Touro Scholar

Lander College of Arts and Sciences Books | Lander College of Arts and Sciences

2012

The Sea of Talmud: A Brief and Personal Introduction

Henry M. Abramson
Touro College, henry.abramson@touro.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://touroscholar.touro.edu/lcas_books

Part of the Jewish Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Abramson, H. M. (2012). The Sea of Talmud: A Brief and Personal Introduction. Retrieved from https://touroscholar.touro.edu/lcas_books/3

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Lander College of Arts and Sciences at Touro Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Lander College of Arts and Sciences Books by an authorized administrator of Touro Scholar. For more information, please contact touro.scholar@touro.edu.

THE SEA OF TALMUD

A Brief and Personal Introduction

Henry Abramson

Published by Parnoseh Books at Smashwords

Copyright 2012 Henry Abramson

Cover photograph by Steven Mills.

No Talmud volumes were harmed during the photo shoot for this book.

Smashwords Edition, License Notes

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment and information only. This ebook should not be re-sold to others. Educational institutions may reproduce, copy and distribute this ebook for non-commercial purposes without charge, provided the book remains in its complete original form.

Version 3.1 June 18, 2012.

To my students

All who thirst--come to the waters

Isaiah 55:1

Table of Contents

Introduction

Chapter One: Our Talmud

Chapter Two: What, Exactly, is the Talmud?

Chapter Three: The Content of the Talmud

Chapter Four: Toward the Digital Talmud

Chapter Five: “Go Study”

For Further Reading

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Introduction

The Yeshiva administration must have put considerable thought into the wording of the hand-lettered sign posted outside the cafeteria. Many young men studying Talmud at this Jerusalem institution were taking advantage of the free food by eating their meals, then taking a second (or third) plate of food up to their dormitories for later consumption. A good number of the students were recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and their behavior might have been the result of their childhood experiences of the social upheaval and economic instability of those early years of political independence. Nevertheless, the cost to the Yeshiva must have been significant, not to mention the fact that the dirty dishes left in the hallways attracted some formidable insects. When the early afternoon minhah prayer concluded and the students left the study hall for begin lunch, a clutch of students gathered around the entrance to the cafeteria to examine the sign:

THE YESHIVA PROVIDES FOOD FOR ONE PORTION ONLY

NO STUDENT IS PERMITTED TO STAND IN LINE FOR SECOND PORTION

Lunch progressed without further incident, and I don't recall whether or not students were compliant with the new policy. After eating our usual fare of baked chicken, couscous and the traditional Israeli salad of vegetables cut in small cubes, we returned to the bet midrash to continue our studies. I happened to glance back at the sign, which someone had altered in a subtle manner:

THE YESHIVA PROVIDES FOOD FOR ONE PORTION ONLY?

NO! STUDENT <u>IS</u> PERMITTED TO STAND IN LINE FOR SECOND PORTION.

With three tiny, playful alterations--a question mark, an exclamation point, and an underscore--the meaning of the text was completely transformed. The anonymous student who defaced the sign exhibited skills typical of Talmudic study: a profound command of the ambiguity of language, an ability to see past first impressions and perceive the underlying philosophical structure of a statement, and an understanding of the multivalent implications of any idea committed to expression in text. The administration relented, and the sign was permanently removed before supper.

* * *

The year was 1994. I was thirty years old and nearing the end of my first year of full-time Talmudic study. Like my peers at Yeshivat Ohr Somayach, I was new to Orthodox Judaism, and the experience of spending ten hours a day poring over the arcane Aramaic text of the Talmud was both exhausting and exhilarating. Back then there were precious few English-language resources to help us. The Talmud: A Brief and Personal Introduction represents a small contribution to the growing body of literature addressed to adult students approaching the Talmud.

This book presents a brief of biography of the Talmud, addressing some basic questions in a manner that will be useful for the intelligent layperson. This work is also a personal introduction, with small autobiographical currents running throughout the more dispassionate, third-person material. My approach is based on the fact that the Talmud is an unusually organic document that cannot be adequately described without some level of personal engagement. On a simple level, understanding the historical and personal context of the lives of the hundreds of contributing scholars is often essential to the comprehension of the Talmud. On a more profound level, the Talmud is an expression of the Oral Torah, which by its very nature requires an interlocutor. With this in mind, I humbly include the story of my own introduction to Talmud. The basic introductory material on the Talmud will alternate with the more personal material.

The Talmud is often referred to as “the sea,” an allusion to its vast size and diverse content. The metaphor is quite appropriate. I hope that this small compilation will encourage its readers to dive deeper into the waters and sample its submerged delights.

Chapter One: Our Talmud

On the Shoreline

I remember the first time I encountered the word "Talmud." I was probably about fourteen years old when I was mesmerized by stories in a worn paperback collection of Jewish tales from my mother's bookshelf. Edgy and surprisingly unsettling, these stories described elderly sages lost in arcane thoughts, psychologically disturbed young scholars, uneducated peasant Jews who mangled quotations from holy texts--all of it revolving around this mysterious book called the Talmud. Many years later, on a visit to my parents' home, I retrieved and reread the book (Great Jewish Short Stories, edited by Saul Bellow) and saw how poorly I had understood the stories on the first reading. Many of them, for example, were highly critical of Talmud study, an attitude typical among eastern European Jewish intellectuals at the turn of the 20th century. Still, the impression I received as a youth was that the Talmud was some kind of fascinating secret document that took years of training to penetrate, full of bizarre and wonderful insights, and the mastery of this text was the sine qua non of true Jewish scholarship. I remember that I even resolved to become a Talmudist one day, much in the way a fourteen-year-old boy decides to become an astronaut or a fireman.

Unfortunately, I didn't know any Talmudists. I grew up an only child in a very remote milling community in northern Ontario, Canada, and my parents couldn't satisfy my intellectual curiosity when it came to the nature of the Talmud. Other than my hazy notion of a secret, complex body of ancient teachings, I didn't have a clue as to the most basic bibliographic information of the Talmud, such as who wrote it, what was in its table of contents, how large it was, and so on. I knew it was a very important text of Judaism, but with my limited knowledge of the religion, I couldn't identify a single instance in which the Talmud informed our highly attenuated practice.

I didn't have any exposure to people who really lived and breathed the Talmud. The full sum and extent of my formal Jewish education was three years of a brief afternoon program, culminating in my Bar Mitzvah. My parents made great sacrifices to enable me to have even this limited exposure to Judaism. Northern Ontario had no Jewish educational opportunities, so my mother and I moved to Toronto. Between 1973 and 1976, my father took a partner into his retail clothing business so he could commute 500 miles every two weeks to visit us. This was truly a sustained, generous demonstration of their commitment to provide me with a Jewish education. I think I made the best of it, learning enough Hebrew to read my Bar Mitzvah portion without great

difficulty. I was inspired by one teacher in particular, Rabbi Jakubovitz, primarily by his retelling of stories that must have come from the Talmud. After the Bar Mitzvah, the classes ended and my mother and I moved back to Iroquois Falls.

Intellectually, I was plagued by obvious questions: What, exactly, was the Talmud? I thought I knew what the Torah was, but how was the Talmud related to it? I knew it wasn't a commentary on the Torah, a popular misconception, but then what was it? Furthermore, if the Talmud was so important, why was it that so few of my peers were familiar with it?

The "Constitution of Judaism"

The Talmud has been called the "constitution of Judaism," an apt metaphor in terms of its central importance to this ancient religion but inexact in terms of the function of the document. Basically, the Talmud is an extended, multi-author commentary on the Mishnah, a third-century compilation of Jewish law and lore. The word "Talmud" is derived from the Hebrew root term "lamad," which means "to learn" or "to teach," and therefore "the Talmud" might be best translated as "the teaching." The Aramaic equivalent is the word Gemara, and these terms are used interchangeably to describe the same book. To avoid confusion, we will restrict ourselves to using the term Talmud rather than Gemara, largely because Talmud is more commonly used in English.

The principal function of the Talmud is to explore and clarify the meaning of the Mishnah and identify its implications for halakhah, Jewish law. The Talmud is not, however, a code of law or a statement of principles like the United States Constitution or the Bill of Rights. It is rather a collection of highly coded arguments, conforming to a unique set of hermeneutic rules of argument, that form the basis of ongoing debates in Jewish law and philosophy to the current day. It is impossible to understand Judaism adequately without engaging the Talmud, and the Talmud retains its relevance and immediacy in every society that Jews have lived in since it was written nearly two millennia ago. For example, the rapid evolution of medical technology presents numerous ethical challenges that are without precedent in human history. What is the true definition of "death" when medical intervention can keep a brain-injured individual breathing artificially despite a lack of higher cognitive activity? What is the legal relationship between a woman and the child she births when modern medical technology obviates the need for mother and child to share a genetic relationship? Amazingly, these questions and thousands more are addressed in arguments held between Rabbis in Babylon and Israel in the second through the fifth centuries of the common era. The Talmud is a document that retains its value and importance far beyond the time and place it was composed.

The Torah itself is a more fitting candidate for the term "constitution of Judaism." Traditional Jewish theology holds that the Torah, otherwise known as the Five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), is the written blueprint of the universe, given directly to Moses by God. The surface meaning of the Torah is usually easily grasped, but more probing analysis reveals incredible depths and great variety of possible interpretations. According to Jewish tradition, the Torah has "seventy faces," meaning, a vast number of possible readings. Several movements have attempted to limit the possible readings in a radical manner and use the Torah as the sole source of authority, notably the Karaites of the ninth century. This approach is rife with difficulty, as the Torah itself is often opaque and abstruse, its meaning impossible to comprehend without commentary that clarifies the text.

Orthodox Judaism holds that a parallel body of teachings was also conveyed to Moses to serve this clarifying function. Known as the Oral Torah because it was not committed to writing for centuries, this body of teachings was handed down from student to teacher for generations. The Talmud is considered the penultimate link in the chain of Oral Torah; the final link is when it literally becomes oral, that is, when two students engage in argument over the meaning of the Talmud itself. Unlike the written, canonized text of the Torah, the Talmud does not stand on its own, fully sufficient and independent. The Talmud has meaning only when it receives voice in a literal sense. Like the sign outside the Yeshiva cafeteria, it needs someone to add the punctuation.

Rain in BM 499

More serious than my ignorance of the Talmud was my attitude. Still in my late teens, I approached the Talmud with a lack of humility, imagining myself as someone who would conquer the document and then dramatically reject it. I enjoyed the image of being a young man with the mind of an esteemed elder yet one who embodied the sensibilities of the progressive 1980s. I prepared myself for imaginary debates with black-clad, bearded old men hunched over their worn volumes of Talmud. In these complex fantasies I bested their arguments with choice quotations from a surprisingly eclectic range of sources, from obscure passages in the Talmud itself to Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus.

Many of these daydreams were spun in the BM 499 section of the John P. Robarts Research Library of the University of Toronto. Built in the fortress-like Brutalist style, this grey imposing structure looked like it was ready to survive an indirect nuclear strike, preserving the wealth of civilization for a post-radioactive generation. I wandered the stacks daily, visiting in particular

the Old Class Oversize section on the ninth floor where the beautiful 19th century Vilna Talmuds were held. They were often rebound in heavy institutional blue bindings with Library of Congress call letters stamped on the bottom of the spine, echoing the heavy concrete lines of the library itself. I would take them down one at a time and retreat to an empty carrel to slowly turn the heavy pages, from the neoclassical title page art to the scattering of commentaries in almost-indecipherable tiny print at the end. I longed to understand what these books actually said, but my Hebrew skills were just barely adequate to determine which side of the book was front and which side of the page was up. I would ultimately retreat to the smaller red volumes of the Soncino translation, but they also left me frustrated, because I lacked adequate background knowledge to understand the Talmud even in the English rendition. I was too arrogant to actually approach a real Talmudist and ask for instruction, because that would betray my fundamental ignorance of the sea of Talmud. In those confusing years I was like a little child at the beach, slathered in sunscreen and clutching my plastic pail, terrified yet fascinated by the waves as they rushed up over my toes. Unable to commit to the water, I ran back and forth with the tide, afraid that the ocean in its hugeness would overwhelm me.

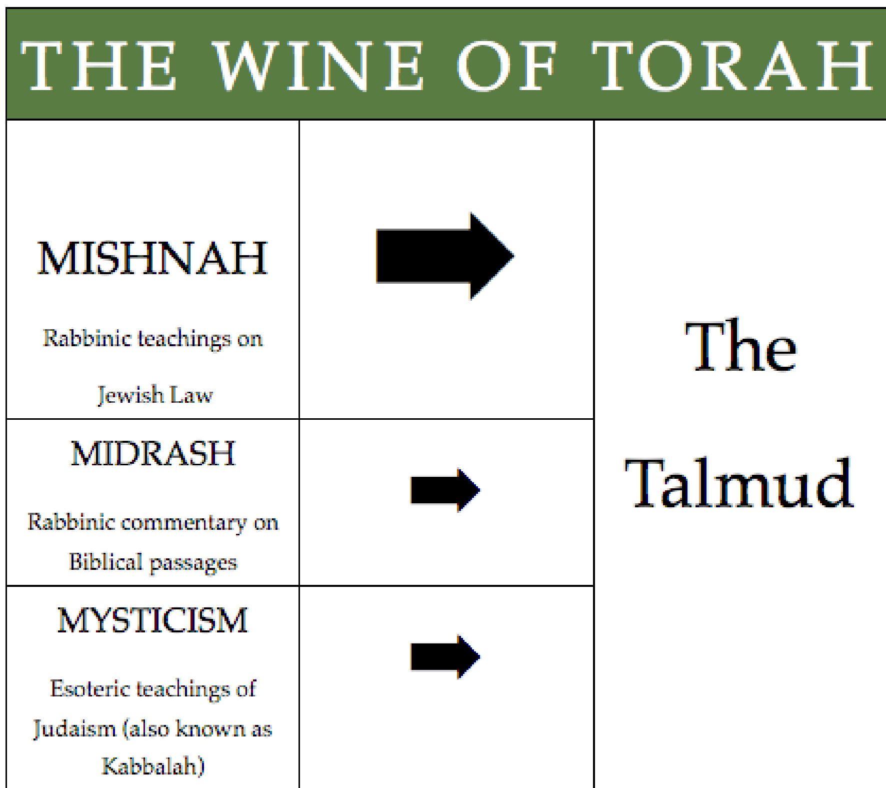
The Talmud in the Context of Jewish Religious Literature

The prime distinction between Judaism and later religions that developed from its culture is the Oral Torah. Both Christianity and Islam make some use of the teachings of the Oral Torah, the former especially by incorporating Jewish interpretations of problematic verses and the latter with a body of teachings that function in a structurally similar manner. Still, the Oral Torah is essentially Jewish, and it is the Oral Torah that makes Judaism highly distinct from these successor faiths. The Written Torah, that is, the Five Books of Moses, acts as the skeletal structure of Judaism, giving it a basic physical form. Just as a skeleton is a crucial element of the human body, providing stability and structure to the human form, the Torah undergirds everything Jewish. A skeleton alone, however, is not what makes a human being recognizable to others. Only a radiologist can identify someone by an x-ray photograph. It is rather the material that surrounds the skeleton--the flesh, skin and hair--that we recognize as a person. The Oral Torah is related to the Written Torah in the same manner. The Written Torah, that is the Five Books of Moses, makes up the skeleton, and the Oral Torah provides the musculature, the circulatory and digestive systems, and finally the skin and hair that makes up the externally recognized form of the person. The Oral Torah builds upon the teachings of the Torah and literally vivifies the document, making it real in a human sense. The Written Torah is therefore a better candidate for the title “constitution of Judaism,” but it is absolutely impossible to separate the Oral Torah from this organic whole and still call the religion “Judaism.”

The Oral Torah consists of three basic types of information: midrash, Mishnah, and mysticism (often referred to by the Hebrew term kabalah, which means “that which is received” or “tradition”). Although all of these teachings were originally maintained as strictly oral communications between teachers and students, at various points in history they were committed to writing as well, and today students of Judaism work with printed texts that are more or less canonized.

Midrash (plural: midrashim) is essentially a huge collection of ancient rabbinic teachings connected to the biblical text, in particular the Five Books of Moses, but is also to other works in the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) as well. These midrashim may have legal import, i.e., they may clarify the meaning of a biblical text so that it may be properly implemented in actual practice, or they may be homiletic in nature, offering insights on theology or human nature. The Mishnah is in the main a collection of legal pronouncements and positions held by ancient Rabbis. Since it forms the most important structural foundation of the Talmud, it will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2. Mysticism, the esoteric teachings of Judaism known as kabalah, comprises the third category of teachings in the Oral Torah.

The Talmud is essentially an extended discussion of the Mishnah. In order to understand the text properly, the authors of the Talmud frequently invoke citations from the other branches of Oral Torah. Accordingly the Talmud forms a distillation of all three and is known as the “wine of Torah” for this reason.



Talmudic literature continued well after the text of the Babylonian Talmud was closed in the fifth century. Three principal categories of Talmudic literature developed, and all of them continue into the 21st century: commentary, analysis, and codification. The work of Rabbi Shlomo Yitshaki (1040-1105), better known as Rashi, from the Hebrew acronym of his name, emphasizes line-by-line commentary on the Talmud, with the purpose of explaining its basic meaning. Another, more complex, trend in Talmudic literature is analysis, exemplified by the work of the Tosafists, a school of Talmudists that flourished in Europe between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. Although their contributions (known as Tosafot, or "additions") occasionally contributed Rashi-like comments on the text, their principal approach to the Talmud was a critical analysis, comparing passages widely dispersed throughout the Talmud and resolving apparent inconsistencies. This type of Talmudic literature also continues to grow in the contemporary period as scholars produce volumes of hidushim, or "novellae," on the Talmud. Finally, Talmudic scholars in the medieval period began the difficult process of codification of the Talmud, gathering legal decisions from across the scope of the Talmud and organizing them into collections, or codes, of Jewish law. Important examples include the Mishnah Torah of Maimonides (1135-1204) and the Shulhan Arukh of Rabbi Yosef Karo (1488-1575). Modern codes, or more precisely, modern commentary on existing codes (especially the Shulhan Arukh)

continue to be produced in the contemporary period, as the demands of a rapidly changing social and technological environment pose new questions not addressed in earlier codes. An example of a modern commentary is Nishmat Avraham, which deals with the implications of twenty-first century medical technology for Jewish Law.

TEXTS ON THE TALMUD		
The Talmud	➡	**Commentary** Line-by-line explanation of the text Example: Rashi
	➡	**Analysis** Critical reading of the text, comparison with other texts Example: Tosafot
	➡	**Codes** Collection and organization of legal material Example: *Shulhan Arukh*

A Splash of Salt Water

The intersection of Bloor and Bathurst streets in downtown Toronto was the location of my first serious connection with Talmudic literature. I was, more precisely, on the sidewalk of Bloor Street, a block or two just east of Bathurst, as I walked back to campus from some errand that I can't recall. I was reading a paperback copy of Judah Goldin's The Living Talmud, a 1957 translation of Pirkei Avot (technically, part of the Mishnah and not the Talmud, not that I knew the distinction back then). The book was a gift from Bob Gibbs, a teaching assistant who taught my section of PHL 105: Introduction to Philosophy, a course that I thought would help me meet girls (or at least sound intelligent if I talked to girls). (Robert Gibbs later completed his PhD, went on to teach at Yale and then returned to Toronto to head up the Jackman Humanities Institute at the University of Toronto.)

I'm not sure what moved him to give a confused but enthusiastic freshman this small present, but it became one of the turning points of my life. Pretty much everything good that has happened since then--my marriage, the birth of our children, my career in higher education and the thousands of students I have had the privilege of teaching over the last three decades--can be connected directly to that little book, and one small passage in particular, which I read that crisp spring day in Toronto. I had to stop and read this section over and over. It was as if someone had turned down the volume on the whole world. I didn't hear the cars on the street or notice the pedestrians detouring around me. I just stood there holding the book in both hands, breathing through my mouth as I attempted to digest the meaning of this life-altering Mishnah. I must have looked like a fool.

Here is that fateful section of Pirkei Avot (4:1), in my translation:

> Ben Zoma says:
>
> Who is wise? One who learns from all people...
>
> Who is powerful? One who conquers one's evil inclination...
>
> Who is wealthy? One who rejoices with what one has...
>
> Who is honored? One who honors humanity.

It was as if the earth shifted under my feet as I read these words. Ben Zoma's fundamental point was that these four desiderata, basic as they were to the human condition—wisdom, power, wealth and honor—were not to be achieved by ambitious pursuit and jealous hoarding of goods,

whether intellectual, physical or spiritual. They were not descriptors of things that could be possessed; rather they described states of being. Wisdom is not the total number of facts contained in one's brain; rather, it is an attitude toward learning that describes the student as a human being, regardless of his or her level of achievement measured by external standards (note that the traditional Jewish term for a person of wisdom is talmid hakham: a wise student, not a wise teacher). Power is not an external force that one might wield over others; rather, it is a mastery of self that moderates and filters all impulses through a well-defined sense of personal integrity and a consistent moral code. Wealth is not achieved through the collection of material goods; rather, it is the cultivation of a healthy appreciation for the blessings in life, large and small. Finally, and perhaps the most powerfully counterintuitive statement: honor is not something one receives from other people; rather, it is the ability to value others, recognizing the good that exists in everyone and respecting them for their fundamental humanity.

"One achieves these goals by opposing them," writes Rabbi Yisrael Lifishits (Germany, 1782-1860) in his magisterial commentary on this passage. If one wishes wisdom, one must consider one's self to be unwise, in order to have the open-minded humility of the student who will learn from all people, regardless of age or status. If one wishes wealth, one must moderate the relentless pursuit of "more" and enjoy the simple pleasures afforded by one's possessions, however meager. If one wishes power, one must learn to dominate no one but oneself. If one wishes honor—a true honor that persists in the heart of others, not in mere ceremony—one must honor others by recognizing and acknowledging their unique qualities and contributions.

I remember thinking, "so this is the Talmud." I was all in.

The Daf-Yomi Program and the Siyum ha-Shas

Talmudic studies enjoyed explosive growth in the twentieth century, a phenomenon all the more amazing given the destruction of one-third of world Jewry in the Holocaust (including two-thirds of the Jews of Eastern Europe, the uncontested center of Talmudic study in the prewar period) and the general decline of religious observance among Jews. The reasons for this resurgence are complex, but one program in particular can claim a major share of credit: the Daf-Yomi Program. The brainchild of Rabbi Meir Shapiro (Poland, 1887-1934), Daf-Yomi literally translates as "a folio a day," folio being the Latin term for a leaf of paper which can have text on both sides. In Hebrew, this sheet of paper is called a daf, or "plank," and the first side, known as recto in Latin, is called amud alef (literally, column a) and the second side (verso in Latin) is called amud bet (column b). In a daf-yomi class, both sides of a single page are studied (amud alef and amud bet).

Previously, the study of Talmud throughout the Jewish diaspora was highly unsystematic and uncoordinated. Yeshivot (Rabbinical Seminaries) and synagogues offered instruction in whatever tractates (the term for an individual book of the Talmud) were convenient for their library holdings, especially before mass printings of the Talmud were available in the 19th century). A small number of tractates received favored status (the so-called Yeshivishe masekhtos), leaving most of the Talmud unstudied even by otherwise well-educated Talmud students. Rabbi Shapiro's elegant suggestion was the creation of a world-wide calendar of coordinated Talmud study that could be adopted by Yeshivot, synagogues and private study groups. His idea received backing from the World Agudath Israel, an organization of Orthodox Jews formed in the early twentieth century, and the first cycle began on Rosh Hashanah 5684 (September 11, 1923). Weighing in at 2,711 folios (5,422 pages), the daf-yomi cycle requires nearly seven and a half years to complete the entire Talmud. The conclusion of the daf-yomi is called the siyum ha-Shas, or "completion of the Six Orders [of the Talmud]," and has been an occasion for world-wide celebration. As I write these words, Jews around the world are actively preparing for the twelfth cycle to conclude on August 1, 2012. It is the Jewish equivalent of a full lunar eclipse, generating mass enthusiasm and encouraging many more students to take on the discipline of daily Talmud study.

Rabbi Shapiro credited his mother, Margulya, as his inspiration. Like many young boys in nineteenth-century Poland, Meir received his early Talmud training from a peripatetic tutor known as a melamed. One year, he was to begin his classes on the day after Passover, but the melamed was delayed in returning from his vacation and Meir spent the day playing outside with other boys. Late that night, he happened to wake and discovered his mother softly weeping at the kitchen table. He asked her what troubled her, and she replied in Yiddish, Meirl, du vayst nit vos meynt a tog lernen: "Little Meir, you don't know what a single day of learning can mean." His mother's distress that he went a day without advancing his Talmud learning made a huge impression on Rabbi Shapiro. Today, Margulya can claim credit for a system of learning that has produced literally millions of hours of study. Her tears were certainly well-shed.

Structurally, daf-yomi has made a phenomenal impact on Talmud study. The concept is appealing: a daf can typically be covered by a competent instructor in about forty-five to sixty minutes, a significant but manageable amount of time for adult students who have to get to work or drive their kids to school. The feeling of accomplishment is palpable, as most tractates can be completed in their entirety in roughly two months of daily study. Group study is clearly preferable, but students who want to join the daf-yomi cycle can easily follow along on their own with translations of the Talmud, not to mention audio classes downloaded from the Internet (more on this in Chapter Four: Toward the Digital Talmud). There's also an amazing feeling of

unity that daf-yomi creates, especially for travelers--there's nothing like getting off a plane somewhere, showing up unannounced in a daf-yomi class in a strange city, and picking up at exactly the right place. Classes are offered free of charge, world wide.

Daf-yomi is an excellent entry point for many adult students. The pace of a folio a day is great for students who want a quick, superficial overview of issues discussed in the Talmud, or those who wish to review a tractate they may have learned in some other setting. At the same time, it is really far too quick a pace to gain meaningful understanding of the text for even intermediate-level students. The real value of Talmud study comes with unhurried contemplation and vigorous debate, and it is impossible to cover an entire daf with this kind of analysis in an hour-long session for working adults. Still, the advantages of the program far outweigh the disadvantages. Ideally, daf-yomi should be combined with a more in-depth and comprehensive regimen of Talmud study that allows the student to progress at a more individualized pace.

* * *

In the course of my secular education I have had the privilege of studying many of the great works of world literature, many of them in their original languages, but I have yet to come acros anything that is remotely like the Talmud. One of the most powerfully engaging aspects of this great work is the fact that it lives and breathes throughout the ages: a concept mentioned in the Torah is explained by a second-century Sage in Israel, argued over by two sages in fifth-century Babylon, elucidated by scholars in medieval France and Spain, debated by thinkers in prewar Poland, and brought to life on the breath of young students following this intellectual trail to present-day Jerusalem. The Talmud brings its students into direct contact with the greatest minds the Jewish people have ever produced. Moreover, its dialectal refuses to allow its readers to remain passively silent--a position must be taken, an interpretation must be defended, continually. Daf-yomi takes that vertical integration throughout history and makes it horizontal, connecting Jews all around the world through the shared academic and spiritual exercise of coordinated Talmud study.

Chapter Two: What, Exactly, Is the Talmud?

The Two Talmuds

Let us begin with the fact that there are actually two Talmuds. The earlier version, compiled in Israel, is known as the Jerusalem Talmud (Talmud Yerushalmi, also known as the Palestinian Talmud); the other, somewhat larger and generally considered more authoritative, is the Babylonian Talmud (Talmud Bavli). When people speak of "the Talmud," or the Aramaic synonym Gemara, it is likely that they are referring to the latter, which has been the subject of far more study over the centuries. The daf-yomi program, for example, is based on the Babylonian Talmud, although some students also participate in a Yerushalmi-yomi program as well. Our focus in this work will be on the Babylonian Talmud, but let us quickly glance at the most significant differences between the two.

The principal reason for the greater popularity of the Babylonian Talmud is that it represents a more up-to-date version of Talmudic material. Compiled some two centuries later, the Babylonian Talmud freely cites teachings from the Jerusalem Talmud. During this time the Jews of Israel were living under increasingly dire circumstances, with major upheavals such as the Roman-Jewish wars and the subsequent expulsion of the late first century, and the failed Bar Kokhba uprising and the subsequent Hadrianic persecutions of the second century. Jews were exiled to settlements in North Africa and elsewhere. The Babylonian Jewish community, already over six hundred years old by the time of the Roman destruction of the Temple, replaced Israel as the scholarly center of the Jewish world. The Babylonian Talmud may be understood as an improved version of the Jerusalem Talmud, even though it omits some highly relevant material, such as the agricultural laws generally observed only in Israel (for example, the commandment to let the land lie fallow in the seventh, Sabbatical, year). These laws were not necessary for life along the Tigris or Euphrates rivers. They retain their eternal relevance for Jewish settlement in Israel, and thus a resurgence of interest in the Jerusalem Talmud accompanied the rise of modern Zionism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

JERUSALEM TALMUD	BABYLONIAN TALMUD
Compiled earlier (circa fourth-fifth century CE)	Compiled later (circa fifth-sixth century CE)
Compiled in northern Israel ("Jerusalem" Talmud a misnomer)	Compiled in southeastern Iraq, in cities between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers
Shorter	Longer
More material on agricultural law	More material on civil and criminal law

Authorship

The two Talmuds represent the voices of literally thousands of individuals. By the time the Babylonian Talmud was codified, sometime in the fifth or sixth century of the Common Era, the Oral Torah had been circulating for roughly two millennia. Each generation of transmission from teacher to student added clarifications and illustrations, included like parenthetical notes jotted down in the margins of a worn history textbook used over and over again by students in public school. The compilation of these notes into a comprehensive and cohesive role is attributed to Rabbi Yohanan for the Jerusalem Talmud and Ravina and Rav Ashi for the Babylonian Talmud. Although the work of redacting the Talmud into its current form represents a signal achievement in scholarship, arguing that they were the authors of the Talmud would be like saying that the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary are the authors of the English language.

The literary origins of the Talmud are described in the very first Mishnah of that little book that Bob Gibbs gave me back in the late 1970s: "Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly." In context, it is clear that this passage refers to the Oral Torah, as the Mishnah continues by quoting teachings that are not found anywhere in the Written Torah, often with explicit reference to the Written Torah as a separate document: "They said three things: be deliberate in judgement, raise up many students, and erect a fence around the Torah."

The last clause, “erect a fence around the Torah,” is widely interpreted as an exhortation to enact protective measures that will reinforce observance of the laws described in the Written Torah. If writing is forbidden on the Sabbath, for example, a law prohibiting the handling of writing materials would be a “fence around the [Written] Torah.” This type of activity is typical of the Oral Torah.

The transmission of the Oral Torah becomes manifest with a generation of scholars known as the zugot, or “pairs,” in the last two centuries before the Common Era. These highly influential Rabbis included the famous Hillel and Shammai, who each formed large schools of followers (Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai, “the house of Hillel and the house of Shammai”). Their debates over the interpretation and implementation of the Torah were continued by a generation of scholars known as the tana’im (“teachers,” singular tana), and recorded in the Mishnah, which was codified in the early third century by the tana Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi. Debates continued for a few more centuries (as the saying goes, “two Jews, three opinions”) during the post-Mishnaic era. These scholars were known as the amora’im (“speakers,” singular amora). The Talmud was completed toward the end of this Amoraic period, sometime around the fifth century CE.

TIMELINE OF THE ORAL TORAH					
TEXT	Oral texts only	Oral texts only	Oral texts only	Mishnah	Talmud
TRANSMISSION	Moses, Joshua, Elders	Prophets and scholars	*Zugot* (Pairs)	*Tana'im* (Teachers)	*Amora'im* (Reciters)
TRADITIONAL DATES	1300-1200 BCE	1200-200 BCE	200 BCE - 0 CE	0 - 200 CE	200-500 CE

In terms of actual words on the page, traditional printings of the Talmud feature two basic texts, with layers of commentary that reach up to the 21st century. The core text is the Mishnah,

codified in the third century. The Talmud itself, also known as the Gemara, follows. These two texts are printed in the center of the page. Since the Talmud is considerably larger than the Mishnah, the reader will often progress through several pages of Talmud before reaching the next Mishnah. Surrounding the text are additional texts of the three types of supporting materials: commentary (e.g., Rashi), anaylsis (e.g., Tosafot) and various navigational tools that allow the student to find parallel texts elsewhere in the Talmud (e.g. Mesorat ha-Shas) or look up references in the codes (e.g., Shulhan Arukh).

The Talmudic Page

Cross-references to other texts

The Mishnah

Rashi

The Talmud (Gemara)

Tosafot

Whirlpool

At nineteen, I had only a hazy understanding of what the Talmud was. Not enough to begin learning it properly but more than enough to make some really embarrassing mistakes. Toward the end of my first year at the University of Toronto, inspired by people like Bob Gibbs, I declared myself a Philosophy major--not a thrilling choice for my pragmatic father, but he didn't give me too much grief over this decision at the time. I knew I wanted to make some kind of impact on the world of Jewish thought and I understood that I needed to develop some serious textual tools to get there. My first challenge was to find a teacher. I should have just called Rabbi Jakubovitz and asked him to teach me Talmud, but I thought I knew better.

The most inspirational figure in my life that year was Professor Emil Fackenheim, a senior scholar and well-known philosopher. I encountered him late in his career, when he was preparing to leave Canada for a position at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He encouraged my youthful ambition and ultimately suggested I continue to study under him in Israel. I jumped on the opportunity. Bursting with pride, I applied and was accepted to the Rothberg International School at Hebrew University and purchased a one-way ticket to Israel that departed as soon as my spring term ended in Canada. I spent a few months living on a kibbutz (a type of Israeli communal farm) hoping to learn Hebrew (I ended up learning a lot more Australian from the other volunteers), then moved into student housing as soon as a room was available. I even got a job as a waiter in Richie's Cardo Cafe, hoping to integrate myself completely into the Israeli milieu. Now, I was sure, the intellectual adventure would begin!

The experience was an almost total disaster. My spoken Hebrew improved, but I found my other classes tedious and my English-speaking classmates frivolous (in turn, they no doubt found me irredeemably arrogant). I was terribly lonely. I recall long evenings gazing out of my dorm window on Mount Scopus looking over the rolling hills of the Judean desert. To make things worse, Professor Fackenheim and I had a major falling out, the kind of argument that only philosophy or perhaps political science majors can have. At that time some extremist Jewish groups were advocating the use of terrorist methods against the Arab population. Professor Fackenheim and I disagreed over the possible justification for such tactics. Professor Fackenheim, a Holocaust survivor who had built his career around a radical redefinition of Judaism in the modern world, was able to place this violence in a larger philosophical context, whereas I in my youthful naïveté felt that Jews may never resort to such terrorist-inspired tactics. I recall feeling a tremendous sense of hurt and betrayal that he could think differently than I on the political use of terror tactics. Soon after I left his home one October evening, I dropped out of school and returned to Toronto. I didn't speak to Professor Fackenheim again for twelve years.

Looking back on this first, failed attempt to reach the sea of Talmud, one moment in those months of confusion and frustration stands out. I had taken a bus from my part-time job in the Old City and had somehow missed the stop at the main entrance to the Hebrew University campus on Mount Scopus, which was surrounded by a high wall of pale Jerusalem stone. Getting off the bus a few stops later, I really should have walked back to the familiar gate. I had some extra time and I thought I would follow the path the bus travelled, certain that I would soon come across another point of ingress. I should have paid more attention, if not to the bus stops then at least to my reading of the 1948-49 Israeli War of Independence, when the University fell behind enemy lines and the students were brutally attacked by Jordanian forces. After the Israelis regained control of Mount Scopus in the 1967 Six-Day War, the University was rebuilt, with a much higher level of security, including a reinforced wall that ran the circumference of the campus.

I walked for well over an hour on the isolated ring road under an unrelenting sun, looking for a way to get in. A few cars passed by, but I was too timid for ask for a ride to the next entrance, always thinking it had to be around the next bend. To my left was the wall, perhaps ten or twelve feet high, and I could imagine the shaded campus buildings with their flowing water fountains just a few yards away on the other side of the smooth and impenetrable barrier. To my right were the undeveloped lands beyond the Green Line, the former armistice line from the 1948 war, barren and treeless. Eventually I reached another entrance to the University, but by then I was tired, demoralized, and ready to give up and go home. The Talmud, like the University, would remain a sealed book.

Since then I have failed many more times, but I have come to accept the truism of the Amora Rabbi Yitshak (Megilah 6a): “if someone says to you, I toiled [to learn Talmud] but did not succeed--do not believe him.” No energy is ever wasted, even if it is misdirected. My ambitions to learn Talmud were only set back for a few years, until I finally met a teacher who would revitalize and transform me. We’ll talk about her shortly.

Structure

Since the Talmud is essentially an extended commentary on the Mishnah, it follows the same structure of six orders. The term Shas is often used to describe the entire Talmud, when it is actually an abbreviation that refers to the Six Orders (shishah sedarim, thus forming the acronym Shas from the opening letters).

NAME	MAJOR THEMES
Zera'im (Seeds)	Agriculture
Mo'ed (Times)	Sabbath and Holidays
Nashim (Women)	Marriage, divorce
Nezikin (Damages)	Civil and Criminal Law
Kodashim (Holy Things)	Rituals of the Temple
Taharot (Purities)	Rituals of purification

The six orders form another acronym: ZMaN NaKaT, an Aramaic phrase that can be loosely translated as tempus fugit, or "time flies." Of the six orders, the tractates most commonly studied in traditional Yeshivot are selected from Nashim (women) and Nezikin (damages). Zera'im is well represented in the Jerusalem Talmud, but only the first tractate appears in the Babylonian Talmud (Berakhot, which deals with blessings to be recited over food and related matters). Even though tractate Berakhot is the technical beginning of the Talmud, the work is not cumulative in structure, and new students will be as lost starting at the beginning as if they had begun near the end or anywhere in the middle. Certain sections, such as the second chapter of tractate Bava Metsia, are generally understood to be slightly more accessible to the first-time reader, although even they require considerable mediation and training to gain comprehension.

The Sea of Talmud is far more welcoming at such shorelines, with sandy beaches and long, shallow waters that allow the inexperienced swimmer ease of access to the wonders of the ocean, with promise of a safe return to dry land. Other points of entry are extremely dangerous, with turbulent waves crashing on rocks or rip currents that threaten to pull the swimmer out to unfathomable depths, or crowded with poisonous jellyfish and teeming with underwater predators. It's important above all never to swim alone. As the Yehoshua ben Perahaya puts it in Pirkei Avot (1:6), "appoint a teacher for yourself, and acquire a friend [to study with]."

Language

The Talmud is written in two closely related languages, with frequent linguistic borrowings from several others. The Mishnah is recorded in an early form of Hebrew known as lashon Hazal, the “language of the Sages” (Hazal, sometimes transliterated Chazal, is a Hebrew acronym for the phrase “the wise ones, whose memory is a blessing”). It differs from biblical Hebrew and modern Hebrew in ways that are beyond the scope of this short work. The Talmud, on the other hand, is written in Aramaic, a Semitic language written in Hebrew characters that became the Jewish vernacular for several centuries, making an impact on the liturgy with the kaddish prayer, for example. Lashon Hazal is relatively accessible to readers with some Hebrew knowledge. Aramaic is another story altogether. The languages are closely related, but even tiny differences between them can be very misleading. The prefix letter shin in Hebrew acts as the preposition “that,” whereas in Aramaic the letter dalet performs the same function. Sometimes identical words have almost diametrically opposite meanings. For example, the Hebrew root word shakhah means “forget.” The same root word in Aramaic means “find.”

Beyond the simple translation is the difficulty posed by the highly coded syntax of the Talmud. Parsimonious when it comes to spelling out an argument, the Talmud will quite often lay out the general parameters of a question and then abruptly change a variable to pose a different question. For example, the Talmud might be discussing the ownership of grain that spilled over an area of four square cubits, and then transition to a phrase like “two cubits, then what? One cubit, then what?” The reader who doesn’t have a firm grasp on the fundamental question (grain spilled over four square cubits) will be lost.

The Talmud often assumes that the reader already has extensive background knowledge of the subject matter under discussion. Biblical verses are quoted as proof texts, but often in a highly truncated fashion, as if the reader should be so familiar with the Hebrew Bible that it would be unnecessary to provide the entire verse (even though the omitted portion of the verse is precisely what makes the text important). Unlike much western philosophical literature influenced by the Greek tradition, the Talmud does not move from the general to the specific. It does not lay out basic information and then examine particulars. Everything is presented in medias res, as if the student stumbled into a room filled with Rabbis halfway through a furious debate, when no one will stop and explain how the argument erupted. Fortunately, one kindly old Rabbi notices the befuddled student, and with a few brief running comments whispered into the ear of the student, the Rabbi slowly clarifies the meaning and significance of each speaker’s position. This Rabbi,

of course, is none other than Rabbi Shlomo Yitshaki (1040-1105), known by the acronym of his name, Rashi.

Rashi's commentary, an essential tool for understanding the Talmud, intimidates many new students because it is written in an unfamiliar font popularly called "Rashi script." Contrary to popular opinion, Rashi did not create this cursive font, but later publishers used it when printing his commentary. It's basically an italicized version of traditional block Hebrew letters, widely used in both manuscript and printed forms of the Talmud to distinguish the text of the Mishnah and Talmud from the supporting commentaries. In reality, there's no reason to be intimidated by Rashi script because only a few letters are radically different from the familiar block letters: eight, to be exact.

<table>
<tr><th>NAME OF LETTER</th><th>TRADITIONAL BLOCK LETTERS</th><th colspan="2">RASHI SCRIPT</th><th colspan="2">HELPFUL HINTS</th></tr>
<tr><td>Aleph</td><td>א</td><td colspan="2">א</td><td colspan="2">Note the "flag" on the top left. Do not confuse with ח.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Bet</td><td>ב</td><td colspan="2">ב</td><td colspan="2">Just one extra little bump in the middle.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Zayin</td><td>ז</td><td colspan="2">ז</td><td colspan="2">Easily confused with ו, but that's true of the block letters too.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Lamed</td><td>ל</td><td colspan="2">ל</td><td colspan="2">Note that the top line is vertical (compare צ)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Mem</td><td>מ, ם</td><td colspan="2">מ, ם</td><td colspan="2">The final ם has a round bottom like a block ס.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Samech</td><td>ס</td><td colspan="2">ס</td><td colspan="2">Has a small foot on the lower left to distinguish it from ם.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Tsadi</td><td>צ, ץ</td><td colspan="2">צ, ץ</td><td colspan="2">Note that the top line leans over (compare ל)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Shin</td><td>ש</td><td colspan="2">ש</td><td colspan="2">This one is totally different.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="6">Familiar-looking Rashi Letters</td></tr>
<tr><td>Gimel</td><td>ג</td><td>ג</td><td>Dalet</td><td>ד</td><td>ד</td></tr>
<tr><td>He</td><td>ה</td><td>ה</td><td>Vav</td><td>ו</td><td>ו</td></tr>
<tr><td>Het</td><td>ח</td><td>ח</td><td>Tet</td><td>ט</td><td>ט</td></tr>
<tr><td>Yud</td><td>י</td><td>י</td><td>Kaf</td><td>כ, ך</td><td>כ, ך</td></tr>
<tr><td>Nun</td><td>נ, ן</td><td>נ, ן</td><td>Ayin</td><td>ע</td><td>ע</td></tr>
<tr><td>Fe</td><td>פ, ף</td><td>פ, ף</td><td>Kuf</td><td>ק</td><td>ק</td></tr>
<tr><td>Resh</td><td>ר</td><td>ר</td><td>Tav</td><td>ת</td><td>ת</td></tr>
</table>

Wading In

I always thought it was the strollers. Young mothers were pushing their toddlers to the shul, all bundled up against the morning cold, then walking back with black-hatted husbands and older children to enjoy the Shabbos meal. I didn't even notice them until Ilana pointed them out, week after week, walking south in the early morning and then returning north around lunchtime on Hilda Avenue, not far from our first apartment in north Toronto. I wasn't impressed, but for Ilana, these young families were the object of great fascination. Who were they, and what was their life like? Why did they walk when the shul was over a mile away?

Ilana and I met on the evening of December 26, 1986, at the North York Ski Center, where she was taking a certification course with the Canadian Ski Instructor's Alliance. The hill was closed to everyone except the CSIA examiners and trainees, but I was a current instructor at the Ski Center and was taking advantage of the fresh snow. I remember with exceptional clarity the moment we met: I was at the bottom of the hill waiting in the singles line for the lift, when she skied up to me and said, "hey, move over," so that she could share the lift, get up the hill, and get back to skiing. I've been moving over--and moving up--ever since then. We were married in June of 1989.

Ilana was attracted, at least in part, to the carefully cultivated image I projected: smart, maybe even wise, but wounded by my experiences. Sophomoric, I know, but it worked, so I'm certainly not complaining. My humiliating early return from Israel had crushed the worst part of my early arrogance, and I had managed to pass enough courses at the University to complete my Bachelor's Degree, majoring in Philosophy. My experience in Israel had left me dejected, however, and I bombed in several other courses I easily could have passed, including a Math course that I took just to please my father and a second-year German class that had a final exam scheduled too early in the day for my liking. Several other courses--including "Religion and Philosophy," taught by the same instructor who gave me that copy of The Living Talmud--were simply excuses for me to complain about my misperceptions of the Talmud and how I was shut out of it.

Which brings me back to the strollers. I misread the meaning of Ilana's fascination with them, thinking it was just some kind of newly-married nesting behavior. I should not have dismissed her interest so lightly. Ilana, who also lacked a strong background in traditional Judaism, had recently read M. Herbert Danzger's Returning to Tradition: The Contemporary Revival of Orthodox Judaism (Yale, 1989), and was deeply moved by the phenomenon of the ba'al teshuvah, the modern individual who abandons the trappings of the conventional secular world and adopts the stringencies and restrictions of traditional Jewish practice. When I looked out the

window of our apartment in Toronto, all I saw were stubborn, unenlightened individuals who refused to accept the societal and technological advances of the last two centuries. To me, the Jewish families pushing strollers in frigid Toronto weather were not unlike the Amish communities in Pennsylvania driving horse and buggies down state highways--quaint and unusual, but not for me. When Ilana looked out that same window, however, she saw the living manifestation of a Talmudic community, a society that embodies by the intellectual discipline and total commitment to a way of life that is completely determined by the eternal values and mores of Judaism.

At the time, we were involved in a community with a more superficial sense of attachment to the day-to-day implications of Judaism, and there were moments that caused Ilana some consternation. We were proud, for example, to be part of an egalitarian congregation where women received equal access to all parts of the Sabbath service, but when one woman insisted on wearing a distinct rock-star look when she was called up to the Torah (including sunglasses), Ilana was unimpressed. Ilana expected synagogue services to be more formal and decorous, the communal expression of awe before the Creator of the Universe. She wasn't troubled by the fact that a woman was called up, which was commonplace and accepted. She was irritated rather by the fact that the woman exhibited such poor form by wearing sunglasses, holding herself with a disdainful and arrogant posture while receiving the honor of being called to the Torah. Ilana wanted something deeper and profound, something more consistent and committed, and she sensed that those families pushing strollers knew what it was.

She insisted we meet with Rabbi Baruch Taub, the spiritual leader of the synagogue that seemed to attract so many of the strollers. I wasn't in favor, thinking that Orthodox Judaism symbolized everything that had gone wrong with my first attempt to penetrate the Talmud. I tried to convince Ilana that it was a waste of our time; that these were close-minded and misogynistic people. The tactic didn't convince her, so I sulked. We ended up "compromising" and went to see Rabbi Taub.

We met in his spacious office in the Beth Avraham Yosef of Toronto synagogue (known popularly as the BAYT, an acronym pronounced like the Hebrew term bayit, or "home"). I was impressed by the massive Talmud volumes that lined the walls and even more so by the fact that they were clearly well used, with several volumes stacked on his desk. A tall, soft-spoken man with penetrating eyes and a light grey beard that hung down his chin but left his cheeks nearly exposed, Rabbi Taub listened attentively to our questions and provided thoughtful answers. In our short meeting of thirty minutes, and despite my best efforts to challenge him with all my

objections and negative assumptions about Orthodox Judaism, Rabbi Taub won us over with his gentle, articulate responses to all our concerns.

Energized, Ilana suggested that we leave the car at home the very next Shabbos and walk to the BAYT instead (following, incidentally, the route taken by the families with strollers). With great trepidation, concerned that we were heading for the same kind of intellectual disaster I experienced as a late adolescent, I grudgingly went along. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was about to meet the greatest Talmud teacher of my life.

* * *

The Talmud, perhaps more than anything else, represents a relentless pursuit of the truth. No question is off-limits to the Talmudic mind, even those that present dramatic theological challenges to conventional interpretations of Jewish philosophy. The scholars of the Talmud--those whose names appear in the text, as well as those who truly devote their lives to its study today--refuse to accept intellectual compromise, reviewing debates over and over, continually testing the logical structure of their arguments for hidden weaknesses. The hermeneutics of Talmudic logic are unique, with decidedly non-western textual elements as well as arguments that are based on the concept of mesorah ("tradition" or "that which is handed down," meaning axiomatic positions that are taken as self-evident), and that may present some difficulties for modern readers. Just as the universe strives for maximum entropy, however, the Talmud strives for maximum harmony, demanding a logical consistency that is intellectually, spiritually, and even aesthetically pleasing.

Chapter Three: The Content of the Talmud

The Way and the Telling

The Talmud consists of teachings than can be loosely divided into two overlapping categories: halakhah and aggadata. Halakhah is literally translated as "the way," and it deals with the comprehensive aspects of Jewish law. The Aramaic term Aggadata means "the telling" (related to the Hebrew Hagadah, the book read at Passover seders) and represents everything that is not halakhah: philosophy, anecdotes from the lives of the Sages, popular Babylonian sayings, recipes, medical information--whatever the Sages felt was relevant or interesting for inclusion in the Talmud.

Halakhah is huge. Jewish law does not recognize valid distinctions in importance between various types of activity--ritual law is equally important to civil or criminal law--and therefore every aspect of human behavior is included. Halakhah discusses seemingly insignificant matters such as how to tie one's shoes, alongside much more weighty issues such as major real estate transactions or premeditated murder.

For most of Talmudic history, halakhah has received the privileged position over aggadata. Far more commentaries have been written on halakhah, and it forms the overwhelmingly dominant portion of the curriculum of Talmudic studies in Yeshivot. This predominance of halakhah has deeps roots in the Jewish tradition, which generally emphasizes the practical and pragmatic over the theoretical. The term "Orthodox," for example, is really a misnomer. Coined in the nineteenth century as a borrowing from ecclesiastical Latin, the word means "right opinion," implying that the traditionally observant community based their identity on a core set of essential beliefs. In reality, a much better term would have been "orthopractic," or "right practice." Traditional Judaism holds only a handful of beliefs to be inviolate (Unity of God, life after death, etc.), whereas the practice of Judaism must conform to a definite set of standards, otherwise known as halakhah. The Mishnah prioritizes the observance of the commandments over everything else in the teaching of Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel (Avot 1:16)--"the study is not the essence, rather the practice."

Orthodox Judaism is not monolithic, however, and even this emphasis on orthopraxy yields a variety of expressions that are considered entirely legitimate. For example, a Talmudic passage that combines both halakhic and aggadic significance is teaching of Rabbi Hiyah bar Ami in the name of Ula (Berakhot 8a): "since the day the Temple was destroyed, the Holy One who is Blessed has nothing in this world except for the four cubits of halakhah." Leaving aside the huge

theological implications of this statement, it is worth noting that the Talmud refers to the “area” of halakhah as four square cubits (Hebrew: amot, singular amah). In modern measurements a cubit is roughly eighteen inches, therefore four square cubits would mean approximately six square feet (two square meters). A lot of people can stand inside six square feet, and each may have a perfectly valid halakhic position. Hence Sephardic Jews, with ethnic roots in the medieval Spanish Jewish diaspora, will have slightly different halakhic practices than Ashkenazic Jews, who trace their background to Germany and Eastern Europe.

The study of aggadata has lagged far behind halakhah. This may be because aggadata does not lend itself well to the same kind of analytical tools used for close inspection of legal issues. Aggadata often demands an immediate, visceral response rather than a sustained dissection. Taking the passage cited earlier, for example, what are we to understand by the statement that God has “nothing in this world except for the four cubits of halakhah”? If this were taken as a halakhic statement, the Sages would debate why four and not five cubits, which of the various measurements of a cubit to use, where exactly these four cubits are located, and so on. This approach would probably destroy the central meaning of the text, which in my humble opinion refers principally to the notion that a relationship may be formed between humanity and God only through careful attention to the study and practice of halakhah. The study and practice of halakhah thus replaces the connection that was once possible through the performance of the rituals of the Temple, now destroyed. On the one hand, one may mourn the loss of a practical, concrete way of reaching God; on the other, that connection is now made manifest in every aspect of Jewish observant life.

Aggadata is like a poem that must be absorbed in its entirety and receive focused meditation. The boundaries of such ideas are often blurry and suffer by comparison with other, apparently competing aggadot. Unlike halakhah, which demands a seamless compatibility of all ideas, aggadata may entertain mutually exclusive interpretations and other contradictions without losing its value.

Marine Life

The transition was slow but inexorable. Ilana and I had many friends at our liberal congregation, and no matter how engaging Rabbi Taub was, I was not enthusiastic with the prospect of switching to an Orthodox synagogue. Still, episodes like the sunglasses at the bimah continued to disturb us. At one point, for example, the congregation set up a small child care service on Saturday mornings, with the thought that this would allow parents to participate more fully in the

services. It troubled Ilana and me to see that some parents, many of them prominent and well respected members of the congregation, began to use the child care service to drop off their children and then go shopping at the nearby mall. The strollers, making their weekly circuit to the Orthodox shul and back, were a far more powerful demonstration of simple commitment to spiritual growth in Judaism.

Besides the halakhic differences between the congregations, we also began to perceive a very profound difference in the way congregants spoke about each other. We were amazed to learn that halakhah has a lot to say about the laws of proper speech, and specifically prohibits various forms of gossip and character assassination (Hebrew: lashon ha-ra, or "evil speech"). Casual water-cooler talk that is considered harmless by conventional, secular standards may constitute serious violations of Jewish law. The Talmud recognizes that gossip is pretty central to the human personality, with the teaching of Rav Yehudah in the name of Rav (Bava Batra 165a): "most people steal and a minority commit sexual crimes, but everyone speaks lashon ha-ra." Still, public defamation of others is generally looked upon with disfavor in the Orthodox community. The contrast between the two congregations on this point was dramatically emphasized that Yom Kippur, when the leader of the liberal congregation used his pulpit to launch a fulminating attack on Orthodox Jews over some communal matter. We were surprised that he would use the Day of Atonement to make such a public condemnation, and in a meeting later that week we asked Rabbi Taub for his reaction. I had expected him to vituperate in response, but he simply sighed and said, "he's really a very religious person. He just went to the wrong Yeshivah." We began attending services at the BAYT quite regularly after that.

Our transition to Orthodox Judaism came in fits and starts as we learned more of the rituals and the reasons behind the thousands of laws and customs. Some things came easily, like making Friday night Shabbat dinners a priority, while others required more effort. Email was an exciting new phenomenon in the late 1980s, for example, and I thought it would unconscionable to go through a full day without checking my inbox for urgent new messages (writing in 2012, I find this highly ironic). My relationship to the Talmud was still one of an outsider. I had not made the intellectual shift from observer to participant.

It happened in a Red Lobster restaurant. Although we were attending the BAYT more often, we still occasionally drove to our liberal congregation to enjoy the Sabbath services, and then went to some restaurant for lunch (readers familiar with halakhah may note some inconsistencies in our youthful behavior). On one fateful occasion, we decided to visit a new Red Lobster franchise. Neither Ilana nor I care for seafood, but it had recently opened and was conveniently located midway between the liberal congregation and our apartment at Yonge and Steeles. We

placed our orders, and as we waited I picked up one of the small card-stock surveys of customer satisfaction that stood in a small dispenser next to four or five miniature pencils. I was just about to check the first box when I had an epiphany of microscopic proportions. In honor of the holy Shabbos, when writing is prohibited, I refused to fill out the Red Lobster Customer Satisfaction Survey. I placed it back in its little stand, returned the tiny pencil to the plastic tray, and folded my hands as we waited for our meal to arrive.

My wife looked at me with incredulity. "What?" she said, "aren't you going to fill out the survey?" I responded in the negative. She reminded me of our transgressions to that point, ticking them off on her fingers. "We went to a non-Orthodox shul. We drove there. Then we drove here. We're carrying money. We're sitting in a non-kosher restaurant. You ordered a non-kosher meal." Running out of fingers, she said, "and you won't fill out a stupid survey?" "No," I responded with the dignity of the self-righteous. "There's no need for me to fill out the survey, and since it's Shabbos, I won't do it." Ilana left it at that, shaking her head with something between exasperation and amusement.

Looking back on my journey to the Talmud, this minor episode stands out as a major turning point in my life. It seemed so small and insignificant at the time, but it represented a sea change in my attitude. Up until then, I was enjoying new experiences, meeting interesting people, but basically following my own agenda in Judaism. Sitting in that Red Lobster restaurant and refusing to take the survey meant that I was recognizing, in my tiny way, that there was a Creator of the Universe.

As I think about that pivotal moment so many years later, another childhood memory comes to mind. My family lived literally across the street from the railway yards that served the Abitibi paper mill. Several times a day the trains would enter and leave the mill, shaking the all the china in my mother's credenza with their weight, their whistle blasts drowning out "Ici Radio Canada" on my father's battery-operated transistor radio. I used to play on the tracks, planting pennies on the rails and hunting for their flattened remains the next day. Of particular fascination were the switches--gracefully curving rails that could be connected or disconnected from the main line at key points, directing trains to various parts of the yard and beyond. I would squat on my heels and examine them, marveling at how the difference of a few inches at the switch could send one car east to the Atlantic coast of Nova Scotia, and another west to the Pacific coast of British Columbia. There are switches like that in life as well. One of mine was in that Red Lobster restaurant.

Parsing the Talmud

Halakhah and aggadata flow smoothly from one to the other in the Talmudic text, which does not follow the norms of most literature in the western tradition. It must be remembered that for several centuries the Talmud was an oral document, memorized and passed down from generation to generation before it was committed to writing. As such, the connections between topics in a given page of Talmud may be thematic or chronological, arranged by the name of the speaker or similarities of expression. The connections between topics may be tenuous, but they follow an internal logic peculiar to the Talmud.

More difficult than the transition between topics, however, is the parsing of the passages within one specific discussion. Let us examine a comparatively straightforward passage in tractate Bava Metsia 34b, reproduced exactly as it appears, but in English translation (one bit of contextual information: selas, shekels, and dinars are units of currency). A word of caution: although this is an example of an easier piece of the Talmud (my sons study it in 6th grade), don't expect to understand this literal translation on first reading.

> the one who loans to his friend on a pledge and the pledge is lost and he says to him sela I loaned to you shekel was equivalent and the other says no but rather sela you loaned me on it sela was equivalent exempt sela I loaned you on it a shekel was equivalent and the other says no but rather the sela that you loaned me on it three dinars was equivalent obligated sela that I loaned to you on it two was equivalent and the other says no but rather sela you loaned to me on it sela was equivalent exempt sela I loaned to you on it two was equivalent and the other says no but rather sela you loaned to me on it five dinars was equivalent obligated

I hope that was sufficiently confusing to make the point! Here's the same passage, with the necessary fibers of information added to the text to make it comprehensible. It's still difficult for the untrained reader, but now it should be a little more accessible.

> the one who loans [money] to his friend on a pledge [i.e., against some collateral], and the pledge is lost [i.e., the lender loses the collateral]

and he [the lender] says to him [the borrower]: “[The] sela I loaned to you [was against your collateral:] shekel was equivalent [meaning, you deposited collateral worth a shekel, which is half a sela, and since I lost your collateral, you only owe me one shekel now].”

and the other [i.e. the borrower] says “no, but rather [the] sela you loaned me on it [i.e. my collateral] sela was equivalent [my collateral was worth exactly the sela you loaned me, and I do not owe you anything].”

[The borrower is] exempt [from the obligation to take an oath in court over this matter, because one is only required to take an oath if one admits to a partial obligation, which is not the case here: the borrower completely denies the allegation of the lender, and there is no supporting documentation to further the lender’s claim].

[Another scenario: what if the lender said, “The] sela I loaned you on it [i.e., against your collateral] a shekel was equivalent [meaning, you deposited collateral worth a shekel, which is half a sela, since I lost your collateral, you only owe me one shekel. The lender’s claim is the same as the first case, but the borrower’s claim will differ as follows].”

and the other [i.e., the borrower] says “no, but rather [the] sela that you loaned me on it [i.e., my collateral] three dinars was equivalent [my collateral was worth three dinars, and since there are four dinars in a sela, I only owe you one dinar, not a shekel].”

[The borrower is] obligated [to take an oath to support his claim in court, since he admitted that he owes a dinar to the lender, which is a partial admission of obligation.]

[A third scenario: what if the borrower said, “The] sela that you loaned to me on it [i.e., against my collateral] two was equivalent [meaning, I deposited collateral worth two selas, and since you lost it, you have to pay me one sela in compensation].”

> and the other [i.e., the lender] says, “no, but rather [the] sela I loaned to you on it [i.e., on your collateral] sela was equivalent [i.e., your collateral was only worth a sela, and therefore I owe you nothing].”
>
> [The lender is] exempt [from taking an oath to support his claim in court, since he does not admit that he owes anything to the borrower.]
>
> [A fourth scenario: The borrower says, “The] sela you loaned to me on it [i.e., on my collateral] two was equivalent [i.e., my collateral was worth two selas, and therefore since you lost my collateral, you owe me one sela.”]
>
> and the other [the lender] says “no, but rather [the] sela I loaned to you on it [i.e., against your collateral] five dinars was equivalent [your collateral was only worth five dinars, and since I loaned you a sela which is worth four dinars, I only owe you one dinar.”]
>
> [The lender is] obligated [to take an oath in court to support his claim.]

This brief example serves to demonstrate just how complex and condensed Talmudic language is. Much of the missing information, such as the relative values of a dinar, a shekel, and a sela, and the crucial element of what “exempt” and “obligated” mean, is supplied in Rashi’s commentary. Learning to translate from Aramaic is only the first step in mastering the basic meaning of the text. Note also that a single paragraph of translated Talmud might take two or three pages of regular prose to render it properly into English, making the 5,422 pages of the Talmud that much more immense.

Swimming Lessons

I began with Rabbi Taub’s daf-yomi class, held at 6:00 a.m. in the small study next to his office. Roughly a dozen men gathered around a boardroom table, each with his own copy of the Talmudic tractate under study, many with a steaming cup of instant coffee within reach. I was the youngest member of the group, by at least a decade, and by far the most ignorant. I considered it a significant accomplishment simply to find the right page under discussion and

follow the text with my index finger. Finally, after so many years of yearning, I was studying Talmud!

Rabbi Taub was an excellent teacher, clear and as comprehensive as he could be within the artificial limits of a folio per every sixty-minute class. He was invariably well-prepared, and organized the concepts in a transparent and logical fashion. Most of the learning was very passive, with Rabbi Taub at the head the table and all the men listening with “two fingers”--one in the Talmud, and the other in Rashi’s commentary. From time to time someone would ask a difficult question. Rabbi Taub would silently look at the questioner as he digested possible responses, and if it was a really great question, he would lean back, shift his kipah over to the top of his forehead, and stroke his beard as he gazed at the ceiling. Minutes would pass as he pondered the answer. Very rarely, he would tell us that he would have to look up some sources, and the next day’s session would begin with the results of his research. Still rarer were the times when he simply admitted that he didn’t know the answer. His ability to publicly acknowledge the limits of his understanding was the most impressive demonstration of all.

I loved daf-yomi and I gained a lot of contextual information from the daily classes, but they were really way above my ability and I eventually dropped out. One small but memorable humiliation illustrates where my Talmudic skills were back then. We were studying tractate Berakhot, so I took a bus to a Judaica store on Bathurst just north of Wilson to buy my very own copy like all the other men. Feeling a surge of great cultural literacy, I walked into the unfamiliar bookstore, located the Talmud section, found the relevant tractate, and completed the purchase. The next morning I returned to the daf-yomi class, my brand new tractate proudly in hand. Rabbi Taub began the class as always by providing the precise location of where we would begin, “four lines from the top, beginning with Rava amar.”

Try as I might, I could not find the passage. I confirmed the page number, then looked over at the tractate held by the man to my right. To my dismay, his page was entirely different! How could this be? Had I perhaps bought a copy of the Jerusalem Talmud instead of the Babylonian? A quick check at the title page disproved that, it was clearly the Babylonian Talmud. I sat through the class like a fool, listening in but too ashamed to ask why I couldn’t locate the correct passage. Sometime later I looked up at the page heading more carefully and discovered my error: I had bought tractate Bekhorot, not Berakhot. I was tempted to return to the store and complain that the titles were misleadingly similar, an act that would only serve to confirm my ignorance. I swallowed my pride and returned to buy a copy of the correct tractate.

The Talmud and Kabbalah

For all its complexity, the Talmud is nevertheless known as Torat Nigleh--the "revealed Torah." It is so called because it seems relatively straightforward when compared with the Kabbalah, which is called Torat Nistar, the "hidden Torah." Students of the Talmud are familiar with tens of phrases that are intentionally disguised for a variety of reasons. It is common for the Talmud to use the phrase "the enemies of the Jewish people" when referring to Jews who transgress, for example, and the student must understand when the text is speaking euphemistically. Such passages are fairly straightforward, with a simple substitution making the text comprehensible. Other passages in the Talmud, particularly those that refer to mysticism, defy simple analysis.

Known as the Kabbalah, or "that which is received," Jewish mysticism is traditionally dated back to the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai. The Talmud frequently refers to these teachings as "the wisdom of Truth" and offers them to the student in tantalizingly opaque passages. Later commentators often collaborate in the intentional obfuscation of the true meaning of these texts by refraining from publishing explanations of the text, leaving this material to a closed circle of students and mekubalim, "those who have received" the wisdom of Kabbalah.

Tractate Hagigah (14b) describes the mystical experience of four Rabbis who enter the "orchard," a metaphor for deep Kabbalistic understanding of the wisdom Torah. The Hebrew word for orchard is pardes, which the Rabbis render as an acronym of four levels of study: Pshat, or surface meaning; Remez, allusion; Drash, homily; and Sod, secret. In other words, these four Rabbis--Ben Azai, Ben Zoma, Elisha ben Abuya, and Rabbi Akiva--prepared themselves to descend to the deepest depths of the Sea of Talmud in the form of the Kabbalah. Before entering this "orchard" through deep meditation on the Torah, Rabbi Akiva warns them that they will encounter a stone of pure alabaster, and when they do, they should not cry out, "water, water!" The meaning of this warning is not clarified, nor is it observed. They discover some sort of partition, and Ben Azai insists on looking behind it, and he is immediately killed. Ben Zoma also glances behind the partition, and he loses his sanity. Elisha ben Abuya doesn't follow the first two Rabbis, but he "rips up the seedlings," meaning he becomes a heretic. From that point on, the Talmud refers to him as aher, "the other one." Only Rabbi Akiva is able to enter and leave the orchard unharmed.

This type of passage, tantalizing and begging for further clarification, is typical of the mystical passages in the Talmud. What, exactly, did the Rabbis see behind the partition? What is the meaning of the "stone of pure alabaster," and why were they cautioned not to cry out "water, water"? A select number of Talmudic commentators carefully address this kabbalistic passage. My favorite is the Maharsha, an acronym for "our master, Rabbi Samuel Eidels," who lived in

Poland in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. He writes that the Rabbis encountered the souls of the righteous who were martyred. In this context, perhaps the passage may be understood as four distinct responses to the difficult problem of theodicy: why do the righteous suffer? Ben Zoma wished to know the answer, and upon discovering it, he retired to the next, more perfect, world. Ben Azai wished to know the answer, and bring it back to this world, but his mind could not sustain the tension and he lost his sanity. Elisha ben Abuya rejected the idea that there was true Divine justice, and became a heretic. Only Rabbi Akiva--ironically, himself becoming a martyr during the Hadrianic persecutions--was able to approach the question and retreat without a comprehensive resolution, retaining his life, his sanity, and his faith.

Rip Current

The BAYT synagogue is a massive building, with multiple services conducted concurrently on any given Sabbath. In the early 1990s, one wing of the structure was occupied by a branch of Yeshivat Ohr Somayach, a Jerusalem-based institution of Talmud study that specialized in training students from non-Orthodox backgrounds. Rabbi Avraham Rothman ran a very successful “beginner’s minyan” for this population, and Ilana and I attended it regularly. Rabbi Rothman brought to the minyan a rare combination of skills that are rarely duplicated. His deep and abiding spirituality was matched only by his irrepressible appreciation for the absurd, and it seemed that nothing could shock him.

The major Talmudic talent at that minyan was Rabbi Uziel Milevsky, a dignified man with a Van Dyck beard and who honored the Sabbath by wearing his distinctive Homburg-style hat. Rabbi Rothman created a regular “stump the Rabbi” session featuring Rabbi Milevsky as part of the regular services, first in between the Torah reading and the Mussaf prayer, and then later, when the sessions ran way overtime, to the end of the services, where the questions and answers could easily last over an hour. Rabbi Milevsky would stand behind a shtender, a sort of simple podium, armed with a single volume of Talmudic scholarship that he rarely opened, speaking largely from memory. The child of European refugees who fled to Uruguay, he spoke a measured and perfectly grammatical English colored by a light but pervasive Spanish tone (he had previously served as Chief Rabbi of Mexico). He would not offer a sermon of any kind, he simply asked for questions from the audience about absolutely anything contained in the world of the Talmud, and the conversation flowed from there.

Questions ranged from the painfully obvious to the deeply insightful. People asked questions because they were curious or because they were angry. Some questions were more like accusations or condemnations than questions. Throughout, Rabbi Milevsky kept his temperature set firmly at “moderate,” and he answered every inquiry with intelligence and compassion. His

command of the sources was phenomenal, and every response sounded like he had just completed a review of the material. Sometimes I even thought that the questions must have been planted beforehand, but I had to abandon that theory because I was one of the more persistent and aggressive questioners myself. Rabbi Milevsky demonstrated the huge breadth and depth of Talmudic wisdom, answering complex questions with a confidence that could only be the product of deep and wide-ranging thought. He became my role model for the Talmudic scholar, and I carry his image in my mind's eye whenever I am presented with a difficult challenge from a student.

* * *

The rigor of halakhah is offset by the poetry of aggadata. Studying page after page of dense legal material is sometimes like swimming in an underwater cave without breathing apparatus. At a certain point, the reader becomes fatigued with the effort and the oxygen debt builds up to an intolerable level--and just then, a glimmer of light appears overhead, and the swimmer rises to the break the surface of the water and inhale deeply the sweet, sweet air of aggadata. Philosophical musings, humorous asides, and other realia give the student pause, and a welcome intellectual rest from the strenuous activity necessarily for Torah study. The real beauty of aggadata, however, is the fact that it can only be appreciated properly in the context of the sustained analysis necessary for the study of halakhah.

Chapter Four: Toward the Digital Talmud

The Complex History of the Transmission of the Talmud

The Talmud, as we know it today, has gone through four distinct stages of transmission: oral, written, printed, and digital. During its first millennium, the Oral Torah was a massive body of information that was committed to memory. Students were required to spend years, a lifetime, in fact, in apprenticeship to a Sage in order to grasp the immensity of what would become the Talmud. Mere technical skills, such as a strong memory or acute analytical skills, were useful but not as essential as this period of apprenticeship, when a young scholar could learn how the Talmud was embodied as a way of life in the Master. In the late classical period, as the Talmud was committed to writing (and to the inevitable scribal errors as manuscripts were copied over and over), this emphasis on shimush talmidei hakhamim, or apprenticeship, became even more significant as the written word could replace those scholars who merely memorized texts ("donkeys carrying baskets of books," as they are described in one memorable passage).

The "people of the book" took to the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century with enthusiasm and alacrity. A Jewish press in Soncino, Italy, produced the first printed copy of the first Talmudic tractate, Berakhot (not to be confused with Bekhorot) in 1483. Issued singly and sparingly over the next few decades, the Soncino volumes are known for their beauty and careful scholarship, although marred by some of the errors typical of late fifteenth-century printing. Pages were unnumbered until tractate Yevamot appeared in 1509. Instead, at the bottom of each column of text a small, displaced word was printed, this being the first word of the next page. Readers were forced to compare these two words--one at the end of the preceding page, the other at the top of the following page--to determine that the volume had been properly printed. Even when pagination was added to the Talmudic page, this convention was retained in printed Talmuds to the twenty-first century. The title page and verso (second side of the title page) was considered the first folio, so all Talmudic volumes actually begin on page two (indicated by the Hebrew letter bet). Since Hebrew is read from right to left, when the Talmudic volume was opened, the first side (recto in Latin, amud alef in hebrew) of the first folio appeared on the left side of the binding. Turning over the page would reveal the second amud of the second daf. In English usage, the recto or amud alef of the daf is represented by an Arabic numeral, and the amud by the letter "a" or "b." The following illustration reproduces Berakhot 2a. In more modern printings the first amud is sometimes rendered with a period for "a" (e.g., page 2a would

be rendered by the Hebrew letter bet followed by a period), and the second amud (page 2b) with a colon (bet followed by a colon). If that isn't confusing enough, some editions of the Talmud printed an Arabic numeral (e.g. the number 2 for this page), but only on the second amud, and only in even numbers (2, 4, 6 and so on). These numbers are typically ignored by Talmudic scholars, who rely on the traditional daf-amud convention. It's worth reflecting that this entire paragraph discusses only one minor aspect of the Talmudic page--imagine how complex the rest of the page must be!

First page of text is number 2 (the Hebrew letter ב). The title page was originally considered page 1. Note that the *amud* is not indicated in this older printing.

First word of the next page (דילמא) printed at bottom of this page.

Beautiful as they were, the Soncino printings were soon eclipsed by the Bomberg (Bamberg) edition (1520-1543), published by a devout Christian, Daniel van Bamberghen of Venice. After receiving permission from the Pope to reprint these books--a notable achievement given the Church burnings of the Talmud in the thirteenth century--van Bamberghen hired a team of Jewish scholars, who collected and analyzed hundreds of surviving manuscripts to produce 9000 volumes of Talmud in three separate editions. Church censorship continued apace, particularly in the wake of the dramatic religious changes following the Protestant Reformation, and the few editions of Talmud published in the sixteenth century were marred by extensive deletions and

alterations. Jewish editors were also complicit in the violence done to the Talmud, resorting to self-censorship in an attempt to receive permission to publish. The paucity of quality printings could not keep up with demand, and a small but important subset of Talmudic scholarship adapted by publishing emendations (hagahot) that corrected texts corrupted by scribal error or censorship.

Early in the nineteenth century, the Shapiro brothers publishing house in Slavuta, Ukraine, appeared and then another edition published by the widow and brothers Romm in Vilna. An acrimonious copyright dispute ensued that followed the cultural seams of the controversy between the younger Hasidic movement (Slavuta) and the traditionalist Lithuanian population (Romm). After the apparent suicide of a non-Jewish employee of the Slavuta publishing house, the Russian government became involved and the Shapiro brothers were exiled to Siberia. The Romm edition of the Talmud, also known as the Vilna edition, ultimately became standard and remains so to the present day.

Fathoming the Depths

In time I grew closer and closer to Rabbi Milevsky and had the privilege of learning with him at the very end of his truncated life (he died in his mid-fifties). Rabbi Milevsky is my Rebbe muvhak--the man from whom I learned the most wisdom. He possessed great sophistication and intellectual honesty, and his mind combined profound understanding with deep compassion.

Under Rabbi Milevsky's guidance, I began studying one-on-one with several people in the traditional hevruta style (more on this in the next chapter), and developed a close relationship with my friends Yaakov Kaplan and Rabbi Mordechai Becher. Learning with Rabbi Milevsky, however, was an entirely different experience. My skills were dwarfed by all my study partners, but his were stratospheric, and it was a great act of kindness for him to take the time to study with me one-on-one. He was known to have mastered the remarkable "pin test," for example. Since each Talmudic page is laid out in a unique manner, students often develop a near-eidetic memory for the specific arrangement of the words on a given page, knowing exactly where to look for a given passage. If one opens a tractate to the first page and places a pin on a random word, an exceptionally advanced student can recite each word that appears directly under the point of the pin on every successive page to the end of the tractate.

I never saw Rabbi Milevsky demonstrate his prodigious memory through the pin test (although I trust the people who tell me they saw it themselves). I did, however, get a glimpse of this brain power when we were studying tractate Sanhedrin together. After we had been learning for some

time, Rabbi Milevsky was diagnosed with an aggressive brain cancer. He insisted on continuing our regular sessions, even when we moved our meeting from the study hall to his home, and then ultimately to his hospital bed. The treatments were hard on Rabbi Milevsky, and toward the end of his life he found it impossible to hold a volume and read from the page directly. I would sit by his bed and read the text aloud, pausing to translate and then listen to Rabbi Milevsky explain its meaning. Deep into the tractate, I was reading a passage from Tosafot when I inadvertently skipped a short line of three or four words--a common mistake, particularly with the extremely small font used for this commentary printed at the margin of the page. Rabbi Milevsky politely stopped me and supplied from memory the precise words I had missed. I realized at that moment that he had memorized the text of Tosafot on this large tractate. Since Tosafot is traditionally studied after the Gemara and Rashi, it was likely that he had committed the entire tractate to memory. That's 113 folios (226 pages), with perhaps 1200 words per page, a total of nearly 300,000 words, all in their proper place and sequence. I was in the presence of genius.

Non-Jews in the Talmud

The Talmud is a document composed by Jews, for Jews. Much of it was written while Jews suffered intense persecution from invading armies in the land of Israel, or as helpless minorities in a far-flung diaspora. Its contents were effectively sealed from the non-Jewish world until the thirteenth century, when the Catholic Church placed the Talmud on trial and subsequently burned cartloads of precious Talmudic manuscripts. It is a document filled with great beauty, with passages of soaring ethical standards and profound insights into the human condition. At the same time, it contains many passages that are uncomfortable for modern readers, particularly when it expresses the anger and frustration of a beleaguered and desperate Jewish population. Passages uncomplimentary to non-Jews only compromise a tiny proportion of the entire Talmud, and they are often quoted grossly out of context in order to advance an openly antisemitic agenda that supports total fabrications such as the infamous Blood Libel, a medieval myth that Jews must consume the blood of Christians on Passover. As absurd as this may sound, the myth has persisted since its introduction in the High Middle Ages to the 21st century. Of the passages that are quoted accurately, such as the difficult "kindness of the nations is a sin" (actually a quotation from Proverbs 14:34, illustrating the problematic nature of this issue: the negative imputation exists in the same Bible revered by non-Jews as well), many were popularized by the research of the seventeenth century Johannes Eisenmenger, who posed as a convert to Judaism and spent nineteen years studying with Jews, ultimately to produce the villainous Judaism Unmasked, an extensively documented two-volume diatribe against Jews, Judaism, and especially the Talmud.

Eisenmenger's critique was unfair, to put it mildly, because the Talmud was considered a closed document, where the Sages could give expression to the frustration of the suffering Jewish masses. The outbursts of anger over the persecution of Jews that occur from time to time in the Talmud have certainly helped many subsequent generations of Jews come to terms with the persecution that has dogged Jews to the present day. In this sense, the Talmud would be analogous to what goes on in a normal family at the end of a long day: one parent may complain about mistreatment by a supervisor, the other may be angry over a slight from a neighbor, and the children will have numerous complaints about school or each other. At the same time the family would probably share a communal meal, filled with the thousand unnamed kindnesses like an elder sibling cutting the food for the baby, a parent helping several children with homework, another going over the family finances to ensure that the medical bills are paid, and so on. If a recording of everything said that evening were to be put in the public domain, would it be a fair representation of the family's value to take all the negative comments--many of which would be grounded in a true assessment of their situation--and condemn them on that basis? Certainly not, yet this is precisely the approach of antisemitic activists who hope to discredit the Jewish people on the basis of scattered Talmudic quotations.

Of particular interest to many non-Jewish readers is the depiction of Jesus in the Talmud. There's not much material to work with--only eight specific and distinct references occur in the Talmud, suggesting the incidental importance of this subject to the Sages. Indeed, of those few references, the meaning of many of them are ambiguous, such as the description of Jesus' split from his teacher, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perahaya. As the story is told in the Talmud (Sotah 47a), Jesus was censured for making an unkind comment regarding an innkeeper, and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perahaya initially refused to accept Jesus' apology. When the teacher eventually came around to reconciliation, Jesus had already abandoned the faith. What is especially interesting about this passage, which the Sages may have included as illustrative of the relationship between Judaism and the early Church, was that the thrust of the message was that the teacher was in the wrong. The Talmud explicitly warns teachers not to "push away with both hands," and uses the example of Yehoshua ben Perahaya and Jesus as a case in point.

The Talmud is about Jews, and Jews live in a world that is predominately non-Jewish, so there are many thousands of references to non-Jews in general, and perhaps hundreds of references to specific non-Jewish individuals. These references include well-worn folk proverbs, anthropological observations of the life of non-Jews, and dialogues between non-Jews and Jews in a variety of contexts, from debates between the Sages and Roman officials to arguments between businessmen. The Talmud portrays a world that is rich and diverse, full of heroes and villains, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

Swimming With The School

Rabbi Milevsky's premature passing was a blow to all of us at Ohr Somayach. We grieved with his wife Chaya and his four children. His legacy would be expressed in part through his students, many of whom named their children after him. On a personal level, Rabbi Milevsky's death came at a crossroads in my life, leaving me ill-prepared to make a fateful decision about my future. I was presented with two highly distinct possibilities for the following academic year: continue my advanced graduate work in Jewish history or spend some serious energy in full-time Talmudic study in Israel. Fortunately, I didn't have the opportunity to make the wrong choice.

My research on Jews of Ukraine came at a fortuitous moment in history. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant that scholars were receiving unprecedented access to secret archives, and my research was receiving positive critical acclaim and popular circulation. Halfway through my doctoral program, I was nominated as a candidate for the prestigious Harvard Society of Fellows, which would have allowed me three to six years of support to engage in my historical research. All I had to do was put together a most excellent proposal that would overwhelm the award committee, and my academic career would be launched into orbit.

At the same time, I was really enjoying my part-time Talmudic study and was experiencing some success in that very distinct form of learning, which the Yeshiva evidently recognized as well because they offered me a truly amazing opportunity: a scholarship that would allow me to study in Israel for a year, together with my wife and two young children. I'm still amazed that they demonstrated such generosity when there were so many other deserving students. I was thankful but fully prepared to decline once my award letter came in from Harvard.

I didn't win. I created that great research proposal, which involved the examination of Eastern European Jewish history using traditional Rabbinic responsa literature. The only problem with my brilliant proposal was that it was the foundation of some excellent research conducted back in the (ahem) 1950s, meaning I was hopelessly ignorant of the subject I professed to know so well. In the end, I'm really grateful for their decision, because it forced me to take the Yeshiva's offer and enter full-time Talmudic study. My wife and I packed up the kids and left for Jerusalem.

The Talmud and the Internet

Printing the Talmud was a huge leap forward for Talmudic studies, making this massive text available to large numbers of students. The Internet has also proven to be of great consequence for Talmudic studies, perhaps even more so because of its structural affinity with the ancient document. The Aramaic term for "tractate" is masekhta, literally "a weaving," an allusion to the deep and pervasive interconnection of texts represented in the Talmud, and the Internet is known popularly as the "web" for the same reason. A given Talmudic passage will link to a phrase in Rashi's commentary, be compared to numerous other texts analyzed in Tosafot, become the subject of discussion in the Codes of Jewish law, and so on. Each phrase acts as a pre-digital hyperlink to literally hundreds of cross-referenced passages, and the student can spend a lifetime wandering from one source to the next. To understand the metaphor differently, the Talmudic mariner can spend a lifetime visiting the exotic shores of distant lands.

At the time of writing, the adaptation of Talmudic texts to the power of the Internet is still evolving. Some early attempts posted the entire Talmud on the web in the traditional format of the Vilna printing. Recordings of daf yomi classes (shiurim, singular shiur) are linked to the page, so the visitor to the site can follow along with an audio recording in English, Hebrew and even Yiddish. The development of digital recording also worked well with the popular explosion of portable music players, so much so that a special edition of the iPod pre-loaded with the entire Talmud went on the market at the time of the tenth Siyum ha-Shas. Ironically, the development of the portable digital audio player also created a renewal of the purely auditory style of learning that goes back to the Babylonian period, before handwritten manuscripts were easily accessible.

My favorite Internet-related Talmud device is the iTalmud app, loaded onto my iPhone. For under $25 this app allows me to download the entire Talmud, display it page by page on my screen in two formats (the Vilna Talmud printing and a digital version better suited to the small viewing area). Passages with commentary are hyperlinked to Rashi and Tosafot. I typically download daf yomi audio classes and listen to them when I'm driving. In coming years, I anticipate digital Talmuds with even greater functionality, linking instantaneously to more commentaries, ancient, medieval, and modern. There's such potential with the digital publication that I worry a little about the future of conventional publishing, which remains essential for learning on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays, when the use of electronic devices is prohibited. Will the printed Talmud eventually be priced out of reach for average kosher consumers? That's hard to imagine, but I have no doubt that Talmudic study will continue, whatever the challenges the digital age might bring.

Lost at Sea

Ilana and I spent the next academic year studying in Israel. We rented a small flat in a four-story walk-up in the Old Katamon neighborhood from an Israeli professor on sabbatical at Rutgers University, and I took the bus to Yeshivat Ohr Somayach, where I spent the day immersed in Talmud study. Ilana studied at Neve Yerushalayim, and our two daughters, aged two and four months, learned how to argue in Hebrew at day care. It was a wonderful year--virtually every night we would sit on the balcony and watch the glow of the setting sun on the Jerusalem stone, listening to the cellist and flautist who lived across the street practice their music. Most wonderful of all, however, was the daily intellectual challenge of the Talmud.

My first few weeks were difficult, as I had a number of cultural handicaps to overcome, and there was no manual for thousands of obscure, unwritten rules of conduct germane to the Yeshiva environment. I learned, for example, never to wear shirts with horizontal stripes (vertical stripes are apparently okay), and that black hats are good on heads but bad on tables. Classes were conducted in English, but they were nothing like the classes I had taken in college. Hours upon hours were spent in a cavernous study hall known as the bet midrash, as students at several levels loudly battled each other in the attempt to translate the Talmudic text. Seated at small tables, the students were arranged in pairs known as hevrutas (Aramaic for "friends" or "colleagues"), and they would argue and gesticulate in a dozen languages as they attempted to determine the translation and essential meaning of the Talmud and its commentaries. Real estate in the bet midrash was at a premium, with senior students getting the most desirable locations and junior students hoping to find a temporarily vacant table. Many perched in the open windowsills or crowded along benches at the back of the bet midrash. The room was well lit but neither air conditioned nor heated. Summertime was reasonably pleasant, given Jerusalem's low humidity, but the winter was uncomfortable. Many students wore scarves and and gloves during the day in a weak attempt to hold off the cold. I caught pneumonia and spent a week in bed. And it was all fantastic.

Every day involved several hours of argument with my hevruta over the text. I had difficulty getting a hevruta that felt compatible with my way of thinking. I needed someone who was intellectually acute and spiritually active, someone who could challenge dogmatic thinking and be willing to consider evidence from secular sources while expressing great confidence in the eternal value of Judaism. It wasn't easy finding the right person--some were not argumentative enough, and let me win even when my logic was weak, and others were too rigid in their thinking, unwilling to entertain a position if it appeared to contradict our reading of Rashi or Tosafot. At one point I discussed my inability to maintain a relationship with a particular hevruta

with Rabbi Yaakov Bradpiece, and he quoted a Talmudic maxim in support of my request for a new one: hayekha kodmin, which translates as “your life comes first.”

Eventually the Yeshiva assigned me to Rabbi Natan Gamedze, an Oxford-trained convert to Judaism from Swaziland. Nati was supernaturally brilliant, no other way to put it. His journey to Judaism began at the University of Witwatersrand, when he was unable to register for a class in Russian language and signed up for Hebrew instead. Over Shabbos dinner at our apartment, he described how he had taken the class on a whim, thinking it would be interesting to learn a language that was written from right to left. Hebrew came easily to him--Nati is fluent in fourteen languages--and in his first semester he was assigned a reading from Genesis Chapter 22, which describes Abraham’s binding of his son Isaac. Speaking with a gentle Oxbridge accent and gesturing in the air with his long, graceful fingers, Nati related how he was utterly transformed by the text and unable to stop thinking about it. Raised in the pagan folk traditions of Swaziland, this was a demanding God that he had never contemplated. Over the coming years, Nati travelled to Europe to continue his studies, but could not shake the attraction to Judaism. He ultimately accepted an offer to begin a PhD at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, converted to Judaism, began studying part-time at Yeshivat Ohr Somayach, and later received Rabbinic ordination from the Brisk Yeshiva in Jerusalem.

Learning with Nati was a humbling experience. Knowing that I also studied several languages as part of my PhD program, Nati would typically greet me with his warm, brilliant smile and say, “Good morning, Hillel--which language shall we use today?” We would then begin with Hebrew, French, or German, but his language skills far outpaced my own, and within a half hour we would invariably revert to English as I struggled to keep up to him. From time to time we would break for a brief walk around the campus grounds, discussing our common philosophical interests. After a few hours of intense debate, we would repair to the Rosh haYeshiva’s study, where we would review the daily assignment with Rabbi Mendel Weinbach. As overwhelmed as I was with Nati, it was still more humbling to sit in the Rosh HaYeshiva’s presence and attempt to address the series of questions he assigned. For most of the morning, Nati and I had taken and aggressively promoted distinctly different approaches to these questions, and we both expected Rabbi Weinbach to affirm that one of our arguments was logically defensible. More often than not, Rabbi Weinbach demonstrated how neither my position nor Nati’s approach were reasonable, patiently and cheerfully dismantling our arguments. On Fridays, Rabbi Weinbach would review Maimonides’ analysis of the same Talmudic passages we had studied, and we caught a glimpse of still greater intellectual genius.

Both Nati and I maintained relationships with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, he as a doctoral candidate and I as a visiting fellow. I would spend an afternoon or two a week researching material in the library or archives, or just talking with the senior scholars and visiting fellows at the Institute for Advanced Studies. The University and the Yeshiva seemed like two completely different worlds of study: the former quiet and decorous, but somehow desiccated and stale, the latter loud and raucous, beating with powerful vitality. Ultimately, the University and its books became my career, but the Yeshiva and its Talmud became my life.

* * *

For all its arcane nature, the Talmud is very much a part of the here-and-now. Jews who follow its teachings consult contemporary Talmudic sages for guidance on the thorniest problems posed by modern life--and the answers are, amazingly, found in the Talmud. From the philosophical and legal implications of modern in vitro fertilization to debates over the privacy of electronic communications, no aspect of life is ignored by the Talmud. Just as the sea comprises a complete ecosystem, allowing creatures to live their entire lives under the waves, so too does the Talmud address all aspects of life. Its students may exist fully within its boundaries, even in our rapidly changing world.

Chapter Five: “Go Study”

How to Learn Talmud

The best way to learn Talmud is to drop everything and go to Yeshivah. As an institution, the clarity of focus and dedication to learning lishmah (“for its own sake”) of the Yeshivah is unparalleled, and it is a natural magnet for teachers and students of all levels. Naturally, Yeshivot differ radically in character, and it’s important to choose a school that suits your learning style, but the first step is getting in the door. This will present challenges to many potential students, as the vast majority of Yeshivot restrict their admissions to Jewish males who live an Orthodox lifestyle, so if you find yourself excluded from one of these categories, you’ll have to do a little more research to find a welcoming institution. Another limiting factor is money. Few adults can manage the economic transition to the full-time study of Talmud, and most students in Yeshivot are sustained by an extended support network of parents, in-laws, or patrons. Certain advanced students may also qualify for living stipends in exchange for community teaching. This arrangement takes place in an institutional context known as the kollel, sometimes attached to a Yeshiva and at other times part of a community synagogue, but it is typically restricted to adult students who have already reached a high degree of proficiency, many of them already holding Rabbinic ordination. So you might not be ready to enter a kollel, but you may live in an area where you could take advantage of one.

If full-time Yeshiva learning isn’t realistic, not to worry, there remain several options to study Talmud in a fulfilling manner. Your local synagogue is a good place to begin. Orthodox synagogues are invariably led by Rabbis with extensive Talmudic training, which forms the core of the curriculum leading up to their ordination. Non-Orthodox congregations and community organizations like the Jewish Federation may also offer adult education in Talmud, and these avenues of approach may seem less threatening to a non-Orthodox student. The Talmudic training of instructors in these settings is subject to a very high degree of variability. When it comes to Talmud, a teacher with a limited competency can often do more harm than good.

It also follows from this that one should not, under any circumstances, learn Talmud alone. The Talmud warns against this tendency by indicating that students who learn alone actually become stupid (Berakhot 63b). Ideally, you should find both a competent teacher and a hevruta. Armed with both these allies, the best approach to studying Talmud involves three distinct steps:

Step One: Prepare a distinct passage with your hevruta. Read the text, in translation if necessary, and discuss its meaning. Work on reading the Hebrew and Aramaic texts, translating as much as

possible. Don't worry about errors at this point; just try to assimilate the material and develop a basic comprehension. Spend about sixty to ninety minutes preparing for the second stage.

Step Two: Review the material with your teacher, ideally in a group with other students looking at the same passage. This is the shiur, which is led by the teacher but may involve the students reading and translating the text. This stage corrects the basic errors of translation and interpretation, and allows the student to gain clarity on the difficult parts of the text and argument. Plan on spending sixty to ninety minutes in shiur as well.

Step Three: Review the material with your hevruta. This stage is called hazarah, and it is essential if you want to retain the material. The same section of text should take about thirty minutes to cover.

This classical three-step approach to the Talmud is a time-honored way to advance and develop independence.

Women and the the Study of Talmud

The Talmud is a highly androcentric document--written mainly by men, for men. The reasons for this are both theological and historical, and they center on a passage in the tractate that deals with the woman accused of adultery in Numbers 5. The biblical passage there describes how this woman, who maintains that she has been faithful to her husband, is administered a kind of potion prepared in the Temple by the kohanim. If she is truly innocent of the charge, she receives multiple blessings and her husband is chastised with some concrete restrictions. If she is guilty as charged, however, "her belly will swell and her thigh will fall away" (5:27), and she will die a painful death. Contrary to the initial reading of the biblical text alone, the Mishnah (Sotah 3:3) clarifies that this physical punishment is not imposed on the adulterous woman immediately:

> Before she even finishes drinking, her face will turn green, her eyes will bulge, and she will be filled with sinews, and people will say, "get her out, get her out," so that she will not defile the [Temple] courtyard.

A horrific punishment, to be sure. The Talmud notes that her partner in adultery meets the same fate.

> If she has merit, [this punishment] will be delayed: with merit, it will be delayed for a year, if she has merit, it will be delayed for two years, if she has merit, it will be delayed for three years.

The Mishnah describes a very important caveat with this passage. If the woman has other merits, such as acts of charity or other good deeds, then her punishment is delayed until the value of those merits are exhausted.

> From here Ben Azai said: a man is obligated to teach his daughter Torah, for if she [is ever required to] drink [this potion], know that her merit will delay [the punishment].

Therefore Ben Azai proposes a preventative measure to protect Jewish women. Fathers should actively teach their daughters Torah (in context, this passage refers to Talmud), so that the children will gain the merit of studying its wisdom. This merit will delay their punishment should they ever commit adultery, deny it in the Temple courtyard, and choose to drink the Sotah waters.

> Rabbi Eliezer said, anyone who teaches his daughter Torah, teaches her lewdness.

Rabbi Eliezer could not disagree more forcefully with Ben Azai. A father should certainly not teach his daughter Talmud, for he would only be training her to minimize the punishment for illicit behavior. Rabbi Eliezer argues that such an approach actually encourages adultery. This passage is the locus classicus for the traditional exclusion of women from formal study of the Talmud.

For most of Jewish history, women had very limited access to the Talmud in a formal sense (actually, most men had limited access to the Talmud but for different reasons). Some women managed to overcome this educational handicap and achieve fame for their learning. The Talmud itself records the teachings of Bruria, for example, a second-century woman who often bested male interlocutors in debate. The twelfth century traveler Petahaia of Regensburg reports of a Bagdad yeshiva run by a woman (ironically, she was known only as the daughter of her father, Samuel ben Ali), who taught Talmud classes to men through a partition (mehitsah). Examples such as these are scattered throughout the centuries, but they are clearly exceptions to the general rule. For most of the last fifteen hundred years, the Talmud has been the abode of male scholars and students.

The twentieth century, however, saw the development of unprecedented opportunities for women to access the Talmud, within the context of a more general trend of increasing formal Jewish education for women in all subjects. The turning point was the 1917 establishment in Poland of the first formal Orthodox school for girls by Sarah Schenirer. This model of secondary education for women found great popularity in the traditionalist community, and within twenty years the Beit Yaakov school system could claim some 35,000 students in 200 schools. Talmud was not

formally on the curriculum, particularly in the traditional Bet Midrash model, but it is impossible to teach advanced students without frequent reference to the Talmud. In the lexicon of the traditionalist community, Beit Yaakov students are typically taught Talmud “outside,” meaning the young women are taught selected passages that are relevant to a larger topic, rather than opening up a tractate at the first page and making their way through the text in sequence.

Postwar America also saw a surge of interest in women’s education in Talmud, particularly due to the increasing influence of feminist thought. Much feminist literature of the era was produced by Jewish women, most notably Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique (1963). These early feminists were typically American-born and connected with liberal Jewish movements (if they affiliated at all). These movements began offering women equal access to their institutions at the tertiary level, starting a wave of ordination of women that began in the early 1970s, although the place of Talmudic studies in the non-Orthodox curriculum was far less pronounced. Several groups on the Orthodox spectrum also began to offer women increased opportunities to study Talmud, but the overwhelming majority of Orthodox institutions with Talmud at their curricular focal point maintain a strict male-only admissions policy. A select number of universities also offer Talmud studies, and their decidedly non-traditional approach certainly includes gender-blind admissions to these classes.

Deep-Sea Diving

We returned home the following year, but I wasn’t ready to give up my full-time Talmud study. Ilana had accepted a job offer from the Jewish Federation of New York, and we rented a house in nearby Monsey, the home of a branch campus of Yeshivat Ohr Somayach. Her salary and the small scholarship I received during the final year of work on my doctoral dissertation kept us afloat (along with parental support). I spent my days studying Talmud, with occasional forays into the academic world. I eventually did get to Harvard, winning a Shklar Fellowship there and having my first book published jointly by the Center for Jewish Studies and the Ukrainian Research Institute of Harvard, but shuttling between worlds was unsettling. I remember walking down Massachusetts Avenue in my dark suit and black fedora to give my first lecture there, and feeling as self-conscious as I did when I showed up in Yeshiva wearing a shirt with horizontal stripes. Nothing is easy.

At precisely midnight on June 5, 1995, I began the transition from student of Talmud to teacher of Talmud. My hevruta at the Yeshivah was Rabbi Benzion Kokis--once again, the Yeshivah had selected a study partner who could deal with my personal strengths and weaknesses. Rabbi Kokis, some twenty years my senior, and was employed by the Yeshivah as the mashgiah, or

“supervisor.” The mashgiah is typically a Rabbi with impeccable character and deep psychological sensitivity, and his role is to ensure that the students are fulfilled in their learning and, more generally, with their lives as a whole. I was humbled that the Yeshivah asked him to devote his valuable time to learn Talmud with me on a daily basis. His calm, sedate approach to the text stood in stark contrast to the aggressive, adversarial style typical of Rabbi Weinbach’s teaching, and his patience with me, both intellectually and personally, left a huge impression. The Bet Midrash in Monsey was just as crowded as in Jerusalem, although it felt a little more heimish, or “home-like,” since it was literally inside a converted three-bedroom home. A major campus building was under construction, but in those years the Bet Midrash met in several irregularly-shaped rooms, with creaking wooden floors and a patchwork of sagging bookcases on every inch of wall space.

The position of the Yeshivah at that time was to discourage students from taking examinations for smihah, Rabbinic ordination. I was determined to circumvent this rule because I saw myself as “Rabbi Doctor” (probably related to my adolescent fantasies of heated debates with bearded men in black). The Yeshivah eventually capitulated and agreed to arrange for me to be examined for Rabbinic ordination by Rabbi Avrohom Pam of Yeshivah Torah VeDa’as, a very respected senior Rosh Yeshivah who was regarded by many as the Gadol ha-Dor, the “great one of the generation.” Rabbi Kokis never discouraged me personally, but could always detect a slight tone of gentle reproof whenever we discussed it. In the end, his personal example of humility was too much for me to bear, and I decided to abandon the project. I was fully committed to an academic career, and the acquisition of a Rabbinic certificate was self-serving, as I had no intention of serving in a pulpit. I informed him of my decision sometime in May, and he responded with a smile, “better a Doctor who gets a geshmak out of a Tosfafos than a Rabbi who doesn’t learn.” In other words, Rabbi Kokis felt it was more important for me to learn Talmud for its own sake, than to use it for my own personal self-aggrandizement.

Shortly after I came to this decision, Rabbi Kokis allowed me the great privilege of teaching in the Yeshivah. On the holy night of Shavuot, which commemorates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, the members of the Yeshivah traditionally spend the entire night learning Talmud, concluding with dawn prayers. On that first Shavuot night of my life as a teacher of Talmud, I led a small group of students through the first chapter of Tractate Megillah.

After that year in Monsey, I defended my dissertation and received my first post-doctoral fellowship at Cornell University. I continued my academic career through various great institutions, including other post-doctoral fellowships and visiting appointments at Oxford and Harvard Universities, and currently serve as the Dean of Academic Affairs and Student Services

at Touro College South in Miami Beach. Over the years I have waded deeply into the Sea of Talmud, and even learned to swim a few strokes, yet its vast and mysterious nature continues to fascinate. I hope that this brief and personal introduction has inspired you, dear reader, to do the same.

For Further Reading: A Select Annotated Bibliography

Translations of the Talmud

The Schottenstein Edition of the Talmud, Brooklyn: Mesorah/Artscroll, 1990-2005.

> Very popular translation, with the original page layout and English translation on facing pages. Commentary is based on Rashi, with anthologized additional notes taken from the traditional Rabbinic commentators. Comes in several sizes, hardcover and paperback.

The Soncino Talmud, edited by Rabbi Isidor Epstein, Brooklyn: Soncino Press, [call for dates]

> Reliable although sometimes difficult translation (understanding Aramaic helps decipher the English, but if you already know Aramaic, what's the point of the translation?). Free versions available online.

The Talmud: The Steinsaltz Edition, edited by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, New York: Random House, 1989-.

> Beautiful modern translation with lots of useful scholarly apparatus (archaeological findings, pictures of flora and fauna, sidebars on people and places). The traditional 19th century layout of the Talmudic page is sacrificed for the sake of clarity and easy of use, which can make it difficult to use in traditional daf yomi classes. Fairly expensive.

Primers

Abramson, Henry, Reading the Talmud: Developing Independence in Gemara Learning Jerusalem: Feldheim, 2006.

> A personal favorite, for obvious reasons. Designed for students who have a minimal amount of Hebrew skills (able to read from the siddur but not translate, for example) and who wish to make progress in understanding the Talmud. Best used with a study partner (hevruta) or study group (haburah).

Anthologies

Cohen, A., Everyman's Talmud London: J.M. Dent, 1934.

> Well-organized overview of theological topics in the Talmud.

Goldin, Judah, The Living Talmud: The Wisdom of the Fathers New York: Signet, 1957.

Not really about the Talmud at all, it's a translation of Pirkei Avot, a tractate from the Mishnah. Still, it has a lot of valuable anthologized commentary from the Talmud.

Introductions

Mielziner, Moses, Introduction to the Talmud New York: Bloch, 1968.

Dense text, assuming the reader already has some familiarity with the subject, but lots of valuable information.

Strack, Hermann, Introduction to The Talmud and Midrash Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1945.

Also a little dry and hard to read, but very scholarly and detailed.

Dictionaries

Frank, Yitzhak, The Practical Talmud Dictionary Jerusalem: Ariel, 1992.

Excellent short dictionary, written specifically for students of the Talmud. I actually read this book cover to cover, and it really helped solidify my Aramaic language skills. Especially useful is the inclusion of common Talmudic phrases, not just words, with clear examples of how these phrases are used in context.

Reference Works

Kaplan, Dovid, The Ohr Somayach Gemara Companion Jerusalem: Targum, 2000.

Brief, handy volume with basic information.

Krupnick, Eliyahu, The Gateway to Learning: A systematic introduction to the study of Talmud, New Revised and Expanded Edition Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1998.

Useful for the intermediate student with some familiarity with Talmud. Very strong material on the structure of the Talmudic argument.

Steinsaltz, Adin, The Talmud: The Steinsaltz Edition, A Reference Guide New York: Random House, 1989.

Excellent guide, worth reading cover-to-cover.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the Source of all Blessing, who has allowed me to reach this moment. I am thankful to my wife, Ilana Tirzah, for the innumerable hours she has devoted to raising our children, Raphaela Meirit, Danit Malka, Aliza Shoshana, Alexander Eliyahu, Boaz Uziel, and Aryeh Yitzchak. I well understand Rabbi Akiva's comment to his students regarding his wife Rachel: "what is yours is mine, and what is mine is hers." Several of my children sniggered through early drafts of this book, and their helpful comments removed some of the more incriminating elements in the autobiographical sections. My parents, Jack and Ethel Abramson of Iroquois Falls, Ontario, also exemplified this model of self-sacrifice, particularly for the sake of my Jewish education. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to my many teachers and hevrutas in Talmud at Yeshivat Ohr Somayach and elsewhere. In my current position as Dean of Academic Affairs and Student Services at Touro College South, I have the privilege of working with my friend and colleague Rabbi Alan G. Ciner, and I am honored to participate in our campus Writers' Circle. Dr. Stefanie Herron and Dr. Lee Williams have suffered through multiple drafts of my writing. The passages of the text that demonstrate grace and clarity are due in large measure to their efforts; everything else is totally mine.

This book is dedicated to my many students, who continue to inspire me, as Rabbi Hanina put it, "I learned much from my teachers, more from my colleagues, but from my students most of all." My current group of adult students at the Young Israel of Bal Harbour amaze me with their progress in Talmud: David Brody, David Herman, Kim Marks, Steven Mills and Gerardo Rodriquez. Steven Mills has also assisted me with his remarkable skills as a professional marketer and photographer, stepping into the Atlantic Ocean himself to take the photograph that appears on the front cover (not to mention the Sea of Talmud, which he also visits regularly). It should also be noted that no volume of the Talmud was harmed during this photo shoot, and I'd like to express my thanks to Crown Cleaners of North Miami Beach for rescuing with the suit. Young Israel is led by the amazing Rabbi Moshe and Rebbetsin Rena Gruenstein, both inspirations to the entire community. I am also grateful for the guidance provided by Rabbi Sholom Dov Ber Lipskar of The Shul of Bal Harbour. Some of the details of e-publishing were clarified for me by our family friend and attorney, Ms. Eileen Yasbin. Other friends and students have contributed ideas and corrections to the text, including Isaac Arber, David Brody, Bev Kagan, Susan Leaventon, Steven Schwartz, Menachem (Marc) Sternbaum, Geoffrey Weisbaum, Myriam Winer, and Aryeh Wuensch.

About the Author

Henry (Hillel) Abramson is a specialist in Jewish history and thought based in Miami Beach, Florida. A native of northern Ontario, he received his PhD in History from the University of Toronto and has held visiting appointments and post-doctoral fellowships at Harvard, Oxford, Cornell and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He currently serves as the Dean of Academic Affairs and Student Services at Touro College South. He is the author of Reading the Talmud: Developing Independence in Gemara Learning (Feldheim, 2006), A Prayer for the Government: Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times, 1917-1920 (Harvard, 1999), The Art of Hatred: Images of Intolerance in Florida Culture (JMOF, 2001), and many articles in scholarly journals. He has received numerous awards for his research and teaching, including fellowships from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and he was named to the "Excellence in the Academy" award by the National Education Association.

Also by Henry Abramson:

Reading the Talmud: Developing Independence in Gemara Learning (Feldheim, 2006)

The Art of Hatred: Images of Intolerance in Florida Culture (Jewish Museum of Florida, 2001)

A Prayer for the Government: Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times, 1917-1920 (Harvard, 1999)

Henry (Hillel) Abramson may be reached through his Smashwords author page. His personal website is www.hillelabramson.org, and many of his lectures in Jewish history are located at www.jewishhistorylectures.org.