

abstract

Towards an Understanding of R. Yosef Engel's Method of Study

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Rabbi Yosef Engel (1858–1919) was one of the most original and creative eastern European talmudic scholars at the turn of the twentieth century. In spite of this, his Torah scholarship has never been the subject of a comprehensive academic study. This article seeks to take the first step into this scholarly void and map out his unique analytical method. It analyzes its three fundamental characteristics—legal-philosophical abstraction, manifold parallel explanations, and the embrace of contradiction—and what conception of Halakhah they reflect. Another, more stylistic characteristic of Engel's writing is his tendency to adopt an "encyclopedic" approach to halakhic issues. Engel's method is also compared to those that developed contemporaneously in the Lithuanian yeshivas, and their different starting points and guiding assumptions are assessed.

The article discusses the sources that influenced Engel's mode of analysis and highlights the points of similarity and difference between him, the rosh yeshivas of the "Analytic School" (Brisk and its offshoots), and additional talmudic scholars. Engel had neither students nor descendants who would go on to fashion a "halakhic man" from his theoretical analyses, that is, an attempt to lay bare (or perhaps construct) the philosophical groundwork of his analytic approach. This paper seeks to begin to address this task, by describing the Engelian "halakhic man" as maintaining a more "encyclopedic" approach than that of the Brisker, one that does not conceptualize in sharp and unyielding categories but with open-ended and flexible ideas.