

BOOK REVIEW: "THE SAGES - THEIR CONCEPTS AND BELIEFS"

by Ephraim E. Urbach (2 volumes).

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INTRODUCTION: This two-volume work is one of the publications of the Perry Foundation in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Volume 1 contains the text, and covers nearly 700 pages. Volume 2 contains the notes, references, sources and bibliography used, and covers 400 pages.

The aim of this work is "to describe the concepts and beliefs of the Tannaim and Amoraim and to elucidate them against the background of their actual life and environment". The author deals with matters of primary importance, and at times a paragraph has to do for a subject meriting a whole chapter. ~~This is in order to maintain matters of primary importance.~~

Chapter 1: Study of Beliefs and Concepts of the Sages.

"The term 'Sages' is customarily used to denote the sages of the Oral Law, who are mentioned in its literary sources: the Mishna, Tosefta, Halakhic Midrashim, Talmudim and Haggadic Midrashim. The earliest of the scholars lived in the era preceding the Maccabean revolt, and the last, when the Mediterranean countries were conquered by the Arabs - that is, "their activities extended over a period of more than nine hundred years".

The author admits a lack of consistency and system among the Sages, but asserts that this allowed freedom in interpreting their 'truths'. This book is based on ancient as well as modern data - archaeological, epigraphic and papyrological - that reveal to us the world of Pharisaic Judaism. The method followed is the philological-historical one; it is taken for granted that "the primary basis of the Sages' teaching is the Bible", and that they sought to contemporize the Torah and prophets.

## CHAPTER 2 : The Belief in One God.

The monotheistic concept of One God is embodied in the SHEMA. As early as the second century BCE, it was a duty to recite it twice daily. "The concept of Absolute Unity was deemed climactic in the understanding of God" The Babylonian captivity effectually cured the Jewish people of idolatry, which was thenceforward regarded as the disavowal of the whole Torah. He who negated belief in One God was called Kofer ba-Iqqar (denying the roots of the faith), or an Epicurean. It was heresy to deny the Providence of God, and the antidote was the faith of Abraham (GEN.15:6), provided that faith was accompanied by works,(at this point, James is favourably contrasted with Paul), particularly the love and fear of the Lord.

### Chapter 3: The Shekhina - The Presence of God in the world.

God's names are related to his attributes, his deeds and His relationship to man. He is immanent, and imminent (see ISA.57:15). Because they rigidly excluded all anthropomorphic qualities and similitudes from God, the Sages had to fill the vacuum they created by the Shekhina

(Divine,

Presence). Maimonides said it was created, but Nahmanides opposed that view since it is said of the Shekhina: barukh and ha-mevorakh. An interesting saying of R Hanania b Teradion is : "If two sit together and occupy themselves with words of the Torah, the Shekhina abides in their midst". (Compare Matt.18:20). The Shekhina is the epithet used to denote a theophany at a given place, and unavoidably becomes equated with God: it is light, it is the Holy One, blessed be He; it is Omnipresent. God's presence and His theophanies are linked to man's conduct and deeds; hence the Shekhina departed before the destruction of the Second Temple (HOS.5:15), according to R. Jonathan, yet others maintain He has never left the Western Wall (See SONG 2:9). In passages that appear unduly daring, the expression accompanying the Shekhina is ki-ve yakhol. ('so to speak'). The Shekhinah is also equated with the Holy Spirit, but figurative expressions that contain a feminine element (such as Princess, Queen, Bride, Matron [Lady], etc.) are scrupulously avoided; nor is it at all identified with 'Wisdom'.

#### Chapter 4: Nearness and Distance (Omnipresence) of God.

'Shekina' is the epithet for God's omnipresence; omnipresence, or alternatively the Maqom, the Omnipresent. Heaven and Maqom were regarded as complementary, but in due time the latter term was replaced by ha-qadosh-barukh-hu because of the gnostic heresy which identified God with the world. It was the greek-speaking Diaspora that first used the epithet 'the Holy One'. The term Elyon was avoided, perhaps due to its use as an adjective for common things.

#### Chapter 5: Gevura (Omnipotence).

The gods of Rome and of Babylon were regarded as near, yet far; whereas the reverse is true of the God of Israel. The boundary of the former is death: no god can revive the dead, or oppose the decree of death (Moirai), hence they are helpless against Fate. (Cf. 1. SAM.2:6). By contrast, God is Pantokrator (~~Pantokrator~~ (LXX), or Gevura (R. Joshua, Eliezer) - the Omnipotent. In MATT.26:64, the synonymous term is used by Jesus when He spoke of the right hand of Power (the Gevura) - . Idolaters believed that power could be bestowed on their idols by their deities; in the light of these views, the second benediction of the Amida stresses that there is no power apart from God's. That in turn raised problems, notably that of Jerusalem's destruction with the Temple. The solution proposed was faith in the future revelation of the Lord's avenging power: God's power and might are absolute, only their manifestation is a promise. Gevura is made synonymous with Revelation, Goodness and Lovingkindness. "In the view of the Sages, the ethical and religious conduct of man determines both the manifestation of God's presence in the world and the revelation of His power and might".

## CHAPTER 6: Magic and Miracle

While the people favoured magic, the Sages found it impossible to reconcile it with an All-Powerful God, since the essence of idolatry is the belief in an alternative source of power. "Magic flows from the desire to utilize these forces". In cases like that of the red heifer's ashes (NUM.19), where no reason is given for their effectiveness, Raban Johanan ben Zakkai said that God's statutes are made to be obeyed though not understood. However, Akiba asserted that conjuring is different from sorcery; and a compromise was sought in the area of magical medicine and incantations, because of the involvement of some Sages in this area. While asserting that miracles are God's acts alone, people like Honi ha-Me'aggel could work miracles by compelling God to hear them. There is clearly an ambivalence in the Sages' attitude - "both Talmuds and the Midrashim are full of miracles wrought by . . . the Tan-naim . . . down to . . . the last Amoraim". They seek to emphasize "the proof that they provide of God's strength and might", a kind of qiddush-ha-Shem. Miracles were not cited for the purpose of establishing the Halakha, and there was the view that the miracle was implanted in nature. Jesus and his disciples were regarded as enchanters and sorcerers, but again there were those who regarded all miraculous acts as due to God's edict to let them happen, regardless of the human instruments.

## CHAPTER 7: The Power of the Divine Name.

The Name of God reflects His presence, and expresses His power and might. The Ineffable Name (the Tetragrammaton) was early pronounced Adonai, to avoid uttering it. Only the High Priest on the day of Atonement mentioned it, ten times; and in the benediction in the temple, it was pronounced, until the death of Simeon the Just. It was written in amulets, and in magical papyri, in the form of a heptagrammaton (triangle with 12 letters at the base, narrowing to 4 at the top). By discontinuing these practices, the Sages sought to maintain distance between God and man, and to prevent the use of the Name in magic.

## CHAPTER 8: The Celestial Retinue.

The spiritual world of the Bible contains angels, seraphim, cherubim, guardian angels, and those like Michael and Gabriel. In many passages, the angel referred to is the Lord Himself; to avoid this, the Tannaim used the epithet 'Shekhina', or simply voided the meaning of the passage. A special problem was posed in EXOD.23:20-22, which was 'solved' by changing the phrase 'My name is in him' to : "In My name is his word". R. Idi posited the Metatron, which he took from the Babylonian onomasticon of angels. There is an evil angel called Samma'el, who struggles with Michael. The Song of Solomon is portrayed as the allegorical relationship between the Shekhina and Israel after the Exodus. Legends abound concerning God, His angels and Israel: Moses is regarded as superior to angels, and the intermediary between Israel and their Father in heaven; the angelology in Hebrews (Ch.1-2) is regarded as misapplied to Jesus; there are good and bad guardian angels, and the Torah has the power to confine the sphere of the latter. The deception of Eve

by the serpent in the book of Genesis, is attributed to Samma'el, who rode the camel-like serpent and ruled its actions. The angel that wrestled with Jacob was declared by R. Hama b. R. Hanina to be Esau's guardian angel, although an ancient Midrash considers him to be God Himself. There is the well-known Midrash concerning Moses' opposition to God's will in several instances, which is truly blasphemous, but which illustrates a superstitious belief in angels. The Amora R. Judan forbade praying to angels, in opposition to the Gnostic teaching. Altogether a confusing picture! And so alien to the restrained language of the Bible.

## CHAPTER 9   Creation

In seeking to elucidate the Creation account, the Sages rejected the idea that the world was created out of uncreated matter: on the contrary, God made the world out of nothing. There is considerable debate over the order and work of Creation, beginning with tohu and bohu. (Rav). Rav also said, 'By ten things was the world created: by wisdom, understanding, knowledge, strength, rebuke, might, righteousness and judgment, lovingkindness and compassion'. - <sup>i.e.</sup> ~~eg.~~, the entire Torah served as the instrument (Akiba). Furthermore, all Creation is good; and when God said "Let us make. . . ." (GEN.1:26), He was not inviting angels to share in the work of creation; the "Us" 'is the way kings speak' (R. Abbahu). Not even the Memra (the 'Logos' of Philo) has a part in creation. The existence of light before the luminaries were created is attributed to God's own light. Some famous Babylonian Amoraim of the fourth century were said to have combined study of the Halakhot of Creation with theurgical and magical practices.

## CHAPTER 10    Man

Nephesh, guf and ruach form an indivisible entity: death is not the antithesis of life but its extreme enfeeblement. Man is not viewed in isolation, but corporately; his function is to know the acts of God, but to keep him from pride ° a gnat came before him' (man was created last). Rabbi accepted the view of the non-Jewish Antoninus that an embryo has life and a soul at its inception (GEN.25:21). However, only at birth is the embryo deemed a separate person. Aqavia said that one needs to reflect on one's origin, destiny and judgment, to keep from sin. Remnants of myths and legends from heathens concerning man's creation were adapted and Judaized by Amoraim; whereas the Tannaim viewed man as °a small world', with a pre-existent soul; they believed in the resurrection of the dead. "King Messiah will not come until all the souls. . . to be born will be born". When a righteous man dies, his soul is enshrined in God's Treasure-house. At birth, the baby is made to forget all the Torah it learns in the womb, and the growing person must freely choose good or bad. The body is as necessary to the soul as a garment to the body; they benefit or suffer together, and "whoever saves alive a single soul, it is accounted to him as though he had saved a whole world".

## CHAPTER 11:    Providence.

There are two aspects to Providence; governmental and moral. "Everything is seen and freedom of choice is given"; "Everything is in the power of Heaven except the fear of Heaven"; Hillel's well-known dictation is °If I am not for myself, who shall be for me?' Akiba main-



tained the ability of fallen man to choose the way of life or death, yet Providence extends to all creation, even to a little bird. The inevitable conflict between man's free choice and pre-determined circumstances, was resolved by placing limits on both. Akiba taught and exemplified the conclusion that precepts are not rewarded in this world, but blessings follow those who have overcome evil. The Sages thus sought to avoid belief in dualism (Evil vs Good), and to attribute all to God - even eclipses are His messengers, and astrology was used for guidance. (There is an unmentionable homily on Adam's disputes with God over His Providence). The only sentence that cannot be changed is that which is sealed on Yom Kippur. To sum up, the Tannaim and Amoraim were divided in their views, and the author considers this a good thing.

## CHAPTER 12: Written and Oral Laws.

The study of the Torah is one of the pillars of the world. The Oral Law is first referred to in Shammai's reply to a proselyte who asked him how many Laws they had; it is believed to exist in its own right, like nature. Akiba taught that to fulfill one precept is to fulfill all; and Rabbi Eliezer taught that wrong interpreters of Torah have no share in the world to come (Hence the Birkat Ha Minim). Only death exempts man from Law-observance. Akiba incorporated the Oral Law in the Written Law, and was deemed by Rav to be superior to Moses. Elijah will resolve any differences between the two Laws, which inevitably clash here and there. Tannaim and Amoraim betray traces of Christian views on the relationship between Torah and faith. The Sages claimed to have received their teachings from Sinai, and that their expositions transcend the Written Torah; even the Almighty is bound by them! Messiah's coming

alters nothing of this, except that in his days "there will be neither merit nor guilt". The Torah he would teach is the "fully ripened" wisdom of Torah. Opposing views did not clash, as long as they remained theoretical; but with the claims of fulfillment of Messianic hope came conflict.

### CHAPTER 13: The commandments

God reveals Himself to man as the commanding God; to break His precepts is to break His covenant. Even Abraham learned Torah by revelation. The unfathomable statutes (e.g. NUM.19) are to be obeyed nevertheless; R. Hanina also stated that he who obeys because he is commanded is greater than he who obeys without a command. The Sages urged people to go beyond the letter of the law, and R. Hoshaiah said 'Greater is Qidush ha Shem than Hillul ha Shem'. Every verse of the Torah is a precept, including the care of the body, and all is to be done for God's glory. R. Simlai's homily reduces the keeping of the law to the all-embracing precept of faith (HAB.2:4). A man should prefer death to three sins: idolatry, incest and murder, because these undermine the entire existence of Judaism. Rava held it more important to heed the Scribes than the Torah. The reason why the Ten Commandments were not read daily, was to deny the claim that these alone, and not the words of the scribes, were necessary. The 613 Mitzvot correspond to the 613 letters from Anokhi to Asher le re'ekha in the 10 Commandments; and whoever has a mezuzah and wears tzitzit and tefillin is secured against sinning. The precepts are a yoke, not for enjoyment; and even if they are fulfilled

with invalid intent, the action counts; because stricter ideals and demands eventually suffer from apathy and licentiousness. Nevertheless, though the precept must be performed, intention and devotion transcend the action itself, and ennoble it.

#### CHAPTER 14 The Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The yoke precedes the commandments. Antigonus of Sokho taught the value of a non-mercenary obedience, such as that shown by Abraham in the Aqqeda<sup>h</sup>, and in contrast to Job (poor Job!). R. Levi's preposterous view was that Satan acted out of pious motives in testing Job, lest he should eclipse Abraham. The pierced ear (EXOD.21:1-6) is symbolic of renewed obedience, since <sup>the ear</sup>~~it~~ had heard and obeyed the tempter in Eden. The fear of sin means primarily withdrawing from transgression, as does the love of God. Rava said, "He that fears Heaven will seek to satisfy both views".

#### CHAPTER 15 Man's Accounting and the World's Accounting

1. Sin and death - The first sin brought death, birth pangs, toil and fatigue. Adam lost his former virtues, and the infirmity became inveterate in Man; but because death was a Decree, there is no connection between the sin of Adam and of mankind. Death was imposed on Adam, so that his descendants would not proclaim themselves gods, and it is linked to the doctrine of reward and punishment: "the day of death is like repentance" (R. Judah). This latter view came in when no more scapegoats could be offered on Yom Kippur; even one's fat and blood diminished through fasting was a 'sacrifice'.

2. Reward and Punishment - These are taught in the Decalogue and the Shema. Calamities are punishments, exacted in this life and the next; where suffering is due to obedience, Akiva taught that it was precious.

3. Reasons for Suffering - Mainly because even the righteous are sinful, suffering is the way to Life. Some Sages practised self-affliction and mortification, while others opposed it.

4. Justice and Mercy - God is merciful and gracious, but compassion follows only after repentance and atonement; but Honi ha Me-'aggel sought to compel God's compassion, regardless of deserving. R. Akiba said, "All that the All-Merciful does is for good". God's Attributes are equivalent to His Names, but His Attribute of Justice was transmuted into angels capable of ignorance.

5. Power of Repentance - Sometimes repentance removes the sin, but not the punishment, as with David. Repentance means to abandon sin, and to resolve sincerely never to return to it. However, the Tannaim taught that heavy transgressions should be augmented by additional acts of expiation. R. Eliezer taught, "Repent one day before your death". Man is duty bound at all times to repent.

6. The Two Inclinations - These phrases were coined by the Sages, who taught the necessity of both - "but for the evil inclination, a man would not build a house, nor take a wife, nor beget children" (R. Samuel). Torah-study is the antidote, and Hillel said "Trust not yourself until the day of your death". The Sages disputed about the merits of submitting to temptation in private to avoid profaning the divine Name in public.

7. The Righteous and Wicked - Man is righteous so long as his guilt has not been proved. A tsaddiq is one who gives charity, but his complete righteousness is in doubt until his last day - except for the extraordinary claim of Simeon b. Yohai. The Amoraim even doubted the complete righteousness of Enoch. The Lamed-Vav tsaddiqim originated from the Egyptian decani. The tsaddiq controls Nature and God's decrees and can help his ancestors by his merit. Isaac's Aqqedah has lasting merit for his descendants.

8. Interpretations of Theodicy - God is righteous, though calamities occur; man becomes "righteous overmuch" when he argues with God. Suffering is due to the unatoned sin of the sale of Joseph, and is borne corporately by the Congregation of Israel.

## CHAPTER 16 Israel and its Sages.

1. Election and Reality - The election is believed by some to be founded on the Sinai covenant, and by others as a cosmic act. Israel chose God before He chose them, since they accepted the Torah. We are all familiar with the Midrash on that point. The election of Israel was a corporate one, and on condition that all "Israel be sureties for one another". The Second temple was destroyed because "they hated one another without cause" (R. Johanan b. Torta).

2. Election and Proselytization - Israel's exile was viewed as God's way of making proselytes. Isaiah 52:13-53:12 are viewed as depicting Israel, and proselytes were their comfort in sufferings. Proselytes were counted among the people of Israel. Even the Minim should be thrust aside with the left hand and brought near with the right.

3. Indictment and Defense of Israel - The liberality of Israel when materials were needed to build the tabernacle, was compromised by their same generosity for making the golden calf. The prophets had to deal with a recalcitrant people, yet they remain a beloved people, and so were to be rebuked with caution.

4. The Sages in Hasmonean Days - Prophecy ended as part of Scripture after Malachi. From then on, the words of the Sages applied, beginning with Simeon b. Shetah. It was he who rebuked Honi ha-Me'aggel. The Sages influenced the temple and its service with their views.

5. Hillel's' character and work - It was Hillel who enacted the Prosbol, which softened the rigour of certain laws, and who coined the term Am ha aretz for the unlearned. He is credited with re-establishing the Law when it had been forgotten, and it was he who taught the "negative golden rule". He is remembered for his teaching, charity, and acts of lovingkindness.

6. Sages' Regime after the Temple - No bureaucracy existed during Temple days. In Jabneh, we find Rabban Gamaliel b. Hillel as Nasi, since "Hillel was descended from David". From this, a hierarchical system emerged.

7. - Struggle between learning and practice - "Study leads to practice". but Torah was not to be made a spade or a crown (source of profit). Study of Torah is a substitute atonement, and "transcends honouring father and mother".

8. - Internal Relations in the Academies - There were often sharp and bitter debates, criticisms, abuse, jealousies and class consciousness, alleviated at times with compliments. R. Nehunya b. Haqana attributed his long life to his care not to seek honour through degrading his colleague. The test of the Sage was the extent to which he sanctified or desecrated the Divine Name.

9. - The Sages among their People - Sages expected the people to fear them equally with God. They had extreme contempt for the Ammei-ha aretz, and shunned their company. At the same time as they recognized the power of personal (good) example, they practically betrayed their ideals. To them, the worst of all were sectarians (those related to Esau).

#### CHAPTER 17: Redemption.

The teaching is derived from the Law and Prophets, and was understood of Israel's national and physical deliverance. Hence Akiba's support of Bar Kochba. Israel's integrity affects that of the world. Views of the Redeemer are many - God, a human King, the Servant of Isaiah 53, etc—and were in place during Temple days, as was the belief in resurrection. Messianic hopes appear in the prayers, and some believed in two Messiahs. R. Eliezer said, "If they do not repent, they will not be redeemed" - repentance comes first and seems to displace the Messianic sufferings. Israel's redemption comes in the Sabbatic millennium, and grows little by little. Deep disillusionment is recorded at

the apparent non-appearance of Messiah, whose names include Shiloh, Yinnon, David, Tsemach, etc. "If Israel were to repent but a single day, the son of David would come forthwith". (But Hillel said, "Israel has no Messiah".) Redemption was subject to the condition that the people wished to be redeemed: but the Sages were not always sure of the sincerity of this desire.



COMMENTS:

1. The Sages and scripture - Throughout this work, it is obvious that the Sages regularly assigned arbitrary meanings to scripture; rarely is it interpreted literally: eisegesis, not exegesis, is the rule. They commonly propound a view of their own, backed by a "homily" and proceed to quote a text that suits them but which is rarely in context. They are almost totally unreliable in this respect.

2. The Sages and Messiah - There is no consensus on the Person of the Messiah; but at least they believe in a personal Messiah. They are all but unanimous that He is human, not Divine; and that His deliverance is not from sin, but as a result of repentance from sin.

3. The Author and Paul - Professor Urbach is merciless with Paul, far more than he is with Jesus. He consistently misquotes, misinterprets and misunderstands the great Shaliach. One cannot find a direct reference to Paul among the writings of the Sages, so as to compare their views with those of Prof. Urbach.

4. The Sages and the "Sectarrians" - Discussions and disputes with the Minim (early Jewish believers) are a clue to the situation existing before and after the Destruction. In every case, the Sages prevail and the Minim are confounded. There is no trace of agreement, or even of amicable disagreements: the "sectarians" are uniformly represented as undesirable.

5. The Value of this Study is in the understanding it gives us of the Jewish mind and Jewish presuppositions. We can use these findings to temper our Gospel approach to our brethren; it does help, when they see that we have taken the trouble to learn what were the concepts and beliefs of ~~the~~ Sages of Israel at a theologically formative time. For this reason, every serious worker in the Jewish gospel (the Gospel of Moses and the Prophets, and of the Lamb) should have access to this work.

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