

Talmud Torah K'neged Kulam

Towards A Culture Of Life Long Learning

The wealthiest man in ancient Israel was ben Kalba Savua'a. He owned vast parcels of lands, farms, estates, and flocks, and herds of animals. Ben Kalba Savu'a had a beautiful daughter, Rachel. It was his dream that his daughter would one day marry a great scholar. With a great scholar as his son-in-law, ben Kalba Savu'a would then have everything he wanted in life.

But Rachel had other ideas. Rachel fell in love with an illiterate shepherd, Akiva. She knew that something about Akiva was special. So even though her father objected, every day she would pack a picnic lunch and sneak out into the hills to meet Akiva.

Rachel lay her head on Akiva's lap. He stroked her long, beautiful hair. He gazed lovingly into her eyes and asked, "Rachel, will you marry me?"

"Akiva, I will marry you, but only if you make me a promise."
"Anything! I'll promise you anything!"

Rachel stood and looked directly into Akiva's eyes: "promise me this, Akiva: When we are blessed with a child, you will go to school with our child and learn Torah."

"But Rachel, I'm an adult! I can't go back to school!" Akiva protested.

"Akiva, do you love me?" she asked as she touched his cheek with her fingers.

"Do I love you? I love you with all my heart!" he responded. "Then promise me you'll go to school," she demanded. "I promise." he answered.

And so, they were married in secret.

When ben Kalba Savu'a found out that his beautiful daughter married an illiterate shepherd, he was furious. He sent her from his house with nothing but the clothes she wore and vowed that she and her illiterate husband would never be welcome in his home.

Akiva and Rachel lived in a barn. They had few possessions, but their love was fierce and God soon blessed them with a son.

When the son was three years old and ready for school, Rachel reminded Akiva of his promise: "You remember, Akiva, you promised me—when our child goes to learn Torah, you must go too!"

Akiva had hoped that his wife might forget that promise. He couldn't see himself going to school as an adult. "But Rachel, "I'm too old, how can I go to school?" he complained.

"Akiva, do you love me?" she asked as she touched his cheek with her fingers.

"I love you with all of my heart, dear Rachel!" he answered.

"Then go to school!"

She would not change her mind.

So he went, together with his three-year-old son. He sat at a tiny table on a tiny class in the class of the three-year-olds. On his first day he learned the first two letters, *alef and bet*.

"I've fulfilled my promise!" he announced to Rachel. "I went to school and learned two letters, *alef and bet*."

"Now, you'll go back and learn the rest of the letters! She insisted.

"The rest of the letters? But Rachel, I'm too old. I can't learn, not at my age!" he grumbled.

She wouldn't let him renege on his promise.

So off to school he went for the rest of the week and he learned all the letters.

"Now, I've learned all the letters. Now I've fulfilled my promise." Akiva proclaimed. "No more school"

But Rachel knew better and sent him back to school again. He stayed for most of the year. He learned to read. And he began learning Torah. First Leviticus. And then the other books of the Torah.

When the year of school ended, he returned home and announced, "I have

fulfilled my promise! I have learned Torah! That's all the school I need!" Rachel looked deep into his eyes, "Akiva, do you love me?" she asked, touching his cheek with her fingers.

"Dear Rachel, I have missed you so this year. I love you with all of my heart."

"Then go back and learn the rest. And don't come home until you are finished."

He knew she meant it. So he went back and studied for seven years. He returned home a scholar of Torah. But she was unsatisfied. Rachel wanted Akiva to pursue his learning even further, and so he returned to school for another seven years. During those years he became the great Rabbi Akiva.

Rabbi Akiva would visit the towns and villages in the Land of Israel, teaching Torah. Everywhere he went, thousands of students followed him. One day he came to his own town, where Rachel lived. The whole town came to see the great rabbi. One by one, the people came before him to present gifts and to ask for his blessing.

There appeared before Rabbi Akiva a very poor woman. Out of respect, she lowered her eyes, never looking into his face. She did not recognize her beloved. She brought him only a small challah as a gift.

"Why such a small gift?" the rabbi asked.

"Many years ago I sent my husband to learn with the great rabbis. In his absence, I have been very poor and shall continue to be until he returns.

"You sent your husband away to learn? Why would you do such a thing? He asked.

"Because the first day I met him, I knew he was destined to be a great master of Torah. I saw that in his soul. I knew that it was my responsibility to make sure he would go and learn. Great Rabbi, I only pray that he will find in his own soul, what I saw those many years ago."

Akiva's eyes filled with tears, and his heart filled with a greater love than he had ever known. He reached out and touched her cheek, "Rachel, do you love me?" he asked.

For the first time, she looked up and saw the face of her Akiva, and she too,

began to cry. "With all my heart, dear Akiva!" she answered.

Rabbi Akiva's student's didn't understand who the woman was, so they tried to move her away from him, but he waved his hand and stopped them. "**Let her be! All that I know and all that I have taught you belong to her!**"

Just then came the wealthiest man in the town, ben Kalba Savu'a. His gift to the rabbis was a golden jeweled tiara.

"Why do you bring such a magnificent gift to the rabbi?" Akiva asked him.

"Because my heart is broken and I seek the rabbi's blessing," replied ben Kalba Savua. "Years ago I made a foolish vow. In anger I sent away my beautiful daughter because I objected to the man she married. And in anger, I vowed that she and her illiterate husband would never have a place in my home. Ever since that day I have regretted that vow. Every day I think of my daughter and miss her terribly. Every day I wish I could reach out and bring her home.

"And the husband? Why were you so angry with her husband?" Akiva inquired.

"I wanted her to marry a scholar, a man worthy of her," replied ben Kalba Savua'.

"If you knew that today the man she married is a scholar, would you still reject him as unworthy?" Akiva asked.

"The man she married was an illiterate shepherd," ben Kalba Savua answered.

"Ben Kalba Savua," Akiva announced, "The man your daughter married stands before you! Your vow is now released. Now go and bring your daughter home!"

Rabbi Akiva accepted the gift of the jeweled tiara from ben Kalba Savua' and with it crowned his beloved Rachel. Ben kalba Savua welcomed his daughter and son-in-law into his home. And because of Rachel's love, Rabbi Akiva became the greatest of the rabbis, just as Rachel knew he would.

(Feinstein, Capturing the Moon, 112-116)

Rabbi Akiva is considered to be one of the wisest rabbis of our tradition. An illiterate shepherd who did not come to his learning until age 40, his wisdom is a credit, in part, to having someone who believed in him, who encouraged him, and who loved him enough to ensure that he received a proper education. And, of course, he worked hard to acquire a certain level of knowledge and proficiency. How many of you have someone in your life who made sure that you got a quality education? How many of you had parents, grandparents, who worked tirelessly so that their children and grandchildren could get a quality education and have opportunities to chase the "American Dream?" I have officiated at many funerals and often hear a common theme from loved ones who are truly grateful for the learning opportunities that the deceased provided for future generations.

But here is the thing- while many of us spend a great deal of time, money, and energy on our own secular educations, I wonder why many of us have been so willing to dedicate so little to our Jewish educations? This is not going to be a sermon focused on the ways parents and grandparents in this room should prioritize the Jewish educations of your children and grandchildren- thought of course that is true. Today I am more interested in discussing how you, the adults in this room, can *reclaim your own* Jewish educations. Take a moment to consider the following: How many of you discontinued your formal Jewish education after your bar or bat mitzvah?

And why is that? Granted- at that age, these decisions are not ours entirely, and the truth is that thirteen year olds are typically not mature enough to realize that Jewish education is the linchpin of Judaism and the secret to making Judaism a relevant and vibrant part of our lives. But then what happens?

Years go by. We get into our lives, our routines, our hobbies, our many varied interests. We have families of our own, and those Jewish books we were given at our bar or bat mitzvah often end up in a box in the basement, or on a bookshelf as decoration. Hopefully by the time you have your own children, you have enrolled them in some sort of Jewish school in preparation for their own bnei mitzvah, but Jewish learning is often far from a top priority, and the cycle will likely just repeat itself.

On Yom Kippur, as we take time to consider those places where we fall short in our lives, as we take time to remember that this tradition has so much to offer each one of us, I want to challenge everyone in this room to do better when it comes to your Jewish learning. It's time to take those books off the bookshelf. After all, we would go to see a doctor who only had a seventh grade level of knowledge in math, science, and medicine. Our physical well being, indeed our very lives, would be at risk. So why is it that we are willing to risk our spiritual lives by living with such an elementary level of

Jewish education?

This past year, the world lost one of the greatest voices of conscience and justice with the passing of Elie Wiesel. Three weeks before his passing, Wiesel was visited by one of his many students, Ariel Burger, an artist living in the Boston area who served as his teaching fellow at Boston University from 2003-2008. Burger writes:

We talked about so many things....

He asked me how I was doing, and I told him that I was feeling that I'd lost time, had spent time on things that weren't essential, and that I was trying to make up for it now in a flurry of creative activity.

He said, "Nothing ever gets lost."

"Nothing?" I was thinking of how much he'd lost. His father, his mother, his little sister; six million, and so many more across the long years.

"Nothing," he said again. "It can take a hundred years, or 200, or 500. We may never see it. But in God's eyes nothing gets lost." He was ready to move on, but he seemed to sense I wasn't completely on-board. "You want proof?" he said. "You missed it – that's a sign that you never lost it." Now I wonder: I had been his student since I was 15 years old. Was he preparing me for this moment?

He said, "Remember that I'm here, I'm always here for you."

I reminded him that 20 years ago I asked him about faith and doubt. "How do you teach faith?" He said, "**I tried to teach all of my students love of Torah – learn, learn, learn.**"

I said, "You succeeded with me and so many. How do you teach that?"

He said, "There is only one way: by being it. So people see you and become inspired. But you also need fear-of-God, so you don't become arrogant..."

When I shared an acute personal challenge I was facing, he said, "But you're learning, that's the main thing. That's what I always tried to teach my students, to keep learning, keep learning. I'm learning every day. I'm older than you, and I learn and learn and learn, and I still feel like I haven't even begun. But I will soon."

Here was Wiesel, brilliant, frail, the consummate teacher with one more lesson to pass on to the world through his student. Never stop learning. Never stop studying. "*I tried to teach all of my students love of Torah- learn, learn, learn...*" And why did Wiesel say this? I imagine because as a lifelong Jew and student of Torah, he understood that everything that we do, everything that we are, everything that we stand for, is found in the study of Torah. Facing his mortality with a deep understanding that Torah wisdom is really life wisdom, human wisdom, filled with relevance, purpose and meaning in our lives and in our interactions with others, Wiesel was reminding us not to squander this precious opportunity.

Echoing this message of the importance of learning, Rabbi Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson recently wrote an inspiring article entitled: *Judaism and World Wisdom*. In it, he describes how people from all over write to him about every day issues. Jews, Christians, Muslims, atheists. Artson explains:

It turns out that Judaism is one of the great traditions of world wisdom. We have nurtured a way of life that has caressed and strengthened a resilient people throughout our wanderings.... We have wandered through persecutions and exaltation, into places that were happy to host us and other places that could barely abide our presences. In and out of all of those locations, we carried Torah with us because it made our lives better. Torah – the living and the learning – molded us to be more resilient and stronger...

We have what to teach: that God sides with the outcast seeking liberation and that all must be included (Passover seder), that we are more than our résumés (Shabbat), that the land owns us rather than the other way round (*ger toshav*), and that all people deserve respect and dignity (*tzelem Elohim*). We have what to share with the world: our values, our stories, our traditions and guidelines, our love of a place, our ways of sanctifying time and family, our hunger for justice.

Ours may be the greatest secret that humanity has yet to discover because it has been hiding in plain view. And it is our job to bring it out there into the world... **To do that, you have to know the sources. How else can we transmit the wisdom that people are starving for if we don't ourselves become fluent in it?**¹

Artson presents us with a lesson and a challenge. The lesson is that Judaism is relevant, that Torah learning is not just for the ritually-minded or those who wish to live an Orthodox lifestyle. Far from it. Torah learning is open to everyone, relevant to Jews of all sizes and stripes, and indeed has lessons that are meaningful and beneficial to all of humanity. But as Jews, we have to be willing to embrace this tradition of learning, to reclaim those treasures of Jewish texts that have been ours all along and there for the taking. We

¹http://www.jewishjournal.com/religion/article/judaism_as_world_wisdom

must be willing to reclaim a tradition that is ours. We must be willing to make the time to learn, to study, and to grow in our knowledge and appreciation of our Judaism.

This is not always so easy. Some Jews grew up with a very traditional perspective where Judaism was presented as just a bunch of rules to be followed. We don't want to "learn" any more than we were forced to. Others grew up with Hebrew School teachers who made Judaism, boring, oppressive, and irrelevant. Teachers who yelled and taught a Judaism of guilt and fear. Others had little-to-no Jewish background and never studied Judaism in a formal way, and still others did not grow up in the Jewish community and may not identify with Judaism as their language of faith.

But regardless of your history, regardless of your circumstances when it comes to Jewish learning- this Yom Kippur I am asking you to open your eyes to the possibility that Judaism has an incredible amount to teach you **about life**. *And it has never been easier to access.* All you need is a willing heart and an open mind.

To that end, here is your challenge for the year. I want you to make time to learn something new about your tradition and about the wisdom and guidance it can offer in your daily life. I want to invite some of you to

reclaim your Jewish learning from your 13-year-old self, or your current skeptical self. Judaism has answers to some of life's most profound questions. It has guidance in some of life's most challenging moments, ethically, medically, socially, emotionally... But its guidance can only be gleaned if you are willing to make the time to study and to learn.

1. When was the last time that you read a Jewish book? This is an easy place to start. I challenge you to go out and buy a Jewish book this week, or take one out from our synagogue library. If you need a recommendation, I happen to know a guy who is a bit obsessed about books. Email me and I am happy to recommend a title. Or (little known fact) go onto our website and look at my page with book recommendations. It is a bit outdated, but it will get you started.

2. Attend one of my adult education classes if you are able. This year's topics include a journey through the Torah starting with a close look at Genesis, a course on writing ethical wills, an incredible lecture series that I am privileged to facilitate on the Israeli/Palestinian situation, as well as a course on exploring Jewish identities in the world today.

3. Download a Jewish themed podcast for your commute to work, join a facebook page with Jewish content, or sign up for a weekly D'var Torah to come in your inbox each week. Again, I am happy to e-mail you recommendations.

4. Do you have something that you want to study? Email me and if there are enough people interested in a particular topic we can put our heads together and try to find a teacher for said topic. For example, as I said last night, do

you want to learn conversational Hebrew? Bring me ten people, and I will find you a teacher.

5. Lastly, and this is one that I really want to push- I want to encourage as many of you as possible to participate in an amazing synagogue opportunity this year called "**Project Zug.**"

Traditionally, Jewish learning happens in pairs, in a *zug* (a couple). Learning groups are not a new educational technique- Jews have been using them for thousands of years. Run through Mechon Hadar in New York, this Hevrutah learning project is an online platform that seeks to make Jewish learning engaging and easy to access.

There are so many topics to choose from, such as:

- An introduction to the Jewish bookshelf
- Secular Jewish culture
- A food tour of the Talmud
- Mindfulness and Judaism
- The balancing act of being a Jewish parent
- A look at Leonard Cohen's work and how Judaism and popular culture can meet

And here's the thing. Joining project Zug is simple to do. You find someone to study with- it could be a spouse, a friend, a sibling or other relative living out of state, a child who is in college, someone at work... You pick a time to study, carving out one hour each week, you go online, sign up, and get started. You choose the time, you choose the topic, you choose the person

to study with. It is really that simple. You can study at home, you can study at Starbucks, you can study in your pajamas, or you can come and study in our building. If you need to re-schedule, you can do that with your partner on your own time, just as you would re-schedule any appointment or meeting. If you want to study in the synagogue, I am around on most Wednesday nights. Come into the library, and if you need my help, or have questions, I will happily stop by after I am done teaching. Interested in finding out more? I encourage you to check out the handouts that are available on the tables by the doors (**Hold up Flyer**), or simply go to online to projectzug.org, sign up for a course, and commit yourself to one hour a week. There are four-week courses, or ten-week courses, all posted on the website. Courses include simple study guides, video clips, and no homework. No previous Hebrew or Judaic knowledge necessary and minimal computer skills are needed to get online. As to the cost, there is a suggested donation on a sliding scale starting at 36 dollars. You choose what you can afford with this program and if money is an issue, please let me know. The official start date of the program is November 13th, so you have a few weeks to find a partner, pick a topic, and plan out a time and date to get started. More information, including a kick-off event and a date to celebrate all who choose to participate in this learning will be sent out in the coming weeks.

Who is willing to give it a shot? Raise your hand. If you have your High Holiday ticket and are willing to participate- hand it up to me and I will follow up with you after the holidays.

When it comes to Jewish learning, the rabbis ask us to consider the difference between a wise person and a fool.

The Rabbis say: The fool enters the synagogue, and seeing there are people occupying themselves with study, he asks: How does one ever manage to learn all of this material? They answer in chronological order. First one learns the Torah, then the Prophets, then the Writings; when they have completed all of this, they begin the Talmud, and then the law (Halacha) and then the rabbinic parables (the Aggadah)

Exhausted and overwhelmed, the fool says to himself: How can I ever learn all of this?! and turns back from the synagogue never to come back to Jewish learning again.

What does the wise person do? She opens the first book, and learns one chapter every day until she completes all of her studying. Forever realizing that there is truly no end to Jewish learning, and that the blessing is found in the journey of study. Based on **Midrash Devarim Rabbah 8:3**

Do you have an open mind? Do you have a willing heart? Your tradition is inviting you back into an ancient, wise, and profoundly beautiful conversation. A New Year is upon us. There are always excuses as to why you can't find time to study. Will this be the year that you set those excuses aside? Start with page one, take just one step forward, and go from there. It will, quite simply, change your life. As one ancient Rabbi, Ben Bag Bag remarked when it comes to Torah learning we are to:

Turn it and turn it because we will find everything in it. We are to scrutinize it, grow old and gray in it, and not depart from it. Because there is no better portion in our life, than the privilege and blessing of Jewish learning (Avot 5:24).

G'mar Hatimah Tovah, May your learning be rich and fulfilling and may we all be inscribed in the Book of Life.