

Judaism is for Adults, too.

You may have heard the story of a young woman from North Jersey who recently brought home her fiancé to meet her parents. After dinner, her mother tells her father to find out about the young man. The father invites the fiancé to his study for a talk. Father asks him, 'So what are your plans?'

'I am a Torah scholar,

'A Torah scholar. Hmmm,' the father says. 'Admirable, but what will you do to provide a nice house for my daughter to live in, as she's accustomed to?'

'I will study,' the young man replies, 'and God will provide for us.'

'And how will you buy her a beautiful engagement ring, such as she deserves?' asks the father.

'I will concentrate on my studies,' the young man replies. 'God will provide for us.'

'And children?' asks the father. 'How will you support the children?'

'Don't worry, sir, God will provide,' replies the fiancé. And so the conversation proceeds.

Later that evening the mother asks, 'How did it go, Honey?'

The father answers, 'Well, he has no job and no plans, but the good news is he thinks I'm God.'

This story reminds us of the way that the great Rabbis of the past, the founders, the writers and thinkers who stretched the Torah into what was then the time of the Roman Empire, who collected the oral teachings, stories and traditions, organized and wrote them down in the years after we lost our Holy Temple, the seat of the Sanhedrin where the scholars once gathered. In those generations they taught that to be a Torah scholar was the highest

goal, that bread with salt should be the scholar's diet, and that study of the Torah should begin early (Avot 5:21), at five years old, the Torah text, at 10, the Mishnah, and so on.

At the same time, the Rabbis were practical people. They were tailors, porters, blacksmiths, cobblers, vintners, builders. And in that way, they were not so different from us. We are of a generation and a community, in which the primary activity in 99.9% of our lives is our daily work, parenting, running errands, keeping house, and trying to squeeze in exercise and sleep. The Jewish education that we may have received as children took us perhaps as far as Bar or Bat Mitzvah, or for a smaller group of others through some or all of our high school years. For a few of us, it was a day school, yeshivah type education, for others, including myself, it was a continuing after school program, maybe some of us were in youth group or Jewish summer camp.

We confront though a significant challenge in the development of Jewish knowledge and faith, the challenge that even with higher level Jewish education past Bar Bat Mitzvah the message may have never become more complex, more nuanced. The Judaism of childhood may have remained just that, like the pictures that kids draw of the world that look a lot like ancient maps of the world, 2D, flat, over simplified. The situation can be compared to repeating basic addition and subtraction through high school.

The Jewish education of our children tends to take center stage, and there is great value and meaning in that. We want to plant the seeds of positive experiences, knowledge of language, culture, and history. But unfortunately we, the adult community, may neglect our own spiritual development and Jewish education. And there may be a tendency to end up standing outside the experiences of students looking in. Today, I hope that we can begin to

open up new horizons and show how Jewish faith and practice can offer us an enriching and challenging worldview that is a lens for us to observe and act in the world: As a practice of spirit and faith, as a discipline, as a body of knowledge about history, as the story of a people – our story, the story of our families, as a response to the changing world around us, as a point of departure for discussion and debate, as an arena for evaluating and expressing our deeply held beliefs and questions. Entering into an expanding world of Jewish consciousness is not easy, and requires us to muster our strength of mind and spirit, but it is also a road, that as the Rabbis taught, is a road paved with gems that we can pick up as we walk.

One of the greatest challenges is that we feel too much time has gone by, that it is too late to start. The early Rabbis themselves knew about this challenge and it found expression in the life of one of the greatest Rabbis of the early years, Rabbi Akiva. Here is his story:

What is the beginning of Rabbi Akiva's story? He was 40 years old and had not studied anything. One time he was standing near the mouth of a well. He said, looking at one of the rocks of the well, "Who carved this stone?" They responded, "The water carved the stone, the water that falls on it every day." They said to him, "Akiva, have you not read the verse from Job, 'The waters wear away the stones...'(14:19) Immediately Akiva formulated in his mind a lesson: Just as what is fluid shapes what is solid, the words of Torah that are hard as iron all the more so that they could shape my heart that is flesh and blood. He immediately returned and studied Torah.

Let's pause the story and look at the evidence. One of the most influential thinkers in Jewish history did not get his start until 40 and it was a start that came from an instinctive response to the world. So Jewish connection not only about kabbalah and spirituality, it's not

only about federations and Israel advocacy – it’s about a genuine response to the world around us, a thinking and feeling, a processing of the small to make better sense of the universal, an appreciation of the universal that reconfirms the holiness of the small. Akiva’s story continues...

He went with his son and sat in on classes with children. Akiva said to the teacher, “Rabbi, teach me Torah.” Then Akiva and his son held on to a writing tablet. The teacher wrote the aleph bet and he practiced these two letters. The teacher wrote aleph to tav, the whole alphabet, and Akiva studied them. Then he studied Book of Leviticus. He kept studying until he had studied the entire Torah. Then he studied the Mishnah. He asked questions, “Why is this ‘Aleph’ here? Why is this ‘bet’ written there? Why does the Torah say it this way?”

The story does not end here, but our telling will end here. We see that slowly, gradually, Akiva mastered increasingly complex lessons from Jewish tradition and thinking. Our goal is not to learn the entire Torah – it’s to open and reopen the doors to Jewish thinking and connection for the adults in our community just as we invest in the Jewish education of children in our community. Our goal is to extend the experience of Shabbat and holidays, to sharpen and connect them to the issues problems and blessings of the time in which we live. Our goal is to strive to make ongoing Jewish education for adults, and families of all types and backgrounds, accessible and meaningful. Today, with all of the tools we have at our disposal, with all of our technology, the answers to many of these questions and ideas for implementing them into our practice are available in ways they were never available before.

The Rabbis teach, (Shabbat 119b) the world exists due to the breath of students – meaning, the act of studying, opening the mind to the wonders of the search for truth – these

are the pillars of existence. The shaping of the minds and hearts of human beings is the stuff of ongoing creation, of a renewal of the world. We find this truth in the DNA of this Rosh Hashanah New Year holiday since the soul of Rosh Hashanah is the evolution of the self and community infused by the Presence and energy of God.

And as we look forward into the New Year, and the possibility of expanding our Jewish consciousness, we can celebrate, at least 9 different opportunities in our synagogue and larger Jewish community for adult Jewish learning. The Torah walk – an annual opportunity here to see the full Torah scroll unrolled and to travel through the holy book from beginning to end, in October. In our Hebrew school, we are launching a family education effort, the younger grades and older students and families will have two special family learning days when parents and students will join together and learn side by side. We have 4 Saturday learner's Shabbat services planned for the year – we will step back from the prayers we say and see what they mean, how they connect to one another and to us. The first weekend in December we will welcome our Musician in Residence to teach us the story of Jewish music. The annual sweet tastes of Torah program February 4<sup>th</sup>, an annual night of sessions on a wide variety of topics in Jewish life and thought. Tuesday nights 8pm, ongoing, we are reading in English and studying the entire Bible from start to finish, now we are around the end of Genesis, it is a drop in experience, come as often or as infrequently as you like, no prior experience necessary. In January, the 5<sup>th</sup> annual interfaith Bible study series will continue on the topic of the life and impact of Moses, a chance to study holy words in an open multi-faith setting. The first Religious Communities of Glen Rock Interfaith Israel mission is departing for Israel on April 22 – there's no better way to study Jewish history and the State of Israel than by traveling, and seeing the

spiritual richness of the faiths that call Israel a Holy Land. And there is the community-wide Florence Melton adult school, an intensive text based, thoughtful and enlightening curriculum that many of the people in this room have done.

And I will renew a commitment I made when I came here 5 years ago – anyone, individuals, small groups, who wants to study Torah, any Jewish topic, or the Jewish angle on any topic, can contact me anytime and I will study with you and then help you find ways to continue.

Today in the Torah we read the chilling story of Akedat Yitzchak – the Binding of Isaac. This was a moment of decision, a moment of wonder, a moment of contemplation of the future. It is clear that the future of the American Jewish community depends in part on the connection of people one to the other, the relationships that we have in our synagogues, and Jewish community centers, in our nursery and Hebrew schools, and through events of the life cycle. And the future also depends in part on the connection of people to the stuff of Judaism itself, its ideas, texts, and meaning. This mind and heart connection, exploration of knowledge, is as important to Judaism as it is to the empowering citizens to maintain democracy in nations like our own. Alexis de Tocqueville noticed this truth when he wrote in his 19<sup>th</sup> century book *Democracy in America*, that education is the force that would help them people quote “remain their own masters.” And in the story of the Binding of Isaac, at the end, when the trial has ended, Abraham leaves the mountain but there is no mention of Isaac. The Rabbis imagine that Isaac went off for three years *to study* in the school of Shem, the very, very, very long lived ancestor, son of Noah.

The Rabbis are teaching us that the binding on Mount Moriah was a powerful moment for Isaac, a moment that served, like Rosh Hashanah, as a call to action. We have an opportunity, for ourselves, for our community, in all Jewish communities of the world to grow the Torah, the Tree of Life, to new heights this year, to add richness and beauty to its branches, and to strengthen its roots, roots that hold us all together and feed us with a food that is full of sustenance for our souls, nutrients to bring clarity to our thinking, and a motivation to carry the tradition of learning and growth inspired by the great Akiva who started late and then lived his life, Torah, home, work, all as a seamless whole, one blending in to the other, a unity that brought inspiration to him and to his students, and he died with that ultimate sense of unity, with the word echad, one-unified, from the Shema, on his lips.

This year, may we find inspiration and a synthesis of our lives into a whole greater than the sum of its parts as we grow in our connection to our Judaism and to one another. Shana Tovah u'metukah – a sweet and nourishing New Year for us all. Amen.