

Jeremy Rosen - What is the Talmud

- I think it's one minute after the hour now. So maybe we should start, Jeremy.

- Okay, I'm ready.

- Okay. Our people have has Shauna let their people in? Oh yeah. Well, welcome back. It's lovely to have you with us. And, today you're going to be talking about what is the Talmud?

- Yes.

- Thank you.

- Indeed. The Talmud is probably the most important book in Jewish culture. And I say this knowing full well that technically speaking the Bible ought to be. But whereas the Bible, as we have it, has been adopted by other cultures, it is the Talmud that differentiates Judaism and its approach to the Bible more than any other book. It's a massive, massive document. There are 37 volumes. It can often take a year to go through one volume in itself. And no other book has got as many commentaries on it within our tradition, with the exception of the Bible than the Talmud. But what is the Talmud? Where does it come from? How did it start? The Torah, the five books of Moses has a whole constitution for how the Jewish people should, or Israelites, as they were, run their affairs. And in the text of The Torah, there is a famous line that says, "If there's anything you don't understand, or if there are situations that have arisen that you don't know how to deal with them, go to the leaders of that generation, and they will explain it to you and what they say should be accepted."

So, on the one hand there is this statement about the evolution of Jewish law. And when you look at the text of The Torah, of course, you can see that the written text needs to have an explanation. The most classic example is taken from a Hammurabi Code, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, and a bruise for a bruise." Question is if a judge was faced by somebody who had no teeth, how is he going to take a tooth for a tooth? Or did they have special mechanisms in those days of deciding what a bruise for a bruise was, because people bruise differently? Or, a man with one eye taking out the eye by accident of another person, if you take out his eye, he'll be totally blind. So, there must have been at some stage this understanding of what the written text meant. And this began as the oral law. That is to say, whereas the Constitution was written down, parallel with it there was the unwritten oral law of how we understood things at the time. So, when Moses comes down and says, on the Festival of Sukkot, "You're going to take the fruit of a nice tree," we don't know what nice tree they took in those days. Was it any kind of nice tree?

Or, was it some sort of tree that did exist and doesn't exist today or today and not then? So, this process makes sense even though we don't know the actual details of how it worked in practise, where you had the development of the biblical system. First of all the laws of Moses, and then

you had the history of the judges and Samuel and Kings, and then you had the great prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Heschal, and then you had the Book of Psalms and the book of Proverbs and all the other books. And that process of the written text went, roughly speaking, not going to be sort of dogmatic about this, roughly speaking from 3000 years ago to 2,500 years ago when the Jews were then sent into exile into Babylon, had to meet totally new situations there without a temple, without the structure and the authority of the priests they had before. And new ideas started coming into Judaism to add, embellish and create conditions and laws to meet changing circumstances. Then under the Persians and then under the Greeks, until we come to the Roman era. And during that time, of course, Jewish law from the Bible was constantly adjusting to new cultures, new situations, but it was never written down, because in principle they said "Only the Torah should be written down."

Two things began to change that attitude during the first century of the Common Era. One of them was the Roman desire, because of Jewish rebelliousness to destroy their communities and to scatter them. And therefore there was this fear that we would lose all these oral traditions that we'd handed down from father to son over the years. And the second reason was that a new religion was emerging that claimed to accept the Bible, the Torah, as much as we did, except they believed that we had added on so many things after it, and they wanted to do it their way, not our way. So, it was decided 'round about the year 120 that the head of the Jewish community in Israel, and remember there was the biggest Jewish community was still in Babylon, the head of the Jewish community in Israel, Rabbi Judah the prince, a descendant of the house of David, decided it was time to document, to write down all the developments of laws in the 500 years since the destruction of the first temple. And now, of course, they had the destruction of the second temple. And he wrote these down. He compiled a beautiful Hebrew. He accepted this as the document we call the Mishnah.

So the Mishnah is the record of the development of Jewish law from the end of the biblical period until the first century. And there are six sections to it. There's a section that deals with agriculture. There's a section that deals with festivals. There's a section that deals with damages, commercial and otherwise. There was a section that deals with women, marriage and divorce. There was a section that deals with purity, which really in those days included medicine that also to do with the temple. Even though the temple was destroyed, it wasn't there anymore. No more sacrifices. Even though laws of purity no longer applied, because they were intended originally for the temple, they felt it was important to document every single aspect of Jewish law. And this was the Mishnah. And the Mishnah is made up of six different volumes. And so, it was called , the six sections of the Mishnah. In short Shas, and Shas is sometimes the shorthand for the Mishnah and later for Gemara. Now, as soon as it was written out as Jews everywhere, they started disagreeing. How can you put in this one and not that opinion, this view, not that view? You missed out this one.

And who does this rabbi think he is? And this debate on the Mishnah immediately blossomed and bloomed into a massive, massive programme that became known as the Gemara. And the Gemara, this debate took place in Israel, it took place in Babylon. There were contributions from

rabbis all over the Jewish world, which at that stage went from India all the way to Spain, into Europe and into Africa. And the opinions of rabbis who were hard line, soft line, intelligent, less intelligent, more socially inclined, less inclusive inclined, coming from different cultures. Some of them treated women well. Some of them treated women badly. It became an agglomeration of a range of opinions on everything you can possibly think of under the sun. This Gemara took another almost 500 years until finally it was compiled. The main one was in Babylon at 600. And that was the Gemara. And the Mishnah and the Gemara together are what we know as the Talmud. As I say, it's a massive, massive work of literature. If you look behind me to my left hand here, you can see those big volumes up there. There are 36 of those volumes, and they contain not only the Talmud as it was when it was compiled, but also generations of commentaries and additions and disagreements. So this in rough terms is the evolution of the Talmud. But what does the Talmud consist of?

It is an amazing document which combines three totally different subject categories. And it also includes within this a lot of opinions that were current at the time of the Mishnah, but not actually collated. The Tosafot and the Baraita. And so they come together under three different headings. The first and most famous is Jewish law. What is Jewish law? And remember, this was not just religious law as we understand it. This was law of a total constitution, covered civil, religious, political, diplomatic, historical. The whole gamut of any culture is included within the framework of Halakha. And the method of putting down Halakha, Jewish law in the Talmud is to state opinions. You've got the opinions of the Mishnah. The Mishnah itself includes a whole range of opinions and doesn't give usually a specific conclusion. These opinions can be expressed by individual rabbis, Akiva, Gamaliel and also by a generic term called the Hahamim the wise men. And we're not exactly certain who those wise men were, but it was a third or fourth opinion. When you come to the Gemara and the Gemara looks at this, it starts saying, "How did these guys contradict each other?"

They're giving different opinions. It doesn't make sense. How are we going to deal with this?" Sometimes, they take a vote. Sometimes, it's a matter of pure, if you like, democracy amongst the scholars of the academies of Babylon and of Israel. Sometimes, it's left, the modern word for a draw and a soccer match. We don't know. We leave it. We can't decide. We're going to leave it for another generation to try and decide. This process of Jewish law is such an important part of our culture to question, to challenge, to come up with new opinions, to examine to see where the faulty logic is and to come out and actually say so. Now I can't claim for one moment that this was always gentlemanly agreements. So for example, the earliest main disagreements came as I'm sure you know, from two different schools of thought. The school of thought of Hillel, who I've spoken about before, and the school of thought of Shammai. These were two groups, Hillel taking a lenient, more tolerant view, Shammai taking a stricter view. They were both, shall we say, within the framework of a constitution, but looking at it in different ways. And in this process, they were laying the framework for the Talmudic method.

There are stories that they had to take votes. And sometimes, just as in modern times, when they were able to pack the academy with their supporters, they would vote one way. And when

the others packed the academy with their supporters, they voted their way, not unlike what goes on in politics today. But, there were in the end general agreements as to how the law emerges. I'll give you an example. You know in the Bible it says, "Don't seethe the goat in its mother's milk," which the rabbis then interpret to mean don't eat meat and milk. But then, there was a question of how do you decide meat? Is meat a quadruped as the goat is, or what about chicken? And what about turkey? Well, one of the great rabbis of that period was a man called Yossi Haglili, Yossi from the Galileo, from the north. And he always ate chicken with milk. He had no problem with it. But in his generation there was a convocation and a vote, and this vote decided that chicken would count as meat. Rabbi Yossi Haglili's children came to him and said, "Dad, what are we going to do? We've been eating chicken and milk all this time." Rabbi Yossi Haglili said, "I'm sorry guys, I did too. Up until this time, there hadn't been a vote. Now that there's been a vote, we've got to accept the majority of opinion. So no more chicken Parmesan."

So there's one example of how you accept the vote. Let me give you another example. After Rabbi Yossi Haglili, the leadership of the Jewish community passed to a man called Gamaliel. Gamaliel was also a kind of a prince, a diplomatic figure, but he was also the boss of the community. And he was a tough minded autocrat, but he used to run the academy. And in the academy there was a discussion about how many prayers do we have to make? Now remember, the Torah doesn't give any description of prayers whatsoever. Prayer was purely subjective. When you felt like praying to God, you pray to God any language, any time, any way. It wasn't until after the destruction of the temple that the rabbis decided, look what's going to keep us together. If we don't have a temple anymore, something's got to keep us together. So, let's have community services. At least this way, we'll get together at least several times a day or a week or whenever. But what are we going to say? So they said, "Well, you know, let's create a kind of a menu of subject matters for people to choose from. And that will help them get used to how you pray in a communal sense. It's not going to stop people praying privately, but at least it deals with this public problem."

And so they came up with services. Initially, they wanted these services to replace the sacrifices. In the temple there was a morning sacrifice, and there was an afternoon sacrifice. And so they fixed these two times, two prayers. Shacharit, morning service, and Minhah, afternoon services. What about Ma'ariv? What about the evening service? There wasn't a third sacrifice to go to. Rabbi Gamaliel said, "You know, because it says in the Torah, you should pray to God morning and night when you feel like it, The Shema, we've got to have an evening service." One of his most brilliant, brilliant colleagues was a man called Yoshor who said, "I'm sorry, I don't think we should make it compulsory. I think we should make Ma'ariv voluntary." Well Rabbi Gamaliel says, "I'm sorry, don't agree with you." So he convokes the whole of the scholars and he says, "People I want to take a vote. Is Ma'ariv optional, or is it obligatory?" Well, because he was such a strong man, most people did not want to stand up to him. But, this one scholar stands up to him.

And when Rabbi Gamaliel says, "Is there anybody who disagrees with me?" He got up and he said, "I'm sorry, I disagree." "Okay," said Rabbi Gamaliel, "Too bad. You will remain standing

until I finish my lecture." Well, the rest of the rabbis around there were scandalised at this inhuman treatment of this wonderful man. And so, the famous Rabbi Akiva led a rebellion. He led a rebellion and they chose to depose Rabbi Gamaliel. And they appointed a young independent man to replace him in the academy, because he was independent minded. And they opened up the academy to anybody who wanted to come in instead of being, shall we say, highly selective. But after a while they said, "Listen, we've got to make peace." And they made peace, and they compromised. The fact of the matter is, although Rabbi Gamaliel was brought back in, he had to share his role. But nevertheless, Ma'ariv, the evening service was considered to be and developed to be as obligatory as the other two.

Then there was another example. One of the most famous examples, I'm sure many of you heard about, it was a debate about an oven, an unimportant issue about whether a particular oven made out of clay and ceramics had to be cleaned and purified and in what way? The discussion was split between two points of view. On the one hand, there was Rabbi Joshua who said one thing. And on the other hand there was Rabbi Eliezer who said another thing. Rabbi Eliezer in a sense took a vote and said, "We're in the majority here. You must go by the majority." Rabbi Joshua says, "I can't accept it. You are simply wrong." So Rabbi Eliezer said, "You know something, if I am right, let's mark the walls of the synagogue where we are, bend in on top of each other." And the walls began to move. And then what happened? Rabbi Eliezer says, "Look, if I'm right, let the water in this spring out, go up the other way." And the water went the wrong way. And he said, "Let the carob tree go the other way." And the carob tree rooted and went another way. And to every one of these things, Rabbi Joshua replied, " , God no longer decides what the law is. The decision of the law comes from us."

And they say that a voice came out from heaven, and the voice came out from heaven and said, "Rabbi Eliezer is right." And even so, Rabbi Joshua said, "I'm sorry, we do not accept heavenly voices. We don't have people hearing voices deciding what the law is. It has to be worked out in a rational way." So, here you have an example of the legal process that applied to Jewish law, to Halaha that has gone on developing even since then to this very day in the court of public appeal and expert opinion. So, a big bit of the Gemara, probably the biggest chunk is what we call Jewish law. But parallel with Jewish law, you have what is called Midrash. Midrash is how do we interpret our biblical texts? And Midrash basically is a process of education, of familiarising everybody with the text of the Torah of drawing in as many different lines from different places, 'cause they didn't all have books in those days. This was all so oral. So the more time you can repeat a verse from the Bible, the better it will sink in. And so, they used these words of the Bible both to deal with ideas and to deal with what we would consider to be theology.

There isn't theology as such in the Talmud. That's a Greek philosophical area of expertise. But, there's a tremendous discussion about ideas, and how significant these ideas are. And these ideas essentially are part of an educational process that also includes disagreement. So, on almost every line of the Bible, there are different opinions. For example, there are two rabbis Rav and Shmuel, they always disagree with each other on actually everything. The classic example is Noah. It says Noah was a good man in his generation. And they said, "What's it

mean in his generation? Does that mean in his generation he was a good man, but not in any other normal generation? Or, does it mean if he was a good man in a bad generation, he must've been super, super good?" And Rav and Shmuel had different opinions. And both these opinions are recorded, and nobody has to say one is right and the other is wrong. So the Midrash is full of disagreements between the rabbis on how we understand the text of the Torah. And included in all this is trying to reimagine the biblical stories in times that were relevant to their age. And sometimes, this comes up with rather strange anomalies.

The Talmud has a configuration of King David as a Talmudic scholar. Of course this was much later, but that's what they try to do. They imagine, for example, some strange situations in which Moses comes into the academy back from life and listens to Rabbi Akiva giving a lecture. And Moses listens to Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Akiva says, "This law dates back to Moses." And Moses is confused, 'cause he doesn't know what's going on, and he doesn't recognise that this might have been his law. And he then turns to God and he says to God, "This is an amazing thing. This man Akiva has developed the law so much beyond me. Tell me what happened to him." And God turns around and shows him that Rabbi Akiva was tortured to death by the Romans. And Moses turns to God and says, "This is the reward you get for Torah?" And God replies, "Shut up. This is a divine decree," as if to say there are certain things that are not logical in life, certain things that go beyond human understanding.

So, there you have an example of where Midrash brings in a whole different area. And the interesting thing about the Gemara is that you will suddenly be switching from a debate about two people arguing about this property is mine and this property is yours, or this field is mine and this field is yours. And suddenly, you've got a complete break, and in comes a little bit of Midrash. And you'll do a bit of Midrash, which sometimes is based on the different rabbis who said similar things, and sometimes it's quite random. It's not if you like what we would call systematic. But then, there's a third section. And this third section is even crazier. It's called Aggadah. Not the Haggadah of Pesach, but Aggadah, which has a similar route. It's what we might call folklore. And it includes such things as medical cures, how to cure. And some of them look absolutely ridiculous, and some of them are still in vogue. And some of them obviously are based on information about herbal remedies, about faith healing, all kinds of things. There are sections of these cures scattered through the Talmud.

Actually, if you are interested in ancient medicine, Maimonides wrote a specific book about all these cures, and some of them he agreed with, and some of them he didn't disagree with. But in addition to medicine and cures, you've also got dream interpretations. And some of the dream interpretations sound very Freudian. A dream only expresses what's in the mind of the dreamer. And some of them want to give you very specific examples. If you have an elephant in your dream, is that a good sign? If you see a monkey in your dream, is that a good sign? And remember, this is 2000 years ago, and all this is still pretty present in the world today, let's alone in mediaeval times. And then you have all these things about spirits. Remember, in those days they didn't understand notions of gravity or static electricity. And so, when they say, "Why is it that somebody's clothes wear out?" "Oh that's because they're a little spirits tugging at them all

the time. And these spirits were around us all the time, and we don't know how to see them." And sometimes they say, "I know how to see them. Very, very simple.

You'll get the placenta of a black cat, and you burn it up and then you grind its ashes, and then you add a few more things and put it over your eyes, and then you'll be able to see all these evil things do zooming around." Or the other explanation is put scatter sand on the ground around your bed when you go to sleep and wake up in the morning, and you'll see little footprints all over them. Those are the little devils. Those are the spirits, the shade in the shadows as they call them. So, there a lot of things there that sound very, very strange to us in this book, in this area of of Aggadah. Indeed, Maimonides, again, the great rationalist said, "Don't take these things literally. Try to understand the message behind them. Try to understand what they're trying to tell you about life and your way of coping with the difficulties of life." And so much of the discussion goes on about reward and punishment.

Are we rewarded? If we are rewarded, how can good people suffer and bad people seem to get away with it? And is there life after death? Do we know there's life after death? And is there such a thing as resurrection? What does it mean? How are we resurrected? There's a nice little story in the Talmud in Sanhedrin about Queen Cleopatra asking the rabbis of the Talmud, "Look, I understand resurrection. Bodies come back. It's part of Egyptian culture. I want to know when I come back, will I come back with my clothes on or without my clothes on?" Cleopatra did not want to be seen unfashionably in a reincarnation. And these things in general are not turned into you must believe. There's no command in the Torah, you have to believe. These are ideas that were considered to be important and significant and inspirational at that particular time. In fact, the Mishnah has virtually none of this theology. There is a separate section of the Mishnah called Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Followers, which contains the wisdom of the rabbis. And some of them deal with some of these issues, but it's a kind of an addendum.

In the Talmud, it's all integrated into the almost every single book. And they're all mixed in. And people look at this and say, "How can they be so mixed in? Was there no system? Was there no method?" There was a method. It was a significant pedagogic method to integrate all of your culture into one process of learning and not to specialise too much in only one way. And it was a way of giving people options. Some people like studying the law. Some people like studying history. Some people like studying Torah. Any study was good, and the Torah incorporates this whole process and all of this studying. Another interesting idea of the Talmud is this idea of history, how they understand how history took place. And so for example, one of the most famous of the historical debates is why was a temple destroyed? And there is a section that deals with a famous story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, two similarly named Jews in Jerusalem. And one of them hates the other. And the other doesn't hate him quite so much but does. So, there's an invitation to a banquet by one of the nobles of Jerusalem.

And the noble of Jerusalem's invitation was taken to the wrong guy, was taken to the wrong guy by mistake or maybe intentionally hoping to get the two of 'em to sit together. They come into this banquet, and the person who was mistakenly invited is suddenly faced by the man who's

provided the banquet. And he says, "You're an enemy of mine. What the hell are you doing here?" And he says, "Look, I'm sorry you invited me." "No I didn't." "You did. Here's my invitation." "Well, I must have mistake. Get out." He said, "Look, don't embarrass me in front of everybody. Please don't embarrass me in front of everybody." "No, no, I want you out." He said, "Look, I'll pay for everything I eat." "No out." "I'll pay for the whole banquet." "No out." And he threw them out. This guy was so upset by what happened that he went and he became an agent of the Romans. And he went to the Romans and he said, "You know, the Jews have rebelled against you." When in fact not all the Jews had and most of the Jews at the time were in favour of a settlement. And it shows how deeply offended he was and how dangerous it was. Anyway, the Romans said, "We don't believe you. Listen.

They're accepting sacrifices from us all the time. If they're accepting sacrifices from us in the temple, that can't be a good evidence that they're against us." He says, "Look, I tell you, let me take them a sacrifice from you and see if they accept it or not." So they agree. He takes a nice little sheep, and he on the way to the temple, he makes a blemish. Now, you're not supposed to sacrifice anything in the temple that's got a blemish in it. That's disgusting, that's unacceptable. This was a blemish that was inside the mouth or inside the eye that according to the Romans, they didn't see anything wrong with it, and they couldn't see what was wrong. But, when he gets to the temple, and the rabbis and the priests are there, they have to decide to accept it. There's a debate. How can we accept an animal that doesn't meet our strictest needs? Well, one response was, "Kill the guy. That gets rid of the problem, saves the majority."

No, they said, "You can't kill a guy for that. People would say that the penalty for a a blemish is a death penalty. Couldn't possibly do that." Other people said, "well look, let's accept it. After all, you know this is a matter of life and death." And there was a man there called Rabbi Avkulas, and he said, "Look, I'm sorry. We can't bend Jewish law in an emergency." He took a hard line. Others said, "You must bend Jewish law in emergency." Unfortunately Rabbi Avkulas lost the debate. They didn't sacrifice the animal, and that they said was why Jerusalem was destroyed. Now that's not simple why Jerusalem was destroyed. It was destroyed for all kinds of historical reasons. But, they were trying to say, "When we are so divided amongst ourselves, when we are treating each other with so much disrespect and hatred, we deserve to lose our temple. We deserve to lose everything we've got." So here's an example of a Talmudic debate which involves politics, Jewish law, opinion and history, all coming together in one single debate.

So, this gives you a range, a broad range of the sort of subjects that the Talmud deals with. And it includes also influences from other sources. As I've mentioned previously, there are Greek words, Greek influences, Roman influences. There are Persian influences, because the Talmud was a product of the combination, a unique combination of a Persian Jewish community, the Babylonian community and of the Israel community, which is essentially a Roman Greek community. There were two Talmuds. There was the Jerusalem and a Babylonian. Because the Babylonian was bigger and more strong, it became the accepted one and the one we study. But, it was this joint effort of a culture of 1,000 years stretching from India to Spain being compiled into one document that is the source book of our culture, of our history, of our background from



a specific Jewish perspective. Now, the big question is did the rabbis reinvent Judaism in the Talmud? Are all these things we find in the Talmud innovations?

Many people claimed they were. Many people like the Samaritans who were there in Israel when the Jews came back from Persia with all their new ideas said, "We refuse to accept these new ideas." And when Christianity emerged they said, "Listen, this is your creating a new religion here, just as we are creating a religion here. Why are you any better than us, or we any inferior to you?" But I've tried to show that the roots of the Talmud do go back. They go back a long way. But, it's true. The rabbis of the Talmud had to deal with two crucial issues. Issue number one is we no longer have a temple. We don't want to lose the idea of sacrifices. We don't want to go like the Christians, and say, "Jesus was the sacrifice." We want to preserve our history as a record. And that is why even though today, 1,000s of years after the temple, when most of us have no enthusiasm for sacrifice whatsoever, they still study the details of the sacrificial system and of the purity system. It's important, 'cause it's our heritage. So this idea is that we have to include in it our whole past so that we can go forward to the future.

But, we've got to add those things that meet new systems, new conditions. And so, having lost the idea of Judaism as a sanctuary, of a place where you express your Judaism by going to watch what's going on, they turned it into a tradition where you have to study, of literacy, where anybody can get access to the texts, when anybody can become a scholar no matter where you come from. And this process of literacy and scholarship was their massive contribution. And it is this that makes the Talmud so crazy, so tough. I want to tell you, I studied philosophy at Cambridge in the generation after Wittgenstein, and it was tough. It was difficult. It was mind breaking. But, I want to tell you the discipline was nothing like the discipline you get when you go to a yeshiva and you study the Talmud, a few lines a day intricately in and out, keeping seven different theories and possible options in your mind as you try to work it out. Which is why so many Talmudic scholars, even if they abandoned the Talmud, were so good in their careers as lawyers, legal, intellectual minds.

So there's that aspect of it which makes it so impressive. But also, the process of learning Talmud is also a religious command. It's a religious focus. The Talmud debates, what's more important, studying Talmud or prayer? And most of them say Talmud is more important, because studying teaches you what to do. And so, study became a religious process. You got closer to God, understanding the complexities of life and understanding and talking about the issues of morality and life and how to behave, which is why nowadays we draw a distinction between studying and learning. Studying is what you do in university. You're not invested necessarily. It's an academic exercise. You study it. Whereas, on the other hand, learning is you are learning how to behave and how to be a good human being in the process of the academic exercise. That, ladies and gentlemen, is why I consider this book so amazing. And now I throw it open to you to ask whatever you'd like to ask.

Q&A and Comments:

Q: So, my first question from Anita Schwarzenberg, "Do you have a copy of the Talmud in the books behind you? If so, can you point it out?"

A: With pleasure. Let me take one down. There. I hope you can see this. Let me put it bit down. This is a massive document, this big. And in this particular document, when you open the first part, this printing format goes back to Vilna. It's not how it was originally published. It's published in scrolls. It goes back to in the middle you see this central column. This column starts off with this, a bit of Mishnah. It goes down to here. And then there's a Gemara Amoraim which is a Gemara. On this side, you have Rashi, the Pentateuch Rashi, who is a mediaeval commentator who explains everything. And on that side, you have the generation that came after him called Tosafot. And so, you have a little bit of the Mishnah, then a whole lot of Gemara, and then another bit of Mishnah and another lot of Gemara, another bit of Mishnah and another bit of Gemara. And then, when you get towards the end of the actual part of the Gemara itself, which is here, after 120 pages, you then have the second part of the book is made up of all the commentaries from 1,000 years ago to this very day. And more commentaries are being written all the time that are not even in the Talmud itself.

So, there's a massive library of thousands and thousands of books going into the detail of what the Talmud is and what we make out of the text. So, I hope that gives you some explanation. We move on to Jerry Telinsky from Toronto. How does the Talmud reference the great rabbis of these days including findings so that they should be even more current in the future? How does some expand covering your opinions? It doesn't expand covering them, but all the great rabbis of today go back to the Talmud to build a case for a modern situation. So, whether it's deciding whether brain death is the same as heart death or how to deal with jet planes on a Shabbat, or indeed intellectual property, they will go back to the Talmudic source and build the case going through all the different opinions. And each opinion is given attention and respect. But, in the end it's a matter of the experts coming with opinion that is acceptable to the majority of the other experts. This process is called, questions and answer or responsa.

So if you have a problem, you send a letter to the rabbi, the rabbi will then, before he answers, go back to all the sources and come up with an answer. Now, there's a big difference between that and shall we say papal authority, because Judaism's approach is, although there are broad lines, broad guidelines, when you answer a question, each question, it may be slightly different to the other. Depends on the circumstances, it depends on the person, depends, I mean there's a bit of a joke to say that you know, "When a poor woman takes a chicken to the rabbi to find out if it's kosher, and if he says it's not kosher, she's not going to eat chicken again for another year." That's going to get a different answer to a very rich person who flies around a world in a private jet and can be a little bit stricter. Now, whether you agree or not, this just shows the ad hominem approach. The approach of Jewish law is establishing guidelines, but in the end, the rabbi answers your question using the information he's got from his predecessors.

Thank you, Evan for great talk.

Q: Regarding Ma'Ariv, the Amidah is said silent, because it's optional?

A: No, the Amidah is not said silent because it's optional. The every Amidah should be said in such a way that you're not disturbing other people, but you should be able to hear the words yourself, quietly. The question of what is said silently is because ideally, this is a time for you to focus privately. And so, the agenda of the Amidah, the prayer we say morning, afternoon, and evening contains different subject matters. It's to do with health, so that if you are particularly unhealthy or worried about somebody, you are going to focus on that. Sometimes to do with knowledge. If you are having an intellectual challenge or an exam, you'll focus on that. Sometimes if you want to think about political issues, there's room for that too. And because of that, it's meant to be said silently. But, nowadays we have the custom of repeating it out loud simply because most people 1000s of years ago didn't have prayer books, didn't know the words and therefore they relied on the cantor to do it for them. And that has been maintained as if you like custom. That's another subject altogether.

But, some communities cut out the repetitions, others don't. It's nothing to do with whether it's Ma'ariv or not. Yilnock and Alfred Camuls, the text of the Septuagint antedates written Hebrew codices and scrolls. In the Septuagint, we read the prohibition against cooking an animal offering sacrifice of such mixture. Thus somewhere in the following extensions, the decision was made to broaden the prohibition to not cooking any form mixture and not only to offerings. Well look, first of all, Hebrew codices, I assume you don't mean the Bible, the Torah, because we have copies of the Torah long before the Septuagint. The Septuagint was done by Ptolemy. Ptolemy, he initiated it in the First Century BCE, before the Common Era. But, for example, there was Samaritan texts of the Torah long before that, dating back 500 years before that. And there were Dead Sea codices and others. But, the point is not whether the text in Latin or Greek or Hebrew said "A kid in its mother's milk." It simply was how you interpreted the words.

They can be interpreted in any number of ways, which is why the oral tradition is so important. The debate on the oven concluded wonderful praise. My children have defeated me. What parent doesn't swell with pride when a child defeats a parent intellectually? Well that's true. That's how the story ends. The story ends that somebody asks Elijah, "You know, you were up there with God when this debate was going on. What did God say when they refused to accept his words?" And the answer was, "I heard say, my children have defeated me." Well, the term when you translate it has two meanings. It can mean victory, to conquer. It can also mean to enhance me. It means to respect me even more, because I'm the one that said in the Torah, you have to do as you are told to do, and not how I intervene. My period of intervention is over. Paul S. Please comment on four movements related with the Talmud now and 100 years ago. Thank you very much. Well, I by and large, and again the term reform, term conservative vary from country to country and time from time.

But, I would say the difference goes like this. The Orthodox world considers the Talmud as authoritative, authoritative, and the Talmudic process of deciding on law, authoritative. Conservative Judaism, some people say reform in England is the equivalent of conservative,

but that's not exactly accurate. Conservative Judaism says, "Look, the Talmud's a very important book. It's a fundamental book, and we have to take their ideas very, very seriously. But, there comes a time when we simply have to say, times have changed and we have to do certain things to preserve the honour of the Torah and to make Judaism accessible. And we will step outside of those established boundaries." And Reforms say, "Look, this is interesting. It's an interesting document, but not really relevant to us today. We've come a long way since then. And so, it's really only for the specialist to have a look at." I think that's fair. I hope I'm not being unfair, because I value, as I've said before, every branch of Judaism, anything that keeps the Jews together and involved has its strengths and has its weaknesses. Orthodoxy has its weaknesses too, and so does all the others. We have our strengths and our weaknesses, and people choose which one they feel most comfortable with.

Isn't it ironic we've ending up as a sacrifice on so many occasions that we are the sacrifice? Yes, I suppose so. I suppose you might take that back to Christianity again. But, you know, the amazing thing is that going right back to the Bible and God's promise to Abraham that your children are going to disappear for or into slavery for 300 years or more. And then, they're coming out. And similarly, you look at the prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Heschel says, "You are going to be defeated and smashed, 'cause you're so corrupt and you're going go into exile, but don't worry, you're coming back." And then at the time of the Romans, "You are corrupt. Your decadence," says the Talmud, "You're a mess, but don't worry, we are going to come back. We're going to come back, and the world's going to be a better place. So, don't worry about it too much." The Mishnah contains its three track dates, redacted land of Israel.

Q: How, when did it get to Babylon, and what was the corresponding track date in Jerusalem, Gemara and the Babylon in Gemara?

A: Well first of all, remember, Israel and Persia, initially Israel was part of the Persian empire. And so, there were Jews travelling between Israel and Persia throughout the period. When King Cyrus allowed the Jews, some of them, to go back and rebuild the temple, they rebuilt the, after a lot of ups and downs and difficulties, the temple in Jerusalem. And from Persia, people used to come to Jerusalem for the three pilgrim festivals, Pesach Shavuot and Sukkot. So much so, that in Jewish law they developed a new law. The law in Judaism was you pray for rain at Sukkot time. You've got to pray for rain on Sukkot, because that's the beginning of the rainy season. But, there are certain limitations. We don't want to pray too hard until we give the Babylonians a chance to get home, otherwise they'll be flooded out. Which is why one of the prayers, starts earlier, but , give rain now to your bless your country your lands with rain is not said until December time when the pilgrims got home. So, there was, like the Hajj today to Mecca, they were coming to and from. Great Hillel was born in Babylon.

He came to the academy in Jerusalem, in Israel, because that was the main academic centre. The Jerusalem Talmud bases itself, like the Babylonian on the books of the Mishnah, but excludes those books dealing with sacrifices and dealing with purity. So, it only deals with four of them, but in the four that it does deal, it's almost identical to the in structure, to the Babylonian,

except the method is different. There is less debate. It is much more condensed. And because the Jerusalem community was slowly shrinking under Roman occupation and then under the Byzantine Empire, which made life terrible and they began to migrate away, that's why Babylon ended up as being the major authority. So, when interestingly enough, Jews were in Spain at the time of the Islamic invasion into Spain, the Jews of Spain turned to Babylon for the rabbis to come over to Spain to teach them how they should function religiously. So there was a close connection all the time between the Jews of Spain, Jews of Jerusalem, Jews of Persia. We were always moving around. We always had the itch, our students.

Q: When was the Talmud complete?

A: There is, yes, there's some debate about scholarship about the Talmud, whether it's between 500 and 600 of the Common Era. There is a debate as to who edited it. By the traditional method is two rabbis in Babylon. Ravina and Rav Ashi were the ones who edited it. New theories talk about some people called the SeTaM, because sometimes of the reference to Se TaM Unattributed, and they were the compilers. But, it was already clearly universally accepted by all communities by about 800, because we already know from the Babylonian communities that there are references and are referencing the people who are called the leaders of the community were already quoting from the Talmud at that stage. Present issues.

Q: Who decides?

A: That's a very good question, very good question. The fact is that there is, if you like, the court of public opinion, just as you might say, there's a majority in the Supreme Court. The court of public opinion is the majority opinion of accepted scholars. And they become accepted as scholars on the basis of their written work as much as their personal qualities. And they publish books of their opinions, their commentaries and opinions. And that gives them a status that gets them to be recognised as major rabbis, gedolim, great ones as opposed to ordinary common garden ones like me. And these guys are people who spend the whole of their lives immersed in Talmud. And therefore, their mastery of the text is phenomenal. The trouble is that very often their opinions are too much, if you like, influenced by internal metahalalic issues. Issues, for example, like how do we preserve our identity in a moment of assimilation? Do we open up or do we close in? Or, how do we respond to the holocaust and to the fact that the culture of the western world was happy to see us all being destroyed and didn't do anything really to help us? Why should we accept any of their ideas and opinions when they clearly don't value ours?

And as a result, there's a built in resistance to anything that comes from outside of Israel. Now I think there ought to be a kind of a happy balance, because after all, during the Greek and the Roman period, there was a balance. There was taking into consideration other opinions outside. At the moment the Jewish world is so, if you like, fixated on surviving after the Holocaust of not assimilating and disappearing, that they take the view that the only way is to be strict. And that actually is already mentioned in the Talmud. The Talmud says you have to build a fence around the law, because the law is so vulnerable, Jewish identity is so fragile, it is so easy to drop off

that try and build defences rather than opening up to everybody. Now, I want to say that this is one of the reasons why I'm delighted there isn't a supreme court today. Because, if there would be a giving papal decisions as to what is Jewish law and what is not, then we'd be in a fix. If we didn't disagree, we wouldn't be able to express our disagreement and still remain within the broad system. As things stand, we can choose different rabbinical opinions. We can find a rabbi whose opinions are more in tune with our mentality.

Hasidic rabbis are different to Lithuanian rabbis. There are different customs, different rules between the Sephardim and Ashkenazi. And therefore, there's a much wider range of possible options. And I like having options. Some people say, "Oh, this is tough, this, you know, I don't know what to do." And I think I'd rather have variation, informality and the ability to make your own choices than to have everything laid down by one centralised authority. So, I am unhappy at the moment with the fact that very often people who want to be innovative in the orthodox world get shouted out of court. But, at least they're only shouted out of court. They're not forbidden from still being able to carry on and be leaders and give spiritual advice. And that's also a reason why there's not enough flexibility. Interestingly enough, there will be flexibility, but this flexibility will come slowly. And the justification for this flexibility is that, you know, secular society jumps at whatever is the latest fashion. You know, if a girl is a boy, is a boy, is a girl, and if you can be one thing tomorrow and the next thing the next, and the one thing, third days after, how can we rely on that for any stable opinion?

And therefore, or in education, what's the best, what method we have to go slowly. The advantage of religion, it is conservative. The disadvantage is that inhibits innovation and sometimes the benefits are lost and the losses are benefits, and it's very difficult to answer. We humans look at things in very short term. And our short-termism I think is often not a good idea. And so, I think it's no bad idea to have somebody pulling the reins back a little bit. It's like disciplining a wayward child. In the end we break out and we create our own lives. But, I think the discipline of it has much to say in favour, even though I'm personally upset with many areas, not many, sorry, that's wrong, with some areas where the Talmud and past allow for doing things differently, but we refuse to make use of them. I'll give you one small example. One example is the question of divorce. How is divorce so difficult, and how do we have the problem of the , the woman whose husband refuses to give a divorce?

Until the time of Rabbeinu Tam, the grandson of Rashi living in mediaeval Europe, it was relatively easy for a beit din to force a guy to give a divorce. But, because the Christian world hated the idea of divorce, for us, nothing wrong with it. The book in the Talmud on divorce is twice the size as the book of the Talmud on marriage. But, so long as you take care of the children, take care of your responsibilities, you make it as amicable as possible and there are safeguards for the woman's financial independence and to inheritance. Then we can make this innovation and allow flexibility. But, because the Christian Church was so much against divorce, Rabbeinu Tam felt he had to reign things in and felt he had to make it harder rather than easier. And we've been suffering from that to this very day. And to this very day in many ultra orthodox communities, a divorce is considered as a stain, as something you mustn't do. And yet, you can

see from the Talmud they were perfectly happy to do it. As they said, that says in the Torah, "Love your neighbour as yourself. So don't be in a position where you hate each other. Rather, separate and love will develop."

Q: Rashi.

A: There's a lot to be said about Rashi. I suggest you look him up on Wikipedia. Look him up on Wikipedia. You'll find as much as you need to know about Rashi. And Rashi fits into this mix, simply because he was the greatest commentator. He was the first man that the Talmud, of the Babylonian tolerance studies in Aramaic. Most of us who are familiar in Hebrew don't understand Aramaic. It's a difficult language to come to terms with if you're not familiar. It was the lingua Franco of the Persian empire, just as Latin was the lingua Franco of the Christian empire. Aramaic, which was the language most Jews spoke during the first temple and carried on in the Talmud to speak in Babylon in Persia. Whereas, the Jerusalem one is more Hebrew based. This was a difficult language to speak.

And therefore, Rashi's greatness lay in his explaining the language of the Talmud, actually sometimes giving French words to explain the words of the Talmud to the order or to people who weren't that bright or those who needed an explanation. So he was the first great explainer of the Talmud, and nobody's come near him since. That's why he's included on the page. His grandchildren, the Tosafot were also great in making it more relevant to their days, in dealing with things like how do we deal with that the Bible tells us not to deal with pagans? Do Christians count as pagans? In which case, can we not do business with them on any of their holy days? And they deal with problems like those under, shall we say, the Christian era. Do we regard them as pagans or not, and other practical issues of Jewish law. Is the Talmud being added to? No, the Talmud is not.

The Talmud is canonised. It's not being added to, although they've been different texts of it, because the Christians censored big chunks of the Talmud. They didn't like anything that might be interpreted as against Christianity. And so for many, many 100s of years, you couldn't get a full text of the Talmud. Thank God copies existed in the, under the Islamic world. They weren't so an antagonistic to it. And therefore, we've preserved the original text. But, there are variations, but not serious variations. But still, when you look on the text of the Talmud, very often you'll come across a mark which says, "There's an alternative reading here of a couple of lines or a couple of words." And so that is included in the text of the Talmud alternative readings.

Q: Why did Gemara come to an end?

A: Well, it came to an end simply because that era of scholars had died down. They'd left their legacy, and the people who came after felt they wanted to build on it. And they have. And we have these documents, these post-Talmudic documents which cover similar ground, adding new dimensions. I'm told Talmud is part of the curriculum at school in South Korea. Yes, that's quite true. It's a small part. But, because they wanted to know how come the Jews were so

successful, and they were told that one of the reasons was they spent so much time studying Talmud and Talmud was so good for the brain, they thought, well why not give it a try? Plenty of other fads, how to improve your brain power and get on in life. And so it is indeed and in Japan as well.

Q: What document explains issues in the Talmud?

A: Well, Ronnie, the ongoing commentaries. As I say, the second half of this book is filled with the first generation of commentaries known as the Rishonim, the first masters after the Talmud. Then there are other books by what called the Acharonim, the later masters, those from the 15th century, 16th century and onwards. And then there are those produced now. And so, that's where we are.

Q: Is a Steinsaltz version one most studied now?

A: It's a very good one, but it's not. The one that's studied now is the traditional one that I showed you. This is the one that studied in all the Orthodox yeshivot. But many of the more moderate yeshivas, like those of the national religious gush in Israel, the more nationalist ones, they do use Steinsaltz as well. But, there's a tradition of sticking just for tradition sake to the old way. And I still like teaching the old way. I will use other tools when I teach the Talmud, but I teach the Talmud from the traditional text, because there's just something magnificent about, I suppose, reading Shakespeare in the way he originally wrote it. If there was today developing new arguments, is the Talmud added to, or where's it recorded and are there recent examples? Well, you know, sort of the obvious example is brain death, which until a generation ago was considered totally, totally against Talmudic law and Jewish law.

Here's a situation now where the experts have come round. The majority, there are still some who refuse. I mean that's the beauty and the weakness of Judaism. You have all kinds of different voices. There are still some rabbis who refuse to accept brain death. And, not only that, but I have had a wonderful, wonderful orthodox friend who is one of the most saintly, good human beings. Trouble was, he was a heavy smoker. When it came to it, he needed a transplant, and his rabbi refused to allow it, and he died. So, there are still people who don't want to change, but there's an example of where now most rabbis are going to tell you that brain death is fine, and we can use the body for saving other lives. Of course, indeed. At this moment we're debating intellectual property. Intellectual property is being debated all the time within these circles of what is acceptable, use of electricity, everything. Nothing is not up for discussion, to be honest.

If there was a wife who wanted to know what to read first. Well I, it's very difficult to read the Talmud by yourself. I would not recommend anybody trying to read the Talmud by itself. It definitely needs guidance. You can read it, but you can't study it. You, and if you read it, you'll find it confusing and not very helpful. The fact is there was a time when rabbis thought that women's brains weren't good enough for studying the Talmud. And one opinion in the Talmud is



you shouldn't teach a woman Talmud because she'll misuse it. But, the fact of the matter is, there were always great women who studied the Torah and knew the Talmud. And the wife of Rabbi Mayer even argued with Talmudic rabbis when she thought they were wrong. And nowadays, things have changed dramatically. First of all, there were certain schools in America, particularly founded by Rabbi Soloveitchik, JB Soloveitchik, which did start teaching girls Talmud as well as boys. And then, people suddenly discovered, "Hey, women's brains are better if not as good as men. More women are graduating than men. Maybe we ought to rethink." And although in some parts of the ultra-orthodox world that has not sunk through yet, there are academies and yeshivot in Israel that teach women Talmud.

And you have Talmudic scholars who are in the top rank now, and who are really experts and so much so that they are accepted by certain courts of law, beit din to give opinions on certain issues. And you can phone up a beit din in Israel and ask for a woman to answer your question. So, we've come a long way now. And it's as open now to a girl who wants to study Talmud as it ever was to a man who wants to study Talmud. But, as the Talmud itself says, you want to learn, get you a teacher or a rabbi to help, because otherwise the Talmud is tough. There are plenty of good books about the Talmud describing things or extracts from the Talmud, selecting certain pieces which might be worthwhile doing.

Q: Modern Talmudists, that is scholars revisiting ancient rulings in the light of 20th century?

A: Yes, there are. There are constantly modern Talmudists who use it to interpret and develop arguments in this modern world in which we are in.

Q: Is much translated into other language?

A: All the Talmud is translated into a whole lot of languages. But again, you will find it's very, very difficult. It's very, very difficult.

Q: Is the evolution of reformed Judaism through Moses Mendelssohn consistent with Talmud?

A: Oh yes. Moses Mendelssohn definitely was totally committed to the Talmud, no question about it. He was not the beginning of the break. The beginning of the break began in Germany in the 19th century with Geiger, and with the Reform Movement. That was the first break. Until that time, there was never a break with the Talmud as being authoritative.

Q: Is there a shortcut for learning Talmud?

A: A good teacher. A good teacher's the only shortcut. You just answered question above, you debate on Torahs started after the Babylon exile, which led to the Talmud.

Q: Was there no debate on the in Temple Times?

A: Yes, there was. There was a clash between, in the second temple, for example, between the high priests, the Sadducees and the Pharisees, the rabbis. They ended up compromising and managing to find a modus vivendi, but they took very different opinions. And then there were the Karaites, the Karaites who developed in Iraq and Persia in the first millennium. They also were totally opposed to rabbinic interpretation. So, the debate has certainly gone on.

Q: Is it not so obvious at the current time that the time represents respectful dialogue and descent? Isn't it talking it exemplifies country until energy?

A: Yes. I do think that the Talmud does, in general, generally it does approve of respectful dissent and thinks it's absolutely necessary. There are some ways of dissent they find offensive. And there are some people like Elisha ben Abuyah who said, "I can't stand this discussion anymore. I'm getting out of here. I'd prefer to be a Greek philosopher." But, there is, and the idea of imposing religious coercion is something which entered into Judaism, frankly in the Christian and Muslim era when they began coercion. But, the only time there is a reaction in the Talmud is when there's been a majority decision, not when the person who's defeated accepts it, but if the person refuses to accept the decision and act on it. In other words, he acts against it. If Rabbi Yossi Haglili has a chicken with milk, that is the only time they take what's called a , which is not excommunication, 'cause it doesn't kick you out of the Jewish community. It just says, "We don't want you here with us. Go somewhere else." So, generally coercion when it did come into Judaism, and it did in mediaeval times, was from Christianity and Islam, and not from Judaism.

- Jeremy.

- [Jeremy] Yeah.

- I want to just, I'm sure you know, you've now 20 minutes over your time, and I don't want to take up any more of your time. So, and there's so many questions. How are you feeling?

- Look, I don't mind going on. Not at all. But, if you feel it's your decision, if you feel we should convene Talmud Part Two, I'm happy to do that with another range of stories and another range of laws. What do you think? Whatever you decide.

- Thanks Jeremy. I think that maybe we should terminate the session now, only because Shauna needs to get back to work. And, I've got another session also just in five minutes. So let's do Talmud. Let's do Talmud Part Two, as you said.

- [Jeremy] Okay.

- And, you and I will talk offline about how long you, you know, you're happy to go on what the session's for.

- Okay.

- 'Cause, I'm looking at a long, long, long, long list of questions. You're going to be here until this evening.

- [Jeremy] Okay.

- And they keep adding.

- Thank you.

- So, want to thank you very much for another outstanding presentation.

- [Jeremy] Thank you. Bye.

- And we will chat soon. Thank you very much. Thank you, Shauna. Thank you to all the participants.