

Pesach: Shabbat HaGadol

Talmudic Sugya: Tradition and Meaning

Introduction:

On the Sabbath just preceding Passover or **Pesach, Shabbat HaGadol**, it is customary for the rabbi to give a discourse on some aspect of the Talmud, called a **Sugya**. As a Messianic congregation of Jews and Gentiles, we do not want to lose touch with the wisdom of the generations that have preceded us, and whose sacrifice and dedication, has meant that our faith has survived intact.

Each generation has faced the challenge of both laying hold of the truths of the Torah (the Bible), and of applying its teachings to every area of their lives.

When the circumstance of their lives changed, it was up to each generation to discover new ways of applying the unchanging eternal spiritual principles to this new context. It is these applications of the Bible to a broad spectrum of life situations that has kept **two things** alive and dynamic in Judaism:

- (1) the documents of the **Tenach** (Torah, Neviim, Ketuvim), and
- (2) the ongoing application of these changeless teachings to whatever situations succeeding generations might encounter (**Talmud**).

The collection and the transmission of these applications is what the **Talmud** is all about. In his amazing guide to the Talmud, **The Essential Talmud**, Adin Steinsaltz gives the following formal definition of the Talmud:

“the Talmud is the summary of oral law that evolved after centuries of scholarly effort by sages who lived in Palestine and Babylonia until the beginning of the Middle Ages”.

Before I go into a more in depth discussion of the Talmud, and how this ongoing tradition applies in a Messianic context, I want to briefly expand on a dimension of its teaching that Dr. Fischer pointed out to us during the Yeshiva (Bible Study course) on the Gospels.

The Newer Testament is actually a **collection** of documents whose style and content belong to the **literary and scholarly discussions** that were eventually set down in what became the **Talmud**. The context, in which the teachings of the Gospels was developed and eventually committed to written form, is Talmudic.

That is to say that when our Lord spoke His teachings and when His Apostles and their followers passed on these teachings, they were not doing so in a vacuum. What they had to say and the way, in which they said it, were common forms of expression known to the people of their time. The worldwide Jewish community was well versed in the Scriptures and in the various schools of interpretation that existed at that time.

The teachings of Yeshua and His followers had a double purpose, when they encountered this discussion.

First of all, the early Messianic Movement wanted to demonstrate from the Scriptures that Yeshua of Nazareth was the promised Messiah. Secondly, **they wanted to teach people how to integrate the impact of His coming into their lives.** This application of the reality of Messiah Yeshua occurred within the context of the contemporary Judaism of that time.

None of the teachings of Messiah Yeshua, nor any in the Newer Testament, contradict the beliefs and practices of the Jewish context in which they were given.

There is nothing **foreign**, nor **Hellenistic** in the teachings of the Newer Testament. Our Newer Testament is a document that faithfully reflects the mainstream, biblical Judaism of that time. All and any intrusions of foreign or pagan influences that may have crept into later Christianity do not come from the documents of the Newer Testament.

The richness and the depth of the teachings of these First Century writings reflect the richness and the depth of the Jewish context in which they were spoken.

However, they also reflect some of the theological tensions of that day. Two of the main discussions related to (1) **the nature of spiritual authority** and (2) **how to apply the teachings of the Torah to everyday situations.**

In the contemporary Judaism of the time, the Scriptures were accepted as the final source of authority, but the traditions that were developed to apply these truths, also came to be accepted as a form of this same Law.

The Law: Written and Oral

When the House of Jacob languished in captivity, the only treasures that were not taken from them were the scrolls and the teachings of Moses and the Prophets. These they collected and put together into what has come down to us as the **Tenach** or Old Testament, and which I prefer to call the **Earlier Scriptures**. Students of these documents committed great portions of them to memory, and began to discuss how to apply these teachings to every day situations.

The documents of the Torah, came to be referred to as **Torah she-bi-khtav**, or the **written Torah**. The oral traditions that arose out of these discussions, and that were used to explain the meaning of the words of the written code, came to be referred to as the **Torah she-be-alpeh**, or **Oral Torah**. It is these discussions and practical applications of the written **Torah**, which make up the bulk of what the **Talmud** is all about.

Steinsaltz points out that the Talmud is:

“a conglomerate of law, legend, and philosophy, a blend of unique logic and shrewd pragmatism, of history and science, anecdotes and humor.”

None of this was initially committed to writing, for fear that the writer would not accurately record the spoken word, and because of the time and expense that the writing of the day involved. However, when the temple was destroyed, and when many of the teachers perished, copies of the discussions were made, so that their wisdom would not be lost.

Their teachings were collected over a long period of time, and came to be considered to be of equal authority with the teachings of the written Torah. Consider the following brief summary of the Talmud, which I have copied for you.

B'nai Chayim: A Brief Talmudic Primer

Mishnah:	lists of the laws (<i>Halacha</i> or plural, <i>halachiot</i>) and the teachings about the laws, written in Hebrew
Midrash:	commentary on a portion of the scriptures, from <i>drash</i> (to study)
Halacha:	from the verb “to walk”, laws derived from Scripture that apply to a variety of situations beyond their original context
Gemarah:	what the Talmud is, the completion (Aramaic), or commentary on the Mishnah
Sedarim:	orders, or six major divisions of the Talmud

Tractate:	one of the 63 major divisions of the Sedarim, listed by content or first word, and further broken down into 517 smaller chapters
Zugot:	the pairs of great scholars during the period of Greek rule who formulated many of the halachic rulings (laws) that were later committed to writing and form the core of the Mishnah.
Tannaim:	from <i>tanna</i> (one who studies) those who studied, and arranged the teachings (both the laws, or Mishnah, and their interpretations of these laws) of the previous generations into a more or less standardized collection in the period leading up to and following the destruction of the second temple.
Amoraim:	from the verb <i>amar</i> (to speak or interpret). Those who put together the laws (Mishnah and Midrash) and the teachings (Gemarah) into two, more or less official versions - along with the various methods of interpretation and further insights that they developed. They worked in the period from the second century to about the seventh century.
Babylonian Talmud:	One of two compilations of the Mishnah and Gemarah, along with the Jerusalem Talmud, and that has come to be the accepted or authoritative version of the Talmud.

- Shulchan Aruch:** Most accepted version of the Babylonian Talmud, compiled by a French Jew, Joseph Karo, in the fifteenth century.
- Mitzvah:** a good deed performed in obedience to the teachings of the laws.
- Kavanah:** "intention" or desire that is necessary to make study and observance meaningful
- Main Personalities:** **Hillel** and **Shammai** (two main schools of interpretation, lenient, and severe). **Ben Zakkai** (re-established Judaism after 70 C.E.), **Akiva** (organization of Halacha into defined units). **Prince Judah** (first to set down oral law in writing). **Maimonides** (Rambam, philosopher who set down rules for interpreting laws). **Rashi** (greatest commentator on the Talmud).

Conclusion: the Purpose of Tradition

How do we relate to the Talmud?

First of all we draw a clear distinction between the **Scriptures** and any **applications** or **commentaries** (explanations) that help us to understand these writings. We do **not** believe that the teachings of the **Talmud** are oral commentaries on the written Torah that were first given by Moses and passed on and expanded by subsequent teachers.

We do **not** believe that the Word of G-d has left Heaven and now resides among the scholars, nor do we believe that their rulings are as inspired as the written Torah.

Second of all we do believe that it is the duty of every generation to seek for meaningful ways to apply the principles of the **written Word** to their particular situation, with at least as much thorough creativity as each generation since the revelation was given at Sinai, and had its completion in Messiah Yeshua.

We neither accept the **absolute authority** of any set of **traditions** that may have been developed since the giving of the Revelation, nor do we **reject** the **wisdom** and **dedication** of previous generations who have struggled to be faithful to their understanding of how to apply the teachings of Scripture to their lives.

With this in mind, we see it as our job to do **three things**, and I will close with this.

(1) First of all, we must come to the Scriptures, as if they were given to us personally, and accept them as our **only rule for faith and practice** (Kavanah or "inspired intention": on steroids).

(2) Second of all, we must accept it as our greatest spiritual privilege and task to apply the teachings of the written Word into every area of our lives.

(3) lastly, we must both acknowledge the debt we owe to the previous generations who have passed their faith onto us, and we must *integrate* the lessons of their wisdom into our own lives, *without elevating their teachings to the same level as the written Word.*

We rejoice in the rich heritage that we have in the traditions and the teachings that have come down to us. We do not want to break faith with those who have made it possible for us to come to like precious faith.

We want to keep the faith, and apply it to our lives, and learn from their lessons, as we participate in the same task they performed – living our faith and passing it on to the next generation, intact and vital, full of meaning.

This is so that they can use the same level of creative determination in whatever new situations they encounter to perform the unchanging double duty of all believers, from Abraham to the return of Messiah:

to have **Faith** (in the Written Revelation)

and

to **obey** (apply the principles of this faith to every area of our lives).

Chag Samaech (happy holy day)
as you prepare your homes and hearts for Pesach.

For a fuller discussion of topics related to the practices of Judaism from a Messianic Jewish point of view, we invite you to visit our website:

www.bnaichayim.com

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We are a Messianic Jewish congregation of Jews and Gentiles that acknowledges that Yeshua is the promised Messiah, and celebrates this fulfillment of Torah in a Jewish lifestyle.