

Rabbi Rebecca Richman
Rosh Hashanah 5780
Sermon - The Gift of Learning

On Shavuot this year, we began our tikkun leyl - our night of communal learning - with a poem by Merle Feld. It's called "We All Stood Together."

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My brother and I were at Sinai
He kept a journal
of what he saw
of what he heard
of what it all meant to him

I wish I had such a record
of what happened to me there

It seems like every time I want to write
I can't
I'm always holding a baby
one of my own
or one for a friend
always holding a baby
so my hands are never free
to write things down

And then
As time passes
The particulars
The hard data
The who what when where why
Slip away from me
And all I'm left with is
The feeling

But feelings are just sounds
The vowel barking of a mute

My brother is so sure of what he heard
After all he's got a record of it
Consonant after consonant after consonant

If we remembered it together
We could recreate holy time
Sparks flying

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In Jewish tradition, we often say that we all stood at Sinai. Just this past week, we read from *parashat Nitzavim*, in which Moshe begins to wrap up his final speech to the Israelites before he dies and before they enter the land of Israel. He reminds them of their own story and suggests that they are implicated in the covenant made between G'd and the people of Israel at Sinai.

This idea that we all stood together there, that you and I were at Sinai, originates in part in Moshe's speech and in part from the rabbinic tradition. Our sages teach us that all the souls of future generations were present at Sinai,¹ not only those of the living in that moment. This is to say that even I - a woman, a mother, a female rabbi with my hands full - even I, was at Sinai; Even I received Torah.

This has not been an easy idea for me to accept.

I grew up in a progressive, Reconstructionist community surrounded by feminists and activists, big thinkers and loving parents. But I was not immune to the still unfair world that privileges men in learning environments and in access to Torah.

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This past Shabbos was the *yahrzeit* of my beloved Bubbie, Hilda Shore. She had the great honor of coming to the Torah for an *aliyah* when I became a *bat mitzvah*.

I knew how proud she was of my leadership and how much it meant for her to see me on the *bimah*, and so when she died a few years later, I wanted to lead one of the *minyanim* - one of the services - during *shiva* - during my mother's and my aunt's period of mourning.

¹ Babylonian Talmud Shevuot 39a

I spent hours preparing an outline, practicing what I would say and what somber melodies I would use. I didn't expect that there would be anyone there except for my immediate family, my aunt, and her best friend. But moments before we started, an older man from my Bubbie's apartment building came upstairs to join us. He had the warmest of intentions. He came to try to help make a minyan, to comfort the bereaved, to show up. I'll admit, I was surprised that he showed up to a *shiva* wearing water shoes, but that's beside the point - when he walked in, we were all moved.

I began the service as I had planned, and my family proudly followed my leadership. The neighbor did not. Several minutes into the service, he had taken over, raising his voice louder than mine and speeding ahead. He was not just davenning louder than the rest of us - he was pushing himself into the role of leader, and he took off at lightning speed.

I left my own service and belly-flopped onto the bed in tears. Having grown up in such a loving, supportive, gender-inclusive community, I did not yet know from the world of women being overtly silenced by men. My parents sat with me on the bed, processed what had happened, and helped me to begin understanding the reality of all the work that lay ahead for me as a woman.

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In the poem I read just a few minutes ago, Merle Feld speaks of the tension between our collective presence at Sinai and the story our ancestors wrote and passed down. For even though our tradition teaches that we were all there, the early stories from our ancestors were written and recorded by men.

For a long time, I felt like I was living right in the middle of this tension. I was spiritually activated by the idea of our shared experience of revelation at Sinai. I yearned to learn, understand, and see myself in the stories of my ancestors, but I didn't know where to start.

I did not grow up with much formal Jewish education. I learned to read the Hebrew alphabet in Torah school, and I learned some prayers, but there were huge gaps in my knowledge and experience of my own tradition.

When I was in college, I led services for a Reconstructionist student group on campus that I helped to found. One year, with great energy, I joined students from other Jewish

organizations on campus for a pluralistic, multi-denominational planning meeting in anticipation of a shared *Simchat Torah* celebration.

I don't know that I can fully describe the pain and shame I felt in our planning meeting when I was asked if I would lead one of the *hakafot*. "Haka-what?" I thought to myself.

A *hakafah*, on *Simchat Torah*, is a walk or dance around the Torah. There are seven *hakafot*, seven rounds of dancing with the Torah. But I did not know this when I sat in the Hillel student lounge. I'm sure I turned bright red. I definitely politely declined the offer, suggesting that I get to know the tradition on campus and maybe lead the following year.

During college, I started a list of terms and ideas I encountered in Jewish space that I thought I should learn more about. *Hakafah* was on that list. So were Talmud, "the rabbis," and words often thrown around in Jewish spaces like weightless ping pong balls: *drash* (a teaching expounding on a text), *chiyuv* (an obligation), *hashgachah* (stamp of approval from a governing authority of kashrut). Every few weeks, I would look up these terms and words, determined to learn the language of my people.

My shame and frustration with all that I did not know turned into insatiable curiosity and thirst for learning. It was so uncomfortable, but I often put myself in Jewish spaces where I knew I would be an outsider, where I knew I would feel lost, just to try to get myself acquainted, to try to figure things out. I felt like an outsider in my own tradition, and I so wanted to be on the inside. I so wanted to hold the words and the lingo and the stories of my people as my own. I felt ashamed that I did not know the stories of the Bible, of our sacred Torah. I felt lost in prayer spaces, and I always felt confused when people introduced "texts" to learn. As a young adult, I was sure that it was already too late to learn Hebrew, to really delve into Jewish learning.

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There is a famous rabbinic story about Hillel the Elder:

Each and every day he would work and earn a half-dinar, half of which he would give to the guard of the study hall and half of which he spent for his sustenance and the sustenance of the members of his family.

One time he did not find employment to earn a wage, and the guard of the study hall did not allow him to enter. He ascended to the roof and sat at the edge of the skylight in

order to hear the words of the Torah of the living God from Shemaya and Avtalyon, the spiritual leaders of that generation.

It was Shabbat eve and it was the winter season of Tevet. Snow fell upon him from the sky.

When it was dawn, Shemaya said to Avtalyon: Avtalyon, my brother, every day at this hour the study hall is already bright from the sunlight streaming through the skylight, and today it is dark; is it perhaps a cloudy day?

They focused their eyes and saw the image of a person in the skylight. They ascended and found him covered with snow three cubits high. They extricated him from the snow, and they washed him and smeared oil on him, and they sat him opposite the bonfire to warm him.²

The rabbis use this story in the context of a discussion about a person who might say that they are too poor to learn Torah. They suggest that, if Hillel - a man of great poverty - went to such an extreme measure to try to learn Torah, no person should say they cannot manage to learn.

As I made lists of terms to learn and sat uncomfortably in new Jewish spaces, I was, in my own way, emulating Hillel, sitting on the sunroof of the *beit midrash*, wanting in. I wanted to be immersed in Jewish learning. I wanted to know how to find my way in services. I wanted to find joy and excitement, rather than fear and intimidation, in “text study” spaces.

The study hall that Hillel so badly wanted to enter is a space featured prominently in rabbinic literature. During the rabbinic period - beginning in the first century CE - much of Jewish learning and writing took place in the *beit midrash*, most commonly translated as a “house of study.” For centuries, *batei midrash* - houses of study - were spaces for men, only. It was in the *beit midrash* that so much of the literature and holy text we now have emerged. “The rabbis” or “the sages” learned together, debated matters of law, and told stories. Their voices, discussions, arguments, and stories were recorded and codified into rabbinic texts such as the Mishnah, the Talmud, and midrashic works.

Much of we know about the *beit midrash* comes from the stories these rabbis told about their lives and their experience of learning. At times, the *beit midrash* was exclusive,

² BT Yoma35b

reserved for only the elite scholars and those with time to spare and money to pay for learning.

But there were also times when the invitation to learn was expanded, and something beautiful transpired.

In the time of “the rabbis,” Rabban Gamliel was the head of the academy. Although he did an excellent job at holding students to the highest of standards, allowing only the most pious to enter, his leadership also became somewhat flawed. His strictness became a bit too intense, and three times he humiliated Rabbi Yehoshua - publicly. Public humiliation, just so you know, in our tradition, is a big “no-no.”

And so, Rabban Gamliel was ousted from his position. In his place, the students appointed Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya as the new leader of the academy.

It is said that, on that day, they dismissed the guard at the door, and permission was granted to the students who were waiting to enter.³

I cried when I first learned this text, and it brings tears back each time I read these words, because I see myself in this story. As a young woman, without a strong Jewish education, I was one of those students waiting to be let in, waiting to be warmly invited into a space too long reserved for men and relegated to only the already learned.

On the day Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria became the leader of the academy, the rabbis teach us, somewhere between four and seven hundred benches were added to the study hall. Upon seeing all of the students rushing in to learn, filling the benches with their bodies and their hearts with Torah, Rabban Gamliel realized that he had made a mistake, preventing so many people from engaging in Torah study. The Talmud tells us that Rabban Gamliel, just ousted from his role as leader, actually stayed in the *beit midrash* to learn with everyone.⁴

This story teaches us so many important lessons about learning, about Jewish community, and about repair. From the addition of the benches and their rapid filling, we learn that our people want to learn, if only we will make space and make it accessible. And from Rabban Gamliel joining the masses in their study, we learn that there is often space for repair - for *teshuvah*, repentance, when we have made mistakes.

³ Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 27b

⁴ Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 28a

But my biggest takeaway from this story is that we don't need to abandon the study hall to find our seats. Our ancestors teach us that the *beit midrash* is open to change, is open to accepting new learners, and is strengthened by Jews who have never been there before. What I dreamed for was not the smashing of the walls or overhauling the system that I would not have had a place in; what I dreamed of was that place - the study hall - expanding its reach, welcoming me into the magic of learning that so clearly transpired within.

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On Shavuot, we learned a teaching from the Kotzker Rebbe, a Hasid born in Poland in the late 1700s. A student once asked him, "Why is *Shavuot* called (*z'man matan Torah*) 'The Time that the Torah was Given,' rather than 'The time the Torah was Received?'" He answered: "The giving took place on one day, but the receiving takes place at all times."⁵

I want to believe that I stood at Sinai, or at least that my soul was present with my ancestors. When I get stuck feeling intimidated or when I lapse back into the narrative that the *beit midrash* isn't a space for me, it is comforting to me to hold this teaching close at heart: I carry the gift of Torah, simply because I am a Jew. The teachings of my ancestors are stories and lessons that belong to me; they are at my fingertips, waiting eagerly to be learned.

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My job in this shul is to be your rabbi and, with you, build our own *beit midrash*, our own house of learning.

We're calling it Koleinu Beit Midrash. Koleinu is a word you might recognize from the High Holiday liturgy (think "shma koleinu" in Avinu Malkeinu). Koleinu means "our voice." Koleinu is a *beit midrash* for each of us, that values our life wisdom as essential to our learning of traditional text; it's one that works hard to bring in the people and voices who have traditionally been left out of the *beit midrash*; and it's a space where we harmonize our different voices and perspectives, honoring the Jewish tradition of sacred argument.

⁵ Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*

In our *beit midrash*, just as “the rabbis” did, we learn in *chevrutah*, in partnership, with a “study-buddy,” if you will. The word “*chaver*” means friend. When we learn in *chevrutah*, we are not simply using each other as spotters to help us make our way through a text; we are building a relationship. Each partner is responsible not only for their own, but also for their partner’s learning. Each person is pushed to articulate their own thoughts and listen to the other person’s ideas, even if different and challenging. In this way, the *beit midrash* can be a healing space for people who have had experiences of being silenced or unheard. I know it has been for me.

Building Koleinu is about embracing the gorgeous Jewish traditions of learning, sharing stories, listening deeply, and debating with love. Koleinu honors the core value of this synagogue as a center for Jewish life, a place where community members come to pray and to learn, to be spiritually activated in multiple modalities. As we grow, we should be so blessed as to need seven hundred benches for our learners.

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But, you might be thinking, the world is basically on fire. Is it not irresponsible, self-centered, and even negligent to spend time learning instead of time repairing?

Great question. Guess what? The rabbis wondered this, too.

In the Talmud, we read:

Talmud gadol o’ ma’aseh gadol? - Is study greater, or is action greater?⁶

Na’aneh Rabbi Tarfon v’amar - Rabbi Tarfon responded: *Ma’aseh gadol* - Action is greater. *Na’aneh Rabbi Akiva v’amar* - Rabbi Akiva responded: *Talmud gadol* - Study is greater.

Then, *na’anu kulam v’amaru* - everyone answered and said: *Talmud gadol, sh’ha’talmud mevi lidei ma’aseh* - Study is greater, for study leads to action.⁷

Our tradition teaches us that neither study nor action alone is enough. They feed each other. Our learning fuels our understanding of the brokenness in our world and gives us language, precedent, and encouragement to take the bold and brave risks needed to effect change.

⁶ Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 40b

⁷ Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 40b

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There are so many more texts and teachings I want to share with you, that I want to learn together. There are texts that suggest that our learning of Torah can flow like a stream,⁸ teachings that when we learn together we sharpen one another like iron sharpens iron,⁹ stories that remind us that even the greatest scholars had to start with the most basic of learning,¹⁰ and so much more. I can't wait to do this learning together.

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I'll leave you with a piece of Torah I have been carrying and teaching all year:

Whenever a person searches [a fig tree] for figs to eat, they find figs in it, for the figs on a tree do not ripen all at once, so one can always find a recently ripened fig.

Af divrei torah - So, too, with matters of Torah: *Kol z'man sh'adam hogeh bahen, motzei bahen ta'am* - Whenever a person meditates upon words of Torah, they find in them new flavor, new meaning.¹¹

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May the tree of life that is our Torah be abundantly productive. May it bear fruit for us when we need it, may it sustain us when we are hungry, may its expanding branches teach us that growth and expansion are possible, and may its roots link us to our ancestors and channel our stories to generations to come.

In this new year, may we merit so much learning, so much Torah, so much fullness in life.

⁸ Shir HaShirim Rabbah 5:9

⁹ Proverbs 27:17

¹⁰ Avot De-Rabbi Natan A, Chapter 6

¹¹ BT Eruvin 54b