

Writing the Talmud

Yair Lapid, Yediot Aharonot 8 Sivan 5770' May 21st 2010

"What's an intellectual?"

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, one of the world's leading intellectuals, a man whom Time magazine once defined "a one-in-a-millennium scholar," is sitting and thinking: what's an intellectual?

He is a smallish, long-bearded man, with one half of the moustache which is white and the other yellowish. Under the yellowish half a pipe is permanently stuck and the honorable rabbi smokes it, empties it with small taps into a clay ashtray and then refills it and resumes smoking.

"I was once in Russia," he finally says, "At St. Petersburg. In the evening I was taken to some party. There were all sorts of people there: a professor of physics, a poet, an opera singer, a painter I had never heard of but was told that he was a great painter. As is their custom, everybody drank all the time."

Did the honorable Rabbi drink too? I interrupt him.

"Well, yes," he says modestly, "The Almighty has given me the ability to drink without getting drunk."

For a moment we are grateful to the Creator of the world for small favors.

"About midnight," says the Rabbi, "There began a major debate which lasted till 3a.m., on a serious issue: Can dogs, too, reach Heaven."

And? I inquire curiously, Can they?

The Rabbi examines me with amused, very blue eyes, and probably decides that I am not an intellectual.

"In the US," he says, "I met more than once with people who are what you may call professional intelligentsia. You speak with them about their field of expertise and they have an endless amount of things to say; but the minute you switch to topics they know nothing about, all of a sudden it does not interest them; they only want to talk about what is important. I want to speak about things not because they matter or do not matter, but because they are a challenge to the mind."

But the dogs, Rabbi, I'm almost beseeching, What about the dogs?

"My grandson," says the Rabbi, as if he did not hear me, "Told me that he was studying at school about Joseph and his brothers. I was delighted, because it is such an interesting story. The boy is in Grade 2. He said to me: 'we got to the point where Joseph gets thrown into the pit.' 'well,' I said, 'and how did it all end?' and the boy looked at me and said: 'We haven't got there yet.' Can you believe it?"

I nod automatically, but in my mind's eye I see Dalmatians, Spaniels with fluttering ears, two curly Schnauzers and one chestnut Irish Setter who looks kind of lost.

"All he had to do," Says the Rabbi glumly, "was to turn a couple more pages and he'd know the end of the story. But he wouldn't do that. The teacher told him to close the book, so he does, until next time."

The honorable rabbi is not the kind of person to burst in tears, but obviously, it was difficult for him to find out that his eight-year old grandchild is not an intellectual.

Just as all those who are now sitting and wondering whether dogs do reach Heaven. The answer is that there is no answer, but the question can continue to be discussed until 3a.m., and it seems that what's really interesting is the discussion itself, especially of Rabbi Steinsaltz participates in it.

The desk of Rabbi Steinsaltz (he changed his name to Even Israel, as advised by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, but no one uses this new name) looks as if it was stricken by a hurricane: books piled on top of each other, ashtrays, tobacco pouches, a computer against which some more books are perched, cardboard files strewn in disorder, and on top of it all large printer sheets.

I draw one of those sheets toward me. These are the very last pages of the Steinsaltz Talmud which the Rabbi is finishing this month. He began working on this project when he was twenty-seven; now, at the age of seventy-two, perhaps the time has come to free himself for the sake of other projects.

Had you known that it would take so long, I ask the Rabbi, would you have started anyway?

"Probably not," he says, thoughtfully, "But who could have known?"

Have you ever feared that you might not complete the project?

The honorable rabbi does not understand the question. A number of years ago, he was hospitalized for to a life-risking operation. The doctors said that his chances of making it were very slim. He thanked them, went to his room and wrote his family a letter in which he told them that he loved them; to his friends he added "good bye and thanks a lot. And the same to those who do not love me." Then he read a little, turned off his night lamp and fell asleep instantly. "Why worry?" he says, "no good comes out of it anyway."

I ask the honorable rabbi if he is happy about ending his project. He fills his pipe with tobacco for the twentieth time and again is reminded of a story.

"Once," he says, "I met with Rostropovitch, the famous cellist, and he told me that his mother had carried him in her womb for ten whole months. When he was already an adult he once asked her, 'mom, if you'd worked on me for an extra month, why did I come out with such an ugly face?' and his mother replied, 'because I was busy preparing your hands!'"

When the honorable rabbi laughs he looks like an imp; not a nasty sort of an imp, but the sort who pinches children in the middle of the night. He does not bother to explain this anecdote, but he probably means to say that nothing is ever perfect.

Perfect or not, the Steinsaltz Talmud is an awe-inspiring, one-of-a-kind, almost inconceivable magnum opus. He also carries on his shoulders the earth-shaking task of preserving the Talmud's charms in the world of modern Judaism. Forty-five years of constant work have yielded a Talmud edition with a commentary, in which the original Aramaic is translated into flowing modern Hebrew and is accompanied with sketches and pictures, explanations and forewords, biographies of Talmudic sages, notes and detailed indexes, alongside a clear, eye-opening

commentary that anyone can understand, even if he or she are secular. Or perhaps especially if they are.

What is the target population? I ask: Yeshiva students, or me?

The Rabbi examines me in light of the question, then refills his pipe.

"You," he states. "What I tried to do was to remove the partition. I call what I've done 'a portable teacher.' You can take it, open it by yourself and read. If I keep talking but no one listens, that's not a dialogue. For most Israelis, the Talmud is a closed, locked up world. In order to have a dialogue, it must be made clearer to them."

And now it will be clearer? I query.

"Ah, well," the honorable Rabbi sighs, "nothing will turn the Talmud into a detective story."

In *Charedi* circles Rabbi Steinsaltz's project created, as could very well be expected, a huge storm. The late Rabbi Schach claimed that his edition of the Talmud is "bereft of even a spark of holiness" and urged to boycott it. In many *batei midrash* (places of Torah study) the Rabbis forbade to even have those books.

"I knew for certain that I was going to be rebuked," says the Rabbi with due modesty, "I just did not know when. What am I actually doing? All my life I have been trying to build bridges between Jews; whether they will actually walk on those bridges is beyond my control."

But why are they so upset? I insist.

"The Yeshiva world," says the Rabbi, regretfully, "Oy, the Yeshiva world! In days past, every *rosh yeshiva* (head of a Yeshiva) was surrounded by a pack of young wolves ready to pounce upon every word he would utter in order to prove him wrong. And today – " the Rabbi becomes silent, rapt in thought.

Nu? I ask, What is happening today?

"Today," he says glumly, "it has become a world of 'he said.' Everyone does everything that 'he said.' What has become of intellectual polemics? Once, polemics was the essence of Jewish thinking, this is what the Talmud is based upon."

Rabbi Steinsaltz was born in Jerusalem to a secular family. His father, Avraham Steinsaltz, was a staunch Communist who in 1936 went to Spain to fight in the civil war there as a member of the International Brigade. After his return he joined the *Lechi* ("Stern Gang") and took part in operations against the British. "He never told me what exactly he did there," says the Rabbi quietly; "unlike me, he was taciturn."

His son became a *ba'al teshuvah* in his teens and was recognized, almost from day one, as an exceptional genius. He studied at the Chabad Yeshiva of Tomchei Temimim and was very close with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. In the Rebbe's last years, Rabbi Steinsaltz was the only person with whom the Rebbe would speak privately for whole nights to discuss this point or that.

In addition to his Talmud project, the Rabbi has established the Steinsaltz Center in Jerusalem, a publishing house and a number of educational institutions such as the Tekoa Yeshiva, received the Israel Prize, President Award and the Prime Minister Award, taught at Yale University, has written hundreds of articles, is writing in a Washington Post website blog, and has published some sixty books which have

been translated, inter alia, into English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, German, and even Chinese.

And as if this were not enough, he also has a BA in physics from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Physics? I am astonished. Why physics?

"Once," the Rabbi says, and I know that yet another story is on its way, "I lectured at Princeton University, and somebody told me that Robert Klapish, one of the founders of the String Theory in physics, was then vacationing not far from there."

Klapish, it turns out, is one of the world's greatest physicists, Officier of the Legion d'Honneur and one of the builders of the huge accelerator in Switzerland.

"I was a bit bored in Princeton," the Rabbi continues, "So I went to visit him. I walk into his home and find him sitting in the midst of a great pile of books. Half of them were books on physics, and do you know what the other half was?"

I don't.

"Books of Kabbalah," says the Rabbi triumphantly. "You understand?"

I'm afraid, honorable Rabbi, that not quite.

"Kabbalah and physics," the Rabbi explains with holy patience, "belong to the same realm. It's a mystical world, nothing there is clear; none of the two disciplines have anything rational about them."

The Rabbi's fondness for the irrational, by the way, does not stop there; in the very few free hours he has, he tells me, he prefers reading science fiction books. "Have you heard of Isaac Asimov?" he asks me.

Of course.

"He is my wife's second cousin. We once spoke on the phone and said we should meet. But he decided to die first."

When Rabbi Steinsaltz chuckles it sounds like the bark of a dwarf poodle that reached Heaven. "The truth is," he reveals to me, "that I have even written one science fiction story, but I've never published it."

Why not?

"Nu," he says, "After all, it is not a respectable thing for one person to publish the Talmud along with science fiction books."

Is the honorable Rabbi beginning, at long last, to take himself seriously?

"No way," he is startled, "I may be the last Rabbi in the Land of Israel in whom the flame of Divine revelation is not burning. Everybody has that, except for me. I do not know how that happened, but everybody knows everything, except for me."

The Rabbi's blue eyes sparkle with delight, his mouth emits smoke and goodly words, intermittently. It is 2 am already, but he looks as if he had only begun his day. After I leave he will probably continue to sit there until 3 or 4 am, poring over those large printed sheets of his, adding a full stop here, deleting a comma there, fixing and improving until the very last minute the greatest commentary project ever produced since the return of the Jewish people to its Land.

Should, God forbid, the honorable Rabbi die tomorrow, I ask him, will he leave this world contented?

"Once there was a king," says the Rabbi, "called Karl the Fifth. He was a great monarch, and he was extremely worried about his own funeral. So he forced everyone to make rehearsals. They conducted a full funeral ceremony, in which he lay in his coffin supervising everybody."

And you?

"I no longer need rehearsals."

Perhaps, I suggest, after 45 years the honorable Rabbi can now go on vacation?

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz closes his eyes for a moment.

"I do not have time," he whispers, "I wish I had, but there still is so much that I need to do."