

Introduction

Jon A. Levisohn and Jane L. Kanarek

Why create standards and benchmarks for the study of rabbinic literature? We, the authors of this introduction, came to the work on standards for the teaching and learning of Rabbinics not as curriculum designers but rather as scholars who care deeply about rabbinic literature and believe strongly in its important role in contemporary Jewish life. That may seem like an obvious thing to say. How could Mishnah, Talmud and the rest of the classical rabbinic corpus not be important? Yet in the contemporary educational environment Rabbinics has too often become marginalized in the curriculum—not through any conscious decision, but as an outcome of other factors. And even in schools where rabbinic literature does receive significant curricular attention, teachers are often left to ask and answer difficult questions about what and how to teach with little guidance from the field.

What factors have led to this situation? In the view of some, Rabbinics, especially the most intricate argumentation of legal disputes in the Talmud, is considered to be too hard for many students. The views of the classical rabbis are sometimes assumed to be too distant and alien. The language of the text, especially the Aramaic of the Talmud, is unfamiliar to students. Understanding the texts seems to require an astonishing and intimidating amount of background knowledge, an obstacle for students but also, significantly, an obstacle for teachers. We might also point to a comparison between the subject of Rabbinics and the subject of Bible, which seems (at least on the surface, although we might challenge these

assumptions) to be much more accessible. When faced with the choice between sailing on the “sea of Talmud” and, say, proceeding through a coherent set of biblical narratives about the development of a particular family that becomes a nation, teachers and curriculum designers understandably have tended to prefer the latter. Once we add in the broader cultural environment, in which the study of Bible has a familiarity and a purchase that the study of rabbinic literature does not, Rabbis hardly stands a chance.

This, then, is the first argument for why we believe in the importance of this project: to help to reclaim a place for the study of Rabbis in our schools.

There are, to be sure, many schools that have maintained a place for Rabbis, confident that Judaism is a rabbinic rather than a biblical religion and that the close attention to rabbinic texts yields not just intellectual insight but spiritual delight. There are many excellent educators and educational leaders who have shared their passion for this material with students and families. But here we have observed a second challenge. Those excellent educators and educational leaders frequently find themselves without a coherent and consistent framework that provides the kind of sequencing of topics and skills that characterize well-defined and well-articulated school subjects. Even when schools choose rabbinic texts according to “themes” (such as, say, lifecycle or ethics), they lack a clear articulation of the learning goals that they hope students will develop over time. What do we really want our students to know and be able to do, after a unit on, say, rabbinic texts about tzedakah or respect for one’s parents?

Thus, the second argument for this project is that it can help to address the challenge of idiosyncrasy in our educational efforts, to encourage greater regularity and systematization in our teaching. To be sure, there should always be room for spontaneity in the classroom, as students discover new and unexpected ideas. But intentionality is the hallmark of pedagogic responsibility. We have to know why we are doing what we are doing, and why we are asking students to do whatever we are asking them to do. Developing standards and benchmarks is a path towards that goal. Particularly in a field like Rabbinics where sequentially is elusive, standards and benchmarks provide a framework for what can lead to what, and how we can build on the work that we do at one stage when we arrive at the next. Encouraging first-grade students to debate the order for lighting Hanukkah candles lays the groundwork for later study of the Talmudic debate between the schools of Shammai and Hillel on the same topic (B. Shabbat 21b). But this can only happen with the kind of transparent mapping of the subject across grade levels that is enabled by the use of standards.

A third and related argument for this project is that standards are a tool for the empowerment of teachers. This may seem counter-intuitive. How can imposing constraints, limiting teachers' choices about what topics and aspects of the subject to cover, possibly be empowering? But it is precisely the discipline of knowing what we are seeking to accomplish that enables us to flourish in developing our efforts to achieve those goals. The clarity of the standards empowers teachers to construct focused, directed lessons and curricular units. The standards help to demystify the complexity of rabbinic literature, a process that encourages teachers to apply what they already do know about teaching to this new subject area. Nor is this limited to teachers.

Students, too, benefit when we pull back the curtain and reveal our goals, enabling them to understand what they are working on and, ideally, providing them with a sharpened sense of the kinds of progress that they are making and why studying Rabbinics matters in their lives.

Finally, standards—these standards in particular—have the potential to help educators move past debates about skills versus content. It is certainly true that the approach to standards adopted in this project emphasizes what students ought to be able to do with the knowledge that they develop, rather than merely what they ought to know (in the sense of what information they can “possess”). For that reason, there are no itemized lists of key terms or concepts. At each moment when the team was tempted to develop such a list, and there were many, we reminded ourselves of our fundamental beliefs: that no list could possibly be comprehensive; that the promotion of a list encourages teaching towards that list; and that behind every list that we might generate stood a more ambitious benchmark if we were just creative and thoughtful enough to discern it. Thus, the promotion of standards is not about elevating skills over content. That is a false dichotomy. Instead, it is more appropriate to understand the standards as an articulation—one articulation, surely not the only one possible—of what it means to know Rabbinics, indeed, what the field of Rabbinics is all about.

In the end, standards and benchmarks do not represent timeless truths about the subject. They are tools—tools to help teachers to be more playful, more deliberative, more transparent, and more sequential. In the best case, standards are not slavishly followed, but rather they enable

principled discussion about what to teach and how, and what to assess and how. And standards

can be liberating for teachers, because they can empower them to prioritize, to say “no” to the text or the learning activity that does not serve the learning goals.

All this is true of standards in general, and it is true of the standards for Rabbinics in particular, for all the reasons we cited above. Rabbinics is hard, and it has been increasingly marginalized in many Jewish day schools. It has been the site of a great deal of idiosyncrasy, where teachers may find themselves bouncing between technical jurisprudential argumentation, theological and ethical discussion, and close interpretation of biblical texts—because all these, and more, are found in rabbinic texts. And teachers often find themselves torn between a sense that students ought to develop “text skills” and a desire to help students to find meaning. Standards and benchmarks do not magically make these issues disappear, but they do provide a healthy framework for deliberation, for better and more principled teaching, and ultimately, for deeper and more meaningful learning for our students.