The Schottenstein Edition of the Babylonian Talmud

The Next Stage in Talmudic Elucidation

by NOSSON SCHERMAN and NESANEL KASNETT

THE THEME of this exhibit, *Printing the Talmud: From Bomberg to Schottenstein*, places the Schottenstein Edition of the Babylonian Talmud in the distinguished company of Talmud editions that have made history. It belongs there, because the Schottenstein Edition is not merely a new approach to elucidation of the Talmud. It has proven to be one the greatest propagators of Talmud study in history. It is ubiquitous. One sees it on airplanes, on the Long Island Railroad, at lunchtime study groups in white-shoe law firms, and in study halls and synagogues from Modern Orthodox congregations in the suburbs to the Satmar *beis midrash* in Williamsburg. The Schottenstein Edition of the Babylonian Talmud has proven itself to be a transforming accomplishment that has already elevated the lives and aspirations of countless people, and it will continue to do so for many generations.

Originally dedicated by the late Jerome Schottenstein of Columbus, Ohio, carried on by his family and now spearheaded by Jay and Jeanie Schottenstein, this project has earned universal respect and has spawned Hebrew and French Editions. And now, with the completion of the 73-volume English-language edition after fifteen grueling but fruitful years, the Schottensteins are sponsoring an edition of Talmud Yerushalmi.

The forerunner and foundation of the Schottenstein Edition was the ArtScroll Series, which began in 1976, fourteen years before the first volume of the Talmud was published. The initial ArtScroll publication was *Megillas Esther*. It was innovative, the first English-language publication of its kind. It translated the sacred text, provided a commentary anthologized from classic sources, and featured a broad-ranging introduction that placed the work in a philosophical and historical perspective. In the beginning there had been no intention of producing more than that one work; Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, the author, intended it to be a memorial to a departed friend, Rabbi Mair Fogel ז"ל, and nothing more.

Why had *Megillas Esther* earned such an unexpected reception? In retrospect, the reason was obvious: it was an illustration of the old cliche, "an idea whose time has come." At that point in time, there were two generations of Jews who had received a *yeshivah* or day school education, sometimes on the secondary or even *beit midrash* level. However, their *mamma loshen* (mother tongue) was English. They might have been able to "study" the classic Hebrew texts and commentaries, but they could not curl up on a recliner and read Hebrew. And, of course, the vast majority of English-speaking Jews were totally unequipped to deal with a Hebrew text at all. If such people

were to deal with a Torah work, it would have to be presented in their own idiom. To them, the ArtScroll *Megillas Esther* was a revelation. Its formula had struck the chord of the time. There was a widespread feeling that such work not stop with *Megillas Esther*. The Torah belongs to every Jew; it should not be locked behind a language barrier.

It was made clear in the introduction to *Megillas Esther* that the translations and commentaries would be faithful to the traditional talmudic and rabbinic literature. It became our conviction that English-speaking Jews needed an authentic Torah literature in their own language, a literature that was proud of and faithful to its origins.

Conception of the Schottenstein Talmud, In a sense, the Schottenstein Talmud was conceived nearly eight years before it was born. In 1982, Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky smilingly asked when we would begin elucidating the Talmud. We were taken aback. The Talmud? Such a mammoth undertaking? Could we even consider such an awesome project? Was the *Rosh Yeshivah* serious?

He *was* serious. He said, "You *should* do it and you *will* do it, and if Hashem grants me years, when the time comes I will give you a letter stating my approval." He was a wise and visionary man, and history has borne him out.

After fifteen years, seventy-three volumes, thirty-five thousand pages, innumerable hours of arduous intellectual effort, and countless prayers that the Almighty bless the effort with accuracy and success, the Schottenstein Edition of the Babylonian Talmud is complete.

Has it succeeded? The answer lies in the great and growing number of people for whom the Schottenstein Edition has become an indispensable part of their lives; in the renowned scholars who say unabashedly that this *Shas* helps them prepare their lectures; in Rabbi Yosef Sholom Eliashiv of Jerusalem who studied the notes in the Hebrew Schottenstein Edition *Tractate Eruvin*; in Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, who declares that his son prepares lectures with the help of the Hebrew Edition; in the *yeshivah* alumni whose learning sessions had lapsed, but have now returned to the pleasure of regular Talmud study; in the striving, seeking Jews who are uniting with their heritage thanks to the Schottenstein Edition; in the people who read Hebrew with difficulty, but have made a *Siyyum ha-Shas* thanks to the Schottenstein Edition. Let us go back to the origins of the work and follow the long, hard, rewarding road to this wonderful moment.

The Time Came. The time came in 1990, with the publication of *Tractate Makkos*. Dedicated by Mr. and Mrs. Marcos Katz of Mexico City, that tractate was chosen as a pilot project of sorts, because it is short enough to be published in one volume and because it is studied in most *yeshivot*.

Many of the leading Torah leaders of Israel and America endorsed the effort in writing, and others gave their support orally. Still others were more cautious, though the reports of such doubts often greatly exaggerate the extent of the misgivings. Some respected rabbis feared that the work would wean people away from serious study or that students would use it as a crutch and never develop skills in the basics. As time went by, these fears were dispelled, both by the quality of the product and by the experience of those who used it. After the first several years, the opposition dwindled and virtually disappeared.

The goal of this project was to open the doors of the Talmud and welcome its people inside. It had to be much more than a mere translation, for the truth is that the Talmud cannot be simply translated. A literal rendering would not capture the essence of the content, because so much exists "between the lines." The Talmud must be taught, explained, elucidated as a master teacher would present it, to clarify its logic, argumentation, and make its goals clear to the reader. At first we thought that the simplest and most direct way to create the manuscript would be to transcribe a good *Daf Yomi* lecture and then edit and flesh it out. How incredibly naive! Teams of scholars and editors would be needed, and they would have to study the tractate as thoroughly as if they were delivering *shiurim* in one of the great *yeshivot*. So exacting was the work that the preparation of a single volume, which on average elucidates 35–40 folio pages, costs upwards of $250,000.

It is remarkable that the original goal and conception of the English Talmud needed very little retooling. As our first General Editor, Rabbi Hershel Goldwurm זצ"ל, defined and refined it, the idea was to create a sophisticated elucidation of the plain meaning of the Gemara according to Rashi, resulting in a coherent, whole literary work of scholarly value. Where there was no Rashi, as in most of *Bava Batra,* the elucidation would follow the primary commentator of the tractate. The actual text of the Gemara would be translated at the top of the page, as a narration. That is, since the Gemara speaks in half-thoughts and half-sentences and assumes that the student understands the flow, its text would have to be fleshed out. However, since one of our primary concerns was to teach *teitch* (literal translation), it was important to differentiate between the actual words of the Gemara and the filler words. To that end the former would appear in boldface type. Similarly, *Mishnayot* and *baraitot* (tannaitic teachings) would be printed in small capital letters to set them off from the amoraic statements. In all, the translation was to be somewhat self-sufficient, so that the more accomplished user need not be constantly consulting the notes below.

These notes were to be largely explanatory. They would provide background information when the Gemara veered into a peripheral *sugya*. They would render every remark of Rashi in all its fullness, drawing from the panoply of commentary on Rashi when appropriate. One rule Rabbi Goldwurm stressed from the very start: we were not to produce original *ḥiddushim*. We were to use the classic sources, both medieval and contemporary, to explain the Gemara and Rashi. In the rare instance where no one addressed an obvious difficulty or ambiguity— one that could not be ignored— we would be forced to offer our own interpretation, but one that was consistent with the primary commentary's general approach. Additionally, the notes would present the interpretations of dissenting *rishonim*, identify important issues discussed by the commentators, and cite sources for further research and analysis. In short, we would provide the beginner with a good understanding of the Gemara, and the scholar with a firm and reliable foundation for in-depth study.

The Process. The Schottenstein Talmud is the product of a team effort. We have encountered many people who envision our team as sitting together in a single *beit midrash,* engaged in spirited debate and judicious redaction, but in fact, the fifteen to twenty-five scholars involved in producing each volume are located all across the United States and in Israel, and work independently. Hence, the work is organized as follows. A volume is divided by chapters or sub-chapters. Each section is

assigned an author, an editor, and a reader. It is the author's responsibility to compose an entire first draft, which includes translation of text and explanatory notes, as discussed above. His draft goes to an editor, who essentially engages the author as a *ḥavruta* (*study partner*). He will correct interpretive mistakes, delete inappropriate material, add salient and concise insights, and generally polish the writing. The editor's draft goes to a reader, who is a superior *talmid ḥakham.* He functions as the *posek aḥaron*, checking for the accuracy of the elucidation and also adding or deleting material as he sees fit. The author communicates with his editor, and the editor with his reader, through notes in the manuscript. The reader's corrections are then sent to the editor, who incorporates them and forwards the manuscript to various proofreaders. After their work is done, the manuscript is paginated, and the process begins again. The graphics staff, led by Rabbi Sheah Brander, creates and inserts the various diagrams, charts, and illustrations requested by the editors. The pages are reviewed by a reader and four proofreaders at least three times. Their corrections are merged by another reader into one final version. The process, then, is one of *birur aḥar birur* (continual refinement). It ensures the best work that the constraints of time, money, and human fallibility allow.

How Do You Start? People often ask how we go from a blank piece of paper or computer screen to the finished work. Obviously, before writing a word, the author must fully research the *sugya,* which includes consulting all of the *rishonim*, the major *aḥaronim*, and other works specific to the tractate. But he must also, when necessary, first define central concepts and establish terminology. For instance, the first chapter of *Bava Batra* deals with a damage called *hezeik reiyah*. A literal translation of this term ("damage of seeing") is ambiguous, and thus unserviceable. Besides, what exactly is the nature of this damage? We always challenge younger colleagues, when they ask for help in translating a term, to first define the concept behind the term. The definition invariably yields the translation. And so, after consulting a major *rosh yeshivah* regarding the nature of *hezeik reiyah,* we came up with "visual trespass" for a translation. The word "visual" derives nicely from *reiyah,* and "trespass," while not a faithful translation of *hezeik*, accomplishes the goal of specificity and enlightenment.

The third chapter of *Bava Metzia* discusses the four *shomerim.* These are four types of people that have become liable, in varying degrees, for protecting another person's property. The difficulty here was finding one translation of the term *shomer* that fits all four types (paid and unpaid watchmen, renter, borrower). [When there is no English equivalent, such as with the word *tzaraat* ("leprosy" is inaccurate), we must transliterate in both the text and the notes. But where there is an English equivalent, that word is used in the text (and often in the notes) for teaching *teitch.*] Now, the obvious choices for *shomer*—"guard" and "watchman"— connote a person whose job is to protect property with no right to use it. While these words describe the paid and unpaid watchmen, they hardly fit the renter and the borrower. We eventually decided upon "custodian," for the strongest sense of that word is someone charged with a duty of care, which is the common aspect of the four *shomerim.*

Sometimes preparation for writing a chapter took the author, editor, or reader far afield. When working on the subject of *Kiddush ha-Ḥodesh* (Sanctification of the New Month), Rabbi Goldwurm had occasion to consult with NASA's chief astronomer at Cape Canaveral. A *sugya* in *Eilu Tereifot*

led Rabbi Eliezer Herzka to conduct extensive e-mail discussions with Dr. Michael Thompson of the Department of Biology at the University of Sydney and with another expert at the University of Virginia, and to do his own research at the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan. Working on the first part of *Eilu Tereifot* required Rabbi Hillel Danziger to consult with experts in the field of animal anatomy in the United States and Israel, as well as with Rabbi Amitai Ben-David, author of the acclaimed *Sikhat Ḥullin*. In addition, Rabbi Danziger spent many hours with Howard S. Friedman, a leading anatomical illustrator who has worked for the Audubon Society and the American Medical Association, to ensure that the volume's many accompanying drawings were both accurate and illuminating.

A Staff Worthy of the Project. It is impossible to encapsulate in one or two paragraphs the fifteen-year experience of writing and editing the Schottenstein Talmud. So multidimensional was the work, so multifarious the challenges, that no day was like any other. Nevertheless, the underlying sense of it was that of standing at Ravina's and Rav Ashi's ground zero, for every word of the Gemara had to be precisely understood and precisely rendered. An active or passive verb could affect the *peshat*, and overarching words could bear two of Rashi's interpretations.

Assembling a staff has been a very difficult task. Obviously, the writers and editors must be accomplished Talmud scholars, but that is not enough. The writers must have a natural ability to understand the needs of the reader. What does the reader have to know to understand the talmudic passage? What introductory material does he need? What should be inserted into the text and what into the notes? What do we deem too much information or not enough? Most importantly, the writer must be able to explain the material so that a reader with average intelligence will understand it, even if his Hebrew background is limited. As one of our writers wrote: "If we take incomprehensible Hebrew and render it in incomprehensible English, we have not served the reader." But that is not enough. The writer should also express himself in clear, correct English.

Thus there are three requirements: knowledge, pedagogy, and language. Unfortunately, few people possess all three qualifications, which makes it very difficult to recruit writers and editors. Those who have all three attributes are scarce and are worth their weight in gold. The most important of the qualifications are the first two: scholarship and the ability to communicate it. Talented editors can do wonders with mediocre writing. Only editors and publishers know how much editing even famous and best-selling authors need.

As the years have gone by, we have been able, with God's help, to develop a stellar corps of writers and editors. Experience and the guidance of the project's coordinator, Rabbi Yehezkel Danziger, have helped many scholars perfect their natural talent.

People with experience in the field of scholarly research can best appreciate the achievements of the scholarly team. Quite frankly, it is unmatched. It was possible only because of the caliber of the scholars and editors, and because of their dedication. Many were the nights when writers, editors, proofreaders, typesetters, and artists were up past midnight, writing and re-writing, editing, perfecting, polishing — laboring to assure that the finished volume would come out in time and be worthy of the thousands of people who depend on it for their regular study sessions.

Though many outstanding *talmidei ḥakhamim* have poured their souls, their knowledge, their talents into this project, Rabbi Goldwurm was the guiding spirit of the project until his untimely passing in 1994 at the age of fifty-six. He set the guidelines and with his phenomenal knowledge and judgment won the respect and admiration of all his colleagues. The finished product is his monument.

The Page. For over a century, the standard Talmud page has been the Vilna *Shas*, developed by the famous Romm family. It had been produced on now obsolete linotype machines and reproduced so many times that it had lost some of its sharpness. In recent decades, sets of the Talmud have been newly typeset with some innovations, the most useful being that many have the opening words of Rashi in bold type, which frees readers of the maddening chore of finding a particular Rashi hidden in a crowded column. After struggling with the Vilna page during the early years, our graphics staff contracted to use the new *Oz Vehadar* Talmud, while it was still being produced, tractate by tractate. It follows the Vilna format, of course, but it is especially beautiful and user-friendly.

One rule was inviolable from the start. The Schottenstein Edition was not meant as a substitute for traditional study, but as an aid. It would have been easy to print the entire Talmud at the beginning of each volume and then simply print the English elucidation, page after page, in the second part of the volume. But if that were done, most users would peruse the English without referring to the Hebrew, and that would defeat the purpose of helping the reader study Talmud in the original. Therefore, the Schottenstein Talmud consists of page spreads, with the *Oz Vehadar* on one page and the English elucidation on the facing page. Since each Hebrew page requires, on average, about four pages of elucidation and notes, the Hebrew page is reprinted all four times, so that the reader will have it in front of him constantly. A light gray bar alongside the Hebrew indicates which part of the Hebrew page is being explained.

As a result of this page spread, many novice students begin by reading the English with only an occasional glance at the Hebrew. In time, they look at the Hebrew more and more and refer to the English less and less. In other words, they become trained to study the Talmud on their own and use the elucidation to check themselves and to provide help for the rough spots.

Daf Yomi. Although the users of the Schottenstein Edition are hardly limited to *Daf Yomi* participants, the ever more popular *Daf Yomi* program and the Schottenstein Talmud enjoy a symbiotic relationship. Many *Daf Yomi* participants could not maintain the grueling regimen without the Schottenstein. Even *Daf Yomi* teachers use it to help them prepare. Actually, many lecturers have no choice because their students are lapping up knowledge from the Schottenstein and come to the lecture well prepared — and no teacher wants his students to be better prepared than he.

The 1983 *Daf Siyyum Daf Yomi* celebration in New York filled Felt Forum, a five thousand seat auditorium. In 1990, the *Siyyum* filled Madison Square Garden, and in 1997 it filled the Garden and the Nassau Coliseum. This year, it filled Madison Square Garden and the Javits Convention Center in New York and the Continental Arena in New Jersey, and the proceedings were carried via satellite to scores of venues, as far off as Australia. No one knows how many participants were able to join *Daf Yomi* because of the Schottenstein Edition, but they surely number in the tens of thousands.

ArtScroll's publication schedule has revolved around *Daf Yomi* in order to help participants navigate through *daf* after *daf* of the sea of the Talmud. The *Daf Yomi* cycle stretches for seven and a half years and in order to coordinate with it as much as possible, new volumes of the Schottenstein Edition were published on a staggered basis to coincide with the *Daf Yomi* schedule, so that it would be in synch with the new *Daf Yomi* volume.

Maintaining such a tight schedule required the coordinated efforts of many people, and the publication of a new volume every nine or ten weeks. It was almost miraculous that this could be accomplished almost flawlessly, and with such consistency, for fifteen years.

The finished product is tribute to the superb staff that produced this edition of the Talmud. It is nothing less than astonishing that a work of this complexity and quality could be produced with such regularity. That the staff was able to keep pace with the *Daf Yomi* schedule over two cycles is one of the main reasons that the numbers of people participating in *Daf Yomi* study has grown exponentially since publication of the Schottenstein Talmud began.

So it was that fifteen years ago our consummate cadre of *talmidei ḥakhamim* approached the sacred task of elucidating the Talmud "with terror, fear, trembling, quaking, and dread," as Ramban described his own feelings in introducing his classic commentary on the Torah. Such an attitude is a prerequisite to excellence, because the wisdom of the Torah is so infinite that only with *siyata de-Shmaya* (the assistance of the One Above) can one merit to scratch its surface and absorb its truth. The more one unlocks and enters the chambers of God's wisdom, the more one is awed by its vastness. In the study of the Talmud, familiarity breeds awe. The work began with a powerful sense of responsibility to be accurate and precise, both in language and interpretation, and that resolve has never slackened. Experience brought refinement, but never relaxation of standards.

Sponsorship. Obviously, this project could not be produced by a lone writer sitting at his keyboard and pecking out translations. A team of this size, and an undertaking of this magnitude, requires considerable financial backing. It should be equally obvious that bookstore sales could never be enough to fund the work. Considerable private support was a prerequisite to success. Very early in the project, Jerome Schottenstein of Columbus, Ohio dedicated the two volumes of *Eruvin,* and then undertook the dedication of the entire Edition. That, plus generous dedicators of individual volumes, made it possible for the work to continue. Mr. Schottenstein tragically passed away after the publication of only a few more volumes, but his family continued his commitment. Mr. and Mrs. Jay Schottenstein became the mainstays of this Edition.

Later, Jay and Jeanie Schottenstein responded to a new demand and dedicated the Hebrew Edition of the Schottenstein Talmud, which has been highly praised by many luminaries of the Torah world, including Rabbi Yosef Sholom Eliashiv and Rabbi Chaim Kanievski. The Schottensteins are also dedicating the newly inaugurated Schottenstein Edition of Talmud Yerushalmi.

We were very fortunate that Joel Fleischman, First Senior Vice President of Duke University, was able to work with us to establish the Mesorah Heritage Foundation, a non-profit organization that funds the scholarship up to and including the final creation of the manuscript. Through the generosity of our sponsors, we are able to keep our list prices within the reach of the average family.

Final Thoughts. In the world of publishing, producing a seventy-three-volume scholarly work is almost unheard of. Producing such a work in only fifteen years, and within the time frame originally projected for it, is unimagined! The success of our venture has many fathers, too numerous to acknowledge here, but ultimately it was God's will that an English Talmud be that caused it to be. We think in our generation there was a niche set aside for a Schottenstein Talmud, and we have tried to describe it here. We call it "sophisticated *peshat*," and it fills the void that existed between *Daf Yomi* learning and traditional in-depth analysis. Indeed, our Talmud has enriched the former and provided a springboard for the latter. May Hashem establish our handiwork for us; our handiwork may He establish.