

WHY DAF YOMI?

Talmud Study

Herman Wouk

In the Talmudic method of text study, the starting point is the principle that any text that is deemed worthy of serious study must be assumed to have been written with such care and precision that every term, expression, generalization or

Daf Yomi: Tossed into a stormy sea when his ship was wrecked, the great Talmudic sage Rabbi Akiva was given up for lost. This is how he later described his miraculous rescue to Rabbi Gamaliel: "A *daf* (plank) from the ship

exception is significant not so much for what it states as for what it implies. The contents of ideas as well as the diction and phraseology in which they are clothed are to enter into the reasoning. This method is characteristic of the Tannaitic interpretation of the Bible from the earliest times; the belief in the divine origin of the Bible was sufficient justification for attaching importance to its external forms of expression. The same method was followed later by the Amoraim in their interpretation of the Mishnah and by their successors in the interpretation of the Talmud, and it continued to be applied to the later

forms of rabbinic Literature. Serious students themselves, accustomed to a rigid form of logical reasoning and to the usage of precise forms of expression, the Talmudic trained scholars attributed the same quality of precision and exactness to any authoritative work, be it of divine origin or the product of the human mind. Their attitude toward the written word of any kind is like that of the jurist toward the external phrasing of statutes and laws, and perhaps also, in some respect, like that of the latest kind of historical and literary criticism which applies the method of psycho-analysis to the study of texts. **This** attitude toward texts had its necessary concomitant in what may again be called the Talmudic hypothetic deductive method of text interpretation. Confronted with a statement on any subject, the Talmudic student will proceed to raise a series of questions before he satisfies himself of having understood its full meaning. If the statement is not clear enough, he will ask, 'What does the author intend to say here?' If it is too obvious, he will again ask, 'It is too plain, why then expressly say it?' If it is a statement of fact or of a concrete instance, he will then ask, 'What underlying principle does it involve?' If it is broad generalization, he will want to know exactly how much it is to include; and if it is an exception to a general rule, he will want to know how much it is to exclude. He will furthermore want to know all the circumstances under which a certain statement is true, and what qualifications are permissible. **Statements** apparently contradictory to each other will be reconciled by the discovery of some subtle distinction, and statements apparently irrelevant to each other will be subtly analyzed into their ultimate elements and shown to contain some common underlying principle. The harmonization of apparent contradictions and the interlinking of apparent irrelevancies are two characteristic features of the Talmudic method of text study. And similarly every other phenomenon about the text becomes a matter of investigation. Why does the author use one word rather than another? What need was there for the mentioning of a specific instance as an illustration? Do certain authorities differ or not? If they do, why do they differ? **All** these are legitimate questions for the Talmudic student of texts. And any attempt to answer these questions calls for ingenuity and skill, the power of analysis and association, and the ability to set up hypotheses - and all these must be bolstered up by a wealth of accurate information and the use of good judgment. No limitation is set upon any subject; problems run into one another; they become intricate and interwoven, one throwing light upon the other. And there is a logic underlying this method of reasoning. It is the very same kind of logic which underlies any sort of scientific research, and by which one is enabled to form hypotheses, to test them and to formulate general laws. The Talmudic student approaches the study of texts in the same manner as the scientist approaches the study of nature. Just as the scientist proceeds on the assumption that there is a uniformity and continuity in nature so the Talmudic student proceeds on the assumption that there is a uniformity and continuity in human reasoning. Now this method of text interpretation is sometimes derogatorily referred to as Talmudic quibbling or pilpul. In truth, it is nothing but the application of the scientific method to the study of texts.*

WHY DAF YOMI?

Because by now the Talmud is in my bones. Its elegant and arcane ethical algebra, its soaked-in quintessential Jewishness, its fun, its difficulty, its accumulative virtue ("I learned a 'blatt' today, I've learned forty 'blatt' this year") all balance against the cost in time and the so-called "remoteness from reality." Is 'Lear' closer to reality? I think they are about as close ('Ihavdil,' as my rabbi would interject) in different ways, and that the Talmud is holy besides.

Anyway, I love it. That's reason enough. My father once said to me, "If I had enough breath left in me for only one last word, I'd say to you, 'Study the Talmud.'" I'm just beginning to understand him. I would say the same thing to my own sons. Above and beyond all its other intellectual and cultural values, the Talmud is, for people like us, 'identity,' pure and ever-springing.

Herman Wouk, unpublished diary,
16 January 1972.

suddenly appeared as a salvation, and I just let the waves pass over me." When Rabbi Meir Shapiro, the rabbi of Lublin between the two World Wars, initiated the program for Jews all over the world to study the same *daf yomi* (daily page of Talmud), he explained the significance of this undertaking by paraphrasing Rabbi Akiva: "A *daf* is the instrument of our survival in the stormy seas of today. If we cling to it faithfully all the waves of tribulation will but pass over us." The entire Talmud is covered in seven years by those who keep to the prescribed daily pace. Study groups and individuals throughout the world are now in the

second half of the seventh cycle of *daf yomi*. One individual is the author, Herman Wouk, who here, in a never-before-published page from his diary, described his experience with the daily *daf*

* Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1929).

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