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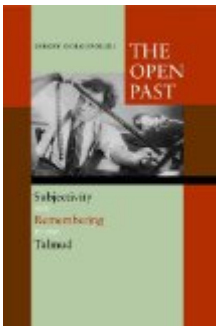

Sergey Dolgopolski. *The Open Past: Subjectivity and Remembering in the Talmud.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2013. xi + 379 pp. $65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8232-4492-8.

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This book by Sergey Dolgopolski situates the Babylonian Talmud's modes of thinking and remembering in light of twentieth-century philosophy and rhetoric. A singular piece of scholarship that will be of interest to scholars of Jewish studies, rabbinic literature, and philosophy, ***The Open Past*** turns to the Talmud to engage problems of the "virtual" and "open past." According to the analytic philosophical tradition, the concept of the open past is "a technical term referring to one's temporary inability to tell exactly which of the descriptions of the past is accurate" (p. x). In general, the goal of this monograph is to trace modes of thinking and memory across time and within the Jewish tradition. To this end, Dolgopolski asserts that the main question in the book is: "How does modern thinking differ from historical methods of thinking, particularly within the Jewish tradition?" The work is a history of thinking in philosophy and Talmudic Judaism, offering points of mutual fruition between the disciplines. While the monograph illustrates for philosophers the idiosyncratic value of the Talmudic corpus for their discipline in how it "provides an important counterexample to how our ability to remember might be conceived and carried out in practice" (p. 3), it offers Talmudists new insights into how to think about thinking as it relates to the dialogical character of the Bavli.

Although this book is, I think, addressed more to philosophers than scholars of rabbinics, at its core it is a sustained critique and re-orientation of text-critical Talmudists' assumptions regarding the concept of thinking in the Talmud. For instance, on pages 131-132 in ***The Open Past***, the author summarizes his critique of past Talmudic studies scholarship explaining that it has promoted flawed categories of thinking persons and authors and would benefit from reframing its notions of thinking based on the history of the topic in Western philosophy and critical theory. An overarching goal of ***The Open Past*** is, then, to reexamine questions of thinking and authorial subjects in Talmudic scholarship, especially as pro-

moted by David Weiss Halivni and Shamma Friedman, two giants in the field.[1]

In what follows I shall give a synthesis of the most salient features of the monograph. The book is divided into an introduction and four parts, entitled "Stakes," "Who Speaks?," "Who Thinks?," and "Who Remembers?" Each of the four parts contains two or three chapters each, for a total of ten. After a conclusion, the author also adds an appendix on Halivni and Friedman's reading of a Talmudic *sugya*.

In the introduction, Dolgopolski lays out the book's basic project. The author perceptively traces how the history of "thinking subjects" in antiquity and the Middle Ages leads to contemporary Talmudists' problematic assumptions regarding the anonymous editors, called the *stammaim* (cf. p. 132). According to Dolgopolski, the rabbis of late antiquity possessed an alternative epistemology of remembrance than most Talmudists assume. In this view, Talmudists are imposing an anachronistic understanding of "thinking subjects" upon their analyses of the Bavli's numerous voices. Instead, the author argues, the Talmudic sages "are no more and no less than agents and placeholders for textual traditions" and "are not person-centered thinkers mediating their thoughts in the text" (p. 4). The rabbis who produce the Talmud should not be understood as thinking subjects.

Part 1 of *The Open Past* opens up by exploring the benefits involved in utilizing the thought of Heidegger, Levinas, and Plato's *Phaedrus* for the study as a whole. Dolgopolski argues that contemporary source-critical Talmudists misunderstand the broader implications of their own research on redaction—that is, without Halivni and Friedman realizing it, their chronological studies are in fact dealing with the philosophical question of "who is thinking" in the Bavli. Dolgopolski wants to approach the Bavli as an "intellectual discipline" and a "performance" (pp. 36-39). On pages 45-53 the author critiques Halivni's "literary-formal" approach and Friedman's "literary-realist" method by stating that "the problems of historical approaches to the Talmud have to do with assuming a historically empirically unverified (and perhaps unverifiable) agency responsible for the Talmud's genesis, while claiming to produce an account of the empirically verifiable history of the Talmud's production" (p. 46).

Part 2 of *The Open Past* scrutinizes contemporary notions of the Talmud's redactors *qua* authors by using *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) authored by Samuel Clemens, a.k.a. Mark Twain, as an analogy (e.g., "Who, then, is the Mark Twain of the Talmud?," p. 71). The book finds fault with text-critical scholars for defining "thinking in rigid association with a person (character, author) found either in historical reality or in the reality represented and/or constructed in the text" (p. 76). Halivni's position, according to *The Open Past*, is that the "Author" is a homogeneous-thinking singularity which includes multiplicity. For Dolgopolski, however, Talmudists need to stop thinking about authorial subjects in the Cartesian model of "they thought, therefore they must have existed" (p. 83). In chapter 6, the author turns to a close reading of *Bava Metzia,* chapter 6. He summarizes his conclusions based on the primary source that "the Aramaic speakers do not have personalities" but rather "function as placeholders defined by the difference in their choreographed roles, not by their identities or by any content or structure of their arguments" (p. 126).

Part 3 of *The Open Past*, entitled "Who Thinks?," is an erudite survey of philosophical traditions about thinking, from Aristotle to Augustine to Foucault, that help to contextualize Judaism's long-standing notions of a thinking subject in the Talmud. Dolgopolski analyzes key passages on this subject found in the writings of Maimonides and Moses Hayyim Luzzato before then moving to Halivni's readings of several *sugyot* (see pp. 143-157) which he attacks as "subscribing to the problematic and theologically charged con-

cept of the thinking subject" (p. 156). While much ground is covered here, one of the more interesting claims of Dolgopolski is where he explains that "specific refutations and defenses have no intrinsic time of genesis" and that it is therefore wrong to perpetuate the "illusion of synchronic conversations in the Talmud" (p. 175). For Dolgopolski the Author of the Talmud is virtual, not real (p. 176) and Talmudists need to revisit the philosophical implications of the sequencing of refutations and defenses.

Part 4 of ***The Open Past*** focuses again upon the virtual aspects of Talmudic voices, which the author compares with Plato's ***The Sophist*** (p. 187). In many ways, this part of the book represents its most explicit statement on the benefits of bringing Talmudic studies and philosophy into conversation. The comparison between Platonic dialogues and the Talmud allows Dolgopolski to contemplate further questions of virtuality. On pages 200-205, the author analyzes Palestinian Talmud, Berakhot 9:1, and Bavli Megillah 19b-20a as a means of illustrating the role of the virtual in the Bavli's dialectical forms of argumentation. Part 4 of ***The Open Past*** also contains a chapter entitled "The Talmud as Film" which draws upon the notion of a "montage" as a way of addressing Halivni's theories of redaction. On this point the author argues that Halivni "addresses that montage historically, in the time of history, not in the time of the montage itself" (p. 246).

For Talmudists reading ***The Open Past***, it is essential to pay close attention to the author's analysis of Halivni and Friedman's divergent readings of Bava Metzia 76a-b (see esp. table 2 on pp. 303-305). In many ways, the appendix represents the author's putting his claims into action--that is, taking us through a text piecemeal, citing Halivni and Friedman on that text, and then revealing certain flaws of their assumptions about thinking. Dolgopolski also adds a comparative chart about these two scholars' approaches towards Talmud (pp. 194-196) before finally concluding that "they still show an uncritical remnant of the traditional normative approach ... to the Talmud, in which (a) the Talmud is both composed by one of the latest name-identified authorities mentioned in it, Rav Ashe, and (b) by the same token, is staged as early as in fifth-century Babylonia, or in respective academies of the rabbis of previous generations" (p. 297).

In conclusion, Dolgopolski's book is an ambitious critique of two of the most important Talmudic scholars of the twentieth century. While the style and content of Dolgopolski's philosophical book is at times too dense for an uninitiated reader, at its best it offers intriguing and successful challenges to Talmudists' presuppositions regarding the concept of thinking subjects and authorship that are rooted in centuries of misconception about late antique ideas of reality and virtuality. Regardless of whether one agrees with all of Dolgopolski's conclusions, it behooves source-critical Talmudists to take this monograph's insights as a signal to become increasingly mindful of the philosophical ramifications of stammaitic theory and collective authorship. While ***The Open Past*** at times gives short shrift to the inner-Talmudic reasons for Halivni and Friedman's well-established modes of analysis, and does not engage enough with relevant Talmudic texts as data and test cases, the monograph nevertheless demonstrates the value of the Bavli's unique rhetoric and compositional character for philosophical inquiries into subjectivity and memory.

Note

[1]. For example, David Weiss Halivni, ***Mekorot u-Masorot: Be'urim Ba-Talmud: Massakhet Bava Kama*** (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1993); David Weiss Halivni, ***Mekorot u-Masorot: Be'urim Ba-Talmud: Massakhet Bava Metsi'a*** (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2003); Shamma Friedman, "A Good Story Deserves Retelling—The Unfolding of the Akiva Legend," ***Journal for the Study of Judaism*** 3 (2004): 55-93;

Shamma Friedman, “Perek Ha-Isha Raba BeBavli be Tziruf Mavo Klali al Derekh Heker Hasygia,” in *Mekhkarim UMekorot: Sefer Alef* (New York: Bet ha-midrash le-Rabanim be-Amerikah, 5738), 275-440; Shamma Friedman, *Talmud Arukh: Perek Ha-Sokher et Ha-Umanin: Bavli Bava Metsia Perek Shishi: Mahadurah al Derekh Ha-Mekhar Im Perush Ha-Sugyot* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1990).