

CHAPTER 5

HISTORY OF RABBINIC JUDAISM



The men of the Great Sanhedrin said three things: be deliberate in judgment, develop many disciples, and make a fence for the Torah.

The Great Sanhedrin

The ancient Jewish court system was called the Sanhedrin. The Great Sanhedrin was the supreme religious body in Israel during the time of the first century Temple era. There were also smaller religious Sanhedrins in every town in Israel, dealing with religious and civil matters.

The Great Sanhedrin dealt with religious and ritualistic Temple matters, criminal matters proceedings in connection with the discovery of a corpse, trials of adulterous wives, tithes, preparation of Torah Scrolls for the king and the Temple, drawing up the calendar and the solving of difficulties relating to ritual law.

In about 30 A.D. the Great Sanhedrin lost its authority to inflict capital punishment. After the Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D, the Great Sanhedrin ceased to exist.

This group of one hundred and twenty sages led the Jewish people at the beginning of the Second Temple Era.

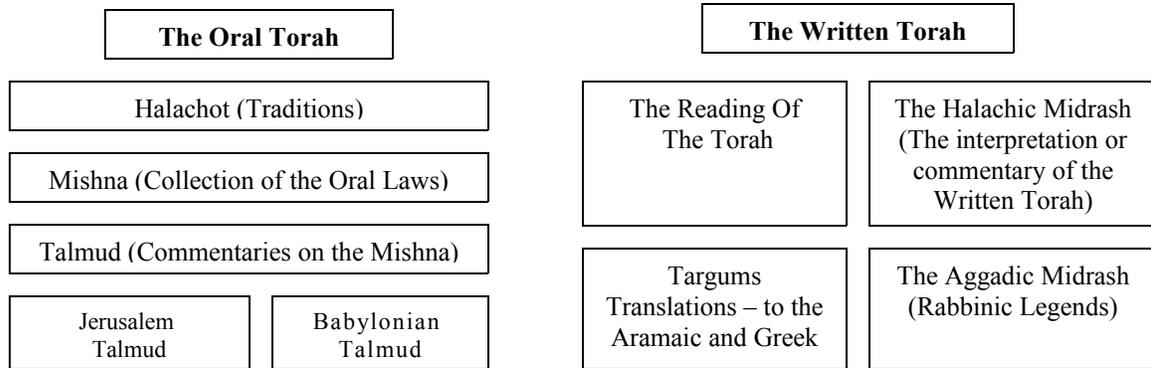
A Fence for the Torah

What is meant by “a fence for the Torah?” One Talmudic claim is that the oral law is a fence around the written Torah.

- Enact provisions and cautionary rules to safeguard against transgression of the Laws of the Torah itself. For example, the rabbis forbade even the handling of certain utensils on the Sabbath, lest one use them to perform a labor forbidden by Torah.
- Shimon the Righteous was among the survivors of the Great Sanhedrin. He used to say, “The world depends on three things: Torah study, service of God, and good deeds.”
- Rabbinical teaching says, “All Israel has a share in the world to come.” It is taken from, “And your people are all righteous; they shall inherit the land forever; they are a branch of my planting, my handiwork, in which to take pride” (Isaiah [Yeshayahu] 60:21).

- The word “Israel” refers to any individual who has not utterly divorced himself from Israel’s lofty spiritual and ethical destiny. His position in the world to come will vary according to his merit, but as long as he remains part of “Israel,” he will never lose it entirely.”

Welcome to the world of Rabbinic thought!
A classification of Torah literature: Revelation at Sinai



Commentaries

Examples of the oral Halachot are found in Matthew 1 (Mattityahu) 5:1, 2, 3, “Then some Pharisees and teachers of the Torah came to Yeshua from Jerusalem and asked, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!” Yeshua replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?” “Thus, you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition” (Matthew [Mattityahu] 15:6).

Origins of Rabbinic Authority

From 64 BC to 135 AD, the Pharisees fought to gain national authority and power. Josephus, tells us that toward the end of the Maccabean period, Hyrcanus left “the party of the Pharisees, and abolished the decrees they had imposed on the people, and punished those who observed them.” Hyrcanus’ daughter-in-law Alexandra later took control and gave the Pharisees great power, which they used to kill their political enemies who had previously killed many of them.

Josephus presents the Pharisees as a strong political force who did not hesitate to resort to violence to promote their vision and insure their power.

The Romans, on their part, sought native political rulers who would keep the people subservient enough to Rome to ensure tax revenue and dominion.

The Sadducean Priesthood formed the normal focus of power and ruled in the councils; Sanhedria, which the Romans established.

The Great Revolt

In 66 AD, a group of Sicarii (Zealots) took Masada by deceit and killed the Roman garrison there. Others in Jerusalem put a stop to the customary sacrifice that had been offered on Caesar's behalf in the Temple.

As the high priests and the leading Pharisees had predicted, the cessation of Caesar's sacrifice brought Roman reprisal.

The Romans were able to stop the revolt in Galilee. Fighting through Judea, they besieged Jerusalem. Finally, the city and the Temple fell. Masada, where the revolt began, was the last stronghold to fall.

In Josephus' account, both the leading Pharisees and the high priests were opposed to the revolt from the beginning. The Talmud gives us the same picture, except the priests are not mentioned, and "the Rabbis" replace the leading Pharisees.

An apparently dead Yohanan ben Zakkai was smuggled out of the city in a coffin. He prophetically greeted Vespasian, the king. At that point, a messenger arrived from Rome with the news that Vespasian had been named emperor of Rome. In response, Vespasian promised to grant Yohanan ben Zakkai's request to make Yavneh a seat of religious authority. The Talmudic accounts make it clear that: 1). The Rabbis disassociated themselves from the Great Revolt; 2). The Romans approved the Rabbinic rule, developed at Yavneh.

To the Romans, the emperor had proven himself more powerful in battle than the God of the Jews. The Roman tax signified that sovereignty over Judea had passed from the God of the Temple to the head of the Capitol. As was their practice, the Romans continued to rule through a new, subservient, native leadership.

The Temple had proven too dangerous, an impetus to rebellion against foreign domination. The Romans strengthened their rule through Yohanan ben Zakkai and the group of Pharisees who followed him. Yavneh became the center of rabbinic authority.

In the first century, there was no Orthodox Judaism. There were several competing varieties. It is especially important to realize that our Rabbinic sources represent the triumph of the Pharisean party, and of Yohanan ben Zakkai. Pharisean opinions alone are recorded; parties, movements, and opinions contrary to these were naturally excluded. For example, in the Mishnah, the Sadducees are described as an insignificant, discredited, and heretical sect. However, we know they played a large part both in the first century and earlier Judaism.

The Talmud is a testimony to the achieved dominance of a particular sect of Pharisees. People who had a story to tell — their story, wrote the relevant materials we have,

Rabbinic or otherwise! They give their version for their reasons. They were not seeking to be fair or impartial.

Basic Rabbinic Theology (Quotes from various Rabbis)

Can God exist in heaven and Earth at the same time?

“But first we must note the fact of God’s abiding in a heaven ever so high does not prevent Him from being at the same time on Earth. Whilst the fact of God’s appearing to Moses in the bush is taken as proof that there is no spot on Earth, be it ever so lowly, which is devoid of the divine presence.”

Prayer and repentance

“For though the distance between heaven and Earth is so infinitely great, yet ‘when a man comes to the synagogue and prays, God listens to him,’ for the petitioner is like a man who talks into the ear of his friend. The same is the case with repentance, the power of which is very great. Directly, a man has a thought of repentance, it instantly reaches the throne of God.”

Good deeds, bad deeds

“The fact is, the nearness of God is determined by the conduct of man, and by his realization of this nearness, that is, by his knowledge of God. Thus, taught the sages, thy deeds will bring thee near (to God), and thy deeds will remove thee (from God). How so? If a man does an ugly thing, his actions remove him from the divine presence, as it is said. ‘Your sins have separated between you and your God’ (Isaiah [Yesha’yahu] 59). But, if a man has done good deeds, they bring him near to the divine presence . . . and it is upon man to know that a contrite and humble spirit is better than all the sacrifices (prescribed) in the Torah.”

Election of Israel

“Israel’s election preceded the creation of the world.”

“He is the Lord of all nations, while His name is especially attached to Israel.”

The kingdom of God and the Shema

“The kingdom of God, derived from the Shema, has brought us to a theological doctrine described by some rabbis as the very truth of the Torah. I am the Lord your God. It is at once the center and the circumference of rabbinic divinity. The conception has, of course, its origin in the Bible, but it is the rabbinic literature where we first see the term ‘kingdom of heaven.’”

“The invisible kingdom is mainly spiritual, expressive of a certain attitude of mind, and possessing a more individual character. He who is desirous to receive upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven, let him first prepare his body, wash his hands, lay his tephilin, read the Shema, and say his prayers.”

“The Shema also implies the exclusion of any human mediator, whether on Earth or in heaven, none but God.”

“Similarly, the words ‘to love the Lord your God’ mean ‘say not, I will study Torah with the purpose of being a sage or rabbi, or to acquire fortune, or to be rewarded for it in the world to come; but do it for the sake of thy love to God, though the glory will come in the end.’”

The Joy of the Law

“Law and commandments, or as the rabbinic expression is, Torah or Mitzvot, have a harsh sound and are suggestive to the outside or something external, forced upon men by authority from the outside, sinister and burdensome. The joy experienced by the rabbinic Jew is being commanded to fulfill the Law. This joy of the Law is an essential element in the understanding of the Law, which can never be conceived by those who have experienced it neither from life nor from literature.”

Source of Rebellion (Sin)

“Sin, being generally conceived as rebellion against the majesty of God, we have to inquire after the source. In rabbinic literature, this influence is termed the Yetzer Hara, translated, ‘evil imagination/inclination’ (evil will).”

“The Evil Yetzer has seven names:

1. Evil (Genesis [B’resheet] 8:21)
2. Uncircumcised (Deuteronomy [D’varim] 10:16)
3. Unclean (Psalm [Tehillim] 51:2)
4. Enemy/Friend (Proverbs [Mishlei] 27:6)
5. Stumbling Block (Isaiah [Yesha’yahu] 57:14)
6. Stone (Ezekiel [Yechezk’el] 36:26)
7. Hidden One (Joel [Yo’el] 2:20)

“The Evil Yetzer is encapsulated by, ‘Satan, Yetzer and Angel of Death are one.’”

“The Evil Yetzer persuades man to sin, and bears witness against him in the future world. The Yetzer of man assaults him every day. The Evil Yetzer was created by God. The Evil Yetzer is not seen as a separate entity representing a power at warfare with God.” (** This is still a continuation of Rabbinic Theology and differs from the Messianic belief.*)

Man's Victory over the Evil Yetzer

“The difference between the wicked and the righteous is that the wicked are in the power of their hearts, while the righteous have the heart in their power. Indeed, it would seem as if everything depended on man. Either Satan enters his body and gains dominion over man and sin becomes his master, or man gains mastery over Satan and he suppresses him. Nay, man has in his power not only to resist the Evil Yetzer, but to turn his services to good purpose. It is simply a question of choice, the wicked preferring the Evil Yetzer, while the righteous choose the Good Yetzer.”

Forgiveness and Reconciliation with God

“What is the punishment of the sinner? The Holy One, blessed be He, answered, ‘Let him do repentance and it shall be forgiven unto him.’”

“What the Rabbi really meant is that forgiveness is achieved in various ways, through suffering and death, through atonement of sacrifices, but more prominently, through repentance.”

“It should be noted that sacrifices are very limited in their efficacy as a means of atonement and reconciliation.”

“In another place, with reference to Proverbs (Mishlei) 2:2, it is pointed out that ‘The superiority of practicing the works of charity and justice over sacrifices consist in this, that whilst the atoning effect of the former extends also to the sins committed willfully, that of the latter is confined only to sins committed unintentionally.’”

Day of Atonement

“According to the Rabbis, it is the Day of Atonement that atones even when there is no sacrifice or goat, it being the day itself which has this efficacy, independent of the sacrificial worship. This efficacy is subject to the following two important conditions: first, that it has to be accompanied by repentance, and further, that in matters between man and man, the Day of Atonement loses its atoning power until proper restitution is made to the wronged person. Through the conditions, the Day of Atonement becomes practically the great Day of Repentance, the culmination of the ten days of repentance. It brings with itself purification, the Father in Heaven making white the sin committed . . .”

“Israel is steeped in sin through the Evil Yetzer in their body, but they do repentance and the Lord forgives their sins every year and renews their hearts to fear him. On the Day of Atonement, I will create you a new creation.”

“Death and Suffering may be viewed either as a punishment satisfying the claims of justice or as an atonement, bringing pardon and forgiveness and reconciling man with God.”

“Self-inflicted suffering, such as fasting, naturally assumes the aspect of sacrifices. Hence, the prayer of a rabbi after a fast that the fat and blood which he lost through a fast should be accounted to him as a sacrifice on the altar, and have the same effect as the sacrifice in the days of yore when the Holy Temple existed. Every loss of property sustained by man, as well as every kind of physical suffering which he happens to undergo, are considered as an atonement.”

Reconciliation

“The Holy One, blessed be He, says unto man, ‘I made the Evil Yetzer. Be careful that he should not make thee sin; but if he did make thee sin, be eager to do repentance, then I will forgive thy sins.’ And as we have seen, repentance is the remedy offered by the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself.”

Rabbinic Kosher vs. Biblical Kosher

Separation of meat and dairy

- A. Exodus (Sh’mot) 23:19
- B. Exodus (Sh’mot) 34:26
- C. Deuteronomy (D’varim) 14:21

Exodus (Sh’mot) 23:19 states, “Do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk.”

This command is referring to false worship practices the children of Israel were to avoid. It is a Canaanite fertility ritual and is not diet-related. In Rabbinical kosher, the Rabbis have taken the Biblical commands from Exodus (Sh’mot) and Deuteronomy (D’varim) and interpreted them to have separation in eating meat and dairy products together.

Rabbinic Sabbath vs. Biblical Sabbath

Exodus (Sh’mot) 35:2, 3 says, “For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day shall be a holy day, a Sabbath of rest to the Lord . . . Do not light a fire in any of your dwellings on the Sabbath Day.”

Work is not defined, but most agree, in context, it referred to the various jobs associated with the building of the Tabernacle. So work is your normal occupation done during the six days! To that, the Rabbis have added numerous restrictions to the Shabbat in addition to the Biblical commands.

Lighting Sabbath Candles

Rabbinic thought maintains that if there is a negative command “Do not . . .” it follows that there is a positive action to follow this command. So “do not light a Shabbat fire” would require one to “light a Shabbat fire” before the Shabbat. This is the logic behind lighting candles before Sabbath on Friday.

The Mezuzot and the phylacteries

A very literal action in response to the command in Deuteronomy (D'varim) 6:8 to “tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”

Nothing is wrong with following this tradition, but the problem arises when rabbinic tradition places a “have to” in order to pray to God!

Payes-Payot (sideburns)

Based on Leviticus (Vayikra) 19:27 and 21:5, the Israelite was not to “cut” the hair at the sides of their head. This Law was given to prevent the mimicking of pagan worship and mourning rituals. This does not mean we let our sideburns grow like the Orthodox.