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**The
Essential
Talmud**

TRANSLATED BY

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Chapter one

What Is the Talmud?

If the Bible is the cornerstone of Judaism, then the Talmud is the central pillar, soaring up from the foundations and supporting the entire spiritual and intellectual edifice. In many ways the Talmud is the most important book in Jewish culture, the backbone of creativity and of national life. No other work has had a comparable influence on the theory and practice of Jewish life, shaping spiritual content and serving as a guide to conduct. The Jewish people have always been keenly aware that their continued survival and development depend on study of the Talmud, and those hostile to Judaism have also been cognizant of this fact. The book was reviled, slandered, and consigned to the flames countless times in the Middle Ages and has been subjected to similar indignities in the recent past as well. At times, talmudic study has been prohibited because it was abundantly clear that a Jewish society that ceased to study this work had no real hope of survival.

The formal definition of 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. It has two main components: the Mishna, a book of halakha (law) written in Hebrew; and the commentary on the Mishna, known as the Talmud (or

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Gemara), in the limited sense of the word, a summary of discussion and elucidations of the Mishna written in Aramaic-Hebrew jargon.

This explanation, however, though formally correct, is misleading and imprecise. The Talmud is the repository of thousands of years of Jewish wisdom, and the oral law, which is as ancient and significant as the written law (the Torah), finds expression therein. It is a conglomerate of law, legend, and philosophy, a blend of unique logic and shrewd pragmatism, of history and science, anecdotes and humor. It is a collection of paradoxes: its framework is orderly and logical, every word and term subjected to meticulous editing, completed centuries after the actual work of composition came to an end; yet it is still based on free association, on a harnessing together of diverse ideas reminiscent of the modern stream-of-consciousness novel. Although its main objective is to interpret and comment on a book of law, it is, simultaneously, a work of art that goes beyond legislation and its practical application. And although the Talmud is, to this day, the primary source of Jewish law, it cannot be cited as an authority for purposes of ruling.

The Talmud treats abstract and totally unrealistic problems in the same manner in which it refers to the most prosaic facts of everyday life, yet succeeds in avoiding abstract terminology. Though based on the principles of tradition and the transmission of authority from generation to generation, it is unparalleled in its eagerness to question and reexamine convention and accepted views and to root out underlying causes. The talmudic method of discussion and demonstration tries to approximate mathematical precision, but without having recourse to mathematical or logical symbols.

The Talmud is best understood through analysis of the basic objectives of its authors and compilers. What were they aiming at, those thousands of sages who spent their lives in debate and discussion in hundreds of large and small centers of learning? The key is to be found in the name of the work: Talmud (that is, study, learning). The Talmud is the embodiment of the great concept of *mitzvat talmud Torah* – the positive religious duty of studying Torah, of acquiring learning and wisdom, study which is its own end and reward. A certain talmudic sage who has left us nothing but his name and this one dictum had this to say on the subject: “Turn it and turn it again, for everything is contained in

the Torah. Regard it and grow old in it and never abandon it, for there is no greater virtue.”

Study of Torah undoubtedly serves numerous practical purposes, but these are not the crucial objectives. Study is not geared to the degree of importance or the practical potential of the problems discussed. Its main aim is learning itself. Likewise, knowledge of Torah is not an aid to observance of law but an end in itself. This does not mean that the Talmud is not concerned with the values contained in the material studied. On the contrary, it is stated emphatically that he who studies Torah and does not observe what he studies would better never have been born. A true scholar serves as a living example by his way of life and conduct. But this is part of the general outlook of the Talmud; for the student poring over the text, study has no other end but knowledge. Every subject pertaining to Torah, or to life as related to Torah, is worthy of consideration and analysis, and an attempt is always made to delve into the heart of the matter. In the course of study, the question of whether these analyses are of practical use is never raised. We often encounter in the Talmud protracted and vehement debates on various problems that try to examine the structure of the method and to elucidate the conclusions deriving from it. The scholars invested all this effort despite the fact that they knew the source itself had been rejected and was of no legislative significance. This approach also explains why we find debates on problems that were relevant in the distant past and were unlikely ever to arise again.

It sometimes occurs, of course, that problems or debates once thought impractical or irrelevant gain practical significance in some later age. This is a familiar phenomenon in the sphere of pure science. But this development is of little consequence to the talmudic student, as, from the outset, his sole objective has been to solve theoretical problems and to seek the truth.

The Talmud is ostensibly constructed along the lines of a legal tract, and many people commit the error of thinking that it is legal in essence. It treats the subjects with which it deals – basic halakha, biblical verses, or traditions handed down by sages – as natural phenomena, components of objective reality. When a man has dealings with nature, he cannot claim that the subject does not appeal to him or is unworthy

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of perusal. There are, of course, varying degrees of importance to issues, but all are alike in that they are – they exist and note must be paid to them. When the talmudic sage examined an ancient tradition, he perceived it, above all, as a reality in itself, and whether binding on him or not, it was part of his world and could not be dismissed. When the scholars discuss a rejected idea or source, their attitude resembles that of the scientist contemplating an organism that has become extinct because of its inability to adapt itself to changing conditions. This organism has, in a manner of speaking, “failed” and died out, but this fact does not detract from its interest for the scientist as a subject of study.

One of the greatest historical controversies was that between the methods of the “houses” (schools) of Shammai and Hillel, which lasted for more than a century. It was eventually resolved in the famous dictum: “Both are the words of the living God, and the decision is in accordance with the House of Hillel.” The fact that one method is preferred does not mean that the other is based on a misconception. It, too, is an expression of creativity and of “the words of the living God.” When one of the sages ventured to say a certain theory was not to his liking, he was scolded by his colleagues, who informed him that it was wrong to say of Torah, “This is good and this is not.” Such a view is analogous to the case of the scientist who is not permitted to say that a certain creature seems to him “unappealing.” This does not mean to imply that evaluations (even of appeal) should never be made; they should, however, be based on consciousness of the fact that no man has the right to judge or to determine that a certain object lacks beauty from the purely objective point of view.

This analogy between the natural world and Torah is ancient and was developed at length by the sages. One of its earliest expressions is the theory that just as an architect builds a house according to a blueprint, so the Holy One, Blessed be He, scanned His Torah in creating the world. According to this viewpoint, it follows that there must be a certain correlation between the world and Torah, the latter forming part of the essence of the natural world and not merely constituting external speculation on it. This way of thinking also engendered the view that no subject is too strange, remote, or bizarre to be studied.

The Talmud reflects so wide a range of interests because it is not a

homogeneous work composed by a single author. When several people collaborate on a book, they have in mind a certain specific aim which lends the work character and direction. But the Talmud is the end result of the editing of the thoughts and sayings of many scholars over a long period, none of whom envisaged a final written work at the time. Their remarks were inspired by life, growing out of the problems submitted to them and the exchange of views between the various sages and their disciples. This is why we cannot discern a clear trend or a specific objective in the Talmud. Each debate is, to a large extent, independent of others and unique, and each subject is the focus of interest at the time it is being discussed. At the same time, the Talmud has an unmistakable and striking character of its own, which does not bear the imprint of an individual, or of the editors, but is collective, reflecting the quality of the Jewish people over a given period. Not only where the thousands of anonymous views are concerned, but also in cases where the identity of the author or proponent is known, the differences between individuals are blurred and the general spirit prevails. However violently two sages may differ, their shared traits and like-mindedness must eventually become evident to the reader, who then discerns the overall unity that overcomes all differences.

Since the Talmud is concerned with subjects, ideas, and problems, there evolved over the centuries the custom of quoting various views in the present tense: "Abbaye says, Rabba says." This stylistic habit reflects the belief that the work is not merely a record of the opinions of the scholars of past ages, and it should not be judged by historical criteria. The talmudic sages themselves distinguished between personalities and periods (clarification of such questions is, in fact, an integral part of study), but the distinctions are only cited when strictly relevant and are not employed for evaluation and discussion. For these scholars time is not an ever-flowing stream in which the present always obliterates the past; it is understood organically as a living and developing essence, present and future being founded on the living past. Within this wide-ranging process, certain elements take on more stable form, while others, pertaining to the present, are flexible and much more changeable; the process as such, however, is based on faith in the vitality of each element, ancient as it may be, and the importance of its role in the never-ending, self-renewing work of creation.

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This process of renewal is closely connected to the centrality of the query in the talmudic debate. To a certain extent, the entire Talmud is framed by questions and answers, and even when not explicitly formulated, questions constitute the background to every statement and interpretation. One of the most ancient methods of studying the Talmud attempted to reconstruct the question on the basis of the statement that served as a response. It is no coincidence that the Talmud contains so many words denoting questions, ranging from queries aimed at satisfying curiosity to questions that attempt to undermine the validity of the debated issue. The Talmud also differentiates between a fundamental query and a less basic inquiry, a question of principle and a marginal query. Voicing doubts is not only legitimate in the Talmud, it is essential to study. To a certain degree, the rule is that any type of query is permissible and even desirable; the more the merrier. No inquiry is regarded as unfair or incorrect as long as it pertains to the issue and can cast light on some aspect of it. This is true not only of the Talmud itself, but also of the way in which it is studied and perused. After absorbing the basic material, the student is expected to pose questions to himself and to others and to voice doubts and reservations. From this point of view, the Talmud is perhaps the only sacred book in all of world culture that permits and even encourages the student to question it.

This characteristic leads us to another aspect of the composition and study of the Talmud. It is impossible to arrive at external knowledge of this work. Any description of its subject matter or study methods must, inevitably, be superficial because of the Talmud's unique nature. True knowledge can only be attained through spiritual communion, and the student must participate intellectually and emotionally in the talmudic debate, himself becoming, to a certain degree, a creator.

Chapter two

Life in the Talmudic Period

Most of the issues with which the Talmud deals are abstract, and their significance and concern 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 derive from specific problems of everyday life. On a more general level, historical events and developments are referred to in the Talmud and provide background to the talmudic discussion, to the relations between the various personalities, and even to the halakhic debate. The following sections throw light on certain aspects of the background against which the Talmud was created – those aspects that have a direct connection with the Talmud itself

The Political Background – Eretz Israel

During the entire mishnaic and talmudic period (approximately 30 B.C.E.–500 C.E.) Eretz Israel was ruled in fact, if not always in name, 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 background of the period. From a political-historical point of view the mishnaic period (c. 30 B.C.E.–200 C.E.) and the talmudic period (200 C.E.–500 C.E.) 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 height. 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 as well – the Pax Romana. During most of the period, relations between the Jewish community in Eretz Israel and the Romans were bad. Nevertheless, short intervals of tranquility did provide opportunities for such important events as the building of the magnificent Temple by Herod, the participation of Herod's grandson Agrippa in the life of the people, and the editing of the Mishna in the days of Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi. Most of the time, however, the Jewish community was in conflict with the Roman overlord and his local representatives. The tense relationship with the House of Herod and the Roman governors of Judea led to the great Jewish revolt, which the Romans crushed, destroying the Second Temple (70 C.E.). A number of other uprisings occurred after the destruction (the “wars” of Quietus and Trajan), culminating in the Bar Kokhba revolt, the failure of which brought ruin upon Judea. The centers of Jewish life and culture were then transferred northward to Galilee.

During the talmudic period (approximately 200 C.E.–500 C.E.) Roman authority was shaken. The central government of the Empire disintegrated, giving rise to periods of anarchy and wars between rival claimants to the imperial throne, and bringing about economic collapse. Simultaneously, the power of Christianity increased, and by the end of the fourth century it had become the official religion of the Empire. Because of international developments, pressure from the authorities on the Jewish community in Eretz Israel constantly increased. To maintain itself, the government imposed crippling taxes on the population, which undermined the economy (there were instances when the scholars permitted working the land during the Sabbatical Year in order to alleviate the burden of taxation). Local security was adversely affected, and toward the end of the period the Christian minority also exerted pressure, which

went beyond tale-bearing and petty persecution and extended to the systematic suppression of Jewish life. The scope of internal Jewish self-government was gradually reduced, and the Jewish community declined in numbers because of emigration to other countries, either to the center of the Roman Empire or to the Persian Empire. These developments brought about a decline in Torah study in Eretz Israel, compelling the scholars to undertake a hasty summary and incomplete editing of the Jerusalem Talmud, with no possibility of completing it. Political pressures and persecution severely weakened the remaining Jewish community. Lacking leadership and central direction they devoted their creative efforts to the areas of aggada and *piyyutim* (liturgical poetry).

Babylonia

The beginning of the amoraic period in Babylonia also coincides with a division between two periods in Babylonian political history. Until this period Persia was ruled by the Parthians, an Iranian people who established a quasi-feudal regime, leaving very broad powers in the hands of the local rulers. The central government scarcely intervened in the lives of the various peoples living in the country. Culturally, the country experienced considerable Hellenistic influence (יִוּנָאִי – Greek – is the expression used by the amora, Rav). In 226 C.E., however, the Parthian kingdom was conquered by the Sassanids. Unlike the Parthians, the Sassanids strengthened and promoted the Zoroastrian religion and its priests (מְגוּשִׁים or אֲמֻגוּשִׁים – “magi”), and strengthened the power of the country’s central government. The wars with the Roman Empire, which had subsided at the end of the Parthian period, now flared up again, affecting the border regions. The centers of population moved eastward. At first the Sassanids were rather hostile to the Jews, but with the passage of time, good and even cordial relations developed between the leaders of the Jewish community and the Persian government. As a result of the increased centralization of government power, the power of the Jewish exilarch (the “Resh Galuta,” head of the Jewish community) likewise increased.

The relative calm within the kingdom and its stable economic

situation both enabled the Jewish community to grow and encouraged immigration of Jews from other countries, mainly from Eretz Israel. Despite friction with the Persian priests (the *habbarim*), the Jewish community developed almost undisturbed.

In the time of Rav Ashi (toward the end of the fourth century C.E.) relations with the Persian government were excellent, enabling the sages to undertake the great project – the fundamental general editing of the Babylonian Talmud. In the next generation, however, a period less favorable to the Jews began. Decrees, mainly religious restrictions, were enacted against the Jews during the reigns of Jezdegerd II and Peroz (described in our sources as אָשִׁיטִי – “the wicked”), reaching their climax with the ascent of Mazdak. In response, a Jewish revolt broke out at the beginning of the sixth century under the leadership of the exilarch, Mar Zutra. The final years of this period also reflect a major decline in spiritual creativity, which was limited to the final editing of the Talmud. Only after the Persian kings relaxed their religious extremism was stability restored to the Babylonian Jewish community, bringing about a renewed spiritual renaissance during the period of the geonim.

Internal Administration – Eretz Israel

The Roman emperors generally did not involve themselves deeply in the internal administration and local affairs of the Jews, nor did their representatives in Eretz Israel, the House of Herod. Later tannaim, such as Rabbi Yose, draw an idyllic picture of Roman indifference to local affairs and of Jewish self-rule during the Second Temple period. However, as early as Hasmonean times, this picture had ceased to be accurate. The later Hasmonean kings, and certainly the Herodian kings and the Roman governors, deprived the Sanhedrin of most of its authority to decide national issues, and ultimately also of its jurisdiction over capital offences. According to tradition, “forty years before the destruction of the Temple the Sanhedrin was exiled from it and met in the markets” (*Avoda Zara* 8b). This was in reality a voluntary exile, in which the Sanhedrin relinquished its right to judge capital cases because it lacked the authority to implement its decisions. However, the Rabbinical Courts

and the scholars did retain jurisdiction over ritual matters, and also the power of decision in monetary disputes and local affairs.

Since most of the Jewish community was concentrated in towns and villages entirely populated by Jews, the forms of Jewish local administration were still preserved. The affairs of the town were managed by a committee, most probably elected, of the *שְׁבַעַה טוֹבֵי הָעִיר* – “the seven elders [literally, ‘best men’] of the city” – and decisions of especial importance were most likely reached by public voting, “with all the men of the city present” (*בְּמַעֲמַד אֲנָשֵׁי הָעִיר*) (see *Megilla* 26a). The local Rabbinical Courts, consisting of three judges, received their authority from the *nasi*, the head of the Sanhedrin. They decided all matters of a ritual nature, and Rabbinic scholars were appointed as the leading scholars or spiritual heads of the locality.

After the destruction of the Temple, the Jewish High Court (the Great Sanhedrin) – commonly referred to then as “the Great Council” (*בֵּית הַדָּוָר הַגָּדוֹל*) since the Sanhedrin had ceased to operate with its full authority – became the recognized center of Jewish life. The head of the Sanhedrin, who was always chosen from among the descendants of Hillel the Elder, was recognized as the head of the Jewish community of Eretz Israel not only by the Jewish community, who gave him the title of *nasi*, but also by the Roman authorities, who called him the Ethnarch. The scholars and the head of the Sanhedrin still retained the authority to fix the date of each new month (and thus the dates of the Festivals), to intercalate the years, and to ordain Rabbis (*סְמִיכַת זְקֵינִים*). Ordination was only recognized when carried out by scholars of Eretz Israel (and, according to an ancient agreement, only with the authorization of the *nasi*). The importance of these functions was so great that the *nasi* was considered the spiritual leader not only of the Jews in Eretz Israel, but of all Jewry.

Nevertheless, as political pressure on the Jews of Eretz Israel increased, many attempts were made to diminish the status of the *nasi* and interfere with the relationship between him and the Jewish Diaspora in Babylonia. In 358 C.E., the head of the Sanhedrin, Hillel II, fixed the Jewish calendar by calculation for all future generations, renouncing the *nasi's* right to perform this act and thus his authority throughout the Jewish world. The position of *nasi* was abolished early in the fifth century (429 C.E.). In the larger towns Jewish affairs were administered

by an official institution, the Boule (“the council,” in Greek), which for a certain period was the decisive power in every town.

A turning point in internal administration took place during the time of Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi (c. 200 C.E.). In his will he divided into two parts the role of *nasi*, which had been spiritual, educational, and administrative. The title and the political authority remained in the hands of his descendants until the end of the period of the Nesi'im, but after his death scholars from other families headed the Great Council. As a consequence, the spiritual and cultural power of the heads of the academies greatly increased; from an administrative point of view most of the Nesi'im, with the exception of individuals such as Rabbi Yehuda Nesi'a I and Hillel II, were leaders in name only. Because of the increasing burden of taxation imposed on the community leaders, the members of the Boule, and the extortion of “contributions” and “gifts” of every kind, everyone sought to avoid these communal positions, until in the end they had no importance whatever.

The local administration seems to have been run, on the one hand, by the Rabbinical Court, and, on the other, by “the heads of the synagogues” (“*archisynagogos*” in Greek). These already existed in the Temple period, but their importance as leaders of the Jewish community increased in the course of time. The weakness of the independent central authority also forced certain leaders to take upon themselves the burden of representing the Jews to the authorities, although they had not been chosen for this role. For example, Rabbi Abbahu of Caesarea was the decisive political personality of his generation, although he had not been formally appointed.

The erosion of the power of the central government and the decline of the Great Council accompanied the general decline of the Jewish community in Eretz Israel.

Babylonia

In practice the Jewish community in Babylonia enjoyed extensive internal autonomy for centuries. The decentralized structure of the Parthian kingdom and the lack of interest in internal problems shown by its rul-

ers enabled the Jews to live almost independently. In addition, the Jewish community was largely concentrated in certain areas; in some cities the majority of the inhabitants were Jews, and there were whole regions whose administration was in practice in the hands of Jews.

It is not certain when the special status of the exilarch was recognized by the authorities. The exilarch, who was descended from the House of David (a descendant, in fact, of King Jehoiachin), was recognized by the Jews as the heir to “the scepter from Yehuda” and was entrusted with wide official powers. It would seem that in the Sassanid period his position was already fairly well defined. He was the leader of the Jews of the Persian kingdom and their representative to the authorities, who regarded him as belonging to a princely house. Hence he held a very high position within the Persian court. At various periods he was considered third in the royal hierarchy. He was responsible for the collection of a major portion of the taxes for the government, and he could appoint leaders and judges whose powers included the imposition of corporal, and sometimes capital, punishment. Near the exilarch’s home was a special Rabbinical Court appointed by him to deal in particular with cases involving money and property. He also seems to have had the authority to make certain appointments throughout the country, though most of them were made in consultation with the heads of the great academies. The exilarchs themselves were referred to in the Talmud by the honorific title *מר* “Sir” – before or after their name, and were steadfastly devoted to Torah. Some of them were, indeed, important scholars in their own right.

In every generation the exilarch’s family contained prominent scholars. In the tannaitic period Rabbi Natan the Babylonian was the son of the exilarch, and in the amoraic period there was the famous amora, Rabba bar Avuha, among others. Rabbana Neḥemia, too, was a member of the exilarch’s family and the grandson of the amora, Rav, and Rav Naḥman bar Ya’akov was “the son-in-law of the exilarch.” Nevertheless, friction frequently developed between the exilarch and the leading scholars of the generation, who did not always accept his authority. Despite that friction a well-established structure of relations evolved between the scholars and the exilarch, reaching its height in the period of the geonim. The exilarch’s supreme political leadership was recognized

by all, and he also received religious respect since he was a scion of the House of David; however, the leadership in the cities and towns was in the hands of the local scholars, who were mainly appointed by the heads of the great academies.

Appointments to public offices in the Jewish communities, many of which were connected with local government, such as inspection of the markets, allocation of water from the rivers, and supervision of the large irrigation network, were made in part by the exilarch and his Rabbinical Court and in part by the local scholars. In contrast to Eretz Israel, in Babylonia there seems to have been no official title of “seven elders of the city”; the administration of the city was generally in the hands of one man, sometimes the most prominent local scholar, who was called “master of the place” (מְרָא דְאֵתְרָא), or sometimes a lay leader, who would leave halakhic issues in the hands of a Rabbinical scholar while he dealt with administrative matters.

The Rabbinical Courts seem to have enjoyed the exclusive right to adjudicate matters among Jews, and great care was taken not to involve the courts of the secular authorities (עֲרֻכָּאוֹת שֶׁל נְכָרִים) except in disputes with non-Jews. In general the heads of the great academies were highly respected by the non-Jewish authorities and sometimes very close relations developed between the scholars and the Persian kings.

Culture and Language – Eretz Israel

Throughout the talmudic period the language and culture of Eretz Israel were under Greek influence. Even the imposition of direct Roman rule did not materially change the situation. Although the Hasmonean war began as a war against Hellenism, it does not seem to have achieved much change in the relationship with that culture. During the Second Temple period and in talmudic times the Jews of Egypt were extremely well-versed in all aspects of the general Greek culture. However, the relationship of the Jews of Eretz Israel (with the exception of active assimilationists) toward this culture is not clear. On the one hand, the Jews of Eretz Israel seem to have avoided contact with the general Greek culture, particularly bearing in mind the Rabbinical ban forbidding Jews from

studying “Greek wisdom.” This ban was not, however, total. Jews such as the members of the family of the *nasi*, who had close connections with the ruling power, were permitted to study Greek philosophy. Nor is it clear what the purpose of the ban was. Some modern scholars maintain that the scholars of Eretz Israel in every generation were well versed in Greek philosophy and culture, though they refrained from drawing attention to the matter, a hypothesis which is difficult to either prove or refute. What is clear is that in certain areas of life no Greek influence was felt, whereas in others, despite the lack of specific quotations or cross-references, there were many parallels between the two civilizations.

Although the influence of Greek culture in its broadest sense is uncertain, there is no doubt that the Greek language was enormously influential. In the mishnaic period, and in many places even in the talmudic period, the language of the common people was probably Hebrew. They spoke and wrote it. Gradually, however, Hebrew was replaced by Aramaic or, as it was called in Eretz Israel, “Syriac” (סורִיטִית), which was also spoken by many non-Jews and served as the common language of all the inhabitants of Eretz Israel. Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi continued to fight against the use of Aramaic, and said: “Why use Syriac in Eretz Israel? Speak either Hebrew or Greek” (*Bava Kamma* 82b–83a). It would seem, however, that once the center of the Jewish community moved to Galilee, the use of Hebrew as a spoken language radically declined and the use of Aramaic grew. Everybody, including the common people, of course understood a little Hebrew from studying the Bible and other sources, and it is certain that all the Rabbinical scholars knew Hebrew. It is possible that, in areas where large numbers of Jews were concentrated, Hebrew continued to be spoken for many years, even during the period of Muslim rule.

But whatever language the Jews spoke, the influence of Greek was very great. Many words, concepts and definitions, measures, and technical terms were borrowed from Greek. Many of these borrowed words have remained part of the Hebrew language to this day: אֵלֶּכֶּת – “diagonal”; פְּרוֹזְדוֹר – “corridor”; סִינֶר – “apron”; סוּדָר – “scarf”; פֶּנֶס – “lamp,” to mention only a few. The number of words borrowed from Greek that appear in the Jerusalem Talmud and in the aggadic midrashim of Eretz Israel is very great, running into many hundreds. By

contrast, the number of words borrowed from Latin is small, and some of these appear not in their original Latin form but in a Greek variant. It should also be remembered that the translations of the Torah into Greek, both the Septuagint and the later translations by Aquila and Symmachus, helped strengthen the relationship between the Greek language and the world of Judaism. In the mishnaic period there were scholars who permitted the use of scrolls written in Greek. On this the Rabbis of Eretz Israel commented: Different languages are good for different things – Hebrew for speech, Aramaic for lamentation, Greek for song, Latin for military matters.

Babylonia

Since most of the Jews in the Persian Empire lived in the geographical region of Babylonia, between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, their cultural and linguistic contacts were mainly with its Babylonian inhabitants and only to a limited extent with the Persians. The language spoken in Babylonia was a dialect of Aramaic very close to that spoken by the Jews. Even though there were minor differences of accent and dialect, the basic language spoken by Jews and non-Jews alike was the same Aramaic. In Babylonia, Hebrew was the language of scholars only – the common people did not understand it. As for Persian, it would seem that cultural and linguistic contact between Jews and Persians was superficial. It seems clear from several sources that a large majority of the Jews did not understand Persian at all, and if they absorbed a few Persian words over hundreds of years of contact, these generally had very limited application. We should also bear in mind that the Persians themselves used Aramaic as their written language, so that they were more influenced by Aramaic than Aramaic was by them. The Persian masters of Babylonia ruled the country in a feudal manner and mainly from a distance, and they had only slight contact with the local inhabitants. Jewish contact with Babylonian culture was also very limited. Babylonian influence can be detected in the spheres of astronomy, astrology, popular remedies, and superstitions. But in general it would seem that the scholars did their

best to avoid cultural contact with Babylonian sages, although Shmuel, for example, did have a friend, Ablat, who was one of them.

With regard to the Persians and their religion, we find that in general the Rabbis avoided debates with them, and only rarely is it possible to find references, sometimes critical, to the dualistic religion of the Persians and other related matters. From time to time the Persian priestly sect did indeed interfere with the lives of the Jews. But apart from periods of religious persecution, even this contact was limited and unimportant. The Jewish scholars possessed superficial knowledge of Babylonian and Persian customs, and of the customs and beliefs of those Arabian tribes which reached certain regions of Babylonia – but in no area can their influence be detected in any substantial way.

The Economy

In the mishnaic and talmudic periods, both in Eretz Israel and in Babylonia, the Jewish economy was based primarily on agriculture. The wage earners were mainly farmers, whether estate owners, tenant farmers or agricultural workers. The wealthy Jews, especially in Eretz Israel but also in Babylonia, were generally owners of great estates, from which they derived their wealth. In the eyes of the halakha the only substantial property was land.

Jews were also found among the artisans, and many scholars worked as carpenters, cobblers, blacksmiths, potters, and tailors – for example, Rabbi Yoḥanan HaSandlar, “the cobbler”; Rabbi Yitzḥak Nafaḥa, “the smith.” There were also many weavers (though for some reason this occupation was considered of lower standing), tanners, builders, and architects. Other occupations were also represented, such as goldsmiths and silversmiths, gem piercers, doctors, bloodletters (רופאים – “surgeons”), and surveyors. We find Jewish hunters and fishermen both in Eretz Israel and outside it, as well as ass drivers, camel drivers, and sailors.

There were also some Jews whose occupation was of a more intellectual and spiritual nature. There were many teachers, of whom a

majority were also scribes. We know, too, of a “factory” for *tefillin* and *mezuzot* in Babylonia. The scribes in the Rabbinical Courts also wrote official documents. Other Jews were employed as beadles in the synagogues, and elsewhere as officials and clerks.

Most of the trade in which Jews were employed seems to have been local and on a small scale. There were many peddlers selling jewelry and spices in the villages. In every community there was, as a rule, a grocer selling flour, oil, and wine. In larger centers there were butchers, who also served as ritual slaughterers, and bakers. Most towns had money changers.

Very few Jews were employed in wholesale trade, although there were already great Jewish merchants in ancient times who traded with distant lands. It seems that the Jews maintained extensive commercial contacts with remote countries in Asia and Africa. Important merchants were involved in the international silk trade with China, and Babylonian Jews apparently conducted regular trade with India – in spices, various fruits, and iron. A number of Babylonian scholars were themselves connected with this commerce, and we find scholars who had business dealings and partnerships in very remote places. In the town of Mehoza a significant section of the wealthy Jewish community was involved in major commercial dealings. In general, however, until the period of the geonim the majority of the Jewish population, even in Babylonia, was employed in agriculture and small trade. Only in later generations did the Jewish community become widely involved in commerce.

Education and Study

According to a tradition cited in the Talmud (*Bava Batra* 21a), in the Second Temple period the Jewish people lacked an organized education system for many generations. Even though in all likelihood most of the population knew how to read and write, they did not have structured educational institutions everywhere at every level. However, the Talmud ascribes the organization of a comprehensive general education system to the High Priest Yehoshua ben Gamla, in the generation preceding the destruction of the Second Temple. This education system, mainly in the

large centers of population, was maintained for centuries. The leaders of every community would ensure that their town had a schoolteacher (מְקַרְי דְּרִדְקָי) at least for primary studies. Apparently, the parents and not the community paid the salary of the teacher, and in practice whoever wanted to become a teacher could do so. The teachers were nevertheless under the supervision of the Rabbinical Court or of the scholars of the community, with regard to their professional competence and to the number of pupils and their age. More than one story is told in the Talmud of a schoolteacher who was removed from his position for various reasons (erroneous teaching, excessive use of corporal punishment, etc.).

Sometimes the children were taught in the teacher's home, but more often in the synagogue, where special rooms were set aside for this purpose. Only boys were sent to school, but in certain places some girls, at least, received a basic education at home from private teachers. The size of a normal class was twenty-five children, and if there were more the teacher was provided with an assistant (רִישׁ דְּוִכְנָא – literally, “superintendent of the platform”) until the size of the class reached forty. Studies started at the age of five or six. Sometimes even younger children were sent to school to spend time in class and to absorb something by listening to the lessons.

The basic text studied at the elementary level was the Bible. The children learned to read, understand, and memorize chapters of the Bible, mainly from the Torah (the Five Books of Moses). It was also customary for the children to memorize a verse each day (hence the expression in the Talmud [*Hagiga* 15a] used by Rabbis to children: פְּסוּק לִי פְּסוּקָךְ – “Recite your verse to me!”). Other subjects taught in school were writing, blessings, and prayers. Although not all the children continued their studies, it is probable that the ability to read and write was universal among men. The Talmud describes a Jew who does not know how to write as a הַיְנוּק שֶׁנִּשְׁבְּה בֵּין הַנְּכָרִים – “child taken into captivity by non-Jews.” Knowledge of the Bible was widespread and everyone was expected at least to know how to read it. The sarcastic expression זֵיל קְרִי בֵּי רַב – “Go, read [study the Bible], at the Rabbi's house!” – refers to the most elementary thing all Jewish men were expected to know. This elementary period of study lasted about five years, and afterward the majority of children do not seem to have continued to study in

any organized way. Care was taken, however, to ensure that every child received at least this minimal level of education.

The next stage of education was, as outlined in tractate *Avot*, the study of the Mishna. This stage of study was not available to all, and only those children who were outstandingly gifted and supported by others, or whose parents were especially interested, continued with it. The study of Mishna was based on memorizing all or part of the six orders of the Mishna, and this study also lasted about five years. Boys of about fifteen who displayed special talent or desire would then continue their studies at the Academy or attend the lectures of Rabbis at various yeshivot. This group of students of Gemara was small and in effect comprised the nucleus of the תלמידים – the disciples of the scholars who continued their studies indefinitely. Some studied until they married and established a home, others continued to study in various ways all their life, combining their studies with their regular occupation. We can estimate the proportion of pupils at the various levels from the following statement: “A thousand enter to study the Bible, a hundred to study Mishna, ten to study Gemara, and one to teach” – one out of a thousand reaches the level of a scholar worthy to teach others.

The Synagogue

In the Second Temple period there were already synagogues both in Eretz Israel and outside it, wherever there was a Jewish community. In large communities there were a number of synagogues. Some synagogues were attended by members of a particular profession, others by people who shared a common country of origin. Some of the synagogues were originally private houses, but as a rule they were public buildings, constructed, maintained, and owned by the community.

The synagogue served not only as a place for communal prayer but also as a meeting-place where community needs were discussed. It also usually served as a school for children and occasionally for adults as well.

In many small towns the synagogue was built well outside the town boundary, perhaps in order to involve several villages in the joint effort of building it. In some cases it contained living quarters for the

ḥazan (beadle). These synagogues far from the town did not usually have a fixed אָרֶז קֹדֶשׁ – “holy ark” – but kept one room locked in which they placed the Torah scrolls. From this room they would bring out the ark for the Torah reading.

The Torah reading in the synagogue was not only a ceremonial matter but also served a practical educational purpose. For many generations it was customary to translate the weekly portion as it was recited aloud, generally verse by verse, into Aramaic. Usually the translators used a well-known Aramaic translation of the Torah, such as that of Onkelos. In Eretz Israel at the end of the amoraic period the translators often added explanations and aggadic material, and these served as the basis for the Jerusalem Targum (Translation) of the Torah, erroneously called תַּרְגּוּם יוֹנָתָן – “Targum Yonatan.”

In the synagogues the scholars would regularly give sermons. Sometimes scholars would speak on Friday evenings, but the regular time for delivering public discourses was on Sabbath afternoons, and the whole congregation, including the women, would assemble in the synagogue and listen. This discourse was called the סִידְרָא – *sidra*, the regular weekly discourse – and it could touch upon various subjects. Some Rabbis would send a young scholar to deliver a preliminary sermon, usually on an aggadic theme, until the whole congregation had assembled to listen to the main lecture by the town’s Rabbi.

The main subject of the *sidra* was a halakhic matter which the Rabbi would explain in detail. In order to capture the interest of the congregation he would begin with an aggadic theme taken from the subject matter of that week’s Torah reading. These introductions and parts of the aggadic material used in the sermons on these occasions provided the material from which the aggadic midrashim were later compiled. The halakhic themes of the *sidra* were of various kinds, chosen by the scholar. However, about a month before each of the Pilgrim Festivals and the High Holy Days, they made it a point to begin teaching about them and explaining their themes and special laws.

The *sidra* was usually delivered in the following manner: The scholar would sit on a raised platform and quietly give a summary of what he wanted to say to a young man, his מְתוּרְגָמָן – “translator” or “interpreter” (in Aramaic, אַמּוֹרָא – “amora,” “speaker”). The latter would

repeat the scholar's words aloud, and expand them in a manner understood by the congregation. If a large congregation was present, more than one interpreter was sometimes chosen.

Something like the *sidra*, but on a far more imposing scale, was the Festival sermon in Babylonia. This was called פִּירְקָא – *pirka*, “the periodic session.” It was delivered at a great public ceremony, frequently attended by the exilarch and the most prominent scholars. Sometimes, scholars of the exilarch's house were given the honor of delivering such a sermon. They would receive the basic themes for the sermon from the great scholars of the generation.

Since the *sidra* and *pirka* were intended for the general public, the scholars limited themselves to halakhic matters of a clear, incontrovertible nature. There are various halakhot referred to as הִלְכָה וְאֵין מוֹרִין בָּן – “halakha, but we do not rule this way [publicly]” – even though scholars would occasionally be willing to give such a ruling on an individual question. Generally it was considered discourteous to interrupt the scholar during these public lectures by asking questions, and if there were scholars who had comments or criticisms they would express them afterward in a more private setting.

The Beit Midrash (Torah Academy)

The synagogue, as mentioned above, was used for public prayer and as a meeting place where community needs were discussed. Although public prayer also took place in many *batei midrash*, the *beit midrash* served mainly as a fixed place for the study of Torah, in particular the study of Talmud. The *beit midrash*, sometimes called בֵּית רַבָּנָן – “the house of the scholars” – was where scholars spent their time in study, either alone or, as was customary, in small groups. These studies which private individuals attended were not part of the official, regular curriculum; the official order of studies in the *beit midrash* was more structured and formal, and remained substantially unchanged for many generations in Eretz Israel and Babylonia.

Initially, the order of study in the *beit midrash* was more formal in Eretz Israel than in Babylonia. The great academies, in particular the בֵּית

הַיְעִיד, which was the appointed place for meetings of the Sanhedrin or its equivalent, served as general teaching institutions, and to a considerable degree their curriculum was designed to arrive at halakhic conclusions binding on everyone. In later generations the *batei midrash* of the great Babylonian academies also became more formal, and we have several descriptions of the curriculum of the Babylonian academies in the period of the geonim, which give us a general idea how the *batei midrash* were organized in previous generations.

At the front of the hall, on a chair or on cushions, sat the head of the yeshiva. Opposite him, in rows, sat the students. Generally everyone had a fixed place. In the front row would sit the great scholars, including distinguished students of the head of the yeshiva, who sometimes also became his colleagues. Less important students occupied the other rows. As a student advanced in his studies, he would be brought closer to the head of the yeshiva.

The standard procedure of teaching was as follows: A particular tractate was studied, for which everyone had prepared in advance. Sometimes the head of the yeshiva would himself begin the explanation of the Mishna, and sometimes he would permit one of the more important students to begin the Mishna, and he himself would add explanations as the need arose. When necessary they would invite one of the תַּנְנַיִם – “tannaim,” the men who knew many *baraitot* by heart – to provide quotations from one of the *baraitot* relating to the subject, and the head of the yeshiva would add explanations and commentary where needed. Although this was the standard form of teaching, it seems that only rarely were the studies conducted in precisely this way. Usually the students would raise a series of questions before the assembled gathering, questions of interpretation, halakhic questions, difficulties in various sources, or other problems of logical analysis. These questions would be answered by the head of the yeshiva, but every one of the students had the right to take part in the debate, to raise objections, and answer them, according to his ability. Usually the discussions continued until the problem was clarified or until the assembled scholars decided that they did not have sufficient information to solve it. Questions such as these were sometimes passed from one yeshiva to another, and sometimes from Babylonia to Eretz Israel and back.

Since the purpose of study in the *beit midrash* was mainly to discuss and solve questions and problems as they were raised, it was not really the place for an individual to reflect upon a particular problem and fully clarify it. Whoever wanted to probe more deeply into a single subject would leave the *beit midrash* and delve into that subject. He would then return and pursue the subject alone or with the help of colleagues.

This was the fixed pattern of study throughout the year. But usually only a limited number of students participated all year long. These were young people with means of their own or whose parents provided for their needs, adults of means who devoted themselves to their studies, and also the permanent staff of the yeshivot. There was, however, a tendency – more pronounced and better organized in Babylonia – for the studies to be most concentrated and best-attended during the *ירחי כלה* – “the months of the general assembly.” These general assemblies, known themselves by the name *ירחי כלה*, took place during two months of the year, Adar and Elul, when agricultural work was less pressing and many people could find time for study. Each time the students gathered for the *ירחי כלה* many scholars would convene in the central yeshiva. They would occupy themselves with one tractate, or parts of it, which everyone had been preparing during the previous six months.

During the *ירחי כלה* the central educational events in the yeshiva were the lectures given by the leading scholar, who would go through the tractate, beginning with the Mishna. He would explain and comment on the text, and discuss the main topics with the resident scholars and the guests. This presentation by the head of the yeshiva was very concentrated. In order to ensure that everyone understood him, the students were required to prepare in advance. Afterward they would also review his words under the supervision of scholars who acted as deputies of the head of the yeshiva and were called *ראש כלה*, or *ראש לבני כלה* – “the head(s) of the assembly.” In large yeshivot this function would be carried out simultaneously by several scholars, depending on the size of the gathering. The *ראש כלה* would also expound on the *מסכתא דכלה*, the tractate that had been chosen for study on that occasion, but he would do so in a less formal manner than the head of the yeshiva. His role was that of a teacher on an advanced level rather than a profound scholar offering his own specialized, original explanations of the Torah.

The *ראש כלה* was usually a younger man, and he would often become the head of the yeshiva after the head of the yeshiva died. At the end of *ימי כלה*, “the days of the assembly,” the head of the yeshiva would decide which tractate would be studied during the next period, and he would *מגלה את המסקת* – “reveal the tractate” – to the students, i.e., explain the basic principles and subjects of the tractate to be studied. At the end of the *ירחי כלה* most of the students would return to their homes to study the tractate by themselves or with partners, according to the principles that the head of the yeshiva had “revealed.”

Despite their fixed pattern, the studies in the *beit midrash* were very open, as the Talmud itself reveals. Everyone was permitted to ask questions and raise objections, although there were yeshiva heads who acted on the principle of *לזרוק מרה בתלמידים* – “rebuking the pupils” – and dealt sternly with those whose questions were not pertinent to the subject. Nevertheless, there was a general principle that all discussions in the *beit midrash* were secret. No one was allowed to publicize remarks that had been made in the course of the discussions. Sometimes harsh words or sharp expressions were used, and occasionally the discussions involved matters of a private nature, the actual problems of individual families and even political issues. The knowledge that what was said within the *beit midrash* would not be mentioned outside gave the students greater freedom to express their opinions in every sphere. The story is told of a student who revealed something that had been said in the *beit midrash* twenty-two years earlier, and as a punishment was no longer permitted to take part in any discussions.

These fixed arrangements applied mainly to the great central yeshivot; the yeshivot of scholars who did not gather such a large audience around them were less formal, and study there more closely resembled that of the *ירחי כלה*.

The Rabbinical Courts

The Torah scholars were generally also judges in their communities. They decided cases of civil law (*דיני ממונות*), served as arbitrators in private suits, and were regarded as authorities in laws governing ritual matters

(דַּיְנֵי אֵיסוּר וְהִיתָר). People would often go to the *beit midrash* to raise questions that had been asked in the courts, and sometimes a judge would ask the *beit midrash* a question he had been unable to answer satisfactorily, and the matter would be discussed and decided there.

In Eretz Israel, the Rabbinical Courts consisted of three, twenty-three, or seventy-one judges. There were special procedural arrangements governing the courts of twenty-three judges (the Small Sanhedrin) and of seventy-one judges (the Great Sanhedrin). The members of both Sanhedrins would sit in a semicircle at the center of which sat the president of the court (the *nasi*), or his deputy (the *Av beit din*), and the other judges sat around him in a fixed order. At a later period the internal hierarchy was very clearly defined, and we find people signing letters indicating their place in the row – “the fourth,” for example, or “the fifth.” The sons of the scholars would sit in a row facing the audience in front of the *beit din*. These places were allocated as a mark of respect only, and did not reflect specific scholastic attainment. Facing the judges were three rows of twenty-three seats, and these rows would be occupied by scholars according to a fixed order. If a member was absent, his place would be taken by the scholar immediately below him in rank. These fixed arrangements applied to the Sanhedrin, but were also customary in other Rabbinical Courts, even in Babylonia.

The sessions of the *beit din* were public; all the students would be present and would listen to the judges’ discussions. The students had the right, and in some cases even the duty, to express their opinions whenever they felt the need to make an observation or ask a question. This participation was one of the most important ways of studying Torah. Sometimes a session of the *beit din* was transformed into a miniature *beit midrash*, with the main legal themes being the subject of discussion between the scholars and their students.

The scribes sat at the side of the court. In the Small Sanhedrin they had the official task of recording the opinions of the scholars, whereas in the other Rabbinical Courts they would write documents and record the formal decisions of the court. In the Rabbinical Courts there were also special officers (חֹזְנִים) whose task it was to execute the decisions of the court, applying corporal punishment in cases that carried this penalty. The amora, Rav, would jokingly say to his attendants before leaving for

the *beit din*: “Give me the tools of my trade – the stick and the lash [to flog the transgressors], the sandal [for the *ḥalitza* ceremony] and the shofar [for excommunication]” (*Sanhedrin* 7b).

In addition to the official Rabbinical Courts of recognized scholars, there were other courts of arbitration composed of laymen, where these procedures were not followed. One thing, however, was common to all the courts – the judges did not receive payment for their work. In rare cases judges received an attendance fee to compensate them for the time spent away from their regular work. The only judges who received a salary were those attached to the Temple and to the Great Council in Yavneh, but they worked full-time as judges. However, these cases were exceptional. In the mishnaic and talmudic periods all Rabbinical functions of elucidating and determining the law were carried out on a voluntary basis.

The Scholars and Their Disciples

During the period of the Mishna and the Talmud scholars represented a special social stratum, an elite empowered to make the most important decisions in every area of life. This scholarly aristocracy was open to talented outsiders, although it occasionally expressed the desire for exclusivity – as evidenced by the saying that it is a fine and praiseworthy thing for a scholar to marry the daughter of another scholar. But gifted men rose to greatness by virtue of their personal qualities, and lineage counted for little in this respect. Although we do find families in which both the father and the son were well-known scholars, and sometimes there were three generations of exceptional men in a family, in general the leading authorities in each generation were individuals, who had risen on their own merit.

The scholars stood out from the mass of the people, and in Babylonia scholars were distinguished by their special clothing. Scholars and their students also received various benefits, such as exemption from certain taxes. Basically, however, they lived among the people. Significantly, most of the scholars did not make their living from their knowledge of Torah but, like the rest of the community, worked in agriculture, at a craft,

or in trade. Some scholars were wealthy, like Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya and members of the House of the *nasi*, but the majority belonged to the middle classes, and some were poor. For most of their lives the scholars could only study Torah when they were free from their other work. Only those who inherited or acquired the means, or young men supported by their fathers, could devote most of their time to the study of Torah.

In the first stage of their studies the young men would be taught by a single distinguished scholar. From him they would receive both **גְּמָרָא** – “Gemara,” the oral traditions on the Mishna and Baraitot – and **סְבָרָא** – “*sevara*,” analytical explanation and commentary on these traditions. In Eretz Israel it was generally customary for a student to study under one particular scholar for years, actually receiving most of his Torah education from him. Both in their personal relations and also in the eyes of the halakha such students forged a very deep bond with their teacher, a relationship of great love and profound respect. The relationship between teacher and student was held to be even deeper and more important than that between father and son. In Babylonia such close relationships were not so common, and students moved more easily from one teacher to another. They also learned Torah from other students by studying together. Even where the bond between student and teacher was very strong, most of the students felt the need to listen to the Torah instruction of another scholar, either regularly or when the opportunity arose. This was not done in the elementary stages of learning, but rather after the student had reached advanced levels, and in order to deepen **סְבָרָא** – “proficiency in logical argument and analysis.”

In Babylonia a student who had studied for some years was called **צוּרְבָא מְרַבְנָן** – “a young man among the scholars”; his fellow townspeople would treat him with respect, but it was very unusual for him to receive an official or permanent appointment. At this stage in their education some of the students would go to other scholars to hear new opinions and theories. Conversely, in some cases a student **לְסִבְרִיהָ לֹא הָיָה צָרִיךְ** וְלְגְמָרִיהָ הָיָה צָרִיךְ – “did not need the teacher’s logical acumen, but did need the teacher’s knowledge of the oral traditions” (see *Sanhedrin* 36b). After a young scholar had held the title **צוּרְבָא מְרַבְנָן** for some time, he could be considered a full member of the Rabbinical fraternity, **חַד מְרַבְנָן** – “one of the Rabbis” – or **הַהוּא מְרַבְנָן** – “that Rabbi.”

During their studies, generally away from home, the visiting students and scholars lived in lodging houses. Landlords apparently supported the lodgers to some extent, though most landlords received payment for the accommodation. In only a few places were buildings specially set aside for students and visitors. The local population would generally give support, particularly to needy students, and the head of the yeshiva would sometimes sponsor them himself, either from his own resources or with the help of the community. In the great, established yeshivot, buildings were set aside for use as the *beit midrash*, and charitable trusts existed to provide funds for the students, in some cases substantial amounts. This system was more established in the great yeshivot, which were major Torah centers, where large sums were contributed to support the permanent staff of teachers, the *רִאשֵׁי כְּלָהּ* – “heads of the assembly” – and others like them, and to maintain the head of the yeshiva in a fitting manner. In Babylonia, particularly during the period of the geonim but apparently also much earlier, the great yeshivot had special “spheres of influence” and received tax revenues, and the local taxes levied on the Jews were transferred to the yeshivot.

The regular course of studies in the yeshivot lasted a number of years. In Babylonia it was customary for students to marry and then study Torah. In Eretz Israel, however, where people generally married later, it was more common for the students to study before marriage.

In Eretz Israel, especially in the period of the amoraim, Rabbinical ordination was conferred upon a select minority of scholars. Under special circumstances, however, the heads of the yeshivot would decide to bestow the title *רַבִּי* – “Rabbi” – upon worthy pupils. In the tannaitic period the authority rested with the Rabbi of each *beit midrash* to ordain his pupils as Rabbis; for this purpose he would co-opt two other scholars to act with him. In the period of the amoraim it was decided that the official authorization of ordination would be granted by the *nasi* alone, in order to enhance the status of the Princely House, which the scholars were anxious to strengthen. As a result scholars worthy of ordination sometimes had to wait a long time before they were ordained. The ordination of an important scholar was a notable occasion, and there are even references in our sources to honorific poems written on such occasions. In the period of the amoraim an unordained scholar in Eretz

Israel was called a חֲבֵיר – “an associate” – and only one who was ordained was called a חֲכָם – “a scholar.” Since there was no official ordination in Babylonia, there does not seem to have been any special ceremony or specific time when the title רַב – “Teacher” – was bestowed upon a deserving scholar; the matter was handled in a less formal way, and it is possible that they were not overly concerned about it.

In Eretz Israel, because of the connection with the Sanhedrin, the appointment system was complex. After their ordination some scholars were also admitted to the Sanhedrin at a certain rank. The highest rank was that of scholars who sat on the committee that dealt with the intercalation of the year (בֵּית דִּין שֶׁל שִׁבְעָה) – “the *beit din* of seven”), to which only the most eminent scholars were admitted. While the *nasi* from Beit Hillel was still the head of the Sanhedrin, his colleagues were the *Av beit din*, who was his deputy; and the third in this hierarchy, the Ḥakham. After the title “*nasi*” had taken on political rather than halakhic significance, the *Av beit din* became the head of the Sanhedrin or the head of the Great Council, and the position of Ḥakham remained vacant.

The status of the head of the yeshiva was the highest of all official appointments anywhere. Heads of the yeshiva were generally named at the initiative of the *nasi*, or in Babylonia by the exilarch, or at least with their approval. Because of the special importance of this post, as early as the talmudic period when a person was elevated to the position of head of the yeshiva, he was described as מֶלֶךְ – “he became king.” To a considerable degree the various generations of scholars are distinguished chronologically by the “reigns” of the holders of this title. A saying based on the Talmud (*Gittin* 62a) puts it in this way: מֵאַן מְלָכִי? רַבָּנָן – “Who are the kings? The scholars.”