

Why Study Talmud in the Twenty-first Century? The Relevance of the Ancient Jewish Text to Our World, edited by Paul Socken. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009. 258 pp. \$75.00.

While Talmud study held pride of place in most Jewish communities in previous centuries by sheer force of tradition, this book seeks out the reasons for this privileged position. After all, Talmud study requires a tremendous investment of time and effort, and the payoff from struggling through its meandering dialectics is not always obvious. In fact, already in the twelfth century, Maimonides declared Talmud study unnecessary since one could simply read his Mishneh Torah. In the fast-paced practical-minded twenty-first century, this issue is even more pressing. Rather than writing programmatic essays about why *everyone* should study Talmud, this group of sixteen leading Talmudists from a broad range of backgrounds has taken up the more modest goal of explaining why they personally study Talmud. Although each writer speaks individually, when taken together as a group, certain common themes emerge that can add up to something of a programmatic treatment.

One theme repeated in many of the responses stands out as the most honest, even if the most prosaic: studying Talmud is enjoyable. Shaye Cohen provides examples of fun Talmudic brainteasers. The Talmud is not only a puzzle, adds Ephraim Kanarfogel, but also like a treasure map that leads every generation to new *hiddushim*. Jane Kanarek finds pleasure in investing the time necessary to decipher this difficult text, especially when doing so with a good study partner. And Barry Wimpfheimer elaborates on the deep satisfaction and even spiritual joy in the “Eureka” moment when one discovers an insight to explain a difficult passage.

This enjoyment of learning itself points to a deeper aspect of the Talmud that is vitally relevant to the twenty-first century. Many people are frustrated by the Talmud’s playful or even illogical arguments, curious and fantastic stories, and far-fetched interpretations. However, for these scholars, part of what makes Talmud study so engaging is, paradoxically, its very strangeness. In the very attempt to make sense of the foreignness of the Talmud, Devora Steinmetz sees an opportunity to develop the virtues of generosity and humility and to reflect on the irrationality of our own culture. Similarly, Elizabeth Shanks Alexander is not satisfied until her students, who are new to Talmud, wrestle with its counterintuitive logic and are finally able to put aside their own cultural biases and read the Talmud “sympathetically in light of its own internal consistency.” Jeffrey Rubenstein demonstrates that even, or especially, when rabbinic stories seem disturbing and perplexing, further analysis reveals in them sophisticated narrative art and deceptive profundity in their abil-

ity to convey in a short space the deepest struggles of the rabbis with critical theological issues. For Azzan Yadin, the rabbinic idiom can sometimes encode much deeper concepts that can be translated for the modern ear using modern literary theory.

Similarly, students who find infuriating the Talmud's compulsion to argue both sides of every issue may be underestimating the value of this multivocality. Richard Kalmin, for example, feels that the Bavli's open-endedness and pluralism makes its study exhilarating and rewarding. Tsvi Blanchard is drawn to the dialectical nature of the Talmud and argues that it trains us to appreciate the ambiguity inherent in law and reality. The multivalent nature of the Talmud can also help alleviate the problems presented by rabbinic statements that are offensive to women and other groups. Judith Baskin, among others, deals with this dehumanizing of women by recognizing that Talmud also contains, even if only in minority opinions, female voices as well as teachings that bolster the status of women.

Most fundamentally, nearly all the participating authors recognize the centrality of the Talmud as the foundation for rabbinic Judaism. It is an essential resource for anyone interested in any denomination of modern Judaism in almost every area of law, thought, and culture. For this reason, Yaakov Elman delivers a strong polemic against traditional conceptual methods of study common in Yeshivot and argues instead for the value of reading the Talmud in its historical context so that we can apply its teachings to similar challenges today. Beyond explaining the origins of rabbinic Judaism, the Talmud can help us advance Jewish values in contemporary society. Michael Chernick discusses cases where the Talmudic ethics are more advanced than laws in modern countries, such as the law of self-incrimination and the obligation of bystanders to rescue someone in danger. Reading each of these essays in juxtaposition and in conversation with one another creates a Talmud-like dialogue whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The editor, Paul Socken, is to be commended for this.

The editor has grouped the writers into four sections: "Women's Voices," "Teaching Talmud," "Academics Respond," and "A Philosopher's Approach." In his introduction, Socken acknowledges that the female contributors are also academics, but he wants to emphasize how they engage the Talmud specifically as women. However, with the exception of Devorah Zlochower, who documents her struggle studying Talmud as a woman, the essays in the women's section could have been equally written by men with little change. While I'm sure it was well-intentioned, my sense is that this division only perpetuates the twentieth-century reality when women had to struggle for opportunities to study and receive equal recognition.

The “Teaching Talmud” section includes an essay by Pinchas Hayman, who considers the very question of the book to be “toxic” and offers dogmatism in response. A single article by David Novak comprises the final section. This previously published article seeks out philosophical reflections in the Talmud concerning the reasons for the commandments, but it does not address the topic of the book. The back material consists of biographies of the authors and a very short index.

My one sentence digests above do not do justice to the learned responses collected here, nor do they even give a taste for the dozens of sample texts analyzed in this book representing the authors’ top favorites. Many of the writers have also responded with mini-autobiographies about their personal intellectual developments. We get to know some of the backgrounds and motivations of these scholars, which can help put their academic projects in better perspective. The scholarly, Jewish, and general reading communities owe Socken a great debt of gratitude for collecting these essays. The authors have provided us many profound reasons to continue, or perhaps begin, experiencing the joy of studying Talmud.

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