The Talmud's Recent Popularity

Rabbi Melanie Aron

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In the 11th century, a French vintner wrote commentaries on the 24 books in the Tanach as well as the 63 volumes of the Talmud and just about everything else. Rashi's writings are still so helpful that they are the first place Jews who study religious texts go in trying to parse out the meaning of difficult passages.

In the 20th century, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, the son of Zionist communists who made *aliyah* in 1924, a former student of math and physics who became Orthodox, noticed that though Israelis spoke Hebrew, the Talmud, which is heavily Aramaic, was inaccessible to them. Starting his work in 1965, he began to publish modern Hebrew translations of the Talmudic text. Eventually he translated the entire Talmud, all 6,200 pages, and also oversaw translations into English and Russian and several other languages. Rabbi Steinsaltz, who suffered a stroke in 2016, died last week, but his work transformed Jewish life.

The Talmud is the arguably the most important text for rabbinic Judaism, the way Jews have practiced Judaism since the 700s (and non-historians would say for the past 2,000 years). Yet it was not widely studied outside of the Orthodox world until recent decades. Partly this was because the English translations that existed were very poor; I used to find it easier to work with Steinsaltz's beautiful, clear, and readable modern Hebrew than with the Soncino Talmud, an English translation first published in 1934 and to me incomprehensible. In addition, our

Reform movement gave primacy to the Biblical text and had very mixed feelings about the legacy of the classical rabbis.

The Hebrew Union College was established in part because of a perception already in Europe in the early 19th century that the classical yeshivot, "with their proud record of Talmudic scholarship, appeared insufficient to prepare rabbis that would have to uphold the eternal light of Torah to the new generation." At the end of the 19th century, Isaac Meyer Wise hired a professor of Talmud for his new college, but Talmud was not central to the curriculum. In 1879 he wrote, "The Talmud can never again be of the same importance to the Jews which it held for the last twelve hundred years. The Bible must again be brought into the foreground". Classical Reform Judaism was not partial to the world of the Talmud. Instead at the turn of the century they sought "freedom of scientific interpretation as an effective antidote against dissimulation and hypocrisy, narrow-minded bigotry, and slavish imitation of meaningless observances." While the Jewish Theological Seminary, the rabbinical school of the Conservative movement, required entering students to have mastered between 10 and 50 pages of Talmud depending on the year, when I studied at HUC, the Talmud requirement was only two core courses, Talmud 1 and Talmud 2, taken in the second of a five-year course. There was so much else that was thought more important for rabbis to master, including philosophy, theology, and comparative religion, but also more practical and somewhat secular courses in education, counseling, and even a small amount of nonprofit management.

Yet within that context I chose to write my rabbinic thesis in the area of Talmud, and when I had a sabbatical in 2002 spent it at the more traditional Jerusalem

institution Pardes, where I could finally fulfill a dream of mine of working through an entire *Masechet,* one of the 63 volumes of the Talmud.

Earlier this year, in January of 2020, the Jewish world embarked on another cycle of Daf Yomi, of the practice established in 1923 of studying one page of Talmud a day for 7 years. What is amazing to me was the variety of non-Orthodox Jews who are choosing to join in this practice. Women and secular Israelis, Reform rabbis and *amchah,* regular "Jews in the pews," have chosen to take on this ambitious practice. In many ways this is a testament to Rabbi Steinsaltz, who made the Talmud more accessible worldwide, and within our movement a testament to Rabbi Judith Abrams, of blessed memory, who was scholar in residence at our congregation two decades ago as part of her mission to convince Reform Jews that the Talmud was part of our heritage as well.

The Talmud got attention outside of Orthodox circles in Israel, when in 2013, newly elected Knesset member Ruth Calderon turned her maiden speech in Israel's parliament into a Talmud lesson. I think in part the pull of Talmud for women and non-Orthodox Jews has related to reclaiming Jewish heritage as our own. Women in particular were traditionally excluded from the study of Talmud, but knowing the texts gives you some ownership of the them and even some power. Studying the core texts of Judaism yourself rather than depending on religious leaders to know it is also consistent with the more "do it yourself" approach to Judaism that has emerged since the early 70s, rather than the "leave it to experts" attitude of the 50s and early 60s.

There is one additional aspect of the Talmud that is particularly relevant to our time and perhaps is also a part of the Talmud's attractiveness. Well aware of the divisiveness current in both American and Israeli society, Hartman Institute scholar Yehuda Kurtzer recently wrote in Tablet, citing Shaye Cohen, an important historian of the Rabbinic period, that the Talmud represents the "domestication of Jewish disagreement," transforming disagreement from "a source of violence to a fountain of richness."

The Talmud came out of the divisiveness of first and second century Palestine, where even the existence of a dangerous enemy, the Roman Empire, was not enough to bring the different groups together. Cohen points out, "The winning combo—freedom of thought on one hand and respect of standards and methods on the other—gave Judaism a culture of tolerant debate and healthy dissent. Paradoxically, the adherence to a shared midrashic hermeneutic methodology gave the Jewish people great cohesion, for it instilled in every Jew a conceptual language in which to discuss and debate; at the same time, the doctrinal openness gave us the possibility of being resilient and adapting to changing times."

Perhaps it is that vision of transforming difference from a source of violence to a fountain of richness that is the most powerful draw that Talmud exerts today—and who better to have promoted that than Adin Steinsaltz, the son of communists, who even as he became an important figure in the ultra-orthodox community, ever faced outward in his priorities in sharing Jewish texts. *Zecher Tzadik Livrachah*—may his memory be a blessing.