

Shavuot 2016 – Torah

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

It was the genius of Babylonian Jewry to meet the challenges of exile 2,500 years ago. Originally Judaism was a fragile community of rival tribes settled in a specific land. Its public religious rituals were based on its agricultural seasons and tithes. It had a central sanctuary, with its priests and sacrifices, and a system of ritual purity. It had its civil laws and judiciary. In addition there were all the laws required of one on a personal level; the general ethical imperatives, charity, and how one ran one's home and family. The relationship with God was personal. What kept the community together (in theory) was everyone gathering in Jerusalem on the three pilgrimage festivals.

When the Children of Israel lost their land and sanctuary what was left? What was going to keep the community together? This was when the synagogue, the Beit Knesset and Beit Midrash, began as places for the Jews to gather. But what did they do there? Not pray. That was something personal that one did in one's own home in one's own time. Daniel records that he went to his loft three times a day and turned towards Jerusalem to pray.

Babylon produced the sofrim, the scribes. Back home they had been just that, skilled in reading, writing, and recording. In Babylon they turned into the scholars, the teachers. What one did in the synagogues was pore over the sacred texts, study, and teach. The term "Knesset" means to get together. And "Midrash" means to study. That was how Judaism re-grouped and survived. That was its secret weapon.

The process of transformation took time. When Jews returned under Cyrus, the Temple was rebuilt and all those earlier laws were reinstated. Except now you had two communities, those in the Diaspora who had one set of routines and those in Israel who had another. And in Israel the Priesthood and the sofrim (forerunners of the rabbis) coexisted in competition and uneasy truce. For another 400 years or so the two systems coexisted. Then in 70 CE the Romans destroyed the Second Temple and Jerusalem. The priests lost their roles. The sects soon disappeared. The rabbis were left standing as the sole bearers of the tradition. Then, through the oral law, the Talmud, the face of Judaism that we recognize today emerged.

Thus the festival of Shavuot was transformed. From being a harvest festival 49 days after the first sheaf of barley was dedicated in the Temple on the first day of Pesach, it was transformed into the celebration of the Sinai experience of Torah. As the diaspora turned into an extended hell for Jews—oppressed, suppressed, enslaved, and murdered—their numbers began to dwindle, and many preferred to lose their Jewish identity than to suffer. It is argued that external oppression was responsible for keeping the Jewish people going. But I find that illogical, since large numbers of Jews were always able to escape that oppression by choosing another, less stressful way of life.

What really kept Judaism alive was Torah study. It was not just the value of study itself. It was also that you were trained to read, to use your brain in disciplined learning. And what's more, to survive and earn a living you had to combine the physical and the scientific with the mystical and the paranormal. This achieved two things. It taught one to appreciate God's universe and, not unimportantly, to have skills to survive. All of this contributed to an evolutionary survival of the fittest, the brightest, the most accomplished. But the question is, accomplished in what? In the study itself or in the byproduct of learning how to survive in an unfriendly world?

This issue is still debated today, and it lies at the root of the miracle of Jewish survival, of such small numbers having so much success (sure, we have our failures too). No wonder so many believe we are the Devil incarnate. How else can you explain what we have achieved against such numerical odds? Perhaps that is precisely why we are singled out for so much anti-Semitism.

In the Talmud there is a debate as to whether study is more important than prayer. Prayer represents the religious spiritual side, which is most often identified with the religious spirit. It focuses on the relationship with God. But for many Jews that is not so compelling; God is too intangible, too abstract. Study, on the other hand, is more substantial in the cognitive sense. It is an intellectual amassing of information and the immersion in a tradition. The intellectual prowess the Greek philosophers so revered as the way to find truth was, in Judaism, the process of study and intellectual debate.

This debate remains unresolved. But the famous line goes that "study is greater because it leads to action." You know what is required and how to do it. So much alienation in Judaism today is because so many Jews are so painfully ignorant. They have no idea what Judaism really is. They are like children whose only mathematical education ended in kindergarten.

There is another major issue. Should the study of Torah be all one needs or not? The rabbis of the Talmud were divided on almost every issue, including this one. We have always loved to argue. Some said that if prayer, encounter with God, was the core of religion, this surely meant that we should pray as much as possible. Others argued that study itself was an act of religious worship (Shabbat 11a).

Now if study was the way towards the good life and to God, should not one study all day long? The Talmud (Shabbat 33b) tells the story of how Rebi Shimon Bar Yochai and his son had to hide in a cave from the Romans for twelve years. They spent their time in study and meditation. When they were told the threat had passed, and they came out they could not understand how ordinary people were sowing, ploughing, and reaping instead of studying Torah. They became a threat to normal life. A heavenly voice said, "You seem to want to destroy My world." So they were sent back into the cave to think again. God was none too happy.

Another text the Talmud says, "It is written, 'The words of Torah will never depart from your lips.' Can this be meant literally? The Torah also says you must gather your corn so that you can eat." You have to earn a living. You

fix specific times to study, and work when you need to. So says Rebi Yishmael. But Rebi Shimon Bar Yochai said that if you do that, you will never study Torah. Instead one should study all the time, and if one is pious someone else will make a living for you." That, of course, is the justification and hope for the hundreds of thousands of Torah scholars who do nothing else. The text tellingly goes on to say that "many tried it Rebi Shimon's way and did not succeed. But many tried it Rebi Yishmael's and they did succeed (Brachot 35b).

Not everyone is cut out for a life of constant study (intellectually or temperamentally) and the society simply cannot function if everyone sits and studies all day long. Like Plato's republic, someone has to do the work! Yet studying Torah remains the single most significant difference between Jews who adhere to tradition and those who do not; between those who pass something onto the next generation and those who fail to. Everyone has to learn Torah to whatever degree he or she is able to. The Torah requires of us that we study and teach our children. That was the crucial and massive contribution of the rabbis not to allow this to be the preserve of an elite, but the obligation on everyone. That is why we start teaching our children to read Hebrew as early as possible. That is why we are called the People of the Book. And that is what Shavuot celebrates. We all have an obligation to keep on studying. Some more, some less. That is the best answer we have, and have always have had, to our enemies.