

Jewish Schooling through the Ages
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“All your children will be learned in the Knowledge of G-d”
- Isaiah 54

Introduction

The history of Jewish education tells a story. The story it tells has not ended, but rather, leaves us with the unwritten chapter of our future – how will Jewish educators today shape the course of Jewish education for the next generation?

From its earliest beginnings, the Jewish religion prized a strong primary education as well as lifelong learning for all community members. From home schools to the development of institutions, curriculum and standardization, Jewish elementary schooling provided the foundation for a universally wise and holy nation.

During the middle ages, however, adult learning for Ashkenazi men all but drowned out quality education for women and minors, eliminated Tanach from the school curriculum, and silenced the sages of Sephardic heritage. Today, Modern Orthodoxy and the Jewish Day School movement have revived the spirit of primary education for both women and minors and revitalized the study of Tanach. (To date, nothing especially seems to have been done to accommodate the existence of diverse perspectives as – although we have lately suffered no book burnings, community-centric authority still persists.) To reach to the ideal vision of the prophet Isaiah, however, much work remains.

The first step towards progress is understanding our past.

I. The School

Pre-Institutionalization

The earliest known setting of Jewish education can be dated to 3000 years prior to the word “education,” to 1760 BCE when the biblical Avraham and Sarah opened their “tent” as a learning center.¹ In fact, it might be said that the entire religion of Judaism grew from this endeavor, thus rendering education the seed from which the full flowering of Jewish heritage began. As we are told by legend, an additional “learning center” existed in the same region under the leadership of Avraham’s relatives, Shem and Ever,² where Yaakov attended what might now be considered high school, college, and some years of “master’s level” coursework.³

By the time of the giving of the Torah in 1312 BCE,⁴ it is clear from the text that written language was known, as commandments such as mezuzot⁵ and writing one’s own Torah⁶ presuppose layman knowledge of written language. Moshe himself is known to have written thirteen scrolls for himself before passing the mantle of educational leadership on to Joshua.⁷ By the era of the Prophets, roughly 1270-860 BCE, authors of Navi and Ketuvim not only had

¹ Genesis 12:5 interpretation, although 14:14 literal meaning of “Chanichav,” his 318 “disciples.” Also Zecharia

² Fendel, p. 27 n. 57; Megilla 17a; Rashi on Genesis 28:9 and p. 33-34, n.114.

³ Rashi on Genesis 25:27

⁴ Based on the calculation that the Jewish year for this event was 2448.

⁵ Deuteronomy 6:9 and 11:20

⁶ Sefer Hachinuch, mitzvah 613; Nedarim 32a; Rambam Laws of Sefer Torah 7:1

⁷ Fendel, p. 63, n.23: *Yalkut Shimoni, Parshas Vayelech*, sect 941; *Devarim Rabbah* 9:4; Rambam, *Intro to Mishnah*, p.9.

mastered basic writing, but also the use of poetic verse and literary devices including allegory, as evident in *Shir HaShirim*, *Mishle*, *Esther* and others. Clear from not only the Book of Chronicles and works of Philo and Josephus, but also from the content of Torah itself, even the recording of secular history held value.⁸ While literacy among other nations during this time may be lesser known, it was commonly known even in antiquity that the average Jew could always read and write.⁹

Josephus attributes the heightened value placed on education to the notion that reading, writing, and learning the laws of Torah were religious commands rather than professional ambitions.¹⁰ Where the chief aim of Greek and Roman education was to foster worthwhile citizenship,¹¹ motivating learners through a vague promise of contribution to society, the Jewish drive to learn furthered personal religious service, offering learners direct and meaningful personal gain. The commitments to learning for one's self as well as ensuring the education of children were strengthened by belief in the divine nature of the Torah text and the text's command to teach children,¹² thus, learning and teaching Torah were as important as observing it.¹³ Jewish historian Nathan Drazin suggests that if the intellectual faculty developed more rapidly among Jews than other nations, it was not due to physiological superiority, but only the by-product of a priority placed on education.¹⁴

In addition to fulfilling a religious duty, educating a child was considered an act of love, wisdom, and piety, and the fulfillment of a prophecy.¹⁵ Jewish parents understood that the investment in their child's education was not a costly enterprise, but rather a compassionate and intelligent choice that would even result in personal reward.

The rabbis considered the ideal generation that of King Hezekiah in the 7th century BCE who was known to have used government funds to make sure that no Jew lacked a proper education.¹⁶ Although Hezekiah was only one of many kings during the first commonwealth,¹⁷ sages describe how throughout this period the average child¹⁸ knew up to forty-nine different analyses of whether a substance was ritually pure or impure.¹⁹ Of relevance to modern educators is the reference that boys were not privileged over girls in the receipt of a proper education, but that "every man and woman, boy and girl was thoroughly versed in most difficult section."²⁰

Despite the lack of evidence for buildings called "schools," in 621 BCE during the Second Temple period, conditions were set for the establishment of formal gathering places of learning. When King Josiah of Judah shut down operation of local altars, community members convened for prayer and Torah learning in these meeting places instead. In these settings, the

⁸ Genesis 1-11.

⁹ Megillah 23b

¹⁰ II Apion 204, based on Deuteronomy 6:7 to teach one's child

¹¹ Nathan Drazin, *History of Jewish Education from 515 BCE to 220 CE* (Baltimore, 1940), 137.

¹² Devarim 4:9, 6:7, 11:19

¹³ Drazin, 137-38; Eliezer Ebner, *Elementary Education in Ancient Israel During the Tanaitic Period, 10-220 CE* (NY, 1956), 20.

¹⁴ Drazin, 138.

¹⁵ Ebner, 23. Isaiah's prophecy that "All your sons will be learned in the knowledge of G-d" (Isaiah 54:13)

¹⁶ Reference that "from Dan to Beer-Sheva" means all of Israel (Shmuel II, 24:2); King used the "threat of sword" B.T. Sanhedrin 94b

¹⁷ The 14th King in the first commonwealth

¹⁸ Yalkut Shimoni II, 758, par 213

¹⁹ Midrash Soher Tov to Psalms 12:7, in E. Kanarfogel, "Torah Study and Truth in Medieval Ashkenazic Rabbinic Literature and Thought" in Howard Kreisel (ed) *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought* (Beersheba, 2006), 102.

²⁰ Sanhedrin 94b

Torah was not only read, but expounded by those previously employed at the altars, forming the construct of a place of learning with a reliable and professional body of teachers.²¹ What could be viewed as the first “synagogues” were more accurately communal learning centers where groups met not only for prayer and weekly readings of Torah, but also for ongoing study and discussion, and for the elementary education of children.²² Thus, in modern parlance, these centers might equally have been considered “schools” which hosted *minyanim* in their *batei midrashim*.

During the 250 years until the educational reforms of Ezra, however, although vocational training was available for priests or scribes, the establishment of general schooling for all students and even the maintenance of weekly Torah study seem to have slowed.²³ Inspired by Ezra, the secular king Yehoyakim traversed the route of the “baal teshuva”²⁴ and initiated national observance and study of Torah. Under Ezra’s religious authority, Torah law was adopted by Jews as well as recognized internationally as the “constitution” for the autonomous Jewish state of Judea.²⁵ Ezra additionally had the Five Books translated into the spoken language of Aramaic, to provide greater access to those who could not read the original Hebrew. The desire for learning during this period escalated to such a degree that those in the scribal profession apparently could not keep up with the demand for scrolls.²⁶

In addition to the mass production of text scrolls as well as translation of Torah into the vernacular, the generation of Ezra witnessed such a flowering of scholarship that not a handful, but hundreds of men became versed in the text and laws of Torah. Selecting seventy from among those highly qualified scholars, together with thirty men still skilled in prophecy, Ezra and his contemporaries formed a “great assembly” of men qualified to represent and render decisions on behalf of the entire nation. This collective met not only for deliberation of legal questions, but also to collect, edit and canonize the narratives, treatises, and poetry that had been generated over the eight centuries since the entrance to Israel and through the First Commonwealth.

Although some canonization had already taken place,²⁷ the material selected by these 120 sages and prophets, operating out of the synagogue in Jerusalem, the “Great” synagogue, determined which writings contributed enough worth to Jewish life to be preserved along with the Books and laws of Moses. With the conclusion of this canonization process, which included occasional emendations of text by these knowledgeable men, the Tanach as we learn it today became a primary textbook of instruction for Jewish intellectual thought and religious practice.²⁸

Institutionalization

²¹ Moses Aberbach, “The Development of the Jewish Elementary and Secondary School System during the Talmudic Age,” *Studies in Jewish Education* vol. 3 (1988), 292.

²² Ebner, 17.

²³ Aberbach, 291.

²⁴ Nehemiah 8:1

²⁵ Ezra 7:25; Ebner, 12.

²⁶ Pesachim 50b, in Binyamin Lau, *The Sages: Character, Context and Creativity. Volume 1: the Second Temple Period* (Koren Publishers Jerusalem, 2010), 15.

²⁷ The Talmud (Bava Batra 15a) credits Hezekiah with overseeing the compilation of the biblical books of Isaiah, Proverbs, Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes.

²⁸ Ebner, 20.

It was successors of Ezra who began to institutionalize education for Jewish children.²⁹ By the 2nd century, as recorded in the writings of one ‘head of school,’³⁰ at least one formal Jewish school existed, and there seems to be no doubt that many more schools had been established as well.³¹ However, the age at which a student enrolled in such “schools” seems unclear. Evidence indicates that it may have been 16 or 17,³² qualifying this type of “school” as the equivalent of our yeshiva high school or college, continuing to leave unknown the possibility of formal education prior to this level of education.

Nevertheless, the spirit of learning, presumably for students of all ages, flourished as long as the region remained generally under Persian rule (538-332 BCE). When the region changed to Greek hands, learning was driven underground and suffered a decline, although as the Chanukah story is told, religious Jews succeeded against the Greeks, and as a result, a second wave of religious nationalism emerged under an autonomous Jewish government run by the Hashmonean family. This new fervor centered on the study and dissemination of Torah, and the Hasmonean Age witnessed the first attempt to impose compulsory school attendance on all male children.³³ Then religious leader Simon ben Shetach ordained that all children should regularly be in school³⁴ and supervised the appointment of primary school teachers throughout Jerusalem.³⁵ Several legends indeed suggest that during this period Jerusalem was full of schools: in one account, elementary schools in Jerusalem at that time totaled 394³⁶ and in another, almost 500.³⁷

As during Ezra’s generation, locations used for Torah services on Shabbat operated during the week as a “school” – both for “elementary” instruction in Biblical texts for younger grades, as well as a “middle” school for the study of Bible commentary, a developing body of work referred to as “oral” law. The Great Synagogue in Jerusalem served as an advanced “yeshiva,” admitting only the most promising students, akin to any competitive high school, providing them with education continuing through university, master’s and doctoral levels of study whereby those who wished to pursue a life in academia could continue learning and eventually teach.

For communities “out of town,” however, even as late as the middle of the 3rd century it was difficult to recruit skilled teachers.³⁸ When faced with a shortage of teachers, one rabbi in a small town in northern Israel was inspired to invent a pupil-teacher system whereby students could teach each other.³⁹ Eventually during the Tannaitic era, elementary school was introduced and developed on a national scale⁴⁰ when the original “Hillel Academy,” a Jerusalem school headed by Hillel the Elder, expanded to create branch schools in regional provinces.⁴¹ Not twenty years had passed until schools were expected in every community, and religious leader Joshua ben Gamla further reformed national policy to ensure that “teachers of young children be

²⁹ Aberbach, 291.

³⁰ Book of Ben Sirah/Ecclesia 51:23

³¹ Aberbach, 291.

³² Bava Basra 21a

³³ Aberbach, 294.

³⁴ *Ibid* and TY Ketubot viii, 11, 32c

³⁵ TB Bava Basra 21a

³⁶ Ebner, 12; TB Ketubot 105a

³⁷ TY Megilla iii, 1, 73d

³⁸ TY Chagigah I 7, 76c; Aberbach, 293.

³⁹ Rav Hiyya. TB Ketubot 103b, BM 85b. Possibly worth understanding as a model to be replicated for use in small schools today, or to help manage tuition costs.

⁴⁰ Ebner, 12.

⁴¹ Aberbach, 295.

appointed in each district and each town, and that children should enter school at age of six or seven."⁴² Whether or not a student pursued advanced high school or post-high school education, at the very least, every boy was expected to attend what we would now consider elementary and middle school.

Mandatory Schooling

Although students of this time were admitted to school at age 6, which in our schools today would be known as "first" grade, prior to this age children were taught at home.⁴³ At what age a parent began instructing their own child may have differed from home to home. First century historian Philo of Alexandria notes that children generally began learning in their "earliest youth,"⁴⁴ and Josephus echoes this in describing his own memories, explaining that his learning began "immediately as soon as we ever became sensible of any thing."⁴⁵

During the Second Temple period, the formal schooling for children expanded into an elaborate system which was free to both rich and poor alike for elementary and secondary grades, as well as compulsory for boys,⁴⁶ although post-secondary education for those wanting to pursue learning through college years required tuition. In the Greek and Roman society these fees were reversed, such that anyone wishing to learn full time after high school could freely join the academies, but for elementary and secondary school parents were obliged to pay tuition.⁴⁷ As of today, ironically, education has an extremely high price tag everywhere.

By the end of the 2nd commonwealth, what could be called a Jewish school was fully organized,⁴⁸ and although instructor wages were dismally low even then,⁴⁹ classes were taught by a professional class of teachers truly concerned with pedagogical skill in addition to mastery of material.⁵⁰ The education of children rose in importance to become a mitzvah even more respected than the priestly work in the Temple.⁵¹ The community believed that an intensive program of education beginning at an early age would ensure observance of commandments and foster a spirit of piety. In the words of Josephus, explaining to his readers the Jewish emphasis on learning, "Above all we pride ourselves on the education of our children."⁵²

Literacy came to be expected even among young children, as dating to the late third century, a possible textual "typo" would be resolved by having it read by a "child of average

⁴² TB Bava Basra 21a

⁴³ Drazin, 140.

⁴⁴ Ebner, 12.

⁴⁵ Drazin, 146.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 143.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 139-40.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 138.

⁴⁹ A possible reason for the low wages of teachers is the origin of the teaching profession in the family of Levites, who were not paid for their services, but expected to provide them freely. As non-Levites entered the ranks, however, the community suddenly faced a new expense which they may have been reluctant to pay. A second possible reason is that teaching children was seen as a religious obligation akin to clerical work, and as a result the role was viewed and engaged in as a duty rather than a capitalistic aspiration, rendering compensation as a motivator secondary to meaningful purpose / religious service.

⁵⁰ Nathan Morris, *The Jewish School* (London, 1937), 144; Aberbach, 292).

⁵¹ Aberbach, 293.

⁵² Ebner, 12 and 17.

intelligence,” presupposing literacy among all children.⁵³ Josephus writes that if any child were asked about a Torah law, “he will more readily tell them all than he will tell his own name.”⁵⁴

The importance of children’s education escalated to a precipice when rabbis threatened that a city could be destroyed if it had no school children or if it failed to pay its teachers, and that scholars could no longer reside in a community without a school.⁵⁵ Israel became a land where illiteracy was condemned – where ignorance carried a social stigma and knowledge a mark of social distinction.⁵⁶ Some believed that the destruction of Jerusalem could be blamed on the neglect of children’s education, and that even the existence of the world was due to its success.⁵⁷ Jewish education was once again, as it began, at the center of Jewish religion.

II. Curriculum Development

First Textbooks

During this Tannaitic-era climate of growth and dedication to Torah study, for three hundred years until the destruction of the Temple, the council of scholars and those with prophetic ability – “The Men of the Great Assembly” convened daily in the Temple plaza. As prophetic vision waned, this group applied natural reasoning and erudition to the resolution of text difficulties and the determination of national law. In addition to the canonization of literary texts, the group discussed practices that had become custom among many people and recorded them as the way people “went on their way” (*halacha*). Further, they agreed upon hermeneutic rules that could be employed when reading text even in subsequent generations to derive potentially hidden messages, and referred to this method of interpretation as “*Midrash*.”

Any new decision arrived at with the aid of such hermeneutic rules added to a growing body of new law and thought. Teachings known to have originated in earlier generations were undisputedly accepted, but at times a new *halacha* stirred controversy, and was passed on in multiple versions, in the names of the disputing schools or individual scholars. Each successive generation then added to this growing body of text interpretation in the light of its own perspective. What became a volume of *halacha* examined the text with view to its legal content and implication, while what became *Aggadah* deduced from it moralizing truths.⁵⁸

Due to the constant engagement in discussion, decisions passed seamlessly to new members of the group and were transmitted to younger scholars. However, in 168 BCE, Roman oppression catapulted the center of learning from Jerusalem to a succession of northern cities,⁵⁹ which severely curbed, if not prohibited entirely the formal collaboration of scholars. Not only did the change terminate the development of new laws and resolution of textual anomalies, it also prevented review of what had become a vast collection of thought and law. Though at first sages had taken pride in passing on these laws orally,⁶⁰ it seemed that without ample opportunity to review material, it could be forgotten, and would be lost entirely if not recorded.⁶¹ Thus, in

⁵³ R’Zeira; Aberbach, 301.

⁵⁴ Drazin, 146; Ebner, 12.

⁵⁵ TY Chagigah I 7, 76c and Shabbat 119b; Aberbach, 292-93; Sanhedrin 176.

⁵⁶ Aberbach, 297-299.

⁵⁷ Shabbat 119b

⁵⁸ Ebner, 15-21.

⁵⁹ Yavneh-Usha-Tiberias-Tsipori

⁶⁰ Gittin 60b

⁶¹ Ebner, 15.

219 CE, these discussions and decisions were compiled, and the written record of these laws became an additional text around which new discussion could revolve.

While some scholars remained in Israel and continued teaching despite Roman brutality, many others left to escape the anti-Semitism. Large numbers returned to Persia, taking along the newly recorded oral laws, entitled *Mishnah*, in addition to the formerly canonized texts. With the stimulus of yet a new text available for study, students had increased motivation to overcome poor reading skills, and illiteracy was predominantly overcome.⁶²

The study halls of both of the Land of Israel and of Persia (Babylonia) thus shared a recognized textbook upon which teacher lectures and student debates were subsequently founded. After several generations of flourishing study and debate in Persia, the development of further law and thought also risked loss as it grew too unwieldy for memorization, and again sages determined the necessity to record points of oral discussion, resulting in the 64 volume *Talmud*.

Early Curriculum Design

As the volume of essential texts grew exponentially, from five Books of Moses, to 24 works of the Biblical canon, to an additional 64 volumes of hermeneutic discussion, it became evident that a system of information management and a curriculum for learning would be necessary to ensure that new initiates to the material – children – could absorb it all in proper sequence and at the proper maturity level.

As the Roman school system required the memorization of a body of law and philosophy known as the “Twelve Tables,”⁶³ so the Jewish child was required to memorize the laws of the Torah. According to 4th century Christian priest and historian Jerome, Jews of his time were able to recite both the Pentateuch and prophets by heart.⁶⁴ Children were expected to memorize the many specific details of each scriptural law and how these were deduced from the text, or how they otherwise originated.⁶⁵ In addition, students read the weekly Torah portion in vernacular translation, and if they did not finish their reading in time, they were permitted to study by candlelight even on Friday night, despite the fear of Shabbat violation.⁶⁶

Eras of Curricular Expansion and Management

From the 1st through 5th centuries CE, not only had scholars committed their study hall discussions to writing in the form of the *Mishnah* and *Gemara* (together, *Talmud*), but also these generations witnessed the flourishing of legal and moral treatises outside these bodies of work. Although styles of interpretation varied by study hall,⁶⁷ all scholars employed the same hermeneutic principles transmitted from Temple era rabbis, and continued the work of resolving what appeared to be problematic passages in the original texts. On each book of the Bible a corpus of interpretation developed known as the “Great Interpretation,” or *Midrash Rabbah*. Additional works composed during this time include the Passover Haggadah, Mechilta, Sifra, Sifre, Tosefta, Perek Shira, the Zohar, Seder Olam, Perkei D’Rav Eliezer, Tanna D’vei Eliezer, hundreds of individual midrashic interpretations of the Bible and prophets, legal tractates, and

⁶² Aberbach, 299.

⁶³ Drazin, 139.

⁶⁴ Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York JTS, 1962), 52, referenced from “The Greatest Singalong Ever” source sheet compiled by Moshe Sokolow for Azrieli course “Foundations of Jewish Education”

⁶⁵ Drazin, 139.

⁶⁶ Tosefta Shabbat Perek 1, halacha 12: R’Simeon Ben Gamliel, from M. Sokolow ‘Greatest Singalong Ever’

⁶⁷ For example, Rabbi Akiva vs. Ishmael ben Elisha

works known as “Baraitot.” Later rabbis likened the multitude of these tractates to an allusion in King Solomon’s *Shir Hashirim*, reading the sixty “queens” descended from Avraham as the volumes of the Talmud, his concubines as the works of midrash, and the “maidens without number” as the innumerable baraitos or legal decisions culled from texts during this era of intellectual creativity.⁶⁸

After approximately three centuries, however, during the time of the Savoraim, this prolific era of creativity ebbed and during the Geonic period came to a close. According to the Geonim, the body of traditional thought and law ended with the composition of the Mishnah and Babylonian Talmud. They viewed the Savoraim as the last editors of these volumes, and believed they had effectively resolved all outstanding primary questions.⁶⁹ The Geonim did not see themselves as participating, even in a minor capacity, in the creation of the new traditions, and in fact believed they could not tamper with the old; they aimed, rather, to facilitate the transmission, interpretation, and application of that which had already been composed.⁷⁰

Although their willingness to innovate in legal matters was limited, however, the Geonim ultimately canonized the Babylonian Talmud and promulgated it as the *sine qua non* source of halachic authority, superior to all other external legal works and Baraitot.⁷¹ In the view of Geonim, rabbinic Judaism was the sole heir to Biblical tradition, and the Babylonian Talmud the most legitimate version of this tradition, thus it was established for communities outside Babylonia as the source of authority from which all religious legal decisions were to be derived. As successors to the teachers in Amoraic and Saboraitic learning centers through the revered method of oral transmission, Geonim maintained authority over its interpretation, serving as gatekeepers to this primary source of Jewish belief and practice.⁷²

Although the academies gained status and administrative structure through these periods,⁷³ there is enough evidence in the rabbinic literature and in medieval manuscripts to show that an absolute fixed order of prophets and writings was not in place. Only the advent of printing and with it the creation of a Jewish “Bible,” many centuries away, would do that.⁷⁴ Rather, the institutionalized transmission of a body of necessary knowledge from generation to generation – the school itself – contributed to the canonizing process, as the choice of texts to be studied within a framework of limited time and resources required a highly selective process.⁷⁵ Thus, Jewish canonization might otherwise be termed “geonic curriculum development,” as the natural process of decision making in “school” settings during this era effectively determined the official texts worthy of transmission to future generation.⁷⁶

Despite the Gaonic emphasis on preservation, however, again after the passage of roughly three centuries, beginning in 950CE, the work of commentary sprang to life once

⁶⁸ Bergman, 116; quoting Yayin HaRokeach by Rabbi Eliezer of Worms on Shir HaShirim 6:8 and Tikunim p.143, as referenced by Rabbi Avraham son on Vilna Gaon in his introduction to Sefer Aggadas Bereshis

⁶⁹ Brody, Robert. (1998) *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture*. Yale University Press, 162 and 161 n.21.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 162.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 39, 161 and 167.

⁷² *Ibid*, 162-63.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 38.

⁷⁴ Philip R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Louisville, 1998), 170.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 35.

⁷⁶ See Michael Rosenak, “Towards a Curriculum for the Modern Orthodox School” in *Visions of Jewish Education*. Eds Seymour Fox, Israel Scheffler and Daniel Marom. Cambridge University Press, 2003 (Cambridge) for more on the idea that “curriculum creates canon.”

again.⁷⁷ As communities moved into Europe, the volume of new works and manuscripts increased. From the 10th-11th centuries, influenced by the surrounding Islamic culture, scholars began to compose liturgical poetry, and analyze the Biblical text using principles of math and logic. Beginning in the 11th century, the first comprehensive scholarly commentary on the Biblical text was produced in France by winemaker Shlomo Yitzchaki, and was followed in the 12th-13th centuries by additional glosses of the text by writers, doctors, statesmen and academics living throughout both European and North African countries.

III. Standardization

A Reliable System

The importance of Jewish elementary and secondary education continued as the Jews migrated from Persia into European lands, where the school adopted the name “heder.” The “heder” appeared everywhere in medieval Jewish society; even in remote villages the isolated Jew strove to employ a tutor for his children or to send them to a teacher in a nearby town.⁷⁸ The standard of education among Jews in the early middle ages was immeasurably higher than among the Christian population. In northern France, a student of theologian Peter Abelard remarked,

“Jews put as many as they have to letters. However poor, even if he had ten sons would put them all to letters, not for [vain] as Christians do, but for the understanding of G-d’s law, and not only his sons but his daughters!”⁷⁹

As in the past, the ability to read prayers and scripture, and knowledge of the contents of the Bible were regarded as essential. The lack of such knowledge reduced a Jew to the level of one whose participation in religious duties was regarded as of doubtful legality,⁸⁰ and parents who neglected to provide their children with an education were practically ostracized from the community.⁸¹ Poverty did not prevent a family from providing children with a Jewish education, as under religious law, it was father’s duty to provide children with education and to bear the necessary expense.⁸² At least for several years, parents were bound by both religious injunctions and pressure of society to send their children to school, and providing them continued education was considered an act of piety.⁸³

Historian Robert Chazan notes that the Jews of northern France possessed a well-developed school system for elementary education.⁸⁴ According to Yaakov Ebner, the success of the school system during this era owes its credit to the determined efforts of community leaders, who invested effort and funding to make it possible for all boys at the very least to receive a proper basic education.⁸⁵ In addition to parental responsibility to provide education for their own children, the employment of a teacher constituted one of the duties Jewish religious law

⁷⁷ Brody, 162-163.

⁷⁸ Goitein, S.D. Mediterranean Society (UCLA, 1971), vol.2, 187.

⁷⁹ Ebner, 16.

⁸⁰ L. Rabinowitz, “Education & Leisure” in Social Life of Jews of Northern France in the 12th-14th century as reflected in Rabbinical Literature of the Period (New York, 1972), 213.

⁸¹ Drazin, 147.

⁸² Goitein, 187.

⁸³ Goitein abridged (1999), ed. Lassner. University of California, Berkeley, 248.

⁸⁴ Ebner, 16.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 24.

obligated the residents of a town to fulfill, ensuring education for orphaned or poor children as well as those from wealthy homes.⁸⁶ Therefore, in localities with insufficient funds to pay for the education of children, money could even be diverted from foundations established for different causes.⁸⁷ German Jewry subscribed to the motto that “It is better to give charity so youngsters may study than to give charity to the synagogue.”⁸⁸

However, even the strong commitment to education in the Franco-German region did not compare to the high quality of organization, content, and all-inclusiveness of education in Spanish Jewry at its height in Arabic Spain 1000-1200.⁸⁹ Spanish Jewry was the first community in Europe to evolve a comprehensive system of public education, and was unrivalled in both Christendom and Islam – and remarkably, remained without parallel in the history of civilization until the modern public school era.⁹⁰

Centuries later, education throughout Europe benefited from the organized and comprehensive methods of Spanish Jewry. Jewish education in Holland and Italy experienced strong influence by Spanish and Portuguese settlers, as exiles from the dispersion carried methods of education to their new countries of residence, and Ashkenazim visiting these communities viewed their schools with admiration.⁹¹ In Germanic lands and Poland, although education was valued in theory, little attention was paid to principles of instruction, thus Ashkenazi schools in medieval Europe lacked the organization and pedagogical quality of their Sephardic counterparts.⁹²

In general, however, schooling was valued. The first day of school for an incoming class of children was a momentous occasion for the entire community, as it took place on the holiday of Shavuot, an important day even for adults.⁹³ A child may have begun to read letters, vowels, and teamim for chanting at home before the age of five, but usually started learning with a teacher between the ages five and six⁹⁴ -- although some exceptional children began earlier, in instances noted as early as four or even three.⁹⁵ Many parents, indeed entire communities, believed that learning should be encouraged early for bright children.⁹⁶

Beginning with their first year of formal schooling, attendance for Ashkenazi students was compulsory every day from eight a.m. through noon for boys until their bar mitzvah.⁹⁷ In the Sephardic community of Amsterdam, however, school hours included both a morning and

⁸⁶ Goitein, 187 and Marcus, Jacob R. *The Jew in the Medieval World, A Sourcebook: 315-1791*. A Temple Book, Atheneum, NY 1975, 379-80.

⁸⁷ Baron, S. (1948) *Jewish Community: Its History and Structure to the American Revolution*, vol II. Philadelphia JPS, 184-85.

⁸⁸ Ebner 17, n.10.

⁸⁹ Marcus, 373.

⁹⁰ Baron, 171.

⁹¹ Baron, 172 and Marcus, 373.

⁹² Marcus, 373.

⁹³ Ingall, Carol K. “Reform and Redemption: The Maharal of Prague and John Amos Comenius” in *Religious Education*, 89(3), 1994, 361.

⁹⁴ Tosafists on Lev 19, 23-4; *Yair Nativ* description in Sokolow (schools... unpublished): students began with one phrase and continued weekly until they could chant the whole parsha; Ingall, 361; Ta-Shma, Israel M. “Children in Medieval Germanic Jewry: A Perspective on Aries from Jewish Sources” in *Creativity and Tradition: Studies in Medieval Rabbinic Scholarship, Literature and Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ Press 2006, p127.

⁹⁵ Baron, 174. Yaakov Emden began age 4, according to the *Yair Nativ*, some began age 3.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 174.

⁹⁷ Shulman, Nisson E. “Authority and Community: Polish Jewry in the Sixteenth Century” Ktav Publishing House, Inc. Yeshiva University Press. NY 1986, p.86.

afternoon session, running from eight to eleven a.m. and from two to five p.m. In between these sessions, students were expected to study privately with a tutor or complete homework.⁹⁸

In Spain, Portugal, and southern France, instruction was commonly held for groups of children in public buildings.⁹⁹ In other parts of Europe, instruction to groups might be held in a space near or connected to the synagogue, or children would be sent to board at the home of their teacher, turning the teacher's residence into a "heder."¹⁰⁰ For affluent families, parents sometimes employed a private teacher for their children in their own home.¹⁰¹

Although most Jews knew the language of their country of residence and used it for writing letters and reading printed books, the everyday language of the community and the language of instruction in many European countries was Yiddish,¹⁰² and in Semitic lands the language of instruction was often Ladino.¹⁰³

A Somewhat 'Common' Core Curriculum

For both Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities, Jewish subjects dominated the curriculum throughout the primary school grades. It was not until "high school" age for Ashkenazim, nor even until "university" academic level for Sephardim that secular subjects such as science and philosophy were introduced.¹⁰⁴

In Ashkenazi lands, the subject matter in the heder's "first grade" involved the Five Books of the Bible and the early prophets with translation into the vernacular to enhance comprehension.¹⁰⁵ In the "second" grade, the same text was reviewed, but also accompanied by the first major commentary of Torah, Rashi. During this year, students also learned the later prophets and writings as well as the ability to write.¹⁰⁶

In the Sephardic community, the system was slightly different. Students studied one subject until it was mastered, and only then would they progress to the next "grade" – which was a new topic. For example, in the first class, students worked on learning and mastering the siddur, until they could read and daven fluently. The second class was then dedicated to the memorization of Chumash, line by line with cantillation. No translation was offered until students had adequately mastered the Hebrew text. It was only in the third class that translation and interpretation, using the vernacular of Spanish and Rashi's commentary, was introduced to elucidate the text they had previously memorized.¹⁰⁷

In the Ashkenazi communities, by the third year of formal study, with or without confirmed, let alone memorized, knowledge of Tanach, students were already moving onto study of the *mishna*,¹⁰⁸ and through the fourth and fifth "grades," selections of the Talmud were added to the students' curriculum.¹⁰⁹ For the "middle school" years between the ages of 11-13,

⁹⁸ Marcus 379-380

⁹⁹ Sokolow (schools... unpublished)

¹⁰⁰ Kiddushin 33b, Tosafists. Vitry 508; Shulman, 85.

¹⁰¹ Rabinowitx, Louis. *The Social Life of the Jews of Northern France in the 12th – 14th Centuries* (NY, 1972), 216; Assis, 327.

¹⁰² Shulman, 82.

¹⁰³ Sokolow (Schools... unpublished)

¹⁰⁴ Sokolow (Schools unpublished) and *Yair Nativ*, ch.15 in *Science in Medieval Jewish Cultures* by Gad Freudenthal (2011), Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰⁵ Shulman, 82; Efrat and Elman, 112-113; Sokolow (Schools unpublished)

¹⁰⁶ Goitein, 190.

¹⁰⁷ Marcus, 378-79.

¹⁰⁸ Ingall, 361.

¹⁰⁹ Shulman, 86.

students were already encouraged to engage in discussions of Torah law in light of glosses and legal works created in previous generations.¹¹⁰ However, it was only until the age of bar mitzvah that schooling was enforced, thus for students who did not wish to continue in academia, formal education ended here.¹¹¹

Sephardic schools, in comparison, were only first getting to Prophets by the 4th “grade,” which students learned to the point of complete memorization with cantillation as well. It was only after these texts were memorized that in what was considered the “fifth” class, students were introduced to the Mishnah, which was also learned by heart.¹¹² During this year, only on special occasions such as holidays would students engage in probing work analyzing one Mishnah with its Gemara and derived legal implications. However, by approximately the age of middle school – or the “6th class,” which may have consisted of mixed ages depending on the rate at which students progressed through levels – students began a curriculum in which every day a new law was studied with its commentaries including Rashi and Tosafot from among the Ashkenazi sages, and from Sephardic heritage the Rambam, Tur and Beit Yosef.¹¹³

In the Sephardic system, it was not until age 15 that Talmud was introduced, following the dictum of Avot (5:21) that “at 15 is reached for the study of Talmud,” and not until a student reached what today would be considered “college” that he was encouraged to think independently and creatively. According to Ibn Akin of 12th century Andalusia, only “when they are eighteen years of age, he should give them that type of instruction in it which lays emphasis on deeper understanding, independent thinking, and investigation.”¹¹⁴ It was believed that knowing a text by heart must precede its understanding, thus throughout primary school years, students spent most of their time memorizing.¹¹⁵ While it may seem contrary to modern “constructivist” pedagogical techniques,¹¹⁶ to Sephardim, complete memorization of Jewish primary texts was the pedagogical goal of elementary instruction.¹¹⁷

Further, only Jewish studies comprised the curriculum through all the years of high school; any other subject was delayed until “college” as well.¹¹⁸ Beginning at eighteen, however, Andalusian educator Ibn Abbas does encourage the start of medicine, mathematics, astronomy, physics and metaphysics, and even *recommends* the study of philosophy beginning with Aristotle, as well as memorization of the work of al-Farabi and Averroes.¹¹⁹ However, the study of philosophy was not promoted for its own sake, but rather as a tool to be used in the defense of Jewish beliefs, and thus was only permitted upon the completion of serious study – and memorization – of the entire Tanach and Talmud.¹²⁰

In Ashkenaz, on the other hand, for several centuries, it was at the age of 14 that students who wished to stay in school could begin to study other topics – although only those

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹¹ *Ibid*

¹¹² Marcus, 374-379.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 378-379.

¹¹⁴ From Marcus Sourcebook p.374-375 - By 1180 in Moslem Spain, in Course of Study part of “Cure of Sick Souls” by Joseph ben Judah ibn Akin

¹¹⁵ Goitein 251

¹¹⁶ Rabhan, Dina. “Understanding Memorization in the Talmudic Era and Now: A Reflection” in History of Jewish Education Course. Azrieli Graduate School, 2012.

¹¹⁷ goitein 256

¹¹⁸ Marcus 374-376 and Yair Nativ- Yair Nativ, ch.15 in Science in Medieval Jewish Cultures by Gad Freudenthal (2011), Cambridge University Press.

¹¹⁹

¹²⁰ From Marcus 375 - Curriculum of Spanish 1180 “Cure of Sick Souls” by Joseph ben Judah ibn Akin

deemed academically “gifted” were given the choice to continue studies on a “high school” level, which included these additional subjects. Students who did pursue education through high school then gained exposure to Greek philosophies, sciences such as astrology, logic, mathematics, and music, and in addition, could explore less common textual commentaries or esoteric treatises of Jewish thought. Past high school, students could continue through the age of 28 to study sciences such as optics and engineering on a “college” or “graduate school” level.¹²¹

While medieval Ashkenazi gifted students did enjoy exposure to secular subjects earlier than their Sephardic peers, at the turn of the 14th century, sentiments changed towards the study of secular subjects in Northern France. Provencal rabbi Rabbi Shlomo ben Adret issued a ban eliminating science and secular philosophy from primary school grades and prohibiting their pursuit until a student had reached the age of 25.¹²² Although the ban was intended only for his community, it gained popularity among regional rabbinic leaders and spread to other communities as well.¹²³ Despite the ban, however, if a student did have interest in the sciences, the study of physics or medicine was permitted beginning at age 25 and lasted through life, or until the age of 40, at which point the study of metaphysics was also permitted.¹²⁴

Although the advanced pursuit of science and general philosophy may have seemed like an abandonment of Jewish subjects, even for those inclined towards advanced studies in academia or medical research, an unwavering commitment to regular Torah study was expected in the evenings.¹²⁵ It was characteristic of this period that philosophic and scientific training was often combined with religious and legal erudition, thus through these centuries a combination of religious and secular scholarship was unexceptional.¹²⁶

In addition to the commonly possessed “worldly” knowledge of even religious leadership, at least among Sephardim, also characteristic among all community members was a pervasive and comprehensive, word for word memorized knowledge of Tanach. For the Sephardim, by the time a student had moved on to general philosophy, it was presumed that they possessed mastery of the entire Talmud as well, as the study of philosophy for students was permitted only “when the Talmud has become so much a part of them that there is hardly any chance of its being lost, and they are firmly entrenched in the Torah and the practice of its commands.”¹²⁷

For Ashkenazim, however, complete knowledge of Tanach was not guaranteed for any student, even those who had ascended to the pulpit of rabbi. Further, the social strata of intellectual ability had begun to develop, with the offer of education past the age of bar mitzvah only to those students with a natural predisposition to learning. Thus, even despite the ban on secular subjects issued in 1305, the academically inclined were afforded opportunities to learn

¹²¹ Sokolow (schools... unpublished). Today in Ashkenazi influenced pedagogy, students do learn secular subjects along side Jewish studies even beginning with early elementary grades. However, regardless of academic ability, all students are expected to complete high school, and are or are not encouraged to pursue either secular or Jewish studies past the age of eighteen exclusively depending upon their gender and unique community leader’s perspective.

¹²² Marcus, 189.

¹²³ *Ibid*

¹²⁴ Sokolow (schools... unpublished).

¹²⁵ *Ibid*

¹²⁶ Goitein Abridged, 249.

¹²⁷ Marcus, 375: Curricular recommendations from “The Cure of Sick Souls,” a work of Joseph ben Judah ibn Akin, published in 1180 Spain.

and converse fluently in both Talmud and secular subjects, while those who struggled academically were privy to quality education in neither.

IV. The Rise of “Hashkafa”

The Yeshiva Approach

The first advanced Talmudic Academy on European soil opened at the turn of the 11th century in Mayence, Germany, headed by Rabbenu Gershon, originally from the city of Metz in France. The yeshiva of Rabbenu Gershom focused on the intensive study of Talmud for approximately 100 years until its destruction at the hands of crusaders.¹²⁸ Pre-crusade scholarship involved mastering as much earlier material as possible without creative attempts at reconciling differences between the sources,¹²⁹ but by the turn of the 12th century, a new method of study began to develop, which posed exploratory questions to clarify texts or resolve conflicting passages or interpretations. For an ensuing 125 years, Jewish scholarship experienced a surge of creativity, a period in which many scholars issued works of commentary, adding their thoughts to the body of traditional interpretation increasing with each century. This period of the “Tosafists” (adders) extended throughout the 13th century, although after the first quarter of the century, the degree of creativity began to lessen.¹³⁰

According to scholar Robert Brody, the end of the creative period may be attributed to the increased persecution in Ashkenazi regions.¹³¹ As early as 1010, a raid was made upon the French Jews, and devastating crusades wiped out German communities roughly every 50 years from the end of the 11th century through the end of the 12th century. With the onset of the 13th century, persecutions increased in particular for the Jews of France, including the cities in which the Tosafists lived and learned, and in Paris, twenty-four wagonloads of Talmud were burned. Terror and persecution impacted French Jews directly in the years of 1205, 1209, 1223, 1225 and 1234, and these communities suffered Inquisitions in the years 1229 and 1254. Any dispute among the Jews furnished pretexts for the extortion of fines, and during these centuries of persecution, whether torture, forced conversion or death, Jews of this region suffered enormous losses, and poverty and distress prevailed.¹³² Despite the difficulty, Tosafists persevered in their learning until circa 1300, but as the fortunes of Ashkenazi Jews declined during the 13th century, the spirit of innovation waned, and even leading scholars resorted to collecting, editing, and at best embellishing earlier Tosafist texts.¹³³

Many of the early settlers and students in German and French communities had initially migrated from areas of Italy. Rather than remain in the Franco-German region under constant threat, many returned to Italy, bringing with them the new learning methods, legal decisions and customs they had learned in yeshiva. When Italian Jews attempted to integrate local customs that had derived from traditions of Palestinian Jewry with new “Academy” perspectives based on

¹²⁸ Ta-Shma “La Cultura Religiosa-the Chain of Tradition. South Italian Rabbinic Tradition in the 12th and 13th centuries” in *Creativity and Tradition*, pp 71-76.

¹²⁹ Brody, 70-71.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 71-72

¹³¹ *Ibid*

¹³² Zunz, Leopold. *The Sufferings of the Jews during the Middle Ages*. NY, Bloch Publishing Company, 1907.

¹³³ Brody, 72.

Babylonian sources, however, they met without success.¹³⁴ New community leaders trained in the “advanced” academies of Ashkenaz insisted that their approach represented the authentic version of Jewish practice that had developed in Babylonia rather than Palestine. Rabbis such as Isaiah deTrani even traveled to communities intentionally to correct and control religious practices, making sure they conformed to German and French academy standards.¹³⁵ Although the break from Palestinian influence progressed at a slower pace in Italy than in Germany, the process of “Babylonization” began to spread to Italy as well.

It was not only the Italian Jews reluctantly reduced to minority opinion. As the academies produced students who took leadership positions in communities throughout Europe, their influence as rabbinic leaders brought the approach and attitudes of the yeshivas into the practices of the mainstream, and those who wished to follow different customs slowly lost influence. Even the German Pietists, a minority group of “early Chasidim” based in the same region as the Tosafists, watched helplessly as many of the religious values of old Ashkenaz disappeared in the face of French Tosafist domination.¹³⁶

Although the academies emphasized intensive study, which resulted in unprecedented creative thought, their unswerving devotion to the subject of Talmud precluded attention to any other topic. Consequently, even the study of Tanach found little space in the lives and focus of these scholars and future community leaders. While the generation of Tosafists did indeed produce a number of Biblical text “Pashtanim” such as the Rashba and Bechor Shor, these pshat exegetes constituted the “exception rather than the rule.” According to evidence available, pshat commentary mainly emerged from only two families, was limited to Northern France, and in general did not reflect the normal give-and-take of the Tosafist Academies.¹³⁷ In his ethical will, one rabbi encourages his son to study the Tanach, lamenting that “I did not study this in my youth, it was not usually taught in Ashkenaz.”¹³⁸

Surprisingly, although the Talmud suffered criticism and even bans and persecution at the hands of the Church, commitment to learning it in scholarly settings seemed only to grow. It is unclear how the loss of 1200 volumes in Paris impacted devotion to its study, but it may be that the loss of the priceless physical books, similar to the destruction of the physical Temple, led to an increased fervor to keep it alive within the halls of study. Further, oral transmission had always been a core feature of learning in the academies of Babylonia,¹³⁹ after which the Tosafist academies were modeled. With or without the written text, students in yeshiva could rely on the methods of a previous era, trusting the memorized wisdom of their teachers. Thus, rather than hinder the spread of Talmud study, its persecution led to a reliance on only those authorities who taught from memory, further lending authority to Talmudic academy teachers and students.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁴ Evidence of this struggle in Ma'ase Geonim of 11th c. and others. In Ta-Shma “La Cultura Religiosa-the Chain of Tradition. South Italian Rabbinic Tradition in the 12th and 13th centuries” in Creativity and Tradition, pp 71-76. More about Babylonization in Ta-Shma – Early Franco-German Ritual and Custom (Jerusalem 1992) (Heb).

¹³⁵ Ta-Shma La Cultura p76

¹³⁶ Brody, 78.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 82. See also Talmage, Frank. “Keep your sons from Scripture: the Bible in medieval Jewish scholarship and spirituality” in Understanding Scripture (1987) 81-101 and Kanarfogel, Ephraim. “On the Role of Bible Study in Medieval Ashkenaz” in the Frank Talmage Memorial Volume I, Haifa: Haifa University Press, 1993, 151-166.

¹³⁸ Brody, 79.

¹³⁹ Grumet, Zvi. “Orality and Textuality: A Historical Perspective” in Jewish Educational Leadership (Lookstein Center) 3:1 (Fall 2004): online.

¹⁴⁰ See Moshe Idel (2000) on the use of orality to retain control over the rabbinic tradition.

Fleeing persecution, waves of Ashkenzim began to migrate to Eastern Europe as early as 1250. The receptive attitude of Polish kings and landowning magnates to Jewish settlement and economic integration invited many towards western parts of Poland such as Krakoz, Poznan and Lvov.¹⁴¹ According to the responsa of R' Judah HaKohen, traveling merchants had established Jewish settlements in Poland in the early 11th century, but when looking for spiritual leadership, had turned westward to the academy of Rabbenu Gershon. Thus, similar to circumstances in Italy, the religious authorities in the new Polish settlements were disciples of the yeshiva in Mayence.¹⁴²

From 1348, large numbers of Jews moved eastward to the community already established in Poland, back to their original roots in Italy, or further eastward to pursue economic opportunities in less developed agricultural Lithuania.¹⁴³ Although the Jews in Poland and Lithuania in the 13th and 14th centuries achieved economic success, they lacked the community substructure of Torah academies and students. As a result, the German rabbinic approach left the strongest cultural and social imprint on these eastern European communities.¹⁴⁴ Jewish settlement moved steadily eastward through the 17th century, and by the middle of the 18th century, more than two thirds of the Jewish population of Poland and Lithuania was living in the eastern districts of Ukraine, Lithuania and what was then White Russia.¹⁴⁵ These Jews carried with them the traditions of their Polish community leaders, who in turn had learned from the Talmudic academies of France and Germany. Thus, the German and Tosafist “yeshivish” approach spread eastward with the migration of Ashkenzi Jewry.¹⁴⁶

The Sephardic Minority

Like the German Pietists, the Sephardic communities also tried in vain to resist the trend of “Babylonization” dominating rabbinic leadership and spreading throughout the European Jewish world. In the early 14th century, when the Ashkenazi-educated Rosh migrated to Spain to become its chief rabbi, Spanish authorities largely ignored his attempt to impose German Ashkenazi traditions on their community. Despite resistance, however, the Rosh persevered in attributing religious authority to the Germanic approach, denying the credibility of Castilian traditions and attempting to abolish customs unfamiliar to German education.¹⁴⁷ Ashkenazi Rabbi Abraham ben Nathan additionally served as rabbi and dayan in Toledo, introducing Franco-German heritage into his new Spanish community.¹⁴⁸ Parts of the Sephardic community may have resisted the change, but did not have enough independent authority to prevent it, and were further weakened by their own Sephardic leaders such as Rabbi Meir ben Abulafia who cited and spread the Franco-German approach through his own teaching.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴¹ David B. Ruderman. “Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History. Princeton University Press. Princeton, 2010, 30.

¹⁴² Ta-shma, Israel “On the History of the Jews in 12th and 13th Century Poland” in *Creativity and Tradition: Studies in Medieval Rabbinic Scholarship, Literature and Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ Press 2006, 37-38.

¹⁴³ Ruderman, 32.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁴⁷ Ta-Shma “Between East and West: R. Asher b. Yehiel and his son R. Jacob” in *Creativity and Tradition*, p114-116

¹⁴⁸ Ta-Shma, “The Penetration of Ashkenazi Custom-Law and Folklore into the Zohar: The Phenomenon and its Historical Origin” in *Creativity and Tradition*, pp185.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p.186

Further, as the Ashkenazi tradition only grew stronger, spreading from community to community, the Sephardic tradition began to dissipate with its own regional persecution, forced conversion and expulsion. Spanish refugees spread in multiple directions to destinations including Turkey, Syria, North Africa, the West Indies, Brazil, Mexico, and North America, in addition to countries throughout Europe.¹⁵⁰ In communities where Ashkenazim had not settled, Sephardim were free to maintain their unique traditions, but in Ashkenazi dominated Europe, they could only establish small minority congregations within the Ashkenazi majority. Further, simply preserving their customs presented difficulty. Constantly in motion and living as secret Jews with false identities, commuting between faiths and cultures, Sephardic Jewry faced fundamental challenges in defining, let alone upholding strong religious identities.¹⁵¹

Other than Ashkenazi dominated Poland, the united Netherlands in the 17th century offered welcoming conditions for minorities,¹⁵² and Northern Italy presented economic and cultural opportunities for those who had amassed fortunes or cultural achievement elsewhere.¹⁵³ Accordingly, these regions within Europe witnessed the largest influx of Sephardic Jewish settlement, and thus it was that into these communities that the advanced Sephardic public education system could and did establish new residence.

The Effect on Elementary Education

Although in Sephardic areas of settlement, elementary education remained strong, the conditions of poverty, insecurity and migration through the majority of Europe presented obstacles in the way of uniform educational organization.¹⁵⁴ The relatively high price of books persisting through the 16th century also impacted the ability to provide enough materials for elementary classes.¹⁵⁵ Additionally and significantly, however, the single minded interest of the Ashkenazi leaders in higher Talmudic learning led to increased focus on advanced academies and distribution of scholarship funding to advanced students, with a resulting neglect of more elementary levels of education.¹⁵⁶

Further, in such communities, elementary teachers received little respect, and in some cases even vilification by rabbinic leaders, who held the attitude that occupation with minors was considered degrading.¹⁵⁷ The glorification of scholarship offered lofty status to teachers of Talmud, with elementary teachers sharing little of that glory, and rather, living amidst communal opinion that “an elementary teacher is the most unworthy of unworthies.”¹⁵⁸

By the 16th century, Ashkenazi European Jewish schools had already begun to field critique of their pedagogical efficacy.¹⁵⁹ In the drive to “educate” every child, schools may have neglected the possibility that not all children thrived in an environment that prized erudition above all. To some, schools were viewed as grueling, unpleasant places where everyone received a similar education, whether academically gifted or in need of remediation.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁰ Ruderman, 29.

¹⁵¹ Ruderman, 35.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 30.

¹⁵³ Roth, ch.1

¹⁵⁴ Ruderman, 28; Baron, 173.

¹⁵⁵ Goitein Abridged, 255.

¹⁵⁶ Baron, 173.

¹⁵⁷ Goitein Abridged, 250.

¹⁵⁸ Baron, 183; Goitein, 250.

¹⁵⁹ Ingall, 361.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*

The *heder* was harnessed to the system of values on which the entire society was based, and although Talmud was pursued only by an exclusive group, its value of supreme importance to society as a whole forced even the lessons of the *heder* to cater to this minority.¹⁶¹ According to the Maharal, rather than providing students with comprehensive knowledge of the Bible and basics of Judaism, elementary school was guilty of preparing young boys only to become scholars of the Talmud as soon as possible.¹⁶² Emphasis was placed on memorization of the halachot and opinions of the Talmud even before students had acquired a fundamental knowledge of even the Five Books of Moses.¹⁶³

In the study of Chumash, no attempt was made to follow continuity of the Biblical narrative. Each week pupils began to learn the Biblical portion of the week, and if they did not finish by the end of the week, they skipped over the last few chapters.¹⁶⁴ Further, and more pointedly, in such study they focused primarily on the lexical readings encountered on Shabbat and preparing for public recitation; instruction in Pentateuch was viewed as a preparation for participation in synagogue rites rather than focusing on an understanding of content.¹⁶⁵ Comprehension as well as moral instruction was left to parental prerogative alone.¹⁶⁶

Further, concepts derived from a text became more important than the simple meaning of the text itself. The Biblical text was more often cited as a “prooftext” for moral lessons, rather than studied for understanding of its narrative. The main emphasis of rudimentary Jewish education was upon ethical living, with the study of Torah viewed as a means to an end, the end being holiness.¹⁶⁷ Thus, a Jewish child who attended *heder* for the first few years acquired only the rudiments of tradition,¹⁶⁸ and beyond the first years, the goal of education became fostering aspirations to scholarship – which according to the community, had become scholarship in Talmud.

Formal education ended at thirteen, and secondary education in a “yeshiva,” where students gained thorough knowledge of Mishna, was virtually unknown for all but a minority.¹⁶⁹ Although only a handful of pupils continued their studies past the age of bar-mitzvah, most community leaders viewed even the dutiful observance of religious law by the majority of Jews only a by-product of the ultimate goal, the rearing of scholars.¹⁷⁰ Thus, despite its purported wide reach to every Jewish male child, the lack of comprehensiveness in pedagogical goals burdened the Ashkenazi educational system.¹⁷¹

It may be possible to blame economic considerations for the poor elementary educational standards. Due to rabbinic dictums against accepting compensation for teaching,¹⁷² community leaders as well as parents resisted or opposed payment of teachers, and teachers were paid little if at all, making the poverty of European Jewish school teachers proverbial.¹⁷³ Despite poor

¹⁶¹ Goitein, 191.

¹⁶² Ingall, 361; Shulman, 86.

¹⁶³ Goitein, 191; Sokolow (schools... unpublished)

¹⁶⁴ Goitein, 190.

¹⁶⁵ Holtz, Barry W. Bible: Teaching the Bible in Our Times” in international handbooks of religion and education, 5, Part 1 (2011): 373-388.

¹⁶⁶ Sokolow (schools... unpublished)

¹⁶⁷ Ebner, 25; Drazin, 143.

¹⁶⁸ Goitein, 191.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*; Sokolow (schools... unpublished)

¹⁷⁰ Goitein, 192.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 190.

¹⁷² Rambam Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:7

¹⁷³ Baron, 183-84.

salaries, however, the door was thus always open to the field of teaching for those who failed in other professions or to new immigrants fleeing persecution, which in turn led to pressured and competitive working conditions, as the field was too often flooded with those for whom a low salary was more desirable than no work at all. Everyone who had completed even basic elementary education could offer this knowledge to young children, thus teachers could be easily replaced, and even steady jobs could not be guaranteed.¹⁷⁴

In contrast, Sephardic communities paid their teachers according to the amount each uniquely needed to cover living expenses at minimum, and offered salary increases based on skills and experience, so that no teacher would find cause to perform poorly due to inadequate compensation.¹⁷⁵ Although salaries differed, they satisfied the security needs of each faculty member, and provided financial incentive to perform well. Eventually, Ashkenazi communities also evolved in their attempts towards standardization and improved pedagogy,¹⁷⁶ and in Poland created a guild for teachers to ensure sufficient pay,¹⁷⁷ although the primary strategy for classroom discipline remained the use of a whip.¹⁷⁸

“Mesorah” Becomes the Spade to Bury Torah

Apart from the poverty as well as pressure among teachers in the Ashkenazi school system, the curriculum of the elementary grades was impacted by an attitude of surprisingly low regard for the written text of Torah, support for which seemed to stem from rabbinic tradition. Basing their approach on the Talmudic statement that the knowledge of Biblical text was not impressive,¹⁷⁹ the scholar Rabbenu Tam as well as other medieval spiritual leaders put a low priority on the learning of this primary text. The vast majority of Tosafists took the position that there was no room for classes or hours devoted to formal Biblical studies.¹⁸⁰ The source they relied on for this position was a discussion among Talmudic sages resulting in the statement that knowledge of Bible was a “Middah v'Eina Middah” (Bava Metzia 33a), a value but also *not* a value.

In heralding the dictum of earlier sages as unalterable truths if not the basis for legal decisions, this statement led Tosafist rabbis to avoid as well as discourage the study of Chumash.¹⁸¹ In the words of 14th century scholar Profiat Duran: “In this period, I note that Jewish scholars, even the greatest among them, show great disdain for biblical studies. They consider one who spends time doing biblical studies a fool.”¹⁸² Not only were there rabbis who had never seen the Bible, but even among laity, it was not customary for parents to teach their children Mikra even if they were in a position financially to do so.¹⁸³

Although Tosafists seemed to apply this statement in practice, minority opinions did object to its application. Biblical studies continued to be valued in the Sephardic tradition, by the

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*; Goitein Abridged, 255-256.

¹⁷⁵ Baron, 172.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 196-197; Assis, 329.

¹⁷⁷ Baron, 184-85.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 198.

¹⁷⁹ “HaOsek baMikra middah v'einah Middah” (Bava Metziah 33a)

¹⁸⁰ Brody, 84.

¹⁸¹ Kanarfogel (1993), p.155, n.37: Rashbam commentary on Genesis 1:1, 37:2 and introduction to Exodus 21, and additional support in the article of E. Touitou in Millet 2 (1985): 275-88 (Hebrew).

¹⁸² Brody, 85.

¹⁸³ Baron, 193-94.

Pietists of Germany, and by other critics of the Tosafist approach.¹⁸⁴ Rationalists opposed the exclusive study of the Talmud and presented an alternative curriculum that emphasized the importance of the Bible. Sephardi as well as rationalist, 13th century Spanish scholar Ibn Shem Tov Falaquera attached great importance to Biblical exegesis. He believed Talmud should be studied only following mastery of both written Torah and halacha, purely as an intellectual exercise to sharpen the mind, and objected to the view that students should devote themselves exclusively to Talmudic studies.¹⁸⁵

The primary difficulty with the Tosafist application of such a Talmudic statement betrays the disagreement among scholars unresolved until today, whether words of Talmudic sages apply equally to all generations, or whether statements may have been issued in application to local conditions and – while true under such conditions – only remain applicable under the same conditions.

At the time Talmudic sages claimed that Biblical knowledge held no (“einah”) value, the complete memorization of primary texts was common even among minors and women. Prior to printed material, all students learned through memorization¹⁸⁶ and the Five Books of Moses were mastered by memory by the second grade of school, roughly age 7.¹⁸⁷ On documents found in the Cairo Geniza revealing trends in Jewish study during these centuries, the Bible far surpassed the Talmud as the most widely used text, and works written with appeal to the masses presupposed in-depth lay knowledge of Tanach.¹⁸⁸ In fact, the Tanach was viewed as obligatory knowledge for every Jew, as it was only once the texts were committed to memory that their content could be discussed in a meaningful way.¹⁸⁹ Thus, a Jew with this knowledge had not distinguished him or herself in any extraordinary manner; the mere possession of it did not mean that a scholar had studied past elementary grades.

Further, codifiers of the Talmud clarified that the financial responsibility of fathers ceased when their sons had completed their instruction in Scripture, and that additional training was only if affordable.¹⁹⁰ Based on this injunction, Biblical knowledge was not considered to be a personal accomplishment, but rather, a result of parental responsibility and financial investment. Only knowledge beyond Scripture constituted the personal investment of effort in learning. Thus, at the time the statement was issued, the knowledge of Tanach may not have represented a personally impressive accomplishment.

Last, even at the time of the Talmud, it was only in advanced academies that study of this primary text could be minimized. Since Tanach was a recorded document, but retention of oral teachings required additional effort, scholars could be expected to spend more time in its study. Thus, the academies of Iberia and Iraq could justify spending their time on oral recall of Rabbinic discussion rather than reviewing the written Torah,¹⁹¹ whereas laymen could, as always, remain dedicated to Tanach.

By the generation of the Rishonim, however, the same conditions no longer applied. In medieval European Jewry, it could not be guaranteed that knowledge of Biblical text was

¹⁸⁴ Kanarfogel (2008), p.87; Assis, 331.

¹⁸⁵ Assis, 331-332.

¹⁸⁶ Grumet

¹⁸⁷ Marcus, 378-79.

¹⁸⁸ Saadia Gaon and Shmuel bar Hofni, from Sokolow (schools... unpublished)

¹⁸⁹ Kanarfogel geonic authority, See more in Idel (2000) and wolfson (2000)

¹⁹⁰ Baron, 174.

¹⁹¹ Sokolow (schools... unpublished)

common for all Jews. Even in regard to scholars, Profiat Duran explains, “it is possible that if you ask them about a particular (Biblical) verse, they will not know where it is.”¹⁹²

While the statement of Talmudic sages may have applied to conditions in which mastery of Tanach was expected, for generations in which laity does *not* possess mastery of Tanach, the statement that Tanach has “no value” may not apply, and may in fact be false. Such a statement may therefore be appreciated for its time, but not applied under conditions that render it false. Yet, not only do the Tosafists apply such a statement under conditions in which it may be false, misrepresenting the sages to whom it is attributed, but they do so in violation of the Torah commandment to “teach your children Torah”¹⁹³ and a second rabbinic dictum, not to use Torah “as a spade with which to dig” (Avot 4:7), in justifying a vice – the neglect of Torah study – as a virtue – guarding words of the sages. Thus, in purporting to follow the “mesorah” of previous generations, the well-meaning Tosafists spread throughout European Jewry the attitude that Biblical text holds little value, if not the actual practice of avoiding it altogether.

The Tanach Lost Even Further in Translation

Judging favorably, Bava Metzia 33a was not only one source on which the Rishonim relied. The Rambam in his halachic code Mishnah Torah seems to make clear that at a certain point in life, after a student completes his primary education, there is no longer a need to study any work other than the Talmud. In his words, “When he grows, he has no need to study written or oral law, aside from periodic review, but should exclusively devote himself to gemara.”¹⁹⁴ In common parlance, the word “Gemara” refers to the Talmud, because it directly translates as the “work of the Amoraim,” which is the commentary to the Mishnah. In the Rambam’s statement, the segregation of the words “oral law” and “gemara” seems to suggest that the “oral law” refers to the Mishnah alone. Thus, this statement has typically been accepted as binding law in support of the abandonment of both Bible as well as Mishnah study after a student “grows,” and recommendation for the exclusive study of “Gemara,” gloss to the Mishnah.

Although this seems to offer the Tosafists’ position an additional proof-text, a semantic problem arises from the text of the Rambam. In the halacha just prior to the statement above, the Rambam provides a description of what he means by the word “gemara,” which does not seem to be the work of the Amoraim:

“A person is obligated to divide his study time in three: one third should be devoted to the Written Law; one third to the Oral Law; and one third to understanding and conceptualizing the ultimate derivation of a concept from its roots, inferring one concept from another and comparing concepts, understanding the Torah based on the principles of Biblical exegesis, until one appreciates the essence of those principles and how the prohibitions and the others decisions which one received according to the oral tradition can be derived using them. The latter topic is called Gemara.”¹⁹⁵

What seems clear from this description is that the Rambam is not referring to the body of published work that *we* mean when we use the term “Gemara,” the work of the Amoraim. Rather, he seems to use the word to mean a process of analysis and independent thinking. Left the reader is confused, the Rambam repeats this description a second time and leaves out the

¹⁹² Brody, 85.

¹⁹³ Devarim 6:7

¹⁹⁴ Rambam Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:12, paragraph 3

¹⁹⁵ Rambam Mishnah Torah Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:11

term “gemara” entirely, explaining only that the third portion of a student’s time should be spent not on the study of a text, but in personal creative analysis and thought.

“One is obligated to divide his time into thirds, one to written law, one to oral law and one to rational comprehension via deductive reasoning, inference comparison and hermeneutics.”¹⁹⁶

According to this statement, it is the middle category termed “Oral Torah” which is to include both the words of the Tannaim, what we call “Mishnah,” and the Amoraim, what we call “Gemara.” The Rambam affirms this a second time in a statement describing the student’s allotment of study hours:

“In those nine hours, he should spend three reading the Written Law; three, the Oral Law; and three, meditating with intellect to derive one concept from another.

The “words of the prophetic tradition” are considered part of the Written Law; and their explanation, part of the Oral Law.”¹⁹⁷

According to this description, it seems clear that the Rambam recommends the first three hours be spent studying the Bible or Prophets. It also seems clear that the final three hours be spent in personal thought relating to the material. It is the second three hours, from this statement, that seem unclear.

The Rambam seems to suggest that what he means by “Oral Law” can include any type of ‘explanation’ of the written law and prophets. Essentially, these three hours of time can be spent studying the work of Rashi on the Chumash just as well as on Talmud study. Thus, rather than recommend a Talmud-centric course of study, upon closer analysis it seems that the Rambam recommends a curriculum of six hours spent on the Tanach and its pshat commentary! Or, in consideration of the view accepting “Oral Torah” as the Mishnah alone, while the Mishnah may be granted a third of students’ time,¹⁹⁸ there is *no* recommendation to study the fifth century Amoraitic text called “Gemara” here at all.

Nevertheless, the Rambam recommends this course of study only for minors, and does make it clear that a student may eventually master both the written and oral law, and will be able to focus exclusively on the third category of learning:

“... When a person increases his knowledge and does not have the need to read the Written Law or occupy himself with the Oral Law constantly, he should study the Written Law and the oral tradition at designated times. However, he should focus his attention on the Gemara alone for his entire life, according to his ambition and his ability to concentrate.”¹⁹⁹

Does the Rambam mean that he should focus his attention on the Talmud, or on his self-stated definition of the word Gemara? If he has made it clear that his use of the word “Gemara” means ‘deductive reasoning, inference comparison and hermeneutics’ (“Mitbonen b’da’ato leHAVIN davar midavar), how is it that the Tosafists were able to mistakenly translate his words to mean something different?

Without the Mishnah Torah, however, the Tosafists possess two additional prooftexts from the Talmud itself, dating from the first and second centuries C.E. Rabbi Joshua ben

¹⁹⁶ Hilchot Talmud Torah, 1:12, paragraph 1

¹⁹⁷ Hilchot Talmud Torah, 1:12, paragraph 1-2.

¹⁹⁸ According to Rashi on Sotah 22a, “Mishnah” includes any type of halachic decision or work of halacha. According to Siftey Cohen, Choshen Mishpat 25:7, the term Mishnah applies to the halachic decisions of contemporary authorities as well.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, paragraph 3.

Chanania sees a hidden message in the verse of Deuteronomy 6:7, to teach children Torah, reading the word “veshinantem” as “veshilashtem” to discover a new meaning – the division of one’s Torah study into three.²⁰⁰ The categories of study Rabbi Joshua proposes consist of what he terms “Mikra,” “Mishnah” and “Talmud.” Although the Tosafists did not follow the prescription to study each of these subjects for one third of the day, they did have a basis for interpreting the word “Talmud” without the Rambam’s description.

Additionally, the Tosafists went further than the Rambam’s position to say that that one who had mastered both Scripture and Mishnah could reduce their daily learning in these areas based on yet a third source, an additional Talmudic wordplay in Sandhedrin:

“What does [the name] Babel connote?— R. Johanan answered: [That the study of] Scripture, Mishnah and Talmud was intermingled [therein].²⁰¹

Based on this, in the opinion of Natronai Gaon, rabbinic leader of Babylonian Jewry in the 9th century, the study of the Babylonian Talmud, as symbolized in the name “Bavel” – subsumes the necessary study of all three subjects.²⁰² Based on his claim, Ashkenazic Jewry brushed aside even the injunctions to devote one third of one’s time to study of Scripture, as community leader Rabbenu Tam assured students that Talmud study satisfied even the time recommended for “review” of Scripture through the occasional references appearing in Talmudic discussions.²⁰³

A semantic problem, however, is no less relevant for these sources as for Hilchot Talmud Torah above. Although neither Joshua ben Chanina nor Rabbi Johanan offer the Rambam’s extensive description of what is meant specifically by each term, it may be presumed that the words used for both Talmud and Mishnah could not possibly have held the same meanings as they do in modern language, because they were used several hundred years before the modern terms developed.

When we use the term “Talmud,” we refer to the body of work redacted in the 5th century, C.E., and “Mishnah” as the work compiled by Yehuda HaNasi in circa 217 C.E. By the time of the medieval Tosafists, both works had been redacted and were known by their titles as well. When Rabbi Chanina and Rabbi Yochanan use the terms “Mishnah” and “Talmud” however, they could not have meant these works of recorded wisdom, as they lived in the first generation of the Tannaim, almost 150 years before the completion of the Mishnah – and 400 years before the Talmud.

What did the original terms mean, then? In Hebrew, the root of the word “Mishnah” means “to repeat,” and presumably refers to memorization by repetition.²⁰⁴ Thus, a possible use of this term in both Rav Chanina and Rabbi Yochanan’s words was simply to denote a process of reviewing, repeating, and memorizing information that had been previously learned. In this case, their recommendation for learning would have constituted three hours for learning Scripture, followed by three hours of memorization of Scripture.

²⁰⁰ Kiddushin 30a: Rabbi Joshua suggests that the years of one’s life should be divided into three, while another sage responds by recommending that this division apply to each day. According to Rashi, the division should occur each week, spending a full two days on each of the three subjects. The Tosafists, though they did not follow the practice, did view this source as the basis for the injunction to divide learning subjects daily. This source is also the most likely basis for the Rambam’s laws of Talmud Torah as discussed above.

²⁰¹ Sanhedrin 24a

²⁰² Kanarfogel (2008), 79.

²⁰³ Baron, 193-94.

²⁰⁴ Eliezer Segal, “The Mishnah” retrieved from www.ucalgary.ca

However, the “review and memorization” may not have been for the written text alone, but for an additional body of oral details which had been passed down along with the written text.²⁰⁵ These oral details presumably constituted the content of the Mishnah text redacted in 217 CE. Thus, although the word did originally denote “review by memory,” following the redaction of the oral details, the term “Mishnah” became associated with this information rather than its method of study.

For the third category that both Rav Chanina and Rabbi Yochanan refer to as “Talmud,” during the time of the Mishnah when they lived, the verb “Limmud” denotes the exegetical deduction of a legal principle from the Biblical text.²⁰⁶ This meaning aligns closely with the Rambam’s explanation of “gemara,” as it describes a process rather than a text – the process of engaging in analysis and deductive work, the development of new ideas and conclusions. Because this was the work conducted by the Amoraim, analyzing and deducing new laws from the work of the Tannaim, following its redaction, the term “Talmud” thus seemed applicable as the title of the work.

Thus, in the original sense of these words, the word Mishnah does not refer to the text redacted by Yehudah HaNasi, and the word Talmud does not refer to the text redacted several hundred years later. Rather, in their original context, the terms may have referred to learning methods rather than to written texts, indicating that a student should spend part of his time learning from text, a second part of his time reviewing and memorizing material, and a final third of his time coming up with original text-based insights and conclusions. However, once redacted, the terms became associated only with the new bodies of work: that content which had initially been learned through memorization, the Mishnah, and the content constituting its discussion and analysis, the Talmud.

Thus, when the Rambam clarifies his use of the term “gemara,” this helps us understand that he interprets the words of Rabbi Joshua ben Chanina according to their original meaning: he accepts the third category of study as a process and not as a text. Despite his clarity, however, as well as his appeal and authority among Sephardim, his Ashkenazic colleagues disregard his position and accept the new meaning of the term “Talmud” exclusively as the redacted work of 5th century sages.

Drowned in the “Sea of Talmud”

Thus, for the Jews of Northern France and Germany, relying on the combination of Bava Metzia 33a which minimized the importance of Scripture, the Rambam’s gloss to Kiddushin 30a allowing the three part curricular recommendation to be relaxed after primary school, and Sanhedrin 24a which fully subsumed “review” of Scripture into the study of Talmud, there was no independent study of any subject outside the Talmud – the redacted work of the Tannaim and Amoraim. In these areas, the Tosafist method of learning began to supplant the traditional Sephardic system that had previously placed emphasis on Tanach.²⁰⁷

The exclusive emphasis on Talmud in advanced halls of study began to influence the communities of study outside the academies, such as preparatory programs – advanced yeshivot for high school age boys – as well as even the emphasis placed on studies in elementary school.

²⁰⁵ Drazin, 139.

²⁰⁶ For examples see R.H. ii. 9 and Sifre on Num. 118

²⁰⁷ Rabinowitz, 220-221

By the middle of the 13th century, the Babylonian Talmud was almost the only text studied even in small “high school” yeshivot.²⁰⁸

In some communities, the study of Talmud was granted such importance that it outweighed financial opportunity. R'Yonatan Eibeschutz tried to influence the communal board of Metz to issue an ordinance forbidding men to engage in business until five years after their marriage and forcing them to pay undivided attention to their studies, which led to the fairly universal custom of fully supporting a son-in-law and his family for these years.²⁰⁹ Communal leadership tried to encourage study by men at all times even through prevarication if necessary: Moses of Coucy expressed the view that by daily recitation of the shema, every Jew fulfills the minimum requirements of the Law, but he enjoined readers not to reveal this doctrine to the uneducated.²¹⁰

Additional reasons may also have contributed to a decline of importance placed on the study of Tanach. Rambam, in a letter to colleagues in France, writes that the Almohad invasion in 1147 may account for the decline of Torah study in Muslim countries, as many Jews were displaced from their homes, uprooting them as well from established times and places for learning.²¹¹ Explanations have also surfaced among modern scholars. David Berger points out that Judaism shared the written Bible with both Christianity and Islam, suggesting that Jewish leaders may have wanted to stress that written Torah alone was not quintessentially a Jewish pursuit, whereas Talmud was the trademark of the Jew.²¹² Accordingly, in the view of historian Jacob Marcus, it was the growing religious intolerance more than anything else that led Jews to neglect all but rabbinic studies.²¹³ Professor Moshe Sokolow notes that in a climate where Karaite leader Anan ben David threatened to influence believing Jews by encouraging independent study of Tanach, rabbinic leadership may have further wished to minimize the value placed on Tanach without its accompanying rabbinic interpretation.²¹⁴

While for scholars of the Talmudic academies, advances in Talmud study garnered respect and the prospect of a post as community leader, the decline of Biblical study did not seem to serve lay community members. Although speculative, Profiat Duran sensed that a connection could be drawn between the neglect of biblical study and the persecutions devouring the region, as he incisively noted that the only communities with few persecutions were also those that had retained Bible in their school curriculum.²¹⁵

For better or for worse, the Ashkenazi method of study not only spread through Europe to reach the eastern countries of Poland, Lithuania and Russia, but persists until today. The emergence of modern Talmud study and commentary can be traced to the work of the Maharsha, Pnei Yehoshua and the Ramban, who advanced the fundamental methods of the Tosafists in posing questions to resolve difficulties in the text, diverting focus from sophisticated answers to the art of formulating a probing question. Their work became the basis for the learning

²⁰⁸ Grumet

²⁰⁹ Baron, 175.

²¹⁰ *Ibid*, 177.

²¹¹ “Epistle to the Sages of Lunel in Southern France” in Sokolow (schools... unpublished)

²¹² Sokolow (schools... unpublished), note 82.

²¹³ Marcus, 189.

²¹⁴ Sokolow (schools... unpublished)

²¹⁵ Baron, 195.

methodology in Polish-Lithuanian academies of the 19th century, which in turn developed into the analytical technique of Chaim Soloveitchik employed today.²¹⁶

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

While right wing religious circles had Talmud study to blame for the decreased study of Scripture, the Bible faced usurpation from the left wing as well, albeit from the growing importance of an entirely different subject. Even at the time of Geonim of the 10th century, secular subjects were beginning to take up a considerable time in schools,²¹⁷ competing for the already shrinking space in the Jewish school curriculum.

During the early middle ages, the works of classic Greek philosophy were introduced to Muslim lands, translated into the vernacular Arabic. Accessible to Jews as well, even Jewish scholars began to include such material into their own studies, reasoning that an ultimate search for truth must include disciplines other than Torah.²¹⁸ Not only in Arabic lands, but in Northern France, the seat of the Talmud-centric Tosafist academies, a spirit of the search for truth and knowledge was underway, as cathedral schools from throughout the region came together in Paris to form what became the first university.²¹⁹ Even while Tosafists were primarily Talmud centered, individual scholars embraced involved in other disciplines in their search for truth, hoping to reveal Biblical interpretation beyond the surface through esoteric studies or systematic inquiry into faith, or to achieve literary perfection in the composition of piyyutim.²²⁰

In some cases, traditional scholars were opposed to the integration of Greek philosophy, Arabic literary device, or scientific methods of inquiry. In the Epistle of Falaquera, the representative of this view comments “I see that most of those who engage in the study of these sciences fall into bad ways: these sciences are harmful to their souls. They are the cause of their going astray.”²²¹ This approach to study of foreign philosophies and sciences led to a significant number of bans, condemnations and controversies over the study of philosophy throughout the 13th century.²²²

On the other hand, some scholars believed that the study of foreign philosophies and science were justified, in they did not contradict the Torah, or further, actually aided the scholar in his divine service. According to 13th century scholar Falaquera,

“Those who favored with intellect to discover their depths is not prohibited from the point of view of our law, and that the truth hidden in them does not contradict a word of our belief.”²²³

He believed that for the multitude who do not seek to improve their intellect, observing tradition without knowing reasons may suffice,²²⁴ but to the seeker of truth, any discipline could be pursued if it aided in one’s search for rational, objective truth. The group of scholars known

²¹⁶ Ta-Shma, I. “Early Modern Trends in Late West-European Talmud Commentary and their Influence on Popular Talmud Studies in the 18th and 19th c” in *Creativity and tradition: Studies in Medieval Rabbinic Scholarship, Literature and Thought*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge. 2006, pp 172-174

²¹⁷ Goitein, 252.

²¹⁸ Sokolow class lecture, History of Jewish Education Spring 2013.

²¹⁹ Kanarfogel (2006), 119.

²²⁰ *Ibid*, 118.

²²¹ Falaquera, Shem Tov ben Yosef. *Falaquera's epistle of the debate: an introduction to Jewish philosophy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies, 1987, 44.

²²² *Ibid*, 106.

²²³ *Ibid*, p15 translation to pp55-56

²²⁴ *Ibid*, 29.

as rationalists believed the danger of idol worship had vanished and it was common to believe in G-d and providence, thus the study of philosophy could cause no harm.²²⁵ As early as the 10th century, Saadia Gaon in his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* justifies the study of philosophy²²⁶ on the grounds that it verifies and concretizes the teachings of Scripture, and 15th century Elijah del Medigo goes as far as to recommend the study of science.²²⁷ Poet and philosopher Bahya Ibn Pakuda goes even further, maintaining that the study of metaphysics is not only recommended, but obligatory for those who are capable, as the knowledge is necessary in order to understand of religion.²²⁸ In Southern France and Spain, systematic and independent study was pursued by scholars in grammar, Arabic, philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, and natural science.²²⁹

Additional support came from the theory that even Greek philosophy had its origin in Jewish thought.²³⁰ Although disputation seemed a Greek mode of reasoning, it had been used as a method of Jewish education dating to antiquity long before we hear of it practiced among the Greeks.²³¹ Although original writings were lost in the Babylonian and Persian exiles, through translations, the ideas contained in them were transmitted first to the Chaldeans and Persians, and subsequently to the Greeks and Romans.²³² It was known, even among the non-Jews, that Pythagoras had studied under Solomon or Ezekiel, Socrates gained from Ahitophel and the psalmist Asaph, Plato from Jeremiah, and Aristotle from Simon the Just.²³³ Thus, even Greek philosophy found itself vying for space in the crowded Jewish school curriculum.

More Welcome on the Left than on the Right

Although rationalists did advocate for a compromise of Jewish content to make space for philosophy and science, ironically they found more support for the study of Biblical scripture than did their Talmudist colleagues. In fact, rationalists advocated for Scripture as a subject worth keeping, and rather, argued against what they viewed as disproportionate time on Talmudic debate.

However, the study of philosophy and the natural sciences led many Jews in southern France and in Spain to challenge the most sacred beliefs of Judaism, and new beliefs threatened the foundations of the orthodoxy so zealously guarded by the rabbinic leaders. As a result of this situation a conflict arose between the liberals and the orthodox. Many orthodox declared even the Rambam's *Guide* heretical to the point of having it burned. The conflict between science and tradition reached a peak in the late 13th and early 14th c. and spanned from Spain through Palestine. Although the 1305 ban against philosophy and science was meant only for a small population,²³⁴ its gained support from a wide network of scholars.²³⁵

In 13th century Spain, Judah ben Samuel ibn Abbas, a more moderate rationalist, composed the *Yair Nativ* in which he outlines an ideal program of study, criticizing both extreme

²²⁵ Assis, 332.

²²⁶ Falaquera, p.15 n.4: Saadia ben Yosef. *The Books of Beliefs and Opinions*. Translated by Samuel Rosenblatt. Yale University Press: New Haven, 1948: 26-27.

²²⁷ Falaquera, p.15 n.4: Elijah Del Medigo. *Behinat ha-Dat* (Vienna, 1833), p4-6

²²⁸ *Duties of the heart*, introduction vol 1 p17. *Additional Rambam: guide I:33*, iii, 51, ii48

²²⁹ Rabinowitz, 220-221.

²³⁰ Morris; Aberbach, 293-4.

²³¹ Drazin, 142.

²³² Sourced 2nd century BCE in Aristobolus of Paneas writing

²³³ Malter, 166-67.

²³⁴ For the Barcelona community led by R'Solomon ben Adret, for students below the age of 25.

²³⁵ Jacob R. Marcus (1975). *The Jew in the Medieval World, a Sourcebook*: 315-1791. Atheneum NY: A Temple Book, p.189.

positions: the Talmudist for neglect of the Chumash, and the rationalists for neglect of the commandments.²³⁶

Further efforts to maintain the study of Scripture in the Jewish school curriculum have surfaced, although have yet to penetrate the broad reach of the yeshivish hashkafa which emanated from the Talmudic academies of the middle ages. In the 19th century, secular Maskilim adopted the cause of Tanach study, and in the newly formed State of Israel, the secular Zionists attempted to revive it.²³⁷ However, when offered by those who neglect the commandments, what may otherwise be an advance for Jewish education faces rejection even by industry professionals who hold opposing religious views. How could those on a religiously low level offer sound advice regarding the important subject of Jewish education? Recently, modern orthodox scholar Gidon Rothstein called for a reconsideration of the minimalist approach to Tanach and potentially overwhelming focus on Talmud.²³⁸ Will his voice be heard “on high”?

V. What Now?

What emerges from a survey of Jewish learning through the ages are several observations of our current state of Jewish education:

1. Poor Memorization of Basics

We live in a generation of hyperlink and the cloud. Information is available whenever – and wherever – we seek it. Rather than high expenses for books, we can download basic information freely. Thus, the need to memorize anything has all but been eliminated.

However, to truly think independently about the Tanach, the knowledge must be in our minds, and not merely accessible to us externally. Thus, while information is accessible to us readily, the need for memorization persists. Are we providing this for our children?

2. Poor Education for Girls

As evidenced in both Mishnaic as well as some medieval sources,²³⁹ Jewish learning had often included girls along with boys, betraying the gender-blind interpretation of “Banim”²⁴⁰ in the injunction to teach Torah to your “children” – both male and female – and not merely to “sons.”

Yet somewhere in the “dark” of the Dark Ages, education for females was blanketed. Although less in Italy, European history tells the story of a nearly complete exclusion of women from most active, as well as passive forms of Jewish education. Were Jews reflecting puritanical views of Islam and to minor extent medieval Christendom?²⁴¹

However, examples such as the Judge Devorah and women who taught in men’s yeshivot pepper the pages of our history. Evidence of the Scriptural support for women spiritual and scholarly leaders can be easily found, and yet in another possible misinterpretation of sources among medievalists, learning among females was crippled. In an era of Open Orthodoxy

²³⁶ (sokolow sourcesheet)

²³⁷ Holtz (2011)

²³⁸ Rothstein, Gidon. “Walking Before Running: Towards a More Practical Judaic Studies Curriculum” in *Wisdom from all my teachers*, eds Jo. Saks and S. Hendelman. 2003

²³⁹ Baron, 177; Goitein, 255; and Cecil Roth

²⁴⁰ Devarim 4:9, 6:7, and 11:19, notwithstanding Kiddushin 30a

²⁴¹ Baron 177

fighting the monolith of the RCA and the far-reaching Yeshiva World following the path of Tosafist Europe, will this change?

3. Another side effect of Ashkenaz domination: Fragmentation in place of Unity

Although physically the Sephardic Jews emigrated furthest, spreading themselves too thin to effectively counter the Ashkenazi majority in their communities, they have also found cohesion and strength in their shared reliance on the same primary works of codification and figures of authority. The Sephardic chief rabbi addresses the concerns of Sephardic Jews of any locality.

By contrast, despite a common heritage and political-economic status among Ashkenazim in Europe, the intense mobility and cultural mixing led to unmistakable peculiarities among sub-communities. David ben Zimra in 16th century Egypt wrote: “the men of each city and each language form communities of their own and do not mix with the men of other cities and other languages... for hearts are divided according to the divisions of places and languages.”²⁴² Distinguishing themselves by local custom, Ashkenazim developed a community-centric view of authority: “ask your local orthodox rav.”

Holding the position of sole authority for his locality, however, each rabbi develops a sense of his own importance that his approach will be followed. He is repeatedly reminded that his word is the law – and therefore, how could anyone else’s be correct? The members of each community need not respect the customs of any other community, as they are correctly practicing Judaism by following their own community rabbi. Thus, developing out of an attempt to achieve sameness is the fractioning of Ashkenazi Jewry into highly differentiated independent segments, or “hashkafot,” as well as the strengthened self-defense mechanism of intolerance for diversity even among equally valid halachic opinions.

Conclusion

By way of resolution, it is high time that Jewish education strives to return our generation to the fulfillment of the words of Isaiah, that *all* people will be learned in the knowledge of God.²⁴³ It is no longer enough for rabbis, scholars, and men to know text and engage in meaningful discussion, but only possible when the words of Torah are discussed both at home and in the street: by the traffic cop and by the mother of young children.

Memorization must be employed with understanding of its function and not merely because tradition dictates. The ability to recall text is invaluable for learning, making inferences, deductive reasoning and critical analysis. The command of information allows a student to delve deeper into text. Critical in the early stages of learning, children must memorize certain facts to effectively make meaning and be able to apply and analyze information.²⁴⁴

We are aided by the availability of sources as close as our personal phones, and in every vernacular language. The memorization of texts can be encouraged, or simply the ongoing engagement with learning at any point of access even if not within the walls of the Beit Midrash nor in the languages of Aramaic or Yiddish.

²⁴² Ruderman 39, according to note 27: response 3, no 472 cited in Joseph Davis “The Reception of the Shulchan Aruch and the Formation of Ashkenazic Jewish Identities” *AJS Review* 26 (2002): 271.

²⁴³ Isaiah 54

²⁴⁴ Rabhan, D. (2012) *Understanding Memorization in the Talmudic Era and Now: A Reflection*. In *History of Jewish Education Course*, M. Sokolow. Azrieli Graduate School, NY.

The benefits of engagement need not be limited to academic achievement, but can also be found in students' strengthened personal identity as well as relationship with G-d. Today in the borough of Brooklyn, NY, while home to what may be the largest concentration of religious Jews, a full 70% of Jews are non-orthodox. This means that for every religious Jew in Brooklyn, there are *three* others who are ignorant or unaffiliated. These numbers are staggering, but can and should be a goal of "Jewish educators" to reach such unaffiliated masses and offer them points of access to their heritage. Their personal Jewish identities, as well as our communities, would be strengthened and enriched by the full intellectual and emotional contribution of every Jew.

What would the Jewish community – or world – look like if each Jew, male and female, truly fulfilled the commandment of Deuteronomy to "write their own Torah,"²⁴⁵ by way of devising their very own comprehensive commentary on the Bible? Our volumes would exceed sixty four: for six million Jews, we would witness the flowering of six *million* works of Torah.

Today, women have graduated with degrees in engineering, medicine and law. If they wish to study Torah and contribute their intellectual efforts to their own G-d given heritage of Jewish texts, does only their gender then hold them back? Rather, it should give them a female perspective on the same information formerly interpreted only by men. If to care for children requires maternity leave, in the same way they would stay home from work in an office or engineering firm, they would also stay home from work as a scholar.

All the more so would academically inclined women be able to spend time learning if circumstances prevent them from caring for children. Under circumstances such as singlehood, an empty nest, infertility, or simply waiting for children to return home from their school day, women are free and available to engage in meaningful work to the same degree as men. If they possess the intellectual ability and wish to spend their time learning Torah, should they be withheld this treasure? If, further, they possess extraordinary spiritual sensitivity, moral compass, and leadership skill, should they not be paid to lead a community? In reviewing the history of Jewish education through the centuries, we can understand that a lack of support for girls' education developed as an erosion rather than a fulfillment of the Torah value to provide education for *all* children.

Finally, in the original spirit of the Tosafist academies, tolerating and in fact prizing the existence of multiple truths,²⁴⁶ the yeshivish approach to learning might consider upholding teachings such as "Shivim Panim," the existence of up to seventy ways to look at the same idea, and "Elu v'Elu," the possibility that contradictory ideas may both be correct.

Involving artists in the learning and transmission of Torah may expand these multiple truths further, enabling multi-dimensional lessons through dramatization and movement. Each person among the Jewish people possesses unique ability and insight – welcoming a range of perspectives true to the intention of the author²⁴⁷ will only broaden and enrich our appreciation for the word of G-d, and further, will engage each individual in a personal relationship with the Torah.

If the Torah can be considered a garden with an infinite supply of color, inspiration and wisdom, it may pay to build a "fence" to protect its beauty, but only if that fence is not so high

²⁴⁵ Rava in Sanhedrin 21b on Deuteronomy 31:19

²⁴⁶ Kanarfogel (2006)

²⁴⁷ Saks, Jonathan. "Creativity and innovation in halakhah" in *Rabbinic authority and personal autonomy* (Orthodox Forum Series) ed Moshe Sokol, Northvale, N.J. : J. Aronson, 1992.

that it prevents others from entering. Jewish history, rather, urges us to appreciate that all Jews live in equal proximity to this same garden, and while some may have a different point for entry, no one gate is of higher value than another. In order to fulfill the utopic picture of Isaiah, we must be able to find a way for all Jews to find their way in to the Torah.

In the words of Michael Rosenak and others who aptly observe what can be corroborated through historical analysis, the development of a Jewish school curriculum may actually serve to determine the canon of work we value as a community.²⁴⁸ Thus, not only is the discussion of Jewish schooling an important conversation to determine what the next generation will know, but also because it may alter and change the future of Judaism itself. It is the Jewish educators today who set the course for the knowledge and service of G-d our nation will have tomorrow.

²⁴⁸ Rosenak, Michael. "Towards a Curriculum for the Modern Orthodox School" in *Visions of Jewish Education*. Eds Seymour Fox, Israel Scheffler and Daniel Marom. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Also see: Weiss, Andrea L. and William Cutter "Canon and Curriculum: How We Choose What We Teach." *Religious Education*, 93(1), Winter 1998: 82-101.

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