

Talmudic Folktales

What Is The Language Of The Talmud?

The Talmud is composed in a mixture of **Hebrew** and **Aramaic** (Aramaic being the spoken vernacular of Babylonian Jews). In general, formal statements by the Amora'im are formulated in Hebrew, whereas the explanations and discussions of those statements are worded in Aramaic. **In the 1960s, a young Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz embarked on the task of translating the Talmud into modern Hebrew and providing his own commentary alongside those of the classical. It was completed in November of 2010.**

OK. So What is the Mishnah?

The Hebrew root "*ShNH*" means "to repeat," and refers to memorization by repetition. "Mishnah" therefore has the sense of "that which is memorized by rote," as distinct from the Rabbinic designation for the Bible: "*Miqra*," that which is read and recited from a *written* text.

Mishnah can refer in a general way to the full tradition of the Oral Torah, as formulated by the Rabbis in the first centuries of the Common Era. **The Mishnah is organized by subject:** Earth, Time, Family, Society, Sacrifice, and Sacnity. You may be familiar with *Midrash*, Rabbinic teachings that are attached to the text of the Tanach, organized by the flow of the narrative.

The teachers in the Mishnah are known as **Tanna'im** (singular: "*Tanna*"), derived from the Aramaic root related to the Hebrew "*ShNH*." The era in which the Mishnah was developed is therefore referred to as the "Tanna'itic" era. The term "*Tanna*" was originally applied to the functionary in the later Talmudic academies whose job it was to memorize and recite the oral traditions of the Tanna'itic era, serving as a sort of "living book." It came to be applied to the actual Rabbis whose opinions make up the Mishnah and its contemporary works.

With a very few exception (quotations from Aramaic legal documents), the Mishnah is composed entirely in Hebrew, in a dialect that appears to reflect the spoken vernacular of Judea. The Mishnah was composed entirely in the Land of Israel, and all the sages quoted there, even if they resided originally in other places (Babylonia, Rome, etc.), were active in Judea.

The main body of the Mishnah consists of teachings attributed to authorities from about the middle of the first century, through to the second decade of the third century C.E. This time period witnessed some major historical turning-points for the Jewish nation, such as the destruction of the

When Was The Mishna Composed And By Whom?

The center of Jewish communal leadership and Torah scholarship moved to this Judean coastal town following the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. The Rabbis of Yavneh (the term "Rabbi" to denote a religious teacher was probably not in use before this time) were faced with the responsibility of reconstructing

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Judaism and adapting it to the new situation, in which its major center of religious life was no longer

in existence. It is likely that the drive to preserve the oral traditions of previous generations was initiated at Yavneh as a central part of this mission.

"Yavneh" is usually used to designate at least two full generations, extending from 70 to 135 C.E. The first Yavneh generation was dominated by such figures as Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai (the academy's founder), Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, and Rabbi Joshua ben Hanania. The later Yavneh period was known for the appearance of the two influential schools of Rabbis Akiba and Ishmael, each of which formulated a distinctive approach to the interpretation of the Torah.

The tragic aftermath of the Bar-Kokhba uprising saw the complete destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, and the devastation of the region of Judea, the southern portion of the Land of Israel that had hitherto been the main centre of Jewish religious leadership. This situation led to widespread migration to the northern region, the Galilee, and the seat of rabbinic judicial authority resided for a while in the Galilean village of Usha, home of Rabbi Meir.

By far the greatest proportions of Mishna's contents derive from this generation. Almost all the "Ushan" Rabbis mentioned in the Mishnah were students of Rabbi Akiba. These include Rabbis Meir, Judah [bar Ilai], Simeon ben Yohai, Yose [ben Halafta], Rabbi Eleazar [ben Shamua] and the Patriarch (*Nasi*) Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel.

All ancient sources are in agreement that the Mishnah was compiled by Rabbi Judah the "Prince," before his death around 217 C.E. The Mishna's redactor, who had studied with most of the important teachers of the previous ("Usha") generation, assembled early redactions that had been shaped in various different academies, combining them into a new and integrated work. The Mishnah contains almost no material that is contemporary with its redactor.

Rabbi Judah ben Simeon bore the Hebrew title of "*Nasi*," signifying the position of Patriarch, the official political representative of the Jewish people. From an internal Jewish perspective, the *Nasi* presided over Judaism's supreme judiciary and legislative body, the *Sanhedrin*. The title had become a hereditary one, almost without interruption, since the days of the revered Hillel the Elder in the first century B.C.E. In Talmudic texts, Rabbi Judah is usually referred to simply as "Rabbi" or, by virtue of his legendary piety: "*Rabbenu Ha-Qadosh*" ("our holy master"). After migrating from Judea, Rabbi Judah the Patriarch resided in Beit Sha'arayim, and later in Sephoris, both in the Galilee.

How Does The Talmud Work? How is it a Commentary on the Mishna?

The Gemara is a commentary on the Mishna, whose order it follows, together forming the Talmud. It was composed over several generations, from the early third century to about the sixth. As a commentary, it deals with many aspects of the Mishnah, often going far beyond mere explanation. Some of the items involved in the commentary on the Mishna include:

- ■ ■demonstrating how the Mishnah's rulings or disputes, derive from interpretations of Biblical texts.
- ■ ■exploring the logical principles underlying the Mishna's statements, and showing how different

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understandings of the Mishnah's reasons could lead to differences in their practical application.

- ■ ■ resolving contradictions, perceived or actual, between different statements in the Mishnah, or

between the Mishnah and other traditions; e.g., by stating that:

- two conflicting sources are dealing with differing circumstances
- they represent the views of different Rabbis.

When Was the Talmud Composed and by whom?

The teachers (Rabbis) who participated in the Gemara are referred to as "Amora'im" [singular: "Amora"], from an Aramaic word that originally designated the official in the academy whose job it was to recite the scholars' teachings before the public. Most of the Babylonian teachers did not bear the title "Rabbi," but were called Rav. Some of the most prominent Babylonian Amora'im were:

First generation:

- "Rav" (Actual name: Abba Arikha), died in 247. Founder of the great school at Sura.
- Samuel, died in 254. He founded the rabbinic school at Nehardea, later moved to Pumbedita.

Second Generation:

- Rav Huna, died 297. He was Rav's successor in the leadership of the Sura school. ■ Rav Judah [bar Ezekiel], died 299. He led the academy at Pumbedita.

Third Generation:

- ■ ■ Rav Hisda, died 309. He stood at the head of the Sura school.
- ■ ■ Rav Nahman [bar Jacob] died 320. He was active in Nehardea, and is known as a judge.
- ■ ■ Rabbah [bar Nahmani], died 330. The most prominent teacher of his generation, he directed the academy at Pumbedita.

Fourth Generation:

- ■ ■ Abaye, died 339. He headed the academy at Pumbedita
- ■ ■ Rava [bar Joseph bar Hama] died 352. He founded an academy at Mahoza.

Fifth Generation:

- Rav Papa, died 375. A student of Abaye and Rava, he led a school in Narsh.

Sixth Generation:

- Rav Ashi, died 427. A prominent head of the Sura academy, he has often been credited with

the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud. Seventh Generation:

- Rav Ashi's son, Mar bar Rav Ashi [also known as "Tavyomi"], died 468.

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When Was The Talmud "Closed"?

A passage in the Talmud (Bava Metzi'a) speaks of Rav Ashi and Ravina as "the end of instruction" (Hebrew: "sof hora'ah"), in a context that compares them with Rabbi Judah the Patriarch as "the end of Mishnah." Because Rabbi Judah is generally regarded as the redactor of the Mishnah, it became accepted to speak of Rav Ashi as the redactor of the Babylonian Talmud. (The name "Ravina" is a recurring one during the Talmudic era, and there was a figure of that name that was Rav Ashi's contemporary). Since Rav Ashi died in 427, and several later generations are represented in the Talmud's pages, it is clear that we cannot speak of him as the Talmud's final redactor, though there is considerable evidence that indicates that he was involved in some sort of preliminary redaction and organization of the traditions--still in an oral, memorized form. In 987, the medieval authority Rav Sherira Ga'on, leader of the Pumbedita academy (then situated in Baghdad), composed an important study on issues of Talmudic literature and chronology. Although Rav Sherira accepts that the Talmudic "end of instruction" is a reference to a final redaction, he applies the expression not to the famous Amora Rav Ashi (to whom he attributes only the beginnings of the process), Rav Yose, and to his contemporary Ravina, who were active at the close of the fifth century.

The Mishnah and Gemarah may have been completed, but the Talmud grows with every commentary, every new edition, and every new student. The living Talmud is all of us together.

Elijah in Talmud Class One

- We know from Torah that:
 - Elijah is a Prophet from a wealthy family
 - Hebrew name is Eliyahu meaning my God is my God
 - God used him to make miracles-
 - Cause the dead to come alive again
 - Bringing fire from the sky
 - Enter heaven by a golden chariot sent by God- never died
 - Spoke against Baal
 - He is a Harbinger of the Messiah

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The Talmud takes the stories from the Torah and makes Elijah even more mythical. He performs acts of need to those who do not suspect that he is an emissary of God.

[Nedarim 50a:2-3-](#)

§ In connection to the above incident concerning the poverty of scholars and their potential to become wealthy through remarkable circumstances, the Gemara relates an incident: Rabbi Akiva became betrothed to the daughter of bar Kalba Savua. When bar Kalba Savua heard about their betrothal, he took a vow prohibiting her from eating all of his property. Despite this, she went ahead and married Rabbi Akiva. In the winter they would sleep in a storehouse of straw, and Rabbi Akiva would gather strands of straw from her hair. He said to her: If I had the means I would place on your head a Jerusalem of Gold, a type of crown. **Elijah the prophet came and appeared to them as a regular person and started calling and knocking on the door. He said to them: Give me a bit of straw, as my wife gave birth and I do not have anything on which to lay her. Rabbi Akiva said to his wife: See this man, who does not even have straw. We should be happy with our lot, as we at least have straw to sleep on.**

Questions to Consider

1. What are the conditions under which Rabbi Akiva and his wife are living?
2. How does Elijah disguise himself here?
3. What is the thrust of Elijah's actions (are they harsh or helpful- why does he do what he does)?
4. How would you characterize Elijah here? Is his behavior similar to or different from his actions in Tanakh?

[Sanhedrin 113a:16](#)

Many years ago it happened that there was a good couple who lived in Baghdad. The husband studied Torah and performed *mitzvot*, giving charity to the poor and helping whoever needed work. The wife, too, was a good woman, distributing charity and offering hospitality to anyone who knocked on their door. They had one son, and the parents taught him the ways of God and to follow the Commandments, as they did.

When the son grew old enough to marry, his parent arranged a marriage with a good family who had a beautiful and learned daughter. At the wedding, everyone, the rich and the poor, were invited to celebrate in the *simchah*.

However, as time went on, the couple still had no child. It was hard for them to see other young couples with their babies. At night they wept bitter tears because they had no child to hold in their arms. During the day they saw the looks of pity in the faces of the people, and they would go out into the marketplace or synagogue only when it was necessary.

It was soon to be Pesach. They prepared everything according to the tradition. On the night of the first seder, they read the *Haggadah*. As she heard the words of the Exodus from Egypt, the wife began to cry. Her husband looked up and saw her tears, and he understood why she was weeping.

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He spoke gentle words to her and, as he had said to her often before, he once again repeated, "My wife, do not worry. *HaKadosh Barukhu*, the Holy One Blessed Be He, will not forget us. We will have a child."

Suddenly they heard a tapping at the door. When the husband opened the door, they saw a weary traveler. Without hesitation, the couple invited this old man to enter and to join them for the seder. They sat and recited the *Haggadah* together and ate together, enjoying a lively discussion about the story of the Exodus.

When the old man got up to leave, the couple invited him to stay the night. But he insisted that he had to leave. And as he rose from his place, he did not thank the couple but spoke these words instead: "I asked *HaKadosh Barukhu* that I may merit to visit you next Pesach at the seder and that your table will be filled with disorder at the time."

The couple was astonished at this and even somewhat angry that this traveler would say such an ungracious "thank you." However, they did not want to offend him, since he was their guest and they had offered him hospitality with their whole hearts, without a thought for a reward or a "thank you."

Soon after Pesach, the wife knew that she was expecting a child. A beautiful child was born three months before the next Pesach, and they knew great joy.

When Pesach arrived, the couple once again sat down to begin the seder and the reading of the *Haggadah*. This time they held a baby on their laps, and the child behaved like all children do. He wiggled and laughed, he reached for the glass of wine, and he pulled at the tablecloth, he tore a page from the *Haggadah*, and he squealed when he threw a plate down. And what did the parents do? They behaved like all new parents. They laughed with joy, and watched with laughter, and spoke with delight at their child's "work." And the seder was in disorder and certainly not *b'seder*.

Suddenly there was again a tapping on the door. And when they opened the door, the couple saw the same traveler who had come the year before. They recognized him and again invited him in. But suddenly, as they stared at the man and also at the table, they recalled his words, his "thank you," and understood for the first time that those words had really been a blessing.

The couple began to talk at the same time, thanking the old man for his blessing, which had come true, and asking for forgiveness because they had regarded his words in a different light.

And the old man smiled with a beautiful smile and said, "There is no need to ask my forgiveness. How could you have understood my words at the time? May you be worthy to bring your child to study Torah and do good deeds and to bring your child to the *chuppah*."

And the old man disappeared.

Then the couple understood that the traveler had been the Prophet Elijah, may his name be remembered for good.

Questions to Consider

1. How would you characterize Elijah here? What is the role he plays within this story?

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2. Why do you think Elijah did not make his blessing explicit at the time? (Hint: How does this maintain the integrity of the character?)

3. Do you see this Elijah as different from or similar to the one portrayed within the Tanakh? What accounts for his similarities or differences?

Now that we have observed the evolution of Elijah across Tanakh, Talmud and folklore, it is time to examine the WHY. Why and how does Elijah change from being extremely zealous for God and angry with the nation to becoming a do-gooder who shows up in various disguises in order to help the nation? And why does he visit our Pesach Seder? '.