
Medium and Message

The Talmud as a Transmitter of Jewish Culture

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THE TALMUD has a long history originating in Judaism's oral tradition, interpretations of the Torah believed to have been communicated in God's revelation to Israel at Sinai. Passed down in various forms and expanded in every generation, these traditions were transmitted through the pharisees to the rabbis of the Mishnah. Their teachings were codified into the Mishnah and the tannaitic (early rabbinic) works. The Mishnah served as the basis for the emergence of two Talmuds (Gemara=teaching), explanations of the oral law in both the Land of Israel and Babylonia. Edited and transmitted orally, these teachings were eventually written down, and they constitute the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds.

In some ways, one can look at the Babylonian Talmud, the Talmud par excellence, as a repository of the wisdom of rabbinic literature as a whole. So much of the other material is paralleled or subsumed by the Bavli that medieval scholars assumed that the *Tosefta*, Jerusalem Talmud, and *midrashim* were all known to the redactors (final editors) of the Babylonian Talmud. Although evidence clearly refutes this assumption, the many parallels and the high level of intertextuality nevertheless do indicate familiarity with much of the material in proto-versions, or in a sort of uncollected oral vegetable soup of free-floating traditions. So whatever the actual literary relationship between the Bavli and the other texts, the Babylonian Talmud became a final, authoritative collection, guiding the subsequent development of Judaism in medieval and modern times.

The history of the Talmud—from oral traditions to Mishnah, to discussion of the Mishnah, to orally transmitted Talmud, to written Mishnah and Talmud, to talmudic manuscripts, to printed Talmuds—is a reflection of the history of the Jews over a period of some two millennia. What remains to be explained is how the Babylonian Talmud and the activity of its formulation, study, and transmission was not just a monument to culture and tradition, but rather a stimulus, a shaper of the very nature of Judaism and of its primary values and aspirations. How is it that the Talmud played so great a role in the formation of Jewish life and thought, and that it continued to grow and expand beyond its actual boundaries in response to its own achievements?

To understand this is to understand much of the essence of Judaism. For Judaism is, on the one hand, a this-worldly civilization—all the aspects of which can be reflected and defined through the looking glass of *halakhah* (legal teaching) and *aggadah* (non-legal teachings designed to inculcate the principles of Jewish thought and theology). Yet it is also about the creation of a reality beyond that of time and space that continues to shape the Jewish present. Even before modern times, the Talmud inquired about the nature of the universe and its origins, about our future and past, and sought to place the Jewish people in the framework of a transcendent reality. In the Talmud's reality, the here and now are always intimately bound to other places and other times. The sages of the first century debate with those of the twentieth century, and the Babylonian rabbis interact with those of France,

as if all these personalities lived next door to one another. The Talmud was able to grant significance to every human act, and to place the life of the individual Jew in collective national and cosmic context. Its study, and the Jewish life that it embodied, transformed the Jewish community—whether persecuted, tolerated, or honored—from its limited situation to the infinite.

Already in the Talmuds we can see the ongoing dialectic between the inner Jewish development of tradition and the influences and connections with the wider surrounding cultures. This interaction with the Jewish people was true of both the Greco-Roman culture of the Land of Israel in Roman and Byzantine (Christian) times, as well as in Sasanian Babylonia, where rabbis and simple Jewish farmers, artisans, and merchants lived in an environment of Iranian culture brought to ancient Iraq by Cyrus the Great in 540 B.C.E. This same dialectic would contribute to the history of the Talmud in all its manifestations, in manuscript, print, and translation. In fact, the existence in our time of new talmudic explications stemming from the Diaspora and Israel testifies to the same ongoing process.

The long history of this process is part of the unfolding experience of the Jewish people and is expressive of the historical character of Judaism. The Talmud's ancient orality bespeaks its emergence from the revelatory experience, and yet states clearly that it is not the written Torah, but rather the result of an ongoing dialogue of God and humanity. Its ability to apply and reapply itself has made the Talmud the basis of Jewish life, and it has made possible the continuation of Judaism in so many contexts. Its later commitment to writing in Babylonia and the Land of Israel, in differing versions, demonstrates the differences between Jewish life in the Holy Land and its derivative forms elsewhere. However, the great achievement of the Babylonian Talmud speaks to us of the potential for Diaspora countries to rise to the greatest of heights, even as Israel remains the spiritual center.

While the Babylonian Talmud was redacted before the Islamic conquest (634–638 C.E.), only in the time of the early *geonim* did written texts of the Bavli begin to circulate in the Jewish world. The role of the *geonim* in bringing about the permanent hegemony of the Babylonian Talmud was accomplished as well through the many responsa (answers to halakhic questions) that they penned and sent to most of the Jewish communities of the then Islamic world. The next to the last major *gaon*, Sherira ben Hanina (906–1006 C.E.), wrote the magnificent *Epistle of Rav Sherira Gaon*, which set down the history of the Mishnah and Talmud, combining research into talmudic sources with access to Jewish archival materials in Islamic Babylonia. Without him we would know very little of the real history of tannaitic and amoraic literature. Further, the earliest talmudic commentaries came into being in the geonic period, along with the earliest halakhic codes and biblical commentaries. The role of the *geonim* was much more than that of simply passing on the Bavli.

The manuscript transmission of the Babylonian Talmud testifies to its influence and the spread of the Jewish tradition to all corners of the earth, as the manuscripts reflect the scribal habits, linguistic traditions, and textual features of each community. The great commentators—Maimonides on the Mishnah, Rashi and *Tosafot* on the Gemara, all eventually included in the printed Talmud editions—remind us of the proud and intellectually giant Ashkenazic and Sephardic inheritors of the traditions of the Talmud, both in Eretz Israel and in Babylonia.

The medieval period was the era of the classic talmudic commentators and of great codes of Jewish law. However, major challenges faced the Talmud and its students. Christian opposition grew

more strident and led to the confiscation and burning of the Talmud in France. Ridicule of the Talmud by Christians was a regular feature of medieval Jewish life, even when violence did not result. Further challenges arose as the Talmud was being printed in the early modern period. Attempts to stop printing and dissemination, as well as burnings in Italy and confiscations elsewhere, must have been stimulated to some extent by an interest in the Talmud even among the Christian intelligentsia. Yet, this interest sometimes also led to the survival of full sets of the early editions of the Talmud, such as the “Wittenberg Copy” of Daniel Bomberg’s edition, and to the survival of many medieval manuscripts of the Babylonian Talmud and other rabbinic texts.

It was in the modern period that the most serious challenges were posed to the authority and centrality of the Talmud. These challenges came about as a result of the inner dynamic of Jewish modernization. Modernity brought in its wake the breakdown of traditional Jewish life, the rise of modern Jewish religious movements and secularism, and the emancipation. The horrors of the Holocaust led to the destruction of the great European centers of Talmud study, and the academies of the Islamic world came to an end in the aftermath of the rise of the State of Israel and the mass migration of Jews from Arab lands. These factors threatened to push the Talmud to the margins of Jewish life. However, the renewed expansion of *yeshivot*, the various translations and publication projects, as well as the growth of interest in universities, have brought about a miraculous revival of the role of the Talmud as the ultimate transmitter of Jewish law and lore—the transmitter of the heritage of ancient Israel in the modern world.

The rise of technology—and the attendant smaller world that came about as early as the fifteenth century—eventually standardized the Talmud in its printed versions, although the various printed editions still displayed textual variation. Later commentaries testify to the emergence of eastern Europe as the major Jewish center of culture and study. The history of the printed editions, and their censorship, allows us to follow the development of modern Jewish communities in their various locations, and the relationship of Jews to their non-Jewish neighbors, particularly governmental and religious authorities. Further, the modern period brought about the need for translation due to a decline in Hebrew knowledge. Concomitantly, the modern period also has been privileged to witness new efforts to reestablish talmudic study at the center of a community engaged in recovering Jewish observance and forms of Torah study in its widest sense.

Take a look at a talmudic page and you will find the earliest versions of intertextuality and hypertext. The Mishnah and Talmud are surrounded by commentaries from the Middle Ages, and notes refer to the Bible, other talmudic works, medieval codes, and even modern works. Various annotations provide textual variants or refer to commentators, many of whose works are printed in the back of the volume. This physical form intends to encourage a dialogue between texts and commentaries, and between all of them and the student. The student is often in dialogue with a *havruta* (study partner), and they and the texts before them are in ongoing dialogue between a world of humanity and a divine command—the written Torah. This dialogue never stops, and can even seem to never have begun. For the Torah that had served as the blueprint for creation, so the rabbis taught, included oral and written elements. The eternal dialogue is contained in the words of the Talmud and in its physical form, in study, and in the life of ritual, ethics, theology, and law that it engenders.

This is the capacity to sanctify acts and issues through inquiry and debate. It reflects the nature of Judaism as such a dialogue, a dialogue over time and space— of those seeking to live God’s word in this world, while at the same time creating in this world a dwelling for the divine.

So the Talmud is not just a book to study. It is an approach to life, in which inquiry and debate transform the mundane into the holy. While *halakhab* definitely lays down certain immutable standards and requirements of the Torah’s law or of the rabbinic injunctions, inquiry about all of them, as well as determining the application of most of them, became a form of divine worship. The Talmud in its widest sense is not just knowledge, but it is the life of Torah, including its observance, transmission, and study; and this life, intellectual, religious, and cultural, has molded the Jewish community for generations.

How do you describe a living organism as if it is an artifact or a series of artifacts? We face this problem when seeking to unravel a complex talmudic passage by tracing the layers that underlie the redacted talmudic text and then by following its later exegesis and codification as *halakhab*, or its exposition in works of Jewish thought and mysticism in the case of *aggadah*.

On the one hand, we uncover its inner core and its historical development, allowing us to see how the Talmud and its contribution to Judaism have responded in each and every generation. At the same time, have we done violence to its timeless and space-less message? No, for this is the greatness of the Talmud. It can be unpacked and reassembled, often in different ways, and each angle and each approach teaches us more about its wisdom and its greatness.

The history of the transmission of the Talmud has not ended. Take a look at the recent expansion of traditional talmudic scholarship, especially evident in the publication of medieval and modern commentaries. The rise of modern talmudic scholarship in seminaries, universities, and other institutions testifies to the application of both age-old and new methods to the study of the Talmud and rabbinic literature. This approach seeks to understand the history of the rabbinic texts and teachings, their ancient historical and linguistic context, and their relevance for ancient Jewish history.

Translations— Goldschmidt, Soncino, Steinsaltz, Schottenstein— have opened the Talmud and its explication to untold numbers of people to whom it was previously closed. The translation into Hebrew of the Schottenstein English Talmud, with its detailed notes, has produced the most important of recent talmudic commentaries, bringing with it a return to the *peshat* (simple) understanding of the text, which had been superceded by *pilpul* and later the Brisker method of talmudic conceptual exegesis. Who could ever have imagined how the Steinsaltz and Schottenstein translation/commentaries have led to expanded participation in the *Daf Yomi* program to the immense proportions it now enjoys? Talmudic study by women in some circles of even the Orthodox community is another part of this trend. Finally, technology, in the form of research tools such as those of the CD-ROMs developed by Bar-Ilan University and the Lieberman Institute of The Jewish Theological Seminary, as well as various other more popular tools and websites, have opened new vistas in talmudic study. Immense amounts of text can be easily searched, and all kinds of bibliographic and textual data are readily available.

Clearly, talmudic study is turning a new corner in our own time. Most importantly, the Talmud has been restored to its central position in traditional Jewish culture. Even more, it has become a

major tool in the renewal of Jewish tradition in an era in which the future of the Jewish people is now being decided. Who knows what potential the Talmud has, in all its intellectual intricacy, to bring countless numbers of disaffected Jews back to full participation in Jewish communal and religious life? For the Talmud has historically always been the possession of the entire Jewish people, not just of an elite or even of the rabbinic class. The true challenge of modernity, and of Jewish continuity, is to restore the Talmud to its centrality for the entire Jewish community.



Centers of Printing the Talmud.