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What Is the Talmud?



IF THE BIBLE is the cornerstone of Judaism, then the Talmud is the central pillar, soaring up from the foundations and supporting the entire spiritual and intellectual edifice. In many ways the Talmud is the most important book in Jewish culture, the backbone of creativity and of national life. No other work has had a comparable influence on the theory and practice of Jewish life, shaping spiritual content and serving as a guide to conduct. The Jewish people have always been keenly aware that their continued survival and development depend on study of the Talmud, and those hostile to Judaism have also been cognizant of this fact. The book was reviled, slandered, and consigned to the flames countless times in the Middle Ages and has been subjected to similar indignities in the recent past as well. At times, talmudic study has been prohibited because it was abundantly clear that a Jewish society that ceased to study this work had no real hope of survival.

The formal definition of the Talmud is the summary of oral law that evolved after centuries of scholarly effort by sages who lived in Palestine and Babylonia until the beginning of the Middle Ages. It has two main components: the Mishnah, a book of *halakhah* (law) written in Hebrew; and the commentary on the Mishnah, known as the Talmud (or Gemarah), in the limited sense of the word, a summary of discussion and elucidations of the Mishnah written in Aramaic-Hebrew jargon.

This explanation, however, though formally correct, is misleading and imprecise. The Talmud is the repository of thousands of years of Jewish wisdom, and the oral law, which is as ancient and significant as the written law (the Torah), finds expression therein. It is a conglomerate of law, legend, and philosophy, a blend of unique logic and shrewd pragmatism, of history and science, anecdotes and humor. It is a collection of paradoxes: its framework is orderly and logical, every word and term subjected to meticulous editing, completed centuries after the actual work of composition came to an end; yet it is still based on free association, on a harnessing together of diverse ideas reminiscent of the modern stream-of-consciousness novel. Although its main objective is to interpret and comment on a book of law, it is, simultaneously, a work of art that goes beyond legislation and its practical application. And although the Talmud is, to this day, the primary source of Jewish law, it cannot be cited as an authority for purposes of ruling.

The Talmud treats abstract and totally unrealistic problems in the same manner in which it refers to the most prosaic facts of everyday life, yet succeeds in avoiding abstract terminology. Though based on the principles of tradition and the transmission of authority from generation to generation, it is unparalleled in its eagerness to question and reexamine convention and accepted views and to root out underlying causes. The talmudic method of discussion and demonstration tries to approximate mathematical precision, but without having recourse to mathematical or logical symbols.

The Talmud is best understood through analysis of the basic objectives of its authors and compilers. What were they aiming at, those thousands of sages who spent their lives in debate and discussion in hundreds of large and small centers of learning? The key is to be found in the name of the work: Talmud (that is, study, learning). The Talmud is the embodiment of the great concept of *mitzvat talmud Torah*—the positive religious duty of studying Torah, of acquiring learning and wisdom, study which is its own end and reward. A certain talmudic sage who has left us nothing but his name and this one

dictum had this to say on the subject: "Turn it and turn it again, for everything is contained in the Torah. Regard it and grow old in it and never abandon it, for there is no greater virtue."

Study of Torah undoubtedly serves numerous practical purposes, but these are not the crucial objectives. Study is not geared to the degree of importance or the practical potential of the problems discussed. Its main aim is learning itself. Likewise, knowledge of Torah is not an aid to observance of law but an end in itself. This does not mean that the Talmud is not concerned with the values contained in the material studied. On the contrary, it is stated emphatically that he who studies Torah and does not observe what he studies would better never have been born. A true scholar serves as a living example by his way of life and conduct. But this is part of the general outlook of the Talmud; for the student poring over the text, study has no other end but knowledge. Every subject pertaining to Torah, or to life as related to Torah, is worthy of consideration and analysis, and an attempt is always made to delve into the heart of the matter. In the course of study, the question of whether these analyses are of practical use is never raised. We often encounter in the Talmud protracted and vehement debates on various problems that try to examine the structure of the method and to elucidate the conclusions deriving from it. The scholars invested all this effort despite the fact that they knew the source itself had been rejected and was of no legislative significance. This approach also explains why we find debates on problems that were relevant in the distant past and were unlikely ever to arise again.

It sometimes occurs, of course, that problems or debates once thought impractical or irrelevant gain practical significance in some later age. This is a familiar phenomenon in the sphere of pure science. But this development is of little consequence to the talmudic student, as, from the outset, his sole objective has been to solve theoretical problems and to seek the truth.

The Talmud is ostensibly constructed along the lines of a legal tract, and many people commit the error of thinking that it is legal in essence. It treats the subjects with which it deals—basic *halakhah*,

biblical verses, or traditions handed down by sages—as natural phenomena, components of objective reality. When a man has dealings with nature, he cannot claim that the subject does not appeal to him or is unworthy of perusal. There are, of course, varying degrees of importance to issues, but all are alike in that they *are*—they exist and note must be paid to them. When the talmudic sage examined an ancient tradition, he perceived it, above all, as a reality in itself, and whether binding on him or not, it was part of his world and could not be dismissed. When the scholars discuss a rejected idea or source, their attitude resembles that of the scientist contemplating an organism that has become extinct because of its inability to adapt itself to changing conditions. This organism has, in a manner of speaking, “failed” and died out, but this fact does not detract from its interest for the scientist as a subject of study.

One of the greatest historical controversies was that between the methods of the “houses” (schools) of Shammai and Hillel, which lasted for more than a century. It was eventually resolved in the famous dictum: “Both are the words of the living God, and the decision is in accordance with the House of Hillel.” The fact that one method is preferred does not mean that the other is based on a misconception. It, too, is an expression of creativity and of “the words of the living God.” When one of the sages ventured to say a certain theory was not to his liking, he was scolded by his colleagues, who informed him that it was wrong to say of Torah, “This is good and this is not.” Such a view is analogous to the case of the scientist who is not permitted to say that a certain creature seems to him “unappealing.” This does not mean to imply that evaluations (even of appeal) should never be made; they should, however, be based on consciousness of the fact that no man has the right to judge or to determine that a certain object lacks beauty from the purely objective point of view.

This analogy between the natural world and Torah is ancient and was developed at length by the sages. One of its earliest expressions is the theory that just as an architect builds a house according to a blueprint, so the Holy One, Blessed be He, scanned his Torah in creating

the world. According to this viewpoint, it follows that there must be a certain correlation between the world and Torah, the latter forming part of the essence of the natural world and not merely constituting external speculation on it. This way of thinking also engendered the view that no subject is too strange, remote, or bizarre to be studied.

The Talmud reflects so wide a range of interests because it is not a homogeneous work composed by a single author. When several people collaborate on a book, they have in mind a certain specific aim which lends the work character and direction. But the Talmud is the end result of the editing of the thoughts and sayings of many scholars over a long period, none of whom envisaged a final written work at the time. Their remarks were inspired by life, growing out of the problems submitted to them and the exchange of views between the various sages and their disciples. This is why we cannot discern a clear trend or a specific objective in the Talmud. Each debate is, to a large extent, independent of others and unique, and each subject is the focus of interest at the time it is being discussed. At the same time, the Talmud has an unmistakable and striking character of its own, which does not bear the imprint of an individual, or of the editors, but is collective, reflecting the quality of the Jewish people over a given period. Not only where the thousands of anonymous views are concerned, but also in cases where the identity of the author or proponent is known, the differences between individuals are blurred and the general spirit prevails. However violently two sages may differ, their shared traits and likemindedness must eventually become evident to the reader, who then discerns the overall unity that overcomes all differences.

Since the Talmud is concerned with subjects, ideas, and problems, there evolved over the centuries the custom of quoting various views in the present tense: “Abbaye says, Rabba says.” This stylistic habit reflects the belief that the work is not merely a record of the opinions of the scholars of past ages, and it should not be judged by historical criteria. The talmudic sages themselves distinguished between personalities and periods (clarification of such questions is, in

fact, an integral part of study), but the distinctions are only cited when strictly relevant and are not employed for evaluation and discussion. For these scholars time is not an ever-flowing stream in which the present always obliterates the past; it is understood organically as a living and developing essence, present and future being founded on the living past. Within this wide-ranging process, certain elements take on more stable form, while others, pertaining to the present, are flexible and much more changeable; the process as such, however, is based on faith in the vitality of each element, ancient as it may be, and the importance of its role in the never-ending, self-renewing work of creation.

This process of renewal is closely connected to the centrality of the query in the talmudic debate. To a certain extent, the entire Talmud is framed by questions and answers, and even when not explicitly formulated, questions constitute the background to every statement and interpretation. One of the most ancient methods of studying the Talmud attempted to reconstruct the question on the basis of the statement that served as a response. It is no coincidence that the Talmud contains so many words denoting questions, ranging from queries aimed at satisfying curiosity to questions that attempt to undermine the validity of the debated issue. The Talmud also differentiates between a fundamental query and a less basic inquiry, a question of principle and a marginal query. Voicing doubts is not only legitimate in the Talmud, it is essential to study. To a certain degree, the rule is that any type of query is permissible and even desirable; the more the merrier. No inquiry is regarded as unfair or incorrect as long as it pertains to the issue and can cast light on some aspect of it. This is true not only of the Talmud itself but also of the way in which it is studied and perused. After absorbing the basic material, the student is expected to pose questions to himself and to others and to voice doubts and reservations. From this point of view, the Talmud is perhaps the only sacred book in all of world culture that permits and even encourages the student to question it.

This characteristic leads us to another aspect of the composition and study of the Talmud. It is impossible to arrive at external knowledge of

this work. Any description of its subject matter or study methods must, inevitably, be superficial because of the Talmud's unique nature. True knowledge can only be attained through spiritual communion, and the student must participate intellectually and emotionally in the talmudic debate, himself becoming, to a certain degree, a creator.

The Structure of the Talmud



BOTH THE BABYLONIAN and the Jerusalem versions of the Talmud are arranged according to the order of the Mishnah, which they expound and elaborate. The Mishnah is divided into six basic sections or *sedarim* (orders). The orders, known by their Hebrew initials as the *shass*, have become synonymous with the Talmud, particularly since the Christian censors decided that the word Talmud was taboo. Each order deals with a specific category of problems.

Seder Zeraim (the Seeds order) is devoted to *halakhah* relating to agriculture and Palestinian crops, leaving offerings to the priests and Levites, and gifts to the poor. The order of the tractates is not identical in all editions, but they are usually arranged by size or, to be more exact, by number of chapters. Each tractate usually deals with one specific subject, such as the *Shevi'it* tractate, dealing with the laws of *shemitah* (the seventh year when the land lies fallow) or *Bikurin* (on the offering of first fruits), but related problems are sometimes appended. The seventy-four chapters of this order are divided into eleven tractates, only the first of which, *Berakhot*, is slightly out of the ordinary, since it deals not with agricultural laws but with benedictions and prayers. In other versions this tractate was transferred to the *Moed* order. Since *Seder Zeraim* was also known as *Seder Emunah* (Faith order: it was said that "a man believes in the eternal life and

therefore sows seed"), the *Berakhot* tractate is appropriately located at the beginning of the order.

The second order is *Seder Moed* (Holidays). Its twelve tractates deal mainly with the festivals throughout the year and its subject matter ranges from Sabbath laws (to which two tractates are devoted) to laws for fast days. The *Shekalim* tractate is the exception in that it deals with the half-shekel tax that covered the maintenance of the Temple, and ways of collecting and distributing it. Since this tax was collected at regular intervals, the tractate was included in *Seder Moed*.

Seder Nashim (Women) is the third order and deals mainly with laws pertaining to marriage, from the ceremony itself to laws of incest, divorce, and property. Five tractates are devoted to these subjects and two more are appendices—*Nedarim* (Vows), dealing to some extent with the relations between man and wife, and *Nazir*, which discusses laws relating to the *nazirite* (ascetic who takes special vows). The *Sotah* tractate, containing *halakhah* on women suspected of adultery, also covers more remote subjects, which are included only because of associative links.

The fourth order, *Nezikin* (Damages), is also known as *Yeshuot* (Rescues), since a considerable part of it deals with saving the victim from his persecutor. Originally it opened with a tractate also known as *Nezikin*, which discussed civil jurisprudence. But since it was a very long tractate of thirty chapters, it was divided into three parts, known as gates, which are now entitled *Baba Kama* (first gate), *Baba Metzia* (middle gate), and *Baba Batra* (last gate). In general this order deals with civil and penal law, the procedure of law courts, vows, punishments, and so forth. A section of the religious criminal code was devoted to the prohibition of pagan worship in any form whatsoever, and a special tractate (*Avodah Zarah*) was devoted to this subject. Another tractate, *Horayot* (Decisions), deals with the crucial problem of what to do in the case of erroneous Sanhedrin decisions that plunge the entire nation into error. The *Eduyot* (Testimonies) tractate is a compilation of testimonies on ancient *halakhah* that was in danger of falling into oblivion and on unusual aspects of *halakhah*, apparently amassed at a special session of the Yavneh court.

Another tractate, which is out of place in this order and differs from most of the other tractates, is *Avot* (Fathers), which deals not with *halakhah* but with ethics and philosophy; it contains the sayings and aphorisms of mishnaic sages. Because of its unique content, this tractate was included in many prayerbooks and was translated into other languages.

The order of *Kodashim* (Holy Things) is devoted mainly to laws pertaining to the Temple and to sacrifices. Of the eleven tractates in this order, ten deal in detail with Temple procedure and with types of sacrifice. The eleventh tractate, *Hulin* (Common Things), also known in ancient times as *Shehitat Hulin* (Common Slaughter), is the only one which does not deal with sacrifices; it contains the laws of ritual slaughter and details on kosher and nonkosher foods, as well as various scattered laws that were not numerous enough to deserve a separate tractate.

The sixth order, *Toharot* (Purity), deals with the most complex and involved halakhic subject—the laws of ritual purity and impurity. These laws, which were observed mainly in the period of the Temple (and for several subsequent generations in Palestine), consist of minute and extremely involved details based on ancient traditions in which the logical connection is not always discernible. Only one tractate, *Nidah*, was of practical significance at that time, since it discusses laws on the periodic ritual uncleanness of women. This order is considered the most difficult of all, and the greatest *amoraim* had difficulty in deciphering it.

According to the modern division, there are 517 chapters in all (with slight variations between versions), arranged in sixty-three tractates. The traditional number of tractates was sixty, and the present number is apparently the result of splitting several tractates, such as *Nezikin*, into independent sections. The various tractates already had names of their own in the talmudic period, generally reflecting the central theme, and these titles have remained almost unchanged. The chapters too have names, some of them dating from the talmudic era, based not on content but on the opening words. When several chapters commenced with identical words it was necessary at

times to give them distinguishing titles, but no great emphasis was placed on these names. The order of chapters in each tractate is normally stable, although it may not always appear orderly and logical. Sometimes a tractate is organized systematically, from the general to the particular, but in several tractates the criterion is the order of the law under scrutiny, the material concerning the earlier part of a commandment coming first. Tractates that contain material in addition to their central subject are usually organized so that the central theme is discussed first, followed by marginal questions. There was also a tendency to begin various tractates with issues that aroused the interest or curiosity of the reader, though they were not necessarily of great importance.

The chapters of the Mishnah are divided into subsections called *mishnayot*, each of which usually discusses one law or several related ones. The subdivision of the *mishnayot* is not uniform, and there are differences between the traditions; but in all printed copies of the Mishnah the division is almost identical. This is why indices of the Mishnah quote the tractate, number of the chapter in the tractate, and number of the *mishnah* in the chapter. For example, the saying "All of Israel have a portion in the next world" appears in *Sanhedrin*, Chapter 10, *Mishnah* 1. In the Middle Ages only the number of the chapter was cited, in most cases without the name of the tractate, on the assumption that the latter would be generally known, and without denoting the *mishnah*, because there was, as yet, no permanent division into *mishnayot*.

Although the *amoraim* studied all the orders of the Mishnah, they concentrated, in Babylonia at least, on the four that dealt with questions of everyday life; these essentially constitute the subject matter of the Babylonian Talmud. The *Zeraim* order, which deals with agricultural laws, was only tenuously related to life in Babylonia, since most of the *halakhah* pertained to Palestine in the Temple period. In this order only the *Berakhot* tractate deals with legislation for daily life, such as prayers and benedictions. Nor was the *Toharot* order of great practical use in Babylonia, and only the *Nidah* tractate was singled out for study, dealing as it does with female purification rituals. Most

of the tractates in the other four orders were elucidated in the Babylonian Talmud, and thirty-six tractates are still extant. Recently several scholars have tried to extract from the Talmud material relating to the tractates that were not studied in depth and to create in this way a kind of "synthetic" Talmud.

The situation was slightly different in Palestine. Since agricultural laws were pertinent for everyday life there, the Jerusalem Talmud discusses all the tractates of the *Zeraim* order. In the Middle Ages there was a section of the Jerusalem Talmud devoted to the *Kodashim* order, but by the time the Talmud was first printed this section had been lost to scholarship. Almost a century ago, a scholar claimed to have discovered the manuscript of this order, but it is generally regarded as a modern forgery. Of the entire *Toharot* order, the Jerusalem Talmud singles out only a few chapters of the useful *Nidah* tractate for perusal, and in all it covers thirty-nine tractates.

The sixty tractates of the Mishnah and their elucidation in the Talmud constitute a single unit, but additions were introduced over the centuries, which are known by the general and imprecise term *masakhtot ketanot* (small tractates). These are not of a kind. Some are ancient and apparently formed part of ancient compilations of external *mishnayot*; most are summaries edited in a later period, mostly the gaonic period, although some of their sources are extremely ancient. These "small tractates" include a number that deal with ethics and conduct, and some scholars believe there may have been a seventh order of the Mishnah (even before the editing of the *mishnayot* by R. Judah Ha-Nasi), possibly known as *Seder Hokhmah* (Wisdom). We find among these works the *Avot of Rabbi Natan*, a much expanded version of the *Avot* tractate, the *Derekh Eretz* (Conduct) tractate, dealing with rules for correct behavior on all occasions, and others. There are also tractates dealing with laws that were not interpreted in the Talmud, such as the *Sofrim* (Scribes) tractate on the writing of scrolls, the *Semahot* tractate, which discusses mourning laws, and others. These tractates are not an integral part of the Talmud itself, although they were sometimes studied and are regarded as illuminating guides to conduct and to certain aspects of *halakhah*.

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The Layout of a Talmud Page



THE LAYOUT OF A PAGE of Talmud as we know it today—i.e., the Talmud text running down the center of the page, surrounded by Rashi's commentary and the Tosafot—and the division of the text into numbered pages, was established in the Bomberg edition that was published in Venice between 1520 and 1523. This layout and pagination were later adopted in almost all printed editions of the Talmud, with only minor changes in page numbering.

As new printed editions of the Talmud were produced, additional commentaries, glosses, and reference apparatus were added in the margins. These additions varied considerably from one edition to another. An especially respected edition of the Talmud is that of the Widow and Brothers Romm of Vilna (printed between 1880 and 1886), which was accurately proofread and included many important additions. Most present-day editions of the Talmud are photo-offsets of the Vilna edition.

Since the components of the Talmud page and its reference symbols are important for the understanding of its content, they are explained below.

Page Numbers (1)

The outer upper corner of each page contains its number. On the first side (the front side) of each folio page the number appears in its

Hebrew form, using the letters of the alphabet to represent the numerals, in the upper left-hand corner. On the second side (the reverse side) of the folio page, in the upper right-hand (outer) corner, one finds the page number in Arabic numerals and not in Hebrew letters. The numbering in Hebrew letters refers to each folio, both sides of the page. The numbering in Arabic numerals is according to each single page. Thus the Arabic numerals are double the folio number in Hebrew letters. In fact, when referring to the Talmud, the Arabic numeral is generally ignored.

The folio (double page) is the unit on which the numbering of the Talmudic tractates is based. The folio numbers of each tractate always begin with ב, i.e., double-page 2, since double-page 1 is the title page of the tractate. Every folio (in Hebrew, *daf*) has two sides (in Hebrew, *amudim*; sing., *amud*). The first side of the *daf* is called *amud alef* (א), and the second side (the reverse side of the folio), is called *amud bet* (ב). As mentioned above, the Hebrew number of the folio is printed on side *a*, and the Arabic number on side *b*. The standard practice in citing a page of Talmud is to refer to the name of the tractate, the number of the folio, and the side. The sample page would be cited in the following way: ע"א כה מגילה—*Megillah*, *daf* כה, *amud* א; or *Megillah* 25a. Sometimes a different system of notation is used to identify the sides: a period following the folio number indicates side *a* (.כה), and a colon indicates side *b* (כה:).

The Page Heading (2)

The heading across the top of the page, in large square letters, is composed of three parts: to the right, the name of the chapter; in the center, the chapter number; and to the left, the name of the tractate. The complete heading before us reads as follows: the name of the chapter (הקורא עומד), the chapter number (פָּרָק שְׁלִישִׁי, Chapter Three), and the name of the tractate (מְגִלָּה, *Megillah*).

The page heading and its form are also a tradition dating from the first printed editions. In most of the manuscript sources before the

advent of printing the only way to refer to passages in the Talmud was to give the name of the chapter containing the passage (and, in the case of a Mishnah, the number of the relevant chapter and the number of the paragraph within it). The chapters were usually named after the first word or words in them, and only a few chapters were given names or titles indicating their content.

The Talmud Text [the Mishnah and the Gemara] (3)

The main text of the Mishnah and Gemara is presented in the center of the page, in the traditional "square" typeface. The version of the Talmud in our possession is mainly that of Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzhak, 1040–1105). He himself studied and compared a great number of manuscripts of the Talmud, and many of his emendations were later included within the text itself, although now, as a result of later editing, some of them may appear superfluous and incomprehensible. Occasionally the authors of the Tosafot defend an earlier reading which Rashi had changed. The text in our possession was also edited by Rabbi Shlomo Luria (בדורש"ל, c. 1510–1574). Many of his corrections were included in the standard printed versions of the text, but without any indication that they were emendations. It should also be noted that there are important variant manuscripts of the Talmud (among the most famous being the Munich manuscript [1334] of the entire Talmud), in which one occasionally finds illuminating variant readings. At the same time it is well known that, despite careful proofreading by generations of printers, the text still contains many mistakes and typographical errors (which, because of the technique of photo-offset reproduction, are perpetuated in new editions). The Talmud was also subjected to government and church censorship, and most present-day editions still contain a considerable number of changes and omissions introduced by censorship. Indeed, almost every passage dealing with non-Jews must be suspected of having undergone some change.

When a new Mishnah appears on a page it is preceded by the abbreviation *מתני'* in larger letters, an abbreviation of *מתניתין*, meaning

"Mishnah" or "Our Mishnah." The start of the section of Gemara immediately following each Mishnah is indicated by the large letters *גמ'*, the abbreviation of *גמרא*.

In the editions of the Talmud in our possession the text of the Gemara is presented after every individual Mishnah. In many manuscripts—and also in many editions of the Jerusalem Talmud—all the passages from the Mishnah are presented together at the beginning of each chapter. The division of the Mishnah passages as quoted in the Talmud is not identical with that in separate editions of the Mishnah, and in places the text is slightly different.

Punctuation (5)

The colon (:) is used in the Gemara and in the other sources and commentaries to mark the end of a paragraph (like the period used in standard punctuation today), and the period is used like a comma.

Some manuscripts of the Mishnah and Gemara contain more punctuation marks than the printed editions, and there are also manuscripts containing cantillation marks, like those used in texts of the Bible, which help to punctuate the entire text. In standard editions only traces remain of an ancient four-dot punctuation system, in which a period was a kind of comma, and a colon marked the end of a sentence. Three dots (.) indicated the end of a passage, and four dots (:) marked a new subject of discussion. Only the first two signs remain in the printed editions. The colon is also found within the text of the Gemara, separating one topic from another. But it does not always indicate a truly significant division.

Parentheses and Corrections of the Text (6)

Parentheses in the Gemara indicate a passage (or word) concerning which there is some doubt, and which according to other sources should be entirely deleted or replaced by another version. Generally, opposite the same line at the side of the page, there is an explanation

of the variant or mention of the source according to which the emendation was made in the text.

Square brackets in the Gemara indicate an addition to the text, either according to a manuscript or from another source. Occasionally, at the side of the page and opposite the line in question, there is also an explanation of the source of the addition. Sometimes round and square brackets follow each other, when it is proposed to delete one variant and substitute another for it.

In the body of the text (and sometimes in the commentaries) these parentheses are ordinarily used for a proposed textual emendation, and not for punctuation. In many instances one should view these emendations—both the deletions and the additions—as mere suggestions, since the text may be understood (sometimes using another method of interpretation) in the earlier, uncorrected, version as well. Sets of parentheses (the function of which is not always clear) also separate many of the conventional signs in the Talmud from the rest of the text. These signs, all of which are for mnemonic convenience, vary from manuscript to manuscript. The signs are usually indicated by apostrophes or inverted commas before the final letter of each “word,” but they are not always abbreviations. The meaning of the signs is also not always clear. Most of the commentators ignore them, and many of them contain printing errors.

Rashi's Commentary (7)

In all editions Rashi's commentary is found next to the text on the inner side of the page (the one closest to the binding). The commentary is always written in “Rashi script” preceded by a quotation from the Gemara introducing the word or passage to be explained. This quotation is called דְּיָבוּר הַמַּתְחִיל—*dibbur hamat'hil*, “the starting word or phrase”—and it is separated from the commentary by a period at its end. The end of the commentary on that word or passage is indicated by a colon (:). In many instances the quotation from the

Gemara should be read as an integral part of Rashi's commentary and the two parts should be run together.

Rashi is universally acknowledged as the greatest commentator on the Talmud. He lived in France and spent most of his life in the city of Troyes. Basing himself on the written and oral interpretations of his teachers he composed a commentary on the Talmud which he himself corrected from time to time (the version in our possession is generally a second or third edition of his commentaries). Because Rashi's commentary was copied by his students immediately after it was put in writing by its author and was circulated in the form of booklets, it is occasionally called פִּירוּשׁ הַקְּוֹנְטְרָם—*perush hakuntres*, “booklet commentary.” Rashi commented on most of the Talmud, but his commentary on certain tractates is incomplete (e.g., *Bava Batra* was mainly interpreted by his grandson, Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, רשב"ם, c. 1085–1174, and the commentary on *Makkot* was completed by his son-in-law, Rabbi Yehudah ben Natan, ריב"ן, 11th–12th century). In some tractates the commentary attributed to Rashi and printed under his name is not his own but that of one of his students (as in the tractate *Ta'anit*).

Almost all Talmudic commentators after the time of Rashi relate to his commentary, in some way disagreeing with it, defending it, interpreting it, or clarifying it. Books have also been written analyzing his methodology and clarifying and classifying his characteristic expressions.

Tosafot (8)

Tosafot are always printed in the outer column of the page (usually in Rashi script). The quotation from the Gemara text (the *dibbur hamat'hil*) introducing the passage to be explained is found at the beginning of each passage and is set off from the Tosafot proper by a period. The first word of the *dibbur hamat'hil* is printed in large square letters. The end of each Tosafot is indicated by a colon (:).

The Tosafot were the collective creation of Rashi's disciples and their students (including many of his own descendants), and they are a kind of summary of the style of study and inquiry in the yeshivot of France and Germany in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They began as additions to and notes on Rashi's commentary; they were subsequently expanded and became a profound and independent interpretation of the Gemara itself. Indeed, in some cases one can view them as an extension of the Talmudic discussion. Among the great authors of the Tosafot were Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (רשב"ם), Rabbenu Tam (רבינו תם), and Rabbi Ya'akov ben Meir (c. 1100–1171)—Rashi's grandsons; also Rabbenu Yitzhak (ר"י), 1115–1184), Rabbi Yitzhak ben Asher (ריב"א), Rabbi Yitzhak ben Avraham (ריצב"א), Rabbenu Hayyim, Rabbenu Peretz, and Morenu (our teacher) Rabbi Meir (מהר"ם) of Rothenberg. The Tosafot were edited in various academies by a number of Sages. The editions of the Tosafot in our possession are mainly those of the Academy of Touques (named after that city in France), but there are some versions of Tosafot from other academies (for example those of Sens and Evreux). These additions sometimes appear as appendices in the outer margins of the page, termed תוספות ישנים—*Tosafot Yeshanim*. In some tractates only these versions of the Tosafot have been included.

Vernacular Words

Rashi and Tosafot occasionally translated words into Old French or other languages, using the languages they spoke in order to explain obscure concepts when they did not have an appropriate word in Hebrew. Rashi usually accompanies such a translation with the word בְּלִשָּׁנָה—“in the vernacular”—and the vernacular word is always marked by the insertion of a pair of inverted commas before the last letter of the word. These do not indicate an abbreviation, but simply make the word stand out. The vernacular words are written phoneti-

cally, and there are regular rules for transliterating them into Hebrew: ש = s, ק = ch, א at the end of a word = e. In many editions of the Talmud there is a translation appendix after each tractate (פירוש קטור רגמן) explaining these foreign words (according to their place in Rashi and Tosafot) in Hebrew or in Yiddish-German written in Hebrew letters.

Rashi's vernacular words are usually in Old French or Provençal, and, more rarely, in German and Italian. Many of them were not understood in later generations, so scribal errors were made in copying them. They represent the language at a certain level of historical development and are therefore a valuable source of information for the study of these languages.

References in Rashi and the Tosafot (9)

References in Rashi's commentary and in Tosafot to other Talmudic passages are occasionally included in parentheses or square brackets in Rashi script smaller than the Rashi script of the text. These references are not part of Rashi's commentary or of Tosafot, but rather later additions by other Rabbis.

The Commentary of Rabbenu Hananel (10)

רבינו הננאל

In many tractates, but not all, the Vilna edition added the commentary of Rabbenu Hananel. In that commentary there is generally no special sign to indicate a quotation from the main body of the text.

Rabbenu Hananel, the son of Hushiel, lived in North Africa in the eleventh century (990–1055). His is one of the earliest commentaries on the Talmud. His father, who was also his teacher, was a student of the Geonim in Babylonia, and the commentaries of Rabbenu Hananel mainly express the exegetical tradition of the

Geonim. Unlike Rashi's commentary, Rabbenu Hananel deals mainly with the interpretation of whole passages or sections, clarifying the principal contents and not always going into detail. Many of his commentaries appear in the *Arukh* (הַעֲרוּךְ—Dictionary—by Rabbi Natan b. Yehiel of Rome, 11th century) and in the interpretations of the Tosafot.

Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah (11)

עין משפט נר מצוה

Ein Mishpat provides reference to the primary Halakhic works that treat the subject matter of the Gemara. Reference to *Ein Mishpat* in the text of the Gemara is indicated by a small square letter, generally placed next to the opinion that reflects the ultimately accepted Halakhah. Each entry in *Ein Mishpat* begins with a large square letter followed by a smaller square letter or several small letters, all of which refer to the same topic. The large reference letters run consecutively from the beginning of the chapter to the end, and every chapter starts again from א; that system of reference number, however, no longer has relevance for the user. The smaller square letter following it corresponds to what appears in the body of the text. *Ein Mishpat* usually refers to three works of Halakhah: Rambam's (Maimonides') *Mishneh Torah* (מִשְׁנֵה תּוֹרָה); *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol* (סֵפֶר מִצְוֹת גָּדוֹל) by Rabbi Moshe of Coucy (thirteenth century); and the *Shulhan Arukh* (שולחן ערוך) by Rabbi Yosef Caro (1488–1575). The first reference is to Maimonides, generally known by the initials of his name and title as Rambam (רמב"ם = Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon).

His work is indicated by the abbreviation מ"מ = מִיִּמּוֹנֵי; then comes the chapter number (e.g., פ"ט = ch. 9); this is followed by the section in which that chapter is found (e.g., הַלְּכוֹת הַפִּילָה—the laws of prayer); and finally, the specific Halakhah within the chapter. It should be noted that no explicit reference is made to the book of the *Mishneh Torah* in which the section (e.g., הַלְּכוֹת הַפִּילָה) is to be found. The reader is expected to know which of the fourteen books

is intended. The second sign is סמ"ג (= סֵפֶר מִצְוֹת גָּדוֹל). This book is arranged in the order of the commandments, positive (עֲשֵׂי) and negative (לֹאֲעֵשׂ), and the symbols refer to the section of the book and the number of the commandment. The third sign is for the *Shulhan Arukh*. Since that work is based on the order of the *Arba'ah Turim* (אַרְבָּעֵה טוּרִים), an earlier Halakhic work, also known as the *Tur*, (טור), the reference has two purposes: it refers both to the טור and to the שולחן ערוך and is indicated by the abbreviation טוש"ע (= שולחן ערוך = טור). Afterwards the section in which the particular Halakhah appears is indicated, i.e., אה"ע; יורח העה—י"ד; אורח חיים—א"ח; אה"ע—חושן משפט—חו"מ; אבן העזר. Then come the numerical letters indicating the sub-sections and paragraphs. There are subjects that are not found in all three of these works. In such cases, only the one or two works where they do appear are indicated.

This important reference tool was created by Rabbi Yehoshua Boaz (author of שְׁלֵטֵי הַגִּיבּוֹרִים—*Shiltei HaGibborim*), who lived in Italy in the sixteenth century. The author intended to write an even more extensive work. *Ein Mishpat* was to include references to the major Halakhic authorities, whereas *Ner Mitzvah* (indicated by the large square letters) was meant to be a reference to a more extensive and profound discussion of Halakhic issues and the relation between the Talmud and Halakhic decisions. That plan was never carried out, and only the reference marks remain.

Torah Or (12)

תורה אור

Torah Or, written mainly by Rabbi Yehoshua Boaz, is a reference apparatus for Biblical quotations. Later Rabbis supplemented his work.

A tiny circle in the Talmud text marks the first word of the Biblical quotation. The reference appears opposite the same line, in the narrow space between the Talmud text and commentaries of Rashi or the Tosafot. It gives the name of the book and the number of the

chapter where the quotation is found, but not the number of the verse. If the same book was previously mentioned, it uses only the word $\square\psi$ (= *ibid.*).

Masoret HaShas (13)

מסורת הש"ס

Parallel texts and cross-references to identical passages elsewhere in the Talmud are given in the reference apparatus called *Masoret HaShas*. Sometimes the parallel is simply the use of a certain expression, rather than an issue of Halakhah or a whole discussion, or it may also be some parallel linguistic form or topic. Explanations of individual words or expressions are cited from various works, in particular the *Arukh*. *Masoret HaShas* also frequently contains textual emendations based on the parallel sources. The correction of a text is marked by the abbreviation צ"ל , meaning צָרִיךְ לְהִיּוֹת —"it ought to be"—before the emendation. When the correction is not certain, but another significant version exists, there is simply a note that in another source one finds such and such. Parallel sources are cited according to tractate, folio, and page. If the parallel source is from the same tractate, the note says לְעֵיל —"above"—if the parallel is on a previous page, and לְקִדְמָן —"in front of us"—if it is on a later page. Not every tractate contains full reference to every parallel of a given subject. Often a reference to one of the sources is given, with the additional abbreviation וש"נ (standing for וְנִסְמָן), meaning that the other parallel sources are listed there.

Masoret HaShas is generally printed in small letters in Rashi script in the column headed מסורת הש"ס in the inside margin of the page. Passages cross-referenced by *Masoret HaShas* are marked in the Talmud text by an asterisk before the first word. The reference is printed on the same level as the asterisk. When there is not enough room in that column, some of these references are placed under *Ein Mishpat* on the outer margin of the page. Some of the *Masoret HaShas* refer-

ences appear in square brackets, meaning that the reference was added by later scholars.

Masoret HaShas was also compiled by Rabbi Yehoshua Boaz. He determined the system and formulation of *Masoret HaShas*, and the main features of this system have been preserved to the present day. Over the generations certain scholars improved *Masoret HaShas*, adding a large number of new sources. Many of the additions were compiled by Rabbi Yeshayahu Pik Berlin, the Rabbi of Breslau during the eighteenth century (1725–1799). Most of his additions are indicated with square brackets in *Masoret HaShas*.

Haggahot HaBah (14)

הגהות הב"ח (Emendations of the Bah)

Haggahot HaBah are generally proposed emendations in the text of the Gemara, in Rashi's commentary and in the Tosafot. When a correction is proposed, the words needing correction are presented in parentheses followed by the letters חא"מ , which stand for חוקרות אלה —"these words are circled," after which is written ונ"ב —"and at its side is written"). Following that abbreviation comes the proposed correction. Sometimes there are explanatory remarks or other comments regarding the contents of the text, but they are always written with great brevity.

The author of *Haggahot HaBah* is Rabbi Yoel Sirkes, who lived in Poland during the seventeenth century. He is famous for his important book, *Bayit Hadash* (בית חדש), a commentary on the *Arba'ah Turim*. His textual emendations to the Talmud were written in the margins of the volumes he himself used, and this explains the method adopted to indicate the emendations. He marked dubious words in parentheses, and at their side he wrote his comments. In his editing he seems to have depended greatly on parallel sources and on various manuscripts. Usually, however, his emendations are simple and almost self-explanatory for a scholar expert in the style of the Gemara.

Many of them are useful to correct faulty or unclear expressions and replace them with better ones.

Haggahot HaBah are printed either in the outer margin or at the bottom of the page. In the Talmud text, reference to them is made by letter numerals in Rashi script in parentheses; within the commentaries of Rashi and Tosafot these reference numbers do not appear. One must look in the *Haggahot HaBah* to see if there are comments on Rashi or Tosafot. If there are comments, they are indicated by the words רש"י (= Rashi) or תוס' (= תוספות Tosafot). Immediately following these words appears the abbreviation ד"ה (= דברי הבורח המוחיל—the first words of the passage to be commented on) which is concluded by the abbreviation וכו' (= etc.). The Bah's comments follow this.

Haggahot HaGra (15)

הגהות הגר"א (Emendations of the Vilna Gaon)

This method of emendation is similar to that of the Bah, but the language of the author is more vigorous. It often says: "These words are to be erased," or "erased"; and after the correction it adds כצ"ל (= כדרך צריך להיות—“this is how it should be”). The *Haggahot HaGra* are found in the outer margin of the page and are referred to in the text by a square Hebrew letter enclosed in square brackets.

א"ג are the initials of HaGaon Rabbi Eliyahu, known as the Vilna Gaon, who lived in the eighteenth century (1720–1797). Like the Bah, he also wrote corrections in the volumes of the Talmud that he used, and these corrections were later copied and printed with the Talmud. *Haggahot HaGra* often suggest radical changes in the standard text, but many of them are generally derived from parallel sources, whether in the Talmud itself or in other books of Talmudic literature and its commentators.

Gilyon HaShas (16)

גליון הש"ס

The notes in *Gilyon HaShas* refer to the Gemara, to Rashi, and to Tosafot. They may be of various types. Sometimes they merely provide a reference to another source (ש"ע = עיין שם—“see there”) where the same phraseology is found. At other times the references are similar to those of *Masoret HaShas*, but treat a matter not included in that apparatus, either because it was omitted there or because it indicates a similarity not of wording but of a different kind, such as method or approach. Occasionally *Gilyon HaShas* comments on problems and contradictions in the Talmud and its commentators, referring to different interpretations or other sources. The comments are often questions, usually ending in צ"ע (= צריך עיון—“it needs further investigation”) or sometimes צע"ג (= צריך עיון גדול—“it needs much further investigation”). The *Gilyon HaShas* is found either in the outer margin or at the bottom of the page, and is referred to in the text by a small diacritical circle: O.

The author of *Gilyon HaShas* is Rabbi Akiva Eger, a famous nineteenth-century scholar (1761–1837) and Rabbi of the city of Posen. He calls the student's attention to a variety of problems, sometimes offering references to sources that are parallel in content but not necessarily in their wording. In general Rabbi Akiva Eger raises questions and points out problems, difficulties, or contradictions in the commentaries accompanying the Talmud or in the remarks of other commentators. Occasionally he also points out difficulties and contradictions in the Talmud itself, but rarely resolves them. Later scholars have written books and hundreds of comments in order to resolve the difficulties he raised.

Haggahot Rav B. Ronsburg (17)

הגהות ר"ב רנשבורג (Emendations of Rav B. Ronsburg)

Textual emendations by Rabbi Betzalel Ronsburg (1760–1820), the author of הורה נבחר. *Haggahot Rav. B. Ronsburg* are printed in the inner margin or at the bottom of the page. Reference to them is found in the Talmud text, Rashi and the Tosafot, in the form of a square Hebrew letter with a bracket on the left side of the letter.

Summary of Special Signs

The signs listed below are found in the Vilna edition of the Talmud and in other similar editions. These signs, however, are in no way standard, and in some editions different signs are often used to refer to the very same sources.

Asterisk. An asterisk next to a word in the Talmud text designates a reference to *Masoret HaShas*. The reference is found on the inside margin of the page in the same row as the asterisk. When there is not enough room in that column, some of these references are placed under *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah* on the outer margin of the page.

A Small Square Letter. Indicates a reference to the Halakhah in *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah*. These letters refer, in order, to the small square letters (not the large ones) of the entries on the outer upper margin of the page.

Circle. A circle next to a word designates a reference to a verse in the Bible. The reference itself is found on the same line in the narrow margin between the body of the text and Rashi's commentary or that of Tosafot, on the left or right side of the text, depending on the space available.

A Letter in Rashi Script in Parentheses. Designates a reference to *Haggahot HaBah*, located in the outer or inner margin of the page (depending on the space available), or at the bottom of the page.

A Small Square Letter in Square Brackets. Designates *Haggahot HaGra*, located in the outer or inner margin of the page (depending on the space available), or at the bottom of the page.

A Circle with a Line Through It. Designates *Gilyon HaShas*, located in the outer or inner margin of the page (depending on the space available), or at the bottom of the page.

Commentaries and Other Additions

Certain tractates in the Vilna edition contain other commentaries and additions, usually printed in the outer margins of the page. These include:

רַב נְסִים גָּאוֹן The Commentary of Rav Nissim Gaon. In several tractates there is also the commentary of Rav Nissim Gaon, which explains selected passages only and is not found on every page.

Rav Nissim the son of Ya'akov Gaon (c. 990–1062) lived in North Africa. His commentary, *Mafeah LeManulei HaTalmud* (מִפְתָּח לְמַנְעוּלֵי הַתַּלְמוּד) is only partially extant. His commentaries refer to relatively few passages, and largely express the exegetical methods of the Geonim of Babylonia.

פִּירוּשׁ רַבֵּינוּ גֵרְשׁוֹם The Commentary of Rabbenu Gershom (*Me'or HaGolah—The Light of the Diaspora*; c. 960–1028 C.E.). The style of his commentary bears a certain resemblance to that of Rashi.

תּוֹסְפוֹת יֶשָׁנִים *Tosafot Yeshanim*. A version of the Tosafot containing much new material on the tractates *Yoma* and *Yevamot*. In some editions there are also other versions of Tosafot for various tractates, including material that is not found in the standard version of the Tosafot (תּוֹסְפוֹת הַרְא"שׁ, תּוֹסְפוֹת חַד מִקְמָא, תּוֹסְפוֹת הַר"ד, תּוֹסְפוֹת הַר"י and others).

שִׁטָּה מְקוּבְּצֶת *Shittah Mekubbetzet*. A collection of emendations and short comments by Rabbi Betzalel Ashkenazi (16th century) on the tractates in the order of *Kodashim*. The emendations are based on many manuscripts and on the commentaries of the Rishonim.

הַגְּהוֹת צֵאן קִדְשִׁים *Haggahot Tzon Kodashim*. Emendations to the order of *Kodashim* by Rabbi Shmuel Kaidanover (1614–1676), the author of הַגְּהוֹת הַיְבֻחַ and צֵאן קִדְשִׁים, commentaries on the order of *Kodashim*. Similar to *Haggahot HaBah*.

הַגְּהוֹת הַר"י לְלֵדָא *Haggahot HaRi Landau*. The textual emendations of Rabbi Yehezkel Landau (1713–1793), the author of בִּיהוּדָה נוֹדַע, and Rabbi of Prague.

Additional Commentaries That Do Not Appear on the Page

In addition to the commentaries “on the page,” most editions of the Talmud include appendices presenting the commentaries of several Halakhic authorities and exegetes. The more comprehensive and modern the edition, the more it generally tries to outdo its predecessors by adding commentaries and notes, taken either from manuscripts of the commentaries of the Rishonim or from the textual emendations and interpretations of more recent scholars. Below is a list of some of these additional commentaries, commonly found in most editions.

פסקי הוספות *Piskei Tosafot* (found in many editions), a summary of the Halakhic rulings and conclusions found in the Tosafot. Traditionally this short book is attributed to the Rosh (see below), and for that reason, though it is only a collection of references, it is considered a book of Halakhic decisions in its own right.

הלכות הראש *Hilkhot HaRosh* (found in many editions), Halakhot composed by Rabbenu Asher ben Yehiel (1250–1327), who completed his education in Germany, his main teacher being Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg. In later life he settled in Spain. The most important of his works is his book of Halakhot, in which he quotes the Talmud, adds the interpretations (chiefly those touching upon the Halakhah) of the Tosafot and other scholars, and sums up with his own opinion. This book is important as one of the primary sources of Halakhic literature, and it can also serve as a Halakhic commentary on important parts of the Talmud. In most editions *Hilkhot HaRosh* are accompanied by auxiliary commentaries such as *Tiferet Shmuel* (שמורת) and *Korban Netanel* (קרובן נתנאל), most of which were written in the seventeenth century.

קיצור פסקי הראש *Kitzur Piskei HaRosh*, the Halakhic conclusions of the Rosh as found in his book, *Hilkhot HaRosh*. This summary version was composed by his son Rabbi Ya'akov (1270–1343), the author of *Arba'ah Turim* (ארבעה טורים). This short work is also used as a Halakhic source.

פירוש המשניות לרמב"ם *Perush HaMishnayot LaRambam* (in many editions), Rambam's first great Rabbinic work. This commentary, also called ספר המאור—*Sefer HaMa'or*—was originally written in Arabic. It appears in regular editions of the Talmud in old, but not necessarily good, Hebrew translations. The commentary is written very succinctly and contains important and original interpretations. The prefaces and introductions are extremely important. In recent years a new Hebrew translation by Rabbi Yosef Kappah has appeared.

מהרש"ל *Maharshal* (in most editions), the work by Rabbi Shlomo Luria, Rabbi in Lublin in the sixteenth century (1510–1573). This is one of the most important and widely used Talmudic reference works. In it the Maharshal succinctly discusses the Talmud and its most important commentators. A major part of the work consists of textual emendations, many of which are now incorporated within the editions of the Talmud itself, often without any indication that they are emendations.

מהרש"א *Maharsha* (in most editions), a combination of two works by Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Edels (1555–1631), the Rabbi of Ostrog, Poland, in the sixteenth century. Two works, *Hiddushei Halakhot* (חידושי הלכות) and *Hiddushei Aggadot* (חידושי אגדות), cover almost the entire Talmud. In most editions the two were combined and printed together, though in two different typefaces. חידושי הלכות mainly interprets the Talmud, Rashi, and Tosafot, page by page, whereas חידושי אגדות interprets the Aggadic material in the Talmud, both literally and figuratively. For centuries the works of the Maharsha have been considered an essential part of advanced Talmud study.

מהר"ם *Maharam* (in most editions), a commentary on the entire Talmud written by Rabbi Meir of Lublin (1558–1618). This work is mainly the fruit of the author's teaching experience in his yeshivah, and its didactic nature is evident: the work is quite extensive at the beginning of each tractate but diminishes in extent towards the end. Rabbi Meir's commentaries on the Talmud, Rashi, and Tosafot are considered to be clear and close to the literal meaning of the text.

The study of the מהרש"א, מהרש"ל, and מהר"ם was an essential part of Talmud study in almost every yeshivah. Apart from these works, which are printed in many editions, additional commentaries by many later rabbis are found in the large Vilna editions, including comments, emendations, and short explanations. The following are only a few of these many commentaries.

הגהות וחינושי הרש"ש *Haggahot VeHiddushei HaRashash*, the commentaries of Rabbi Shmuel Strashun of Vilna, a nineteenth-century Rabbinic scholar. They explore the literal meaning of the text, with a critical tendency. Some of these commentaries are also the author's original insights.

חידושי מהר"צ חיות *Hiddushei Maharatz Hayyot*, the commentaries of Rabbi Tzvi Hayyot, the Rabbi of Zholkow in Galicia, who lived in the nineteenth century. These commentaries and interpretations include many of the author's original ideas.

הגהות ר' אלעזר משה הורוביץ *Haggahot Rabbi Elazar Moshe Horowitz*, original comments and important textual emendations by Rabbi Elazar Moshe Horowitz, the Rabbi of Pinsk in the nineteenth century.

יפה עינים *Yefei Einayim*, by Rabbi Arye Leib Yellin, the Rabbi of Bilsk in the nineteenth century. This work includes many additions to מְסוּרַת הַש"ס, indicating parallels not only from the Babylonian but also from the Jerusalem Talmud and the Halakhic Midrashim, as well as many quotations from Aggadic Midrashim. It also contains important interpretative comments.

Appended Collections of Halakhic Decisions

The largest and most complete editions of the Talmud also include as appendices certain major works of Halakhic decisions which follow the order of the Talmud.

הלכות הר"ף *Hilkhhot HaRif*. This important book of Halakhah was composed by Rabbi Yitzhak Alfasi (known as the Rif), who lived in North Africa and Spain in the eleventh century (1013–1103).

It is constructed as a kind of Halakhic summary of the Talmud, following the order of discussions in the Talmud but deleting everything that does not touch upon the actual, applicable Halakhah. It shortens the Talmudic debates considerably and leaves out those Halakhot that had no practical application (for that reason it was composed only on the tractates in the orders of *Moed*, *Nashim*, and *Nezikin*, and on the tractates *Berakhot* and *Niddah*). The Rif presents only those Aggadic matters that convey practical lessons, whether in the area of action or of ethics. To this day his work is considered a fundamental source of the Halakhah. Many commentaries have been written on it, some of which are themselves sources for Halakhic decisions and interpretation, and they are important not only for determining the Halakhah but also for understanding the Talmudic text itself. Many of these commentaries, known as נושאי כליים—"armor-bearers"—are printed on the page of standard editions of *Hilkhhot HaRif*. Among them should be mentioned an abbreviated version of Rashi's commentary adapted to *Hilkhhot HaRif*. Sometimes this commentary reflects a version of Rashi different from that in the Talmud.

המאור *HaMa'or* consists of two works, הגדול (covering the orders of *Nashim* and *Nezikin*) and הקטן (on the order of *Moed*). The author is Rabbi Zerahyah HaLevi of Lunel in Provence, who lived in the twelfth century. This work mainly contains glosses and criticisms of decisions of the Rif and also the author's original Halakhic conclusions.

השגות הראב"ד *Hasagot HaRa'avad*, the glosses of Rabbi Avraham ben David of Posquieres (c. 1125–1198), containing sharp criticism of Rabbi Zerahyah HaLevi's work and a defense of the Rif, though occasionally also criticizing the latter.

מלחמות ה' *Milhamot HaShem*, by Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman (Ramban, also known as Nahmanides) of Gerona in Spain, who lived in the thirteenth century (1194–1270). Ramban, one of the greatest scholars of the Talmud, wrote this work mainly to defend the Rif from the objections of ספרי המאור, answering rebuttals and

explaining *Hilkhhot HaRif*. He also wrote it in response to the *Hasagot HaRa'avad*.

הר"ן *HaRan*, the interpretation of Rabbenu Nissim ben Reuven of Gerona in Spain, who lived in the fourteenth century. This book is an extensive and exhaustive commentary on *Hilkhhot HaRif*, thereby explaining the Talmudic discussion and presenting other authorities as well. The work covers only part of *Hilkhhot HaRif* and is generally printed alongside it. It is an extremely important interpretative and Halakhic source.

נִימוּקֵי יוֹסֵף *Nimukei Yosef*, a commentary on *Hilkhhot HaRif*, by Rabbi Yosef H̄aviva, who lived in Spain in the fifteenth century. His commentaries are usually printed with those tractates on which there is no commentary by Rabbenu Nissim. This work, like that of Rabbenu Nissim, is also a general commentary on the Talmud and the Halakhah, presenting much material from works both by Halakhic authorities and by commentators.

תְּלִמְיֵי רַבֵּינוּ יוֹנָה *Talmidei Rabbenu Yonah*, a collection of commentaries written by the students of Rabbenu Yonah of Gerona, who lived in Spain in the thirteenth century. This is an extensive and detailed work, and its interpretations are important and interesting. It is printed only on the tractate *Berakhot* (in *Hilkhhot HaRif*).

שְׁלֵטֵי הַגִּבּוֹרִים *Shiltei HaGibborim*, the commentary of Rabbi Yehoshua Boaz (the author of *מְסוֹרֶת הַש"ס* and other works), who lived in Italy in the sixteenth century. This book presents supplements to the work of the Rif taken from many other Halakhic authorities.

In addition to those mentioned above, there are a great many additional textual studies and reference works, some of which are printed on the same page as *Hilkhhot HaRif*.

סֵפֶר מֶרְדֵּכַי *Sefer Mordekhai*, written by Rabbi Mordekhai ben Hillel Ashkenazi, who lived in Germany in the thirteenth century. This book, which follows the order of *Hilkhhot HaRif*, is an original work of Halakhic commentary, containing an enormous amount of earlier interpretative and Halakhic material from the Geonim to the

great Rabbis of Germany. This work was apparently even more extensive, and what we possess is a kind of summary of it. There are many different manuscripts of this work, which also contain a great deal of additional material. Numerous interpretations, textual emendations, and additions to the *Mordekhai* have been written, some of which are printed on the pages of regular editions of the work. To date no complete edition of this important work has been published.

15

The Subject Matter of the Talmud



THE LIST OF TRACTATE NAMES suffices to give some impressions of the scope of the Talmud, but it does not exhaust the tremendous range of subjects. The purpose of the Talmud is *talmud Torah* (literally study of Torah) in the widest sense of the word, that is, acquisition of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, since Torah is regarded as encompassing everything contained in the world. An allegory in the Talmud and the commentaries depicts the Torah as a kind of blueprint for construction of the world. Elsewhere, the Talmud calculated that the scope of Torah was several times that of the world. Thus all of life is of interest to scholars and constitutes fit subject matter for the Talmud, to be discussed in brief or at length. The concept of Torah is immeasurably wider than the concept of religious law, and while Jewish religious jurisprudence encompasses all spheres of life and overlooks almost nothing, the scope of Torah is even wider. Habits, customs, occupational hints, medical advice, examinations of human nature, linguistic questions, ethical problems—all these are Torah and as such are touched upon in the Talmud. And since all of life is permeated with Torah, the sages are not merely teachers, offering *ex cathedra* instruction; their very lives constitute Torah, and everything pertaining to them is worthy of perusal.

The sages themselves said, "Random conversations, jests, or casual statements of sages should be studied," and sometimes impor-

tant *halakhah* is derived from chance remarks made without any educational intent. This being so, the actions of the sages are of even greater significance. Everything a sage does in every sphere of endeavor must be carried out in a spirit of truth and should be Torah itself. Disciples often studied closely the behavior of their rabbi in order to learn how to conduct themselves. An extreme example of this was the disciple who was reported to have concealed himself under the bed of his great teacher in order to discover how he behaved with his wife. When queried on his inquisitiveness, the young disciple replied: "It is Torah and deserves to be studied," an approach accepted by both rabbis and students as valid. Since certain matters pertain to Torah, there is no room for reticence or for exclusion of certain spheres of behavior from the general rule. It is extremely interesting to note that, although the talmudic sages were marked by their almost excessively modest approach to sexual life and the naked human body and were shocked by profanity, there was no taboo on study of the minutest details of these subjects. Discussions were based on euphemisms and used the most delicate terms; however, the scholars could dwell on both normal and deviant details as long as these were considered pertinent.

This wide range of interests is characteristic not only of *halakhah* in the limited sense of the word but of Torah in the fullest sense. An illuminating exchange of views has been preserved on this subject in the Talmud itself. One of the prominent scholars asks his son, also renowned for his learning, why he has discontinued his visits to the lectures of one of the academy heads. The son replies resentfully: "Every time I come he gives me trivial subjects to study," and explains that the great rabbi had lectured on regulations of lavatory hygiene. "If so," says his father, "then you should renew and increase your visits, since he is dealing with important matters crucial for daily life." In light of this attitude, it is not surprising that the Talmud contains medical hints, remedies against disease, explanations of folk sayings, and many hundreds of anecdotes about various famous personalities. These matters do not form part of the regular curriculum of study,

and although certain scholars adhered strictly to the subject at hand as long as they were inside the academy, this did not imply that they denied the values of other matters. R. Zira, the sage, who was famed for his piety and saintliness, went to Palestine against the advice of his rabbi. Before leaving he felt the need to see his teacher for the last time without being seen, so he concealed himself and listened while the rabbi instructed the bathhouse attendants in their duties. Later he noted that he was overjoyed at having learned something new from his beloved mentor.

At the same time, certain restrictions were applied to subject matter. However great the scope of Torah, the sages were never concerned with scientific speculation for its own sake and displayed no interest whatsoever in philosophy, whether in its Classic Greek, Hellenistic, or Roman versions. Talmudic study of subjects corresponding to general philosophy is constructed in a totally different fashion. Similarly, the sages were indifferent to science itself, whether astronomy, medicine, or mathematics. In these, as in other spheres of science and knowledge, they recognized only the boundaries of Torah and they studied these matters on only two planes, dealing with science only when it related directly to *halakhah* and with the natural sciences only when there were general ethical and ideological implications. Their attitude to medicine is characteristic of this approach. Since laws pertaining to ritual impurity call for considerable knowledge of animal anatomy and physiology, the sages developed this sphere of study and succeeded, through research efforts that were not based on prior knowledge of prevailing scientific theories, in arriving at amazingly accurate conclusions. In this, as in other areas, they anticipated modern science while endeavoring to employ an empirical approach without having recourse to theoretical structures that did not derive directly from tested facts. They never deviated from the domain of fact into pure scientific speculation, since this was of no concern to them.

The same is true of the study of human problems. In certain fields of anatomy it was necessary to arrive at precise conclusions, and in

those cases the sages did not rely on the scientific knowledge of their day but conducted their own experiments. In laws of defilement, for example, it was important to determine the number of bones in the human body, and to this end, R. Ishmael's disciples examined the corpses of women sentenced to death and executed by the authorities. Their conclusions were remarkably accurate and are still valid. On the other hand, they did not deal with the medical or physiological problems of the human body. Their yardstick for deciding whether a certain medicine was efficacious or a quack remedy was scientific testing. As for astronomy, where precise factual data were required (the length of time between new moons, for example), they succeeded in obtaining the necessary information but took no interest whatsoever in theoretical astronomy. Their image of the world, as ascertained from several sources, is inconsistent and appears very primitive at first glance. When one studies their statements, however, it becomes clear that they were not engaging in real cosmological speculation but were contemplating an ideal spiritual world, although they avoided abstract expressions. When they wrote that the land rests on the mountains, the mountains on the sea, and the sea on a pillar named *tzaddik* (righteous one), it is evident that the description was not meant to be taken literally.

Those sages who were physicians by occupation were, of course, obliged to acquaint themselves with the medical lore of their time. Those who were professional surveyors studied geometry, and the mathematicians were well versed in their subject. But these were professional studies and were not related to talmudic study except to the degree that they were needed for halakhic rulings or ethical opinions.

The restrictions on scientific studies applied mainly to method: the talmudic scholars respected facts and tried to limit their studies to tested factual themes. They were indifferent to scientific speculation, whether tested and proved or in the realm of philosophical conjecture, because they were preoccupied with their own unique ways of thinking.

Thus the spiritual world of the sages was not closed to external influence or knowledge. "If you are told that there is wisdom among the nations, believe it," they said. At the same time, however, they tried to confine themselves to what they regarded as important, and when they studied Torah they tried, as far as possible, to remain within its boundaries. Some of the mishnaic and talmudic sages were acquainted with Greek and classical literature, but this knowledge had almost no impact on their way of thinking where talmudic scholarship was concerned. In this they differed greatly from Egyptian Jewry, which tried to combine Greek culture with Judaism.

Since almost all of the talmudic scholars engaged in common occupations, they were involved in everyday life. Many knew several languages, and one of the qualifications for the appointment of members of the Sanhedrin was expertise in a number of sciences and in languages. Traces of their erudition are abundantly evident in the Talmud, each related subject itself becoming Torah.

The view of the Torah as all-embracing accounts for another trait of talmudic literature—the constant transition from issue to issue and sphere to sphere without specifying the differences between them. Talmudic debate, with its associative methods, is not limited to the *halakhah*. Any subject under the sun may be related to another matter by internal association. Sometimes, for example in a discussion of marriage laws, evidence will be cited from the sphere of criminal law or sacrificial law, and the two categories are not regarded as differing in essence. What is more, halakhic debate on an extremely prosaic subject will sometimes shift almost imperceptibly to the sphere of ethics, allegory, or metaphysics. Only in the Talmud can one read the following statement: "On this subject there were differences of opinion between two Palestinian sages, and there are those who say that it was a debate between two angels from Heaven" without finding the juxtaposition strange. After all, mundane affairs, abstract discussions of *halakhah*, and questions pertaining to the heavenly sphere are all concentrated together within the concept of Torah, and each interacts with the others.

16

Prayers and Benedictions



IN THE FIRST TEMPLE ERA, prayer was entirely spontaneous; when a man felt the need to petition his God or thank Him, he prayed in his own words and on his own ground, and in times of trouble or particular stress he would come to the Temple to utter his prayers there. The formal regulation of prayer had already commenced; the first psalms had been composed and were sung by the Levites on special occasions in the Temple, so that the general public was aware of the existence of certain official prayer ceremonies that took place at fixed times.

The need for a recognized version of prayers became pressing at the beginning of the Second Temple era. Many of the returning Babylonian exiles had only sparse knowledge of the Hebrew language and of basic concepts of Judaism. When they wanted to pray, they lacked both language and content. The Great Assembly therefore decided to compose a standard prayer reflecting the wishes and aspirations of the entire people. It was composed of eighteen benedictions, each dealing in brief with one subject. This prayer, most of which has survived to the present day and still constitutes the basis of the synagogue service, consists of three opening benedictions, three closing benedictions, and twelve intermediary ones containing various requests and supplications. In the mishnaic era the first three benedictions were named *Avot* (Fathers), in praise of the faith of the fathers;