

SAN DIEGO Jewish World

There is a Jewish story everywhere

'Battle of the two Talmuds' looks at an ancient split between Israel and the Diaspora By Fred Reiss, Ed.D

WINCHESTER, California – One does not need to listen to very many rabbinic sermons before he or she hears the words, “And the Talmud says...” Certainly for the Orthodox and Conservative Jewish movements, the Talmud is to the Bible as Supreme Court rulings are to the Constitution. In short, the Bible gives us the laws, such as, “Honor your father and your mother” and “Remember (or observe) the Sabbath Day to keep it holy”. The Talmud, which is composed of the Mishna, the oral law based on ancient Jewish practices, and the Gemara, a discussion of that which is contained in the Mishna, tell how to apply the laws. Before the Mishna, individual Jews passed down the implementation of Jewish laws orally. Indeed, the rabbis in the post-Temple era even debated among themselves whether or not the oral law should be put into written form.

But which Talmud? There are, in fact, two Talmuds. One is called the Jerusalem Talmud (a misnomer since this Talmud was mainly developed in Tiberius and Caesarea, in northern Israel). The other, created by Jewish scholars living in Babylonia and studying at the academies located in the cities of Sura and Pumbedita, is called the Babylonian Talmud.

The year 586 B.C.E. became a watershed year for the Jewish people. In that year, Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar overran the remaining two tribes, Benjamin and Judah, exiling all but the poorest residents back to Babylonia. King Cyrus of Persia, who defeated the Babylonians about 539 B.C.E., encouraged the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild the Temple. In the time between Kings Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus, Babylonian Jewry grew in power and wealth, so that only a handful of Jews returned to Judea with Ezra and Nehemiah. This is analogous to most Jews in the Diaspora today preferring to remain in their host countries rather than making aliyah (permanently emigrating to Israel).

Leon Charney and Saul Mayzlish in their newest joint venture, *Battle of the Two Talmuds*, delve into the power struggles and animosities, communication and friendly rivalries, which occurred over the two hundred years that overlap the creation and redaction of the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds. They divide *Battle of the Two Talmuds*, into three parts. In the first, the authors set the background and explain why the Talmud is the most authoritative book of Judaism. Charney and Mayzlish provide a who's who of the Talmud. While the list at times is no more exciting than a phonebook, the names, dates, and locations of important Talmudic contributors lays the foundation for understanding the religious positions of the scholars and for further study.

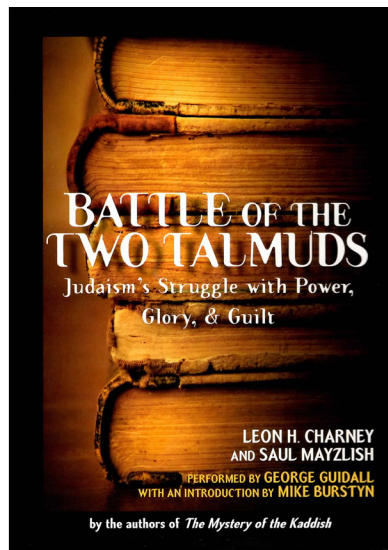
Arguably the most important chapter of part one spotlights the issues that divide the two centers of scholarship. After the failure of the Bar Kochba Revolt against the Romans, from 131 C.E. to 135 C.E., surviving Jews were sold into slavery, found their way to the Galilee, or emigrated to Babylonia to escape the ruthless reprisals against

them by the Roman Emperor Hadrian. (The interested reader is referred to the Martyrology Service of the High Holiday prayer book, which describes in gruesome detail the deaths of the most famous of the Israeli rabbis at the hands of the Roman government.) Tensions grew over which center, Israel or Babylonia, should take precedence over the other. Israeli rabbis continually sought money from their wealthy Babylonian brothers and often shamed them for not living in Israel. Charney and Mayzlish give the reader a clear and comprehensive understanding of the issues and arguments.

Part two illuminates the different views of the rabbis living in impoverished Israel (then called Palestine) and wealthy rabbis living in the Diaspora. One interesting difference, according to Charney and Mayzlish, is how the Hasmonean Rebellion (led by Judah Maccabee) is portrayed in each Talmud. The Babylonia Talmud diverts attention away from the revolt and toward the miracle of Hanukkah, while the Jerusalem Talmud calls the rebellion a just war and does not condemn the rebels.

Part three centers attention on the issue of making aliyah and living in Israel. According to the Old Testament, God set aside the land of Canaan as an eternal inheritance for the Jewish people. Why then, did the Babylonia sages, experts in the Bible, not return to their homeland? The authors respond to that question by looking at aliyah through the ages and at the Zionist movement.

With the demise of rabbinic scholarship in Israel before the middle of the third century C.E., and the inability to generate financial support for their work, the Jerusalem Talmud fell into disuse and much of it was lost. *The Battle of the Two Talmuds* is an engaging and enlightening book. The authors offer the reader an insider's look at the struggles between and among the most influential Jews in the long history of the Jewish people.



***Battle of the Two Talmuds: Judaism's Struggle with Power, Glory, & Guilt* by Leon H. Charney and Saul Mayzlish, Barricade Books, Fort Lee, NJ; ISBN 978-1-56980-439-1 ©2010, \$22.95, p. 224 plus glossary**



Dr. Fred Reiss is a retired public and Hebrew school teacher and administrator. He is the author of *The Standard Guide to the Jewish and Civil Calendars*; *Ancient Secrets of Creation*; *Sepher Yetzira, the Book that Started Kabbalah, Revealed*; and *Reclaiming the Messiah*. The author can be reached through his website, www.fredreissbooks.com.