

“Rabbi Tarfon and some elders asked: Which is greater, study or action? Rabbi Tarfon spoke up and said: Action is greater. Rabbi Akiva spoke up and said: Study is greater. The others then spoke up and said: Study is greater because it leads to action.”

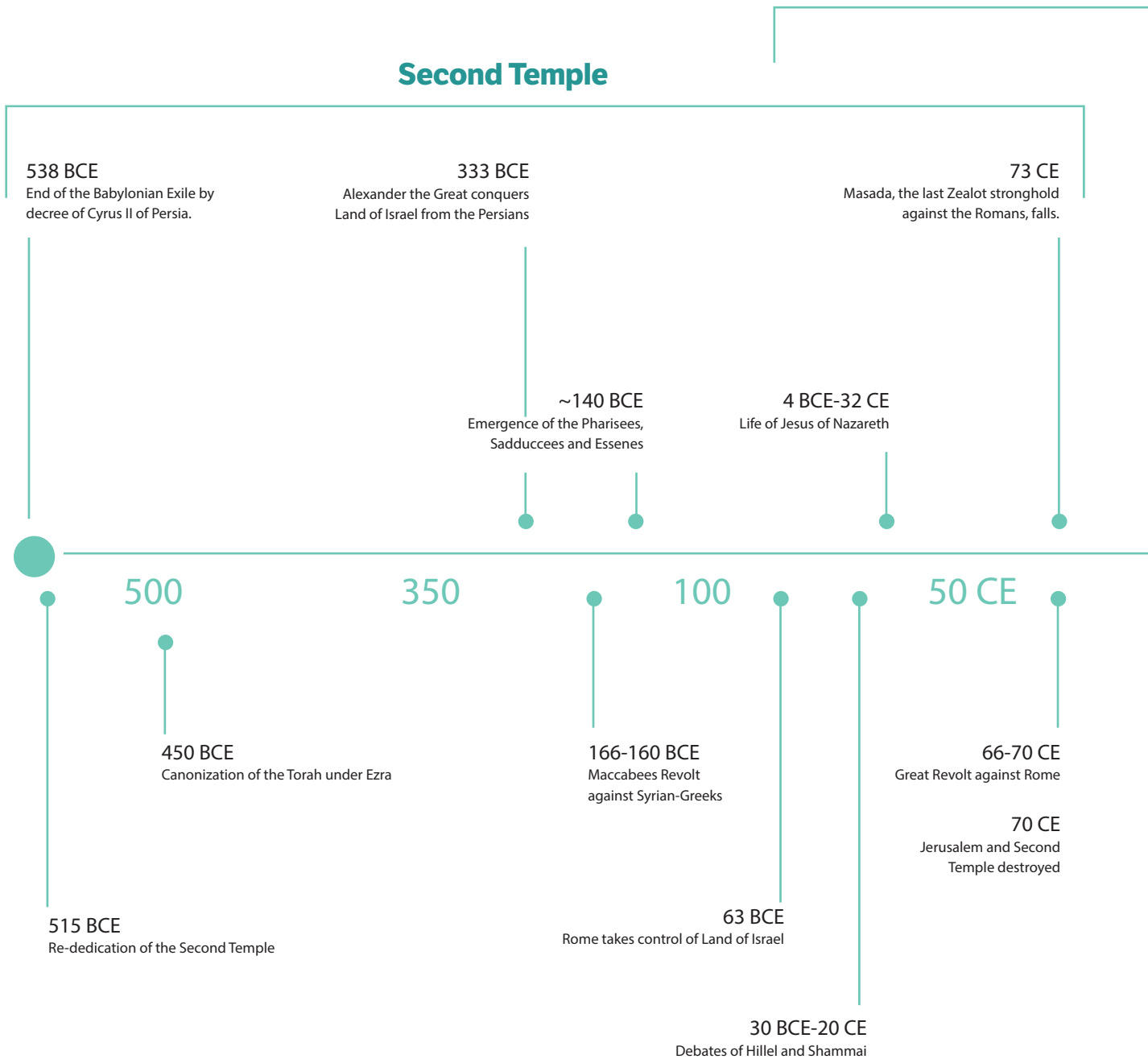
Babylonian Talmud
Kiddushin 40b

The Rabbinic Revolution

After the Bible, our most important set of religious books is made up of nearly 5,000 arguments, of which 99% are left unresolved. In this class, we'll examine the history, ideology, and fierce debates of the Rabbinic Revolution, which continues to shape the Judaism of today.

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Timeline of the Second Temple and Rabbinic Period



Rabbinic Period

132-135 CE
Bar Kochba Revolt

313 CE
Emperor Constantine
legalizes Christianity

393 CE
Emperor Theodosius I
Christianizes Rome

200 CE

350 CE

500 CE

200 CE
Rabbi Judah the Prince compiles the Mishnah

500 CE
Babylonian Talmud completed

200 CE - 500 CE
Composition of the Babylonian
and Jerusalem Talmuds

The Rabbinic Revolution

Written Torah / Oral Torah

Mishnah

Gemara

_____ + _____ = Talmud

Halakha

Aggadah

A Page of Talmud

The most common printing of the Talmud, first done in Vilna in the 1870s, extends over 37 volumes and includes 2,711 double-sided folio pages. The page below is the first, from Tractate Brakhot (Blessings), which begins by addressing the question of when to say the evening Sh'ma.

PAGE # ב

PAGE TITLE מאימתי פרק ראשון ברכות

MISHNAH (200 CE)

COMMENTARY OF RASHI (1100 CE)

GEMARA (500 CE)

COMMENTARY OF TOSAFOT (1200-1400 CE)

The Stubborn and Rebellious Child

A Case Study in the Rabbinic Revolution

In every generation, a religious civilization must either evolve or face the risk of becoming, in Heschel's words, "irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid." The Rabbinic Revolution (30 BCE–500 CE) was a period of intense religious creativity and re-invention as a new class of leaders took Biblical religion and radically transformed it into the Judaism that we practice today. Here is one powerful example of that process:

Torah

Deuteronomy 21:18-21

If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son [*ben sorer u'moreh*] who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of his town. They shall say to the elders, "This son of ours is wayward and defiant. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard." Then all the men of his town shall stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you. All Israel will hear and be afraid.

Mishnah (200 CE)

Sanhedrin, Chapter 8:1-4

1. The stubborn and rebellious son: When does he enter into the category of stubborn and rebellious?

When two hairs appear on his beard, until the time it fills in. This is speaking of the lower beard, but the Sages use euphemistic language.

As it is written: "When a man has a son..." Therefore we learn: A son, and not a daughter, a son and not yet a man. A minor is totally exempt, since he does not yet have any liabilities.

2. At what point is he considered liable?

From when he eats a *tartemar* of meat and drinks a half *log* of wine. Rabbi Yossi says: It must be a *maneh* of meat and a full *log* of wine.

If he eats it at a gathering for a mitzvah, or for a New Moon meal, or as part of his tithes in Jerusalem, or he eats non-kosher foods or foods that were improperly tithed, or eats anything that it's a mitzvah to eat or anything that it's a sin to eat, none of this counts.

If he eats any food other than meat, or drinks any beverage other than wine, he isn't liable. This is based on the verse: "He is a glutton and a drunkard." There is a Scriptural hint that these words refer to meat and wine, which comes from the Book of Proverbs: "Do not be among the wine drinkers or the gluttonous meat eaters!" (Proverbs 23:20)

3. If he steals money from his father and eats the food in his father's house, he is exempt. If he steals the money from others and eats with others, he is exempt. If he steals from others and eats in his father's house, he is exempt. It is only when he steals from his father and eats with others that he might be liable. Rabbi Yossi bar Yehuda says: He must steal from both his mother and his father to be liable.

4. If his father denounces him, but his mother disagrees, he is not liable. If his mother denounces him, but his father disagrees, he is not liable. They have to agree together.

Rabbi Yehudah says: If his mother isn't fitting for his father, then he is not liable. If one of the parents is blind or deaf or mute or in any way at all disabled, he is not liable.

They must first bring him to a court of three, where he will be punished. Then he has to do the sin again, and this time he must be judged by a court of twenty-three, including the original three judges.

If at any point he runs away, and doesn't return until he is a legally a man, he is exempt. However, if he was judged guilty, and then runs away before he can be executed, he is still executed on his return.

Gemara (500 CE)

Sanhedrin 71a

What does it mean that his mother is not "fitting for his father?"

It might mean that their relationship is in some way improper. However, at the end of the day, his parents are still his parents, so this probably isn't so.

Rather, it must mean that his mother must be physically similar to her husband. Why? Because the Torah says: "He doesn't pay attention to **our voice** [singular, not plural]." From this we learn that they must have similar voices, and it logically follows that they must have the same physical stature.

There is a teaching: "There never was and never will be a true *ben sorer u'moreh*."

Why, then, is it written at all? It must be simply so that you can study it and in so doing, gain reward!

Whose opinion does this teaching follow?

It might be Rabbi Yehudah, who requires that the parents look and speak similarly — which is basically impossible.

It also might be Rabbi Shimon, who taught this: "Just because a boy ate meat and drank wine, his parents will never take him out to be stoned!"

But, Rabbi Yonatan said: "I once saw a stubborn and rebellious son, and I even sat on his grave!"

It is Not in Heaven!

Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 59b

An oven was constructed out of layers of clay with sand in between the layers. Rabbi Eliezer says that this oven is pure; the Sages say it is impure.

Rabbi Eliezer brought every argument under the sun, but they wouldn't accept it.

Then Rabbi Eliezer said:

“The law goes according to me — and the carob tree will prove it!”

And the carob tree uprooted and moved 100 yards!

The Sages responded:

“We don't accept proof from trees!”

Rabbi Eliezer tried again:

“The law goes according to me — and the river will prove it!”

And the river turned around and flowed backwards!

The Sages responded:

“We don't accept proof from water!”

Rabbi Eliezer tried a third time:

“The law goes according to me — and the House of Study will prove it!” And the walls of the House of Study began to collapse in on themselves.

Rabbi Joshua got to his feet and shouted:

“If Sages are disputing a point of law, what business is it of yours?!”

And the walls stopped collapsing in, out of respect for Rabbi Joshua, but they didn't straighten either, out of respect for Rabbi Eliezer.

Rabbi Eliezer tried one last time:

“The law goes according to me — and Heaven will prove it!”

A Divine Voice came out of Heaven and announced:

“What are you arguing about? The law goes according to Rabbi Eliezer on all matters!”

Rabbi Joshua got to his feet and shouted:

“It is not in Heaven!” (Deuteronomy 30:12)

Rabbi Yirmiah explains:

“Torah was already given at Mt. Sinai. From that point on we don’t rule according to Divine Voices. As it says: 'After the majority you should incline.'” (Exodus 23:2)

Some time later, Rabbi Nathan met Elijah the Prophet and asked:

“What was God doing at that time?”

Elijah replied:

“The Holy One was laughing and saying:

'My children have defeated me! My children have defeated me!’”



Pirke Avot: The Wisdom of Our Ancestors

Pirke Avot is a section of the Mishnah, the first collection of rabbinic writing composed in 200 CE. However, unlike the other tractates of the Mishnah, Pirke Avot doesn't contain debates about laws or sacred matters. Instead, it is a collection of the favorite sayings and teachings of the Rabbis. Pirke Avot is found in the back of most *siddurim* (prayerbooks) and is a wonderful entrance point to begin studying rabbinic literature.

Shimon the Righteous taught:
The world rests on three pillars: On Torah, on service, and deeds of lovingkindness. (1:2)

Hillel taught:

A shy person cannot learn. A strict person cannot teach. And in a place where there is no humanity, strive to be a true human being. (2:6)

Do not disdain any person or underrate the importance of anything. There is no one who does not have their hour, and there is no thing without its place under the sun. (4:3)

Ponder three things and you'll avoid falling into sin: Know your origin, know your destination, and know before Whom you'll be required to give an accounting for your life. (3:1)

Hillel taught:
If I am not for myself, who
will be for me? If I am only
for myself, what am I? If not
now, when? (1:14)

Rabbi Tarfon taught:
The day is short and the
work is long. You are not
obligated to complete
the work, but neither are
you free to desist from it.
(2:21)

Rabbi Shimon taught:
There are three crowns —
the crown of Torah, the
crown of priesthood, and
the crown of royalty. But the
crown of a good name is the
greatest of all. (4:17)

Ben Zoma taught:
Who is wise? One who
learns from everyone.
Who is rich? One who is
satisfied with their lot.
Who is mighty? One who
conquers themselves.
(4:1)

Do not withdraw from the
community. Do not be
sure of yourself until the
day of your death. Do not
say: "When I have leisure, I
will study." Perhaps you'll
never have leisure. (2:5)

Make for yourself a teach-
er. Acquire for yourself
a friend. And when you
judge others, tip the
balance in their favor. (1:6)

Falling in the Love with the Rabbis

Janet Sternfeld Davis

I love the writing of the Rabbis, especially the Talmud, because I love that it involves thinking about how to make decisions and how to live life. I'm endlessly fascinated by its unique, dialogic approach, by its rich use of analogies to re-think a situation and its legal implications, and its clever way of showing how two seemingly similar situations are not really the same at all. The Talmud uses scenarios that can be easy to imagine, or crazy, or take me back to earlier times both real and not so real.

The Rabbis ask questions (gee, where did our favorite Jewish character trait come from?), and there is room for my own answers as well as the puzzle of understanding their answers. Bells ring, light bulbs go on, and learning emerges from the conversation between the text and the others in the room. This is the very definition of dynamic learning, and not just fact, fact, fact.

My first foray into studying Talmud was during college. I liked it just fine, but it was nothing special. Then, one day I encountered this totally nutty case about — well, who remembers what it was actually about — which made me sit up and laugh out loud, and I thought: "I could really like this!" My teacher said it was small wonder so many Jews became lawyers or psychologists as our core text is all about figuring out motivations and dealing with the consequences of the actions we take. Talmud is a course in Real Life 101-with a twist.

I participated for several years in a small class with a rabbi and a lawyer. I kept thinking the lawyer should apply his education to the text more — I thought he was listening too much and not challenging enough. He finally told me: "It's the other way around, Janet. I practice law differently than I used to. I try more things. I argue more creatively. I learned to take more

risks from studying the Rabbis." The commitment to study Talmud actually changed him. And I was challenged to re-interpret a scenario through a very different lens. Good for me.

One other thing; I appreciate that there are so many ways into studying this text: There is room for the linear and the associative thinker; the mystic and the practical person; men and women. It is wonderful to be in the room with a carpenter, a physician, a stay at home parent, a physicist, and a real estate developer because their take on things helps me to understand what is happening in the text.

For me, it's so important not to just leave the Talmud for our rabbis to study. They need us — you and me — to be their study partners. I love it and encourage you to take advantage of this opportunity to join an eternal dialogue. It is time well-spent.



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Reflection on Chapter 9



Something we discussed in class today that I appreciated:

Something we discussed in class today that challenged me:

Something we discussed in class today that I would like to know more about:

Learn: 10 Ways to Engage in Jewish Study

■ Read the weekly parasha

Pick a humash (Torah in book form) that you like — we recommend *Etz Hayim*, edited by David Lieber, or *The Five Books of Moses*, edited by Everett Fox.

■ Subscribe to an online commentary or podcast

There are more digital Jewish learning options every day. Check out zieglertorah.org as a great place to start.

■ Attend an adult education class or lecture

Call your synagogue, local Jewish community center or university, and look in your local Jewish press to find out about speakers and classes in your area.

■ Acquire and read Jewish books

We're the People of the Book — that means there is a lot to read. Check out the suggested booklist at the end of each chapter for some great options.

■ Work on your Hebrew

It's not easy to learn a new language as an adult, but Hebrew is the key to the kingdom in Jewish life. Learn Hebrew and you'll discover a whole new world of learning available to you.

■ Watch Jewish films

From *Schindler's List* to *Annie Hall*, many films wrestle with questions of Jewish history, identity, and culture. Beyond Hollywood, look also for documentaries and Israeli films that illuminate new elements of the Jewish experience.

■ Attend a Talmud class

The Talmud is an inexhaustible yet exhausting treasure chest of Jewish insights, debates, and wisdom. Begin to explore this quintessential Jewish text with a good teacher, and you'll start a lifetime of discovery.

■ Learn with friends or family

Read a Jewish text with your partner, study the weekly parasha with your kids, or gather a group of friends for a Jewish book club. Learning brings people together.

■ Create your own commentary

Jewish learning is an ongoing conversation across the generations; add your own voice to it. Whether you are a blogger or an artist, a musician or a poet, you can add your own creative commentary to the centuries of Jews who came before you.

■ Teach others

The best way to learn is to teach. Volunteer with your synagogue's Hebrew school, offer an adult education class, tutor a new Jew by Choice, or share your Torah interpretations online.

Additional Readings

Books

- Adin Steinsaltz, *The Essential Talmud*
A detailed introduction to the historical evolution and the central ideas of rabbinic thought from the greatest living Talmud scholar.
- Ruth Calderon, *A Bride for One Night: Talmud Tales*
A collection of some of the Talmud's best stories, together with a modern re-imagining of the story and a moving, profound commentary by one of Israel's most fascinating public figures. A great way to begin exploring the massive body of rabbinic literature.
- Milton Steinberg, *As a Driven Leaf*
A historical novel of uncommon power, this book follows the life of Elisha ben Abuya, the Talmud's most famous heretic. Steinberg weaves fragmentary stories from the Talmud into a narrative about faith, reason, and human frailty that brings to life the world of the Rabbis.
- Shaye Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*
A classic academic exploration of the late Second Temple Period, one of the most complex and fascinating moments in Jewish history, by a leading Harvard professor.