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Contemplate

WE ENTER THE TALMUD BAREFOOT

Ruth Calderon

The Quiet Revolution

There are currently almost one hundred non-halakhic Torah study centers in Israel, the product of an ongoing quiet revolution. This has freed many graduates of the general school system in Israel from the restrictions of the cultural diet on which most were raised.

For the past 20 years, I too have taken part in this cultural turnabout, which involves a redefinition of the term *Talmud Torah* - the study of Torah - by population sectors commonly defined as "secular." The process of change has involved the study of classic Hebrew texts combined with the reading of the literature of other cultures, and the assimilation of the resulting products in the language, thought, and creative process of many contemporary Israelis.

The essence of this revolution is embedded in the study of new materials. In addition to Bible studies, which form part of the curriculum in the general school system, the curricula of the new study centers also include the study of the Mishna, Talmud, Kabbala, Hassidism, liturgy, poetry, and philosophy. This manner of studying Torah is influenced by methods used in the yeshiva and in the university; however it presents several novel features and characteristics:

Critical and Interpretive Tools

The conscious, or perhaps unconscious, participants in this process do not seek mediation in the reading of traditional texts. Instead, they tend to critical interpretation of texts by applying new tools that are not part of the accepted hermeneutic tradition of the exegetic literature. Feminist criticism, post-modernist criticism, historic, sociological and psychological analyses, literary analysis, and personal interpretations have become routine in the new approach to the study of classical Jewish texts.

The Choice of Texts

The texts chosen for examination are not limited to the usual topics or selections, most of which consist of *halakhic* issues studied according to the mainstream Lithuanian code. The range includes texts often considered "marginal" in the established world of yeshivot and conventional yeshiva curricula. Alongside "Jewish" texts, the curricula also deals with texts that until now were not considered part of the world of Jewish study, but which have become cornerstones in Israeli Hebrew culture.

The Curriculum

Because of the grass root nature of the process the curricula and programs offered are not uniformly organized or rigidly structured. Each learning community defines the special study program best suited to its members. This flexibility makes it possible to adjust the curriculum to the needs of the specific study group without being bound by predetermined or preconceived conclusions.

The Teachers

Teachers and instructors are not regarded as "absolute authorities," but rather as mentors, skilled in the use of sophisticated teaching tools. Their attachment to the texts is clearly identifiable. The teachers not only teach, they study with the members of the study groups. The study atmosphere is becoming more egalitarian.

Study and Practice

By its very nature the study of Torah leads to action. Study groups have been organizing themselves in communes, study communities, and even urban kibbutzim. They are creating new teaching systems, designing life rituals according to their values, publishing periodicals, and establishing institutions of learning and social action. Study also serves as an opportunity for personal growth. The appropriation of the Jewish canon by so-called seculars may be regarded as a new version of "to build and be built in" - the motto of the early pioneers. For Israelis whose life in their own land is something they take for granted, "in it" no longer means **in the land**, as it did for their parents and grandparents, but rather **in their own culture - that includes the Torah**.

Coming Full Circle

Moreover, the journey into the rabbinical texts actually constitutes a liberation from the restrictive Zionist education that imbued us with ideals of youth, heroism, pragmatism, and anti-religiosity. Post-modernism and post-Zionism, even if their arguments are not fully acceptable, indicate a liberating trend from the role of so-called neo-Biblical trailblazers in the wilderness.

At the outset of the revival of the Jewish homeland, the Talmud was kept from us to prevent contamination by the "viruses" of the "unproductive" and "pale" Jews of the Diaspora. Now, for the first time, and to the surprise of many of us, alongside the intrepid eternally youthful champions of the 1948 War of Independence and the Six Day War, new heroes began to emerge - old men who lived out their days in the Beit Midrash. Through them - the grandparents we never had - we discovered the allure of wise skepticism, the fascination of the Diaspora mentality and the appeal of religiosity.

We are the grandchildren of the revolutionaries, of the founding fathers and mothers - the first generation of pioneers, who left behind their books, parents, and language to carry out a revolution. Land, language, work, and socialism were the ideals that became reality during their lifetimes. This did not leave their children, our parents, much room for innovation. For them - the second generation - the Hebrew language, land, and work had become a fact of life. They strove to excel - in the army, in the professions, in industry and agriculture, in short to fulfil their parents's dreams of becoming Sabras. They mocked intellectuals, spoke the local vernacular, went barefoot, took on "Hebrew" names. Growing up in the giant shadow of the first-generation pioneers, the second generation spoke little and did much.

We, the grandchildren, found a normal country, for better and for worse, and because we were able to shake off the artificiality of some of "the new" Hebrew roles, the revolution became possible. The balance between body and spirit began to be restored along with the legitimization of study. It might be said that we have come full circle, sitting down next to our grandparents in the Beit Midrash as sovereign, discerning and curious partners in study.

The traditional mode of study of the rabbinical text distanced us from the accepted practice in academe, which imparts tools for the critical reading of texts but does not allow for any intimacy in the reading, nor encourages integration of conclusions of the study with personal experience. The tradition of the Beit Midrash offered the model of the *hevruta* - the study-pair system - along with the study-through-discussion method to compete with the academic custom of silent rows of passive students listening to a lecturer in the lofty halls of universities.

We enter the Talmud "barefoot," without mediation. We are not required to invent a theory or an ethos. Talmudic virtual reality has become an additional, accessible cultural option.

The entry into the world of rabbinical study for speakers of Hebrew was a gate into a wonderland located right in our backyard. The classic text revitalized our mother tongue with strange semantic fields, new nuances, and Aramaic, which now became intelligible. The enriched language included new ways of using familiar words as well as new conceptual contents. The sensation of freedom, emancipation, the independent delving into the reservoirs of texts that had been closed to us - all these constituted an intellectual delight providing gratification as well as an opportunity to become familiar inside ourselves from a new angle.

A New Scholarly Voice

Scholarly women in the religious communities are changing the religious and intellectual contents of the family agenda and in religion itself. In secular Torah study circles the rise of women is remarkable.

The new feminist perspective has changed the approach to the entire rabbinical text corpus, modifying the direction of the focus of study from the male leaders towards the domain of women who were generally neglected and not considered equals by the traditional rabbinical culture. We are now looking through the eyes of persons who traditionally could not testify in court, acquire property, teach, make their voice heard, or walk freely in the marketplace, who were not mentioned by name and were not permitted to fulfill commandments on behalf of others! Each ceremony, every custom and practice is now revealed in a new light, different from the image seen previously through the eyes of the Torah Scholars.

The entire rabbinical corpus - the Bible, Mishna, Aggadic and halakhic literature, Talmud, etc. - has to be processed by such an exhaustive critique. Only then will we begin to understand the extent to which the entire culture of learning will be enhanced and sustained along with the communities living around it. The innovation is reflected in study methods, in the creation of a new model of the *Talmidat Haham* - the female Torah scholar - who studies and creates, teaches and gives birth, who feels at home both in the home and in the *Beit Midrash*.

Another result of this revitalizing trend is that some study institutes have become "domesticated"; a new sense of aesthetics has penetrated the sterile ambiance of the classes. The staff of those institutes have become more aware of feelings, of personal contact, and of the importance of how the students feel, and not only how well they perform. The world of Torah study has provided a new field of action for women with a different spiritual and existential world.

The entry of the secular public into the world of Torah study bears many characteristics similar to the entry of women. In both cases, there has been an arousal among a sector of the population that previously was removed from the materials of study and centers of learning that were also centers of power. With its enhanced self-awareness and recognition of its strengths, this population is now insisting on participating in the exegesis of the cultural reservoir on equal terms. Like a spring being released the new students are propelled forward, charged with enormous energy, enthusiasm, and joy. They are like explorers crossing uncharted territory, only to discover that it is in fact their homeland.

The Secular Innovation

The strength of the non-*halakhic* students lies primarily in the fact that they come to the study of Torah out of love. No parent, rabbi, or teacher imposes the study on them, or forces them to perform out of a sense of guilt or obligation. On the contrary, in many cases the passion for study must first overcome the secular taboo that keeps so many away from "religious" texts. Study that stems from free will brings the student closer to the text, creating a greater opportunity for interaction between the ancient materials and present experience.

The new students did not learn the rabbinical texts as schoolchildren and therefore never developed feelings of repulsion, hatred, or boredom towards them. They read the text almost *tabula rasa*. The secular student comes to the rabbinical texts as an adult, an age more appropriate for the understanding of the complexity of the sages, who combined theoretical thinking with public leadership within a given reality. Secular study has a greater chance of going straight to the literal meaning of the text. The strata of interpretations and accepted views, taken for granted by religious students of texts, do not mediate or stand between the secular students and the words. Secular students are not bound by value-based prohibitions and this enables them to uncover paradoxes, weak sections, mistakes, or expressions of stupidity and meanness. They do not accept the *a priori* assumption that the text was written by God and that it represents God's word, and because they do not believe that the Torah is divine, they are able to get closer to the text, honestly and truthfully.

In addition, secular students of the Torah bring with them the gift of nontraditional scholarship. Contrary to their image among religious circles they approach the Torah bearing a "heavily laden wagon of knowledge." Granted, they cannot quote Bible verses and Talmudic proverbs by rote and perhaps they are not skilled in the reading of Rashi and *halakhic* texts. However, they are familiar with Greek and Roman culture, with sophisticated tools of reasoning and common sense; they are endowed with intellectual curiosity and scientific integrity; they are accomplished in Hebrew literature and language as well as in world literature and life experience. All this and more are effective and beneficial in the study

of Torah, which is predisposed to the use of comparison as a study tool. The world of film, theater, literature, poetry, and dance, treks in the Far East and academic references all harmonize well with the pages of the ancient texts.

The Relationship between the Authors and the Students of the Texts

Maintaining Torah study in a community of students who hold very different cultural positions from those who authored and preserved the texts is possible by virtue of the values embodied in the world of study itself. By its very nature, the study of Torah is open to any challenge of the text as long a minimal condition is fulfilled. The student should treat the text as worthy of exegesis in a manner that combines freedom and commitment - the commitment to see oneself as a link in the chain of culture, and the freedom of self-determination and autonomy in interpreting the values of that culture.

The new community of Torah students does not look for *yiddishkeit* or nostalgia in its quest, and nor does it "subsidize" the classic text. In other words, the students do not refine or soften their views to make them fit the text. Nor do they modify the text in order to make it compatible with its values. Ambivalence and opposition to the text are an integral part of the study experience.

The Durability of the Text

The underlying assumption that makes this entire revolution possible is that the material - the text - is resilient and enduring, well able to deal with any intellectual challenge and enjoy the encounter. The new study centers do not function based on the premise that the texts are sacred in the religious sense. However, the students do ascribe to them the vigor of the great classics, in the same way that artists attribute power to their paints, or poets to their words. The text is regarded as raw material for individual creation, for the understanding of oneself and of the world. In this respect, the text is unique or holy, even in secular terms.

The *Beit Midrash*

The structure of the traditional *Beit Midrash* is eminently suited to the needs of the new students. The traditional model of studying and teaching was chosen in the majority of the new centers as a basis for new developments. The *Beit Midrash* as an institution relaxes the frontal teaching style. Teachers do not stand and lecture from a lectern on a podium. They are members of the study group, sitting at one of the tables together with the students or with other teachers. The learning space is open, usually located in a library, enabling the development of independent study procedures by the study groups. Different study processes are likely to take place simultaneously under the roof of the *Beit Midrash*, all blending to create a broad understanding of the text being studied.

In the *Beit Midrash*, the study material is open to all students and teachers. This poses a challenge for the teachers who cannot rely on unknown prepared texts but are encouraged to find something new in the texts while studying them together with the students. Good teachers will find how to point out an innovation in a familiar text. The skills provided by the *Beit Midrash* differ from those offered in the university. There, one learns how to become a good researcher. The skills acquired in the *Beit Midrash* more closely resemble those of a good reader. Interpretive skills, hermeneutics, criticism, and empathy serve the study in the *Beit Midrash* well. This is true in every *Beit Midrash*, and all the more so in the *Beit Midrash* described here, in which various texts are subject to so many different interpretations and analyses.

The *Beit Midrash* serves as a center for a talking community. The study brings people closer together, weaving threads of kinship, commitment, and affection. The atmosphere created is as close as the secular Israeli community can get to the social dynamics of the synagogue. My experience has taught me that this type of community is a catalyst of energy generating social *tikkun* - rectification - whose members seek out channels of action that will bring about *tikkun olam* - a world reform.

Who is Likely to Understand What

Until this cultural movement began, conventional wisdom had it that the persons who had already learned would be the ones who would continue to learn, i.e., only religious men of good family, money, or luck. Now the introduction of other persons into this elite domain threatens the traditional social order. Opponents to the study of Torah by secular people argue that if the latter do not observe the commandments of the Torah in the accepted manner, there is no point to their study, that it is irrelevant.

The Achilles heel of objectors to study of Torah by nonobservant Jews lies in their lack of humor and overly rigid logic. Ironically, such a type of approach not only hinders true understanding, it is actually alien to the world of Torah study, in which humor and flexibility form an integral part.

The study of Torah is the most exciting, joyful, and fitting pursuit for the current intellectual appetite precisely because Torah study is tolerant and encourages different propositions. It challenges students when they try to apply new critical approaches only to find that throughout the ages Torah learning has already done so, often far more successfully, because so many scholars have already kneaded the magnificent dough. Like a good computerized chess program, it seems that almost all the possible moves are already known. Yet the challenge in this rich reservoir remains as vital as ever, continually attracting a new circle of people to join the community of Torah scholars, irrespective of the views or opinions of the "veterans." The revolution happens when new minds, free of conventional, established ideological commitments, delve and blend and create within the greatest Jewish textual treasure of all time, to produce a creation that is simultaneously subversive and peace inspiring.

The rabbinical sages determined that the act of study should not be restricted and that every innovation attains legitimization as original Torah because "Whatever a Torah scholar innovates in the future was already given to Moshe at Sinai." Nothing can restrict those who succeed in entering the world of Torah. The social circumstances and political forces that succeeded in keeping so many people far from the texts have largely been removed, although some still exist in the conservative, ultra-orthodox spirit of some parts of the "secular" population itself.

The Reason for the Supreme Value of Torah Study

The role of Torah study is to grant never-ending vitality to written bodies of knowledge, to enable their ongoing exegesis, while at the same time allowing a new culture to develop. The sages understood that the only way to preserve the vitality and relevance of the biblical parts of the corpus lay in the study process, namely constant renewal. Solutions to problems in issues such as the rebellious son, forbidden work on the Sabbath, the four means of execution by the court, and other major and fundamental issues underwent revolutionary changes in the process of adapting interpretation, all of which are known as *Talmud Torah*. Those who are not paralyzed by the prejudices of former generations are most eminently capable of doing *Talmud Torah*, the act of revival by means of exegesis.

The Perception of the Torah Student

In the eyes of many secular Torah students, the experience of *Talmud Torah* goes far beyond that of an intellectual-academic experience. Many new students do not accept the premises, beliefs, and lifestyle of the old-time Torah students in the yeshiva world. But the value that was passed down to them and which they accept is the value of Torah study as something that revives and renews the students in particular and the culture in general. They feel they belong to the sources they term texts and consider the texts as their own. This sense of belonging is an expression of loyalty and respect. In the new *Beit Midrash*, there is an intense demand to confront the texts with the beliefs, values, and lifestyles of the secular students. The texts are challenged with the questions that trouble the students and new answers emerge by means of the interpretive study process that involves discussions and debates in study pairs.

A Torah student is invited to delve into God's Torah without having to make even the slightest concession concerning one's beliefs or lifestyle.

Moreover, if the secular community abandons these texts that for so many years have (together with many other excellent texts taken from the literature of other cultures) formed the foundation of the Jewish-Hebrew culture, those sources will remain unredeemed. The texts are liable to languish within professional institutions, many of which have not truly challenged the Torah with new questions for many generations. The ultra-Orthodox preservation of the ancient premises does an injustice to the traditional concept of *Talmud Torah* and does not truly fulfill it.

What about "Religious" People?

The secular study revolution is not a rebellion of one community against another. Secularity and the treatment of the texts as human creations are no longer a revolutionary innovation, requiring a battle. Religious Torah students who relate differently to the texts and who have a *halakhic* commitment

arouse curiosity and make it possible to conduct a productive debate. The aspects and attributes of God come up for discussion and debate in the new Beit Midrash; however, the question of whether or not God in fact exists is rarely raised. The religious views of all students are always respected and no effort is ever made to "convert" or to turn anyone against religious belief. The process of secular study begins where the religious-secular argument ends, or at least rests.

The Perception of God

Unlike what is commonly accepted, it is not the relationship with God that separates secular and religious Jews. I tend to define the secular Israeli as a non-*halakhic* Jew, a definition embodying a wide range of secularity. It includes complete atheists, those with a more traditional approach, and those who experience a Divine presence in their lives but do not accept rabbinical authority or belong to a formal congregation or observe the commandments. "Religious" people are also far from constituting a monolithic community. Various liberal trends make it possible to interpret customs and ceremonies in new ways. Nor are observant people immune to theological criticism.

The continuum stretching from the period of the classic Torah scholars, the authors of the Mishna, the Talmud, the midrashic literature up to our times, is not a continuum of a description of God. It is rather a continuum of the student, the scholar, the interpreting individual facing the texts. The student had the freedom, and perhaps even the commitment, to read into the text anything that he or she considered the truth. It was not uncommon for some scholars to challenge accepted values and even to interpret texts that were not written, adding texts of their own. Torah scholars were never deterred by freedom of thought, by a challenge to the classic texts using the philosophical approaches influenced by the cultures with which they came in contact. Both the contemporary scholar and the Talmudic sage understand God as the ultimate study partner, one who sowed signs throughout the text: hints, allusions and riddles. By deciphering their meanings year after year, the student can get closer to what God meant and attain a sense of intimacy with the Creator.

To the authors of the early centuries - and to me - the text is the place where one can meet the absolute source of culture - affectionately known as God.

*Translated by Ruchie (Rachel) Avital and David Louvish

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