

# The book they couldn't suppress

## **The Talmud: a Biography**

*Harry Freedman*

Bloomsbury/Continuum, £25

*Reviewed by Rabbi Harvey Belovski*

► IN THIS intriguing work, Harry Freedman, former chief executive of Masorti Judaism, offers a two-part approach to understanding the development and impact of the Talmud. The first considers the Talmud as a developing text, exploring its origins in the post-destruction Roman Empire. He provides a fascinating investigation into cross-fertilisation between Jewish and early Islamic scholars and its impact on the ideas and development of the Talmud.

However, while current scholarship points to later editing of the Talmud, Freedman overemphasises this, for example, claiming, inexplicably, that the traditional attribution of editorship to Rav Ashi and Ravina is untenable because they are mentioned in the text. While mostly technically correct, there are one or two minor inaccuracies, such as his claim that before the Temple was destroyed, the lulav was only used here.

The book's subtitle, "Banned, censored and burned; the book they couldn't suppress", summarises its second half, an excellent outline of the Talmud's troubled journey from the 13th century to today. Freedman comprehensively covers the

uglier burnings and bans, why and how the Talmud survived, how it became a central study text, the influence of printing on its dissemination, its encounters with Christian scholarship, science and enlightenment thought and its role today. It's a broad, ambitious work, which mostly succeeds.

*Dr Freedman speaks about his book at Jewish Book Week, London, 11 am, March 2*

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