

KISS OR CURSE?

Which is the greater test of faith, affluence or poverty? Is it harder to be a good Jew when you're rich or when you're poor, when you're successful or when you're struggling? No doubt, we would all much rather accept upon ourselves the test of affluence, wouldn't we? But let's not be subjective about it. Let us rather take an objective historical approach.

Back in the early 19th century, Napoleon was conquering Europe and promising liberty and equality for all. When he squared up against Russia, many Jewish leaders sided with him, hoping he would finally bring an end to Czarist persecution and enable Russian Jewry to enjoy full civil rights. Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of Chabad, thought differently. He actively opposed Napoleon and even had his Chassidim assist in intelligence gathering for the Russian army.

When his colleagues challenged him and questioned his apparent lack of concern for the well-being of his own people, he argued that while Napoleon might be good for the Jews materially, his victory would result in spiritual disaster. History proved him correct. Minus the Little Emperor, Russian Jews remained staunchly Jewish, while French Jewry virtually vanished. How many Jewish Rothschilds are left in the world? G-d knows we could have used them. Most of French Jewry today hails from North Africa. The originals are few and far between.

There is a fascinating Midrashic interpretation in this week's parshah about the dramatic encounter between Jacob and Esau. The Torah says, "And Esau ran towards him (Jacob) and embraced him... and he kissed him." The Hebrew word for "and he kissed him" is *vayishakayhu*. In the Torah, this word is written with a line of dots above it. Says the Midrash Yalkut Shimoni: these dots are there to indicate that the word should be read differently; not *vayishakayhu*, he kissed him, but rather *vayishachayhu*, he bit him!

How can we understand a Midrash which seems to change the entire meaning of the word? A kiss is an expression of love and a bite is the opposite! Says the Sfat Emet (Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter, 5607-5665, or 1847-1905, the second Rebbe in the Chassidic dynasty of Ger), "When Esau kisses, Jacob is bitten!"

The American experience confirms beyond a shadow of a doubt that freedom, democracy and equal rights, while a wonderful blessing for Jews for which we should be eternally grateful, also present a profound challenge to

our Jewish identity and way of life. In the melting pot of the United States, Jews have integrated so successfully that they are virtually disappearing! Success and affluence are wonderful gifts of opportunity, but we don't seem to be passing the test of faith with flying colors.

The French philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre, argued that anti-Semitism has been good for the Jews. It has kept Jews Jewish! While no one wants to be oppressed, and we reject anti-Semitism categorically, the man does have a point. When antisemitism bites, we intuitively know how to respond. But when the world is in a kissing mood, we don't quite know how to handle it.

I remember as a young rabbi working with university students in Johannesburg in the late 5730's (1970's). At that time, they were completely apathetic to Judaism. My colleagues and I were struggling to elicit any meaningful response to Jewish programs on campus. During one particular meeting, we seriously contemplated getting up in the dead of night to spray-paint some swastikas on the Student Union building. Surely, that would get some reaction! Of course, we never did it. But the fact that the thought actually crossed our minds demonstrates how external threats have a way of making Jews bristle with pride and righteous indignation. May we never again face the test of poverty or persecution. Please G-d, we will be proud and knowledgeable Jews successfully meeting the spiritual challenges of the good life.

*By Rabbi Yossy Goldman
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WHO COMPILED THE BABYLONIAN TALMUD?

The Talmud is a vast compendium of Jewish law and lore - the product of several hundred years of scholarship. There were actually two Talmuds: Jerusalem and Babylonian. They are quite different works. The Babylonian Talmud is uniquely vast, comprehensive, and marvelously constructed. It is one of the greatest products of religious literature of all time; a central pillar in both the teachings and practice of Judaism.

It is impossible to provide a fitting description of the Talmud. It needs to be experienced to be understood. And like that metaphorical elephant, it can be approached from so many angles. Some will be struck by the vastness of the work. It consists of 2,711 folios, or 5,422 pages, mostly written in dense, cryptic text. Others will be astonished

by its comprehensiveness. There is hardly a topic of Jewish law or life that is not covered somewhere in the Talmud. It serves as an encyclopedia of the oral teaching of the early sages.

The impact that the Talmud has on Jewish life cannot be overstated. It is the final word on Jewish rite and practice. The spiritual fulfillment Jews derive from poring over its pages is immense, as if one is almost present in the study halls of antiquity. Judaism as we know it today would be unimaginable without the Talmud.

And yet, how many people know who created the Talmud? Everyone knows that Moses gave us the Torah, David composed the Psalms, and Rabbi Judah the Prince edited the Mishnah. The Medieval greats, such as Rashi and Rambam (Maimonides) are names on the tip of every knowledgeable tongue. These are the most celebrated figures in sacred Jewish literature. But what about the Talmud?

Scholar and Leader

The one who compiled the Babylonian Talmud was the great teacher and leader Rav Ashi (4112-4187, or 352-427 CE). Journals containing many of the teachings of the Talmud were copied, shared, and studied in the generations prior to Rav Ashi, but he compiled all those teachings into a single authoritative text.

The process of editing the Talmud continued for several generations after Rav Ashi, but he created the main body. Whatever was done subsequently was merely an elaboration or clarification of his titanic accomplishment.

What was the secret of his success? It certainly helped that Rav Ashi was wealthy and that he lived a long life, but perhaps his most notable quality was his ability to unite the greatest minds and inspire their dedication to a monumental task that spanned several decades.

Babylonian Scholarship and Fragmentation

Here is the backstory. The first major Talmudic seminary in Babylon was founded by Rav in 3979 (219 CE). His real name was Abba bar Eivo (or "Abba the Tall," on account of his physical height), but his scholarship and spiritual stature were so great that he was known simply as Rav, meaning rabbi or teacher. The seminary was situated in Sura in southern Iraq. Under Rav, the academy rose to great prominence, becoming a magnet for all the most promising scholars of the time.

Upon Rav's passing, the leadership of the Sura academy was passed to Rav Huna, an outstanding scholar whose teachings feature heavily in the

PARSHAT VAYISHLACH

10 - 16 Kislev 5786
30 November -
6 December 2025

Torah: Genesis 32:4-36:43
Haftorah: Obadiah 1:1-21

PSALMS DAILY

Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

Psalm 117

1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.
2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!

(Please say Chapter 20 daily)

SEFER HAMITZVOT

Positive Mitzvah 236 Personal Injury

The courts are commanded to adjudicate cases that involve personal injury caused by one person to another. [Monetary penalties are assessed to compensate for devaluation of the injured individual, pain sustained, medical bills, unemployment due to the injury, and shame incurred.]

Only an ordained court in the Land of Israel can adjudicate such cases [aside from medical bills and unemployment, which any rabbinical courts can adjudicate].

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Talmud. But the center of gravity then switched to Rav's illustrious colleague, Shmuel, who had his own academy in the city of Neherda'a, in Western Iraq. Rav and Shmuel were the preeminent rabbinic figures of their generation, and upon the passing of Rav it was natural that the mantle would transfer to Shmuel.

Tragically, two years after the passing of Shmuel, the city of Neherda'a was destroyed by a band of brigands, never to be restored. Under those circumstances, it could be expected that Sura would have once again become the unparalleled center of Torah in Babylon. Yet that is not what happened.

It seems that a process of fragmentation had begun to occur, whereby great scholars established academies of their own, rather than congregating in one centralized location. Underlying this trend was a degree of divisiveness.

One significant event highlights the problem.

The Talmud (Bava Metzia 33a) relates an occasion when Rav Huna was having a discussion about the laws of lost property with his most distinguished student, Rav Chisda.

They could not come to an agreement, and Rav Chisda ended up leaving the academy.

This was a huge blow to the stature of Sura.

Reunification

For two centuries, no single seminary reached the heights of Sura under Rav. Until Rav Ashi. His academy was in Mata Mechasiya, a suburb of Sura. In his day (starting in 4152, or 392 CE), the Sura academy again became the unquestionable center of Torah scholarship - and that is how the Talmud became possible.

Rav Ashi had made a point - over several decades - of befriending the scholars in all the

academies dotted around Babylon. When he became the head of the academy in Sura, he brought them together into a great committee for the preservation of Jewish learning. Each academy had its own teachings and traditions, at times at odds with each other. Rav Ashi's greatness was in being able to blend all those diverse streams into a breathtaking mosaic.

Twice a year the sleepy suburb of Mata Mechasiya would transform for an entire month as tens of thousands of scholars descended on the place to study and share. So impressive was this phenomenon, that Rav Ashi wondered how the gentile inhabitants of the area did not convert to Judaism, bearing witness as they did to such an awe-inspiring sight.

This unity brought back glory to Sura, and that enabled the creation of the Babylonian Talmud. Rav Ashi combined the vast knowledge of the array of scholars before him, giving the Babylonian Talmud its distinctive textual fabric. He wove the teachings of more than 500 scholars into an intricate tapestry, creating an exquisite monument of Torah learning that glows brightly some 1,500 years later.

In a very real sense, the Talmud is Rav Ashi - and Rav Ashi is the Talmud. His spirit animates the entire project. The Talmud was not just his life's work - it was his life. It embodies his unique values of cooperation and unity.

By Rabbi Yossi Ives

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VAYISHLACH IN A NUTSHELL

The name of the Parshah, "Vayishlach," means "And he sent" and it is found in Genesis 32:4.

Jacob returns to the Holy Land after a 20-year stay in Charan, and sends angel-emissaries to Esau in hope of a reconciliation, but his messengers report that his brother is on the warpath with 400 armed men. Jacob prepares for war, prays, and sends Esau a large gift (consisting of hundreds of heads of livestock) to appease him.

That night, Jacob ferries his family and possessions across the Jabbok River; he, however, remains behind and encounters the angel that embodies the spirit of Esau, with whom he wrestles until daybreak. Jacob suffers a dislocated hip but vanquishes the supernal creature, who bestows on him the name Israel, which means "he who prevails over the divine." Jacob and Esau meet, embrace and kiss, but part ways. Jacob purchases a plot of land near Shechem (Nablus), whose crown prince - also called Shechem - abducts and rapes Jacob's daughter Dinah. Dinah's brothers Simeon and Levi avenge the deed by killing all male inhabitants of the city, after rendering them vulnerable by convincing them to circumcise themselves.

Jacob journeys on. Rachel dies while giving birth to her second son, Benjamin, and is buried in a roadside grave near Bethlehem. Reuben interferes with his father's marital life. Jacob arrives in Hebron, to his father Isaac, who later dies in 2228 (1533 BCE) at age 180. (Rebecca has passed away before Jacob's arrival.)

Our Parshah concludes with a detailed account of Esau's wives, children and grandchildren; the family histories of the people of Seir, among whom Esau settled; and a list of the eight kings who ruled Edom, the land of Esau's and Seir's descendants.

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, 10 Kislev 5786 - 30 November 2025

Liberation of Rabbi DovBer (1826)

In 5586 (1826), Rabbi DovBer of Lubavitch was arrested on charges that his teachings threatened the imperial authority of the Czar but was subsequently exonerated. The date of his release, 10 Kislev, is celebrated amongst Chabad Chassidim as a "festival of liberation." Tachnun (confession of sins) is omitted from the day's prayers, farbrengens are held, and Rabbi DovBer's teachings are studied.

Tuesday, 12 Kislev 5786 - 2 December 2025

Passing of Rabbi Shlomo Luria (1573)

Rabbi Shlomo Luria, known by his acronym Maharshal, was an eminent scholar in sixteenth-century Poland. He headed a Yeshiva in Brisk and Lublin and wrote many works, including Yam Shel Shlomo and Chachmas Shlomo. An independent thinker, he did not hesitate to criticize his colleagues when he felt they had erred in their method of Talmudic study and halachic analysis. At the same time, he was an extremely humble person and was the teacher of many great Torah scholars of his generation.

Wednesday, 13 Kislev 5786 - 3 December 2025

Talmud Completed (475 CE)

In the first decades of the 5th century, Rav Ashi (d. 4187, or 427) and Ravina I (d. 4181, or 421) led a group of the Amoraim (Talmudic sages) in the massive undertaking of compiling the Babylonian Talmud - collecting and editing the discussions,

debates and rulings of hundreds of scholars and sages which had taken place in the more than 200 years since the compilation of the Mishnah by Rabbi Judah HaNassi in 3949 (189). The last of these editors and compilers was Ravina II, who passed away on the 13th of Kislev of the year 4235 (475 CE); after Ravina II, no further additions were made to the Talmud, with the exception of the minimal editing undertaken by the Rabbanan Savura'i (4236-4320, or 476-560). This date thus marks the point at which the Talmud was "closed" and became the basis for all further exegesis of Torah law.

Thursday, 14 Kislev 5786 - 4 December 2025

Reuben Born (1568 BCE)

Reuben, the eldest son of Jacob and Leah, was born in Charan (Mesopotamia) on the 14th of Kislev of the year 2193 (1568 BCE). As Jacob's firstborn, he was initially entitled to the leadership of Israel and to a double portion in the Holy Land, but these privileges were taken from him (and given respectively to Judah and Joseph) because he sinned by "violating the bed of his father." Reuben unsuccessfully tried to prevent the persecution of Joseph by his brothers in 2216 (1545 BCE) and subsequently berated them for selling him into slavery (Genesis 37:21; 42:22). In 2238 (1523 BCE) he relocated to Egypt together with his father, brothers and their children, where he died on his 125th birthday in 2318 (1443 BCE).

Friday, 15 Kislev 5786 - 5 December 2025

Rabbi Judah the Prince (188 CE)

Rabbi Judah the Prince - also known as Rabbeinu Hakadosh ("our holy master"), or simply as "Rabbi" - was elected Nasi - spiritual and civil head of the Jewish community at large - after the death of his father, Rabbi Simeon ben Gamliel. Foreseeing that due to the tribulations of the Exile which the Jewish nation was about to endure it was likely that many of the sacred laws would be forgotten, Rabbi Judah decided to gather, record, edit, and organize the statements of the earlier sages, setting the Oral Law down in writing for the very first time, in the form of the Mishnah.

He passed away around 3948 (188 CE); some say it was around 3978 (219 CE).

On the day that Rabbi Judah died, a heavenly voice went forth and announced: Whosoever has been present at the death of Rabbi is destined to enjoy the life of the World to Come.

The Talmud (Ketubot 103a) relates that even after his passing, for a time, Rabbi Judah would still visit his home every Friday evening at dusk. Wearing Shabbat clothes, he would recite the Kiddush for his family.

Shabbat, 16 Kislev 5786 - 6 December 2025

Noah's Ark Comes to Rest (2104 BCE)

On this day in 1656 (2104 BCE), the bottom of Noah's ark, submerged 11 cubits beneath the water's surface, touched down and came to rest on the top of Mount Ararat.