

## INSTRUCTIONS FROM AUTHOR TO LIBRARY FOR THESES AND PRIZE ESSAYS

**AUTHOR** Edward J. Sukol

TITLE An Analysis of Selected Rabbinic Sources on  
the Image of the Scholar, the Talmid Hacham

TYPE OF THESIS: Ph.D. [ ] D.H.L. [ ] Rabbinic [x]

Master's [ ] Prize Essay [ ]

1. May circulate [ ☒ ] ) Not necessary  
2. Is restricted [ ☐ ] for \_\_\_\_\_ years. ) for Ph.D. thesis

**Note:** The Library shall respect restrictions placed on theses or prize essays for a period of no more than ten years.

I understand that the Library may make a photocopy of my thesis for security purposes.

3. The Library may sell photocopies of my thesis. X  
yes      no

March 9, 1987

---

Date

Signature of Author

Library  
Record

Microfilmed \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Library Staff Member

AN ANALYSIS OF SELECTED RABBINIC SOURCES  
ON THE IMAGE OF  
THE SCHOLAR, THE TALMID HACHAM

EDWARD J. SUKOL

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-  
Jewish Institute of Religion

1987/5747

Referee, Professor Eugene Mihaly

## DIGEST

The rabbinic literature contains many passages describing the talmid hacham. This thesis examines selected rabbinic passages concerned with the concept of the talmid hacham.

An analysis of the pertinent rabbinic literature reveals that the status of talmid hacham was the highest accomplishment one could achieve. Extensive study with other talmidei hachamim and through apprenticeship to one or more great scholars was required. To become a talmid hacham an individual had to master all the Judaic sources of the time, specifically Scripture, Mishnah, Talmud and Midrash. However, the rabbis explicitly state that academic scholarship alone is not enough to be a talmid hacham.

The talmid hacham had to be meticulous in his observance of the mitzvot, attendance to ritual and personal conduct. To be a talmid hacham an individual had to live what he studied. His being, his actions and his conduct were inextricably linked to his study.

The talmid hacham was to be loved, respected and revered by the lay community in which he lived. Meeting his daily needs for food and shelter was compared to entertaining the Divine Presence. Sustenance provided to the talmid hacham was compared to the offering of first fruits to the Almighty. If a layman was particularly diligent in his support of the talmidei hachamim he might be

rewarded with sons who would themselves join this scholarly class.

In death, too, the talmid hacham was be accorded every measure of reverence. His eulogy was to be eloquent, greater even than that offered for a king. The talmidei hachamim occupy a special place in the world to come and are said to retain their learning after death.

The rabbinic concept of the talmid hacham provides a look into the rabbis' conception of self. They considered themselves to be talmidei hachamim and the requirements and special privileges of this class reflect their own perception of their importance as the progenitors of Torah learning.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My heartfelt thanks and appreciation go out to the many people whose support and encouragement have made the completion of this thesis possible. There are too many individuals who have helped me in these five years of rabbinic school to mention everyone by name. Please know that your faith in me does not go unacknowledged.

To Dr. Eugene Mihaly--Your guidance, encouragement and patience have enabled me to undertake and complete this thesis. Thank you for all your help. As my teacher you have opened up the vistas of Judaic scholarship and thereby given me a gift for which there can be no repayment. Your wisdom has helped identify both the moorings of my life and that for which I reach.

To all the members of the Sukol and Breines families--I wish to express my deepest gratitude for the support you have given both Roxanne and me. Though some of the days and nights have been trying, and the distance between us too great, your love has sustained us at all times. I could never have done it without you. Thank you.

To Ira and Estelle Breines--You have welcomed me into your home and hearts as your own son. Many thanks for being who you are and for your support.

To my mother, Marcia H. Sukol--No words can express my thankfulness that you and Dad created a Jewish home in which I was able to flourish. It led me to where I am today. One

never knows what fruit will be born from the seeds planted and yet, the apple, as you know, falls not far from the tree. Rest assured that the ancestral wisdom is heeded as I shall begin my walk to Ordination with the right foot.

To my daughter, Talia--Though now you are too young to understand this you are a wonderful daughter. You have been a terrific distraction from the pressures of school and I cherish the time spent with you. It is my sincere hope that your life will be as enriched by Judaism as mine is.

To my beloved wife, Roxanne--You are the wise wife that Proverbs praises. You are "she that shines through like the dawn, beautiful as the moon, radiant as the sun..." whose beauty Song of Songs extolls. You have rejoiced with me in hours of gladness, stood by me in my moments of despair. I thank you with all my being for the lives we share. May the One who blesses us all, bless you forever. I love you.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter I	Introduction	1
Chapter II	The Talmid Hacham and the Nature of His Studies	
	A. The Importance of Study	4
	B. Curriculum for the Talmid Hacham	7
	C. The Priority of Study Over Other Endeavors	9
	D. Discourses of the Talmidei Hachamim	14
	E. Study on Shabbat and the Talmid Hacham	17
Chapter III	Personal Characteristics of the Talmid Hacham	19
	A. Proper Conduct of the Talmid Hacham	20
	B. Conduct Forbidden to the Talmid Hacham	23
	C. Piety of the Talmid Hacham	26
	D. Behavior of the Talmid Hacham	27
	E. Pride of the Talmid Hacham	29
	F. The Talmid Hacham and Sin	30
	G. Dress and Appearance of the Talmid Hacham	31
	H. The Personality of the Talmid Hacham	32
	I. The Talmid Hacham as Posek	34
	J. Residence of the Talmid Hacham	39
Chapter IV	The Paired Study Method of the Talmid Hacham	
	A. Study with Another Talmid Hacham	42
	B. Learning from One of Less Knowledge or Status	44
Chapter V	Talmidei Hachamim Within Their Own Community	
	A. Treatment of One Talmid Hacham by Another	46
	B. Disagreements Among Talmidei Hachamim	48
	C. Differences Between Talmidei Hachamim	51

Chapter VI	Attitudes Toward the <u>Talmid Hacham</u>	
	A. Mistreatment of the <u>Talmid Hacham</u>	53
	B. Comparisons to the Divine Presence, Prophets and Royalty	56
	C. Respect for the <u>Talmid Hacham</u>	58
	D. Support of the <u>Talmid Hacham</u> and its Reward	62
	E. Consequences for Failing to Support the <u>Talmid Hacham</u>	68
	F. Support of the <u>Talmid Hacham</u> When it is Beyond One's Means	69
	G. Support of the <u>Talmid Hacham</u> as an Example for Others	71
Chapter VII	Love for the <u>Talmid Hacham</u> and the Blessing of Scholarly Sons	
	A. Desire to Study with <u>Talmidei Hachamim</u>	73
	B. The Blessing of Scholarly Sons	77
Chapter VIII	Death of the <u>Talmid Hacham</u>	
	A. Special Nature of the Death of a <u>Talmid Hacham</u>	81
	B. Privileges of the Dying and Deceased <u>Talmid Hacham</u>	82
	C. Eulogy of the <u>Talmid Hacham</u>	84
Chapter IX	Conclusion	86
Bibliography		93
Index of Rabbinic Passages		97

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout the rabbinic literature are found a multitude of comments, aphorisms and descriptions regarding the talmid hacham. This phrase can be easily defined as "scholar" or "learned sage," yet such facile definition ignores the multifaceted nature encompassed by the concept of the talmid hacham. The goal of this thesis is to examine, in a thematic fashion, selected rabbinic passages that concern themselves with the concept of the talmid hacham.

The ultimate status that one could hope to reach, in the view of the rabbis, was that of the talmid hacham. Attaining this status was an ideal for which one strove through many years of training and study. There is no doubt that leadership within the Jewish community has been linked to one's reputation as a learned Jew. The rabbinic literature is replete with stories of how individual sages dedicated themselves with complete devotion in order to become learned men.

In order to sift through the wide array of rabbinic material several concordances were consulted. These secondary sources led this author to passages within the primary sources that dealt with or characterized the talmid hacham. A complete listing of the specific sources and editions that were employed in the collection of the relevant passages may be found in the bibliography. These

passages were collected from rabbinic sources, including halachic and aggadic material from Midrash, Mishnah and Talmud, analyzed for their content and then grouped thematically. From this process, several dominant themes emerged within the literature. These themes may be seen in the chapters and sub-sections of this thesis. Many of the ideas discussed in one section overlap ideas discussed in a different chapter or section. This overlapping is a reflection of the rabbinic literature in which many themes are presented not as discrete ideas, but in compliment and consonance with other themes.

The primary questions that this thesis set out to answer are: How does one define a talmid hacham? What are the qualities and characteristics that the talmid hacham must possess? How can one attain this title and, once attained, what is the nature of the lifestyle to which a talmid hacham must adhere? How is the talmid hacham to treat his colleague and how are the talmidei hachamim to be treated by the laity? The main chapters and sub-sections of this thesis are made up of the responses that the rabbinic literature provides to these questions. A discussion of the meaning and significance of the rabbinic concept of the talmid hacham in light of the cited passages accompanies each section.

The final chapter of this thesis is made up of the conclusions that may be drawn in answer to the questions posed. From the rabbinic passages and the accompanying discussions and conclusions, one is able to gain a full understanding of the nature and meaning of the term talmid hacham.

Throughout this thesis the author has made use of translations of rabbinic passages in order to make this material accessible to all readers, regardless of their level of proficiency in Hebrew and Talmudic Aramaic. The 'Index of Rabbinic Passages' that is found in Appendix I will guide a reader to the original loci of the passages cited.

It should be noted that for the purposes of this study the particular context from which a cited passage is taken has been largely ignored, except in the few instances in which context was crucial to an understanding of the passage. For the most part, however, the passages that refer to the talmid hacham may be understood in their own right, irrespective of their context.



## CHAPTER II

### THE TALMID HACHAM AND THE NATURE OF HIS STUDIES

#### A. The Importance of Study

"A great thing is scholarship: If they [who possess it] are old, they are beloved; if they are young, their youthfulness is a secondary factor."<sup>1</sup> This is just one of many statements throughout the rabbinic literature that speak to the revered status of the talmid hacham. The talmid hacham claims his special place within the rabbinic society on the basis of his learning, his knowledge, in sum, his scholarship. He must study in order to attain a complete knowledge of the holy books of Judaism. The talmid hacham, stripped of his learning, is stripped of all he possesses. His studies, his quest for knowledge must be an ongoing process, one without end. And this continual expansion of his learning is not without its reward. For as R. Nahman b. Isaac said:

To the students who make their foreheads  
wrinkled because of their study of the  
Law in this world, God will reveal  
mysteries in the world to come.<sup>2</sup>

In another passage, this one in Deuteronomy Rabbah, R.

---

<sup>1</sup>Leviticus Rabbah, XI:8, in Midrash Rabbah, H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, eds., London: The Soncino Press, 1983, vol. IV, p.150.

<sup>2</sup>Hagigah 14a, in C.G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, A Rabbinic Anthology, New York: Schocken Books, 1974, p. 598.



Nahman also said: "He who loves Torah can never have sufficient of Torah."<sup>3</sup> Reinforcing the same point we find:

The Rabbis said: This verse ['He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver.' (Ecclesiastes 5:9)] refers to scholars who love the words of the Torah which is compared to silver....<sup>4</sup>

The rabbis recognized the dichotomy between study and action and in a passage from Kiddushin debated the relative merits of each.

Once R. Tarfon and the elders sat in the upper chamber of the house of Nitzah in Lydda, and the question was raised, 'Is study greater, or doing?' R. Tarfon said, 'Doing was greater.' Akiba said, 'Study was greater.' Then they all said that study was greater, for it led to doing.<sup>5</sup>

As important as righteous behavior was to the rabbis this passage clarifies the greater priority for them. Though study devoid of action was frowned upon, when put to the final test, the rabbis came down on the side of study as the greater of the two obligations. If this was true for the common man, how much more true it was for not only the established talmid hacham, but also the budding talmid hacham. In Hullin the talmidei hachamim of Israel are

---

<sup>3</sup>Deuteronomy Rabbah, II:26-27, in Midrash Rabbah, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. VII, p. 55.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Kiddushin 40b, in A Rabbinic Anthology, p. 183.

likened to the grape clusters on a vine, for they are sweet due to their study of Torah.<sup>6</sup>

Avot d'Rabbi Natan also stresses the ongoing process of study in which the talmid hacham must engage.

R. Meir said: If you have studied under one teacher, say not, 'It is enough for me'; but go to [another] scholar and study Torah under him.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, this passage teaches:

It is incumbent upon a man to attend upon three scholars....Go not, however, to anyone, but to him who is akin to you from the outset.<sup>8</sup>

Several meanings have been adduced for the phrase 'him who is akin to you.' Some have said that it means that one should study with scholars who live in close proximity. Others interpret it to mean that one should study with a talmid hacham who is sincere and to whom the Torah is dear, while others still take it to mean that the proper talmid hacham with whom to study is the one who can best take into account your capabilities and prior level of knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Each of these interpretations possesses its own validity.

---

<sup>6</sup>Hullin 92a, in The Rabbinic Anthology, p. 183.

<sup>7</sup>Avot d'Rabbi Natan 19a, in The Babylonian Talmud: The Minor Tractates, A. Cohen, ed., London: The Soncino Press, 1965, p. 31.

<sup>8</sup>Avot d'Rabbi Natan 19a-b, A. Cohen, ed., p. 31.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., footnote 12.

Perhaps the best talmid hacham to study with would be he who embodies all three meanings of the verse.

#### B. Curriculum for the Talmid Hacham

The basic curriculum over which the talmid hacham had to attain mastery consisted essentially of Bible, Mishnah, Midrash, and later, Talmud. Of course, included in these categories were both the halachic and aggadic sections of the traditional writings. Regarding the talmid hacham's knowledge of the Scriptures, R. Simeon b. Lakish is quoted as saying:

Just as a bride is adorned with twenty-four ornaments [enumerated in Isaiah 3:18-24], and if one is missing she cannot pass muster, so a Rabbinical scholar should be conversant with the twenty-four books of the Scriptures, and if he is not conversant with one of them he cannot pass muster.<sup>10</sup>

"That this injunction was strictly fulfilled by the student is clear from the facility and frequency with which the Rabbis quoted the Prophets and the Hagiographa."<sup>11</sup> We find

---

<sup>10</sup>Song of Songs Rabbah, IV:11.1, in Midrash Rabbah, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. IX, p. 214; also, Exodus Rabbah, XLI:5, in Midrash Rabbah, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. III, p. 474-475.

<sup>11</sup>Solomon Schechter, Aspects of Rabbinic Theology, New York: Schocken Books, 1961, p. 122.

in Derech Eretz Zuta a passage which states: "...He who learnt Scripture and Mishnah...is a scholar."<sup>12</sup>

This held true even if the young scholar had merely studied and learned these works, but had not yet had a chance to expound on them.<sup>13</sup> In Avot d'Rabbi Natan R. Eleazar b. Shammua employs a beautiful image to describe the different levels of learning of the talmid hacham.

There are three types of disciple: a cut stone, a corner-stone and a plinth. 'A cut stone'-what does this describe? The disciple who has studied Midrash only, so that whenever a scholar comes to consult him on a Midrashic subject he can enlighten him. Such a one is like a cut stone which has only one polished surface. 'A corner-stone'-what does this describe? The disciple who has studied Midrash and halakoth, so that whenever a scholar comes to consult him either on a Midrashic or halakic subject he can enlighten him. Such a one is like a corner-stone which has two polished surfaces. 'A plinth'-what does this describe? The disciple who has studied Midrash, halakoth, 'aggadoth and tosephoth so that whenever a scholar comes to consult him on a subject in the Midrash, in the halakoth, in the 'aggadoth or in the tosephoth he can enlighten him. Such a one is like a plinth which has four polished surfaces on its four sides.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup>Derech Eretz Zuta 59a, in The Babylonian Talmud: The Minor Tractates, A. Cohen, ed., p. 595.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Avot d'Rabbi Natan 28b, A. Cohen, ed., p. 137.

This last category of scholar, the one compared to the plinth, is the level to which each talmid hacham aspired. This could be done if one heeded the advice found in Kallah wherein it states:

If he is a scholar let him occupy himself with the Torah, with study and good deeds and 'aggadoth....<sup>15</sup>

#### C. The Priority of Study Over Other Endeavors

The talmid hacham was not supposed to study so as to fulfill his own sense of pride or ambition. He was required to study out of a sense of love of Torah as we read in Nedarim:

'Woe is me, for I have used the crown of the Law for my own profit.' For the teaching ran: 'A man must not say, I will study, so as to be called a wise man, or Rabbi, or an elder, or to have a seat in the College, but he must study from love; the honour will come of itself.'<sup>16</sup>

On the same page in Nedarim this theme is further discussed.

He who makes use of the crown of the Law is rooted out of the world. Do the words of the Law for the doing's sake, and speak of them for their own sake. Make them not a crown with which to exalt thyself....<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>Kallah 50b, in The Babylonian Talmud: The Minor Tractates, A. Cohen, ed., p. 402.

<sup>16</sup>Nedarim 62a, in The Rabbinic Anthology, p. 278.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

A variant passage, attributed to Hillel, is found in Avot.  
 "...One who makes worldly use of the crown [of the Law]  
 shall waste away [he will abandon his faith and his  
 people].<sup>18</sup>

Indeed it was the opposite of this type of mismotivated  
 study which is idealized in a passage from Ecclesiastes  
Rabbah:

Who is a disciple of the Sages? R.  
 Abbahu said in the name of R. Johanan:  
 Whoever neglects his personal affairs  
 for his study.<sup>19</sup>

This then was the goal, to study to the exclusion of one's  
 personal business. If this was done then one created the  
 opportunity in which to truly study and learn so that he  
 could properly answer any question posed to him regarding  
 the halachah. When this was the case then one could be  
 considered a talmid hacham.<sup>20</sup> A similar passage is found in  
Sotah in which we learn that:

Any disciple of the sages who occupies  
 himself with Torah in poverty will have  
 his prayer heard.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup>Avot I:13, in Philip Blackman, Ethics of the Fathers,  
 New York: Judaica Press, 1964, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup>Ecclesiastes Rabbah, VII:6.1, in Midrash  
Rabbah, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. VIII, p. 180.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Sotah 49a, The Babylonian Talmud, I.  
 Epstein, trans., London: The Soncino Press.



Whereas these passages address the issue of the talmid hacham who studies to the exclusion of all else, there is another category of passages that discusses the talmid hacham who interrupts his study, usually to engage in more worldly matters. In Hagigah we learn: "A scholar who abandons study is like a bird that strays from the nest."<sup>22</sup> In addition, in Exodus Rabbah we are told: "A scholar who busies himself with communal affairs forgets his learning."<sup>23</sup> In Derech Eretz Zuta we read that anyone who engages in much business cannot be a talmid hacham.<sup>24</sup> Likewise in Lamentations Rabbah the talmid hacham who forsakes his study to seek out a livelihood is compared to a hallowed stone whose contents are poured out.<sup>25</sup> So it is with the talmid hacham; when he goes out to earn a living his hallowed occupation, namely his study, is reduced within him. In a more stringent view we find in Avot d'Rabbi Natan:

Any scholar who once studied the Torah

---

<sup>22</sup>Hagigah 9b, in Reuben Alcalay, A Basic Encyclopedia of Jewish Proverbs, Quotations, and Folk Wisdom, Jerusalem: Massada Press Ltd., 1973 and Bridgeport: Hartmore House Publishers, column 428.

<sup>23</sup>Exodus Rabbah, VI:2, Reuben Alcalay, column 429.

<sup>24</sup>Derech Eretz Zuta 58b, A. Cohen, ed., p. 576.

<sup>25</sup>Lamentations Rabbah, IV:1, in Midrash Rabbah, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. VII, p. 215.

and abandoned it has no portion in the world to come.<sup>26</sup>

In a midrash on the book of Esther we learn that

the measure in which Mordecai gained in worldly power and consideration, he lost spiritually, because the business connected with his high political station left him no time for the study of the Torah. Previously he had ranked sixth among the eminent scholars of Israel, he now dropped to the seventh place among them.<sup>27</sup>

Thus we see that although Mordecai increased his standing in worldly affairs, his learning suffered. Repeatedly we see from these passages that continuous study was emphasized.

Anything that detracted from the talmid hacham's ability to study was to be avoided. There were, however, exceptions. In Avot d'Rabbi Natan the talmidei hachamim are instructed as follows:

Should two scholars be sitting engaged in the study of the Torah, and a bridal procession of a cotege passes by them, if there are sufficient people present to attend to the needs of the occasion, let them not interrupt their studies; otherwise it is their duty to rise and cheer and applaud the bride or accompany the dead to the grave.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup>Avot d'Rabbi Natan 32a, A. Cohen, ed., p. 182.

<sup>27</sup>Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1982, vol. IV, p. 445.

<sup>28</sup>Avot d'Rabbi Natan 20a, A. Cohen, ed., p. 35.



This passage illustrates that although study was viewed by the rabbis as the most important endeavor of the talmid hacham, he must refrain from study if the need to perform a mitzvah arose. However, if the mitzvah was being performed properly and adequately by others, there was no need for the talmidei hachamim to interrupt their studies. Were it in fact necessary to stop studying to greet the bride or accompany the dead, or for any other reason, the talmidei hachamim were to be careful to resume their studies with the same material with which they had left off. Failure to do so would result in premature death as we learn from a passage in Avot d'Rabbi Natan:

Why do disciples of the Sages [often] die young? It is not because they are immoral or because they rob; but because they interrupt their study of Torah to indulge in idle talk. Moreover, [when returning to their studies] they do not begin where they left off.<sup>29</sup>

Although the rabbis frowned upon forsaking study in order to engage in business they were willing to accept such a talmid hacham when he wished to return to his studies, regardless of how much time had passed. In Exodus Rabbah we read:

Imagine a prince who has been taken captive across the sea when small; even after the lapse of many years he is not abashed, for he consoles himself by saying: 'I will return to the

---

<sup>29</sup>Avot d'Rabbi Natan 27b, A. Cohen, ed., p. 130.

possession of my ancestors! So it is with a scholar who departs from the study of the Torah and engages in other pursuits, yet even after many years have elapsed when he wishes to return [to its study] he is not abashed, because he says: 'I am returning to the heritage of my ancestors.'<sup>30</sup>

#### D. Discourses of the Talmidei Hachamim

Following his mastery of a text it was customary for a talmid hacham to provide his fellow talmidei hachamim and students with a discourse on what he had learned. This was not merely a type of test, it was instead an act whose very nature engendered holiness.

Hence it follows that when a scholar sits and expounds the Torah in an assembly, Scripture accounts it to him as though he had offered the fat and the blood [of a sacrifice] upon the altar.<sup>31</sup>

In a period when the sacrificial cult had ceased to function the talmidei hachamim replaced those acts of holiness with acts of Torah study. The academy represented the altar upon which his words were offered. Furthermore, we read in Shabbat that one who listens to such a discourse and is not moved by the special nature of the words is punished.

...For R. Giddal said in Rab's name: If any scholar sits before his teacher and

<sup>30</sup>Exodus Rabbah, XXXIII:7, in Midrash Rabbah, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. III, pp. 422-423.

<sup>31</sup>Avot d'Rabbi Natan 20a, A. Cohen, ed., p. 35.

his lips do not drip bitterness [caused by his awe and reverence], they shall be burnt....<sup>32</sup>

From this we learn that a talmid hacham was to take seriously the knowledge and the discourse of his fellow. 'Lips dripping with bitterness' can be understood to mean that one should not engage in study in a light-hearted manner.<sup>33</sup> It is then somewhat surprising to find in the same passage from Shabbat this reference:

Even as Rabbah before he commenced [his discourse] before the scholars used to say something humorous, and the scholars were cheered; after that he sat in awe and began the discourse.<sup>34</sup>

It appears that for all of their serious study the talmidei hachamim also realized the need to be in the proper mind set before commencing their study. Perhaps Rabbah had discovered, through trial and error, that a small amount of levity relaxed his listeners and so made them more at ease and receptive to his words. After the passage discusses Rabbah's resort to humor, it is careful to indicate that he adopted a more serious tone before actually beginning his discourse.

---

<sup>32</sup>Shabbat 30b, The Babylonian Talmud, I. Epstein, trans.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

The discourses of the talmidei hachamim were a regular part of the daily life of a talmid hacham. Derech Eretz Zuta offers this advice to the talmid hacham:

Sit before the Elders and incline your ear to hear their words. Listen carefully to the words of your fellow; be not hasty to answer but give proper thought to your words. Speak not before him who is greater than you in wisdom.<sup>35</sup>

The rabbis realized that in an environment of such intense learning there might have been the tendency for one to be ashamed should he find himself unable to master a particular point of law. This could be especially true in an academy in which there were many of greater learning than oneself. The rabbis were sensitive to these feelings and so in Derech Eretz Zuta we read:

If you desire to study, do not say regarding what you do not understand, 'I understand'. If you are questioned on [even] a trivial matter and you are not acquainted with it, be not ashamed to say, 'I do not know'. If you were taught something which you did not grasp, be not ashamed to say [to the teacher], 'Repeat it to me' and do not pretend to yourself 'I understood it'.<sup>36</sup>

The close of this passage is especially interesting in that it indicates on the part of the rabbis an understanding of the fact that it was not merely to others that one might try to pretend he understood a particular point, but also to

---

<sup>35</sup>Derech Eretz Zuta 58b, A. Cohen, ed., p. 571.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

one's own self. With this final verse they were addressing an aspect of human nature which arises when one feels he ought to know something either because he has already learned it or because others around him seem to be grasping it. Taking this into account the rabbis still stressed that in such a circumstance one must not attempt to fool oneself or anyone else, instead he must ask to have the lesson taught again, so that he might yet learn it.

#### E. Study on Shabbat and the Talmid Hacham

In a discussion in Pesahim in which the proper use of the Sabbath is disputed, the issue of the talmid hacham's study arises.

R. Hiyya b. Abba said: The Sabbath was given for enjoyment. R. Samuel b. Nahmani said: The Sabbath was given for studying the Torah. The one saying does not contradict the other. R. Hiyya referred to scholars who spend the week studying the Torah; when the Sabbath comes, they enjoy themselves, whereas R. Samuel was thinking of labourers, who are busy with work all the week, and on the Sabbath they come and study the Torah.<sup>37</sup>

This passage points out two matters germane to our present discussion. First, Torah study was not an activity that belonged solely to the talmidei hachamim. It could be and was to be engaged in by everyone. Second, although we have

---

<sup>37</sup>Pesikta Rabbati 121a, in A Rabbinic Anthology, p. 195.

already seen that the talmid hacham was not to interrupt his study, neither was he expected to study constantly without a break. Since the talmid hacham studied Torah all week, the Sabbath was the time in which it was permissible to cease his study, relax and enjoy the pleasures of the Sabbath. This break was perhaps as important as the hours in which he studied, for it provided the talmid hacham, on a weekly basis, with a chance to renew and refresh himself. Following the Sabbath he could approach his studies with the vigor of a new week.

### CHAPTER III

#### PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TALMID HACHAM

Throughout the rabbinic literature are passages that provide lists of characteristics with which a talmid hacham should be imbued. Some of these passages discuss the positive attributes of a talmid hacham, while others address negative features that a talmid hacham ought not to possess. The sum of this material provides a kind of definition to the question, 'What is a talmid hacham?' A short citation in Ecclesiastes Rabbah asks, "Who is as the wise man?"<sup>38</sup> It answers, "This alludes to a Rabbinical scholar."<sup>39</sup> Ben Zoma in Avot asks: "Who is wise?"<sup>40</sup> and answers his question with, "He who learns from all men, as it is said, 'From all my teachers I have gotten understanding.'"<sup>41</sup> This passage addresses the matter of the education of the talmid hacham. The present discussion shall focus on those aspects or characteristics of the talmid hacham which are not primarily in the realm of study and learning.

---

<sup>38</sup>Ecclesiastes Rabbah, VIII:1.4, in Midrash Rabbah, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. IX, p. 215.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Avot IV:1, in A Rabbinic Anthology, p. 490.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.



# A. Proper Conduct of the Talmid Hacham

In Derech Eretz Zuta, a work written primarily for scholars regarding their proper conduct, we read in the opening passage:

The characteristics of a scholar are that he is meek, humble, alert, filled [with a desire for learning], modest, beloved by all, humble to the members of his household and sin-fearing. He judges a man [fairly] according to his deeds, and says 'I have no desire for all the things of this world because this world is not for me'. He sits and studies, soiling his cloak at the feet of the scholars. In him no one sees any evil. He questions according to the subject-matter and answers to the point.<sup>42</sup>

In a number of other passages from the same work we learn that:

A scholar is recognised by his conduct as regards money, and drinking; also by the control of his temper, by his dress, and, some say also, by his speech. Let the scholar be seemly and quiet in his eating, drinking, bathing, anointing, tying his shoes, his gait, his dress, his voice, and in his charitable deeds.<sup>43</sup>

Also we read that:

A scholar should not eat standing, lick his fingers or belch in the presence of

---

<sup>42</sup>Derech Eretz Zuta I:1, A. Cohen, ed., p. 567.

<sup>43</sup>Derech Eretz Zuta 58b, two citations, A. Cohen, ed., pp. 581 and 584.



his fellow. He talks little, jokes little, sleeps in moderation [and] is frugal in pleasures....<sup>44</sup>

In a longer list of the characteristics of a talmid hacham, Derech Eretz Zuta teaches that the following fifteen are associated with the scholar.

He is decorous in his entering and leaving, modest in his sitting, subtle in the fear [of God], shrewd in knowledge, discerning in his ways, [his mind] is absorptive and retentive, he answers fully, asks in accordance with the subject-matter and answers in accordance with the accepted decisions, listens [to others] and enlarges upon each subject, goes [to seek instruction] from the wise and learns in order to teach and practise.<sup>45</sup>

This point is further stressed in a shorter passage from the same work where we read: "A scholar must be modest in his deeds, and must be recognised by his seemly ways."<sup>46</sup> These passages provide us with a good overall view of the proper behavior of the scholar. The common thread is the stress on moderation, modesty and humility. That not all talmidei hachamim were modest can be learned from a passage in Baba Metzia where we read:

One coin in a bottle rattles; a bottle full of coins makes no sound; so the scholar who is the son a scholar is

---

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 581.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 576.

<sup>46</sup>Derech Eretz Zuta, VII:3, in A Rabbinic Anthology, p. 486.

modest; the scholar who is the son of an Am ha-Aretz trumpets his knowledge around.<sup>47</sup>

The literature is careful not to make the talmid hacham a complete ascetic, nor should he be a man ruled by his passions. He must be an upright individual whose main concern is with his learning and studies. Those things deemed important by society at large must be of little concern to him.

In Avot d'Rabbi Natan a distinction is made between those characteristics that mark one a talmid hacham and those that mark one a boor.

Seven things mark...the wise man. [The wise man does not speak before one who is greater than he in wisdom and in years, and does not break in upon the words of his fellow, and is not hasty to answer; he asks to the point and answers according to the accepted decision; he speaks on the first point first and on the last point last;] and of what he has not heard a tradition he says, 'I have not heard'; and he is not ashamed to acknowledge the truth.<sup>48</sup>

It is obvious that the themes in this passage agree with those found in Derech Eretz Zuta. In a similar vein to the above-quoted midrashim, the Sifre on Deuteronomy teaches that: "...Students of the Law are recognised in the street

---

<sup>47</sup>Baba Metzia 85b, in A Rabbinic Anthology, p. 471.

<sup>48</sup>Avot d'Rabbi Natan 32b, A. Cohen, ed., p. 186.

by their walk, their speech, and their dress."<sup>49</sup> All of these passages stress the appearance of the talmid hacham as he will be viewed by those outside the community of scholars. His every manner must be above reproach. He must be a role model in his habits and practices.

#### B. Conduct Forbidden to the Talmid Hacham

Just as the rabbinic literature provides lists of how the talmid hacham should act, so, too, it provides list of actions and behaviors that are not proper for a talmid hacham. Brachot provides this listing of six forbidden acts:

To go tipsy to market, to go out alone at night, to wear patched shoes, to speak with a woman in the market-place, to consort with boors and to be the last to enter the synagogue.<sup>50</sup>

Derech Eretz Zuta lists four behaviors unbecoming of a talmid hacham.

One should not start out on a journey by night, go out scented, be the last to enter the Synagogue, or frequent the society of ignorant persons.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup>Sifre Deuteronomy, Berachah 343, in A Rabbinic Anthology, p. 165.

<sup>50</sup>Brachot 43b, in Reuben Alcalay, column 427.

<sup>51</sup>Derech Eretz Zuta 58b, A. Cohen, ed., p. 582.

The issue of a talmid hacham's behavior is also noted in a passage in Pesachim where we learn that:

Every scholar who feasts much in every place, eventually destroys his home, widows his wife, orphans his young, forgets his learning, and becomes involved in many quarrels; his words are unheeded, and he desecrates the Name of heaven and the name of his teacher and the name of his father, and he causes an evil name for himself, his children, and his childrens' children until the end of time.<sup>52</sup>

This passage makes clear the penalty that the talmid hacham would incur were he to lack moderation in his eating habits. The details of his penalty can be understood as follows:

His fondness for feasting elsewhere leads him to do the same in his own home, and to make it possible he must sell his furniture, etc. Seeing himself on the road to ruin, he wanders into exile, leaving his wife and children widowed and orphaned. He wastes his time, so forgets his learning. This involves him in disputes on learning. Or, his poverty involves him in disputes with tradesmen because he cannot settle his bills. Again, the banqueting table itself is a fruitful source of quarrels.<sup>53</sup>

Additionally, in Brachot we read: A scholar is forbidden to stand in a place of filth, because he must not stand still without meditating on the Torah."<sup>54</sup> There is a school of

---

<sup>52</sup>Pesachim 49a, I. Epstein, trans.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., footnote C-7.

<sup>54</sup>Brachot 24b, I. Epstein, trans.

thought that states that rules regarding the prohibition of forbidden acts are only enumerated after people have performed them. So, we may safely conclude that the talmidei hachamim were warned against behaving in particular ways precisely because there were those among them who acted thusly.

There are a number of other, shorter passages that discuss the actions of the talmid hacham. In Leviticus Rabbah we read: "...A scholar who lacks sensibility, a carcass is better than he."<sup>55</sup> The Tanna debe Eliyahu contains a nearly identical passage. "If a scholar has no good taste, an animal is better than he."<sup>56</sup> In Yoma we are told: "Any scholar whose inside is not like his outside [who is not sincere and honest] is no scholar...or...he is called abominable."<sup>57</sup> Brachot contains a variant passage that reads, "A scholar who is not sincere and honest should not enter a synagogue."<sup>58</sup> It is clear from these passages that the talmid hacham had to be an honest, genuine person. His daily actions necessarily had to reflect the morality contained in the books he studied.

---

<sup>55</sup>Leviticus Rabbah, I:15, in Midrash Rabbah, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. IV, p. 18.

<sup>56</sup>Tanna debe Eliyahu, page 33, in A Rabbinic Anthology, p. 486.

<sup>57</sup>Yoma 72b, The Babylonian Talmud, I. Epstein, trans.

<sup>58</sup>Brachot 28a, in Reuben Alcalay, column 427.

### C. Piety of the Talmid Hacham

One place this had to be true was in regard to the talmid hacham's fear of God and Heaven. In the continuation of the passage from Yoma that was previously cited we read:

Woe the disciples of the wise who occupy themselves with the Torah, but have no fear of God. Woe to him who has not house, but makes a door for it. R. Joshua b. Levi said: Is his intent pure [be he worthy], the Law is made for him a medicine of life: if it is not, it made for a medicine of death.<sup>59</sup>

Similarly, in Derech Eretz Zuta we find a passage regarding the scholar wherein it states:

One who has wisdom but no fear [of God] is contemptible; [one who has] fear [of God] but no wisdom is poor; [one who has] neither wisdom nor fear [of God] is thoroughly wicked; [one who has] wisdom and fear [of God] is thoroughly righteous.<sup>60</sup>

This aspect of the talmid hacham was of particular importance. The talmid hacham had to be a pious, God-fearing individual if he was to be able to transmit that set of values to others. To be identified as a talmid hacham yet lack proper fear of God would be hypocritical, and would have opened up the entire community of talmidei hachamim to attacks by their detractors. There existed a standard of

---

<sup>59</sup>Yoma 72b, in A Rabbinic Anthology, p. 147.

<sup>60</sup>Derech Eretz Zuta 59a, A. Cohen, ed., p. 596.



behavior for the talmidei hachamim and they were rigorous in their attention to it.

#### D. Behavior of the Talmid Hacham

As we have seen, there were a number of prohibitions regarding the behavior of the talmid hacham. Some of the passages in the literature become very specific in regard to what the talmid hacham was permitted or prohibited to do.

In Taanit the talmid hacham is instructed:

A scholar is not allowed to impose fasts upon himself, because it makes him lessen his heavenly work.<sup>61</sup>

A mishnah in Pesachim addresses the issue of work on the ninth of Av, the day that is observed to commemorate the destruction of both the first and second Temples. In regard to the common man, the mishnah teaches:

Where it is the custom to do work on the Ninth of Av, one may do it; where it is the custom not to work, one may not do it.<sup>62</sup>

However, such is not the way of the talmid hacham. In this same mishnah and in a passage attributed to R. Akiba in Derech Eretz Zuta, we learn that in all places, regardless of the custom, talmidei hachamim are to abstain from work on

---

<sup>61</sup>Taanit 11b, in A Rabbinic Anthology, p. 529.

<sup>62</sup>Pesachim 54b, I. Epstein, trans.

the ninth of Av.<sup>63</sup> This passage is just one example of how the talmid hacham follows a different standard than the common man. Another example, interesting in its own light, is found in Shabbat. It regards permission to have sexual intercourse during the daylight hours.

The Israelites are holy, and do not cohabit by day! But Raba said: If the house is in darkness, it is permitted. Raba also said-others state, R. Papa: A scholar may cause darkness with his garment, and it is [then] permitted.<sup>64</sup>

On a more ordinary and expected note we find a passage in Tanna debe Eliyahu that instructs the talmid hacham to go early to the synagogue and to the betai midrash.<sup>65</sup> Again we see that the talmid hacham was expected to follow a more vigorous set of standards than the ordinary person. A passage which typifies this is found in Soferim where it is taught:

Scholars fast on Mondays and Thursdays [throughout the year] on account of the desecration of the name of God and for the honour of the Temple which was burnt.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup>Pesahim 54b, I. Epstein, trans.; also, Derech Eretz Rabbah 57b, A. Cohen, ed., p. 564.

<sup>64</sup>Shabbat 86a, I. Epstein, trans.

<sup>65</sup>Tanna debe Eliyahu, Pseudo-Seder Eliyahu Zuta, p. 37, in A Rabbinic Anthology, p. 326.

<sup>66</sup>Soferim 43a, A. Cohen, ed., p. 317.



There can be no doubt that the stricter standards for the talmid hacham were especially operative regarding his study and prayer habits.

#### E. Pride of the Talmid Hacham

Given the relatively strict code of behavior to which the talmid hacham had to adhere, the rabbis were also aware that the talmidei hachamim were people and might, because of their vast learning, legitimately feel a sense of pride. The rabbis permitted this so long as it was kept in check, as we learn from a passage in Sotah.

R. Hiyya b. Ashi said in the name of Rab: A disciple of the Sages should possess an eighth [of pride][i.e., a small amount]. R. Huna the son of R. Joshua said: [This small amount of pride] crowns him like the awn of the grain. Raba said: [A disciple of the Sages] who possesses [haughtiness of spirit] [i.e., too much pride] deserves excommunication and if he does not possess it [i.e., a small amount of pride] he deserves excommunication.<sup>67</sup>

What is the reason for all this? It is that a small amount of pride enabled the scholar to maintain his self-respect and effectively exercise his authority whereas too much pride manifested itself in a self-centeredness that was improper. The talmid hacham walked a thin line between adequate and excess pride in his own accomplishments. A

---

<sup>67</sup>Sotah 5a, I. Epstein, trans.

passage in Taanit responds to this difficulty and provides the following advice: "A scholar who is not as hard as iron is no scholar."<sup>68</sup>

#### F. The Talmid Hacham and Sin

No matter how hard the rabbis tried there were always some talmidei hachamim who fell into the grip of sin. The rabbis believed that, in some ways, the talmid hacham was at greater risk of committing a sinful act than the ordinary person due to his greater nature. In Sukkot a story is told about the potential power of the yetzer ha-ra, the evil inclination.

The evil yetzer attacks the scholars most of all. Abbaye once heard a man say to a woman, 'We will go away together,' as their road was the same. He thought, 'I will go and keep them back from sin.' He went after them for three parasangs along a meadow. When they separated from one another, they said, 'The way has been long, our companionship has been sweet, [they had walked together in innocence]. Then Abbaye said, 'If he who hates me [the yetzer] had thus encountered me, I could not have withstood him.' Then he went and leant against the bar of the door of his house, and was grieved. Then an old man came and said, 'He who is greater than his neighbour, his yetzer is also greater.'<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup>Taanit 4a, in Reuben Alcalay, column 429.

<sup>69</sup>Sukkot 52a, in A Rabbinic Anthology, p.

In this story the talmid hacham himself realizes his own weakness. He is aware of the special jeopardy into which his status as a talmid hacham places him. As Loewe has written in A Rabbinic Anthology, "In a scholar, the trifling neglect, venial in others, is culpable."<sup>70</sup> A clear example of this is found in Yoma:

What is profanation of the Name? Rab said: I [a scholar] profane it if I buy meat from the butcher, and do not pay him straightaway.<sup>71</sup>

Sanhedrin we learn that for certain sins a person is subject to the punishment of stripes only if he has previously received a warning. However, this is not true for the talmid hacham for it is assumed that he knew a priori that the act was forbidden.<sup>72</sup>

#### G. Dress and Appearance of the Talmid Hacham

We have already seen that a talmid hacham must be particular in his manner of dress and appearance. Two passages emphasize this point for they teach that an untidy talmid hacham is deserving of death. While neither statement should be understood in its literal sense, resort to this kind of hyperbole is indicative of the seriousness

---

<sup>70</sup>A Rabbinic Anthology, p. 397, comment by H. Loewe.

<sup>71</sup>Yoma 86a, in A Rabbinic Anthology, p. 397.

<sup>72</sup>Genesis Rabbah, XIX:1, in Midrash Rabbah, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. I, p. 148.

with which the rabbis viewed the talmid hacham's appearance. In Shabbat we read: "Any scholar upon whose garment a [grease] stain is found is worthy of death...."<sup>73</sup> Similarly in Avot d'Rabbi Natan we find:

Isi b. Judah said: Why do scholars [sometimes] die before their time? It is not because they are immoral or because they rob, but because they make themselves contemptible.<sup>74</sup>

In this passage 'contemptibility' refers to neglect of their own appearance.

#### H. The Personality of the Talmid Hacham

The rabbinic literature is replete with short passages that provide brief insights into the personality and make-up of the talmid hacham. In Shabbat, for example, we find:

R. Ishmael son of R. Jose said: As for scholars, the older they grow the more wisdom they acquire.<sup>75</sup>

Another complimentary passage is found in the opening of the fourth chapter of Derech Eretz Zuta, where it states:

"Scholars lend dignity to a company...."<sup>76</sup> We find in

<sup>73</sup>Shabbat 114a, I. Epstein, trans.

<sup>74</sup>Avot d'Rabbi Natan 28b, A. Cohen, ed., p. 142.

<sup>75</sup>Shabbat 152a, I. Epstein, trans.

<sup>76</sup>Derech Eretz Zuta 58b, A. Cohen, ed., p. 578.

Brachot a very favorable passage that teaches: "Scholars enhance peace in the world."<sup>77</sup>

In many ways the passage from Exodus Rabbah sums up the view of the talmid hacham:

[Scholars are as the tents of Kedar]:  
though they appear unprepossessing in  
this life, they are full of good things  
from within-Bible, Mishnah, Talmud,  
Halacha, Haggadah.<sup>78</sup>

Other comparisons are also made: In Avot d'Rabbi Natan we read: "A sponge and a glazed vessel describe the scholars."<sup>79</sup> In other words, the talmid hacham absorbs new learning and retains that which has already been learned. In Leviticus Rabbah we read: "R. Judah b. R. Simon said: These [craftsmen and smiths] denote scholars."<sup>80</sup> This refers to the talmidei hachamim who were skilled in their knowledge of Torah and who were carried off into exile in Babylonia. In the same work we also find the talmidei hachamim compared to branches of palm trees. This is said because the talmidei hachamim compel themselves to study Torah with one another. This midrash is based on a word-play on the Hebrew letters caf and fei which are found both

---

<sup>77</sup>Brachot 64a, in Reuben Alcalay, column 428.

<sup>78</sup>Exodus Rabbah, XXIII:10, in Midrash Rabbah, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. III, p. 289.

<sup>79</sup>Avot d'Rabbi Natan 34b, A. Cohen, ed., p. 208.

<sup>80</sup>Leviticus Rabbah, XI:7, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. IV, p. 146.

in the word for palm branch and the verb 'to compel.'<sup>81</sup> Ecclesiastes Rabbah compares the talmidei hachamim to the stars in heaven, but gives no clear reason for this comparison.<sup>82</sup> The characteristics that make up a talmid hacham and the definition of the talmid hacham are complex issues for which, as we have seen from the above passages, the rabbis employed a variety of images.

#### I. The Talmid Hacham as Posek

Another aspect of the talmid hacham worthy of exploration is the category of 'talmid hacham as posek', i.e., adjudicator. There are many references in the literature to instances in which the talmid hacham is asked a question of halacha, of law. In addition, there are a number of passages that contain general principles regarding the talmid hacham's ability to perform the task of legal interpretation and judgment. In this regard we find in Shabbat a passage in which R. Johanan asks: "Who is a scholar? He who is asked the halachah in any place and can state it."<sup>83</sup> The rabbis had every confidence in the ability of the talmid hacham to give a proper legal ruling. In

---

<sup>81</sup>Leviticus Rabbah, XXX:11, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. IV, p. 392.

<sup>82</sup>Ecclesiastes Rabbah, XII:7.1, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. VIII, p. 304.

<sup>83</sup>Shabbat 114a, I. Epstein, trans.



Eruvin we learn that: "It is fair to assume that a scholar will produce nothing that is not correct."<sup>84</sup> However, this is not to say that there were no disputes among the talmidei hachamim, for we read in Numbers Rabbah:

...Scholars sit in groups and study the Torah, some of them declaring a thing unclean, others declaring it clean; some pronouncing a thing to be forbidden, others pronouncing it to be permitted; some disqualifying an object, others declaring it fit.<sup>85</sup>

A variant of the above passage can also be found in Avot d'Rabbi Natan.<sup>86</sup> That numerous interpretations of the Torah were derived, each perhaps leading to a different understanding of the law, is also referred to in a midrash about Moses. The midrash tells of God revealing to Moses

the treasures of the Torah, of wisdom, and of knowledge, and the whole world's future. Now he [Moses] beheld in the inner chamber of God rows of scholars and judges interpreting the Torah in forty-nine different ways as they sat in the court of hewn stones...<sup>87</sup>

In Sotah an analogy is drawn in which each ruling that a talmid hacham must make is like confronting a crossroads. He passes over the crossroads unharmed when he rules in

---

<sup>84</sup>Eruvin 32a, in Reuben Alcalay, column 428.

<sup>85</sup>Numbers Rabbah, XIV:4, in Midrash Rabbah, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. VI, p. 576.

<sup>86</sup>Avot d'Rabbi Natan 25b, A. Cohen, ed., p. 105.

<sup>87</sup>Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, vol. II, p. 325.



accordance with the accepted halacha.<sup>88</sup> In the end it was expected that a talmid hacham would pronounce the proper ruling.

Two particular kinds of issues often ruled on by the talmidei hachamim were absolution of vows and matters of family purity. In Nedarim we read:

When they reached the passage of the Book of Numbers dealing with the remission of vows, the king put the question: "If a man desires to be released from a vow, what steps must he take?" The Sanhedrin replied: "He must repair to a scholar, and he will absolve him from his vow."<sup>89</sup>

Another story regarding vows tells of Jephtha, who wished to be released from a particular vow. However, as a punishment for his having slaughtered thousands of the tribe of Ephraim, the scholars mysteriously forgot the halacha pertinent to his case and refused to release him from his vow.<sup>90</sup>

Talmidei hachamim were forbidden to render a decision while under the influence of alcohol. In Numbers Rabbah we read: "...a Sage who has taken a fourth of a log of wine

---

<sup>88</sup>Sotah 21a, I. Epstein, trans.

<sup>89</sup>Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, vol. IV, p. 292; also Nedarim 56a.

<sup>90</sup>Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, vol. IV, p. 46.

must not give a decision."<sup>91</sup> A decision rendered under the influence might lead to a grievous sin. One such case is cited in both Leviticus Rabbah and Esther Rabbah. In these two works we read of an instance in which a man engages in sexual intercourse with his wife, even though it was during her menstrual period. In these cases, R. Assi said that should the talmid hacham be under the influence of alcohol "...he will in the end declare what is clean unclean and what is unclean clean."<sup>92</sup> That is to say, the drunk talmid hacham would issue an improper ruling due to his drunken state of mind. This could result in the violation of a forbidden act. Therefore, a talmid hacham was forbidden to render any decision while under the influence of alcohol.

Just as there are certain restrictions on the talmid hacham regarding his rendering of decisions when intoxicated, so, too, are there restrictions regarding his age and level of learning. In Sotah the phrase 'a minor whose months are not completed' is used as an example of one who brings about the destruction of the world. But the meaning of this phrase remained ambiguous and so the rabbis offered these definitions:

---

<sup>91</sup>Numbers Rabbah, X:4, in Midrash Rabbah, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. V, p. 354.

<sup>92</sup>Esther Rabbah, V:1, in Midrash Rabbah, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. IX, p. 65.

It refers to a disciple who rebels against the authority of his teachers. R. Abba said: It refers to a disciple who has not attained the qualification to decide questions of law and yet decides them; this refers to a disciple who has attained the qualification to decide questions of law and does not decide them. At what age [is he qualified]?-At forty. But it is not so, for Rabbah decided questions of Law!-[He did so only in a town where the Rabbis] were his equals.<sup>93</sup>

This passage addresses several issues of importance in the present discussion, namely, rendering a decision without proper qualification, failing to render a decision when one is able and called upon to do so, and the age at which one may render a decision. As would be expected, offering a legal opinion before one has the proper credentials is forbidden. Interestingly, however, we also learn that one who has the requisite learning commits a sin when he fails to render a decision if the task of doing so has fallen to him. In this light we understand a passage from Exodus Rabbah in which we learn:

R. Nehemiah said: ...As soon as he [the talmid hacham] is appointed head [of a community] and dons the cloak [of leadership], he must no longer say: 'I live for my own benefit, I care not about the congregation,' but the whole burden of the community is on his shoulders.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>93</sup>Sotah 22a-b, I. Epstein, trans.

<sup>94</sup>Exodus Rabbah, XXVII:9, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. III, p. 328.

In other words, once a talmid hacham is a recognized authority there can be no escape from the responsibilities that fall his way.

The qualifications necessary to become appointed the head of a community are delineated in Shabbat.

If [he is well versed only] in one Tractate, [he can be appointed] in his own town; if in the whole [field of] learning, [he can be appointed] as the head of an academy.<sup>95</sup>

This passage relates back to the earlier citation from Sotah where we learned that Rabbah rendered legal decisions prior to the accepted age of forty. In this instance he was the greatest talmid hacham in his own town and was therefore permitted to offer a decision.

#### J. Residence of the Talmid Hacham

The rabbis realized that the scholars did not live or work in seclusion, and as such, the greater community in which they lived was very important. For this reason we find the following passage in Sanhedrin:

A scholar should not reside in a city where the following ten things are not found: A court of justice...; a charity fund...; a Synagogue; public baths; a convenience; a circumciser; a surgeon; a notary; a slaughterer and a school-master.<sup>96</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup>Shabbat 114a, I. Epsteins, trans.

<sup>96</sup>Sanhedrin 17b, The Babylonian Talmud, I. Epstein, trans.

These ten items represent those institutions and individuals necessary to a Jewish community in order that the community may function properly and justly. Without them the community is at best incomplete, at worst wicked. In either case a scholar is forbidden to live in a place which lacks even one of these ten.

Kallah Rabbati contains a story about the nature of the town in which a scholar should live. The story is told by R. Jose b. Kisma.

Once I went on a journey when a man met me and greeted me. He asked me, 'Rabbi, from which place do you come?' I replied, 'From a great city of scholars and scribes'. He said to me, 'Rabbi, if you agreed to dwell with us in our place, I would give you a thousand thousand golden dinars and precious stones and pearls'. I replied, 'My son, were you to give me all the silver and gold and precious stones and pearls in the world, I would not dwell in any place but in a place of Torah. Because in the hour of a man's departure [from the world], neither silver nor gold nor precious stones and pearls accompany him but only Torah and good deeds....<sup>97</sup>

This story reveals several interesting characteristics within its relatively few lines. First it is noteworthy that when asked where he is from Jose b. Kisma replies not with the name of a particular place but rather with a description of that place, in this case "a great city of

---

<sup>97</sup>Kallah Rabbati 54a-b, The Minor Tractates of the Talmud, A. Cohen, ed., pp. 494-495.

scholars and scribes.' In his mind it is the presence of the scholars and scribes that makes the city great. Second, he declines to live in any place devoid of Torah and its students. It is, however, the reason for his decision that is most telling. Jose b. Kisma's concern is with the day of judgement following his death. He believes that it is only through learning and scholarship that he can attain a place in The World to Come. This, as we will see elsewhere, is a recurrent theme in the literature. Study and the attainment of the title 'talmid hacham' grants one many privileges, not the least of which is a place in The World to Come.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE PAIRED STUDY METHOD OF THE TALMID HACHAM

#### A. Study with Another Talmid Hacham

We have already seen that the talmid hacham is obliged to study in order to gain the requisite knowledge to be considered a talmid hacham. One aspect not fully discussed in Chapter I is the relationship between two or more talmidei hachamim. The nature of this relationship operates on both the personal level and on the level of fellow students of the Torah.

There is ample evidence in the literature to support the idea that talmidei hachamim were required to study with one another and that to do so brought them under the umbrella of good will of the Lord. On this point we find in Shabbat the following:

R. Jeremiah said in the name of R. Simeon b. Lakish: When two scholars are amiable to each other in [their discussions in] halachah, the holy One, blessed be He, gives heed to them....<sup>98</sup>

R. Abba, too, uses the saying of R. Simeon b. Lakish to make the same point.<sup>99</sup> On the same page we also find another attribution to R. Jeremiah along the same lines.

R. Jeremiah said in R. Eleazar's name: When two scholars sharpen each other in halachah, the Holy One, blessed be He,

---

<sup>98</sup>Shabbat 63a, I. Epstein, trans.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid.



gives them success....Moreover, they  
ascend to greatness....<sup>100</sup>

The idea of studying together in order to 'sharpen each other' in their knowledge of the halachah was an image frequently employed by the rabbis. In Avot, we learn that one is to "Procure thyself a teacher, [and] acquire unto thyself an associate...."<sup>101</sup> Today, when we think of the process involved in Talmud study it is this system of paired studying, called hevrusa in the language of the Yeshiva, that first comes to mind. This manner of study was the basis for the learning of the talmid hacham. The reason for it is made clear in a statement in Genesis Rabbah.

R. Hama b. R. Hanina commenced thus:  
°Iron sharpeneth iron...(Proverbs  
27:17) Said R. Hama b. R. Hanina: A  
knife can be sharpened only on the side  
of another knife; so can a scholar  
sharpen himself only through contact  
with his colleague.<sup>102</sup>

Perhaps it was to this midrash that the passage in Taanit refers to when it says, "A scholar who is not as hard as iron is no scholar."<sup>103</sup> In any case it is clear that talmidei hachamim must study together in order to advance their knowledge.

---

<sup>100</sup>Ibid.

<sup>101</sup>Avot I:6, Philip Blackman, p. 42.

<sup>102</sup>Genesis Rabbah, LXIX:2, in Midrash Rabbah, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. II, p. 630.

<sup>103</sup>Taanit 4a, in Reuben Alcalay, column 429.

## B. Learning from One of Less Knowledge or Status

One aspect of paired studying which is of particular interest is addressed in Song of Songs Rabbah.

Just as with water a great man is not ashamed to say to a lowly man, 'Give me a drink of water,' so with the words of the Torah, a great scholar must not be ashamed to say to a lesser one, 'Teach me one chapter, or one statement, or one verse, or even one letter.' Just as with water, if one does not know how to swim in it, he will be drowned, so with the words of the Torah, if one does not know how to thread his way in them and to instruct in accordance with them, he will ultimately come to grief.<sup>104</sup>

This passage is noteworthy for within it there is an implication of a hierarchy of scholars, some greater than others, and some lesser. However, this does not preclude a lesser scholar from the opportunity to teach Torah to one of his superiors.

Another passage, from Taanit, makes the same point:

R. Nahman b. Isaac said: Why are the words of the Torah likened to a tree? This is to teach you, just as a small tree may set on fire a bigger tree so too it is with scholars, the younger sharpen the minds of the older. This will be in agreement with what R. Hanina said: I have learnt much from my teachers, and from my colleagues more

---

<sup>104</sup>Song of Songs Rabbah, I:2.3, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. IX, p. 34.

than from my teachers, but from my  
disciples more than from them all.<sup>105</sup>

Given the degrees of status that existed among the talmidei hachamim these passages should not be understood as indicating a lack of distinction. Indeed, differences did exist in regard to the different levels. What this passage does tell us is that in matters of Torah these differences may be overlooked. When knowledge was at stake, learning took precedence over accepted norms. The following passage indicates, however, that in more banal matters class distinctions were operative.

One who accompanies his teacher may not depart from him until he has withdrawn backwards a little and asked his permission. If they are two scholars of equal status, the host enters [the house] first and the guest after him. And when they leave, the guest goes out first and the host after him. One who takes leave of his teacher, whether he be his senior or not, should say, <sup>°I</sup> [ask permission] to take my leave.<sup>106</sup>

---

<sup>105</sup>Taanit 7a, The Babylonian Talmud, I.  
Epstein, trans., London: The Soncino Press.

<sup>106</sup>Kallah Rabbati 54a, A. Cohen, ed., p. 488.

## CHAPTER V

### TALMIDEI HACHAMIM WITHIN THEIR OWN COMMUNITY

#### A. Treatment of One Talmid Hacham by Another

The close and intimate contact necessitated by the Rabbinic method of paired studying must have been a source of constant friction between talmidei hachamim. Thus we find in the literature two types of comments. One is concerned with the manner in which the talmidei hachamim should treat each other and the other with the consequences for their ill treatment of one another.

Of the first variety we find the following in Shabbat:

Harlots paint each other's faces--how much more must scholars be mindful of each other's repute; harlots praise each other, the more so do scholars.<sup>107</sup>

While it is somewhat peculiar to find scholars compared to harlots within the rabbinic literature, the point of this passage is to remind the scholar that he must uphold the reputation of his fellow. This is a classic example of R. Ishmael's first hermeneutic principle, kal v'homer. If harlots, who are unworthy and lowly, are careful to uphold each other's reputation, how much more careful must scholars, who are esteemed and revered, be to uphold one

---

<sup>107</sup>Shabbat 34a, in Reuben Alcalay, column 428.

another's reputation! The inference here is from the minor to the major.

A number of passages address the issue of scholars getting along poorly with one another.

R. Elai b. Jebarekya also said: If two disciples of the Sages proceed on a journey and there are no words of Torah between them, they are deserving of being burnt with fire...<sup>108</sup>

Similarly, we find another passage attributed to the same rabbi:

If two disciples of the Sages reside in the same city and do not support each other in [the study of] the law, one dies and the other goes into exile...<sup>109</sup>

A variation of this passage is found in Derech Eretz Zuta, where it states:

If two scholars reside in the same city who have set up separate Courts of Law and dissension occurs between them, they will ultimately die [prematurely].<sup>110</sup>

Abba Saul comments on this verse with the observation that "Dissension between separate Courts of Law is the ruination of the world."<sup>111</sup> This thought is expressed elsewhere. In Sanhedrin we find a quotation of R. Jose son of R. Judah in which he states "...that two scholars who hate each other

---

<sup>108</sup>Sotah 49a, I. Epstein, trans.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid.

<sup>110</sup>Derech Eretz Zuta 59a, A. Cohen, ed., p. 591.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid.

may not sit together as judges."<sup>112</sup> Whereas Abba Saul's comment only reflects a particular belief, R. Jose's comments reflects that same belief and offers a preventative measure.

#### B. Disagreements Among Talmidei Hachamim

While the rabbinic ideal regarding the relationship of one scholar to another was that their relationship would be one of good-will and respect, the rabbis did not suggest that there could therefore be no disagreement between them. One need only read any aspect of the rabbinic literature, whether it be Talmud, Mishnah or Midrash, to discover that the rabbis frequently disagreed with one another, sometimes on major points, sometimes on minor ones. Respect and grace toward your fellow scholar was not equivalent to homogeneity of opinion. In fact, the rabbinic method of refining issues in the law required that there be disputes, sometimes quite vitriolic. A passage from Numbers Rabbah illustrates that disagreement was not only tolerated but also fostered.

Although one scholar offers his view and another scholar offers his, the words of both are all derived from what

---

<sup>112</sup>Sanhedrin 29a, I. Epstein, trans.

Moses...received from the One Lord of the universe.<sup>113</sup>

In other words, the opinion of each, though in disagreement with the other, is considered to be taken from the Oral Law which is purported by Tradition to have been received by Moses at Sinai. An even more obvious reference to this point is found in Song of Songs Rabbah, where it is said that

R. Nehemiah said: If two scholars argue over a law and each one adduces a general principle to support his view, the Holy One, blessed be He, says, "Their source...comes from Me."<sup>114</sup>

Elsewhere in the same midrash, we find a passage attributed to R. Jonah in which he states that

If two scholars are discussing a point of halachah and one can give a basis for his ruling and the other cannot give a basis for his ruling, the Holy One, blessed be He, says, "His banner over Me is love."<sup>115</sup>

The above three passages graphically emphasize that the rabbis felt that to disagree was at least permissible, if not, at times, desirable. To their way of thinking, however, this did not in any way detract from the manner in

---

<sup>113</sup>Numbers Rabbah, XIV:4, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. VI, p. 581.

<sup>114</sup>Song of Songs Rabbah, I:2.5, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. IX, p. 28.

<sup>115</sup>Song of Songs Rabbah, II:4.1, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. IX, p. 103.



which scholars were required to relate to one another. Disagreement did not mean disrespect. To the contrary, whereas they believed that a dispute l'shem shamayim had the blessings of the Almighty, they also believed that improper treatment of one scholar by another could bring about the end of the world or the death of the scholars who were disrespectful to each other. In their minds the differences between the two instances were clear.

Arguments between talmidei hachamim occurred not only on matters of law. A number of passages in the literature address other differences between scholars. One frequently mentioned category of differences is that between the talmidei hachamim of East and West, i.e., the scholars of Ancient Palestine and those of Babylonia. In a comment in Sanhedrin we read:

R. Oshaia said: What is the meaning of the verse, "And I took unto me the two staves; the one I called No'am [graciousness] and the other I called hoblim [binders]? No'am refers to the scholars of Palestine, who treat each other graciously [man'imim] when engaged in halachic debates; hoblim to the scholars of Babylon, who injure each other's feelings [mehablim] when discussing halachah.<sup>116</sup>

This passage serves two purposes in the present discussion. On the one hand it illustrates that differences did exist between scholars from different geographical areas, while on

---

<sup>116</sup>Shabbat 24a, I. Epstein, trans.

the other it serves to reinforce just why the rabbis were so concerned with how scholars treated one another. This passage makes clear to us that such discussion was necessary precisely because the scholars did not always treat each other properly. Whether R. Oshaia's comment noted above was a true and accurate description of the situation is unclear. Regardless of its truth value his comment does serve our present discussion.

#### C. Differences Between Talmidei Hachamim

Two other passages also address the differences between the talmidei hachamim of Palestine and Babylonia. The question is raised, "Why are the scholars in Babylonia [as opposed to those in Palestine] distinguished [in dress]?"<sup>117</sup> Two answers are provided, one charitable, the other damning. The one answer is "Because they are not in their [original] homes, as people say, In my own town my name [is sufficient]; away from home, my dress."<sup>118</sup> The other answer, which is not particularly generous, is "Because they are not well learned."<sup>119</sup> In either case the point is made that the rabbis' perception of the talmidei hachamim of

---

<sup>117</sup>Shabbat 145b, I. Epstein, trans.

<sup>118</sup>Ibid.

<sup>119</sup>Ibid.

Babylonia was different from that of the talmidei hachamim of Palestine.

That the scholars from the two areas also differed in matters of law can be seen in a passage in Soferim regarding the position in which to recite the benediction following the reading of the Haftorah. The question at issue was whether one ought to recite this benediction while standing or seated. In Soferim we find:

This point is one of the disagreements between the scholars of the East and West; the former give the response while sitting and the latter while standing.<sup>120</sup>

Although some of the passages just discussed exhibit a tendency on the part of the scholars to mistreat each other, this reality does not in any way detract from the ideal which the rabbis emphasized, namely that the talmidei hachamim treat one other with respect. The ordinary person was expected to treat the talmidei hachamim in this manner. It would have been foolish had the community of scholars not attempted to set an example for the common person. This, at least in part, was the motivation of the rabbis to promote equanimity among their own ranks.

---

<sup>120</sup>Soferim 40a, The Minor Tractates of the Talmud, A. Cohen, ed., pp. 273-274.

## CHAPTER VI

### ATTITUDES TOWARD THE TALMID HACHAM

#### A. Mistreatment of a Talmid Hacham

The literature is clear in its emphasis that the scholar must be respected by the laity. Several passages address this issue from the negative side, namely, what occurs in the event that a scholar is insulted or slighted in some way. Ecclesiastes Rabbah contains a story of the deathbed scene of R. Eleazar b. R. Simeon. When he is about to die he tells his wife:

A maggot...is destined to pierce behind my ear because I once entered a place and heard the voice of a man insulting a scholar and it was within my power to punish him but I did not.<sup>121</sup>

Because of his righteousness he was considered to possess a body that would not be consumed by worms as is the usual way after one dies. This would have placed in him in a league with those mentioned in Derech Eretz Zuta wherein it states:

The following seven patriarchs have gone to their eternal rest with great honour and worms and maggots had no dominion over them, viz: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Miriam and their father Amram. Some say: Also David...<sup>122</sup>

However, he realizes that his brain shall be devoured by

---

<sup>121</sup>Ecclesiastes Rabbah, XI:2.1, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. VIII, pp. 290-291.

<sup>122</sup>Derech Eretz Zuta 58a, A. Cohen, ed., p. 570.

maggots because of his failure to act when he heard a scholar being insulted.<sup>123</sup>

In Pesachim, Akiba makes explicit his view that one is to show awe and reverence for the scholar. He interprets Deuteronomy 6:13, "You shall fear the Lord your God," to include scholars.<sup>124</sup> The comparison being drawn between God and the scholar is that the scholar represents the depository of the word of God and thus must be respected in the same way that God and His word must be respected. The unspoken message here is that obedience to religious authority is demanded.<sup>125</sup> In a similar vein we find a passage in Tractate Sanhedrin which says that the phrase "one who acts impudently against the Torah" refers to one who insults a scholar.<sup>126</sup> In this same passage there is a statement attributed to both Rab and R. Hanina that to insult a scholar is to be labelled an epikoros.<sup>127</sup>

It is clear from the above noted passages that to insult a scholar is a wrongful prohibited act. Certain passages within the literature, however, indicate the

---

<sup>123</sup>Ecclesiastes Rabbah, XI:2.1, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. VIII, pp. 290-291.

<sup>124</sup>Pesachim 22b, The Babylonian Talmud, I. Epstein, trans.

<sup>125</sup>Ibid.

<sup>126</sup>Sanhedrin 99b, I. Epstein, trans.

<sup>127</sup>Ibid.

penalty for committing such a wrong is far more serious than simply being labeled an epikoros or devoured by maggots upon death. To the rabbis much more was at stake. This is illustrated in the following passage.

Rab Judah said: Jerusalem was destroyed only because scholars were despised therein: for it is said, "but they mocked the messengers of God, and despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, till there was no remedy." [II Chronicles 36:16]<sup>128</sup>

Another passage in Shabbat provides the same message. "He who despises a scholar, has no remedy for his wounds."<sup>129</sup> A passage in Berachot teaches a similar lesson:

R. Joshua b. Levi further said: In twenty-four places we find the Beth din inflicted excommunication for an insult to a teacher, and they are all recorded in the Mishnah.<sup>130</sup>

Although the reference here is directed towards teachers the continuation of the verse includes the scholar:

He [R. Eleazer] went and examined and found three [of the twenty-four] cases: one of a scholar who threw contempt on the washing of the hands, another of one who made derogatory remarks about scholars after their death, and a third

---

<sup>128</sup>Shabbat 119b, I. Epstein, trans.

<sup>129</sup>Ibid.

<sup>130</sup>Brachot 19a, The Babylonian Talmud, I. Epstein, trans.

of one who made himself too familiar  
towards heaven.<sup>131</sup>

This verse teaches that the scholar must be accorded the respect due him, both by ordinary persons and by his fellow scholars. A more complete discussion of the latter point may be found in Chapter VI.

#### B. Comparisons to the Divine Presence, Prophets and Royalty

Even someone who witnesses a scholar committing what is certainly a sin is not to hold it against the scholar. This point is made explicitly in the Tanna debe Eliyahu:

The Rabbis said, "If you see a scholar who committed a sin to-day, do not disparage him for it to-morrow, for he may have repented of it in the night, '...so you see that whoever talks [evil] about the shortcomings of scholars is as though he talked [evil] about the Shechinah."<sup>132</sup>

In this verse, as seen elsewhere, there is a hint of comparison between the talמיד hacham and the Divine Presence.

In Genesis Rabbah a parallel is drawn between the talמיד hacham and a king.

He who sets his face against a king is  
as though he set his face against a  
scholar; how much the more [heinous is

<sup>131</sup>Ibid.

<sup>132</sup>Tanna debe Eliyahu 16, in A Rabbinic Anthology, p. 482.



his offence] when it is against a king  
and a scholar!<sup>133</sup>

Interestingly, there are several other passages in which the talmid hacham is treated as or referred to in the same light as a king or prophet. The mere fact that there are passages of this type is indicative, at least in part, of how the rabbis believed the talmidei hachamim should be viewed by the common people. In a number of Talmudic and Midrashic sources we find a passage associated with the exile of the Jews to Bablyonia in the days of Jehoiachin. He made a pact with the Babylonians in order to prevent harm from coming to Jerusalem or her people, but, as we learn,

The Babylonians did not keep their oath.  
A short while thereafter they carried  
into exile, not only the king, but also  
his mother, and ten thousand of the  
Jewish nobility and of the great  
scholars.<sup>134</sup>

It is evident in this passage that the talmidei hachamim of Jerusalem were grouped with the city's ruling class. In a story about a great horse race which occurred monthly we find that the scholars and their disciples are included with the king and his attendants in their viewing of the race.

The spectators [of the race] were  
divided into four parties distinguished  
by the color of their garb: the king

---

<sup>133</sup>Genesis Rabbah, XCIV:9, in Midrash Rabbah,  
Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. II, p. 877.

<sup>134</sup>Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews,  
vol. IV, p. 286.

and his attendants, the scholars and their disciples, and the priests and Levites were attired in light blue garments.<sup>135</sup>

Elsewhere in Shemot Rabbah and the Tanhuma we find that the talmidei hachamim are included with the prophets.

Every prophet, every sage, received at Sinai his share of the revelation, which in the course of history was announced by them to mankind. All heard indeed the same words, but the same voice, corresponding to the individuality of each, was God's way of speaking with them. And as the same voice sounded differently to each one, so did the Divine vision appear differently to each....<sup>136</sup>

This passage attributes to the talmid hacham the same revelatory experience received by the prophet. This implies that the talmidei hachamim were to their generations what the prophets were in their time. In view of the above passages and others cited throughout this work, this understanding of the verse is not so farfetched.

#### C. Respect for the Talmid Hacham

Several other passages provide evidence of the way the talmidei hachamim were to be regarded. In Esther Rabbah we read that "You scholars command respect through your

---

<sup>135</sup>Ibid., pp. 161.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid., vol. III, p. 97.

learning..."<sup>137</sup> The scholar's knowledge is the crucial element of his person which grants him the privilege to receive extraordinary treatment. In a verse from Song of Songs Rabbah, a similar point is made about the talmid hacham's learning.

Shall I say that just as water after  
being drunk is imperceptible in the  
body, so are the words of the Torah?  
Not so, since it is compared with wine:  
just as wine leaves its mark when drunk,  
so words of Torah leave their mark, and  
people point with the finger and say,  
that is a scholar.<sup>138</sup>

Every aspect of interaction that the talmid hacham might have with ordinary people was governed by norms of behavior. There is a legend about Jehoshaphat that he was particularly gracious in his attitudes towards talmidei hachamim. "When a scholar appeared before him, he arose, hastened to meet him, and kissing and embracing him, greeted him with 'Rabbi, Rabbi'"<sup>139</sup> One passage in Sanhedrin stresses the special nature of the talmid hacham as opposed to the little worth of the unlearned.

R. Eleazar said: How is the scholar  
regarded by the ignorant?-At first, like  
a golden ladle; if he converses with

---

<sup>137</sup>Esther Rabbah, II:4, in Midrash Rabbah, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. IX, p. 36.

<sup>138</sup>Song of Songs Rabbah, I:2.3, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. IX, p. 35.

<sup>139</sup>Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, vol. IV, p. 185.

him, like a silver ladle; if he [the scholar] derives benefit from him, like an earthen ladle, which once broken cannot be mended.<sup>140</sup>

This passage seems to teach that the talmid hacham should keep his distance from the ignorant if he is to maintain their respect. In another passage, this one from Derech Eretz Zuta, we learn that it is "unbecoming when one eats in the presence of a scholar."<sup>141</sup> These passages indicate that a careful separation was maintained between the community of talmidei hachamim and the rest of the people.

Even the father of a talmid hacham, who ordered his son to engage in household chores rather than study, was admonished and required to grant his son his due. This is found in a lengthy story in Avot d'Rabbi Natan where we read:

What was the beginning of R. Eliezer b. Hyrkanos? He was twenty-two years old and had not yet studied Torah. One day he said [to his father], 'I will go and study Torah under Rabban Johanan b. Zakkai'. His father Hyrkanos replied, 'You shall not taste a morsel of food until you shall have ploughed a complete furrow.' He rose early in the morning and ploughed a complete furrow. As he was walking on his way [to Jerusalem in order to study] he saw a stone which he thought [to be food]; he took it and put it in his mouth--some say that it was cattle dung. He walked on until he came to an inn where he spent the night. He

<sup>140</sup>Sanhedrin 52b, I. Epstein, trans.

<sup>141</sup>Derech Eretz Zuta 59a, A. Cohen, ed., p. 587.

went and sat before Rabban Johanan b. Zakkai in Jerusalem. Soon an offensive smell came forth from his mouth; whereupon Rabban Johanan b. Zakkai said, 'Eliezer, my son, have you eaten anything to-day?]' He then said to Eliezer, 'Just as an offensive smell came forth from your mouth, so shall there go forth from you a distinguished name in Torah.'

When his father Hyrkanos heard that he was studying Torah under Rabban Johanan b. Zakkai he declared, 'I shall go [to Jerusalem] and prohibit my son Eliezer by vow [from deriving any benefit] from my estate'. It was said that on the day Rabban Johanan b. Zakkai was sitting and expounding the Torah in Jerusalem, and all the notables of Israel were sitting before him. On learning that Hyrkanos had arrived, he posted watchmen and charged them, 'If Hyrkanos comes in and wishes to sit down, do not let him. When he came in and wished to sit down, they did not allow him to do so, and he was compelled to move forward.... It was said that on that day Rabban Johanan b. Zakkai turned his gaze upon R. Eliezer and bade him commence the discourse. He said, 'I cannot do so'. The master as well as the disciples urged him, whereupon he began the discourse and expounded matters about which no ear had ever heard [the like]. At every utterance that came from his lips, Rabban Johanan b. Zakkai stood up and kissed him on the head; but R. Eliezer exclaimed, 'My master you have taught me the truth'. Before the time of adjournment had arrived, his father Hyrkanos stood up and said, 'My master, I came here for the sole purpose of depriving my Eliezer by vow of my property, but now [I declare] all my property assigned to my son Eliezer....<sup>142</sup>

<sup>142</sup>Avot d'Rabbi Natan 20b-21a, A. Cohen, ed., pp. 46-47.

This story illustrates the power of the magnificent words of a talmid hacham. By having to sit in the forward rows Hyrkanos witnessed his son's distinction and was forced to recant his earlier intention. Even the unwilling father was unable to withhold the respect properly due a talmid hacham, who in this case happened to be his own son.

Hyrkanos's desire to prevent his son from studying is somewhat unusual. Generally, one would do all in his power to come to have sons who were themselves recognized as talmidei hachamim. In Shabbat we find a passage attributed to Raba in which he states that:

He who loves the Rabbis will have sons who are Rabbis; he who honours the Rabbis will have Rabbis for sons-in-law; he who stands in awe of the Rabbis will himself be a Rabbinical scholar. But if he is not fit for this his words, will be heeded like those of a Rabbinical scholar.<sup>143</sup>

Imitation is the greatest form of flattery. As such it was certainly true that fathers, out of respect for the talmidei hachamim of their day, hoped that their own sons would become talmidei hachamim.

#### D. Support of the Talmid Hacham and its Reward

We have already seen the primary duty of the talmid hacham was to study and become conversant in the holy writings of Jewish tradition. Extensive study meant that the ability of the talmid hacham to earn a living was

---

<sup>143</sup>Shabbat 23b, I. Epstein, trans.



severely limited. Exacerbating this difficulty was the oft-quoted maxim from Avot II:26, against using one's learning as a "spade with which to dig," i.e., to earn a living. Therefore, in order to engage in the scholarly pursuits demanded of them, outside support was necessary. This theme is found throughout a number of passages in the literature. An examination of these passages will reveal that the support of a talmid hacham was viewed as an obligation which must be undertaken by individuals of sufficient means. To do so is regarded as a great mitzvah. To fail to do so is accounted as a sin. In each case, reward or punishment is implicit in the understanding of this obligation.

R. Jose makes the statement "that the Holy One, blessed be He, will recompense him who welcomes scholars...with food and drink and with well-laid beds."<sup>144</sup>

Nowhere is a more positive statement made regarding the support of scholars than in Song of Songs Rabbah. There we learn "that to entertain scholars is like entertaining the Divine Presence."<sup>145</sup> While not explicitly drawing a parallel between the talmid hacham and the Divine Presence this passage implies its existence. A similar statement is found in Ketubot where it reads: "One who benefits scholars

---

<sup>144</sup>Numbers Rabbah, IV:20, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. V, pp. 130-131.

<sup>145</sup>Song of Songs Rabbah, II:5.3, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. IX, p. 106.



from his estate is regarded by Scripture as if he had cleaved to the Divine Presence."<sup>146</sup> Another passage illustrating the holiness of the act of providing for talmidei hachamim is found in Leviticus Rabbah in which it states: "R. Abin observed: Whoso entertains a scholar in his house is regarded by Scripture as though he had offered first-fruits."<sup>147</sup> The principle of bringing first fruits involves the offering to God of the choicest produce from one's initial harvest. In this passage the talmidei hachamim are regarded as God's first fruit, i.e., the choicest of God's creations. The act of providing food and sustenance for them is transformed into a holy deed, akin to offering the first fruits themselves. With this view it is not surprising to find a number of selections that specifically mention the reward one can attain through the act of supporting, attending to, or waiting upon the talmid hacham.

An example of that which one may merit is found in Leviticus Rabbah. There we read that if one has studied the Scriptures and the Oral Law but has not ministered to the sages then he is as one from whom the inner secrets of the

---

<sup>146</sup>Kallah Rabbati 53b, A. Cohen, ed., p. 463, footnote 6.

<sup>147</sup>Leviticus Rabbah, XXXIV:13, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. IV, p. 439.

Torah are forever withheld.<sup>148</sup> However, if he has studied the Scriptures and the Oral Law and has ministered to the sages "then even if he dies or is killed...he abides in bliss forever."<sup>149</sup>

Using Isaiah 35 as its prooftext, the Midrash on the Book of Numbers comments that the wilderness and the desert will blossom and bloom as a reward for accepting the people Israel into its midst. So, too, the Midrash explains, shall the one who receives scholars in his house be rewarded.<sup>150</sup> Although no particular reward is alluded to in this passage, the bloom and blossom of the desert, when applied to the lives of ordinary men, could mean the acquisition of wealth, a sense of happiness and satisfaction, being blessed with many children or a share in the world to come.

This idea is made more explicit in Pesachim in a statement attributed to R. Johanan. "Whoever cast merchandise into the pockets of scholars will be privileged to sit in the Heavenly Academy."<sup>151</sup> To buttress this statement R. Johanan offers a midrashic translation of Ecclesiastes 7:12, "For wisdom is a defence, even as money

---

<sup>148</sup>Leviticus Rabbah, III:7, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. IV, p. 45.

<sup>149</sup>Ibid.

<sup>150</sup>Numbers Rabbah, XXIII:4, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. VI, p. 865.

<sup>151</sup>Pesachim 53b, I. Epstein, trans.

is a defence." He understands this verse to mean that one who provides money for the talmid hacham merits entrance into the realm of wisdom, in this case, the Heavenly Academy.<sup>152</sup>

Supporting talmidei hachamim raises the possibility of other rewards, such as the unexpected accumulation of great wealth. One such instance is found in a story in Leviticus Rabbah.

Once R. Eliezer and R. Joshua and R. Akiba went to the Harbour-area of Antiochia, to make a collection for [the support of] scholars. There was a man there of the name of Abba Judan, who used to provide maintenance liberally [for the needy]. He subsequently became impoverished, and when he saw our Rabbis there, his face turned the colour of saffron. When he came to his wife, she said to him: 'Why is your face sickly?' said he to her: 'My Rabbis are here, and I do not know what to do.' His wife, who was even more saintly than he, said: 'We have nothing left except your field. Go, sell half thereof, and give them [the proceeds].' They prayed for him, saying: 'May the All-present make good your deficiency!' After some days he went to plough the half field he had retained; and as he was ploughing, his cow fell and its leg was broken. When he went down to lift it up, the Holy One, blessed be he, gave light to his eyes, and he found a treasure there. Said he: 'My cow's leg was broken, but it turned out to be for my benefit.' When our Rabbis came there again, they inquired after him, saying: 'How is Abba Judan doing?' They answered him: 'He is Abba Judan of goats, Abba Judan

---

<sup>152</sup>Ibid.

of camels, Abba Judan of oxen! Who can catch a glimpse of Abba Judan?' When the latter heard [of the Rabbis' presence], he went out to meet them. Said they: 'How is Abba Judan doing?' Said he to them: 'Your prayer has produced fruit, and fruit from fruit.' Said they to him: 'As you live, even though others gave more than you did, we wrote you down at the head [of the list].' Then they took him and gave him a seat with themselves...<sup>153</sup>

The story is telling on several counts. First, the piety and righteousness of this man and his wife are evident from their willingness to deprive themselves in order to support the rabbinical scholars. Second, there is an element of reciprocity involved. In exchange for his small but properly motivated gift, the rabbis pray for his welfare. Third, Abba Judan then becomes a wealthy man, the prayers seemingly efficacious. Finally, the rabbis welcome him into their company. The meaning of the story leads back to an earlier noted verse from Numbers Rabbah, "...the Holy One, blessed be He, will recompense him who welcomes scholars and students..."<sup>154</sup>

There are several passages in the literature which use one's support of talmidei hachamim as representative of one's goodness or righteousness. The Tanhuma tells the

---

<sup>153</sup>Leviticus Rabbah, V:4, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. IV, p. 66.

<sup>154</sup>Numbers Rabbah, IV:20, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. V, pp. 130-131.

story of Mattithiah b. Heresh who was a wealthy and God-fearing man. He is reported to have been of excellent qualities, not the least among them was that he supported many scholars from his wealth.<sup>155</sup> Elsewhere, another story is told of Ahab, king of Samaria, who was considered to be a wicked and vicious ruler. "But he was not wholly wicked, he possessed some good qualities. He was liberal toward scholars, and he showed great reverence for the Torah...."<sup>156</sup>

#### E. Consequences for Failing to Support the Talmid Hacham

Just as one is rewarded for the support and maintenance of the talmid hacham, so, too, is one punished for failure to do so. In Avot d'Rabbi Nathan we find the extraordinarily blunt statement: "He who does not wait upon scholars deserves death."<sup>157</sup> This passage is a variant of Avot 1:13 and is found in tractate Nazir where it is attributed to Rabbi Akiba.<sup>158</sup> This same statement can also be found in Derech Eretz Zuta. There Rabbi Akiba adds that, in an effort to be continually in accord with that which is

---

<sup>155</sup>Tanhuma, Hukkat, 66a, S. Buber, ed., in A Rabbinic Anthology, p. 299.

<sup>156</sup>Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, vol. IV, p. 186.

<sup>157</sup>Avot d'Rabbi Natan 23b, A. Cohen, ed., p. 79.

<sup>158</sup>Ibid.; compare Yoma 38b.

required of him, he never lets an opportunity pass in which he can minister to the Sages.<sup>159</sup> Similarly, in Sanhedrin we read that one "who declines to endow a scholar with his worldly good will see no blessing."<sup>160</sup>

Ecclesiastes Rabbah makes the same point, namely that one who fails to support the talmid hacham while possessing the means to do so is cursed. Whether the nature of that curse is that he is deserving of death is not made explicit as it is in Avot d'Rabbi Nathan.

R. Aha said in the name of R. Tanhum:  
If a man studied Torah and taught it,  
observed and performed its precepts, but  
had the means to support [needy  
scholars] and failed to do so, behold he  
comes within the category of "Cursed be  
he that confirmeth not the words of his  
law (Deuteronomy 28:26)."<sup>161</sup>

#### F. Support of the Talmid Hacham When it Is Beyond One's Means

Consideration of the converse of the above cited quote relates to an interesting idea noted earlier. It is apparently permissible to attempt to support a scholar even if one lacks the means. The continuation of the above passage addresses this issue:

<sup>159</sup>Derech Eretz Zuta 59a, A. Cohen, ed., p. 588.

<sup>160</sup>Sanhedrin 92a, in Reuben Alcalay, column 428.

<sup>161</sup>Ecclesiastes Rabbah, VII:11.1, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. VIII, p. 190.



If he studied and did not teach or observe or perform the precepts, and had not the means to support [needy scholars] and yet did so [by self-denial], behold he comes within the category of 'Blessed be he that confirmeth the words of his law', since every 'cursed' implies a blessed.<sup>162</sup>

Indeed, the passage seems to teach that the one who supports a talmid hacham under any circumstance will receive a blessing. A similar idea is found elsewhere in Ecclesiastes Rabbah in which we are told of a scribe, R. Meir, who used to spend one-third of his weekly wages on the support of rabbinical scholars, to the exclusion of the support of his own children.<sup>163</sup> While one would expect some admonition of this type of behavior none is found. As a rationale for his action Meir says:

If they [his children] are righteous, then it will be as David said, "Yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread (Psalm 37:25). If they are not righteous, why should I leave my possessions to the enemies of the Omnipresent!"<sup>164</sup>

This may represent an extreme position on the part of Meir and yet the story is illustrative of the fact that little wrong could be found regarding the support of the scholars.

---

<sup>162</sup>Ibid.

<sup>163</sup>Ecclesiastes Rabbah, II:18.1, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. VIII, p. 68.

<sup>164</sup>Ibid.



### G. Support of the Talmid Hacham as an Example for Others

A story about Rabbi Akiba in Leviticus Rabbah illustrates the basic world view held by the rabbis themselves about support of the talmid hacham. R. Tarfon gives a sizable sum of money to Rabbi Akiba and instructs him to purchase a particular estate so that they [the rabbis] might be supported from its profits while they studied. Akiba takes the money and distributes it among the scholars and students of the Torah, thereby enabling them to continue their studies. When R. Tarfon inquires of Rabbi Akiba as to whether or not he has made the purchase, Rabbi Akiba answers that he has. He then proceeds to show R. Tarfon not the estate that he had been instructed to buy, but rather the many scholars to whom he has given the money.<sup>165</sup> Disobedience to R. Tarfon was of no concern to Rabbi Akiba. The most worthy use of the money he possessed was to give it to scholars and students. In this way he did not merely purchase some land from which he would have profitted, but instead supported others and set an example for all who were in a position to support and maintain the scholars in their midst.

Kallah Rabbati interprets the Deuteronomy verse "After the Lord your God, shall ye walk..." to mean that one "walks

---

<sup>165</sup>Leviticus Rabbah, XXXIV:16, in A Rabbinic Anthology, p. 422.

after God' by supporting and benefiting scholars.<sup>166</sup> The passage goes on to suggest that one ought to be eager to do so and that 'your heart should rejoice'<sup>167</sup> from your support of talmidei hachamim, for to do so is to fulfill genuinely the commandment 'to walk after the Lord.' A similar but more complete expression of this idea is found elsewhere in Kallah Rabbati in which it is taught that the Torah is acquired through the acquisition of forty-eight characteristics, one of which is attendance upon scholars.<sup>168</sup>

---

<sup>166</sup>Kallah Rabbati 53b, A. Cohen, ed., p. 463.

<sup>167</sup>Ibid.

<sup>168</sup>Kallah Rabbati 54a, A. Cohen, ed., p. 493.

CHAPTER VII  
LOVE FOR THE TALMID HACHAM AND THE BLESSING OF  
SCHOLARLY SONS

A. Desire to Study with Talmidei Hachamim

The talmid hacham is a respected figure within the rabbinic world view. The talmid hacham was, according to the rabbis, worthy of being loved by the people among whom he lived. In a passage in Leviticus Rabbah the phrase "O, beloved," which is found in Song of Songs (5:1), is used as a proof-text and interpreted to mean that 'beloved' refers to the scholars.<sup>169</sup> One of the ways that reverence and affection for the talmid hacham were expressed was the extent to which common people were eager to study with the talmid hacham. A broad statement along these lines teaches that those who make their home amidst scholars, who are by definition lovers of the Torah, will have their renown in Torah increased.<sup>170</sup> That is to say, by living and, presumably, studying with scholars, an individual will increase his own level of Torah learning and thereby increase his status.

Several other statements in the literature stress this idea more explicitly. In Avot d'Rabbi Natan, Jose b. Joezer taught:

---

<sup>169</sup>Numbers Rabbah, XIII:2, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. VI, p. 502.

<sup>170</sup>Avot d'Rabbi Natan 24a, A. Cohen, ed., p. 88.

Let your house be a meetinghouse for the wise. What is meant by this? It teaches that a man's house should be available to the wise, their disciples and the disciples of their disciples...<sup>171</sup>

A similar thought is expressed in Ecclesiastes Rabbah in which it is written: "There shall all Israel gather and preserve his [the scholar's] wisdom, listening to him and learning from him."<sup>172</sup> It is safe to conclude from the tone of these two passages that just as the talmid hacham is obligated to study and further his own knowledge, so too is the common person obliged to avail himself of the teachings of a talmid hacham. Again, Jose b. Joezer teaches:

When a scholar comes to a town, say not, 'I have no need of him'; but go to him, and sit not before him on a couch or on a chair or on a bench, but sit before him on the ground; and every word that he utters accept with awe and reverence, with fear and dread, in the same manner that our forefathers received the Torah at Mount Sinai with awe and reverence, with fear and dread.<sup>173</sup>

This short passage emphasizes not only what has already been said immediately above but also includes several other interesting aspects regarding the attitude towards the

---

<sup>171</sup>Avot d'Rabbi Natan, 6:1, A. Cohen, ed., p. 43.

<sup>172</sup>Ecclesiastes Rabbah, XI:2.1, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. VIII, p. 292.

<sup>173</sup>Avot d'Rabbi Natan, 6:1, A. Cohen, ed., p. 43.

talmid hacham. It is not enough for a person merely to sit in the presence of the talmid hacham; one must sit on the ground at the feet of the scholar. A similar statement is found in Avot where it is taught that one should "sit amidst the dust of their feet and drink in their words with thirst."<sup>174</sup> Why is this? A reasonable understanding of this idea is that it is out of respect for the scholar. The unlearned person must relate to the scholar as a master, for indeed he has mastery over material that the student, however willing, does not. Furthermore, the listener must receive every word that the talmid hacham utters with the same fear and dread that was felt by the Israelites standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Here we see, as is also seen elsewhere, that although no direct relationship is drawn between the talmid hacham and the Divine Presence there is an implication that the authority of the talmid hacham is of a similar caliber. I believe there can be no question that these kinds of statements were wholly self-serving on the part of the rabbis. To attribute to the scholar oratory and teaching so powerful that one ought to receive it in the same way that one received the Ten Commandments is a degree of respect far and above the ordinary.

In Derech Eretz Zutah a student is instructed to

---

<sup>174</sup>Avot I:4, Philip Blackman, p. 40.

Sit before the Elders and incline your ear to hear their words. Listen carefully to the words of your fellow; be not hasty to answer but give proper thought to your words. Speak of the first [point] first and of the last [point] last, and admit the truth. Speak not before him who is greater than you in wisdom.<sup>175</sup>

Numbers Rabbah contains a parallel passage in which it states: "Do ...your part [to] make your ear like a grain receiver and acquire a heart that can understand the words of the scholars..."<sup>176</sup> Again, as in the previous passages, we find the teaching that one should listen closely to the words of the scholar. This passage illustrates the deference that is to be shown toward one who is greater in wisdom and in this way relates to the idea discussed earlier regarding the proper respect that is to be granted one of great learning. Two additional passages make the same point. In Yebamot we read "It is a duty to hear the words of scholars,"<sup>177</sup> and Avot instructs one to "...warm thyself by the fire of the Sages...",<sup>178</sup> namely their teaching.

Despite the strong emphasis on the zeal with which one

---

<sup>175</sup>Derech Eretz Zuta 58b, A. Cohen, ed., p. 571.

<sup>176</sup>Numbers Rabbah, XIV:4, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. VI, p. 576.

<sup>177</sup>Yebamot 20a, in Reuben Alcalay, column 428.

<sup>178</sup>Avot II:10, Philip Blackman, p. 52.



must study the teachings of the scholars, Avot d'Rabbi Nathan tells of an instance in which this was not possible.

If a man sins and begets an illegitimate child, they say to him, 'Fool that you are! You have harmed yourself and also the child'. For that illegitimate son may be desirous of studying Torah together with scholars who sit and study in Jerusalem. He joins their company until they reach Ashdod; there he halts and cries, 'Woe is me! Had I not been of illegitimate birth, I should now be studying with those who were hitherto my fellow-students; but being illegitimate I may not sit and study with them because an illegitimate [person] is not allowed to enter Jerusalem.<sup>179</sup>

By noting the woeful cry of him who is prevented from studying with the scholars of his day, the rabbis further emphasized the extent to which they considered such study an obligation as well as a privilege. And, whereas the illegitimate child is prevented from studying with the scholars, we shall see later that one may come to be blessed with children who are themselves scholars as a reward for their [the parents] righteous actions. On the one hand we find the child punished as a result of parental misdoing; on the other we find the child's status increased on account of parental righteousness.

#### B. The Blessing of Scholarly Sons

In the world of the rabbis few rewards could give as much pleasure as having sons who became talmidei hachamim.

---

<sup>179</sup>Avot d'Rabbi Nathan 23a, A. Cohen, ed., p. 77.



It was in this light that the rabbis understood the second verse of the Priestly Blessing found in Numbers 6:25. "The Lord make His face to shine upon thee..." The midrash on this verse explains that the expression "to shine" suggests that God may "enlighten your eyes and heart in the Torah and give you sons who will be scholars."<sup>180</sup> The implication is that to be blessed with sons who are scholars is a blessing which emanates from God.

A thematically similar but unrelated story in which one is blessed with scholarly sons is told regarding the time when Jacob's son, Levi, is preparing to die. He gathers his kin around him and tells of the dream in which he is arrayed in priestly garments, with a crown of righteousness, an ephod of understanding, a crown of truth, a mitre-plate of faith, a mitre of dignity and shoulderpieces of prophecy.<sup>181</sup> Then he is told that

...ye shall eat all that is lovely to  
look upon, and the table of the Lord thy  
descendants will appropriate for  
themselves, and from them will come  
...scholars, for all that is holy will  
be guarded from their mouth.<sup>182</sup>

---

<sup>180</sup>Numbers Rabbah, XI:6, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. V, p. 434.

<sup>181</sup>Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, vol. II, p. 196.

<sup>182</sup>Ibid.

Both of the above stories illustrate that scholarly sons were regarded as a blessing.

Tractate Shabbat attributes to R. Huna the saying that "he who habitually practises [the lighting of] the [Hanukah] lamp will possess scholarly sons."<sup>183</sup> In this passage, as in the others, we find evidence to support the claim that scholarly sons were regarded as a reward for fulfilling the mitzvot and living properly. The same Talmudic discussion says that sons and sons-in-law who are scholars are attained as a reward for proper treatment of the rabbis. "He who loves the Rabbis will have sons who are Rabbis; He who honours the Rabbis will have Rabbis for sons-in-law...."<sup>184</sup>

It was considered advantageous to have a talmid hacham in the family regardless of whether he was born into the family or married by a family member. To this end we find in Pesachim the following: "Let a man always sell all he has and marry the daughter of a scholar."<sup>185</sup> Just as it is permissible to impoverish oneself in order to support a talmid hacham so too it is not only permissible, but also encouraged, to impoverish oneself in order to marry the daughter of a talmid hacham. There can be no question that the presence of a talmid hacham in the family increased the

---

<sup>183</sup>Shabbat 23b, I. Epstein, trans.

<sup>184</sup>Ibid.

<sup>185</sup>Pesachim 49b, I. Epstein, trans.

family's reputation for greatness. Marrying the daughter of a scholar would bring one into contact with scholars. By this interaction one was able to move up the social ladder to a higher level.

CHAPTER VIII  
DEATH OF THE TALMID HACHAM

A. Special Nature of the Death of a Talmid Hacham

As revered and honored as the talmid hacham was in the rabbinic period, he, like all other men, had to die. With what we have so far seen to be the treatment of the talmid hacham it is not surprising that in his death, as in life, the talmid hacham was granted maximum respect and honor. In Horayot we read this simple maxim: "When a scholar dies, we do not see his like again."<sup>186</sup> On a similar note we find in both Ecclesiastes Rabbah and Song of Songs Rabbah the following passage:

There are four things which are very necessary for the world, but if they are lost substitutes can be found for them. [They are silver, gold, iron and brass.] But if a scholar dies, who will replace him for us?<sup>187</sup>

The death of a talmid hacham was felt more deeply by the rabbinic community than any other death, precisely because one who was learned and could teach had died. In Numbers Rabbah we are taught:

A Sage takes precedence over a king of Israel, for if a Sage dies there is none to replace him, while if a king of

---

<sup>186</sup>Horayot 13a, in Reuben Alcalay, column 428.

<sup>187</sup>Song of Songs Rabbah, VI:2.5, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. IX, p. 258.

Israel dies-well, all Israelites are eligible for the kingship.<sup>188</sup>

Every talmid hacham possessed his own learning and was unique in this way. Although it can certainly be argued that no one can take the place of any person who dies, the rabbis felt that this applied in a special way to the death of a talmid hacham. Part of this view is bound up with the fact that the death of a talmid hacham meant to the rabbis that one of their own was gone. The death of their community member confronted them with their own mortality and its consequence. Thus, the great praise of a deceased talmid hacham, the eloquent eulogy provided for him, and other aspects of the beautification of his death are all measures that the talmidei hachamim hoped would be observed on the occasion of their own deaths.

#### B. Privileges of the Dying and Deceased Talmid Hacham

The rabbis imagined that a talmid hacham was able to retain his learning even after death. In Song of Songs Rabbah, R. Simon offers this comparison:

It is as when one drinks old wine; even after he has finished drinking, the taste and scent are in his mouth.<sup>189</sup>

---

<sup>188</sup>Numbers Rabbah, VI:1, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. V, p. 157.

<sup>189</sup>Song of Songs Rabbah, VII:10.1, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. IX, p. 299.

In other words, even after a talmid hacham dies, the taste of his learning remains. R. Hohanan b. Torta imagined that: "Even when one [a talmid hacham] is dead, his lips quiver in the grave."<sup>190</sup> Even after he has died the teaching of the talmid hacham is repeated by those whom he influenced and taught.

Talmidei hachamim are, as we see in Ecclesiastes Rabbah, awarded a special place in Paradise. The story is told of the death of R. Bun b. R. Hiyya. He was a great talmid hacham and is reported to have learned more in twenty-eight years of scholarship than even an eminent scholar could learn in a hundred years. For his great knowledge,

R. Johanan said: Whoever has laboured in the Torah in this world is not allowed to sleep [in the Hereafter] but is taken to the Academy of Shem and Eber, and of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Aaron.<sup>191</sup>

Similarly, in a reference in Berachot we are told:

R. Hiyya b. Ashi said in the name of Rab: The disciples of the wise have rest neither in this world nor in the world to come; as it is said, "They go from strength to strength, every one of them appears before God in Zion."<sup>192</sup>

---

<sup>190</sup>Ibid.

<sup>191</sup>Ecclesiastes Rabbah, V:2.4, Freedman and Simon, eds., vol. VIII, p. 152-153.

<sup>192</sup>Brachot 64a, in A Rabbinic Anthology, p. 494.

We see then that the talmidei hachamim are viewed as privileged in their death and afterlife in much the same way as when they are among the living.

Special treatment is also accorded the talmid hacham who lies on his deathbed. In Semahot we learn that if a common person is dying his kin do not call people to his bedside, nor do they recount his good deeds. This is based on a Talmudic principle that states that a dying person is considered alive in every way. Thus, just because one is now on the deathbed does not mean that others are summoned to be at his side or praise him, for this would not be done at any other time. However, if the dying person is a talmid hacham his close friends and relatives do recount his good deeds and praise him. Why? Because, unlike a common person for whom this is not ordinarily done, it is frequently done for the talmid hacham. Therefore, since it is not unusual for others to praise the talmid hacham it is perfectly acceptable to do so when he is lying on his deathbed.<sup>193</sup>

#### C. Eulogy of the Talmid Hacham

At the funeral of a talmid hacham there should be an eloquent eulogy that recalls his greatness. In Shabbat we learn: "Who is slothful in the funeral oration of a sage

---

<sup>193</sup>Semachot 44a, The Minor Tractates of the Talmud, A. Cohen, ed., p. 327.



has not long to live."<sup>194</sup> In addition, in the eulogy of a talmid hacham,

The children of the rich are like the  
children of scholars and the children of  
scholars like the children of kings.<sup>195</sup>

That is to say, the children are praised in a eulogy as a means of honoring their parents. This passage allows for some exaggeration in that when one is rich, his children may be said to be children of scholars, thereby reflecting on his greatness; and if one is truly a scholar, his children may be counted as if they were the children of royalty. The point is that the talmid hacham retains his special niche in rabbinic society even after he has died. The respect and good treatment that were due him in life are no less his due in death. This is the proper way in which the talmid hacham must be treated both within the community of talmidei hachamim and among the laity.

---

<sup>194</sup>Shabbat 105a, in Reuben Alcalay, column 428.

<sup>195</sup>Semachot 44b, A. Cohen, ed., p. 336.

## CHAPTER IX

### CONCLUSION

"Every culture has its elite-people who represent the ideal that others strive to emulate or attain. In Jewish culture it is undoubtedly the scholars...who constitute this aristocracy."<sup>196</sup> The rabbinic literature is clear and consistent in its presentation of the talmid hacham. As the scholarly class, talmidei hachamim represented the pinnacle of achievement.

The special status of the talmid hacham was inextricably linked to his knowledge and learning. The study of the religious texts of Judaism, including Bible, Mishnah, Talmud and Midrash, was a continual, ceaseless responsibility for the talmid hacham. With age he grew wiser, yet the true talmid hacham was never free to end his studies.

A particularly important aspect of the training of a talmid hacham was that he was required to study under talmidei hachamim who were of greater learning than he. In this way, knowledge was passed from one scholar to the next and from one generation to the next. One had to apprentice

---

<sup>196</sup>Adin Steinsaltz, The Essential Talmud, New York: Bantam Books, 1976, p. 259.

oneself to other scholars in order to gain the requisite knowledge necessary to attain the title talmid hacham.

Several passages throughout the rabbinic literature remind us that the learning a talmid hacham undertook was done not for self-aggrandizement, but rather for the sheer love he felt for the Torah. The study of Torah, in the broadest sense of the word, was its own reward. Although the talmid hacham did in fact possess more knowledge than the laity, it was not to be flaunted or used in any immodest way. This point is stressed repeatedly throughout the literature.

The extensive study that the talmid hacham engaged in was not done alone. The most common method of study for young men was paired studying. In this way two young scholars could both learn from and teach each other. Of course, both of them were under the tutelage of other, more learned talmidei hachamim.

That the talmid hacham's study took precedence over all other activities is generally true. However, the observance of certain mitzvot could interrupt his Torah study. The most noted example of such an exception is found in Avot d'Rabbi Natan in which we learn that if two talmidei hachamim are engaged in study and a bridal procession or funeral with an insufficient number of people present passes by them, then they are to cease their studies and accompany

the group.<sup>197</sup> This example illustrates that the talmid hacham may not engage in study to the exclusion of all else. Like every other member of a community the talmid hacham must tend to the needs of his fellow.

As already noted, attainment of the title talmid hacham was based upon extensive learning and demonstration of proficiency in understanding and interpreting Jewish religious literature. However, any individual, no matter what his station in life, or the station into which he was born, could become a member of this scholarly class. In this sense the talmidei hachamim represented an open and ever growing aristocracy. This aspect of openness serves to counterbalance the element of elitism present in the rabbinic understanding of the talmid hacham.

That the rabbis considered the talmidei hachamim to be a special class is evident from both the privileges granted them and the special restrictions placed upon them. Compared to an ordinary person, a talmid hacham had to be more pious, more careful in his personal habits, and more humble. A stricter code of behavior was placed upon him in every aspect of his daily living, be it in the realm of ritual and religious observance or in more mundane matters of dress and appearance. The requirements made upon the talmid hacham regarding his study and manner of living show

---

<sup>197</sup>Avot d'Rabbi Natan 20a, A. Cohen, ed., p. 35.

that "it is not enough for a scholar to preach; he must also practice what he preaches, and when there is incongruence between theory and practice, a man can no longer be considered a scholar."<sup>198</sup>

The talmid hacham operated in a world surrounded by other talmidei hachamim. In their paired studying and in other activities there is no doubt that problems arose due to personal differences. The rabbinic literature provides numerous passages that are concerned with the treatment of one talmid hacham by another. In this matter, the talmidei hachamim are instructed to be considerate of each other and to show their colleagues proper respect. One may conclude that such admonitions were necessary precisely because the community of talmidei hachamim did not always act in accordance with what was considered proper. Although scholarly dispute was tolerated and in many instances promoted, a distinction was made between arguments that were considered "for the sake of Heaven" and those that were not. The latter type, namely disagreements of a personal and petty nature, were expressly prohibited. If the community of talmidei hachamim were to be respected by the laity, as was expected, then the talmidei hachamim themselves had to treat each other respectfully and with dignity.

---

<sup>198</sup>Adin Steinsaltz, The Essential Talmud, p. 261

As a member of a privileged class the talmid hacham was the recipient of support and respect from the laity. The rabbinic literature is replete with examples illustrating the financial support and favor that the talmid hacham was to receive from the laity. One was even permitted to impoverish oneself and one's family in order to support a talmid hacham. This is a particularly potent illustration. The talmid hacham was to be treated in the same manner that one would treat a king or his royal family. Deference, respect and service were accorded to the talmidei hachamim. No mention of a sin or wrongdoing on the part of a talmid hacham was to be made by a common person. One did not question the integrity of the talmidei hachamim. Thus we learn that the talmidei hachamim policed their own ranks.

There are passages within the rabbinic literature that compare the talmid hacham to the Divine Presence. Great merit is accorded the layman who offers the talmid hacham food and drink. It is accounted to him as if he entertained the Divine Presence, and the food offered the talmid hacham is counted as an offering of first fruits.

One of the rewards received for supporting the talmidei hachamim was to be blessed with sons who would themselves join the scholarly class. This was considered the greatest achievement one could attain, short of actually being a talmid hacham.



Just as one was graciously rewarded, both in this world and the world to come, for offering support to the talmidei hachamim so too was one punished if support was withheld. To fail to support the scholars when one possessed the means was considered a grievous sin. The punishment for this sin was to be condemned, cursed and even considered deserving of death. For the rabbis, the greatest good that a layman could perform was to support the talmidei hachamim and thereby enable them to pursue their study of Torah. Additionally, the layman was encouraged to study with the talmidei hachamim whenever possible. In this way, knowledge of Torah was made available to all within the Jewish community.

In closing, the original question is again asked:

How can one define a scholar? The first and most important criterion is that he be capable of studying and understanding the Torah, a condition that calls for the highest possible degree of intellectual ability. This, however, is only one facet of the fundamental outlook of the scholar. It is not enough for him to be erudite and perceptive; he must also be a noble human being endowed with spiritual and humanitarian qualities. One whose deeds are not compatible with his theories...cannot be regarded as a true scholar....<sup>199</sup>

The author of this thesis has attempted to understand the specific qualities and characteristics that encompass

---

<sup>199</sup>Ibid., p. 260.



the rabbinic concept of the talmid hacham. An analysis of selected passages from the rabbinic literature has shown the dominant trends and attitudes of the rabbis toward the talmid hacham. "...Scholarship is not merely an intellectual standard but encompasses the entire personality, the man becoming the symbol of Torah, his whole essence synonymous with it."<sup>200</sup> It is in this light that one must understand the rabbinic concept of the talmid hacham.

---

<sup>200</sup>Ibid., p. 261.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary Sources

#### Biblical and Rabbinic, including Translations

- Avot d'Rabbi Natan. Edited by S. Schechter, Vienna, 1887.  
Translated by J. Goldin, The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955;  
Schocken Books, 1974.
- The Babylonian Talmud. Translated by I. Epstein, London:  
The Soncino Press.
- The Babylonian Talmud. Standard text, 20 vol., Jerusalem,  
1944.
- Ethics of the Fathers. Philip Blackman, New York: The  
Judaica Press, Inc., 1964.
- The Holy Scriptures (Tanach). Standard Hebrew text,  
Jerusalem: Koren, 1981.
- The Holy Scriptures. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication  
Society of America, 1917.
- Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael. Edited by H. Horowitz and I.  
Rabin, Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1970.
- Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael. Edited and translated by J.  
Lauterbach, 3 vol., Philadelphia: The Jewish  
Publication Society of America, 1933.
- Midrash Rabbah. Edited by H. Freedman and M. Simon, 10  
vol., London: The Soncino Press, 1983.
- Midrash Rabbah. Standard text, Jerusalem, 1970.
- The Minor Tractates of the Talmud. Translated and edited by  
A. Cohen, 2 vol., London: The Soncino Press, 1965.
- The Minor Tractates. Edited and translated by M. Higger,  
New York: Debe Rabanan, 1935.
- Mishnah. Edited by H. Albeck, 6 vol., Jerusalem: Mosad  
Bialik, 1956.
- Otzar Habraitot. M. Higger, 9 vol., Brooklyn, New York:  
Shulsinger Brothers Linotyping and Publishing Company,  
1938-1946.

Pesikta d'Rav Kahanna. Y. Mandelbaum, 2 vol., New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962.

Pesikta Rabbati. M. Friedmann, Tel Aviv, 1963.

Pirke Avot. Translated by R. T. Herford, The Ethics of the Talmud: Sayings of the Fathers. New York: Jewish Institute of Religion, 1945; Schocken Books, 1962.

Sifra. Edited by I. H. Weiss, Vienna, 1862.

Sifre Deuteronomy. Edited by H. Horowitz and L. Finkelstein, Berlin, 1939; Jewish Theological Seminary, 1969.

Sifre Numbers and Sifre Zutta. Edited by H. Horowitz, Berlin, 1939; Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1966.

Tanhuma Hayashan. S. Buber, 2 vol., New York: Sefer, 1946.

Tanna debe Eliyahu. Edited by Ish Shalom, Vienna: Achiasaf, 1904.

## Secondary Sources

### Reference

Alcalay, Reuben. A Basic Encyclopedia of Jewish Proverbs, Quotations, and Folk Wisdom. Jerusalem: Massada Press Ltd., 1973.

Bialik, H. and Ravnitzky, J. Sefer HaAggadah. Tel Aviv: Dvir Publishing, 1972.

Encyclopedia Judaica. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1972.

Ginzberg, L. The Legends of the Jews. 7 vol., Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1937.

Gross, M. Otzar HaAggadah. Tel Aviv: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1954.

Hyman, A. Torah Haketuvah Vehamesurah. Tel Aviv: Dvir Publishing, 1979.

- The Jewish Encyclopedia. New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1901.
- Kassovsky, J. Otzar Lashon HaMishnah. 2 vol., Frankfurt-an-Main, 1927.
- Kassovsky, J. Otzar Lashon HaTalmud. 41 vol., New York: The Ministry of Education and Culture, Government of Israel and The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1954-1982.
- Kassovsky, J. Otzar Lashon HaTannaim. 4 vol., Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965.
- Mielziner, M. Introduction to the Talmud. New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1968.
- Montefiore, C. G., and Loewe, H. A Rabbinic Anthology. New York: Schocken Books, 1974.
- Schechter, S. Aspects of Rabbinic Theology. New York: Schocken Books, 1961.
- Steinsaltz, A. Madrich LaTalmud. (Guide to the Talmud). Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1984.
- Strack, H. Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash. New York: Atheneum, 1980.

#### General

- Graetz, H. History of the Jews. 6 vol., Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1894.
- Guttman, A. Studies in Rabbinic Judaism. New York: Ktav Publishing, 1976.
- Dimitrovsky, H. Exploring the Talmud. New York: Ktav Publishing, 1976.
- Finkelstein, L. Akiba: Scholar, Saint and Martyr. New York: Atheneum, 1970.
- Ginzberg, L. Students, Scholars and Saints. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1928.
- Mihaly, E. A Song to Creation: A Dialogue with the Text. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1975.

Steinsaltz, A. The Essential Talmud. New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1976.

Urbach, E. The Sages. Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1979.

# INDEX OF RABBINIC PASSAGES

## Midrashic Sources

## Page Number in Thesis

### Genesis Rabbah

XIX:1	31
LXIX:2	43
XCIV:9	57

### Exodus Rabbah

VI:2	11
XXIII:10	33
XXVII:9	38
XXXIII:7	14
XLI:5	7

### Leviticus Rabbah

I:15	25
III:7	65, two entries
V:4	67
XI:7	33
XI:8	4
XXX:11	34
XXXIV:13	64
XXXIV:16	71

### Numbers Rabbah

IV:20	63;67
VI:1	82
X:4	37
XI:6	78
XIII:2	73
XIII:4	65
XIV:4	35;49;76

### Deuteronomy Rabbah

II:26	5, two entries
II:27	5, two entries

### Song of Songs Rabbah

I:2.3	44;59
I:2.5	49
II:4.1	49
II:5.3	63

<u>Song of Songs Rabbah, con't.</u>	Page Number in Thesis
IV:11.1	7
VI:2.5	81
VII:10.1	82;83
<u>Lamentations Rabbah</u>	
IV:1	11
<u>Ecclesiastes Rabbah</u>	
II:18.1	70, two entries
V:2.4	83
VII:6.1	10, two entries
VII:11.1	69;70
VIII:1.4	19, two entries
XI:2.1	53;54;74
XII:7.1	34
<u>Esther Rabbah</u>	
II:4	59
V:1	37
<u>Pesikta Rabbati</u>	
page 121a	17
<u>Sifre Deuteronomy</u>	
<u>Brachah</u> 343	23
<u>Tanhuma</u>	
<u>Hukkat</u> 66a	68
<u>Tanna debe Eliyahu</u>	
page 16	56
page 33	25
page 37	28



## Talmudic Sources

## Page Number in Thesis

Brachot

19a	55;56
24b	24
28a	25
43b	23
64a	33;83

Shabbat

23b	62;79, two entries
24a	50
30b	15, three entries
34a	46
63a	42, two entries;43
86a	28
105a	86
114a	32;34;39
119b	55, two entries
145b	50, three entries
152a	32

Eruvin

32a	35
-----	----

Pesachim

22b	54, two entries
49a	24
49b	79
53b	65;66
54b	27;28

Yoma

38b	68
72b	25;26
86a	31

Sukkah

52a	30
-----	----

<u>Taanit</u>	Page Number in Thesis
4a	30;43
7a	45
11b	27
<u>Hagigah</u>	
9b	11
14a	4
<u>Yebamot</u>	
20a	76
<u>Nedarim</u>	
56a	36
62a	9, two entries
<u>Sotah</u>	
5a	29
21a	36
22a	38
22b	38
49a	10;47, two entries
<u>Kiddushin</u>	
40b	5
<u>Baba Metzia</u>	
85b	22
<u>Sanhedrin</u>	
17b	39
29a	48
52b	60
92a	69
99b	54, two entries
<u>Avot</u>	
I:4	75
I:6	43
I:13	10
II:10	76

<u>Avot, con't.</u>	Page Number in Thesis
IV:1	19, two entries
<u>Horayot</u>	
13a	81
<u>Avot d'Rabbi Natan</u>	
19a	6, three entries
19b	6, three entries
20a	12;14;88
20b	61
21a	61
23a	77
23b	68, two entries
24a	73
25b	35
27b	13
28b	8;32
32a	12
32b	22
34b	33
VI:1	74, two entries
<u>Soferim</u>	
40a	52
43a	28
<u>Semachot</u>	
44a	84
44b	85
<u>Kallah</u>	
50b	9
<u>Kallah Rabbati</u>	
53b	64;72,two entries
54a	40;45;72
54b	40
<u>Derech Eretz Rabbah</u>	
57b	28

Derech Eretz Zuta

58a  
58b

59a

I:1  
VII:3

Hullin

92a

## Page Number in Thesis

53  
11;16, two entries;  
20, two entries;  
21, two entries;23;  
32;76  
8, two entries; 26;  
47, two entries;60;  
69  
20  
21

6