

WINNING JEWS TO CHRIST

A Handbook to Aid Christians in their Approach to the Jews

by

Jacob Gartenhaus, Lrrr. D.

Copyright @ 1963

CHAPTER NINE

JEWISH LITERATURE

The Jewish people have often been referred to as “The People of the Book.” The “book” probably originally meant the “Bible.” But one might as well say, “the people of books.”

Not only has this people produced more literature than any other people in the world, comparatively speaking, but also there is or was no other people that had so much reverence, respect and love for books, for their authors, and for those who are learned and well-versed in books. The hero in Jewish life, legend and genealogy has never been, as with the Gentiles, one of brawn, but of brain. The *talmid chacham* — the “wise scholar” — was the ideal type in Jewish estimation. The *am ha’ aretz*, the ignorant, has always been the subject of contempt.

For the last 2,000 years and perhaps centuries earlier, there were hardly any illiterate male Jews. Every Jewish boy attended some kind of school. Schooling usually began when the boy was only three years old. At the age of five he was already initiated in the study of the Pentateuch in the original Hebrew and translated into the vernacular.

At thirteen when he became bar mitzvah, “a son of the law,” a full-fledged member of the community, he could deliver an oration on an intricate Talmudical subject full of hair-splitting casuistry (“pilpul”). If after some more years of schooling he distinguished himself as a “talmid chachan,” he was, as a rule, “snatched” up as a son-in-law by well-to-do parents, in whose house he could continue his studies for several more years.

His studies were, almost entirely, in the Talmudic books and their commentaries and in books of later dates, dealing with Jewish laws.

On rare occasions he may have glanced into the Bible, besides the Pentateuch, in which almost every Jew was well-versed.

Besides the large libraries (of “sacred books”) which every community possessed and usually kept in the synagogues, open and free to all at all times, every Jewish home had a library of its own, each according to its means. Cases or shelves well-stocked with books were considered as the best ornaments of the Jewish home.

Even the poorest, ignorant family had at least its own liturgical books, such as a *siddur* (“order,” meaning order of service), which contained the daily prayers and benedictions for various occasions; a *machzor* — series of prayer books for each of the various holy days; *Selichot* (Supplications), a book containing the prayers which are recited in the early mornings (or late at nights) several days before New Year and between New Year and the Day of Atonement; *Kinnoth* — a book of elegies and prayers, containing also the “Book of Lamentations,” which is recited on the fast of the Ninth of Av (the memorial day of the destruction of the Temples); *Haggada* (“Legend”) containing the “prayers,” etc., which are recited and chanted on the Eve of Passover (Seder); *Megillah* — (Scroll) — meaning the “Book of Esther” which is read both on the Eve and the Day of Purim; *Thillim* — The Psalter, which has always been a handy book and steady companion, to be read on various occasions, in time of illness, of danger, of worry, or just for pleasure in spare time; *Chumash* — meaning the “five” books of Moses. This book is divided into weekly portions, which are read in the synagogues during the morning service of the Sabbath, each Sabbath a different portion, so that during the year the whole book is publicly recited (read). The same portion was also read privately at home, and it usually was studied during that week in “Cheder” (elementary school).

All these books were necessary for the “divine service” at the synagogue or at home. As to commentaries for study of the “Torah,” their number and variety depended on the state of learning of the male members of the family.

While the women were not obliged to pray or attend services at the synagogue, they often did pray at home. On Sabbaths and festivals when they attended the synagogue, they used either the same books as the males, or the same books together with a translation in the vernacular (in Yiddish). In European communities the Jewish women also had some books in Yiddish of their own, such as the *Deutsh-Chumash*, a free translation of the Chumash richly mixed with expositions and legends from the Talmudic books. Another favorite book was *T’chinoth* (supplications), prayers in Yiddish for various occasions, and there were other books specifically prepared for women in Yiddish.

Within the limits of this discussion it is possible to give only the briefest of brief accounts of the Hebrew literature which began some three millennia ago. The Bible, the “Book of Books,” mentions various books which disappeared during the ages. As early as the time of Moses, someone wrote a book called “Book of the Wars of the Lord” — (see Numbers 21:14). It must have been quite popular at that time.

Ecclesiastes (12:12) warns against the many and innumerable books. The recent discoveries of scrolls at the Dead Sea reveal that the Jews had about the time of Christ many books besides the Bible and the Apocrypha.

After the destruction of the second Commonwealth and the dispersion of the Jewish people, their literary production received a serious setback. For long years the rabbis outlawed all books besides the Bible. The Bible was called *Torah She’bichtav* (written Torah) in distinction to the *Torah She-balpeh* (oral Torah), which were laws and customs that became part of Jewish life during the centuries after Moses.

According to the Rabbis these laws were already handed down from Sinai, but for certain reasons were not then incorporated in the written law. They were to be delivered orally from generation to generation. However, since there was the danger that in exile these oral laws might be forgotten, the rabbis decided to write them down.

The result of that decision was The *Talmud* — a monumental work which was about 500 years in the making. It is not strictly a code of laws, although it contains all the laws which were enacted up to the time of its completion, but also contains exposition and interpretations of the “Written Law,” as well as some historical events and legends and much superstition mixed with scientific facts.

Side by side with the Talmud there came into being the *Midrash* (or in the plural, *Midrashim*, books dealing with the homiletic exposition of the Bible, mainly of the Pentateuch). These, like the *Haggadah* part of the Talmud, became very popular with the Jewish masses, since they were written in Hebrew, in the moving, narrative style, not like the *Halachah*, which was mostly in Aramaic, intricate and less appealing to the heart, even to the legalistic heart of the Jew. (See chapter on “Talmud and Midrash”).

The *Targums* (Translations) form a set of books which usually come under the heading of Exegesis (See chapter on “Exegesis”).

The Kabbalist Books: These are the mystical interpretation of the Scriptures. Sometime around 1200 A.D. there arose in Spain a tendency and belief that the Bible, or religion as a whole, might best be understood by faith and spiritual insight and contemplation rather than by the ordinary sense perception or the use of logical reasoning (See chapter on “The Kabbalah”).

The Kabbalah had a profound influence on the pseudo-Messianic movement of *Shabathai Zvi*, and later upon the Chassidic movement which arose in Poland in the eighteenth century.

The Chassidic movements have produced a large number of books, some homiletic, but mostly narrative, biographies of certain wonder-rabbis. These books were very popular at their inception, but are now seldom read.

Among the most famous post-Talmudic books which profoundly inspired Judaism (with an enduring effect) are:

Emunoth We-deoth (Dogmas and Truths) by Saadya Gaon (892-942).

Chovath Halvavoth (Duties of the Hearts) by Bachya ben Joseph in the eleventh century. This is the first Jewish system of ethics. In it, the writer insists on the need of fulfilling the spirit of the Law rather than its letter.

Moreh Nevachim (Guide of the Perplexed) by Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (1135-1204) or as he is known by the initials of his name “BaMBaM.” To the Gentiles he is known as Maimonides. Most of his books became classics in Jewish literature.

In his time he was regarded with disfavor by many of the leading rabbis, mainly because of his heretical teaching as expressed in his book, *Moreh Nevochim*, which was considered dangerous to rabbinic orthodoxy. Later he was regarded as the greatest Jewish genius since the first Moses.

While in his other books he showed himself to be a faithful disciple of the rabbis of old, in this book he ran counter to rabbinic teaching. In it he attempts to show that Judaism is the very expression of human intelligence, that there is nothing in Judaism, if properly explained, which contradicts true philosophy.

Thus he sought to spiritualize what seemed to be “contradictory to true philosophy,” and interpret it in the allegorical manner of the Alexanderines (Philo, etc.). And yet, paradoxically, this man, who in his time was suspected of heresy and even atheism, became the author of the so-called Jewish Creed or Confession of faith.

In his commentary on the Mishnah he enunciates thirteen principles of the faith which every Jew ought to believe. These principles (in Hebrew, *Ikkarim*) were generally accepted and embodied in the Prayer Book and are to be recited daily, except on Sabbath and holydays.

The “*Moreh Nevochim*” was generally outlawed by the Rabbis, especially was it forbidden to the younger students who might be misled into unbelief, and yet it was published again and again, and was studied, often secretly, by young and old.

Kuzari by Yehuda Helevi (1085-1140). This author is generally regarded as the greatest of Hebrew poets, many of whose poems are embodied in the Jewish liturgy. The *Kuzari* was first written for the benefit of the ruler of the Kuzarim (Khazars). It is in the form of “Apologia” and justifies Judaism as against Philosophy, Christianity and Mohammedanism. The Khazars were then converted to Judaism.

The books that exercised the most powerful influence on (later) Judaism, however, were the various codes.

CODIFICATION

The Talmud, although it contained, as it was intended to, all the Rabbinic Law, could not for long serve its purpose. It was too lengthy, difficult and confusing for the average Jew, and it became necessary to make shorter compendiums and codifications, omitting all the non-legal portions (stories, etc.) and the legal discussions.

Among the systematic codes are the *Rif* or *Alfasi* (in the eleventh century).

The *Mishneh Torah* (Repetition of the Law) by the “RamBam,” consists of fourteen volumes, sometimes called *Yad Hachazakah*, and is written in Hebrew so that anyone knowing this language could easily read it (1180 A.D.).

The *Turim*, a four volume book:

1. Dealing with liturgical laws;
2. Ritual laws;
3. Marriage laws;
4. Civil laws.

This code is the more practical as it restricts itself to the laws actually in use at the time. It omits all laws that had become obsolete, and embodies all laws and customs that came into practice after the completion of the Talmud.

The *Shulchan Aruch* — this is the most extensively used of the various Codifications. It was written by Joseph Karo in the sixteenth century and has become the guiding authority on Jewish practice. It is this code that the Jews have since been consulting to learn what is the law (what to do and what not to do).

Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (Abridged Shulchan Aruch), written in simple language, contains only those laws and customs which are generally practiced. It disregards the laws that are only occasionally used. When such an occasion arises, a Rabbi has to be consulted. This abridged compendium was widely spread.

Besides the various codes there are also The Responsa books, compilations of questions and replies. Whenever some legal question arose which was not mentioned in the extant codes, it was put before one of the great authorities of the age. Such questions and the authoritative reply to them were recorded for reference.

There were also several books, mostly poetic, of a religious nature, many of which were incorporated in Jewish liturgy for various occasions.

Since the *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) movement the Jewish people have produced a vast literature which is mainly secular. Most of the books were written in Hebrew, a great many in Yiddish, and others in the various languages of the countries where large Jewish communities lived.

Among the great authors of secular books: novels, poems, etc. are: Mendele Mocher S'farim, Perez, Shalom Aleichem, Shalom Ash, Bialik, and Chernichovski.

~ end of chapter 9 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
