

# REVIEW: Rabbenu Tam

T [traditiononline.org/review-rabbenu-tam/](http://traditiononline.org/review-rabbenu-tam/)



Avraham (Rami) Reiner, *Rabbenu Tam: Parshanut, Halakha, Pulmus* (Bar-Ilan University Press, 2021), 503 pp.

*Today, 4 Tammuz (June 14), marks the 850th yahrzeit of Rabbenu Tam. This review draws our attention to an important new work on the interpretation, halakhic legacy, and controversies of a monumental figure whose rulings and readings continue to impact Jewish law until the present day.*



The name of Rabbenu Tam is ubiquitous in Talmudic commentaries and halakhic works from the twelfth century onwards. Rabbi Yaakov ben Meir of Ramerupt, who died in 1171, was a grandson of Rashi (who died in 1105, probably around the time that Rabbenu Tam

was born), brother of Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (Rashbam) and uncle of Rabbi Yitzhak ben Shmuel of Dampierre (Ri ha-Zaken).

Although Rabbenu Tam's opinions are probably best known from the Tosafot printed around the Gemara, it is important to remember that those versions of his statements are mediated by two, three, four or even more generations of students and scholars who reformulated his statements and adapted them to the medium of a multivocal discussion. It is only when we turn to *Sefer ha-Yashar*, a collection of Talmudic analyses compiled by Rabbenu Tam and by his students, or to his responsa (preserved in a second volume also titled *Sefer ha-Yashar*, or in medieval manuscripts and other printed works), that we can hear Rabbenu Tam in his own words.

For centuries, Rabbenu Tam has drawn the attention of scholars with the startling brilliance of his Talmudic interpretations, the discomfiting radicalism of his rulings, his relentless self-confidence and the ferocity of his rhetoric. But only rarely have his readers invested close reading and systematic study to understand what Rabbenu Tam was like as a person – how he learned, how he read, how he reached decisions and how he put them into action.

Avraham (Rami) Reiner, a professor at Ben-Gurion University, has devoted decades of scholarship to recovering Rabbenu Tam's responsa and to reconstructing their historical, social, intellectual and personal contexts. Reiner's MA thesis was devoted to Rabbenu Tam's personal relationships with teachers, contemporaries, and students in France and Germany. In his Ph.D. dissertation, he explored Rabbenu Tam's stormy interactions with rabbinic scholars in Paris, Germany, and Provence. In early 2020, Reiner and I published a critical edition of the responsa by Rabbenu Tam's nephew, Ri ha-Zaken, which includes many important comments about Rabbenu Tam himself. At present, Reiner is preparing a critical edition of Rabbenu Tam's own responsa that were not published in *Sefer ha-Yashar*. The Hebrew book under review here reflects all of those long-term projects and presents a fine-grained intellectual biography of one of the greatest medieval rabbis.

The opening section of the book sketches out the biographical context. According to Reiner, Rabbenu Tam's father Meir ben Shmuel of Ramerupt was not a revolutionary thinker in his own right. However, Meir created a collaborative learning atmosphere at home in which his sons flourished. Meir's two elder sons were Yitzhak, who died at a young age around the year 1130, and Shmuel (Rashbam), who lived to a ripe old age. Both of them had a profound influence upon their younger brother Yaakov, and they are as close to mentors as Rabbenu Tam seems to have had. Reiner provides helpful signposts for Rabbenu Tam's career by dividing it into decades – from the 1120s as he remained in the shadow of his older brothers; the 1130s, when a number of budding scholars arrived from Germany to study with him after their master Rabbi Yitzhak ben Asher died in Speyers; and the 1140s onwards, during which Rabbenu Tam emerged as the leading scholar in northern France until his death in 1171.

These details set the stage for the heart of the book, whose structure is reflected in the subtitle: "Interpretation, halakha, Controversy." In Part II, Reiner painstakingly reconstructs Rabbenu Tam's library and how he used the books at his disposal. In his

approach to Mishnah and Tosefta, Rabbenu Tam revealed keen awareness of issues that concern modern Talmudic philologists: the textual differences between the Mishnah as quoted in the Babylonian Talmud and the text found in free-standing manuscripts of the Mishnah (*Seder ha-Mishnah*); the complex relationship between tannaitic works like the Tosefta and *baraitot* in the Babylonian Talmud; *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) with legal details that diverge from the rulings of the Bavli. In a discussion of his attitude towards the Geonim, Reiner identifies a specific manuscript of Geonic responsa, still extant today, that may have been perused and described by Rabbenu Tam.

Part III explores Rabbenu Tam in action – reading and correcting the Babylonian Talmud, drawing practical conclusions from his reading that often flaunted time-honored halakhic conventions, and promulgating communal regulations (*takkanot*) in order to achieve social goals that he was unable to reach directly through Talmudic precedents. Rabbenu Tam was particularly active, and even aggressive, in the field of divorce law, where he repeatedly overturned decisions by the Paris rabbinic court (whose members included his elder brother Rashbam) but also issued *takkanot* in order to combat the *paritzim* (bullies) who, he felt, were misusing Jewish law in order to publicly shame and persecute other members of the community. Chapters 7 and 11 are devoted to *Sefer ha-Yashar*, Rabbenu Tam's only full-length book that is notoriously obscure and confusing.

Part IV is titled "Influence," and explores areas in which Rabbenu Tam's impact was relatively benign but often developed into stormy exchanges with his rabbinic colleagues. Rabbi Meshulam of Melun, a migrant from Narbonne who served on the Paris beit din, had an extended and harsh correspondence with Rabbenu Tam, as did the biblical commentator Yosef Bekhor Shor. Besides ad hominem barbs, what these acrimonious clashes elicited from Rabbenu Tam were some of his clearest and most fascinating methodological statements. For example, he boasted to Bekhor Shor that "I interpret the [Talmudic] passage according to its flow and its simple meaning, and the questions [that I pose about it] are simply an aid. Even when one passage in the Talmud states [in a given case that a person is] liable and in another passage [it states the exact opposite, that he is] absolved, we can explain it easily." Although they were penned defensively and do not necessarily reflect the position for which he was being criticized at the time, these comments provide precious insight into Rabbenu Tam's self-perception as an interpreter of the Talmudic text.

Other interactions were more pacific. Reiner traces the ways that Rabbenu Tam's influence grew outside his native region, in Germany and in southern France (Provence), through his correspondence with figures such as Ephraim of Regensburg and Yitzhak ben Abba Mari of Marseilles (author of *Sefer ha-Ittur*). In the last chapter of the book, he describes and explains a fascinating report, found in Tosafist commentaries on the Torah, of a series of questions about the Bible that were posed to Rabbenu Tam by "the ruler of Champagne" – probably Count Henry the Liberal who ruled the County of Champagne until 1181. Reiner argues that this exchange does not reflect Rabbenu Tam's expertise in biblical exegesis—there is no reliable evidence that Rabbenu Tam considered himself an

expert in the field. Rather, it was the result of long-term personal ties between Rabbenu Tam and the Count, hinting at a hitherto unexplored political dimension to the rabbi's career.

Taken piecemeal, this book provides sensitive, careful readings of some of Rabbenu Tam's most important writings and opinions. It does not purport to survey the entirety of his work, nor does it necessarily analyze the ideas most readily identified today with Rabbenu Tam. Among the halakhic issues with which he is most associated in our contemporary ritual lives, tefillin are not discussed here at all, and the topic of twilight (*ben ha-shemashot*) appears only in the section about Rabbenu Tam's disciple Rabbi Eliezer of Metz. The focus always returns to Rabbenu Tam as an exegete, his surviving writings and the issues that he himself considered to be the most important, even when they concern problems that drew less attention in later generations. As Reiner explains:

It is not Rabbenu Tam's halakhic conclusion that stands at the fore of the discussion [in this book] but the exegetical path that he followed, the internal code and the mechanism that made his interpretations and rulings what they were (19-20).

For its reader, the book *Rabbenu Tam* provides a startlingly intimate glimpse of a brilliant and complex person who died exactly 850 years ago, whose interpretations and rulings continue to impact Jewish law until the present day, but one whose full personality remains an enigma.

***Pinchas Roth*** is associate professor in the Department of Talmud at Bar-Ilan University.