

- **Shari Mendes - Hadran Siyum Shas - April 11, 2021, RH Iyar, 5781**

Thanks for 'coming' to my siyum and celebrating with me. This day crept up on me, unwittingly...Daf yomi has become such a daily habit that at first I didn't make a big deal about finishing this cycle. And then you, my daf yomi friends, and my dear family and friends, got so excited for me that I realized....this is really something!

This siyum is in memory of my father, **Martin Greenwald**. Though he couldn't have known, I have been doing Daf Yomi, thanks to him. My father, whose yahrzeit was on chol Hamoed Pesach, a few weeks ago, (also, actually, today, April 11,) was a pharmacist in Milford, Pa. for many years. We lived there full time until I was 12, (we were almost the only Jews,) and then he and my mother made great sacrifices so that they could move our family to a more Jewish community. (They chose Teaneck, NJ, and became very active in Jewish institutions as soon as they arrived...) Jewish life and education were paramount to my parents, a lesson that I've carried with me since. My father retired after an illness in middle age and it gave him more time to do the things he wanted to do. He loved nature, Shabbat and his family more than anything. He died too young, but from him I've learned courage in ways that are impossible to describe.

I would like to also dedicate this siyum in memory of another person who was important in many of our lives, the former Rabbi of BKOA in Raanana, a founder of Bet Hillel, **Rav Ronen Neubirt**, who passed away over Pesach at the age of 50. We are all still in shock, reeling from the terrible loss.

Rav Ronen was more than a Rav, he was also a good friend. He officiated at the weddings of our children, he attended their army ceremonies (tekesim,) we worked together on shul projects. He and Pnina became close friends and it is almost impossible to believe that he isn't in our world now. We wish much comfort to his family.

Michelle.

In addition to my Dad, it is thanks to my wonderful friend, Rabbanit Michele Farber, that I am here.

In 2013, I was at the end of the year of saying Kaddish for my father. Though not many women were saying Kaddish in our shul, I found the fellowship of our daily minyan in Raanana, very comforting. I was concerned about how I'd feel afterwards. For a variety of reasons, Michelle suggested I join their women's daf yomi group which she led every morning in her house at the time. Though I'd never formally studied Talmud, it intrigued me and I joined.

And so we met, day in and day out, in person...for years (until we moved to Jerusalem in late 2019 and then Corona was kind enough to bring Michele back to my living room, care of ZOOM!)

I jumped in at the beginning of Masechet (Tractate) Yoma, the fifth book in the traditional Daf Yomi cycle. Knowing not a word of Aramaic, (but indebted to my translated Artscroll edition,) I was immediately captivated. The Talmud made Jewish history come alive. It filled in the blanks! In the most human way! The Holy Temple was demystified. Real people with real names worked there. They negotiated salaries. The High Priest, the Kohen Gadol, even had a potential substitute wife! There were secret passages, hidden places! Who knew? Sold...I was in....

In the ensuing years, I dipped my feet in the water and began to swim. I did not become a Talmud scholar, ...but I've grown to love the study of Talmud. It is our collective Jewish heritage and is now an inseparable part of my life. I am proof that *lo bashamayim hi*, the Talmud is accessible to all of us. Anyone.

For those of you who are just beginning to study, or who are considering, or even those who want to just dabble now and then, the Talmud is a rich world of ideas.

Amid the details, step aside and hear the fabric of the words, the larger concepts. We are eavesdropping on the discussions of generations! From the most mundane to the most profound. As a whole, a sweeping magical ride....

Please forgive any errors. I was asked what impressions struck me most over the past 7.5 years. Here are a few, I invite you to come along with me.

Masechet YOMA: (Yom. Preparation for the Big Day, Yom Kippur in the Temple)

Dealing with human behavior is a primary topic of Shas. The Talmud is honest....The High Priests, the Kohanim, in the temple were mostly the creme de la creme, but a few were corrupt. A lottery system had to be established to fairly distribute roles. This isn't whitewashed, which I appreciated. It is human.

On the other hand, the efforts of the Kohen Gadol on behalf of his nation on Yom Kippur were incredible. So much rested on one man, so many people worked to prepare him. The evolution of Yom Kippur is far more holy and complex than I realized. The study of Yoma has changed and enriched my personal experience of YK.

Masechet SUKKAH:

I'm an Architect - I thought I'd love the details (no one loves details like an architect!) (So many measurements! Amot! Cubits! Do you know how small the smallest possible sukkah can be? Wait....) But it was the stories and the discussions in Tractate Sukkah that fascinated me most.

Did you know that an elephant can be a wall of a sukkah? Did they even have elephants in ancient Israel (or Babylonia?) I never researched this, but it seemed that Rabbis were asking this for a deeper reason, perhaps being provocative?

"Why were they asking **this** question like **this**?" became a favorite question of mine. There are often many layers to a discussion in the Gemorrah, like peeling an onion, I

could see how one could spend a year analyzing complexities. Daf Yomi whets the appetite for more.

Morality...If you don't have a lulav on Sukkot, can you steal one? Does a positive commandment override a negative commandment. What is morality? Obviously not following commandments blindly.

And then there's the fun story of Rabbi Akiva's flimsy sukkah on a ship...

Masechet ROSH HASHANA: The advanced science and math in ancient times...

You can practically get a degree in physics and astronomy by studying this masechet. They used the heavens as GPS and the sun and moon as google calendar. I had no idea that these concepts were hidden in the Talmud. A version of the pythagorean theorem was used to calculate angles. Was this Greek influence or was it discovered independently? Another thing to research...

Masechet TAANIT (Fasting)

One of my favorites. Full of gems.

You realize how modern and yet how ancient we still are by learning about how critical rain was in the survival of all people. Rain as the life force. Societies collectively fasted if rain didn't come. Sometimes for days! Today we can desalinate and move water from place to place, yet we are still at the mercy of nature even now. Witness...the modern devastation of hurricanes, earthquakes, and yes,...Corona...

Then, there is the famous story of Choni Hamaagal, Choni the Circle Drawer! On page 19. He has his own Wikipedia page and even a tomb you can still visit in the Galil.

Here is a man bargained with God on his own terms to bring rain, was able to get it to rain (!) and then was rewarded by being excommunicated because of how he spoke to

God. His tone wasn't quite right. Fascinating discussion ensues that sounds eerily familiar.

Masechet MEGILLAH:

As you can see, the Talmud is loosely marching through the year. Rain comes in winter, then Purim arrives.

Who can read a megillah to a congregation? If no men were available, then children, deaf mutes...and even WOMEN! Imagine a group of smart women sitting around a table, learning about what we were not allowed to learn about.

Masechetot MOED KATAN and CHAGIGA:

These tractates are concerned with what is permitted during the intermediate days of holidays (chol hamoed) then it segues into the laws of mourning. There is no separate masechet for many subjects that you'd think should be in the canon. Death and mourning? It's all over the place, partly here.

In case any of you are worrying about keeping up, it can be challenging. Happens to all of us. These masechetot came out in the months before the wedding of one of our children. This was a whirlwind time and I had a hard time keeping up with the daf, missing many days. Technology to the rescue! I am a swimmer, and I bought underwater headphones and downloaded the daf on podcasts. Ever the multi-tasker, I was able to make up the daf while doing laps, between splashing. I used to laugh, thinking I may have been the only woman in the world who was doing daf yomi underwater :) at the time. Thanks to Michelle and the explosive growth in women learning Talmud, I bet that women are doing daf everywhere now.

The next six books are known as the Order of Women. NASHIM.

I was looking forward to this. What did a bunch of ancient men have to say about women? In fact it's not even clear why each of these 6 topics are included in a section about women. Nazir (zealots) and Nedarim (oaths) what did these topics have to do

with women? The connections are interesting. NOT at all what I expected...and it was certainly fun to be in a woman's study group for this.

Masechet YEAMOT:

How does one teach the complex concept of Yibum, the Torah requirement of a brother to marry his brother's childless widow? A man dies, but does his name have to die with him? Yibum ensures continuity of a name, but it also had practical applications regarding inheritance and tribes keeping control over land.

Even more interesting, perhaps to us, was the explanation of the chalitzah process, in which a woman may refuse the marriage! If she does a very odd ceremony with a shoe. There are many examples of the powerlessness of women depicted in the Talmud but this is not one of them. Yibum is still practiced in modern day Israel in some Sephardic families. We read about one case in the newspaper as we were learning about it. It is very rare but it happens.

And if you like IQ like logic problems, this is the book for you. Keeping track of the complex family relationships was challenging. Michelle used her children's dolls as learning tools. Anyone coming into our class might have wondered what we were doing.

Masechtot KETUBOT, GITTIN AND KEDUSHIN:

These tractates all deal with marriage, the rights or lack of rights, of women. Age of consent, (shocking! But it was a different time...) Sex, divorce, plenty of drama...My takeaway from these sections was how far we have come as modern women. We are not there yet (witness the problem of agunot,) but we are light years away from the lives of women a few thousand years ago.

Masechet NEDARIM, NAZIR: The Power of the word in Judaism

The taking of any oaths and extremism were strongly discouraged by the Rabbis. This illustrated the power of the spoken word in Judaism more than anything. You say

something, you better think first be prepared to stick to your word. Because breaking vows was considered to be a very serious offense.

The Torah allows one to take on the yoke of extremism, to be a Nazir, to forsake haircuts, grape products and avoid contamination with the dead. One would think that religious leaders would love this, encourage a higher religious level, like monkhood. But I was struck by how the opposite seems to be true. Like oaths, extremism is strongly discouraged. The Sages seemed to be saying that this was allowed but excessive. One could reach high spiritual heights through regular practices and equality. Another great lesson for modern times as we grow increasingly polarized.

Damages. SEDER NEZIKIN, the BABAS....:

Having had their say about women, the next tractates are known collectively as Nezikim, damages.

Some of the most well-known tractates of the Talmud are in this section, dealing with civil laws (torts.) Theft, punishment, boundaries, responsibility, witnesses, testimony, judicial processes,how humans must live together in a civil society.

So many of these laws no longer seem revolutionary to us, but they must have been at the time. Sanhedrin was one of my favorite tractates, full of topics that I delved into more deeply on weekends, such as the formation of a Jewish legal system, the characteristics of a true leader, and finally capital punishment.

These sections are not dry legal tomes. They challenge us morally to think, throughout.....about the victim as much as the perpetrator. They are also peppered with Aggadeta, Talmudic moralistic stories as well as legends about famous biblical personalities.

Seder KEDOSHIM, the Holies:

This next section, several tractates, is all about the sacrifices in the Temple.

(Truthfully, who would not find this daunting at the outset? Who was not saying secretly to themselves, if ever there was a time to maybe quit daf yomi, perhaps this is it? Do I really need to learn this? What possible relevance could there be to my life...)

And yet, and yet...like all of the Talmud until now, I didn't know what awaited me, and wow was I surprised. It is never what you think it will be...

First, the Rabbis were doing something very noble. They were trying to preserve and record what they conceived were the practices of the Temple before they were forgotten. The Second Temple had been destroyed about 200 years before the earliest Talmudic voice was heard. The Sages relied on testimony and expanded on what they knew of sacrificial practices. Learning this masechet one can feel the importance of their mission.

In addition, the details of the sacrifices were actually interesting. The process was demystified, made real. Who did what and when. (Vayikra.)

More interesting were why and with what intent. Intent plays a big role in sacrifices. In a practice that seems on the surface to be so action oriented, THOUGHT is critical. If the Cohen charged with sacrificing your animal is distracted and doesn't have the proper intent, your sacrifice might not count.

After the destruction of the Temple, sacrifices were replaced by personal prayer and a person no longer had to outsource his God connection to a third party (the Cohen.) For a time, THIS was how Judaism had been practiced. Interesting to know how it worked, it is very important.

On a side note, these tractates are not for the faint-hearted. Plenty of blood and gore. Chullin is a veritable butcher's manual and by the end a few of us were converts to vegetarianism. We were also amateur veterinarians, knowing the anatomical systems of

all kosher animals as well as the various wing spans of grasshoppers. There was a certain amount of pride when we finished these challenging tractates, Kudos to Michelle for extraordinary teaching.

Masechet NIDDAH wrapped up the traditional cycle. We, a group of women, were learning about men's views of menstruation. A complex tractate.

Many of you have been here for the start of the new daf yomi cycle, since January 2020. Kol Hakavod for starting...Brachot, Shabbat, Eruvin, Pesachim and Shekalim and it's delightful to see the blossoming of our small daf yomi group into something large and worldwide.

Tips for those looking to last the long haul? The daf yomi system is brilliant because each day starts anew. It is a taste that allows you to dig deeper in your own time if you wish, or quite honestly, pass quickly if a certain page doesn't pique your interest. It is worth sticking with the daf cycle even if a masechet title seems uninteresting or too complex. I found the Talmud to be the ultimate example of ADD editing! A paragraph that could bore a builder or a butcher, let alone an amateur like me, suddenly segues into the most fascinating story about Queen Shlomtzion Hamalka, or a charging ethical debate!

See this as a 7.5 year course (which will pass quickly, let me tell you!) in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The sweeping breath of knowledge that you will gain is invaluable. I am looking forward to starting again.

You are also part of a huge community. I was once sitting on an airplane when I realized that my seatmate, as unlike me as one could be, had his Talmud open to the same page as me. Fellow daf yomi studyers, we proceeded to discuss the daf, as if we were old friends.

Life has happened in these 7.5 years. Good healthy life for which I'm enormously grateful. The daf has been my constant friend each day, accompanying me through thick and thin. I wake up to the sun, a new day, a new daf, always moving forward...

And in ending Kaddish, I embarked on a beginning. Continuing Jewish learning has allowed me to keep the souls of both my parents alive in me. It is indeed a celebration.

Thank you.

Shari Mendes