



Turning it Over: Reflections on Learning, Teaching, and Reading in Community

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Overview: Our three-part class will grapple with a fundamental question at the heart of Jewish education: What does it mean *to read* as a spiritual practice, and how do we do so within the context of a community? We will think deeply about the place of learning Torah—most broadly construed—as key to our continuous processes of moral, religious, and intellectual self-formation. Rather than trying to “cover” a lot of textual ground, please approach the readings as opportunities to “uncover” space for reflection on who we want to be as people in the world, and what type of lives we will live. Let us approach the texts as spiritual or ethical prompts—not as a normative prescription or specific nudges to do the right thing, but as texts that spark a process of thinking, reflection, and discernment. The arc of our time together will be as follows:

Session 1: Why Do We Learn?

Session 2: What, and How, Do We Learn?

Session 3: With Whom, and From Whom, Do We Learn?

Ongoing Reflection -- To aid in the good work of integration, here is a recommended activity: **Start a commonplace notebook** (could be **digital**, but I especially **recommend a physical journal or composition book**), a place for you to consider the texts you’ve read for this week’s session and to express the surprise, pleasure, concern, and questions that emerge from your studies. Consider this a written space for the collection of your *talmud torah*, something akin to what the Christian monastics call *lectio divina*, a four-stage process of reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. (If you keep this up, it will become, over the weeks, a written record of your travels and a garden of your thinking. In the words of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “My commonplace formed my own canon, just as I imagine each of yours did for you. And a canon, as it has functioned in every literary tradition, has served as the commonplace book of our shared culture.”)

For your upcoming session, you might transcribe at least two and no more than five sentences or passages from things you’ve read this week. Be sure to include the author’s name, the title of the work in which the quote appears, and where to find it. Then, add on! You may write summaries in your own words of the writers’ most important arguments, and flag sentences or passages that strike you as either particularly important or well-said. More importantly, reflect on what these sentences spark or bring up for you in heart and mind, and how they contribute to our growth. Connect your chosen passages to ideas from other readings or from outside of class, or with the events in your own lives.

Although our class will be doing this work asynchronously and independently, I’d encourage folks to share something from your commonplace notebooks each week in our WhatsApp group. You will not have to share everything, but you should share something significant. Then, give some kind of offering or reflection to that person, but make sure to check in and see what they’d like to receive (words, comments, or just silence).

Session 1: Why We Learn?

Mishnah Avot 5:22

Ben Bag Bag said: “Turn it over and turn it over, for all is within it.”

בן בג בג אומר: הפך בה והפך בה, דכולה בה.

Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 54a-

Why were matters of Torah compared to a fig tree? Just as this fig tree, whenever a person searches it one finds figs on it, so, too, with matters of Torah. Whenever one considers them, one finds new meaning in them.

למה נמשלו דברי תורה פתאנה, מה תאנה זו
פל זמן שאדם ממשמש פה — מוצא בה תאנים. אף דברי
תורה, פל זמן שאדם הוגה בהן — מוצא בהן טעם.

Mishnah Avot 5:22 -- according to Kauffman manuscript

Ben Bag Bag said: “Turn it over and turn it over, for all of it is within you, and all of you is within it.”

בן בג בג אומר: הפוך בה והפוך בה דכולה בך
וכולך בה

Anonymous comment on the flyleaf of MS Mantua 18, fol. 1a

What is the book? Paper.
What is the paper? Cloth.
What is the cloth? Linen.
What is the linen? Earth.
What is the earth? The blessed Holy One.
What, then, is a book? God.

מה הספר של נייר
מה הנייר של סמרטוט
מה הסמרטוט של פשתן
מה הפשתן של ארץ
מה ארץ של הקב"ה
מה הספר הוא

Ya'akov Leiner, Beit Yaakov, va-yebi

“If I have found favor in your eyes” (Gen. 47:29). There are places in Torah which on the surface appear uninspiring. To the person who just sees their surface meaning, they appear as a lifeless, immobile body. Such a lackluster appearance is akin to being buried. However, for someone who sees the words of Torah in a gracious, favorable light, there is no passage in Torah that is uninspiring, for by means of the gracious regard (*ben*) you have for Torah, your heart is aligned with and resonates with the depth of these seemingly buried passages. (based on trans. Nehemia Polen.)

“אם נא מצאתי חן בעיניך... אלא משום שיש מקומות
בדברי תורה אשר בפשטותם בלעדי עומק הפנימי שבהם
אינם מעוררין את האדם והאדם המביט רק לפשטותם הם
נגדו כמו גוף בלא חיים שאין בכחו להתנועע ממקום
למקום והעלם כזה הוא כענין קבורה אכן מי שיעלה חן
לדברי תורה בעיניו אזי אין עוד שום מקום נגדו בדברי
תורה שלא יעוררו אותו כי על יד החן של דברי התורה
הנמצא אצלו מכוון תמיד בעומק לבו לעומק הפנימי שיש
בהם

Mishnah Avot 1:6

Yehoshua ben Perahya and Nitai of Arbel received it from them.
Yehoshua b. Perahya says: “Make for yourself a teacher (*rav*), and acquire for yourself a friend (*haber*), and judge every person favorably.”

הוֹשֵׁעַ בֶּן פְּרַחְיָה וְנִטַּי אֶרְבֵּל קִבְּלוּ מֵהֶם.

הוֹשֵׁעַ בֶּן פְּרַחְיָה אָמַר:

עֲשֵׂה לָךְ רַב, וּקְנֵה לָךְ חֵבֵר; וְהִגִּי דָן אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם לְכַר זְכוּת

Rashi on m. Avot 1:6 (Rabbi Shlomo Yitshaki, 1040-1105, France)

“Make for yourself a teacher.” Do not study all on your own, from logical inference, but learn from a teacher and from tradition.

“Acquire for yourself a friend.” Some say this refers to books, others say it actually refers to a friend. So it says, “two are better than one” (Eccl. 4:9), and it says, “A sword is upon the boasters, and they shall become fools” (Jer. 50:36).

“Judge every person favorably.” Say that anything that you hear is meant for the good until you know for certain that it is not. If you judge others in this way, you too will be judged this way by heaven, as it says in the [18th chapter of b. Shabbat].

עֲשֵׂה לָךְ רַב. שְׁלֵא תִהְיֶה אֵתָהּ לְמַד לְעַצְמְךָ מִסְבְּרָא אֲלֵא מִן הָרַב וּמִן הַשְּׂמוּעָה:

וּקְנֵה לָךְ חֵבֵר. אֲמַרְי לֵה סְפָרִים וְאֲמַרְי לֵה חֵבֵר מִמֶּשׁ לְפִי שְׂטוּבִים הַשְּׁנִים מִן הָאֲחֵד וְכֵן הוּא אֹמֵר חָרַב אֵל הַבַּדִּים וְנִוְאָלוּ:

וְהוּי דָן אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם לְכַר זְכוּת. עַל כָּל שֶׁתִּשְׁמַע עֲלִיּוֹ אֲמֹר שֶׁנִּתְכוּוֹן לְטוֹבָה עַד שֶׁתִּדְעַ בְּבִירור שְׂאִינוֹ כֵּן שְׂאֵם אֵתָהּ תִּדְיִן כֵּן יִדְוֵנוֹ אוֹתְךָ מִן הַשְּׁמִים לְזְכוּת כְּמוֹ שֶׁמְפָרֵשׁ בְּפ' מִפְּנִיךְ:

Yehudah ibn Tibbon's Ethical Will/Letter to His Son Shmuel

My child! Make your books your companions, your bookcases and shelves your orchards and gardens. Bask in their paradise, gather their fruit, pluck their roses, take their spices and their myrrh. If your soul is satiated and weary, change from garden to garden, from furrow to furrow, from prospect to prospect. Then your desire will be renewed, and your soul filled with delight.

בְּנִי! שִׂים סְפָרֶיךָ חֵבֵרֶיךָ וְאֲרָגִזֶיךָ וְתִיבּוֹתֶיךָ פְּרֻדְסִיךָ וּגְנוֹתֶיךָ רֵעָה בְּגִנוֹתֵיהֶם וּלְקוּט שׁוֹשְׁנֵיהֶם וְאֲרָה מְפָרִיהֶם בְּשִׂמְיָהֶם וּמִוְרֵיהֶם. וְאֵם תְּקוּץ נִפְשֶׁךָ וְתִלְאָה הָעֵתֶק מִגֵּן אֵל גֵּן. וּמַעְרוּגָה אֵל עֵרוּגָה וּמִמְרָאָה אֵל מְרָאָה כִּי אַז יִתְחַדֵּשׁ חִפְצְךָ וְתִנְאָה נִפְשֶׁךָ.

Alberto Manguel, *A Reader on Reading*, x, 10, 274 (Contemporary writer)

I believe there is an ethic of reading, a responsibility in how we read, a commitment that is both political and private in the act of turning the pages and following the lines ...

In the midst of uncertainty and many kinds of fear, threatened by loss, change, and the welling of pain within and without for which one can offer no comfort, readers know that at least there are, here and there, a few safe places, as real as paper and as bracing as ink, to grant us roof and board in our passage through the dark and nameless woods...

I am tempted to say that every book that allows a reader to engage with it asks a moral question. Or rather: that is a reader is able to delve beyond the surface of a given text, such a reader can bring back from its depths a moral question, even if that question has not been put by the writer in so

many words, but its implicit presence elicits nevertheless a bare emotion from the reader, a foreboding or simply a memory of something we knew, long ago. Through this alchemy, every literary text becomes, in some sense, metaphorical.

It may be that, of all the instruments we have invented to help us along the path of self-discovery, books are the most useful, the most practical, the most concrete. By lending words to our bewildering experience, books become compasses that embody the four cardinal points: Mobility and stability, self-reflection and the gift of looking outward. The older metaphor that sees the world as a book we read and in which we too are read merely recognizes this guiding, all-encompassing quality. In a book, no one point is exclusively the north, since whichever is chosen the other three remain actively present.

Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, *Derekh ha-Melekh, tsav*

When a branch is taken from a great tree and planted, it is not enough for the sapling to remain the size and form that it was when first taken from the tree. It must flourish and grow, becoming a mighty tree that gives forth its own branches, leaves, and fruit.

So, too, you must grow such by making Torah from yourself. When one receives instruction, from a teacher or a book, first you must incorporate those words of Torah into your very self. But that alone is insufficient. You must be utterly transformed, and from your thoughts and mind, the tree of Torah emerges.

Those teachings are like a transplanted sapling, or like a seed that has been planted. If they are hidden within salted earth lacking in the capacity for growth, they will remain just as they were, or they will wither. But when planted in ground imbued with divine fertility, it flourishes and grows into a new tree... For what is the entire Torah if not a sacred tree, the Tree of Life from the Garden of Eden that flourishes in the land of the living, in the soul of a Jew.

וחוץ מזה, הפסוק (ישעיה ס, כא) אומר "ועמך כלם צדיקים וכו' נצר מטעיי" - האיש ישראל הוא נצר ממטעיי ד'. וכמו נצר שלוקחים מאילן גדול ונוטעים אותו - לא די שישאר הנצר בגודלו ובצורתו כפי שלקחוהו מן האילן, רק צריך לצמוח ולהתגדל, להעשות מעצמו אילן גדול וממנו יצאו ענפים עלים ופירות, כן איש ישראל צריך להתגדל, שמעצמו יעשה תורה. והשומע תורה מרב או מספר, ראשית כל יכנסו הדברי תורה ששמע או ראה אל קרבו. אבל זה לא די לו, רק צריך להשתנות כולו, ומן מחשבותיו ורצונו יעלו אילן של תורה. הדברי תורה ששמע הם רק כנצר הנטוע או כגרעין שנורע, באם תחבו את הנצר והגרעין באדמה מלחה שאין בה כח הצמיחה, היה נשאר כמו שהיה או גם הוא היה מתייבש. רק כיון שנתחב באדמה שיש בה כח הצמיחה שנתן בה ד', לכן היא מצמחת ומגדלת אילן חדש. כך נפש הישראלית שבו - כיון שנכנסה בה תורה צריכה היא מן עצמותה לעשות ולהצמיח תורה. ובאמת מה היא כל התורה אם לא אילן קדוש, עץ חיים מגן עדן שצומח על ארץ החיים שבנפש ישראל. כי התורה נתגלה גם ב"לא תגנוב ולא תגזול", ב"מחליף פרה בחמור" וכו', ובאם לא היתה טבע בני האדם לגזול או לעשות חליפין וכו', האם ח"ו חלק תורה היה נחסר - לא, התורה ירדה לישראל, וכפי עצם ישראל, גופיהן, נפשותיהן ונשמותיהן היא מתגדלת, צומחת ונתגלה, עד שמי שמשיב גזילה מקיים מצוה בפועל, והמחליף פרה בחמור ועושה כדינו נעשה גוף המצוה. ואם היו טבעם של ישראל באופן אחר (ובאה התורה להם), אז נתגלה התורה כפי מצבם אז. אבל אנו אומרים בזה שלא די העצם של כלל ישראל - מה שנעשה ממנו תורה, רק גם כל איש פרטי - הדברי תורה ששמע לא דיים לו, רק צריך שמעתה מן עצמותו ונפשו יעשה תורה, "נצר מטעיי", והנצר צריך להתגדל ולהעשות אילן לעצמו.

Seneca, On the Shortness of Life, 2005, p. 23 (1st Century, Roman Stoic philosopher)

Of all people, they alone are at leisure who take time for philosophy, they alone really live; for they are not content to be good guardians of their own lifetime only. They annex every age to their own; all the years that have gone before them are an addition to their store. Unless we are most ungrateful, all those men, glorious fashioners of holy thoughts, were born for us; for us they have prepared a way of life. By other men's labours we are led to the sight of things most beautiful that have been wrested from darkness and brought into light; from no age are we shut out, we have access to all ages, and if it is our wish, by greatness of mind, to pass beyond the narrow limits of human weakness, there is a great stretch of time through which we may roam. We may argue with Socrates, we may doubt with Carneades, find peace with Epicurus, overcome human nature with the Stoics, exceed it with the Cynics. Since Nature allows us to enter into fellowship with every age, why should we not turn from this paltry and fleeting span of time and surrender ourselves with all our soul to the past, which is boundless, which is eternal, which we share with our betters?

Divrei Shalom, par. bo

One who reads the Megillah out of order, [does not fulfill his obligation] (b. Megillah 17a). The Ba'al Shem Tov said: One who reads the Megillah "out of order," meaning that he believes the miracle was only then, and not now, has not fulfilled his obligation.

הקורא את המגילה למפרע וכו' (מגילה י"ז א), אמר הר"י בעש"ט נ"ע, הקורא את המגילה למפרע, פירוש, שסובר כי אז היה הנס ולא עתה, לא יצא: