

The Role of Talmud Study Yesterday and Today

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According to Jewish Tradition, the Divine Instruction (Torah) revealed to the children of Israel consists of both a written text, the Pentateuch, and an oral tradition which expounds and expands on the former. This oral Torah is contained in the Talmud, consisting of the Mishnah and Gemara. The Mishnah, compiled by Rabbi Yehudah Hanassi around the year 200 C.E., is a systematic codification of the halachic (i.e. practical directives for religious conduct) corpus of the Tradition. The Gemara not only expounds on the Mishnah through debate and reference to sources not included in the Mishnah; but it also uses the discussion as an opportunity to include a vast body of homiletical exposition, theology, wisdom, legend and opinion. These terms, Mishnah and Gemara are the ones which Orthodox Jews will use by way of reference to the corpus of the Oral Tradition. The word Talmud is rarely used to designate the text. Its most common usage is as part of the instructive term "Talmud Torah", i.e. the study of Torah, the study of Divine instruction.

One may see in this very term not only the idea that Divine revelation must be studied in order to be really known (in keeping with the Biblical injunction in Joshua Chap. 1, v.8) but that the act of religious study is akin to the experience of Divine revelation itself! Accordingly while ideally this study leads to correct religious behavior, it is nevertheless a value in and of itself. Indeed, the Talmud contains much discussion and narrative that has little or no practical relevance even to all the precepts and guidelines of Jewish observance. Yet for the Orthodox Jew, the Talmudic text serves as a vehicle by which one enters the very world of the working of the Holy Spirit and by which one draws close to the Divine Presence itself.

Accordingly the Talmud itself teaches that while it is essential for a person to acquire a worldly skill in order to provide for one's material needs and those of one's family (and the needy), one should keep this pursuit to the minimum so as to spend as much time of the day as possible in Talmud Torah. By way of illustration one might say that what meditation is for Buddhism, the study of the Talmud and its commentaries is for Judaism.

However while there are aspects of the Talmud which are largely theoretical, there is no aspect of Jewish daily life that is not dealt with by the Talmud and the subsequent codes of Jewish practice that are based on it. Indeed this way of life is the essence of Jewish spirituality, the purpose of which is reflected in the Rabbinic homily seemingly somewhat cryptic at first glance, that declares that one who sees the sun rise and does not make the blessing for such; or sees the sun setting and does not make the appropriate blessing for such, is considered to be a dead person. (Midrash Tanhuma, Vezot Habrachah, 7).

In order to comprehend this statement we need to grasp the role and meaning of a blessing in Jewish practice. The Talmud clarifies that we are obliged to make a blessing before benefiting from any material pleasure such as food or drink (or pleasurable scent, or new clothing, etc.). Accordingly before an observant Jew will bite into an apple, for example, he will recite the formula "Blessed are You O Lord our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the tree". In expressing these words, he not only acknowledges the pleasure and benefit that he is about to enjoy, but also recognizes the Source of that which he is about to consume. Thus, a "blessing" in Jewish practice, is an expression of awareness and appreciation. Accordingly the rabbinic homily declares that if one can see the beauty of sunrise or

the glory of sunset without any sense of awareness of the Divine Presence – then one is not really here! The body may function, but the soul is dead! To really live, means to be conscious of the Divine in the world, in oneself and one's neighbor. Indeed that is not only the purpose of a blessing, but of all the precepts that the Talmud contains, that regulate the gamut of the aspects of individual and communal life. This awareness of the Divine, is meant to infuse the different aspects of our lives; both our personal life – e.g. how we eat and drink, how we work and rest; and our social lives – how we relate to others, especially the more vulnerable in society. However Jewish tradition has taught that this consciousness can itself be most enhanced through the very study of the Divine word and way, embodied in the Talmud and its commentaries.

Because the debate and discussion on the Mishnah continued in study centers both in the land of Israel and in Babylon which became the major center of Jewish life and learning in the centuries following the redaction of the Mishnah, two Talmuds (or more precisely Gemaras) were compiled. However while the Babylonian Talmud only covers thirty six tractates of the Mishnah's sixty three, it is far richer and more extensive in its coverage of the specific subject matter than the Jerusalem Talmud and thus became the main normative text for Talmud study throughout the Jewish world.

Characteristic of the Talmudic text is its openendedness with many issues of discussion remaining apparently unresolved. While there were certain accepted guidelines for determining the normative ruling, it was left to the subsequent codifiers to resolve the plethora of outstanding issues. They were assisted by the work of rabbinic scholars who had continued to discuss and debate the texts even

after the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud around the year 500 C.E. However the major codes such as those of Maimonides (twelfth century) and Rabbi Joseph Caro (sixteenth century) not only helped to clarify, but also serve as further stimulus for debate and discussion. In this fashion, Talmud study continued not only to crystallize understanding of the Tradition, but also to expand the educational culture of debate and discussion. As a result, in every generation additional commentaries and novellae are added to the extensive corpus of Talmud study. Accordingly the Talmud is studied together with a vast array of works of rabbinic commentaries.

In the yeshivot – the Talmudic study centers – a study structure emerged in which a specific tractate and its commentaries would be studied over a semester or perhaps even throughout the year. While there are lectures by the leading teachers in the yeshiva, the key feature of the yeshiva methodology of study is the “havrutah” or study partner system. Pairs of students accordingly seek to dissect, analyze and comprehend the text together – assisting, cajoling and debating with one another in a joint effort to grasp the subtleties of the theme under discussion. If one of the students is more advanced in scholarship, then he is challenged to present the text and theme, with the complexities of its debates and commentaries, to the less advanced partner in as clear and succinct a manner so that the latter will effectively grasp the issues and overall concepts. Thus regardless of the level of the student, the havrutah system provides remarkable stimulation and challenge to master the texts and commentaries accordingly. In the leading Eastern European centers of Talmudic learning, it became common to spend a whole semester on just a few pages of a Talmud tractate as a result of the degree of depth of the study through the vast array of commentaries – a characteristic that prevails in the majority of yeshivot today.

The intellectual stimulation combined with the sense of spiritual satisfaction and purpose, ensured that the study of the Talmud and commentaries served to provide the Jewish community down the ages with an inner world of joy and fulfillment in the face of all outside adversity and tribulation.

The advent of modernity has posed a great challenge for Talmud study and reactions have been diverse, reflecting the variety of responses to modernity itself. The slow but steady emancipation of the Jews in Europe and the opportunity for intimate encounter with secular culture produced contrasting reactions. These ranged from rapid assimilation and divestiture of Jewish tradition, to an extreme withdrawal from any contact with the outside world in reaction to the threat it posed for the preservation of Jewish tradition and particularity. This latter response is referred to as ultra-Orthodoxy and in modern Israel as “Haredi” Judaism. Often this segment of the Jewish world is referred to erroneously as “Hassidic”. However the Haredi community contains both Hassidic elements – i.e. the continuation of the popular pietistic revivalist movement that began in the eighteenth century – and elements that are non-Hassidic or Mitnagdic (literally in opposition to Hassidism – a term that dates back to the extreme ideological battles of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but which were eclipsed by the new divisions wrought by modernity). Between the position of Haredi rejection of modernity and the assimilationists’ rejection of Jewish Tradition, the majority of the Jews sought to maintain their Jewish identity while integrating as part of the modern world. Accordingly the streams of modern Judaism from the most radical Liberal forms, through what came to be known as Conservative Judaism, to modern or neo-Orthodoxy, strived to find their balance between Tradition and Modernity,

notwithstanding the perceived and presented specific ideological as well as practical divisions between them.

Accordingly for ultra-Orthodoxy, the world of Talmud study not only provided the means for nurturing Jewish commitment and godliness, but also served as a vehicle for insulating and isolating the community from the world outside with which it perceived itself as being in continual conflict. For modern Orthodoxy, Talmud study was an essential component of authentic Jewish identity, though not for the purpose of shutting out the rest of the world but rather as the value system through which one related to it. However, the more one moved leftwards across the Jewish spectrum, the less central Talmud study was viewed for a modern Jew.

In addition to the above responses to modernity came another vision that was rooted in eighteenth century rationalism and nineteenth century nationalism. This ideology maintained that the only way a Jew could maintain his or her identity in the modern world was through a modern Jewish nation state, which was the only durable solution for Jewish particularity in the face of anti-Semitism which was viewed as endemic to gentile society – European, in particular. This movement of historical national restoration known as Zionism, was rejected both on the left by the Reform movements of Judaism and on the extreme right by ultra-Orthodoxy which saw it as but a Jewish ethnic manifestation of the same threat – the secular world. As opposed to this ultra-Orthodox view, modern Orthodoxy that became identified with Religious Zionism, overwhelmingly saw the secular character of the national movement as a contemporary means and vehicle for the fulfillment of the prophetic hope and vision for religious restoration.

The Haredi community in the Land of Israel and even more so after the establishment of the State, found itself in a confrontation not only with the secular character of the State of Israel and the majority who did not consider themselves bound by the corpus of halachah in accordance with Talmudic teaching; but also with the religious nationalism that embraced Zionism as part of its ideology. Both in this context and in the wake of the Shoah with the decimation of the leading centers of Talmudic learning and their scholars, Haredi society saw itself as first and foremost bound to distance itself from all other elements of the population and devote itself to establishing ever greater flourishing centers of Talmudic study in Israel. In this way they expanded their communities and way of life, viewing such as the expression of the only authentic character of Judaism and thus the only means of guaranteeing its posterity. Indeed ideologically, not only does Haredi Judaism view its loyalty in its very withdrawal from the secular world, but sees such as the actual guarantor of Divine preservation not only of the Jewish people but of the cosmos as a whole! This led to an ever increasing focus on the world of Talmudic study to the point where the sages' own dictum warning against living off such study and urging the acquisition of a trade or skill in order to provide for the material needs of oneself, one's family and community, was increasingly ignored. Indeed this overwhelming focus on Talmud study led to a paradox, if not contradiction, with the Haredi anti-secular ethos.

In order to provide for the ever-increasing numbers of men studying in yeshivot, the Haredi world had to obtain funding totally out of proportion to its own very limited economic sources. This became a major impetus for increased cooperation with the secular State and even joining governments in order to be able to obtain a disproportionate slice of the national fiscal budget. The need became all the more

acute as a new component of Haredi society emerged and expanded rapidly. This is the Sephardic (from Islamic lands) Haredi grouping, identified with the Shas political party. Sephardic Haredi Judaism is less ideologically rigid than Ashkenazic (from Christian lands) Haredi society and emerged principally as a reaction to the crisis of self-image encountered by Jewish immigrants to Israel from less developed societies in Arab lands. The sudden encounter with modern secular Israeli society, its pressures and demands, led to the breakdown of traditional structures of family, community and observance. Sephardic Haredi Judaism is a successful revivalist movement in response to this challenge.

However, the fact that myriads of yeshiva students are able today to maintain their lifestyle only by virtue of the non-Haredi Israeli taxpayers, has led to overwhelming resentment on the part of the latter who predominantly do not see Haredi society as a vehicle for the preservation of the community but rather as an unproductive if not parasitical exploitation of the rest of the society. However by virtue of the vagaries of the political system in which no political party in Israel's history has ever had an absolute majority in the Knesset to rule independently - but has been dependant upon coalition partners and increasingly upon the elected representatives of the Orthodox community - consecutive governments have capitulated and extended the national maintenance of the Haredi population. Above all in this quid pro quo, Haredi society has received a virtual blanket release from military service in order to enable its adult male population to devote itself to Talmud study. The Haredi demand for such is not only born out of its profound ideological commitment to Talmud study, but also out of its profound fear of exposing its young people to secular society which is indeed an inevitable consequence of serving in the military forces. Accordingly the State support for studying in yeshiva enables Haredi society

to maintain its separation from the rest of Israeli society even though the involvement in national political life has brought the Haredi community into the ambit of secular society way beyond the former's original ideological limit. A sad consequence of these developments is that Talmud study is all too often associated in the mind of the majority of Israelis with what they perceive as shirking the burden of defense with all its concomitant demands and sacrifices. Thus Haredi and secular Israelis see the world of the yeshivot in diametrically opposed terms.

Religious Zionism saw itself as a bridge between the modern secular state and religious traditionalism. This aspiration took many forms including the political alliance of the national religious political parties with the dominant labour bloc during the first decades of statehood. In the field of Talmud study, it was reflected in the predominance of the national religious weltanschauung within the flourishing departments of Talmudic studies in the various Israeli universities. Generally speaking, the more scientific orientation of the academic approach seeks to elicit the message as well as contextualise the characters and process of the Talmudic text. Nevertheless in its desire to nurture the worlds of religious and secular studies, the national religious orientation established a network of yeshiva high schools to develop future generations of religious Israelis who would feel part and parcel of the worlds of both Jewish and general studies. This effort had only limited success and to some degree was self-defeating. These institutions did not produce enough Talmudic scholars themselves who were interested in ensuring religious educational leadership within these institutions, which became increasingly dependent on Talmud teachers from the Haredi world. At the same time the political redirection of the religious national orientation in the late sixties and even more so in subsequent decades, saw a realignment with the right wing nationalist bloc of which the religious

nationalist parties assumed in due course, the mantle of the most rigid ideological component. (Of course this did not apply to all of religious Zionism which has its “left” wings in the religious peace movement and the Meimad political party.) As a result, the métier of being a bridge between secular and religious was increasingly undermined as the main institutions of religious Zionism moved rightwards both politically and religiously.

This meant that substantial segments of the religious nationalist community drew closer to the Haredi outlook, often rejecting secular studies - unless in order to earn a living - seeking total immersion in Jewish studies with the Talmud and commentaries at the heart of such. Indeed a new term “hardal” emerged – an acronym for the Hebrew words Haredi-dati-leumi, meaning ultra-Orthodox/religious nationalist! (This was paralleled by the increasing involvement of Haredi society in Israeli national life – first and foremost for the sake of access to its fiscal resources via the national political mechanisms which led to a growing nationalist orientation especially among its younger generations!)

This has compounded the perception of a life of Talmud study as something to be sought as a refuge from and often rejection of the world outside. Yet it is clear from a critical examination of the Talmud itself and of history, that the Jewish norm of the past consisted of a constructive albeit critical engagement with other cultures. This view of Talmud study as a counter culture is very much a function of modernity itself, or more specifically a reaction against the challenges of modernity. Undoubtedly the vagaries of Israeli political and economic life will substantially determine developments in this regard. Nevertheless the Talmud continues to serve as the fountainhead and treasure store of Jewish life and learning for a spectrum of various

Jewish outlooks and lifestyles that seek to guarantee the creative intellectual and spiritual posterity of the Jewish people.