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Shlomo's Short Guide to Unpacking Gemara

Talmud is the Oral Law, and not just in name. Until the 6th to 8th centuries of the Common Era, it was a memorized text transmitted orally. As such, its style is more about memorization and compactness than full explanations. The rabbis of old used some techniques which could be comparable to a .zip file of a computer today to make Talmud more transportable in someone's head. As I write D'verei Torah I often have to take passages of Talmud and unpack or un-zip to understand the passage.

I've been thinking of the process I use to do exactly that, and thought I'd teach some of that process so others can get the full experience of Talmud. So here are some of my ideas. I decided to take my slogan *It is a matter of Torah and I am required to learn* and use the passages it came from to explain this. For those that don't know it's actually a bit of toilet humor found in the middle of the tractate on prayer, Brachot. Yet as we unpack it, there a lot more going on than just a toilet joke.

The People of the Question

Jews are not the people of the book as much as they are the people of the question. No where is this more true than the Talmud where virtually everything is questioned and challenged. In that frame of mind there are always questions I keep ready to ask about a passage.

1. Are there any pronouns?
 - a. What do they reference?
2. Who said it?
 - a. Mishnah/Gemara/Baraita.
 - b. Amora or Tanna
 - c. Who trumps who?
 - d. Who else is involved?
3. Are there references to something else?
 - a. Biblical passages
 - i. Where is it?
 - ii. What is it?
 - iii. What's the context there?
 1. Full passage and surrounding passages
 2. Context in story.
 - iv. Any additional details?
 - v. How does it fit here?
 1. is it a proof text
 2. or are they applying a mitzvah

- b. Talmudic Passages
 - i. Where is it?
 - ii. What is it?
 - iii. What the context there?
 - iv. Any additional details?
 - v. Agrees or disagrees with the current passage.
- 4. Is there a hermeneutic?
 - a. Which one?
 - b. How does it work here?

An Example- It's a Matter of Torah

Let's take these two passages of Gemara from Brachot 62a and parse them as an example. For brevity, I cut out two passages in between these two:

It has been taught: R. Akiba said: Once I went in after R. Joshua to a privy, and I learnt from him three things. I learnt that one does not sit east and west but north and south; I learnt that one evacuates not standing but sitting; and I learnt that it is proper to wipe with the left hand and not with the right. Said Ben Azzai to him: Did you dare to take such liberties with your master? He replied: It was a matter of Torah, and I required to learn. It has been taught: Ben 'Azzai said: Once I went in after R. Akiba to a privy, and I learnt from him three things. I learnt that one does not evacuate east and west but north and south. I also learnt that one evacuates sitting and not standing. I also learnt it is proper to wipe with the left hand and not with the right. Said R. Judah to him: Did you dare to take such liberties with your master? — He replied: It was a matter of Torah, and I required to learn. ...

Why should one wipe with the left hand and not with the right? — Raba said: Because the Torah was given with the right hand, as it says, *At His right hand was a fiery law unto them*. Rabbah b. Hanah said: Because it is brought to the mouth. R. Simeon b. Lakish said: Because one binds the tefillin [on the left arm] with it. R. Nahman b. Isaac said: Because he points to the accents in the scroll with it. A similar difference of opinion is found among Tannaim. R. Eliezer says, because one eats with it; R. Joshua says, because one writes with it; R. Akiba says, because one points with it to the accents in the scroll.

Phase 1: Translating.

If you know Aramaic and Hebrew, translate the text from the original. Often English translations don't tell you enough of the story, but looking up the word themselves will give you major insights. If you cannot translate, use several translations of the text to understand possible nuances. As translation for a foundation, I prefer the Socino for several reasons, primarily for its academic integrity.

Phase 2: Parsing.

Take the text and find discrete elements or phrases in it. Write it into a list. You can do a short summary list like this:

1. Akiba learned three things from R. Joshua
2. East-west not north to south
3. Sitting not standing
4. Wipe with the left and not right

5. Ben Azzai asks why?
6. Matter of Torah...(etc)

Or take the translated text and chop up the text with a few returns in your word processor (I often do this while translating). A “chop up” list may look like this:

1. It has been taught: R. Akiba said:
2. Once I went in after R. Joshua to a privy,
3. And I learnt from him three things.
4. I learnt that one does not sit east and west but north and south;
5. I learnt that one evacuates not standing but sitting;
6. And I learnt that it is proper to wipe with the left hand and not with the right.
7. Said Ben Azzai to him: Did you dare to take such liberties with your master?
8. He replied: It was a matter of Torah, and I required to learn.
9. It has been taught: Ben 'Azzai said:
10. Once I went in after R. Akiba to a privy, and I learnt from him three things.
11. I learnt that one does not evacuate east and west but north and south.
12. I also learnt that one evacuates sitting and not standing.
13. I also learnt it is proper to wipe with the left hand and not with the right.
14. Said R. Judah to him: Did you dare to take such liberties with your master?
15. He replied: It was a matter of Torah, and I required to learn. ...
16. Why should one wipe with the left hand and not with the right?
17. Raba said: Because the Torah was given with the right hand,
18. As it says, *At His right hand was a fiery law unto them.*
19. Rabbah b. Hanah said: Because it is brought to the mouth.
20. R. Simeon b. Lakish said: Because one binds the tefillin [on the left arm] with it.
21. R. Nahman b. Isaac said: Because he points to the accents in the scroll with it.
22. A similar difference of opinion is found among Tannaim.
23. R. Eliezer says, because one eats with it;
24. R. Joshua says, because one writes with it;
25. R. Akiba says, because one points with it to the accents in the scroll.

Take the list and Look for common elements, and make it into an outline. Add comments about references to other texts in parentheses:

- 1) Akiba – why is this story here?
 - a) Akiba learned three things from r. Joshua
 - i) East-west not north to south (the link to the passage above it)
 - ii) Sitting not standing
 - iii) Wipe with the left and not right
 - b) Ben Azzai asks why?
 - i) Matter of Torah
 - c) Ben Azzai does it to R. Akiba
 - i) learns same three things
 - d) Akiba asks him
 - i) Matter of Torah
- 2) Why wipe with the left?(link to 1.a.iii/1.c.iii)
 - a) Raba Torah was given
 - i) Quote (Deut. 33:2)
 - b) Rabbah b. Hana – food hygiene
 - c) Simeon b. Lakish -tefillin
 - d) Nahman b. Isaac – pointing Torah

- 3) Tanna answer
 - a) Eliezer - food hygiene
 - b) Joshua - writing
 - c) Akiba – pointing torah

Phase Three: Fleshing It Out With Questions And Answers.

Use the questions above and start to ask and answer what is going on in the passage:

- 1) Akiba – Why is this story here? It's here as a link to the passage preceding it arguing over the direction one needs to go to the bathroom. The idea is not to defecate in the direction of the Temple, but since that changes from where you are, there is a difference of opinion. R. Akiba has an extreme view and thus we are treated to this story.
 - a) We learn in a Baraita, The Tanna R. Akiba learned three things from his teacher R. Joshua after following him into the restroom.
 - i) East-west not north to south so as not to profane the temple. (the link to the passage above it)
 - ii) Stitting not standing. Why? It's just less messy.
 - iii) Wipe with the left and not right. Why? This we learn more about below.
 - b) Ben Azzai, a student of Akiba asks why?
 - i) Akiba responds. But what is he really saying? "It is a Matter of Torah *to know how My teacher does the halacha* and I need to learn *by observation.*"
 - c) The Tanna Ben Azzai, who heard the story above, does the same thing to R. Akiba. Why?
 - i) Ben Azzai learns the same three things – so there is no inconsistency between what Akiba said in the story above and Akiba's actions.
 - d) Akiba asks him the same question – since it's a repetition, we need to ask ourselves why is this scene repeated after Akiba told him all this already?
 - i) Ben Azzai responds the same too, but does he mean the same? "It is a Matter of Torah not *only to know how you do the halacha* and I need to learn *by observation if you practice what you preach.*"
- 2) Why wipe with the left? (link to 1.a.iii/1.c.iii) The next passage takes the third of Akiba's observations about wiping with the left hand and asks why it should be the left. We are given answers based on a right handed person:
 - a) Raba (Amora) Torah was given with the right hand. You want to handle Torah the same way as God, and not with a dirty hand. There's a proof text.
 - i) *At His right hand was a fiery law unto them.* (Deuteronomy 33:2) Since the rabbis invariably quote only part of a verse, quote the whole thing: *2. And he said, The Lord came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir to them; he shone forth from Mount Paran, and he came with holy tens of thousands; from his right hand went a fiery law for them.* The context of the entire verse can be that the fiery law is Torah.
 - b) Rabbah b. Hana (Amora) Because it is brought to the mouth. What's "it?" Given Raba's explaining the right hand, we can again assume the right hand. In that case, you do not want to bring your dirty hand to your mouth. You don't want to eat with a dirty hand.
 - c) Simeon b. Lakish (Amora) Because one binds the tefillin [on the left arm] with it. On right handed person tefillin goes on the left arm and thus the hand touching the box of the parchments to do the binding would be the clean right hand once again.
 - d) R. Nahman b. Isaac said: Because he points to the accents in the scroll (*taamei Torah*) with it. Huh? This one does not make sense to me, since scrolls are unaccented. It becomes one of those places where translation becomes necessary to see if there are alternate meanings to some of the words. The key words here are because he points (shows, clearly explains) to the accents (sense, wisdom, sound reasoning) in the scroll (Torah) with it. Doing a concordance search *Taamei Torah* in all other cases (B. Pesachim 119a, Sanhedrin 12b, and Sanhedrin 102a) does not mean the *accents of the*

Torah. But instead *the reasons for the Torah*. Thus we re-translate this phrase as Because he gives a clear argument with it the reasons for the Torah. Again the meaning does not seem clear, but here we can make a few suppositions that gesturing during lecture was common. If that is so showing a filthy hand to those you are talking theology to would be rude and disturb your argument.

- 3) Those were all Amoraim, but there is no agreement. There are also Tannaim who answer the questions
 - a) R. Eliezer says, because one eats with it; this is just like Rabbah b. Hanah
 - b) R. Joshua says, because one writes with it; this is new. So what's special here? Touching parchment, particularly sacred written objects like torah and tefillin. So Resh Lakish and R. Nahman b. Isaac are alluded to but not specifically matched.
 - c) R. Akiba says, because one points with it to the accents in the scroll. just like R. Nahman b. Isaac

Phase Four: A Narrative Re-Write

Take the above notes and write it into paragraphs:

We find an Aggadic passage regarding the previous passage to the direction one is to face when evacuating in the latrine. The primary idea in that passage is not to defecate in the direction of the temple and thus profane it, but since that changes depending where you are, there is a difference of opinion. R. Akiba has an extreme view and thus we are treated to this story.

We learn in a Baraita, The Tanna R. Akiba tells a story to his Student Ben Azzai that he learned three things from his teacher R. Joshua after following him into the restroom. First, to evacuate East-West and not North to South so as not to profane the temple, as discussed in the previous passage of Gemara. Secondly, sit while defecating and don't stand. It's just less messy. Finally, one should wipe with the left hand and not with the right hand. This we learn more about below. Ben Azzai, a student of R. Akiba asks R. Akiba why he would ever do such disrespectful things to his teacher. R. Akiba responds it is A Matter of Torah to know how R. Joshua performed the halacha and R. Akiba was required to learn by observing R. Joshua doing them.

We are told that Ben Azzai, who heard the story above, does the same thing to his teacher R. Akiba and follows him into the privy. He learns the same three things. There is no inconsistency between what R. Akiba said in the story above and R. Akiba's actions. R. Akiba asks Ben Azzai the same question Ben Azzai Asked R. Akiba in the previous story. Ben Azzai gives the same answer but means something a little different. Ben Azzai responds that it is a Matter of Torah not only to know how Akiba performs the halacha but also he is required to learn by observation if R. Akiba practices what he preaches.

After skipping some other passages, The next passage takes the third of Akiba's observations about wiping with the left hand and not with the right hand and asks why it should be the left hand to wipe after defecation. We are given answers of various later rabbis, Amoraim, based on a right handed person. Raba believes it was because Torah was given with the right hand. He uses as his proof text Deuteronomy 33:2, which is the beginning of the blessing of Moses:

And he said, The Lord came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir to them; he shone forth from Mount Paran, and he came with holy tens of thousands; from his right hand went a fiery law for them.

God then gave and handled Torah with his right hand. Either in remembrance of that you want to keep that hand clean, or You want to handle Torah scrolls the same way as God, and not with a dirty right hand.

The next rabbi with an answer is Rabbah b. Hana. He answers "Because it is brought to the mouth." What's "it" in the sentence? Given Raba's explaining the right hand, we can again assume the right hand, or clean hand. This is a matter of hygiene. People tend to eat with their

dominant hand. In that case, you do not want to bring your dirty hand to your mouth. You don't want to eat with a dirty hand.

The Amora Simeon b. Lakish, sometimes known as Resh Lakish answers: Because one binds the tefillin on the left arm with the right hand, so you want that hand clean. On a right handed person tefillin goes on the left arm and thus the hand touching the box of the parchments to do the binding would be the clean right hand once again.

The Amora R. Nahman b. Isaac said: Because he shows to the sound reasoning in the Torah with it. Socino had a translation of *Because he points to the accents in the scroll with it*. This one does not make sense, since scrolls are unaccented. Comments by Rashi point to a habit of gesturing the accents while reading. However, the translation could be as above. The key words here are because he points (shows, clearly explains) to the accents (sense, wisdom, sound reasoning) in the scroll (Torah) with it. Doing a concordance search *Taamei Torah* in all other cases (B. Pesachim 119a, Sanh 12b, and Sanh 102a) does not mean the *accents of the Torah*. But instead the *reasons for the Torah*. Thus we re-translate this phrase as Because he gives a clear argument with it the reasons for the Torah. Again the meaning does not seem clear, but here we can make a few suppositions that gesturing during lecture was common. If that is so showing a filthy hand to those you are talking to would be rude and disturb your argument.

Those were all Amoraim, but there is no agreement. There are also Tannaim who answer the questions and since Tannaitic opinion trumps the Amoraic opinion, we can try to see if there is a consensus there, but once again it's all over the place.

One opinion is from the Tanna R. Eliezer, who believes because one eats with his right hand, he should wipe with his left. This agrees with Rabbah b. Hanah's hygiene opinion.

Next we have R. Joshua, the Teacher of R. Akiba. Interestingly, R. Joshua is the guy R. Akiba followed into the restroom in the first place. He gives a new opinion, believing because one writes with the right hand, and therefore writing or touching sacred documents while composing should not be with a dirty hand; This is a new opinion but has elements like R. Simeon b. Lakish who didn't want the parchment in the tefillin touched by a dirty hand. It also could be compared to Raba, if we say "Giving with the right hand" is equivalent to writing with the right hand.

Finally we have R. Akiba once again. Interestingly while he does follow the practices of R. Joshua, he does not give the same reason for the practice. Instead, like R. Nahman b. Isaac, Akiba believes because one uses his right hand to explain the reasons for the Torah you want to keep that hand clean.

After this form of unpacking, then one can take the passage and begin to understand the passage on deeper levels. This is of course just a sample of what can be done with an Aggadic passage. There is a lot more going on in a halakic one, including the form of argumentation, and the devices use for such a form.

There is one step we can go further with this passage which we mentioned above. Certain rabbis have more authority than others, and some trump others in a context of statements. The rules for this are a bit more than the scope of this work. But there are resources that are under construction for this.