

# UNLOCKING THE RABBIS' SECRETS

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THE TALMUD The Steinsaltz Edition. Volume One: Tractate Bava Metzia, Part One. Commentary by Adin Steinsaltz. Translated and edited by Israel V. Berman. 252 pp. New York: Random House. \$40. THE TALMUD The Steinsaltz Edition. A Reference Guide. By Adin Steinsaltz. 323 pp. New York: Random House. \$40.

Judaism is poor in images - proudly poor, because images will become idols. But a culture cannot live without images. For Jewish culture, the task was to find an image that will not become an idol. A word is such an image. A text is a holy thing that will not be worshiped. For the Jew, therefore, words became images, and the sight of a text became a spiritual experience. This experience, though, leads the spirit to questions as well as to answers. The sight of the word conducts the eye directly to the mind, which prefers reading it to seeing it.

There is no more powerful sight in Judaism than a page of the Talmud. It daunts, teaches, scolds, tempts, pleases, defeats. It is a slap in the face of slovenliness and superficiality. And it is the sight of tradition itself. On this grand and grueling page - the design of the widow Romm and the brothers Romm, who published what has become the canonical edition of the Babylonian Talmud in Vilna, Lithuania, in the 1880's - time is abolished. Rabbis of the first and second centuries are addressed by rabbis of the third, fourth and fifth centuries, who are addressed by rabbis of the 11th, 12th, 13th, 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. The page is the proof that they would have recognized one another.

The Talmudic page is the image, but also the instrument, of continuity. These are the graphics of survival. The page's many authorities are arranged in a maze of right angles, wrapped around one another in an order that gives coherence to a whole culture, in blocks of discourse almost completely without punctuation and the other amenities of intelligibility. It is a large and bustling page. The ancients, the scholars of the Mishna, the conspicuously elliptical code of law that was completed around A.D. 200, and the scholars of the Gemara, who completed their extraction of practical and philosophical meaning from the Mishna around A.D. 500, are in the center of the page, where origins go, in square, muscled letters that summon the student to a test of his reason and his solidarity. The medievals and the moderns surround the ancients, and tuck their minds into the wide margins that the page reserved for the future, almost all of them in the more delicate and

more dense "Rashi script," emending texts, defining words, identifying sources, attacking contradictions, refining concepts. No fine print was ever finer. As the letters shrink and the perplexities grow, dreams of originality dim. The student learns how large is the debt that creativity owes to commentary.

There are 5,894 such pages in the Babylonian Talmud. They hold 2.5 million words of Mishna and Gemara, and many millions more of subsequent exegesis. The Talmud (it means "study") is written in a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic, a North Semitic tongue that gained power as the language of the Persian Empire and gained immortality as the language of the yeshivas. It is divided into six "orders" of law - agriculture, festivals, marriage and sexual precepts, torts, sacrifices, ritual purity and impurity - which are themselves divided into 63 tractates. These juridical classifications notwithstanding, the Talmud is, in truth, about all things. There is no corner of human life and no corner of Jewish life into which the fastidious rabbis did not peer. Only about a third of these texts, strictly speaking, are Halakha, or law. Most of them - they are the transcripts of deliberations at rabbinical academies for most of a thousand years - are aggadah, a magical rabbinic mode of thought in which myth, theology, memory, poetry and superstition robustly mingle.

The texts of the Talmud take no prisoners. They appear to be formless. They are sublimely, maddeningly concise. They think silently. They reverberate endlessly, and seem to have all of the Talmud in mind all of the time. They digress to a degree that puts modernism to shame. They seem the very enemy of style, the very enemy of system. And yet, as the generations of glossators saw, they are never what they seem. They are, in fact, masterpieces of style, of a precise, chiseled, classical language rarely equaled for the intensity of its beauty. And they are the unsystematic records of some of the earliest monuments of systematic thought.

**The Steinsaltz Talmud is not the first translation of the Talmud into English, but it is a great achievement of pedagogy, and it will unlock some of the rabbis' secrets for a new generation of English readers. It is itself a faithful translation, supervised by Rabbi Israel V. Berman, of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz' translation of the Talmud into Hebrew, begun in 1967 and not yet completed. The first volume of this Talmud is a rendering of the first chapter of the tractate Bava Metzia, or the Middle Gate, of the order of Nezikin, or torts; the chapter treats of the nature of ownership, as it may be deduced from the consideration of cases in which two people claim ownership of one object. Judging by this inaugural installment, the Steinsaltz Talmud will be remarkable for its lucidity. And the "Reference Guide" that appears as a prolegomenon to the work will remain a useful tool for students at many levels of fear and trembling. UNLOCKING THE RABBIS' SECRETS**

There are infelicities. It is not helpful to leave the colorful term for the portion of a wife's property that a husband may use as "property of iron sheep." The exclamation points that litter Rabbi Steinsaltz' punctuation of the text are a little ridiculous; they miss the poise of the rabbis, the coolness that marked their triumph over circumstances. Worst of all, the perfume is gone. In the more than 300 pages of the "Reference Guide," you will learn next to nothing about the literary forms of the Talmud. Here Rabbi Steinsaltz is not exercised by aggadah. (His statement that "there is no fundamental distinction between Halakhah and Aggadah" is baffling.) The Steinsaltz Talmud is a prosaic Talmud. But that is to say, too, that it is a serviceable Talmud, a splendid support for anybody ready to roll up his or her sleeves and work.

But work, why? Before a text of such opacity, one must give reasons for its study. The obvious reason for the study of the Talmud is that it is the study of the law; but this reason will be obvious only to observant Jews, and it seems fair to say that many of those who study the Talmud in translation live much of their lives in translation, too. This is not, in any event, only a modern problem. The practical reason for the study of the Talmud was vexed even before the traditional community cracked. "If all the people of Israel were saints," wrote Abraham Ibn Ezra in the 12th century, "they would have no need for the order of Nezikin." Of course, all the people of Israel were not saints, as they still are not. Yet even sinners, according to Ibn Ezra, do not need to study the Talmud: "Just as there are commandments that are not binding upon all, but a single individual may fulfill them for all, so a single judge may suffice to straighten the crooked."

Rabbi Steinsaltz does not agree. In his presentation of the text, he adds a department called "Halakhah" at the bottom of the page, which provides the practical ruling that was distilled from the Talmudic discussion; in Rabbi Steinsaltz' edition, law is quite literally the bottom line. And yet he denies that the Talmud is essentially a guide to practice. "The goal least emphasized in Talmudic inquiry," he writes, "is that of reaching definitive Halakhic decisions." The Talmud contains only "a limited analysis of practical problems."

This view of what Rabbi Steinsaltz calls "the non-utilitarian nature of the Talmud" is odd. For the Talmud contains an unlimited analysis of practical problems. Medieval and modern rabbis have always used the Talmud as an authority for the making of law. There is a difference, moreover, between observance and the understanding of observance. Surely the

study of the Talmud is necessary for the understanding of observance, for the avoidance of hollowness in a law-abiding life.

Perhaps Rabbi Steinsaltz is merely canny; he must know, at this late date in the secularization of Jewish life, that a better than practical reason must be found for the study of this strange, stupendous work. Of course, he does not conclude from "the non-utilitarian nature of the Talmud" that it should not be studied. Quite the contrary. Even the discussion of the meal offerings at the Temple and the purification of leprosy should be studied. The glossary of halakhic concepts in the "Reference Guide" dotes on the particulars of the Temple and its appurtenances. (This is not a work that will be made obsolete by the Messiah.) The Talmud should be studied, according to Rabbi Steinsaltz, because it is an avenue of access not to the normative, but to the eternal: "Halakhic rulings and the practical application of Torah laws are subordinate to the quest for the underlying truth of things. The ultimate purpose of the Talmud . . . is to seek out the truth." All right, then: the truth. But what truth? Rabbi Steinsaltz is vague. "The exclusive Torah connection with any given subject," he says. Or, "the nature of all things according to the Torah." In his book "The Essential Talmud," which appeared in 1976, Rabbi Steinsaltz observed that "the concept of Torah is immeasurably wider than the concept of religious law." Torah is "regarded as encompassing everything contained in the world," whatever that means. Does the Talmud, then, point in the direction of philosophy? No, for "however great the scope of Torah, the sages . . . displayed no interest in philosophy."

Never mind that the sages displayed a lively interest in philosophy. Rabbi Steinsaltz' observations on the relationship of Talmud to truth are troubling. For a start, they are gooey. His use of "Torah" as an adjective is the use of a preacher, not a scholar. For the Torah is, supremely, a noun, a particular revelation, a specific text; it is the Torah. Rabbi Steinsaltz' generalities have an evangelizing tone. An evangelist is, among other things, a person for whom the definition of the truth is less important than the conviction that he brings it. Rabbi Steinsaltz doesn't hector, but he is carrying news. For all his historical and philological pains, he is without the critical spirit. He appears to aspire to a rather paradoxical role in Jewish life: a guru of the Talmud.

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In the world of the Talmud, a rabbi is the opposite of a guru. The notion that the goal of Talmud is truth is un-Talmudic in spirit. It promises a finality, a definitiveness, a certainty, that the Talmud mocks on every page. If the Talmud was designed to reveal the truth, it would not have preserved rejected opinions, minority dissents, discredited views; but it preserves them in abundance, in law and lore, in a riot of disputation. In the seventh chapter of Bava Metzia, Rav Ashi and Ravina, the fifth-century sages who concluded the work of the Talmud, are said to have been *sof hora'ah*, or the end of binding instruction; after Rav Ashi and Ravina, in sum, controversy became a permanent characteristic of Jewish life. Medieval and modern Talmudists honored the Talmudic ideal of contentiousness. In the 13th century, Nahmanides described the aversion to definitiveness, well, definitively: "All who study our Talmud know that there are no final proofs in the arguments of its interpreters. . . . In this discipline there are no clear demonstrations, as there are in geometry."

The objective of Talmud is not truth but thought. The Talmud is one religion's great homage to mind. That is why it remains worthy of study, even for the godless. And it deserves the attention of godless Jews for another reason, too. The Talmud is where they come from. As the enemies of Judaism acknowledged when they piled the Talmud on their pyres - in France in 1242 and 1319, in Italy in 1553, in Poland in 1757 - the Talmud is the spine of Judaism, the scripture of Jews to whom God no longer speaks. From this oceanic source, Jewish identity will never be completely disentangled.

The Talmudic addiction to argument is vividly illustrated by the Talmudic page. Its thick system of cross-references is an engine for the production of doubts and difficulties. Some are solved; some will have to wait for the coming of commentators; some will have to wait for the coming of Elijah the Prophet, "who will solve all questions and problems." The Steinsaltz Talmud reproduces the Talmudic page, but it does not quite reproduce its magnificent open-endedness. And in the most profound sense, it does not reproduce the page at all.

There have been previous translations of the Talmud into English. None of them have presented themselves, however, with Rabbi Steinsaltz' presumption. "The overall structure of the page," he writes of his edition, "is similar to that of the traditional pages in the standard printed editions." And so it is. The text of the Talmud is set in the center, swaddled in exegesis. Where the commentary of Rashi was, there is Rabbi Steinsaltz' "literal translation." (Rashi's commentary, which more or less inaugurated Talmudism, appears below it.) Where the commentary of the Tosafists was, there is Rabbi Steinsaltz' "translation

and commentary." Where the commentary of Rabbenu Hananel was, there appears Rabbi Steinsaltz' guide to "concepts." Where the commentary of Rabbi Joel Sirkes was, there is Rabbi Steinsaltz' guide to "sages." And so on. The student is referred to these features of the translation by the same superscripts that referred the student to the features of the original. The Steinsaltz Talmud is even published with gilded edges, in the folio format in which the Vilna Talmud was published.

Again, all that appears on Rabbi Steinsaltz' page will assist the student significantly. But there is something slightly false about the experience of its study. When all the work on Rabbi Steinsaltz' page has been done, when all his superscripts have led the student to all his information, the student will have experienced nothing more than the literal meaning of the text. Beyond the literal meaning, Rabbi Steinsaltz provides only allusions to subsequent debates and the legal rulings that resulted. But it is precisely in the space between the literal meaning and the legal ruling that the experience of Talmudism is to be found. After the rudimentary explanation of words and concepts, after the judicial extrapolation of practices and regulations, the dance of reason begins.

The duty of the translator, of course, is to provide Talmud, not Talmudism. As a translator, and as an amplifier of his translation, Rabbi Steinsaltz succeeds nicely. But this is not only a translation of the Talmud. It is also a mimicry of the Talmud. It leaves the student on the surface, but it dupes him into the feeling that he has dived below. For this reason, it should be used with a little care. The differences between the translation and the original are just as important as the similarities - more important, in fact, for the measure of the tradition, and for the measure of its loss. The Steinsaltz Talmud is light only at the beginning of the tunnel, and the road is long.

Drawings

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