

Yom Kippur - Talmud for Today

Tonight/Today, I plan to make the case to study Talmud, a 63 volume, 1500 year old, religious text that is at the core of rabbinic ideology. You might be thinking, not sexy, not urgent and totally unrelated to the contemporary world. And really, aren't rabbis always pushing studying Talmud, what could be different now?

Personally, I am surprised to find myself giving a Yom Kippur sermon about the relevance of studying Talmud. Rabbi Rose has a masters in Talmud and loves Talmud study. I often find it challenging and have sometimes wondered about its relevance. But now, thirty years after my first exposure to Talmud study, I have a newfound appreciation. I am finding it very relevant for today, an important antidote to many challenges in our contemporary society and a helpful tool for character refinement, the key challenge Yom Kippur asks of us.

This year, for the first time, my daughter was assigned at school to read the same article I was reading on my own. (And yes, for those of you who have watched my children grow up here at Beth Shalom and remember my first Rosh Hashanah when I was pregnant, it is hard to believe that they are now juniors in high school). The article, which also appeared as a Ted talk is by social scientist and researcher, Jonathan Haidt, and titled: "Why the Past 10 years of American Life have been Uniquely Stupid".

For those of you who haven't read the article, Haidt claims we are more intolerant, more judgemental, more divided and stupider as a society. Haidt attributes part of these problems to social media's algorithms which are designed to trap us in digital echo chambers, where we hear our own positions reinforced over and over, limiting our exposure to different viewpoints, which makes it easy to perceive those with different political views as mistaken, and even sinful and evil. These algorithms also allow for the exponential spread of extreme positions, conspiracy theories and false truths. As an academic himself, Haidt speaks of the fear academics feel over expressing unpopular opinions which could lead to negative consequences, leading some academics to refrain from sharing their thoughts and hurting academic research. This fear is familiar to so many of us, in many different areas beyond the world of academia.

We live in a time where democracy feels under threat, civility is being eroded, truth is easily twisted and false narratives flood social media. On top of that or because of that we are becoming stupider. Ouch.

Micha Goodman, of the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, speaking about the effects of the digital revolution explains: "Because of the digital revolution, our lives are being transformed by three grand bargains. The intellectual bargain: we have more knowledge but less capacity to concentrate

and focus. The social bargain: we are much more available but much less attentive. And most importantly, the emotional bargain: we are much more connected, but much less empathetic leading to a huge empathy deficit.”

Less ability to concentrate and focus. Definitely true for me. Less attentive and easily distracted. Also true for me. More connected, reading about the lives of many more folks all over the world and what hardships they face, yes, but how much am I doing about it? Have I become less empathetic? I like to hope it is not true for me, but I am worried it too might be true. And I definitely worry about the empathy deficit on a larger scale.

So what does this have to do with Talmud? Micah Goodman suggests studying Talmud and adopting Talmudic methodology in our lives can serve as a critical antidote to the challenges created by the digital revolution. Why Talmud?

Consider who the Talmud holds up as its role models and the values they exemplify. You can learn a lot about a society based on who it cherishes as its role models and heroes. (As an aside, what do American role models and their values say about contemporary American society?) While there are many role models in the Talmud, today/tonight, I want to focus on one of the most famous ones: Hillel, and his school of thought, the house of Hillel, Beit Hillel.

Hillel is well known for the advice he gives, especially in Pirkei Avot, and his warm, and inclusive approach. Many of you might know him from the famous story of him and his counterpart Shammai being approached by an individual wanting to convert to Judaism on the condition that all of Torah could be taught while the prospective conversion student was standing on one foot. Shammai pushes away the prospective student. And Hillel responds:

"What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.

That is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary—go and study it!" זיל גומור!

Hillel and Shammai, frequently arrive at different interpretations of Jewish law. Both are respected important scholars, but in the vast majority of cases, we follow Hillel's position. Why? The Talmud wants us to understand the reason for this and provides a famous story (Eruvin 13b) by way of explanation:

Rabbi Abba said that Shmuel taught: For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. These said: The halakha, Jewish law, is in accordance with our opinion, and these said: The halakha is in accordance with our opinion. Ultimately, a Divine Voice, a bat kol, emerged and proclaimed: Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the halakha is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel.

This is an amazing story - divine intervention in a human debate over who is right. We are told that both are right and follow the words of the Divine AND we are to follow one, Beit Hillel over the other.

Why? The Talmud continues with an explanation: **Beit Hillel was agreeable and patient, and would teach both their own statements and the statements of Beit Shammai, and shared first the opinions of Beit Shammai before their own.**

Yes, Beit Hillel shared the contrasting position first, sharing it as a serious option and only then would offer their own position. And on occasion, after considering the opinion of Beit Shammai, they changed their mind and adopted the position of Beit Shammai. They were not trapped by needing to be right. It is for these reasons, not because they had better arguments, or better logic, or better communication or social media teams, but because of their approach that we follow Hillel.

This is what the Talmud upholds, listening, deep listening, where judgment is replaced with curiosity, what the American psychologist Carol Gilligan calls radical listening.

Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai's different legal conclusions resulted in both schools permitting some things the other school forbade, including which marriages were forbidden and which food was considered kosher. While these differences could easily result in social distancing and barriers, the two

schools continued to socialize and intermingle. The mishna (which is the earliest stata of the Talmud) makes a point of stating that “Beit Shammai did not refrain from marrying women from Beit Hillel, and neither did Beit Hillel refrain from marrying the women of Beit Shammai.” And they ate from each other’s dishes and in each other’s homes despite different opinions on which food is kosher. *This is in contrast to our current American reality where many of us are not interested in engaging with folks with different political opinions. Consider a Pew study from the 1960s, a time of great political division in our country, which found 3% of respondents answered they would be concerned if their son or daughter were to marry someone with different political beliefs. This same question was recently asked and found a full 50% of respondents shared they would be concerned.*

In contrast to our digital age and fast information, **Talmud is slow information.** It’s not meant to be digested quickly or be a response to what is trendy. You read each word carefully, trying to understand the different possible meanings behind it and the significance of every word choice. It is slow to learn. It is common to spend hours pouring over only a part of a page. It was codified slowly over several centuries with attention on every word.

Talmud preserves the arguments and conversations, and stories about the sages. And it often intentionally leaves out the rulings or summary statements, wanting those studying

Talmud to engage their own intellectual skills in following the argument, finding merit in each position, and seeing the limitations of each position, and asking good questions. And lots of questions, adding our own layer of questions to the generations and generations of questions.

Talmud passages often conclude with multiple acceptable positions, ambiguity, unresolved debates and even more questions. For the rabbis, the debate is a spiritual practice, part of the process of interpreting and living revelation. The Talmud is designed as a core religious text but one that does NOT present a unified set of rules or practices or tell you what to believe.

This is in contrast to other important legal and religious texts from the same time period. Consider the corpus of Roman law, which canonizes the law but leaves out the arguments and the Nicene Creed which codifies a set of unified beliefs for Christians all over the world. What a different approach than the one the Talmud adopts.

Talmud is relational. It is studied in hevruta, with a study partner, who is supposed to help sharpen your thinking, and help you understand different positions. And deep friendships and cultivation of empathy often arise from these hevrutas. Talmud is also relational through time as you get to know different Talmudic sages and commentators, and what animates their opinions and actions. You learn to appreciate

each of them, and their respectful way of engaging with one another.

Talmud is expansive and a system of intellectual rigor - you study and seek to understand all the positions on the Talmudic page, and ones that get added through the generations. With Talmud, there are no solid proofs of what is right, there are good arguments but we need to use our best reasoning to decide what is most plausible. It is an exercise in keeping minds sharp and open - what Jonathan Haidt might consider an anti-stupidity regiment.

Rabbinic tradition wants us to do two things simultaneously. One, live by the confines of halacha, Jewish law, with its permitted and forbidden actions and understanding that there is an acceptable code of behavior for living a sacred, ethical life. And at the same time, we are told to study Talmud and with it to have a wider intellectual life, where we embrace questions, dialogue, and understanding opinions, practices, and life stories, that go beyond the confines of normative halachic practice. It's an amazing posture - coupling a wide intellectual discourse with the practice of an established, narrower set of acceptable behavior. And the continuous engagement in study allows for thoughtful adaptation and new understandings of Jewish law to emerge.

Studying talmud can be a process of character development. Talmudic methodology ideally leads us to a mindset of intellectual generosity as we are taught not to

dismiss anything initially but to expend effort to understand different approaches, opinions and their nuances, on the path to figuring out what ultimately seems the most reasonable position. It takes humility to be open to the idea that there could be an insight not already apparent.

With all this discussion of what Talmud is, let us turn to one more Talmudic story:

Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Zarnokei and Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak were going to the city of Asya to establish the calendar for the coming year. Reish Lakish joined them, saying: I will go learn how they do this. On the way, Reish Lakish saw a number of things that seemed religiously problematic and questioned the others multiple times about what he saw. They dismissed his concerns. Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Zarnokei and Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak **said: This one is troublesome.** (The technical aramaic word for a troublesome one or nuisance is Truda אַתְּרָע) **When they reached** their destination, **they went up to the roof and pulled up the ladder behind them**, intentionally excluding Reish Lakish. (Sanhedrin 26a)

Now, what are we to take away from this story? *Pause*

On one hand, this resonates. When someone challenges us--over and over-- it's hard not to feel bothered or even threatened. It can feel good to climb up to some high place with like minded folks, and pull up the ladder to avoid

engaging with people who disagree with us and ask us hard questions and might even point to our faults and shortcomings.

But where does that leave us? Comfortable. And happy.
Maybe.

But also, stranded and isolated, excluding other voices and shutting off the possibility of learning from others. Perhaps resulting in more poor results and possibly more stupid.

These two rabbis who climbed up to the roof and pulled up the ladder, do not appear anywhere else in the Talmud outside this story. They disappear. They become irrelevant, while Resh Lakish becomes a very important Talmudic teacher and figure, appearing throughout the Talmud.

This story is about more than just setting a calendar. It is about establishing the rules for governing society and gets included in those decisions. It is a cautionary tale about the price of exclusion - you become irrelevant and disappear like those two rabbis on the rooftop.

And it is a story of speaking up, sharing your truths, even when unpopular and calling out things that don't seem right.

And we can read it as a cautionary tale about how we raise complaints and challenges. Reish Lakish, though he doesn't disappear from the Talmud, has his concerns ignored and ends up being excluded, with no access to how the calendar is set or his concerns addressed. He is a nudnik in this story.

And nudniks are nudniks, and not fun and we are tempted to dismiss them.

Reading this story today, influenced by our current political landscape, I'm appreciating that Rabbi Hiyya bar Zarnokei and Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak did not cast any aspersions on Reish Laksih or besmear his reputation or say anything not nice about him. We only hear of them not taking Reish Lakish's questions seriously and pulling up the ladder, but they don't respond by changing the rules on how the calendar is to be set, or spreading false truths, or turn to conspiracies or violence as a response to Reish Lakish's challenge.

The Talmud is replete with cautionary tales. They're intended to make us think and rethink the seriousness of our words and actions. They warn us about the costs of shutting out voices, changing rules of the game, threats to healthy communities, and offer guidance on how to act and speak. They urge us to be compassionate and thoughtful.

So where do we go with my pitch to study Talmud and incorporate its methodology into our lives as a helpful antidote to the contemporary world and the impact of the digital revolution?

Personally, my plan is to increase my own personal learning this year through taking a Talmud class or two (both here through Beth Shalom with Rabbi Stone and elsewhere). Then there is the critical work of adopting Beit Hillel's practice of

considering and honoring multiple opinions, being open to changing my mind, and engaging, and socializing with those with whom I disagree, approaching different perspectives with curiosity rather than judgment.

With Hillel as my role model, let me be inspired by one of his pieces of advice found in Pirkei Avot: Say not: ‘when I shall have leisure I shall study;’ perhaps you will not have leisure. (PA 2:4).”

And I say to myself, don’t wait until I have leisure to start following this advice. Now is the time to make more time to study, studying Talmud, strengthening my skills at constructive debate, learning to listen with curiosity, asking thoughtful questions, open to changing my mind, and working to increase my empathy for others.

As Hillel concluded his one foot challenge “go and study” זיל גומור

A note on divrei torah - I am going to be at cbs tomorrow and delivering this dvar torah there and rabbi rose will be here, at uuc, and delivering the dvar torah she gave tonight at cbs. If you end up hearing one of us twice and missing one of the divrei torahs, or just really want to hear us again, both of our divrei torah were sent out yesterday as you tube links and we're happy to share them.