

For Jewish Action

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Mapping the Daf

A system of geometric shapes gives structure and clarity to the Sea of Talmud.

With the surging popularity of Talmud study – Daf Yomi, ArtScroll, CDs and websites – thousands of people are asking themselves: Am I attaining a clear understanding of the Gemara, and do I have an effective system to review and retain the information?

An innovative system called Gemara Markings is out to solve these concerns.

Gemara Markings uses geometric shapes, lines and numberings to overlay key points directly onto the Gemara text. This gives a visual snapshot of what is unfolding on the page, allowing one to easily keep track of the disputants, the various arguments, and the Gemara's overall flow.

Take one example: On Pesachim 2a, the Gemara presents a dispute over the definition of the word "ohr." With the marking system, triangles are used to indicate each source that supports one side of the dispute (in this case, Rav Huna, who says that *ohr* means "day"). An *inverted* triangle is then used to mark sources that support the other side (Rav Yehudah, who says that *ohr* means "night").

Throughout this back-and-forth series, one can see the Gemara's flow at a glance: Each source is clearly marked, and the direction of the triangle indicates which side of the argument it supports. Also, the sources are numbered in the margin, for ease of reference.

"This visual picture is essentially what a talmid chacham will do in his 'mind's eye'," explains Dov Bauman, a New York businessman who has learned through the entire Shas using the marking system. "Unfortunately most of us are not blessed with such genius. So the markings are a way to gain that clarity."

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The Gemara Marking System was developed 20 years ago in Jerusalem, and is now being used by hundreds of people worldwide, as well as being taught in yeshiva high schools and at Daf Yomi shiurim.

Rabbi Shmuel Horowitz is a rebbe at Torah Academy of Baltimore, where he has been teaching the Gemara Marking System for three years. He has seen students move from being indifferent about their Talmud study, to unbridled enthusiasm.

“Many high school students are frustrated by their lack of success in understanding the Gemara,” says Horowitz. “They lack a foundation of how the Gemara operates structurally. A typical page of Talmud contains 300 words, with no punctuation or indication of where one thought begins and ends. So students can’t see the forest for the trees.”

With the system, 6-8 points are marked per page – actually penciled into the Gemara – to map out a logical flow and highlight key points. “Beneath the surface,” says Horowitz, “the Gemara has a very distinct ‘topography.’ These markings help students get the big picture.”

One feature of the system is to take a key comment of Rashi and apply it to the Gemara text itself. For example, on Bechorot 15b, the Gemara quotes a long, 130-word Breita supporting the opinion of Rav Sheshet. However, most of the Breita is tangential to the discussion, leaving the key point buried. Rashi points out the five words that prove the point of Rav Sheshet. In the marking system, these five words are highlighted by a dot-underline, focusing one quickly and clearly on the key words that proves the point under discussion.

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The Gemara Marking System has also been a boon to those studying Daf Yomi. At the pace of one page of Talmud a day, one of the most difficult challenges is how – after learning hundreds and eventually thousands of pages – to recall all that material. With gemara markings, it is possible to look back and quickly reconstruct the main points and structure of the page. Review can be done in one-third the time it would otherwise take, thus freeing up more time for additional review and deeper study.

The marking system has been presented to Roshei Yeshiva and gedolei Yisrael, both in America and Israel, and the reaction has been universal: If the system works, use it!

Of course, the marking system uses the traditional *tzurat hadaf* (Talmud page), and does not add or subtract one iota from the Gemara text. A pencil is merely used to insert “study aids” into one’s Gemara, and everyone accepts the idea of writing down *Torah sh’Ba’al Peh* for this purpose.

In private conversations, many gedolim revealed that they write these types of notes into their own Gemaras.

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Teachers of Gemara have found an even greater benefit. By having students pencil in the markings, it keeps everyone alert and involved. So while shiurim are by nature a passive experience of listening, the system keeps everyone actively involved in marking the Gemara, and strengthening their personal attachment with the Shas.

Further, the markings enable a teacher to quickly refer back to key points made previously – either earlier on the page, or from many pages ago. In this way,

everyone is able to quickly focus on this key point, allowing the maggid shiur to maximize the limited available time. And best of all, everyone gets it; no one is left behind.

The results have been astounding.

Rabbi Tzvi Teichman, principal of Torah Academy of Baltimore, testifies: "Students who were never motivated in learning before, are now excited to be learning. In chinuch today, enthusiasm is the most important thing. If students find learning enjoyable, it will carry them through for a lifetime. The marking system gives students a sense that they can take it all the way and finish Shas."

At Torah Academy, Horowitz is especially gratified at the feedback he gets from parents. "It's very difficult for a parent to see their son not learning effectively, without a sense of accomplishment – and what that may lead to in terms of 'risk,'" he says. "But with the marking system, boys come home and spend Shabbat afternoon reviewing 5, 6 or 7 daf. Or they go to shul to learn with a partner because they enjoy it so much. Parents are amazed to see their son voluntarily learning Gemara in his free time!"

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Dov Bauman, the manager of a large supermarket in Brooklyn, says that the marking system changed his entire approach to Torah study. "As a kid, I wanted to play ball more than learn. I never expected to be a serious Talmud student."

Then someone showed him the marking system, and Bauman felt he finally had a framework to understand the Gemara. "I started with the goal of finishing one long mesechta. I completed Baba Batra, and I began to realize that I might actually be able to complete the Shas."

A few years later, when Bauman invited 100 friends and relatives to his home for a Siyum HaShas, the reaction was one of astonishment. "I'm not an intellectual. So for me to finish Shas was a big surprise."

Now Bauman helps teach the system over to others, and a large crowd attended his presentation of the Gemara Marking System at the Torah U'mesorah convention in May 2005.

Word of the system is spreading. The website GemaraMarkings.com gives examples and offers a series of "pre-marked" Gemaras to illustrate how the system works.

Says Bauman: "This is not a novelty. It works, cover to cover. I and many others have gone through the entire Shas – from Brachot to Nida – using the marking system. In the end, it all comes down to a practical consideration: What will get you farther, faster?"