Guest Editors’ Introduction

Introduction to Finding and Re-Finding the Talmud in Reform Judaism

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We can begin at Dictionary.com:

Tal·mud·ic [tahl-moo d-ik]

adjective

1. of or pertaining to the Talmud.
2. characterized by or making extremely fine distinctions; overly detailed or subtle; hairsplitting.

Or we can begin with the more standard intellectual history of Reform Judaism:

In 1845, Radical Reformer Samuel Holdheim argued that the “banner of progress,” i.e., the reform of Judaism, had to be freed from “rigid hands of the Talmud.”

The standard narrative is that Talmud disappeared from Reform Jewish life at some point in the nineteenth century because our Reform forbearers shared the dictionary’s assessment of Talmud and Talmudic thinking, and it was not to reemerge until the late twentieth century rise of postmodernism. For the radical and later classical Reformers the jewels in the crown of Torah were the Prophetic books. These were the central and, moreover, the only

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relevant books in the constellation of classic Jewish sacred texts. Given that it was the ethics particular to Judaism that mattered for modern Jewry, the “externals” of Jewish observance together with Talmudic legalese could finally be discarded (or, if not entirely discarded, relegated to being a museum piece).

This narrative is not without justification, for Holdheim was not simply expressing his personal opinion. Almost 130 years ago, the Pittsburgh Platform asserted that “only the moral laws” were “binding” while biblical and “rabbinical laws” were outmoded.2 It did not mention the Talmud specifically; as this narrative is told, Talmud was so removed from Reform Jewish life even then that it did not need to. But not so fast. Apparently classical Reformers still had some use for the Talmud.

Five years after the proclamation of the Pittsburgh Platform, Isaac M. Wise himself argued that the very authority of Reform Judaism was based on “Talmudical teachings.”3 And here again, Wise was not solely expressing a personal opinion without larger communal meaning. Even before the radical upheavals of the mid-twentieth century (including the Shoah and the birth of a modern Jewish state), the 1937 Columbus Platform neutered the radicalism of Pittsburgh and rehabilitated keystones of the tradition, including post-biblical, Rabbinic literature: “The Torah, both written and oral [italics added] enshrines Israel’s ever-growing consciousness of God and of the moral law,” the authors of the Columbus Platform declared.

And today, although some elements of Western, mass culture may still equate the Talmud with obscurantism, current thinking about the Talmud is more nuanced, both within and outside the Jewish community. The Talmud question was put on the public agenda by a historic event that took place just two years ago. This event was arguably unparalleled in Jewish history: The Twelfth Siyum HaShas of Daf Yomi held in the summer of 2012 at MetLife Stadium in New Jersey included close to ninety thousand participants with the proceedings simulcast to sixty cities in twenty countries, and it was reported in countless papers across the globe. Orthodox Jewish men have engaged in daf yomi study since Rabbi Meir Shapiro first introduced the idea in 1923, but this event generated discussion and debate across the Jewish spectrum:

• Is daf yomi the ideal mode for Talmudic learning? Last August, the online journal Jewish Ideas Daily featured a “Siyum-posium”
on this very question. Shlomo Zuckier spoke for many observers, writing, “daf yomi also reflects some less than salutary trends. The need for the ‘learner’ to perpetually have a clear, quantified goal betrays the influence of a results-oriented American corporate culture that stands at odds with the traditional ideal of studying Torah for its own sake (lishmah). Moreover, daf yomi is necessarily a cursory study of the Talmud, as it is impossible to come away with a grasp of the range of medieval interpretations, contemporary halakhic applications, or jurisprudential issues at hand, in one short hour.”

- Is daf yomi for Orthodox Jews only? Literary critic and senior editor of The New Republic Adam Kirsch is currently writing weekly in the mainstream Tablet magazine (tabletmag.com) about his wrestling with Talmud through daf yomi study from “basically a secular point of view.”

- Is Talmud for Orthodox Jews only? Israeli MK Ruth Calderon devoted her inaugural Knesset speech to the idea that Talmud is the inheritance of the entirety of the people Israel, not only those identified as “dati.”

All this brings us to the central question of this symposium: What about Reform? Clearly, early Reform ideology prioritized the Bible as the core text while downgrading the significance of (and divine hand within) the Talmud. Equally clearly, the language of classical Reform ideology still has resonance within current Reform conversations. Colleague Rabbi Dan Freelander expressed it when asked in an interview with the Jewish Telegraphic Agency for a Reform response to the Siyum HaShas. He stated that Reform Jews “focus on the Ur-text, on Torah in particular . . . Talmud . . . does not have the same status to us as the Torah does.” But again, not so fast. Putting aside the question as to whether any “Ur-text” actually exists, do we, in our congregations, our seminary, and our religious schools promulgate a hierarchy of sacred texts?

ReformJudaism.org explains that as the “earliest rabbinic interpretation of the Bible, the Talmud is indispensable to understanding the laws and customs still practiced today.” Moreover it states that the Talmud “is one of the central works of the Jewish people.” Without conducting a “Talmudic” process over the meaning of the word “central” we might still ask, “So is the Talmud central to contemporary Reform Jewish life or not?”
Using the *Siyum* as a springboard, we thought it was an ideal time to take a closer look at what role the Talmud plays in contemporary North American Reform life. Our call for papers raised the following questions:

- To what extent has Talmud study become a significant factor in Reform communities? Has the study of Talmud transformed its role in the life and in the understanding of Reform Jews?
- Should the *daf yomi* method be embraced by Reform educators? Should systematic Talmud study be an educational priority for Reform Jews?
- Should Reform Judaism promulgate a hierarchy of texts, biblical or Rabbinic? What makes one text more sacred than the other for Reform Jews?
- What is the significance of Talmudic study for the current HUC-JIR curriculum? How does it shape the future of Reform rabbinic leadership?
- Is there a “Reform” way of learning Talmud?
- Does your community offer regular and/or ongoing Talmud study opportunities?
- What is the significance of Talmud study in your rabbinate?
- Have you found a method within your own rabbinate for meaningful Talmud study that other colleagues (particularly those without extensive text skills or teachers available) can emulate?

We do not claim to have resolved let alone fully responded to all of these questions in this issue, and rather have merely scraped the surface of some of these queries. What is clear, to quote historian Jonathan Sarna, is that, *Siyum* or not, “Talmud study today is not just confined to men with black coats and long beards,” and that reality “is truly something to celebrate.”

This special issue of the *CCAR Journal* is in its own way a celebration of how Reform rabbis have engaged the Talmud in their congregations, classes, and communities. This is also a celebration of contemporary Reform Judaism in all of its complexity and as such a corrective to those who frame North American Reform Judaism as a monolithic entity, when in fact contemporary Reform Jews differ over matters ranging from theology to liturgy. Our
sincere hope is that this issue will provide readers with practical tools for Talmudic study as well as being thought-provoking.

Notes


2. See the “Pittsburgh Platform” in Meyer and Plaut, The Reform Judaism Reader, 198.


