

Text Study **ב** - Bet
In the Tradition of the Rabbis

After saying the blessing before study, please read this text and discuss the questions below.

Offering commentary—elucidating the meaning of a core text by explanation and association—is a fundamentally Jewish activity. Some say it even began with Moses:

דְּבָרִים פֶּרֶק אַ פְּסוּק ה

וּ בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב הוֹאִיל מֹשֶׁה בְּאֵר אֶת־הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת לְאִמְרָ:
 בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּי

On the other side of the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to expound this Teaching

Deuteronomy 1:5

...the ambiguity of the Hebrew be'er [is that] “expound” means “set forth” or “clarify.” The meaning “set forth” agrees with the fact that this verse introduces the addresses of Deuteronomy, which were not previously delivered. On the other hand, “clarify” agrees with verses... which imply that these addresses recapitulate and clarify earlier teachings. The ancient translations understood the verse in the latter sense.

JPS Torah Commentary, Deuteronomy

- To you, what is the difference between “set forth” and “clarify?”
- What difference might it make if Moses was “setting forth” or “clarifying?” How might it change what you think of the words in Deuteronomy?

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Here is some background for understanding the next text: *The Talmud (compiled between the 3rd – 6th centuries CE) is composed of two parts: the Mishnah and the Gemara. The Mishnah (dating from the 3rd century CE) is a discussion of rules for Jewish living extrapolated from the Torah. The Gemara, essentially, is elaboration on the Mishnah.*

What makes the Talmud particularly appropriate as a study of the evolution of ideas is that each page not only has text that integrates the Mishnah and Gemara, but is surrounded by commentary that spans hundreds of years. It not only explores meanings and different interpretations, but also raises questions that are tangentially connected to that text. It is virtually impossible to be engaged by a Talmudic text without feeling that you yourself are participating in an emotionally charged intellectual debate over hundreds of years.

On each page, we find not only comments and reflections upon comments, but we come upon aphorisms and stories that provide an associative/emotional bond rather than a strictly logical one. Furthermore, even when the discourse is in a problem solving mode, it is not unusual for a carefully reasoned debate with conflicting points of view to end with the Hebrew word "Taku," which translates as "Tie." That is, neither side has provided a definitive enough argument and it is left to the reader to decide upon a conclusion or appropriate course of action.

**Stephen I. Brown, A Modern/Ancient Encounter with Text:
*Revisiting the Talmud***

- According to this text, what are the various specific ways in which Talmudic commentary helps us to understand the meaning of the text?
- What are the advantages and challenges presented by this non-linear kind of commentary?

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All learning takes place in dialogue. While solitary study also has its place, the soul of rabbinic Judaism is found in the debate—typically associated with the academy. All opinions are given serious thought for everyone adds to the living notion of sacred literature. The give and take in the Talmud, generally referred to as *pilpul* (literally, “pepper”), actually gives flavor to rabbinic texts. Such struggle is necessary to ascertain the true meaning of any text.

Kerry M. Olitsky and Leonard Kravitz, *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics*

- What does it mean to you for a reader to be “in dialogue” with a text? How does that happen for you when you read the newspaper or a novel? How might this dialogue be different when reading a Jewish text?
- Do you agree that “struggle” is necessary in order to find meaning in the text?
- Through what other approaches might someone find meaning in Jewish texts?