

Tablet Magazine's Adam Kirsch Celebrates Five Years of Belittling the Talmud

Tablet magazine's Literary editor Adam Kirsch has just marked a special anniversary:

<http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/243694/daf-yomi-210-five-years-wonder>

Five years ago he began to participate in the Daf Yomi project, an initiative of the Orthodox Jewish community which reads one page of the Babylonian Talmud each day. He has posted many articles of his Talmudic readings.

Here is how he characterizes the endeavor:

My own encounter with the Talmud has been unusual in a number of ways, and I am constantly aware of the unorthodoxy—in several senses—of my approach to it here in Tablet. One difference has to do with terminology: Usually, people say they are “learning” Talmud, rather than “reading” it, and while any reading of it involves constant learning, I do feel that reading is the right word for what I’m doing. I am not learning from a teacher, but going it alone, which to me seems like the only way to read. I am reading in English, not learning the original Hebrew and Aramaic. And, of course, I am writing about my experience here in Tablet. In all these ways, my Daf Yomi experience is nonstandard, though I hope not inauthentic.

The question of “authenticity” is an interesting one given that the Daf Yomi project is one that is directly tied to a certain Ashkenazi Orthodox way of seeing the Jewish literary heritage which Kirsch rejects:

The more profound unorthodoxy, however, has to do with belief and observance. Talmud study has expanded greatly in recent years—the popularity of Daf Yomi is a sign of that, as is the appearance of a wonderful tool such as the [Koren Talmud Bavli](#), the English edition which I am reading. But it is still the case that the vast majority of people who spend time with the Talmud are Orthodox Jews. I was raised in a Conservative synagogue and today I am not observant, which puts me at a disadvantage in many ways. Customs and laws that to Orthodox Jews are second nature are new discoveries for me.

Now there should be no requirement for religious observance when it comes to studying the rabbinic literature. This in itself is not the problem.

The problem arises when the complex literary ways of the Talmudic Sages are processed contrary to a proper understanding of their conceptual values and philosophical intentions.

Here is how Kirsch presents rabbinic thinking:

This anachronistic way of thinking grows directly out of the rabbis' sense of the permanence of Torah. The law does not change, and so Judaism does not change. In fact, of course, it does evolve dramatically over time, and the rabbis of the Talmud themselves participate in that evolution. But they innovate without acknowledging that this is what they are doing; their innovations are always cast as recoveries of the Torah's original meaning. This way of nullifying historical change is one of the Talmud's strangest and most important ways of thinking: time itself means something different to the rabbis than it does to us. This is the kind of discovery that can only be made by encountering the Talmud directly. After five years, I'm still grateful for such surprises, which teach me more about what Judaism means than any other Jewish experience I've had.

Here is a typical example of his method:

<http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/234064/daf-yomi-200>

In the following passage from that post we see how he approaches the Talmudic system:

At the same time, however, the rabbis are always at pains to show that what might seem like new laws, which go beyond and sometimes even contradict the laws of the Bible, are in fact in harmony with the Bible. To do this, they are compelled to read against the grain of the biblical text, in ways that strike the uninitiated reader as highly counterintuitive. They will, for instance, make important deductions based on the presence of a prefix or suffix of a single letter; or they will look for other uses of a given word elsewhere in the Bible, and draw conclusions based on the context of those seemingly unrelated usages. The rabbis' hermeneutics are far from lawless—they have a rigorous method for making deductions from the text—but they often give the impression of doing whatever needs to be done to make the Bible mean what they want it to mean.

The rabbis are charlatans who intentionally “misread” the Biblical text in order to suit their own purposes and maintain a static, anachronistic system of Jewish Law.

This analysis completely ignores important factors in the larger Jewish tradition, especially Sephardic Jewish Humanism and its attempt to integrate philosophical and scientific studies into the rabbinic tradition.

We should note that Ashkenazi Jews, whether they are Orthodox or not, have severe problems when it comes to trying to balance parochial Judaism with Gentile civilization. Often there is a lack of balance, whether it is a complete rejection of non-Jewish sources, or whether Judaism is seen as obscurantist and anti-Humanist.

Kirsch identifies himself as a modern, alienated Jew who proudly sees the Talmud as “anachronistic”; a euphemism for being ignorant of the form of critical rationality demanded by contemporary Western Civilization.

And indeed the rabbis do think in different conceptual patterns than traditional Western philosophers.

Kirsch would have understood this had he spent some time away from the flawed Modern Orthodox version of the Talmud he uses, the Koren edition which is based on the Hebrew rendering by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, and actually attempted to read the insightful scholarship of Susan Handelman or Jose Faur which brings rabbinic thinking into the framework of contemporary Post-Modern thought, a movement which also attacks Western essentialism, identified by Jacques Derrida as “Logocentric”:

<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!msg/davidshasha/Dha5JInFRcQ/laDmOwkaCQAJ:context-place=forum/davidshasha>

I have reviewed some of these ideas in that recent article which looks at the spurious attempt to bring Ashkenazi Orthodox figures like Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik into the Post-Modern fold.

He might also have examined the pioneering philosophical work of Emmanuel Levinas who helped to integrate rabbinic studies into the current intellectual scene:

https://groups.google.com/forum/#!msg/davidshasha/gl4CAmM_i8c/MBCg-sw5AAAJ:context-place=forum/davidshasha

Beyond this, we have the arrogant attempt to undermine Handelman and Faur’s insights on Jewish Post-Modernism by establishment figures like Robert Alter whose vulgar historicist sense denies, pace Kirsch, the conceptual integrity of the classical rabbinic tradition:

<https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B1NQdm28qvXeFJDdkdrYmVVQUk/edit>

But Kirsch has sought to go it alone and has not engaged the contemporary scholarly issues, and in the end his five-year project of reading the Talmud has largely been about his own alienation from the basic patterns of rabbinic thought.

I have written a number of articles that attempt to explain the way the rabbis approached things:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-shasha/understanding-midrash_b_535249.html

http://www.tikkun.org/article.php/nov_dec_09_shasha/print

<http://www.tikkun.org/article.php/Shasha-climbingtheladderofinterpretation>

Here in full is my brief Huffington Post article which provides a basic introduction to the subject of Midrash; the discursive template of Talmudic thinking:

While the Halakhah, Jewish civil and ritual law, is the stern discipline of Jewish life, the Aggadic Midrash is its fountain of creativity. The word Midrash comes from the Hebrew root D-R-SH meaning “to inquire” or “to seek.” The word Aggadah comes from the Hebrew root N-G-D meaning “to tell” or “to narrate.” Midrash is the mechanism that permits Jews to generate new and multiple meanings from the Sacred Scriptures.

The tradition of Midrash as interpretation can be found in the strikingly odd tale of Ezra the Scribe in Nehemiah 8:8, where Ezra stood before a gathering of the people and presented to them the text of the Law, “translating it and giving the sense so they understood the reading.” Ezra — the “Bookman” — transformed Judaism into a text-centered religion which promoted study and critical investigation of its traditions.

In the period of the classical Sages, Midrash became a discipline unto itself, and many collections of Rabbinical Midrashim, most prominently the canonical Midrash Rabbah, were generated and later collected into books.

In her classic 1981 study of Rabbinic interpretation in the context of contemporary thought, [The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory](#), Susan Handelman contrasts Midrashic hermeneutics to the Greek philosophical tradition:

The infinity of meaning and plurality of interpretation are as much as the cardinal virtues, even divine imperatives, for Rabbinic thought as they are the cardinal sins for Greek thought. The movement of Rabbinic interpretation is not from one opposing sphere to another, from the sensible to the nonsensible, but rather from “sense to sense,” a movement into the text, not out of it.

Rabbinic Midrash begins with the text of Scripture in order to spin out infinities of new meaning through the agency of stories, interpretations, and exegetical acts. While the ethical aims of both the Greeks and Jews sought an ideality, the methods that the two groups used were quite different.

The great scholar Max Kadushin, in his seminal 1952 work [The Rabbinic Mind](#), sees the Midrashic method of narrative expansion that he views in “organic” terms:

The organismic principle of integration is an all-embracing principle, taking in all the value-concepts in the complex and relating every concept to every other concept in an identical manner. Within this general, all-inclusive type of integration or relationship, however, there is room also for additional forms of integration having to do not with the complex as a whole but with numerous specific concepts.

Kadushin illuminates for us the ethical elements that drive Rabbinic thinking, elements that emerge from a kaleidoscopic reading of Scripture.

In Medieval times Rabbinic sermons centered around the rhetorical aspect called Melitzah. Melitzah is the Hebrew term signifying rhetorical ornamentation and poetical values. The expert Derashah was one in which, as Jose Faur has written in an article on Rabbi Joseph Dana and Jewish oratory, the eloquence and erudition of the rabbi were central:

In our hands has been preserved a unique and quite singular art whose entire substance has been refined from a definitively Jewish source: the derasha or the “rabbinical oratorical art.” It would be germane to mention here that the Tanakh functioned within the Sephardic rabbinical tradition as a fully formed model of “rhetoric.” In this tradition, “rhetoric” is not considered an ornamental setting devoid of substance, but a Jewish aesthetic that shapes “truth/beauty” into a single unity: a truth that is inimitably beautiful is inimitably true, and the reverse [...]. From the aesthetic standpoint, the accomplished Darshan is no less an artist than the poet, painter or composer.

The art of Derashah thus comprises the scholarly-intellectual, the ethical, the exegetical, the aesthetic, and the poetical. Its aim is to expound Scripture by means of narrative expansion, thus allowing the Darshan, the one making the Derashah, to formulate new and often innovative ideas that can encapsulate cultural, historical, scientific, and philosophical values that are seen as “emerging” from the ancient Biblical texts.

As the scholar James Kugel states so eloquently in his landmark 1983 article “Two Introductions to Midrash”:

Here then is the crucial factor in the mentality of all early exegesis: for when what then happened in Scripture happens again and again, unfolds over and over, it is because the Bible is not “the past” at all. For it to be the past, its sense of time would necessarily need to be continuous with our own, and we would have to live amid a series of similarly God-dominated events, so that the whole flow of time from Abraham to now could make for one simple, consequential, story. Once this is no longer the case, biblical time becomes “other,” a world wholly apart from ours, yet one which is constantly intersecting our own.

In the end, Midrash is a means to affirm the sanctity of the Hebrew Bible as Scripture, yet it permits us to engage in a meaningful dialogue with the text in order to evolve as mature human beings. The Biblical text thus takes on a dual aspect: the ancient stories are told and retold while our current concerns are addressed.

The Midrashic method contrasts with static historicism, known alternatively as “originalism” or as “fundamentalism,” in its ability to adopt multiple perspectives and a pluralistic stance towards meaning in our lives. Rather than assume that the truth is a singular, univocal idea, the attitude found in the Platonic philosophy and adopted by Western civilization, Jewish tradition leaves room for multiple truths

and a seemingly infinite chain of meaning that is exemplified in the use of the Midrashic method.

In typical Tablet fashion Kirsch displays a lack of intellectual depth and curiosity when it comes to trying to better understand the internal logical system of the Talmud, making no real effort to get to the root of its Midrashic hermeneutical methodology. He has attempted to replicate the Orthodox Daf Yomi process in an offensively “Unorthodox” manner, with expectedly negative results that reflect poorly on the integrity of his intellectual process.

His deeply tendentious analysis of the Talmud often descends into a degradation of the Jewish tradition. It reflects an intellectual laziness as well as a distinct lack of appreciation for the deeply complex modalities of rabbinic thought as we struggle to make sense of the ancient literature in contemporary society.

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