

Connecting Gemara to Psak Halacha: A Practical Framework for Yeshiva Learning

This learning method is not just a personal preference—it's the structure clearly used in the classic teshuvot of earlier poskim. When you study how halachic decisions developed over time, you'll see this is the basic format: starting from the Gemara, moving through the main halachic sources, and arriving at a practical ruling.

Today, this same model is used in serious halacha programs—like the YU Semikha Program—because it builds the ability to think, understand, and live Halacha with depth.

1. Understand the Gemara Thoroughly

Start with a clear and careful understanding of the sugya:

- Learn the Gemara with Rashi.
- Use Tosafot only when it raises halachic issues or is quoted by later poskim. A good Rebbe should guide which ones to focus on.
- Don't accept things passively—check every melacha, every halachic statement. Ask: What's the source? Is it de'oraita or de'rabbanan? Where is it derived from?

This mirrors the approach used in the classic halachic literature: everything begins with deep understanding of the sugya.

2. This Is Not an OCD Process

This isn't about obsessive completeness. You don't need to read every line of every commentary. Some parts are not relevant today; others are too complex and distract from the main points. A Rebbe should guide you in choosing what to skip and what to emphasize.

Trying to go through everything without focus will bog you down and prevent progress. The goal is clarity and psak—not encyclopedic knowledge for its own sake.

3. Learn the Major Halachic Voices

After understanding the Gemara:

- Learn the Rosh, who gives a halachic summary.
- Know the views of the Rif and Rambam—they're often quoted in later sources like the Beit Yosef, and you can go look them up if necessary.

4. Tur and Beit Yosef – The Halachic Core

This is the central stage:

- Learn the Tur to understand how the sugya fits into halachic structure.
- Then study the Beit Yosef, where Rav Yosef Karo compares and analyzes the opinions of the Rosh, Rif, Rambam, and others.

This is the core of the halachic process. The Beit Yosef is more important than the Shulchan Aruch for understanding the why behind the ruling. If you're unsure what the psak is or why the Shulchan Aruch says what it says, the Beit Yosef is where you go.

5. Shulchan Aruch and the Nosei Keilim

Once the Beit Yosef is understood:

- Go to the Shulchan Aruch to see the codified ruling.
- Then examine the Nosei Keilim (side commentaries: Taz, Bach, Magen Avraham, Gra, etc.)—but only the ones that are needed.

This is where guidance is very helpful. A Rebbe should ideally direct students on which commentaries to focus on. Without that guidance, you might feel pressure to read them all—and that's overwhelming and inefficient.

If you're learning alone, browse through the Nosei Keilim. Get a sense of which ones are central to the sugya or discussing the issue you're working on. Stop on those that clearly contribute, and focus your time there. Don't get lost trying to read everything.

6. Aruch HaShulchan vs. Mishnah Berurah

The Mishnah Berurah, while respected, is not the final word in Halacha. It's one person's opinion and can sometimes be more detailed or complex than necessary. Many mistakenly treat it as definitive, which limits real halachic thinking.

The Aruch HaShulchan is often a better option:

- It's clearer and more concise.
- It presents the Halacha in a practical and readable way.
- It gives context that often answers your questions directly.

However, don't learn the Aruch HaShulchan while you're building your own understanding. Either:

- Use it at the end, after you've completed the sugya and formed your own view, or

- Use it occasionally, when you're unsure how something applies today and want to confirm how it's been applied in recent generations.

Relying on it too early will stop you from thinking on your own—and that defeats the entire point of learning Halacha in depth.

7. Don't Chase Teshuvot

When it comes to teshuvot, don't run around looking for everything ever written on the topic. You'll get stuck like a person on a treadmill—always moving but never getting anywhere.

Instead, if in the course of learning, you're directed to a specific teshuvah—and you're grappling with the exact issue that teshuvah addresses—then read it. It will often go through the same process you've gone through and will either confirm or challenge your understanding. But don't use teshuvot as a shortcut. Use them to refine your thinking—not replace it.

8. Train Yourself to Think Like a Posek

Your goal isn't to memorize someone else's conclusions—it's to train yourself to think halachically. That means:

- Understand the sugya.

- Understand the halachic process.
- Form your own opinion about what the psak should be (if you had the authority to pasken).

Later, compare your conclusion to the common practice or modern poskim. But do it after you've built your own clarity.

This is how poskim are made.

9. Bekiut and Background Learning

Don't neglect bekiut—learning large portions of Gemara quickly without deep analysis. It gives you the background and context you'll need later when you're going deeper.

Also, learning Tanach and Targum builds your language skills and sharpens your understanding of Hebrew and Aramaic. These tools will strengthen all your learning.

10. At the End of Each Sugya

When you finish a sugya:

- Identify the handful of practical halachic issues that emerge.

- Summarize the sugya and the major poskim's views.
- Write out your conclusion: what would you pasken, and why?

Then compare with how the Halacha is practiced today. If there's a difference, ask why. Discuss it with a Rebbe. Even if you defer to his view, you'll understand it better—and maybe even contribute something he hadn't seen.

11. If You Don't Enjoy Gemara Yet...

That's fine—but don't give up on it. Instead, change how you learn it.

When you approach Gemara as the foundation for living Halacha—not as an abstract mental exercise—it becomes relevant, powerful, and even enjoyable. Every sugya you learn becomes a gateway to living Torah.

“Lo ba'shamayim hi”—the Torah isn't in Heaven. It's here, in our hands. Our responsibility is to learn it with integrity, and our privilege is to build our own clarity, one sugya at a time.