

Talmud Happily Ever After

"Although for centuries the Talmud could be read only by those steeped in Jewish learning, now you can read it, study it, treasure it, as you never could before."

Our new translation "removes the language barrier and makes the classic Jewish learning experience available to everyone."

Our Talmud edition is now "in a form that is easy to understand"

—from advertisements for several recent Talmud translations.

1

The proliferation of Judaica in English translation has been, on balance, a positive development, a manifestation of the renewed interest in classical Jewish sources, and an opportunity that has enabled tens of thousands to explore aspects of Torah which might otherwise have remained hermetically sealed to them.

While there is an ongoing debate as to whether the Talmud in particular, because of its special nature, can ever be successfully translated, and whether it even should be attempted (the classic "can/should" dilemma), there is a less complicated matter which has yet to be resolved. We refer to the kind of public relations blitz which has accompanied the new Talmud translations, the garbled signals which are imparted, and, above all, the unintended mischief done to the good name and integrity of the study of Talmud.

Although the publishers and translators of the various Talmud editions have by and large done excellent and in some cases impeccable work, they have apparently been less than attentive to the advertising being disseminated in their names.

The hard sell and hyperbole which sells autos, toothpaste and deodorants by persuading us that without them we can never live happily ever after have become staples of our existence. We should have become inured to them by now. Nevertheless, one finds himself a bit discomfited by the breathless, quick-fix tone of the Talmud ads and their implicit promises—so reminiscent of the classic encyclopedia salesman's assurances that with the purchase of the twenty-volume set on easy terms, you and your children will have "the world's knowledge at your fingertips" and will be magically transformed into educated and cultured people.

(In an amusing juxtaposition which reveals volumes, one of the Talmud advertisements features a color picture of Tractate Bava Metzia on a book-

shelf shoulder to shoulder with the Encyclopedia Britannica. This makes several not so subtle points: (a) an apotheosis has taken place, and it is now respectable in polite society to own and display a set of Talmud; (b) just as the Britannica on your bookshelf says something about your general intellectual pretensions, so now does the new Talmud say something about your Jewish intellectual pretensions; and, unwittingly, (c) this new Talmud will be promoted in the time-honored encyclopedia manner.)

It is not that the claims present half-truths; it is that they suggest complete untruths: that Talmud can be absorbed in a relatively painless way; that it is no longer necessary to "devote years to mastering its language and logic"; that it need no longer be the exclusive province of those "steeped in Jewish learning"; that anyone—"you and your children"—can now become Talmud scholars simply by "reading" and "studying" the new translations; that just as you can read an encyclopedia and learn new facts almost effortlessly, without bothering to understand Kant or Milton or Wittgenstein, so also can you now read and study the new translations and learn new facts about Judaism almost effortlessly, without bothering to understand, *lehavdil*, Rashi, Rambam, or the Brisker Rav.

All this, of course, is no revelation to the translators and publishers. In fact, the Introduction to one of the translations explicitly states that it is not a substitute for serious "learning." But apparently the publishers have allowed the salesmen free rein, who in turn have skewed the real meaning of Talmud study.

II

What the salesmen do not realize is that the barriers to knowing Talmud are not those of ordinary language which can be overcome by lucid translations. The language barriers to Talmud study are of a different dimension altogether, because this language contains words and concepts which contemporary society simply does not fathom: discipline, concentration, sacrifice, toil. These are untranslatable in a society which demands that the most complex matters be mastered in six easy lessons and that the profoundest ideas be reduced to the ten-second sound-bite (reminiscent of the perhaps apocryphal comment of the great rabbi who complained that "*Yeder Yid vill verren a talmid chacham in ein nacht—abber die nacht vill er zich gut ois-schlaffen*" ("Every Jew would like to become a Talmud scholar overnight—but during that night he would like to have a good night's sleep"). These are concepts which emanate from another time and another place, and they are not found in any modern dictionary. These are the real barriers.

The Talmud is not for dabblers. The concept of *'amelim ba-Torah* and of *yegia*; and Joshua's *vehagita bo yomam valaylah*; and Perek Kinyan Torah; and Rambam on Torah study—all make it clear that Torah is not acquired from a lounge chair. It demands dedication by day and by night, through heat and cold, in youth and in old age, in sickness and in health. It is not something you glance at occasionally and then return to the coffee

table. To know it truly, to comprehend it, requires endless hours bent over a gemara trying to coax the proper logic and meaning out of a *sugya* which, despite the toil you have devoted to it, refuses to reveal its inner self, its subtle, hidden logic. In a couch-potato society whose major expenditure of energy consists of pressing the button on the remote-control switch, such concepts are beyond translation.

Beyond all this, what the translators know but neglected to tell the salesmen is that successful Talmud study requires not only a disciplined mind, total intellectual focus, precise thinking, and constancy, but that primarily it requires faith in God and in Revelation, plus belief in the intellectual and religious integrity of the Talmudic sages, plus the conviction that by studying Torah and Talmud one is fulfilling a religious obligation which outweighs all other mitzvot. That's why study of the Torah and Talmud requires a prior *berakha*.

And since they don't mention such things, an even more vexing problem emerges: that of the dilettante's half-knowledge. Having been assured that the new English text makes Talmud "crystal clear," he becomes an overnight *mayvin*, and in short order he notes what to him are strained analogies and obvious inconsistencies, and ascribes them to the credulity of the ancients. Why, he inevitably wonders, all this fuss about the brilliance of the Talmud? He has, after all, read it, and parts of it make no sense at all, and in fact appear trivial and completely irrelevant.

Sadly for him and for the reputation of the Talmud, he will never perceive the eddies and currents which flow beneath the surface—he will not even be aware that there are levels deeper than his own—and he will never realize that beneath that surface, waiting to be discovered, lie the elegant, stately, and harmonious resolutions of the *rishonim* and *aharonim*.

If a little learning is a dangerous thing, superficial Talmud study can be downright perilous.

III

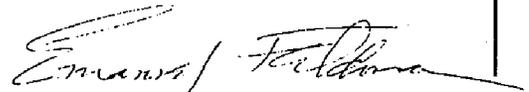
That the translators have translated skillfully and that the publishers have published expertly and that their work has the great potential of broadening the exposure of masses of Jews to the influence of Talmud study—all this is self-evident. Similarly, it is axiomatic that Talmud study should be open to all and not be an exclusive club for a small coterie of aristocrats, Torah is given to all Jews—*morasha kehillat Yaakov*—and its study is the privilege, right, and duty of us all.

This, rather, is a plea to control rhetoric, to limit claims, and to review advertising copy as meticulously as textual material. Once this is done, then in my fantasy future ads will read:

This translation will not make you a Talmud scholar. For that you will require years of intensive study. But this Talmud edition can assist you with difficult terms in the original Aramaic, can be an aid in preparing

and reviewing the Talmud class you attend, will give you some insight into the Talmudic method of thinking, will serve as an introduction to the vast range of Talmudic learning. If you study this translation carefully, patiently, and humbly, and if you work with a competent teacher regularly, you will gradually become aware of the subtleties of the text, you will begin to appreciate some of the majesty of the Oral Torah, and your mind will be stretched as it is exposed to the depths of the Talmudic process, to new ways of thinking, and to the precise analysis and insights of our sages—and you will begin to understand why Jews believe that not only the Written Torah but also the Oral Torah stems from Sinai.

Admittedly, such ad copy would probably not sell many volumes, but it would help preserve the integrity of Talmudic learning and the good name of the Talmud and its true and faithful disciples. In the interim, we can be grateful for small things—among them that Ravina and Rav Ashi did not have to depend on PR people to disseminate their redaction of the Talmud.



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