

The Babylonian Talmud: A Living Book that Now Speaks Italian

Tommaso Cartia (November 01, 2017)



The Italian delegation of the PTTB (The Babylonian Talmud Translation Project) stopped in New York to present their very first Italian translation of the Talmud, a sacred text of Judaism. Key individuals that night were Riccardo Di Segni, Rabbi and head of the Jewish community in Rome, and Clelia Piperno, director of the project and professor of constitutional law at the University of Teramo. An important opportunity to discuss culture and education, in light of what recently happened with Italian soccer fanatics, who have once again become the protagonists of a discriminatory act.

The first digitalized Italian translation of the [Talmud](#) [2] is certainly a comprehensive and ambitious project. It was achieved through the use of an innovative software called “Traduco,” which was



created in collaboration with the [CNR \(Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche\)](#) [3]. After stopping in Washington D.C., the PTTB continued its traveling presentation on October 24th with two important meetings: a press conference at the upscale [Lincoln Ristorante](#) [4]—organized by Sally Fischer PR with a delicious Italian Kosher lunch offered by [Va Bene](#) [5]—and a debate on the topic at NYU’s Casa Italiana-Zerilli-Marimò, in collaboration with the New York’s Centro Primo Levi. The roadshow ended on the 25th with a presentation at the [Consulate General of Italy](#) [6].

The Talmud

The sacred Jewish text has its roots in the transcription of discussions by Babylonian scholars of the [Torah](#) [7]. The Talmud has been an object of study and discussion for some three centuries in Jewish communities across the world. Its historical, religious, philosophical, scientific, and legal value has given us an essential piece for understanding the Babylonian universe in the fifth century and an indispensable instrument for analyzing the other sacred text that is a cornerstone of the Jewish culture—the Bible.

Historically, the first true edition of the Talmud was printed in Venice by [Daniel Bomberg](#) [8] between 1519 and 1523. Both this edition and Marcantonio Giustinian’s have become a fundamental point of reference for all later editions until the definitive one by Romm Vilna in 1886.

The Talmud has a troubled and complex history. Its content was considered heretic and condemned by the [Holy Inquisition](#) [9], which burned it at the stake for the first time in 1244. It was then sequestered from ghettos during the deportation of the Jews. Biased interpretations, or ones extrapolated from the text of some passages, caused the text to be considered blasphemous. In particular, the cryptic reference to a certain “Yeshu” (Jesus) and “Miriam” (Mary) and dubious references to these figures from the Gospel, which were never confirmed have contributed to this perception of the Talmud. Over the course of history, the sacred text has undergone numerous censorings, cuts and adaptations, becoming a bit of a metaphor for the discrimination and antisemitism that have historically accompanied the Jewish population and its diaspora.

The Italian Translation

The Talmud project, thanks to the formidable direction and determination of Professor [Clelia Piperno](#) [10], who has been its driving force since the beginning, has obtained 5 million euro grant from the [Ministero dell’Istruzione \(Miur\)](#) [11], in collaboration with the [Presidency of the Council of Ministers](#) [12], the [CNR](#) [3], the [UCEL](#) [13] (l’Unione delle Comunità Ebraiche Italiane) and the CRI (the College Rabbino Italiano). 90 researchers and translators from all over the world came together to complete the epic undertaking. It’s a project that brought not only translators, linguistics, researchers, historians and computer programmers together but also people from different cultures and backgrounds. The Italian translation of the Talmud has therefore created a bridge between Italy, Israel, the European Community and also the United States, rejuvenating the spirit of the Talmud, which is anything but discriminatory, divisive, and anti democratic.

“If you don’t study, you can’t produce culture,” proclaimed Clelia Piperno during the conference. She underscored just how much the Talmud is relevant today: “The Talmud’s method is very active, and it’s a living text. Our project is an approach to democracy. We’re trying to construct a new community where the keywords are respect and education. Respect is the key to democracy, and in the Talmud, there is a great deal of respect.”

The “Traduco” Software

The Italian edition compares the original text, written in Hebrew and Aramaic, with the translation. The point of reference for the original page is a recent elaboration of the classic structure with a significant difference in the vocalization of the words. The Italian version is not, however, a mere translation; it’s a multimedia, interactive text that suggests automatic translations, which can also be modified, adapting its legibility to the modern day. It’s a continuous study and a work in progress where commenting on the text has a historical and linguistic importance that is just as relevant as the text itself.



All this was made possible thanks to “Traduco,” which is a software created by the Istituto di Linguistica Computazionale of the Consiglio Nazionale di Ricerche. It’s a system born from Italian intelligence; it indexes information and allows for uniform translations of text, notes, and comments.

It’s a great success; the volumes comprising the translation have been selling extremely well. The organizers of the project have already been contacted by important organizations like [Ernst & Young](#) [14], the global management consulting firm, which proposed that the Talmud Project collaborates on a coach system project.

Piperno and Di Segni on the Lazio Fans Controversy

To demonstrate the importance and historic modernity of the teachings of the Talmud are the recent facts appearing in Italian news, which highlight how generalized failed education and misinformation regarding certain subjects can still produce monsters. Italian soccer is one such example. Some fans of the [Lazio team](#) [15], S.S. Lazio, defamed the historical figure of [Anne Frank](#) [16] by putting her head in a photo montage above photos of [Roma team](#) [17], A.S. Roma, soccer players - their historical rivals - labeling them as “Jews” and using the term to mock them. This is why a translation and knowledge of the Jewish Talmud is not only important but also necessary. There’s still a lot to be done in terms of both culture and education.

“It was really surprising to discover the interest that there is around the Talmud. Although it’s a difficult text, it has entered into 10,000 Italian households. Therefore, it can be assumed that many of these homes weren’t Jewish. People are interested in understanding and learning about diversity,” Riccardo Segni argued when we reached him after the presentation.

“Going against this is important because the signs we’re seeing are signs of the crumbling of society. Europe was built based on the idea that intolerance shouldn’t exist. Today, this construction is beginning to waver because it’s resisting the phenomenon of mass migration and the economic crisis. Everything is crumbling down, and what’s happening in stadiums is a symptom of it. It’s an old problem. People have always trivialized and exploited symbols and models. Only until a certain point though. First there was a certain discretion, or perhaps a certain respect in raising your head and doing things similar to what was done recently. The collapse of this mental block, of every limit, needs to be highlighted.”

Immediately after the fact, the president of the Lazio team [Claudio Lotito](#) [18] went, with a delegation from the team, to the synagogue in Rome to distance themselves from the events and express their disapproval regarding what happened: “We are here to reaffirm our denunciation of antisemitism and racism. Lazio will promote an annual initiative to bring 200 young fans to [Auschwitz](#) [19]. The majority of our supporters stand with us against antisemitism.” Lotito added, “We want to be clear why you mess around with certain facts. There can be no more mocking.”

Professor Piperno’s comment was very strong: “I believe that this is a great opportunity for Italian soccer and for president Lotito in particular. If instead of proposing his soccer players with a trip to Auschwitz, he were to buy 100 copies of the Talmud, give them to the families, and explain that the Jewish culture is a living thing, perhaps the next time before they try to use the photo of a dead woman, they’ll think twice about it and have more respect. It’s a question of lack of respect, a question of a lack of education, a question of a lack of culture.”

Repentance with a pilgrimage where so many Jewish people lost their lives is worse than the episode itself,” Piperno continued. “It means that the only form of respect that Lotito has for the Jewish culture is for the dead Jewish culture. He doesn’t have the ability to look around and see that it’s alive and to support it. The memory and respect for the memory belong to the Jewish culture. The pilgrimages don’t belong to us.”

For more info on the Talmud Project click here [>>](#) [20]



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