent self-directed learning.

- Shiur means lesson. Traditionally in yeshivot this is the lesson given by the head of the yeshiva or a magid shiur – a narrator of the class. The content of the shiur is often a sugya – a passage taken from the Talmudic or Talmud which is read aloud and analysed in depth with references to other canonical texts. This is in effect a reading given by a master scholar who is both a model and an authority from which the students can learn. As previously noted, the shiur comes after the students’ attempt to study the same piece in havruta and the students may then discuss it again afterwards. This sequence of learning can therefore be likened to a kind of apprenticeship in the Jewish discipline of close textual reading involving opportunities to learn both by example and practice. It can perhaps be seen as learning in a community of practice.

The shiur also reflects the great respect for the rabbi as an authority and teacher, even if they are argued with. Holtz writes:

> A particularly significant feature of the religious context is the fact that traditional learning is invariably done with a master, someone who can guide one’s encounter with the text and help make sense of what may be arcane, confusing, or beyond one’s grasp. The teacher in such an environment has a special kind of authority [...] because the traditional texts themselves are based to a great degree on a sense of the authority of wisdom. Such an attitude may go back to ancient days when the Oral Torah really was oral and learning was a kind of discipleship. Although the texts have long been written down, we still venerate the learned teacher, and the texts themselves reinforce this, representing the tradition as a human chain in which one builds on the teachings and insights and legal judgements of the sages who have preceded us.

*(1984: 20)*

Today, the word shiur is used in a more general way to refer to any session in which Talmud or the Bible are studied, be it in the synagogue or other settings. It can also refer to a written piece as well as to lessons recorded, for example, on the web.

The terms, Havurah and Hevrah refer to study groups, study circles and fellowships. We see them today in the Jewish community, but their origins may lie again in ancient religious communes that Heilman dates back to the Pharisees of Jerusalem. He writes:

> What began among the ancient Pharisees of Jerusalem as a kind of religious commune, (called havura) fundamentally organized for maintaining among the select a strict observance of the laws of ritual cleanliness and Temple offerings, by the first century evolved into a group organized around Jewish study. This common interest in study yielded more than an educated elite. ‘It created a community, bringing student and teacher together, sitting, travelling by the way.’

*(1983: 205)*

Heilman (1983: 206) adds that the earliest fellowship groups, however, were probably burial societies (groups tasked with burying the dead) influenced by Greco-Roman civilization. These burial societies evolved in the first century into study groups performing their burial duties side by side. Study groups in Jerusalem are documented from the fifteenth century and are also found in Europe and Yemen from the sixteenth century onwards (Goldman, 1975: 174–75; Heilman, 1983: 205–07).

Study circles were also an important part of voluntary associations formed for ‘occupational, charitable, religious or educational purposes’ (Goldman, 1975: 173). These were the equivalent of Jewish guilds. They
endeavoured to look after the economic as well as the religious needs of their members, including prayer and study.

There were also fellowships that were established with the sole purpose of learning. According to Heilman and Goldman, fellowships or study circles organized themselves according to the different curricula being examined. Those with little education recited Psalms. 'These fellows', Heilman says, 'were not so much analyzers of poetry as they were men who sought to extend their prayers and enhance their spirit through the chanted, collective repetition of holy verse' (1983: 207). Next in the hierarchy of knowledge came those who studied the Bible – especially the weekly portion of the Torah read at Synagogue during services. Afterwards came the more able who read legends and tales from the Talmud. Beyond them were those able to grapple with the Mishnah and, finally, there were the most scholarly who could read directly from the Talmud.

All these fellowships had rules and obligations that have been preserved in books of minutes. These books announce the aims of the fellowship including the curriculum, criteria for admission into the fellowship and what was expected from members in terms of obligations, discipline, attendance, observance of daily and Sabbath prayers and payment of dues. The group would also engage in social and cultural events related to religious holidays and in charitable activities such as visiting the sick and participating in ritual mourning for the dead. In short, the fellowship was much more than just a study group to help its members perform their duty of lifelong learning. As Heilman writes, it was a refuge against the harsh realities of the diaspora, a world in which Jews were excluded from society (1983: 209).

Heilman: who has written about study circles in the Orthodox Jewish community in the 1980s, quotes Clifford Geertz’s observation that ‘the intimate atmosphere of the study circle may be understood as a “kind of sentimental education,” during which what [a person] “learns is what his culture’s ethos and his private sensibility […] look like when spelled out externally in a collective text”’ (1983: 61). Interestingly, some of the characteristics of the fellowships of the last five hundred years can be found in these modern groups. Heilman describes them as having strong identities and sharing a common ethos as well as a common cultural viewpoint and social reality. To belong to them implies mutual interests and a willingness to ‘share their rules of discourse’ and be spiritually in tune so that religious dissonance does not occur (1983: 17). The characteristics that Heilman emphasizes include likening the shiur to a drama or a performance. He stresses social reasons for joining the study circle as well as motivations of loyalty, camaraderie and intimacy, thereby creating ties between the members which strengthen and give longevity to the group. He also mentions religious obligation. He writes: ‘For them lernen was a form of worship, an act of homage to their God, nation, history and faith’ (Heilman, 1983: 25). Heilman also uses Victor Turner’s term ‘communitas’ and Herman Schmalenbach’s ‘communion’ (1983: 204) to describe the sense of order and coherence as well as the sense of belonging and shared experience engendered by these study groups.

Today, there are many types of study circles engaged in the study of texts. Some of them are associated with a synagogue or other Jewish institutions, but there are also independent groups. There are even groups that meet on the internet. All these involve adults who come together to learn about their culture and simultaneously enact it as they join in the conversation found in their texts – a conversation going back across the ages. As they meet, study (and sometimes eat together), they learn to construct knowledge jointly and create community by bonding with each other. Just like the burial societies of the past, the havurah offers friendship, support and belonging with people who share a similar world view and culture and are engaged in a similar pursuit.

**Conclusion**

This short chapter has tried to shed light on some of the characteristics of traditional Jewish learning. Needless to say, other, more universal methods and approaches are also used when teaching and facilitating in contemporary Jewish educational settings. The focus has been, however, on the fact that Jewish learning is
in essence exegetical, involving the close reading of sacred texts and that the way this is done is by studying with others in community – with teachers and peers. A triangle is established between the learner, other people, and the text. The learner enters into dialogue with the text by reading and engaging with it, by interpreting it and perhaps by creating midrash out of it. The process is facilitated through argumentation, listening and conversation with peers and teachers with whom meaning and knowledge is constructed. This, in turn, mimics the dialogic content of the texts themselves, which represent conversations of rabbis down the ages. Those rabbis are then themselves referred to by others in their own writings. A web of intertextual references is woven and each generation can add its understanding and its voice to a chain of tradition. The oral origins captured in the texts talk to the reader, reverberating across time and space.

Essentially, what has just been said is that learning with others facilitates textual understanding and the construction of meaning. But it is equally true that the very process of studying with others creates and builds community. Bonds are formed between people in the most profound ways. Taking part in the formation of Jewish community is to take part in something holy. This phenomenon is operative at the collective and individual level. It is spiritually regenerative and transformational.

Going on from this, there is one last important factor. Because the social dimension is interwoven with intellectual Torah study, it makes it easier for Jews to embrace lifelong learning which, anyway, is meant to be an imperative for them. (It may not altogether surprise the reader to know that, unfortunately, these aspirations do not always match the reality!).

This whole approach to learning, with its roots in ancient times and its continuing evolution over many centuries, turns out in the end to be surprisingly modern. Many of today’s familiar educational concepts such as large group, small group, peer learning, collaborative learning, community of practice etc. are already at work in traditional Jewish learning. The relational is central here. From its earliest days, Judaism has recognized what Peter Jarvis has called ‘a fundamental aspect of learning – that we always learn in a social context and that the learning processes are themselves affected by the relationships within which we function’ (2007: p.20).

The wheel has come full circle. It is this that gives Jewish methods of study considerable relevance to twenty-first century thinking about learning.

References