The Hachi Garsinan Project as a Critical Edition of the Talmud Bavli

Menachem Katz

in collaboration with Hillel Gershuni, Asael Shmeltzer and Sarah Prais

2017 https://fjms.genizah.org

An important and significant step in understanding, interpreting, and researching any classic work is the preparation of an edition, which aims to present the full textual tradition of the work.

Critical Editions of Talmudic Literature

As early as the nineteenth century, the need to present critical editions of Talmudic literature was recognized. Prof. J. N. Epstein, in his famous lecture at the opening of the Hebrew University about a hundred years ago, presented this task as the most important and necessary endeavor in the study of Talmudic literature.

Epstein himself hoped to prepare a critical edition of the Mishna, for which he wrote his major work "Introduction to Mishnaic Text"[1], but a comprehensive critical edition of the Mishna[2] has not been published to this day. Academic editions of the rest of the Talmudic literature were published gradually – there are critical editions of most of the Midreshe Halacha[3], and of the greater part of the Midreshe Aggada[4]. The

---

[1] See the preface by E.Z. Melamed's preface to the second edition (1964) of Epstein's *Introduction to the Mishnaic Text*: "This book by my esteemed teacher Prof. J.N. Epstein zt"l was originally written as an introduction and preparatory work to a critical edition of the Mishna that the Society for Academic Jewish Studies in Berlin commissioned fifty years ago. My late esteemed teacher spent all his life thinking about this major enterprise, and even made some preparations for its implementation, but the plans did not come to fruition, and to this day we have not had an academic edition of the Mishnah has not been published. More's the pity!"

[2] Critical editions of some individual Mishna tractates have been published over the years.

[3] For example, the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael was published in two critical editions (Horowitz-Rabin and Lauterbach); Sifra (beginning only) - Finkelstein edition; a new edition of Sifre Bemidbar was recently republished (Kahana edition), after a previous edition (Horowitz edition); Sifre Dvarim - Finkelstein Edition.

[4] Bereshit Rabbah (Theodor-Albeck edition), Shemot Rabbah (Shin'an edition), Vayikra Rabbah (Margaliot edition), Devarim Rabbah (Lieberman edition), Esther Rabbah (Tabori-Atzmon) and Kohelet Rabbah (Hirschman); Midrash Shmuel, Midrash Hadash al Hatorah and *Legends of the Jews*, and there are plans to publish editions of other midrashim.

rabbi and Talmud scholar Saul Lieberman published a critical edition of most of the tractates of the Tosefta. However, a critical edition of the Talmud – the Jerusalem Talmud[5] and the Babylonian Talmud – was never compiled.

Critical Editions of the Talmud Bavli

From the beginning of the twentieth century, several attempts have been made to publish critical editions of individual tractates of the Talmud Bavli. None of these efforts were well received. This shows that the classic way of publishing an academic edition, as a traditional paper book, is not appropriate for the Talmud Bavli. Anyone who is familiar with the extent and complexity of the Bavli text is aware that it is impossible to print a critical edition of the entire Talmud in a format that resembles, for example, Liebremans' Tosefta edition, and it is not by chance that a comprehensive physical edition like this has not been published. It is clear, in light of these considerations, that there will not be a critical edition on paper of the entire Talmud in the future.

The solution to this problem lies in exploiting the advantages of the computer. Only by utilizing the advantages of the dynamic digital platform, with its flexibility, can a viable critical edition of the Bavli be presented to the learner and the researcher. **In fact, it can be argued that the "Hachi Garsinan Project" which is intended to include all the textual witnesses in the Babylonian Talmud in a comparative display, in images and transcriptions, is the longed-for critical edition of the Babylonian Talmud.**

The Two Aims of a Critical Edition

Let us clarify. What is a critical edition and what are its goals? Prof. Chaim Milikowsky writes:

> *In the classic model of the critical edition there are two aims: **presentation and reconstruction**, and to an extent these are conflicting aims. On the one hand, the editor wishes to present all the variants to readers in a way that will enable them to reconstruct the variant readings and examine each variant, and on the other hand, the editor should apply himself to reconstructing the original version of the work as much as possible…* [6]

---

[5] A diplomatic edition of the Jerusalem Talmud Ms Leiden manuscript was published by the Academy of the Hebrew Language, but despite its great importance (since Ms Leiden is the only surviving version of most of the Jerusalem Talmud); it cannot be regarded as a critical edition of the Jerusalem Talmud. A critical edition of one tractate, Qiddushin, was recently published by M. Katz.

[6] H. Milikowsky, "Vayyiqra Rabba, Chapter 28, Sections 1-3: Questions of Text, Redaction and Affinity to"Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana", Tarbiz, 2001, p. 71, p.24.

In printed critical editions of Talmudic literature, the focus is generally on presentation; the editors did not purport to try to reconstruct the original version, but presented the best textual witness as the basic text, while presenting textual variants from other textual witnesses.

For this purpose, a computerized synopsis edition is a better alternative, because it allows readers to "reproduce the readings and examine each and every version" (Milikowsky) more easily than in the traditional format of a printed main text with critical apparatus, where the reader is often lost.

Indeed, the aim of reconstruction, which to a degree is also present in the editions of Talmudic literature that place the emphasis on the presentation of the textual traditions,[7] is not present at all in the computer edition, because there is no fixed basic text. In fact, the digital edition can be viewed as an edition that human editors can rely on in the process of compiling a critical edition oriented towards reconstruction.

The Advantages of the Hachi Garsinan as a 'Presenting' Edition

Presentation of Textual Witnesses in a Complete Flexible Synopsis

For some time now, researchers and editors have recognized that a full synopsis edition (by column or row) is the best way to present textual variants to the user in the most comprehensive and clear way. The main drawback of the physical critical edition is lack of economy - an edition of one chapter in the Babylonian Talmud, in synopsis form, takes up 400 pages; a printed edition of the entire Babylonian Talmud would contain about 577,000 pages![8] A complete critical edition, impossible in print, becomes not just feasible, but real, with the medium of the digital platform.

In addition, a printed edition requires many decisions regarding the form of presentation (synopsis by line, synopsis columns, a basic text and critical apparatus with all or selected textual variants, which textual witness should serve as the basic text to which the other textual witnesses are compared, etc.), and each option excludes the advantages of the other options that were rejected. The digital

---

[7] The very choice of a basic text, in any printed critical edition, constitutes an informed decision that is not taken in the computerized edition; this basic text usually corrected in cases where it is clear to the compiler that the wording of the base text is defective.

[8] In S.Y. Friedman, "Talmud Arukh: BT Bava Mez'ia VI", the text contains 422 pages. The number of words in the chapter (according to the Vilna edition) is 5,122, and the number of words in the Babylonian Talmud is 7,387,321.

platform allows for maximum flexibility and offers multiple options for selection by the user.

The *Hachi Garsinan* project includes synopsis by column as well as synopsis by row, with the possibility to select the chosen text pairs and to change their order, and to highlight all variants or only significant variants (in the flexible synopsis discussed below), or to display the selected variants in the layout of the Vilna edition. The website presents different types of editions simultaneously and in a flexible way. These are options that would not have been possible at all in a printed edition.

Filtering Information - the Flexible Synopsis

Another disadvantage of synopsis as a printed edition, beyond the space it takes up, is that the information is presented to the reader without being filtered, making it difficult for him to work, and requiring him to spend time filtering out the irrelevant variants in an effort to find those that are important to him.

The *Hachi Garsinan* project seeks to solve this problem. To that end, the "flexible synopsis" was created, which filters out for the learner textual variants that he marks as not important to him. There are 14 categories of textual variants that users can request the system to filter out, according to their personal choice and area of interest, so that other variants that are not excluded will be clearly highlighted.

Access to Sources

In the printed editions of the Talmudic literature prepared until now, the reader had to rely in one form or another on the information presented to him, usually with no the practical possibility to examine the work of the editor. In contrast, the "Hachi Garsinan" project enables anyone to examine the data in the edition. The project includes not only a synoptic comparison of the texts but also provides the learner or researcher with a high-quality image of each version and a continuous transcript. A computerized tool developed on the site enables the viewer to display each image against its transcription, with each word in the transcript linked to the relevant part of the text in the image, so that the learner can examine the manuscript closely with its transcription.

Additional Advantages of the Digital Interface

The fact the the edition is computerized and not printed offers tremendous advantages to the system and its flexibility. As mentioned above, the system enables each user to determine the order of the manuscripts according to his wishes, which makes it easier to compare his selection of manuscripts as well to divide them up according to branches.

Another significant advantage is that additional textual witnesses can be added as they are discovered, and there is no fixed publishing deadline. Printed editions are sometimes delayed for decades so that all textual witnesses will be included (and still further witnesses are discovered later), whereas the digital edition can be launched even if not all the textual witnesses are available and it can be continually updated. Even when it comes to corrections and improvements, a digital edition can be amended (when errors in the transcription or synopsis are found) instantly, without waiting for years to compile a list of errors and finally pasting it as usual as an appendix to the printed edition (if at all).

Amendments can also be shared "upwards" by users of the site. The site already includes a system for amending and adjusting the synopsis by rows, which users can use to edit the synopsis and share their work instantly with other site users. In the future, there may also be a forum that will allow the sharing of information of all kinds: new fragments, corrections of errors, research findings, interpretations and suggestions, with all users of the site.

Another advantage of the computerized edition is the option to conduct a sophisticated search of individual textual witnesses and tractates, enabling textual phenomena to be identified in a way that was not possible in the past.[9]

Textual Witnesses in the Project

The aim of the project is to include all primary[10] direct [11] textual witnesses of the Babylonian Talmud - all the manuscripts (including Genizah fragments and binding fragments) and early printings of all tractates.

The inventory of the Babylonian Talmud, or "source-book" of the project, is based on catalogs and lists of both the Talmudic manuscripts and early printings, above all the "Thesaurus of Talmudic Manuscripts" edited by Prof. Y. Sussman[12].

---

[9] For full text search options and the lexicon, see the introductory section on the search and the lexicon, on the Hachi Garsinan site.

[10] Manuscripts and printed editions copied from early printings already known to us are of no importance for reconstructing the text of the Talmud, since the text the scribe or printer copied from is known to us, and therefore any changes are not original. However, the project includes the Venice edition of 1520-23 which is the first printed edition that included the entire Babylonian Talmud, although in many tractates we have the printings that were copied from them, as well as the Vilna Edition.

[11] On the indirect witnesses, see below.

[12] Y. Sussman et al, Thesaurus of Talmudic Manuscripts, Jerusalem, 2011.

However, the work on the project enabled us to locate previously unknown manuscripts. The two main sources are: (A) "The European Genizah": Talmudic manuscripts that were repurposed in book-bindings in libraries and archives across Europe. Further fragments are being discovered to this day from this source, and high-quality images and the removal the Talmudic fragments from the bindings sometimes allow us to read more text than was previously possible.[13] (B) The Cairo Genizah: In the preparatory work for the project we examined all the Genizah fragments, including the small fragments found in the multiple fragment images,[14] and we were able to identify about seven hundred new Talmud fragments. Some of these fragments form joins to existing fragments and supplement them, and some stand alone.

On the website we were able to present the information in a variety of ways and thus enrich the information in different ways. The user can obtain detailed information about the manuscript inventory at the click of a button. For example, the number of textual witnesses per page in the Talmud is divided into categories: early printings, complete manuscripts binding fragments, and other fragments. The information also shows the status of each textual witness of the website - whether it is displayed on the site, and whether images have been received and are being processed or images have not yet been obtained. In addition, information on each manuscript can be displayed from the Sussman catalog or the Friedberg Updates to the catalog.

Hachi Garsinan - First Steps

We can conclude that the Hachi Garsinan project can be regarded as the *beginning* of a critical edition of the Babylonian Talmud, or "Mahadura Qama". The beginning - because there is still much work to be done. It is for future projects to complete what is missing at the moment.

As we said above, the intention of the project is to include all the direct Bavli witnesses; but not all textual witnesses are included in it now. Most of the Genizah fragments are included, most of the early printings and some of the complete manuscripts. Other complete manuscripts are still being worked on, as are the binding fragments and other fragments. In the case of some complete manuscripts we have not yet obtained images. Therefore, the user of the site does not yet have

---

[13] On the European Genizah in the project, see the introduction to Binding fragments and other Babylonian Talmud manuscript fragments, on the Hachi Garsinan site.

[14] On the identification of tiny Talmudic fragments, see the introduction to the Cairo Genizah and the Identification of tiny fragments.

complete information about the textual tradition of the Talmud in its direct witnesses. However, the user can see not only what can be viewed on the site but also what is not yet available, at the touch of a button, and thus for every page of the Talmud complete information on all known witnesses is provided.

The current project does not include the *indirect* textual witnesses of the Babylonian Talmud – digests and compilations on the one hand, and *Talmud text quoted in the literature of Geonim and Rishonim* on the other. These textual witnesses are sometimes very important for a reconstruction of the Talmud text, but working with them requires judgment and a different approach than the direct witnesses - and therefore the inclusion these textual witnesses in one synopsis together with other textual witnesses could confuse the user. The decision was therefore made to exclude these textual witnesses at this stage of the project.

As for the compilations and digests whether they are comprehensive works such as "Ein Ya'akov" and "Menorat Ha-Ma'or" or briefer works that were included in the Sussmann catalog, working with them is relatively simple: the catalog information is largely available and all that remains is to digitize, transcribe and include them, possibly in a separate section of the synopsis for every page of the Talmud.

How to present the quoted Talmud text in the works of the Geonim and the Rishonim is a more complex issue and will require a more extensive project. However, there are already projects that have gathered a large part of these indirect witnesses, and may in the future be used to create the "Mahadura Batra" of the project, whether by combining the indirect textual witnesses within the synopsis of the Talmud or by separate presentation of these witnesses for each page of the Talmud.

Another element common in printed critical editions that is missing from "Hachi Garsinan" is the component of interpretation.[15] This is of course a matter for researchers and is not a task for the project. Nevertheless, it can be said that when the current stage of the project is completed, we will have compiled a first "presenting" critical edition of the Bavli. This edition will be able to be used to create more sophisticated editions (including, among other things, indirect textual witnesses), as well as editions created by researchers, which can focus on the aspects of reconstruction and interpretation.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

---

[15] Further features that could be added by future projects are references to parallel passages in the Talmud Bavli, an inventory of Biblical verses cited in the Talmud, and references to parallels in passages of other rabbinical literature.

This project is based on the catalog of textual witnesses compiled by and toiled over by Prof. Sussmann, and the many members of his team, for many years, which was published *around five years ago*. In his preface to the catalog, Prof. Sussmann (pp. ‏ג‎-‏ד‎) wrote:

> Talmudic literature can be successfully researched only after all Talmud manuscripts have been listed and examined and published in critical editions. *It will take a long time*, but the first step, essential for the compilation of a critical edition, has been taken, with the completion of the catalog.

When Prof. Sussman wrote "It will take a long time", we can assuem he had in mind many decades, probably more than a hundred years. And now, less than five years have passed since these lines were written, and Prof. Sussmann's vision is being fulfilled, at least as regards the approach of a "presenting" critical edition. On the basis of the catalog prepared by Prof. Sussmann, we have at our fingertips today the long-awaited critical edition. This achievement is little short of a miracle.