

THE ORAL AND THE TEXTUAL IN JEWISH TRADITION AND JEWISH EDUCATION. Edited by Jonathan Cohen and co-edited by Matt Goldish and Barry Holtz. Hebrew University Magnes Press. 2019. 286 pp.

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The Oral and the Textual in Jewish Tradition and Jewish Education is a compilation of papers that were presented during the 2014 conference hosted by the three joint Melton Centers in Jerusalem. The overall aim of the volume is to commemorate the Melton family and demonstrate a broad snapshot of the contributions and pedagogy the Melton family has contributed to within the field of Jewish studies. The volume is comprised of five sections and an introduction, each focusing on a different aspect of chronology in Jewish thought and education. Three essays focus on the Rabbinic period, three on the Middle Ages, two on pre-modern era, two on the modern era, and one essay focusing on contemporary Jewish oral and textual interaction. This review will briefly summarize some of the key articles and comment on particular aspects and conclude with an overall evaluation.

The first essay, “Silence, Speech and Song: Religious Education in Late Antiquity,” by Marc Hirshman sets the frame for the section on the Rabbinic period. Hirshman seeks to explore the development of rabbinic training in the vein of the oral culture that surrounded rabbinic life. Hirshman notes early in his essay that “Scripture was cited by heart. Rabbinic law and exegesis was also an oral affair, transmitted from teacher to student.”¹ Given this fact, the knowledge of Scripture recorded in scrolls must be disseminated in various methods. Hirshman turns to the Tosefta and some of the recorded teaching on oracular reproduction of written texts, particularly through three methods, hearing the text, singing\chanting the text, and speaking the text. The key to this understanding can be summed up by this observation: “Every time a learning situation is portrayed in rabbinic literature, with only the rare exception, it is always of people speaking, talking to one another or even reciting aloud to oneself.”² Hirshamn traces this idea in the majority of rabbinic writings with selections from various texts and demonstrates how the teachers would dialogue with students and influence them to learn, memorize,

1. Hirshman, Marc. 2019. Silence, Speech and Song: Religious Education in Late Antiquity. *The Oral and the Textual in Jewish Tradition and Jewish Education*. Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press. 12.

2. Hirshman, Marc. 2019. Silence, Speech and Song. 19.

and utilize the knowledge gained from an oracular interaction with the biblical text. Hirshman ties the idea of listening and speaking to the primary means of education yet concludes with the observation that “it remains to be explored whether the Jewish Sages also perceived thought as being produced in silent thinking or rather as being a product of verbal exchange.”³

The second essay, “The *Merqolis* and the Tannaitic Coding of Non-Jewish Ritual,” by Avram Shannon, focuses on how the Rabbinic Sages perceived and commented about rituals that were outside the bounds of their religion, namely the non-Jewish societal taboos they witnessed and knew of by observation of particular practices. Shannon views the descriptions of these non-Jewish rituals in written Tannaitic texts as “doubly coded to the modern reader.”⁴ This is due to the inexperience of the Sages in these practices and to the medium of transmission, textual based instead of the oral nature of the typical Rabbinic transmission. Shannon demonstrates this facet of the interaction of the textual and the oral nature of the teaching represented through the lens of the Mishna. Shannon looks particularly at the *Merqolis* ritual in which stones are thrown at a *merqolis*, typically defined as a wayside shrine found in Greek worship. Shannon describes the Sages as viewing this in a form of *avodah zarah*, “idolatry, strange ritual.”⁵ Shannon attempts to tie the discussion of the textual encoding of oral descriptions of these types of rituals to the way these rituals were taught by the Sages.

In the majority of the article, Shannon seeks to argue for the identity of the *merqolis*, a scholarly discussion in and of itself, as well as demonstrate how the Sages perceived and were able to condemn the act of those throwing stones at the statues as idolatrous pieces. Shannon demonstrates the interplay of lexical similarities in biblical passages and the way these are juxtaposed to the Tannaitic writing, in order for the Sages to both condemn and rationalize their condemnation via authoritative means. Shannon utilizes the findings of the lexical study to both interpret the Mishna text and give meaning to the term *merqolis* in general. This lexical study concludes that the phrase used to render *merqolis* in the Tosefta is understood as a stone pile, which is not the full understanding of the term. Shannon proposes that this idea drove Jerome to use this idea for his translation of the same word in Proverbs 26:8 and the

3. Hirshman, Marc. 2019. Silence, Speech and Song. 23.

4. Shannon, Avram. 2019. The *Merqolis* and the Tannaitic Coding of Non-Jewish Ritual. *The Oral and the Textual in Jewish Tradition and Jewish Education*, (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press. 25.

5. Shannon, Avram. 2019. The *Merqolis* and the Tannaitic Coding of Non-Jewish Ritual. 24.

Sages had the same understanding of the word when composing the Tosefta and intended the double meaning, “sling” and “pile of rocks” as a lexical play. Shannon argues that this is done by the Sages in order to discuss their own ritual practices and display the contrast. In doing this, Shannon concludes that; “It is, therefore, doubly encoded and becomes one of the premier rabbinic examples of the strangeness of non-Jewish ritual, a notion that is picked up on by Jerome in his Christian translation of the Bible, further compounding the process of transformation through oral transmission.”⁶

Given the far-reaching implications of the Sage’s oral teaching and subsequent written record, Shannon seeks to cover much ground and explore a rather large idea in this short article. Shannon is able to demonstrate that the textual transmission of the Sages oral teaching, as well as the later use of the works for textual hermeneutics has a much broader impact than typically perceived. Shannon shows how the second hand, oracular understanding of a non-Jewish ritual both served the purposes of the Sages in their writing and helped bring an understanding of some more obscure practices in the classical world.

To round out the first section of the book dealing with the Rabbinic period, Joshua Guttoff provides his article, “Listening to Texts, Reading People: Recovering the Interpersonal Experience in Talmud Education,” in which Guttoff seeks to look at the memesis between student and teacher in Talmudic schools. The interchange between how the student learned and how the teacher taught have deep ties in the oracular transaction that happened in the Talmudic discourse. Because the Talmud is a published, written work, this study focuses on sequences in which the student receives oral material from the master and memorizes and re-teaches the material.

Guttoff establishes a framework for understanding the people behind the production of the learning tractates in the Talmudic material through interaction between text and oral replication. Guttoff directs the attention away from the specific content of the Talmud for the search for understanding this dynamic, and instead looks to “the voice that directly addresses the reader, when propositional content is being taught.”⁷ Guttoff directs the attention to the introductory formulae of propositions in the Talmud to show how the

6. Shannon, Avram. 2019. The Merqolis and the Tannaitic Coding of Non-Jewish Ritual. 43.

7. Guttoff, Joshua. 2019. Listening to Texts, Reading People: Recovering the Interpersonal Experience in Talmud Education. *The Oral and the Textual in Jewish Tradition and Jewish Education*. Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press. 51.

relation between speech and pedagogy are understood and transmitted. This allows the reader of the Talmud opportunity to envision the intersect of teacher\student and the transmission and subsequent editing of the writings of the Talmud in a text critical fashion.

The second section of the book encompasses an essay by Amy Shuman and Amanda Randhawa entitled “This Too Shall Pass: The Afterlife of a Proverb.” This fascinating study on the history of proverbial sayings from the perspective of folklore research is incredibly well done. The authors succinctly trace the development of the “Solomonic” proverb; “This too shall pass.” The authors peer through the lens of text production and textual evaluation, much in the vein of the previous article in this volume “From ‘Religious Truth-Seeking’ to Reading: The Twelfth Century Renaissance and the Emergence of Peshat and Ad Litteram as Methods of Accessing the Bible” by Robert Harris on the literal sense understanding, and finally in the reuse of the proverb in new contexts, in this case: folklore. The authors follow a tale in which Solomon is said to extol this proverbial saying, yet in several different versions, the impetuosity of the utterance is cast in several different ways. The authors disseminate the tales from varying perspectives to demonstrate how the tale evolved through different communities and different time periods in order to show how change happens from an oral telling to a written record to multiple records from different regions. The ultimate goal of the authors is to produce how the story changes and how it is then reused by later generations. The implications for this study on other areas of research are many.

The final essay in this section by Matt Goldish entitled “The Oral, the Written and the Preformed in Safed,” focuses on the Safidic movement in the 16th century that was interested in the rise of Kabbalah practices, a mystical sect of Judaism. Goldish seeks to elucidate the act of performance during the oral proclamations of the practitioners, and how those two elements are portrayed within the written account. In his essay, Goldish recounts several examples of the performance of some of the more prominent figures of the movement and demonstrates the inseparable quality of the aspect of performance with the rise and flow of the movement overall.

The next section holds an important essay entitled, “Wounds, Kisses, and Torah Studies: Gender Issues in the Stories of Rabbi Joseph Hayyim,” by David Rotman. Rotman provides an interesting glimpse into the struggle of women’s rights within the Jewish community in Baghdad. Rotman discusses

some of the writings of Rabbi Joseph Hayyim that characterize this struggle, particularly in regards to young girls' education becoming a societal norm, told in the form of orally given folkloric tales encapsulated in written form after his death. Rotman shows the tale of a father and his daughter who secretly learns the Oral Torah and shows great wisdom in her social dealings, far beyond what her gender would typically allow her and against the will of her father. Rotman analyzes the story to demonstrate the tearing down of the societal norms and the achievements of the daughter who is held in esteem based on her erudition. Rotman demonstrates through his essay that given the current circumstances of societal norms changing in Baghdad at the time of composition, Hayyim was unable to fully depart from the traditional model of male dominance with Jewish religious education, yet the story holds several important points of acceptance of learning and spiritual education put before a highly regarded female figure that surpasses the role of the father in the story. Rotman also contributes a large appendix of places within Rabbi Joseph Hayyim's writings that touch on the topic of gender issues which will be vastly informative for future studies.

The book then shifts to the modern realm of thought with two essays on modern exegetes in Jewish thought and a final essay on the modern realm intersecting the written text and the original oral intent. For the sake of brevity, these articles have been left out of this review.

In critique, the volume attempts a concise format, yet the nature of the topic gives way to a very scattered stance. Each article tackles a very specific and very specialized area of study that may not be of interest to every reader. This review has attempted to draw out the more important (in my mind at least) of the articles and their basic tenants, yet overall, the volume tends to drift from the original topic or mask the intentional topic of the relationship between oral and textual transmission, the result of collecting the various papers from the original conference. The volume is highly valuable for Jewish studies, historical interpretation of the Hebrew Bible from a Jewish perspective, as well as students working in the field of post Second Temple Jewish exegetical work. No doubt the students and teachers will find this volume invaluable for their individual study and the volume will complement the bookshelf of many scholars to come.