# **Teaching Mishnah: A Multidisciplinary Approach**

**How should Judaism be taught?**

There are many possible approaches to teaching Judaism.

**Judaism as a Religious Discipline (Orthodoxy)**

This was the customary approach in traditional Judaism in previous generations. It is practiced today mainly in Orthodox communities. Classical Jewish texts are taught as authoritative and in light of the exegesis of the halakhic sages and decisors throughout the generations until contemporary times. This is the accepted method of study today in Yeshivot in Israel and in the rest of the world.

# **Judaism as a Historic Source (***Wissenschaft des Judentums)*

This has been the popular approach within modern Judaism since the enlightenment. The *Wissenschaft* movement was a result of the understanding that the Jewish religion has completed its role and, therefore, from that point on, its sources should be studied as part of the history of human culture, in a way that is similar to the study of other religions and cultures by historians. The study of texts focuses on philological and historical analysis and is indifferent to practical ramifications. This method is commonplace in universities in Israel and in peer-reviewed academic journals in foreign universities as well.

**Judaism as a Culture (Haskala and Zionism)**

This approach was adopted by some Haskala scholars and was reinforced by Zionist thinkers who abandoned religion but wished to find foundations in traditional Jewish sources to create a Jewish culture and a contemporary Jewish identity. This approach is attributed to Ahad Ha’am (Asher Ginsberg). David Ben Gurion, who founded the secular State of Israel believed in a return to a biblical heritage forged in the land of Israel, but objected to the study of Talmud and rabbinic literature. He viewed these latter sources as a product of Diaspora Judaism which should be abandoned. This approach is widespread today in Israeli universities to a certain extent, but is especially prevalent in the secular school system, in both elementary schools and high schools.

**Judaism as a Source of Inspiration for our Era**

This approach views Judaism as a source which gave rise to significant parts of human culture. It views Judaism as relevant in our era as well, in the fields of ethics and law, theology and myth, poetry and art. Like the approach which views Judaism as a culture, this approach posits that Judaism has valuable cultural significance and can serve as a source of inspiration, not necessarily limited to Jews and certainly not exclusively to observant ones. This approach is popular among certain cultural circles around the world. For example, in South Korea, there is great interest in the study of Judaism based on the assumed connection between Jewish sources and the phenomenal success of the State of Israel in science, finance and security. They wish to become familiar with the methods of study of Jewish sources and adopt them in order to acquire tools for success.

**Judaism as a Civilization**

This is a term coined by Mordecai Kaplan in the United States of the 1930’s. This approach views Judaism not only through the prism of religion and nationality but also as a civilization in itself worthy of research and study, preservation and existence.

The interdisciplinary teaching method I wish to present is primarily based on the civilization approach. It suggests viewing the journey to Judaism as a journey to another, neighboring civilization whose way of life is entirely different than the culture we live in.

This is significant for three circles of learners: Interested non-Jews, Jews who are not observant but are interested in acquiring a Jewish identity and observant Jews. Each of these groups has a slightly different significance with regard to becoming familiar with the other culture, but first and foremost, it is important to understand that the recognition that studying Jewish sources is an encounter with another civilization entails a different, holistic, multidisciplinary approach toward the study of Judaism.

**Mishnah, Berakhot 1,1**

FROM WHAT TIME MAY ONE RECITE THE *SHEMA'* IN THE EVENING?

FROM THE TIME THAT THE PRIESTS ENTER IN ORDER TO EAT THEIR *TERUMAH.*

UNTIL THE END OF THE FIRST WATCH.

THESE ARE THE WORDS OF R. ELIEZER.

THE SAGES SAY: UNTIL MIDNIGHT.

R. GAMALIEL SAYS: UNTIL THE DAWN COMES UP.

ONCE IT HAPPENED THAT HIS SONS CAME HOME FROM A WEDDING FEAST AND THEY SAID TO HIM: WE HAVE NOT YET RECITED THE *SHEMA'*.

HE SAID TO THEM: IF THE DAWN HAS NOT YET COME UP YOU ARE STILL BOUND TO RECITE.

AND NOT IN RESPECT TO THIS ALONE DID THEY SO DECIDE, BUT WHEREVER THE SAGES SAY UNTIL MIDNIGHT', THE PRECEPT MAY BE PERFORMED UNTIL THE DAWN COMES UP.

THE PRECEPT OF BURNING THE FAT AND THE [SACRIFICIAL] PIECES, TOO, MAY BE PERFORMED TILL THE DAWN COMES UP.

SIMILARLY, ALL THAT ARE TO BE EATEN WITHIN ONE DAY MAY LAWFULLY BE CONSUMED TILL THE COMING UP OF THE DAWN.

WHY THEN DID THE SAGES SAY 'UNTIL MIDNIGHT'? IN ORDER TO KEEP A MAN FAR FROM TRANSGRESSION.

**FROM WHAT TIME MAY ONE RECITE THE *SHEMA'* IN THE EVENING?**

**What is the Recitation of Shema?**

The biblical sources should be consulted in order to become familiar with it to some level. The source should be read, either one paragraph of it or all three. The text should be studied including the values embedded within it in order to understand why it has become the fundamental text of Judaism throughout the generations.

One can open a siddur (Jewish prayer book) and find the place of the Shema in the prayer (siddur-prayer-liturgy). This is an opportunity to acquire basic familiarity with the structure of the siddur.

**What is the Source of the Obligation to Recite the Shema?**

It is imperative to understand through a reading of Midrash, Halakha and the Talmud how the Sages derived the obligation to recite the Shema twice daily from the biblical words “speak of them…when you lie down and when you rise”.

This is an opportunity to explain the character of Midrash Halakha and the relationship between the written and oral Torah.

**What is the Rationale for the Obligation to Recite Shema?**

It is a declaration of the principles of faith and the believer’s commitment (Sefer HaHinukh—Rationales for Mitzvoth, Aggadic Literature).

The importance of reciting the Shema in the Jewish ethos. Stories about Jewish martyrs who recited the Shema while being executed based on the model of Rabbi Akiva. More subtle stories about Jews who recognized each other or identified Jewish children who were lost or abducted by completing the words of the Shema Yisrael verse.

**Recitation of the Shema at Bedtime**

When you lie down, the custom to recite Shema before going to sleep even if it has already been recited earlier during the evening prayer. Reciting the Shema at bedtime is one of the first prayers taught to children at a very tender age. Its educational value is very high. In itself, it is a symbol of identity and belonging. It also involves the hope that reciting the Shema may provide protection from fear of dark and nighttime.

**FROM THE TIME THAT THE PRIESTS ENTER IN ORDER TO EAT THEIR *TERUMAH.***

What are priests? A discussion of the following issues: the sanctity of priests, the priestly blessing, the tribes and tribal descent in Judaism.

Why are priests necessary when a Temple exists? What is the role of the priests in the Temple? A sociological/social discussion relating to the issue of hierarchy in society and in Judaism, the relationship between a hierarchal approach to a modern, egalitarian approach.

Why are priests necessary today? Is it in order to recall the Temple era?

What is *terumah* (one of the tithes)? The order of the commandments particular to the Land of Israel as a social order, the hierarchal system and attitude toward the priest, the Levite and the poor.

The commandments particular to the Land of Israel and the farmer’s belief in God, the separation of tithes as an expression of this faith. This is why the order of Zeraim in the Mishnah is referred to as “the order of faith”.

The requirement of eating terumah in a state of purity. The priests’ immersion for purity. The meaning of the term kedusha (sanctity) and its relationship to purity. The concept of *kedusha*-sanctity (the broader theological discussion), the concept of tahara-purity (including contemporary ramifications- *niddah-*a woman during menstruation, *mikveh-*ritual bath, Hasidim immersing)

Life in a priestly family: Pottery shards and *mikveh* immersion pools discovered by archaeologists in the private homes in Jerusalem from the Second Temple period. Halakhic times were determined according to the schedule of the priests. The social significance, the story of Yohanan the *halla* eater whose father would take him out of school early so that he could immerse before dinner while it was still daylight. The theological-literary significance of connecting many laws in Tractate Berakhot to the Temple as a kind of commemoration of sanctity that no longer exists and replacing it with the synagogue and prayers.

**UNTIL THE END OF THE FIRST WATCH**

What is an *ashmura* (watch)? It is a biblical word referring to a segment of the night. The root *shamar* (watching over) resonates. This is an opportunity to discuss Hebrew etymology and the importance of familiarity with the language to fully understand Jewish sources. The phrase “that in the night they shall be a guard (*mishmar*) to us” in the biblical meaning of standing watch, of the “watchmen for the morning” in Psalms and the spiritual significance of Torah study and prayer at night, a topic discussed extensively in the talmudic discussion of our mishnah.

The Amoraic dispute regarding the number of watches, a Talmudic discussion which is chiefly of biblical exegetical nature, which turns into an Aggadic discussion regarding the significance of the segments of the night according to the Talmud. The night as a time when God laments the destroyed Temple.

When you lie down-the beginning of the night, parallel to “when you rise”-the beginning of the day, or the time people lie down which is all night long. The structure of the Midrash as previously discussed regarding the study of the verses.

The daily schedule of people in the ancient world. Going to sleep at dusk and rising at daybreak. This is also the schedule of young children and at times, of the elderly as well. It is a schedule that is more closely connected to the nature of humans which has changed drastically in modern times, mainly with the advent of street lights.

The significance of the change for modern man. In the Middle Ages, night rituals would take place very early. Prof. Yaakov Katz relates in his article to the connection between the sociological change and the halakhic change and the beginning of being meticulous about reciting the Shema no earlier than the time of the appearance of the stars. This change is not only a change in halakha and custom but something that can be related to general social and cultural change.

This introduces the discussion of the gap in our lives between nature and culture. Contemporary man is not subject to nature but makes nature its subject. Is this a strength or weakness of modern man? The debate surrounding sustainability and ecology, human’s integration with nature in all areas of life.

**THESE ARE THE WORDS OF R. ELIEZER**

What is this referring to? Does it also refer to the time one can begin reciting the Shema? This is an exegetical question relating to the Mishnah’ s structure which relates to the major dispute between the Tannaim in the Talmud regarding the time night begins and the halakhic ruling.

Who was Rabbi Eliezer b. Horkenos? He was a very prominent personality during the Yavneh period. He was a model of conservativism in evolving times. His personality can be connected to the topic of the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel and to the issue of the sects as well.

The history of the Tanna’im, their era and the editing of the Mishnah. Delving into a description of Rabbi Eliezer and his biography is part of a general policy of teaching Mishnah and classical sources—becoming familiar with the personalities and the period, and a systematical introduction to the work being studied and its character.

The literary structure of the Mishnah—why does it lack an organized introduction? Why doesn’t it begin with the central issues? Chronological or case based structure vs. the normative structure

The dispute—why are there disputes in the Mishnah? What is the importance of the dispute in the Oral Torah and in Jewish culture in general? The halakhic ruling, commitment and meaning.

**THE SAGES SAY: UNTIL MIDNIGHT**

The symbolic meaning of midnight, from the Exodus to Tikkun Hatzot (the Midnight rite) in Kabbalah and Hasidism as the time signifying the beginning of rectification and redemption in the midst of the dark night. The symbolic meaning of nighttime in the Talmud, in philosophy and Kabbalah as an expression of exile and suffering. Tikkun Hatzot—the custom and how it evolved.

**R. GAMALIEL SAYS: UNTIL THE DAWN COMES UP.**

Who was Rabban Gamaliel? As mentioned above regarding Rabbi Eliezer, his character and the relationship between the two brothers in law should be discussed. This is an opportunity for a conversation about the institution of *nasi* (prince) and about Rabban Gamaliel’s unique personality.

When is dawn according to astronomy and Halakha? The argument in the Talmud regarding dawn, a term parallel to sunset and the appearance of the stars as the beginning of the Jewish day, the time when Shabbat and holidays begin. What is the significance of the difference between a human, social based time and one based on astronomy?

The additional times which appear in the Talmud: *hanetz hahama*—daybreak, a time when the light is sufficient to distinguish between two similar shades of color.

*Ayelet hashahar*—the morning star as a symbol of redemption. The well-known story from the Seder night about the Sages who sat all night and discussed the Passover story until their students came and told them.

**ONCE IT HAPPENED THAT HIS SONS CAME HOME FROM A WEDDING FEAST**

The story in the Mishnah as a chapter in the study and interpretation of the Mishnah—is this story cited in order to prove or to contradict? This is an opportunity to open a wider discussion regarding the casuistic style of the Mishnah and that of laws in general. From the perspective of Halakha as living Torah, not merely a system of rules and laws, as well as the legitimacy of doubt, failure and error.

Within this historical section, Rabban Gamliel’s sons can be discussed in the context of the story of the inheritance of his position and his last will and testament.

**AND THEY SAID TO HIM: WE HAVE NOT YET RECITED THE *SHEMA'*. HE SAID TO THEM: IF THE DAWN HAS NOT YET COME UP YOU ARE STILL BOUND TO RECITE**

What were his students doing at the wedding feast and why were they late? Is this a description of a normal schedule in the homes of the Sages and the nasi’s home as well? Why didn’ t they recite the Shema earlier?

Father-son relationships—an educational discussion. Was the father still awake, waiting up for them? Studying Torah? The sons consult with the father and tell him. The father’s reaction is matter-of fact, not critical—how should one educate people to observe the commandments? What type of dialogue takes place between parents and their children?

**AND NOT IN RESPECT TO THIS ALONE DID THEY SO DECIDE, BUT WHEREVER THE SAGES SAY UNTIL MIDNIGHT', THE PRECEPT MAY BE PERFORMED UNTIL THE DAWN COMES UP.**

Was this statement made by Rabban Gamliel or by the opinion without attribution? Who are the Sages other than Rabbi Eliezer and Rabban Gamliel? Whose opinion does the Halakha follow, that of Rabban Gamliel or of the Sages? Methods of ruling, the fundamental rule that the halakha is determined in accordance to the majority opinion.

Generalization and simplification in contrast with case law and details.

Skip the additional examples focused on Temple matters and the order of Kodashim: burning the fat and the sacrificial pieces, all that are to be eaten within one day.

**WHY THEN DID THE SAGES SAY 'UNTIL MIDNIGHT'? IN ORDER TO KEEP A MAN FAR FROM TRANSGRESSION.**

Ethics of the Fathers: “And make a fence around the Torah”, the issue of preventative decrees and ordinances of the Sages and the development of halakha and the oral Torah.

Summary

The study of sources—an entire world is concentrated in a minimal amount of text.

The first thing that is evident here is that studying the classical sources leads to wide range of disciplines and areas of interest.

**The Choice of Curriculum is Up to the Teacher**

The teacher can choose what to focus on according to his or her areas of knowledge and interest, depending on the pedagogical context, whether he or she is teaching a basic course, theology, an introduction to the Mishnah or history; whether it is a group of youngsters or adults, beginners or advanced students, with or without background. Of course, everything depends on the needs of the students, their talents and interests. The guiding principle is that the teacher has to choose, and to that end, he or she also needs to know a lot more and also must know how to keep things concise in accordance with pedagogical needs.

**Understanding Judaism as a Civilization**

The general approach I wished to present is that of Judaism as a civilization, a framework that requires a multidisciplinary, and diverse perspective and one which addresses every level of human existence.