

A few weeks ago, standing in the line at Staples on the first day of school (why I agreed to do that I'll never know!), our daughter used the opportunity to try to get me to buy her an iPod.

"You know, at some of the universities my friends go to they get an iPod during Frosh week."

"They give every student an iPod?"

"Sure. That way they can download any lecture and listen to it wherever they are."

"What happened," I asked, "with going to the class?"

I was given a cold stare that I was "so 1970s."

Then came the sell job. "Since my school doesn't do that, how about if you buy me one instead?"

I just smiled.

Although an iPod may seem like a frivolous luxury, maybe it is the way of the future. After all, I have already had a request for sermons being offered on our website to be downloaded as 'podcasts', so why not lectures at university?

Maybe I am stuck in the past, however, because the only thing I can really imagine an iPod being used for is music. To be honest, if they were around in my day, I would have loved one. Teens today listen to different music than I did, but I still recall how important music was to me then (and remains so even now).

Emerson, Lake and Palmer; the Who and Pink Floyd were the bands I first loved as a teen. The instrumental richness and experimentation I enjoyed in their music led me, however, and strangely enough to classical music. The varied tones of the Moog synthesizer and rich orchestral sounds of Mike Oldfield's "Tubular Bells" led me to the fugues, symphonies and sonatas of Mozart, Beethoven and Bach.

One of the first classical works I fell in love with was Johann Sebastian Bach's Brandenburg Concertos. The concertos are the composer at his best - exquisitely detailed, ebullient, an intricate play and counter-play of instruments weaving a rich tapestry of orchestral sound. The amazing thing about this remarkable creation is that the person for whom they were written never heard them.

In 1721 Bach presented the Margrave Christian Lewis of Brandenburg with a bound manuscript containing six pieces written for chamber orchestra. We know little about the Margrave except this - he never acknowledged the gift nor did he ever hear the music played. The parcel sent to him was found unopened at his death thirteen years later. In fact, the works were not performed until the nineteenth century when the manuscript was rediscovered in the Brandenburg archives.

Over the coming Days of Awe I want to speak to you about the gifts we are given - and how often we leave them unopened. Some 2200 years ago, one of the earliest sages, Shimon HaTzaddik (the Just) said, "the world stands on three things - on Torah, on Prayer (literally "service" of God) and on Righteous Deeds." The opportunity to use these as a means of opening ourselves to the gifts we have been given - and the gifts we can give - will occupy my thoughts with you tonight, tomorrow and on Yom Kippur. These days are reminders to open ourselves to those blessings - to be connected to the rich traditions of Jewish life, to seek to make this a better world, to find a sense of spiritual fulfillment in our days and, through the meaningful way we live to be connected to eternity.

Shimon HaTzaddik's deceptively simple statement is actually a blueprint for how to live to the fullest - first, to engage the mind (in Torah); second, to open our hearts (with Righteous Deeds) and third, to have faith (expressed in a spiritual life). Shimon Hatzaddik's approach is a holistic one, for he suggests that mind, heart and soul are all important components of a rich, deep and fulfilling Jewish life.

This ancient sage is not the only one to affirm that these different elements are important to living life to its fullest. In Frank L. Baum's well-known tale, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy has to find her way back home. To do so she needs the help of three trusty companions - the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman and the Cowardly Lion. Is it not possible that these three are aspects of Dorothy's own self? The Scarecrow is seeking a brain, only to realize that he has a mind of great capabilities when he uses it. The Tin Woodman feels he is without a heart, only to see that through helping others has one - and when given a cloth heart by the Wizard he wants to be assured that it is a "kind heart." And the Cowardly Lion? His deepest fear is the failure to recognize his essential self. Only when he has faith in himself - a

metaphor for faith itself - does he become "King of the Forest." Baum's three central characters are, then, the same as Shimon HaTzaddik's - mind, heart and soul. Only with them all we are whole.

Some 1600 years ago Rab Judah, teaching in the name of Rav, taught much the same thing.

The day consists of twelve hours. During the first three hours the Holy One studies with the Torah, during the second three God sits in judgment ... during the third quarter, God feeds the world ... and during the fourth quarter God makes sport with the leviathan.<sup>1</sup>

He is not simply telling us what God does, of course, but what we ought to do. A fully balanced life involves having fun (for the great fish leviathan was God's "pet"), taking care of others, being connected to the world, but first of all, taking time to study.

The primacy of study is reiterated in the text traditionally studied every day as part of the morning prayers. "These are the things without measure, whose reward, too, is without measure - to honor father and mother, to perform loving deeds ... to visit the sick, to pray with intention. *V'Talmud Torah keneged kulam*, and the study of Torah is equal to them all."<sup>2</sup>

In the *Gates of Prayer*, the Reform movement's prayer book from 30 years ago, the translation of this passage is expanded. "And the study of Torah is equal to them all because it leads to them all." But the Hebrew is significantly stronger. It says clearly that study is equal to all these other righteous deeds. Does this make sense?! Is study more important than honoring parents? Does it have primacy over feeding the hungry or clothing the naked?

The answer may be in more clearly trying to understand what the Hebrew *keneged* means. Often translated as "equal to" all the other good deeds, it literally means "in opposition to", implying study as having a balancing or parallel relationship with all the other good things we do.

What is it about study of Jewish texts that is so important? First, it connects us to our roots and with other Jews and second, a deep connection to the Jewish textual tradition links us to the enduring values that can help guide our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Talmud *Avodah Zarah* 3b

<sup>2</sup> Mishnah *Peah* 1:1

## Connection to Jewish Life

Once upon a time there was a mother mouse who was walking in the woods with her three babies. She noticed a big cat crouching behind a bush. The cat eyeballed the mother mouse. The mother mouse eyeballed the cat. Then the mouse suddenly bellowed, "Woof, woof, woof!" The cat got so scared that it jumped up and ran away. The mother mouse turned to her babies and said, "Now do you see the value of learning a second language?" We send our children off to Hebrew school, but what do we learn of the rich language of our faith?

In every class in our school we have at least one, and sometimes two, sessions a year that are for parents and students to learn together. I suspect that lots of parents think these PACE (Parent and Child Education) are mostly for their children, but I want to let you in on a secret - they are really for the grownups. Don't get me wrong. We want our students to be excited about and engaged in Jewish learning. But no matter what we do here - no matter how dynamic a program we offer - we can succeed in connecting youngsters to Judaism only if they see their primary teachers (their parents) willing to learn Jewish texts. One of the programs that our congregation ought to be proudest of is our requirement for parents and students to come every Shabbat morning for Torah study at the end of sixth and beginning of seventh grade. I am inspired on a regular basis by the insights both parents and children bring to that class. More important than any particular lesson, however, is that our young people see that Jewish learning does not end when they are 13. In fact, the deepest understanding of Judaism comes only in adulthood.

To fail to connect to Jewish tradition threatens to lead us down a path of irrelevance, if not Jewish oblivion. Consider, if you will, the fate of the Jews of Namibia, in southwest Africa. Isolated from Jewish life, they struggled to maintain their identity. When one of the community members died in 1939 his survivors had difficulty fulfilling the instructions in his will that Hebrew be written on his gravestone. By that time there were no Jews in the region able to read the language. Desperate to find something to honor him appropriately, they finally found something with Hebrew on it, and asked a local mason to chisel the letters on the stone. And that is why, if you go to Namibia you will see a gravestone with the Hebrew written

upside down ... and which says the only Hebrew words they could find - from a box of matza: "Here lies Walter Galler, *Kosher I'Pesach*."

Five years ago our family went to live in Israel for six months. We all used the opportunity to learn. Our youngest attended a school that connected secular studies with Jewish values. The older children were in a special program of Hebrew immersion for teens. Anne focused on improving her Hebrew. I spent four days a week in a modern Orthodox *yeshiva* studying Talmud, translating the Aramaic into Hebrew with an Italian Catholic graduate student whose English was about as good as my Italian.

The other day of the week I was at Yakar, a unique study program that brought together a wide diversity of students. Among the students who sat around the table were students taking time off from university trying to "find themselves", a Conservative rabbi, a feminist lesbian who was involved with the Jewish Renewal movement, the modern Orthodox English-born Israeli teacher who advocated a prayer style that was meditative and mystical, and a thirty-something Bobover Hasid. One day I, wearing jeans, sweater and knitted *kipah* began to debate with the Hasid, with his *payos*, felt hat and a distinctive silk overcoat. He felt that the fifteenth century commentator we were studying was too restrictive. "Such strictures on a Jewish community are not good," he exclaimed. "Judaism should be freer." I disagreed, arguing that stricter standards are important for a minority community to maintain itself. Suddenly we started to laugh. Here, in the midst of a text 600 years old, two Jews found common ground - a Hasid seeking a Jewish community that was more open and a Reform rabbi yearning for deeper commitment to Jewish tradition.

There is much that divides us as Jews. We have different ways of understanding the Torah and how to pray. We disagree about the nature of women as religious leaders and about what we think about God. But in Jewish texts we can find a common ground - a connection to our past and a means of understanding our place here and now.

## Wisdom

The Scarecrow of Oz seeks a brain, not realizing that the wisdom is there all along. It is the same when we come to Jewish texts. So often we look elsewhere, blind to what we have close at hand. It is like the woman who spent months going to see a well-known guru in Nepal. When she finally arrived at his ashram, she was told that since the guru was so busy, she could only speak five words. Finally, the day came for her audience. Looking the great master in the eye, she carefully uttered her five words: "Sheldon, enough already. Come home."

Torah says the same thing to us: "come home." There is a rich accumulated wisdom in our textual tradition. In fact, a significant factor of Jewish survival has been the portability and flexibility of that tradition. In Yiddish, itself a language of exile, there is a phrase that hints to this: *Toireh iz die beste schoyre* - "Torah is the best merchandise." As we moved from land to land, under changing fortune and circumstance, our ancestors realized that the one constant that sustained them was the Torah.

Torah actually has two meanings in Judaism. In its narrowest sense the word signifies the first five books of the Bible. In its broadest sense, however, Torah refers to the whole corpus of Jewish sacred literature. In reality, for our people to survive Torah had to become broader in meaning or we would have become a relic of the past - an interesting, but no longer relevant fossil. The metaphor I often use when teaching people unfamiliar with Judaism is that the written Torah is like the foundation of the house. It supports everything else, but it is not where we live.

The rabbis of old set up a system of legal precedent setting that enabled Jewish law to remain connected to the Torah yet respond to new situations. Our ancestors could not have imagined the issues that occupy our contemporary concern - genetic engineering, stem cell research, conflict with Palestinians, feminist theology. Yet they articulated the general principles that have stood the test of time.

Every so often I meet someone who is apologetic about not having delved very deeply into Judaism. I encourage them to worry less about what they do not know, and open themselves to what they might. More troubling is the attitude that "I'm a good person, so how much more can I learn from studying Jewish texts?" It is like the

astrophysicist who once challenged a rabbi saying, "All Judaism can be reduced to 'love your neighbor as yourself.'" The rabbi replied, "Well, I guess so, if all astronomy can be reduced to 'twinkle, twinkle little star.'"

The importance of study is that it is in the details of how to live the good life that God is found. So many of us want to know that our life has meaning, but it is hard to know where to look. The storehouse of Jewish wisdom may not give us a definitive answer, but it can point us in the right direction through the questions it raises.

The semester I was at Yakar (the program I spoke about earlier) the topic of one class was on medieval Jewish texts on *tzedakah*. The commentators we studied and the legal texts we debated focused on a variety of complex questions. Is *tzedakah* to be given as a percentage of net or gross income? Can loans to family members be considered *tzedakah*? Can money deferred by being placed in educational trusts be considered *tzedakah*? Which is more important - and to what degree - the poor of one's own community or those who seek help from farther away? Since we are obligated by Jewish tradition to help non-Jews "for the sake of peace", what percentage of our charitable giving should go to Jews, how much to others? It is such pointed reflection that cannot help but sharpen the mind.

Judaism is open to a questioning spirit and doubting mind, but one with a firm footing in learning. This is reflected in the story of an atheist in Eastern Europe who wanted to find a teacher. Hearing of a great *apikoros* (literally "Epicurean", but implying "heretic" or "unbeliever"), he traveled to see him. "Teacher," he said, "I have decided to become an *apikoros*. I come to learn with you." Not even looking up from the Talmud he was reading the man asked, "And how long have you been studying Talmud?" The man hesitated. "Uh ... I have barely looked at it." "So how long have you studied Torah?" "Sir, I know only the stories in Torah I was told as a child." Putting aside the tome, he looked the hopeful student straight in the eye. "You know neither Torah nor Talmud, yet you reject it all. Young man, you have only *chutzpah*, for an ignoramus can not be an *apikoros*."

In Judaism study is not simply an esoteric exercise of the mind. In classic Jewish thought, in fact, understanding does not come from the brain at all. In the Bible

there is no word for the organ we know controls our conscious and unconscious behavior. For the ancients wisdom and awareness were resident elsewhere - specifically, in the heart and kidneys.<sup>3</sup> Was this a sign of medical primitiveness? Or is it that our ancestors are trying to get to something deeper - to convey the sense that wisdom has to come from the core of our being, from that place in our bodies that is at the center of who we are? God has given us the ability to learn - just as the scarecrow always had a brain. The question is whether we will use it.

Let me conclude with some Torah I learned a few months ago at the gym. I thought I had long ago heard every way there was to say hello. "Hi", "Hey", "Wassup?", "What's cookin'?" I knew some offered sophisticated greetings - "How do you do?"; others used the more colloquial - "How *you* doin'?" Then, at the JCC, I overheard a new one from one of the floor trainers. Seeing someone I assumed he saw regularly, the trainer asked, "So, what did you learn today?"

Though the trainer was talking about what new insights the person had learned about "pressing" the weights, I was struck by how deeply Jewish was his question "What did you learn today?" Try to imagine if we greeted one another with such a question - always seeking to find out new insights we have gained each day. "What did you learn today?" is a question that asks us to reflect on our life. Instead of just accepting where we are, the question I heard from that trainer took me a teaching some 2000 years old. The early rabbinic sages claimed that one has to continually reflect upon our sacred texts in order to understand them. Thus, they said: "turn it [i.e. the Torah] and turn it, for everything is within it." In other words, go back to the old text - the sacred foundation of Jewish life - but then ask yourself: "what new thing did I learn from it today?"

Old, yet new, the Torah is the source of our wisdom. Open the gift. Open it wide. As the Psalmist taught three millennia ago: תּוֹרַת יְהוָה תְּמִימָה מְשִׁיבַת נֶפֶשׁ "The Torah of the Eternal is perfect, giving life to the soul."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Psalms 7:10; Jeremiah 20:12

<sup>4</sup> Psalms 19:8