

Talmud Yerushalmi Overview

The Talmud Yerushalmi (also: Jerusalem Talmud, Palestinian Talmud) is a compilation of the teachings and discourses of the six generations of Amoraim of Eretz Yisrael from the late Roman period to the middle period of the Byzantine empire. The name 'Jerusalem Talmud' appears to be a misnomer. It was not composed in Jerusalem but in the learning centers of Byzantine Eretz Yisrael, Tiberias, Saphorus and Caesarea. Nevertheless, the name of the city of 'Jerusalem' has been attached to it going back to the early Middle Ages as in the writings of some of the Geonim and Rishonim. The reason for this is the opening of a new Torah center and Geonate in Jerusalem towards the early Middle Ages which became the disseminator of Torah Eretz Yisrael. A more appropriate name for this Talmud would be 'Talmud Eretz Yisrael'.

The claim of Eretz Yisrael as the supreme authority of Rabbinic Judaism slowly declined with the collapse of the Roman empire and the rise of the Byzantine empire which imposed decrees against Jewish Learning. In time, the religious authority of the Academies of Eretz Yisrael finally gave way to the Babylonian Academies and by default to the Babylonian Talmud.

But despite its displacement, Torah activity in Eretz Yisrael did not cease. The discovery of the Geniza reveals evidence of continuing activity in Eretz Yisrael in the legislation and study of halakha. 'Sefer Ha-ma'asim', a book of law according to the practices of Eretz Yisrael was produced in the late Byzantine period and is cited by earlier Babylonian Geonim. Responsa from Palestinian Geonim reveal the existence of a Geonate in Jerusalem in counterpart with the more renowned Geonate in Babylonia. 'Laws of Terefoth' and a composition on the differences between the customs of the Jews of Babylonia and Eretz Yisrael should be added here.

Over time, the Babylonian Talmud seeped into the Academy in Jerusalem where it was treated with authority perhaps as great as the Jerusalem Talmud. The Geonim of Jerusalem employed both Talmuds side by side in their responsa and in their legislation of halakha. The Babylonian Talmud which is more elaborate was used to fill the gaps in the Jerusalem Talmud.

Jerusalem Talmud Throughout The Ages

The Jerusalem Talmud did not cease to be studied through out the ages. In Babylonia, the authors of early Halakhic works (originating from Sura) such as Halakhoth Gedoloth, Halakhoth Pesuqoth and Halakhoth Ketzuvoth follow some rulings of Eretz Yisrael over the Babylonian Talmud. This could be due to the Palestinian origins of the Academy of Sura founded by Rav who descended from there. Actual incorporation of the Jerusalem Talmud is attested in early Geonic works such as Sefer Ha-Hefez and Sefer ha-Methivoth which cite the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud in tandem. Rabbi Saadiah Gaon appears to have been the most heavily influenced of the Geonim of Sura

Numerous Medieval Authorities continue to cite it and interpret it in their novellea and compositions on the Babylonian Talmud, notably Rabenu Hananel, Ramban, Ba'al ha-'ittur, Rashba, Meiri and even the Tosafoth. Maimonides gave great weight to the Jerusalem Talmud and was criticized for ruling at times in favor of it over the Babylonian Talmud. Maimonides even composed

a compendium of its laws similar to the Halakhoth Gedoloth of Rabbi Yitzhaq al-Fasi on the Babylonian Talmud.

The Jerusalem Talmud continued to be studied and cited by Acharonim. R. Yosef Karo, as an example refers to the Jerusalem Talmud thousands of times. Complete commentaries on the Jerusalem Talmud, (rather than simply interpretations of selections) surfaced already as early the Expulsion from Spain and today are numerous.

The Jerusalem Talmud Today

Notwithstanding the continued interest in the Jerusalem Talmud throughout the generations, this Talmud still remains a relatively closed book. A major factor contributing to this paucity is the fact that the Jerusalem Talmud is extremely terse and often difficult to comprehend. One can not always tell if an expression is a statement or a question nor does one always know where a question starts and where an answer begins. The Jerusalem Talmud often lacks the basic dialectic connective tissue commonplace in the Babylonian Talmud which makes the latter so much more understandable.

Another factor that has contributed to the general difficulty in comprehending the Jerusalem Talmud is the condition of the texts that are available to us. The text of the standard printings in many places is corrupted making it almost impossible to read. Traditional commentators, in an attempt to dispel the perception of the Jerusalem Talmud as incomprehensible, tend to come up with ingenious explanations of such texts; only in rare cases where they had little choice would they acknowledge that the texts are corrupted beyond reconstruction.

Due to the efforts of scholars of the previous generation, such as Epstein and Lieberman and the discovery of Geniza Fragments and partial manuscripts of the Jerusalem Talmud (See <https://sites.google.com/site/jtalacad/bibliography> for a list of Geniza Fragment publications) much headway has been made in establishing a correct text of the Jerusalem Talmud. Instrumental to this was also the study of citations of the Jerusalem Talmud in the writings of the Rishonim which often preserved correct readings. (<http://webapp2.netanya.ac.il/talmud/> - online citation database).

Of particular interest is the Leiden manuscript which was one of the four manuscripts used in the editio principio (Vilna printing) and was unknown to any of the Traditional commentators. Although the manuscript is faulty it preserves many good readings which were often corrupted by printers who misunderstood the text. The series entitled "Talmudah shel Erets Yisrael" (www.hatalmudhayerushalmi.org) uses the Leiden Manuscript as its base-text and draws upon Geniza materials to establish a correct text of the Talmud.

As a prerequisite to advancing the study of the Jerusalem Talmud Rabbi Shaul Lieberman listed two additional desiderata. A terminological dictionary and an improved Masoreth hashas of the Jerusalem Talmud. The former has been met in recent times and the latter is on its way.

Recent generations have seen a renewed interest in the Jerusalem Talmud both on the Academic and more popular fronts. Advancements in the scholarship of the redaction, terminology,

vocabulary, general phenomenology and obviously of the textual witnesses of the Jerusalem Talmud have contributed to our understanding of its contents enormously.

A well known teaching of the Gaon of Vilna (and reiterated by Rav Kook) tells us that Messianic Times will be marked by the resurging interest in the Jerusalem Talmud.

The Influence of the Talmud Yerushalmi

1. Whenever the Babylonian Talmud does not dispute the Talmud Yerushalmi the law of the Talmud Yerushalmi is accepted.
2. Whenever the Babylonian Talmud has doubt about the halakha and the Talmud Yerushalmi rules explicitly
3. When the law is not explicitly stated in the Babylonian Talmud but is explicitly stated or even derived in the Talmud Yerushalmi
4. When the Talmud Yerushalmi cites a dispute and rules like one opinion while the Talmud Yerushalmi cites a maaseh which rules like the other opinion
5. When the Talmud Yerushalmi gives good explanation for its ruling. (otzar geonim pesahim teshuvot 39)