

Dear Friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

As some of you may be aware, a few members of Hillcrest Jewish Center are engaged in the new cycle of *Daf Yomi*, the daily study of the Babylonian Talmud. As a matter of fact, on Saturday, March 7th, we officially marked the completion of the first tractate, Tractate Berachot, by studying together a few relevant sections of the tractate in the context of the Shabbat afternoon shiur.

The Jewish sage Ben Bag Bag teaches in Chapter 5 of Pirkei Avot, referring to the Torah, "Turn it, and turn it, for everything is in it!" Hence, different people will find many relevant teachings in the Torah, both the written Torah and the oral Torah, of which the Talmud is its ultimate expression.

Cheryl Meyer, one of the Hillcrest Jewish Center members engaged in *Daf Yomi*, shared with me a relevant teaching from Tractate Berachot, which in turn, I would like to share with you.

This teaching emphasizes that "the Torah is only acquired through study in a group" (Berachot 63b). As the editor of the Koren Edition of the Babylonian Talmud explains in the name of Ein Ayah, "The Holy Torah is a Torah of life. It does not guide its followers towards a life of asceticism or a rejection of the wholesome pleasures of the world that can raise the spirits of an individual. Therefore, the Torah anticipates that those who walk in its path will be members of a community, whose support and encouragement will help facilitate their spiritual growth and development." It continues, "An essential aspect of a Torah scholar is the role that he plays in improving the world around him. To accomplish this, the scholar must develop an appreciation for opinions that are at variance with his own, both in the realm of halakha and in the realm of ethics. That kind of openness comes about only by means of group study, in the course of which one becomes accustomed to hearing opinions that are different from his own. When one chooses to limit debate and to remain secluded within his own closed community, he is unable to learn the ideas and thoughts of his peers and will consequently be unwilling to accept dissenting positions. Isolation inevitably leads to intractable disagreements and, ultimately, to bitter fights and arguments."

While this teaching is epitomized in the study of Torah in a chavurah, a Torah study group, its relevance transcends the realm of synagogue life, or even Jewish life.

We live in times in which many individuals get accustomed to listening to their own voices, or to the voices of those who agree with them. These individuals, who constantly seek approval and confirmation of the validity of their ideas and the righteousness of their positions, live a life of intellectual and spiritual isolation, despite perhaps, being surrounded by many like-minded people.

The Talmud recognizes that there are values in the world, and that people should stand for what they believe. Many of these Sages even gave their lives for the sake of their values and beliefs. And yet, they were not afraid of interacting with other Sages or even with lay people, Jews and non-Jews alike, who challenged their views and many times helped them reframe, if not change, their positions.

“Turn it, and turn it, for everything is in it!”

As I continue with my daily study of Talmud, I pray that it will lead me to a place of wisdom, open-mindedness, understanding, kindness, and compassion.

Rabbi Manes Kogan