



Learning With Children

For the parent who is quietly troubled by the relevancy question

Your child looks up from the page and asks why the two of you are spending an hour on an ox that gored a cow. Nobody owns an ox, and nobody they know has ever been near one.

The answers within reach are the ones you do not entirely believe yourself: that it is Torah and we learn it because it is Torah, that it will be relevant when Moshiach comes, that you said so. Each of these is true in its own way, and none of them answers the question that was actually asked. Children can hear that difference quite clearly, which is usually why the question comes back a week later.

This appendix is written for that moment. It does not set out to defend Torah study, which needs no defense from anyone. It offers a practical answer to a fair question, along with a way of learning together that lets a child see the answer rather than be told it.

Start by granting the question

The question is not a symptom of weak commitment or a warning sign of anything else. It is the correct instinct of someone trying to work out why a text is built the way it is, and it deserves better than deflection. A child who asks it is doing something a good deal closer to learning than a child who has stopped wondering.

So grant it out loud before you answer it. *That is a good question. Let me show you something.*

Why the Gemara chose an ox

An ox was not an exotic choice for the Mishnah to make. It was the most ordinary expensive thing a family could own, serving at once as the pickup truck, the power tool and the livelihood. When the Mishnah opens *Bava Kamma* by naming four categories of damage, the ox, the pit, the grazing animal and the fire, it is not reaching

for colorful cases to hold a reader's attention. It is naming the four ways that an ordinary person's ordinary property actually caused damage on an ordinary day.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

The case is dated, but the question underneath it has not aged at all. What the Gemara wants to know is not something about oxen. It is asking when a person becomes responsible for harm that his property caused while he was somewhere else entirely, and that question arises in a parking lot as readily as it once did in a field.

Which means that the relevancy question has an answer you can demonstrate rather than argue. You show the child the same case running in their own parking lot.

The shopping cart in the parking lot

You finish loading your groceries. The cart corral is four rows away and it has started to rain, so you leave the cart beside your car and drive off. The lot slopes, the wind picks up, and the cart rolls down the incline, gathering speed, and scrapes three parked cars on its way.

Ask your child the flat question first: *do you have to pay?*

Most children answer straight away, and most of them answer with complete confidence in whichever direction they happened to pick. That confidence is what gives you an opening, because the case starts coming apart in their hands the moment you begin pulling on it.

Here is the same exchange set out in the five components this book has been using since Chapter Eight. Read it the way you read the hamburger conversation there.

STATEMENT

"You left the cart, the cart did damage, so you pay."

QUESTION

"But I did not push it into anything. I parked it, and the *wind* pushed it. Why am I responsible for what the wind did?"

ANSWER

"Because you set it down where you knew it could roll. The wind only finished what you started."

QUESTION

"Then is every accident my fault as long as I touched something first? Where is that supposed to stop?"

INQUIRY

"And besides, it is not even my cart. It belongs to the store."

What your child has just done, with no training of any kind, is produce the outline of a sugya. Every one of those objections is a question the Gemara actually raises, and its answers to them are not the obvious ones.

The questions hiding inside the cart

Work through them one at a time. There is no need to reach a ruling at the end, since the point of the exercise is that every question is real and every one of them turns on something small.

1. **Did you push it, or did you leave it?** These are not two degrees of the same thing. They fall into different categories carrying different rules, because a person who does damage directly and a person whose property does damage while he is elsewhere belong to two separate discussions, and those discussions do not come out the same way.
2. **The wind moved it, so is the wind's force yours?** This is the Gemara's question about fire, and it divides into two theories that are still argued over today. One approach treats fire as an extension of the person, so that his fire is like an arrow he has loosed: where it lands is his doing even though he is no longer touching it. The other treats fire as his property, so that he is liable in the way he is liable for an animal that wandered off, because it was his to control. The cart sits exactly on the seam between them. Was leaving it on a slope in the wind closer to firing an arrow, or closer to failing to tie up an animal?
3. **It is the store's cart, so does that help?** Try the sharper version. Suppose you announce that you renounce any claim to the cart at all. Can a person shed his liability by shedding his ownership? The Gemara asks this directly, and the Sages who take it up disagree with each other. Put the question to a child and watch them feel the pull of both sides.
4. **Where did it happen?** A private lot belonging to the store, a public street, or a spot where the damaged party had no right to park in the first place. The Gemara treats the location of damage as a live factor in the ruling rather than as background scenery.
5. **Three cars, not one.** Does each owner collect in full? What if the cart barely grazed the first and destroyed the third? What if one of the three was parked across two spaces where it had no business being?

WORTH SAYING ALOUD An insurance adjuster handling this claim would work through much the same five questions in much the same order, and nobody taught them to him out of a Gemara. He arrives at them because they are the questions the case contains, which is exactly the point you are making to your child.

Why the Gemara goes into such detail

This is the deeper form of the child's question, and it is the one worth answering properly. The question is not only why an ox, but why so much of it: why the Gemara spends pages separating cases that look almost identical instead of stating the rule and moving on. There are four answers, and they build on one another.

First, the detail is where the principle actually lives. "Be careful with your property" is not a rule that anyone can use, because it offers no guidance at all once the cart is already rolling. Does it matter that you did not push it, that the wind did, that the cart was never yours to begin with? Each of those is a genuine fork with a different answer waiting at the end of it, and no amount of staring at the slogan will produce them. The detail in the Gemara is not decoration laid over the principle; it is the place, and the only place, where the principle turns into something a person can apply on a Tuesday afternoon.

Second, it trains the search for the real point of difference. The characteristic move of the Gemara is to set two cases side by side that appear identical and then ask why the law treats them differently. The answer always turns out to be some small thing: who was getting the benefit, who had control, what could have been foreseen, where it happened. Finding that small thing is a skill, and it is the same skill involved in working out why one patient responded to a treatment and another did not, why the code runs on one machine and fails on the next, why one contract held up in court while its near twin did not. A child who has been trained to ask what exactly is different between these two cases has been handed something they will use every week for the rest of their life.

Third, it trains a person to argue against himself. This one is rare, and it is taught almost nowhere else. The Gemara raises the objection to its own answer rather than waiting for an opponent to come along and find the weakness. A child who learns Gemara seriously absorbs the habit of asking, straight after saying something, what the strongest thing is that somebody could say against it. Most adults never pick this up at all.

Fourth, the stakes are real without being the child's own. The cases are concrete enough to care about and far enough away to think about clearly. A child can reason honestly about whether the person who left the cart should pay, because nothing of theirs is riding on the answer, and the reasoning goes in cleanly as a result. Some years later it is their scooter, their neighbor and their money, and the structure is already built and waiting.

Three more, for the dinner table

The cart is the fullest example, but almost any sugya in *Nezikin* has a version that already lives somewhere in a child's own world. These three work particularly well.

The borrowed scooter that breaks

Your child lends a scooter to a friend. It comes back cracked, and the friend explains that it was not his fault, because he hit a pothole he never saw coming.

Every child has an instant answer ready for this, and the answer the Gemara gives is more interesting than theirs. Jewish law recognizes four different kinds of person who might be holding something belonging to somebody else, and the level of responsibility is different for each of them. What separates the four has nothing to do with how careful they were being, and everything to do with why they had the object at all and who was getting the benefit from the arrangement. Somebody watching a neighbor's package as a favor and somebody who borrowed a bicycle for his own use are in genuinely different positions, and the borrower, who takes all of the benefit, carries the heaviest liability of the four: he pays even for an accident that he could not have prevented.

Then, to show how fine these distinctions become, there is this. If the borrower also engaged the owner's own services at the same time, borrowing the car and asking the owner to come along and teach him to drive it, the liability changes. A child who sees that will understand without being told that they are looking at a system somebody has genuinely thought about.

The phone found in the schoolyard

"Finders keepers" is the instinct, and most parents counter it with "always give it back." The Gemara says neither of those, and what it does say is better than both.

What matters is whether the object carries an identifying mark on it, and whether the owner has realistically given up hope of getting it back. Those two questions together do a surprising amount of work: they explain why a phone with a photograph on the lock screen is treated differently from an unmarked coin lying in the street, and why where and when you found it changes the answer. The child is learning that doing the right thing is not a feeling you have. It has a structure to it, and the structure can be reasoned about.

"I had it first"

Bava Metzia opens with two people holding opposite ends of the same garment, each of them claiming the whole of it. This is the very first Mishnah, the first thing the tractate finds to say, and it is a playground argument written down.

The ruling is that they divide it, with each of them swearing that he is entitled to no less than half. The reasoning behind that is worth giving a child directly: the court cannot simply let the stronger of the two keep it, because a court that allows that has licensed theft. Neither of them counts as being in possession, for the good reason that both of them are holding it. So it gets split. Children find this one gripping straight away, having personally litigated the case a number of times.

A method you can reuse on any sugya

You do not need to know in advance which modern case matches the Gemara you are learning. Four steps will usually turn one up.

1. **Strip the case down to its question.** Ignore the ox entirely. What is being asked? Usually it comes to something like this: when does setting a thing in motion make you responsible for where it ends up?
2. **Re-stage it where your child lives.** School, the yard, the car, the kitchen, the group chat. The object changes and the question stays put.
3. **Ask the Gemara's question there, and let the child answer before you do.** This is the step that people skip, and it is the one that does the work. Let them commit to an answer, and then introduce the complication that the Gemara raises. The moment they feel their own confident answer start to wobble is the moment they understand why the Gemara needed another half a page.
4. **Go back to the text and see what it did.** The daf is no longer a foreign document at this point. It is a record of people working on the problem your child has just been working on.

USE SPARINGLY Do not do this with every line, and never let the modern parallel stand in for the text itself. The analogy is scaffolding, put there to get a child up to the height of the sugya, and it should come down once they are standing on it. A child who ends up learning your parking lot instead of the Gemara has been moved further from the page rather than closer to it.

What to say when the question comes back

It will come back, because it is a real question and children re-ask real questions. Here is the answer compressed to something you can say in the car.

The Gemara is not a book about oxen. It is a record of some of the most careful people who ever lived working out, in public and out loud, exactly when a person is responsible for what he set in motion. They used the objects that happened to be in front of them, which is what anybody does. We use the objects in front of us.

The cart in the parking lot is their case. It has just changed its clothes.

WHAT YOU NOW KNOW

- The relevancy question is a fair one, and it answers better to demonstration than to argument.
- The Gemara chose cases like the goring ox because they involved the most ordinary property in its readers' world rather than the most exotic. The case is dated; the question underneath it is not.
- The abandoned shopping cart raises, in a modern parking lot, the same questions the Gemara raises: direct damage as against damage done by one's property, whether a force you set in motion remains yours, whether liability can be shed along with ownership, and how location and multiple damaged parties change the answer.
- The level of detail in the Gemara is not excess. It is where the principle becomes applicable, and it trains three habits that transfer everywhere: finding the real point of difference between similar cases, arguing against one's own position, and reasoning about stakes before they become one's own.
- Any sugya can be re-staged. Strip it to its question, move it into the child's world, let the child answer before the Gemara does, then return to the text.

From A Beginner's Guide to Gemara. Free to print and keep alongside your learning.