

In the Shadow of Giants: Current Research in Rabbinics

Lawrence H. Schiffman

*Dor holekh we-dor ba' ve-ha-'ares le-`olam `omadet*, one generation passes and another comes, but does the earth, the study of Rabbinic literature, the foundation of Judaic Studies, really stand still? We are assembled here this evening in an era in which nothing of the kind is true. A generation of giants has passed from us, and others now follow them, and it seems as if nothing can ever be the same. Fundamental changes have occurred in the manner in which Rabbinic literature and the Rabbinic period are perceived, taught and researched, at least in North America. Yet even after the major challenges to the methods of these giants, their lasting contribution remains permanent as it should.

Indeed, the giants of whom we will speak this evening may be seen to a great extent as having brought to fruition the plan of research of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, and to have gone beyond it substantially. At the same time their work was challenged to the very core in terms of methodology and results. Yet the ultimate result seems to be that a new generation is carrying on the work of these giants, while responding to the issues and problems to which they failed to respond, creating a new synthesis which will preserve and develop their work for the future.

We speak here of two central axes, Israel, the land in which Judaic studies has certainly reached its greatest extent of

development, as is to be expected, and North America, where unbelievable progress has created as near parity as can be expected in view of the circumstances in which we work and the role we play in universities and Jewish institutions of learning. Ephraim E. Urbach shaped Israeli scholarship in immeasurable ways, in Rabbinics and in all other areas of Judaica Studies as well. Saul Lieberman overarched both scholarly communities being the consummate dean of Talmudists in America and Israel alike, setting the agenda for the field for a generation. Louis Finkelstein, both in his own scholarship and in his administrative role, had a major influence on American Rabbinic studies of the scientific variety, and influenced other areas of Judaic Studies profoundly as well.

Before proceeding, we have to define what we mean by Rabbinics. We intend here to deal with those scholars who have devoted themselves to the study of the classical Talmudic and Midrashic corpus on its own grounds, studying it within its own historical context, not as a basis for the study of the later development of Jewish law. While all these scholars were drawn to medieval Rabbinics to some extent, they fully understood the difference between that field and the study of the Late Antique Rabbinic corpus, and conducted the study of the Talmudic materials within their own context. We exclude as well areas of Second Temple studies from our definition, concentrating on the study of the Rabbinic texts themselves.

These three scholars emerged from very different kinds of backgrounds. Urbach (b. 1912) began his career by training at the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau and at the universities of Breslau and Rome. Such a combination of institutional and disciplinary resources was typically of those entering the field of modern Judaic Studies in Europe at that time. He imbibed there the spirit of scientific scholarship, yet never gave up the simple piety of his Polish Jewish family, nor his love for everything Jewish. After a brief stint at the seminary as an instructor in 1935-38 he emigrated to Israel where until 1953 he was part of the educational establishment, a role shared by many of Israel's leading Judaic scholars. Only in 1953 did he begin to teach at the Hebrew University where he became professor in 1958. From then on he served in every important Israeli academic post, rising to a position of virtual one man leadership in the field from a political point of view. His leadership of the World Union of Jewish Studies ended only shortly before his death and his influence on the building of that organization was all-pervasive. Urbach had been trained in the ways of the religiously traditional *Wissenschaft*, and even though he differed greatly with the religious Zionist establishment, and prayed in a Hasidic synagogue, he actually found his ideological home somewhere in the religious Zionist community.

Lieberman (b. 1898) came from a very different kind of background. Born in Belorussia, he received his Talmudic train-

ing at the Yeshivas of Malch and, most notably, Slobodka. He then studied at the University of Kiev. Rumor has it that at one point he studied medicine, but he was never to pursue this career. A brief stay in Palestine in 1920 was followed by studies in France. From there he emigrated to Palestine again in 1928, intending to spend his life there. At the Hebrew University he sought to augment his knowledge of the Talmudic text with studies in classics, and he was appointed lecturer in 1931. Subsequently, he also taught in the educational establishment, at the Mizrachi Teacher's Seminary. From 1935 he was dean of the Harry Fischel Institute of Advanced Talmudic Research, a Jerusalem research institute that, although it still exists, never really developed as a scientific scholarly institution. The truth be told, Lieberman was in conflict with J. N. Epstein, and for this reason he did not find his natural home at the Hebrew University. In 1940 he left Israel to teach at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York as professor, then dean and in 1958 as rector. Here Lieberman continued to teach until his death. Yet in his last years he finally returned, albeit for only part of the year, to his beloved Jerusalem. Like Urbach, he was closest to the religious Zionist approach, and even his association with the Conservative seminary did not damage the respect he commanded in these circles.

Finkelstein (b. 1895) was a genuine American product, born in Cincinnati. His father was an Orthodox rabbi. He graduated

from CUNY in 1915 and completed his Ph.D. at Columbia in 1918. He was then ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1919, and served as a rabbi for ten years. But he started teaching Talmud at the seminary starting one year after his ordination. From 1931 he was professor of theology, although his main research was in Rabbinics. He then began his rise up the administrative ladder, being appointed assistant to the president in 1934, provost in 1937, president in 1940, and chancellor from 1951. In these positions he shaped both the intellectual and religious aspects of Conservative Judaism, and built the Seminary into the important research institution it was. At the same time, he was unendingly involved in American public affairs, returning to scholarship as a full-time occupation very late in his extremely long life.

It is curious that despite these very divergent backgrounds, the research of these scholars would unite around certain trends. If anything unites these men it is the devotion to the critical edition as the consummate type of scholarship. In this respect, they continued the trend which the *Wissenschaft* had itself inherited from nineteenth century classical studies.

Early in his career Finkelstein engaged in the detailed study of the manuscript evidence for the text of Avot de-Rabbi Nathan which his predecessor S. Schechter had worked on. He went on to subject the manuscripts of the *midreshe halakhah* to the same type of study, establishing detailed stemma for these mate-

rials. He then devoted himself to continuing the great work of H. S. Horowitz, and produced his classic edition of the Sifre in 1939. Finkelstein would later demur from the eclectic method used in that edition. Only a small part of the edition of the Sifra which he prepared, has recently appeared and we understand that no more will be published. Yet much of his life was devoted to the preparation of a critical text of this central Rabbinic document.

Urbach's first major work was his critical edition of a medieval text, *Sefer `Arugat Ha-Bosem* of R. Abraham b. Azriel, vol. 1, 1939. While this edition certainly did not involve the technical problems of a critical edition of a Rabbinic period text, it did follow the traditional *Wissenschaft* pattern for editions of unpublished manuscripts. Indeed, Urbach's early work was primarily in medieval Rabbis, as is the case with his *Ba`ale Ha-Tosafot*, first published in 1953/4, which saw several editions. This work was also based on critical study of manuscripts.

Lieberman was the great master of the critical edition, using manuscripts to establish critical texts for the Tosefta and the Talmud Yerushalmi. In the case of the latter, his approach makes possible the reconstruction of the text to a form much closer to that which emerged from the crucible of Late Antiquity than the textual evidence preserves. His *Tosefet Rishonim* and *Tosefta Kifshutah* cover practically the entire Tosefta which is

now on a firm textual and exegetical basis because of Lieberman's monumental work, despite his not having completed his work on this text.

Nevertheless, the critical edition as we know it was fast becoming a thing of the past already in the lifetime of these scholars. This approach to textual variants was taken over, as we mentioned, from classical studies. Yet its application to our field had its own limitations. First, the amount of data for critical editions of Rabbinic texts was unmanageable, and second, the atomistic method of notation of variants allowed the creation of eclectic readings from the data, with little attention to the wider contexts of the readings in the respective recensions. Computerized data bases are fast replacing the traditional critical apparatus as the technique of scholarship, yet in the hands of the generation we have been discussing. Such editions certainly reached their apex in the work of Lieberman.

Besides this textual interest, all three men had a passion for history, albeit of different kinds. Urbach's early medieval work certainly pertained in large measure to the history of the Rabbinic class in medieval Europe, and in those days almost all history was that of the Rabbinic class. Later, he moved on to write a variety of papers on historical issues, such as his study of the Rabbinic laws on idolatry as a source for Jewish history in Late Antiquity. In his *Hazal* he attempted to construct a history of Rabbinic ideas. He later brought his work on the

history of *halakhah* together into one volume. While some would come to doubt the historical methods used here, the work was clearly historical.

Finkelstein also tried his hand at medieval history with his work on self-government. While this field has progressed way beyond his volume, it demonstrates his interest in the history of Jewish communal structures. The bulk of his historical research revolves around the Second Temple and Rabbinic periods. His work on the Pharisees is based on the semi-marxist assumptions which dominated much of historical scholarship at the time. In subsequent editions he retracted many extreme interpretations. In any case, this remains a pioneering work and now, as more material for this period is emerging from Qumran texts regarding the sectarian groups in this period, the work remains a valuable source and an intellectual stimulus, even when we cannot accept many of its conclusions. This same approach is exaggerated in his biography of R. Akiva, the methodology of which could never be accepted today and which must be understood in its own historical context.

Lieberman also dealt with history. He wrote a number of extremely significant articles dealing with the history of late Roman/Byzantine Palestine based on both Greek and Talmudic sources. He also dealt with certain issues relating to the Dead Sea sect, although these were primarily in the area of *halakhah*. Yet perhaps his greatest historical contribution lay in his *Greek in*



*Jewish Palestine and Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* where the pervasive influence of Greek language and Hellenistic culture on Palestinian Jewry in the late Roman/Byzantine period was stressed. While these volumes are in reality a series of English *hiddushim* in terms of their organization, recent studies have begun to draw the wider conclusions from this and similar evidence of widespread Hellenization in Byzantine Palestine.

The methodology and conclusions of these scholars were challenged extensively in their lifetimes by the works of a number of scholars, curiously their own former students. The students trained in Urbach's own department ultimately rejected his wide ranging approach to Talmudic studies, preferring instead to limit themselves to the study of Talmudic and Midrashic manuscripts and readings, as well as to investigations of text-critical issues. Those who were trained by Urbach and who sought a wider approach, soon found their homes in the departments of Jewish history and Hebrew literature, where wider perspectives on the Talmud continued to develop.

On the American scene, two very divergent challenges emerged from the works of D. Weiss Halivni and J. Neusner, both trained to a great extent at JTS and both former students of Lieberman and Finkelstein. We will first look at the elements common to Halivni and Neusner, and then examine the great divergences in method and results which emerge from the works of these two scholars.

At the outset, let us note that both Neusner and Halivni challenged the prevailing notion of the critical edition school that the major problem in understanding the Rabbinic texts was to establish the correct text. Both Halivni and Neusner argued that the real problem was to understand how our text had come into being. In Halivni's *Mekorot U-Mesorot*, and in Neusner's *History of the Mishnaic Law...*, especially in the volumes on Purities, the text is taken apart into layers, by Halivni for the amoraim and Neusner for the tannaim. In other words, both scholars asserted that the real issue was not how the text of the Mishnah had been handed down after it was fixed, but rather how it had come about. The shift of interest was from transmission and the post-Talmudic era to composition and redaction in the Rabbinic age in late Antiquity.

But thus far Neusner and Halivni were raising the same challenge. In many ways, however they differ. Halivni's work followed the usual canons of philological research as expected by the very scholars whose analyses he was seriously challenging. He was arguing that after doing that spade work, there was much more to be said. Neusner largely ignored that kind of work and instead opted for the close analysis of form critical issues and for the use of translation (rather than critical editions) as a mode of research designed to set forth the issues. While this method has much to contribute, it opened his work up to the delegitimization which took place at the hands of some of these

very people whom he challenged, and at the hands of many other scholars who felt that the traditional philological homework was a *sine qua non* for all Talmudic research.

Further, tied to Neusner's analyses of the text were a variety of historical conclusions which changed over time. These conclusions challenged general assumption of the field, some intimately tied to what, the truth be told, are religious issues. Neusner's early work on the Jews of Babylonia had been historicist and almost fundamentalist in his use of Rabbinic sources, relying on the details of Talmudic reports to an unbelievable extent. In his later work on the Pharisees and on certain Rabbinic masters, he began to be very skeptical as to the reliability of Rabbinic teachings for historical research. He emphasized greatly the fact that Rabbinic teachings reflected not the time of the events they described but rather the views of Rabbis in the times in which the materials were formulated. These conclusions, even if often taken further than many would prefer, introduced a needed corrective into the approaches taken by his predecessors.

Yet it was not long before these views were taken to the extreme, suggesting that nothing could be recovered from Rabbinic documents except information about the period in which they reached final form and that these documents should be understood only in that historical context. Neusner began to speak of an "authorship", meaning a collective which had redacted the docu-

ments. This approach, in reality, was simply taking to an excessive extreme the correct conclusion that all Rabbinic documents, in their present form, reflect the aims and purposes of the redactors and collectors.

The challenge that Neusner posed to the generation of his predecessors--indeed his teachers--was eventually the cause of extremely bitter debate. Yet ironically, it was the younger generation of scholars which would move beyond both extremes, seeking a middle position. This trend was evident already in the early days of this challenge and is clear today, both in Israeli and American research, even among those who would deny it.

Chief among the synthesizers was a young scholar tragically taken from us at so young an age, Baruch Bokser. Bokser grew up under the influence of his father, a Rabbi-scholar trained at JTS who himself was greatly influenced by Finkelstein and Lieberman. Bokser attended the Jewish Theological Seminary, completing his rabbinic studies there and receiving ordination. He was a student of Lieberman and Finkelstein, as well as of Halivni and other important scholars. Essentially, he was in a unique position to make such a synthesis when he came to Brown to study with Neusner in the expanding Brown Judaic Studies program, then in the context of the Department of Religious Studies.

Bokser imbibed the teachings of Neusner, but like Neusner's early students, remained close to the tradition of the scholars with whom he had studied previously. In this context, one should

understand his two volumes on the amora Samuel's Mishnah commentary. This combination of methods is also observable in his book on the Seder as well as in a number of important articles. His forthcoming translation and commentary of a reconstructed text of the Palestinian Talmud, tractate Pesahim, is the crowning achievement of his synathesis of approaches.

When one looks further among younger scholars today, it is clear that the challenges posed by Halivni and Neusner, each in its own way, has had profound effect on younger scholars, both in America and Israel. Indeed, many of those who negate the influence of these men, most particularly of Neusner, are in fact indebted to his methodolglcal strictures for much of their approach. Yet curiously, and perhaps tragically, he would negate totally the value of their approach and they of his.

For some years it appeared that the next generation of Rabbinic scholars in America would be constituted of the twenty doctorates prepared at Brown University. Indeed, these students, along with some from a few other institutions, did constitute the first generation of university trained Rabbinic scholars to enter the American scene. Now, finally, Talmudic studies had penetrated the American Judaica scene and it would sucessfully interact with the academy at large. Despite the growth of the field, it was beset by intellectual battles over how to approach Rabbinic texts, conducted with extreme acrimony. Scholars entering the field in those years, were put in the impossible position of

navigating between an almost monopolistic hold in the field by one institution in this country, and academic relationships with colleagues in Israel.

The rise of additional centers at NYU, Columbia, Yale, Berkeley, and a second time at Brown, has now presented the American academy with a new and wider group of scholars, augmented by some trained at the Jewish institutions. This generation was primarily university based and many sought to bring together the old tradition of textual and historical scholarship with what they perceived as the valid contributions of Neusner.

There are a variety of important trends to be noted in this new generation. We have already alluded to the shift from Jewish institutions to universities. While this shift has been occurring for more than a quarter of a century in all areas of Judaica, it was slowest in Talmudic studies. It has been heightened by the recent changes in Jewish institutions which are responding in a variety of ways to the religious commitment and behavior of the Jewish community which forms their constituency.

Second, the scholars now occupying this field were trained in a variety of institutions. As a result there is a possibility of true collegiality and interaction. The almost complete hegemony of JTS which was reflected in the last generation is no longer the case, and the almost monopoly enjoyed in the transitional era by Brown University is no longer in existence.

Third, and perhaps most important of all, the leading Rabbi-

nic scholars in universities today of the younger generation are successful because they understand the rabbinic materials in a disciplinary or historical context which would have been foreign to the three great scholars whom we discussed above. Each individual reflects this tendency in a different way. In general, pure Talmudic textual studies is not the norm at American secular universities where Talmud flourishes because of its interaction with wider fields. It seems, further, that the same tendency is beginning to impact on the rabbinical seminaries as well. From the point of view of method and the issues we deal with, this is clearly a new generation.

What emerges from all this is that the great scholars we are memorializing this evening did indeed cast a giant shadow. This shadow was not made smaller by the challenges posed by the work of Halivni and Neusner. On the contrary, as the tradition was received by a younger generation, the challenges posed to these scholars widened and refined the approaches to scholarship they represented. A new generation is now standing on the shoulders of these giants, hoping that their research and their contributions will be both a fitting continuation of the work of great predecessors and a foundation for future Talmudic research.