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May 31, 2021: The Hallowed Secular Talmud

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Title: The Hallowed Secular Talmud

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Background

What can the Talmud, the sprawling multi-volume work of the rabbis from around 70-550 CE, teach the non-Jewish world? If the Talmud is a book of Jewish law, nothing.

But if the Talmud is one of the world's spiritual masterpieces, a great deal.

There was a Talmud project that had as one of its aims the introduction of the Talmud to non-Jews: the Talmud El Am of the 1960's. To me, it was the flowering and hope of liberal Judaism to found a new kind of Judaism by studying this ancient text in a new way. This was the hope of Rabbi Arnost Zvi Ehrman. But the project, and perhaps with it this hope, collapsed. Only a small portion of the Talmud was translated.

I have read that the Talmud El Am was also the work of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. That would make sense. The JTS was, in 1965, the great emblem of modernizing Judaism—keeping the best of the old while looking to the future.

I suppose that Talmud El Am means the people's Talmud, but it might mean the eternal Talmud. (I have to find out). It turned out to be neither.

But why should anyone today care about this wayward Talmud project? With the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70, Judaism faced a crisis that was both theological and political. Politically, the destruction of the Jewish State, which was completed after failed revolts in 115 and 135, meant that Jews were leaderless. Most of the world's Jewish population even in 70 lived outside Israel. But all Jews had their eyes on Jerusalem as long as the Temple existed. Theologically, there needed to be a way of Jewish life without the rituals of the Temple.

The theological crisis was actually deeper than that. The rabbis sought to create a way of life not directly dependent on God. Efforts aimed at a radical expression of divine will through military action had proven disastrous. The motto of the rabbis would be, "It is not in heaven." Originally, that line from Deuteronomy indicated that God's will was present in the world. Now, it would mean that God was defeated.

We today are faced with the destruction of our own Temple—the structure of the creator God. We have not been able to forge a new way of life appropriate for this changed circumstance. We have to be as creative as the rabbis were.

Introduction

The Talmud is a compilation, with later commentaries, of two works: the Mishna and the Gemara. The Mishna was redacted around 200 and represents a kind of overall interpretation/interaction with the Old Testament. It consists of some of the discussions from rabbinical academies from that time.

The Gemara was redacted in Israel around 450 and in Babylonia around 550. The Babylonian version is considered the more prestigious. The Talmud El Am is a translation of the Babylonian Talmud.

The Talmud El Am begins with the traditional starting point of the Talmud, with the Tractate Berakhoth—Blessings.

Here are the first words: “From what time [may people] recite the evening Shema? From the hour that the priests come in to eat of their Heave-offering, until the end of the first watch; says R. Eliezer; the Sages say, Until midnight; R. Gamaliel says, Until the first light of dawn....”

In a sense, this one short paragraph tells the whole story of the Talmud. First, it begins with prayer. And not just any prayer, but with the central premise of Judaism: the Lord is one—the Shema.

For us today, this amounts to a declaration that we do not live in chaos. Everything is part of one whole. We and the universe are one.

The assumption of the Talmud is that we all know that the Shema is to be recited twice a day—when we rise and when we go to sleep.

So, already we learn the centrality of this starting point. Perhaps a secular way of life requires meditation in the morning and the evening on the unity of everything.

There is agreement on when one can say the evening Shema—when the stars appear. But this time is given in terms of the life of the priests of the Temple. In this way, the Talmud connects with that lost way of life. The Temple is always there. The discussion of that lost way of life amounts to a kind of science fiction.

Granted that after the stars appear, one may recite the evening Shema, how long does one have to recite it—before, in other words, it would become the morning Shema?

But there is a disagreement on this ending point. Eliezer—there is the view of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanos, one of the leading figures of the Talmud—the evening Shema may be recited until the end of the first third of the night. There is the view of the Sages—presumably the conventional and majority view—until midnight. And then there is the view of another vaunted figure, a contemporary of Rabbi Eliezer, Rabban Gamliel, the head of the Assembly in Yavne shortly after the destruction of the Temple.

We learn later that this disagreement is not really resolved. So, the second point is that a way of life can be reasoned about but probably not definitively determined. Law is not what it seems. Later, Gamliel will assert that whenever the Sages said until midnight, it always meant until dawn.

Finally, there is the juxtaposition of these two giants: Eliezer and Gamliel. It is their clash over the Oven of Aknai in another book of the Talmud that ends with the declaration that it is not in heaven. God's attempt to intervene directly in matters of law under discussion is not authoritative. Indeed, God himself accepts this limitation. God calls it a human triumph.

We'll have much more to say about that. But it is certainly worldly. Worldly enough for secularists.

Finally, there is Gamliel himself. Gamliel essentially sets the Talmud going by attempting to ensure that there is a full set of instructions for life after the destruction of the Temple. This is how the people will be kept together.

Because it is to be a way of life for all, Gamliel will contest against the more difficult interpretations of Eliezer. That will lead to their break.

But Gamliel will go further in enforcing a unity of interpretation. It is Gamliel who provides the final form of the Amidah, another central prayer. Gamliel adds the Blessing on the Heretics—presumably the early Christians. Thus, Gamliel is associated, by myth at least, with the final break between Judaism and Christianity. This would have occurred at the end of the first century.

One last point, association Gamliel with the break is exquisite irony. It was Gamliel's grandfather who, in the Book of Acts, warns the other members of the Sanhedrin not to molest the Jesus movement because it may be from God. His grandson breaks with him on this point seventy years later.