



Do the Daf

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90,000 Jews gather in Met Life Stadium. No, it's not the opening of a joke; it was this summer's *Siyum HaShas*, the completion of seven and a half years of Talmud study called the *Daf Yomi*.

Of course, the historic gathering of so many Jews in one place, all celebrating the study of an ancient text, was not without moments of humor. One attendee tweeted, "Best announcement heard at the *Siyum HaShas*: 'The rabbis at the dais should enter through the Bud Light gate.'"

Some people train for marathons; others, triathlons. Still others collect chess championship trophies or pins on a map of places visited around the world. But Talmud study, every day, for seven and a half years?

A page a day sounds okay, until you realize the pages of the Talmud consist of incredibly dense Aramaic text, and the definition of a page is both the front and the back folio of the ancient legal text. Who would spend the better part of a decade of their life doing this?

It turns out that the majority of those involved in this kind of study are Orthodox men, particularly the ultra-Orthodox, who are sometimes referred to colloquially as "black hats" for their uniform dress. Photos of the Met Life Stadium show a sea of black, with a few stand-out colored baseball caps and a small segment behind a *mechitzah*, a divider, set aside for women.

Reb Mimi Fiegelson, of the Ziegler school of Rabbinics in Los Angeles, reflected recently on her experience with the Talmud growing up. She held up a volume of the Talmud in one hand and a copy of the New Testament in another, and she asked those

gathered: “What do these two books have in common?” The answer: “Growing up in Rehovot in the mid-1970s as an Orthodox girl, both of these books were equally prohibited to me.”

Noting gender bias and insularity, Chancellor Arnie Eisen of the Jewish Theological Seminary, leader of our Conservative movement, wrote recently in the Wall Street Journal that the *Daf Yomi* has become an exclusive, rather than an inclusive, practice – a divider setting apart Orthodox Jews who study these obscure texts at a clip so fast that one can only touch the surface of deep Talmudic argument, not for the sake of application to life’s challenges, but for their own sake. The Chancellor writes: “One disadvantage of the *Daf Yomi* is that it deprives students of a precious opportunity to raise difficult questions about meaning and truth.”

He has a point. Indeed, one classic rabbinic tale tells of a man who proudly announces to his rabbi: “I have been through the Talmud seven times!” “That’s fine,” the rabbi replies, “but how many times has the Talmud been through you?”

From this perspective, Chancellor Eisen proposes instead a different kind of learning for liberal Jews, “one that is,” he writes, “open to the larger world and bears the impact of modern thinking. It would cleave faithfully to texts, rituals, history and faith while being informed by art, music, drama, poetry, politics and law.”

He puts forward a dream: “Imagine if every Jew who wished to do so could awake to a platform of daily Jewish text not limited to Talmud – and to Jewish media not limited to text. Daily reading of Torah or Psalms would be juxtaposed with their echoes in the headlines of the day; a passage from Job would be accompanied by clips from the Coen brothers’ film ‘A Serious Man’...”

Our Chancellor’s proposal is a lovely dream. How wonderful to make Torah live in modern media that can be engaged by all. Moreover, his critique is valid. Many liberal Jews today resonate with the stories and action-packed teachings of the Talmud,

yet find it grueling to get through some of the dense halachic minutiae the Talmud can lapse into.

Nevertheless, as I read his words, I could not help but feel saddened that he was so quick to cede the study of Talmud through the *daf yomi* to the Orthodox. When he asks, “What about the rest of the Jewish population? How can they be offered a sense of community and meaning?” I want to cry out, “Through Talmud study!”

In my experience, broad Talmud study is not just an intense, socially rarefied endeavor. So much is there in the nooks and crannies of the Talmud.

Want to know how to run a business? It’s in there. Want to know how to build relationships, how to perpetuate a legacy? It’s in there. Want *chizzuk*, support, to get through challenging times? It’s in there.

But we’ll never find it if we focus only on the “sound bites” and what our modern art, music, and social media culture can do with them. We must relearn how to read the original score and listen for the wisdom, the connectedness, of what our ancestors have to teach us.

That is what Yedidah Koren found in her study of the daily daf: “It’s been the most steady thing in my life for the last 10 years... It really gives you a sense of stability and a strong emotional bond... the more you learn it, the more you connect to it, and it is always there for you.”

Ilana Kurshan uses poetry to relate to the words on the page and posted daily online reflections on how the *daf* corresponded to her life. She likens the rabbis’ question in *Brachot* about whether dreams come true to her own questions of whether the shared dreams her new husband and she have forged together will come to pass. She interprets a particularly esoteric portion about God’s judgment, and our judgment of ourselves, in modern language:

“I do not allow myself to go to bed until I have answered all the emails in my inbox... only to find myself resenting those people who do not, in turn, respond to me in a timely... fashion...instead of viewing myself as just another member of this endearingly fallible human race.”

She emerges inspired by the text to rise to more patience and compassion. She concludes, “What is exciting for me is that the debates were not resolved. You have everybody’s opinion...”

Regular study of the Talmud opens us to a mode of conversation that is open and expansive, and which can, if we allow it, translate back into the way we learn to listen to each other more graciously, with more interest and attempts to understand the other.

Salvador Litvak, who directed the hilarious film “When Do We Eat,” has, in the past seven and a half years, taken on another persona as well. He calls himself “The Accidental Talmudist.” He writes:

“On March 2, 2005, I ventured into 613 Mitzvah store...in Los Angeles...On previous visits to the bookstore...I would look over the long shelves of Talmud and shake my head. Those volumes seemed like bricks in a wall separating the super-religious from everyone else...But this time, I had a new thought. Why be intimidated? O.K. so each set of Talmud looks like three Encyclopedia Britannicas. But I was an English major in college, and they’re just books.”

He took one down from the shelf and brought it to the register. “So, you’re doing *Daf Yomi*,” the kid behind the register said.

“What’s *Daf Yomi*?” Sal replied.

The kid explained about the worldwide daily Talmud study program and concluded, “Today is day one.” With that began a journey for Sal that culminated at Met Life Stadium, having completed a full cycle of the Talmud. At that celebration, his friend Lionel turned to him and said: “More than the 2,711 pages, I’m proud of the person you’ve become.”

Taken aback, Sal asked, “The person I’ve become?”

“Sal, I’ve known you for 29 years,” his friend replied. “You’re different now. Not that you weren’t a nice guy before, but I would now hold you up against anyone in terms of respectfulness and kindness to others. It’s in the way you speak to your wife and kids, and everyone. It has to be because of this.”

Two days later, Sal headed to a much-dreaded family reunion. There was, as there is in many families, contention and discord. But with Lionel’s words still ringing in his ears, Sal “remembered a phrase we often read in the Talmud: Torah scholars increase peace in the world.”

So, arriving at that family reunion he pulled each family member aside and asked them each, with empathy and a true desire to understand, what the argument was really about.

“So much of Talmud,” he writes, “is just that: piercing the veil of words to decipher exactly where the viewpoints differ. What is at stake, and is there really a contradiction? I explained to each what I had heard the others say, and proposed a [different] way by which we might navigate this fragile situation. And it worked!

“Shabbat was a joy. That is why we study... Talmud... so that we can find a ... way.”

Daily Talmud study can inform our deeds, sensitize us, and ultimately, if we allow it, can help us to be the kind of people the world desperately needs. What a shame it would be to cede that kind of power to the ultra-Orthodox alone. What a shame it would be to give up our claim, our stake in that ancient wisdom, which, applied to our lives, can make us whole.

As Reb Fiegelson said, “Doing *Daf Yomi* is...coming home. It was claiming what was and is mine...to bring it home into my mind, and honestly, more importantly, into my heart as belonging to me, and I belonging to it.”

The Chancellor is right about so many things. But in accordance with ancient Talmudic practice, I have to say *adrabah*, on the contrary. Daily Talmud study is ours to make meaningful. It is our inheritance too.

So this year, with my father as my *chevruta* and the daily daf e-mail in my inbox, I am starting the cycle. I invite you to join us – to join Jews around the world. Claim your inheritance. Do the daf!



For study resources, see <http://www.templemanuel.com/DoTheDaf>