

The Study of Text as a Religious Exercise

RABBI ELYSE GOLDSTEIN

(This article originally appeared in the CCAR Journal, Spring 1999, and is reprinted with permission. Ed)

The Need to Know

As interest in adult education increases in the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Movements, and initiatives multiply to induce congregants into life-long study, we have yet to perform the simple task of defining the purpose of adult education in a non-Orthodox setting. For it is not yet self-evident, nor taken as the norm of liberal Jewish life, that there is a need to go beyond *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* training, a need for acquisition of adult study skills, a need to know Rashi, a need to learn *Talmud*. Let's be honest: liberal Jewish adults do not *need* to study.

The need to know is real in the *yeshiva* world of the Orthodox. This is a world which absolutely requires fluency in Hebrew, *halacha*, *Torah*, and a host of other texts in order to be a fully functioning member of that community – indeed even to be a marginally functioning member. This is a world where the questions “What are you learning?” or “Where are you learning?” are dinnertime conversations among adults. This is a world where your adult neighbors, your adult cousins, your friends learn at least once a week. This is a world that does not anticipate children teaching Judaism to their parents. So, while it is current fashion in the liberal movements to emulate the “*yeshiva*” model of the Orthodox – our own *Kolel* here in Toronto is a prime example – we have yet to ask why a non-Orthodox Jew would enter the doors of such a *yeshiva*.

For in the liberal Jewish world – and in this I believe there is equal truth whether one identifies as Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, *Havurah*, or Jewish Renewal – an adult may be a fully functioning member of a congregation, even among its leadership, and yet be vastly wanting in text knowledge and even daily Jewish living skills. A *Seder* can be done totally in

English, composed of cut-out readings and poetry, or followed in a kind of *Seder*-by-numbers format, with any one of a number of the “do-it-yourself” *haggadot* on the market. *Shabbat* is done at temple. A prefab *Sukkah* comes to your door from the lumber store. Just what does a liberal Jew really need to know?

Hebrew is no longer necessary for participation in services, neither for the Jew who comes but once a year nor for the weekly *Sabbath* attender, with the advent of easily accessible transliteration. Very few adult education courses require Hebrew as a prerequisite, nor study a text in its original. We use Steinsaltz's English edition of the *Talmud*, *midrash* appears in English through the translation of the Bialik edition of *Sefer Ha'Aggadah*, the *Talmudic Anthology* and the *Rabbinic Anthology* take the place of primary sources. Just what does a liberal Jew really need to know?

The sheer abundance of basic Judaism and basic level adult courses in our congregations attests to this reality.

We confuse informational adult education with transformational adult education when we assume that the motivational factor, the reason adults come to us to learn, is a need to know.

The Need for Meaning

It is usually a “trigger event” which causes adults to first enter into adult education. A death, an intermarriage, or an upcoming *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* catapult a need for immediate information and move a person to dabble at first in a class. For those who stay, once their immediate questions are answered, the informational model is insufficient. Although details, facts, and data seem to be the goal of the learner, it soon

becomes obvious that adult learners are seeking much more than information. Anne Sokol and Patricia Cranston have noted that “Adult education has moved beyond... the ‘banking model’ of teaching in which educators make deposits of information into the empty vaults of students’ minds.”¹ They suggest that adult education is about transformation, not training. Adult learners who stay are hungry for transformation, and they sense that traditional texts and traditional text study may lead to it. They sense that a text is not merely a text, not only a written document of historical or sociological significance, but reflecting deep philosophical and spiritual value as well. They stay to find out if their hunch is correct. And often it is.

It is in this second model of adult education, the transformational model, that the study of text becomes a religious exercise.

What does the religious study of text look like? It depends much less on frontal, lecture methodology because the role of the teacher is not to pour information into waiting students, but to help students extract ultimate and existential meaning for themselves. It uses the *chevruta* (partner) and small group model more, giving students the opportunity to inquire of each other. It is not afraid of cacophony, of small groups in a room each struggling with a text, just within hearing range of each other. It is Socratic in nature, focusing much more on questions than on answers. It may concentrate on depth, rather than breadth, of a certain subject or a particular text.

The religious study of a text may manifest itself in a concern with the relationship between the teacher and the students. In many cases, the teacher is not only purveyor of knowledge, but classical spiritual guide; not only Rabbi, but Rebbe. Unafraid to use his or her own life as a model – both positive and negative – the teacher teaches personally, so that the students can move the material from the head to the heart. The teacher serves as a conduit for the life changes such study may present, and also functions as a kind of *shadchan* (matchmaker) to help spiritually searching students find each other.

Religious study of text offers no external rewards. It is – and it feels like – *Torah lishma*, study only for the sake of study. There are no certificates, no degrees, no titles. There is no graduation. There isn’t even a true

“end” of the class or semester, and some study courses may go on for years and years on the same text or same topic. There is always more to learn, and we aren’t necessarily “getting anywhere” in particular. In this way, the “religious” study of text differs significantly from the “academic” study of texts found in university Jewish Studies programs.

The religious study of text begins with the question, “What message is this text trying to teach me about how to be a good Jew?”, and only ends with the question, “How do I do such-and-such?” The religious study of text asks the learner to confront received prejudices and reread the text with new eyes. It does not attempt to answer the question, “is this true?” – meaning – “did this really happen?” but helps the learner reframe the question into “is this True?” – meaning – “what Truth will this shed in my life to guide me?”

And in the end, the religious study of text will lead the learner on a personal quest for the answer to that question of Truth. This personal quest will, the teacher hopes, lead the learner into observance, life changes, increased attachment to Jewish tradition, and increased need for Jewish community. The religious study of text goes beyond scientific inquiry, historical analysis, or contextual examination. It is study in fulfillment of Jewish commitment. Thus, the religious study of text is “missionary” in that it has a mission.

Liberal Ownership and the Authority of Sacred Text

Too often non-Orthodox Jews feel that while the *Torah* “belongs” to everyone, its interpretations belong to the Orthodox. There is almost an obsession in liberal adult education with what “they” say and “they” do and why “they” do it in a certain way, and how “they” interpret whatever passage the class is studying. This obsession stems from the issue of ownership. If these texts are sacred because they belong to someone else, and we are guests journeying into someone else’s property, then it is natural that we acknowledge the owner at every turn. Sacred texts will have no authority for liberal Jews unless we see them first, and rightly, as our own.

Once we do that, we may be able finally to have meaningful religious dialogue with other learning Jews from across the denominational spectrum. Rabbi Irving “Yitz” Greenberg has written, “At a time when

the relations between the denominations have become poisoned, we must reassert the unifying power of *Torah*... we must restore dialogue by ‘talking in *Torah*’... At this moment the Jewish community must grasp each other’s hands and sit down to study together.”² We can argue passionately if we are arguing in the same language.

And, once we own the texts, and we no longer obsess about what “they” say, the texts take on authority because they impart a sense of Jewish authenticity to everyday ideas, ethics, and decision-making. In other words, the texts become authoritative because they inform us of “what Judaism says” about all the things that matter to us, and they empower us to make Jewish decisions about seemingly secular matters. In doing so, we begin to live a more seamless Jewish life, one in which “religion” and “work” are no longer dichotomous and “religion” and “ethics” become synonymous, because we have Jewish answers that are usable. The religious study of texts assumes that texts become relevant and authoritative as we use them in critical decision-making moments.

Sacred texts also take on authority when they increase the learner’s sense of being Jewish adults who know more than their kids, and thus are able to direct their families’ Judaism. Today, more than in any other generation, we have, in the main, reactive Jewish parents rather than pro-active Jewish parents. While in every other realm of their lives today’s young parents take control – T.V. programming, the kinds of books their children read, their children’s schools, and the like – it is often the children who direct and control the Judaism of their parents’ home. How can any Jewish text have authority in such a situation? As these parents take on the study of texts, the texts begin to guide the whole family’s Jewish life.

Liberal Jews are fond of quoting Mordecai Kaplan’s teaching that tradition has a vote but not a veto. Sacred texts are the foundation upon which the liberal Jew’s right to vote rests.

Therefore, we ought to be concentrating on the kinds of texts which have within them family direction, ethical guidance on a wide range of issues, existential meaning, and transformational qualities. Beginning with *Torah* as a base, using *midrashim* and commentaries to enliven, clarify and open questions, we

should be broadening the base of text study to include primary sources concentrating on the areas enumerated above, especially but not limited to *Talmud*, *halachic* texts such as *Mishneh Torah*, and *Responsa*. Also significant is the study of the *siddur* (prayerbook), for the change such study makes in people’s prayer lives.

Morally Questionable Texts

In transformational education, study of text becomes the reading of a spiritual diary. As such, we may not like all the entries, but we cannot erase them. They are an inherited dialogue between our ancestors and the Divine, and as such, we are privy to private conversations, left to us as a sort of ethical will. We can reread them, but we cannot rewrite them.

Thus, even morally questionable texts carry messages, albeit difficult, contradictory, or discomfiting ones. Learners, who take text study seriously in general, will take morally objectionable texts equally seriously, and study them deeply in historical, psychological and sociological context. A religious study of text does not throw the baby out with the bath water, rejecting such texts out of hand as unworthy of reflection. It considers the implications of such texts today, while asking what their spiritual purpose might still be. What is the layer underneath the layer we have received? Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi calls this looking for “the deep structure.” Jews have always retold ancient stories with new twists and turns. Therefore, we need to see ourselves as grand revisionists, creating new *midrashim* and commentaries, which critique these difficult texts from within, while searching for the deep structure, the larger picture, the overarching paradigms that inform the text itself.

In the end, studying texts as a religious exercise may be a challenge, even a threat, for liberal Jews used to a more rational methodology. It may appear to some as too “touchy-feely” or too concerned with that buzzword “spirituality.” However, studying the text as a religious exercise is what in the end, changes lives. Not only knowing how to light *Shabbat* candles, or in which century the blessing was composed – though those facts are important too – but finding the peace that *Shabbat* brings to harried lives through the texts of *Shabbat* may be what effects transformation. And, if we wish to transform liberal Judaism, to change it into one in which adults need to study, then a new

methodology of transformational adult education, a methodology which encourages the study of text as a religious exercise, is now due.

RABBI ELYSE GOLDSTEIN is the Director and
Rosh Yeshiva of *Kolel: A Centre for Liberal Jewish Learning* in Toronto.

1. Anne V. Sokol and Patricia Cranston, *Adult Learning*, Spring 1998, page 14.
2. Greenberg writes this in the context of introducing feminist commentary to the Orthodox world, in his introduction to my book *ReVisions: Seeing Torah through a Feminist Lens*, (Vermont: Jewish Lights 1998), pages 14-16.