

Text, Pretext and Context: Who is an Educated Jew?

Shoftim

September 7, 2019

The Jewish Center

Rabbi Yosie Levine

Over the summer, *Moment Magazine* ran a series called “Five Books to be an Educated Jew.” The editors asked rabbis, scholars, educators and artists to share the five books they believe every Jew should read.

I found the exercise – and the responses it generated – quite provocative. Among the most popular answers were classic texts as well modern and contemporary books.

- Tanakh, Talmud or Pirkei Avot;
- Thinkers like Buber, Heschel, R. Soloveitchik and Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks;
- Holocaust memoirs of Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi;
- Novelists like Philip Roth;
- And books on Zionism, Israel and Jewish history;
- There were also some surprises like the suggestion to read the New Testament or a book on Bedouin culture

But this morning I’d like to expand the scope of this exercise and think about three related questions. What might the Torah itself tell us not just about what to read, but when to read, how to read, and for whom to read?

There’s only one text explicitly mentioned in our parsha.

יח וְהָיָה כְּשֶׁבָתוֹ, עַל פֶּסַח מִמְּלַכְתּוֹ--וְכָתַב לוֹ אֶת-מִשְׁנֵה הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת, עַל-סֵפֶר, מִלְּפָנָי, הַכְּהֹנִים הַלְוִיִּם. יֵט וְהָיְתָה עִמּוֹ, וְקָרָא בּוֹ כָּל-יְמֵי חַיָּו--לְמַעַן יִלְמַד, לִירְאֶה אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו, לְשָׁמֵר אֶת-כָּל-דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת-הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה, לַעֲשׂוֹתָם.

The king is commanded not just to write a sefer Torah, but וְקָרָא בּוֹ כָּל יְמָיו. He keeps it with him and reads it all his days. And what’s true for the king is true for the populace.

Even if we could all agree on what constitutes the Jewish canon, it would never be enough to read it. Whatever Jewish literacy means, we could never say that achieving it is sufficient.

בשבבתך בביתך ובלכתך בדרך

To be a Jew is to be a perpetual student: A person who reads and learns and studies in an ongoing way.

It’s like the story they tell about the elders of Chelm. After recently hiring a new rabbi, one of the townspeople noticed that there was regularly a candle burning in the rabbi’s house into the wee hours of the night. The elders approached the rabbi to ask why. “After I’ve seen to it that the duties of the day are complete,” the rabbi said, “I open up my books and I learn.” “Well in that case,” the elders said, “we have no choice but to ask for your resignation.”

“Why?” the rabbi said.

“Because we hired you to be a rabbi; not a student.”

If you want to say someone is learned, the biggest complement you can pay them is to call them a תלמיד חכם: Not a sage – a student of sages.

We became known as the people of the book not because of the books we’ve read, but because of the books we intended to read. The moment we stop reading is the moment we renounce our identity.

But it’s not enough to study great texts – even if we study them all the time. We also need to understand the values that they’re preaching.

And on this point, there is perhaps no more poignant model in our tradition than the comment of R. Yose Ha-Glili in his reading of our parsha.

The Torah tells us that there are three special people who are exempt from conscription during wartime. Of course if it’s a milhemet mitzvah, no one is exempt.

But in a discretionary war, three people can opt out:

מי-הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר בָּנָה בַּיִת-הַקֹּדֶשׁ וְלֹא תָנָכוּ....
וּמִי-הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-נָטַע כָּרְם, וְלֹא חָקְלוֹ...
...וּמִי-הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-אַרְשׁ אִשָּׁה, וְלֹא לָקַחָהּ יָלֵד, וַיָּשֻׁב לְבֵיתוֹ

- If someone built a new house, but hasn’t dedicated it.
- If someone planted a vineyard, but hasn’t harvested it.
- If someone is engaged, but not yet married...

They’re permitted to leave the battlefield.

And it’s bizarre. Obviously it’s painful for these people to leave unfinished what they’ve started. But it’s a war. Everyone is leaving something or someone behind. Everyone is at risk. If I just had a baby but haven’t seen her take her first steps, I’m not exempt?

What is this all about?

R. Yose Ha-Glili says something extraordinary. He says you can only understand these first three exemptions if you look at the fourth.

The Torah goes on to say:

וַיִּסְפוּ הַשְּׂטָרִים, לְדַבֵּר אֶל-הָעָם, וְאָמְרוּ מִי-הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה וְרַחֵם הַלֵּבָב, יָלֵד וַיָּשֻׁב לְבֵיתוֹ; וְלֹא יָמַס אֶת-לֵבָב אָחִיו, כְּלָבָבוֹ.

If someone is just too nervous – if they don’t have the psychic makeup to be able to succeed in a conflict – they’re dismissed.

In any group, there's going to be someone who can't handle the stress and the anxiety. And to have that person on the battlefield will be bad for him and bad for the other soldiers. It won't just be distracting; it'll be dispiriting and demoralizing.
So he gets a pass.

But what an embarrassment for that person! How humiliating to be the one guy who has to walk off the battlefield in front of a thousand other soldiers.

So R. Yose Ha-Glili says it was for the benefit of this one man that the Torah invented the other categories. They're not real. They're a pretext – a smokescreen – to protect the dignity of the man who can't stand up to protect himself. When he walks away, he won't be alone. He'll be in the company of people in the first three categories and no one will be the wiser.

My first point was about the text and the notion that textual study is ongoing and continuous. My second point is that an educated Jew needs to understand that sometimes what's in front of us is a pretext – to recognize that there's a deeper meaning or value underneath the text itself.

As important as *what* we read, is *how* we read. It's not enough to read great books; we also need to actively seek out the values that undergird our texts and animate dignified Jewish living.

How many people do we know who are great scholars and lousy Jews? Every once in a while we have to stop and ask ourselves: What's beneath the text? Is what we're reading seeping in?

I met a man last year who now lives in Israel. He made Aliyah with his family in his 30s. I said, "tell me the story: How did that happen?"

He said he was a teacher and for three years he taught a course on Israel. "At some point," he said, "it was just crazy that these texts were coursing through my veins and I wasn't there." So he picked up and made Aliyah.

I don't think most people are quite so bold. But it's probably healthy to ask ourselves every so often: Why aren't we?

Which brings us to the third point. Beyond text and pretext, there's of course context.

Parshat Shoftim ends with a public spectacle known as *eglah arufah*. It's the case of an unsolved murder for which the Torah mandates that communal leaders rush to the scene of the crime and perform a very involved ceremony.

And the elders make a public proclamation:

דָּיְנוּ, לֹא שִׁפְכָה (שָׁפְכוּ) אֶת-הַדָּם הַזֶּה, וְעֵינֵינוּ, לֹא רָאוּ.

Our hands didn't spill this blood, nor did we see what happened.

But Ibn Ezra reads the pasuk differently. Not that we were guiltless – we didn't shed blood nor did we witness the crime.

Instead, the second clause qualifies the first. It's true that we didn't commit the crime, ועינינו לא ראו – but it's equally true that our eyes didn't see. We're not guilty of an act by commission, but we're guilty of an act of omission. We weren't observant enough. We were vigilant enough. Had we done more, we could have stopped this crime from ever unfolding.

This is my third point: Part of what it means to be an educated Jew is to see the larger context: to understand our place in the larger narrative.

That's why I like the formulation: *For whom do we read?* I'm not saying we shouldn't just enjoy a good book or enrich ourselves by learning something interesting.

But no one exists in a vacuum. We can never have too many reminders that we're part of a larger system that we call community.

So I would argue that even reading – a solitary act that we usually associate with interiority or the development of our inner selves – has an external component, too.

Whether it's sharing what we've learned with others or using books to create a common language, we also need to consider what we're reading in the context of our community.

Here we stand in the first week of Elul. What a great moment to open up a Jewish text and broaden our Jewish horizons. But what a great moment, too, to think about the pretext – the unwritten words beneath the surface – the values that animate Jewish life.

And what a great moment to think about Jewish books within their greater context. What's being demanded of us? What are we charged with? For whom do we read?

Come Rosh Hashana, the ספר ההיים and the ספר המתים will be open in heaven in front of Hashem. Down here on earth, what books will be open in front of us?