

Ruth Calderon, member of the Israeli Knesset, was raised in the “very Jewish secular traditional religious Israeli mainstream of the 60’s and 70’s. Bible as the history of Israel was taught in school, but the major aspects of traditional Rabbinic Jewish Torah study were absent. She was not introduced to the Mishna, the Talmud, Midrash, traditional Bible commentaries, Kabbala or Hasidism. As a teenager, Ruth sensed that something was missing. What she missed was depth.

As a young adult, Ruth encountered the Talmud, with its humor, profound thinking, modes of discussion, and the practicality, humanity, and maturity that emerge from studying it. She studied academically in various settings and earned a doctorate in Talmudic Literature at the Hebrew University. She studied for the pure joy of learning, and founded Alma – Home for Hebrew Culture in Tel Aviv, and Elul, Israel’s first joint *beit midrash* study program for men and women, religious and secular. Since then, over the course of several decades, a Jewish renaissance movement has begun to flourish, in which tens and hundreds of thousands of Israelis study within frameworks that do not dictate to them the proper way to be a Jew or the manner in which their Torah is to become a living Torah.¹

We read Torah every Shabbat and holiday, as well as every Thursday morning minyan. The public reading of Torah is intended to make sure that we are familiar with Torah, but the mitzvah of Talmud Torah, Torah study, goes beyond the surface level of knowing and understanding the stories. Torah through the lens of Jewish traditional commentaries is the vocabulary that gives us a past, a present, and a future. Studying Torah means being challenged intellectually, finding answers to life's great questions, and finding questions to challenge the answers that contemporary culture gives us. The regular study of Torah can be the single most nourishing act for a Jewish soul.

Our basic Humash text of Etz Hayyim contains the text of the Torah, but it doesn't stop there because Jewish Torah study wants us to go deep. Etz Hayyim contains three levels of commentary - *P'shat*, *D'rash* and *Halakha*. Contained within the *D'rash*, the commentary often inserts a fourth level of meaning, that of *Sod*.

P'shat is the literal meaning of the text. Imagine that you were standing next to Moses as he was explaining the sacrificial system to the Priests, or that you were listening to an ancient storyteller teach about the creation of the world. The *P'shat* is what you would have understood they meant.

D'rash, or Midrash, is added, non-literal meaning. Midrash adds information or context not found in the text. *D'rash* can help you draw ethical lessons from the text. It helps you relate the narrative of the Torah to the story of your own life.

Halakha is Jewish law. Significant parts of the Torah were written to give us a Guide to Jewish practice - how do Jews behave? Some parts of halakha describe Israelite civil or criminal law, and can be used as a guide to our own ethical behavior. Other parts of halakha describe religious law, such as Holidays or Kashrut. Still other aspects of Torah describe the way we ought to treat our fellow Jews or human beings in order to create sacred community.

Finally, for those of you who have a mystical streak, there is *Sod*, or allegory. *Sod* treats the stories of Torah as an allegory, often of the human relationship with God. *Sod* assumes that the

¹ Biographical information was taken from a speech to the Knesset, translated and transcribed here: <http://www.thejewishweek.com/editorial-opinion/opinion/heritage-all-israel>

goal of a religious life is to be in close union with God, and treats the stories of Torah as pathways which explicitly connect us with the Divine. *Sod* infuses much of Jewish liturgy and practice, influencing the way we do mitzvot and the way we talk about God.

D'rash and *Halakha* are the keys to Jewish Torah study, but they are built on a foundation of *P'shat*. Torah study might draw upon the lens of thousands of years of classical and modern Jewish commentaries to explain the basic meaning of *P'shat* and the more complex varieties of *Drash*. If we want to focus on specific areas of Jewish practice, such as Shabbat or Kashrut or *Lashon Hara*, laws of proper speech, we might study the texts through the lens of works of *Halakha*. We might look at Hasidic commentaries, often infused with *Sod*, to focus on sharpening our connection with God. We might study Mussar commentaries, to focus on refining personal qualities.

In Judaism, revelation of Torah is a communal, not a personal, experience. Revelation is said to have begun with the entire Israelite people, not with Moses alone. Optimal Jewish Torah study is not an individual enterprise. We read Torah in minyan. We prefer to study in community, with a *hevruta*, a partner.

Reading and study is an active engagement with a text. The text doesn't speak, per se. Meaning is developed through an interaction between the text and the reader. You bring assumptions and questions to the text, and in turn you pull meaning out of the text. It is not as simple as opening the page of a book and seeing God's answer to your question, but if you have a question and carry the question in your consciousness when you study, you might find that your question is resolved.

Every year we read the same Torah, the same words, the same stories, the same laws, we read about the same rituals. The words are not new, but you are. From a cellular level up, you are a different human being than you were last time you heard this Torah reading. You have a slightly different body - a year older and therefore stronger or weaker, healthier or sicker, heavier or lighter. Your neural pathways have been altered - you are carrying a different set of memories and experiences. If you read casually, you might see only the same black words on white paper that you saw last year, but if you study the text and interact with it, you will most likely find something you didn't previously see or be affected differently than last year.

Pose questions such as the following to every text that you study:

- What did this text mean to the people who first read or heard it?
- How has this text been understood and used in later Jewish literature?
- What instructions does this text have for me in my life?
- How might this text affect the relationship between God and the world?

Rabbi David Wolpe has described the Jewish relationship to Torah as a dialogue with God and the world. Our understanding of God is affected by the world in which we live, and our understanding of our role in the world is affected by the words of God's Torah. Torah is not static; it changes. For example, Torah tells us that a man may take additional wives and concubines. 1000 years ago, our sage Rabbeinu Gershom, living in the midst of Christian Europe, ruled that polygamy was no longer permitted. Jewish authorities in Moslem countries, societies which maintained polygamous marriage, did not accept Rabbeinu Gershom's ruling. In 1948, with the establishment of the State of Israel, Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews accepted the ban

on polygamy. Our understanding of what Torah does and does not permit was affected by changes in the world in which we lived.

In Ruth Calderon's first speech upon being elected to Israel's Knesset, she held a volume of Talmud and talked about how Jewish learning changed her life. She said:

I am convinced that studying the great works of Hebrew and Jewish culture is crucial to construct a new Hebrew culture for Israel. It is impossible to stride toward the future without knowing where we came from and who we are, without knowing, intimately and in every particular, the sublime as well as the outrageous and the ridiculous. The Torah is not the property of one movement or another. It is a gift that every one of us received, and we have all been granted the opportunity to meditate upon it as we create the realities of our lives. Nobody took the Talmud and rabbinic literature from us. We gave it away, with our own hands, when it seemed that another task was more important and urgent: building a state, raising an army, developing agriculture and industry, etc. The time has come to re-appropriate what is ours, to delight in the cultural riches that wait for us, for our eyes, our imaginations, our creativity.

Her words are as true here in North America as they are in Israel. The serious personal study of Torah does not belong only in Orthodox Yeshivot and Synagogues - it belongs in the home and in the life of every Jew. It is part of our heritage, our character, our identity as Jews.

Adonai, you are the source of blessing who has sanctified us and commanded us to be engrossed in words of Torah. Holy One, may the words of Your Torah be pleasant and sweet words of wisdom in our mouths so that we and our children may all know You and study Your Torah for the sheer joy of learning. Blessed are You who has given us the gift of Torah.