

MISHNA משנה

The Mishna is a collection of Jewish legal material. It takes all the laws that are scattered throughout the Torah and compiles them in thematic groupings while at the same time adding to them. It was begun in Eretz Yisrael from the time of the destruction of the Second Temple was finally ordered, given a unified style and edited by Judah HaNassi in 200CE. The Mishna is written in Hebrew, in a clear and concise style. It is composed of six major sections (ששה סדרי משנה).

- 1 Zeraim (Seeds) - deals with laws of agriculture
- 2 Mo'ed (Appointed Time) - deals with the laws of Shabbat and the festivals
- 3 Nashim (Women) - deals with laws pertaining to marriage, divorce and family relationships
- 4 Nezikim (Damages) - Deals with civil law and government
- 5 Kedoshim (Sacred Matters) - deals with laws of sacrifice and Temple rituals
- 6 Toharot (Purity) deals with laws of ritual uncleanness

As is reflected in the subject headings of the six sections, the Mishna relates to all aspects of life, presenting a comprehensive set of rules of behavior. No distinction is made between religious and non-religious aspects of life. This literary style reflects and expresses an ideological stance; that Jewish law strives to realize a vision of a comprehensive, integrated society imbued with a certain set of values. These values relate to every realm of life, from the most mundane to the most sublime.

The Mishna was the law code according to which the Jewish People lived and were governed. However the Mishna is not just a legal code. It is, no less importantly, a work of philosophy which is expressed through the medium of rules and regulations. When we look at the system as a whole, and read beneath and in between the lines, we can see an entire worldview being set forth by the Tanaim (the scholars of the period). In a sentence, the Mishna teaches that it is our task to sanctify life, to make it holy through every single action we perform. Thus the division of agriculture (a seemingly non-religious subject) deals with how to produce crops in accordance with Biblical law, as well as other laws concerning the giving of parts of the harvest to the Priests, Levites and poor. The underlying idea is that the land and its produce is not an end in itself, to be enjoyed according to our own needs and wishes. The laws convey the message that the land is ultimately God's and not ours', that we must treat it a certain way and share its produce with others. Far from being a technical farmers' almanac, this section of the Mishna translates theological and moral principles into concrete daily life.

GEMARA גמרא

Scholars discussed and analyzed the Mishna during the generations following its compilation. Many real life situations arose which were not addressed in the Mishna. Furthermore, as the Mishna was studied, theoretical questions arose as to which Tanaim were responsible for the various mishnayot (the specific sections of the mishna), questions regarding the internal logic of the mishnayot, laws which seemed to contradict each other, etc. The questions, discussions and solutions presented by the scholars of this period, the Amoraim (200 -500 CE), are recorded in the Gemara.

A term which is sometimes used interchangeably with the "Gemara" is the "Talmud". The term "Talmud", however, is used in two ways, in a narrow sense and in a broad sense: 1) as the text which expands upon and explains the Mishna (the Gemara, as explained above), and 2) as the Mishna and the Gemara together. We speak here of the Talmud in its more specific meaning, as the text which explains the Mishna.

Although we speak of "the Talmud", in fact two Talmuds exist: the Babylonian and the Jerusalem Talmud. Each was the product of a different center of Jewish life and learning; Babylon and Eretz Yisrael (the Galilee, not Jerusalem). Both are explanations of the Mishna yet the two differ in terms of language, style and content. Due to historical circumstances, work on the Jerusalem Talmud ended prematurely, about a century before the Babylonian Talmud. The political situation of the Jews in Eretz Yisrael was much more difficult than that of the Jews of Babylon. Their version of the Talmud was never completely finished or edited. As a result, the Babylonian Talmud is usually viewed as the more authoritative work.

The Mishna and the Gemara differ greatly. The Mishna is concise, the Gemara wordy. The Mishna is written in Hebrew, the Gemara mostly in Hebrew and Aramaic. The Mishna is organized and presented quite logically, the Gemara is associative. Parts of the Gemara, which seemingly have nothing in common, may find themselves next to each other because a word in one reminded a particular scholar of another idea or story. This is not to say that the Gemara's structure does not follow a logical path; it follows its own internal logic, which is often quite far from logic as we might know it.

The Gemara is organized around the same sections as the Mishna. It takes a particular Mishna and analyses each phrase and sentence in it and includes all the discussions around each sentence. In some cases the discussion veers off on a tangent, but, it is nevertheless included. When differences of opinion exist between different Amoraim regarding a particular law, the various opinions are presented. The Gemara presents a pluralistic approach and minority voices are heard. The Gemara explores the different laws presented in the Mishna, bringing many examples which expand upon original rulings. It also includes much Midrashic material, because when the Amoraim discussed a particular law, they were often reminded of Midrashim which were connected to the subject.

It is important to note that in the Gemara we do not find a clear set of laws on how to behave; this is not viewed or presented as the most important aspect of the text. The