

Talmud For All: The Case for Democratizing Jewish Texts

I. The What

1) Babylonian Talmud Tractate Brachot 28a

It was taught: On that day that they removed Rabban Gamliel from his position and appointed Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya in his place, they dismissed the guard at the door and permission was granted to the students to enter.

As Rabban Gamliel would proclaim and say: Any student whose inside, his thoughts and feelings, are not like his outside, i.e., his conduct and his character traits are lacking, will not enter the study hall.

The Gemara relates: On that day several benches were added to the study hall to accommodate the numerous students.

Rabbi Yohanan said: Abba Yosef ben Dostai and the Rabbis disputed this matter. One said: Four hundred benches were added to the study hall. And one said: Seven hundred benches were added to the study hall.

Rabban Gamliel was disheartened. He said: Perhaps, Heaven forbid, I prevented Israel from engaging in Torah study.

He was taken with a dream, where he saw white jugs filled with ashes.

The Gemara comments: That is not the case, but that dream was shown to him to ease his mind.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות כח.

תנא אותו היום, סלקוהו לשומר הפתח ונתנה להם רשות לתלמידים ליכנס.

שקיה רבן גמליאל מכריז ואומר: כל תלמיד שאין תוכו כפרו, לא יכנס לבית המדרש.

ההוא יומא אתוספו כמה ספסלי. אמר רבי יוחנן: פליגי בה אבא יוסף בן דוסתאי ורבנן. חד אמר: אתוספו

ארבע מאה ספסלי. וחד אמר: שבע מאה ספסלי. הנה קא חלישה דעתיה דרבן גמליאל, אמר: דלמא חס ושלום

מנעתי תורה מישראל. אחזו ליה בתלמיה חצבי חנוני דמליין קטמא.

ולא היא, הדיא ליתובי דעתיה, הוא דאחזו ליה.

II. The How

2) Babylonian Talmud Tractate Ketubot 103b

And this is the background to an exchange that took place when Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Hiyya argued. Rabbi Hanina said to Rabbi Hiyya: You are arguing with me? If, Heaven forbid, the Torah would be forgotten from the Jewish people, I would restore it through my analyses, i.e., using my abilities of analysis I would be able to rediscover all that had been lost.

Rabbi Hiyya said to Rabbi Hanina: I am working to ensure that the Torah will not be forgotten from the Jewish people. For I bring flax and I plant it, and I then weave nets from the flax fibers. I then go out and trap deer, and I feed the meat to orphans, and I form scrolls from the skins of the deer. And I go to a town that has no teachers of children in it and I write the five books of the Torah for five children. And I teach the six orders of the Mishna to six children. To each and every one of these children I say: Teach your order to your friends. In this way all of the children will learn the whole of the Torah and the Mishna. And this is what Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi referred to when he said: How great are the actions of Hiyya.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת כתובות קג:

והנינו דכי הוו מינצו רבי חנינא ורבי חייא, אמר ליה רבי חנינא לרבי חייא: בהדי דיד מינצת? דאם חס ושלום נשפחה תורה מישראל, מהדנא ליה מפלפולי.

אמר ליה רבי חייא: אנא עבדי דלא משפחה תורה מישראל. דאיתינא ביתנא ושידינא, ומגדלנא גישי, וצידנא טבי(א), ומאכלנא בישרא ליתמי, ואריקנא מגילתא

ממשכי דטבי, וסליקנא למתא דלית בה מקרי דרדקי, וכתובנא חמש חומשי

לחמשא ינוקי, ומתנינא שיטא סידרי לשיטא ינוקי, לכל חד וחד אמרי ליה אתני סידרה לסברה.

והנינו דאמר רבי: כמה גדולים מעשה חייא.

III. The Why

3) Babylonian Talmud Tractate Ta'anit 7a

The Gemara cites other expositions that deal with Torah study. Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, said: What is the meaning of that which is written: "Iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend" (Proverbs 27:17)? This verse comes to tell you that just as with these iron implements, one sharpens the other when they are rubbed against each other, so too, when Torah scholars study together, they sharpen one another in halakha.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת תענית ז.

אמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא, מאי דכתיב: "ברזל בברזל יחד", לומר לך: מה ברזל זה — אהד מחדד את חברו, אף שני תלמידי חכמים — מחדדין זה את זה בהלכה.

4) Babylonian Talmud Tractate Shabbat 88b – 89a

And Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said:

When Moses ascended to the Heavens, the ministering angels said before the Holy One, Master of the Universe, what is one born of a woman doing here among us?

The Holy One said to them: **He came to receive the Torah.**

The Angels said before God: The Torah is a **hidden treasure that was concealed by You for 974 generations before the creation of the world, and you seek to give it to flesh and blood?** As it is stated: "The word which God commanded to a thousand generations" (Psalms 105:8).

(Since the Torah, the word of God, was given to the twenty-sixth generation after Adam, the first man, the remaining 974 generations must have preceded the creation of the world.)

"What is man that You are mindful of him and the son of man that You think of him?" (Psalms 8:5).

Rather, **"God our Lord, how glorious is Your name in all the earth that Your majesty is placed above the heavens"** (Psalms 8:2). The rightful place of God's majesty, the Torah, is in the heavens.

The Holy One said to Moses: Provide them with an answer as to why the Torah should be given to the people.

Moses said before God: Master of the Universe, I am afraid lest they burn me with the breath of their mouths.

God said to him: Grasp My throne of glory for strength and protection and **provide them with an answer.**

And from where is this derived? As it is stated: **"God causes him to grasp the front of the throne, and spreads God's cloud over it"** (Job 26:9), and **Rabbi Nahum said: This verse teaches that God spread the radiance of God's presence and God's cloud over Moses.**

Moses said before God: Master of the Universe, the Torah that You are giving me, what is written in it?

"I am the Lord your God Who brought you out of Egypt from the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2).

Moses said to the angels: Did you descend to Egypt? Were you enslaved to Pharaoh? Why should the Torah be yours?

Again: What else is written in it?

"You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3).

Moses said to the angels: Do you dwell among the nations who worship idols that you require this special warning?

Again, Moses asked: What else is written in it?

"Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it" (Exodus 20:8). **Moses asked the angels: Do you perform labor that you require rest from it?**

Again: What else is written in it? "Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (Exodus 20:7).

Moses asked the angels: Do you conduct business with one another that may lead you to swear falsely?

Again: What else is written in it?

"Honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12).

Moses asked the angels: Do you have a father or a mother?

Again: What else is written in it? "You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal" (Exodus 20:13). **Is there jealousy among you, or is**

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת פח: - פט.

ואמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: בשעה שעלה משה למרום אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא: רבנו של עולם, מה לילד אשה בינינו?

אמר להן: לקבל תורה בא.

אמרו לפניו: חמדה גנוזה שגנוזה לה תשע מאות ושבעים וארבעה דורות קודם שנברא העולם, אתה מבקש ליתנה לבשר ודם?

"מה אנוש כי תזכרנו וכן אדם כי תפקדנו?"

"ה' אדנינו מה אדיר שמך בכל הארץ אשר תנה הודך על השמים!"

אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: התזיר להן תשובה.

אמר לפניו: רבנו של עולם, מתזירא אני שמא וישרפני בהבל שפיהם.

אמר לו: אחוז בכסא כבודי וחזור להן תשובה. שנאמר: "מאחז פני כסא פרשו עליו ענני", ואמר רבי נחום: מלמד שפירש שדי מזיו שכינתו ועננו עליו.

אמר לפניו: רבנו של עולם, תורה שאתה נותן לי מה קתיב בה?

"אנכי ה' אלוקיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים".

אמר להן: למצרים וירדתם? לפרעה השתעבדתם? תורה למה תהא לכם!

שוב: מה קתיב בה?

"לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים".

בין הגוים אתם שרויין, שעובדין עבודה זרה?

שוב: מה קתיב בה?

"זכור את יום השבת לקדשו"

כלום אתם עושים מלאכה, שאתם צריכין שבות?

שוב: מה קתיב בה?

"לא תשא"

משא ומתן יש ביניכם?

שוב: מה קתיב בה?

"כבד את אביך ואת אמך"

אב ואם יש לכם?

שוב: מה קתיב בה?

"לא תרצח", "לא תנאף", "לא תגנב". קנאה יש ביניכם? יצר הרע יש ביניכם?

there an evil inclination within you that would render these commandments relevant?

Immediately they agreed with the Holy One as it is stated: "God our Lord, how glorious is Your name in all the earth" (Psalms 8:10), while "that Your majesty is placed above the heavens" is not written

Immediately, each and every one of the angels became an admirer of Moses and passed something to him, as it is stated: "You ascended on high, you took a captive, you took gifts on account of man, and even among the rebellious also that the Lord God might dwell there" (Psalms 68:19). The meaning of the verse is: In reward for the fact that they called you man, you are not an angel, and the Torah is applicable to you, you took gifts from the angels.

And even the Angel of Death gave him something, as Moses told Aaron how to stop the plague, as it is stated: "And he placed the incense, and he atoned for the people" (Numbers 17:12).

And the verse says: "And he stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped" (Numbers 17:13). If it were not that the Angel of Death told him this remedy, would he have known it?

מִיָּד הוֹדוּ לוֹ לְהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר:
"ה' אֲדֹנֵינוּ מִה אֲדִיר שְׁמֶךָ יְיָ", וְאֵילוּ "תִּהְיֶה
הוֹדָה עַל הַשְּׁמִימִים" לֹא כְּתִיב.

מִיָּד כָּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד נִעְשָׂה לוֹ אוֹהֵב וּמִסֵּר לוֹ
דָּבָר,

שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "עֲלִיתָ לְמָרוֹם שְׁבִית שְׁבִי לַקְּהָתָה
מִתְּנוֹת בְּאָדָם" —

בְּשֹׂכֶר שֶׁקִּרְאוּ "אָדָם", לַקְּהָתָה מִתְּנוֹת.

אִם מִלֵּאדָה הִמָּנֹת מִסֵּר לוֹ דָּבָר,

שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "וַיִּתֵּן אֶת הַקְּטֹרֶת וַיִּכַּפֵּר עַל הָעָם",

וְאֵלֶּיךָ: "וַיַּעֲמֵד בֵּין הַמֵּתִים וּבֵין הַחַיִּים וַיְגֹ"ו

— אִי לֹא דָאֵמַר לִיה מִי הָיָה גִּדְעָה?

IV. Conclusion

5) Babylonian Talmud Tractate Gittin 60a

And a proof for this is that [Rabbi Yohanan](#) and [Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish](#) used to read from a scroll of *aggada* containing the words of the Sages on Shabbat.

But such a scroll **may not be written**, for in principle, the statements of the Oral Law may not be committed to writing. **Rather, since it is not possible** to remember the Oral Law without writing it down, it is permitted to violate the *halakha*, as indicated by the verse: **"It is time to act for the Lord; they have nullified your Torah" (Psalms 119:126).**

Here too, in the case of a *haftara* scroll, **since it is not always possible** to write complete books of the Bible, due to the expense, it is permitted to apply the reasoning of **"It is time to act for the Lord; they have nullified your Torah.**

תלמוד בבלי מסכת גיטין ס.

דְּרַבִּי יוֹחָנָן וְרַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן
לֵקִישׁ מַעֲיִינִי בְּסִפְרָא דְּאַגְדָּתָא
בְּשַׁבָּתָא

וְהָא לֹא גִיתָן לִיכְתֹּב
אֱלָא כִּינּוּן דְּלֹא אֶפְשָׁר עַתָּה לַעֲשׂוֹת
לֵה' הִפְרוּ תוֹרָתָהּ

הִקְא גַּמִּי כִּינּוּן דְּלֹא אֶפְשָׁר עַתָּה
לַעֲשׂוֹת לֵה' הִפְרוּ תוֹרָתָהּ