Rabbinic Study Circles

Edited by
Marc Hirshman
and David Satran

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Mohr Siebeck

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8

Rabbinic Study Circles

Aspects of Jewish Learning in Its Late Antique Context

Edited by

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with the assistance of

Anita Reisler

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Introduction

Marc Hirshman and David Satran

"Torah study above all else" (mPeah 1:2). This startling opening of what arguably might have been the first tractate of the Mishna, the earliest and foundational document of rabbinic literature, privileges learning over all other rituals and commandments. This statement is all the more surprising in that it appears in the opening lines of a tractate devoted to charity. This is the educational ethos which was to sustain and nurture Jewish learning for the next two millennia.

But how did this tiny group of the scholarly elite imbue the general populace with this spirit? The Jewish sages of Palestine of the early Roman Empire (called *Tannaim*) and in both Palestine and Sasanian Babylonia during the following three centuries (called *Amoraim*) mentioned in our literature number fewer than 800 all told. What institutions developed in the first centuries of the Common Era in Palestine and subsequently among Babylonian Jewry to promote this educational goal? In biblical times, the priests and Levites had been considered the teachers of the people. They now were integrated into a spiritual and scholarly leadership that, for the most part, privileged learning over pedigree. The priests would continue to play a prominent role among the Jewish sages, but spiritual and scholarly leadership was no longer decided by the blue blood of priestly or royal lineage. This educational agenda was pursued in the wake of the disastrous destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE and the decimation of the Judean populace in the Bar Kochba revolt some sixty years later.

A brief overview of the field of rabbinic education in recent scholarship will help to introduce and frame the contribution of the present volume. Scholarship has shifted over the last fifty years from a bold and confident historical reconstruction – based on sifting the various (and often contradictory) rabbinic sources and forging them into a scholarly synthesis – to a radical skepticism that has led to a lean and minimalist portrait of the rabbinic movement. This new scholarly turn has included a view of the rabbinic movement as a peripheral, almost sectarian, movement up until the fourth century CE. We will not engage this larger picture, but rather attempt to focus on the educational achievements of the rabbinic sages, and we turn now to a number of recent and influential studies of rabbinic education of the period.

David Goodblatt's pioneering 1975 monograph, *Rabbinic Instruction in Sasanian Babylonia*, found that the most widespread terms describing higher education in the Babylonian Talmud employed terminology not of an academy (*metivta* or *yeshiva*) but usually of studies in the master's home or school. Goodblatt (2006) went on to emphasize that most of the higher learning took place in what he called "disciple circles" rather than fully developed institutions of higher learning. Yet, he does concede that there were public lectures for a wider audience (*pirka*, *kallah*), which were de rigueur also for the sages at all levels.[1] (Stories about these lectures, the *pirka*, in the Talmud are reassessed here in Fraenkel's essay.) This new perspective of rabbinic disciple circles displaced the long held scholarly view that advanced academies of learning (*yeshivot*) had begun already sometime in the third-century in Babylonia, particularly the two great yeshivot of Sura and Pumbedita. This earlier account was based almost entirely on medieval rabbinic histories of the academies. Goodblatt, and Isaiah Gafni[2], saw this older model as a retrojection of the ninth-century Baghdad institutions by those names, nicknamed in that century as "the two yeshivot."

Palestinian institutions of higher learning in the Tannaitic (first-second centuries) and Amoraic periods (third-fourth centuries) have received less focused attention. A suggestive article by Hayim Lapin (1996) focused on rabbis who were reported to have lived in Caesarea. He tentatively asserts that in a manner similar to the student circles that gathered around Origen, so too Caesarean rabbis might have had their disciple circles. Yet, Lapin concedes that "… some traditions of the Palestinian Talmud seem to assume that 'academies' meet in permanent facilities …" and suggests that "… it is possible to describe *batei midrash* on the basis of Palestinian traditions as rather more 'institutionalized' (that is organized to outlive the existence of a single master) than those of Christian Caesarea before Constantine."[3] Catherine Hezser has surveyed the opinions of Lee Levine and Aharon Oppenheimer advocating the emergence of institutional yeshivot in third-century Palestine[4], while she herself emphasizes that the rabbis' teaching and learning was carried on in various and sundry venues, including also the synagogue, private people's lofts and out of doors. In her view, there seem to have been no major institutional changes within the rabbinic period.[5]

How widespread was the network of rabbinic learning? Raffaella Cribiore's illuminating scholarship has emphasized how schools of rhetoric proliferated in the Roman East by the fourth century.[6] Rabbinic literature knows of centers of learning which dotted cities in Palestine and Babylonia, with mentions of centers also in Rome and Nisibis. Jewish scholars travelled often between the centers, and letters were exchanged. An additional (complicating) factor is that the monumental rabbinic legal works that were created in this period, were transmitted orally.[7] There is evidence that there was some written note-taking and possibly even one of the literary creations, the tannaitic, legal midrash on Leviticus known as *Torat Cohanim* or *Sifra*, was divided into units that were tailored, standard parchment units.[8] More recently, a theory has been advanced that the anonymous stratum of the Babylonian Talmud (the *stam*) is evidence for a shift to creative learning rather than rote recitation.[9] Hirshman has shown that extended educational discussions in the Babylonian Talmud are indeed highly polished literary units.[10]

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[1] Goodblatt 2006: 835–836.

[2] Gafni 1990: 185. He outlines the medieval views but demurs from Goodblatt's view and argues for a gradual development of the yeshiva in the amoraic period (p. 203).

[3] Lapin 1996: 510–511. Of late, Satran 2018 has reassessed the portrait of Origen's learning center in third-century Caesarea.

[4] Hezser 1997: 200–201.

[5] Hezser 1997: 205.

[6] Cribiore 2007, chapters 2–3.

The essays in this collection rest upon this tradition of scholarship in order to further our understanding of the intellectual underpinnings of the educational ethos of rabbinic literature, while exploring aspects of the institutions that were created to educate scholars and non-scholars alike. The opening piece by Marc Hirshman sets the tone for the volume by presenting early (tannaitic) midrash as a foundation and infrastructure of the entire rabbinic educational enterprise. Yael Wilfand explores the social classes that were treated in tannaitic literature, employing a subtle comparison with contemporary Roman authors, and raises strong objections to earlier research that viewed the sages as a wealthy elite addressing a wealthy elite. Shimon Fogel's study of the postures and positions of rabbinic teachers offers a carefully detailed analysis of physical descriptions of social and intellectual import. Adiel Kadari's intriguing analysis of the portrait of Elijah as an educator in rabbinic literature focuses on a story that is illuminated by reflecting on pietist strains in that literature and in the New Testament. Reuven Kiperwasser's essay sheds new light on the oral nature of this scholarly movement and its prodigious efforts to cultivate memory and combat forgetfulness. The article by Eliashiv Fraenkel focuses on a particular rabbinic teaching framework (the aforementioned *pirka*) and demonstrates the enormous complexity of our literary evidence. The two final contributions broaden the perspective somewhat, each presenting a unique outlook on the early Jewish (and Christian) context of the issues under discussion. Jonathan Cahana-Blum offers a strikingly different approach through a reflection on modern critical theory and recent scholarly attempts to align late antique Judaism and Christianity with different sides of the current debates on feminism and gender. Richie Lewis closes the volume with a thoughtful meditation on midrashic mythopoesis: the rabbinic creation of the "myth of the Torah."

These essays are written by members of a research group at the Hebrew University which worked hand-in-hand with and was supported by the DFG project in Göttingen, Germany, organized by Professor Dr. Peter Gemeinhardt: "Collaborative Research Centre (SFB) 1136 Education and Religion in Cultures of the

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[7] Jaffee 1997: 525–549
[8] Naeh 1997: 502–505.
[9] Vidas 2014: 203–207.
[10] Hirshman 2009, especially pages 65–67.

Mediterranean and Its Environment from Ancient to Medieval Times and to the Classical Islam (2015–2019).” It was also supported by the Ministry of Science and Culture of Lower Saxony. The editors of this volume also benefited from a generous grant from the Israel Science Foundation (1991/16 – “Comparative Studies in Jewish and Christian Thought in Late Antiquity”) to explore, among other topics, education in Christian and Rabbinic thought. Finally, the Mandel Chair for Jewish Education at the Hebrew University contributed to the meetings of the research group.

As noted at the outset, the named Jewish sages over this half millennium of learning do not even number a thousand figures. Perhaps this is not at all surprising. One who has traversed the Mishnaic orders of Holy things and Purities or the some 2,700 folio pages of the Babylonian Talmud knows how complex the material is and how intricate the debates are. It is no wonder that rabbinic literature itself preserves a homily that speaks of the ‘dropout’ rate in Jewish education. It claims that out of 1,000 students who began elementary scripture study, only 100 complete the course and go on to Mishna studies and of them only ten continue on to Talmud, with but one finishing successfully (Leviticus Rabbah 2:1). The numbers of this stylized homily are stereotypical, but the thrust of the homily is clear. Only the best and the brightest could manage this rigorous course of study. The dropout rate was prodigious, as was also the decision to specialize in a certain aspect of rabbinic teaching (aggada) or specialized topics in the law such as “the laws of monetary issues” (*dine mamonot*).

There is still much to be explored as to how this primacy of learning played itself out, but as Hillel instructed a prospective student, “for the rest, go and learn.”

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A Resurgent Religion

Midrashic Teaching in the First Centuries*

Marc Hirshman

During the first century of the Common Era, an enormous amount of attention was lavished on the Hebrew Bible, both on the original Hebrew version and its Greek translation. The flurry of literary activity in the Greek language extends from Alexandria to Rome and, of course, Palestine itself. Philo's multi-volume allegorical interpretation of the Bible in Greek, composed in Alexandria (and possibly in Rome) in the first half of the century, will become the cornerstone of Christian allegorical exegesis in that city and throughout the near east from the second century onward. Toward the close of the first century, Joseph ben Mattityahu, a Judean priest and a failed general, sitting in Rome, writes a history of the Jews. It is a multi-volume Greek work on the Jewish Antiquities, whose initial eleven books are devoted to a re-telling and interpretation of the Bible. Of the gentile Christians Henry Chadwick wrote: "From the start Gentile Christians had a bible: that of the Greek Synagogue."[1] In the middle of that same century Paul sends letters to Christians in communities across Asia Minor, containing his view and his hermeneutic of the Hebrew Bible, also writing in Greek. All of these three Jewish interpreters of the Bible – Philo, Paul and Josephus – have been the object of brilliant modern scholarship, shedding light on the intense and creative interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, especially in its Greek translation.

In addition to those three famous authors – as well as a large assortment of individuals, often exploring the eschatological implications of the biblical text – a group of first and second century Jewish scholars in Palestine, called in Hebrew *hachamim* (the equivalent of the Greek *sophoi* – wise people) interpreted the Hebrew Scriptures, in Mishnaic Hebrew. This group left us a number of anthologies, mosaics of comments and interpretations of the Bible, bringing together insights of numerous named scholars and rabbis, alongside an abundance of anonymous comments. These diverse interpretations were collected into what became known as Midrash Tannaim, commentaries on most of the chapters of the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The word *tanna* (pl. *tannaim*) is the title given to the Jewish sages from the first century CE until midway through the third century, generally denominated the Tannaitic period.

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* An earlier version of this essay was delivered as a lecture at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in the Spring of 2019 as Greenberg Visiting Professor for Jewish Studies.

[1] Chadwick 1992: 25, 32–34 (on Philo). More recently, see Niehoff 2018.

Throughout the first century Jewish sages, rabbis and non-rabbis alike, studied and taught Scripture. There is good reason to believe that elementary Jewish education in Palestine focused on reading and memorizing Scripture in a mode similar to classical Greek *paideia* which had placed Homer at its core. From Josephus in Rome at the end of the first century, through Jerome in Bethlehem of the late fourth century, Jews are lauded for their intimate knowledge of Scripture. These sages lived in Palestine of the first two and half centuries, roughly the period of the early Roman Empire, mainly in towns but also in larger centers like Lydda, Caesarea and Tiberias. Modern scholarship is almost unanimous in seeing these works as having been compiled by the middle to late third century CE.

These anthological commentaries are noticeably different in their legal exegeses in terms of terminology and other characteristics. Nineteenth-century scholarship successfully identified two distinct methodologies and associated these with the schools of R. Akiba and R. Ishmael, second century Tannaitic luminaries. The debate between the schools revolved around the issue of whether the Torah was revealed in the language of the giver or of the receiver: the Akiban school held that the Torah was revealed in divine language, while the Ishmael school opined that the Torah was revealed in human language. By the end of the twentieth century, scholarship had identified at least two collections of interpretation for the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.[2]

These early rabbinic interpretations of the biblical passages of Exodus-Deuteronomy dealt also with the narrative sections, and these too are included in these Tannaitic midrashim. Recent scholarship has argued that these portions dealing with aggada in the collections associated with R. Akiba and R. Ishmael, show a greater affinity and less divergence than the exegeses of the legal sections of Scripture. The aggadic exegeses cannot be cleanly divided into two hermeneutical approaches that typify the legal commentary of those same sages.[3] That being said, I do think that A. J. Heschel's (methodologically flawed) attempt to describe two distinct theological approaches of the schools of Akiba and Ishmael in this aggadic material is basically correct and deserves further attention and revision.[4] This aggadic (non-legal) commentary contained in the Tannaitic anthologies of the first three centuries CE is the focus of our inquiry.

As opposed to their contemporaries who wrote down their biblical commentaries in Greek, these Hebraic, rabbinic Sages privileged oral teaching. What was to become known as the foundational collection of the rabbinic legal corpus, the Mishna, was compiled orally at the beginning of the third century CE by Judah the Patriarch in the western Galilean town of Sepphoris. In the Mishna, the oral law was organized topically without reference to the Bible. As opposed to this Mishnaic style of learning, yet at the very same time, the oral law and lore together were studied in close connection with Scripture and organized as biblical commentary. This style of learning was called midrash – inquiry into Scripture. Was the Midrash, the interpretations of Scripture by these same Sages, also an oral endeavor? Most likely, though recently one scholar has argued brilliantly for a written commentary form for the sage's interpretations of Leviticus, called the Sifra.[5]

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[2] See Kahana 2006: 4–40.

[3] Kahana 2006: 44–46.

[4] Heschel 2005.

What are the nature and origin of these early rabbinic interpretations of the narrative sections of the Torah? I will focus on what I consider the earliest extant collection of named, rabbinic interpretations from the Tannaitic period that treat the non-legal, narrative sections of Scripture. These non-legal interpretations are called aggadic, a word roughly parallel to the Greek rhetoric, probably indicating oral teachings and commentaries. This early collection appears in the Tannaitic Midrash collection on Exodus called the Mechilta of Rabbi Ishmael. The work is divided into nine tractates, devoted to legal interpretations of the laws in the book of Exodus, especially chapters 21–31, but no less to the aggadic interpretation of the Exodus narrative. J. Z. Lauterbach, who produced a wonderful critical edition and translation of this work almost a century ago, reckoned that three-fifths of this Mechilta treats aggadic material and only two-fifths legal, halakhic material.[6] Three of the nine tractates are devoted to comments on the verses that tell the stories of the Song at the Sea, the Battle with Amalek, Jethro's visit and the Revelation at Sinai, corresponding to Exodus chapters 15–20.

The tractate called Amalek will serve as an example of how this early midrash presents itself. This tractate devotes two sections (*parashot*) to the battle with Amalek (Ex. 17:8 ff) and another two sections to following passages in Ex. 18 relating to Jethro's arrival at the Israelite encampment at God's mountain. As we will see, the joining of these two topics into one tractate is quite intentional. Amalek is portrayed by the Bible and the rabbis as the ultimate evil nation, while Jethro becomes in the rabbinic reading of the story, the pious gentile who is fashioned into the paradigmatic convert.

The Mechilta in this tractate builds upon the comments of two preeminent students of Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai, the great rabbinic figure, who is said to have spearheaded the revival of rabbinic Judaism in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. His students, R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus and R. Joshua are praised by their teacher Rabban Yochanan in the Mishna of Avot 2, 8 and the two figure prominently in both the Mishna and in our Midrash. A third contemporary of theirs, R. Elazar of Modiin, the priestly town of Maccabean fame, is regularly paired in our midrashic tractate with R. Joshua, offering very distinct and often opposing interpretations to one another. These three rabbis, R. Eliezer, R. Joshua and R. Elazar of Modiin, lived at the turn of the first century CE and give us our first real glimpse into the beginnings of rabbinic, aggadic midrash. In a most unusual and even dramatic instance in the Tannaitic midrash, we are treated in these sections of the Mechilta to sustained selections of the comments of these early rabbis of the late first century. Scholarship has attempted to characterize the individual approaches of these three figures: R. Eliezer, R. Joshua and R. Elazar of Modiin. We will here view them as a whole, sampling examples of their individual interpretations in order to reflect on this seminal, rabbinic approach to interpreting Scripture, we call aggadic midrash.

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[5] Naeh 1999: 64–66

[6] Lauterbach 1976: xix.

But first a disclaimer. I will not treat antecedents to rabbinic midrash in the literature of the Second Temple period, mainly because I am in full agreement with a recent essay by Steven Fraade who maintains that rabbinic midrash is quite different from those other earlier forms of interpretation.[7] Within rabbinic tradition, we have precious little aggadic midrash from the period prior to these three Sages of the late first century. Their teacher Rabban Yochanan, circa 70 CE, has left us only sporadic comments which have been characterized by that great student of midrash, Wilhelm Bacher, as moralizing sermons based on Scripture. This view was also adopted by Jacob Neusner in his early biography of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai. I have on another occasion compared this style to Paul's use of scripture in his letters.[8] This sermonic style is not, however, the inquiry into scripture and the free-form comments that characterize what we know as classical aggadic midrash. This midrashic method developed by the Palestinian sages of the first few centuries of the common era, found ways to create new meanings in Scripture through word play, hyper-literalization and a host of other techniques, catalogued beautifully by Isaac Heinemann in his *Darchei HaAggada*.[9]

I now will examine two or three examples of this early aggada, and then reflect on how this unusual collection in the Mechilta helps us to understand both the roots of the midrashic endeavor and its importance in the challenging times of the early Roman Empire. We read the final difficult verses at the end of the description of the battle with Amalek in Exodus 17:15–16:

And Moses built an altar and named it God my miracle.	καὶ ᾠκοδόμησεν Μωυσῆς θυσιαστήριον κυρίῳ καὶ ἐπωνόμασεν τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ κύριός μου καταφυγή	וַיִּ֥בֶן מֹשֶׁ֖ה מִזְבֵּ֑חַ וַיִּקְרָ֥א שְׁמ֖וֹ יְהוָ֥ה ׀ נִסִּֽי׃
He said: For a Hand upon the throne of the LORD, the LORD's war with Amalek, from generation to generation	ὅτι ἐν χειρὶ κρυφαίᾳ πολεμεῖ κύριος ἐπὶ Αμαληκ ἀπὸ γενεῶν εἰς γενεάς	וַיֹּ֗אמֶר כִּֽי־יָד֙ עַל־כֵּ֣ס יָ֔הּ מִלְחָמָ֥ה לַֽיהוָ֖ה בַּֽעֲמָלֵ֑ק מִדֹּ֖ר דֹּֽר׃ (פ)

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[7] Fraade 2018: 282.

[8] Hirshman 2020 with references to Bacher and Neusner.

[9] Heinemann 1949. It is much to be regretted that this seminal and foundational work was never translated.

As is clear from the Greek translation, the phrase "a hand on the Lord's throne" is quite cryptic. The Septuagint understands this as God's hidden hand (*yad kesuya*?). Let us turn to the three interpretations in the Mechilta on this verse, all ascribed to our three late first century rabbis:

> And He Said: 'The Hand Upon the Throne of the Lord, the Lord Will Have War,' etc. R. Joshua says: When the Holy One, blessed be He, will sit upon the throne of His kingdom and His reign will prevail, at that time, "the Lord will have war with Amalek." R. Eleazar of Modi'im says: The Holy One, blessed be He, swore by the throne of His glory: I will not leave any offspring or progeny of Amalek under the entire heaven, so that people will not be able to say: This camel belongs to Amalek, this ewe lamb belongs to Amalek. R. Eliezer says: God swore by the throne of His Glory that if a person of any of the nations should come desiring to be converted to Judaism, Israel shall receive him, but a person from the house of Amalek they shall not receive. For it is said: "And David said unto the young man that told him: 'Whence art thou?' And he answered: 'I am the son of an Amalekite stranger'" (II Sam. 1.13). At that moment David recalled what had been told to Moses our teacher – that if a person of any of the nations should come desiring to be converted to Judaism, Israel should receive him, but a person from the house of Amalek they should not receive. Immediately: "And David said unto him: 'Thy blood be upon thy head; for thy mouth hath testified against thee'" (ibid. v. 16). In this sense it is said, "From generation to generation." Another Interpretation: From Generation to Generation. R. Joshua says: "From generation," that is, from the life of this world; "to generation," that is, from the life of the world to come. R. Eleazar of Modi'im says: From the generation of Moses and from the generation of Samuel. R. Eliezer says: From the generation of the Messiah which really consists of three generations. And whence do we know that the generation of the Messiah consists of three generations? It is said: "They shall fear Thee while the sun endureth and so long as the moon, a generation and two generations." (Ps. 72.5) (Lauterbach p. 160–161 ll. 171–192)

R. Joshua defers God's battle with the arch-enemy Amalek until God returns to the throne – "hands on the seat." This is likely a reference to the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem, the footstool of God's throne. R. Elazar of Modiin understands the verse as the hand of the Lord swearing by the throne to blot out all memory of Amalek – drawing on the biblical promise a couple of verses above. Raising of the hand is a figure of speech in the Bible as in our own day of swearing. In rabbinic literature an oath was done by grasping a religious article. Here God's throne serves as such. But the most surprising and creative interpretation is that of R. Eliezer, the sage praised by his teacher for his conservative traditionalism (Mishna Avot 2:9). He suggests that God's war with Amalek is nothing more nor less than a religious ostracizing of Amalek. According to his view, Judaism will accept converts from every nation of the world, but only Amalek will be precluded. Blotting out the memory of Amalek is accomplished by prohibiting them from joining Israel, the eternal people. Extremely noteworthy is R. Eliezer's declaration of accepting any convert from any nation except Amalek. He has introduced cunningly the theme of conversion as the real issue in this tractate of the Mechilta. As we will see, R. Eliezer will continue this approach in the second half of the tractate of Amalek, the Jethro story. The place granted converts in Judaism in turn will become the closing theme of this tractate. All the research into R. Eliezer

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