From Roman antiquity to the present, the *beit ha-midrash*, the “study house” has been the central locus of rabbinic culture. Here rabbis and their followers gathered for all of their communal needs, from study and prayer to court proceedings, business, and in later generations, for a good night’s sleep. Yet the *beit ha-midrash* is a highly elusive institution. Paired with the synagogue in rabbinic sources as “synagogues and study houses,” *batei midrashot* are far less prominent in most forms of rabbinic literature or the archaeological record than the synagogue is (the exception being the Targumim to the Pentateuch). What is true in the extant sources is also the case in modern scholarship. Synagogues have taken pride of place in Jewish social research, in no small part owing to the central role of the synagogue in the transformation of Western Jewry during

---

1 This essay was prepared for a conference on Jewish Culture in the Ancient World, “The *Beit Midrash*: The Emergence and Institutionalization of Jewish Schools of Higher Learning from Second Temple Times to Late Antiquity,” University of Haifa, June 2012.


the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This centrality was expressed not only in scholarship on what Joseph Heinemann and J. J. Petuchowski called "the literature of the synagogue" by Leopold Zunz and his followers in the Wissenschaft des Judentums, often with the intent of transforming contemporary liturgy. It was expressed in the explosion of synagogue construction the world over that began during the mid-nineteenth century and continued through the twentieth (with a break for the Great Depression and World War II). This phenomenon paralleled the search for archaeological and visual roots that began with David Kaufmann’s early writings on Jewish art and the Palestine Exploration Fund’s excavation of ancient synagogues in Palestine. The beit ha-midrash simply was not as important as all that, except for the rabbi-centered school of Gedaliah Alon (d. 1950)—who read the Sanhedrin as a kind of semi-autonomous vaad ha-leumi, on the model of the Zionist “National Council” that led the Jewish community of British Mandatory Palestine.

Interest in the beit ha-midrash developed considerably during the last third of the twentieth century, as the imbalance in our knowledge of the synagogue and the study house became clear, and more importantly, as “synagogue” became a cipher for “nonrabbinic Judaism,” while “study house” came to be equated with “rabbinic” Judaism. Studies of a so-called “rabbinic class” and “rabbinic movement” were the order of the day by a generation of mainly New York–trained Americans who matured during the 1960s and early 70s, seeking a new balance toward the “nonrabbinic Judaism” of American liberal synagogues and away from the world of the yeshiva. Other scholars—some responding to the “linguistic turn” in history writing, and in recent years “Modern Orthodox” Jews such as myself, imagining (and living) a balance that was not quite so stark—began to break down this rather binary category formation, and to seek more complex answers. This approach has been accepted more broadly in recent

5 Fine, Art and Judaism, 5–46.