

Thriving – A Textual Deep Dive
Session Three – Context is Everything

Textual Principle #3 – For my students to thrive, they need to develop tools for making meaning from Jewish texts and ideas. In order for this to happen, they need to understand that all texts have historical, legal and literary contexts, which, if understood correctly can make the texts feel accessible and relevant.

I. **What is Thriving?**

Thriving: is the product of the pursuit and engagement of an authentic life that brings inner joy and happiness through meeting goals, being connected with life passions and people, and relishing in accomplishments through the peaks and valleys of life.”

Jewish Education That Leads to Thriving: Jewish education that leads to thriving draws from mainstream scientific research and Jewish wisdom to allow learners to live a more meaningful, develop relationship-driven, and responsible life. Jewish Education that leads to thriving gives Jews the capacity to be the best possible versions of themselves and ensures that the learner is at the center of their own growth and learning. Thriving provides Jews with the tools to help bring about a more equitable and just world, and the tools to grapple with what does God ask from me? (The Jewish Education Project)

II. **All Texts Exist in Multiple Contexts**

1) Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, Context and Genre: Elements of a Literary Approach to the Rabbinic Narrative, in Matthew Krauss, ed., How Should Rabbinic Literature be Read in the Modern World (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006), 137-166

All texts exist in multiple contexts: historical, social, political, literary, cultural, institutional, situational, biographical, and so forth. Few scholars, I assume, would argue that a text could be correctly interpreted outside of its general historical and cultural context. We would never interpret a Talmudic story in terms of the social or political climate of the Renaissance for obvious reasons. The degree to which other contexts are relevant or necessary for interpretation is more open to debate. At all events, in many cases of ancient literature, including that of the Bavli, most of these contexts cannot be recovered. Bavli stories (and other traditions) appear in texts redacted many years after their original expression, the contexts of which are, for the most part, unknown. The main context—or contexts—to which we have access are the literary contexts. I say “contexts” because the parameters of the literary context can be defined in various ways. Do we mean the immediate literary context, the texts directly preceding and following the story? A slightly more extended literary context, say the sugya in which the story is found? The series of sugyot in the section of Talmud commenting on the proximate Mishna paragraph? The entire chapter or Tractate of Talmud? The entire Talmud, including all relevant intertexts?

2) Text and Context: Torah and Historical Truth, Prof.B. Barry Levy
<https://www.thetorah.com/article/text-and-context-torah-and-historical-truth>

Another important aspect of historical-critical analysis is the effort to contextualize all texts and ideas, on the premise that any text or idea can be understood best if placed in its original context. This assumption does not preclude applying other approaches to the same text, but it does mean that contextual influences play a major role in the critical thinker’s perception of how the text came to be, what it says, what it originally meant, and arguably what it could or should mean today.

For example, the attitudes towards government and its polity in various Jewish cultures were developed in response to the treatment of Jews by particular governments. In one context, the attitude toward the state may be positive, in another, it may be negative. Any understanding of rabbinic thinking, halakhic rulings, and general public attitudes about this question must be understood in context.

III. Putting it into Practice!

❖ The Text as it is Often Quoted and Taught

Talmud, Taanit 23A

"I found a fruitful world, because my ancestors planted it for me. Likewise I am planting for my children."

- 1) Given just this quote what is the text trying to teach us?
- 2) How would you use this text in a classroom?

And sometimes:

Talmud, Taanit 23A

One day, Honi the Circle drawer, was journeying on the road and he saw a man planting a carob tree; he asked him, How long does it take for this tree to bear fruit?

The man replied: Seventy years.

He then asked him: Are you certain that you will live another seventy years?

The man replied: I found carob trees in the world; as my forefathers planted these for me so I too plant these for my children.

- 1) Given just this quote what does the text teach me?
- 2) How would you use this text in a classroom?

❖ The Entire Story of Honi Falling Asleep

Babylonian Talmud Tractate Taanit 23a

Rabbi Yochanan said: This righteous man Honi was pained his whole life by the meaning of the verse (Psalms 126), "*A Song of Ascents, When Hashem will return the captivity of Zion, we will be like dreamers.*"

He said: Is it really possible for a man to dream continuously for seventy years?

One day he was journeying on the road and he saw a man planting a carob tree; he asked him, How long does it take for this tree to bear fruit?

The man replied: Seventy years.

He then asked him: Are you certain that you will live another seventy years?

The man replied: I found carob trees in the world; as my forefathers planted these for me so I too plant these for my children.

Honi sat down to have a meal and sleep overcame him.

As he slept a rocky formation enclosed upon him which hid him from sight and he slept for seventy years.

When he awoke he saw a man gathering the fruit of the carob tree and he asked him, Are you the man who planted the tree?

The man replied: I am his grandson.

Then he said to himself, "I must have slept for seventy years."

He saw that his donkey had brought many offspring into the world.

He went home.

There he asked, "Where is the son of Honi Hama'agal?"

They said to him, "His son is no longer alive, but his grandson is".

He said, "I am Honi HaMa'agal", but no one believed him.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת תענית דף כג.

אמר רבי יוחנן: כל ימיו של אותו צדיק היה מצטער על מקרא זה **+תהלים כ"ו+** שיר המעלות בשושן ה' את שיבת ציון היינו כחולמים.

אמר: מי איכא דניים שבעין שנין בחלמא?

יומא חד הוה אזל באורחא, חזייה לההוא גברא דהוה נטע חרובא, אמר ליה: האי, עד כמה שנין טעין?

אמר ליה: עד שבעין שנין.

אמר ליה: פשיטא לך דחיית שבעין שנין?

אמר ליה: האי [גברא] עלמא בחרובא אשכחתי, כי היכי דשתלי לי אבהתי שתלי נמי לבראי.

יתיב, קא כריך ריפתא, אתא ליה שינתא, נים. אהדרא ליה משוניתא, איכסי מעינא, ונים שבעין שנין.

כי קם חזייה לההוא גברא דהוה קא מלקט מינייהו. אמר ליה: את הוא דשתלתי?

אמר ליה: בר בריה אנא.

אמר ליה: שמע מינה דניימי שבעין שנין. חזא לחמריה דאתיילידא ליה רמכי רמכי.

אזל לביתה.

אמר להו: בריה דחוני המעגל מי קיים?

אמרו ליה: בריה ליתא, בר בריה איתא.

אמר להו: אנא חוני המעגל. לא הימנוהו.

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| <p>He went to the Beit Midrash and heard the sages say, "This issue is as clear to us today as it was in the days of Honi HaMa'agal, who, when he came into the Beit Midrash, would elucidate to the sages all the difficulties in comprehension." He said to them, "I am he!", but no one believed him and no one gave him the respect he deserved. <i>Halash Da'atei</i> - His mind became weak, he prayed for mercy and died. Rava said: This is why people say "Either Havrutah (friendship), or death."</p> | <p>אזל לבית המדרש, שמעינהו לרבנן דקאמרי: נהירן שמעתתין כבשני חוני המעגל, דכי הוי עייל לבית מדרשא, כל קושיא דהוה להו לרבנן הוה מפרק להו אמר להו: אנא ניהו. ולא הימנוהו, ולא עבדי ליה יקרא כדמבעי ליה, חלש דעתיה, בעי רחמי ומית. אמר רבא, היינו דאמרי אינשי: או חברותא או מיתותא.</p> |
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Deepening the Context:

- 1) Exploring the Biblical verse quoted and its context
- 2) Exploring the historical context of the story
 - a. Who is Honi and when is he said to have lived?
 - b. Who is telling this story? Who is Rebbe Yochanan and when does he live?
 - c. Who concludes this story? Who is Rava and when does he live?
- 3) Exploring the Halachic (Legal) Context of the story:
 - a. What legal material is taught in the Mishna that precedes this text? What is the legal conversation around this text?
- 4) Exploring the Literary Context
 - a. Notice the names that are given to Honi here – what does this teach you?
 - b. What is the connection between the first and second parts of the story? Are they naturally connected? Prove your answer from the text.
 - c. What is the significance of Honi being a Torah Scholar? Does the first half of the text support this idea of Honi?
- 5) Exploring the Larger Literary Context
 - a. What story comes before this text in the Talmud?
 - b. What story comes right after this text in the Talmud?
- 6) Are there parallel versions of this story?

Biblical Context:

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| <p><u>Psalms 126</u> A song of Ascents: When the Lord restores the fortunes of Zion—we see it in a dream—our mouths shall be filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then shall they say among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them!” The Lord will do great things for us, and we shall rejoice. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like watercourses in the Negev. Those who sow with tears will reap with song. He will go along weeping, carrying the valuable seeds; he will come back with song, carrying his sheaves.</p> | <p><u>תהילים פרק קכו</u> א שיר, המעלות: בשוב יהוה, את-שיבת ציון-- היינו, כחלמים. ב אז ימלא שחוק, פינו-- וילשוננו רנה: אז, יאמרו בגוים-- הגדיל יהוה, לעשות עם-אלה. ג הגדיל יהוה, לעשות עמנו-- היינו שומחים. ד שובה יהוה, את-שבותנו (שביטנו)-- כאפיקים בנגב. ה הזרעים בדםעה-- ברנה יקצרו. ו הלוד ילד, ובכה-- נשא מושך-הזרע: בא-יבא ברנה-- נשא, אלמתינו.</p> |
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Parallel Text:

Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Taanit 3:10

R. Yudan b. Guria said: This Honi the Circle-Drawer (of the previous rainmaking story) was the grandson of Honi the Circle-Drawer who lived close to the destruction of the [first] temple.

He went out to his workers in the fields.

While he was there, it rained.

He entered a cave.

When seated, he became drowsy and fell asleep.

He stayed deep in sleep for seventy years, until the temple was destroyed and rebuilt a second time.

At the end of seventy years he awoke from his sleep. He went out of his cave and saw a changed world.

A place that was a vineyard became an olive grove. A place that was an olive grove became a sown field.

He inquired in the city.

He said, "What is going on in the world?"

They said to him, "Do you not know what is going on in the world?"

He said to them, "No."

They said to him, "Who are you?"

He said to them, "Honi the CircleDrawer."

They said to him, "We have heard that when he entered the courtyard [of the temple] it became light."

He entered and it became light.

He applied to himself the verse, "When the Lord restored those who returned to Zion we were like dreamers (Ps 126:1)." An interesting exercise is to make a list of similarities and differences between the two versions.