

THE RULES OF THE ORAL TRANSMISSION OF THE MISHNAH ACCORDING TO THE ALEPPO TRADITION

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This study presents in outline the results of research designed to understand the laws governing the oral transmission of the Mishnah, the Jewish Oral Law.¹ This compilation was originally orally transmitted and remained so until the end of the second century C.E., when it was committed to writing. Even after being fixed in writing, it was read and studied in Jewish communities without the aid of graphic signs such as the accents system used for reading the biblical texts.² The vital importance of the Mishnah in the preservation of Jewish cultural identity and the public character of its study, lead to the question whether the oral transmission obeys certain rules intended to ensure continuity and stability.

Various studies have shown that the reading of biblical and mishnaic texts in several Jewish communities follows phonological and morphological laws that can be examined by studying the oral material.³ Could one investigate syntax, semantics and discourse along the same lines?

For the present study we examined recordings of identical Mishnah passages performed by several representatives of the Aleppo tradition.⁴ On the basis of this corpus the following questions were asked: what oral means do different members of the same community employ; is there a definite number of such means; what is their nature; what functions do the different oral means fulfill; what kinds of relationships link the oral means and the various functions; what

1 See F. Alvarez-Pereyre, *La transmission orale de la Mišnah; Une méthode d'analyse appliquée à la tradition d'Alep*. Jerusalem-Paris, 1990.

2 On the systems of vocalization and accentuation in general, and on the rare traces of such systems in the text of the Talmud, see A. Herzog, Masoretic Accents — musical rendition, *EJ*² XI:1098-1111, and B. Bayer, Talmud — musical rendition, *EJ*² XV:753-755.

3 See S. Morag, "Oral Tradition as a Source of Linguistic Information" in J. Puhvel, ed., *Substance and Structure of Language* (Berkeley, 1969), pp. 127-146; and the work carried out at the Language Traditions Project directed by S. Morag.

4 The recordings used in this study are located in the archives established at the Language Traditions Project at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. These recordings include readings of the first two chapters of *Berakhôt* and the first chapter of *Shabbat* by five informants from Aleppo.

hierarchies can be distinguished between the different means, and between the different functions; can one observe variations affecting the nature of the means or the way of using them in successive chapters of one tractate, or in texts taken from different tractates?

If, finally, there are strict laws governing the number, nature, and functioning of the oral means, and if the relations between means, functions and texts follow recurrent rules, do nuances exist in the behavior of each representative of the tradition? If so, what aspects of the whole do these nuances affect?

FROM ORAL PARAMETERS TO FUNCTIONS

In listening to five informants from the Aleppo tradition reading the Mishnah, we noted that they seemed to have recourse to a stable and shared number of oral means. We refer to these means as oral parameters. A study of the detailed transcriptions of these performances showed that there are six parameters, used by all the informants: pause, syllabic prolongation, textual accentuation, cadenced rhythm or reading, intonation and melody. Another parameter—contrast in speed of delivery—was used by only one informant intensively and by a second informant marginally.

An analysis of each oral parameter allowed us to define its exact nature. Syllabic prolongation and textual accentuation are uniform in kind. Other parameters are more complex. For example, there are two degrees of pause. In the cadenced reading, some informants create a contrast between successive parts of the text by using different rhythmic patterns, in addition to the contrast created by sections read rhythmically and sections read without rhythm.

Intonation and melody constitute the most complex parameters, for they simultaneously bring into play several distinct functional components. In the melodic line one has to distinguish between ornaments, sound durations, contrasts of register, phenomena of local melodic move, and the different uses of curves and melodic contours. In the case of intonation the following elements could be recognized: local intonative move, variations of the intoning range, a phenomenon of syllabation and a contrast between local and general curves of intonation.

Arranged in strict hierarchical relationship on the basis of their variable complexity, the same parameters display other relationships if one considers their statistical weight, as determined on the basis of their use by the five informants. Syllabic prolongation, textual accentuation and melody are the least frequently exploited parameters. Rhythmic reading is statistically more important, while pause and intonation are the most used oral parameters.

Seeing the remarkable agreement between the various informants and the number and nature of the parameters among all the informants, we proceeded

to check to what extent the use of the parameters follows recurrent laws in their relation to the text. It soon became clear that all the informants used the oral parameters in relation to a determined and shared number of functions. At the same time divergences between informants emerged, affecting the more or less exclusive or favoured relations between parameters and functions and the informant's attitude to the text. Further, while each informant used the same parameter in relation to the same function, the application of the parameter in relation to the textual detail was sometimes not strictly identical.

Eight functions emerged from our study. Six are disjunctive functions which can be divided into two groups of three each, one group textual, and the other semantic. The proposition, as a formal syntactic and discursive unit, constitutes the pivot around which the two groups of functions are deployed.

The group of textually disjunctive functions contains functions of discursive and narrative disjunction, and of discursive hierarchization. Narrative disjunction operates on the level of narrative entities, i.e. topics, sentences and points of view, authors, and narrative sections. Discursive hierarchization creates a hierarchy between the successive propositions and phrases of the text.

The semantically disjunctive functions include syntactic-semantic disjunction, topicalization and emphasis. The first corresponds to the division of the syntactic-semantic units that make up each of the propositions. The latter are more hierarchical in intention. Topicalization gives prominence to the part of the text (words, groups of words, propositions) that corresponds to the subject or theme that the text is about to treat. Emphasis, which can affect longer or shorter parts of the text, means in practice that an informant underlines these parts because he considers them important. It is here that each informant's individuality is best manifested. This does not imply that the emphasis applied to a certain word or portion cannot constitute a collective phenomenon, evidencing a particular tradition relating to a certain passage in the text.

As can be seen, the six disjunctive functions reflect and relate to the different and complementary levels constituting the text. Moreover, some of these functions assume a hierarchizing character whose formal limits and justifications do not precisely correspond to each other, thus restoring to the text the richness of its components.

To the six disjunctive functions one must add a conjunctive function and one of a mnemonic character. Up to a point these two functions do not have an independent existence; they can be viewed as complementary aspects of the disjunctive functions, arising from the very nature of some of the parameters. It cannot be denied that rhythmic reading of successive parts of the text helps one to memorize them. The recurrence of certain melodic motifs or the very regular local moves in the intonation can only help in the absorption of the texts concerned.

At the same time, every disjunction of successive phrases has as a corollary the reunion of all the components placed between the bounds of two pauses. The same applies to propositions. It should be added that the parameters of intonation and melody present facts of explicit conjunction, shared however very unequally by the different informants. These phenomena of conjunction have a syntactic and semantic vocation.

SYSTEMATICS AND DYNAMICS OF THE RULES OF TRANSMISSION

The Table allows us to visualize the systematics involved in the application of the parameters.

While in some cases the link between a parameter and a function may be weak, even non-existent, in general several parameters are attached to one function. But the statistical and functional weight of such parameters is not identical for the same function.

Long pauses indicate, above all, narrative and discursive disjunctions. Short pauses are used almost exclusively in relation to topicalization and emphasis. This functional contrast between the two degrees of pause is reinforced by the fact that the consensus among informants regarding the placing of these pauses is greater in the case of long pauses linked to narrative and discursive disjunctions. The use of short pauses is largely individual, and is employed to interrupt the text in order to stress a part of it. Syllabic prolongation is somewhat more effective in relation to topicalization and emphasis. As for the cardinal function of textual disjunction, only the aspect of discursive disjunction is taken into account by this parameter, rather to the benefit of propositions than of phrases. Textual accentuation is clearly linked to topicalization, as is frequently attested to in the different performances. Rhythm seems at first sight to favour textual disjunction by stressing its different components. A careful study of the relations between this parameter and the text, however, shows that rhythm, which also operates in relation to emphasis (textual units separated by narrative disjunction), plays an important role in relation to syntactic and semantic disjunction as well.

Rhythm is thus closely linked to the melodic line and the intonation, whose relations to the syntactic-semantic disjunction are very strong. This does not prevent the melodic parameter from being related to emphasis and, to a lesser extent, to topicalization. Intonation is also closely linked to emphasis. But the uses of intonation are decidedly more collective in regard to textual disjunction.

Does the accumulation of different parameters for the same function correspond to a mere juxtaposition? Not at all. This reinforcing is a practical illustration of an essential principle of oral transmission. The whole panoply of complementary means, taken together, define and hierarchize, reinforce and delicately variegate

	Discursive hierarchi- sation	Narrative disjunc- tion	Discursive disjunction phrases propositions		Syntactico- semantic disjunction	Topicalization	Emphasis
Pauses +++ degree place		V 3/4 (V 1/4) 4/4	V 4/4 4/4	V/V 2/4	---	1/4 V 2/4 (V4/4) 3/4 more collective	1/4 individual
Syllabic prolongation +		---	1/4 2/4 (3/4) -----	1/4 2/4 (3/4)	---	1/4 2/4 (3/4) (4/4)	1/4 2/4 3/4 (4/4)
Textual accentuation +		---	1/4	1/4	---	4/4 3/4 -----	1/4
Rhythm Berakhôt ++/ / Shabbat +++	+++	+++		+++			++ sentence; instance
Music Berakhôt ± Shabbat +							
Curves ++	x	x		x			
Contours ++	x	x		x	x	x	x
Register - Local	x	x		x	x	x	x
contour ++	x	x		x			
Longer notes - Ornaments -		x		x	x		x
Intonation +++ Global curves ++	x	x		x			
Local curves ++					x	x instance	x
Local into- native move ++	x	x		x		x	adverbial comple- ment; sentence or part of it; means of argumentation; other cases;
Register - Syllabation ++	x	x		(x) (x)	x x	(x)	x
-----		more collective (2)	more collective (3)		more individual (2)	more collective (4)	more individual (1)

LEGEND

- + / ++ / +++ / - / ± : comparative importance in the usage of the parameters
- x : actual use of one of the components of a given parameter (in the case of music and intonation)
- : scarce use of parameter for a given function
- V / V : longer pauses / shorter pauses
- 1/4 2/4 3/4 4/4 : type of consensus between the informants (1/4 = one of 4; 2/4 = two out of four; and so on)
- : consensus relative to the longer pauses
- : consensus relative to the shorter pauses
- (1) (2) (3) (4) : comparative consensus relative to a given function

the collective and individual aspects of the text's oral transmission. Two examples can be adduced to illustrate this phenomenon.

In their relation to the function of discursive hierarchization, the pauses operate on the level of larger and more neutral discursive units. Rhythm, melodic line and intonation invest the largest of these units according to their syntagmatic status, to their literal semantic content, and to the weight that each informant wants to give to the unit. Intonation and local melodic move, while partly materializing absolute endings (of phrases or *mishnayôt*) and intermediary endings (propositions or groups of propositions), also specify, up to a point, the units contained between two signs of ending. Local intonative move is the most systematic indicator of absolute and intermediary endings. Local melodic move is less concerned with large discursive units within their objective limits. It is more systematically used in the syntagmatic or semantic specification of these units. This particularity of the local melodic move enriches the reading of the text, while other melodic parameters (curves and pitches) confirm or establish the largest discursive units. In this context the rhythm, marking the largest discursive frontiers, also has the function of marking the syntagmatic status of the different discursive units as well as of revealing the differential relationships of the informants with different parts of the text.

Second, one finds a wide range of parameters connected with topicalization and emphasis. Up to a certain point their comparatively common function (to isolate an element of the text in order to give it more prominence) is represented by an almost perfect parallelism of the parameters that concretize these functions. However, some differences distinguish them. The local intonative move functions with two of its three degrees in relation to the topicalization, while for the function of emphasis it operates only very marginally. Syllabation, on the other hand, operates more closely in relation to emphasis.

For topicalization and emphasis, each of the parameters partly fulfils a role shared by the others; but it also has a specific behaviour. Thus a pause marks a suspension of the reading, and in general it is the brief pauses that characterize the relation to topicalization and emphasis. Nevertheless, the full sense of the pause is given by the local intonative move. Brief pauses, local contours and curves in their turn isolate an element of the text whose real status (topicalization or emphasis) emerges only in the light of the types of consensus existing among the upholders of the tradition. The consensus regarding the topicalized units is decidedly more collective than for the textual elements involved in emphasis. The individual character of the latter does not depend on the type of unit underlined (linguistic units used to indicate spatial or temporal conditions, for example) but on the precise terms of the text that the informants choose to stress.

The information arising from the preceding data reflects the structural complementarity of the parameters in relation to functions, and the complementarity of functions in relation to the different levels in which the text exists and is perpetuated. This double complementarity is seen again while examining a final element of the system: the possible interrelation of different parameters used at the same place in the text for the purpose of converging purposes.

In the various texts studied here, strong links were found between pauses, local intonative move, syllabic prolongation and textual accentuation. These links are particularly expressed in the endings of specific *mishnayôt* and, in a fair proportion of instances, the function of topicalization. The proportional relation of these same parameters to the function of emphasis is much lower altogether. These four parameters or constituents are united to materialize the most objective and unavoidable elements of the text.

The simultaneous presence of rhythm and intonation or melody follows another tendency. These parallelisms are much more closely linked to emphasis, which appears to be more subjectively applied. In addition, these parameters are often linked to the syntactic-semantic, discursive and narrative divisions. While, in principle, these three parameters are very generally used in relation to these divisions, they are not redundantly used when they appear in the same part of the text. In fact, one can speak here of a complementarity of parameters in two directions. An informant may combine at the same time a different type of reading for each of these parameters: for instance, a semantic reading by rhythm and a discursive one by intonation or melody; or a semantic and discursive reading by rhythm and a very syllabic type of intonation, which may disjoint certain morphological elements and bring the words together. Or, alternatively, following the second tendency, the informant may use the same type of reading for two different parameters, and in practice the units delimited by each are not the same.

COLLECTIVE MODELS AND INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOUR

The data that we have summarized here are based on performances by five different informants who read the same successive sections of the Mishnah. These performances show collectively shared laws, a striking testimony to the perennality of the text and the means of preserving it. Similar research in the traditional reading of the Mishnah in other communities will allow us to verify the extent to which different communities have used similar oral means of transmission. Another point to be investigated in parallel studies, is the quantitative and qualitative relation between collective models and individual

variations or variants within one community. It cannot be denied that the five Aleppo informants do not behave identically. Their variants primarily reveal different personalities. Theoretically speaking, these individual variations may involve the number and nature of oral parameters, the list of functions attached to the use of the parameters and the systematics and dynamics of the parameters and functions. In fact, in the case of the Aleppo informants, we observed an impressive consensus on all these points. The structural basis and the refinements constituting the laws of the oral transmission of the Mishnah seem to underlie such consensus.

The informant who adds a parameter—contrast in speed of delivery—to the six unanimously shared ones, uses it in conformity with the rules of the system. He also uses this parameter to affirm his personal approach to the text, a comparatively dramatized expressiveness apt to attract the attention of someone listening or studying beside him.

If one of the informants uses contrasting rhythmic cadences for successive parts of the text, while others use an unchanging rhythm for the same parts, he is not deviating from the rules of the system of oral parameters. He is rather exploiting the very nature of the parameters to express with greater subtlety his personal approach to certain parts of the text.

The personal behaviour of each informant seemed, at first sight, totally disordered. But this is not the case. Comparing the data relating to each informant, we saw that the scattered facts contributed to define a coherent and well-established image of each informant. One informant may favour a very explicit manifestation of the different points of view expressed in the text, as well as the divisions of the discursive units. Another may be very sparing in his use of the oral parameters, clearly preferring some to others. His choice is determined by his desire to transmit the text on the basis of particular attention to the successive elements of each phrase, to the detriment of a more cogent vision of the larger discursive and narrative divisions.

Such individual behaviors—very perceptible, and fully explicable in analysis—do not shatter the structural basis of the system, the nature and number of oral parameters, the rules that define each of the functions and their collective dynamics. A striking proof of this double reality is the fact that apart from the often individual ways of manifesting it, all the informants establish a distinction between the different chapters of a tractate, and especially between tractates.

Chapter I of the *Shabbat* tractate was considered much more as an entity. The informants used the same parameters more recurrently for all the *mishnayôt* in this chapter. The consensus regarding the parameters was more variable in the first two chapters of the *Berakhôt* tractate. Here the manifestation of the

functions did not follow the same tendencies in each of these two chapters. Thus, topicalization is favoured in the second chapter, while emphasis is clearly more apparent in the first one.

One thus sees that these parameters ensure the necessary perennality of the text contents on whatever level, and at the same time allow for individual manifestations whose objective presence is inevitable and whose submission to collective models is patent.

PERSPECTIVES

What particular perspectives can be envisaged once one confirms that the Oral Law has been transmitted for two thousand years on the basis of oral means and extremely codified rules, without the aid of any written system of signs to guide the oral transmission of the text?

First, let us suggest two undertakings that might follow our study of the Aleppo tradition. One concerns the explicit modalities of the pedagogical method applied to the oral transmission of the Mishnah and the Talmud. This research should extend to the oral transmission of other tractates, always considering the different social contexts (teaching, study, reading in the synagogue service), in which these texts and tractates are read. The second undertaking is an extension of the first: different traditions should be studied in order to determine the agreements and divergences which may exist when the same texts are or were transmitted and studied in such remotely separated places such as Baghdad, Djerba, Hungary, Yemen or Lithuania.

Second, it seems that the methodological assumptions that allowed us to carry out this research on the Mishnah tradition of Aleppo may also be useful in the study of other liturgical or paraliturgical texts (i.e., the reading of the Zohar and the cantillation of daily prayers) which do not contain graphic signs connected with their vocalization and accentuation. In the case of biblical texts, where vocalization and accentuation signs exist, the systematic study for its own sake of the oral aspect of the cantillation would allow for a study of the system of the *te'amim* in its origins, applications and performance practice, as well as a more complete understanding of the mechanisms underlying the relations, so essential to Judaism, between the Oral and the Written Law.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- EJ² Encyclopaedia Judaica. Jerusalem 1971-1972.
EH אנציקלופדיה עברית (Encyclopedia Hebraica)
HOM A. Z. Idelsohn, *Hebräisch-orientalischer Melodienschatz...*, vols. I-X, 1914-1932. Berlin, Vienna, Jerusalem.
JNUL Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem.
NGD The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, ed. Stanley Sadie.
NSA National Sound Archives, JNUL.
Yuval Yuval — Studies of the Jewish Music Research Centre.