

Join the Conversation

RABBI WILLIAM BERK

According to the Talmud, when we die we are asked these five questions: 1) *Were you honest in business?* 2) *Did you try to raise a family?* 3) *Did you expect and work towards the repair of the world?* 4) *Did you enjoy the permitted fruits of this world – in other words, did you celebrate life in a wholesome, healthy way?* And the fifth question – *did you study Torah?* It's jarring, isn't it, this fifth question? I mean, the other four are so universal, so applicable to everyone. Surely we can all agree that it's crucial to be honest in business, to raise a family, to work towards redemption, and to celebrate life. But study Torah? Are we to put this in the same category? Is it that crucial? And what are we to think of all the people who can answer "yes" to the first four questions but would have to answer "no" to the fifth question?

Consider the following:

- The Wexner and Bronfman families have donated millions of dollars not for Israel, not for rescuing Jews, not for the purpose of educating children, but for the purpose of teaching adults Torah. Five members of my own congregation were selected by the Wexner Foundation to engage in intense, advanced Jewish study – and all their expenses were paid, which included a trip to Israel and two week-long retreats.
- Thanks in part to the Jewish women's movement, there are now hundreds of thousands of Jewish women studying Torah. Jewish women are attending retreats, studying at *minyans*, and joining all types of study groups.
- More Jews are studying Talmud today than at any other time in the history of the Jewish people.

The amazing truth is – we are undergoing the greatest renewal of Jewish learning ever. There are three reasons this is happening. First, we are being hit by a great historical wave – I call it the re-religionization of America. More and more people – not just Christian fundamentalists – are returning to religion. This return is caused primarily by the growing realization that without religious underpinnings, our culture is vulnerable to disease and disintegration. People need a strong, dependable source of values, a God-based morality, or they face the unraveling of civility and the collapse of morals.

Secondly, we Jews are fighting for our survival on this continent. We've shrunk from being 3% of the United States population to one and a half per cent. We have learned that gastronomic Judaism doesn't work. We have learned that pediatric Judaism doesn't work. We have learned that M-TV Judaism doesn't work. We have learned that to love Israel and dance the *hora* Judaism doesn't work. The only Judaism that has ever worked or ever will work is Judaism centered on Torah – Judaism where you enter the great conversation of the Jewish people that goes back to Abraham and Sarah.

The third cause of this incredible renewal is the wisdom of the Jewish people who have sensed that we are in a time of great transition. At a time of massive re-wiring, we sense the need to check in with the wisdom of the ages. Dennis Prager puts it like this – "There are some truths you can't learn in one generation." If we are going to do a good job re-wiring Jewish life and making our contribution to the re-wiring of the planet earth, we had better join the conversation of the generations to find out what they have to say. It's a matter of survival. If we proceed

with the arrogance of the typical eighteen year old who says – “I know just about everything and what I don’t know I’ll learn myself,” we are in big trouble. That kind of attitude leads to disaster. Ask those who survived the excesses of the sixties. They’ll tell you. They feel lucky to have survived. They wish someone would have taught them the truths that take generations to learn.

Studying Torah fills in the gaps in our upbringing. You know what Torah study is? It’s entering the conversation. Now, if there’s one thing we know about most Jews, it’s that Jews like to talk. I remember when I first got involved as an adult in entering the conversation. It was after college and somehow I ended up listening to this teacher from Israel. He was teaching the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel. Suddenly he asked, “Who is Jacob wrestling with?” To my surprise, he proceeded to explain how the Torah is intentionally vague. At one point, it looks like he’s wrestling an angel. At another point, it looks like he’s wrestling with God. Then, it seems like he’s wrestling a man. Then the teacher asked – what do you think? If you were about to see your estranged family and you carried guilt from the past about your relations with the family, what wrestling might be going on inside you? I was stunned. He was talking to me. This Torah was talking to me. I had guilt about one of my relationships in my family. And I was in the process of trying to come back to my family. Not only was this question important to me – but the teacher was eager to hear my answer. It was as if what I would say would determine what the Torah meant today!

What’s so empowering and exciting about Torah study, about entering the conversation, is that what you say matters. What we think – how we respond – becomes the Torah of our generation. Once you enter into the conversation, you discover something so energizing and hope-inducing. You discover that you are worthy, that you are needed, that your voice is crucial. You find out that with each additional voice we become more whole, more ourselves. It’s a conversation that is elevating.

The more you get involved in Torah study, the more your conversation takes on the issues that have been our issues for thousands of years – what are we here for? How do we teach the lesson of the Exodus to the

world? How do we make sure we learn the lesson? How do we inspire our children to commit to inspiring their children to inspire their children? Having suffered as a slave, how do I treat others? Living in a brutal world, how am I to allocate my meager resources? Do I turn the other cheek? Do I embrace revolution? If the world is a mess, is it permissible to live for the moment and just look out for myself? What of the danger of selling out the dreams of our ancestors? Is there some way to make a partnership with God to uplift and eventually perfect the world? Join the conversation.

Since we’re re-wiring so much of how we do things, it’s probably the most interesting time in two thousand years to enter into the conversation. Today we’re wrestling with issues like – how do we balance freedom and self restraint? How do we recover Jewish values like humility and modesty? How do we get the various camps within the Jewish world to open up to the truths that each holds? How do we deal with our fanatics? How does the existence of Israel change Jewish law? What are the new Jewish laws we need? Do we need laws governing how much television our children watch? Should kosher eating laws now include a ban on foods that are ecologically harmful? Are we commanded to check the morning paper for news from Israel? How are we to remember the Holocaust in a way that will get the story into the next millennium but won’t create a culture of fear and a siege-state mentality in our people? What great insights of Jewish learning would help us make our work lives sane and more meaningful?

Getting involved in the conversation is a commandment. It’s a commandment that is so important that we sing daily – these are the obligations without measure, whose reward, too, is without measure – to honor father and mother, to perform acts of love and kindness, to attend the house of study daily, to welcome the stranger, to visit the sick, to rejoice with bride and groom, to console the bereaved, to pray with sincerity – and the study of Torah is equal to them all because it leads to them all. As if this isn’t enough, the daily *Tefilah* prayer has us say, morning, noon, and night – *hashivenu avinu letoratecha* – return us, our Father, to your Torah. And at the end of the *Tefilah* prayer, we say softly to ourselves – *petach libi betoratecha* – open my heart to your Torah.

Getting involved in the talk is a commandment because we human beings are in such great need of learning the walk that flows out of the talk. We have lost so much that we need and that America needs. From Abraham we learned the *mitzvah* of hospitality. We learned that when someone leaves your home, you don't say goodbye at the door, you walk the person part way towards his or his destination. From Aaron and Miriam we learned that you don't say bad things about people, you don't gossip. From the laws of what you could bring as a sacrifice we learned that you can't use poverty as a justification for stealing (see commentary to Lev.1:2). From Maimonides we learn that when you criticize someone, you must do so privately so as not to embarrass the person and that you must do so with tenderness. From our rabbis we learn that the primary ethical obligation of the Jew isn't to help someone after they need help, but to find a way to prevent them from needing help in the first place. Do you understand how precious is the walk that flows from conversations of our people? Entering the conversation is not only a commandment. It's also the best way I know to fend for our inner lives.

I now want to make the psychological argument. I'm not talking about how the conversation is good for the world. I want to talk about insecurity, about loneliness, about lack of meaning, about being lost. When you study Torah, when you get involved in the conversation, you connect up to the generations. Maybe it was because I never had grandparents – and I was hungry for this connection – but I couldn't stand the thought that the existentialists threw at me in college – that this is all there is. That I am all that matters. It's too lonely. It's too narrow. And it's not true. I am not alone. I am part of a people that has created meaning for the world.

When my ancestors got out of Egypt, they discovered hope! The moment of their escape from slavery was so surprising, so electrifying that it's as if the whole people saw a "flash" of reality, a flash of hopefulness that had been hidden in a world brutal beyond our imagination. They protected and nurtured this flash. They tried to teach it to their children. The words and stories and laws that flowed from it were their most cherished possessions. They wrote the words on parchment and placed them on the doorposts of their houses. With *tefillin* they put those words near their hearts and close to their brains. In a dark barbaric world they managed to keep hopefulness alive. They

bolstered themselves to keep going. They would give themselves courage by reciting these words – like the words of Psalm 27 – “*Adonai* is my light and my life, whom shall I fear? *Adonai* is the foundation of my life, whom shall I dread? If an army should camp against me, even then will I be confident.” You and I are connected to these people! You and I are connected to these people who brought freedom and human dignity into the world, who used their words and stories and laws – what I'm calling their conversation – to lift themselves up, to keep themselves going, to survive everything and to become the world's symbol of hope and blessing.

How do you come to feel this connection? How do you come to feel like a colleague, a partner, even a friend? You make your way slowly, with difficulty, into the study of Torah. There, a great surprise awaits you. The Bible calls it – getting honey from a rock. The honey is sweet. Once you enter the conversation you find yourself better able to find yourself, and your own deep inner joy. You are happier than you realize you are. This is a crucial insight of Torah learning. You can find the joy buried deep beneath the outer crust of boredom and sameness and defeat and sadness. When you enter the conversation and take the time to share the conversation with your children or grandchildren, you find magic. Nothing brings the generations together like sharing Torah talk. Children need adults who will teach them how to walk, encourage them in their ethical and spiritual development, and help them learn to use family stories to resolve problems.

On the other end of the age spectrum, if there is one key formula for aging with dignity it is to join the conversation. When you enter the conversation, you might just discover the world, the dimension, of holiness. I had a dream a few months ago. I stood before my mom. I was tall, lean, and strong. I gently but firmly asked her, “Why didn't you teach me? I would have listened.” When I awoke from this dream, I was overwhelmed with a feeling about what holiness really is.

Holiness is how far you've come. You don't have to feel bad or inferior for what you didn't become, what you didn't achieve, what you never learned. Holiness is how far you manage to move your life starting from wherever you are. Holiness is the change you make by using the words, the dreams, the hopeful-

ness of the past to look inward and turn in the present. That's why the rabbis two thousand years ago said that there is no higher level of spirituality than the person who turns inward and redirects his or her life. *Makom shebaalei teshuvah omdin, ain tzadikim gemurin yecholin laamode* – in a place where someone who has returned stands, even the completely righteous are not able to stand. Holiness isn't about how much Hebrew you know, or how much Torah you have learned. Holiness is how far you've come. That's why there are no excuses. You can't say – it's too late. I never learned Hebrew. It's too late – I'm way too set in my ways to try Torah. It's too late – my life is too messed up to have the time, energy, or money to find out what Jewish learning could do for me. Holiness is how far you've come. And how far you might yet go.

No matter how you were raised, no matter what your parents didn't teach you, no matter how old you are, no matter how messed up your life is, no matter the condition of your hopes and dreams, no matter what you know or don't know – you can join the conversation. There's a healing in the conversation. You have trouble with children? The entire book of Genesis is about problem children and problematic parenting. You're lonely? You ought to check into what Jacob went through, or Job, or Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav. Perhaps life is quite good for you but there are gnawing feelings of insecurity and emptiness? There's no friendship like friendships rooted in joining the conversation. You're alienated? Check out the alienation of Franz Rosensweig and how he became the first post-modern Jew to make his way from the periphery into the center. Perhaps your suffering keeps you from trying? Study the suffering of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, who buried ten children and learn how he transformed his pain into love. Torah talk is a powerful catalyst to self healing.

We encounter, again and again, the stories of our ancestors. Because the Torah portrays our ancestors the way they were – human, flawed, prone to weakness – we can see from their lives how they managed to rebound from their mistakes, how they moved on, how they triumphed. We learn how they even turned total defeat into victory. The ultimate rewards of being a part of the conversation are those rare moments when you feel a great “aha”. There are

insights so stunning that you feel the hand of God, you hear God's voice. In a world where so many drift, where so many seem to have little clue as to the purpose of their life, the task of their soul, these rare moments of encountering God in the conversation are precious indeed.

Rabbi Saul Berman, one of the great rabbis in America today, says that the *mitzvah* for today's world should read like this – spend one hour a week studying Torah with someone. For those of you who already study Torah, the challenge is to up the ante. That's what we're doing in the school. We're asking our kids to work harder and use less crayons and glitter in the classroom. For the first time we are challenging the kids with learning by heart the Ten Commandments and the seven *Noachide* Laws, and the *Mishnah's* list of obligations whose reward is without measure. The challenge is for all of us to increase our learning for us to become a congregation of learners.

One famous story illustrates the great passion for Torah learning that has characterized our people. Elie Wiesel reports that when he was in Auschwitz he was one time on a work detail. Under guard by the SS, performing backbreaking slave labor, hungry and scared, he met up with one of his old Talmud teachers. As they were working, under the gaze of the Gestapo, his teacher gently asked him, “What page did you last study?” Shocked, realizing that his teacher intended to teach him in that place, at that time, Wiesel asked, “Even here? Even here you would have me study?” And his teacher nodded. Wiesel gave him the Talmud page, and his teacher began to recite.

As the American Jewish community fights for its life, as we struggle to re-wire ourselves and our world, as we grapple with the need for stronger moral foundation, more and more people are going to start taking Jewish learning seriously. It is a matter of life and death. And when the heavenly courtroom opens its doors for our last trial at the end of our days – and the Judge asks – did you study Torah? May we all be able to answer – yes.

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