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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

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If these first decades are an indication of things to come, the twenty-first century will be an astonishingly complex time. We face an ever-increasing and dizzying array of technologies that shred our attention while monetizing our every action and shaping our choices and behavior.[1] We are barreling toward a climate crisis that is slipping into catastrophe, a collective tragedy that raises existential questions as well as critical issues around environmental and distributive justice. With the enormous shifts in political and economic orders, we are once again witnessing armed conflict and total war on a scale thought to be a thing of the past; this problem will only intensify as resources, and security, become increasingly scarce. Social and economic inequality are their highest since the Gilded Age, and although the United States is being forced toward an uncomfortable reckoning with the racial discrimination and the patriarchalism that undergirds so much of its culture and society, this

[1] Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

particular symphony of inequity is far from finished. The passive spread of disinformation through social media and the active measures of those who wish to sow dissent have compounded the growing social and political polarization. And, of course, the continuation of disease and global pandemics has further contributed to social and economic entropy.

How are we to respond to these and other complicated, nearly intractable issues? By what principles or criteria are we to determine or discern the right course of action? The disciplines of ethics and moral philosophy seek to answer these questions from a variety of angles, including metaethics (reflections on the nature of moral reasoning), normative ethics (understanding which norms or values ought to guide human life), and applied ethics (deciding what one ought one to do in specific situations). Each of these fields operates within its own areas of concern and has its own animating questions and methods, but all deal with the messy and often heart-breaking business of making difficult choices. And yet, each approach also carries limitations. For instance, the use of cut-and-dry rubrics or decision trees based on a set of principles (called deontological ethics) may impede our ability to appreciate the complexity of a subject and the impact of an action. Utilitarian visions of morality justify the right action as the one whose consequences produce the most good, but such visions may be subjective or unclear, and it can be difficult to determine what the outcome of any given action will be.

This essays in this issue of the *Journal of Textual Reasoning* propose a different approach to moral reasoning, modeling it as a conversation between an individual or community and a specific ethical prompt. An ethical prompt is not simply a nudge or push to do the right thing, but a source or text—though it could be a work of art, a concrete experience—that sparks a process of thinking, reflection, and discernment. This encounter expands our mental toolbox by providing new data and methods of reasoning, thereby deepening our capacity for ethical decision-making. In some cases, these texts may offer us values or models that can be imported into our daily lives. The primary aim of this type of reasoning, borne out in the present collection of studies, is to enter into a

conversation that stretches and transforms our moral frameworks rather than to identify or adopt wholesale responses from ancient sources.

While numerous texts might function as an ethical prompt, these essays center on rabbinic sources, and on the Babylonian Talmud in particular. Collectively, they argue that sustained engagement with the Talmud can offer new ways to think through a constellation of the most pressing ethical, legal, and existential questions of our day. Without romantically assuming that Jewish sources have all of the answers, we seek to understand what we might glean from Talmudic literature in order to overcome tired paradigms and, as Ludwig Wittgenstein would have it, "to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle."[2] We are not aiming to find ready-made solutions, but searching for new pathways of thinking that allow us to encounter our own blinders and assumptions, and move beyond them.

To avoid putting the cart before the horse, some words on the Talmud are in order. Jewish law (called *halakhah*) is, in a sense, a conversation across the generations; it is a discourse spurred by specific questions and cases embedded in time and place, but one which is driven by a jurisprudential dialogue across time and across geography, spanning from ancient Israel to every place that Jews have lived.[3] The lodestar of this broad and variegated discourse is the Talmud, a mélange of law and legend that is often curious and compelling in equal measure.[4]

The Talmud as such is a literary combination of two discrete compositions. The first of these is the Mishnah, a rabbinic document of primarily apodictic law (c. 200 CE) written in Hebrew. Though it can also

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[2] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2001), 309.

[3] For more extensive explorations of the Jewish legal system, see Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Menachem Elon, *Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles*, trans. Bernard Auerbach and Melvin J. Sykes (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994); Chaim N. Saiman, *Halakhah: The Rabbinic Idea of Law* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2018).

[4] Barry Scott Wimpfheimer, *The Talmud: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

be read on its own, the Mishnah is most often studied through its later rabbinic interpretations. The most important of these is the Gemara, whose Aramaic and Hebrew discussions (called *sugyot*) track the structure of the Mishnah and explore its words in a discursive, often dialectical manner. In fact, "*the* Talmud" is a misnomer; there are two: one redacted in Palestine circa 400 CE and the other in Babylonia circa 600 CE.[5] These different collections of rabbinic law and wisdom mirror one another, and there is much overlap, but they are still distinct. Jewish tradition has generally attributed a greater degree of authority to the Babylonian Talmud, called "the Bavli,"[6] a text that gained such cultural significance that for many individuals it has become personified as a proxy for Judaism and the Jewish people.

Why is it worthwhile to read Talmud–-as students, teachers, scholars in the twenty-first century—as a way to grapple with the complexities of contemporary ethics? The Talmud is a religiously important text that has long been at the core of Jewish curricula, and for many modern Jews, its voice remains authoritative. We should note, however, that many of its faithful students in *yeshivot* and seminaries do not conceive of their investigations into Talmudic dialectics as forays into fundamental questions of existence and moral philosophy. Indeed, reading the Talmud with an eye to normative ethics and moral reflection is neither an obvious pursuit nor a simple task. Rabbinic literature is filled with strange tales and fanciful dialectics, and topics in the Bavli span from messianic

[5] Scholars continue to debate how the redaction of the Talmud took place and when it was completed. The majority of scholars ascribe to a theory of post-amoraic redaction. On this view, a later group of sages known as the *stammaim* ("anonymous ones") collected the teachings and statements in the Talmud and edited them together, adding in their own anonymous commentary. For this view, see David Weiss Halivni, *The Formation of the Babylonian Talmud* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) and Richard Kalmin, *The Redaction of the Babylonian Talmud: Amoraic or Saboraic?* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1989). Others argue that the named sages within the Talmud (the *amoraim*) are also responsible for the anonymous portions of the text, pushing the date of redaction earlier. For this view, see Moulie Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Babylonian Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[6] When the essays in this issue refer to "the Talmud," they refer to the Bavli unless otherwise specified.

speculation and demonic remedies to prosaic discussions of who is responsible for the damages incurred by goring oxen or rampaging fire. Its stories frequently border on phantasm and the grotesque. Reading the Bavli with an eye to ethics often requires philosophical, literary, theological, and exegetical sensitivity—and no small measure of creativity.

And yet, while the Talmud may not be an obvious source for normative ethics, it is an unusually fruitful conversation partner precisely because of both its vastness and its oddness. The Talmud includes a remarkable diversity of forms and ideas. It is filled with laws, and thus speaks in the language of obligation, outlining what Robert Cover described as "jurisprudence of the social order"[7] while still emphasizing that there are many normative shades to that order. These legal dimensions are complemented, and often challenged, by the Talmud's tales, themselves a fertile site for narrative ethics. In addition, the very form of the Talmud makes it an excellent ethical prompt. It is a multi-layered text that includes the voices of many different rabbis arguing with one another, often across time and space. The many strata of the text, from the sayings of the early rabbis to the structure and analysis added by later redactors, are extended by exegetical layers of commentary on the sides of the page—and in the back of the book—that have been added throughout the centuries.

The Talmud is correctly famous for its digressions, but the Jewish cultures of "learning Talmud" also afford pride of place to those the who can read this text and produce many different interpretations. Talmud study can cultivate an intellectual approach that is inherently pluralistic, albeit one with limitations and boundaries. Valid questions and legal positions, even those at odds with the majority, endure as a part of Jewish legal discourse. The Talmud does not primarily seek to provide answers, but to solicit, and elicit, as many questions and viable options as possible. Many centuries ago, Nahmanides (1194–1270) argued that in the study of

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[7] Robert M. Cover, "Obligation: A Jewish Jurisprudence of the Social Order," *Journal of Law and Religion* 5.1 (1987): 65–74.

Talmud, a position or decision can never be proven to the extent that it curtails any further argument; in this realm, there are no truly dispositive answers.[8] This mirrors Maimonides's definition of "Talmud" as a mode of interpretation composed of "reflection, deducing conclusions from premises, developing implications of statements, comparing dicta, studying the hermeneutical principles by which the Torah is interpreted"[9] rather than the memorization of an ossified corpus of rabbinic statements. Talmud, argues Maimonides, is less a closed canon than a method of applying principles and investigating the pathways of the Oral Law in all of its fullness; this method of inquiry is embodied in the book called the Talmud, but it continues beyond the fixed pages of that text. Talmud study can aid in cultivating the skills, textual as well as interpretative, to formulate enduring questions and develop patterns of mind.

Beyond the exercise in reading a polyphonic text, it is fruitful to read Talmud because this ancient text reflects patterns of thought that are very different from our own. While the Talmud may present problems that we recognize, its authors, editors, and interlocutors come at them, and reason through them, in distinctive ways. As modern readers, we often cannot anticipate the answers the rabbis will propose to question, or the logical steps they will pursue in thinking through it. This brings new factors, values, mechanisms, and frameworks into our consideration of the issue at hand, widening our perspective. When the Talmud brings up issues that are of central concern to us, it often frames the question in ways that markedly diverge from contemporary discourse. In addition, the Talmud often brings up issues that its modern readers may initially find unimportant or irrelevant and asks us to take them seriously. The way in which the Talmud differs from its contemporary readers, its very

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[8] See Naḥmanides, *Milḥamot Ha-shem*, in *Kitvei Ramban*, vol. 1, ed. Bernard Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1963), 413–414.

[9] *Mishenh Torah, hilkhot talmud torah*, 1:11; as translated in Isadore Twersky, ed., *A Maimonides Reader* (Springfield, NJ: Behrman House, Inc., 1972), 65. See also Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 96–105; Hanina Ben-Menahem, "The Second Canonization of the Talmud," *Cardozo Law Review* 28.1 (2006): 37–51.

foreignness as a text, is a gift. The words of the Talmud rupture our moral certitude; we can no longer be as convinced of our own correctness. This disruption is a fruitful starting point for ethical reflection.

We live in a technological age that understands the importance of disruption and embraces paradigm shifts as the way to carve new paths forward. But disruptive innovation is itself rooted in the past. The pre-modern roots of rabbinic literature present sources of knowledge and wisdom that predate current moments of entanglement. Their ways of thinking do not conform to the keywords of modern ethical discourse; as such, they provide a powerful challenge to the paradigmatic hegemony that binds our horizons of possibility. Ancient religious sources can unseat our ways of thinking, puncturing regnant paradigms and unsettling our assumptions.[10] The Talmud is a challenge, forcing us to think differently, and through doing so, to act differently. To read the Talmud deeply and repeatedly is to be formed as a thinker. Over time, the conversation with the text has the power to shape the reader and the ways in which they reason about ethical challenges and reach moral conclusions. While many Jews have, historically, turned to the Talmud to look for precedents that can provide legal and moral guidance in their present day, engaging the Talmud as a conversation partner or ethical prompt provides a point of access for all readers, regardless of religious commitment or background. Approaching a *sugya* as a prompt, as a starting point for further thought, can provide us with a groundwork to better articulate and think through our moral questions.

Our turn to Talmud in this issue suggests that the reasoning and valuation of moral philosophy are not independently sufficient to answer complex human questions. But rather than seeking to enact legislation or normative ethics from these antique and medieval sources, our goal is to

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[10] See Deborah Bird Rose, Thom van Dooren, Matthew Chrulew, Stuart Cooke, Matthew Kearnes, and Emily O'Gorman, "Thinking Through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities," *Environmental Humanities* 1.1 (2012): 1–5.

"think with" the sources of the Talmud.[11] We are not looking for precedents and giving an answer that can be readily extrapolated and adapted to our contemporary context. This may be possible, but it is not our aim. Nor are we entering into the ritual grammar of studying Talmud in its traditional sense, which assumes a different orientation to the text. We have described our mode of engagement as "thinking with" the Talmud, but that is not the only way of referring it. Charles Altieri has described a form of interpretation that he calls "reading through," an affective and philosophically attentive form of ethical reading by which "we can gain a rich grammar for interpreting particular experiences or projecting self-images that have significant resonance in how we make decisions in the present."[12] These possibilities, ideas, images, and values become a part of our "mental furniture," a realm of potential reconfiguration allowing us to make different choices. Through the encounter with "words, images, exemplars, and prose and poetic forms" from texts far from our own experiential reality, suggests Francis X. Clooney, "we learn also to reread our own daily lives so as to make room for new choices."[13] Engagement with ancient texts matters because they expand the possibility of the present and the future.

This mode of "thinking with" rabbinic sources is already gaining ground within the field of Jewish ethics.[14] As Louis Newman artfully puts

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[11] This orientation is deeply influenced by a series of conferences and workshops on "Thinking With the Talmud," organized by Dana Hollander, Randi Rashkover, and Chaya Halberstam. We are grateful to the organizers and participants for helping us to develop both our pedagogy and our scholarship around these questions.

[12] Charles Altieri, *Canons and Consequences: Reflections on the Ethical Force of Imaginative Ideals* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 17.

[13] Francis X. Clooney, *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Śrī Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 134.

[14] See especially Louis Newman, "Of Woodchoppers and Respirators: The Problem of Interpretation in Contemporary Jewish Ethics" *Modern Judaism* 10.1 (1990): 17–42; Mark Washofsky, "The Woodchopper Revisited: Analogy, Halakhah, and Jewish Bioethics," in *Medical Frontiers and Jewish Law*, ed. Walter Jacobs (Pittsburgh: Freehof Institute of Progressive Halakhah, 2012): 1–62; Emily Filler, "Classical Rabbinic Literature and the Making of Jewish Ethics: Review," *Journal of Jewish Ethics* 1.1 (2015): 153–170; and Rebecca

it, contemporary Jewish ethics is best thought of as "a dialectical relationship [with the rabbis] in which finally no sharp distinction can be made between our voices and theirs."[15] Thinking with the text of the Talmud is a process of co-creation; the reader generates new ethical insights in conversation with the sources. Newman argues that this is not (only) a normative claim, but a descriptive one. While ethicists and halakhic decision-makers alike may present their engagement with the Talmud as a straightforward process of identifying principles within the text and then applying them to the case at hand, the reader is an active participant at every stage of the process, selecting the texts that they will use as precedent, deriving principles from them, and determining how to apply those principles to the case.

Elliott Dorff reaches a similar conclusion when he describes Jewish law as a "living organism" that adapts and evolves through a process of interpretation and application over time.[16] It is clear that the "evolution" of this organism is prompted not by changes in the text, but by changes in the communities of readers who push the meaning and application of the text in new directions. Within the broader realm of Talmud studies, there has also been increasing emphasis not only on the content of the text, but on the reasoning processes it encodes[17] and that shape its halakhic interpretation.[18] This focus on patterns of reasoning, in both the text and the

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Epstein-Levi, "Textual Relationships: On Perspective, Interpretive Discipline, and Constructive Ethics," *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 10.1 (2018).

[15] Newman, "Of Woodchoppers and Respirators," 37.

[16] Elliott Dorff, *For the Love of God and People* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2007): 60ff.

[17] See, for example, David Kramer, *The Mind of the Talmud*: *An Intellectual History of the Talmud* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Much of the work in this vein places increasing focus on the role of the Talmudic redactors in shaping how the text communicates with the readers. See, for example, Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Babylonian Talmud*, and Barry Wimpfheimer, *Narrating the Law: A Poetics of Talmudic Legal Stories* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

[18] See Adiel Schremer, "Toward Critical Halakhic Studies," Tikvah Working Paper 4 (2010), and Mark Washofsky, "What's So Special About Halakhic Reasoning? Cigarette Smoking, Jewish Law, and Rabbinical Decision-Making," in *Addiction and Its Consequences in Jewish*

interpreter, provides an illustration of the different forms a conversation between the text and the reader might take.

The work of feminist readers offers yet another illustration of the way contemporary ethical commitments might shape that conversation with the text. While some feminist readers seek to uncover voices within the text that have been silenced or overlooked, others push back directly against the content of the text, its claims, and the practices it has inscribed. As Judith Plaskow noted poignantly in her landmark book *Standing Again at Sinai*, "Torah—'Jewish' sources, 'Jewish' teaching—puts itself forward as *Jewish* teaching but speaks in the voice of only half of the Jewish people."[19] Proposals about how to remedy that absence—ethical, theological, halakhic, and cultural—are as varied as the community of readers itself.[20]

Our shared project reflects the influence of the French-Jewish philosopher and intellectual Emmanuel Levinas (1905–1995), whose Talmudic lectures delivered before the Colloquium of French-Speaking Jewish Intellectuals *(Le Colloque des Intellectuels Juifs de Langue Françai*se) addressed contemporary ethical conundrums from careful readings of *sugyot*. Equally critical of pietistic Talmudism and the arid philology of academic scholars,[21] Levinas argued that the abstruse and finely detailed

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Law, ed. Walter Jacob (Pittsburgh: Solomon B. Freehof Institute of Progressive Halakhah/Rodef Shalom Press, 2015), 37–88..

[19] Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: HaperCollins, 1990), 5.

[20] For a few different approaches, see Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*; Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judasim: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics (*Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998); and Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2004).

[21] See Samuel Moyn, "Emmanuel Levinas's Talmudic Readings: Between Tradition and Invention," *Prooftexts* 23.3 (2003): 338–364. See also Efraim Meir, *Levinas's Jewish Thought: Between Jerusalem and Athens* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2008); Elisabeth Goldwyn, *Reading Between the Lines: Form and Content in Levinas's Talmudic Readings*, trans. Rachel Kessel (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2015); Ira F. Stone, *Reading Levinas/Reading Talmud: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998); Étan Levine, "The Talmud in the Mind of Emmanuel Levinas," *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 4.2 (2001): 249–271;

Talmudic discussions "conceal an extreme attention to the Real."[22] These rabbinic discussions highlight the mundane and prosaic events of life in the encounter between human beings. Readers develop their ethical muscles through paying careful attention to the "unity and progression of thought in the text."[23] In his lectures, Levinas attempted to translate the particular ethical elements of Talmud into a common and inclusive idiom,[24] seeking to "extricate the universal intentions from the apparent particularism."[25] Reading Talmud thus plays a key role in ethical formation, and Levinas claimed that such intellectual reflection ought to be realized through worldly acts of care and concern.[26]

Complementing these new directions in the study of both Talmud and ethics, the present issue takes inspiration from the growing literature that examines Talmud pedagogy and the varied contexts in which the study of Talmud can serve diverse educational purposes.[27] These essays contribute to this emerging literature by offering a new focus on the ethical implications of reading and teaching Talmud. Within the field of rabbinics, there is also growing emphasis on the use of various critical

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and Claire Elise Katz, "Levinas—Between Philosophy and Rhetoric: The 'Teaching' of Levinas's Scriptural References," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 38.2 (2005): 159–171.

[22] Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 5.

[23] Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 32.

[24] Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 66.

[25] Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 5.

[26] Roland A. Champagne, *The Ethics of Reading According to Emmanuel Levinas* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998).

[27] Paul G. Socken, ed. *Why Study Talmud in the Twenty-First Century? The Relevance of the Ancient Text to our World* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009); Orit Kent and Elie Holtzer, *A Philosophy of Havruta: Understanding and Teaching the Art of Text Study in Pairs*, (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2014); Jane Kanarek and Marjorie Lehman, eds. *Learning to Read Talmud: What It Looks Like and How It Happens* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016); Susan Fendrick and Jon Levisohn, eds. *Turn It and Turn It Again: Studies in the Teaching and Learning of Classical Jewish Texts* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013).

lenses—including animal studies,[28] disability studies,[29] and discourses of power,[30] among others—to offer new frameworks for analyzing Talmudic literature. These essays draw on such theoretical and methodological approaches to offer a new way of approaching Talmud pedagogy and a new corpus of core texts for study.

The present collection of essays grew out of a workshop that sought to create a collective dialogue among participants about these texts, approaches to them, and the ways they connect to contemporary ethical issues. Reading slowly is part of our aim, and to this end, we have asked authors to choose a *sugya* that they find essential to cultivating heightened moral sensitivities in students today, one that contributes a distinctive way of thinking about ethical issues from a rabbinic perspective. As each scholar draws connections between ancient texts and modern concerns, they also offer faithful readings and critical analyses of the text on its own terms.

Our aim has been to create the armature of an educational framework that may be used by upper-level undergraduates, graduate students, and rabbinical students. A curriculum, to our mind, is composed of a series of materials that students encounter in a sequence that makes good sense and guides their thinking. Each essay explicitly engages the Talmud in thinking about contemporary moral issues and questions, but all do so with different starting points regarding *how* and *why* we ought to read Talmud as an ethical prompt. Rather than progressing through the material according to chronological order or advancing through rabbinic sources in an order from "easiest" to hardest," the essays unfold across a three-part structure meant to showcase different ways that scholars turn to the Talmud as textual partner in moral reasoning. Of course, these contributions are meant to be exemplary rather than exhaustive.

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[28] Mira Wasserman, *Jews, Gentiles, and Other Animals: The Talmud After the Humanities* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

[29] Julia Watts Belser, *Rabbinic Tales of Destruction: Sex, Gender, and Disability in the Ruins of Jerusalem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[30] Beth A. Berkowitz, *Execution and Invention*: *Death Penalty Discourse in Early Rabbinic and Christian Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

In a sense, we have chosen to follow the arguments of Grant Wiggins and Jack McTighe, central theorists of contemporary educational design, in suggesting that a curriculum ought to be conceived as "uncovering" a subject rather than "covering" it.[31] We hope that the present issue will be useful to instructors of Talmud as a prompt for their own thinking about the pedagogic work that they do, while also giving them some new ways of thinking as well as new materials.

The first set of essays takes the text of the Talmud as their starting point, paying close mind to the questions and issues that are implicitly and explicitly raised by its discussions. In other words, the particular *sugya*—chosen, of course, for a reason—serves as the prompt that spurs or sparks reflection. Deborah Barer looks at a *sugya* on lost property, exploring how the everyday occurrence of finding or losing property can reveal deeply held assumptions about proper behavior and what we owe to others. Jonathan Schofer examines the Talmudic expansion of a mishnah about the laws of reading Scripture on holidays, considering how aspects of this *sugya* may inspire or prompt ethical reflection. Sarra Lev looks at a *sugya* that highlights the interface of rumors, power, community, and extrajudicial punishment, considering the implications of shame and shunning. Elisha Ancselovits looks at the work of the *stam*, the anonymous redactors of the Talmud, as a guide for how to read more ethically. This first set of essays highlights the ways that the text shapes the ethical formation of the reader. How does the experience of reading these texts prompt new ethical consideration and reflection, both by challenging the reader and by offering them tools to think differently?

The second set of essays starts with a theory, idea, or question that then guides the author toward a *sugya*. From this orientation, the theory helps the author to understand the text, but the Talmud also helps to stretch, challenge, and compound their theory. Beth Berkowitz thinks about the idea of the udder as an indeterminate feature that confounds binary categories in the context of rabbinic discussions of meat and milk.

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[31] See Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, 2nd exp. ed. (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005).

Ariel Evan Mayse examines the interrelated ideas of solidarity, collective action, and individual responsibility through reading a *sugya* about fasting in times of drought and pestilence. The essays in this second group begin with a question or an idea and then turn to Bavli as an ethical prompt for thinking about it in new ways.

Essays in the third section begin with the problems of our world. Marjorie Lehman refers to her students as an ethical prompt that guides her reading—and her teaching—of rabbinic sources. These students bring questions, ideas, relationships, and identities to the texts, as well as moral outrage and inspiration, and the gap between the students and the text prompts conversation. Aryeh Cohen begins with injustice and social problems and then considers how to find examples in the Bavli that highlight activism, advocacy, and civil disobedience rooted in non-violence. He seeks to show to his students "the street as the context of the text that they are studying," and, in a certain sense, to do the opposite as well. For Mira Wasserman, it is the #MeToo moment and the importance of human responsibility that guide her reading of the Bavli. In this third section, authors identify a problem, or a set of problems, then look to the Bavli to help them think about those problems with nuance and texture. These authors strive to see ethical roads not traveled, pushing back against the assumptions of the ancient text, but pushing back against assumptions in the present as well.

Although these essays reflect different origins, different irritants that begin the process of ethical reflection, all "think with" the Talmud and engage deeply with its words. While these Talmudic texts may be read prior to the essays (and some essays assume that the reader has indeed read these texts first), they are also meant to be read alongside each essay. As you read through each piece, we invite you to ask: what makes this conversation productive, and to what end? Just as each author begins from a different starting place, readers may have different criteria to evaluate whether their reading has been successful. Those who start with the text may ask: has this process helped me think differently? Do I understand something new about the text or the world around me? Those who start with a theory or idea may ask: Has this process helped me refine that

theory, or understand its applications better? Those who start with the world may ask: has this process given me clarity about how I want to act in the world? Has it motivated a shift in how I understand my own commitments or role?

We recognize that, as a reader, you will not be drawn to each of these essays in the same way. You may find some exhilarating, others helpful, and still others frustrating. We invite you to pay attention to your reactions to each essay, as those responses may signal something about your own intuitions and commitments. Just as each author in this volume engages in a dialogue with the Talmud, we invite you to engage in a conversation with these essays. We hope that, through the process of reading and reasoning about them and the texts they engage, you will come to better understand what you think and why you think it, thereby developing your own ethical frameworks and modes of reasoning.

With so much wrong with the world, is more reading what we need? Especially of texts that ask more questions than the answers they provide, or of sources whose ethical concerns, vocabulary, and values are far from our own? We argue that it is. Engaging with these sources, precisely *because* of their difference, can help us move beyond the modes of thinking that entrap us. It can help us cultivate our sensitivity to others' perspectives, enabling us to learn across difference. It can help us build a generous disposition, making us willing to listen even when we vehemently disagree. By revisiting these ancient texts with new eyes, by being open and vulnerable enough to listen to them, whether or not we like what they have to say, we can deepen our formation as moral agents. If you find this conversation with the text productive, then this issue will have achieved its purpose.