

The Vilna Blatt – The Sacred Page.

If you peer over the shoulder of a Yeshiva student in any traditional Yeshiva and look at the Talmud he [or increasingly, she] is studying, it's most likely to be in the standard format of the Vilna Shas, the third edition of the Talmud published by the Romm printing house in Vilna between 1880 and 1886. Established in 1789 by Baruch ben Yosef Romm in Grodna (Horodna) , ten years later they set up an additional press in Vilna. The Romms printed many classic Hebrew religious books and in 1835 they started printing a set of the Talmud. Due to many difficulties it took 19 years -till 1854 - to complete their first edition of the Talmud. In 1858, the Romm printing House started on their 2nd edition of the Babylonian Talmud which they completed 8 years later in 1866.

However, it is the third edition of the Talmud printed by Romm, known as the Vilna Shas, that has become the standard Talmud used by students, and its page layout has become sacred. Any publisher who deviates from its iconic format does so at their own risk for they are likely to be assailed by the Charedi community for violating tradition. Consider Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz who found this out the hard way. A brilliant idiosyncratic rabbi and populariser of Talmud and Rabbinics, in 1965 Steinsaltz started his edition of the Talmud for the modern Israeli, translating the Talmud from Babylonian Aramaic into Modern Hebrew. His edition also includes the original Aramaic text in pointed Hebrew and he added several features including historical notes and diagrams of physical objects of antiquity and biographical notes on the Rabbis. But, he deviated from the sacred design of the Shas page by spreading each page over 2 pages to make room for the extra features.

Steinsaltz also integrated his translation with a commentary and explanation to make the Talmud easier to understand. Previous translations like the Goldschmidt translation into German and the Soncino Talmud into English were literal translations with some explanatory footnotes but made very difficult reading for the non-scholar. Steinsaltz led the evolution of Talmud translations by integrating the translation with an interpretive commentary. Subsequently, this technique was also adopted in the Artscroll Schottenstein Talmud and its first volume appeared in 1990.

While Steinsaltz made the Talmud more accessible, at the same time he angered some of the traditionalists by adopting a different page format and adding the features described above. The criticism was sharp and so eventually, a new edition of the Steinsaltz Talmud - both in modern Hebrew and in English - was published using the Vilna Talmud page layout instead. Artscroll, the other major modern translation of the Talmud, also uses the page layout of the Vilna Talmud.

The Charedi community recognise the need to update the Vilna Talmud but have various techniques to disguise this and make it 'kosher' I have seen one edition which refers to their Talmud as the "Vilna Shas HaChadash" i.e., the new Vilna Shas or enhanced Vilna Shas. They are careful to keep the main shape and format of the Vilna page and any additional features appear at the margins of the page.

I have seen an advert for a Talmud which has the vowels added to the text of the Vilna page but the advertisement stresses that this is still in accordance with tradition (i.e it is not a significant enough difference to consider it a deviation from the Vilna Talmud).