

REVISED EDITION



REFERENCE GUIDE TO THE TALMUD

RABBI ADIN
EVEN-ISRAEL
STEINSALTZ

THE INDISPENSABLE TALMUD STUDY AID



Reference Guide to the Talmud



Shefa



KOREN

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel
Steinsaltz

REFERENCE GUIDE TO THE TALMUD

Revised edition edited by
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Reference Guide to the Talmud

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There are three crowns –
the crowns of Torah,
of priesthood, and of royalty –
but the crown of a good name
surpasses them all.

(ETHICS OF THE FATHERS 4:17)

Dedicated in memory of

Jack Nash ז"ל

A visionary who loved the Jewish people,
believed in the Jewish future,
and was a true friend.

Lotte and Lou Bravmann

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Preface

The *Reference Guide* was conceived as a tool to facilitate the study of the Talmud, for both the beginner and the more advanced student. It was not designed to be used exclusively with the new edition of the Talmud. Students ought to find the information in this guide helpful, whether they are studying in a formal framework or on their own. As much as possible, it uses non-technical language, while striving for the utmost precision.

One of the principal difficulties in studying the Talmud is that it is not written in a systematic fashion; it does not move from simple to weighty material, from the definition of terms to their application. In almost every passage of the Talmud, discussion is based on ideas that have been discussed elsewhere, and on terms that are not necessarily defined where they appear. The Sages themselves said, “Matters of Torah are poor in one place and rich in another” (Jerusalem Talmud, *Rosh HaShana* 3:5). This guide has been written to help the student understand concepts that are not explained in a particular passage and are therefore not clear in their limited context.

The *Reference Guide*'s main aims are to foster the understanding of principles and methods of study; to clarify and afford a precise understanding of a wide range of concepts; and to summarize general conceptual structures.

Those beginning their study of the Talmud can turn first to the introductory and background chapters and the guidelines to talmudic study. If they are studying from a traditional edition of the Talmud, they can consult the explanation of the structure and content of the traditional page. If they seek to study the rudiments of Aramaic, they can refer to the chapter on that language. If it is Rashi script that they seek to decipher, a chapter on the subject is available to them.

The student already familiar with the Talmud should find the extensive glossaries useful. They explain the terminology of talmudic discourse and the terms and concepts of the *halakha*, as well as providing information on the weights and measures used.

The chapters dealing with the terminology of the Mishna and the Talmud and with halakhic concepts can help both the beginner and anyone else who is seeking a more profound understanding of the principles whereby issues and problems are interpreted and resolved.

Although the *Reference Guide* is mainly intended for the study of the

Babylonian Talmud, it also contains material useful for the study of the Jerusalem Talmud and halakhic and aggadic midrash.

While this volume is designed primarily to serve as an aid in the study of Talmud in general, and in conjunction with the Koren Talmud Bavli in particular, many of its chapters may be read on their own as general background with regard to the world of Judaism. The entries in the glossaries also clarify matters beyond their strictly utilitarian function.

For the sake of brevity and clarity, relatively few references to sources or rabbinic authorities have been included in this volume. Naturally, different scholars have different approaches to the various matters discussed in this book; in general, only one approach, perceived to be the most representative, is cited.

There are several innovations in this revised edition designed to render the *Reference Guide* more accessible to those not conversant in Hebrew or Aramaic. The sections Mishnaic Methodology, Principles of Talmudic Hermeneutics, and Halakhic Concepts and Terms, which appeared in the previous edition in Hebrew alphabetical order, appear in this volume in topical order. An index of Hebrew terms appears at the end of the volume to enable one seeking a Hebrew term to locate the relevant entry.

Introduction

The Essential Nature of the Talmud

TORAH AND TALMUD

Just as the Bible is the foundation of Judaism, the Talmud is the central pillar supporting the entire spiritual and intellectual edifice of Jewish life. The Talmud, in the broader sense of the term, is comprised of two components: the Mishna, which is the first written summary of the Oral Law, and the Gemara – also known as the Talmud, in the more limited sense of the term – which is formally an explanation of and commentary on the Mishna. The legal and practical value of the Talmud is obvious, but this does not explain its centrality and vital importance for Judaism. In order to understand and appreciate the unique nature of the Talmud, one must first have a clear understanding of the unique Jewish concept of Torah study, of which studying the Talmud is the most distinctive and characteristic aspect.

The study of Torah, the Written and Oral Law, can be viewed as a means to an end. The Torah consists primarily of laws and mitzvot, not all of them easily understandable. They require elaboration, commentary, and explanation as to how to fulfill them. According to this perspective, Torah study provides the means to learn the requisite principles and details to fulfill the mitzvot.

In reality, however, that perspective of Torah fails to convey its true essence and requires elaboration. In particular, it does not explain why Judaism developed great veneration for the study of Torah, a veneration expressed throughout rabbinic literature: “‘All matters that may be desired are not to be compared to it [Torah study]’ (Proverbs 8:11). This means that even the desires of heaven, the mitzvot, cannot be compared to it” (Babylonian Talmud, *Moed Katan* 9b). “These are the matters, the fruits of which man enjoys in this world, while the reward remains for him in the World to Come: honoring one’s father and mother, performing deeds of kindness, making peace between man and his fellowman. And the study of Torah is equal to all of them” (*Pe’ra* 1:1).

To say that the study of Torah is equal to all of them indicates that Torah study transcends the fulfillment of the mitzvot. It shows that the significance of Torah study goes beyond merely facilitating the fulfillment of the mitzvot. Otherwise, a strange contradiction would arise: If the study of Torah is merely

the means to an end, a guide to fulfilling the mitzvot, how could it be more significant than the performance of those same mitzvot?

In reality Torah and its study must be considered in an entirely different light. Torah, as its Hebrew root implies, is a form of teaching. It teaches man the path he should follow, and is indeed a guide to fulfilling the mitzvot. Yet it is far more than that. It is a comprehensive guide, the expression of Judaism's perception of all that exists in the world. Every subject lies within the purview of Torah, and Torah teaches how each subject is to be understood, how to relate to it and act toward it. Consequently, whether the matter is concrete and practical or abstract and spiritual; whether it expresses an immediate, real-life need or is entirely theoretical and without practical application; since it is related to Judaism's worldview, it is related to Torah, and the Torah does indeed deal with it.

Establishing the practical law, the *halakha*, and providing guidance in fulfilling the mitzvot are only one aspect of Torah. Torah seeks the essence of all things, in every area of life. It embraces the entire world and what lies beyond it. The ultimate purpose of Torah is not, then, only to scrutinize the mitzvot and arrive at practical conclusions with regard to them; it is, rather, to provide a comprehensive worldview, bringing out both the essential relationship of Torah to every subject as well as the subjects' connections with each other. If one arrives at an understanding of the overall nature and purpose of the Torah, one can then understand and appreciate the special nature of that portion of it known as the Talmud.

THE MISHNA AND THE TALMUD

The Mishna, whose Sages are called *tanna'im*, is written in a precise and terse Hebrew style, presenting complex subject matter in concise form. Although the language of the Mishna is itself usually clear, it does not cover every possible case, and many problems and dilemmas, whose resolution cannot be found in the formulation of the Mishna alone, arise. For three centuries (c. 200 CE–500 CE) after the redaction and editing of the Mishna, later Sages, called *amora'im*, and their students discussed and analyzed the Mishna. Their questions, discussions, and solutions comprise the Talmud.

Understandably, since the Mishna deals mainly with halakhic matters, many of the issues and problems that arise in the study of the Mishna are halakhic in nature. Nevertheless, the resolution of halakhic problems, and in particular arriving at definitive halakhic rulings, is not the primary objective of the Talmud. Halakhic rulings and the practical application of Torah laws are subordinate to the quest for underlying truth. The ultimate purpose of the Talmud is not utilitarian in any sense; its sole aim is to seek the truth.

Accordingly, it is immaterial whether the subject under investigation is practical or theoretical; whether the conclusions reached in the analysis yield practical benefit or forever remain no more than an abstract, conceptual achievement. The Talmud's purpose is to seek out the exclusive Torah connection with any given topic, whether legal, ritual, historical, philosophical, or related to any other area of inquiry. The truth is the objective toward which the Talmud strives.

That explains the extraordinary fact that the Talmud attaches equal weight to the study of both practical and theoretical issues, and, similarly, to the study of opinions that are halakhically binding and those that are not binding and were in fact rejected generations earlier. Since the aim is to ascertain the truth, it is irrelevant whether or not a topic has any practical application. Much, perhaps a majority, of the subject matter does not. The investigation, for example, of the authorship of the various *mishnayot* does not always have practical significance, but it is, nevertheless, a major concern of the Talmud.

THE TALMUDIC DIALECTIC

The non-utilitarian nature of the Talmud also helps explain another of its characteristics, one that may initially daunt the student significantly: the talmudic dialectic. This dialectic is unique in that it takes nothing for granted. It is only satisfied with proofs that approach absolute certainty. It constantly seeks to sharpen the proofs, cull the evidence, and reach the very essence of the problems, with the greatest possible precision. This dialectic and the sophisticated nature of the precise distinctions it draws often go far beyond the practical requirements of everyday life. However, where the purpose of the inquiry is truth for its own sake, one employs the most sensitive and acute instruments to analyze the issues, to verify inferences, and to distinguish between similar cases, in order to arrive at a correct understanding of all matters. Consequently, a proof that appears self-evident may be rejected in the Talmud because of an extremely subtle flaw in its argumentation. Only the most logical and incontrovertible argumentation is accepted by the Talmud.

The talmudic dialectic is comparable to an inquiry in pure science, particularly in the sphere most closely resembling talmudic study: mathematics. When one seeks to discover the truth, he cannot rely on inaccurate measurements or on inconclusive evidence. He must conclusively prove his thesis point by point. The entire configuration is not acceptable until it is deemed completely sound. The authority of the Talmud lies in its use of this rigorous method in its search for truth with regard to the entire Torah; in other words, with regard to all possible subjects in the world, physical and metaphysical.

When studying the Talmud, one must identify with its spirit. He must not approach matters from the point of view of their external value or practical use, but rather in terms of their intrinsic significance, based on the need to arrive at a true understanding.

THE SPIRITUAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE TALMUD

Although the Talmud is a most varied and discursive work, dealing with many aspects of Judaism and life in general – the Talmud contains, among other things, medical cures, commercial advice, tales about individuals, and philosophical and historical inquiries – it exists on a fundamentally coherent basis: the Mishna.

The Mishna is the foundation of the Talmud, and the Talmud is first and foremost an explanation of and an expansion upon the Mishna. It is organized around the Mishna, interpreting and analyzing it. But the Mishna's relationship to the Talmud is not merely organizational. The Mishna is not just the text upon which the Talmud is a commentary. The Mishna provides the Talmud with both its conceptual and its factual foundation. All provisions and laws in the Talmud are established in accordance with the Mishna. Every *halakha* has a source, and this source is generally the Mishna. In every discussion or argument, there are factors that determine its legitimacy; and these, too, are found in the Mishna.

The Talmud accepts the contents of the Mishna as incontrovertible fact. The Talmud can find interrelationships and connections among the topics, it can draw attention to problems, it can reconcile apparent contradictions; however, it cannot disagree with the Mishna. The Talmud looks to the Mishna as the source corroborating its findings. The Mishna serves as the ultimate arbiter of every problem and provides ultimate proof for every assertion or theory.

This special authority and importance is not accorded solely to the Mishna, but also to the other collections of the statements of the *tanna'im*, i.e., the *Tosefta*, *baraita*, and halakhic midrash.

PRINCIPLES OF TALMUDIC INQUIRY

The basis of the Talmud is, as mentioned above, the Mishna. The Talmud approaches the Mishna and conducts its inquiries and investigations employing standard conventions. Failure to understand the fundamental principles on which these inquiries are based will render the Talmud an impassable maze.

The first principle of talmudic inquiry into the Mishna was mentioned above: The acceptance of the Mishna and the teachings of the early *amora'im*

as incontrovertible and unchallengeable. This authority is not ascribed to opinions of the Sages, but rather to facts that were established and endorsed by divine revelation.

The second principle is the premise that every word of the Mishna, of the *tanna'im*, and of the *amora'im*, was precisely weighed and measured, as was their every action, and consequently far-reaching conclusions may be drawn from them. Lessons are drawn not only from the formulation of the Mishna, but also from its use of language, from expressions that the Mishna could have used but did not use, and from the order in which its cases are mentioned. All these elements comprise the basis for characteristic talmudic inference. The fundamental idea here is that a true Sage in the talmudic sense is a person embodying general perfection and not just intellectual excellence. A Sage of that type expresses and embodies God's word as revealed in the Torah. Therefore his conduct, including his every statement, is characterized by absolute precision and divine guidance, and serves as an authoritative source for binding halakhic decisions: Even the mundane conversation of scholars warrants study (*Avoda Zara* 19b).

The third principle is that there is a common, shared basis to all the opinions expressed in the Mishna, and that in seeking to understand the statements of the Mishna or of the *amora'im*, one should always seek elements that reconcile the parties to the dispute and not those that divide them. Many of the most searching and significant questions and discussions in the Talmud derive from the effort to resolve differences. The goal is not to accentuate the division between opinions and principles and thereby create separate groups and tendencies, but rather to reveal the affinity between the various opinions, educating what they have in common and what unites them. This principle is manifest in two basic manners. First, in distinguishing between sources, the Talmud seeks to define the points of contention between the disputants as narrowly as possible, and when the inquiry reaches the crux of their dispute, the conclusion is that the difference is based on an extremely subtle point that can be understood in different ways. Second, the Talmud seeks to explain that statements of the Mishna or of the *amora'im* do not represent the specific opinion of one of the Sages, but rather that they are consistent with all previously articulated opinions. Only in special cases does the Talmud classify opinions in accordance with preexisting, conflicting perspectives.

The fourth principle is that everything found in the sources has significant meaning. Points already established are not repeated without reason; nothing which could simply and logically be deduced from known facts is stated; nor are obvious matters recorded unless they contain some new or unusual

feature. Apparent tautologies prompt queries such as: This is obvious, so what is he teaching us? The answer to these questions is usually: It was necessary to teach this because..., proving that an apparently superfluous addition was, in fact, significant and necessary. The Talmud explains and defines the cases and the special circumstances that engendered that repetition, or it shows that, were it not for the special emphasis in the phraseology, a different, and erroneous, conclusion would have been drawn.

A similar question frequently arises when the Talmud finds that a dispute between *amora'im* seems to be no more than a recapitulation of the identical dispute between *tanna'im*. The question: Let us say that this dispute is like the one between *tanna'im*, is one that the Talmud does its utmost not to answer in the affirmative. It seeks to show that the disputes of the *tanna'im* and of the *amora'im* are not identical by accentuating subtle distinctions between them.

These basic principles, which form a set of axioms of talmudic inquiry, may be summarized: The *mishnayot* and other tannaitic statements are the source material in the Talmud's quest for truth. The sources are precise and accurate in every detail. One must seek what differing views have in common and what unites them. All statements in the sources have independent and significant meaning.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE TALMUD

Viewed superficially, the Talmud seems to lack internal order. The order of the Talmud is unlike the order found in standard textbooks. The arrangement of the Talmud is not systematic nor does it follow familiar didactic principles. It neither proceeds from the simple to the complex nor from the general to the particular. Nevertheless, the Talmud does have an internal order, albeit one different from that with which we are familiar. Textbooks deal with specific material, and it is therefore easy to present that material in a clearly defined order. The Talmud, by contrast, deals with an overwhelmingly broad subject: The nature of all things according to the Torah. Therefore its contours are a reflection of life itself. It has no formal internal order, but is bound by a strong inner connection between its many diverse subjects. The structure of the Talmud is associative. The material of the Talmud was memorized and transmitted orally for centuries. Its ideas are joined to each other by inner links, and the order often reflects the need to facilitate memorization. Talmudic discourse shifts from one subject to a related subject, or to a second that evokes the first in an associative manner.

There are, of course, several characteristic features of the organization of the Talmud. First, it is very rare for the talmudic discussion of any given subject to begin with a detailed definition of the subject. The vast majority of

concepts discussed throughout the Talmud are not defined in the Talmud itself. One must familiarize himself with those concepts and understand them before encountering them in the Talmud. One who fails to somehow internalize the atmosphere of talmudic study and its fundamental concepts will make no headway toward understanding the subject.

A second feature of talmudic organization is that subjects are arranged to stimulate interest. Tractates usually open with a somewhat arcane introduction, emphasizing secondary details of the subject, and only afterwards does the discussion return to the essence of the topic. In general, the Talmud begins with the mishna, whose structure is based on similar principles, and, after explaining it, the Talmud develops themes connected with it. The sources' bearing on these themes are cited and discussed in detail. Sometimes, however, when a source connected to the central theme is cited, a detailed discussion of that source ensues. Sometimes, too, the Talmud moves from one subject to another in free association. After the statement of a certain Sage is cited, a series of his statements may follow. Consequently, the Talmud may drift away from the original, primary topic. Sometimes in discussions of this kind, the focus may shift from subject to subject until the Talmud finds itself straying far from the point of origin. However, not only does the Talmud ultimately return to the original subject, the discussion is also guided by an internal connection, sometimes very subtle, but often very obvious, between all the subjects discussed. This connection is never merely superficial, and the seemingly far-flung digressions in fact contribute substance and interest to the central theme.

AGGADA IN THE TALMUD

It is difficult to define talmudic *aggada*. Generally, *aggada* is taken to include all sections of the Talmud that are not halakhic in nature and are therefore not subject to any final, definitive ruling. Consequently, all theological and philosophical discussions, stories about individuals, ethical guidance, and other such subjects are included in a category that is by no means homogeneous: *aggada*.

There is no fundamental distinction between *halakha* and *aggada*. In fact, *halakha* and *aggada* are so intimately intertwined as to blur the distinction between them. They resemble each other closely in methodology and in approach, and the transition from one to the other is generally accomplished without emphasizing any practical distinction. The subject of the Talmud is reality in its broadest sense, including both those matters which characterize

specific obligations, *halakha*; and those matters which do not define those obligations, *aggada*.

The halakhic and aggadic elements in the Talmud are complementary, not contradictory. If the basic subject is normative, obligating a certain mode of conduct, then the basis of the tractate will be halakhic. If the tractate deals with ethical and spiritual issues, the aggadic part will be correspondingly greater. The abundance of aggadic material in tractates such as *Berakhot* or *Sota* and its absence in *Eiruvim*, for example, can be easily understood in the light of the subjects of those tractates. Since the topics discussed in *Berakhot* are general moral and religious issues, extensive attention will naturally be paid to *aggada*. The same is true of tractate *Sota*, because of the religious and moral aspects of marital infidelity. In tractate *Eiruvim*, on the other hand, where moral and spiritual considerations do not occupy a central place, *halakha* predominates.

Even if the aggadic elements are not directly connected with the subject of the tractate, as is frequently the case, there is often an implicit connection between the aggadic and the halakhic elements in their relationship with the central theme of that tractate.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TALMUD

Many of the difficulties encountered by the student of the Talmud are caused by the special structure of the book, which is itself dictated by the manner in which it developed. Although there is not an abundance of historical material with regard to the development of the Talmud, from the material available, e.g., the epistle of Rav Sherira Gaon, the following picture emerges: Talmudic scholars would gather at fixed times during the year, or would meet by chance. Their conversations, their teachings, and their conduct were committed to memory, and sometimes synopsized in brief notes. The Talmud is comprised of this material. An eminent scholar had to be completely proficient in the written Torah and equally knowledgeable of the entire Mishna. Only a Sage who had mastered these two areas was considered to be on a sufficiently high level to approach the most profound area of Torah study, the Talmud.

Consequently, talmudic study was on a higher level; it was a more profound area of specialization. The foundation was the Mishna, but the statements of the Mishna were also the basis for a more profound understanding of all halakhic statements and the Torah in general. Each mishna was the source for several standard, almost routine, questions, e.g., according to whose opinion is the mishna taught? Sometimes the answers to these preliminary questions were clear to everyone with the requisite knowledge. In those cases both the

question and the answer would remain the anonymous collective contribution of all of the Sages. Sometimes, however, more complicated problems would arise, but these too became, as it were, common property, as each of the Sages attempted, to the best of his ability, to contribute to their resolution. Occasionally, those problems were left unresolved, occupying scholars for generations. In science, too, one encounters questions that do not yield a satisfactory answer despite generations of effort. There are also cases in the Talmud where, after the combined effort of generations, an individual Sage would succeed in finding a solution to a problem. This solution would then be attributed to him and recorded in the Talmud as his personal discovery.

In this way, the halakhic rulings of various Sages were transmitted. Some of them were stated publicly, so that every Sage knew them and knew which Sage was their author. There were, however, other statements known only to few Sages who themselves received them through tradition. When these later Sages publicized those statements in the academy, their name would be attached to the statement, which they transmitted in the name of an earlier Sage.

That is how the Talmud developed from generation to generation. Certain questions, either collective or raised by an individual Sage and cited in his name, together with the answers to them, became part of the treasure trove of knowledge common to every Sage. He had to remember the questions raised with regard to particular *mishnayot* and the answers to those questions. These questions and answers and their discourse in one generation were transmitted to the next. Later, other problems would arise and were transmitted to the following generation as the tradition of the previous one.

The Talmud in its present form is a snapshot, as it were, of the Torah in a particular generation. Toward the end of the fourth century CE, the Babylonian scholar Rav Ashi decided that it was necessary to gather and summarize all the known *halakha* and *aggada* so that they would not be forgotten. This final redaction of the Talmud, which began under his supervision, was completed over the course of the ensuing century-and-a-half.

All the questions, answers, and discussions of the Sages of Rav Ashi's generation and previous generations were recorded for posterity.

The Talmud, then, is the recorded dialogue of generations of Sages. It has all the characteristics of a living dialogue. Freshness, vivid spontaneity, and acute awareness of every subject permeate every argument and discussion. The spirit of life is palpable on every single page.

Part One

Historical Background

Chapter 1

Life in the Talmudic Period

Most of the issues addressed in the Talmud are abstract, and their significance and focus are not restricted to a particular period or way of life. Nevertheless, the Talmud is very closely connected with real life, since the subjects and issues raised in the talmudic discussion and halakhic debate frequently stem from specific problems that arise in the course of everyday life. In general, historical events and developments are referred to in the Talmud and stand in the background of the talmudic discourse, of the interaction between the various personalities, and even of the halakhic debate itself. The following sections illuminate certain aspects of the surroundings within which the Talmud was composed, aspects with a direct connection with the Talmud itself.

THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Eretz Yisrael

During the entire mishnaic and talmudic period (c. 30 BCE–500 CE), Eretz Yisrael was ruled *de facto*, if not always *de jure*, by the Romans. Roman rule in general, and the problems Roman government and its representatives posed for the Jewish community in particular, provide the political backdrop for the period. From a political-historical perspective, the mishnaic period (c. 30 BCE–200 CE) and the talmudic period (200 CE–500 CE) coincide with two distinct eras of Roman rule, and can therefore be regarded as two distinct periods.

During the mishnaic period, Roman imperial power was at its apex. As a rule, the Roman emperors exercised their power vigorously and effectively, and their authority was felt throughout the empire. Internal public order was well maintained, and the Romans imposed international order, *Pax Romana*, as well. During most of the period, relations between the Jewish community in Eretz Yisrael and the Romans were strained. Nevertheless, brief intervals of tranquility provided opportunity for significant events such as the construction of the magnificent Temple by Herod, the participation of Herod's grandson Agrippa in the life of the Jewish people, and the redaction of the Mishna by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. Most of the time, however, the Jewish