

## Wrestling with God: An Adult Learner Finds Meaning in Study

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One of my teachers, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, believes that each of us has a '*torah*' of our own, a unique teaching that we convey to others and emphasize with our lives. Mine has to do with the obligation to fulfill the sense of my personal Hebrew name.

I am *Yisraela*, the feminine form of the name Jacob received as a blessing when he wrestled with God's angel. In a way, each Jew shares this name, for we are all *B'nai Yisrael*, children of *Israel*. Our challenge is to live up to that name, to become *Israel* by continuing to wrestle with God.

Judaism offers us many paths to God. For some, the most easily traveled is prayer. For others, the most direct is *gemilut chasadim*, acts of 'loving kindness.' For an increasing number of Jews, including myself, it is in the act of study where we meet God. In touching and being touched by our sacred sources, we discover the meanings of our lives, our role in the cosmos, our intended relationships to others, and to the Other, that which transcends our physical being.

I have discovered that, in order to become the person I am intended to be, I must study; I am committed to the *mitzvah* of *talmud torah*, of lifelong learning. In study, I wrestle with God, I struggle to understand *Torah*, I strive to know what God requires of me. *Torah* (in the broad sense of the entire body of Jewish text and thought) leads not only to understanding, but also to action and change; it shapes my life and my soul. While I do not understand every word to be 'true,' the words of *Torah* lead me to essential truths. To study and interpret *Torah* is to bring God into my life and ultimately into the world.

In the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel, according to Rashi, the Hebrew word for 'wrestle' (*avek*) may imply that Jacob was 'tied.' Rashi refers to a Talmudic passage where the same word is used to describe fringes that are twined with loops, or 'knotted.' His commentary continues, 'for thus is the manner of two who struggle to overthrow each other, that one embraces (the other) and knots him with his arms.'

To wrestle with God is to be 'tied,' locked as in an intimate embrace; through my struggle with God and *Torah*, God and I are brought closer together. I struggle to discover meaning; to understand God's will, to fulfill the expectations of my Creator. I commit myself to a relationship in which I am eternally bound up and tied to the One that challenges me to grow and who assists me in that struggle; my spiritual journey is undertaken with God.

When I engage with sacred text, I wrestle with holy words. Perhaps this is why learning is a lifelong obligation, for it fulfills my identity as *Yisraela*. When I wrestle with *Torah*, with teaching, I remain tied to God; as long as I continue to learn, I am blessed.

The Jewish tradition of learning is a vast conversation made up of many voices. When I study, I add my voice to that conversation. I enter into a dialogue with the text, engaging the written words and the voices of the past, present, and future. As I try to answer the questions that emerge from the text, I hear not only my voice, but also the voices of others. I make connections to history, to fellow learners, to my teachers, and to my future actions. If my ultimate goal is to 'become' *Torah*, to make my life a blessing and a teaching, then I must stand again and again at Sinai – hearing the words, turning them over and

over as I bring increased understanding and interpretations to the text.

Judaism gives us permission to participate in the tradition of *Torah* study. It teaches that we all stood at Sinai; the *Torah* heard there belongs to each of us, not just to our ancestors. Our Rabbis and teachers command our respect as important resources for study, but they cannot remain our sole source of knowledge. We need to balance our humility in the face of rabbinic commentators with a feeling for the power and legitimacy of our own interpretations. In every generation, there are teachers who are legitimate and significant. Some of them are found in collections of commentary on our library shelves, and some of them belong to our congregations. To ignore the worth and potential contribution of any of these to our understanding of *Torah* would be to err. Just as we must study and preserve the tradition, so too we must be active participants in the pursuit of knowledge.

According to the *Talmud*, the *Torah* speaks in the language of all people; moreover, the *Midrash* teaches that the *Torah* has seventy faces. Rachel Adler, in her essay 'Women and Tradition: Talking Our Way In,' gives voice to this notion (see *The Jewish Condition: Essays on Contemporary Judaism Honoring Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler*, UAHC Press, 1995). She writes,

*The problem is that most of us have not been taught to think of Judaism as a conversation, much less to regard ourselves as potential conversants. Lay people tend to see Judaism as a selection of institutions that claim varying degree of authority over religious thought and praxis. They tend to envision their own contributions as largely financial. As Jewish learners, they are resigned to being the rabbi's perpetual pupils.*

She admonishes us to reform Jewish conversation. "A broadly based conversation," writes Adler, "would allow us to pool the shares of *Torah*, which every Jew may claim as an inheritance."

Why study *Torah*? Establishing a relationship with the text helps me to develop my identity as a Jew. The biblical characters are my relatives, my friends and neighbors. *Torah* teaches me how they lived, what they believed, how they too struggled with God.

I encounter archetypal human relationships that mirror my own; as I get to know them, I am better prepared to understand myself and others, my personal relationships, and my community.

Through my encounter with the text, I discover a coherent system of values, and develop insight into resolving personal conflicts of faith and reason. I discover that some questions have no answers and hopefully learn to be less uncomfortable with this reality in my life. I also learn, as the Rabbis knew, that it is possible to have multiple interpretations of a given verse; as the *Talmud* states: '*this and this*' are the words of *Torah*. As my study has led me to learn Hebrew, I recognize that unlike English, which can be so precise, the language of *Torah* allows for alternative meanings.

Perhaps the most important reason of all for engaging in *Torah* study is to be models to our children, who place value on what adults do. If we wish our children to act out of moral commitment, we must show them the way.

A man came to Menachem Mendel of Kotzk and asked how he could make his sons devote themselves to *Torah*. Menachem Mendel answered: "If you really want them to do this, then you yourself must spend time over the *Torah*, and they will do as you do. Otherwise, they will not devote themselves to the *Torah*, but will tell their sons to do it. And, so it will go on. If you yourself forget the *Torah*, your sons will also forget it, only urging their sons to know it, and they will forget the *Torah* and tell their sons that they should know it. And no one will ever know the *Torah*."

The notion of remembering should guide us in studying *Torah*. When adults study, they are not empty vessels to be filled with Jewish knowledge by a Rabbi or other teacher. Rather, we are individuals with Jewish experience and the capacity to rediscover the meaning of our *Torah*, for it lives in us. We must approach the text with a sense of discovery and an appreciation of our ability to learn, to ask the human questions that bring alive our sacred text. Studying *Torah* requires careful reading and listening, waiting for connections to reveal themselves through our examination of various clues and insights. It is an adventure, slow, and endless, but ever an adventure. Whenever I begin to think the task too great, I recall

the midrashic admonition, “fools attempt to learn the whole *Torah* all at once, and when they fail they give up altogether. The wise study a little every day.”

My own love for learning has led me to facilitate study for other adult learners, to help create and sustain the UAHC *Kallot*, Jewish learning communities now sponsored by the Reform movement’s Department of Adult Jewish Growth. Since 1989, these 5-day retreats on several college campuses have provided Reform Jews the opportunity to engage in serious study of classical and modern Jewish texts. Hundreds of adult learners, like myself, have here discovered the transformative value of studying in community.

The *kallah* is a 24-hour immersion experience. Shut off from distractions of the outside world, participants need not work, cook or clean, care for family or self. The entire time and space is defined as Jewish - there is no business except Jewish learning and living. The intensity of the retreat experience seems to guarantee that the learning will be far greater than one might predict from just looking at the amount of time spent in the classroom. Learning also takes place at meals, on walks to class, during coffee breaks; even the entertainment has Jewish component. A Jewish bookstore at each site provides participants materials for continued learning after the *kallah*.

The *kallah* model creates a profound sense of community, of belonging to the group. This may in part be due to the informal, camp-like setting. There is a comfort level that allows people to be more confident Jews, to be willing to try new Jewish things, to stretch both ritually and academically. The experience of living together seems to give people the courage to express themselves in worship and in the classroom; at *kallah* we experience the joy of ‘being’ Jewish, not just learn ‘about’ Judaism.

For many, the community extends beyond the time and place of *kallah*. Participants email each other, check-in periodically to see what others are learning; they share learning and leadership ideas and mentor each other. Some have email and/or telephone contact periodically with faculty. One group of women has a reunion several times a year, meeting for study and renewal of friendships.

Anecdotal reports indicate that ‘*kalleagues*’ appear to gain tools and skills to continue learning at home. For many, Jewish learning has become more central to their lives. They seek out others for *Torah* study in their congregation and/or community; several regular attendees have helped create regional *kallot*. Some have become teachers of other adults or children; many have learned Hebrew, or studied for *bar/bat mitzvah*, while others seek out online study. Some have redefined their personal *Shabbat* observance, attending worship and study, instead of engaging in other activities. Many seem to make more ‘Jewish choices’ which affect their lives - they ‘live a Jewish life,’ as opposed to being an ‘active Jew;’ at least six have gone to Rabbinical school to prepare for a second career (although this is not the goal). On the whole, attendance at *kallah* seems to lead to increased involvement in Jewish community.

Torah remains alive because in every generation, students take it seriously, and add their commentary to our story. This is our task, just as it was that of the Rabbis and students of past generations. It is not only our right, but our obligation to engage in the study of *Torah*, as we say “Blessed are you, *Adonai*...who commands us to engage in the study of *Torah* – *la’asok b’divrei Torah*.”

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