

# Lesson Guide: Class Nine

## The Rabbinic Revolution

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Miller Introduction to  
Judaism Program

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY



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## **Lesson Guide for Class #9: The Rabbinic Revolution**

### **Class Summary:**

Overview of the development of Rabbinic Judaism and how it is distinct from earlier Biblical Israelite religious practice. The historical context of the late-Second Temple Period and the existential challenge posed by the destruction of the Temple. Examination of illustrative examples of rabbinic literature, particularly how rabbinic texts adapt, expand, and update Biblical concepts.

### **Objectives:**

*Students will:*

- Become familiar with the history of the Second Temple Period and Rabbinic Period (515 BCE – 500 CE)
- Explore the different types of rabbinic literature and understand how the Rabbis changed the Jewish Tradition to create the form of Judaism that we practice today.
- Study a few representative rabbinic texts to understand some of the central concepts guiding the Rabbinic project.

### **Key Vocabulary:**

- Written Torah
- Oral Torah
- Second Temple
- Pharisees
- Sadducees
- Essenes
- Zealots
- Rabbis
- Mishnah
- Gemara

- Babylonian Talmud (Bavli)
- Jerusalem Talmud (Yerushalmi)
- Halakha
- Aggadah
- Rabbi Judah HaNasi
- Makhloket L'Shem Shamayim

### **In-Person Teaching Materials:**

- Room and door signs
- Name tags and pens
- Chalkboard, white-board, or large flip chart
- Colored markers or chalk
- On One Foot course books or printed PDFs
- Projector, computer & screen if using Class Slide Decks, On One Foot videos
- *Recommended:* Several volumes of Talmud for students to pass around.

### **Online Teaching Materials:**

- Zoom Pro Account
- PDF of On One Foot chapter
- PowerPoint Class Slide Deck
- Appropriate background, lighting, and sound setup.

### **Set Induction: “Revolution/Re-invention”**

This class tells the story of a revolution – how Judaism came to the brink of extinction two thousand years ago, and instead of dying out, reinvented itself for a new world.

Either as a whole class or in small groups/breakouts, do a quick brainstorm: “What are examples of times when either you personally or a community you are part of needed to reinvent itself? What did it take?”

We will be talking about the Rabbis reinvent Judaism. But, first, we need to tell the story of how we got to that point.

### **Lecture: “Part I: The Second Temple Period”**

The last class that focused on history was the session on the Tanakh. That class concluded with the Babylonian Exile and its immediate aftermath.

To review: The Babylonian Exile (started 586 BCE) is short-lived; the Persians under Cyrus II conquered Babylon in 538 BCE and permitted the Jews to return to the Land of Israel and rebuild the Temple. The Second Temple was dedicated in 515 BCE. The Persians ruled the Land of Israel until 333 BCE, when it was conquered by the Greeks, led by Alexander the Great. Israel eventually winds up under the sphere of influence of the Syrian Greeks (Seleucids).

Greek rule was mostly tolerant, until Antiochus IV forbade the practice of Judaism, which led to the successful Maccabean uprising (166-164 BCE). This incident is the story commemorated in the holiday of Hanukkah. The Maccabees won political independence, but while they were good warriors, they were corrupt politicians. Finally, after several generations of internal strife, the Romans were invited to keep the peace in 63 BCE. This is the end of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel for the next 2000 years.

The Romans appointed Herod as King of Judea in 37 BCE. Herod has an unusual story – he was an Idumean, the only group in history to have been forcibly converted to Judaism. He is most remembered for his major building projects across Judea, including the city of Caesaria, the winter fortress of Masada, and a major remodel of the Temple complex, including what we know today as the Kotel/Western Wall. After Herod, Judea is ruled directly by Roman governors who are increasingly tyrannical.

The Jews revolted against the Romans in 66 CE, leading to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. The final chapter of this rebellion was the fall of Herod's fortress of Masada in 73 CE. More revolts broke out again in 132 CE under the leadership of a pseudo-messianic figure named Bar-Kochba, and even more Jews were killed. Jerusalem was converted into a pagan city (Aelia Capitolina) in which Jews were forbidden to live.

**Judaism needed to find a new way to stay alive and relevant without a Temple, priesthood, or the realistic chance of regaining independence.**

At the same time as there is external chaos, Jewish society is full of internal divisions. In the late Second Temple Period, Jews were fractured into many competing sects, including Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, early Christians.

### **Pharisees**

Name means "intepreters." Religious reformers, emphasizing home and synagogue-based rituals

over Temple service. They are the ancestors of the Rabbis.

**Sadducees**

The wealthy, aristocratic class. Strongly associated with the Temple priesthood and more literal interpreters of the Torah than the Pharisees.

**Essenes**

According to R' Joseph Telushkin: "A group of ascetic and disciplined group of ancient hippies." They rejected the Temple and Jerusalem as corrupt and retreated to the desert. This is the group (or a very similar sect) that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls.

**Zealots**

A politically revolutionary group, dedicated to preparing for and provoking war with Rome and punishing those Jews whom they felt were collaborators. The community at Masada that ultimately chose suicide over capture.

**Nazarenes/Christians**

A Jewish sect that followed a charismatic, messianic figure named Jesus of Nazareth, who was executed by Rome in 32 CE. Likely one of many messianic groups at the time.

The Great Revolt wipes out most of these groups, including: The Sadducees (no more Temple), the Essenes (how long do a celibate, desert-dwelling people last?), and Zealots (the Romans killed all of them). The Pharisees and the early Christians competed for who would be the inheritors of the legacy of the Bible and the driving force in shaping the Jewish future.

**Break**

**Lecture: "Part II: The Rabbinic Revolution"**

After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, the Pharisees begin to refer to themselves as Rabbis (teachers). They take it upon themselves to re-invent Judaism for an era without a Temple and a homeland.

In the traditional understanding, the Rabbis are simply conveying the Oral Torah, the additional traditions and interpretations given to Moses along with the Written Torah. However, a more progressive explanation is that the Rabbis created many new rituals and practices that allow Judaism to flourish in a completely changed world.

Many of the observances that we think of as core to Jewish practice: Communal prayer, Shabbat candles, Kiddush, Havdalah, Passover Seder, Hanukkah, Purim, Chuppah, Ketubah, Shiva, Kaddish, Meat/dairy dishes, kosher slaughter, etc. all appear for the first time in rabbinic writings. They also limit ancient practices, like animal sacrifice, capital punishment, etc.

The Talmud is the product of their discussions over nearly 500 years. The Talmud is a two-part text consisting of an earlier, shorter document called the Mishnah and its longer commentary and expansion called the Gemara. The Mishnah was compiled in 200 CE by Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi. There are two Gemaras that were completed, one in Babylonia (the more famous, Talmud Bavli) and one in Israel (Talmud Yerushalmi).

The Talmud is written in a distinctive form – it's mainly composed of extended arguments on points of law among the Rabbis, most of which do not come to a definitive resolution. This type of debate is called *makhloket l'shem shamayim*, debate for the sake of Heaven.

If meeting in person, if possible, it is helpful to distribute volumes to Talmud to allow students to see the different parts of a traditional page, identifying the Mishnah and Gemara. If teaching online, use the labeled image in the PowerPoint.

**Key takeaway:** All modern forms of Judaism are rabbinic, rather than biblical. We do not practice Judaism according to the way it is described in the Torah. Instead, we practice Judaism as interpreted by and added to by the Talmud. For students coming from a non-Jewish background, this is a critical message to make sure is clear. Many students enter an Intro to Judaism course believing that Judaism is identical to the religion of the "Old Testament" and don't realize that it has evolved.

### **Text Study: “Halakha: The Case of the Stubborn and Rebellious Son”**

There are two types of discussions in the Talmud, halakhic debates over points of law, and aggadah (narratives.) We'll start the text study portion of this class by

looking at a classic halakhic discussion that gives insight into how the rabbis "updated" traditional texts.

Begin by reading the Biblical text together (Deuteronomy 21:18-21), which contains the commandment to execute a disobedient child. Read the text aloud and solicit student reactions. Discussion questions: What is the text saying? Why do you think it was written? How does it make you feel that it is included in the Torah?

After students express their understandable discomfort with this text, let them know that the Rabbis were also made highly uncomfortable by this commandment.

Study the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 8:1-4) in hevruta/breakouts and then review as a group. Discuss each section to elucidate how the Rabbis are using a very close reading of the Biblical text and legal reasoning to limit the applicability of this practice.

Then read the Gemara (Sanhedrin 71a) together and note how the next generation of Rabbis is even bolder. They do not only limit the practice, but effectively eliminate it altogether ("there never was, and there never will be a true ben sorer u'moreh.)

Spend time with these texts and proceed slowly, frequently checking for understanding by asking students to summarize what has just been read and show how the Rabbis were connecting back to the Biblical text. For most students, this will be their first opportunity to study Talmud. The goal is to introduce them to a particular way of thinking and approaching text, rather than focusing on the specific content itself.

### **Text Study: "Aggadah: Oven of Achnai OR Pirke Avot"**

Having studied a halakhic text, now introduce aggadah by either reading the famous story of the "Oven of Achnai" (Bava Metzia 59b) or selections from Pirke Avot.

If you elect to teach the Oven of Achnai text, lead the students through it as a group. Use it as a further example of how the Rabbis transitioned the Jewish Tradition away from the Biblical period. Instead of reliance on the supernatural and the miraculous, they emphasize reasoned argument and majority rule. Note that nobody empowered the Rabbis to revolutionize Judaism; they simply recognized that in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple, they could either lead or the Jewish People would perish. This text is their self-justification, their declaration of their right to re-

interpret the Tradition (“*lo bashamayim hi*” “it is not in Heaven), and their sense that God approved of their interpretive enterprise (“*nitzachuni banai*” “My children have defeated Me.”)

If you select to teach Pirke Avot, begin by giving a context for Pirke Avot – unlike the other 62 tractates of the Mishnah, this one contains no halakhic argumentation; it is composed of the favorite moral aphorisms of each of the Rabbis. The coursebook includes ten selections from Pirke Avot, which can be studied using one of two active learning methods:

1) Students can break into groups (either in-person or breakout rooms) and assign each group one or more selections to study, discuss, and report back on.

2) Several of these quotes can be written in the center of large pieces of paper and taped up around the room. Students are given markers and invited to walk around the room, adding their reflections, interpretations, and comments around the quotes. Come back together as a group and read some of the comments. Then explain that the students are functioning like the Rabbis of the Gemara, who looked at a selection from the Mishnah and added their commentary, explanations, and expansions of the text. Note that this can also be done effectively online using a Jamboard or another collaborative whiteboard application.

## **Wrap Up and Reflection**

*Journal Prompt: “Something that we discussed in class that I appreciated.”, “Something that we discussed in class that challenged me.”, and “Something we discussed in class that I would like to know more about.”*

Instructors should be checking for understanding throughout the lesson and regularly pausing for questions. However, it is essential to do so at the close of each class. In addition to using the journal prompts included in coursebook, the instructor may wish to do a group check for understanding using one of the following methods:

- As a whole class, have students go around and briefly state/write in chat one thing they learned/that surprised them/that interested them in class.
- Have students divide into pairs and share with their partner something they learned/that surprised them/that particularly interested them.

If you want to check that the students understand primary content, at the end of this class, students should be able to define *rabbi*, *Mishnah*, *Gemara*, *Talmud*, *halakha*, and *aggadah*. They should also be able to explain the circumstances that led to the Rabbinic Revolution and some of the ways that the Rabbis changed Jewish thought and practice.

### **At Home Work**

Students should be told to watch the "Rabbinic Revolution" video and answer the review questions and journal prompt.

# The Rabbinic Revolution

## Written Torah / Oral Torah

The Written Torah refers to the Hebrew Bible. The Oral Torah are the traditions, explanations, and interpretations of that text, which is recording in the writings of the Rabbis.

## Mishnah

The earliest collection of rabbinic teachings, written in Hebrew and edited in Israel around 200 CE. The Mishnah contains discussions of a wide range of issues, from holidays to civil and criminal law, from prayer to lifecycle rituals.

## Gemara

The massive rabbinic commentary on the Mishnah, produced in both Babylonia and in the Land of Israel, in the 3rd- 5th centuries. Talmud is the combination of Mishnah and Gemara.

**MISHNAH + GEMARA = Talmud**

## Halakha

“Jewish law.” Based on the root verb, “to walk,” halakha describes the Jewish path through life, which contains traditions and prescriptions for all aspects of daily living. Most of the Talmud deals with matters of halakha.

## Aggadah

“Folklore” Based on the root verb, “to tell,” aggadah are the stories, sayings, and discussions in the Talmud that aren't directly about matters of law, but rather focus on meaning, ideas, and values.