Academic Talmud in the Bet Midrash

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In recent years, there has been an attempt in some circles to introduce various aspects of academic Talmud study into the world of the traditional study of Gemara. Not surprisingly, there has been at times vociferous opposition to the introduction of this material. It is worth briefly reviewing some of the academic methodologies and their potential positive contribution to the denizens of the traditional Bet Midrash. We will also consider some of the objections to the introduction of such methodologies, as well as possible responses to those objections.

Three things might commonly differentiate the study of Gemara in the Bet Midrash and the study of Talmud in the academy:

1) The goal of study
2) The attitude toward the authority of the text and the Sages therein
3) The methodologies employed

1. The Goal of Study

Putting aside the question of what might stimulate the academician’s interest in the text in the first place, the academician is typically interested in the text either as a body of literature worthy of study as such, or for its value as a primary

source that sheds light on the history or sociology of the context from which the text emerged—the Babylonian Jewish community of the middle of the first millennium CE. The student in the Bet Midrash, however, is generally interested in the text as a foundation for normative halakhic practice and moral instruction; the text is not only the vestige of a bygone era or primary source for the history of the Classical period, but one very much relevant to day-to-day life.

2. Attitudes

The academician does not necessarily regard the text with reverence. It is not different in its inherent value from any other text from any particular period. The academician does not (again, necessarily) have reverence for the Sages of the Talmud—either as people or as moral guides for his or her life. The traditional student however, regards the text as sacred, and the Sages are major figures in terms of the masorah—the chain of Jewish tradition going back to Sinai. While one can acknowledge that the Sages were human in every sense of the word, the student of the Bet Midrash holds these individuals in the highest of esteem and is reluctant, if not completely unwilling, to cast aspersions upon them or attribute ulterior motivations to their rulings.

3. Methodologies

The academician and the student in the Bet Midrash have different interests, and their methodologies typically reflect those varied concerns. The academician who is interested in history will typically be more interested in historical background, in determining what is fact and what is legend, and in understanding the realia—both physical and cultural—implied in various talmudic passages. And certainly, the history of interpretation of the talmudic text in subsequent eras is generally of little interest, as it does not necessarily reflect on anything about the original context of the Talmud. The student in the Bet Midrash, on the other hand, is more likely to be interested in concepts and values that can be extrapolated from the text and that will be relevant in life; there is a great deal of emphasis on the subsequent interpretation of the Talmud found in the rishonim and aharonim.

Of course, there is frequently a great deal of overlap between the interests of the two individuals. Certainly, the historian will be interested in concepts and values expressed in the texts—at least for the purposes of intellectual history. And the student in the Bet Midrash certainly will (or should) want to understand the talmudic realia so as to able to properly extrapolate to contemporary circumstances. Nonetheless, the differences between the interests of the two are usually fairly obvious. The academician is more likely to be interested in what Rava ate, whereas the student of the Bet Midrash is more likely to be interested

in what blessing he recited over the food.

In discussing the relevance of academic talmudic study to the Bet Midrash, it should be obvious that it is only the third area (i.e., that of methodology) that is of interest to me here. Clearly, a student of the Bet Midrash should not have any less reverence for the Sages due to new methodologies in the study of Torah, nor should the broader agenda be any different—even with new methods, one is still interested in bringing the Talmud into life as a religious and spiritual force.

It should also be noted that in the spirit of King Solomon's observation that there is nothing new under the sun, there is very little truly new in academic Talmud study. That is to say, virtually every tool in the academician's toolbox was already employed at times by the rishonim. [1] The difference, however, is one of priority or emphasis. While an academician may be focused on splitting the Talmud apart into its historical layers as a matter of course, the rishonim who employ such a methodology do so sporadically, and only because textual problems or difficulties in the sugya, both internal and external, have forced them to do so.

What follows are a number of differences in methodology that typically (or sometimes stereotypically) distinguish between the interests of the academy and that of the Bet Midrash. The list is not meant to be comprehensive, but will focus on those methodologies that are of greatest relevance to the student in the Bet Midrash and often enhance the study of Torah.

1. Girsaot

The question of ascertaining the correct text, logically speaking, is equally relevant to the academic scholar and the talmid hakham. However, both because of the relative difficulty of access to other textual witnesses, as well as the effect of the printed text (especially the Vilna shas) in leaving some with the impression of its fixed and unchanging nature, most students in the Bet Midrash are either unaware of questions of textual accuracy, or not terribly interested. Recent printings of the Talmud have started to bring some of these textual variants in the margins, and the dikdukei soferim has been available for almost a century and a half. Nonetheless, these issues are usually not on the minds of most students in the Bet Midrash. In truth, most of the significant textual variants have already been mined and noted by the rishonim and aharonim—they frequently serve as the basis of dispute between earlier authorities. Certainly there are cases where awareness of alternate texts will solve problems that arise for the student in the Bet Midrash, but most of the unnoted variants are probably more relevant for issues of language and scribal practices.

2. Texts of Interest

Academicians are often interested in a broader set of rabbinic texts than the typical member of the Bet Midrash. Study in the Bet Midrash, in most cases, focuses (or at least until recently has focused) primarily on the Talmud Bavli. To the academician, the other bodies of rabbinic literature often offer alternative perspectives on the same issues, or may hint to the historical development of ideas found in the Bavli. Of course, this interest is not fundamentally new. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed a resurgence in interest in the Talmud Yerushalmi as well as the various collections of rabbinic Midrashim. Both of these bodies of literature have been the subjects of many commentaries, especially in the last two to three centuries. Much of this literature was known to the rishonim, and certainly was the subject of study, but very little in the way of commentaries (to the extent that they were even composed) have survived, perhaps a reflection of the peripheral nature of those texts with respect to study in the Bet Midrash.[2] (That peripheral nature of the texts is also indicated by the tendency to harmonize those texts with the Bavli—which generally entails both reading the Bavli's presentation of ideas into those texts, and reflexively leveling the actual texts themselves to match the parallels found in the Bavli.) There is little doubt, however, that reintroduction of other works of rabbinic literature has served to broaden the horizons of the Bet Midrash and enrich the study of Torah.

3. Layers

One of the major tools of the academician is the parsing of the text into historical layers. In particular, there is an assertion (correct on the whole) that a differentiation can be drawn in the Bavli between the Amoraic layer, or the meimra, and the anonymous material in the Talmud, which usually reflects a later editorial or redactional stage of interpretation. The significance of this assertion is that it raises the possibility that while the anonymous editorial layer of the text offers one understanding of an Amoraic statement, an alternative possible understanding of the statement may exist. (Sometimes this alternative is actually found in the Yerushalmi, or in another sugya in the Bavli.)

This is perhaps the most controversial aspect of academic Talmud study—the assertion that the understanding of the anonymous layer of the Talmud may not reflect the only possible meaning, or perhaps even the original meaning. This possibility presents two kinds of religious problems—the theological and the pragmatic. Theologically speaking, how do we have the audacity to claim greater understanding of what an amora said than the later (anonymous) sages who compiled the Bavli? Pragmatically speaking, what does this mean for normative

purposes? If one asserts that the amora meant something different from the explanation offered by the Talmud, what would that imply for contemporary practices?

In truth, neither problem need be regarded as particularly compelling. On the pragmatic level, the impact on halakha is non-existent; legal systems generally do not burrow back into the past to travel paths not taken. Once the law has taken a certain course, it continues on that path. Put differently, we pasken not based upon the rulings of the amoraim but rather by how they were understood and implemented by the redactors of the Bavli, the Mesadrei haShas.

Regarding the question of how we might possess a greater understanding of the words of the amoraim, two points should be considered. First, frequently the editors understood everything that we understand, but may have been taking into account other factors and information in their interpretation (or perhaps better, reinterpretation), including other contradictory texts and alternative versions. Second, we usually have insight into alternatives only because we have information that wasn't necessarily in front of an individual editor—i.e., we possess either other sugyot in the Bavli, or parallels in the Yerushalmi. The analogue would be to the famous medieval aphorism, "pygmies on the shoulders of giants." It is also worth noting that instances in which one can assert with any degree of certitude that an interpretation other than the one offered by the editors is more correct are rare—in most cases one can, at best, only speculate.

Most significant, however, is that this methodology was not invented by modern scholars. The Ba`alei HaTosafot in numerous places in their commentary note the distinction between what the amoraim said, and how the Gemara (or a particular Gemara) interpreted their words. Tosafot in a number of places [3] observe that the solution to a contradiction between two sugyot that cite an amoraic statement differently is to distinguish between what the amora actually said and how the Gemara in each place (immediately following the amora's words, which often looks as if it is actually the end of his statement, rather than an explanation of it[4]) understands his statement. The actual statements are identical, but the differing explanations reflect a debate between the two sugyot in how to understand the amora.

4. Realia

Understanding the historical and cultural context in which the Bavli was composed is of great interest to academicians, both in terms of the history itself and because it may shed light on the meaning of some texts. The tendency in

most contemporary Batei Midrash is to be much more interested in concepts and theory than in any realia. (In its extreme form, consider those who study the laws of shehitah while never having seen a living cow.) Of course, many situations demand an understanding of realia in order to make heads or tails of various statements. Obviously, one cannot understand the passages in Shabbat that deal with weaving or knots without understanding how a loom (from the talmudic era) worked or what sailors knots look like.

But sometimes, lack of appreciation of realia stems from being unaware of how different their world was from ours. Takes for example the practice of vatikin, those who begin shaharit at sunrise, of which the Talmud speaks glowingly. Most contemporary students of Talmud assume that the greatness of those who pray with the sunrise is the fact that they awaken so early in the day. However, such an interpretation is almost certainly incorrect. In the preindustrial world, people generally went to bed shortly after dark and usually woke up well before sunrise.[5] Most people were already at work in the fields by the time the sun rose. (In light of this point we understand the Mishnah in Berakhot [2:4] that speak of workers reading the shema and praying while up on a scaffold or in a tree.) If anything, the greatness of those who prayed with the sunrise was that they delayed going to work until they could say the Shema and pray at the ideal time. Alternatively, one might consider the greatness of vatikin as having the good fortune to be able to time one's Shema to come out at sunrise—recall that they had no means of telling time the way we do today as there were no watches or clocks. Thus, when attainable, a greater awareness of the realia of the talmudic era is not merely an enhancement of traditional study, but also a sine qua non for a correct understanding of many passages.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the bread and butter of study in the Bet Midrash remains the havayot of Abaye and Rava. Whether the study be for the purpose of ascertaining the halakha, or for a more theoretical clarification of talmudic concepts, the traditional approach still will occupy the bulk of the student's labor. Nonetheless, there are many occasions where methodologies, whose roots are in traditional talmudic interpretation but which have been adopted as the primary tools in the Academy, can prove quite useful in traditional Talmud study. Sometimes they address issues not raised by the traditional commentaries, and on other occasions they offer alternative possibilities to solving problems raised by those commentaries. The question of approach need not be an either/or proposition; new methodologies can supplement the old, without supplanting them. Adopting

additional methods serves to enrich our understanding of the Talmud and expand the vistas of students of Torah. When utilized properly by those who dwell in the Bet Midrash, and who possess the appropriate reverence for Hazal and respect for talmudic authority, these tools serve to illuminate and to glorify Torah.

[1] The only obvious exception that comes to mind is the use of literary analysis in the study of aggadah in particular.
[2] This is true not only for the commentaries, but for the texts themselves. The Talmud Yerushalmi survives, more or less, in one manuscript (ms. Leiden). Any chapter in the Yerushalmi not preserved in that manuscript (e.g., the last three chapters of Y. Shabbat, the third chapter of Y. Makkot and the last seven chapters of Y. Niddah) are completely lost to us. Similarly, the Tosefta survives in one complete manuscript (ms. Vienna) and one that covers just beyond the first four orders (ms. Erfurt).
[3] Bava Batra 176a s.v.goveh, Bava Metzi`a 112a s.v. ’uman, Shabbat 10b s.v. sha’ni. Also note the textual instincts of Tosafot Shabbat 4a s.v. de’amrinan.
[4] Usually the simplest way to distinguish is that the meimra is usually in Hebrew whereas the explanation is typically in Aramaic.
[5] For an extensive treatment of night and sleep patterns in the pre-industrial world, see Roger A. Ekirch, At Day’s Close: Night in Times Past, 2005.