

Excuses for not studying Torah

In this week's Torah portion, *Ekev*, we are enjoined to study and teach the Torah:

And you shall teach [my words] to your children, speaking of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. [Deut. 11:18-19]

We are indeed supposed to study Torah, but few of us actually do. The excuses are legion. What's YOUR excuse? Below are a few suggestions, but I am sure you can think of many more.

Excuse Number 1 - I am too old and don't learn easily.

Rabbi Akiva was an illiterate peasant at forty. His girlfriend told him, "I'll marry you only if you become a rabbi". He did and slowly rose to become the most illustrious rabbi of the Talmud, and preached for fifty years.

Excuse Number 2 - I am too young and have other interests.

Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah became head of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish "Supreme Court", at age eighteen. It was because of his merit: He was already a great Torah scholar.

Excuse Number 3 - I am too busy earning a living to support my family.

Our most prominent rabbis had demanding professions and were frequently poor. Hillel was a welldigger, Shammai a building contractor, Yehoshua a blacksmith, Meir a scribe, Yochanan ben Zakkai a businessman, Chanina a honey merchant, Maimonides and Nachmanides much-sought-after physicians, and Rashi made good wine. The Talmud says:

Do not say "I will study when I have the time", because perhaps you will never have the time. [Pirkei Avot 2:5]

Excuse Number 4 - I am not good enough with words to discuss or teach Torah.

When God called on Moses, Moses said the same thing:

O Lord, I have never been eloquent... I am slow of speech and slow of tongue. [Exodus 4:10]

Excuse Number 5 - I am not religious.

Judaism is a religion of action, not a religion of belief. The Torah and its commentators discuss many practical matters with concrete implications for our everyday lives.

Excuse Number 6 - I am not smart enough.

There are four levels of understanding of the Torah, each deeper than the previous one. There is a right level for everyone.

Excuse Number 7 - I am a traditional woman and I am not obligated to study Torah.

But you can choose to. In Talmudic days, there was a very learned woman named Beruriah who debated and even challenged the Sages on their interpretations of the Torah and was highly praised by them. [Tosefta Keilim Bava Kamma 4:9, Tosefta Keilim Bava Metzia 1:3] Rashi's three daughters were learned in Torah and Talmud. There are many modern female scholars in Jewish tradition.

Excuse Number 8 - I am always on the go for my work and carry very little luggage.

Ever hear of Android tablets, smartphones and the like? Did you know that the entire Talmud, in both versions, plus the Tanach, the Midrash, the Zohar, and all major commentators, both in Hebrew and in translation, will fit comfortably on a thumb drive, ready to be retrieved instantly?

The Talmud teaches that the commandment to study the Torah is equal to all other major commandments combined, such as honoring parents, practicing charity, and making peace between people. [Peah 1:1; Shabbat 127a]

Excuse Number 9 - I am rich and fortunate, and there is nothing I need from God.

But others have needs. Why don't you use your means to help them? It will make you feel even better. Study the laws of charity to find out the best way to accomplish this. Their insight may surprise you. The Talmud tells the story of Rabbi Eleazar ben Harsom, who had

inherited immense wealth, but disguised himself as a common man and went from city to city to study the Torah. One day his own employees almost had him imprisoned. [Yoma 35b]

Excuse Number 10 - I am charming, good-looking, and popular with the opposite sex. It's a distraction I can't tear myself away from.

Joseph could. His employer's wife tried to seduce him, but he knew it was not right to yield to her. She had him thrown in jail, and from there he rose to become the savior of the Jews and the progenitor of two tribes of Israel. If he could, why can't you?

So what's YOUR excuse? Well, at least you are reading or hearing this. That's a start!

Shabbat shalom.