

Ki Tissa 5774 -- The Jewish Way to Learning

Jewish learning is not an individual matter. As with prayer and acts of chesed, the two other pillars on which our rabbinic tradition stands, Jewish learning is heightened by interchange with others. Tefilla, prayer, is enhanced in the presence of a minyan and by the cooperative effort of that minyan to praise, thank and petition God. With acts of chesed, we step out of our limiting silos into soul-expanding interchange, fulfilling needs both acute and overt -- and those barely realized.

We can certainly learn Jewishly by ourselves, but the ideal is to learn in partnership with other people, in chevruta. Lest we think otherwise, let's reflect for a moment on the first experience of chevruta we read about in the Torah, that between God and Moses.

The exchanges between God, Moses and children of Israel on and beside Sinai start out as unilateral proclamations and dictations by teachers to students. They do not effectively help B'nai Yisrael learn what they need to learn, let alone change their actions.

Let's look back at Parashat Yitro. God first speaks the Ten Commandments to the people. Hearing from God directly is overwhelming for the people, and they implore Moses to be an intermediary for God's words in the future. I question how much they really learn from God's proclamations, so consumed are they by fear of the setting and speaker. Even in the best of situations, who

learns the first time anyway? That much more so when, as according to a famous midrash, the laws and the mountain are being held directly over your heads?

Moses indeed becomes that intermediary of the law. Virtually the entirety of parashat Mishpatim is God's expansion of the Ten Commandments into more detailed law, to the ear of Moses. At the end of the parashah, Moses repeats all these laws to the people, writes them down as a covenant, and emblazons the assent of all three parties with dashes of blood on an altar and on the people. Quite relieved, I imagine, to hear not from God but rather from Moses, the people twice affirm their commitment to all of God's words. This, the acceptance of the covenant, all happens very quickly, too quickly, I would argue, for a people who are still more focused on the messenger and setting than the message.

God then summons Moses back up the mountain, ostensibly to give Moses the written tablets of the original commandments. But, as we know, Moses stays on Mt. Sinai much longer, 40 days to be exact, receives more laws, and only then is given the tablets.

Those 40 days, as opposed to the quick frontal experience of the first covenant-making, I believe, indicate to us how real learning happens, both in Biblical days and today. Those 40 days are filled with discussion between God and Moses about the law and its application -- the oral law, as we call it -- not just dictation of it. If that time is all about the letter of the law, then how can Moses then smash the letters of the law so cavalierly upon his descent from

the mountain and his viewing of the people and the Golden Calf, in our parasha this week? Would that not be a mortal sin, to immediately smash the word of God to the ground?

Moses must already know that God's words, although introduced on the first tablets, are still a work in progress. They need to be reintroduced, in the words of human beings, from a human being, integrated into the life of human beings by human beings. The first tablets were cracked almost from the beginning. They were bound to break in short time, so poorly were they absorbed by the people of Israel. The second tablets were whole and grounded, a symbol of the ongoing communication of law by God to Moses, and the more gradual and gentle relay of these laws, over the course of 40 years in the desert by Moses to the people, and in the generations ever since between Jews in study.

In our day, certainly, the written Torah, in Jewish tradition, is sacred. But it shares space equally with the discussions and expansion of Torah which have gone on ever since, the oral Torah. We cannot understand Jewish tradition, its commands and its privileges just from reading the scroll. We can only begin to understand its words by being in conversation over the words, by discussing what others have said about the words, and by creating new understandings of the words for ourselves. Without the second Torah, this, the written Torah, is just a holy shell. Our interchange with it gives it life, and gives us life.

How do we do this? We need to model the interchange which Moses and God have during those 40 days, and the discussions therein about the needs of hu-

mankind and heaven, and the exchange between the two. Learning takes concerted, dedicated time, not rushed, together with others, away from the distractions of life, not necessarily on a mountain but in a bet midrash, study hall, or in a library study room.

In Pirkei Avot, chapter 1, verse 6, we read the following:

א,ו יהושוע בן פרחיה וניתאי הארבלי קיבלו מהם. יהושוע בן פרחיה אומר, עשה לך רב, וקנה לך חבר; והוידן את כל האדם לכף זכות.

Yehoshua ben Prachiya and Nitai ha-Arbeli received the tradition from them. Yehoshua ben Prachiya says, 'Make for yourself a teacher, and acquire for yourself a partner. And judge each person toward innocence.'

The three parts of the mishna are all connected and direct us in the learning process. First, we must have teachers. We need to aggressively search them out and then open ourselves to them if we are to maximize the relationship. Not each teacher will be *our* teacher, even if they are masters in their craft. Then, to internalize the learning, expand its reach, and discuss its applications, we need study partners. Finally, we need to apply the learning in our worldly activity and in our relationship with others, with the same generosity, openness of spirit and non-judgmentalness that we bring to our study partnership. Chevruta, study partnership, thus becomes a model for our relationships with others as a whole.

We have many models for chevruta study in the Detroit Jewish community. There is Partners in Torah, where adults of all denominations gather for one-on-one and small group study each Tuesday, after an introductory lesson. We have individual study partnerships that people within the BI community have started on their own. Rabbi Jason Rubenstein of Machon Hadar, during his lecture three weeks ago, utilized chevruta time as a means for us to more personally embrace our past experiences and the thinking of Rav Yaacov Hutner.

I would love to see our community establish a few bookshelves in the chapel, which we fill with more *sifrei kodesh*, holy books of our tradition beyond the chumashim and siddurim that we already possess, and create a monthly chevruta evening, when we transform the chapel into a room of small group learning on issues and texts we choose together. Please approach me if you are interested.

God, Moses and B'nai Yisrael move forward as a unit bound by narrative, covenant and law with trial and error. The enterprise of the first tablets is hasty and ultimately unsuccessful. The people need sufficient time, the right teacher, and the right model of learning to truly absorb the covenant and its precepts. God accomodates them in each respect, empowering Moses as their teacher, having him communicate the laws over the span of 40 years, and modelling a give and take with Moses that the people can then employ with each other for their own learning.

It's time for us to get learning this way, the Jewish way.