**The Canonization Process of the Vilna Talmud and its Implications**

In the first half of the 16th century, the Christian printer Daniel Bomberg of Venice was the first to print a full Babylonian Talmud, including all its tractates. (#) Prior to his success, only individual tractates had appeared, which were published by a different Italian family, the Soncino printing press. These two presses shaped the basic layout of the Babylonian Talmud as we know it today. The Talmudic text stands at the center of the page. On the inner side we find Rashi, the great Jewish commentator of eleventh century France, and on the outside of the page, Tosafot – an interpretive collection penned by Rashi's students and descendants. Each page has a number, with the left side of the page being “Side A” (Amud Alef) and the right side being “Side B” (Amud Bet). (#) In the example before us we see: Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakhot, Page 2, Side A. The text of the Talmud is in red, Rashi's commentary is in blue and commentary of Tosafot is in green (#). And here is the next page, Page 2, Side B on one side and page 3, Side A on the other.

Over the course of years, several editions of the Babylonian Talmud were printed in various cities in Europe, such as Amsterdam and Berlin. In Vilna, it was printed during the first half of the nineteenth century in the Romm Press in a similar format. This printing house, which we will be focusing on today, published an elegant edition of the Babylonian Talmud that appeared between the years 1880 - 1886. This new edition included: corrections that were made on the basis of an examination of manuscripts of the Talmud, more commentaries that were added in the page margins, an introduction by Rabbi Nissim Gaon, one of the most important Rishonim – a term for the “early” Jewish commentaries from the 11th to 15th centuries – and other additions that we will not dwell on at this time. This edition was quickly accepted as canonical, and became known as the "Shas Vilna" – The Vilna Talmud. (#) From that time until today, even as the Talmud has been reprinted in hundreds of different editions throughout the Jewish world, there is one common denominator that remains constant – utter fealty to the “Shas Vina” – including: the same format, the same introductory pages, the same commentaries on every page and in the closing pages of every tractate. This phenomenon demands explanation, since there is no precedent on the Jewish bookshelf for such an absolute book design, with the only exception being the calligraphy of Torah scrolls, which continue to be written by a scribe in ink on parchment. But even the Torah appears in many different formats when it is published as a printed book.

Moreover, throughout the entire Jewish canon we find that the internal division of sections was, apparently, arranged by the author or editor:

- The division of the Mishnah into orders, chapters and individual mishnayot, appears to have been determined by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, who completed the Mishnah in the third century CE;

- The internal divisions of the great medieval codes of Jewish law is determined by the author: whether it is the Rambam or Rabbi Yosef Karo, who divided their works by topics, chapters and individual laws – and the commentaries on these works in the generations that followed were careful to maintain these.

The “Shas Vina” is unique in that it was the publishers of this edition who decided on the divisions by means of which the Talmud is studied to this day. (That is to say, the divisions of the Talmud are not based on the content of the work, rather according to its structure. Were you to ask a student of the Talmud what he is learning, he would respond with the page number of the tractate – which is based on an arbitrary decision of the printer – rather than the content of the discussion.) As an example, see this(#) . On one side is the Shas Vilna printed in 1880, and on the other side is the same page as it was printed in Israel in 2006. The formatting is the same; the commentaries are the same; even the letter fonts are the same.

Attempts were made in the second half of the 20th Century to offer a new commentary on the Talmud and to redesign the Talmud page. Perhaps the best known attempt was that of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, but as you can see (#) this led to calls to place a ban on his books, due to his innovative stance, as expressed in his approach to the commentary and his attempt to publish the Talmud with a page format that differed from that of the Shas Vilna. (#) As you can see, Rabbi Steinsaltz’ Talmud offered vocalized text, with the traditional commentaries – Rashi and Tosafot on the inside of the page and his own modern Hebrew commentary on the left side and at the bottom of the page. There are a number of other differences, as well, that we do not have the time to discuss at this time.

With this background in mind, in recent years, publishers of new editions of the Talmud feel that they must clarify how their edition differs from that of the Shas Vilna, and why they made those changes. (#) Here is an example of what is called “The new Shas Vilna,” published in 2006, which exemplifies how the publisher felt committed to what appears to be the original source. We find the title page of the Shas Vilna, with an explanation of changes and addition to the canonical edition appearing on an inner page. (#)

Over the years, attempts have been made to try and replicate the success of the Shas Vilna. (#) Here is a page taken from one of the most important of the Codes of Jewish Law, the Shulhan Arukh authored by Rabbi Yosef Karo, which was printed in a format that the publisher called Tzurat haDaf – the standard page format. Nevertheless, this experiment ultimately ended in failure, as few editions of the Shulhan Arukh appeared in this format.

In the first stage of my research, I would like to examine the process of canonization of the Babylonian Talmud, in the manner that it was formatted in the Romm Publishing House in Vilna. There are many questions to be asked about the process of canonization of the Shas Vilna, until it reached its final format: First, there are questions about the circumstances – historical, social and technological – that led to the canonization of this particular edition, specifically in the second half of the 19th century. An additional question that must be raised is: What are the implications of this process?

However, in order to answer these questions, we must first examine the assumption that the Shas Vilna has, indeed, become sacred in the eyes of Jewish publishers and students of the Talmud. To accomplish this, it will be necessary to create a complete catalog of all the printed editions of the Babylonian Talmud from 1880 to the present, and to examine whether and how changes were made in them. We will also have to examine exceptions to the rule – which serve to prove the rule – where the Babylonian Talmud was printed in other formats, and to discuss why they may have been printed as they were.

(#) Here is one example – We see an edition of the Babylonian Talmud that was published in Djerba in North Africa in 1945, which is not organized according to the traditional Shas Vilna format. It is possible that in a comparative analysis we will find that the standard Shas Vilna page was fixed mainly in Europe and in associated Jewish communities, whereas in the North African regions the Babylonian Talmud was printed in a completely different manner. As a result, the entire approach of Talmud study in these Jewish communities was very different from that of Europe, where they learned from editions based on the Shas Vilna. It is clear that there is much to examine regarding this phenomenon over the course of 150 years of the printing of the Babylonian Talmud throughout the Jewish Diaspora. This will require careful research.

I would also argue that the canonization of the Shas Vilna has implications for understanding the place of the Babylonian Talmud in Jewish society over the past 150 years. I will focus on one example, although the existence of a canonical edition clearly affects the dissemination of Talmudic knowledge in Jewish society in many areas.

The example that I will focus on is, perhaps, the clearest and best-known. I refer to Rabbi Meir Shapiro’s Daf Yomi project, which encouraged every Jew to study one folio-page of Talmud every day. This project, launched by Rabbi Shapiro in August 1923, began with the first page in the first tractate – Tractate Berakhot – and continued for more than seven years, until the entire Talmud was studied. Upon its completion, the cycle began again with Tractate Berakhot. This idea was received enthusiastically, and over the years thousands of Daf Yomi groups have studied in this format. By means of his Daf Yomi project, Rabbi Shapiro created “Imagined Communities” of Torah learners, to borrow a concept from Benedict Anderson. Still, the concept of a single community of learners throughout the world who are all “on the same page” is only possible when there is a standard edition that is divided in a unified manner and contains the same commentaries. Moreover, the Daf Yomi project was not meant for Yeshiva students, but for the general populace of Jews, wherever they can be found. For this reason, the existence of a single canonical edition that includes all the commentaries that the Daf Yomi learner needs to understand the text, has a decisive influence.

I therefore argue that the format of the Shas Vilna has far-reaching social implications. Today, participation in Daf Yomi study is one of the most widely accepted methods of Talmud study, to the extent that new printings of the Talmud are now being published in special “small format” editions (#) that allow a person to carry it with them and learn while on the road. Here is a booklet containing pages for monthly study. Daf Yomi study is now popular amongst a wide-variety of Jews, mainly in Israel and in North America. Examining the Daf Yomi phenomenon as a social phenomenon is a subject worthy of research in itself, and I intend to include this research together with all the social questions that arise from it within the framework of this study.