

Italian Talmud

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Talmud is the most defining text of Judaism as it is today—in a way, even more so than the Bible, even though without the Bible there would be no Talmud.

The Bible is shared with Christianity and, in a very indirect way, with Islam. In the case of Christianity, the Old Testament has been superseded by the New. Although that is not relevant to me personally, at least we can agree on the text of the original.

Islam, on the other hand, claims that the Bible we have is a distortion at best and a forgery at worst. Which strikes me as laughable since the biblical text existed in Hebrew at least a thousand years before Islam. Whereas the earliest uncritical date of the Koran is that Mohammad stated receiving Divine revelations from 609 CE onwards. Even in translation, the Greek Septuagint dates to 132 BCE and the Vulgate in Latin to around 390 CE and they overwhelmingly accord with the Jewish version. Which was why Maimonides approved of studying the Bible with Christians rather than Muslims, but preferred accepting a Muslim oath by Allah rather than a Christian one.

But more importantly for Judaism, the written biblical text always coexisted alongside an oral tradition of some sort, that clarified how people understood the written. The oral tradition, with its developments and innovations, was only formally written down around the second century of the common era. This document, the Mishnah, was the platform on which the expansion, the Gemara, was built. The two together are what we call the Talmud. It covers the spiritual, ethical, and legal spectrum of Jewish life over a thousand years, from the Persian to the Roman world. Judaism today cannot be understood without it.

The Talmud is a massive encyclopedia of Jewish law and lore that took almost 500 years to complete. It has 63 tractates and is usually published nowadays in nineteen volumes. They include not just the Talmud itself, but a huge collection of super commentaries on the text which, in modern editions, extend to our times. Since Jews were barred from universities and academies for much of the past, the Talmud became the focus of Jewish intellectual activity, energy, and creativity. The core of Jewish scholarship.

The Talmud was translated into German in the nineteenth century and into English with the Soncino edition of the text under Rabbi Isidore Epstein between 1936 and 1945. In 1965 Rabbi Dr. Zvi Ehrman began editing a Talmud El Am, a popular Hebrew translation, and then an English version. Rav Adin Steinsaltz began translating the Talmud into Modern Hebrew with his own commentary and explanation in 1989, which was then produced in English, French, Russian, and Spanish. The most popular modern translation into English is the Artscroll/Mesorah which added a valuable, if selective, traditional commentary and was completed in 2004.

Translations are helpful because the Talmud contains archaic words both Hebrew and Aramaic, as well as references to Greek. But studying the Talmud, as opposed to just reading it, is a very different and complex process. It is an intellectual discipline that has contributed the intellectual sharpness of its students. The popular Daf Yomi, reading a Daf a day, is really just a gimmick (albeit a beneficial one), because many pages of the Talmud are so complex and ambiguous that it can take days to work out the meaning and to master the flow of logic and conflicting opinions. In the yeshivas where I studied, a Daf could take a week or more. So a Daf-a-day is more a useful discipline, an act of commitment, than a serious academic process.

All this brings me to an event I attended last week to celebrate the Italian translation of the Babylonian Talmud. Behind the project is a remarkable woman, Professor Clelia Piperno, of proud Italian stock, ably supported by the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Riccardo Di Segni. Professor Piperno was the driving force who had the contacts and knew how to raise funds through Italian and European cultural agencies for what turned into a massive project.

To everyone's surprise, the first volume sold over 10,000 copies in Italy. Italian Jewry is relatively small; there are some 24,000 Jews in Italy nowadays. Hardly any of the original Italian Jewry that descended from exiles from Israel to Rome still exist. Italian Jewry always stood independent of both Ashkenazi and Sephardi streams and customs. Most Italian Jews now are postwar arrivals. Not many are Jewish scholars. Those interested in studying the Talmud in Italian, even fewer. Even if there are probably twice as many Italian-speaking Jews in Israel, this translation could have been seen, initially, only as a token or a vanity project—but for one factor that emerged when the representative of the technical company that turned this project into a digital miracle, took the floor.

He told us that this translation of the Talmud was the work of the Institute of Computational Linguistics of the National Research Council of Italy. Some mouthful. The project was named "Traduco" (literally "I translate"). The system "indexes information on its own and allows for a uniform translation of text, notes, and comments. And it provides alternate translation suggestions automatically."

Impressive. But what really struck me was the presenter saying that this software would enable the Talmud to be translated into any other language. In other words, this goes beyond any work of translation of the Talmud that has ever been done. It is a remarkable tool, a product of modern technology unlike anything we have witnessed in Judaica. And the brain child of an Italian community that once was the proudest in all Jewry yet is now one of the smallest. Who knows that the biggest academies in Jewish life a thousand years ago were in the heel of Italy? But inspiration comes from many sources. There is something significant, even miraculous, in that this achievement is the product of Italian Jewry.

Lesson one is that one should never write off any Jewish community. Lesson two is that a country rooted in culture that spans sectarian and nationalist boundaries is fertile ground for innovation and creativity. And thirdly, that this is one of the most significant developments in Judaism's contribution to

world culture.

My connection to Italy and the Italian language is tenuous, but I have always loved Italian culture, its richness, variety and "joie de vivre", even if it is one of the most corrupt, dysfunctional countries in Europe. Now that I live in the USA, which is in many ways even more dysfunctional, I realize that functionalism is not nearly as crucial as inspiration of which Italy and the US have plenty. This project is a little miracle.

Those who study the Talmud closed off in their confined academies certainly contribute significantly to Jewish life in one way. But those who can take it out into the world at large are contributing to humanity in general, enabling the Talmud to be translated into any language. This is really something special. Kol Hakavod, Respect, and may the project go from strength to strength.