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Today's Torah

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Why My Non-Jewish Taxi Driver Respects Judaism: Judaism's Unique Approach to Education

Torah Reading: Deuteronomy 29:9-30:20

Haftarah Reading: Isaiah 61:10-63:9

"Surely, this Instruction that I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach" (Deuteronomy 31:11). *Why* could the Torah be sure that it is not too baffling for us or beyond reach our reach?

The answer lies in the educational system that the Torah constructed. First and foremost, parents had the obligation to teach the Torah to their children: "Impress them [or "teach them diligently"] to your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise up" (Deuteronomy 6:7). This last verse, famous for being embedded in the *Shema*, uses a biblical device called a "merism," where the ends of a spectrum are mentioned in order to indicate everything in between as well. Thus this verse is telling parents -- and Jews in general -- to talk about the Torah everywhere (home and abroad) and always (from the first waking hour to the last). In doing so, it is repeating a heritage going back to Abraham: "For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right, in order that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him" (Genesis 18:19).

Second, adults as well as children would know the Torah because they would be reminded of it through an elaborate ritual system. Contrary to things like tables and chairs, the abstract ideals and even the specific stories and laws of the Torah do not exist in the world in which we live. We must be constantly reminded of the existence and the message of the Torah if it has a chance of affecting our lives. As a result, the Torah requires us to mark the seasons so that their passage can trigger in us an appreciation of our connections to nature and to Jewish history (e.g., Exodus 12:24-27; Leviticus 23:42; Deuteronomy 26:1-11); to mark life cycle events with yet other lessons in mind (e.g., Genesis 17:9-14; Leviticus 15); and, even more pervasively, to put on the *tallit* and *tefillin* each day (Deuteronomy 6:8), to put a *mezuzah* on our doorposts (Deuteronomy 6:9), to restrict our eating in accordance with the dietary laws (e.g., Leviticus 11, especially 11:43-45; Deuteronomy 12:23-25), and to surround eating with blessings (Deuteronomy 8:10). All these rituals remind us ultimately of aspects of our Covenantal relationship with God; they teach us what that relationship requires of us; and they reveal to us the values and concepts embedded in that relationship.

Third, to reinforce these educational methods in the life of each of us in the home and the community, once every seven years, as Jews gather in Jerusalem for the Sukkot holiday, they are to listen to a reading of the entire Torah:

Every seventh year, the year set for remission [of debts], at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God in the place that He will choose, you shall read this Teaching aloud in the presence of all Israel. Gather the people -- men, women, children, and the strangers in your communities -- that they may hear and so learn to revere the Lord your God and to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching. Their children, too, who have not had the experience, shall hear and learn to revere the Lord your God as long as they live in the land that you are about to cross the Jordan to possess.

(Deuteronomy 31:10-13)

While Jews take it for granted that everyone is entitled -- indeed, commanded -- to learn the tradition, this was not at all the practice in the ancient world. Most religions were esoteric; that is, only the priest or other elite members of the society were made privy to the secret beliefs and practices of the religion. In sharp contrast, the Torah records that God repeatedly told Moses to "speak to the *Children of Israel* -- not just to the priests or elders, and not just to the men, but to the entire people. A striking example of this difference, recorded by Columbia University scholar E. J. Bickerman (*Studies in Jewish and Christian History* [Leiden: Brill, 1976], Part 1, p. 199), occurs in the archaeological remains of the Syrian city of Dura in two third-century houses of worship there:

In the Mithra temple at Dura it is a Magian in his sacred dress who keeps the sacred scroll *closed in his hand*. [But] in the synagogue of Dura, a layman, without any sign of office, is represented reading the *open* scroll.

That every Jew is privy to the sacred texts of the Jewish tradition has several important implications. First, this feature of Judaism confers significant status to each and every Jew. Since we can all learn the revelation of God, we can all interact with God directly. Rabbis and others learned in the tradition can teach Jews the skills necessary to understand the content and methods of the tradition, but ultimately no intermediary stands between a Jew and the sacred texts of Judaism. Each Jew may learn the Torah, wrestle with it, and interpret it in the way most plausible to him or her. Anyone who wants to make his or her interpretation the official stance of the Jewish community (or a subset of it) must justify that reading to those s/he wants to convince, but even if every other Jew thinks your interpretation is wrong, you have not only the right to suggest it, but the duty to reveal the new facet you have found in the sacred text.

"Is not My word like a hammer that breaks a rock in many pieces (Jeremiah 23:29)? As the hammer causes numerous sparks to flash forth, so is a Scriptural verse capable of many interpretations. (B. *Sanhedrin* 34a).

It is for very good reason, then, that "Where there are two Jews, there are at least three opinions!"

Second, the sacred status of each Jew as student and interpreter of the Torah comes with a reciprocal duty: each of us has not only the right, but the *responsibility* to learn the tradition. None of us can pass off that duty to others. Some, by virtue of their learning, may have the special charge to help others learn, but in the end each of us has the duty to learn as much about the tradition as we can. And we cannot blame bad teachers for our failure to learn it ourselves!

Third, learning the tradition brings with it yet another responsibility -- namely, to act in accordance with it. Each and every adult Jew can justly be held responsible for transgressing the Torah's commandments because all Jews are expected to know what they are. This applies not only to our individual behavior, but to the actions of our community as well, for we all are supposed to know what is right and wrong:

Whoever is able to protest against the wrongdoings of his family and fails to do so is punished for the family's wrongdoings. Whoever is able to protest against the wrongdoings of her fellow citizens and does not do so is punished for the wrongdoings of the people of the city.

Whoever is able to protest against the wrongdoings of the world and does not do so is punished for the wrongdoings of the world. (B. *Shabbat* 54b)

Knowledge brings with it responsibility for our own actions and for those with whom we are associated.

Finally, when only a small elite possesses the secrets of a tradition, they can retain their special power only if they keep the tradition both secret and constant. If everyone knows the tradition and lives by it, though, the tradition will inevitably adjust to the new realities of each generation. That is not only a good thing, but a crucial one, for only when traditions are learned and challenged and adjusted can they live on from one generation to another.

Recently, my taxi driver in Chicago, a young man who two years ago had come to this country from Krakow, Poland, told me that he had immense respect for Jews. He even had a book on the history of the Jews on the front seat of his taxi. When I asked him why he respected Jews so much, he said that Jews value family and education. To the extent that he is right about our commitment to education, it begins with passages such as the one from this week's Torah reading with which I began -- and others like this one in this week's reading, with which I shall end: "No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it" (Deuteronomy 31:14).

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