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Definitive words of the rabbis

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Charles Middleburgh reviews a brave man's 'life' of the Talmud

The Talmud - A Biography: Banned, censored and burned, the book they couldn't suppress

Harry Freedman

Bloomsbury £25

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The standard edition of the Babylonian Talmud comes in twenty volumes, the Jerusalem Talmud in seven. Together they cover thousands of pages and contain millions of words. To write the 'biography' of two such massive works, even if principal attention is given to the former, which is authoritative, takes a brave man; to succeed in 215 pages, and to do so in a manner that is fascinating, engaging and adequately detailed is an outstanding achievement.

The courageous author, Harry Freedman, has succeeded in producing a book that is an appropriate reflection of the genius and enduring power of its focus. Divided into two sections, The Talmud In Its World and The Talmud In The World, and comprising fifteen chapters, Harry Freedman brings not just the Talmud as a legal text to life, but also its rich and varied history, the heroic and the tragic.

Those who approach this book thinking that the Talmud is a dry legal colossus will be quickly disabused of this notion. Freedman details all those whose lives are inextricably bound into the Talmud, its production, developing use, serial abuse and desecration. We read about the rabbinic sages who bestride its pages, the yeshivah heads and scholars of Babylonian and Palestinian Jewry, the Exilarchs and Geonim, the scholars of Muslim Spain and Christian Europe, the fierce debates between rabbinic leaders and Christian antagonists (often themselves converts from Judaism to Christianity), the printers who first published the Talmud and their enduring influence on its structure and form, the quirky involvement of the Talmud in Henry VIII's complicated love life, and the intense revival of Talmud study in the 20th and 21st centuries across the Jewish spectrum.

The Talmud stands as one of the most significant achievements in human literary history, and its continuous use as a defining document in Jewish life over a period of close to two thousand years seals its greatness.

Harry Freedman's biography of this massive work is both excellent and appropriate to the Talmud's stellar status.