

The Play's the Thing: On Being an Insider in the Study of Torah

אלה תולדת נח נח איש צדיק תמים היה בדרתיו את האלקים התהלך נח:

When I was thirteen years old, I was assigned a passage in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* to commit to memory and recite in class. Those were different times. Most children tried hard not to disappoint their parents and teachers. Although I had a very good memory for words, I was very nervous and practiced again and again. I even remember falling asleep repeating a speech by Cassius which I can recite until this day. While the rest of the class worked quietly on a written examination, each boy was called to the teacher's desk to recite his passage before sitting down to finish his test paper. This was the first major examination in high school and I had been told many times that how I did would affect whether I was accepted into the highest track next semester which would determine where I went to college, whom I married, and how intelligent all the generations that followed me would turn out to be. This was an awesome responsibility for a thirteen-year-old.

I wasn't certain how well I had done but one thing was clear: I hated *Julius Caesar*. It wasn't a play about power and loyalty and moral fiber; it was a minefield in which a single misstep could seal the fate of generations of Glickmans to come. My mother ע"ה and I had always shared a love for Shakespeare. When I was a little boy, she would read to me from Charles Lamb's *Tales of Shakespeare* sitting on the edge of my bed while I listened intently. I would invariably fall asleep to her voice and often dreamed of kings and castles and enchanted forests. When Caesar fell in the Roman forum, any love I had for Shakespeare died with him.

Sometime that summer, my father took me to see *King Lear* performed in Yiddish. It is the most Jewish of Shakespeare's plays, with its celebration of responsibility over fickle emotion. Although my father and I were the only audience members under 70 years old, it was one of the best afternoons of my life. This is not only because it is one of the last times I ever spent alone with my father. It was also because I felt connected to Shakespeare's play, even as I hardly understood a word of the dialogue.

Shakespeare's tragedy was drama and drama is experienced. The script may need to be studied carefully but experiencing Shakespeare is not the same as studying Shakespeare in the classroom. Parsing the words, learning about antecedent sources, and examining Shakespeare's contemporary society may all inform the experience but they are not the experience itself.

It is not a mindless experience. One needs to understand Shakespeare's language in order to make sense of what takes place on the stage. Had I not read the play in the original with my mother before seeing it in Yiddish, the experience would have been lost on me. The point, רבותי, is that one needs to be an insider in order to experience the play. Not a member of the original cast or on the staff of the Globe Theatre. One needs to play a role in the drama as an involved member of either the cast or the audience to experience what Shakespeare intended. One needs to be an insider.

My father ע"ה was משכיל (who else would take a 13-year old in Philadelphia to the Yiddish Theater?). Growing up, I was surrounded by the books he read at Dropsie College, books about ancient Near Eastern civilizations and literary studies of Biblical poetry. In addition to my פרשה, משניות, and several folios of יעקב עין, my father gave me Albright's *From the Stone Age to Christianity* and Frankfurt's *Before Philosophy* to read before "I" wrote my דרשה for my מצוה בר מצוה celebration. Although I loved lecturing my father on intellectual history with all the presumptuousness of a precocious thirteen-year-old, it wasn't W.F. Albright or Henri Frankfurt who captured my heart. It was holding the ספר תורה every week when I davened מוסף or שחרית in the small *shul* we attended and where my best friend and I served as regular ציבור שליחי. It was the שבת afternoon שיעור with my tutor Mr. Fox and the handful of learned men in our small *shul*. It wasn't learning about the Torah but doing Torah that made me whatever I am today.

It's being an insider participating in Torah rather than an outsider talking about it that is the genuine Torah experience. When my father read Babylonian myths about a great flood with me, it may have helped me understand the differences between פרשת נח and pagan fables. Comparing the two, however, is not Torah. Wissenschaft des Judentums fails as the based for a religious movement because it strips away the essential experience.

Do not be confused, though, רבותי. The experience of Torah is not a mindless one. It is not the recitation of דיעות while swaying over a ספר wearing a white shirt and black pants. Even the addition of a Borsalino isn't enough. It is singing the song of Torah by learning from the inside, like an insider. Being an insider means participating in the ongoing revelation of השם רצון through לימוד ההורה.

Sitting down מוצש"ק to begin my study of the פרשה, I felt the full burden of פרידה from intimacy with הקב"ה, the סוכה looking abandoned and forlorn outside my kitchen window. I quickly lost myself in the familiar words of רש"י: if נח had lived in the generation of אברהם איבנו he would not have been considered anything special. A technical דיוק in the דקרא לישנא דקרא? (בדרתיו)? And then there is the other opinion of חז"ל, that if נח had lived in a righteous generation, he would have been even greater. Rabbinic one-upmanship? I'll see your דיוק and learn the opposite? Or is the Torah speaking to me through חז"ל?

I realized that no matter which take on the דיוק one accepts, there is an implicit criticism of נח. Either he really wasn't anything special at all or he was not quite what he might have been in a better generation. What was deficient in נח? There is

nothing explicit he does that should attract criticism. In fact, his persona is described as wholly righteous (תמים היה). Nevertheless, he suffers in comparison to אברהם אבינו.

So if it isn't something he did do, it must be something that נח didn't do that אברהם אבינו did. It was late at night by now and my mind began to race. I thought of the career of אברהם אבינו as described by the Torah and explicated by חז"ל: the souls he brought closer to השם, his advocacy for innocents in סדום... And I realized that if נח was deficient, it was because his צדקות was confined to his own sphere ("את האלקים התהלך נח"). He walked with God but he brought no one with him.

Alone in my kitchen, the rest of the house sleeping, I experienced Torah. I heard רצון השם in its words and the teachings of those who taught it to me. I didn't read about the Torah or study parallels in ancient Near Eastern texts. I didn't compare its מדרשים to rhetorical texts on the poetry on Homer. These may sometimes sharpen my thinking and excite my intellect. But my soul thirsts for Torah, ולתפלה, ולשמע אל ה' ואל התפלה, and to sing with my teachers and with you.

שבת שלום

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