Steinsaltz Talmud Returns Jews to a Self-Understanding

By Nehemia Polen
Special to the Advocate

There is a witticism which distinguishes between a Jewish best-seller and a secular best-seller. A best-seller in the secular world is a book that sells a million copies the first year after publication, ten thousand copies the second year, a hundred copies the third year, and no copies for all succeeding years. A Jewish best-seller sells one thousands copies the first century, one thousands copies the second century, and one thousand copies for each succeeding century.

With the appearance of the English version of the Steinsaltz Talmud, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz has accomplished the seemingly impossible: a best-seller in both senses of the term. It is being purchased in large numbers, even by American standards, yet there is every indication that it is destined to be an enduring work, a work that intellectually curious Jews and non-Jews will wish to own and cherish and pass down to their children. It will never be 'remaindered.'

Over a hundred years ago, Rabbi Israel Lipkin (Salanter), the founder of the Musar movement, proposed the idea of translating the Talmud into Hebrew, as well as German and other European languages, in order to make it accessible to the secular intelligentsia of his day. Like many of his ideas, this one did not reach fruition in his lifetime. Salanter would no doubt be pleased that his project has now begun to be realized by Rabbi Steinsaltz and his team of translators.

It is no secret that the Talmud is not an easy book. Indeed, the adjective 'talmudic' has become synonymous with circuitous, labyrinthine reasoning. The Talmud itself seems to concur. A passage in *Sanhedrin* (24a) commenting on Lamentations 3:6, "HE HATH MADE ME TO DWELL IN DARK PLACES . . . ", states, "This verse refers to the Babylonian Talmud." Yet the Talmud is the central document of Rabbinic Judaism, and it is impossible to understand any aspect of Jewish religion or culture without it. Anyone who does not have at least some familiarity with the vast talmudic literature is doomed to Jewish cultural illiteracy.

And that is exactly where Rabbi Steinsaltz comes in. He has made the popularization of the Talmud his lifework. His justly famed Hebrew edition provides a fully punctuated and vocalized text, a translation of the Aramaic into modern Hebrew, a running commentary on each word and phrase of the original, as well as a wide range of helpful historical, geographical, linguistic and other background information. All this and more is now being made available to the English reading public with the appearance of the first volume of the English translation, published by Random House.

Elegantly produced and bound, with gilt-edge paper, everything about this edition announces that the Talmud has arrived on the American cultural scene; nothing dusty or archaic here. Of course the text itself is as difficult as ever, but the translation and commentary are there to take us by the hand and gently guide us, step by step, through the maze of talmudic argument.

The Steinsaltz Talmud, for all its wide acceptance, has not lacked for detractors. Some academic scholars have dismissed it as 'unscientific,' as not taking into account modern critical research in the development and editing of the talmudic text. Some elements within the Orthodox community, on the other hand, have criticized Rabbi Steinsaltz for alleged impieties, for not sufficiently emphasizing the divine character and Sinaitic origin of the talmudic corpus. Both groups of critics, it seems to me, misunderstand the goal of his Talmud edition.

It is this sense of common culture and shared language which we have lost, and which Rabbi Steinsaltz hopes to enable us to regain.

To better articulate this goal, allow me to indulge in a bit of personal reminiscence. One of my earliest memories is that of my father, of blessed memory, *lernen mit der oylem* (learning with the people) in shul. Just before or just after services, the people who had come for the minyan would gather around long tables, sit down on wooden folding chairs, and would open up the old, yellowing pages of the Talmud. My father would read the Aramaic text and would translate into Yiddish; typically a lively discussion would ensue. While a few of those who joined in the learning seemed to be knowledgeable and scholarly, most were not. Truth to tell, some — perhaps they were old *komunisten* — were very skeptical about the Talmud and its teachings, but they seemed to enjoy the *lernen* at least as much as the others.

People joined the group not because they were professional scholars, and not even because they believed that they were studying a sacred text, but simply because they knew that this is what Jews do, this is how Jews converse, this is how Jews challenge their minds, this is how Jews exchange ideas. The Talmud was, for them, the universal currency of the Jewish intellect.

It is this sense of common culture and shared language which we have lost, and which Rabbi Steinsaltz hopes to enable us to regain. Neither a work of academic scholarship nor of religious piety (though both piety and scholarship are abundantly there, hovering in the background), the Steinsaltz Talmud is meant for amateurs and dilettantes — in the original senses of these words. For, as Jacques Barzun has reminded us in another context, an amateur is a lover, and a dilettante is a seeker of delight; the treasurers of our cultural legacy, Barzun has argued, are too important to be reserved to the scholars and pedants, to those who study them professionally, but must always remain accessible to those who love them, to those who seek delight in them.

This is precisely Rabbi Steinsaltz's goal, no more and no less. He has been called a "guru" of the Talmud, but I think the word "enthusiast" is both more flattering and more accurate: he wants all Jews, indeed the entire world, to be as excited and enthusiastic about the Talmud as he is. His interests as well as his goals are universal, not parochial. He has mastered the language and rhythms of talmudic discourse, although he first came to them later in life, and he beckons to us, saying in effect, "Come join me; you can do what I have done. The Talmud will not narrow your thinking, it will broaden it. It will open vistas, not close them."

So the Steinsaltz Talmud must be evaluated under the rubric that it has set for itself, as a work of popular pedagogy. The first hurdle for a student entering the world of Talmud is of course the Aramaic language and the elliptical, telegraphic style of talmudic discourse. Here Rabbi Steinsaltz succeeds brilliantly: he displays a native grasps of the language, and effectively conveys its rhythms, nuances and tonal inflections, its shouts and its silences.

The idea of presenting two levels of English translation — one literal, one expository (with the literal text embedded within it) works beautifully, and will be extraordinarily helpful for students wishing to track the contours of the original text. The translations are transparently clear and crisp, with nothing of the awkward and ponderous "Yinglish" style sometimes seen in efforts of this kind.

A careful comparison of the English with the Hebrew shows that the English translation and commentary are much expanded, indeed at times entirely different. Random House should consider giving more prominent credit to the team of English-language translators, whose work displays great originality, perceptiveness and intelligence, not to mention much diligence and determination, but whose names appear but once, in small print, on the overleaf to the title page.

But the bottom line of all this is, can you really learn Talmud, on your own, without a teacher, from this edition? This is not a trivial question. One thinks of the example of the Soncino Talmud: anyone who has tried to master a *sugya* from the Soncino edition knows that it is virtually impossible. So it is good to be able to report that yes, it is indeed possible to learn the *shakleh vetaryah*, the quintessential give-and-take of talmudic debate, from the English edition of the Steinsaltz Talmud. Possible — not easy! (Learning Talmud will never be easy.)

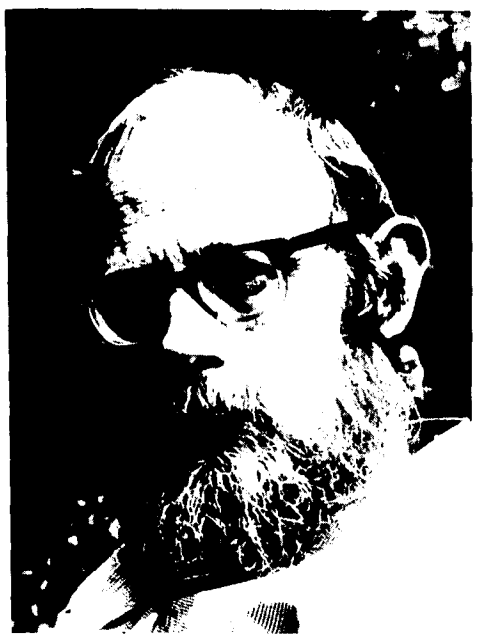
The English commentary is especially good at explaining the relationship between parts of an argument. It is helpful at pointing out transitions and changes in direction, in just the places that the Soncino edition was silent. It fleshes out the interstices, the connective tissue. It helps you hold on to the thread.

Yet for all that, this edition is not without its problems. To explain, we must say something about the subject matter of the text, *Bava Metzia* Chapter One, which begins with the classic case of two people grasping a *tallis*, each one claiming to have found it. Central to the chapter is the notion of *kinyan*. Now the Introduction to the tractate in fact gives us a two-paragraph explanation of this term (p. 2). The word is first defined to mean "acquisition," "ownership." The text then continues, "*Kinyan* is the essential *right of ownership* which a person has over an object which is his. In fact the definition of a valid transaction in civil law is the transfer of ownership (*kinyan*) . . . *Kinyan* itself is an essential connection between a person and a certain object . . . "

Now all this is quite accurate and helpful, but fails to emphasize the most pertinent sense of this key term for our chapter: *kinyan* as a stylized, demonstrative action to *effectuate* ownership of an object. *Kinyan* is a patterned, structured, performative activity which can cause ownership to transfer or rights and obligations to accrue to an individual. An example of *kinyan* in this formal sense is the grasping of the handkerchief to empower the *ketubah* at a wedding ceremony.

Now for the purposes of our chapter it is important to know that lifting up an object is just such a *kinyan*, but the Chapter Introduction does not tell us this fact. The commentary does tell us, but only on page 84! Actually, the *Reference Guide*, a highly valuable companion volume, provides an excellent definition of the word *kinyan* on page 254, but the student studying the Talmud text would have no way of knowing to look for it.

After spending some time with this translation and commentary on *Bava Metzia* Chapter One, I came away with a renewed appreciation of Rashi (1040-1105), the classical Bible and Talmud commentator par excellence. The Steinsaltz edition does provide Rashi's commentary, in the original and in full, on every page, but does not always incorporate Rashi's comments into the English commentary — the only commentary that most readers are likely to be able to read.



Adin Steinsaltz

Now let me hasten to state that I do not expect Rabbi Steinsaltz to follow Rashi slavishly and blindly mere' · because of Rashi's venerable antiquity. Far from it; I believe that Rashi himself, that most gentle and self-effacing of sages, would have loved nothing more than to know that someone else had superseded him with a commentary which spoke more clearly to another age and time. It is simply that, in some crucial respects, Rashi's pedagogic instincts are still unsurpassed, and when his lead is not followed, the student is in danger of losing out on an essential level of understanding.

To be specific: Rashi on the first Mishnah of the chapter introduces the notion of *ha-motzi me-havero alav ha-ra'yah*; loosely speaking, this means that possession is nine-tenths of the law. Once again, we have here a key concept which frames the discussion of the entire chapter, but which the Steinsaltz edition does not mention in its commentary on the Mishnah or in the Chapter Introduction. Of course, it is discussed later, and is highlighted in the Conclusion to Chapter One at the end of the book but one has to agree with Rashi in his implied judgment that the student needs to know this information at the very beginning, in order to lay the groundwork for an understanding of the chapter as a whole.

A chapter of Talmud is not like an early classical sonata, with a clearly discernible A-B-A form; it is much more like a sprawling Romantic symphony, with often dizzying changes in tone, direction, rhythm, and mood, an unfolding of themes and motifs which begs to be grasped not only in its individual parts, but as a unified whole.

Rashi, in his unobtrusive manner, alerts the student by his comments on the Mishnah to the generative problematic of the chapter: that by *holding* the garment, each of the two claimants has a legitimate right to claim ownership, because each one is demonstrating ownership; indeed, each is engaging in an action which may legitimately be viewed as a *kinyan* — an effective procedure for acquiring ownership. And it is for this reason, as Rashi tells us, that their claims are taken seriously.

Furthermore, at several places in his commentary to the Mishnah, Rashi informs us that certain issues or questions will be discussed later in the Gemara. These comments are omitted by the Steinsaltz commentary. Now it can be argued that nothing much is lost here; after all, the student will get to the Gemara soon enough, it is hoped, and will discover the Gemara's discussion for himself or herself. But why then did Rashi feel it was important to make his comments in the Mishnah?

The usual way to understand these remarks, which occur quite frequently throughout his commentaries to the entire Talmud, is that Rashi is anticipating that the student might be puzzled by a question, and is telling the student to keep going, not to get bogged down, because the question will be dealt with later in the Gemara. But I believe that there is a deeper pedagogic insight at work here: Rashi is actually alerting the student to a problem that her or she may not have seen, so that when the student does encounter it in the Gemara, the issue will not be an unfamiliar one. In other words, Rashi is gently shaping the contours of the student's understanding of the Mishna in conformity with the Gemara's — which will make the task of understanding of the Mishna in conformity with the Gemara that much easier.

Of course, academic scholars such as Jacob Neusner argue forcefully that the Mishnah must be understood as an autonomous, independent self-explanatory document, without reference to other works such as the Tosefta and the Gemara. But whatever the value of such a reading of the Mishnah, it is certainly not the enterprise at hand here. The student is learning Talmud, which is the Mishnah together with the Gemara, indeed the Mishnah in light of the Gemara, and Rashi's commentarial lead is one that can still be profitably followed.

While, as mentioned before, the Steinsaltz edition does an excellent job of helping the student follow the thread of the talmudic argument, the "lay of the land" on a local scale, it is less helpful at enabling the student to see the plan of larger units of text, or the topographical features of the chapter as a whole. Part of the problem is simply the physical size of the chapter. While, in the classic Vilna (Romm) edition of the Talmud, Chapter One of *Bava Metzia* takes 42 pages to print (21 folios), and 86 pages in the Hebrew edition of the Steinsaltz Talmud, in the English edition, the chapter expands to 247 pages. Of course this bulk is necessary, but it has the consequence of obscuring still further the large-scale features of the talmudic terrain.

It must also be pointed out that a helpful feature of the Soncino English Talmud is absent here: in the Soncino edition, amoraic citations of tannaitic material are placed in capital letters. Since a major feature of talmudic discussion is the jousting with texts from the Mishnah, it is very helpful to alert the student to tannaitic material by a simple typographical device. Furthermore, the numbered paragraphs of the Steinsaltz Hebrew edition are eliminated in the English edition.

There is a good reason for this, because numbers are here used to key the words of the text to the corresponding sections of the translation and commentary, an excellent device, but one which again removes a typographical aid to perceiving larger structural elements. One suggestion might be to provide a chart of diagram mapping out the structure of larger units of text, so that the student would be able to visually map his or her progress along the path of the *sugya*.

A chapter of Talmud is not like an early classical sonata, with a clearly discernible A-B-A form; it is much more like a sprawling Romantic symphony, with often dizzying changes in tone, direction, rhythm, and mood, an unfolding of themes and motifs which begs to be grasped not only in its individual parts, but as a unified whole.

A master conductor knows not only how to read each measure and phrase, but how to elicit the larger structures the meaning of the entire work, indeed to foreshadow the sense of the work as a whole within the opening measures. There is no doubt that Rabbi Steinsaltz is such a master conductor, but there is more he might do to sensitize his readers to the broad perspective which he surely possesses.

To continue the musical analogy for one more moment, Gustav Mahler once said, "The symphony must be like the whole world. It must contain everything." Rabbi Steinsaltz would probably say the same for the Talmud. Indeed, this seems to be part of the Talmud's attraction for him: its elusive structure and wide-ranging mode of discourse. But the commentary sticks so closely to the text that we get very little sense of Rabbi Steinsaltz's personal perspective. His dazzling erudition, his playful yet profound style, his impishly penetrating *apercus* — all of the personal qualities which make a conversation with him a genuine intellectual delight — are, for the most part, absent from the commentary, which always stays close to the surface of the text. Of course, the first duty of a commentary is to explain, but one would have liked to sense more of Steinsaltz in the Steinsaltz edition.

None of these quibbles is meant to detract from the essential value of Rabbi Steinsaltz's achievement. He has indeed accomplished what he set out to do. He has made the Talmud accessible to us. He has put it on the top of our intellectual agenda. He has ensured that the Talmud will once again become a central vehicle of Jewish communication and self-understanding (and has thereby made an inestimable contribution to fostering the elusive goal of Jewish unity). He has reintroduced the Talmud and its values to the world of general culture.

What we are to do with the tools that he has given us is of course up to us. As always among Jews, various factions will come along, pulling and tugging at the Talmud, claiming it as their own, claiming that their interpretation is the only correct one, claiming that . . . but wait a moment, doesn't the Talmud itself discuss just such a case, with two people arguing about an object which they claim belongs to them alone? Let's open up *Bava Metzia*, Chapter One, and find out.

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Where Has the Leisure Gone?

By David Margolis
Special to the Advocate

One morning last week, I achieved a state of maximum productivity, as follows: I sat before my computer, printing out a series of business letters; while the printer clattered away on each letter, I read a few pages in a manuscript I was obliged to read; when each letter was finished, I punched the keys for the next one and resumed my reading. When the whole batch of letters was printed, I folded them into envelopes, sorted enclosures to be mailed with each and typed address labels while making phone calls (saving a few moments by using the memory device on my telephone). Using all my machines, I felt like a machine myself, working at top efficiency and wasting no time. The feeling was exhilarating, in its way, and yet there was something hollow about it, too.

The hollowness was cumulative, perhaps. For I realized that I had spent several consecutive weeks in that state of drivenness, working all day and most of the evening, even Saturday nights. Pride in working hard mixed with dismay at how near to normal this constant labor had become with me. My days were so filled with tasks and heavily scheduled that just going to a movie sometimes required making the plan a week in advance.

Nor is it only me. A few weeks after a woman I know had her third child, she was back at her full-time professional job; her family may need her income or maybe she simply wants to keep up with her career — maybe. A lawyer I know finally resigned from a burdensome and time-consuming communal obligation — and immediately scheduled two extra evenings and Sunday morning at his office; maybe he needs the money, or maybe he is trying for partner in the firm — maybe. These are two examples out of many. For the married people I know, the norm now seems two career marriages, with jobs, children, car-pools, household chores, community activities, classes. My single friends are very nearly as busy.

For a while, I thought maybe the sense of extreme overbusyness was just a personal complaint. But it's a "phenomenon." According to a *Time* magazine cover story (last April 24) on "The Rat Race" there is even a statistic for it: The average American's leisure time has shrunk 37 percent since 1973.

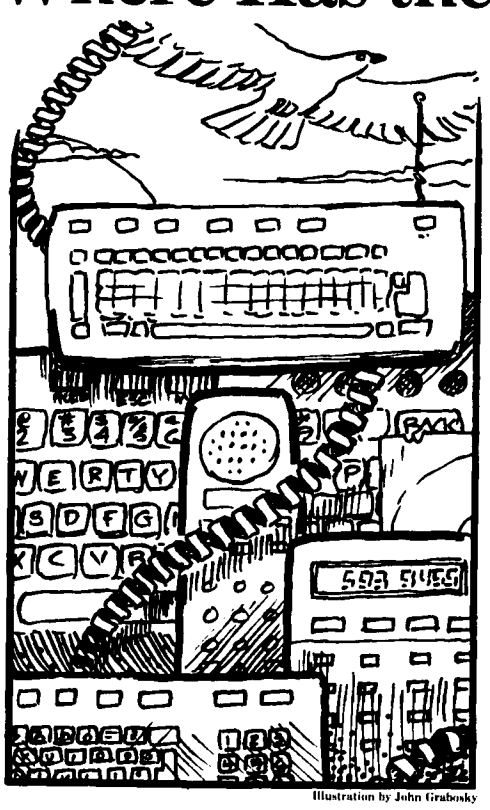

Illustration by John Grabosky

Indeed, it was in the early or mid-1970s that my own time began to disappear. In the 1970s, my wife and I had time to bake challah for Shabbas, read poetry aloud, do creative projects with the children and hand-craft gifts for each other's birthdays and, especially, hang out with friends. Those were days when "hanging out" itself seemed a productive, useful activity. Now we can hardly sit still. We invite friends for dinner occasionally; after they leave, we get back to work.

Of course, one must earn one's living. And for many people, appropriately, their work is one of the most interesting things in their life. That's great. But my own and others' frenetic pace seems to me excessive, obsessive, slightly out of control. I don't believe it is just for livelihood or all for fun. And so I have to wonder, What is it for? What is the point of so much busyness?

In *The Devils of London*, Aldous Huxley formulates three modes of self-transcendence, the desire of the human organism to escape from the limitation of its own identity. Huxley names "upward transcendence," by which he means love of and union with the divine; "downward transcendence" into addiction, sexual debauchery, mob delirium and the like; and, the most usual kind, "horizontal transcendence" into work, married love, identification with some cause greater than oneself — any of those things of ordinary life that takes us out of ourselves.

Calling it a means of self-transcendence gives work a nearly metaphysical status and makes it seem not only financially necessary or enjoyable but healthy, healing and human in the deepest way. And yet my own unceasing work activity seems in part the opposite of healthy escape — and so does yours. It seems desperate, a form, not of transcendence, but of running away.

Running away from what? Here are some possibilities: From engaging deeply with family and friends; from contemplating the awful secret that we are bound to die; from letting the mind wander freely and following it no matter where it goes; from taking honest stock; from facing one's inner confusion. You will no doubt have your own list of what you might be running away from.

Do not imagine that this column is an advertisement for observing the Sabbath day, either. Shabbat helps, but even it can become a slave to desperation, a way of enforced keeping busy, with preparations before, mandated activities during and cleanup afterward–and then back to work.

When I began writing for the Jewish papers several years ago, my editor in Los Angeles suggested that I find the community hangout, that central locus to which all different kinds of people in the community came to waste time in a useful way — have a cup of coffee, nose around, talk to others, watch the street scene, listen to the local gossip, keep in touch. I would then write a kind of community journal from the vantage point of this central meeting place.

Indeed, I remembered such a place from another time in my life — comfortable seats, an unhurried atmosphere, inexpensive food and drink. The local characters would come in, pass the time and then go back to work. A few people would hang out all day instead of going to work. The poets would hang out as part of their work.

I never found such a place in my local Jewish community. I don't know if there can be such a place now. Probably the economics are wrong: You can't pay the rent if people sit at a table talking or playing cards all afternoon. They have to eat and get out. And certainly the sociology is wrong: People have appointments, schedules, quotas, goals, important things to do.

But I keenly feel the lack of this congregating place and of the social landscape in which it fits. There is some watering of the imagination that simply does not happen at high speed. While we are all so hard at work in our separate boxes, the sense of neighborhood is reduced, a certain kind of community awareness is lost. It may be impossible to measure, or even to name exactly, what has been sacrificed, but I would trade a bit of high productivity to have it back.

David Margolis writes from Los Angeles.