

INTRODUCTION

In August 2012, I read about an extraordinary event that took place at New Jersey's MetLife Stadium. Where crowds usually gather to watch the Jets and Giants play football, some eighty thousand Orthodox Jews filled the seats to celebrate a religious and intellectual milestone. The Siyum HaShas, "the completion of the Talmud," marked the conclusion of the cycle of Daf Yomi, "daily page"—a study program in which Jews around the world read one page of Talmud every day for 2,711 days, about seven and a half years.

I knew about Daf Yomi, but I hadn't realized what a major phenomenon it had become. And the Siyum itself, with its wonderful incongruity—a scholarly achievement celebrated like the Super Bowl—was a striking demonstration of the dynamism and possibility of American Jewish life. Where else in Jewish history could so many Jews have come together so openly to celebrate the Talmud? I decided that when the next Siyum rolled around, in January 2020, I wanted to be part of it.

Most people who do Daf Yomi are Orthodox Jews, for whom it is both a learning opportunity and a devotional exercise. I lead a secular life, and my interest in the Talmud had a different source: as a student of Jewish literature and history, I came to realize that I couldn't fully explore these subjects without some knowledge of the Talmud. After all, for 1,500 years the Talmud shaped the way Jews thought and what they thought about. Talmud study was the most prestigious activity in Jewish society, a key to social advancement as well as a rigorous training in how to think, analyze, and argue. It was also reserved for men, as it still is in the ultra-Orthodox world; only in recent decades have other denominations encouraged women to study Talmud.

The amazing continuity of Judaism across time and space is owed in large part to the Talmud. Rabbi Akiva, who was martyred by the Romans in the second century CE, pondered some of the same halakhic issues that occupied Maimonides, who lived in Egypt in the twelfth century. In the

twenty-first century, yeshiva students in Lakewood, New Jersey, are analyzing the very same problems, in part by consulting the words of Akiva and Maimonides.

The difference is that, in American Judaism today, those Talmud students are the exception rather than the rule. For the 90 percent of American Jews who are not Orthodox, the Talmud plays little or no role in their Jewish education. I grew up in a Conservative synagogue and attended many years of Hebrew school, and while I learned a good deal, I never encountered a page of Talmud. In a way this makes sense, because what differentiates Orthodox from non-Orthodox Judaism is their attitudes toward halakha or Jewish law, and the Talmud is the foundation of halakha. There's not much reason to spend years studying the Talmudic tractates on Shabbat observance or marriage and divorce if you don't believe that these laws are divinely inspired or personally binding.

I'm sure that if I had been exposed to Talmud study as a teenager, I would have had no patience for it. But as an adult I was more curious and less defensive—free to learn without feeling obligated to argue. Daf Yomi was a chance to fill the Talmud-sized gap in my understanding of Judaism. As a literary critic, I'm accustomed to grappling with difficult texts by writing about them, so I was delighted when the online magazine *Tablet* agreed to have me write a column about my Daf Yomi experience. I started right away, in the first week of August 2012, and kept writing on an almost weekly basis until the end of the thirteenth Daf Yomi cycle in January 2020.

When I was thinking about embarking on this long journey, I asked a Jewishly learned friend for advice. He said I should go ahead, as long as I kept in mind the difference between what I was doing and actual Talmud study. I knew the differences were profound. Daf Yomi sounds like, and is, a major commitment, but it was invented in 1923 as a popularizing method, a way of making Talmud study accessible to lay people. You can read a page of Talmud in an hour before or after work and get the gist. But yeshiva students pore over the Talmud ten hours a day; great scholars study it their whole lives.

What's more, I was reading the Talmud in English translation, rather than in the original Hebrew and Aramaic, and I was doing it alone, rather than with a teacher or study partner. Such an undertaking would hardly have been possible even a generation ago. But in the twenty-first century,

the appetite for Talmud study—and the need for English-language help, even among religious students—has grown to the point that there are now two complete English translations of the Babylonian Talmud in print, as well as a free digital version available at Sefaria, the online Jewish library. Since I started Daf Yomi in 2012, there has been an explosion of digital resources for learners—calendars, summaries, discussion groups, audio and video lectures.

For my study, I used the Noe Edition of the Babylonian Talmud published by Koren, which is based on the modern Hebrew edition of the Talmud by the great Israeli scholar Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz. This version includes the original Hebrew and Aramaic text along with an English translation that clarifies its terse, ambiguous language. It also includes footnotes, diagrams, and illustrations, while omitting the many commentaries that appear on a traditional Talmud page, which turn it into a forum of voices from across the centuries.

Early in the Daf Yomi cycle, I had a chance to study a page with my cousin, who is much more observant than I am. As we read together on a bench in Central Park, it occurred to me that no one in our family had studied Talmud for a least a century, since our great-grandparents came to America. But here we were, taking it up again after what turned out to be a long interruption, rather than a permanent parting. I was learning Talmud in a very different spirit than Jews in the past, or devout Jews today; but I was still learning.

This book is mainly intended for readers who are in a similar position. I've found that introductory books about the Talmud, some of which I've benefited from greatly, generally fall into two categories. Academic studies like *The Talmud: A Biography* by Barry Scott Wimpfheimer and *Halakhah: The Rabbinic Idea of Law* by Chaim Saiman, both published in 2018, focus on the Talmud's historical development and its role in Judaism. On the other hand, works by rabbis, such as Abraham Cohen's *Everyman's Talmud*—first published in 1932 and still in print—draw on the Talmud to synthesize general statements of Jewish belief.

Both approaches illuminate why the Talmud matters, but they give little sense of what the Talmud actually *is*—how the text moves and what it thinks about, its preoccupations and insights, its moments of strangeness and profundity. That's what I hope to do in this book. I am no kind of expert

on the Talmud, neither religious nor academic. But as a critic, I have some experience in exploring difficult texts and discussing what I found there, and why it matters. In fact, maybe the best way to describe this book is as a kind of travel writing—a report on what I saw during my seven-and-a-half-year journey through the Talmud.

The Talmud is full of verbal formulas—words and phrases that are used repeatedly in certain situations. One of them is “*ta shma*,” Aramaic for “come and hear,” which is used when a rabbi quotes an earlier authority to settle a dispute about the law. Beyond its technical meaning, however, “come and hear” captures something important about the ethos of the Talmud, which always wants to widen the circle of discussion rather than close it off. That’s what I hope this book will do: help readers to come closer to the Talmud and hear some of the wise, complicated, and challenging things it has to say.

The Talmud is difficult to describe in a way that’s both brief and meaningful. Usually we approach unfamiliar books by likening them to ones we already know, but there is no book that resembles the Talmud—it is its own genre. Almost anything you could say about it requires qualification. It’s the most important Jewish text next to the Bible, but it’s nothing like the Bible; it’s the source of Jewish law, but it’s not a law code. Jewish tradition gestures at the Talmud’s amorphousness and scale by comparing it to a sea. You can’t grasp the whole thing at once; you have to dive in and start swimming.

Still, it helps to start with a map. The Talmud is made up of two layers: the Mishna, which was written in Hebrew around the year 200 CE, and the Gemara, a commentary on the Mishna that was composed in Aramaic over the following three hundred years. On a standard Talmud page, the Hebrew text of the Mishna and the Aramaic text of the Gemara sit at the center. Each unit of the Mishna, referred to as “*a mishna*,” is followed by a corresponding unit of Gemara that comments on it, known as a *sugya*. Often a few sentences of Mishna can give rise to many pages of Gemara. The standard pagination of the Talmud was established in the first printed edition, in the 1520s; a page number is followed by “*a*” or “*b*,” to signify the front or back of the folio page. (A *daf* is made up of both sides of a page.)

The key to understanding the Talmud’s unique structure is that both the Mishna and the Gemara were originally oral traditions, not written documents like the Torah. The Mishna was a collection of laws that had

been passed down from teacher to student for generations; according to the traditional understanding, they were given to Moses on Mount Sinai at the same as the written Torah.

These laws were finally written down in the second century CE, at a time when Jewish society in the land of Israel was in ruins. The Jewish revolt against the Romans in 66–70 CE had ended in the destruction of the Temple, the ancient center of Jewish worship. A second revolt in 132–135 CE had also been crushed, resulting in the death and deportation of hundreds of thousands of Jews and the erasure of the name Judea from the map of the Roman Empire.

These catastrophes were comparable to the Holocaust in their political and religious consequences. Fearing that the chain of transmission of the oral Torah would be broken, the rabbis of the second century began to collect and systematize its laws. This process culminated in the redaction of the Mishna by Yehuda HaNasi—“Judah the Prince,” the leading rabbi of his generation—who arranged the laws by subject matter into six large divisions called orders, subdivided into sixty-three tractates. The Mishna is the foundation of Jewish law to this day, though much of it deals with subjects that had no practical application after the destruction of the Temple, such as the laws of animal sacrifice.

The structure of the Mishna reflects its oral origins. Rather than simply stating the law, it records the teachings of various rabbinic authorities, known as tannaim, even when they conflict with one another. The view that has the force of law is usually stated first without attribution, or attributed to “the rabbis,” while a dissenting view is attributed to the tanna who holds it. For instance, the Mishna records many disagreements between the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai, rival sages of the first century BCE. As a rule, the law follows the opinion of Hillel, but the opinion of Shammai is always recorded too. As the Mishna says, their disagreements were “for the sake of Heaven,” so both views are sacred and deserving of study.

In other ways, too, the Mishna is more like the record of a discussion among experts than a law code. It doesn’t state abstract principles in a systematic fashion; rather, principles emerge from the analysis of concrete problems. Thus tractate Shabbat doesn’t begin by stating that it is prohibited to transfer items between a public domain and a private domain on Shabbat.

Rather, it imagines a situation in which someone in a public domain hands an item to someone in a private domain, or vice versa, and asks which of them is guilty of violating Shabbat.

These features of the Mishna—the plurality of opinions and the focus on concrete problems—invite further analysis and discussion. What are the general principles that govern the Mishna’s rulings, and how could they be applied to new situations that the Mishna didn’t anticipate? Can the opinions of different tannaim be harmonized? Can one area of law yield insights into an apparently unrelated area?

These kinds of questions were discussed in rabbinic academies for three centuries following the redaction of the Mishna. The record of these discussions is the Gemara, the second layer of the Talmud, which was organized and written down in the sixth century CE. Unlike the Mishna, the Gemara is written in Aramaic, the language actually spoken by Jews (and other peoples) in the Middle East at that time. By the third century, the center of Jewish life had shifted from Roman Palestine to Babylonia (present-day Iraq), which was part of the Persian Empire and enjoyed greater prosperity and stability. Both countries produced a Gemara to accompany the Mishna, but the Babylonian Talmud (the Bavli) is richer and more authoritative than the Palestinian Talmud (the Yerushalmi). When people refer simply to the Talmud, they mean the Babylonian Talmud.

In the Talmud there is Gemara on thirty-seven of the sixty-three Mishnaic tractates, including all the ones that deal with issues of continuing relevance—holidays, marriage and divorce, civil and criminal law, kashrut. The rabbis of the Gemara, known as amoraim, take the oral and plural qualities of the Mishna to a new level. They engage in vigorous debates—positing, refuting, citing proofs, bursting out with insults. They use thought experiments, sometimes bizarre ones, to test the limits of concepts—for instance, asking if it’s permitted to build a sukka using a live elephant as one of the walls. They closely analyze the Torah, reading it against the grain to find support for their position. There were eight generations of amoraim and many names are cited in the Gemara, though a few predominate, including rival pairs such as Rav and Shmuel or Rava and Abaye.

As with any conversation, the tannaim and amoraim often digress from the main subject. When a sage is cited on one issue, the Talmud might take the opportunity to list his teachings on other matters, or tell stories

about his life. Sometimes a rule that takes a certain grammatical form will lead to a discussion of unrelated rules that follow the same pattern. This means that while each tractate is nominally devoted to a certain subject, their names aren't always a guide to their actual contents (for instance, to find the laws of circumcision, you have to look in tractate Shabbat.) This unpredictability is one of the things that makes the Talmud so difficult to master; simply knowing where to find the subject you're interested in requires a feat of memory.

Most of the rabbis' discussion is about halakha or law, but sometimes it swerves into aggada or storytelling. This category includes all kinds of non-legal talk: anecdotes about the personal habits of famous sages, miracle tales, speculations about the nature of the cosmos, ethical maxims, Biblical homilies. Only about ten percent of the Talmud is devoted to aggada, but it's the source of the best-known Talmudic sayings, and it's where the rabbis express their ethical and spiritual ideas most directly.

This heterogeneity means that the Talmud is a difficult text to pin down. A discussion doesn't always end in a clear statement of what the law actually is. Questions are often raised but not conclusively answered; sometimes the rabbis adjourn a debate with the formula "let it stand," meaning that they can't reach a decision. This complexity and ambiguity makes it difficult to be sure "what the Talmud says" about a given issue.

Still less can one assume that what the Talmud says is what Judaism says, since the process of halakhic interpretation didn't end in the sixth century. The Talmud, like the Bible, permits polygamy; according to tractate Yevamot, a man can have up to four wives, the most he can expect to satisfy sexually. Islam also permitted polygamy, and Jews living under Islamic rule continued the practice. But Ashkenazi Jews, living in Christian Europe where monogamy was the norm, gave up polygamy around the year 1000 by rabbinic edict. Slavery, too, was common when the Talmud was composed but later disappeared from Judaism.

To know the halakha on a particular subject, then, Jews today don't consult the Talmud but the *Shulchan Aruch*, a practical and systematic digest written in the sixteenth century. Still, codifications like the *Shulchan Aruch* and Maimonides's earlier *Mishneh Torah* have never stopped Jews from going back to the Talmud, because in Judaism, Talmud study isn't a goal-oriented activity; it's an end in itself, a sacred practice. According to

Rabbi Meir, one of the most important tannaim, anyone who engages in study for its own sake is “exalted above all of creation.”

This identification of the sacred with the intellectual is what makes rabbinic Judaism so distinctive. For Judaism, learning and thinking are forms of worship—an idea that continues to shape Jewish culture today, even among Jews who have no interest in the Talmud. In fact, Talmud study isn’t only or even mostly about what we now think of as religious matters, like morality or spirituality. Halakha governs every part of human life, and the Talmud is interested in all of it—Shabbat observance and kosher slaughter, inheritance and real estate, marriage and divorce, personal injury and capital punishment, the size of the universe and the nature of the afterlife, how to deliver a baby and how to bury a corpse, semen and menstrual blood, good table manners and the inscrutability of divine justice. As one sage says, “Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it.”

In *Come and Hear*, I hope to give some sense of the Talmud’s richness. The book follows the order of the tractates in the Daf Yomi cycle, but makes no attempt to be comprehensive. Instead, I pay attention to particular arguments, episodes, and themes, to illuminate what the Talmud thinks about and how. Modern readers will find many things to object to in the logic and values of the Talmud—how could it be otherwise, with a text written more than 1,500 years ago? But my purpose here isn’t to register objections, even when I share them. It’s to enter into the Talmud’s world, with all its difference and difficulty, and share some of what I found there in the seven and half years of my Daf Yomi journey.