

Message to Confirmation Class -- 2005

Adin Steinsaltz, one of the most important Jewish thinkers of our day and age, a modern-day Rashi, who is translating the entire Talmud into modern Hebrew, has written, in his book, “The Essential Talmud”,

“If the Bible is the cornerstone of Judaism, then the Talmud is the central pillar, soaring up from the foundations and supporting the entire spiritual and intellectual edifice. In many ways, the Talmud is the most important book in Jewish culture, the backbone of creativity and of national life. No other work has had a comparable influence on the theory and practice of Jewish life, shaping spiritual content and serving as a guide to conduct.”

This year we studied Talmud, which again, according to Steinsaltz, is “the repository of thousands of years of Jewish wisdom... the conglomerate of law, legend and philosophy, a blend of unique logic and shrewd pragmatism, of history and science, anecdotes and humor.”

Talmud is so important, that the rabbis say that God spends three hours every day studying Talmud. What a fascinating image and concept! Even God, who after all, should have a pretty decent understanding of the text, even He, devotes a portion of His day to studying this great work.

When one studies Talmud, it is you are immediately catapulted into an ongoing conversation that began over 2,000 years ago, and which our ancestors have engaged in ever since. After the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 CE, as the dispersion of our people, known as the Diaspora formally began, our sages pored their energy into creating a text that would serve as a way of life to guide our people wherever we would go.

Containing both passages of law, halakha, as well as expositions of flight, fancy and fantasy, or agada, it is a book of contradictions, defined as the word of God, yet clearly the result of arguments and disputes among men. It is a religious book, yet one which does not shy away from expressing serious doubt about the nature of God. Much of the material is rational, yet there are mystical passages as well. The questions it raises, often left unanswered, are as important as the answers proffered.

All of which is to give you the answer you may have been wondering all year long – Why are we learning this stuff?

There are several important messages I wish to impart to you this Shabbat, and they are related to our course of study.

As exemplified by our study of Talmud, I want you to have a connection to your past.

As Jews, you are the product of all those generations who came before you. They live through you, and Judaism lives on, through you as well. You will shape and determine

the nature of the Jewish people and of our future, by virtue of how you will live your lives. I want you to be engaged in this wonderful enterprise, and you can only do that if you understand that you are linked to a rich and beautiful heritage, with sacred and meaningful traditions and customs, a way of life and body of literature that contain fascinating and intellectually stimulating passages.

Furthermore, I want you to understand that our perception of the world, our unique understanding of right and wrong, our values are all mediated through the texts held dear by our people. One way to form that link with the past is through study and knowledge. The ignorance in the Jewish world today is appalling. Despite the fact that we are the most educated and sophisticated Jewish community in history, and our achievements and accomplishments surpass other American groups, we know little about our own Judaism, and are barely conversant in the texts which have served for centuries as the bedrock and foundation of our people.

Gemorrah, Rashi, Tosephta, Tosafot, Midrash, Baraita, Zohar, Shulhan Aruch, Mikraot Gedolot, Sefer HaHinuch, Tzena Reina, Humash, Rambam, Sheolot u'Teshuvot – Not only did every Jew at one time know what these words referred to, but they also could intelligently discuss the ideas and concepts in each. And they did that at a time when most of the world was illiterate. Our ignorance has not made us any richer. It certainly has not made us any wiser.

So part of my purpose this year, and part of my message to you this morning – is to become familiar with our, with your sacred texts, to be a part of the conversation, to take up the mantle, and to be linked with our past, so that you will play a role in forging our future. The task of creating Judaism is not yet finished. You have a role to play. New forms and new interpretations constantly emerge out of the encounter with our past – Let them come from you.

I hope then that your connection to Judaism will prod you to participate in the Jewish endeavor, not to be indifferent to it, and that in turn will hopefully lead you to do three things.

Be connected to each other, and to the Jewish people. In other words, understand as the Talmud proclaims, *Kol Yisrael areivin zeh b'zeh*: All of Israel is responsible for one another. You are responsible for the Jewish people, for Jewish survival, for carrying on our traditions. Just as the generation before you helped to save Soviet Jews who were imprisoned in the oppressive gulag of communism, and helped to build the modern day State of Israel, now you must pick up the gauntlet, and act on behalf of Jews and Jewish communities, wherever they may be.

The second thing I hope you will take away from our studies is the importance of responding in a Jewish fashion to situations presented to you. There is a unique set of Jewish ethics and values, and it is my hope that you come to appreciate this so that you will always strive to act accordingly. Our Christian friends are fond of asking, w-w-j-d, meaning “What would Jesus do?” We too, can use almost the same initials, and ask,

“What would Judaism say we should do?” Only don’t be surprised if there is more than one answer. Our faith is not monolithic, and that is part of the secret to its beauty and vitality. Coming to understand how Judaism approaches various situations then, inherently necessitates further ongoing, regular study of Judaism.

Finally, the means to be connected to our past, our people, our texts, and our ethics, is by living your lives as Jews and by being a part of the Jewish community. Seek out your fellow Jews. Take on mitzvot. You can do this in a myriad of ways, and it is not that difficult. Make a decision to refrain from eating shellfish, pork or other forms of trafe. Make a commitment to refrain from shopping and using money on Shabbat. Judaism does not have to be all or nothing. The crucial thing is to choose to be engaged in some fashion with the world we have peeked into this year.

Let that world, the world of our ancestors, the world of Talmud, the world of the rabbis and their dialectic become yours. Let the fate of the Jewish people be of concern to you. Let the song of Judaism live through you.

Amen.

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