

THE TOSAFISTS - (BA'ALEI TOSAFOS)

12TH CENTURY FRANCE

While the 12th and 13 centuries were physically so very tragic to the Jews of France and Germany, they saw at the same time the incredible flowering of Torah scholarship and spirituality. This success was the accomplishment of Rashi's descendants and disciples, known as the Tosafists. The development of the Tosafot commentary on the Talmud marked the further intensification of Talmudic study in the Ashkenazic communities, and it irrevocably placed the seal of Talmudic life upon the Jews of Europe. The Tosafot commentary consists of commentary, discussion, analysis and insights into the Talmud and the commentary of Rashi. In the printed Talmud, it appears on the same page as the Talmud's text, across from Rashi's commentary. There are many different manuscripts and versions of Tosafot stemming from different yeshivot and even different countries. But from the end of the 16th century the version to be found in our printed Talmud became the officially sanctioned one.

The great Tosafists were not only scholars, but public figures as well. They were rabbis, teachers, heads of yeshivot, and representatives of the Jewish community to the church and governmental authorities. They were also merchants, tradesmen, bankers, and farmers. But above all else, they were the scholars who expounded the Talmud and made it understandable, stimulating, and challenging to the general Jewish world.

The foundation for the development of the yeshivot of the Tosafists was laid by Rashi's son-in-law, Rabbi Meir ben Shmuel (1060-1130). A native of Lorraine, France, he studied in Worms after his marriage to Rashi's daughter, Yocheved. He eventually returned to France and settled in the town of Ramerupt. There he founded a great yeshiva and composed the first Tosafot commentary to the Talmud. His comments are incorporated in over half of all the Tosafot commentaries in the printed Talmud. Rabbi Meir recognized that Rashi's work on the Talmud fulfilled all reasonable

requirements of a running commentary. Instead, he placed his emphasis on critical analysis, and on pointing out and resolving apparent inconsistencies in the Talmudic text and logic. The Tosafot commentary reviewed all comparable cases in the entire Talmud, and analyzed their similarities and differences. It scanned all the vast data of Jewish tradition contained in the Talmud, and brought forth the necessary breadth of knowledge to the studied page. This scholarly direction was imparted by Rabbi Meir to his disciples, and most importantly to his sons - Rabbi Shmuel (Rashbam) Rabbi Yitzchak (Rivam), and Rabbi Yaakov (Rabbeinu Tam). They were the true Tosafists, and the work of scholars over the next two centuries in developing the Tosafot commentary on the Talmud was based entirely on their style, research, analysis, and inspiration.

Rashbam (1085-1174)

Rashbam studied under both his father and his illustrious grandfather. At a young age he became a recognized Torah authority. He disputed Rashi concerning Biblical interpretation and Halacha, and Rashi actually conceded to his arguments many times. After Rashi's death, Rashbam left Troyes and settled in Ramerupt where his father headed a flourishing academy. He is known to have also visited Caen and Paris. He earned his livelihood as a merchant of wine and wool, and he owned his own vineyards and flocks of sheep.

Rashbam strictly adhered to the principle that the interpretation of Torah must always be approached on more than one level. There is a responsibility to interpret a verse in its plain, literal sense whenever possible. Simultaneously, however, one must not forget that the essence of Torah must be interpreted using the 13 principles recorded by the Tanna, Rabbi Yishmael.

In his monumental Torah commentary, Rashbam stresses the plain meaning of the text more than any of his predecessors. He combines the literal translation with a clear, simple interpretation, avoiding any extraneous matter. He was most critical of the Biblical commentators who

came before him, accusing them of stretching the literal sense too far. Rashbam's commentary on the Torah is the only one of his commentaries on the Tanach that has been preserved in its entirety.

Several of Rashbam's commentaries on the Talmud have also been preserved. His commentary to Bava Basra and the last chapter of Pesachim have been incorporated into today's standard Talmud edition. Rashbam uses concise analysis, quotes earlier commentators, and redacts the text of the Talmud itself. His deletion of entire phrases was frowned upon by his colleagues, and especially by his brother Rabbeinu Tam.

Rabbeinu Tam

The last of Rashi's grandsons, Rabbeinu Tam, became the leader of French Jewry after the death of Rashi. However, the France he lived in was far different from that of his grandfather. The terrible persecution of the Jews sparked by the First Crusade had resulted in the weakening of the Jewish infrastructure in France and the Rhineland. The roads were increasingly dangerous for Jewish merchants and yeshiva students, and the opportunities for economic advancement were curtailed. Jews fled to England and Central Europe, and the great French yeshivot that existed in the Rhine Valley were severely weakened in prestige and influence. What Rashi had built was now threatened with destruction. Rabbeinu Tam, his grandson, now stepped into the breach, saved what had been achieved, and even expanded upon Rashi's work.

In post-Crusade France, the only way for the yeshivos to be saved, for new halachic questions to be resolved, and for the Jewish community to be unified in the face of difficult outside forces, was for a strong and definitive leadership to emerge. Rabbeinu Tam provided this skill, and ably stepped into this role. Rabbeinu Tam was a wealthy man, engaged in the wine business, finance and loans, and also served as a broker in the diamond trade. He came in contact with many of the great, non-Jewish noblemen of France, and being a shrewd judge of character, successfully negotiated

with them for the benefit of the Jewish community and for individual Jews. His wealth, personality, and contacts made him a power in the Jewish world of France, while his scholarship, Torah knowledge, and halachic prowess made him the community's unquestioned leader. Rabbeinu Tam restructured many communal customs, strengthening those he felt to be correct, and decrying those he felt to be detrimental to Jewish life. He fought for what was right as he saw it in the light of halachic tradition and the practical circumstances of his society. He was aware of the difficult economic situation of his fellow Jews and took this into account in his rulings. He was also aware of the spiritual chaos the Crusades had brought into Jewish life, and he dealt with the matter of converts - both to and from Judaism - firmly and yet compassionately. He also dealt with new questions of interest and usury forced upon the Jewish community by an increasingly hostile non-Jewish society. In the midst of the wrenching upheaval that wracked the Jewish community, he was the rock that would not budge.

Rabbeinu Tam perfected the analysis of the Talmud, stopping to examine every phrase and thought, and sifting the entire wealth of Torah knowledge. He had a phenomenal memory and a most creative mind. His all encompassing thoroughness and his definitive conclusions were the hallmarks of his methodology. Rabbeinu Tam's system of study was carried on by his disciples and became the prototype for all later Ashkenazic Talmudists. Though often complaining that his public service and commercial life did not leave him sufficient time for Torah study, he nevertheless served as the main teacher of Ashkenazic Jewry, and he was the acknowledged halachic master of his time. Scholars from Provence and from Spain wrote to him and even travelled long distances to meet with him. Legends of his greatness abound, and Rabbeinu Tam became a folk hero to the people of Israel. For example, his opinion on the order in which the parchments of the tefillin are to be placed, contrary to the accepted custom and opinion of his grandfather Rashi, became the source of many legends regarding the relationship between the aging grandfather and the precocious young grandchild.

Rabbeinu Tam wrote a halachic work called Sefer HaYashar (The book of Rectitude). This work, although it has come down through the ages in imperfect fashion, remains a source of scholarship and inspiration. Rabbeinu Tam also wrote poetry and liturgical pieces. However, his true legacy to Israel and posterity was the defense of Torah life and scholarship. He was also responsible for educating a cadre of disciples who became the leaders of Ashkenazic Jewry after his death. It is said that Rabbeinu Tam produced, through his yeshiva in Ramerupt, eighty Tosafists of note, plus other disciples without number.

In 1146, during the Second Crusade, a rampaging mob sacked Rabbeinu Tam's home and almost took his life. Many legends abound regarding this event, and all of them cast his survival as a miraculous event. Rabbeinu Tam's compassion for his fellow Jews only increased after this horrific experience. His understanding of his co-religionists' dangerous and abject situation in Christian Europe intensified, and his attitude towards the non-Jewish world became ever more wary. Soon after the attack on his person, Rabbeinu Tam left Ramerupt and returned to the home of his grandfather, Rashi, in Troyes. The Jewish world was in turmoil as many Jewish communities had failed or were faltering. The exile became an intensified reality among the wandering groups of Jews fleeing their French homes. Many of Rabbeinu Tam's disciples left France for England and Germany, and with their departure the central yeshivos of France continued to decline. By the time of Rabbeinu Tam's death in 1171, the French Jewish community felt itself dying, though the schools and scholarship of the Tosafists would continue to be concentrated in France for the next century.

Blood Libels and Banishments

The antipathy aroused by the Crusades gave rise to a spate of blood libels. In 1171 the entire community of Blois met a martyr's death as a result of such an accusation. The boy king Philip II (1180-1223) ardently believed in this myth, and in 1181, soon after his coronation, he had the Jews in Paris arrested and their property confiscated. In 1182 they were completely banished. This edict, however, was effective only in the fief directly held by the king - the Ile de France - Paris and its surrounding area. Because of the weakness of the monarchy, the lords of the other provinces were free to disobey the king. In 1198 the king allowed the Jews to return to his domain, but they suffered greatly under his rule. They continued to suffer under his successors, Louis VIII (1223--26) and Louis IX, St. Louis (1226-70). Several dukes also independently banished their Jews. For those allowed to remain, severe restrictions were enacted to hamper the chief occupation left open to them - usury. And on occasion, various dukes even abrogated those loans owed to their Jews.

Tosafists of late 12th Century France

A disciple of Rabbeinu Tam was Rabbi Eliezer of Metz (c1175) R. Eliezer served as an intermediary between the German and French Tosafists, conveying the interpretations and decisions of Rabbeinu Tam to the German region. In addition to his Tosafot commentary, he also wrote Sefer Yeraim, a famous halachic work listing and commenting on the 613 mitzvot of the Torah. His work includes dissertations on ethics as well.

However, the main thrust of Tosafist scholarship after the death of Rabbeinu Tam came from the efforts of his nephew, Rabbi Yitzchak of Dampierre (1120-1200) the Ri. Second only to his uncle in prominence among the Tosafists, the Ri was the main editor of the Tosafos. After Rabbeinu Tam moved to Troyes, the Ri directed the Talmudic academy at Ramerupt, but later settled in Dampierre where he founded a flourishing yeshiva. His yeshiva became the largest in France by the end of the 13th century. Known as Ri HaZaken (the elder Ri) to distinguish him from colleagues and students also named Yitzchak, he became the elder statesman of French Jewry and assumed his uncle's mantle of leadership

and responsibility. Under the Ri, the Tosafist method of Talmudic analysis reached its fullest expression. His name is mentioned on most pages of the Tosafos, and even many of the insights given anonymously, are attributed to him in other sources. A holy person who lived an ascetic life - he fasted for two consecutive days to commemorate Yom Kippur - he became the prototype for the Tosafists of the 13th century. These Tosafists were as well known for their piety and asceticism as for their brilliance and intellect.

One of Rabbeinu Tam's disciples, also named R. Yitzchak, Rabbi Yitzchak ben Avraham, the Ritzba (1145- 1210), succeeded the Ri as the head of the yeshiva in Dampierre. He continued the work of his master in editing, revising, and publishing Tosafos commentary. Many of his opinions and explanations are recorded throughout the edition of Tosafos that we currently possess. The Ritzbah was skilled in rendering practical decisions on difficult matters. Many of his responsa are quoted by contemporary and even later authors. He was a well known scholar whose halachic authority reached Provence, Austria, and even Spain. He was known to have been prompt in answering religious questions even when it became difficult for him to do so because of poor health. Under his leadership northern France was still able to retain much of its primary status in scholarship and halachic authority.

Though life for the Jews of France remained increasingly difficult during the 12th century, scholarship remained at a high level and there was a great flourishing of Talmudic discourse.