



“MAY THE TORAH BE OUR OCCUPATION...” TEACHING AND STUDYING IN THE MEDIEVAL JEWISH COMMUNITY

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The importance of studying the Torah

Studying the Torah and other religious texts, which literally means “teaching” (*Talmud Torah*, as the rabbis call it¹) is one of the fundamental commandments of the Jewish religion. The goal of religious education is to produce “a kingdom of priests, a holy people,” as Exodus 19:6 says. Every Jew has the duty to recognize the divine will in the laws of the Covenant and to study Israel’s history, which reflects God’s concern for His chosen people. Psalm 78:1–4 expresses the importance of studying history as the place of God’s activity: “Give ear, O my people, to my teaching [*Torah*] ... I will utter riddles concerning days of old that we have heard and known and our fathers have told us. We will not hide from their children telling to the generation to come the praises of the Lord and His strength and His wondrous works that He has done.”

Following this and Deuteronomy 6:7: “Impress them—the words of God—on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up,” every father has the duty to teach his children so that God’s works and the history of Israel become a part of the people’s collective memory: “Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past; ask your father, he will inform you, your elders, they will tell you” (Deuteronomy 32:7).²

According to Talmudic sources the basis of education is the study of the Torah, an all-embracing concept. Education is not to be treated as distinct from the inner content of life, but as one with it. Torah study is not to be limited to a certain age but to continue throughout one’s life under the guidance of a teacher—a very modern concept of lifelong learning! The commandment of

¹ See *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter 1970), Vol. 15, col. 1235ff., article Torah; Vol. 12, col. 1439ff., article Oral Law; Vol. 7, col. 1156ff., article Halakha; Vol. 15, col. 750ff., article Talmud.

² See the introduction to Moritz Güdemann, *Quellenschriften zur Geschichte des Unterrichts und der Erziehung bei den deutschen Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf Mendelssohn*. (Berlin, 1891), reprint (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1968), 3–9.



Martha Keil

Mishnah, Avot 1:16: “Provide yourself a teacher” was intended for everyone, without regard to age or social standing. By studying, a man gains a good character because, according to the Talmud, Torah study by its very nature leads to the observance of the *mitzvot*, the commandments (Babylonian Talmud, tract. Kiddushin 40b). The ideal man “studies Bible and Mishnah, attends upon scholars, is honest in business and speaks gently to people” (Babylonian Talmud, tract. Yoma 86a).

Business life is not separated from the holy work of study. A father is not only obliged to teach the Torah to his son, but also to teach him a trade. Both activities are regarded as “the affairs of heaven,” which means religious duties (Babylonian Talmud, tract. Shabbat 150a). From the age of thirteen onwards the father is no longer responsible for the religious education of his son. The boy is now an adult and the observation of the laws, the *mitzvot*, applies to him as it does to all the other adults, for the rest of their lives.

The education of children, the ritual of the first learning

As we find in fragments of various works of medieval educational literature, ritual customs (*minhagim*) prepared the little boy who was not yet aware of it for the future study. *Sefer Hukei haTorah*, an anonymous work of 1309 from northern France, reports the following *minhag*:

Eight days after circumcision, ten men (a *minyan*, a prayer community) gathered in the home of the infant, a *humash* (Pentateuch book) was placed over the head of the infant in his cradle and the elders of the community or the head of the Yeshiva said a benediction. Then the head of the Yeshiva put his hand on the baby and on the Pentateuch and said: ‘May this boy learn what is written in this book and may he observe what is written in this book, may the Torah of the Lord be in your mouth, may this Pentateuch not move from your mouth.’ And the father gave a banquet to celebrate the covenant (*berit*) and the retiring to study (*perishut*).³

Minhagim like this survived for centuries. The convert Paul Christian Kirchner gives a similar report in his book *Jewish Ceremonial* around 1700: On the thirtieth day after circumcision, the father placed a Pentateuch and a sheet

³ *Hukei haTorah*, part B, §5, printed (in Hebrew) in: Moritz Güdemann, *Geschichte des Erziehungswesens und der Cultur der abendländischen Juden*, Band 1 (Vienna, 1888), reprint (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1966), 270. He mentions another evidence of this custom in *Sefer Hassidim*, §1146.



“May the Torah be our Occupation...”

of a rabbinical text over the head of the baby and recited the first verse of each of the Five Books of Moses to express that his son would learn the Torah in its entirety.⁴ After that, children from the neighbourhood came, raised the cradle three times and called the baby by his secular name. This ceremony is called the *Hollekreisch* and was practised by the Jews in Germany, the Rhineland, and Alsace from the fourteenth century until World War II.⁵

During early childhood the boy was very close to his father and his religious activities: He learned to repeat many prayers and benedictions, although without understanding them, he carried his father's prayer book to the synagogue and sat on the shoulders of his father during the services.⁶ It was “a custom for the little children,” as the *Mahsor Vitry* from thirteenth century France says, “to get them used to the synagogue and the school, to give a good reward to the people who have brought the children with them, and so they themselves get a good reward.”⁷ On Friday evening the boy ran home to notify his mother of the arrival of the Shabbat and of candle-lighting time. At Purim, Pessah, Hanukah and other holidays, children, both boys and girls, had and have special tasks at home and in the synagogue: noisemaking at Purim or finding the last crumbs at Pessah, dancing around the Torah scroll at Simhat Torah, and others. Rabbi Yzhak Or Sarua of Vienna (from the middle of the thirteenth century) informs us about a custom for the special day when the beginning of the month (*rosh hodesh*, New Moon) falls on a Shabbat or another holiday: “After the *Sheliah Zibbur*⁸ has read, he goes and sits down on the Chair of Elijah (*kathedra*), and the small children come and kiss the Torah scroll after

⁴ Paul Christian Kirchner, *Jüdisches Ceremoniel*. Vermehret und mit Anmerkungen erläutert von Sebastian Jacob Jungendres, (Hildesheim–New York: Georg Olms, 1974), 164.

⁵ It is not clear where the term comes from: either from *Holle*, the German goddess Hulda and *kreischen*, to screech to protect the baby from Holle's bad plans or *Kreis*, circle. The popular explanation was the derivation from „raise the cradle – *baut la creche*. See Freddy Raphael, “The Hollekreisch in Alsace.” In: *Mappot. ...blessed be who comes. The Band of Jewish Tradition*, ed. Annette Weber, Evelyn Friedlander, and Fritz Armbruster. Exhibition Catalogue, (Osnabrück: Secolo, 1997), 81f.

⁶ *Sefer Hassidim*, cited in: Ephraim Kanarfogel, “Attitudes toward Childhood and Children in Medieval Jewish Society.” In: *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, ed. David R. Blumenthal, Vol. II (Brown Judaic Studies 57). (Chico/California: Scholars Press, 1984), p. 1–31, p. 8 and 26, note 48.

⁷ *Mahsor Vitry*, ed. Samuel Hurwitz. (Nuremberg: Izchak Bulka, 1923), reprint (Jerusalem: Beit Sfarim I. Bulka, 1988), Vol. II, 713.

⁸ The *Sheliah Zibbur* is the envoy or messenger of the community, who had special tasks in the administration of the community and also in the synagogue service. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 14, col. 1355f., article Sheli'ah Zibbur.



Martha Keil

the “roller” has rolled the scroll together. This is a very beautiful custom, to educate the children for the commandments and to strengthen them.”⁹

According to tradition, a boy’s education should start when he begins to speak (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 21a, Babylonian Talmud, tract. Eruvin 82a). In the beginning, the father teaches him to repeat some selected “programmatic” Torah verses, such as: “Moses commanded us a law, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob” (Deuteronomy 33:4). First the children only imitate, later they will—hopefully—understand. The *Mishnah*, Avot 5:21, is more sophisticated: “Rabbi Yudah ben Tema said: ‘At five years the age for studying the Bible is reached, at ten for studying the Mishnah, at thirteen for fulfilling the Mizvot, at fifteen for studying the Talmud,’” but this curriculum was not always applied. The Talmudic scholar Rav said to the schoolteacher Samuel bar Shilat (Babylonian Talmud, tract. Ketubbot 50a): “Do not accept a pupil under the age of six; but accept one from the age of six and stuff him [with knowledge] like an ox.”

At the age of five or six, a Jewish boy living in medieval Germany or France might have begun his formal schooling by participating in a special ritual initiation ceremony, which is transmitted by three different sources: the anonymous *Sefer Assufot*, written in France around 1100, the abovementioned *Mahsor Vitry* of R. Simha of Vitry, and the *Sefer haRokeah* by R. Elazar ben Yudah of Worms around 1200.¹⁰ The fourth source is unique: the illuminations of the *Leipzig Mahsor*, a prayer book from southwest Germany (around 1320) preserved in the library of the University of Leipzig.

Early in the morning of the festival of Shavuot, the feast of the donation of the Torah on Mount Sinai and the forerunner of the Christian Pentecost, the father or a learned man wrapped the boy in a coat or a *tallith* (prayer shawl) and carried him from his house to the teacher (see *Fig. 1*). He was protected from the evil eye by the tallith and not endangered by seeing anything unclean, like a dog, a pig, or a gentile. As during other periods of transition and change—passages¹¹ like birth, the night before circumcision, wedding, illness, and death—medieval people, Jews and Christians alike, felt threatened by demons

⁹ Yizhak bar Moshe, *Or Sarua*, 2 Volumes. (Shitomir, 1862), reprint (Tel Aviv: Hekhal Hasefer, 1976), Vol. I, part 2, *Hilkhot Shabbat*, p. 21, nr. 48, 2nd half.

¹⁰ On the basis of these sources, Ivan Marcus wrote an excellent book on the “inward acculturation” of German Jews in the Middle Ages: Ivan R. Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood. Jewish Acculturation in Medieval Europe*. (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 1996).

¹¹ See Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).



“May the Torah be our Occupation...”

and needed supernatural protection. That was why the child was carried by an adult and hidden in a sacred garment; beside that, the tallith is a symbol of being adult and erudite.¹²

*Fig. 1. Leipzig Mahsor, ca. 1320,
University Library of Leipzig, Hebrew
Manuscript Volders 1102/1, fol. 131r.*

At the teacher’s house, the boy was placed on the teacher’s lap and shown a tablet with the Hebrew alphabet. The teacher read the letters first forwards, then backwards, finally in symmetrically paired combinations, and the boy repeated each sequence aloud. Then the teacher smeared honey over the letters on the tablet and told the child to lick it off. A woman brought cakes on which biblical verses had been written. They were to be baked by virgins from flour,

¹² Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood*, 70ff.



Martha Keil

honey, oil, and milk. Next came shelled hard-boiled eggs on which more verses have been inscribed. The teacher read the words written on the cakes and the eggs, the boy repeated them and then ate them (*Fig. 2*).

*Fig. 2. Leipzig Mahsor, ca. 1320, University Library of Leipzig,
Hebrew Manuscript Volders 1102/1, fol. 131r.*

The teacher then asked the child to recite an incantation against Potah, the Prince of Forgetfulness, to go far away and not to block the boy's heart, which meant the mind: "Ten times he should say these three words: NGF, SGF, AGF. I adjure you, Potah, Prince of Forgetfulness, that you extract and remove from me a fool's heart, I so and so, son of so and so, and throw it on a high mountain, in the name of"—line blank, because the ritual names are omitted



“May the Torah be our Occupation...”

in the *Sefer Assufot* to do no harm to anyone who by chance reads the names. This combination of food magic and invocation of magical powers can be found in Babylonian Jewish sources as early as the ninth century, and the roots are probably much older.¹³ Although some rabbis were against these practices because they might lead to the sin of *avoda sara* (idolatry), magical thinking—I do not want to call it “superstition”—was a part of Jewish religion as of all the others from biblical times until now.

*Fig. 3. Leipzig Mahsor, ca. 1320, University Library of Leipzig,
Hebrew Manuscript Vollers 1102/1, fol. 131r.*

After the ceremony the child received fruits, nuts, and other delicacies to eat. At the conclusion of the rite, the teacher led the boy down to the riverbank and told him that his future study of the Torah would never end, like the water in the river (see *Fig. 3*). He recited the verse of Proverbs 5:16: “Your springs will gush forth in streams in the public squares.”¹⁴ As the *Sefer Assufot* tells us, all

¹³ Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood*, 30, 67–69.

¹⁴ Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood*, 30, 71.



Martha Keil

these acts were performed to expand the child's heart. The great Maimonides, Spanish philosopher, physician, and scholar in the twelfth century, also gave pedagogic advice to motivate the child to study by promising him a sweet reward—because the child is too young and ignorant to understand the benefit of Torah studies.¹⁵

Yet the ceremony was more complex: The boy was repeating and then symbolically eating three texts written on cakes and smeared with honey. The first verse was Deuteronomy 33:4: “When Moses charged us with the Torah as the heritage of the congregation of Jacob.” In the Talmud this verse was already considered representative of the entire Torah. The second verse was the symbol of the beginning of study: Children start with the book Leviticus, not with Genesis, so its first verse is also written on the tablet. An old *midrash* (an interpretation of the Bible) gives an explanation: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said: ‘Since sacrifices [the Book of Leviticus deals with sacrifices] are pure and children are pure, let the pure begin by studying the laws of purity.’” Another reason is the mystical interpretation of the book of Genesis, the Book of Creation; only mature and learned men were allowed to study mystics because they could confuse one's mind and harm one's faith.¹⁶

The third verse on the tablet was the Talmudic phrase that I chose for the title of my paper: “May the Torah be our occupation.” It is the end of a personal prayer that some Talmud scholars said in the morning: “May it be Your will, O Lord our God, that Your Torah be our occupation, so that our heart will not be grieved and our eyes will not be darkened.” (Babylonian Talmud, tract. Berakhot 16b).

This ritual presents the small child as a symbol of the Jewish people as a Torah community. The child left his natural mother at home and entered the culture of a new symbolic mother—the male Torah teacher, who is portrayed as the mother of a newborn baby. The female image of the Torah teacher is based on a verse of the Torah (Numbers 11:12): “Did I conceive all this people, did I bear them that you should say to me: Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries an infant?” Another symbol within the ritual is the meaning of the child as a pure sacrifice to the Lord. According to *Sefer Assufot* and other sources, the boy must be protected from all sources of pollution. That is why they wrapped him in a sacred garment, the *tallith*, so that a pig or dog nor a gentile could see him.¹⁷

¹⁵ Maimonides, *Perush ha-Mishnah*, *Introduction to Sanhedrin*, chapter 10, 2:134, cited in: Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood*, 18f.

¹⁶ *Midrash Wayikra Rabba*, cited in: Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood*, 38 and 39.

¹⁷ Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood*, 80.



“May the Torah be our Occupation...”

Although some parts of the ceremony, like the food magic and the invocation, are much older than Christianity, one cannot overlook the Jewish polemical response to Christian customs. Eating the honey cake as a symbol of the sweet Torah is reminiscent of the Eucharist, the boy sitting on the teacher's lap of the Madonna and child Jesus. The river symbolizes the living water in contrast to the “deathbringing” baptismal water—to make that difference clear, the child remains standing at the riverside and is not allowed to step into the river. The illuminations in the *Leipzig Mahzor* also chose Christian iconography to show a Jewish rite.¹⁸ This is not the place to present the mutual influence of images of Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages, but this inward acculturation is one of the most exciting phenomena of Jewish-Christian history.¹⁹

Why does this ceremony take place at the feast of Shavuot? The first association is obvious: At the Feast of Weeks, God assembled his people at the foot of Mount Sinai and gave the Torah to Moses. Everyone, as the book of Exodus says (19:18), men, women, and children had to hear God's commandments. In the Talmudic sources we find no evidence for the beginning of school at Shavuot. It is remarkable that, despite the importance of religious study in rabbinic culture, nowhere in the Mishnah or in the Talmud do we find a date in the calendar year at which Jewish children should begin their studies. Each child started individually when it was mature enough. Beginning school at Shavuot seems to have appeared for the first time in the medieval European ceremony.

Nevertheless, in Pre-European Judaism, mainly in the *yeshivot* (the Talmud Academies in Babylonia), Shavuot was considered to be most appropriate time for religious study, especially the study of the vision of the prophet Ezekiel and his chariot mysticism. Ezekiel chapter 1 is read in the synagogue at Shavuot to complement the reading about the decalogue on Mount Sinai. “The Lord came down on Mount Sinai” (Exodus 19:20). To prepare for this event, it was a custom in ancient times and is still an orthodox tradition that the men wake the night before Shavuot and study Kabbalah and other mystical texts.

Thus, the medieval initiation ceremony grew from these two traditions: that a father is religiously obliged to teach his son Torah at an appropriate age,

¹⁸ See Evelyn M. Cohen, “The Teacher, the father and the Virgin Mary in the Leipzig Mahzor,” in: *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Div. D, Vol. 2. (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1990), 71–76.

¹⁹ See for example: Joseph Gutmann, “Christian Influences on Jewish Customs,” in: *Spirituality and Prayer: Jewish and Christian Understandings*, eds. Leon Klenicki, Gabe Huck. (New York: Paulist Press, 1983); Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance. Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (Scripta Judaica 3) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).



Martha Keil

and the ritual study of the Torah and mystics on the night before Shavuot. We do not know exactly when and by whom these two elements were combined, but by the late twelfth century the ceremony was established enough to be noted as “the custom of our ancestors.”²⁰

This school initiation of the small child disappeared in the fifteenth or sixteenth century and was replaced by the Bar Mizvah ceremony, as we know it now. As early as the late thirteenth century Ashkenazic authorities objected to the old custom that a boy could observe many adult religious rites before reaching the rabbinical age of religious majority, meaning his thirteenth birthday. From the fifteenth century onwards, the boy had to wait until this age of majority, and a new ritual was created: the first public reading of the weekly portion of the Torah and a little sermon on the text, all in front of the community, in the synagogue, the public space of Jewish life. Elements of the initiation ceremony were preserved as a simple Jewish folk custom, however, whose traces survived until the Nazis extinguished shtetl culture. Even today orthodox Jewish communities mark the first day of learning by giving the children honey and sweets. Non-jewish parents as well sweeten this day for their children; in Germany and Austria a horn filled with sweets (*Schulütte*) is very common.

The organisation of school: Curriculum and methods of instruction

Every father was obliged to teach his son Torah or, if he himself had no time or ability, to provide him a teacher. For financial reasons, several parents hired one teacher for all their children. The first regulation to send children to school, in other words compulsory education, was introduced by Simeon ben Shetah, the brother-in-law of King Alexander Yannai, as early as in the first century before the Christian era.²¹ The Babylonian Talmud Baba batra 21a reports: “First teachers were appointed in each district and the boys entered school at the age of sixteen or seventeen. But because a boy who was punished by his teacher would rebel and leave school, the children should begin their schooling at the age of six or seven.”

The earliest schools were housed in the synagogues. In the third century, this system was well developed. But not every village or little town had their own synagogue, so the regulations of R. Joshua ben Gamla in the fourth century stated that a child could be sent from one synagogue to another in the same town, but not daily from one town to another. Therefore, class often took

²⁰ Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood*, 46.

²¹ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 14, p. 1564, article Simeon ben Shetah.



“May the Torah be our Occupation...”

place in the house of the teacher or another member of the community, and only the adults studied in groups or independently in the synagogue. That is why the vernacular word for the synagogue in the Middle Ages was *shul*. According to the regulations of R. Joshua ben Gamla, the number of pupils to be assigned to one teacher was 25. If there were 40, an assistant was to be appointed.²²

Over the centuries, the organized community took certain responsibilities in the educational field. From the Gaonic period (eighth century) onwards, the community administration appointed teachers and paid them. Talmud students, the so-called *bahurim*, had to pay fees to the teachers, and if their parents could not afford them, the community paid them and took care of the students' accommodation. In the twelfth century, Rabbenu Jacob Tam (northern France) decreed that communities had to pay the teacher's salary, and in cases of the shortage of educational funds, money designated for welfare purposes [*zedaka*] could be diverted for educational needs. The communities along the Rhine accepted these ordinances in the year 1220.²³ The synod of Castilian Jews in 1432 even imposed taxes for educational purposes.²⁴

Despite the high esteem of learning, teachers of children (*melamdim*, *melamdei tinokot*) worked on the same low financial level as servants and scribes. When they did not earn more than two marks a week, they were exempt from taxes and were therefore not equal members of the community.²⁵ At holidays they got gifts and extra presents. In medieval Austria, a rabbi or a scholar who ran a Yeshiva was exempt from taxes even if he was wealthy, because “when he is the head of a Yeshiva we can be sure that the Torah is really his labor, and that he is not working in a secular profession,” as Rabbi Isserlein of Wiener Neustadt (mid-fifteenth century) stated in a comprehensive legal decision concerning taxes.²⁶

²² *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 6, p. 401, article Education.

²³ Louis Finkelstein, *Jewish Self-government in the Middle Ages*. Second ed. (New York: Philipp Feldheim, 1964), 230 (Hebrew), 247 (English).

²⁴ Finkelstein, *Jewish Self-government*, 350f.

²⁵ Menahem Merseburg, Din 6, printed at the end of the *Responsa of R. Jacob Weil, She'elot uTeshuvot*, ed. Sela, (Bnei Brak: Sela, 1988), 167–178. He lived in the middle of the fourteenth century in Austria and Germany. We hardly know anything about his life.

²⁶ R. Isserlein bar Petahya, *Sefer Terumat haDeshen*, part I: *She'elot uTeshuvot*, ed. Izhak Abitan, (Jerusalem: Shemuel Abitan, 1991), nr. 342.



Martha Keil

Curriculum

The main goal of school was to prepare the boy for participation in the synagogue service. The ability to read was the first objective. Children learned the alphabet by copying its letters on parchment or paper, wax or slate. The regulations of *Hukei haTorah* (an anonymous work from 1309, Northern France) instructed the father to take his child to a teacher at the age of five and to tell the teacher what he expected from him: “You are to teach my son knowledge of the letters during the first month, vocalization in the second, combination into words in the third, and afterwards this ‘pure’ child will take up the ‘purities’ of the Book of Leviticus.”²⁷ At a more advanced level, scrolls or sheets with biblical texts or Torah scrolls unfit for synagogue use were used. Afterwards, prayers and sections of the rest of the Pentateuch were on the program, followed by the Prophets and Hagiographia, and then immediately by the Talmud. Following some *geonim* (heads of Babylonian academies) of the eighth and ninth century, it was allowable to teach the native language and arithmetic.

Arab Spain inherited Babylonia’s place as the diaspora’s leading Jewish center; the Spanish scholars became independent from the Babylonian authorities. Influenced by the Moslem circles of scholars, they made innovations in the learning material, expanded the curriculum, and included secular instruction. “The Discipline of Teacher and Student,” chapter 27 of the ethical work “The Hygiene of Healthy Souls and the Therapy of Ailing Souls” was written originally in Arabic by Yoseph Yudah ibn Akinin about 1180.²⁸ It gives detailed instruction about when and what a Jew has to learn to become an outstanding scholar in all of the religious and scientific subjects of his time: Children started with Hebrew and grammar, a more serious study of the Prophets and hagiography, and contemporary Hebrew poetry. From the age of fifteen until thirty, Talmud and traditional Jewish literature should be the main topics, so that the student was able to refute “the errors of the apostates and heretics” and to justify “those views of practices that the religion prescribes.” After having reached this state, philosophic studies including logic were the main parts of the curriculum, continued with arithmetic, geometry, optics—the measurement of terrestrial and celestial bodies—and astronomy. Music, mechanics, natural

²⁷ *Hukei haTorah*, Part C, printed (in Hebrew) in: Güdemann, *Geschichte des Erziehungswesens*, Vol. 1, 272.

²⁸ Yoseph Yudah ibn Akinin (ca. 1150–1220) was born in Barcelona and moved to North Africa, probably as a reaction to the Almohad persecution. He is the author of several philosophical and medical works. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 2, col. 501ff. For his work “The Hygiene of Healthy Souls and the Therapy of Ailing Souls” see col. 502, nr. 5.



“May the Torah be our Occupation...”

sciences, and medicine completed the program. The peak of erudition was the profound study of metaphysics on the basis of Aristotele’s works.²⁹

In the thirteenth century, the Spanish scholar Yuda ibn Abbas offered even more detailed curriculum guidance for virtually a lifetime: At the age of three or three and a half, the child was to learn the alphabet, reading, and proper vocalisation. Then he was to be taught the weekly portions of the Torah, their correct reading and cantillations. Then he was to learn to translate them into Aramaic to prepare him for the study of the Talmud. After the translation of the Torah, he studied the Prophets and the Hagiographia, syntax and writing. By the age of thirteen, as a Bar Mizvah, a “son of the Law,” he should be through this program. Then the boy was to study grammar and language, and after that he could start with the Talmud and its commentaries. Special studies were needed for the *halakha*, the ritual laws and their culmination in the codification of Maimonides, the Mishne Torah. At the age of 18, the ideal young man studied medicine, mathematics, astronomy, logic and natural sciences. This curriculum with local derivations was also followed by the academies in Southern France and Italy.³⁰

Some rabbis, however, feared that the study of the philosophy and the natural sciences of the Greeks and the Arabs in some cases could threaten the divine authority of the Bible, especially if students were too young and not stable enough in their religion. Consequently, Rabbi Shelomo ben Aderet of Barcelona (1235–1310) pronounced a ban against those who studied philosophy and some of the natural sciences “written by the Greeks” before they reached the age of 25, which was accepted by several cities. However, it was allowed to study the original Jewish works of philosophy and science, even those of Maimonides, and medicine, “because the Torah permits the physician to heal.”³¹

The scholars of Northern France and Germany did not have problems of this kind. Their educational aims were profound knowledge of the Torah, strict observance of the commandments and complete devotion to God up to the readiness to be killed or to commit suicide before being baptised. They had absolutely no interest in philosophy as the Spanish did; for them the scholar’s task was to explicate the law where it was difficult and obscure, as Rashi of Troyes did in his famous commentary on the Bible. Hebrew and study of the

²⁹ Jacob R. Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World. A Source Book: 315–1791*. (New York: The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1938), reprint (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press 1965), 189–192, 373–377.

³⁰ *Encyclopaedia Judaica* Vol. 6, col. 381–466, article Education: col. 406.

³¹ Translated into English by J. Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World*, 190f.



Martha Keil

Bible was so widespread in eleventh century France that there was hardly a Jew there who did not know Hebrew.³² Petahya of Regensburg, a globetrotter at the end of the twelfth century, stated that in the whole of Babylonia, Asia, Media, and Persia, every Jew could at least read the 24 books of the Bible.³³

Generally, in the Middle Ages the curriculum and length of study were not fixed as they are today. The students studied at several *yeshivot* until their rabbi considered them to be capable of teaching in their own right, of applying the Halakha and of making binding legal decisions. The *semikha* certificate was the official ordination that entitled the student to practise as a rabbi.³⁴

Methods of Instruction

R. Joshua said: “He who studies the Torah and then forgets it is like a woman who bears a child and buries it.” The challenge was hard, and it still is. The Hebrew poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik, who died in 1934, compared the Talmud Torah in his poem *Ha-Matmid* (The Constant Learner) to an immense sea where the student is in danger of drowning. The Talmud has 5,800 pages of text with 2.5 million words. To master the extensive texts, Talmudic authorities recommended sheer repetition (Babylonian Talmud, tract. Hagiga 9b): “He who has repeated his chapter a hundred times is not to be compared to him who has repeated it a hundred and one times.”

Every possible mnemonic device was employed, using stylistic patterns of the composition of the text: division into three parts, thesis, antithesis, synthesis, *notarikon*, association of ideas, and so on. The problem of these methods was the difficulty of applying them to large bodies of text. No visual aids other than the words themselves were available. Before printing was invented, not even a standard page existed. Forgetting Torah was a sin, so the only possibility was continuous study.

No wonder the students could not cope with this burden and rather trusted in magical techniques. This was no question of superstition: Magical techniques like eating magical food were seen as the most effective teaching methods available, not only for children, as we have seen, but also for adults. As we learn from the Psalms and from the prophet Ezekiel (13,1–3), the Torah is sweet like milk and honey: “God said to me: ‘Mortal, feed your stomach and fill your belly with this scroll that I give you. I ate it and it tasted as sweet as honey to me.’” Another example of God’s magical food is the manna that fell

³² *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 6, col. 381–466, article Education, col. 408

³³ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 6, col. 381–466, Article Education, col. 404.

³⁴ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 14, col. 1140–1147, Article Semikha. See also Mordehai Breuer, “The ashkenasic Semikha (Hebrew),” in: *Zion* 33 (1968): 15–46.



“May the Torah be our Occupation...”

in the desert after the Israelites had fled from Egypt. The sages, the rabbis, considered themselves the successors of the biblical prophets, and like them, they started their career with the eating of the sweet alphabet. By eating the honey on letters or cake, the consumer literally eats God’s words in a metaphorical meaning for the “opening of his heart.” A more practical statement in the Talmud says that some food is good for the memory: “Five things restore one’s learning: Wheat bread and much more so wheat itself; a fried egg without salt, frequent consumption of olive oil, wine and spices” (Babylonian Talmud, Horayot 13b).

Fig. 4. Coburg Pentateuch, 1395, London, British Library, Add. MS 19776, fol. 72v.

Discipline played a vital role in the Talmudic school system. Corporal punishment was inflicted when deemed necessary, but the sages warned against injuring a child. The *Mahsor Vitry* gives the advice: “In teaching him, the child is at first coaxed and finally a strap is used on his back.” (Fig. 4). The pupil should

Martha Keil

be trained to move his body back and forth as he studies, so that the words can reach every part of the body as the psalm in the Shabbat prayer says: “My whole being will exclaim: ‘Who is like You, O Lord?’” The teacher should place a lazy pupil next to an attentive one and he himself should impress his pupils by speech and deed.

A teacher should teach carefully rather than fast. He should first improve the memory of the pupil by accurate transmission and frequent repetition of the material, and at a later stage, they should develop their own creative thoughts. This led to the method of *pilpul*, which means pepper. This method of studying represented the highest form of debate. Sections of the Talmud were discussed in groups of two or more, and the *baburim* were even allowed to contradict their teachers when they had better arguments.³⁵

The aforementioned *Hukkei haTorah* from the early fourteenth century dealt with a community’s responsibility, school administration, and supervision. According to these regulations, teachers should not instruct more than ten children in one group.³⁶ The pupils should be trained to discuss their lessons with each other and thus sharpen their minds and increase their knowledge.³⁷ “On Fridays, teachers should review with their students what they have studied during the preceeding week, at the end of the month what they have studied during the past month, in the month of Tishri what they have studied during the summer and in the Nisan what they have studied during the winter so that they don’t forget a word and remember more.”³⁸ The community was to appoint a supervisor (*Mashgiab*) to observe the pupils’ abilities.³⁹

The *Sefer Hassidim*, a book of ethics written by Rabbi Yehudah heHassid of Regensburg around 1200, points out the educational aim: Students should study until they no longer need a teacher and “are already teaching others.” But not everyone is gifted for a long study: “If you see that the boy can study the Bible, but not the Talmud, do not pressure him to study Talmud.” *Hukkei haTorah* also instructs the supervisor: “If he notes a slow-learning, dull child, he

³⁵ R. Isserlein bar Petahya, *Terumat haDeshen*, ed. Yizhak Abitan, part 2: *Pesakim uKhetavim*, (Jerusalem: Shemuel Abitan, 1990), nr. 238.

³⁶ *Hukkei haTorah*, Part A, §VI, printed (in Hebrew) in: Güdemann, *Geschichte des Erziehungswesens*, Vol. 1, 268.

³⁷ *Hukkei haTorah*, Part A, §IX, printed (in Hebrew) in: Güdemann, *Geschichte des Erziehungswesens*, Vol. 1, 269.

³⁸ *Hukkei haTorah*, Part A, §X, printed (in Hebrew) in: Güdemann, *Geschichte des Erziehungswesens*, Vol. 1, 269.

³⁹ *Hukkei haTorah*, Part A, §V, printed (in Hebrew) in: Güdemann, *Geschichte des Erziehungswesens*, Vol. 1, 268.



“May the Torah be our Occupation...”

should bring him to his father and say: ‘May God bring up your son to perform good deeds because it is difficult to bring him up for study, lest on account of him brighter students be retarded.’ And he should not take the father’s money because then he would seem to be a thief. And perhaps the young man will go to another teacher and be more successful with him.”⁴⁰

If the boy was bright enough, several years of Talmudic studies followed after the elementary and intermediate schooling. Talmud was the exclusive subject in the *yeshivot* and Talmudic erudition was the highest educational objective in medieval Germany. Most of the *baburim* travelled to towns that had famous *yeshivot*, comparable to the Christian travelling scholars and journeymen. Due to the demolition of many Jewish communities during the Black Death, Austria became the center of Jewish study and many students from Germany, Hungary, and Bohemia/Moravia went to Austrian *yeshivot* in Krems, Wiener Neustadt, and Vienna. The *baburim* formed a student body and served as a substitute family at the same time. Usually they studied and lived in the house of the rabbi and paid fees for learning and accommodation. It was unavoidable that there was sometimes tension between the students and their host families. Some students indulged in gambling or gave the rabbi other causes for concern. Around 1450, Rabbi Abraham Katzenellenbogen from Buda (Ofen) complained bitterly to a colleague: “A *babur* living in my home secretly drank my wine, slipped into the cellar at night and stole my meat and bread.”⁴¹

The importance of Torah reading in the synagogue— the exclusion of women

In Talmudic times, the entire educational enterprise was restricted to the male population. There are references to an organised girl’s class, to a girl who attended school with her brother, and to some female teachers, but these were exceptions. Jewish women of this period were untutored and either completely or partially illiterate.

In the Middle Ages also, only daughters or sisters of rabbis learned a little Hebrew. *Sefer Hassidim* states that girls should be taught to pray and learn the commandments concerning female religious activities. Nevertheless, their education was quite limited. Most of the women could do no more than write their names in Hebrew letters and perhaps read simple blessings. But many

⁴⁰ *Hukei haTorah*, Part C, printed (in Hebrew) in: Güdemann, *Geschichte des Erziehungswesens*, Vol. 1, 272.

⁴¹ R. Yosef ben Moshe, *Leket Josher*, ed. Jakob Freimann, (Berlin: Zvi Hirsch Itzkowski, 1923), reprint (Jerusalem: Hanokh Wagschal, 1964), part 2, 26.



Martha Keil

Jewish women were experts in running a Jewish home, with all the knowledge and practical wisdom that went with it, well versed in the laws of kashrut and regulations for observing the Shabbat and able to say prayers and psalms.

We have evidence of some rabbis' daughters, sisters, and wives who had their own teachers or participated in the lessons that took place in their house. Yosef bar Moshe, the pupil and servant of Rabbi Isserlein of Wiener Neustadt, stated: "And I remember that his (Isserlein's) daughter-in-law, Redel of blessed memory, studied with an old man named Yudel Sofer in the house of the rabbi and in the room where many sons of the house [he means the *baburim*] were staying, and this old man was married."⁴² Elasar ben Yehudah of Worms (ca. 1165–1230) tells us about a pious man (*hassid*) who taught his daughters to write, read, and count, to prepare them for their future as businesswomen who would not need the help of male partners.⁴³

The ideal of a woman who nourishes her husband, who for his part neglects his family duties, and her children by working on her own has existed since Talmudic times, and it still exists today. In the Middle Ages, this type of woman also played a certain role. Thus Rabbi Elasar of Worms wrote a long poem of mourning for his wife Dulce, who was murdered in 1197 together with their two daughters. He took Proverbs 31,10 "Who can find a woman of valor" and described the qualities and activities of his beloved wife in the form of an acrostic:

"*Her husband trusts her implicitly* (Proverbs 31:11): She fed and clothed him in dignity so he could sit among the elders of the land and provide Torah study and good deeds; ... Her labor provides him with books. ... *She is like the merchant ships* (Proverbs 31:14): She feeds her husband [so he can] study Torah."⁴⁴

The problem was not only a question of education. Jewish women were not required to attend synagogue services, but it was nevertheless encouraged and considered an honour. It was commendable for a woman to hear the

⁴² *Leket Josher* II, p. 37.

⁴³ R. Elasar of Worms, *Hiduschim beOtiot Hassirut*, printed (in Hebrew) in: Gudemann, *Geschichte des Erziehungswesens*, 230 note 5. His main argument was the good reputation of his daughters: It could be suspicious to be alone with a male scribe. See also Emily Taitz, "Women's Voices, Women's Prayers: Women in the European Synagogues of the Middle Ages," in: *Daughters of the King. Women and the Synagogue*, eds. Susan Grossman, Rivka Haut (Philadelphia, Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1992), 59–71, here 62.

⁴⁴ Ivan Marcus, "Mothers, Martyrs and Money-makers: Some Jewish Women in Medieval Europe," in: *Conservative Judaism* 38 (1986): 34–45, here 41.



“May the Torah be our Occupation...”

Torah, but she had to be separated from the men—as today in orthodox communities. Next to the main room of the synagogue, the women had a separate room where they could see the *bima* and ark containing the Torah scrolls through the openings—the restored synagogue in Sopron (western Hungary) is an example.

The synagogue room that most Jews in the Middle Ages visited several times a day for prayer and study was the central meeting place of the community. Here, the members of the community would share their joys and sorrows, receive public recognition, honours and sympathy, congratulations on happy events, and commiseration in their grief. The medieval synagogue was also the place for public announcements, the swearing of oaths, and the execution of judgements.⁴⁵ Thus, the exclusion of women from reading the Torah on the *bima* also excluded them from most aspects of community life and honour. Women were honoured, but only in private, at home, as wives and mothers.

It is true that the Torah does not oblige women to study and read the Torah in public, but on the other hand one cannot find an explicit prohibition of doing so anywhere.⁴⁶ Of course, the scholars of Mishnah and Talmud knew the texts by heart, and they had problems with their argumentation: The basis for the restriction of the woman can only be found in the Talmud, not in the Torah, for example in Babylonian Talmud, tract. Megilla 23a: “The Rabbis taught: Everybody is authorized to the seven [persons being called up for the Torah on Shabbat], even a child and even a woman; but the Sages say: A woman is not allowed to read the Torah because of the honour of the community.” This argument was also used by Rabbi Yizhak Or Sarua of Vienna in the middle of the thirteenth century. He could not deny that women and even children were allowed to read the Torah, but “because of the honour of the community it is not the done thing.”⁴⁷ The question is: What is meant by “the honour of the community?” which of course consisted only of male members. One recurring argument is that men feel irritated by the sexual attraction of women, expressed by their voices: “The voice of a woman is indecent” (Babylonian Talmud, tract Berakhot 24a and Babylonian Talmud, tract. Sota 48a). This idea, supported by the surrounding Christian or Islamic society,

⁴⁵ See Martha Keil, “Bet haKnesset, Judenschul. Die Synagoge als Gotteshaus, Amtsraum und Brennpunkt sozialen Lebens,” in: *Wiener Jahrbuch für jüdische Geschichte, Kultur und Museumswesen*. Vol. 4 (1999/2000): *Über das Mittelalter*, ed. G. Milchram im Auftrag des Jüdischen Museums der Stadt Wien, 71–90.

⁴⁶ See Irwin H. Haut, “Are Women obligated to Pray?” in: *Daughters of the King*, eds. S. Grossman, R. Haut, 89–101.

⁴⁷ Yizhak bar Moshe, Or Sarua, Vol. 1, *Hilkebot Yibbum veKiddushin*, 180, nr. 752.



Martha Keil

found great appreciation in the Middle Ages.⁴⁸ In Biblical times, this did not seem to be a problem; on several occasions men, women, and children were called up to hear the Torah and pray together, as at the reception of the Torah on Sinai.

Another point is the ritual impurity of a menstruating woman. In many ashkenasic communities of the Middle Ages, women were excluded—or excluded themselves—from entering a synagogue during menstruation. This separation from holy places is definitely not according to the Halakha, but it was seen as an expression of extreme piety. Paradoxically, women proved their piety by separating themselves from pious duties.⁴⁹ In spite of these widely accepted ritual customs, Or Sarua's colleagues had problems finding strong arguments for the exclusion of women. Maharil of Mainz (mid-fifteenth century) wrote in a responsum: "Our teacher Rabbi Simha [thirteenth century] said that the women read the Hallel prayer at Pessah, because they were included in the miracle [of the Exodus] as well." Consequently, Maharil's pupil Rabbi Salman of St. Goar asked his teacher: "Is it also the case with reading the *Megilla*, the Esther Scroll at Purim, because here women also were included in the miracle [of the salvation of the Persian Jews by Queen Esther]?" Maharil answered me: "Indeed, it is the same in the case of the *Megilla*. But the scroll of Esther is read in public, in the synagogue [and the Hallel at the Pessah Seder, privately at home], and the public proclaiming of the miracle is *more beautiful* among men (*yoter yafé*)."⁵⁰

Conclusion

The enormous importance of studying Torah, Talmud and other religious texts found its expression in various medieval sources. They give us insight into the comprehensive conception of Jewish learning in the Middle Ages: The first day of the child's schooling was seen as a rite of passage and therefore a ritual of initiation with several elements was created. Food magic and magical incantations played an important role, in spite of the fears of some rabbis that ceremonies like these could arouse suspicions of idolatry. As Ivan Marcus showed, these ceremonies also reflected Christian attitudes and customs and

⁴⁸ Taitz, "Women's Voices," 61.

⁴⁹ Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Purity and Piety: The Separation of Menstruants from the Sancta," in: *Daughters of the King*, eds. S. Grossman, R. Haut, 103–115, esp. 103 and 109.

⁵⁰ *The Book of Maharil. Customs by Rabbi Yaakov Mulin*. ed. Shlomoh Spitzer (Hebrew), (Jerusalem: Makhon Yerushalaim, 1989), 121, nr. 45.



“May the Torah be our Occupation...”

adopted them to Jewish life and thinking: an example of “inward acculturation” like many others in Jewish-Christian history.

Jewish teaching and study was a forerunner of the modern concept of “lifelong learning.” The sources inform us about the curriculum at different times and places. In medieval Ashkenaz the interpretation of and commenting on religious texts was the main objective, in Spain the ideal man not only had to have a profound religious knowledge, but also a good education in medicine, natural sciences, and philosophy. The texts about teaching and learning are full of advice on how to improve one’s memory, because forgetting was considered a sin. Studying led to the capability of reading the Torah in public at the synagogue’s service—an honour from which women were excluded and in orthodox groups still are today.

Sources on Jewish learning in the Middle Ages also teach us about the importance of the male child in the Jewish family and society, the duties of the father and the community towards him, and the relationship between adults and children. These texts, therefore also contribute rare information about childhood in the Middle Ages.