

Jewish Education and History

Continuity, crisis and change

**Moshe Aberbach, edited and
translated by David Aberbach**



Routledge Jewish Studies Series

Jewish Education and History

Moshe Aberbach (1924–2007) was a leading educator and scholar in Jewish studies, specializing in the field of Jewish education in the talmudic period. This book draws on a representative selection of his writings over a fifty-year period, and includes, among others, essays on biblical and talmudic topics, Herod and Josephus, Saadia Gaon and Maimonides, Geiger and Hirsch, as well as the roots of religious anti-Zionism and the Lubavitch messianic movement in the context of similar movements in Jewish history.

The core focus of the book is the history of Jewish education, linking the Roman destruction of the Jewish state in 70 CE with Jewish survival after the Holocaust. In the author's view, survival after the Holocaust, as after 70 CE, depends on a strong system of Jewish education and the moral example set by teachers. The dynamism in Moshe Aberbach's thought lies in his close analysis not just of the educational process but also the undermining of Jewish education through a series of historic barriers to survival which in some ways also enriched Judaism: idolatry, Hellenism, anti-Semitism, religious and political schism, militant nationalism, messianism, rational philosophy, personality cults, secularism, socialism, patriotism, self-hate and assimilationism.

The book includes an autobiographical memoir of Moshe Aberbach's childhood in Vienna, as well as a biographical Foreword by his son, David. It will be of great interest to Bible scholars and students of Jewish Studies, History, the Holocaust and Jewish social psychology.

Moshe Aberbach (1924–2007) was Emeritus Professor of Jewish History and Literature, Baltimore Hebrew University. Born in Vienna, he came to England in 1938 in a *Kindertransport*. He studied Ancient History and Hebrew at Leeds University and received his PhD (1959) from London University for a study of Jewish education in the time of the Talmud, later published in Hebrew. Among his other publications are books on Targum, Jewish labor in the talmudic period, and (with his son, David) the Roman–Jewish wars. **David Aberbach** is Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature, McGill University, Montreal. He has published books on the Hebrew writers Mendeley Moche Sefarim, Bialik and Agnon; and his most recent book is *Jewish Cultural Nationalism* (Routledge).

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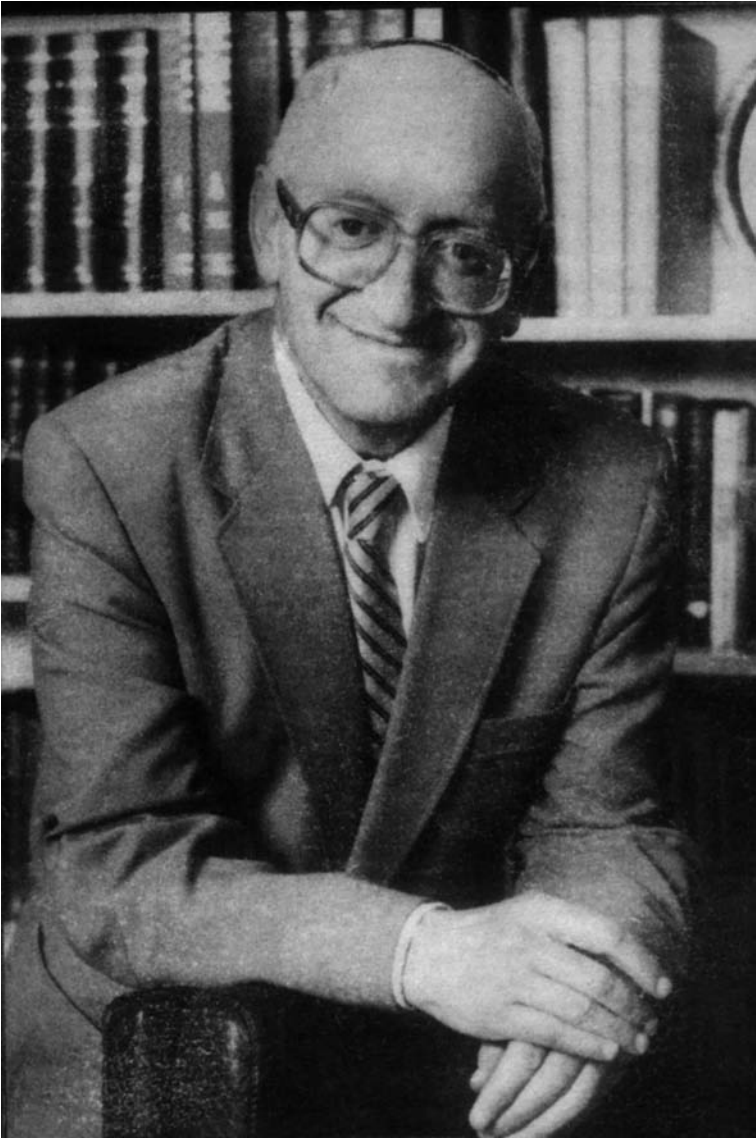
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Moshe Aberbach, Baltimore, 1975.

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Moshe Aberbach

A biographical foreword by
David Aberbach

My father was not just an historian but himself a fragment of history, an eye-witness to and participant in crucial events in the 1930s, which determined his world outlook and his later approach to history. From childhood, he was intensely aware of his unique historic moment and its causes, from a world about to be destroyed into a world not yet fully created. As a boy in Vienna, he experienced the aftereffects of World War I and the impact of the Depression; he witnessed the battles between the Communists and Nazis in 1934 and the



Leeds, 17 March 1939, two weeks before arrival of parents.

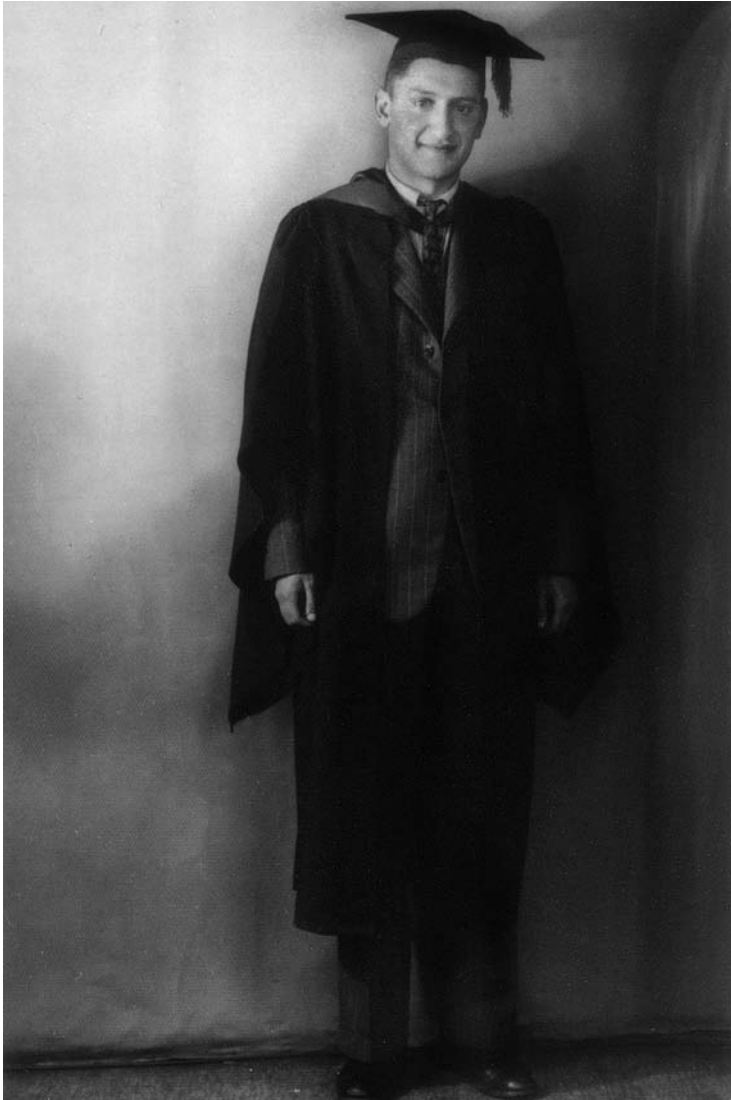
Anschluss in 1938; he attended one of the most unusual of schools – a Zionist *Gymnasium*, the only Jewish high school in Austria, which was allowed to remain open under Nazi rule, in 1938–1939; he saw the twilight of European Jewry and experienced its rich culture which nourished him all his life; and through his parents, both Hebrew teachers, he became a bearer of this culture after he escaped to England in a *Kindertransport* in 1938.

The core of my father's scholarship, which was less a profession than a calling, was that the road to the Holocaust began with the Roman destruction of the Jewish state in 70 CE, and that Jewish survival after 1945, as after 70 CE, depended on a strong system of education and the moral example set by teachers. He studied thousands of fragments scattered in the Talmud and Midrash from a period of half a millennium and more, which indicate how the Jewish educational system evolved and was maintained. This work lasted over thirty years and had two landmarks: his London University doctorate (1959) – whose painstaking scholarship was so clear that his examiners, Cecil Roth and Bernard Lewis, simply congratulated him and brought the viva to a speedy end; and his book in Hebrew, *Ha-Chinukh ha-Yehudi bi-Tkufat ha-Mishnah veba-Talmud* (*Jewish Education in the Time of the Mishnah and Talmud*), published in Jerusalem in 1982. This, a definitive work in its field, was a major scholarly achievement in the years after the Holocaust. My father, 'a brand plucked from the fire', was determined after the obliteration of European Jewish centers of learning to contribute to the reconstruction of Jewish life and the revival of Jewish education. The creative aftermath of the disastrous Roman–Jewish wars, when education became a tool of healing after trauma, served as his model for Jewish survival. The dynamism in my father's work lies in his close analysis not just of the educational process but also the undermining of Jewish education through a series of historic barriers to survival – such as idolatry, Hellenism, anti-Semitism, religious and political schism, militant nationalism, messianism, rational philosophy, personality cults, secularism, socialism, patriotism, self-hate and assimilationism. A fascination with forces opposing Judaism binds many of the chapters selected here, from Jeroboam and the battle against idolatry in the biblical age (Chapter 1) to current messianic trends in Judaism (Chapter 18).

From 1949, when he published his first article,¹ until his death on 1 February 2007, my father wrote at least something on most days, except for Sabbath and festivals. He had scholarly interests in practically every facet of Jewish history and literature, though much of his writing was on the period 168 BCE–500 CE, with books on the Roman–Jewish wars, labor and crafts in the rabbinic period, and Targum, much of which grew from his studies of Jewish education in the time of the Talmud. His scholarship reflects total post-Holocaust commitment to Judaism, Jewish education, the Jewish people and Zionism. He was an uncommonly gifted teacher, especially in Hebrew, and his writing was an integral part of his teaching, just as his scholarship, in its integrity and quest for truth, was an expression of his deepest convictions.

Together with his mastery of biblical and talmudic as well as non-Jewish sources, he brought to his scholarship profound humility, gentleness and

kindness, and a thirst for knowledge as well as sharp historical and literary insight – and a fine sense of humor. In particular, his work on the talmudic period has exceptional intellectual pressure, originality and encyclopedic knowledge. Few short books can have as much crammed into them, or be written with such pathos and anxiety to comprehend the riddles of Jewish suffering, as his short book on the Jewish revolt against Rome, 66–70 CE (1966).² He was particularly drawn to historical paradoxes: for example, in the years prior to the Roman war in 66 CE there is evidence both of a rise in anti-Judaism and also of increased



BA graduation, Leeds, 11 July 1944.

conversion to Judaism as well as adoption of Jewish customs. How to explain the simultaneous growth of these two conflicting forces? He first tackled this question in his earliest original scholarship, his MA thesis at Leeds University, begun in 1944–1945, as the war was ending.

He would explain to me (we spoke in Hebrew) in the manner of a talmudic sage: there is no contradiction; anti-Judaism in the Roman empire spread precisely *because* Judaism in the Roman empire was expanding, whether through mission or because it attracted sympathizers and converts, or because Roman religion (and much else in the empire) was unsatisfactory. A somewhat similar paradox occurred in the nineteenth century, when traditional religious anti-Semitism grew, and racial anti-Semitism emerged, it seemed, despite unprecedented Jewish assimilation, secular education, enfranchisement, patriotism, a longing to be accepted as part of the state or nation. No, my father would argue: the rise of modern anti-Semitism, especially its racial form, was partly a *result* of Jewish emancipation.³

My father's view of the rabbinic world was not uncritical⁴ – he once remarked to me that every person must make their own *Shulkhan Arukh* (code of laws) – but he felt that rabbinic Judaism was fundamentally sound and workable, and conducive to Jewish survival. His spoken Hebrew was beautifully flavored with rabbinic and biblical idioms, and he had uncommon sensitivity to the political nuances of talmudic texts. As a student at Talmudical Academy of Baltimore (1963–1971), I realized early on how completely different he was from the yeshiva scholar. When I was about ten, the yeshiva head, thinking perhaps that as the son of a Talmud scholar I had an aptitude for the subject, called me into his office and started teaching me the section of the Talmud beginning '*Ha-zahav koneh et ha-kesef*' (Gold buys silver...).⁵ The discussion made little sense to me, and when I got home and told my father, he gave me my first lesson in economics: the Roman empire had suffered crippling inflation in the third century CE, and this was part of the background to the talmudic discussion.⁶

My father, with his mixture of *yekkish* discipline and Viennese *schlamperei*, produced a genizah of original insights which he never brought together. Some of his most interesting essays deal with biblical and talmudic typologies: for example, the story of Aaron and the golden calf reflects the religious upheaval caused by the split of the kingdom and Jeroboam's introduction of the calf cult to the northern kingdom (Chapter 1); in the book of Genesis, Judah takes Benjamin from Joseph, but politically this implies the annexation of the territory of Benjamin to that of Judah (Chapter 2). My father's writings are populated with biblical characters who stand in for contemporary historical figures in the Talmud (an approach adopted by Dryden in the poem *Absolom and Achitophel*), which he charmingly summed up with the Yiddish saying: *Tsu der tokhter ret men, und di shnur meynt men* (One talks to the daughter but means the daughter-in-law). The portrait of Pharaoh in rabbinic literature is based on contemporary Egypt, where there was much conflict between Jews and pagans (Chapter 7). Joash king of Judah is depicted as a self-deifier punished in his homosexual practices: actually, the rabbis were referring to Agrippa I.⁷ The midrashic portrait

of Nebuchadnezzar, destroyer of the First Temple in 587 BCE, is based partly on Titus, destroyer of the Second Temple in 70 CE.⁸ Hezekiah king of Judah is inexplicably described as the Messiah; the rabbis had the eminent Patriarch, Judah Hanasi, editor of the Mishnah (early third century CE), in mind (Chapter 8). Relations between Solomon and Jeroboam as described in the Babylonian Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 101b) reflect friction between the Patriarch and rabbis who contested the Patriarch's power.⁹ Rabbinic attacks on the biblical prophets are puzzling – until their context is recognized: Christian attacks on Judaism, using prophetic diatribes as 'proof' of Israel's wickedness (Chapter 6). My father's enthusiasm for these and many other subjects is infectious, and his writing has a great sense of fun as well as wisdom. Drawing on an enormous range of primary sources, he engaged in close textual study in which diverse texts are linked in ingenious ways, but he never lost sight of broad social and historical processes and meanings. Among his most intriguing insights, for example, was the role of imperial Greek freedmen in undermining and ultimately destroying the Jewish state (Chapter 4). A danger linking ancient and modern Judaism, in his view, was the cult of personality (Chapter 10). The messianic movement associated with the Lubavitch rebbe drew from him a detailed analysis of parallel phenomena in Jewish history, and why messianism and personality cults could never be accepted as part of mainstream Judaism (Chapter 18).

My father's outlook and lifestyle were Orthodox, but he was a free thinker and totally unconcerned with religious denominations. In Baltimore, for example, he attended an ultra-Orthodox shtiebel while teaching at St. Mary's Ecumenical Seminary, where he taught trainee Catholic priests. He had eclectic interests in high and low culture: Latin and Greek as well as Karl May, Bernard Shaw and music hall, Sholom Aleichem and the Ealing comedies; he loved silly television programs such as *Mr. Ed* and *Get Smart* and was an avid fan of Erle Stanley Gardner, Jeffrey Archer and John Grisham. After morning prayers, he might disappear into the bathroom (which he treated as an extension of his library) from which would emanate a mock-schoolboy recital of Schiller in the bath; emerging in his toga-like red bathrobe, declaiming lines from Virgil in the original, from his *Gymnasium* days in pre-war Vienna; then while shaving, singing music hall songs ('There I woz, waitin' at the church'). His tolerant eclecticism led to an unusual situation in the early 1960s: after coming to Baltimore, he was offered lectureships (which he turned down) both at Jews' College, then the training college for British Orthodox rabbis, and the Leo Baeck College, the training college for Reform rabbis. My father's scholarship was an integral part of his entire way of life. When my brother, Joshua, and I were little, he wrote scholarly entries on Midrash for the *Encyclopedia Judaica* and told bedtime stories in Hebrew from Bialik's *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*.

He had one of the largest private libraries in London and, later, in Baltimore. His books covered every strand of Jewish history and literature from the Bible to modern times, and there was much general literature as well. This was a working library. Above all, there were Talmuds, several entire editions including a single-volume Talmud which, astonishingly, he once took with him on holiday

in Roquebrune on the French Riviera when he was writing his doctorate. I was a little boy of four in short trousers dying to get to the sea and build sandcastles, and he would sit in the sunny garden on a deckchair holding this Talmud on his knees, poring over a rabbinic tractate. My main recollection, however, is not of the studying but of the deckchair collapsing under the weight and my father ending up amid general hilarity on the grass. Another time, our house in Baltimore was burgled and a few odds and ends were taken, but no books, not even the valuable ones. My father was comically disgruntled at the low educational standard of the Baltimore underworld. If only the robbers had attended his classes, they might have known what to steal.

His background was intellectual, he recounts in the memoir included in this book. Both his parents, who came to Vienna from Galicia before World War I, were private Hebrew teachers, descended from rabbinic families, and he was, unusually for the time (even in pre-state Israel), a native Hebrew speaker. His father, Joseph Aberbach, a yeshiva student before conscription in the Austro-Hungarian army in World War I, taught him Talmud for many years. As relations between father and son were blighted by the effects of war trauma and marital and financial difficulties – these are described frankly in his memoir – my father came to associate lessons with paternal love. His later commitment to talmudic studies and to Jewish education had a deeply personal side. His father's Talmud lessons were vital as Talmud and Jewish law generally were not included in the curriculum in the *Chajesgymnasium* in Vienna, where my father was a student from 1934–1938.

Nine months after the *Anschluss* of March 1938, my father, then aged fourteen, was brought to England in a *Kindertransport*. A few weeks later, he obtained visas for his parents who joined him in Leeds – apparently the only one in his transport of 400 children who managed to save his parents. His early years as a scholar, after completing his BA and MA under the esteemed scholar, Shimon Ravidovitch, at Leeds University (1941–1946), were difficult as his parents, who continued as Hebrew teachers in Leeds, disapproved of his marriage in 1946 – my mother, to their eyes, being poor, uneducated and working class, was unworthy of their illustrious son. My father married for love – this was still clear sixty years later – and, like Jacob, he willingly paid a heavy price: estrangement from his parents, to whom he had been close.

For the next fifteen years (1946–1961), while writing his doctorate at Jews' College, London, he worked as a schoolteacher, first at the Avigdor Primary School and later at the Jews' Free School – which gave him invaluable practical experience in his study of Jewish education in the talmudic age¹⁰ – and from 1952–1961 as librarian of the London *Jewish Chronicle*, where he was also a reporter, an interviewer (especially when Hebrew, Yiddish or German were needed), and Yiddish theater critic. From 1961–1989 he taught mainly at the Baltimore Hebrew College and also at Johns Hopkins University and, as mentioned, St. Mary's. His retirement to Jerusalem in 1989 meant that for the first time he could devote himself wholly to study and writing.¹¹ His main works in his last years were a book on labor as reflected in rabbinic literature (published



Moshe and Shoshana, south of France, summer 1951.

by the Magnes Press, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1994) and two books which he wrote with me from 1996 until his death: *The Roman–Jewish Wars and Hebrew Cultural Nationalism* (published by Macmillan, 2000) and, beginning as a sequel but taking on a life of its own, *European Jewish Patriotism 1789–1939*, unfinished at the time of his death. Material adapted from these books is included in the selection here (Chapters 4 and 13).

In the 1940s, when my father began his career, talmudic studies were still largely ignored at the universities, and the future of Jewish education was generally bleak. Scholars with his deep empathetic knowledge of Talmud and a sound classical education were rare. From the mid-1960s, he published mostly in Hebrew, developing a rich and beautiful style in which his astonishing knowledge of the sources was used to the full. He became a regular contributor to the American Hebrew journals *Shevilei Ha-Chinukh* (where his memoirs were first published) and *Ha-Doar*, and also to *Midstream*. Some of his published work disappeared in his large library and awaits rediscovery. In his last months he sent me many of his articles with the intention that I should edit them.

This book is a fairly representative selection of my father's interests, from the Bible to the modern period, including some of his Hebrew writings in English versions. Much of his work derived in some form from his MA and PhD and was published in the following journals and books: *Jewish Education in the Time of the Mishnah and Talmud* (Hebrew) (1982); 'The Development of the Jewish Elementary and Secondary School System during the Talmudic Age', *Studies in*

Jewish Education III (1988); 'Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves' (with Leivy Smolar), *Journal of Biblical Literature* lxxxvi, 2 (1967); 'Joseph and his Brothers and the History of the Twelve Tribes' (Hebrew), *Bet Mikra* 2, 109 (1987); 'Nebuchadnezzar in *Daniel*' (Hebrew), *Bet Mikra* 1, 104 (1986), and *Midstream* (June/July 1994); 'Imperial Greek Freedmen and the Fall of the Jewish State, 70CE', *The Roman-Jewish Wars and Hebrew Cultural Nationalism* (2000); on Herod and Josephus, *Jewish Heritage* (Fall 1967 and Fall/Winter 1968) and *Midstream* (May 1985); on Pharaoh in the aggadah, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd edn. (2007) 16: 28–29; 'King Hezekiah and Judah Hanasi: Messianic Links' (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* (Nisan/Sivan 1984); on rabbinic views on education and class, *Labor, Crafts and Commerce in Ancient Israel* (1994); on Judaism and personality cults, *Ha-Doar* (29 Tevet, 5/12 Shevat 1979); on Saadia Gaon, as a publication of the London Board of Jewish Religious Education (1951); on Maimonides, *Midstream* (December 1986); 'Ancient Roots of European Anti-Semitism and Jewish Patriotism', *European Jewish Patriotism 1789–1939* (in progress); on smoking and the Halakhah, *Tradition* (Spring 1969); on Geiger and Hirsch, *Midstream* (June/July 1992 and August/September 1992); 'On Being a Jewish Historian', *Jewish Quarterly* (Summer 1965/Autumn 1971); 'The Roots of Religious anti-Zionism', *Midstream* (August/September 1982); on messianism and the Lubavitcher rebbe, *Midstream* (November 1994, October 1995).

Every so often, an elderly man or woman comes up to me and asks if I am the son of Moshe Aberbach, a wonderful teacher they had forty or fifty years ago. The impression of a unique personality and intellect remains and is preserved in the work collected here. May my father's memory be an everlasting blessing.



Moshe, David and Jessica, Shanklin, Isle of Wight, summer 1996.

Introduction

Origins of Jewish education in the ancient world

The biblical portrait of Moses descending from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments inscribed on two stone tablets to find the Israelites worshipping the golden calf is a striking representation of the hard and long war between education and idolatry.¹ The systematization of elementary Jewish education – one of the first education systems aimed not at an elite but at all levels of society (including to some extent women) and a precedent for free, mandatory education after 1789 – was a major achievement in the ancient world as it ensured the survival of Judaism after the destruction of the Jewish state.² Jewish education, though limited in an impoverished peasant economy and by the effects of the Roman–Jewish wars, was made available to large numbers who had learned to value and profit from it. It fortified the Jews for what became, in Isaiah Berlin's words, 'an unbroken struggle against greater odds than any other human community has ever had to contend with.'³

The persistence of idolatry in Israel prior to the age of Josiah made widespread Torah education no more than a prophetic dream. As long as the cult of the God of Israel was dispersed and practiced 'on every hill and under every green tree', there could be no authoritative religious guidance. Initial conditions for the growth of Jewish education were created once Josiah extirpated idolatry (late seventh century BCE) and concentrated the sacrificial cult in Jerusalem. Josiah's reforms had consequences significant to Jewish education. Only when exclusive Jewish monotheism was centralized in Jerusalem was it possible for the Torah to come out of Zion, as in Isaiah's prophecy.

At the same time, the Jewish Diaspora, like the Greek diaspora, stimulated literacy; and the creation of a simplified alphabet by both Greeks and Jews facilitated communication among the scattered peoples. The Judaeans exiled by the Babylonians in the early sixth century BCE, unable to fulfill their religious obligation to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem on the festivals, began to place more emphasis on prayer. In this way, the institution of the synagogue as a place for prayer developed both in the Diaspora and in the land of Israel after the return from Babylonia under Persian rule and the rebuilding of the Temple in the late sixth century BCE. Exile achieved a degree of Jewish collective identity and unity which sovereignty rarely did.⁴ As taxes were often high,⁵ crops unreliable and famine not infrequent, Jews emigrated from the land of Israel: by the start of the

2 Introduction

Imperial age most Jews lived in the Diaspora.⁶ Increasingly, Jews both in the Diaspora and in aristocratic circles in Palestine used Greek, the dominant language of culture and education in the Roman empire.

The creation of a school system is hard in the best of circumstances. Schools could not function unless parents were willing to send their children there and so, in a sense, the education of parents had to precede that of the children. There were enormous difficulties in setting up and maintaining schools with a fixed curriculum, as well as training and paying for teachers in a largely impoverished agricultural society vulnerable to social and political upheaval. Children, who were often needed for labor on farms and in towns, could not be forced to attend school, if there was one within reach. Fathers, not schools, were primarily responsible for teaching their sons. Writing materials were scarce and expensive, and there was widespread preference for the oral tradition over the written word (as would be the case later, in Islamic society).⁷ Even for adults, the Torah, however life-enhancing, was a 'yoke' or a bitter substance the sweetening of which had to be prayed for each morning;⁸ how much more for children.

Prior to the time of Ezra, there seems to have been little formal schooling for Jewish children, though there were schools for the training of priests and *sofrim* (scribes). Ezra institutionalized public Torah readings (fifth century BCE) to which children too could presumably listen. The Men of the Great Assembly convened by Ezra demanded that teachers should 'raise many disciples' and not restrict education to an elite.⁹ Ezra's successors, the *sofrim*, made education a fixed feature in Jewish life. In the synagogue, the Torah was read, translated when necessary, and explained and expounded by the *sofrim* and Levites, many of whom had previously been employed in local sanctuaries. These were poor men who had no land of their own.¹⁰ Many of them became scribes and schoolteachers, using the synagogues or their own homes as classrooms.

The *sofrim* institutionalized Jewish education and, by the time of Ben Sirah (c.200 BCE), set up at least one Wisdom school in Israel.¹¹ Yet, such schools were evidently for adults, not children.¹² A major obstacle to the creation of a professional class of schoolteachers was that the teaching of Torah was regarded as a *mitzvah* (commandment) to be fulfilled free of charge.¹³ Schoolteaching as a profession was possible only on the basis of payment for full-time teaching. Legal fictions allowed teachers to be paid without infringement of the law: for example, teachers were paid for their supervisory duties involving loss of time and, therefore, earning capacity; or for teaching the cantillation of scriptural texts. Even so, teachers were often in short supply: their wages were always low and often inadequate, and in difficult times were not paid.¹⁴ Mandatory general Jewish education for male children apparently did not begin until the late Hasmonean period under Pharisaic influence, and did not become firmly rooted until after the editing of the Mishnah (c.200 CE). Until then, Jewish education (apart from institutionalized public readings of the Torah) was mostly oral and informal, with instruction at any available space, in the Temple precincts, the marketplace, a private house, a hill, a field, the bank of a stream.

Virtually all spiritual leaders after Ezra elevated Torah study as the supreme *mitzvah*, equal in importance to all other commandments combined.¹⁵ Simon the Righteous (c.200 BCE) enumerated the three pillars upon which the world stands: Torah, the Temple service and kind deeds.¹⁶ As Simon was high priest in Jerusalem, he underscored the status of Torah study by putting it before the Temple service. Forceful propaganda for education is found in the later sections of the Bible (in Psalm 119, for example) and in the Apocrypha.

Jewish education in the Roman period

Though our main sources of information on Jewish education in the Roman period are historically unreliable rabbinic texts, which lack precise data on Jewish schools, teachers, methods and curricula at any given time,¹⁷ the evolution of Jewish education underlies the entire corpus of talmudic literature: it is the most important development in Jewish life under Rome and has had incalculable historical repercussions. As one might expect of texts produced by educators and their students, there is much information on the daily process of education, though mostly from the post-Mishnaic period.¹⁸ By the end of the Roman empire, Jewish education was more developed and widely available than it had been at the start of the empire a half-millennium previously. Key factors in making Jewish education a matter of urgency were the Jewish defeats in the revolts of 66–70, 115–117 and 132–135 CE, after which the survival of Judaism depended largely on the ‘four cubits of the Law’.¹⁹ As Greeks were heavily involved in the wars against the Jews, Greek education – a major rival to Jewish education throughout the Roman empire – lost much of its former attraction. Prior to 70 CE, organized Jewish education seems not to have been widespread except possibly in Jerusalem, and tannaitic texts rarely mention teachers and schools;²⁰ while after 135 CE there is growing evidence of teachers and schools.²¹ Roman–Jewish conflict held Jewish education back, especially as, prior to 135 CE, Jewish education was associated with anti-Roman militant messianism.²² In contrast, post-135-CE Jewish education was committed to peaceful accommodation with Rome, without which the Mishnah could not have been edited. The rise of Christian anti-Judaism in the century after 70 CE was an important incentive to strengthen Jewish education.²³ The Hebrew language was preferred by the tannaim as the God-given language of instruction unstained by enemy use, unlike Greek, Latin and Aramaic.²⁴ The concentration of refugee Jews from Judaea in urbanized Galilee in conditions of relative peace and prosperity led, by the early third century CE, to a significant growth in the number of synagogues, which both replaced Temple worship and offered space in which Jewish education could develop at minimal cost.²⁵

Education generally has a political undercurrent, but Jewish education in the ancient land of Israel was unusual in being occasionally suppressed – notably in the Hasmonean era, under Herod, and during the Hadrianic persecution. The rabbis might appear to have withdrawn from history, but some of them were aware of the historic significance of events and personalities connected to the vicissitudes of Jewish education and its unifying power, especially after the

destruction of the Temple. The Dead Sea Scrolls give evidence of a highly variegated Judaism prior to the fall of the Jewish state. After 70 CE, a Jewish 'orthodoxy' was forced into existence,²⁶ and the creation of a widely accepted education system for Jewish children became a more realistic hope than previously.²⁷

Societies, however diverse, often seek unity in crisis, and the Jewish wars against Rome reduced the internecine conflicts that had made difficult, if not impossible, the creation of a viable system of education.²⁸ A people who, as Josephus in his *Antiquities* described the Jews in the Great Revolt of 66–70 CE, 'preferred to perish at one fell swoop than piecemeal',²⁹ could not build a stable education system under Roman rule. By totally defeating and humiliating the Jews, Rome inadvertently achieved a form of social electrolysis: it destroyed the Sadducees, the Essenes and the Zealots, helped split Christianity off from Judaism, and made imperial Greco-Roman culture unpalatable to many Jews.³⁰ The survivors were perhaps more receptive after the destruction of the Temple than previously to the authority of rabbis who saw education as vital to the survival of Judaism and the preservation (or creation) of a unified national identity.³¹ Judaism evolved after 70 CE, and the rabbis encountered opposition.³² Yet, for a critical mass of Jews until the modern period, education became the new Temple; and the study of what was lost replaced what was lost.³³ The apparent retreat from politics enhanced the possibility of Jewish survival as the new pacifist form of rabbinic Judaism centered on education could not be construed as a threat to Rome to be crushed brutally as in the past but, on the contrary, seen as a support to and supported by Roman rule.³⁴

The rabbis and the politics of Jewish education

To what extent were rabbis in the talmudic age conscious of political implications in Jewish education in the Roman empire? Talmudic literature on the evolution of Jewish education, though unreliable as history (particularly regarding numbers of schools and students), occasionally suggests a strong rabbinic awareness of political factors behind Jewish education. The rabbis preserved at least residual memories long after the events (it is rarely clear if these are real or aggadic or both) of historical crises – above all, the destruction of the Temple and the failed revolts – as triggers in the emergence of systematic Jewish education. Though not historians, the rabbis would have had some concept of an historical narrative, of cause and effect, from the historical books in the Bible, particularly the Book of Kings.³⁵ As the Bible sets the Torah within an historical panorama, so too do the rabbis. Despite the historiographic difficulties of rabbinic texts, they plausibly link the vicissitudes of Jewish education with the effects of Greek culture on the Jews, particularly the deterioration of relations between Jews and Greco-Romans from the time of the Hasmoneans until the Bar-Kokhba revolt. Educational watersheds in the Talmud are associated not just with historical crises but also with prestigious individuals and places, for example, Simeon ben Shetach in the time of Alexander Jannaeus (late first