WHY DAF YOMI?

In the Talmudic method of text study, the starting point is the principle that any text that is deemed worthy of serious study must be assumed to have been written with such care and precision that every term, expression, generalization or exception is significant not so much for what it states as for what it implies. The contents of ideas as well as the diction and phraseology in which they are clothed are to enter into the reasoning. This method is characteristic of the Tannaitic interpretation of the Bible from the earliest times; the belief in the divine origin of the Bible was sufficient justification for attaching importance to its external forms of expression. The same method was followed later by the Amoraim in their interpretation of the Mishnah and by their successors in the interpretation of the Talmud, and it continued to be applied to the later forms of rabbinic Literature. Serious students themselves, accustomed to a rigid form of logical reasoning and to the usage of precise forms of expression, the Talmudic trained scholars attributed the same quality of precision and exactness to any authoritative work, be it of divine origin or the product of the human mind. Their attitude toward the written word of any kind is like that of the jurist toward the external phrasing of statutes and laws, and perhaps also, in some respect, like that of the latest kind of historical and literary criticism which applies the method of psycho-analysis to the study of texts. This attitude toward texts had its necessary concomitant in what may again be called the Talmudic hypothetico-deductive method of text interpretation. Confronted with a statement on any subject, the Talmudic student will proceed to raise a series of questions before he satisfies himself of having understood its full meaning. If the statement is not clear enough, he will ask, 'What does the author intend to say here?' If it is too obvious, he will again ask, 'Is it too plain, why then expressly say it?' If it is a statement of fact or of a concrete instance, he will then ask, 'What underlying principle does it involve?' If it is broad generalization, he will want to know exactly how wide its scope is and in what sense it is true. Statements apparently contradictory to each other will be reconciled by the discovery of some subtle distinction, and statements apparently irrelevant to each other will be subtly analyzed into their ultimate elements and so be converted into something else. Thus the Talmudic student proceeds on the assumption that there is a uniformity and continuity in nature so the Talmudic method of text interpretation is sometimes derogatorily referred to as Talmudic quibbling or pilpul. In truth, it is nothing but the application of the scientific method to the study of texts."

Talmud Study

Herman Wouk

Daf Yomi: Tossed into a stormy sea when his ship was wrecked, the great Talmudic sage Rabbi Akiva was given up for lost. This is how he later described his miraculous rescue to Rabbi Gamaliel: "A daf (plank) from the ship suddenly appeared as a salvation, and I just let the waves pass over me."

WHY DAF YOMI?

Because by now the Talmud is in my bones. Its elegant and arcane ethical algebra, its soaked-in quintessential Jewishness, its fun, its difficulty, its accumulative virtue ("I learned a 'blatt' today, I've learned forty 'blatt' this year") all balance against the cost in time and the so-called "remoteness from reality." Is 'Lear' closer to reality? I think they are about as close ('l'havdil,' as my rabbi would interject) in different ways, and that the Talmud is holy besides.

Anyway, I love it. That's reason enough. My father once said to me, "If I had enough breath left in me for only one last word, I'd say to you, 'Study the Talmud.' " I'm just beginning to understand him. I would say the same thing to my own sons.

Above and beyond all its other intellectual and cultural values, the Talmud is, for people like us, 'identity,' pure and ever-springing.

Herman Wouk, unpublished diary, 16 January 1972.

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