

YK5782 morning

All Directions Home: Talmud Torah as our Traveling Sinai

The Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisrael Meir ha-Kohen Kagan established a Yeshiva in Radun, his town which had about 1,000 Jews before the Holocaust. At the time it was in Poland; now it is part of Belarus. When the Soviet Union first arose and took over the region, the ideal of communism was popular among many of the oppressed in Eastern Europe. Many Jews were also attracted to the cause of increasing the rights of workers and the poor. Of course, they didn't know then that the Soviets would turn out to be even more oppressive than the Tsar. Well, some of Chofetz Chaim's students joined the Soviets and, as was expected of a dedicated Soviet, they renounced their Judaism. Soviet doctrine rejected all religion. For them, a true follower was devoted only to the interests of the state.

One particularly harsh winter, the townspeople of Radun suffered terribly. Their survival was not certain. Food was scarce and help from the government all but non-existent. The Yeshiva students were the poorest of the poor and that winter, they too were starving. So Chofetz Chaim went to visit one of his former students who had abandoned his faith and was now an administrator in the Soviet government.

When they met, Chofetz Chaim said, "*Gut Shabbos, Reb Archik!*"

Reb Archik replied gruffly, "Those so called holy days of yours are no different than any other day to me."

Slightly taken aback, the Chofetz Chaim said, "So you say, but still, let me give you a little thought about this week's Torah portion."

Archik sniffed, “You know that I don’t believe in the Torah anymore.”

“Just the same,” said the Chofetz Chaim, “everyone delights in a clever idea. Let me share a *vort*, a little teaching. This week we begin reading about the Creation of the World and that God placed the Tree of Life in the center of the Garden of Eden. Why did God put it in the center and why was it necessary for the Torah to tell us exactly where it was? The reason is so that everyone could have equal access to it. There are many ways for someone to reach the Tree of Spiritual Life. Some do it through the study of Torah, some through *mitzvot*, and some through kindness to other people. You no longer study Torah, Reb Archik, and you no longer believe in Shabbat and the *mitzvot*. But you are a good-hearted man. I’ve known that about you since you were my student. Now, I want you to know that my students are starving. *Gut Shabbos*, Reb Archik.” And with that, the Chofetz Chaim nodded his head and returned to his home. The next day, a wagonload of food was delivered to the school. (Art Scroll, Genesis Vol VI, p. 1906)

Even though his student had moved so very far away from his Jewish heritage, the Chofetz Chaim still reached out to him. He reminded Reb Archik that beyond observance and the active participation in Jewish ritual life is a connection with family and community.

Earlier, Allan Markman chanted from the Torah these words from Deuteronomy: “*Atem nitzavim ha-yom, kul-khem*

You are standing today, all of you, before Adonai your God: your leaders, your tribes, your elders, your officers; every man in Israel, your children, your wives, and the stranger who is in the midst of your camp - - - All of you are here to enter into the *Brit*, the Covenant of Adonai, your God.

Note that the Covenant that binds us as people, the Covenant that created our people, was not exclusive. It was not and is not reserved for the scholars and the leaders. It was not and is not reserved for the men or the home born. Rather, everyone who wishes to be so is included in our family. And of course, that includes those who were not born of our family and faith, those who chose to join our family. We welcome and embrace them as blessings. It also includes those who, like Reb Archik, feel that in order to be true to their intellectual pursuit or a new philosophy, career, or any other relationship, they can no longer be an active part of the Jewish community. And it includes those who struggle with their faith, those who have theological doubts, and those who simply are not attracted to religious observance. Nevertheless, they all still are a part of our Covenant and our family.

The Jewish people are a family. Of course, like any family, that does not mean we'll always agree with one another. *Lehefekh*, we would be pretty shocked if all of a sudden we all agreed with one another. But disagreement, even estrangement, was never a disqualification.

In the Talmud, Rabbi Abba the son of Zavda is quoted as saying, "Even though [an Israelite] has transgressed, he is still called 'Israel.' Rabbi Abba said, there is a popular saying: 'A myrtle, though it stands among reeds, is still a myrtle.'" (Sanhedrin 44a)

It is for that reason that we begin Yom Kippur by declaring that no matter how far someone has strayed, we welcome them back to pray with us, to repent, reflect, and renew with us, to reestablish their bonds to the family of the Jewish people with us.

I spoke on Rosh HaShanah about the creative and regenerative spirit of Judaism and the Jewish family: that after every setback, after every heartbreaking experience of loss, destruction, oppression, and exile we nevertheless found a way to persevere, to adjust, to learn, and to build a life for ourselves in new lands; reimagining what it means to be Jewish in ever changing circumstances; growing, evolving, and excelling wherever we found ourselves.

But how can we explain why Jews and Judaism have survived after the most tragic of events? How can we explain the successes of our Jewish family when all the other ancient cultures and nations have disappeared from the modern world? What is the secret of Judaism and the Jewish family?

God, Torah, and Israel! The three pillars of Judaism.

We have already spoken about the Covenant, the *Brit*, the sacred pledge that binds us to God and to one another, that the Covenant joins all of our family in an eternal relationship with the Divine source of all life. And we just reviewed the fundamental principle of our family unity: that regardless of differences and no matter how far one has gone, family is still family.

There still is one pillar we must consider and more fully appreciate in order to understand Judaism: **Torah**.

In this case, we are speaking of Torah in the broader sense and not just The Five Books of Moses. When we speak of Torah study it includes the entire Hebrew Bible, the Talmud, and all serious Jewish literature, history, philosophy, and law. So, is the secret of Judaism just found in study and more study? Yes - - - and No!

Yes, study and more study is important. It is the portal, the gateway, to wisdom. I'm a Rabbi. What did you expect me to say?!

But the secret of Judaism is not just study. Rather, it is how we study; it is the approach to study that makes all the difference. Let me share with you an example:

There's a curious phrase in the Book of Proverbs: "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in vessels of silver" (Proverbs 25:11).

Ascribed to wise King Solomon, this proverb is somewhat confounding. Since the golden apple is rare and valuable, why would someone cover it in silver, a less rare and valuable metal? And what is the significance of the simile: A well-turned phrase is like a golden apple covered in silver? In what way is that true?

Moses Maimonides, the RAMBAM, the great scholar, physician, and philosopher, provided an inspired interpretation of that proverb in his masterpiece *Moreh Nevuchim*, Guide for the Perplexed. The RAMBAM had experienced both the heights of success and the humiliation of being exiled from his home. He was born and raised in Spain during what is frequently called the Golden Age of Spain, the 12th century, when Spain was under Muslim occupation. With the rise of more violent Almohads, a radical Islamic movement, RAMBAM and his family were forced to flee. Eventually, he made his way to Egypt.

For the RAMBAM, the key to understanding scripture was in recognizing the similes and metaphors of the text. If one reached a conclusion after only the first impression or by looking at the simple, or the surface, evidence one would most likely miss the point.

Likewise, a golden apple covered in silver was a metaphor for a deeper method of study. This is how RAMBAM explains it:

The wise king [Solomon] said, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in vessels of silver" (Prov. 25:11). This is the explanation of what he said:--The word *maskiyot*, the Hebrew equivalent for 'vessels,' denotes filigree work. - - - The eye can see through them [the filigree]. Thus Solomon meant to say, 'Just as apples of gold in silver filigree with small apertures, so is a word fitly spoken.'"

The RAMBAM was teaching us to look closely and then closer still at the text we are studying. At first glance, the word, the text, may have an attractive meaning. It appears as silver. It's valuable. It's interesting. Okay, very nice. Next! But only when one looks closer is it apparent that the true value is deeper than the first impression. On closer inspection it is apparent that the silver is only a filigree that covers something much more rare and valuable. One has to look through the small openings of the filigree to notice that beneath the silver is gold.

So it is with Torah. Reading the literal text is worthy and valuable. But the real value, the layers of true insight and inspiration are only evident when you look beyond the surface.

When we study, we look first at the original text, whether it is Torah, the Hebrew Bible, Talmud, or Midrash. But that is only the start. Then we look closer, through the filigree, and examine the interpretations of generations of commentators, each one with something different to say. And in doing so we are invited to participate in the dialectic, an investigation of seemingly

conflicting or contradictory things. Our voices, our perspectives, and our insights are then added to the study experience.

Professor Daniel Boyarin, one of the greatest modern academic scholars of Talmud, is among those who have championed the intertextuality of Jewish study. They have identified our Jewish tradition of gathering together for Torah study and considering different, even contradictory, opinions as one of the primary reasons for Judaism's continued survival and development. For thousands of years, we have been establishing formal and informal forums of study. These opportunities for study bring together people and invite all to participate and share. Together we learn and we teach each other.

This tradition of study serves both as a democratization of the text and an essential reaffirmation of the intrinsic worth of each person who participates.

In his book [A Traveling Homeland](#), Boyarin describes how the study of Talmud originated in the Land of Israel but only truly developed in the Diaspora. In fact, different forms of Talmud study flourished in the Sephardi schools of Spain and the Ashkenazi schools of Central and Eastern Europe. For each, the world of Torah and Talmud study was a traveling homeland: a rich and nurturing community where Jews could spiritually and intellectually develop; where new ideas wrestled with old assumptions; where inspiration was born, minds sharpened, and a sense of connection and continuity was formed.

For the past 1,000 years Jews in Christian Europe and in Muslim lands were forbidden to own property and hold certain professions. These restrictions impoverished many Jews materially. However, wherever we could carry our books, we had the riches of the mind. While Christian and Muslim rulers prevented Jews from reestablishing a secure place in our ancestral home in the Land of Israel, wherever we had our books, we had a traveling homeland. Wherever we are, it is eternally Sinai and we are eternally renewing what it means to be Jewish.

From every continent, many Jews eventually returned to the Land of Israel. The most recent polls indicate that nearly one-half of all Jews currently live in the modern Jewish State of Israel. And what do they look like? Well, they look like they came from all over the world. Modern Jews represent nearly every culture, ethnicity, language, and skin color. There are Jews from Ethiopia and Egypt. There are Jews from Bulgaria, Brazil, and Boulder. There are Jews from Iraq, Iran, India, Italy, and Indiana. There are Jews from Yemin and Yonkers. There are Jews from Hong Kong and Helsinki, Poland, and Pittsburgh. There are Jews from Denmark and Denver. And there are Jews from Arabia, Argentina, and Alaska. All different in appearances and yet all of one family. *Atem Nitzavim*, our ancestors stood together and embraced the Covenant. They brought it and taught it as a traveling homeland and now every face and ethnicity of the world is a part of our Jewish family.

Note that the “success” of our family is not measured in terms of money or material. There are many Jews who fall below the poverty line. Rather, our success is how we react to the needs and struggles of others.

Throughout history, Jews have set up funds and organizations to help our family and others in times of need.

Consider what you, Temple Sinai members, have created! You have set up funds to provide vital resources to help others. Some of you have established endowments to provide social services and aid for those struggling with emotional or cognitive challenges. Some of you have made generous donations to funds so that we can send confidential and sensitive help to those who have financial hardships. Others have set up scholarships to enable kids in need to go to a Jewish summer camp or on the Israel Study Tour.

Our success is that we are here for each other even during the most challenging times. This has been demonstrated daily throughout this pandemic. Indeed, we are more aware of our blessings now than ever!

No matter how far some feel distanced from that family and that Covenant, we wait patiently at the door to welcome all home. We ask not for conformity of thought and opinion. Indeed, the very idea of conformity is repugnant to us. Rather, we ask only for an open heart and mind. As the Chofetz Chaim reached out to his former student, pleading with him to recall the kindness of his heart and the blessing of *tzedakah*, so we too reach out to all of our community and invite them home. Come home to study and explore. Come home to reclaim your share in the Covenant.

Come home to your family!