

Response to antisemitic distortions of the Talmud

Introduction

The Talmud has been a favorite target of antisemites for at least a millennium. They take quotes out of context, truncate them, even fabricate them, never mention it may be just one rabbi's opinion, and never mention what Jewish law or Jewish practice actually is.

They do this to make Jews look bad and stir up hatred against them. Let's take a look at some of these “charges” and answer them properly, particularly because these lies have been proliferating exponentially on the Internet. They resulted in the Talmud being censored, banned, or burned.

Some detractors of the Talmud:

- Emperor Justinian (6th-century Rome)
 - 553 CE, Justinian Code: The Mishnah, or, as they call it, the second tradition, we prohibit entirely. For it is not part of the sacred books, nor is it handed down by divine inspiration through the prophets, but is the handiwork of man, speaking only of earthly things and having nothing of the divine in it.
- Nicholas Donin (13th-century France)
 - 1240 Disputation of Paris, at court of Louis IX, with Rabbis Yechiel of Paris and Moses ben Jacob of Coucy defending. 24 wagonloads of Talmud burned.
- Pablo Christiani (13th-century Catalonia)
 - 1263 Disputation of Barcelona, with Nahmanides defending
- Geronimo de Santa Fé (15th-century Catalonia)
 - 1413 Disputation of Tortosa
- Johannes Pfefferkorn (16th-century Germany)
- Johann Andreas Eisenmenger (17th-century Germany)
 - The Traditions Of The Jews*, 1700
- The Frankists (18th- and 19th-century Europe)
- August Rohling (19th-century Prussia)
 - Der Talmud Jude*, 1871

-Justinas Pranaitis (19th-century Lithuania)

-*The Talmud Unmasked*, 1892

-Elizabeth Dilling (20th-century US)

-*The Plot against Christianity*, 1964

-David Duke (20th-century US)

-Many Muslims, atheists, skeptics, and even some Jews

Ten examples

1-Claim: Jews don't care whether Gentiles live or die.

Proof: The Talmud says:

Whoever destroys a life from Israel, Scripture considers it as if he destroyed an entire world; and whoever saves a life from Israel, Scripture considers it as if he saved an entire world. [Sanhedrin 37a]

Answer: This quote is from the Bavli. The Yerushalmi says:

Whoever destroys a life is considered as if he destroyed an entire world; and whoever saves a life is considered as if he saved an entire world. [Sanhedrin Y 4:1 (22a)]

This more general statement also appears elsewhere in Jewish

SOURCES [Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 47; Eliyahu Rabbah 11; Yalkut Shimoni on Exodus 166].

How can it be otherwise? Adam alone began an entire world.

Objection: If the two Talmuds disagree, the Bavli wins.

Answer: Yes, but here they do not disagree!

2-Claim: Jews may kill Gentiles at will.

Proof: The Talmud says:

Rabbi Shim'on ben Yochai taught: [Even] the good among the Gentiles must be killed. [*Tov shebe goyyim harog*] [Sofrim 15:10]

Answer: He meant in time of war.

The Torah says:

And [Pharaoh] took six hundred chosen chariots, and all the chariots of Egypt, and captains over every one of them. [Ex. 14:7]

The Mechilta asks:

Where did the animals that drove the chariots come from?

If you say they were from Egypt, doesn't it say [in Exodus]:

All the cattle of Egypt died [in the fifth plague], but none of the cattle of the people of Israel. [Exodus 9:6]?

If you say they were from Pharaoh, doesn't it say [in Exodus]:

[Moses said to Pharaoh]: Behold, the hand of the Lord is upon your cattle. [Exodus 9:3]?

If you say they were from the Jews, doesn't it say [in Exodus]:

Our cattle also shall go with us. Not a hoof shall be left behind. [Exodus 10:26]?

Rather, those animals came from the Egyptians who feared God [and were not affected by the plagues]. These animals caused great hardship for the Jews [by being used for chariots to pursue them]. From here Rabbi Shim'on [bar Yochai] said: Kill [even] the good among the gentiles.

[Mechilta, Beshallah 2 (on Exodus 14:7)]

Bar Yochai was then just saying that, in war, one must kill enemy soldiers, even if they are righteous people.

Relevant quotes:

-The righteous of all nations have a share in the World to Come. [Tosefta Sanhedrin 13]

-I call heaven and earth as witnesses: Any individual, whether gentile or Jew, man or woman, servant or maid, can bring the Divine Presence upon himself in accordance with his deeds." [Tanna Devei Eliahu Rabba 9]

3-Claim: Jews allow sex with toddlers.

Proof: Talmud says:

Rava said: If an adult has sex with a girl under the age of three, the matter is ignored. [Ketubot 11b]

Answer: Context is a discussion of a ketubah (what a man must pay his wife he divorces her). A virgin bride gets a higher ketubah. The ruling is just that if a girl is molested before age 3, she is still considered a virgin and is entitled to the higher ketubah.

4-Claim: Never trust Jews. They can break promises at will.

Proof: On Yom Kippur, Jews recite Kol Nidrei:

All vows we are likely to make, all oaths and pledges we are likely to take between this Yom Kippur and the next, we publicly renounce. Let them all be relinquished and abandoned, null and void, neither firm nor established. Let our vows, pledges and oaths not be considered vows, pledges, or oaths.

Answer: Kol Nidrei nullifies only *voluntary religious* obligations a Jew takes upon himself, if he cannot fulfill them for any reason. The Code of Jewish Law says:

[Kol Nidrei] refers to a vow or oath promised to one's self alone. If the oath involves someone else, the nullification does not apply. [Shulhan Arukh, YD 211:4]

Kol Nidrei does not cancel promises that involve others.

5-Claim: Jews don't want you to know how evil Judaism is.

Proof: The Talmud says:

Rabbi Yochanan said: A non-Jew who studies the Torah deserves death. [Sanhedrin 59a]

Answer: The full quote shows a wide range of opinions on this subject:

Rabbi Yochanan said: A non-Jew who studies the Torah deserves death, for it is written,

Torah tziva lanu Moshe, morasha kehillat Yaakov -- Moses commanded us a law, the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob. [Deut. 33:4].

It is our inheritance, not theirs... If you read [the word as] "*morasha*" [i.e., an inheritance, then] he steals it [by studying it, because an inheritance only goes to specific people, not to everybody]. If you [vocalize the word differently and] read [it as] "*me'orasa*" [i.e., betrothed, then] he is as guilty of violating a betrothed maiden, [and therefore deserves] stoning [for adultery].

An objection is raised. Rabbi Meir used to say: From where do we know that even a non-Jew who studies the Torah is as a High Priest? From the verse:

You shall therefore keep my statutes, and my judgments, which, if man does, he shall live in them. [Lev. 18:5.]

It does not mention Priests, Levites, and Israelites, but men. Hence you may learn that even a non-Jew who studies the Torah is as a High Priest! [Another rabbi said:] That [permission] refers [only] to their own seven laws [i.e., the Noahide laws].

[Sanhedrin 59a]

Rabbi Yochanan was afraid that if the Roman occupiers learned Judaism, they would use it against the Jews. Rabbi Meir was more open-minded.

Also, "deserves death" is a common expression of disapproval. It is not a call to action. Rabbis may not impose a death penalty not mentioned in Torah.

6-Claim: The Talmud considers itself holier than the Bible.

Proof: The Talmud says:

My son, be more careful in [observing] the words of the Sages than the words of the Torah. [Eruvin 21b]

Answer: Written laws require interpretation by courts. The 71-member Sanhedrin decided on the interpretation of the Torah that became Jewish law, by democratic majority vote. So the Talmud is simply saying: Look at how our Sages interpreted the Torah for guidance: They will tell you how to apply it in your lives.

Example: Students learn from modern textbooks to understand the original papers of great thinkers.

However, the Talmud adds:

If the words of the Sages are of such substance, why are they not written in the Torah itself? ... [Because] the making of books has no limits. [Eruvin 21b]

7-Claim: Jews kill Christian children to use their blood to bake matzah for Passover.

Proof: None!

Answer: The Torah says SEVEN times that Jews must not eat blood. [Gen. 9:4; Lev. 3:17; Lev. 7:26-7; Lev. 17:10-14; Lev. 19:26; Deut. 12:16; Deut. 12:23–25]

Sample:

It shall be an everlasting statute for your generations throughout all your dwellings, that you... not eat blood. [Lev. 3:17]

This “blood libel” gave rise to 150 recorded cases that resulted in the murder of Jews, with more being reported.

8-Claim: A Jew is allowed to break Shabbat to save the life of another Jew, but not to save the life of a non-Jew.

Proof: Mishnah:

Every danger to human life suspends the [laws of] Shabbat. If a structure falls on someone, and you don't know whether or not [someone] is [buried] there, or whether he is alive or dead, or whether he is Jewish or not, dig into the heap of debris for His sake [even on Shabbat]. If you find him alive, remove the debris; and if dead, leave him there [until Shabbat is over]. [Mishna, Yoma 83a]

Answer: Does not actually say (but may imply) that non-Jews are ignored. At any rate, not followed today and no evidence it was ever followed. Regularly watered-down over the centuries.

Basic logic: One can violate Shabbat to save someone so that he may observe other Shabbatot and commandments in the future. Objective is to maximize observance of commandments.

-Talmud:

Rabbi Shim'on ben Gamliel said... The Torah said [Ex. 31:16]: Profane one Shabbat for [a Jew in danger of dying] so that he may live to observe many Shabbatot [in the future]. [Shabbat 151b]

-What if he is a non-observant Jew?

Shabbat may not be violated to save the life of a non-observant Jew. [Rabbi Yosef Teomim, Pri Megadim, Orah Hayim 328 MZ 6] [18th-cent. Galicia]

-What if, had we saved that non-observant Jew on Shabbat, he would have repented and become observant?

We violate Shabbat to [save a Jewish sinner] because... he may repent and confess his sins [to God]. [Rabbi Menahem Meiri on Yoma 83a Mishna] [13th-century Catalonia]

-What if he is a non-Jew, but observes the seven Noahide laws? [No idolatry, murder, blaspheming, adultery, stealing, eating limbs off live animals; and establish courts of justice]

One may violate Shabbat to save a Ger Toshav, a gentile who has officially accepted on himself to live a righteous life. [Ramban, 13th-century Catalonia]

-What if a Jewish person's life is not in danger, but he is in danger of following fewer mitzvot?

A young girl is kidnapped [and raised as a Christian]. May Shabbat be violated to rescue her even though her life is not in danger? Yes [so she has the opportunity to follow mitzvot in the future]. [Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayim 306:14].

-What if not saving gentiles on Shabbat results in ill will that may endanger an entire Jewish community?

Then save gentiles on Shabbat. The practice today is best described by Rabbi Dov Karoll, Yeshivat Har Etzion:

Many authorities over the last few hundred years ruled that the understanding which the Gemara takes for granted cannot be assumed in modern society. [Chatam Sofer on YD 131; Moshe Feinstein in Igrot Moshe, OC 4:79; Rav Eliezer Waldenberg in Tzitz Eliezer, 8:15, chap. 6, sec.12; Rav Yitzchak Weiss in Minchat Yitzchak 1:53]

Rather, they claim, if Jews refuse to treat gentiles on Shabbat, this refusal could have disastrous ramifications, either for the doctor himself or for the Jewish community as a whole. As such, they rule that one should take whatever actions are necessary to save the life of a gentile, even if it requires violation of Shabbat laws...

So, whether or not one views the reason as self-serving, gentiles may be saved on Shabbat.

9-Claim: The Talmud approves of bestiality.

Proof: The Talmud says:

Adam had intercourse with every beast and animal but found no satisfaction until he had intercourse with Eve. [Yevamot 63a]

Answer: The Talmud indeed says:

Rabbi Eleazar further stated: What is meant by the text in the Torah, [And Adam said:] This time, this [woman, Eve,] is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. [Gen. 2:23]? [Emphasis is on "this time".]

This teaches that Adam had intercourse with every beast and animal but found no satisfaction until he had intercourse with Eve. [Yevamot 63a]

But so what? The Torah had not yet been given, so Adam was not told bestiality was forbidden. He was alone in the world and was experimenting with his sexuality. Everything was new to him.

Besides, the Talmud also says:

Yalsha once said to Rav Nachman: Observe that, for everything that the Divine Law has forbidden us, it has permitted us an equivalent. [Chullin 109b]

The creation of Eve is a case in point.

Finally, the Maharal and Radak teach that the text must not be taken literally. Earlier the Torah says:

And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found a help to match him. [Gen. 2:20]

So Adam merely named the animals, to understand their essence, their strengths and weaknesses.

10-Claim: Jews are cruel, lack compassion, lust for revenge. They practice retaliation in kind: An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. If someone puts out your eye, go ahead and put out HIS eye. Give him a dose of his own medicine. Even the Pope accused Jews of applying this injunction literally, in a 1980 encyclical.

Proof: The Torah says, three times:

- You shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. [Ex. 21:23-5]
- A fracture for a fracture, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Just as he inflicted an injury upon a person, so shall it be given to him. [Lev. 24:20]
- And you [shall have no] pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. [Deut. 19:21]

Answer:

No record of Jews ever doing this. Talmud: The injunction refers only to financial compensation. Its purpose is to set a limit to it: Do not ask for more than the value of an eye for the loss of an eye. The penalty must be proportional to the offense, not higher than the offense. The arguments are quite clever.

Mishnah:

- One who injures another becomes liable for five things: damages, pain, medical expenses, incapacitation, and mental anguish.
- Damages: If he put out his eye, cut off his arm or broke his leg, the injured person is considered as if he were a slave being sold in the market place, and one must calculate how much he was worth before the injury

and how much he is worth after the injury. [The difference is the damages to be paid.]

-Pain: One must calculate how much a man of equal standing would require to be paid to undergo such pain.

-Medical expenses: If he has struck another, he is under obligation to pay medical expenses... If the wound was healed but reopened, healed again but reopened, he would still be under obligation to heal him. If, however, the wound had completely healed [even though it may have reopened much later] he would no longer be under obligation to heal him.

-Incapacitation: The wages lost during the period of illness must be reimbursed.

-Mental anguish: Must be calculated in accordance with the status of the offender and the offended. [Bava Kamma 83b]

Gemara: [Bava Kamma 83b-84a, paraphrased]

Why pay compensation? Does the Torah not say 'An eye for an eye'? Why not take this literally? If he put out his eye, the offender's eye should be put out, or if he cut off his arm, the offender's arm should be cut off, or again if he broke his leg, the offender's leg should be broken. Let this not enter your mind. [Here's why.]

-It says in Leviticus:

He who kills a beast shall make it good; beast for beast. [Lev. 24:18].

All agree that "beast for beast" means monetary compensation. So it is for "eye for eye".

-It says in Numbers:

You shall not take monetary compensation from a murderer: He must be put to death [Num. 35:31].

This implies that it is only from a murderer that you may not take compensation. You may take compensation for other offenses, such as loss of body parts.

-Rabbi Dostai ben Yehudah says: It does not mean actual retaliation, because if the eye of one was big and the eye of the other small, one weak and one strong, they would not be equivalent, and the Torah says in Leviticus:

You shall have only one standard of law, for you, for your countrymen, and for the stranger... [Lev. 24:22]

Justice must be evenly applied -- so monetary compensation is implied. Money is the great equalizer.

-Rabbi Shim'on bar Yochai says: If "eye for eye" really meant retaliation, what would you do if a blind man put out the eye of another man, or if a person missing both hands cut off the hand of another, or if a person missing both legs broke the leg of another? You could not physically retaliate in kind. Yet the Torah says, "You shall have only one standard of law", which implies that the law should be applied the same way to all. So it means monetary compensation.

-The School of Rabbi Ishmael taught: The Torah says in Leviticus:
Just as he inflicted an injury upon a person, so shall it be given to him.
The word "given" can apply only to monetary compensation.

-The School of Rabbi Hiyya taught: The Torah says in Deuteronomy. "Hand for hand". This means something that is given from hand to hand, that is, money.

-Abbaye said [in the name of the School of Hezekiah]: It says in Exodus: "life for life, eye for eye". It does not say "life *and eye* for eye". If one retaliated in kind, it could happen that the offender would die while he is being blinded. This would be unfair, and cannot be predicted or prevented, so monetary compensation is meant.

-Rabbi Zebid said in the name of Raba: It says in Exodus, "Wound for wound". If retaliation were meant, a person who is delicate would suffer more pain than a person who is not delicate. This would be unfair, so monetary compensation is meant.

-Rabbi Papa said in the name of Rava: It says in Exodus:
If men quarrel together, and one strikes another with a stone, or with his fist, and he does not die, but keeps to his bed; ...then shall he who struck him ... shall pay for the loss of his time, and shall cause him to be thoroughly healed. [Ex. 21:18-19]

This explicitly refers to monetary compensation ("shall pay") and does not even mention retaliation. Further, there are people whose flesh heals fast and others whose flesh does not heal fast, so retaliation would be unfair, and monetary compensation is meant.

-Rav Ashi said: It says in Exodus:
If one man's ox [kills] another man's ox... he shall surely pay ox for ox...
[Ex. 21:35-6]

The word “for” in “he shall pay ox for ox” is the same “for” as in “eye for eye” [namely, “*Tachat*”]. So just as in the first monetary compensation is implied (“he shall pay”), so it is in the second.

One might counter that these arguments are not airtight. In the case of murder, financial compensation is not allowed, even though it is possible to ascertain the value of the victim in the slave market. Also, if the offender is rich, compensating the victim does not inconvenience him much, but if the offender is poor, compensating the victim is a huge burden. It is not fair to treat them equally.

However, these arguments are quickly refuted when you realize that the aim of Jewish justice is not so much punishment of the guilty as restoration of the victim. Putting out the eye of the offender does not help the victim one bit, but financial compensation does. Whether the offender is rich or poor is a secondary matter and immaterial to the victim. And in the case of murder, no restoration of the victim is possible, so a different resolution is necessary.

Just about everyone in the world retaliates in kind, except us, yet we are the ones blamed for introducing the principle of retaliation in kind and applying it right and left.