IN THIS CHAPTER

- Discovering what the Talmud is
- Tracing the fascinating history of how the Talmud was compiled, preserved, and studied
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- Getting familiar with essential legal terms used throughout Talmudic discussions

Chapter 1
Introducing the Talmud

This chapter provides an overview of the Talmud in broad strokes. It delves into the Talmud's history and covers the nitty-gritty of modern Talmud study. It also looks at how antisemitism manifested historically and how the Talmud's role within this history shaped its legacy for generations to come.

Recognizing What the Talmud Is

The Talmud is unlike any book you've ever seen. In fact, the Talmud isn't a singular book at all; it's a set of books — 63 in all — and each contains five books on almost every page! You don't open the Talmud at the beginning and start reading from front to back.

In a nutshell, the Talmud is the heart of Jewish learning — a sprawling, multilayered conversation that has been unfolding for a few thousand years. It's a collection of teachings, debates, and stories, centered on Jewish law and ethics, while touching on nearly every aspect of human life. At its core are the *Mishna*,

a concise compilation of legal principles, and the *Gemara* ("G" as in goat), a vast commentary and exploration of those principles, written in the lively and questioning spirit of ancient Jewish scholars. Together, these texts create a dialogue that spans generations, inviting readers not just to learn, but to engage, question, and contribute. Far from being a dry legal code, the Talmud is dynamic, thought-provoking, and deeply human — a living testament to the power of study and the pursuit of wisdom.

If this topic sounds overwhelming, don't worry. The Talmud might feel intimidating at first glance, but it's one of the most fascinating and enriching works you'll ever encounter. For centuries, it's been a cornerstone of Jewish thought, shaping not only religious practices, but also a way of approaching life itself.

Many people who don't know much about the Talmud think it's the law book of Judaism, but that's an oversimplification.

Jewish tradition teaches that when God gave the Written Torah (also known as the Five Books of Moses) to Moses, God also gave him, orally, a detailed explanation of how to apply its teachings to life.

The Talmud was never meant to be a completed document. Individual students add new commentaries and insights to the Talmud daily in the form of their own margin notes. More significantly, new editions of the Talmud have been published in our day, containing new contemporary commentaries.

Looking closer at the layout

When you first open a page of the Talmud, you probably notice that it doesn't look like any book you've seen. A portion of two books appears in the middle of each page: the *Mishna* and the *Gemara.* The *Mishna* is in Hebrew, and the *Gemara* is in Aramaic (the language spoken by people in Israel 2,000 years ago). The word *Mishna* means "instruction." The word *Gemara* means "to finish" or "to complete."

The *Mishna* provides the laws of the Oral Torah. But, like any book of law, many elements need explanation. What do certain words mean? How, more precisely, does a person perform or follow or understand those laws? That's where the *Gemara* comes in. The *Gemara* explains the laws in that *Mishna*; along the way, it also contains thousands of years of Jewish wisdom. The *Gemara*, if gathered together, also adds up to a book — or more accurately, to the size of many books.

A *Gemara* is almost always longer than its *Mishna*, which is usually rather short. The *Gemara* can sometimes go on for pages before a new *Mishna* appears. Together, the *Mishna* and the *Gemara* form the Talmud. With some exceptions, the Talmud

generally contains a *Mishna* and its *Gemara*, another *Mishna* and another *Gemara*, for a total of 63 volumes, running down the middle of each page.

Just like the *Mishna* needs the commentary of the *Gemara* to help make it understandable, the *Gemara* needs a commentary that provides its explanation. A rabbi called Rashi, born in 1040 CE, wrote this commentary. Rashi's commentary appears on almost every page of the Talmud and seeks to elucidate the *Gemara*. But much of Rashi's commentary also needed explanations and often objections and clarifications, and that part of a page of the Talmud is called *Tosafot* (addition) which includes Rashi's grandsons.

So, the *Mishna* needs the *Gemara*, the *Gemara* needs Rashi's commentary, and Rashi's commentary needs the *Tosafot.* These elements appear throughout the volumes of the Talmud, page by page, and additional commentaries and references by important scholars over the centuries surround the text of the Talmud on each page to help the reader grasp its meaning and intention. Five things occur on each page, so you see five different texts simultaneously when you look at a single page. The Talmud is essentially a written record of discussions and debates on the part of at least 1,000 rabbis.

Knowing that it covers everything

In its vastness, the Talmud contains discussions just about every topic under the sun — and above it, too! And the Talmud itself makes the point that the best subjects to study are the subjects that you want to study. For example, if you're interested in child-rearing, look for texts in the Talmud about child-rearing. The Talmud deals, for example, with agriculture, dream interpretation, etiquette, theology, faith, mathematics, lavatory behavior, obesity, astronomy, medicine and medical advice, medical remedies, folklore, science, heresy, human habits, ethical problems, sexual life, astronomy, astrology, and business ethics.

Because the Talmud doesn't have a Volume 1, you can really jump in anywhere. Start with a *Mishna* and try to understand it. The Steinsaltz edition helps you to do that. Then, start to study the *Gemara* immediately following that *Mishna,* and work on it word by word, phrase by phrase, and sentence by sentence.

Studying the Talmud

One of the complexities of the Talmud is that, although its 63 volumes are organized by topic, the Talmud is continually free-associating. Like conversations in real life, Talmudic discussions jump from topic to topic, at times returning to the original subject and sometimes not. Of course, two topics can seem to discuss two different issues when actually, at the heart of things, they deal with the same

issue. The Talmud often quotes a particular rabbi on a certain topic, followed by, "Speaking of Rabbi So-and-So, he also said . . ." and then go to an entirely different subject.

Also, keep in mind that when studying the Talmud the best way to do it is to crack open the text and locate the eternal ideas embedded within it.


TIP

When you start exploring the Talmud, stay with it — you can find knowledge and inspiration on every page. Words of wisdom pop up in the Talmud often when you least expect it. And if you are reading a book or essay that quotes the Talmud and gives a page number from the Talmud, you might want to go to that page and read around it.

Tracing the History of the Talmud

The history of the Talmud (which means to study/to learn) is deeply intertwined with the broader history of Judaism because the Talmud represents the transmission and evolution of Jewish thought from ancient times to today. Before the Talmud, Judaism was primarily defined by the Written Torah (also known as the Five Books of Moses) and the Oral Torah, an accompanying body of interpretation and practice that was passed down orally.

Jews relied on these teachings to apply the laws of the Torah to daily life; but without a formal record, they risked losing or understanding those teachings over time. So, at one point, the Oral Torah was written down. Without commentary, a person might find the Torah difficult, if not impossible, to fully understand. For the Children of Israel to understand and grasp the Written Torah, they needed help.

The history of the Talmud begins at Mount Sinai, when God dictated the Written Torah to Moses. At that same time, God also gave Moses the Oral Torah. The written version of the Oral Torah is called the Talmud.

Rashi: The great commentator of the Talmud

If you want to study Talmud, you need to get familiar with Rashi (1040–1105 CE). The name Rashi is actually an acronym for his full name, RAbbi SHlomo Yitzchaki. The shorter form is more convenient to say and write.

In the standard edition of the Talmud, Rashi's commentary has appeared on every page since the 16th century. Rashi's Talmud commentary reflects his ability to explain complexities in simple, straightforward, concise language. His commentary made Talmud study far more accessible and reached many people. In addition to his Talmud commentary, Rashi also provided a well-known commentary on the Torah.

REMEMBER

The word *commentator* in this context simply means someone who helps to explain what the text means. If Rashi thinks that the reader might need some clarification, he makes a comment.

Post-Rashi: The Tosafot period

In addition to Rashi's commentary on each page of the Talmud, another commentary called Tosafot (which means addition) appears there, too. The commentaries of the Tosafot were originally written by students in their yeshivas, Jewish educational institutions that focused on the study of traditional religious texts.

These notes were edited and were placed in various parts of the text surrounding the Talmud. They appear on every page, with Rashi's commentary always on the inside margin and Tosafot always on the outside margin.

The Tosafot period began when Rashi finished his Talmud commentary in the late 11th century. The very first commentators of the Tosafot period were Rashi's sons-in-law and his grandsons.

Key milestones in Jewish history

The following list isn't a comprehensive timeline of Jewish history; rather, it includes some important dates that had a significant impact on the decision to write down the Oral Torah (for a more detailed overview of Jewish history, see Book 1, Chapter 3):

- **70 CE: Destruction of the Second Temple:** The destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE was cataclysmic for the Jewish people and Judaism. Essentially, the Jews needed to design a new form of Judaism because the Temple was such an important part of Jewish life. The destruction of the Temple shifted the focus from Temple rituals to Rabbinic Judaism and Torah study, which you can see throughout the Talmud.
- **70 CE: The establishment of the Yavneh school:** Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai established a center for Jewish learning at the city of Yavneh, which was crucial for the development of Rabbinic Judaism. It was a true watershed

moment. A group of Jews led by Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, chose to negotiate with the Romans and to establish a center for Torah study. Rather than fight to the death against the Romans, as many Jews did, the sensible path was to establish a center for Jewish learning.

- **132 CE: Roman Emperor Hadrian enacts oppressive laws:** Realizing that the Torah and mitzvot (commandments to connect with God) were the key to Jewish survival, Roman Emperor Hadrian instituted laws banning mitzvah (singular of mitzvot) observance; specifically, Shabbat and circumcision. Many Jews found the situation under Hadrian's rule intolerable, and the harsh restrictions led to widespread unrest within the Jewish community.
- **135 CE: The Bar Kokhba revolt:** In the face of Roman Emperor Hadrian's intolerable conditions and oppression, Bar Kokhba, a Jewish military leader, led a rebellion against the Romans. It failed, with an estimated half million Jews killed in the fighting. Large numbers also died from hunger or disease, or were sold into slavery. After the revolt, Hadrian increased the laws against Torah observance.
- **138 CE: Hadrian and his laws die:** When Hadrian died in 138, his successor, Antonius Pius, revoked the most oppressive anti-Jewish laws. The Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court, reconvened.

Key events in Talmudic history

The following sections provide a timeline of the Talmud's evolution and various editions, tracing its development from 200 CE to the modern day. Beginning with the compilation of the Mishna (the first major written collection of Jewish oral traditions, known as the Oral Torah, that serves as the basis for all subsequent rabbinic literature, and was the foundation of the entire Talmud), Jewish scholars began shaping the foundational text of Jewish law. Those same scholars also then created the Gemara in two distinct regions — scholars in Palestine created the Jerusalem Talmud in the 4th century, and scholars in Babylonia wrote the Babylonian Talmud, which became the more influential and widely studied version of the two by the 6th century.

Over the centuries, the Talmud went through numerous editions and commentaries, reflecting shifts in Jewish scholarship and practice. This timeline highlights the key moments in the Talmud's history, from its early stages of compilation to its ongoing study and influence in contemporary Jewish life.

- **200 CE: The Mishna is compiled.** The Mishna (study by repetition) is a written collection of the oral laws and traditions. The rabbis and sages quoted in the Mishna are known as Tannaim (to teach/to repeat). The Mishna is the collection of teachings, traditions, and laws.

- **200 CE: The Amoraic Period begins.** In their efforts to understand the meaning of the contents of the Mishna, the rabbis and sages began to produce a body of teachings dedicated to explaining the Mishna, adding their own recollections of the Oral Torah that they heard. When compiled, these teachings became known as the Gemara.
- **219 CE: The Sura academy opens.** The Sura school (established in the ancient Babylonian city of Sura, on the banks of the Euphrates River) played a pivotal part in developing the Babylonian by serving as a major center of Jewish learning and scholarship in Babylonia.
- **259 CE: The Pumbedita academy opens.** Judah bar Ezekiel founded the Pumbedita school in 259 CE in Pumbedita, a city in ancient Babylonia. Students of the Sura academy sometimes criticized the Pumbedita academy as being overly intricate in its analyses of the Mishna. But despite their differences, both schools were essential to the preservation and evolution of Jewish law and tradition.
- **3rd–5th centuries CE: The Jerusalem Talmud is compiled.** Known as the Yerushalmi, the Jerusalem Talmud is the written Oral Torah that uses the same Mishna that the Babylonian Talmud does, but the Yerushalmi generally contains a different Gemara than the Babylonian Talmud, reflecting the opinions and interpretations of the rabbis and sages living in Palestine at the time. When most Jews study Talmud today, they study the Babylonian Talmud, not the Jerusalem Talmud.
- **3rd–6th centuries CE: The Babylonian Talmud is compiled.** The Babylonian Talmud, or Talmud Bavli was compiled in Babylonia and became more comprehensive than the Jerusalem Talmud. Talk about the Talmud today refers to the Babylonian Talmud. The Babylonian Talmud is considered more authoritative and influential than the Jerusalem Talmud because of its more extensive discussions and deeper analysis of Jewish law and tradition.
- **224 to 651 CE: Influence of Sasanian Culture.** The Sasanian Empire (also called the Iranian Empire; 224–651 CE) influenced the Babylonian Talmud through the sociopolitical and cultural context of its rule over Babylonia. The Babylonian Talmud contains over 300 Persian words. Also, discussions in the Talmud often reflect familiarity with Persian customs and social norms.
- **4th–5th centuries CE: Rav Ashi and Ravina.** Two sages, Rav Ashi and Ravina, compiled and edited the Babylonian Talmud. Ravina's work came after Rav Ashi's initial compilation and organization.
- **11th century CE: Medieval commentaries.** Scholars such as Rashi wrote extensive commentaries on the Talmud, making it more accessible to students and scholars alike, during the Middle Ages.

- **12th–13th centuries CE: The Tosafot.** A group of medieval rabbis known as the Tosafot expanded on Rashi's commentaries, further elaborating on Talmudic discussions.
- **1240 CE: Disputation of Paris.** A public debate in 1235 was held at the instigation of Nicholas Donin, a Jewish convert to Christianity who was excommunicated from the Jewish community in Paris around 1225. He accused the Talmud of containing blasphemous content against Christianity. The debate, called the Disputation of Paris, led to the Talmud's censorship and actual burning in France.
- **16th century CE: Printing of the Talmud.** The invention of the printing press allowed for wider dissemination of the Talmud. The first complete printed edition of the Talmud was produced by Daniel Bomberg, a Christian printer from Antwerp, who established his press in Venice.
- **19th century CE: The Vilna Edition.** The Vilna edition of the Talmud was first published in the 1870s and again in the 1880s in Vilna, Lithuania. The publisher was a non-Jewish family, The Widow and Brothers Romm. In 1836, Russian Czar Nicholas I closed all printing houses of Jewish text except for two, one of which was the Romm House. They produced what became the definitive edition of the Talmud. The Vilna edition includes the text of the Mishna and the Gemara, as well as Rashi's commentary on the inner margin and Tosafot on the outer margin. Remarkably, traditional Jews still consider the Vilna edition the standard edition of the Talmud, and many students and scholars use it today.
- **20th–21st centuries CE: The Steinsaltz Talmud Bavli.** In 1965, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz began a project that took him 45 years to complete. It was a translation from the Talmud's original Aramaic into modern Hebrew. Because Hebrew often doesn't use vowels, Rabbi Steinsaltz's addition of vowels to the text, along with his brilliant commentary, made the Talmud accessible, for the first time, to the masses.
- **20th–21st centuries CE: Schottenstein Talmud.** Mesorah Publications, located in New Jersey, followed Rabbi Steinsaltz's example and published its own English translation of the Talmud. Unlike the Steinsaltz edition, which Rabbi Steinsaltz himself wrote, Mesorah's Schottstein edition was the result of the efforts of many scholars.

TIP

The most significant development for any student of Torah is the online resource Sefaria (`www.sefaria.org`). Sefaria offers a growing library of Jewish literature for free. On this website, you can find the entire Babylonian Talmud in the William Davidson edition, which is based on the Steinsaltz English edition but without Rabbi Steinsaltz's margin notes.

Blessings for Studying Torah (Including the Talmud)

First, a note on the word Torah. The term can refer to any Jewish sacred text that you read or learn from. So, when you dive into the Talmud, you're engaging with Torah. In Jewish tradition, people recite blessings of gratitude before many of the commandments and pleasures of life — including Torah study. In the Talmud's Masekhta Berachot (tractate blessings), the sages teach blessings for many of life's activities.

The practice of reciting blessings before studying Torah holds deep significance in Jewish tradition. The Talmud establishes that you should say a blessing before performing many mitzvot, including Torah study. This commandment is rooted in the Torah itself, as derived from the verse "When I proclaim the name of the Lord, ascribe greatness to our God." The Jerusalem Talmud confirms that Torah study necessitates a blessing, emphasizing its sanctity and the intentionality with which you have to approach such study.

Blessings before and after a study session

Here are a few guidelines for how to say a blessing before studying Torah (including the Talmud):

- You may say the blessings in Hebrew or English. (A person should recite blessings and prayers in a language that they can understand.)
- You may say the blessing standing or sitting.
- You recite blessings on Torah study only once a day because Torah study is a constant obligation and should always be in your mind.

The Talmud teaches that if you rise early, before the morning service, say the blessings before you study the Written Torah or the Oral Torah (the Talmud).

In addition, Talmudic scholars recite a traditional blessing at the conclusion of a Torah study session. This blessing expresses gratitude for the opportunity to engage in Torah study and reflects on the value and sanctity of the learning process. This blessing stresses Torah's eternal nature and acknowledges God's role in providing these teachings to humankind. It provides a fitting conclusion to a period of study, reinforcing the spiritual significance of engaging with sacred texts.

Rituals for studying Torah

Rituals and traditions play a significant role in enhancing the experience of studying Torah — including the Talmud. Beyond blessings, these practices help create a sense of reverence and intentionality, connecting the physical act of study with deeper spiritual meaning. The following list describe some of these practices:

- **Washing your hands:** In Judaism, students customarily wash their hands before studying Torah. The act is seen as a form of spiritual cleansing, like a mini-mikvah. (A mikvah is a ritual bath used to achieve purity.) The handwashing helps individuals focus and rededicate themselves to the study of Torah. Washing before Torah study prepares one spiritually for engaging with sacred texts.

WEARING A HEAD COVERING DURING STUDY

The custom of males wearing a head covering during Torah study has evolved over time. Although the Torah doesn't explicitly require a person to cover their head with a kippah (skullcap) or hat, this practice originated during the Talmudic Period (70m CE to 500 CE). It spread from Babylon to various Jewish communities, including those in Spain and eventually across Europe.

During the Middle Ages, Jewish legal authorities commonly agreed that everyone should speak sacred words, including Torah study, with their head covered. This practice became linked to reverence and humility before God, symbolizing acknowledgment of Divine authority.

In Jewish mystical tradition, covering your head carries kabbalistic significance (concepts, practices, or interpretations related to Kabbalah — the mystical tradition within Judaism). It represents a constant awareness of God's presence. Over time, this practice acquired the weight of religious law.

The expulsion of the Jews from Spain led to a mass migration to many parts of Europe, including France, Italy, and other regions around the Mediterranean Sea. They brought with them cultural and religious practices, including the custom of head coverings. The Jews who emigrated from Spain carried with them customs that had evolved over centuries.

Although historically, only men have participated in the custom of covering their heads, more and more women are adopting the custom, too.

- **Kissing the books:** Individuals kiss the Torah scroll when removing it from or returning it to the ark (aron kodesh), frequently using an intermediary such as the edge of a *tallit* (a fringed prayer shawl) to avoid direct hand contact with the scroll. In the same way, observant Jews may kiss prayer books and other sacred texts, such as the Talmud, when they take those texts out for use and before storing them, or if they accidentally drop the text. Although it's not mandatory, kissing religious texts is a cherished tradition that underscores the significance of those texts in Jewish spiritual practice.
- **Stacking sacred Jewish books:** In Judaism, books have an interesting hierarchy when it comes to stacking them, especially those that hold significant meaning. This hierarchy honors the sacred texts, ensuring they are treated with the deep respect they deserve within Jewish tradition. The hierarchy for stacking Jewish sacred texts, from top to bottom, is as follows:
  - Torah (Five Books of Moses)
  - Nevi'im (Prophets)
  - Ketuvim (Writings)
  - Talmud
  - Siddur (prayer book)
  - Other holy books
- **Handling Torah scrolls with care:** If a Torah scroll falls to the ground, Jewish tradition views this event as an extremely unfortunate occurrence. Jews commonly kiss a religious text after dropping that text. The faithful might perform additional acts if a Torah scroll falls, such as fasting or giving charity, in hopes of restoring spiritual balance.

Study partners

A *khevruta* (a traditional way of studying texts together in pairs) highlights the beauty of collaborative learning and dialogue, letting two individuals dive deeply into Jewish texts, such as the Talmud or Torah, by sharing and debating their interpretations.

The term khevruta comes from the Hebrew word for "friendship" or "companionship," emphasizing the importance of partnership in this dynamic study method. Partners read texts aloud, engage in lively discussions, and challenge each other's interpretations, fostering deeper understanding and multiple perspectives. Traditionally not the main mode of study in Jewish education (which is classroom style, with the teacher up front and the student sitting facing him), khevruta learning now holds a central place in *yeshivot* (traditional Jewish schools), promoting active

engagement, better memory retention, and a supportive atmosphere. Pairing students who have similar skill levels enhances the experience, encouraging collaboration and the exploration of sacred texts through dialogue.

TIP

When selecting a khevruta partner for Torah study, consider several key factors for a productive experience. When students take these criteria into consideration, they can find khevruta partners who really enhance their learning journey and help them connect more deeply with the texts that they explore together. Partners who have similar knowledge and skills foster balanced discussions, while partners who have complementary strengths, such as analytical thinking and verbal skills, enhance learning by supplementing their knowledge and skills with their partner's knowledge and skills. You must match learning styles and personalities to maintain harmony and mutual respect between khevruta partners. Both partners need to have a commitment to regular study sessions, a shared interests in texts, an effective method of communication, and open-mindedness. Although friendships can enrich the experience, the partners must maintain focus on study to have a successful and engaging khevruta partnership.

Giving tzedakah each time you study

In Judaism, a student traditionally gives *tzedakah* (charity) whenever they study Torah or engage in learning. This practice comes from the belief that diving into sacred texts enriches not just our spiritual journey, but also uplifts the entire community and supports those in need.

Many people keep a tzedakah box on their desk. A tzedakah box, also known as a *pushke* in Yiddish, is a receptacle used in Judaism for collecting charitable donations. The word tzedakah comes from the Hebrew root tzedek, which means justice or righteousness, emphasizing that giving to those in need is considered an act of justice rather than mere charity. Giving tzedakah is considered a religious imperative in Judaism, even for those who have little to give. Its primary function is to collect money for various charitable causes.

The amount a student contributes may change, but it usually represents a thoughtful, symbolic gesture that showcases the student's willingness to help. Regularly giving tzedakah during study sessions encourages a habit of generosity and mindfulness.

Participating in Daf Yomi

Daf Yomi (page of the day) offers a wonderful way to dive into the rich teachings of the Talmud. Each day, all participants engage with the same page, or daf, which makes the journey so much more manageable and enjoyable because it not only

helps its students connect with Jewish law and tradition, it also creates a sense of unity and shared experience across diverse communities.

The program has made Talmud study accessible to Jews who are not Torah scholars, democratizing this form of learning. By providing a structured, communal approach to Talmud study, Daf Yomi offers both intellectual stimulation and a sense of connection to Jewish tradition and community, making it a valuable practice for many participants. By following this method, you can complete the entire Talmud, consisting of 2,711 double-sided pages, in about seven and a half years.

You can study Daf Yomi on your own or enjoy it with friends in groups. You can find many great resources available, such as classes led by friendly rabbis, online lectures, and audio recordings to suit all kinds and levels of learning styles.

Enjoying a siyum

A *siyum (*completion) is a joyful occasion in Judaism. This event celebrates the end of a unit of Torah study, especially when finishing a masekhta (tractate) of the Talmud. These are the key aspects of a siyum in the context of Talmud study:

- Participants usually share insights from the last topic they studied, highlighting the key points and takeaways from the masekhta (tractate) with enthusiasm.
- Students of Talmud recite together the *Hadran* prayer, which expresses students' commitment to returning to their studies.
- Students of Talmud also recite the *Kaddish D'Rabanan* (Rabbis' Holy Prayer), which holds a special place in Jewish tradition.
- The event includes a unique passage that prays for the well-being of Jewish teachers, their students, and all those who engage in Torah study. By combining praise for God, honor for Torah scholars, and the elevation of Torah study, Kaddish D'Rabanan encapsulates core values of Jewish tradition, making it a uniquely significant prayer in Jewish practice.

Reciting the Kaddish D'Rabbanan

Kaddish D'Rabbanan (Rabbis' Holy Prayer) is a special version of the Kaddish prayer which is a central Jewish prayer that praises and sanctifies God's name. It is written primarily in Aramaic and recited during various parts of Jewish prayer services. While it is most commonly associated with mourning, the Kaddish has a broader liturgical role and exists in multiple forms, each serving different purposes.

Here are the key features of the Kaddish D'Rabbanan:

- Honors the teachings of the Torah and shows the students' gratitude for the opportunity to learn together, acknowledging the preciousness of the knowledge that they gain.
- Praises God while sharing a heartfelt longing for peace and redemption. It also includes blessings for the Jewish community and all who embrace the study of Torah.
- A *minyan* (a gathering of ten Jews) recites the Kaddish D'Rabbanan, highlighting the importance of coming together as a community to learn.

Saying the Hadran

After completing the study of a masekhta (tractate) of the Talmud, a student recites the Hadran. Here are the key aspects of the Hadran in Talmud study:

- Expresses the student's commitment to revisiting the text that they just completed. It captures a connection to and fondness for the material.
- Typically recited during a siyum, the celebratory event marking the completion of a masekhta (see the section "Enjoying a siyum," earlier in this chapter, for an explanation of this celebration).
- Represents students' commitment to continuous study and the bright journey of intellectual growth within the Jewish community.

The individual or group completing the study reads a small portion of that section of the Talmud aloud before reciting the Hadran three times together, which serves to establish and reinforce the learner's commitment to returning to the text. It reflects the Jewish concept that repeating something three times solidifies its importance and establishes it as a firm intention. Reciting the Hadran three times is considered a *segulah* (propitious remedy) for remembering what one has learned. This repetition is believed to help imprint the knowledge more deeply in the learner's mind.

The number three also holds special significance in Jewish thought. It represents the establishment or reinforcement of a particular aspect. In this case, it establishes the learner's desire to return to further study of the completed tractate in the future. This practice has become a well-established custom in Jewish learning, passed down through generations. While its exact origins may not be explicitly stated, it has become an integral part of the siyum (completion ceremony) tradition.

The Antisemitic War against the Talmud

Throughout history, the Talmud has been the subject of widespread misrepresentation and baseless accusations, many of which have contributed to the hostility and persecution it faced. These falsehoods — often propagated by those seeking to undermine Judaism — have painted the Talmud as everything from a tool of anti-Christian propaganda to a dangerous and blasphemous text. In reality, these misconceptions have no foundation in the text itself. To understand the true nature of the Talmud and dispel these myths, first examine some of the most prevalent false claims that have fueled the war against it:

- The Talmud is anti-Christian. Nothing in the Talmud makes it anti-Christian. All accusations are based on fabricated quotations supposedly from the Talmud. In fact, neither the Talmud nor Judaism, in general, represent any desire to criticize other religious traditions. In addition, Jews don't try to convert non-Jews to Judaism. If anything, Judaism represents the belief that Judaism is the religion of the Jews.
- The Talmud replaced the Torah. The Torah is also known as the Written Torah, and the Talmud is called the Oral Torah. Both are essential parts of Jewish scripture.
- Jews expect everyone to follow the teachings of the Talmud. The Talmud records the discussions and debates about Jewish law by the rabbis and sages over the centuries. It's not a code of law, and it actually expresses differences of opinion throughout. No one is bound by the Talmud, and surely not non-Jews.
- Non-Jews can't study the Talmud. Non-Jews can certainly study the Talmud. It's not a secret document of any kind. The Talmud has recently been translated into English making it more accessible than ever to non-Jews and those who can't read the original Hebrew and Aramaic.
- The Talmud contains blasphemous teachings. The Talmud is a holy book of the Jews and doesn't contain blasphemous teachings from the Jewish perspective. Some theological positions might appear blasphemous to some non-Jews, but no different than non-Jewish books of theology can appear blasphemous to Jews.

Fabricated quotes and false statements about the Talmud

Social media has spread false accusations about the Talmud. The quotes are often fabricated or taken out of context, yet they reach large audiences and perpetuate antisemitic stereotypes.

To combat misleading or fabricated quotes attributed to the Talmud, you can take several important steps to verify a quote's accuracy:

- **Look it up.** Check the alleged quote against authentic Talmudic texts. With the Talmud now available online, comparing the supposed quote with the actual text can often reveal discrepancies.
- **Ask the experts.** Engage with knowledgeable scholars and rabbis who are familiar with the Talmud. These experts can help verify the authenticity of a quote and offer insights into the context and meaning of specific passages. Many false quotes arise from taking statements out of context, so you must understand the broader discussion within the Talmud. The Talmud offers a complex dialogue among rabbis over centuries, and you have to grasp the full scope of a conversation to accurately interpret its teachings.

  Additionally, some quotes may be based on real Talmudic discussions but are misinterpreted to appear malicious or offensive. Scholars frequently highlight these misinterpretations by providing accurate translations and clarifications.
- **Confirm the sources.** Fabricated quotes often cite nonexistent sources, such as Gad Shas or Libbre David, which don't appear in any recognized Jewish texts.

Identifying these red flags can help distinguish falsehoods from the true content of the Talmud.

Religious intolerance through history

The history of religious persecution against the Jews, particularly during the medieval and early modern periods, is deeply intertwined with the treatment of the Talmud. As a cornerstone of Jewish religious and cultural life, the Talmud became a target for hostility from Christian authorities who viewed it as a barrier to conversion and a source of alleged heretical teachings. This hostility often led to censorship, public disputations, and the mass destruction of Jewish texts. Beginning in the 13th century and extending into the modern era, Christian leaders used the Talmud as a focal point for their efforts to suppress Judaism and assert dominance.

The persecution of Jews has continued well into the modern era, with historical efforts to oppress and eliminate Jewish culture, identity, and religious practices extending beyond ancient times. In the 20th century, regimes such as the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, Austria, Poland, and Hungary carried out targeted campaigns against Jewish communities, including systematic destruction of Jewish religious texts like the Talmud. These acts of cultural and religious suppression, including widespread book burnings, demonstrate the persistence of antisemitic violence and hostility, even in modern history.

Identifying Key Terms and Concepts from the Talmud

The Talmud references hundreds of terms, but the Talmud itself often doesn't clearly identify or define these terms. The rabbis simply use them in the text, assuming the reader already knows them. Identifying and defining them not only aids in discussions and debates but also offers insight into the values underlying the Jewish way of life and thought.

The following sections translate 45 terms used in the Talmud, along with definitions. Although they may appear to be just words and phrases, in fact, each has a specific legal meaning as terms utilized in Talmudic discussions and debates.

Marriage

In Judaism, marriage is not only a romantic union between two people. It's also a serious business transaction that involves many rights and responsibilities for both parties.

- **Conjugal rights:** Called *onah*; it establishes that a husband must engage in sexual relations with his wife based on the mutual agreement of the partners.
- **Marriage contract:** Called a *ketubah*; a legal document that the groom gives to the bride listing his obligations both during and after marriage.
- **Promiscuous sexual relations:** Called *zenut*; states that no one can have sexual relations outside of a marital relationship.
- **Wedding canopy:** Called a *chuppah*; it acts as a symbolic home entered during the wedding ceremony by the bride and groom.

Courts and the law

In *masekhta* Sanhedrin, as well as elsewhere in the Talmud, the sages spell out details about Judaism's court system, discussing and debating questions such as who qualifies as a witness, how many witnesses you need to establish the facts in a case (this principle is rooted in verses such as Deuteronomy 19:15, which states, "A matter can only be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses"), and scores of other points:

- **At times sane, at times insane:** Translation of *itim chalim, itim shoteh*; establishes that if a person has periods of sanity and insanity, all business

transactions are binding while they are sane. While the person is insane, they're not responsible for their behavior. Jewish law entrusts the court with determining insanity based on various established criteria, while allowing for professional input to inform their judgment.

- **Five types of indemnity:** Called *Nezikin*; Injury, pain, medical costs, loss of livelihood, and humiliation.
- **Gift of a person on their deathbed:** Translation of *Matnat Shechiv Meira*; establishes that such gifts are valid: The verbal commitment of the dying person is sufficient. An ill person may also retract their gift if they're of sound mind. Jewish law does not mandate witnesses for deathbed gifts, relying instead on the sincerity of the donor's intentions. However, practical considerations may encourage involving witnesses to avoid later disputes.
- **Laws of Heaven:** Translation of *dinei shamayim*; states that when a court can't enforce a law, the accused still has a moral obligation to conduct themselves in a manner that will satisfy even the laws of Heaven.
- **The law of the land is the law:** Translation of *dina malkhta dina*; Jews must obey the laws of the country in which they live. Jewish law encourages compliance with civil laws in most cases but prioritizes religious obligations when conflicts arise. Solutions often involve negotiation, adaptation, or reliance on rabbinic courts to mediate between the two systems.
- **Oaths:** Translation of *shevuah*; a statement invoking the name of God. The punishment for a false oath is severe. According to the Talmud, the punishment for a false oath is severe and multifaceted: The Talmud states that a person who takes a false oath "will never be forgiven by God" and will be "immediately punished," even if their life is otherwise meritorious. For intentional false oaths, the punishment is lashes administered by a human court. The Talmud emphasizes the gravity of false oaths to underscore the importance of truthfulness and the proper use of God's name in Jewish law and ethics.
- **Pit:** Called *bor* (boar); any obstruction that a person causes on public property.
- **The requirement for an uneven number of judges:** Translation of *bet din shakul*; this rule avoids two equal groups who can't reach a decision.
- **The requirement to have more than one witness:** Translation of *Edim Shnayim*; establishes that one witness can't sufficiently confirm the facts in a court case. In fact, if the court will hear only one witness, that witness can't even testify.

Human behavior

The rabbis in the Talmud are highly sensitive to subtle and not-so-subtle human behavior. Human relationships and their dynamics are central to the Jewish legal system:

- **Acts of kindness:** Called *gemilut chasadim*; these are mitzvot — commandments or obligations given by God to the Jewish people, as outlined in the Torah, offering physical or spiritual assistance.
- **Behavior typical of Sodom:** Translation of *middat S'dom*; this term refers to selfish and cruel behavior characterized by an unwillingness to help others or share resources, even when it costs nothing to do so. Enforcing unjust laws that penalize the vulnerable. Showing cruelty to strangers and the poor.
- **Rebuke:** Called *tochachah*; this act is a mitzvah. The term tochahah is derived from the biblical commandment in Leviticus 19:17, which states "You shall surely rebuke your fellow, but incur no guilt because of him." According to the Talmud, It should be done privately and gently, to avoid embarrassing the person being rebuked. The rebuke should be given with the intention of helping the person improve, not out of anger or a desire to shame them. The obligation to give rebuke applies even to a student rebuking a teacher, if necessary. Proper rebuke is considered an act of kindness and love.

Personal status

The Jewish social system is highly sensitive to various stations within the population. An individual ordained as a rabbi in Talmudic times, for example, requires certain behavior and respect. It is interesting to see, for example, that someone called a "student of the wise" occupies a highly respected position within the Jewish community. A student of Torah is a most commendable person.

Here are terms related to some of the social positions discussed in the Talmud:

- **Disciple:** Called *talmid* or *talmidim,* plural; refers to a student who follows a rabbi (teacher) with the goal of emulating their life and teachings. This relationship was far deeper than simply acquiring knowledge; it involved a total commitment to becoming like the rabbi in all aspects of life — actions, beliefs, and behaviors. The role often goes beyond passive learning, as they are expected to challenge their teacher through questions, thereby deepening mutual understanding and sharpening intellectual engagement.
- **Disciple-colleague:** Called *khaver*; refers to a peer who is both a student and is an intellectual equal in some respects. This term highlights the collaborative

nature of Torah study, where individuals may learn from one another while maintaining mutual respect. The term is often used to describe a disciple-colleague or a companion in study. It signifies someone who is both a peer and an associate in the pursuit of Torah knowledge and observance of Jewish law.

- **Ordination:** Translation of *semikha;* the term in Jewish law refers to the process of ordination, "the laying of the hands," where authority is conferred upon an individual to serve as a rabbi, teacher, or judge. Ordination could only be performed by someone who was already ordained. In Jewish law semikha refers to the process of ordination, where authority is conferred upon an individual to serve as a rabbi, teacher, or judge. The person granting semikha had to be accompanied by two other judges, forming a court of three. However, only one of the three needed to be ordained themselves.

  In the Talmud, semikha refers to the formal rabbinic ordination that traces its origins to Moses, who ordained Joshua through the symbolic act of laying hands on him (Numbers 27:18-23). The term semikha literally means "laying of hands," symbolizing the transmission of authority and responsibility from teacher to student. However, by the time of the Talmudic era, the physical act of laying hands was no longer practiced, and semikha was conferred through verbal or written acknowledgment.

  The "laying of hands" (semikha) in Jewish tradition, as described in the Talmud, was a symbolic act used to confer authority or responsibility. It was performed by Moses when ordaining Joshua as his successor (Numbers 27:18–23). The act involved physically placing hands on the individual being ordained, symbolizing the transfer of leadership, wisdom, and divine authority.

- **Rabbi:** Called *rabbi;* primary teacher from whom a person learns Torah. In essence, a "Rabbi" in the Talmud is both a teacher and a leader, embodying the transmission of Jewish tradition from Moses through successive generations. Today's rabbis are not considered rabbis in the classical Talmudic sense, as they do not possess the original rabbinic ordination that was conferred through an unbroken chain of transmission beginning with Moses and ending around the 4th century CE. Instead, modern day *semicha* (to lean on, ordination) refers to a certification or diploma granted by a rabbinical institution or a senior rabbi, signifying proficiency in Jewish law (halacha) and authorizing the recipient to serve as a rabbi or teacher.

  While today's rabbis are not "rabbis" in the Talmudic sense, their semicha certifies them as learned authorities in Jewish law and tradition, enabling them to fulfill essential roles in Jewish communities worldwide.

- **Sage:** Called *chacham*; according to the Mishna, a wise man known as a sage is "one who learns from every person." This reflects humility and an openness

to acquiring knowledge from diverse sources, regardless of the teacher's status or background.

Sages are often considered more honored than rabbis in terms of Torah wisdom and spiritual stature, while rabbis are highly respected for their formal roles as teachers and leaders within Jewish communities. Both reflect different aspects of reverence for Torah.

- **Torah scholar:** Called *talmid chacham*; a Torah scholar studies the Holy Scriptures of Judaism (similar but not identical to what Christians call the Old Testament), Mishna, and Talmud and serves Torah scholars as a disciple. He must also adopt higher standards of behavior than anyone in the community. A true talmid chacham integrates wisdom with piety, humility, and a deep connection to God. The term (which literally means "wise student") is used to describe an advanced scholar who excels in Torah study and embodies wisdom and moral conduct.
- **Descendant of Noah:** Translation of *Bnai Noakh*; the term refers to all of humanity, as Noah and his family were the sole survivors of the Flood and thus the ancestors of all people.
- **Two pubic hairs:** Translation of *shtei sa'arot*; when a boy is 13 and a girl is 12, or if at least two pubic hairs appear. In the Talmud, the presence of two pubic hairs is a key physical sign of sexual maturity and is used as a halachic indicator of adulthood. This concept is significant in determining when a boy or girl transitions from being a minor to an adult, which carries implications for their obligations under Jewish law and their legal status in various contexts.
- **Righteous convert:** Called *ger tzedek*; a righteous convert — gentile who accepts Judaism. A convert, by Jewish law, is like a newborn Jewish child, and is considered to be as Jewish as any Jew in history. The Talmud emphasizes the spiritual significance of such converts, viewing them as individuals who join the Jewish people out of genuine devotion to God and His commandments.
- **Heretic:** Called *apikoros*; one who doesn't accept the fundamental principles of the Torah or the authority of the sages, or who treats them with contempt, is derived from the Greek philosopher Apicurus, whose ideas about denying divine providence and focusing on materialism were seen as antithetical to Jewish beliefs.
- **Excommunication:** When the leadership of a Jewish community excommunicates someone, that person is no longer considered a member of the community, but they're still a member of the Jewish people. In the Talmud, excommunication is referred to as a form of religious censure used to enforce communal discipline and ensure adherence to Jewish law. It involves excluding an individual from the

Jewish community, either temporarily or permanently, depending on the severity of their offense. The decision to excommunicate is typically made by a rabbinic court (bet din) or community leaders, depending on the severity of the offense and the local authority structure.

The Talmud outlines three levels of excommunication: nezifah, niddui, and cherem, each with increasing severity:

- **Rebuke:** Called *nezifah*; a mild form of censure lasting one day or a short period. The individual is expected to withdraw from communal interactions, speak minimally, and reflect on their behavior.
- **Temporary exclusion:** Called *niddu*i; a more serious form of excommunication lasting 30 days, extendable if repentance does not occur. The individual is barred from social and religious interactions, including coming within six feet of others. It was often used for offenses such as disrespecting scholars, refusing to testify in court, or violating rabbinic laws.
- **Total exclusion:** Called *cherem*; this is the most severe form of excommunication, involving total exclusion from the community. The individual is shunned entirely and barred from all communal and religious activities. This could last indefinitely until repentance or could be permanent. Rituals accompanying cherem included public announcements, curses, and symbolic acts like extinguishing candles to signify spiritual separation. Excommunication is often announced publicly in the synagogue.

Crimes

Like in the laws of today's secular society, Jewish law identifies many crimes. Some people who commit these crimes are punished by the tangible world, while others are susceptible to spiritual punishment:

- **Burglary:** Called *maḥteret*; the Talmudic term for burglary, addresses the case of a thief caught breaking into a house at night. Someone who breaks into another person's home is considered a potential murderer. The victim can defend themselves and even kill the thief unless the victim knows that the thief has no intention of harming them.
- **Destruction:** Called *bal tashchit*; a law against destroying objects of value.
- **Evil speech:** Translation of *lashon hara*; means evil tongue and prohibits gossip. Speaking negatively about another person is prohibited, even if the gossip is true. False, disparaging remarks such as slander are even more serious.

- **Forever forewarned:** Translation of *l'olam*; the Talmud teaches that a person is responsible for all damages that they cause, regardless of whether the damage was caused intentionally or unintentionally. This phrase is used to emphasize that a person is perpetually considered forewarned and accountable for their actions, particularly in cases of damage or harm.
- **Verbal mistreatment:** Translation of *ona'at devarim*; prohibits causing distress by making statements that shame or embarrass a person. The Talmud offers a lengthy discussion of the seriousness of verbal abuse.

Mitzvot

Judaism's system of mitzvot; the plural of mitzvah. In the Talmud and Jewish tradition, the term refers to the commandments given by God to the Jewish people, as outlined in the Torah. It includes good deeds, prescribed rituals, and forbidden actions. Judaism is particularly sensitive to peace and pleasantness between and among individuals and in society, in general:

- **Intent:** Translation of *kavanah*; kavanah refers to the mindset or conscious intent to fulfill a mitzvah as commanded by God. It involves focusing on the act and recognizing its purpose as a Divine obligation.
- **Repairing the world:** Translation of *tikkun olam*; refers specifically to rabbinic interventions aimed at maintaining justice and social order, reflecting Judaism's commitment to ethical governance and communal well-being.
- **Saving a life:** Translation of *pikuach nefesh*; states the effort to save a life takes precedence over all mitzvot, with the exceptions of idol worship, murder, and forbidden sexual relations. The Talmud explains that a Jew must not worship idols, murder, or participate in acts like incest or adultery.
- **Ways of peace:** Translation of *darchei shalom*; Darchei shalom in the Talmud represents a foundational principle aimed at creating societal harmony and ethical relationships, both within the Jewish community and with others. It highlights Judaism's emphasis on peace as a core value.
- **Ways of pleasantness:** Translation of *darcheha darchei noam*; the Talmudic concept of "ways of pleasantness" reflects Judaism's ethical ideal that religious practice should lead to a life of joy, kindness, and respect for others. It serves as a reminder that the Torah is not merely a set of laws but a framework for creating a just and compassionate society.
- **Way of the world:** Translation of *derech eretz*; refers to the integration of ethical conduct, practical living, and societal norms into a life guided by Torah values. It reflects Judaism's holistic approach to balancing spiritual aspirations with everyday responsibilities.

Human emotions

Jewish thought is sensitive to the full range of human emotions and is surprisingly aware of subtle human feelings and their implications within life:

- **Despair:** Translation of *ye'ush*; the Talmudic term for despair is ye'ush, which refers to the emotional and legal state of giving up hope. In Jewish law, ye'ush is particularly significant in the context of lost objects. It denotes the point at which an owner abandons hope of recovering their lost property, thereby relinquishing their ownership rights.
- **Fasting for a dream:** Translation of *ta'anit chalom*; if a person has a troubling dream, they can fast to reverse the negative effects of that dream.
- **Human dignity:** Translation of *kevod haberiyot*; this concept emphasizes the inherent respect and value owed to every human being, as all are created in the image of God. It is a central Talmudic principle that underscores the sanctity of human dignity, permitting flexibility in Jewish law to preserve respect and honor for individuals.
- **Invasion of privacy:** Hezek re'iyah; meaning "damage caused by seeing," Hezek Re'iyah reflects the Talmudic emphasis on respecting personal boundaries and protecting individuals from both physical and non-physical invasions of their privacy. The Talmud considers merely looking into someone else's private space as a form of harm, as it infringes on their right to privacy and dignity. It also applies to unauthorized access to personal information.