

**Class 9 – Medieval Scholarship Flourishes**  
**Rabbi Moshe Davis**

**Class Outline**

- Review
- Transition between the Geonim and the Rishonim
- Centers of Jewish life and learning
- Areas of Medieval scholarship
- Major Rishonim

**I. Review**

Amid changing and somewhat turbulent times, the two Talmuds, both the Talmud of the land of Israel and the Talmud of the land of Babylonia, were completed. The Babylonian Talmud gained its hegemony for a variety of reasons, and ultimately became the primary work of Jewish scholarship – more so than the Written Torah itself. Although the Talmud is a ‘sealed book,’ and new formal derashot are not developed after the completion of the Talmud, Jewish law certainly continues to develop and expand, and remains innovative.

**Why were the scholars of the 11<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries called Rishonim?**

**II. Transition between the Geonim and the Rishonim**

**The geonim of Babylonia and the shaping of medieval Jewish culture**

**Dr. Robert Brody**

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When we attempt to pinpoint the end of the Geonic period, we are confronted by difficulties of a different nature. True, few sources detail the fate of Babylonian Jewry in the eleventh century; but the crucial point is that the “end” of the Geonic period was a relatively protracted historical process rather than an isolated event. In contrast to the transition from the Savoraic to the Geonic era, which took place within the single milieu of Babylonia, the most obvious manifestation of the inception of the medieval period of rabbinic culture (the period of the Rishonim, or “Earlier Authorities) was a dramatic shift in the center of Jewish cultural and intellectual life. For the first time since the exodus from Egypt, the center of gravity migrated westwards, from Palestine and Babylonia to North Africa and Europe. But in actuality, this move was accompanied by a far-reaching decentralization: No individual or institution of this period could lay claim to the same sort of worldwide recognition and influence which had been enjoyed by the leading academies of the ancient Jewish heartland. Such developments can hardly be explained as the result of historical event, however dramatic; their roots lie much deeper.

This process, once begun, was in large measure self sustaining. But what were its origins? On general grounds one might argue that no particular institution could be expected to maintain its supremacy indefinitely, and that local communities would inevitably have reached a point in their development at which they would assert their independence from the parent institutions. In addition, the personalities of individuals both in the center and at the periphery doubtless played a role in these developments, although our sources allow us only occasional glimpses into the character of these individuals. We can, however, offer a more specific, if necessarily particular, explanation. The marked decline in the flow of queries addressed to the Babylonian academies, as well as the growing crisis in those academies, as least in Sura, can be traced back to the first two decades of the tenth century and intensifies towards the middle of the century. This trend can be correlated with the unsettled political situation in North Africa, culminating in the rise of the Fatimid dynasty in 909, a development which also weakened the ties between this crucial region and Abbasid Iraq. The battles which took place in North Africa has a severe impact on international trade. Even in Iraq the Abbasid empire was crumbling, although its facade was preserved; from 945 on, the true rulers were not the caliphs but the Buyid condottieri. The Zirids, who came to power in North Africa in 969, reintroduced an orientation toward the East; but the damage to the Babylonian Jewish center had already been done by then, and could be undone only to a limited extent.

### **III. Centers of Jewish life and learning**

#### **The Rishonim, Page 21**

#### **Artscroll History Series**

Shortly before the decline of the Babylonian Geonate, providence arranged for an occurrence (990 CE) that would have far reaching consequences for the entire Diaspora and free its Jews from their dependence upon the Babylonian academies and their scholars. Four great Torah scholars from Southern Italy embarked on a sea voyage to raise money for the Torah academies of their country. The four sages were R' Moshe ben Chanoch, R' Chushiel, R' Shmaryah ben Elchanan, and a fourth whose identity and fate are unknown. En route they were captured by Ibn Rumahis, a Moorish-Spanish pirate in the service of the Spanish caliph, who decided to offer them for ransom to four different Jewish communities along the Mediterranean coast. The rabbis wisely kept their identities secret for fear that Ibn Rumahis would extort huge sums in return for their freedom. The pirate carried out his plan with an outcome that was of historic benefit to Jewish life.

R' Moshe (together with his young son Chanoch) was ransomed by the Jews of Cordova, under the leadership of Chisdai Ibn Shaprut. The community soon recognized the erudition and eminence of the captive and appointed him their spiritual leader. R' Moshe promptly established an academy, and was succeeded by his son R' Chanoch. Between them, they raised a new generation of scholars who would not have to look to Babylon for guidance on every question. R' Shmuel HaNaggid, Talmud scholar par excellence, poet, and statesman, was one of R' Moshe's disciples. Other yeshivos were later established in other Spanish cities. The study of Torah received a further impetus with the arrival (1088) of R' Isaac al-Fasi from Morocco.

Another of the captives, R' Chushiel was brought to the shores of Tunisia, where he accomplished in the city of Kairouan what R' Moshe did in Cordova. His son, the famous commentator R' Chananel, and his illustrious disciple R' Nissim (Gaon) ben Yaakov continued his work of making

North Africa a major Torah center that became independent of Babylon in matters of Talmudic scholarship.

The third sage, R' Shmaryah ben Elchanan, was ransomed in Egypt. He established an academy in Cairo, where he was succeeded by his son, R' Elchanan. As a result, Cairo, too, became a thriving Jewish community and an important center of Torah knowledge.

### **Major Jewish Centers**

#### **1. Sephardic Lands (Spain, North Africa, Land of Israel)**

[Jews were involved in all areas of scholarship and outside life]

**Abarbanel, Ovadiah 1:20** – Jewish settlers were first exiled to Spain by Nebuchadnezzar after the destruction of the first Temple.

#### **Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 115b**

Resh Galutha Isaac, a son of R. Bebai's sister, once went from Cordova to Spain and died there. A message was sent from there [in the following terms]. 'Resh Galutha Isaac, a son of R. Bebai's sister, went from Cordova to Spain and died there. [The question thus arose] whether [the possibility that there might have been] two [men of the name of] Isaac is to be taken into consideration or not? — Abaye said: It is to be taken into consideration: but Raba said: It is not to be taken into consideration.

#### **Babylonian Talmud, Menachot 110a**

R. Abba b. R. Isaac said in the name of R. Hisda — others say, Rab Judah said in the name of Rab, From Tyre to Carthage the nations know Israel and their Father who is in heaven; but from Tyre westwards and from Carthage eastwards the nations know neither Israel nor their Father who is in heaven.

#### **Kings II 25:26**

And all the people, both small and great, and the captains of the forces, arose, and came to Egypt; for they were afraid of the Chaldeans.

#### **2. France-Germany**

[Jews of this region tended to be insulated; less philosopher and doctors, more Talmud commentators]

**Judges 20:45, Rashi** – Jews arrived in the area prior to the construction of the First Temple.

**Teshuvot Maharhal 29** – French King Charlemagne (784-814) brought R' Moshe HaZaken to Mainz from Lucca (in Northern Italy).

#### **3. Provence**

[Jews in this region were less insulated, Hebrew grammar and poetry flourished]

#### **4. Italy**

[Jews in this region were relatively free and many engaged in secular study.]

#### IV. Areas of Medieval Scholarship

Recall that the Oral Tradition broadly divides into four categories. These four categories are the major focus points during the period of the rishonim:

- Law (During this period – essays, codes and responsa)
  - a. Halacha LeMoshe MiSinai – No longer developing, though interpretation continues
  - b. Peirush HaMekubal MiSinai – No longer developing, though interpretation continues
  - c. Derashot – No longer developing, though interpretation continues
  - d. Takanot – Still developing
  - e. Gezeirot – Still developing
- Explanation of Written Torah (During this period - Running commentaries to the Torah)
  - a. Midrash style – Comes back into style
  - b. Mishnah style – continues to be used
- Philosophy (During this period – Books of Philosophy, Poetry)
- Mysticism (During this period – books, included in Torah commentaries, oral)

## V. Major Rishonim

	Sephardic Lands	France-Germany	Provence	Italy
<b>10<sup>th</sup> Century</b>	R' Menachem ben Saruk (quoted frequently by Rashi)	R' Shimon Hagadol (author of many prayers in machzor/siddur)		
<b>11<sup>th</sup> Century</b>	R' Chananel (Talmud commentary) R' Shmuel Hanagid (rules of Talmud study) R' Bachya Ibn Pkudah (Chovat HaLevavot) R' Yitschak Alfasi (Talmud commentary/code) R' Yitrschak Ibn Guas (Talmud commentary)	R' Gershom Meor Hagolah (instituted well known takanot) R' Shlomo Yitschaki (commentary to Talmud, Tanach) R' Yehudah ben Nattan (Rivan, Talmud commentary)	R' Moshe HaDarshan	R' Natan ben Yechiel (Aruch, dictionary)
<b>12<sup>th</sup> Century</b>	R' Yosef Ibn Migash (Talmud commentary) R' Yehudah Halevi (Kuzari, poetry) R' Avraham Ibn Ezra (Tanach commentary) R' Moshe Ben Maimon (Law code, Mishnah Commentary, book of mitzvot, book of Philosophy)	R' Shmuel Ben Meir (Rashbam, Torah commentary) R' Yaakov ben Meir (Rabbeinu Tam, Talmud commentary) R' Eliezer ben Natan (Ravan, Talmud commentary) R' Eliezer of Metz (Yereim, Talmud commentary) R' Yitschak of Dampierre (Ri, Talmud commentary) R' Yehudah HaChasid (book of Jewish living) R' Eliezer ben Yoel Halevi (Ravya, Talmud commentary) R' Shimon of Sens (Rash, Jerusalem Talmud commentary) R' Elazar Rokeach of Worms (Rokeach, Talmud commentary)	R' Yosef Kimchi R' Zerachya Halevi (Razah, Talmud commentary) R' Avraham ben David (Ravad, Commentary on Rambam)	R' Toviyah ben Eliezer (Lekach Tov)
<b>13<sup>th</sup> Century</b>	R' Meir Halevi Abulafia (Ramah, Talmud commentary – NOT the RAMA) R' Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban, commentary to Tanach, Talmud, Jewish law, philosophy, mysticism) R' Aharon Halevi (Ra'ah, Talmud commentary) R' Shlomo ibn Aderet (Rashba, Talmud commentary) R' Yom Tov ibn Asevelli (Ritva, Talmud commentary)	R' Moshe of Coucy (Semag, book of Mitzvot) R' Yitschak of Vienna (Or Zaruah) R' Meir of Rothenburg (Maharam) R' Mordechai ben Hillel	R' David Kinchi (Radak, Torah commentary) R' Chizkiyah Chizkuni (Torah commentary) R' Menachem HaMeiri (Talmud commentary) R' Aharon of Lunel (Orchot Chaim)	R' Yeshayah of Trani (Tosephot Rid) R' Tzidkiyah HaRofei (Shibolei HaLeket)
<b>14<sup>th</sup> Century</b>	R' Bachya ben Asher (Torah commentary) R' Vidal of Tolosa (Maggid Mishnah) R' David Abudraham R' Nissim (Ran) R' Yitschak ben Sheshet Perfet (Rivash) R' Yosef Chaviva (Nimukei Yosef)	R' Asher ben Yechiel (Rosh) R' Yaakov baal Haturim (Tur) R' Yaakov Moelin (Maharil)	R' Levi Ben Gershom (Ralbag) R' Eshtori HaParchi (Kaftor veFerach)	R' Menachem Recanati
<b>15<sup>th</sup> Century</b>	R' Yosef Albo (Sefer Haikarim)	R' Yisrael Issrelein (Terumat Hadeshen)		R' Yosef Colon (Maharik)