

Our Legacy of Learning

A synagogue's Torah study group is engaged in its weekly learning session when suddenly an angel appears. The angel turns to the group's leader and says, "Moishe, you are an example to your fellow community members in every way. So, in return for being such a *mensch*, I am going to offer you a choice of reward. You can either have infinite wealth, infinite health, or infinite wisdom. What will it be, Moishe? Whatever you choose will be granted immediately." Without any hesitation whatsoever, Moishe replies, "I would love to have infinite wisdom." "Mazel tov! Moishe," says the angel. "It's done. Enjoy!"

Then the angel disappeared. No one could believe what had just happened. Then one participant broke the silence.

"Moishe," she asked, "why don't you test out your new found wisdom right away? Say something really wise to us, Moishe!" To which Moishe replied, "Oy vey! I should have taken the money."

While humorous to be sure, the joke's setup reveals a great deal about the classical Jewish worldview throughout the centuries. Having some money in the bank is a good thing, but this is far from life's ultimate goal. And our health is critical, but it is so often beyond our control, and we know that eternal life is not only unattainable but also undesirable. Yet knowledge, wisdom, a deeper understanding of our world through lenses both secular and spiritual...these are life goals worth pursuing.

It is arguable, in fact, that these are the values of paramount importance in Jewish life for the past two millennia or more. The *Talmud* recounts a debate between Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva. Their students inquired, "What is more important, our deeds or our study?" Rabbi Tarfon contended that deeds were the ultimate goal...living lives filled with righteous, just, and compassionate behavior. Rabbi Akiva countered that study is most important, as important as all the other *mitzvot* combined, in fact. The sages all sided with Akiva noting that it is only through our learning that we could know how to live lives of substance, character, and meaning.¹

Earlier this evening we prayed the words of the *V'ahavta* - "[*V'shinantam L'vaneicha*] 'You shall teach these traditions over and over again to your children.' And so we have done for countless generations. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks recalls that "in ancient times, the Egyptians built pyramids, the Greeks built temples, the Romans built amphitheaters. Jews built schools. And because of that, alone among ancient civilizations, Judaism survived."²

This legacy of learning continues to be ours today, visible at every age level beginning with our very youngest. Our Children's Center now serves over 90 pre-school-aged

¹ *Talmud Bavli – Tractate Kiddushin 40b and Mishnah Pe'ah 1:1*

² Jerusalem Post, "Sacks Makes 1st House of Lords Speech," by Jonny Paul, November 28, 2009

kids and our other programs for families with young children serve dozens more. Under Ellen Dietrick's leadership, the Children's Center has received numerous grants, enabling our faculty to deepen their own knowledge so that they can foster excellence in learning for our children. I have watched these programs flourish, creating rich and engaging learning environments, providing content that stems from our children's own curiosities and inquiries, and nurturing the whole child's intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development.

Mia and Adam Markley chant Shabbat blessings, sing Hebrew songs complete with sign language, retell stories from Torah, and speak the language of *mitzvot*...and Michele and I are humbly aware that we had very little to do with this. Those are passions and skills that our children gained here in our Children's Center.

And on this Rosh Hashanah, our community ought to be very proud of the launch of Mayim, our brand new learning program for elementary-school-aged children and their families. After two years of planning and preparation, Temple Beth Shalom took a bold step forward by, essentially, shutting down our classical religious school model. While this mode of Jewish learning had been the industry norm for the past century, it was no longer meeting the needs of our children nor the goals we had for their learning and engagement.

In its place we have created Mayim, a program whose name means "water" because it is specifically designed to foster much greater depth – depth of learning and of relationships amongst our families. Gone are the days when Hebrew learning does not begin until third grade. The opportunity to hear and use Hebrew language begins in kindergarten, the moment a child walks through our doors. Are families responding positively to this shift? We have reason to believe that they are as the number of our kindergarten and first grade participants has more than tripled in just two years' time.

Gone is the classical religious school staffing model which, blessedly, often attracted wonderful teachers, but also necessitated that they serve our community on a very limited basis. In its place we have created a team of Jewish Learning Guides, supervised by Allison Gutman our Director of Elementary Learning.

Selected from amongst dozens and dozens of applicants, this all star team is not only responsible for crafting extraordinary learning opportunities and experiences for our children but also for hours of weekly prep time, regular communication with our families and sustaining their own ongoing Jewish learning. Think of a stand out teacher from your own childhood...someone who not only helped you to gain knowledge but also really knew you and helped you to become your best self. When we ask that question of our children 30 years from now, we want their Jewish Learning Guides at TBS to be amongst the faces they remember.

Finally, in launching Mayim we have set aside the curriculum that's been in place for years now. While its content was good, the methodology was not sufficiently compelling. Instead our K-5 children will now experience project based learning – a paradigm which invites participants to gain knowledge for the sake of applying that understanding immediately in relevant and meaningful ways.

So, our kindergarteners and first graders will not just talk about community, they will help to foster it by creating their own directory of the children and families in their learning group. Our 2nd and 3rd graders will not simply have a conversation about what it means to be a *mensch*, they will enable themselves and others to live our values by creating a guide for kids who are visiting the sick, or comforting mourners, or celebrating new birth. And our 4th and 5th graders will not just discuss the concept of holiness, they will seek it out as they create their own blessings for life moments that are worthy of highlighting and marking with Jewish ritual. This is the level of learning that our 21st century children deserve and so this is the level of excellence we seek to provide at TBS.

As a result, this transformation of synagogue learning is garnering attention far beyond the walls of this building. The Mayim website has had 3,000 visitors from Los Angeles to Tel Aviv. Why? Because Temple Beth Shalom is at the forefront of a Jewish learning revolution. Just this week we were asked to share our change process with the upcoming convention of the National Association of Temple Educators so that they might learn from our story.

But the real indicator of our success is not increased interest from outsiders but rather the reactions of our own children. When we piloted project based learning in a 4th grade class last year we experienced something entirely new...children pleading with their parents to come to religious school. And just in its first week of life, parents have already shared their experiences with Mayim, reporting – with a combination of shock and bemusement – that their children are using words like “the best,” “amazing,” and “I’m so excited.” Parents were dumbfounded that some of the words their kids came home using were in Hebrew. One child was overheard defiantly telling a doubting friend at the bus stop, “DUDE! Hebrew school is actually really awesome!”

If that were the sum total of our successes, Dayeinu, it would be enough. But our Teen Learning programs have also undergone tremendous growth and development over the past five years. *Sha'arim*, our rich array of options for students in grades 8-12 provides gateways into meaningful Jewish experiences for our youth, inviting them to access our tradition through cooking, or modern Hebrew, through art, or through exploring the natural wonders of the world around us, to name but a few. Our teens travel throughout the country performing acts of social justice and community service wherever they go. They learn together on retreats at camp that have become so popular, the teens are begging Lauren Bohne, our Director of Teen Learning, to run more of them. While so many congregations throughout the country struggle to keep children engaged following the celebration of *bar* or *bat mitzvah* our retention rate beyond that pivotal year is more than 300% the national average.

We should all be proud of our community's accomplishments in these realms, but our work doesn't end there...for Jewish learning and growth does not cease with high school graduation, does it? We, as adults, owe it to our children and grandchildren, to continually taste anew from the cornucopia of delights contained within 3,000 years of Jewish philosophy, theology, ritual practice, and ethical teachings.

A man once asked the Kotzker Rebbe how he could best ensure that his children study Torah. The rebbe answered, "If you wish your children to study Torah, study it yourself in their presence, and they will follow your example. Otherwise, they won't study Torah, they'll just tell their kids to do so." It is telling that both the English word, "tradition," and its Hebrew equivalent, "*masoret*" come from roots associated with inheritance. The implication...we cannot pass a tradition on to our children which we don't own for ourselves any more than I'm allowed to bequeath Bill Gates' fortunes to my kids.

But we ought not engage in Jewish learning for the sake of our kids alone. We owe that gift to ourselves as well. So, what gets in our way? For some it is simply that our schedules are nuts. We couldn't possibly find the time. We think this is a modern phenomenon unique to our generation, but 2,000 years ago, Rabbi Hillel famously remarked, "Don't say, 'When I have time I will learn,' for what if you never have time?"³

For centuries Jews have been known as the people of the book. If time is an issue then let's become the people of the tablet or better yet the smart phone...who knows...those things could actually make us smarter! There are countless websites that provide accessible, comprehensible, and substantive weekly and daily Torah teachings. Subscribe to one, and commit to reading what they send you. Spend five minutes a week at first...then build to ten, thirty, or even sixty. When developing new habits, it's best to pace ourselves.

Still others among us feel a disconnect from Jewish tradition - a sense that we just don't believe in some or even much of what we learned as children and therefore we are hesitant to engage anew. First of all, skepticism and doubt are always welcome at our learning tables. They only make the conversation that much richer. Secondly, in the words of Rabbi Joseph Telushkin: "The goal of Jewish study should not be only to reinforce what we already believe, but to challenge our thinking as well."⁴ In a world which provides so many models of entrenched refusal to ever admit being wrong – please see current election campaigns for examples - encountering texts and teachings which challenge our presuppositions is a healthy exercise.

³ *Pirkei Avot* 2:4

⁴ R' Joseph Telushkin, *A Code of Jewish Ethics*, Harmony Publishing (2006), p. 496

Still others have told me that they avoid Jewish learning for fear of being exposed. Competent, bright, and accomplished in other realms of life, some have a sense of embarrassment about not knowing enough about Judaism to participate whether because they did not grow up within the Jewish world or because that which was once known is now forgotten. But if we are to become the community of learners we seek to be, then in our synagogue home we must shift from a mindset that requires us to prove our expertise to others to one in which we are all perpetually learning. We ought not be ashamed of that which we don't understand but rather celebrate the fact that we don't know...yet. This is an opportunity for growth, not a cause for embarrassment.

In the words of Rabbi Brad Artson, "Our sages teach that we all stood at Mount Sinai; Just as God revealed Torah as we stood together, so we are encouraged to study our sacred texts in community. When we study together...it is as if we are helping one another remember what we heard long ago at Sinai...The more we learn, the more we have to give; and the stronger we become as individuals and as a community."⁵

It is such a delight to live and to lead in a congregation where so many of our adults do regularly engage in Jewish learning. From the 50-70 individuals who attend our weekly Torah study, to our adult *b'nei mitzvah* classes, to the scores of others who attend adult learning opportunities throughout the year. And yet, no matter how much Jewish learning we have done, there is always room to expand our horizons, and as you'll soon see in your mailbox, there is no shortage of opportunities here.

I myself have fallen prey to every one of the excuses for not engaging in Jewish learning that I mentioned. They are real, but they are surmountable and the rewards are well worth the effort. As Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, famously taught, "In prayer, we speak to God, but in study, God speaks to us [anew]." Let us not silence that voice.

As we begin this new year – a time which provides so many reasons to celebrate our children's Jewish learning at TBS, shouldn't we recommit to our own as well? Jewish study helps us to be more compassionate and empathetic, it cuts across social, economic, and professional boundaries, it allows us to connect with people of varied ages and expands our ability to think flexibly and creatively. Jewish learning guides our moral and ethical behavior, and helping us to be our best selves.⁶

For many of us the first 18, or 22, or even 30 years of our lives were dedicated almost exclusively to learning. Let 5773 be a year when we return to earlier phases of life...when learning was at least as important as doing and producing. Let us return to our Jewish questions long forgotten and actively seek out answers that resonate in our minds and inspire our souls. Let us return, together, to stand once again at Sinai and to hear God speak to us through the voices in our texts and the voices of those seated beside us. *Hashiveinu Adonai* – return us that we might return to You.

⁵ *Making a Difference* by Bradley Shavit Artson and Gila Gevirtz, Behrman House (2001)

⁶ Adapted from Telushkin, *ibid.* pp 507-512