



Introduction to Talmud

Answer Guide

The Essential Talmud

by

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Lesson One: Chapters 1-3

Instructions

All answers are to be prepared and submitted as an email attachment using a document format that can be opened by either the majority versions of Microsoft Word or Adobe Reader. Acceptable formats include doc, rtf, html, and pdf. Your answers are to be either single- or double-spaced, with the question number clearly indicated.

Be sure to include the page number on which you base your answer in parentheses at the end of your answer. In the event your answer is different from the one expected, you will be given credit if the instructor can find the basis for your answer on the page that you indicate.

Be sure to include the course title on the first page and your name and the date on all pages.

The answers to "true or false" questions must include your *reason(s)* for deciding whether the statement is true or false.

If you are asked to state your opinion, in the spirit of Talmud no opinion will be considered as incorrect as long as it (a) pertains to the issue, (b) can cast some light on the issue, and (c) is clearly stated and defended.

1. "If the Bible is the cornerstone of Judaism, then the Talmud is the central pillar ..." (p. 3)

2. Why is the Talmud the most important book in Jewish culture?

"In many ways the Talmud is the most important book in Jewish culture, the backbone of creativity and of national life. No other work has had a comperable influence on the theory and practice of Jewish life, shaping spiritual content and serving as a guide to conduct." (p. 1)

3. Why has talmudic study historically been prohibited?

"At times, talmudic study has been prohibited because it was abundantly clear that a Jewish society that ceased to study this work had no real hope of survival." (p. 1)

4. What does the author say is the formal definition of the Talmud?

“The formal definition of the Talmud is the summary of oral law that evolved after centuries of scholarly effort by sages who lived in Palestine and Babylonia until the beginning of the Middle Ages.” (p.1)

5. What are the two main components of the Talmud, and what is the primary function of each?

“It has two main components: the Mishna, a book of *halakhah* (law) written in Hebrew; and the commentary on the Mishnah, known as the Talmud (or Gemarah), in the limited sense of the word, a written summary of discussion and elucidations of the Mishna written in Aramaic-Hebrew jargon.” (p 4)

6. What is the main objective of the Talmud?

“Although its main objective is to interpret and comment on a book of law, it is simultaneously a work of art that goes beyond legislation and its practical application.” (p. 4)

7. True or false? The Talmud is the authority for purposes of ruling on halakhic law. Explain your answer.

False. “Although the Talmud is, to this day, the primary source of Jewish law, it cannot be cited as an authority for purposes of ruling.” (p. 4)

8. How is the Talmud best understood?

“The Talmud is best understood through analysis of the basic objectives of its authors and compilers.” (p. 4)

9. The Talmud is the embodiment of what great concept?

“The Talmud is the embodiment of the great concept of mitzvot talmud Torah – the positive religious duty of studying Torah ...” (p. 5)

10. What does the author believe is the main purpose of studying Torah?

“Study of Torah undoubtedly serves numerous practical purposes, but these are not the crucial objectives. ... Its main aim is learning itself. Likewise, knowledge of Torah is not an aid to observance of law but an end in itself. ... for the student poring over the text, study has no other end but knowledge.” (p. 5)

11. Do you agree or disagree with the author (question 10)? Explain why or why not.

Any answer is “correct” as long as the student’s position is clearly stated. The goal of the question is to get the student to think, not regurgitate data.

12. What does the author claim is the “sole objective” of the talmudic student?

“... to the talmudic student ... his sole objective has been to solve theoretical problems and to seek the truth.” (p. 6)

13. Along what lines is the Talmud constructed?

“The Talmud is ostensibly constructed along the lines of a legal tract ...” (p. 6)

14. With what three things is the Talmud concerned?

“Since the Talmud is concerned with subjects, ideas, and problems ...” (p. 8)

15. What is one of the most ancient methods of studying the Talmud?

“One of the most ancient methods of studying the Talmud attempted to reconstruct the question on the basis of the statement that served as a response.” (p. 8)

16. Is it legitimate to voice doubts in the study of Talmud? Why or why not?

“Voicing doubts is not only legitimate in the study of Talmud, it is essential to study.” (p. 9)

17. What two components will keep any inquiry from being considered unfair or incorrect?

“No inquiry is regarded as unfair or uncorrect as long as it pertains to the issue and can cast some light on some aspect of it.” (p. 9)

18. True or false? The author believes that one should not question the time-honored decisions of the sages.

False. “... the student is expected to pose questions to himself and to others and to voice doubts and reservations.” (p. 9)

19. How does the author say that true knowledge is attained?

“True knowledge can only be attained through spiritual communion, and the student must participate intellectually and emotionally in the talmudic debate, himself becoming, to a certain degree, a creator.”

20. What is the basic task of the oral law?

“The basic task of the oral law, therefore, is was to transmit the meaning of words.” (p. 11)

21. How is the definition of words derived?

“Precise definition need not entail explicit legislation, but is derived from ways in which people learn what should be done and how they should behave in various eventualities.”

22. Another important task of the oral law relates to what?

“Yet another important task of the oral law that went hand in hand with written law relates to laws based on popular customs or generally known facts that are not detailed in the biblical text and can only be learned through the oral tradition.” (p. 12)

23. Who is the first sage to be identified by name?

“Ezra ... is the first sage ... to be identified by name.” (p. 14)

24. What are the approximate dates of the era of the *Knesset Gedolah*?

“This era, which corresponds approximately to the period of Persian rule over Palestine (ca. 539-332 B.C.E.) ...” (p. 14)

25. What is another name given to those of the Great Assembly, and why were they called that?

“... the sages of the time ... were known by the general appellation of *sofrim* (scribes) ... ‘because they counted all the letters of the Torah’ ...” (p. 14)

26. Who was it that decided which of the books were to be included in the canon of the Tanakh?

“The members of the Great Assembly ... decided which books would be canonized in the Bible ...” (p. 14-15)

27. What does the author say was the main achievement of the scribes?

“... their main achievement was the linking of [the oral traditions] to the written law.” (p. 15)

28. What methods does the author include in the basic methods of *midrash halakhah*?

“... the basic methods of *midrash halakhah* (halakhic exegesis), that is, methods of learning and deriving *halakhah* from the biblical texts themselves, reconciling apparent textual contradictions, interpreting enigmatic statements, and analyzing and solving problems through perusal of the text. They also tried to find ways of introducing order into the mass of material so as to facilitate systematic transmission.” (p. 15)

29. What ancient text does the author say can be viewed as the world’s first constitution?

“The Great Covenant (see Nehemiah 9) – which can be viewed as the world’s first constitution ...” (p. 16)

30. What is the central prayer of the Jewish liturgy?
 "... the *Shemoneh Esreh* (eighteen benedictions), ... the central prayer of the Jewish liturgy ..." (p.16)
31. Name two units of commentary on the written law that are of a mystical nature, and in what body of work they are now contained.
 "Others – of a mystical nature – ...and were later included in the subject matter of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* (Act of Creation) and *Ma'aseh Merkavah* (Divine Chariot), which formed the latter part of the *Kabbalah*." (p. 16-17)
32. What does the anonymity of the sages of the Second Temple period indicate?
 "The anonymity of the sages of this period suggests that they generally worked in unison, their aim being to arrive at generally acceptable conclusions ..." (p. 17)
33. Approximately what time period is covered by the *zugot*?
 "The era of the *zugot* (pairs) corresponds, to a large extent, to the period of Greek rule in Palestine (332-140 B.C.E.) and the subsequent era of the Hasmonean dynasty (140-37 B.C.E)." (p. 18)
34. Who is the person (or persons) who dominated the early days of the era of the *zugot*?
 "The early days of this period were dominated by the great and legendary figure of the High Priest Simeon Ha-Tzadik (the Righteous). ... two different people (grandfather and grandson) bore the same name and appellatio. It may be that the name was used to denote the collective activities of several High Priests in this period of transition ..." (p. 18)
35. What book from the Second Temple period extols the virtues of Simeon Ha-Tzadik?
 "Simon is lavishly praised in the concluding section of the *Book of Ben Sira*. ..." (p. 19)
36. The spiritual leaders of what minority party were considered the heirs of the members of the Great Assembly?
 "The spiritual leaders of [the Hassidim] were the scholarly disciples and heirs of the members of the Great Assembly." (p. 20)
37. What is the Hebrew term for "let him die rather than sin"?
 "... the basis of the concept of *yehareg ve-al ya'avur* (let him die rather than sin) ..." (p. 20)
38. To whom is the ordinance permitting defensive warfare on Shabbat attributed?
 "The ordinance permitting defensive warfare on the Sabbath is attributed ... to Mattathias, father of the Hasmonean dynasty..." (p. 20)
39. What did the Sadducees advocate, and what was their main concern?
 "Formally speaking, the Sadducees advocated religious conservatism, rejecting the oral law, its traditions and rulings, and calling for a return to observance of the written law alone. ... Their main concern was to confine the authority of the Mosaic code to the sphere of practical action, in the most restricted sense, in order to facilitate close emulation of Greek civilization." (p. 21)
40. Give three tenets of faith that were rejected by the Sadducees.
 "... belief in the immortality of the soul, in heavenly reward, and in the resurrection of the dead." (p. 21)
41. What does the term "Pharisee" mean?
 "... Pharisees (*Perushim*, meaning separatists) ..." (p. 21)

42. Who were the “pairs” who headed the Sanhedrin, and what function did each perform?

“... the Sanhedrin, was headed by *zugot* (pairs of sages), one of whom served as *nasi* (president) while the other, his deputy, was the *av bet din* (head of the law court).”

43. Who was the sage who was in constant opposition to the Sadducees during the reign of Alexander Yanni?

“The only personality know to us from this period is the *nasi* Simeon Ben Shetah, ... one of the most vociferous opponents of the Sadducees, he was constantly at loggerheads with Alexander.” (p. 22)

44. What woman ruled Israel and brought about a “golden age” and what did she do?

“After Alexander’s death, however, his widow, Salome (Shlomzion) ruled in his stead and her reign is described in the Talmud as a ‘golden age.’ Salome restored the conditions that had prevailed at the beginning of the Hasmonian era.” (p. 22)

45. Why Simeon Ben Shetah significant?

“... he succeeded in ejecting the heads of the Sadducees and their supporters from the Sanhedrin, and from then on this institution was exclusively Pharisaic in character. He eradicated the last traces of idolatry and sorcery, employing severe measures to this end, and succeeded in gaining acceptance for the principle of ‘the rule of Torah,’ ... also introduced many ordinances, the most renowned of which altered the text of the *ketubah* ... in order to extend the rights of women and increase the stability of family life.