

Temple Aliyah
Shavuot 2016 Sermon Slam
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“People of the Book”

I don't remember what age I was when I first learned that Jews were known as the people of the book. But I do remember that it made a lot of sense to me, because of course I grew up surrounded by books. Our house, like the houses of my Jewish friends, was filled with books and people who read them. Built in bookcases were added to any vacant wall and reading was a daily required activity. Discussions of new books, who had just read what, were part of our regular conversations.

When we had dinner in the city (New York) with my grandmother, weather permitting, it was always followed by a stroll down whatever street or avenue was near with the intention of finding and browsing in whatever bookstore we came across. In elementary school I remember there was a “balloon to the moon club” a big bulleting board tracking each student. Every time we finished a book another balloon was added above your name. You could get extra credit for getting the most books read first. What a deal - to get extra credit for reading!

At some point I learned that People of the book was referring to one very specific and special book and that shifted things in my mind a bit. I think it made me feel both a little disappointed that we weren't talking about lots of books and yet it also felt a bit awe-inspiring to think that all Jews had this one book in common to read and ponder and reread again. That may have been the point where I started to pay a bit more attention to my Sunday school classes. It may also have been right around that time that I learned that not everyone was working with the same material. The immediate neighborhood I grew up in was predominately Catholic. I remember I was playing with some of my neighborhood friends and they were telling me about what they learned in Sunday school. I got really confused – I knew I had missed a couple of weeks – but I didn't remember learning a thing of what they were talking about.

We were the people of the book because we had the Torah. We were the people who had been given this incredible book that was to be our guidepost

for learning and life and to have been the people that received this book was very special indeed.

I am not sure if Jews invented the concept of the book club but if you define a book club as a group of people who regularly gather (perhaps weekly) to ponder the meaning of a shared reading, discuss its personal connections to our lives today and how it might say something about the larger community, – perhaps we did.

Over the years I have come to think that having the label, People of the book has been a gift in of itself. I think that, that term has created a stereotype – a very positive stereotype – both for how we see ourselves and how those outside our community see us—that we are people who value learning, questioning and growing. Stereotypes can be self-fulfilling prophecies sometimes for the good. Our children are as aware of this mantle as is the world at large. I think our commitment to reading and learning whether through Torah study or through the neighborhood book club have become very much an identifiable piece of what it means to be a Jew.

Technology has altered our relationship with books and information – in many good ways and some challenging ways. We have more information more instantly at our disposal than at any other time in our history. Today we are likely to be sharing our bookshelves with our Kindle – and yet, there is nothing like standing on the bima holding a yad over ancient, handwritten words, carefully scribed on parchment, creating a sense of connection, with our past, our present and our future to remind us that this is who we are - the people of the book.

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