

WHY IS GEMARA AT THE CENTER OF JEWISH LEARNING?

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

CENTRAL IDEAS OF THE CLASS:

- 1 Noticing and acknowledging the chaotic nature of Gemara, different from the straightforward nature of many other subjects that are taught in school.
- 2 With a careful eye, one can see the interconnected style of the Gemara as it pairs lofty ideas with mundane rules to provide a wholesome learning experience.
- 3 The Gemara represents a continued conversation of the Jewish people that goes back to receiving the Torah; we too can continue that conversation today.

WHY GEMARA POLL:

- 1 Looking back on the last four years, which judaic subjects would you want more of? Which would you want less of?
- 2 Did you learn too much, too little, or the right amount of Gemara while in Yeshiva HS?
- 3 Did you learn too much, too little, or the right amount of Tanach while in Yeshiva HS?
- 4 If a non-affiliated coworker asked what Talmud was, how would you answer?
- 5 Can you manage your way through five lines of a Gemara? How about with Artscroll?
- 6 Do you intend to learn Gemara after graduating?

Ask the class: for volunteers to share their answers to question #2, #4, and #6.

VIDEO & INTRO: (5-10 MINUTES)

Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9N6vI0NuvI>

Ask the class: What are we actually doing when we learn Gemara? How would you describe it to an outsider?



PODCAST CLIP #1 AND DISCUSSION (10-15 MINUTES) - WHAT IS GEMARA?

In these clips Chaim Saiman addresses what Gemara is and what it is not.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKrfU-DIs3E>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z944tMHYJDg>

He made a few points that are very important to highlight for the class:

- While the Gemara is a commentary on the Mishna, it gets distracted quite easily which can be confusing for some people [See Source #1 – Rambam Intro to Mishna Torah]
- The Gemara might be printed as a book, but aside from the covers, it's defining characteristics are far from it. Saiman says, "So right away, on page one it's telling you, not only is there's no introduction, there's no real beginning. It's a circle, because at every point you can pick it up and you may or may not know what's going on. And in that way, it's a book in the sense of, we print it between two covers, but is it really a book?"

Ask the class: List pros/cons for arranging the Gemara the way it is. Has anyone here struggled with learning Gemara and perhaps learning how to learn Gemara?



Source #1: The Rambam explains why he felt the need to write the Mishna Torah, to ultimately replace the Gemara.

Ask the class: What is compelling about the Rambam? What might you lose when removing the conversational approach to the Gemara? Why do we spend more time in Yeshiva HS learning the Gemara and not the Rambam?

PODCAST CLIP #2 AND DISCUSSION (15-20 MINUTES) - WHAT TO MAKE OF ALL THE DETAILS?

If the Rambam wanted to cut out all of the details, why don't we? For example:

Source #2: The Mishna presents what seems to be a machloket about what can be carried and what cannot be carried on Shabbat.

Ask the class: What is being discussed in this Mishna? Is there more than just the basic interpretation that can be understood in this conversation of learning?

In these clips Chaim Saiman discusses how Gemara is dealing with more than just what meets the eye.

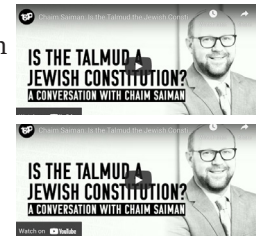
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qb8_5Mzz2tQ

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ocehJoYaBR0>

He made a few points that are very important to highlight for the class:

- Our Mishna [Source #2] presents both a legal discussion about carrying swords on Shabbat and a rabbinic value judgement upon those who celebrate sword culture. If we learn Gemara, we will understand not only the laws that the Rambam sifted out of it [Source #1], but a rabbinic outlook on life as well.
- The Gemara ultimately is significant for everyone to learn and think about, not just scholars, because it speaks to our collective values.

Ask the class: Are there lessons about life you can root back to your learning of Gemara over the last four years? Does this give new insight into why we learn Gemara?



DISCUSSION #3 (10-15 MINUTES) - THE CASE FOR CONTINUED LEARNING

Source #3: Rav Soloveitchik presents what happens for him when he enters into a Gemara learning experience. The original audio can be [found here](#) beginning at 00:48 seconds.

Ask the class: How is this perspective different from Elon Gold's perspective of the back and forth experience about learning? Do you feel part of a conversation when learning Torah/Gemara?

CLOSING VIDEO (1840 VIDEO ON TALMUD STUDY)

Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XB99l34ZeQk>



SUMMARY AND TAKEAWAY (5 MINUTES)

Ask the class: Did this change your perspective on learning Gemara, if so how?

We learn Gemara, which is a strange literary work with much complexity and distraction. We as a people focus on learning Gemara because it teaches both the laws of Judaism with the values of how to be a good Jew. In doing so we join a conversation that spans generations and find our place within a chain of *Mesorah*.

SOURCES

1. [Introduction to Rambam's Mishna Torah](#) - The Rambam's frustration with the complex style of the Gemara prompted him to write an entirely new work that is more organized.
2. [Mishna Shabbat 6:4](#) - A case study into the intertwining nature of legal rulings and aspirational values all together.
3. [Rav Soloveitchik at Pidyon HaBen in 1974](#) - An illustration of the continued conversation through the study of Gemara.