

BOOKSHELF

Edging Out the Bible

In the Talmud, rabbis across the centuries debate everything from personal property, put space and when you can eat an egg.

By **JEREMY DAUBER**

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The Talmud isn't the most sacred Jewish book: That's the Bible. But that 1,500-year-old compendium of rabbinic legal debate, Jewish legend, biblical interpretation and much else is the central text of Judaism, the work that serves as the font for any discussion of the laws by which observant Jews live. Yet the Talmud is so legendarily abstruse that its name, in adjectival form, has become a synonym for "fiendishly difficult and esoteric." The prerequisite knowledge to understand the text is prodigious; the language (Aramaic) forbidding; and the size daunting: If you read a folio of it a day, it takes seven years to complete. No one in traditional Jewish life ever bragged they were marrying their daughter off to a distinguished Bible scholar.

For these reasons, a biography of the Talmud—call it a bibliobiography—is welcome. Such a book could explain how the Talmud came to be and who reads it and why. Perhaps most important, it would explain to the uninitiated how to understand the Talmud's complicated logic. Harry Freedman's "The Talmud: A Biography" addresses almost all of these subjects. But reading it is a lot like reading the Talmud, which is not necessarily a compliment.

Mr. Freedman hits all the highlights: the birth of this complementary legal tradition to explain and amplify Biblical law; the new centrality of that tradition after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE, when Judaism switched from a Temple-centered religion to a text-centered one; and the development of that tradition through rabbinical academies, beginning 2,000 years ago in Yohanan ben Zakkai's vineyard at Yavneh.

He explains how, around the sixth or seventh century, a series of unknown editors assembled legal arguments in such a way as to create conversations between prominent scholars who lived centuries apart. On a single page of Talmud, Rav (third

century) and Rava (fourth century) might debate with Rav Ashi (fifth century) over the implications of a gnomic statement of law originally made by Rabbi Meir (second century), and the reader feels little, if any, chronological whiplash. Even after the editing was complete, students have always felt comfortable building their own edifices of commentaries. They saw—and continue to see—themselves as participants in a grand, temporally free-floating, debate. As Mr. Freedman notes, those scholars' contributions are often reckoning with the fact that the Talmud, for all its absorption with legal discussion, often isn't focused on reaching legally determinative conclusions. Thus, vast portions of the traditional Jewish bookshelf—legal codifications, collected writs of expert opinion, even folk tales—have this one text at their root.

THE TALMUD: A BIOGRAPHY

By Harry Freedman

Bloomsbury, 243 pages, \$26

Not everyone was such a fan. Mr. Freedman writes with evocative brio of the Karaites who rejected Talmudic interpretation in the early medieval period; medieval burnings of the book, egged on by Jewish converts to Christianity who claimed the book was anti-Christian; and censorship of the Talmud's printed editions in the early modern period by Church-appointed inquisitors.

Many of those opponents had only the vaguest idea of what the book they were persecuting contained. But the Talmud would become an increasingly open and accessible book. The printer Daniel Bomberg's first full edition of the Talmud, produced in 1523, boasted a layout—original Talmudic text in the center, selected commentaries positioned in the margins—that has remained unchanged for almost five centuries.

Today, there are myriad ways to approach the Talmud. You might notice a Hasidic Jew poring over a bound copy on the subway during his morning commute, but the woman sitting to his left could very well be reading a page of the ancient book on an iPhone app.

These are just the barest highlights of the Talmud's rich and compelling trajectory. The problem is that Mr. Freedman presents this story in a remarkably idiosyncratic manner. Central matters get only limited focus and long treatments of the tangential are par for the course.

To take one particularly telling example: The culture of the Eastern European yeshivot, or Talmudic academies, which flourished in the 18th and 19th centuries, constituted one of the high-water marks in the history of the Talmud. Yet neither the Hebrew poet Chaim Nachman Bialik, nor the Yiddish poet and novelist Chaim Grade—both responsible for indelible portraits of this particular culture and its students—appear in Mr. Freedman’s book. (Nor, for that matter, does Chaim Potok, whose portrait of Talmudic study in the novel “The Chosen” is probably still the one familiar to most American readers today.) The yeshivot themselves—and I’m being generous here—get about two pages in the book, scattered over various chapters. Henry VIII, whose attempts to find legal cover for his divorce expanded to encompass a search through Talmudic case law, gets almost the same amount of space.

Not that the Talmud’s role in the “Great Matter” isn’t interesting, or its relationship to Peter Abelard, or Johannes Kepler, to take a few other of Mr. Freedman’s noteworthy digressions. Telling the story of the Talmud this way—by giving the heretics more ink than their mainstream, orthodox counterparts—frequently feels, to borrow an old joke, like recounting the tale of “A Streetcar Named Desire” from the perspective of the ambulance driver who carts Blanche away. It’s not incorrect, exactly, but it’s often frustrating, and sometimes besides the point.

Mr. Freedman closes the book with an account of the 93,000 celebrants who packed MetLife Stadium in August 2012 to mark the completion of a seven-year cycle of Talmud study. (Mr. Freedman inaccurately characterizes the group as exclusively male; I was there and can attest to a substantial number of women.) Had they been there, the rabbis of late antiquity with whom the Talmud’s story began would have recognized scarcely anything, from the dress of the rabbis on the podium to say nothing of the Jumbotron. But the words would have been familiar, and the story of those words’ survival and flourishing is one to be told and to be cherished.

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