

## A Very Brief Introduction To Talmud Study

### What Do I See On A Classical Page Of Talmud? *And Why Is It So Hard To Read And Figure Out?*

Let's decode the page. The main body of the page, occupying its center and printed in formal block letters, is the **Mishna** and **Gemara**, together composing the **Talmud**. It looks this way because of Daniel Bomberg (d. 1549 or 1553) one of the first Christian printers of Hebrew books and one of the most influential of all Hebrew printers. Born and raised in Antwerp, Bomberg settled in Venice where he established his printing press, here he printed two complete editions of the Talmud. Bomberg's design of the Talmud became standard, placing commentaries (Rashi, Tosafot, Rabbi Hananel ben Hushiel) surrounding the text of the Mishna and the Gemara. The coolest site on the web to explore a page of Talmud is found at <http://people.ucalgary.ca/~elsegal/TalmudPage.html>



### What Is The Language Of The Talmud?

The Talmud is composed in a mixture of **Hebrew** and **Aramaic** (Aramaic being the spoken vernacular of Babylonian Jews). In general, formal statements by the Amora'im are formulated in Hebrew, whereas the explanations and discussions of those statements are worded in Aramaic. **In the 1960s, a young Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz embarked on the task of translating the Talmud into Modern Hebrew and providing his own commentary alongside those of the classical. It was completed in November of 2010.**

### What is the Mishnah?

The Hebrew root "*ShNH*" means "to repeat," and refers to memorization by repetition. "Mishnah" therefore has the sense of "that which is memorized by rote," as distinct from the rabbinic designation for the Bible: "*Miqra*," that which is read and recited from a *written* text.

*Mishnah* can refer in a general way to the full tradition of the Oral Torah, as formulated by the Rabbis in the first centuries of the Common Era. **The Mishnah is organized by subject: Earth, Time, Family, Society, Sacrifice, and Sanctity. The Midrash follows the flow of the narrative.**

The teachers in the Mishnah are known as **Tanna'im** (singular: "*Tanna*"), derived from the Aramaic root related to the Hebrew "*ShNH*." The era in which the Mishnah was developed is therefore referred to as the "Taanaitic" era. The term "*Tanna*" was originally applied to the functionary in the later Talmudic academies whose job it was to memorize and recite the oral traditions of the Taanaitic era, serving as a sort of "living book." It came to be applied to the actual Rabbis whose opinions make up the Mishnah and its contemporary works. With very few exceptions (quotations from Aramaic legal documents), the Mishnah is composed entirely in Hebrew, in a dialect that appears to reflect the spoken vernacular of Judea. The Mishnah was composed entirely in the Land of Israel, and all the sages quoted there, even if they resided originally in other places (Babylonia, Rome, etc.), were active in Judea.

The main body of the Mishnah consists of teachings attributed to authorities from about the middle of the first century, through to the second decade of the third century CE. This time period witnessed some major historical turning-points for the Jewish nation, such as the destruction of the Second Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, and the catastrophic failure of the revolt against Rome under the leadership of Simeon bar Kokhba (or: bar Kuziba) in 135 CE. Because the Mishnah is a technical work of religious law, these momentous historical events find almost no explicit mention in the Mishnah, even though the very composition of the Mishnah is often viewed as a response to those very events.

### When Was The Mishna Composed And By Whom?

The center of Jewish communal leadership and Torah scholarship moved to this Judean coastal town following the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. The Rabbis of Yavneh (the term "Rabbi" to denote a religious teacher was probably not in use before this time) were faced with the responsibility of reconstructing Judaism and adapting it to the new situation, in which its major center of religious life was no longer in existence. It is likely that the drive to preserve the oral traditions of previous generations was initiated at **Yavneh** as a central part of this mission. "Yavneh" is usually used to designate at least two full generations, extending from 70 to 135 CE. The first Yavneh generation was dominated by such figures as Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai (the academy's founder),

Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, and Rabbi Joshua ben Hananyah.

The later Yavneh period was known for the appearance of the two influential schools of Rabbis Akiba and Ishmael, each of which formulated a distinctive approach to the interpretation of the Torah.

The tragic aftermath of the Bar-Kokhba uprising saw the complete destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, and the devastation of the region of Judea, the southern portion of the Land of Israel that had hitherto been the main center of Jewish religious leadership. This situation led to widespread migration to the northern region, the Galilee, and the seat of rabbinic judicial authority resided for a while in the Galilean village of Usha, home of Rabbi Meir. By far the greatest proportions of the content of the Mishnah originate from this generation. Almost all the "Ushan" Rabbis mentioned in the Mishnah were students of Rabbi Akiba. These include Rabbis Meir, Judah [bar Ilai], Simeon ben Yohai, Yosei [ben Halite], Rabbi Eleazar [ben Shamma] and the Leader (*Nasi*) Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel.

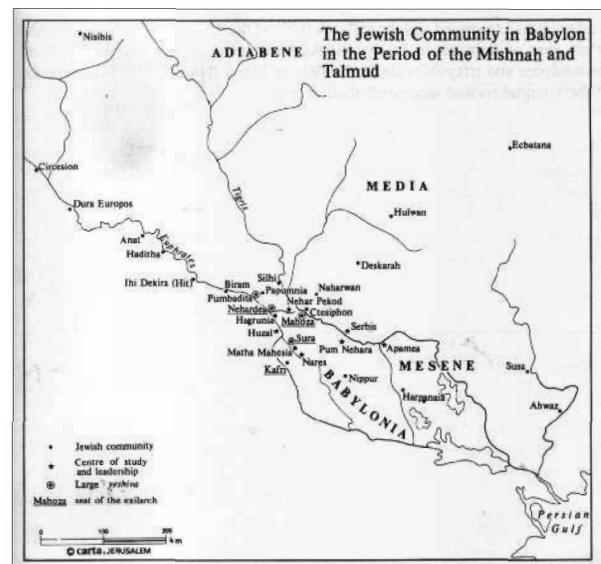
All ancient sources are in agreement that Rabbi Judah compiled the Mishnah before his death around 217 CE. The Mishnah's redactor, who had studied with most of the important teachers of the previous ("Usha") generation, assembled early redactions that had been shaped in various different academies, combining them into a new and integrated work. The Mishnah contains almost no material that is contemporary with its redactor.

Rabbi Judah ben Simeon bore the Hebrew title of "*Nasi*" signifying the position of Leader, the official political representative of the Jewish people. From an internal Jewish perspective, the *Nasi* presided over Judaism's supreme judiciary and legislative body, the *Sanhedrin*. The title had become a hereditary one, almost without interruption, since the days of the revered Hillel the Elder in the first century BCE. In Talmudic texts, Rabbi Judah is usually referred to simply as "Rabbi" or, by virtue of his legendary piety: "*Rabbenu Ha-Qadosh*" ("our holy master"). After migrating from Judea, Rabbi Judah resided in Beit Sha'arayim, and later in Sepphoris, both in the Galilee.

## How Does The Talmud Work? How is it a Commentary on the Mishna?

The Gemara is a commentary on the Mishnah, whose order it follows, together forming the Talmud. It was composed over several generations, from the early third century to about the sixth. As a commentary, it deals with many aspects of the Mishnah, often going far beyond mere explanation. Some of the items involved in the commentary on the Mishnah include:

- **Demonstrating** how the Mishnah's rulings or disputes derive from interpretations of Biblical texts.
- **Exploring** the logical principles underlying the Mishnah's statements, and showing how different understandings of the Mishnah's reasons could lead to differences in their practical application.
- **Resolving** contradictions, perceived or actual, between different statements in the Mishnah, or between the Mishnah and other traditions; e.g., by stating that:
  - Two conflicting sources are dealing with differing circumstances
  - They represent the views of different Rabbis.



## When Was the Talmud Composed and by Whom?

The teachers (Rabbis) who participated in the Gemara are referred to as "Amora'im" [singular: "Amora"], from an Aramaic word that originally designated the official in the academy whose job it was to recite the scholars' teachings before the public. Most of the Babylonian teachers did not bear the title "Rabbi," but were called Rav.

## Was The Talmud "Closed"?

A passage in the Talmud (Bava Metzi'a) speaks of Rav Ashi and Ravina as "the end of instruction" (Hebrew: "sof hora'ah"), in a context that compares them with Rabbi Judah Ha Nasi as "the end of Mishnah." Because Rabbi Judah is generally regarded as the redactor of the Mishnah, it became accepted to speak of Rav Ashi as the redactor of the Babylonian Talmud. (The name "Ravina" is a recurring one during the Talmudic era, and there was a figure of that name that was Rav Ashi's contemporary). Since Rav Ashi died in 427, and several later generations are represented in the Talmud, it is clear that we cannot speak of him as the Talmud's final redactor. **The Talmud is open as long as a living community is engaged in it.**