



Reconstruction at
Yavneh: Rabbinic
Judaism from 70 CE

HPRS50I5/60I5

Session Outline



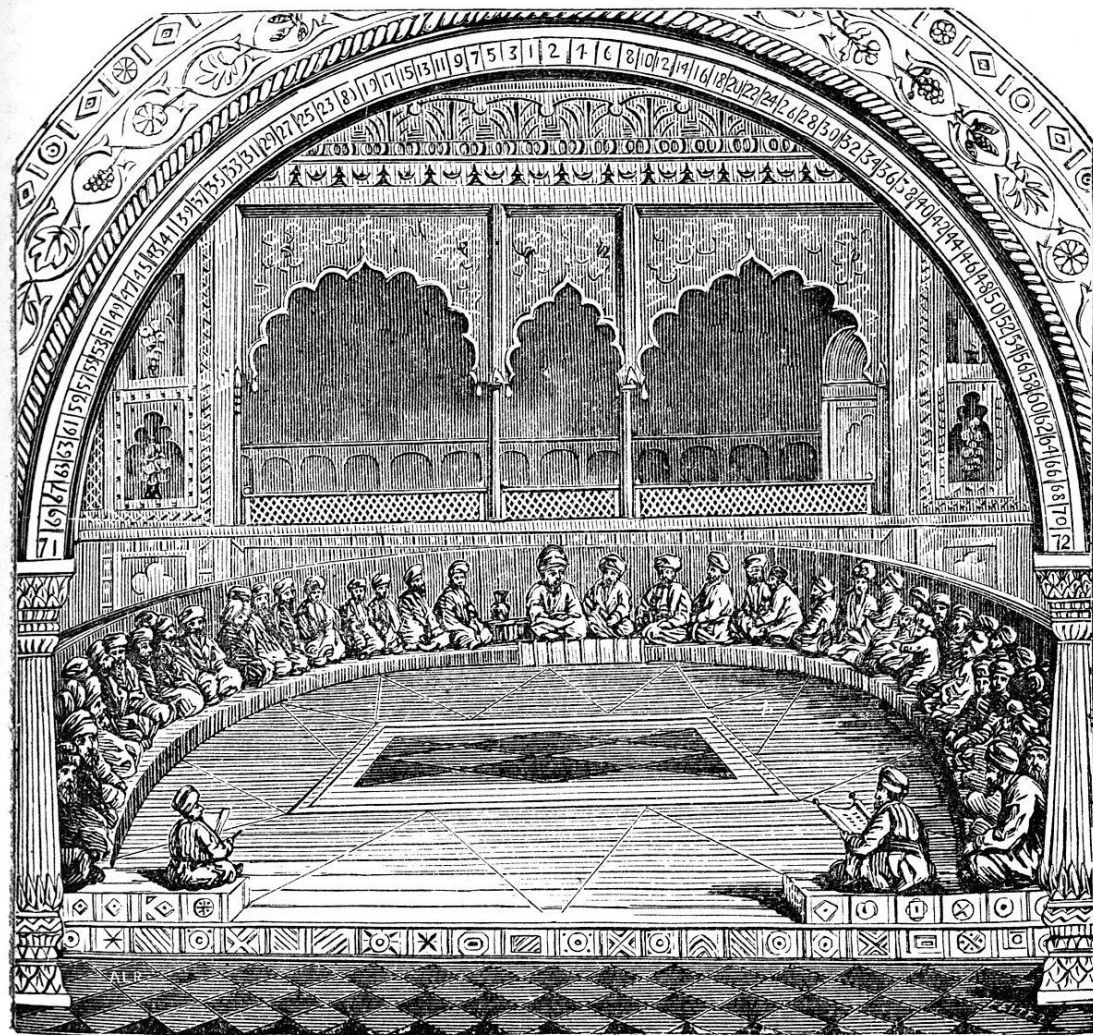
- The Sanhredin and the Zugot
 - Hillel and Shammai
- Yohanan ben Zakkai and the 'Vineyard' at Yavneh
 - Beyond Yavneh

The Historical Context: The National Tragedy of 70 CE



The Sanhedrin and the Zugot

- The Great Sanhedrin (*bet din hagadol*) – the supreme political, religious and judicial body in Israel during the second temple period.
- From around 150 BCE to the beginning of the 1st century CE, the Sanhedrin led by five successive pairs or Zugot, i.e. the two leading scholars of the Law in each generation.
- The pairs consisted of a *Nasi* and the *Av Bet Din*, the chairman and deputy chairman, respectively.



The Sanhedrim.

Hillel and Shammai



- ❖ Each of the five generations of Zugot added to the growing body of Oral Law, but none would make as important a contribution as the last pair: Shammai (c. 50 BCE – c. 30 CE) and Hillel (c. 70 BCE – c. 10 CE).

Hillel and Shammai

- Hillel and Shammai would often disagree and the opinions of their rival schools are recorded extensively.
- The legal rulings of Shammai and his followers (*Bet Shammai*) tended to be less flexible than those of Hillel and his followers (*Bet Hillel*).



Not all their arguments were settled naturally.

Divorce: The Written Torah

‘Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, **but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her**, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man’s wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who marries her dies); her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the LORD, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a possession’ (Deut. 24:1-4).

Divorce: Hillel and Shammai

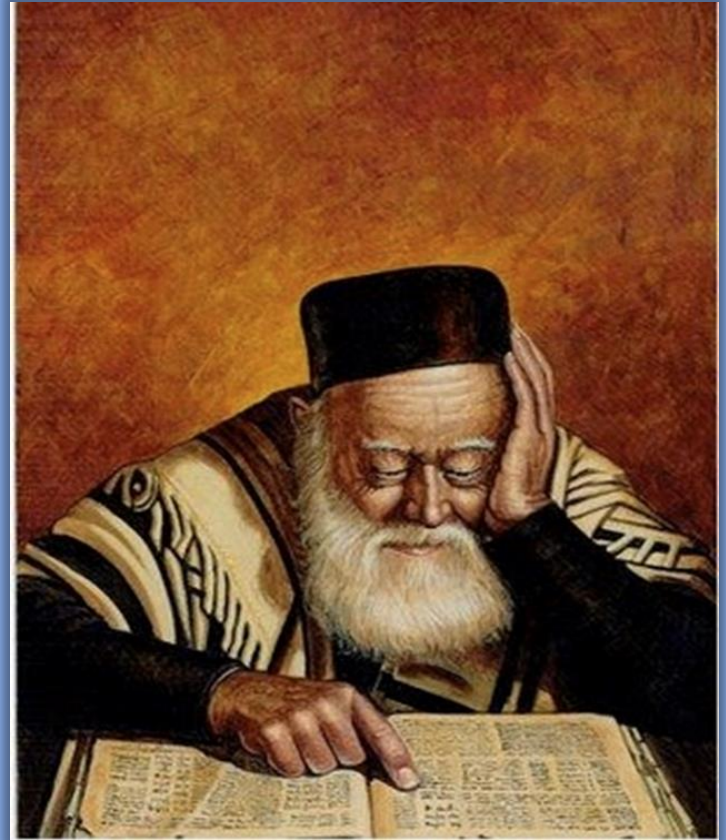
‘The School of Shammai say: A man is not to divorce his wife unless he has found in her some indecency [i.e. she committed adultery or is suspected of doing so] as it is said, “Because he has found some indecency in her”. But the School of Hillel say: Even if she spoiled the cooking, as it is said, “Because he has found some indecency in her”’ (*M. Gittin* 9:10).

Hillel's Predominance

- Of Hillel and Shammai, it is Hillel who is remembered most fondly in rabbinic traditions concerning the two scholars.
- Stories about Hillel and Shammai incredibly biased. Shammai consistently portrayed in a bad light.
- Part of the reason for Hillel's predominance in rabbinic sources is the fact that his followers took over leadership of Judaism following the destruction of the temple.

Hillel: The Chief Authority

- ❖ Came from Babylonia to Israel as an unknown immigrant, but his talent and learning were recognized among the Pharisees and he was made *Nasi*.
- ❖ Many wise sayings attributed to Hillel, more than the rest of the Pharisaic masters put together!
- ❖ Extremely difficult to reconstruct the historical Hillel.



The Wisdom of Hillel

‘That which is hateful to you do not to your fellow: that is the whole Torah; all the rest is its explanation. Go and learn.’ (*Mishnah: Sabbath* 31a)

‘Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace, and pursuing peace, loving mankind, and bringing them near to the Torah.’ (*Mishnah: Pirkei Avot* 1:12)

‘He used to say, “The more flesh, the more worms; the more property, the more anxiety; the more women, the more witchcraft; the more maid-servants, the more lewdness; the more men-servants, the more robbery; the more Torah, the more life; the more schooling, the more wisdom; the more counsel, the more understanding; the more charity, the more peace. He who has acquired a good name, has acquired it for himself; he who has acquired for himself words of Torah, has acquired for himself life in the world to come.”’ (*Pirkei Avot* 2:5-7)

Yohanan ben Zakkai and the 'Vineyard' at Yavneh (70-135 CE)

- The principal figure after 70 CE is **Yohanan ben Zakkai** (c. 30-90 CE), described as a disciple of Hillel.
- **Yavneh** (Greek: 'Jamnia') – a small coastal town where a group of Pharisaic sages met to continue the process of religious scholarship that existed prior to the temple's destruction.
- At Yavneh, Yohanan ben Zakkai attempted to implement a programme for the survival and reconstruction of the Jewish people and faith.
- Jews should commit themselves to studying the Torah, keeping the commandments and performing acts of kindness.

Emphasis on Loving-Kindness

‘Once as Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai was coming forth from Jerusalem, Rabbi Joshua followed after him and beheld the Temple in ruins. “Woe unto us!” Rabbai Joshua cried, “that this, the place where the iniquities of Israel were atoned for, is laid waste!” “My son,” Rabban Yohanan said to him, “be not grieved; we have another atonement as effective as this. And what is it? It is acts of loving-kindness, as it is said, For I desire mercy and not sacrifice” (Hos. 6:6).’ (*The Fathers acc. To Rabbi Nathan*)

The Legacy of Yavneh

1. The establishment of a new judiciary system.
2. The development of the legal tradition and the preservation of oral traditions, including those associated with Hillel and Shammai.
3. New importance attached to the synagogue.
4. New procedure of rabbinic ordination. **Rabbi** ('my teacher/master') becomes an official title with authoritative status in matters of Law.
5. The foundations of the Jewish prayer book laid down.
6. Agreement on a closed canon of scripture (*Tanakh*).

The End of the Yavneh Era

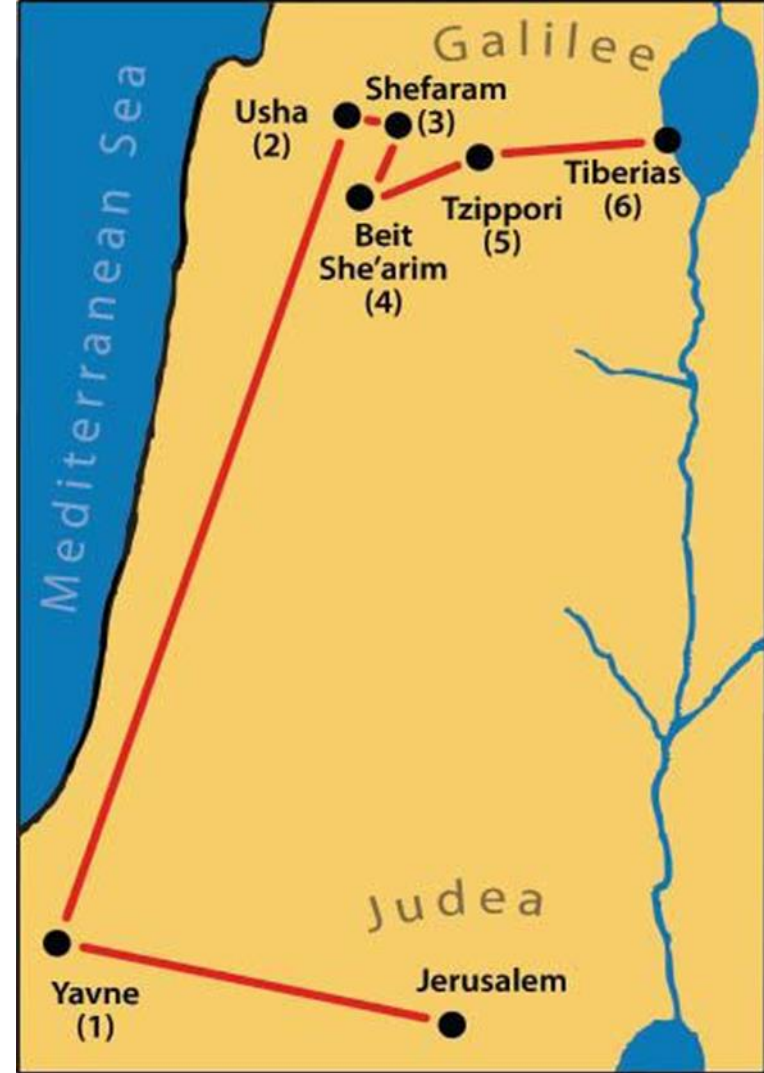
- The latter part of the Yavneh era dominated by Rabbi Akiva ben Joseph (c. 50-135 CE). Akiva renowned as an important innovator in the field of biblical interpretation.
- 132-135 – The Bar Kokhba Revolt.
- The country obliterated. 1000s of Jews killed.
- Jews prohibited from entering Jerusalem (*Aelia Capitolina*).



Silver tetradrachm issued by the Jewish rebels during the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

Beyond Yavneh

- Following the Bar Kokhba revolt and the years of legal repression, Jewish life had to be renewed once again.
- Galilee in the north becomes the new centre of rabbinic activity.
- Judaism able to survive the consequences of the Bar Kokhba revolt, again, largely thanks to the rabbis and their practices, the foundations of which were established at Yavneh.



Summary

- Post-70 Judaism shaped by the heirs of Pharisaism.
- Thanks to the efforts of these 'rabbis', particularly at Yavneh, Judaism was able to survive the calamities of the early centuries CE.
- The faith reoriented around Torah in lieu of temple worship.
- This more Torah-focused form of worship still a major feature of Judaism today.