

Alum gets Talmudic with the Library

It's the unmet need, the open opportunity, which inspires some Libraries supporters to take action. Such was the case with Rutgers College graduate David Salem.

David returned to the Rutgers-New Brunswick campus a few years back for a class reunion and stopped in at Alexander Library to examine the Jewish religious book collection. He noticed that the collection was missing some critical components. So he decided to help fill the gap by adding one sizeable element. In the spring 2006 semester, with the assistance of World History Librarian Jim Niessen, David donated a full 73 volume set of the Schottenstein Edition of the Babylonian Talmud, published by the Jewish book publisher ArtScroll, to the Rutgers University Libraries.



Reviewing the new Talmud collection in Alexander Library are, left to right: World History Librarian James P. Niessen, Associate Professor of Jewish Studies Azzan Yadin, and Chair of the Department of Jewish Studies & Blanche and Irving Laurie Chair in Jewish History Gary A. Rendsburg.

The Talmud is the cornerstone of Jewish religious Oral Law. One of the principles of Jewish tradition is that God dictated the Written Torah (the Five Books of Moses) to Moses and also provided an oral explanation of how to interpret the Torah and observe its 613 Commandments. Without the Oral Law, the Written Torah could be misinterpreted or distorted beyond recognition.

The Oral Law explains the details of how to observe the Sabbath, Jewish holidays, kosher dietary laws; how to perform a Jewish wedding and many other areas of Jewish life. Such detail is not included in the Written Torah. The Oral Law also explains that the Biblical injunction of an "eye for an eye" (Leviticus 24:20 and Deuteronomy 19:21) should not be interpreted literally but rather to mean proportionate monetary compensation. The Written Torah and Oral Law are inseparable because the Written Torah cannot be understood without the explanations contained in the Oral Law.

The Oral Law was originally transmitted orally from generation to generation but was eventually codified and written down as the Talmud. The Talmud consists of two parts: the Mishnah, a delineation of the rules for religious behavior, and the Gemara, an exposition, explanation, and commentary by different rabbis on the Mishnah. The Mishnah was published around the year 200 C.E. and the Gemara around 500 C.E.

David's gift addressed a need of the Libraries. It also fulfilled a personal need. He sought to make a meaningful gift to his alma mater in memory of his mother,

Gloria Salem, and in honor of his father, Joshua Salem. The Talmud set fit this need perfectly.

David, who grew up in Paramus, regards his Rutgers days fondly, remembering some terrific professors and making many life long friends while living "on the banks of the Old Raritan." He also recalls studying at Alexander Library on a regular basis during his term as an undergraduate. David remains active in the Rutgers Alumni Association and attends his class reunions.

Since his years at Rutgers, David has explored his Jewish heritage and developed an appreciation for it. He currently attends an Orthodox synagogue although he supports a wide variety of Jewish causes across the denominational spectrum. He serves on the board of directors of The Jewish Study Center, a small non-denominational not-for-profit organization that holds Jewish education classes in the Washington, DC area.

One of David's charitable interests is in donating Jewish religious books to Jewish and secular organizations. He chose to donate to Rutgers so that students and faculty could engage in serious inquiry into the teachings and practices of the Jewish religion and understand the traditional Jewish interpretation of the Torah. David continues to explore his Jewish heritage and is planning to make other donations of Jewish religious books to the Rutgers University Libraries.

David works in the finance department of the Office of the Sergeant at Arms of the United States Senate, which provides information technology and other support services to the Senate.

The Libraries are very grateful to David Salem for his generous donation. The Talmud set will surely inspire generations of students and faculty to consider, discuss, and debate the many questions and answers that helped establish the rites, rules, and practices of the Jewish faith.

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URL: http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/rul/news/06/06_talmud_donation.shtml

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