2. Ashkenazi Judaism (from the 10th to the end of the 15th centuries)

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(a) The living conditions and character of Ashkenazi Judaism

Ashkenazi Judaism as a distinct cultural entity began to emerge as early as the tenth century within the confines of the Christian “Edomite Kingdom,” primarily concentrated in the urban centers of northern France and along both banks of the Rhine. The distinctive identity of Ashkenazi Judaism was developed under the auspices of great sages – commencing with R. Gershom Me’or Hagolah and extending through his disciples, the scholars of Lotharingia, followed by Rashi, the Tosafists, and culminating with the Maharil – R. Ya’akov, ben R. Moshe Halevi and Rabbi Israel Isserlein who mark the end of the period and whose works provide a summary picture of it. In Ashkenaz, France, and Lotharingia, various facets of life were slowly fashioned during this epoch, such as societal structures, cultural norms, philosophical outlooks, educational methodologies, linguistic patterns, modes of expression, and paradigms of sensitivity and sentience, exerting enduring influence on the trajectory of Judaism as a whole, persisting into contemporary times.

Ashkenazi Judaism exhibited a notable degree of homogeneity, characterized by a cohesive cultural trajectory that yet remained attuned to the exigencies of the era. This Torah-centered Judaism, which created a great heritage in the fields of Biblical interpretation and halakhic interpretation of the Talmud, did not make important contributions in secular fields. Ashkenazi Jews were distinguishable by their distinct physical features, setting them apart from their Sephardic counterparts. R. Menaḥem ibn Zeraḥ the Sephardi (14th century) attested to these differences, writing: “It is well-known that the forms of the people of Ashkenaz are different from the forms of the people of Sepharad...according to the climate, solar patterns, and atmospheric influences under which they live, so that species of plants and fruits are different and those who eat this food will change according to their temperament so that their language and physical appearance will change... and according to the magnitude of the change of physical appearance, thoughts and opinions change, as well” (*Tzedah Laderekh* I, 1, 36).

The term “Ashkenazi Judaism” has broad national-cultural significance, denoting a Judaism that extended its influence beyond the confines of France and Germany. It permeated into English Jewry, exerted influence in Italy, initially absorbing influences from there, and established branches in Bohemia and neighboring regions. Its most significant impact was on the Judaism of Eastern Europe, notably in Poland, Lithuania, and Russia.

Ashkenazi Judaism demonstrated remarkable resilience in establishing a network of autonomous communities despite facing formidable political challenges, limited economic opportunities, and precarious living conditions. The autonomy of these typically small communities was primarily derived from two distinct sources: (1) *Din Torah* – Torah law – which served as the supreme religious authority universally recognized by all community members. (2) The consent and official endorsement of secular authorities. Written charters, known as *privilegia*, were granted to the communities by rulers such as kings, princes, or governors. While these rulers often subjected Jews to servitude and designated them as “servants of the royal chamber” (*servi camera*), they concurrently safeguarded the status and autonomy of the Jewish communities, endorsing their religious and organizational independence. Leadership and executive authority within these communities were predominantly vested in rabbis and community officials (who frequently had scholarly backgrounds). With the power of coercion at their disposal, which included the imposition of bans and, when necessary, appeals to secular authorities, these leaders compelled even recalcitrant members of the community to adhere to communal discipline and norms.

The presence of a Torah scholar in a particular locality bestowed upon its inhabitants the authority to independently deliberate and decide upon public and religious affairs, thereby averting external interference from other qualified Jewish leaders. This provided an additional incentive to honor Torah scholars and commentators perhaps helps explain the widespread aspiration to become a Torah scholar. The rabbis engaged in deliberations concerning contemporary issues through the lens of traditional law, and when deemed necessary, they established regulations and enacted decrees accordingly. This proactive approach, coupled with communal activities, played a pivotal role in fostering national unity and ensuring the preservation of historical continuity.

During this period, the Jewish diaspora in Europe operated without a centralized authority or an officially sanctioned supreme institution akin to the Sanhedrin, the *nasi* in Israel, or the *ge'onim* in Babylonia. Instead, each community developed its own set of regulations and customs and guarded its autonomy in the face of external pressures. Only occasionally, primarily at fairs, did representatives of different communities gather together (known as a *kenufiya* [gathering] of sages) to formulate regulations that would be binding on the multiple communities they represented. Despite the relative isolation of these often small communities, they wielded significant spiritual influence, and their educational systems greatly surpassed those of the surrounding Christian environment. There was also frequent interaction and exchange between communities, particularly in the realm of higher education. Students traversed various locales, seeking tutelage from great rabbis, and these traveling students strengthened the bonds between the communities of Ashkenaz.

From the onset of the 11th century, coinciding with the tumultuous era of the Crusades, until the conclusion of the Middle Ages, Jewish history within the French-Ashkenazi domain unfolded amidst a continuous series of trials and persecutions. Contemporary literature, notably the liturgical poetry of *kinot* (laments) and *seliḥot* (liturgical poems focused on asking divine forgiveness) bears witness to the prevailing atmosphere of distress and captures the spirit of steadfast resolve to sanctify the name of God. This enduring state of adversity fostered a profound internalization of the community’s values that left a lasting impression on the cultural and religious identities of these generations.

(b) Economic and cultural contact with their surroundings

The economic and cultural interactions between Ashkenazi Jews and their surrounding communities played a significant role in shaping their educational and scholarly endeavors. From the early stages of the period under consideration, when Ashkenazi Jews were still involved in trade and various artisanal pursuits, to the later periods when they increasingly were forced to turn to money-lending with the local populace, economic activities had profound educational implications. Engaging in money-lending, which demanded relatively less time, especially since women often participated in these activities, allowed the men to dedicate their leisure hours to Torah study. This facilitated a conducive environment for Torah scholarship to flourish. As R. Joseph (Joslein) ben Moses pointed out (*Leket Yosher*, written in the latter half of the 15th century): “As for the Torah being observed in Ashkenaz more than in other countries, it comes from taking interest from the Gentiles so they do not need to do work, and have leisure to study Torah; And he who does not learn helps those who study Torah.” R. Yehuda Heḥasid (d. 1216) author of *Sefer Ḥasidim*, expressed his unhappiness at this economic reality while similarly underscoring the centrality of Torah study, advising (Ms. Parma *siman* 674) those with the capability to prioritize Torah scholarship over other pursuits to fulfill the command “contemplate it day and night” (Joshua 1:8) in a literal fashion.

Even the greatest Torah scholars of that era typically sustained themselves through their business activities and did not receive remuneration for their rabbinic duties. Furthermore, it is reasonable to presume that their livelihood requirements and direct engagement with worldly affairs provided them with a wealth of practical knowledge concerning everyday matters. This experiential knowledge undoubtedly informed their discussions and writings.

Cultural exchanges between Jewish communities and their neighbors were prevalent during this era. The author of *Sefer Ḥasidim* observed that the customs of Jewish communities often mirrored those of the surrounding non-Jewish populace (*siman* 901). Additionally, *Sefer Ḥasidim* cautioned against adopting Gentile music and folk songs (*siman* 347). Rabbenu Tam (1100-1171), one of the most significant shapers of the period, admonished a contemporary sage, mockingly advising him against emulating the rhetorical style of Catholic religious priests: “Do not reply quickly like the shaved ones (the tonsured Catholic priests)” (*Sefer Hayashar*, 153). Jewish scholars were aware of the dialectical methods employed by their non-Jewish counterparts, albeit viewing them with a degree of disdain (*Sefer Ḥasidim* 552). The Gentiles, in turn, were aware of the Talmudic dialectic employed by Jews, dubbing them *parvipontani*, a term evoking the image of attempting to pass an elephant through the eye of a needle.

Secular love songs were known to the Ashkenazi Jews, and an anonymous commentator (in his commentary to the Song of Songs 3:5; Leipzig edition 615, p. 45) even compared them to the Song of Songs. R. Yeḥiel of Paris (d. 1296) mentions Catholic religious priests who were scholars of Hebrew language, having acquired this knowledge from Jews. Moreover, the author of *Sefer Ḥasidim* does not hesitate to point out Gentiles as moral exemplars, who could serve as models for Jews in times of calamity (*siman* 359). Similarly, R. Isaac of Corbeil (13th century) suggested that Jews could learn from idol worshippers, who, despite their lack of belief in the true God, remained silent in their holy places (*Sefer Amudei Golah*, called *Sefer Mitzvot Katan*, *siman* 11).

Despite these instances of interaction, this contact did not lead to significant formal educational or cultural influences.

A distinct form of interaction emerged in the realm of religion, stemming from an ongoing polemic prompted by the stark contrasts between Jewish and Christian religious beliefs. This dynamic relationship may reflect a dialectical interplay between economic interaction and ideological disparities. Throughout the Middle Ages, religious debates between Jews and Christians were commonplace, occurring in informal settings as well as in official forums (such as the Paris debate of 1240). In addition to oral debates, literary polemics proliferated within the writings of the period, spanning commentary, liturgical poetry, philosophy, and more. Engaging in such polemics demanded a high level of proficiency and comprehensive knowledge of both Jewish and Christian religious texts, as exemplified by R. Yom-Tov Lipmann ben Solomon Muhlhausen’s (14th-15th centuries)work, *Sefer Hanitzaḥon*. However, this knowledge was not enough to bridge the gulf between the two religions.

The sentiment of being chosen: “You have chosen us from among all peoples,” and entrusted with a unique destiny: “who not made our portion like theirs,”[[1]](#footnote-1) was cultivated, serving as a foundational element in both the conceptual framework and practical manifestation of Judaism. This perception contributed significantly to the education of young individuals in both current and subsequent generations. Rashi (1040-1105), renowned for his Torah commentary characterized by polemical tendencies and widespread theological teachings, exemplifies this educational ethos. His interpretations have been revered across generations as indispensable educational tools.

(c) The nature of education

The educational landscape of French and Ashkenazi Jewry was deeply imbued with the rich legacy of Talmudic teachings, drawing extensively from the traditions of the land of Israel and from that of Babylonia. This Talmudic heritage served as a guiding beacon, delineating pathways for the internal development of Ashkenazi Judaism and instilling a sense of purpose and direction, particularly within the realm of educational ideals. This is evident in the meticulous codifications of laws of Talmud Torah found within the writings of halakhic decisors, including Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*, which exerted considerable influence on Ashkenazi Jewish thought. Additionally, *Shoresh Hatorah* that appears at the beginning of R. Eleazar of Worms’ (1176-circa 1238) *Harokeaḥ* offers a compendium of insights from rabbinic sages on educational principles and practice.

The collective dedication of the people of Ashkenaz during that era to the legacy of their past, coupled with prevailing aspirations, political and cultural constraints, and the both symbolic and practical significance attributed to scholarly sages, underscored Ashkenaz’s stature as a vibrant Jewish religious and educational hub whose academic achievements were extremely numerous.

In Ashkenaz, education was not approached by the rabbis and teachers as a subject for systematic study and theoretical formulation. Rather, it was viewed as a practical endeavor essential for preparing individuals for a wholesome life. Education in this context was not geared towards acquiring a profession or purely intellectual achievements, but rather towards fostering godliness and moral character, as articulated in the *Sefer Ḥasidim (siman* 752): “The only Torah a person should learn is that which leads to reverence for God.” Consequently, education went beyond mere knowledge dissemination; it aimed to cultivate the persona of a scholar deeply rooted in past tradition, capable of bearing the burdens of the present while harboring aspirations for the future. Emphasis was placed on shaping the spiritual and religious identity of the student, guided by the belief that education disconnected from action would yield limited benefits. Rashi’s definition of *ḥinukh* – education – as presented in Genesis (14:14) further elucidates this perspective as he defines *ḥinukh* as “the introduction of a person or thing to a particular occupation with the intention that they remain steadfast in it.” In essence, practical and tangible reinforcement.

This education cultivated a deep love for the Torah in the youth, a fervent aspiration for redemption, and a readiness to sanctify the name of God. This was achieved through various means, including the careful selection of textbooks (which consisted of excerpts from the Bible) and the tailoring of the curriculum to suit the requirements of synagogue worship, household commandments, and religious rituals. These educational methods were designed to immerse the child in the religious practices and thought of the community. All societal institutions actively supported this educational approach, working together to integrate students into the societal fabric and life patterns of Ashkenazi Jewry.

This educational ethos was not reserved solely for the exceptional or privileged individuals within Ashkenazi society; rather, it was incumbent upon all members to impart Torah knowledge to their sons and daughters. R. Eliezer Bar Shmuel Halevi’s ethical will (14th century) underscores this obligation, emphasizing that even if one had to resort to door-to-door charity collection, they should not allow their children to remain idle. Jacob Katz highlights the widespread reach of traditional education, noting that due to the religious imperative and community pressure, virtually all members of society, without exception, were encompassed within its purview. This sentiment was recognized even by non-Jews, as evidenced by the words of a Christian theologian, a student of Abelard, at the end of the 12th century. He observed that “out of their reverence for God and love of His Torah, Jews send all their sons to study, in order to understand God’s teachings. The Jew, even the poorest of the poor, if he has ten sons, he will send them to study.”

Education was perceived as an ongoing lifelong journey, from cradle to grave, with no concept of graduation or final examinations. Instead, individuals were encouraged to continue learning throughout their lives, drawing upon their talents, prior knowledge, and available free time. This perspective is exemplified by *Takkanot Shum* (12th-century regulations jointly established by the communities of [Speyer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_community_of_Speyer), [Worms](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Worms,_Germany), and [Mainz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mainz)) which mandated that every person allocate time for study: Every person should set aside time for study. If he is unable to study Talmud, he should study Bible, *Parashah*, or Midrash to the best of his abilities.” This commitment to lifelong learning was underscored by R. Moses of Coucy (France): Every person whether rich or poor is obligated to set aside time for Torah study during the day and at night….for the covenant of Torah is evident in the blood…and whoever does not study Torah brings destruction upon the world” (*Sefer Mitzvot Gadol* 12; written in the middle of the 13th century). Halakhic summaries and theoretical discussions pertaining to education similarly urged individuals of all ages to persevere in their learning endeavors and seize every opportunity for study. The recurring concern, expressed metaphorically yet with real-world implications, was “lest the Torah be forgotten by Israel,” reflecting an overarching effort to promote Torah study among all segments of society and across all age groups. This inclusive approach aimed to ensure that Torah study remained a central and enduring aspect of Jewish life, accessible to individuals of diverse backgrounds and circumstances.

(d) Elementary education

Elementary education practices in Ashkenaz were not explicitly described in contemporary writings. However, from accounts of educational activities and summaries of instructions and regulations, a coherent image emerges of both the students and teaching methodologies.

Formal education typically commenced when children were five or six years old. The initiation ceremony was marked by a festive occasion, wherein the child, adorned in holiday attire and draped in a tallit, was brought to the synagogue, which was usually adjacent to the school. This auspicious beginning often coincided with the holiday of Shavuot, commemorating the giving of the Torah, and occasionally during the month of Nissan, deemed “appropriate for everything” (*Midrash Tanḥuma, Parashat Bo*). The teacher would then prepare a board inscribed with the first and last four letters of the Hebrew alphabet, along with the verse “Moshe charged us with the law” (Deut. 33:4). Additionally, the first verse of the book of Leviticus would be included, [reflecting the ancient Talmudic expectation that “those pure in heart should engage in the study of purity” - see above, Part II, Chapter 8, Section 4, Subsection (e)]. Finally, the sentence “Torah shall be my faith,” would also be featured on the board (as recorded in *Sefer Assufot* at the end of the 13th century, echoed in the *Roke’aḥ*). Some proposed an alternative order of study for the Pentateuch, beginning with Genesis instead of Leviticus, a shift intended to render the sequence more logical and less symbolic. Additionally, the following was done: “When a child was brought to begin his Torah study, letters of the Torah would be inscribed on a board…Three loaves of bread made with fine flour and honey, prepared by an unmarried woman, along with three boiled eggs and assorted fruits, would be prepared…An esteemed scholar would be sought to escort the child to the synagogue. He would hide him under his clothing and bring him into the synagogue. They would feed him the bread with honey and the eggs and fruits and read the letters to him, and then cover them with honey, and they would say: lick [them].” (*Maḥzor Vitri*, by R. Simḥah ben Samuel of Vitry, a student of Rashi, active at the turn of the 11th and 12th centuries). The author of *Shvilei Emunah*, (end of the 14th and beginning of the 15th centuries; quoted in R. Moses ben Ḥanokh Altschul in his Yiddish *Sefer Brant Shpigl*), adds “God willing, as the wafers are sweet, so will the words of the Torah be sweet to you.” This celebratory and symbolic commencement of Torah study reflected educators’ aspirations to endear the Torah to young hearts through engaging rituals and gestures. Such practices undoubtedly left a profound impression on the children, and their influence extended into everyday life.

Initially, children would begin their education by familiarizing themselves with the Hebrew letters. Subsequently, they would progress to assembling these letters into words, then mastering entire verses, followed by sections of the Torah (*parashot*). This educational progression would continue with the study of Mishnah and eventually, Talmud, as detailed in the *Roke’aḥ*. The book *Ḥukei Hatorah*, (likely originating from Provence in the early 13th century, though some attribute it to the 11th century; it faithfully reflects customs and beliefs that were prevalent in all of France and in Ashkenaz), provides further insight into the educational process. It recounts a father entrusting his son to a teacher, specifying: “You will teach my son in this month the recognition of the letters, and the second month the vowels, and in the third month the combination of the letters in the words, and then “those pure in heart should engage in the study of purity” – the Book of Leviticus.”

Education typically took place in dedicated spaces, such as the teacher’s residence or a study hall adjacent to the synagogue (see, for example, image 81). The term *ḥeder*, used as a colloquialism for the place of study, began to gain prominence in the 13th century. In southern France, efforts were made to ensure that educational institutions had an aesthetically pleasing exterior, with some communities even constructing magnificent buildings specifically for this purpose. This emphasis on creating conducive learning environments extended to certain regions of Italy as well (see image 82).

According to the *Ḥukei Hatorah*, a teacher typically had a class size of only ten students, a departure from the Talmudic standard of 25 students per teacher. This adjustment was attributed to the diminished capacity of individuals’ hearts due to the servitude imposed by foreigners. In reality, however, the number of students per class decreased because many individuals sought to pursue teaching as a profession and consequently opened their own schools.

When forming classes, consideration was sometimes given to the talents and abilities of the students. Teachers sometimes advocated for the separation of clever students from slower learners, recognizing that each group would benefit from tailored instruction to facilitate their individual progress. “He who is instructing children and observes that one among them demonstrates greater aptitude than his peers, and the teacher discerns that it is inappropriate for them to continue learning together, recognizing the need for a separate teacher for the more apt students, he should not remain silent and should say to the father: ‘These require their own teacher, these their own’ even if it entails financial loss [for the teacher]” (*Sefer Ḥassidim, siman* 423).

Corporal punishment was a customary practice, but it typically was preceded by verbal encouragement – “at first they encourage him, and finally a strap on his back” (*Maḥzor Vitri*). Even so, the communities avoided hiring teachers who were quick to anger.

Teachers were expected to embody a supreme moral character, exemplifying piety towards both heaven and humanity, thereby serving as role models for their students; “If you see a learned man who does not fear God, do not let your son study before him” (*Sefer Ḥasidim siman* 811). However, teaching was not regarded as a specialized art requiring formal training. Instead, it was considered a profession and a means of livelihood accessible to individuals of varying talents, backgrounds, and motivations. Teachers ranged from the learned to the ignorant, from idealists to adventurers, and even included those who sought to evade their responsibilities by fleeing before the end of the *zeman* (half a year), with their wages in hand.

Many affluent households employed private tutors to educate their children within the confines of their homes. These tutors were sometimes engaged for specific tasks, such as aiding in the completion of the Bible, or hired yearly. The prevailing custom was to contract tutors for a fixed term – a *zeman*. By the twelfth century, there emerged a practice of hiring tutors by the hour, who provided individualized instruction to a single child for a specified duration. While the responsibility of paying school fees typically fell upon the parents, some communities extended support to economically disadvantaged families by covering the costs of education, often utilizing funds from charitable endowments.

In large communities throughout France, oversight of educators was a common practice. These communities often appointed a head teacher, known as a *sofer mata* (see Rashi Bava Batra 21a), who held authority over subordinate teachers. This head teacher provided guidance and instruction to all educators under his purview, ensuring quality in teaching practices. Additionally, there were instances where a more experienced teacher was placed above the regular teachers to oversee their work. This senior educator did not directly teach the students but instead focused on supervising and monitoring the teaching staff, providing guidance on how to teach (*Ḥukei Hatorah, siman* 2).

(e) Curriculum

At the beginning of the child’s education, significant emphasis was placed on the study of the Bible. An anecdote from the days of R. Gershom Me’or Hagolah (d. 1040) highlights this focus, as a teacher lamented being deprived of his salary, stating, “I taught your son until he completed the Bible.” According to *Ḥukei Hatorah*, the curriculum typically involved two years of studying the Pentateuch followed by two years dedicated to the study of Prophets and Writings. From the teachings of *Sefer Ḥasidim* it can be inferred that during that period, students were engaged in studying at least the Torah and the Prophets. Moreover, it was customary for the students who were studying during Talmud to have three instructors – “one for Torah, one for Nevi’im (prophets), and one for Talmud” (*Sefer Ḥasidim, siman* 420).

This was true in theory. In practice, during this period, the study of the Talmud took precedence over other subjects. Rashi’s interpretation of the enigmatic statement in the Talmud, “prevent your children from logic” (Berakhot 28b), reflects this preference, suggesting that children should not become too familiar with the Bible “because it is attractive.” Additionally, R. Judah ben Asher, who immigrated to Spain from Ashkenaz in the early 14th century [see above, section 1, subsection (d)(2)], emphasized in his ethical will: “set for learning the verses of the Bible with the grammar and commentary … as a child I did not learn it, because they were not used to learning it in Ashkenaz.” This neglect of Bible study seems to have intensified over the years. By the second half of the 16th century, R. Joseph Yuspa Nördlinger Hahn of Frankfurt, lamented that “in our generation, there are some rabbis who have not encountered the Bible ever in their lives.”

In the end, while the Bible was not entirely absent from the curriculum, it did not hold an esteemed position within it, despite the significant contributions Ashkenazi Judaism had made to its interpretation. Studies of the Prophets and Writings were largely neglected, and although the Pentateuch was taught, the method of instruction was flawed. Students would begin studying the weekly Torah portion each week in the *ḥeder*, without ever finishing it by the end of the week.

The response of the people of those generations to this situation varied, with some offering explanations and justifications while others condemned it. Rabbenu Tam justified the neglect of Bible study by invoking the teaching that “a person should always divide his years into three parts: A third for Bible, a third for Mishna, and a third for Talmud” (Kiddushin 30a), and suggesting that one could fulfill the obligation of covering all necessary material by studying the Babylonian Talmud, which he viewed as encompassing all the various sources. Similarly, in the early 16th century, R. Ḥayim ben Bezalel, brother of the Maharal, attributed the reduction in Bible study to the “bitter and long exile” because “they did not have the ability to teach their children all wisdom; that is why our holy forefathers, and in particular the *Ḥakhmei Ashkenaz*, saw to it that their children are exposed only to the Talmud and to accustom them and educate them using this holy book as it contains wisdom and the fear of God all in one place, which is the basic foodstuff that will allow us to live among the Gentiles” (*Etz Haḥayim*). This perspective echoes the sentiment expressed by R. Natronai Ga’on (head of the yeshiva in Sura 853-858), who wrote: “Since poverty and destitution abounded and students were required to earn a living from manual labor, they could not engage in constant Torah study and divide their day into three parts, they turned only to the Talmud and left the Bible and Mishnah” (quoted in the *Maḥzor Vitry*). Still, the obligation to read “theBible text twice and the translation once”(Berakhot 8b) on a weekly basis was fulfilled (perhaps not in all places) by adolescent boys reviewing the Torah portion of the week.

The Christians also knew that the Jews preferred the study of the Talmud, but they interpreted it as they had since the days of the Church Fathers. Using a parable, Pope Innocent IV claimed (1244) that Jews prioritize Talmudic study over the Bible out of fear that exposure to the Bible may lead their children to convert to Christianity.

The Mishnah was typically not studied as an independent subject but was rather studied alongside the Talmud. Mishnah commentaries, primarily focused on the orders missing in the Talmud (*Zera’im, Taharot*), as the rest would be covered during Talmud study. *Ḥukei Hatorah* understands the instruction to begin studying Mishnah at age ten (Avot 5:21) as the commencement of Talmud study, specifically starting with Tractate Berakhot and the shorter tractates in *Seder Mo'ed*, continuing until the child reached thirteen years old. Furthermore, there was a common practice of starting Talmud study even before the age of ten. Ultimately, the curriculum emphasized achieving a high level of proficiency in Talmud studies.

The moral and religious orientation in learning was evident in the significance placed on studying *Midrash Aggadah*. *Ḥasidei Ashkenaz* valued the study of midrashim and did not differentiate between *aggadah* and *halakhah* in the Talmud. They believed that “anyone who understands Midrash but not *halakhah* has not truly experienced the taste of Torah, and conversely, anyone who knows *halakhah* but not Midrash has not truly experienced the taste of fear of sin” (*Roke’aḥ*, authored by R. Eleazar of Worms, who is quoting from Avot d’Rabbi Natan). *Sefer Ḥasidim* (*siman* 748) also recommends studying midrashim or reading the Bible or *aggadot* as a way to open one’s heart and learn from the actions of the righteous and pious individuals throughout history.

In the circles of *Ḥasidei* *Ashkenaz* and the Kabbalists, *Torat Hasod* (Jewish mysticism), was also studied. However, unlike in Spain at that time [see above (2)], there was almost no inclination in Ashkenaz to teach “external wisdoms” such as philosophy and sciences in educational institutions or through self-study. “A man should not learn any Torah, except that which brings him fear of God... and not other wisdom, such as the dialectics of Gentiles” (*Sefer Ḥasidim, siman* 752). On the contrary, they interpreted the Mishnah: “Turn it over, and [again] turn it over, for all is therein” (Avot 5:22) as instructing that the Torah be reviewed over and over again since all the wisdom of the world can be found in it (*Maḥzor Vitri*). However, elements of philosophy can be found in the writings of *Ḥasidei Ashkenaz* and Kabbalists, and R. Saadia Gaon’s *Emunot Vede'ot* was widely studied in Ashkenazi Judaism even before the translations of R. Judah ibn Tibbon were available. Philosophy and the sciences from Spain, particularly through Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*, penetrated into southern France, leading to a significant cultural conflict in the 13th century that also impacted northern regions.

(f) Teaching methods

Methods of teaching in Ashkenaz were characterized by reading aloud “to ensure clear articulation [of the words of the Torah] and prevent stammering or whispering” (Rashi, Eruvin 54a). Memorization was emphasized through regular and frequent repetitions – every week, month, mid-year, etc. Learning by heart was highly valued not only because of the Talmudic rule: “one who reviews his studies one hundred times is not comparable to one who reviews his studies one hundred and one times” (Hagigah 9b), but also due to the scarcity and cost of books. The Talmudic custom of chanting while reading was regarded favorably. It was done while rocking back and forth, apparently as a means of facilitating several learners consulting one book. This approach improved concentration and recall of the material, “They were accustomed to reviewing *mishnayot* in song in order to learn it by heart, and better commit it to memory” (Tosafot Megillah 32a).

Similar to the Talmud’s advice (Shabbat 104a) to diversify the study of reading by introducing special intentions in the names of the letters and their form [see above, Part II, Chapter 8, Section 4 Subsection (8) (1)], R. Isaac ben Moshe of Vienna, author of the *Or Zaru’a* (active in the first half of the 13th century), also recommended this approach. For example: “*Alef-Bet*. That is, study (***A****lef*) two (***B****et*) Torahs: the written Torah and the oral Torah. And how should you learn? *Gimel-Dalet*: first study (***G****emor*) and then you will know (***D****a*).” [He then goes on to offer interpretations of the meanings of the other letters of the alphabet]. This didactic tendency attributed multiple meanings to each letter, providing various interpretations that were often used by teachers.

However, little consideration was given to didactic rules aimed at facilitating learning for the student. Teaching was primarily dominated by rote study, which may explain why many individuals had limited achievements in reading and writing.

The studies were generally conducted in the vernacular language – French, German, Italian, and so on. Texts were translated into these languages and interpreted accordingly. This practice is evident from various sources, particularly from the *Ḥukei Hatorah*. R. Judah ben Asher, while traveling from Ashkenaz to Spain, found himself unable to participate in studies in France because: “I knew neither the writing nor the language to be able to learn from their written books or understand the language of their lectures” (from his will, *ibid*). However, it is possible that Hebrew was the language of teaching in the yeshivot or that students attained a sufficient level of proficiency to use Hebrew when needed. As noted by R. Solomon Parḥon who was born in Aragon and lived in Italy in the 12th century: “All the land of Edom [= Catholic Europe] speak different languages, and when lodgers come, they do not understand each other, so they speak in the holy tongue, which is how they become more accustomed to it.” Additionally, R. Elijah Capsali (Turkey, circa 1490-1555) provides an interesting testimony: “This R. Ḥayim Cremieux was one of the great scholars and was a Frenchman... and my father visited his rabbi to discuss *pilpul* with him; and so they did, and they said *pilpul* in the yeshiva in the holy tongue so that he too would understand” (Book of Chronicles of the Kingdom of Venice).

(g) Women’s education

Girls’ education was characterized by its limited scope, primarily focusing on imparting religious knowledge to cultivate pious women who could fulfill their religious duties. The emphasis was on teaching them to pray and acquainting them with the specific commandments applicable to women, for “If you do not know the laws of Sabbath, how will you keep the Sabbath?!” (*Sefer* *Ḥasidim, siman* 835). “We must teach women the *mitzvot* in which they are obligated, the positive and negative commandments, as well as reading and grammar which are as important to them as the study of Talmud is important for men" (*Sefer Mitzvot Katan*, introduction). Some advocated for broader education for girls: “twenty-four [books of the Tanakh] and the laws of *issur veheter* (kosher laws and other laws focusing on what is permitted and what is prohibited), which the fathers are obliged to teach them” (*Sefer Middot*, written in Yiddish in a slightly later period). While there were differing opinions on the extent of girls’ education, there were instances where fathers permitted their daughters to pursue learning according to their interests, despite the traditional view “that women were not obligated to study Torah” (Piskei Rid, active in Italy in the half the first of the thirteenth century). However, it is worth noting that there may be some exaggeration in the assertions made by a Christian theologian from the 12th century, a student of Abelard [quoted above, subsection (c)], who praised the dedication of Jewish parents to educating their children, including girls, contrasting it with perceived negligence among Christians: “If he has ten children, he will send them to study... and not only the boys but also the girls.”

Girls were also taught practical skills such as sewing, weaving, and embroidery, not necessarily for utilitarian purposes, but rather to keep them occupied and prevent idle time that might lead to sinful thoughts.

The education of adult women was primarily conducted by learned and righteous women. For instance, R. Eleazar ben Judah of Worms (circa 1176-1238) praised his late wife, acknowledging that “she taught women in all countries.” Additionally, from the time of Rashi’s daughters in the 11th century to the grandmother of R. Yair Ḥayim Bacharach in the 16th century, daughters of Torah scholars engaged in self-study of rabbinic texts and attained proficiency in them. Some became qualified teachers whose opinions on matters of custom were respected. One notable example is Miriam, daughter of R. Shlomo Shapira and wife of R. Yohanan Luria in the 16th century (Ashkenaz and in France), who even delivered a Talmud lesson in a yeshiva from behind a curtain.

(h) Yeshivot

At the age of 13, youths continued their studies in yeshiva. According to *Ḥukei Hatorah*, fathers were encouraged to ensure that at least one son was dedicated to Torah study. Much like the establishment of Christian universities in Europe during that era, yeshiva centers formed around renowned teachers. Consequently, the focus and curriculum of each yeshiva were shaped by the personality and knowledge of its leader.

The Talmud served as the cornerstone and focal point of learning in the yeshiva, with the overarching goal of cultivating students who were adept at navigating the complexities of the Gemara. As a result, Ashkenazi yeshivot excelled in producing significant accomplishments in this realm, nurturing a cultural elite and spiritual leadership within the community. This emphasis on Talmudic proficiency – knowingly and unknowingly – imparted an aristocratic quality to education, as only the most talented individuals could attain the requisite heights of mastery.

The most talented students aspired to study at famous yeshivot, even if it meant traveling great distances to do so. “Like doves who fly from one dovecote to another seeking food, so they go from the study house of one sage to the study house of another to seek tastes of the Torah” (Rashi’s Commentary on the Song of Songs 5:16). To maintain a degree of consistency in the curriculum and accommodate these traveling students, a new tractate would typically commence on Rosh Ḥodesh.

Yeshiva students who hailed from distant locales were taken care of by the yeshiva authorities with support from the local communities. Additionally, study halls or the residences of yeshiva leaders often served as living quarters for needy students who traveled from afar.

The primary mode of study was self-directed. The Rosh Yeshiva (the head of the yeshiva) would deliver a lecture to all the students, after which each student would engage in individual study based on their own preferences. Initially, before the widespread dissemination of Rashi’s commentaries, it is presumed that the rabbi’s primary role was to teach and interpret the text of the Talmud. According to *Ḥukei Hatorah*, the rabbi was aided by “interpreters” who would review explanations with groups of ten students, repeating the teachings delivered by the Rosh Yeshiva twice daily to all students. With the increasing availability of Rashi’s commentaries, there were shifts in study methods. By the time of the early Tosafists (beginning of the 12th century), the Rosh Yeshiva began classes with a lecture focused on a specific text, which also included comparative analysis and discussions on Jewish law, allowing space for student questions within this educational framework. “Before him [the Ri, R. Isaac ben Samuel the Elder from Dampierre, France, active in the 12th century], 60 rabbis would gather to study. Each would attentively listen to the rabbi's teachings. Additionally, each rabbi would independently study a tractate not covered by their peers, committing it to memory. Together, they were well-versed in every *halakhah* taught by R. Isaac [collectively encompassing the entire Gemara]. Any *halakhah* or statement by a *tanna* or *amora* that seemed to be a contradiction to what was found elsewhere in the Talmud was thoroughly discussed and resolved in due course” (*Tzeida Laderekh*, introduction).

Thus, this comparative-critical method was cultivated and refined, and scholars honed their ability to review the entire Talmud comprehensively. They analyzed issues thoroughly, identified difficulties, and provided resolutions. Moreover, they adeptly addressed contradictions, employing logical analyses of fundamental concepts to reconcile discrepancies. This method not only sharpened their intellect but also encouraged deeper exploration of Jewish law, fostering an understanding of both similarities and differences across various legal domains. Additionally, it served as a valuable tool for addressing practical questions. At times, however, scholars were criticized for excessive reliance on this method, known as *pilpul*, particularly when it veered into artificial questions and answers. Detractors argued that such approaches neither enhanced understanding of Jewish law nor promoted intellectual acumen. Instead, they contended that *pilpul* could lead to confusion and misguided conjectures, ultimately resulting in superficial brilliance and meaningless speculations. Consequently, there were calls to curtail the use of this method.

The lecture of the Rosh Yeshiva and the novel explanations offered by him in the yeshiva were documented by the students in *kuntrusim* – notebooks – which served as a foundation for further exploration of the discussed topics and for the independent intellectual pursuits of the most gifted among them. The yeshiva leaders actively promoted their top students to compose essays “before our Rabbi,” that is, crafted under the guidance and oversight of the Rosh Yeshiva. In both purpose and outcome, these essays resembled dissertations or theses seen in university settings.

Yeshiva students delved into a comprehensive study of the Talmud, encompassing even those sections of law with no immediate practical halakhic application, such as the commandments exclusive to the land of Israel. While there was a prevailing inclination to overlook the orders of *Zera’im*, *Kodashim*, and *Tohorot*, their neglect stirred dissatisfaction.

Teachers wielded a profound personal influence on their students, molding their characters and guiding their development. Close bonds were forged between teachers and students, who often prayed together rather than joining the general congregation. Students were frequently invited to share meals at their rabbi’s table, and some even lodged in their homes. Over time, distinct patterns of communal life emerged within the yeshiva, nurturing graduates who were well-rounded in Torah knowledge and piety, and poised to assume leadership roles in the public sphere.

(i) Self-study and adult education

Householders – *baalei-batim* – whose primary occupation was not Torah study, were encouraged to establish regular study schedules, dedicating time to delve into various texts according to their abilities and interests. Whether it be Talmud, Bible, Parsha of the Week, or Midrash, each individual pursued his own path of learning. Particularly cherished were the *aggadah* – the narratives of the Talmud – and the *midrashim*, which instilled fear of sin. The aggadic passages included in Rashi’s Bible commentary were likely intended for these householders. it was for their sake the sermon was established, “in which the preacher preached publicly every Shabbat” (Rashi, Sotah 49a). In times of adversity, both learners and listeners sought solace in these *aggadot* and sermons, finding spiritual guidance and comfort amidst challenges.

To further enrich the religious education of adults, various books were compiled, catering to different aspects of morality, Jewish law, and storytelling. Works such as *Sefer Ḥasidim* focused on morality, while others like Sefer *Haroke’aḥ* and Sefer *Yerei’im* combined moral teachings with *halakhah*. Collections of stories in Yiddish, like *Maase Boch* (*Sefer Maaseyot*), were also widely studied. Interestingly, while the rabbis of the time may have disapproved of books detailing wars and conquests, they encouraged the reading of history books containing biographies, memoirs, and stories that intertwined legends with factual accounts. For example, *Sefer Yosipon*, a collection of stories from Jewish history likely composed in the tenth century, was popular not only among the general populace but also among established scholars. These books served as repositories of wisdom, offering valuable lessons drawn from the experiences of great figures in Jewish history.

(j) The legacy of Ashkenazi Judaism

The legacy of Ashkenazi Judaism is significant, particularly in its development of *nusaḥ Ashkenaz*, which dominated, in terms of its values and methods, a large part of Judaism, particularly in Eastern Europe, where its influence persisted well into the modern era. The archetype of the *matmid* emerged – a devoted scholar who immersed himself tirelessly in the study of Torah devoid of practical or utilitarian motives. “The sages of Ashkenaz would take off their shoes only on the eve of the Sabbath, since they study all nights of the week and just sleep a little in their clothing” (R. Moses of Coucy); “In France, scholars were known to embark on extensive endeavors, dedicating themselves to the comprehensive study of the entire Talmud, often remaining seated in one place for extended periods” (*Orḥot Tzaddikim* whose anonymous author, probably an exile from France, lived in Ashkenaz in the 14th century). The remarkable perseverance and dedication to study found in France and Ashkenaz were so profound that one of the eminent scholars of Spain, R. Isaac ben Sheshet (Rivash, 14th century), remarked: “For from France will come Torah and the Word of God from Ashkenaz.”

1. Both of these quotes come from Jewish prayers, the first in the *kedushah* section of the *amidah* prayer of the three pilgrimage festivals, and the second in *aleinu* recited at the end of every prayer service. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)