

A PLACE FOR TORAH STUDY

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And [Yaakov] sent Yehudah before him to Yosef, to guide before him to Goshen, and they came into the land of Goshen" [Genesis 46:28]

Why did Yaakov send Yehudah on ahead? The brothers had been down to Egypt and back, twice. Yehudah didn't need to hail a camel driver for directions. So what, then, did Yehudah need to accomplish in order to prepare the way for Yaakov?

The Midrash provides the answer, quoted by Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi) in his famous commentary: Yehudah went to prepare a House of Study for the brothers and their families. [The word "Torah" actually means "guide" or "instruction," from the same root used in "to guide before him to Goshen." Furthermore, the verse is written with a missing Vav in "to guide," leaving the same four letters as "Torah," rearranged.]

Individuals knew the laws of the Torah even before it was given at Sinai, says the Midrash, naming Adam, Noach, and others -- including our forefathers. Concerning Avraham in particular, G-d says that he "listened to My voice, and guarded My safeguards, My Commandments, My decrees, and My Torahs." [Gen. 26:5] This knowledge he then passed to his children and grandchildren.

Yehudah went down to Goshen to set up a House of Study, to ensure that the brothers never lost not only that knowledge, but the lifelong pursuit of Jewish learning. Through his efforts, learning continued throughout the exile. This was why Yehudah had to go first.

The Iturei Torah writes: "the first thing which must accompany the founding of a Jewish community is that there be a place for Torah study, for it is impossible for it to stand even a moment without it. There cannot be a Jewish settlement without a House of Study, from which teaching emerges."

"Maaseh Avos Siman L'Banim." "The stories of the forebears are signposts for the children."

Nothing has changed. The Iturei Torah does not mean that the people will mysteriously die or suddenly lose all vestige of Judaism. He does, however, say that a community not founded upon Jewish studies cannot stand; it sows the seeds of its eventual collapse. Without Jewish learning as a communal focus, without the House of Study at the center, the result is not really a Jewish community at all -- rather, it could better be defined as a community of Jews who are losing their attachment to the Jewish people. What the Midrash told us thousands of years ago, we see around us.

This is not merely the rant of a traditionalist zealot. Reform Rabbi Eric Yoffie, President of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, called this the most Jewishly ignorant generation in our history. It also sports the highest rates of assimilation and intermarriage ever recorded. Even without a Midrash to spell it out for us, it would be hard to call this coincidence.

Anyone active in the Jewish community has heard about the "continuity crisis." Because of assimilation and intermarriage, the Jewish community in the United States is alleged to be in danger of dying out. The UJC just spent \$6 million on a new survey of the Jewish community, but now -- because of allegations of lost data -- cannot deliver the latest grim projections of a dwindling Jewish population.

It's the most widespread myth in Jewish life today.

A myth? What a foolish statement! Am I ignoring basic demography?

No, just the opposite. One need only look at the intermarriage and birth rate statistics for Jewish Day School graduates to envision a bright future. Every year, multiple new first-grade classes are created in day schools across the country -- not only because more parents are choosing Jewish education, but because alumni are marrying other dedicated Jews and having more Jewish children.

We don't need to grope in the dark, searching for solutions. We possess an ancient medicine that never lost its power.

Arthur Hertzberg, the noted Conservative Rabbi, author, and historian, is more blunt: "I am almost totally contemptuous of the present programs for the Jewish community, because they are about ethnic schmaltz, togetherness, let's rally against our enemies, and let's fight for Israel. Where's the beef? The beef is Jewish learning."

Right now, it is claimed that national Federation funding for Jewish Day School education stands at roughly two weeks per child. I cannot verify this; what we know for certain is that the median income of a Jewish family cannot withstand two Day School tuitions without major compromises.

We, the Jewish community, can afford to prioritize Jewish education in the coming years. Can we afford not to?

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Yaakov Menken