

A Global Day of Jewish Learning

Rabbi Jan Katzew

I learned to love Jewish learning in general and Talmud in particular from a phenomenally insightful person that was blind, Dr. Ben Zion Wacholder. For one summer while I was a student at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, I was Dr. Wacholder's eyes. In a room literally littered with books he would instruct me to go to a specific case, a particular shelf, the third book from the left, page x, paragraph y, and begin reading. Invariably, like a human laser he would shine his intellectual light to illumine a word or phrase to be explained. I would not have believed my own vignette unless I had experienced it. I was humbled and intimidated. How could I ever aspire to such mastery of Jewish learning? How could I claim the title "*Rav b'Yisrael*" (a rabbi/teacher of the Jewish people) without command of Torah and Talmud? I have had many humbling and intimidating experiences since I was a student of Dr. Wacholder, but each time I have found comfort and inspiration in one of the lessons I learned from him.

A "*Talmid Chacham*", a Jewish scholar, once claimed to have gone through more than a hundred "pages" of Talmud and felt proud of the accomplishment until he was asked, "How many pages of Talmud have gone through you?" A rabbinic aphorism speaks to

the heart of this question.

Tanchuma

VaYakheil 7 [A Jewish scholar whose inside (knowledge) is not in harmony with his (or her) outside (actions) is not a Jewish scholar.] Jewish learning should not only be quantitatively assessed; it should also be measured qualitatively in the actions and character of the learner. Sadly, we have ample evidence that it is possible to be a learned brute. However, the Sages teach that it is not possible to be a pious

ignoramus.

(Avot 2:6).

A Global Day of Jewish Learning is both an event (November 7, 2010) and a process. As an event, it celebrates the conclusion of a forty-five year project, the inspired vision of Adin Steinsaltz, the translation of the Babylonian Talmud to Hebrew and English. Words do not suffice to capture the enormity of this work. It has the potential to democratize and thereby revolutionize Talmud study. As a process, adopting Talmud study represents a sea change in Reform Judaism. At its inception, the Reform Movement endeavored to leave the Talmud behind as a relic of Rabbinic Judaism, no longer a source of authority, and indeed, no longer relevant in the age of reason . The re-embrace of

Talmud as a source of timely and timeless wisdom is emblematic of a Reform Movement that is not afraid to reform itself and in the felicitous phrase of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, to renew the old and to sanctify the new.

We live in a culture that tends to engage in lengthy preparation for significant events, e.g., Bar/Bat Mitzvah and weddings, all too often at the expense of the ensuing status, e.g., a life as a Bar or Bat Mitzvah and a married couple. Consequently, in the case of A Global Day of Jewish Learning, taking its goals serious means that Jewish learning in general and Talmud study transcend a day. (write in Hebrew) *Mitzvah goreret mitzvah* (Avot 4:2) Performing one commandment leads to performing another commandment. This is an underlying theory of Jewish learning and living. Jewish learning, since it is intrinsically a social activity is, at its best, infectious, or to use a word more in vogue, viral. By participating in a day of global Jewish learning, it is possible not only to be on the same page literally with myriads of our people, it is also possible and desirable that we will be caught in a sacred web that links us not only around the globe but also through Jewish time sharing a home, or at least a home page, a page of Talmud, now made accessible to readers of Hebrew and English.

Talmud study is sanctified by a Kaddish, in all likelihood, the original version of the Kaddish, the Kaddish d'Rabbanan.¹ The operative paragraph in this Kaddish is:

God of Heaven and Earth, grant abundant peace to our people Israel and their rabbis, to our teachers and their disciples, and to all who engage in the study of Torah here and everywhere. Let there be for them and for us all, grace, love and compassion, a full life, ample sustenance, and salvation from God, and let us respond: Amen. (*Mishkan Tfillah*, p. 48)

The text reminds us that the goal of Jewish learning generally and Talmud study particularly is not only intellectual, but also, and primarily,

ethical.

Disciples of the wise increase peace in the world. (*Berakhot 64a*) On November 7th, may we be part of the Jewish community that is actively engaged in Talmud study, and thereby increasing peace in the world.

¹ The completion of a Talmudic tractate is sanctified by yet another version of the Kaddish – the *Kaddish d'Itchadata* (the renewal Kaddish), ostensibly to promise a return to Talmud study and to suggest cosmic, salvific implications for Jewish learning. The only other time this Kaddish can be recited is at a burial. (For more information, *Kaddish* by Leon Wieseltier)

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