

Rabbi Kosowski teaches Judaic Studies
at the Middle School of Yeshivat Rambam
in Baltimore

A BEKI'UT INITIATIVE IN MISHNAH

Introduction

The issue of quantity versus quality pervades many schools and classrooms. A teacher or administrator may want a certain body of material covered or students may feel that they are moving too slowly. On the other hand, a teacher may want to go into further depth on an issue or teach more skills that will enable a student in the future to cover more material on his/her own, but may seem frustrating in the here and now. There is always more to cover, however, and always further depth to penetrate. Where does one draw the line?

Several years ago, I was visited by alumni and asked to consider how much material I cover. They agreed that they still utilized the skills they had learned in both Talmud study and other disciplines, but felt that they could have covered more ground. I responded: "In four forty minute periods a week, how much did you expect to cover?!" Simply put, in all schools, one's own course is not the only one the students have. While it would be nice to have more time, it is simply not available, raising the question of how can one do it all, or at least do more to accommodate both the teaching of skills and the sense of covering ground.

After this conversation, I decided that the approach I would take is for my *Talmud* students to learn *Mishnayot* on their own outside of class time. Each week, the students would learn a *perek* from the *Mishnayot* Kehati and would be quizzed on it in class. In my school, a quiz is defined as ten questions or less in ten minutes or less. And so, not

everything is covered, nor is there much analysis manifest in the quiz, an issue which I will address below. But, there is a sense of accomplishment and a clear enhancement of a knowledge base.

Process

I chose to structure this assignment as follows. Students are to have a Mishnayot Kehati, which must be their property, so that they can take notes inside. Students are assigned a *perek* each week. I start with the *masekhet* that we are currently studying and then turn to the other *masekhtot* within that *sefer*. Students are encouraged to take notes on the *mishnayot* being learned and can use these notes for the quiz. Understandably, students are not permitted to use photocopies of someone else's notes, or photocopies of a translation. Since the point of the assessments is to ensure that the students have done the learning, there is no problem with their taking notes and using them during a quiz.

In the class prior to the assessment, students are offered the opportunity to ask questions on the material. It is important that they be offered the chance in class to clarify the learning as they are preparing it on their own and their time is limited. Because of the nature of any independent assignment, it is likely that students will be seeking guidance, especially at the beginning. At the same time, it is crucial that the class not become a Mishnah course. The *beki'ut* is meant to enhance the learning of *Talmud*, not to replace it. "Fortunately," most students procrastinate, and most questions that would take class time are never asked.

Another way to go with regard to the evaluation of what the students have learned is to give worksheets at home in order not to take away any further precious class time. Simultaneously, they have the decided disadvantage of being unmonitored. It is even possible that groups of students will work together; i.e. one will do the work and the others will share the results. Similarly, there is almost a guarantee that students will work from a translation rather than from the original text. While the goal of increasing the breadth will still be achieved, that of sharpening the students' skills in learning will not.

Since, again, the *ikar* is for the students to learn the material, my assessments contain rather straightforward questions. Students may be asked the meaning of a key term in the Mishnah or what the *halakhah* is in a given case. Questions with answers of yes/no or true/false are not

uncommon. Infrequently, I will ask a *hevdel ekroni*- fundamental difference – question, but given the time constraints of the quiz, not that often.¹ Since students do not have the questions in advance, they are compelled to learn the *perek* comprehensively. [See appendix for sample quiz.]

Reservations

As with any initiative, this one has its issues. The first is the reality that class time, already scarce, will be lost. Whether the teacher elects to give quizzes or worksheets to be done at home, some class time will be sacrificed. Every teacher needs to determine for him/herself if that sacrifice is worthwhile.

Second, no one wins any popularity contests for being demanding on a regular basis. If you lack the fortitude this may not be a good way to go. If you have developed the necessary perseverance, however, then you are probably already accustomed to challenging standards. The good news is that in the long run, you will be remembered and appreciated for demanding more.

Third, because so much of the work is done outside of class, students lack direction from the teacher. In addition, it is hard to assess effort. Students may prepare thoroughly and still perform poorly on a quiz. Each teacher will have to determine the best way of evaluating student progress in this endeavor.

Advantages

In a very short time, students actually will gain *beki'ut*. They will apply this in the classroom and begin to obtain a broader understanding of the material being covered. Teachers will be able to rely on material being familiar, which will save some time in introducing and explaining new concepts. For example, if you are teaching a *Tosafot* that references a case in a *Mishnah* that they have learned – you've got it made.

Second, students actually do appreciate consistency from their teachers. Seeing that this is actually required each week helps students understand that the teacher is demanding in a positive way. Additionally, students see that there is much more to the issue at hand and to the material being studied than just the few pages that will be covered during the academic year. It is also important for students to have the

sense that our subject is equal to their general studies in its complexity and level of expectation. This project accomplishes that task.

Third, if the students are advanced and can handle a faster pace, it is possible to complete an entire *seder* within the year. Knowing that one sixth of *mishna* has been learned is a good feeling for anyone to have, and students of the age we are teaching – *al ahat kamah v'kamah*. I have had the privilege twice now of standing before the school and community at a *siyyum* with students who have completed *Seder Nashim*. I assure you, none was singing my praises while they were learning. When they could step back and be recognized and respected by their classmates and schoolmates, however, and they grasped what they had actually achieved, well, they still were not singing my praises, but they fully appreciated their accomplishment nevertheless.

Conclusion

Beki'ut increases the demands on the students, expands the knowledge base and allows for a genuine feeling of accomplishment. Learning regularly helps students recognize the inherent value in the task and gives them the ability to do it. While the students are gaining more from the course, relatively little time is being taken from classroom instruction to accomplish this goal. Although there are concerns with the project, the advantages clearly outweigh them. A teacher with a finger on the pulse of the class will recognize how to vary the expectations to achieve the desired result. There is no question in my mind that this method can be used for *Tanakh* study as well, although I have not tried it personally. While the initial work will be taxing for the teacher, it is well worth the investment. The students, as the ultimate beneficiaries, will gain that much more from our courses and be inspired by our commitment.

1 For a review of good testing, see my article, "Ve-Dibbarta Bam" in *Ten Da'at*, Vol. XII, Summer 1999.

Mishnayyot Quiz: Ketubot Chapter 5

1. According to R. Meir, should a *ketubah* ever be written for less than 200 *zuzim* for a virgin or 100 for a widow? Yes/No
2. In Mishnah 2, is the groom or the bride responsible for the delay in the marriage?
3. When Mishnah 2 states that a woman can eat *terumah* after a year, whom does it assume she has married?
4. In Mishnah 3, who disagrees with the idea that she can eat *terumah* twelve months after the betrothal - as indicated in Mishnah 2?
5. True or False: The essential difference (הבדל עקרוני) between R. Meir and R. Yohanan ha-Sandlar is whether one can sanctify things that are not yet in existence.
6. In Mishnah 5, what causes שעמום?
7. (a) In Mishnah 5, what does שבת mean?
(b) According to Beit Shammay, what happens after two Shabbatot?
8. In Mishnah 7, what does מורדת mean?
9. In Mishnah 8 and 9, what is the topic?

Mishnayyot Quiz: Ketubot Chapter 5

1. In the *reisha* of Mishnah 1, why are the perjured witnesses (עדים זוממים) flogged rather than punished - literally - according to what they intended to do to the accused?"
2. In Mishnah 2, what is the basis of the disagreement between R. Meir and the Sages regarding flogging?
3. In Mishnah 3, what does משלשלין mean?
4. In Mishnah 4, how do witnesses perjure themselves?
5. Based on the view of the first *tanna* in Mishnah 5, was there an appeals process before capital punishment was carried out? Yes/No
6. (a) Explain: עד שיגמר הדין
(b) Why is the opinion of the Sadducees mentioned in Mishnah 6?
7. In Mishnah 7, what does נטפל mean?
8. In Mishnah 8, explain תקיים העדות בשאר

9. In Mishnah 9, what important element does R. Yossi add to the discussion?
10. In Mishnah 10, what seems to be the attitude of the Sages towards capital punishment?

Mishnayot Quiz: Makkot Chapter 1

1. Why is it permissible to carry on *Yom Tov*?
2. What is another name for the tractate of *Beitzah*?
3. In Mishnah 1, what is the issue with the egg? (answer in one word)
4. (a) In Mishnah 2, why does one need dirt?
(b) Explain the phrase: אפר כירה מוכן הוא
5. (a) What is the overall subject of Mishnah 3 and 4? (answer in one word)
(b) Why does Beit Hillel allow non-פוש-נפש to be carried on *Yom Tov*?
6. In Mishnah 8, why is it prohibited to use a sieve on *Yom Tov*?
7. In Mishnah 9, according to Beit Hillel - what kind of gifts may be sent?
8. Indicate the criteria used in Mishnah 10.

Mishnayot Quiz: Yoma Chapter 8

1. List the five actions prohibited on *Yom-ha-Kippurim*.
2. Why does R. Eliezer permit a recent bride to wash her face?
3. What are the minimum prohibited amounts of food and drink?
Can these measurements combine into a prohibition?
4. In Mishnah 3, define העלם. Define: פטור (at the end).
5. In Mishnah 4, explain: מחנכין אותם.
6. In Mishnah 5, what are בקיאיין? Give an example.
7. What is the theme of Mishnah 6?
8. What general rule emerges from Mishnah 7?
9. Summarize Mishnah 8 in one word (Hebrew or English).
10. In order for *Yom ha-Kippurim* to atone for sins between people, what needs to happen first?