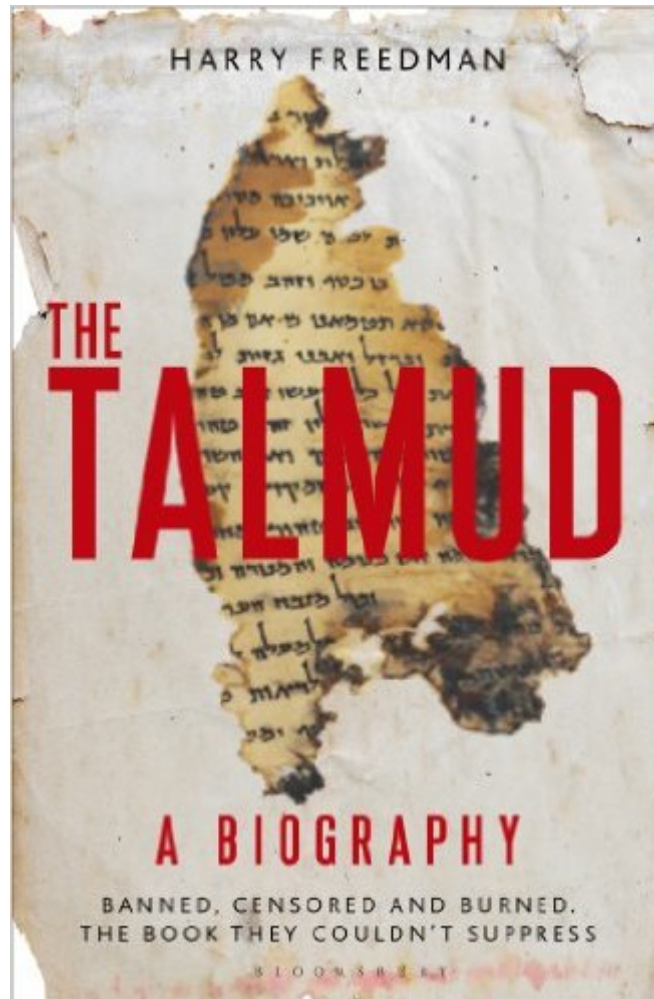


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# The Talmud - A Biography: Banned, Censored And Burned. The Book They Couldn't Suppress



## Synopsis

Containing nearly two million words in thirty-seven volumes, the Talmud covers topics as diverse as law, faith, medicine, magic, ethics, sex, humor, and prayer. It is a highly complex, profoundly logical, and frequently impenetrable work with a history like no other. In its fifteen-hundred-year history, the Talmud has been banned, censored, and burned; dissected by scholars and rabbis; probed by philosophers, poets, politicians, and kings. In *The Talmud*, Jewish scholar Harry Freedman tells the engrossing story of an ancient classic, the legal and mystical pillar of Judaism, and recounts the story of a chronicle that, in many ways, parallels the history of the Jewish people. From its origins as a record of discussions among scholars in towns and villages close to modern-day Baghdad, Freedman traces the spiraling paths of the Jewish diaspora and explores the story of the Talmud, its role during the Enlightenment, and its influence over traditional Judaism. A compelling fusion of law, storytelling, and spirituality, the Talmud's story provides fascinating insight into the history of Judaism, and Harry Freedman's *The Talmud: A Biography* is a remarkable account of one of the most important cultural, historical, and religious works of our time.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This "biography" of the Talmud is an interesting overview of complex history that has many things going for it, but also suffers from a number of minuses. On the positive side, Dr. Freedman does an excellent job of tracing the evolution of the Babylonian Talmud from its origins as an accumulation of discussions among the rabbinic sages over several centuries, which were transmitted orally from one generation of scholars to the next, until its compilation, redaction and commitment to written

form. Among the negatives, the author can't seem to decide whether his subject is a history of Judaism or of a series of books that were central to its development. While this is understandable, given the historical (and continuing) importance of the Talmud, the author still devotes too much space to extraneous material, much of which is quite subjective. To cite just one example, the saga of the false messiah Shabbtai Tzvi is recounted in detail, yet it has no relevance whatsoever to the story of the Talmud. On the other hand, there is some material on the Vilna Gaon, a towering figure who was the Lithuanian equivalent of one of the ancient Jewish sages; but the author, who is so wrapped up in recounting irrelevant anecdotes, doesn't communicate the full significance of the role of the Gaon and the world he lived in. In fact, the Vilna Gaon was the ultimate product of a culture where the study of the Talmud reigned supreme, where thousands upon thousands of young men attended hundreds of Yeshivas in Poland and Lithuania taught by some of the greatest minds of 18th and 19th century Judaism. This dimension of the story of the Talmud - its dominant role in the lives of Eastern European Jewry - is underemphasized.

Professor Shai Secunda of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem astutely noted in his book *The Iranian Talmud: Reading the Bavli in Its Sasanian Context* that the Babylonian Talmud is a complex literary artifact with a multi-vocal textual architecture that frequently confounds attempts to read for consistency. The very nature of its composition precludes many from any attempt to study it. While the Talmud itself may be impenetrable for many, in *The Talmud - A Biography: Banned, censored and burned*, the book they couldn't suppress, author Harry Freedman has written an engaging account of the book itself. For those who may be fascinated by the Talmud and at the same time intimidated by it, the book is a great resource that profiles what the Talmud is. Freedman wrote the book not to tell you the text of the book or to delve into its myriad contents and subjects; rather to show the reader how instrumental it has been to the Jews and world history, in addition to other cultures and religions. Freedman details where the Talmud came from, its creation almost 2,000 years ago; to its development and use in current times. He provides an interesting, albeit brief overview of its development, copyediting, printing, burning and banning. For those looking for a detailed and much more technical introduction to the Talmud, *The Essential Talmud* by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz provides a superb overview. What Freedman provides is a much higher overview of the topic, and details what the Talmud is, but does not get into its lower level abstractions, which can be so frustrating to the beginner. Freedman writes that for all its complex composition, the Talmud appears to the reader to be a seamless work.

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