

THE TEXT WRITES ITSELF

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I have often been asked to comment on the ways in which the Jewish tradition might inform my artistic practices, either directly or indirectly. Rather than seek a linear response, I have chosen to answer with a significantly reduced distillation of a two thousand year discussion on the "care of the ancient books" expressed in the language of the Babylonian Talmud as a series of legal arguments according to Jewish Law. The Talmudic discussion attempts to determine what is holy and what is not holy, thereby questioning the meaning and value of an incomplete, disintegrating, disappearing and erased text.

In Jewish Tradition, the "teaching" or "law" is understood to have been given orally as well as in written form at Mount Sinai. During a historical period in which the rabbis feared that the written and oral traditions would be lost, a conference was called in Yabneh ca. 100 A.D. Here began the first the canonization of the written text, the Canon. Shortly thereafter, the Rabbis began the process of writing down of the oral tradition as well, "to save it". The Talmud is a "record" of accepted and dissenting opinions. Only records of verbal commentary attempts a guide through this forest of seemingly conflicting and non-linear statements and prevents the writing down of the oral tradition to ossify and harden. The oral teaching is thereby contained in a kind of virtual form within the written teaching. It would need to be extracted, and here the active form of interpretation would begin. Here developed an inter-textual reading "sewn or stitched" through oral and written memory. The Talmud addresses this problem with the following story:¹

"It is written: 'write for yourselves these words....'

It is also written elsewhere: '...for according to these words...'"

The first verse means that the Torah must be written, the second that it must be taught orally. How do we resolve this? The answer is that the words that are written may not be recited by heart, and the words which are transmitted orally may not be committed to writing.

The Talmud consists of multiple layers of "onion skin", texts surrounded by seemingly endless interpretations. Cross-indexed as an enormous hypertext. Since all discussions and themes are interrelated (digressions and references to related subjects

abound) one might start to read at any point. In religious communities to this day, the Talmud is chanted and thereby partially memorized; decisions are argued verbally often in pairs and small groups. In the Talmud, our contemporary understanding of logic is largely absent, statements contradict, and one has the impression of reading the minutes to an endless meeting, where participants appear and disappear at will, and where the discussion can drift from the holy to the secular in adjacent sentences.

In the tractate “Sabbath” of the Babylonian Talmud, there is a section, which discusses the problem of saving the holy scrolls from a fire in the synagogue on the Jewish Sabbath.² The situation is doubly problematic since the carrying of objects out of the synagogue is normally prohibited. The passage begins with a discussion about the types of scrolls which may be saved, and which laws may be broken to save them. The entire passage is based on the following short paragraph: *“All Holy Scriptures – whether they are Torah scrolls or scrolls of the other books of the Bible – may be saved from a fire on the Sabbath – whether we read from them (publicly) or whether we do not read from them ... and even though they are written in any language other than Hebrew. They warrant being hidden away...”*³

The commentary now begins its rambling commentary with a discussion about the nature of the book; in effect a scroll which was hand-copied; and reading or chanting the texts out loud was standard practice. The Talmud considers books which are read publicly as more sacred than the books which are read privately. Furthermore, scrolls, which are written in other languages or translations from Hebrew (here considered the holy tongue), may or may not be saved (depending on whether they are read, i.e., publicly or not), in which case *“their decay (the decayed particles after a fire) warrant being hidden away. In addition, if one leaves them in an unguarded place they should be left to decay of their own accord.”*

There is a reference here to the burying and resulting decay of the human body. The text is a living thing, when it’s holiness or it’s breath departs, when it is no longer whole, it should be left to decay as a body, in an “unguarded place”. The discussion continues with a consideration of the ink in which the texts are written. Here, permanence is the issue. If *“they were written with paint, with red pigment, with gum or with ferrous sulfate, in the Holy Tongue, may we save them from a fire on the Sabbath?”*

As opposed to translations, where may be some doubt, "... *here, where they are written in the Holy Tongue, we may save*" them. Another Rabbi protests "*this applies only to where (the scrolls) are written in black ink, which lasts. But here, since the (paint, pigment, etc.) does not last as long as black ink, no, we may not save the scrolls.*"

The Rabbis are considering the preservation and readability of the text. The famous medieval commentator "Rashi"⁴ reflects that many holy books may be written with inferior inks, therefore we may save these books regardless in which inks they are written: "*And since it is legal to write other books with these inferior type inks, it is also permissible to save them from a fire on the Sabbath.*"

The Commentary continues, "*in the case of a Torah Scroll in which there is not sufficient writing to gather eighty-five letters, (i.e. most of the writing is erased, and the number of intact letters in words scattered throughout the scroll does not total 85), similar to a section in the Torah that begins, 'And when the Ark would journey' – may we save it from a fire ... or may we not save it.*" When a Torah has been partially erased by the fire or other catastrophe, or by the decay of time, how many letters must be present to qualify being saved? By law, the letters must be readable to qualify as holy information. Eighty-five letters corresponds to a section from the Torah, which begins "*And when the Ark would journey*" and which refers to the transport of the ark through the desert⁵. The tradition seems to value this aspect of "portability", as if the text is moveable, interchangeable, and seems to take on a life of its own, wandering from place to place. Indeed, in the handwritten parchment torah scroll, only this section is traditionally separated from the rest of the Torah, leading the rabbis to discuss whether there are perhaps seven books of Moses and if perhaps this section is "not in its proper place", ranking as a book on its own. "*They inquired, these eighty-five letters ... must they be together, or may they even be scattered throughout the scroll?*" One rabbi answers, "*together*" and another said "*even scattered*".

The Talmud gradually takes leave of a concrete situation in the direction of philosophical speculations. The scroll is partially erased, only the recognizable letters may be considered here. The number of required letters is agreed upon, but may they be individual letters and textual fragments haphazardly strewn throughout the surface of the scroll or must they be together?

Perhaps this passage was the inspiration for the Medieval Spanish Cabalist Avraham Abulafia⁶, who randomly threw letters on a page

in the search for a hidden, meaning. But in the case of a real fire, would one have the time to have Talmudic discussions before deciding which scrolls one is permitted to save? The Talmud has lost interest in such practical concerns. The eighty-five letters are now moveable, much as the ark was carried from place to place in the desert.

“They inquired, regarding the blank portions of the Torah Scroll, may we save them from a fire on the Sabbath or may we not save them from a fire?”

The Talmud is not content with the writing itself, and begins to consider the surface of the object upon which one writes. *“In regard to a Torah scroll which has become worn, if there is within it sufficient writing to gather eighty-five letters, (We may) derive that it may be saved on account of its blank portion!”*

Perhaps the Rabbis are referring to the blank portions which “join” or “connect” the fragments of wandering letters with one another? Therefore it might be the blank sections that might create a sense of hypothetical readability. A Rabbi disagrees: *“A worn scroll is different.”* A worn section of the writing is not readable, and is therefore not sacred. Yet a worn section of a blank portion, since it does not affect the readability of the text, has no influence on the holiness of the entire scroll. *“In regard to a place where there once was writing, I have no doubt that it loses its sanctity because when (this portion) originally received its sanctity ... (it is) only on account of the writing on it. Thus when the writing departs, the sanctity (of this portion) departs as well.”* A section of scroll, upon which there is writing, only holds its sanctity as long as the writing is readable. The writing is the “breath” of the object, when the life force departs; the object is buried and allowed to decay of its own accord. *“When am I in doubt – in regard to the blank portions, i.e., margins, above and below the writing, between one section and the next, between one column and the next, and at the beginning and the end of the scroll.”*

The plot thickens. The Rabbis seem to be referring to a sort of “negative” text, the inverse of the intention of the act of writing. As the contemporary comment points out: *“These portions were always intended to remain blank. There for it may be argued that the fact that the whole Torah is now blank is no reason for (it) to lose its sanctity.”*

In Jewish Law, the question of intention is extremely important. Now the entire Torah has been erased, and the Rabbis are still trying to hold onto its sanctity. Since some sections were intended to remain blank, the essence of “blankness” must itself be sacred.

Even when only the portions of the scroll on which the writing has been erased are considered sacred; all portions are of “one piece”. Therefore, the entire scroll, even if it is completely erased, and even if it is the most sacred of scrolls, the Torah, might retain its sacredness. As Rashba⁷ concludes:

“...the space between the lines (and letters) are considered on par with the place on which the writing appears. This is because these spaces are essential for the writing to remain legible. The margins by contrast, are merely intended to lend aesthetic beauty to the scroll. Accordingly, their sanctity is independent of that of the writing.”

The structure of the scroll is differentiated. The blank space between the letters, as the negative image of the writing, are necessary for legibility and are therefore more holy than the outside margins, which have only a decorative function. Another rabbi counters this argument: *“The blank portions, i.e. Margins, above and below the writing, between one section and the next, between one column and the next, and at the beginning and end of the scroll, render hands unclean thus, we see that the margins of a scroll have the same sanctity as the scroll itself.”*

The categories of “unclean” and “clean” cut clear across all biblical and rabbinical debates. Upon death, contact *“renders the hands unclean”*. Here again, since contact to all parts of the scroll *“render the hands unclean”*, the portions may not be differentiated; again the unity of the object with its content is substantiated. The Talmud considers a text which has been “given” and “canonized”. Yet, the tradition merits perpetual exegesis above all else; expressed in the metaphors of readability, translation, and moveability. The text has been partially erased, but not only do the fragments retain their sacredness, but patches of meaning might even be recombined. Finally, even the empty page might rewrite itself.

¹ Talmud, Gemara, Gittin 60b

² For a interesting gloss on this tractate, see “The Burnt Book”, by Marc-Alain Ouaknin, translation by Llewellyn Brown, Princeton University Press, 1986

³ All English quotations from the Talmud are excerpted from “Talmud Bavli, Tractate Shabbos Volume IV, The Schottenstein Edition”, Mesorah Publications, Ltd., New York, 1997. Liberties have been taken in compressing the original text, and no attempt has been made to present a traditional commentary which might replace traditionally accepted sources.

⁴ Rabbi Shelomo Yitzhaki, 1040 – 1105, commonly known as “Rashi”.

⁵ Numbers 10:35-36. This section tells of the portable transport of the ark in the desert during the forty years of wandering after the exile from Egypt. As the Ark was moved from place to place, a protective “holy cloud” would follow.

⁶ Abraham Abulafia--Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, and Theurgy. Los Angeles: Cherub Press. 2000.

⁷ Rabbi Shlomo ben Abraham Adret (1235-1310), commonly known as “Rashba”.