

A Talmud In Modern English

Both sides

By Edwin McDowell

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Random House plans to publish the Talmud in stages in a modern English translation that will make the 1,500-year-old compilation of Jewish oral law, legends and philosophy both more understandable and more widely accessible to the English-speaking world.

"We are making a major financial commitment to this project and a considerable emotional one," said Peter Osnos, the Random House associate publisher who will edit the project. "Assuming we find the audience we think there is, most of the Talmud could eventually be translated into English." The overall cost could eventually be high in six figures.

The translator is Adin Steinsaltz, an Orthodox rabbi and noted Talmudic scholar, who will also provide commentaries and explanatory notes. The first three volumes are to be published by 1990. Rabbi Steinsaltz of the Israel Institute for Talmudic Publications in Jerusalem thinks the project could eventually total as many as 15 volumes and take about a decade. Mr. Osnos said the volumes will probably cost \$30 to \$40 each.

"We have now possibly a major part of the Jewish people whose native tongue is English," Rabbi Steinsaltz said in a telephone interview, "and who really are not comfortable in any other language."

Joni Evans, publisher of Random House, said the company "shares with Rabbi Steinsaltz the goal of making this great work available to the widest possible audience." The project was sold to Random House by Pam Bernstein, a literary agent at the William Morris Agency, who heard the rabbi speak at the 92d Y a few years ago. The First Parts

The first volume will be an introduction to the Talmud, the rabbi said. "The other two will deal mainly with Jewish civil law - claims and counterclaims. After that, we would deal with business ethics."

The English-language Talmud will be translated from the 2.5-million-word Babylonian Talmud, which was compiled in the sixth century after Christ. There is also a shorter Jerusalem (or Palestinian) Talmud, compiled in the fifth century, but the Babylonian version is regarded as the authoritative work. The University of Chicago Press has published 22 of a projected 36 volumes of the Jerusalem Talmud, edited by Jacob Neusner. Mr. Neusner is also translating the Babylonian Talmud into English, and that work will be issued through Brown Judaic Studies and distributed through the Scholar's Press.

The Talmud is a vast compilation of Jewish oral law and history; it is often obscure, despite the accompanying rabbinical commentaries, the newest of which is 900 years old. And only in recent years has a significant portion of the Talmud been available in modern Hebrew.

Moreover, the standard English-language translation, the Soncino edition, the first volume of which appeared more than 50 years ago, is a literal rendering of use primarily to scholars. Modern Hebrew Versions

No one has provided a complete commentary to the Babylonian Talmud since the 11th-century French rabbi known as Rashi, but Rabbi Steinsaltz has been working to do so for more than 20 of his 50 years. His institute recently published volume 19 of the modern Hebrew translation of that work. With 21 volumes still to go, the series has already sold more than 500,000 copies.

In addition, last December the institute published the first volume of the translation of the Jerusalem Talmud into modern Hebrew, and all 10,000 copies sold out within a week.

"He certainly has done much more than anyone else in putting the Talmud into readable, colloquial Hebrew," said Norman Lamm, president of Yeshiva University in New York. "If he does it as well in English, it will be a major contribution toward popularizing the Talmud."

Eugene Borowitz, professor of Jewish religious thought at Hebrew Union College, called Rabbi Steinsaltz "the Rashi of our time," adding "He does for the modern reader what Rashi has done for centuries of Jewish readers."

Rabbi Steinsaltz, who had a secular upbringing in Jerusalem in a family headed by a Socialist father, is the author of the one-volume survey "The Essential Talmud" (Bantam Books, 1976) and of "The Thirteen-Petalled Rose" (Basic Books, 1980), an exposition of Jewish mysticism. Two collections of his essays are to be published soon.

