Dialogue and "Distance":
Cognitive-Developmental Theories and the Teaching of *Talmud*

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In many Jewish day schools the teaching of *Talmud* is seen as an important, but difficult, endeavor. What makes this task particularly challenging is the fact that the Babylonian *Talmud* (*Talmud Bavli*) is so unique; our students have not been exposed to any literary work that resembles it. The *Bavli*'s unusual character is the result of a distinct style of dialogue utilized by its redactors/editors to weave together an array of disparate sources from different time periods. Positions are challenged and these challenges are then undermined on a consistent basis. In addition, many components within the argumentative framework of the *sugya* (coherent *Talmudic* textual unit) are ambiguous, tangential, and elliptical. Arguments are often non-linear in nature and fail to offer legal resolutions. Indeed, the string of attacks and counterattacks, which functions as the building blocks of each *sugya*, lends a degree of instability to the individual points of view proposed throughout its pages. This volatility is surprising for a seminal religious text where students may expect to uncover a well-defined religious vision or a clear perspective on any issue discussed within its pages.

A *Talmud* educator might be tempted to mask the ambiguities and overcome the challenges that the *Bavli* presents by teaching isolated pieces of larger *sugyot* in an attempt to convey a synthetic message. In this way, the rabbis emerge as a group of people with a particular viewpoint. However, as David Kraemer argues, the very nature of the *Bavli* itself as an argumentative text testifies to an acknowledgment, on the part of the editors of the *Bavli*, that there is no definable truth. Sequences of deliberation produce polyphony of opinion on any given subject and make access to one truth difficult. According to Kraemer, the *Bavli* strives to convince the reader of the viability of all of the perspectives presented therein, even if such opinions contradict one another.[1] Our own research in the field of socio-cognitive developmental psychology has prompted us to consider the educational value of presenting this argumentative and often contradictory text to the students as it is, rather than opting for curricula that explain away the texts' difficulties. We have observed that the argumentative form of expression utilized by the *Bavli* reflects that its editors used a redactional style that is not only consistent with a particular theological perspective on "truth," as Kraemer argues,[2] but also with what we know to be important cognitive processes.

There is educational value in presenting the argumentative and often contradictory Talmud *to students as it is, rather than opting for curricula that explain away the difficulties. The Talmud style is not only consistent with a particular theological perspective on "truth," but also with what we know to be important cognitive processes.*

COGNITIVE THEORY AND THE TALMUD *BAVLI*

We believe that the unique nature of the *Bavli* creates enormous educational potential despite its inherent difficulties. This view emerges directly from our understanding of the socio-cognitive approaches of Lev Vygotsky and Irving Sigel. Vygotsky is seen as the progenitor of a set of theories that reverses the usually understood sequence of cognitive development.[3] Instead of seeing knowledge as transmitted in a unidirectional manner from person to person, Vygotsky stresses the importance of knowledge existing interpersonally, in the (give-and-take) interactions among people within the larger society. Knowledge is created through an interactive process and then is internalized by the individuals involved.[4] As applied to the field of education, a Vygotskyan perspective emphasizes the social nature of learning and suggests that students be engaged together in learning activities. Through such a process, Vygotzky believes, a higher level of cognitive functioning is achieved, that is, students internalize increasingly complex understandings of the material. In fact, Vygotzky would have found a great example of this in the dialogic *sugyot* of the *Bavli*. His theories have inspired us to postulate that the redactors of the *Talmud* themselves recognized the pedagogical value of dialogue.

In addition, while Vygotsky's work highlights the importance of social interactions in the learning process, later theorists have discussed the types of interactions that are most likely to result in cognitive growth. Contemporary developmental psychologist Irving Sigel conducted research on interactions that force students to grapple with discrepancies, resolve apparent contradictions, or deal with information that does not meet their expectations.[5] Such inter-

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actions cause students to "distance" themselves from the particular material (e.g., text) or idea that presents the difficulty. When confronted with such discrepancies students, Sigel argues, create increasingly complex mental representations of the idea at hand. They mentally manipulate it, so to speak, in order to resolve the contradiction with which they are faced. This increased cognitive activity fosters a more complex understanding of the idea being discussed. "Distancing behaviors," or those behaviors that lead a student to confront and resolve discrepancies, Sigel believes, are fundamental to effective education.[6] It is this process that gives power to educational strategies such as questioning, comparing, and contrasting.

In a Babylonian sugya Sigel's "distancing" theory plays out on two levels. On one level, when a reader encounters discrepancies within the content of the text (e.g., Rabbi X in discussion with Rabbi Y), an opportunity for distancing is created in that the reader must attempt to understand two (or more) opposing points of view on a given topic. A second level of distancing occurs as discrepancies are found between the content of the text and the reader's expectations. For example, students might expect a resolution to an argument, or at least the linear development of a discussion as the text progresses. Instead, what they encounter is a disruption in the flow of the argument (e.g., a seemingly unrelated quotation from an earlier source, an aggadic story, etc.). The reader is thereby prompted to start grappling with the text by asking questions, such as: Why does the text unfold in this way? What are the redactors trying to convey? How do subsequent steps in the argument relate to the initial dialogue between rabbis X and Y? In its non-linearity the text provides many such opportunities for cognitive distancing. In fact, the structure of the Babylonian sugya provides embedded stimuli that generate the type of cognitive environment that can enable students to come to deeper understandings of the issues raised within it. As such, the Bavli's text is uniquely constructed in a way that not only reflects the advantages of the interpersonal construction of knowledge, but which also demands the reader's participation in this process.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TALMUD EDUCATION

We propose that there is much to be gained in a pedagogic approach to Talmud that is influenced by the ideas of the developmental theorists cited above. We would like to encourage Talmud educators to create "instructional interactions" in their classrooms that address the dialogical possibilities inherent in these texts. In such a pedagogic approach instructors would concentrate on utilizing the redactional strategies of the Bavli's editors, including question and answer, challenge and counter-challenge, digressions, diversions in argumentation, and ambiguities as "thinking devices."[7] Instructors would take advantage of the text's ability to create moments of discrepancy. Rather than being explained away, the textual non-sequiturs would be appreciated for their ability to "distance" the reader. The instructor, by drawing students' attention to these aspects of the text and by asking them to consider what can be learned from the particular way the text is structured, would generate an additional level of "distancing" to help the reader cognitively engage with the issues of the sugya. The overall goal of the instructor would be focused upon not only helping students understand the meaning of the words in the text, but also

upon encouraging them to consider the thought processes of the editors in weaving together different opinions to create the dialogue that exists. To achieve this, students should be prompted to offer opinions about the content (e.g., "I think Rava is trying to say X...") as well as about the process (e.g., "I think the editors have set Rava up as a dissenting voice in the argument because..."). And, by emphasizing the process through which a sugya unfolds (e.g., letting the students' questions, confusions, and frustrations become part of the learning endeavor), we believe that an optimal interactive setting would be created amongst the students paralleling that of the Bavli, one in which students engage the text along with their classmates in order to construct new meaning.[8]

Through such methods, students may come to realize that the process by which a text forces a reader to engage its contents is itself a goal of the text. Possibly, when students fail to find a "bottom line" or a clear message in the text they will become less frustrated by the search. They may learn to recognize that texts have the ability to speak *with* us, as well as *to* us, and that more meaning can emerge upon careful analysis of each step in an argument. They may come to understand and value this process. We also hope that they will learn to match the Talmud's word "with a counter word,"[9] just as the Bavli's editors modeled for them, and recognize that final outcomes, including halakhic resolutions and clearly stated views, are not necessarily the goal of the Talmud.

ADDITIONAL EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Educators at the post-secondary level often speak of their dissatisfaction with the ability of their students to analyze texts. Possibly, such students have become accustomed to looking for "a right answer" and have not been sufficiently encouraged to extract meaning. We believe that when Talmud instructors employ teaching methods in the secondary school curriculum of the Jewish day school that consider socio-cognitive theories, this type of education can have an impact upon the way students approach other subjects. Indeed, educators can use the Talmudic textual template as a basis for approaching other subject matter. We would like to suggest that controversies become the basis of the discussions to which students can add their voices and viewpoints.[10]

Finally, grappling with a text's ambiguities may ultimately lead students to feel more comfortable with the "gray areas" that are an inevitable part of life. By highlighting the importance of dialogue in the learning process educators can provide valuable lessons regarding the importance of learning from others, even if this involves interpersonal disagreement. Rather than seeing disagreement as "conflict," students will hopefully come to recognize that a diversity of perspectives can provide an opportunity for learning and growth. Such lessons have the potential to contribute to a school's efforts to build students' interpersonal skills, such as problem solving and conflict management.[11]

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ENDNOTES:

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3. Kraemer, op. cit., pp. 102-105.
3. Vygotsky, Lev S. *Mind in Society*, ed. Michael Cole. Cambridge,

MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.

4. Hausfather, Samuel J. "Vygotsky and Schooling: Creating a Social Context for Learning" in *Action in Teacher Education* 18 (1996):1-10; Wertsch, James A. *Vygotsky and the Social Formation of the Mind*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985, pp. 59-76; Kozulin, Alex. *Psychological Tools: A Sociocultural Approach to Education*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 63.

5. Sigel, Irving E. "The Centrality of a Distancing Model for the Development of Representational Competence" in *The Development of Meaning and Psychological Distance*. Rodney R. Cocking and K. Ann Renninger eds. Hillside, NJ: Erlbaum, 1993, 141-158; Sigel, Irving E. and Todd D. Kelly. "A Cognitive Developmental Approach to Questioning," in *Questions and Discussion: A Multidisciplinary Study*, J. T. Dillon, ed. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1988, pp. 105-134.

6. Sigel, Irving E. and Todd D. Kelly. "A Cognitive Developmental Approach to Questioning," op.cit., p. 106; Copple, Carol, Irving E. Sigel and Ruth Saunders, *Educating the Young Thinker*. New York: Van Nostrand, 1979, p. 25.

7. Wertsch, James V. and Jennifer A. Bivens. "Social Origins of Mental Functioning," in *The Development of Meaning and Psychological Distance*, Rodney R. Cocking and K. Ann Renninger, eds. Hillside, NJ: Erlbaum, 1993, p. 212.

8. Interestingly, *Havruta* is commonly used for *Talmud* learning. While the topic is beyond the scope of this paper, such an approach can be seen as both a manifestation of a Vygotskyan interpersonal learning approach and as a way of helping students grapple with apparent discrepancies in the text.

9. Wertsch, James V. and Jennifer A. Bivens. "Social Origins of Mental Functioning." Op cit., pp. 203-218; Wertsch, James V. and Ana Luiza B. Smolka, "Continuing the dialogue: Vygotsky, Bakhtin, and Lotman," in *Charting the Agenda: Educational Activity after Vygotsky*, Harry Daniels, ed. London: Routledge, 1993, pp. 69-92; Lotman, Yu. M. "Text Within a Text," *Soviet Psychology* 26 (1988b): pp. 32-51.

10. Hoadley, Christopher M. and Marcia C. Linn. "Teaching Science through Online, Peer Discussions: SpeakEasy in the Knowledge Integration Environment," *International Journal of Science Education* 22 (2000), pp. 839-857. These authors found that the students achieved more when the teachers inserted the voices of certain historical scientists (e.g., Kepler and Newton) into an artificial (online) dialogue designed for the students to enter. Hoadley and Linn found that this artificially constructed dialogue provided increased content understanding and increased motivation and participation. They also found that these dialogical conditions forced the students to confront their fellow classmates directly and that these conditions were ultimately a successful pedagogical tool in enabling the students to gain an appreciation for multiple opinions.

11. For more on this, see Kress, Jeffrey S. and Maurice J. Elias, "Social and Emotional Learning in the Jewish Classroom: Tools for a Strong Jewish Identity" in the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 77 (2001), pp. 182-190. Also for a discussion of Vygotsky and the impact his theory has had on research in spiritual development, see Estep, James Riley, Jr., "Spiritual Formation as Social: Toward a Vygotskyan Developmental Perspective" in *Religious Education* 97(2002), pp. 141-164.

Pedagogies of Engagement

point of view,[8] layering the text study with activities designed to create independent learning /text access skills, appealing to multiple intelligences, helping students make personal meaning, and creating many opportunities to share and cooperate in discovering the power and wonder of the Biblical text. Intensive teacher training and support are part of this initiative that seeks to teach the text to day school students in the original Hebrew, thereby helping them become lovers of *Torah* study and highly competent in both textual knowledge and interpretive approaches.

Thus the Melton Research Center is trying to implement learner-centered models and approaches to teaching and learning in a variety of educational settings. All Melton Projects have extensive evaluation components by both internal and external evaluators to give both formative and summative reflections on our projects. For more information check out the Melton Website: http://www.jtsa.edu/davidson/melton/index.shtml. ✹
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ENDNOTES:

1. Feden, P.D. and R. M. Vogel. *Methods of Teaching: Applying Cognitive Science to Promote Student Learning*. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003.

2. Wiggins, G. and J. McTighe. *Understanding by Design*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1998.

3. Millis, B.J. and P. G. Cottell, Jr. *Cooperative Learning for Higher Education Faculty*. Phoenix, AZ: Onyx Press, 1998.

4. Wolfe, P. *Brain Matters: Translating Research Into Classroom Practice*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2001.

5. De Houwer, A. "Two or More Languages in Early Childhood: Some General Points and Practical Recommendations," in *AILA News*, Volume 1, Number 1. International Association of Applied Linguistics (ERIC Digest EDO-FL-99-03), July 1999. See also: Eric Digest. Fostering Second Language Development in Young Children. National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, October 1999. www.cal.org/ericcll/digest/ncrcds04.html

6. Marzano, R.J. and John S. Kendall. *A Comprehensive Guide to Designing Standards-Based Districts, Schools and Classrooms*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1996.

7. Reeves, D.B. *Making Standards Work*. Englewood, CO: Advanced Learning Press, 1996..

8. Conservative Judaism believes in revelation, the uncovering of truth emanating from God. We recognize that there is a range of views within Conservative Judaism about what is revelation, all of which understand revelation as being mediated by humans. In interpreting the Bible, we reject fundamentalism, making no assumption that the *Torah* is a historical accounting and it is certainly not a scientific accounting. We do assume that it contains great ideas, values and meaning; that it reflects the meeting of God and Jews and it is a place where God and Jews continue to meet.