

ADAM KIRSCH

Come and Hear

What I saw in my
seven-and-a-half-year
journey through
the Talmud

Brandeis University Press / Waltham, Massachusetts

Brandeis University Press
© 2021 by Adam Kirsch
All rights reserved
Manufactured in the United States of America
Designed and composed in Arno Pro and
Source Sans Variable by Mindy Basinger Hill

For permission to reproduce any of the material in this book,
contact Brandeis University Press, 415 South Street,
Waltham MA 02453, or visit brandeisuniversitypress.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kirsch, Adam, 1976– author.

Title: Come and hear : what I saw in my seven-and-a-half-year journey
through the Talmud / Adam Kirsch.

Description: First edition. | Waltham : Brandeis University Press, 2021. |

Includes index. | Summary: “Mainly intended for readers who have little
sense of what the Talmud actually is, Kirsch explores the Talmud as a critic
and journalist. Maybe the best way to describe this book is as a kind of
travelogue—a report on what Kirsch saw during his seven-and-a-half-year
journey through the Talmud”—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021027680 (print)

LCCN 2021027681 (ebook)

ISBN 9781684580675 (cloth)

ISBN 9781684580682 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Talmud—Study and teaching.

Classification: LCC BM504 .K47 2021 (print)

LCC BM504 (ebook)

DDC 296.1/206—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021027680>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021027681>

CONTENTS

ix Introduction

I TRACTATE BERACHOT AND SEDER MOED

Prayers, Shabbat, and Holidays

3 Berachot

On how to pray, whose prayers are granted,
and the perils of snubbing a rabbi's wife.

11 Shabbat

On forbidden labors, set-aside items,
and learning the Torah while standing on one leg.

22 Eruvin

On boundaries, interpreting the Torah,
and why the Messiah will come on a weekday.

28 Pesachim

On searching for chametz, the Passover sacrifice,
and the size of the universe.

38 Shekalim

On money changers in the Temple, the appearance of impropriety,
and what happened to the Ark of the Covenant.

43 Yoma

On sacred choreography, the meaning of atonement,
and the many uses of manna.

53 Sukka

On squaring the circle, using an elephant as a wall,
and why the sages juggled torches.

- 57 **Beitza**
On newly laid eggs, good table manners,
and why the Jewish people need a fiery law.
- 61 **Rosh Hashana**
On the date of Creation, hearing the shofar,
and how to trick death.
- 67 **Taanit**
On praying for rain, the importance of solidarity,
and inauspicious dates.
- 73 **Megilla**
On divine inspiration, rewriting the Bible,
and Haman's years as a barber.
- 78 **Moed Katan**
On holidays, marking graves, and the right to be beautiful.
- 82 **Hagiga**
On divine judgment and the danger of prying into God's secrets.

II SEDER NASHIM

Marriage and Divorce

- 87 **Yevamot**
On levirate marriage, converting to Judaism,
and a camel that didn't dance.
- 97 **Ketubot**
On marriage contracts, the value of virginity,
and how to deal with a disgusting spouse.
- 106 **Nedarim and Nazir**
On how to take a vow—and why you shouldn't.
- 114 **Sota**
On magic potions, unfaithful wives, and a worm
that chews through stone.

118 **Gittin**

On divorce, the destruction of the Temple,
and the real meaning of tikkun olam.

124 **Kiddushin**

On betrothal, the duties of parents and children,
and why women don't have to wear tefillin.

III **SEDER NEZIKIN**

Civil and Criminal Law

133 **Bava Kamma**

On negligence, restitution, and the problem
with being robbed by a Jewish bandit.

140 **Bava Metzia**

On ownership, exploitation, and when to ignore the voice of God.

147 **Bava Batra**

On real estate, inheritance, and surviving catastrophe.

155 **Sanhedrin**

On capital punishment, the World to Come,
and using magic to make dinner.

165 **Makkot**

On flogging, perjury, and forbidden tattoos.

169 **Shevuot**

On taking oaths, the burden of proof,
and when to throw a duck at a judge.

172 **Avoda Zara**

On idol worship, intermarriage, and the rabbi
who used an emperor as a footstool.

180 **Horayot**

On mistaken judgments
and why scholars outrank kings.

IV SEDER KODASHIM AND TRACTATE NIDDA
The Temple, Sacrifices, and Ritual Purity

- 185 Zevachim and Menachot
On animal sacrifices, meal offerings,
and how the Jewish people is like an olive tree.
- 193 Hullin and Bechorot
On kosher slaughter, separating meat and dairy,
and when a firstborn isn't a firstborn.
- 202 Arachin, Temura, and Karetot
On the value of a life, switching sacrifices,
and a punishment worse than death.
- 208 Meila, Tamid, Middot, and Kinnim
On stealing from God, a day in the life of the Temple,
and avian brainteasers.
- 215 Nidda
On menstruation, ejaculation,
and why girls are wiser than boys.
- 220 Conclusion
- 227 Acknowledgments
- 229 Index