

Discussion Questions for The Talmud: A Biography

1. What preconceptions of the Talmud did you have before reading this book? How has your impression changed?
2. Were you surprised by the emphasis on legal cases? Did you find the logic hard to follow?
3. Why was the Talmud viewed as a threat to Medieval Christianity? Why do you think it had not been similarly attacked prior to that? What seemed to be the ultimate effect of the death sentences it received at its trials in Spain and Italy?
4. The Talmud has been "rediscovered" several times, after being criticized as "not modern" by Enlightenment writers (18th C), the hassidic movement (19th C), and Zionist leaders in the 20th century. After seeking to distance themselves, what drew them back? Why do you think the Talmud has been adapted by modern, non-Jewish audiences such as South Koreans?
5. The book is described as a biography. Was there a point in your reading where you came to see the Talmud as a living entity?
6. Can you think of a Christian equivalent to "Responsa" (writing a question addressed to Talmud scholars and receiving a published legal decision or consideration of the issue).
7. On his deathbed, Albert Einstein is reported to have said his one regret was not studying the Talmud. Discuss these 7 measures of a life well lived from (Shabbat 31a*) Note the order:
 1. Were you honest in business?
 2. Did you make time for your spiritual life?
 3. Did you busy yourself with creation?
 4. Were you hopeful?
 5. Did you seek wisdom?
 6. Did you learn to discern what is true and what is false?
 7. Have you been true to yourself?
8. Which tractate did you find most interesting? Fire Liability, the Camel Proof, the Mountain held over the Israelites, the Coerced Betrothal, or other coerced transactions.
9. What did you think of the gender issues discussed in the book?
10. The editor refers to the Talmud as "a model of different modes of rationality". What are some of these modes?