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UNDERSTANDING THE TALMUD

A Systematic Guide
to Talmudic Structure
and Methodology

by
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C. What This Book Does Not Do

First and foremost, this book **does not** replace a Gemara class. We are dealing with *Torah SheB'al Peh* (the Oral Law), and it is impossible to learn how to study Gemara without a teacher or Rebbe. This book also leaves out many essentials which are **crucial** to such study. It does not describe the development of the Oral Law, nor does it provide an extensive history and listing of the Tannaim (Mishnaic sages) and Amoraim (Gemara sages), the thirteen rules of Biblical exegesis (שלש עשרה מדות), and elementary Aramaic grammar. Neither is it a complete dictionary. All these can be found in other works, listed below under the heading "suggested reading." If, however, used in conjunction with a proper *shiur* and the other available aids, this book can help you arrive at a clearer understanding of what you are learning.

I have no doubt that much has been left out, and that many things are not explained as clearly as they should be. I ask for your comments and suggestions in order to improve this work, for as we know:

"מכל מלמדי השכלתי ... ומתלמידי יותר מכולם."

"From all my teachers I have gained knowledge ... and from my students — more than all of them."

II. History and Style of the Gemara

In order to better appreciate the unique structure and style of the Mishna and Gemara (and thereby understand the need for precise text skills), it is important first to comprehend how the Mishna and Gemara developed. It is extremely worthwhile to spend some time reading some **detailed** accounts of the development of the Oral Law and the redaction of the Mishna and Gemara (see "suggested readings"). Here I present only an outline of those factors which account for the particular **style** and **wording** of the Mishna and Gemara.

A. Mishna — Tannaim

The Mishna is, essentially, a book of *halachot* (laws) as stated by the Tannaim.

The period of the Tannaim is dated roughly from Hillel and Shammai (the early days of King Herod). The Tannaim took the mass of oral tradition (both interpretations and details of the Written Law and regulations and restrictions enacted by the Rabbis), as given by G-d to Moses and handed on to the prophets, elders, and scholars, and began to organize it into a network of precise laws arranged by topics and mnemonic association. This was in order to facilitate memorization and proper transmission to future generations.

The amount of material, methods of analysis, and modes of expression expanded greatly in the later Tannaitic period, as many more Yeshivot were opened to an ever greater number of students.

Rebbi Yehuda HaNasi, among the last of the Tannaim, feared that much of the Oral Law as it was known to the Tannaim would be forgotten. He decided to summarize and organize it and, according to many opinions, he also recorded it. His work is known as the Mishna.

Much of the phrasing of the Mishna reflects certain principles: a) the retention of certain forms and groupings of laws as they had already been memorized by many scholars; b) the facilitation of memorization for future generations; and c) the assumption that the Mishna would be transmitted orally and that future scholars would elucidate all the implications of each word. The Mishna was thus not an end, but rather the basis of future study. This accounts for the concise, terse style, and the use of mnemonic devices in its phrasing and arrangement.

B. Braita — "Outside"(the Mishna)

After Rebbi Yehuda HaNasi's death, his disciples continued to write down much of the Tannaitic material that Rebbi Yehuda HaNasi did not include in the Mishna. Some of it survived as an independent work, called the Tosefta. The *Midrashei Halacha* were also compiled at this time. These, along with the isolated *halachot* and Tannaitic statements not included in any compilation, are now known as "braitot"(or "baita" in the singular).

C. Gemara — Amoraim

The Tannaim were followed by the Amoraim, who analyzed, discussed, explained, and applied the laws contained in the Mishna and braitot. Rav and Shmuel were among the first generation of Babylonian Amoraim, and Rav Ashi and Ravina were among the last.

Seeing that the vast bulk of discussions between the Amoraim were in danger of being forgotten, Rav Ashi decided to organize the material and record a synopsis of discussions — even though the Amoraim, as they studied, never envisioned a final written work.

The Gemara is not only a record of the halachic conclusions, but also a summary of the discussions leading up to them, including the thought processes and the halachic and agaddic digressions which occurred.

An excellent description of the redaction of the Gemara, which sheds light on the underlying philosophy of this book, can be found at the end of the eighth chapter of **The Essential Talmud** by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz (the emphasis is mine):

“The incomplete indexing and arrangement of material do not result from a dearth of editorial talent but rather derive from a certain type of approach. In Jewish literature as a whole, there are very few works with clear schematic frameworks because the assumption is that the Torah, as a reflection of life itself, cannot be artificially compartmentalized, but must develop naturally from subject to subject.

“On the other hand, the Talmud scrupulously respects detail and takes great pains to convey statements accurately. The sources are punctiliously cited and any doubts as to authenticity or traditions are faithfully reported. What is more, **talmudic readaction created a precise terminology** for classification of quotations and debates. There is a special annotation for mishnayot, braitot, or for the maxims of an amora. There are also classifications for different types of questions and differentiation between the nuances of queries. The Talmud distinguishes, for example, between conjectures and assumptions which are refuted at the end of the discussion and those which are accepted, and between contradictions which can not be reconciled and problems to which solutions exist. The order in which various matters are presented is also significant, indicating the relative weight to be attributed to the solutions. It is because of this precision, the outcome of generations of endeavor, that the Talmud, which at first glance appears inconsistent and disorganized, is revealed to be, in fact, a most consistent work with its own fixed methods of analysis. Because of the quality of the editing, it serves as a halachic source of outstanding importance, though this was not the original aim. And because of the profound stability of its method and ways of thinking, its mode of expression and writing, it was possible for talmudic creation to be continued for many centuries.”

By using this book properly, you will learn to recognize and take advantage of the “precise terminology” of the Gemara and thereby better understand the issues the Gemara discusses.

III. How to Use This Book

A. Page Design

Opposite each word or phrase is a literal translation. When this does not adequately convey the actual meaning, a free translation, marked “Freely,” follows the literal translation.

Below this comes an explanation of what the term does (e.g. introduces an attack question, introduces an alternative answer) and in what context it is used.

Then comes a description of what words come before and after the term, as well as what to look for and what questions to ask yourself when you encounter it.

The page may include a diagram of the general structure in which the term appears, breaking down its components in order to help clarify the term’s function. Where appropriate, a page of Gemara on which a clear example of the use of the term may be found is cited. The student may also be referred to one of the two appendices, each of which presents a detailed structural analysis of a passage of Gemara in which a number of important terms appear.

It is **very important** to emphasize that the explanations, diagrams, and examples were written under the assumption that you are using them while learning a passage of Gemara. This book can not be used as a text on its own.

B. Vocalization

The terms are brought with vowels that are, in general, grammatically correct. It should be noted, however that the rules of Aramaic grammar are sometimes at variance with the pronunciation traditional in yeshivot, and may even differ from yeshiva to yeshiva. Each student should adopt a consistent system of pronunciation as used by his rebbe.

C. Terms Used in this Book

This book uses a number of words and phrases to describe various components of the Gemara. They are terms I find useful to precise understanding. You may, however, give these components other names, just as long as it is absolutely clear to you and to others what each one of them represents. Each of these words or phrases is listed below. Each term is defined and one or two signal words typical of each is presented.

a. **Statement:** The Gemara presents several types of statements:

- 1) *Information statements* relate a piece of information. Such a statement does not set out a law, but rather tells you something. It is important that you know why the Gemara takes the trouble to relate this information at this particular point.
- 2) *Legal statements* set out a point of law. Every law consists of a scenario (either clearly stated or implied) and the presentation of the law itself.
- 3) *Explanatory statements* explain a point of law (as opposed to changing it, adding to it, or limiting it). You should understand exactly **which** unclear point requires explanation, and **why** it is not clear. The Gemara does not explain clear laws.
- 4) *Qualifying statements* (e.g. *הני מילי, לא שנו אלא*) qualify or limit a law to a specific scenario or issue. You should know the original law, its new limited form, and what difference it makes. It must make a difference — otherwise the qualification would not appear.
- 5) *Arguments* are made up of two contradictory statements (either legal, explanatory, or qualifying statements) stated by two Rabbis of equal authority. If one of the two Rabbis is a Tanna and the other an Amora, it takes the form of an attack on the Amora. See — אמר ר'.

Note that explanations or qualifications are termed answers when they come in response to a question. If brought independently, they are termed statements.

b. **Information Question:** Commonly called a שאלה, its purpose is to ask for one of three types of information:

- 1) the resolution of a legal issue; (e.g. *איבעיא להו*)
- 2) the authorship of a citation; (e.g. *מני*)
- 3) the Torah or logical source of a statement. (e.g. *מניין, מאי טעמא, מנהימ*)

Since it seeks information and does not attack the logic or the authority of a previous statement or idea, the question may be left unanswered without weakening the standing of that statement or idea.

c) **Attack Question:** Commonly called a קושיא, its purpose is to attack a statement or an idea. This can be accomplished in two ways:

- 1) showing that the statement or idea is false;
- 2) showing that, although the statement or idea may be true, it is superfluous and unnecessary. (e.g. *פשיטא, מאי נימ*)

Attack questions may be based on:

- 1) quotations; (e.g. *תנינא, איתיביה, התניא, רמי*)
- 2) *svara* or logic. (e.g. *מתקיף*)

Attack questions may be either:

- 1) direct — showing that the statement or idea itself is false or unnecessary;
- 2) indirect — showing that the statement or idea leads to a **conclusion** which is false or unnecessary. (e.g. אלא מעתה, אי הכי)

One good way to understand an attack question (i.e. to focus precisely on what kind of attack it is, and where it ends), is to stop where you think the Gemara has presented the question and ask yourself, “Were the Gemara to end here and not answer the question, **who** or **what** would be weakened and **why**?” If neither an authority nor a law would be weakened, the question has not (yet) attacked anything.

Note that attack questions are often long and constructed of a number of components: assumptions (e.g. מאי לאו), quotes, information questions (e.g. היכי דמי) and their answers, and even other attack questions (e.g. והוינן בה) and their answers. It is important that you first see the attack question as a unit and understand what it accomplishes. Then break it into its component parts and see why each section was needed to create the question. An example of this can be found in Appendix B.

Note that an attack question may sometimes attack a **previous** attack question. If it succeeds, the first attack question is rejected. It thus functions as an answer, even though it is introduced with an attack question word. A good example of this can be found in Bava Kama 4b, near the top, where the words מתקיף לה רב זביד appear. There the הכי מאי מבעה אי attack question attacks the validity of the מתקיף question. In the end, the הכי אי attack question is found valid, and the original מתקיף attack question is rejected.

d. Answer: Answers are statements which come in response to specific questions. Remember that a statement may come independently of any question, but **answers** always attempt to solve a problem presented by an information or attack question. They may take three forms:

- 1) a new explanation;
- 2) a qualification limiting the law or scenario;
- 3) an attack on the question.

Always make sure you know precisely what the answer changes:

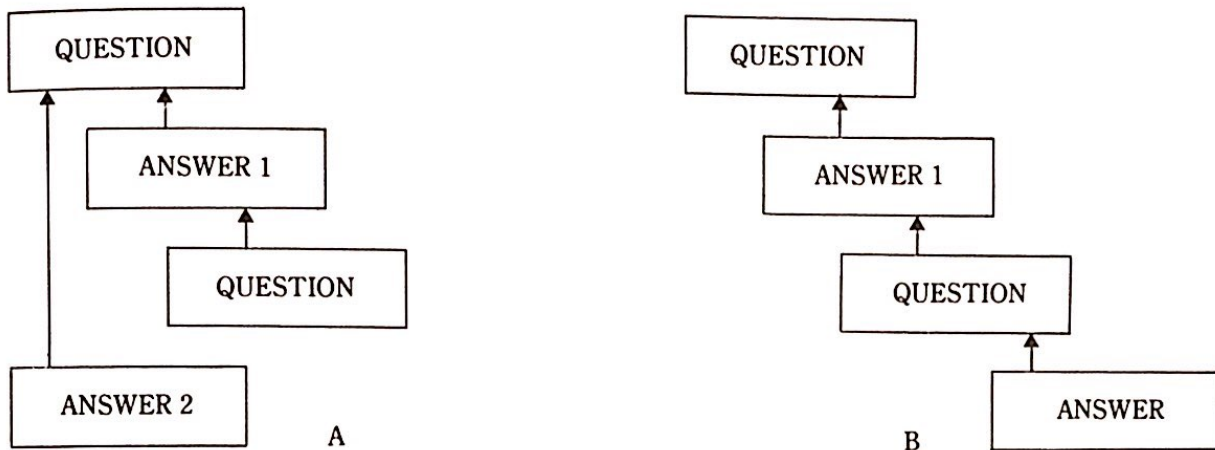
- 1) the text; (e.g. הכי קתני)
- 2) the understanding of a statement or idea; (e.g. הכי קאמר)
- 3) the limitation of a scenario to a specific case; (e.g. הכא במאי עסקינן)
- 4) an assumption, which is now rejected. (e.g. מאי לאו... לא)

Be sure you know **how** that change affects the question.

Always make sure you know **which** question is being answered. If the Gemara presents an attack question, an answer to it, and then an attack on that answer, there are two options:

- 1) that answer may be rejected, in which case the Gemara will present a **second answer to the original question** (diagram A);
- 2) the attack on that answer **may itself be answered**, preserving the viability of that first answer (diagram B).

Note that, in diagram A, the last answer comes in response to the original attack question, after the first answer has been invalidated by the second attack question. In diagram B, however, the last answer comes in response to the attack question raised against answer 1. By answering that attack, it preserves the validity of the first answer.



e. **Proof:** There are proofs based on:

- 1) logic; (e.g. הכי נמי מסתברא)
- 2) text. (e.g. דתניא)

A mishna, braita, or *posuk* (verse from the Torah) can only be taken as proof of a statement when the quote cannot be explained **in any other way**. If there is another way of interpreting the quote — improbable as it may be — it can not serve as proof of the validity of a statement.

Note that, when found after an information question, the proof functions as its answer in one of two ways:

- 1) by directly proving correct one possible answer to the question;
- 2) by attacking one possible answer, thereby indirectly proving the correctness of the other possible answer.

f. **Scenario:** Laws are presented in association with a case, a specific set of details or conditions under which the law applies. This is called the scenario of the law. The scenario may be explicit or may be implicit. It may have different permutations, under which the law changes accordingly.

IV. General Study Rules

The following rules tell you **how to study** Gemara.

1. Do not use pronouns (e.g. it, he, here, there) or general terms (e.g. “the Mishna,” “the Gemara,”) in translating and discussing the Gemara. Be as precise as possible. You will be surprised how difficult — but how productive — it is to learn Gemara for an hour without using any pronouns.
2. Whenever the Gemara quotes something or someone, be sure to note:
 - a. precisely where the quote ends;
 - b. which part of the quote is relevant to the Gemara’s discussion.
3. It is always important to be aware of whether the person speaking is a Tanna or an Amora.
4. At every step ask yourself whether what follows is an:
 - a. information question — and if so, what kind, and what the issues at hand are;
 - b. attack question — and if so, what kind, against what or whom, and why;
 - c. answer — and if so, what kind, to what, and how;
 - d. statement — and if so, what kind, and what it accomplishes;
 - e. proof — and if so, what kind, and what it proves.

Use this book to help yourself understand the role of each line, returning to the “Terms Used in this Book” section to find out what questions to ask yourself when encountering various structures.

5. Use an outline or a chart to keep track of every step of the Gemara’s discussion. This should show how the argument developed from the mishna to the step you are currently working on.
6. Understand at every step how the mishna has been affected (if at all) by the Gemara’s discussion — whether its text or understanding has been changed, or whether it has been qualified or explained.
7. When you arrive at the end of the discussion of a particular point of the mishna or a particular point of any law, stop and ask yourself the following questions: “At this point in the discussion, what is the *psbat* (understanding) of the mishna or issue?” “What is the status of the mishna or issue — has it been qualified, rejected, expanded, or validated?”

An example of rules 4-7 may be found in Appendix A.

V. Suggested Reading

English

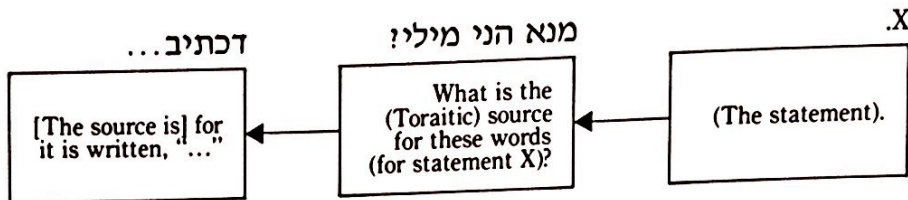
Gateway to the Talmud, by Rabbi Meir Zvi Bergman
The Gateway to Learning, by Rabbi Eliyahu Krupnik
Aiding Talmud Study, by Rabbi Aryeh Carmell
The Oral Law, by Rabbi H.C. Schimmel
The Student’s Guide Through the Talmud, by Rabbi Zvi Hirsh Chajes

Hebrew

אוצר התלמוד מאת יוסף שכטר
אשנב התלמוד מאת ע'צ מלמד

Biblical verse is in and of itself the source, or whether the Gemara goes on to discuss the verse in order to turn it into a source for the statement.

X. מנא הני מילי? דכתיב, ...



מני

LITERALLY: *Who is it?*

מני is an information question asking for the name of the author of the previous law, mishna or braitā. Make sure you know exactly what law is being discussed.

The answer immediately follows the word מני.

Note that the question may sometimes appear as מני מתניתין, “who is the author of our Mishna?”

For an example of the use of מני, see the bottom of Bava Metzia 8b. Note that this is a good example of the Gemara constructing a מיתיבי attack by using an information question (מני), its proposed answer (אילימא), and its final answer (אלא לאו) to explain the quotation in a way that turns it into an attack. See איתיבה.

מניין

LITERALLY: *From where?*

מניין introduces an information question, usually concerning the statement that follows, and generally asking for the Toraitic source of that statement.

The answer is often introduced by the words תלמוד לומר, meaning that the source is the following Biblical verse. Make sure you know whether the verse is itself the source, or whether the Gemara must continue with a discussion of the verse in order to turn it into a source.

תְּנוּ רַבָּנָן (ת"ר)

LITERALLY: *Our Rabbis learned.*

תְּנוּ רַבָּנָן introduces a known and generally accepted braitā, usually introducing a new topic.

תְּנִיא כּוּוֹתִיה דְּר' —

LITERALLY: *A braitā was taught (that is) like the law of R. —.*

— תְּנִיא כּוּוֹתִיה דְּר' introduces support, based on a braitā, for a previously stated law. Immediately following the phrase is the quotation of the braitā. Make sure you know where the quotation ends, and whether it (or part of it) constitutes the proof of the law itself, or whether the Gemara goes on to discuss the braitā in order to construct the proof.

תְּנִיא נְמִי הַכִּי

LITERALLY: *It was also taught in a braitā this way.*

תְּנִיא נְמִי הַכִּי introduces a braitā that, in text or content, is equivalent to what was said previously. See — תְּנִיא כּוּוֹתִיה דְּר' —, to which it is structurally similar.

תְּנִינָא

LITERALLY: *I/we learned.*

תְּנִינָא appears in two formats:

1) as a signal word announcing that a law, generally from a braitā but sometimes from a mishna, is about to be cited.

2) as a signal word announcing an attack question against an

איכא דמתני לה אהא

LITERALLY: *There are those who learn it on this.*

FREELY: There are those who say that the previous statement applies to or was said in reference to the following, rather than in reference to the matter dealt with above.

איכא דמתני לה אהא introduces a second tradition regarding a certain statement (generally a statement of law), as to what issue (or what section of the mishna or braita) the statement refers.

It is important to know what statement the Gemara is dealing with ("there are those who learn it," — what is "it?"), and to what original issue (or part of the mishna or braita) the Gemara thought the statement referred.

For an example of the use of איכא דמתני לה אהא, see the top of Makot 8b, and Rashi's comment.

איכא דרמי להו מירמא

LITERALLY: *There are those who raise it as a contradiction.*

FREELY: There are those who cite a tradition that the previous statement was not said merely as a statement of law or explanation, but rather as an answer to the following question.

איכא דרמי להו מירמא introduces a different tradition as to the context of a given statement, claiming that it was meant as an answer to a particular question, rather than simply as a statement.

Immediately following the phrase is the question that the previous statement answers. It is important to know which statement the Gemara refers to.

For an example of the use of איכא דרמי להו מירמא, see the bottom of Rosh Hashana 27b, and Rashi's comment there.

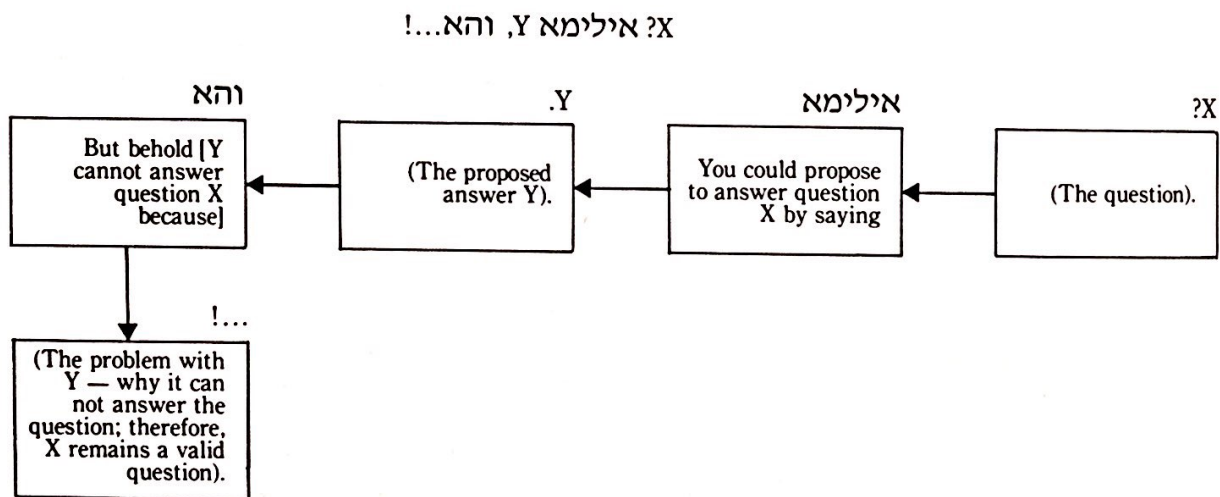
אילימא

LITERALLY: *If one would say.*

אילימא introduces an answer to either an attack or an information

question proposed rhetorically by the questioner, knowing that it can be refuted. The purpose is to strengthen his question by showing that what one might have proposed as an answer has already been suggested and rejected.

When you see the word אילימא, you know that you have reached the end of the question, and that the proposed answer begins immediately afterwards. It continues until you reach one of the question words (והא, התני, התניא, etc.) which signify the beginning of the attack which will refute the proposed answer. In order to understand the exchange clearly, it is important first to stop at the end of the question and consider what it is attacking and how. Only then should you read the proposed answer and consider how the proposed answer would have answered the question. After the proposed answer is clear, one may read the attack that refutes the proposed answer and understand why it is being rejected. Note that, while it should all be charted as part of the original attack question (since the purpose of the אילימא is to strengthen the attack), it is nevertheless important to divide it into its various components.



For an example of the use of אילימא, see Bava Kama 66b and Appendix B.

אימא

LITERALLY: *Say*.

אימא introduces some change, either in text or understanding. This could be in the context of a question, proposed explanation, or an answer.

אלא מאי

LITERALLY: *But what?*

FREELY: But what must we assume?

אלא מאי is used to introduce an assumption upon which an attack question is based.

The phrase אלא מאי is inflected as a rhetorical question asking one of two points:

- a) What must we assume is the law in the previous scenario?
- b) What must we assume is the explanation of the previous law?

Immediately following the phrase comes the “answer” on which the Gemara is going to base an attack question. Following the “answer” to the אלא מאי comes the attack itself. You must understand why the attack question depends on the assumption of that “answer.” When the Gemara answers such an attack question, it is important to know whether the answer rejects or accepts that assumption. If the assumption is rejected, it is important to know what is **now** the “answer” to the אלא מאי question.

For an example of format b, see the bottom of Bava Kama 9a, where the phrase לענין מיטב is the “answer,” and the phrase אי הכי introduces the attack itself.

Note: Do not confuse this with the phrase לך למימר איך, which is often used to construct an answer.

אלא מעתה

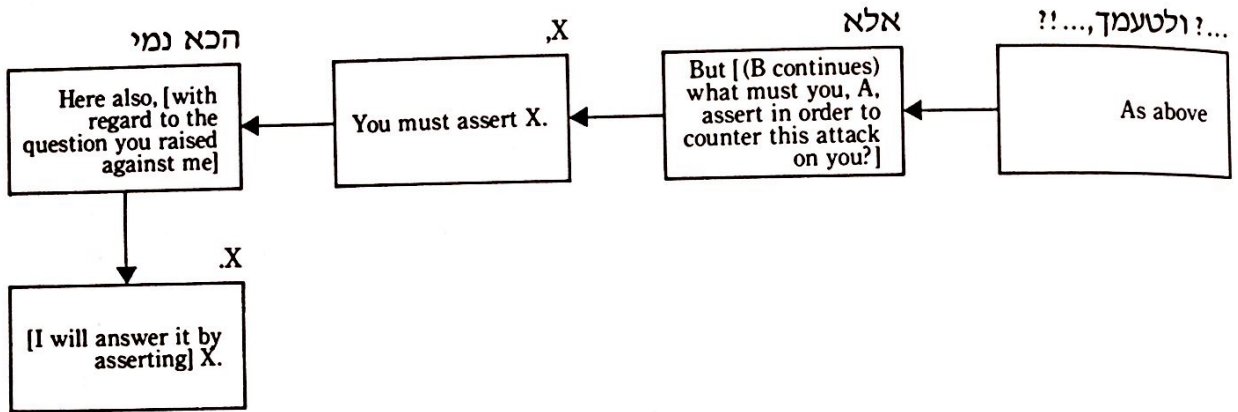
LITERALLY: *But from now.*

FREELY: But, according to what you’ve said, you could conclude the following.

אלא מעתה introduces an indirect attack question against a statement. Structurally, it is the same as אי הכי (the second format) — that is, the words אלא מעתה introduce a conclusion drawn from the statement, and the Gemara now intends to show that this conclusion is false (if that is not already obvious). With the conclusion proven false, the original statement is shown to be false as well. See the explanation of אי הכי, format 2, which applies equally well to אלא מעתה.

For an example of the use of אלא מעתה, see the top of Bava Kama 9b, where it signals an attack on an אילימא answer, by drawing an obviously false conclusion from that answer.

... ולטעמך, !!..., אלא X, הכא נמי X.



Sometimes, ולטעמך does not appear in the context of an argument. Rather, it may be found after the Gemara (in the role of side A) presents an attack question against someone (B). ולטעמך then signals the beginning B's retort to the question. Structurally, it works according to the above diagram — you need only replace A with "the Gemara's question."

A good example of the use of ולטעמך, which also incorporates הכא נמי, may be found in Bava Kama 66b and in Appendix B.

ומה

LITERALLY: *And what.*

FREELY: Just like.

ומה is used in constructing either a...אף... מה or a וחומר קל comparison. See both these terms for a full outline of the structures.

ועוד/ותו

LITERALLY: *And furthermore.*

ועוד and ותו introduce additional attack questions against the statement just attacked by the Gemara.

!!..., ועוד, !!... X

continued...

