

Video Clip: Rabbi Nissim ben Yaakov

The first Talmud commentator

Rabbi Nissim ben Yaakov was a Talmudic and Torah scholar as well as a scholar in Greco-Arabic philosophy. He acted as a bridge between the Geonim of Babylonia and the scholars of Spain, in addition to his own scholarship. He is best known for being the first to create a key to understanding the Talmud (think: search engine before technology).

Suggested Implementation

Talmud

1. Introduction to Talmudic commentary

History

1. Golden Age of Spain (he preceded the Golden Age but influenced its leaders)

Background

Rabbi Nissim ben Yaakov was born in approximately 990 and raised in his father's yeshiva in Qayrawan, Tunisia in the first half of the eleventh century. His father, Rabbeinu Yaakov ben Rabbeinu Nissim was the Rosh Yeshiva in Qayrawan but passed away when his son, Nissim, was only 16 years old. Although Nissim's brilliance was seen at an early age, as he was very young when his father passed, and therefore Rabbeinu Hushiel was appointed Rosh Yeshiva. Upon Rabbeinu Hushiel's death, Rabbi Nissim was appointed Rosh Yeshiva until Qayrawan was pillaged and all but destroyed. At that point he moved to Mahdia on the coast of today's Tunisia. He remained there until his death in 1057.

He corresponded regularly about *halakha* with Rav Hai bar Rav Shrira Gaon in Pumpedita as well as Shmuel HaNaggid in Spain. Some say it was thanks to Rabbi Nissim that the responsa and literature of the Geonim of Babylonia reached Spain. As with many of the Arabic writings of the time, Rabbi Nissim's works are lost to us today. However, in the Cairo Geniza there have been found some of his writings, occasionally quoting the Qur'an alongside Judaic sources, and many of them have been collated into publications.

Shmuel HaNaggid held Rabbi Nissim in high esteem to the point that he married off his son Yehosaf to the daughter of Rabbi Nissim. He also supported Rabbi Nissim's yeshiva financially as well as wrote poems in his honor. Rabbi Nissim travelled to Spain for his only daughter's nuptials and while there, taught many students, including Shlomo ibn Gabirol. Rabbi Nissim's daughter was known to be pious and a scholar, herself. After her husband died, she went to Lucena, Spain, and was honorably provided for by the community.

His works

1. *Kitab Miftah Migahaliq al-Talmud* (Key to the Locks of the Talmud) – Written in 1040 or 1088. He did not complete the whole Talmud, but we have his commentaries on Massekhet Berachot, Shabbat, and Eiruvim.
2. *Megillat Starim* (The Book of Hidden Knowledge) – Halakhic dictums, responsa, and comments, that were compiled by his students after his death.
3. *Kovetz Sifrei Hanihumim* (Compilation of Condolences) – He wrote for his father-in-law, Dunash ben Labrat, upon the death of his son. The book contains 60 stories from the Mishnah and Braita, Talmud and Midrash. He wrote them in Arabic and they were translated to Hebrew. It was presumably written in 1050.
4. *Sefer HaMa'asiyot* which is based on Midrashic and Talmudic Aggadah that reflect God's oversight and providence over the world. He takes the liberty to expand upon some of the stories and applies them to his generation. This book was written in Arabic.
5. Siddur for the full year, including notes on laws and items pertaining to prayers. The transcribers tended to omit or shorten some passages, at time even mid-sentence. His siddur was never accepted, as the Jews of Spain held fast to their siddur from the Geonim of Babylonia, and the Ashkenazim held fast to the *nussah* of Rav Amram.

Questions for Discussion

1. If so many of his works are lost, why is it important to learn about Rabbi Nissim? What was his contribution to our Talmud learning today if not from his direct commentary?
2. Is there value in learning works in their original language or can we rely on translations? Why did so many Jewish scholars write in Arabic and not in Hebrew?

Suggested Readings

<https://daat.ac.il/encyclopedia/value.asp?id1=1059>

<https://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=36620&pgnum=86>

http://www.herzog.ac.il/vtc/tvunot/netuim14_brandes.pdf