

A memoir of learning Talmud

Interviewed by Len Abram
Advocate correspondent

JERUSALEM — It's a lesson for the good that one person can do beyond a lifetime. In 1923, Polish Rabbi Meir Shapiro had a congregant, a student of Talmud, going to New York on business. He wished to discuss Talmud with Jews there. Which section or tractate would they be on?

Rabbi Shapiro suggested that if Jews studying the Talmud read the same page each day, then wherever they traveled, across the world or the street, they would be on the same page. Shapiro called this approach Daf Yomi, a page a day, the cycle taking seven-and-a-half years to complete the 2,711 pages. A rabbinical council adopted the plan. Rabbi Shapiro lived to see the end of the first cycle.

The Rabbi would be astonished that in 2012, in a stadium in New Jersey, 92,000 Jews joined thousands more across the world to celebrate completing the 12th cycle of Daf Yomi. He might be equally surprised that in 2017, a young woman from the U.S. has written a best-selling, "If All The

Seas Were Ink," a memoir about following his program to study Talmud.

Ilana Kurshan didn't start out to write about a book about the Talmud or its influence on her life. The marriage she moved to Israel for ended in painful divorce. She remained to work in publishing and translating. When a friend mentioned Daf Yomi to her, she was curious. Kurshan started at tractate (section) Yoma and continued, a page a day. In her journal, she wrote observations on Talmudic sayings and discussions. Those notes became the start of the best-selling memoir. She met her husband Daniel in her third year of Daf Yomi, and they are raising their four young children. The Jewish Advocate spoke with Kurshan in Jerusalem, where the couple recently celebrated their Daf Yomi anniversary.

The Jewish Advocate: Your book is full of Talmudic quotations. Do you have a favorite?

Kurshan: I enjoy re-writing Talmudic aphorisms as limericks — so here is my reworking of a famous piece of Talmudic wisdom, from Hagigah 9b:

A person who learns and reviews

A full hundred times, still he will lose
Out on what he'd have learned
Had he once more returned
Said Bar Hey Hey — for knowledge accrues.

TJA: The Talmud does not mention many women as models. The women in Exodus may be one exception. You note these and another, Beruriah. What do these women represent?

Kurshan: Very few women are mentioned by name in the Talmud, true, so when I look for role models in the text, I generally look to men rather than women. The more I study Talmud, the more it becomes clear to me that by the Talmud's standards, I am a man rather than a woman — if "man" is defined as an independent, self-sufficient adult, whereas

"woman" is a dependent generally living in either her father's or her husband's home. In some ways this is a relief, because I can regard the Talmud's gender stereo types as historical curiosities rather than infuriating provocations. For years women were excluded from Talmud study — and yes, Beruriah is the notable exception — but the Talmud does not offend me because I am



Ilana Kurshan

defying its classifications through my very engagement with the text. So many of the classical interpretations of the Talmud reflect gendered assumptions, and these texts have the potential to take on radically new meaning when regarded through feminine eyes. So for me, what is most interesting is not searching for the few women in the Talmud, but rather encountering the Talmud's men and their teachings with my modern feminist sensibilities.

TJA: It is unusual for women to study Talmud or for a young woman, a feminist, to write a best-selling book about it. Have

you heard from men and women in the Orthodox community?

Kurshan: I wrote my book hoping that maybe some people would read it and be inspired to take up Daf Yomi, and indeed many people — including Orthodox women — have written to me to tell me that they have started Daf Yomi after reading my book. And several religious Jews have written to tell me that my book is one of the few books that both they and their spouses read — men read it because it's about Talmud, and women read it because it's a women's coming-of-age story. So that is very gratifying for me to hear. I organized my book by masechet — each chapter corresponds to one tractate in the Talmud — because I wanted my book to serve as a guided tour of the Talmud and an introduction to that world for the uninitiated, both women and men.

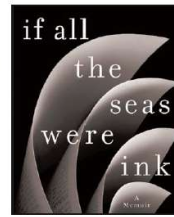
I believe that the more people who study Torah, the more Torah is out there in the world. No two people read the text the same way, because we all read in light of our experiences. Torah is often analogized to water, and there is a story in Taanit that expands on this analogy — we are all vessels for the Torah we study. And just as a liquid takes the shape of its container, so too does Torah take the shape of all of those who learn it. And so the more people who study, the

more Torah that is created in the world.

This is true of men, but it's especially true of women, because for 1500 years Talmudic texts have been pretty much the exclusive province of men — not to mention men who consider themselves experts in women's physiology, anatomy, psychology. It's been thrilling to be part of the rediscovery of traditional Jewish texts by women and to regard the Talmud, though plowed through by generations of scholars, as fertile ground for gleaming new insights.

TJA: You began reading Talmud when your life had setbacks and disappointments. Could the Talmud strengthen those searching for happiness, not just for wisdom?

Kurshan: For me it was the regular discipline of learning every day that enabled me to feel hope and open myself up again to finding happiness. At some point I realized that moving forwards after a difficult setback is about putting one foot in front of another, and one way of doing that is by turning page after page. If every day I turned another page, eventually a new chapter would have to begin. And so that's how it was for me.



"If All the Seas Were Ink: A Memoir," by Ilana Kurshan, St. Martin's Press, 2017

Daf yomi was initially my companion during a very lonely stretch of life, in keeping with the teaching that "one who is walking along his way and has no companion should occupy himself with Torah study" (Eruvin 54a). But as I soon realized, Daf Yomi is never really a solitary pursuit, because tens of thousands of Jews learn Daf

Yomi worldwide, and they are all literally on the same page. And so I joined a Daf Yomi class, and slowly my community began to form around Daf Yomi. By the time I completed the Talmud seven years later, I was married with three children. And so yes, Daf Yomi brought happiness in to my life, and my learning continues to be a source of daily satisfaction and often joy.

TJA: If all the seas were ink, you quote a scholar, there is not enough for the depth and breadth of the Talmud. Skimming its surface is another scholar's lament. Can modern readers plumb these ancient texts and make the Rabbis our contemporaries?

Kurshan: The Babylonian Talmud is often compared to an ocean because of its vastness and depth. As with an ocean, you can immerse yourself in Talmud at various levels. You can get by just barely skimming the surface, or you can swim underwater, or you can train as a deep sea diver and become an expert on all the flora and fauna in one particular corner of the ocean floor. Daf yomi is, by its nature, rather superficial; when you're moving forward at the impossible clip of

a page a day, it's nearly impossible to stay afloat.

But there are many ways to access the text and to make it memorable and relevant. I have a practice of writing a limerick for every page of Talmud I study — you can find the full set at www.ilanakurshan.com. These limericks serve as mnemonics, helping me to remember what I learned, and which rabbi said what.

The more I've learned, the more familiar the rabbis of the Talmud have become, like old friends — Ben Azzai, who loved studying Torah so much that he couldn't bear to sacrifice precious learning time to raise a family; Rabbi Eliezer, who left his family's huge farming estate against his father's will to go learn Torah in Jerusalem; and Rabbi Yehoshua, who developed his love of Torah in the womb because his mother used to pass by the study house when she was pregnant with him. These various rabbis' approaches to study are a reminder that there are many ways to engage with the texts of our tradition and to make them relevant and real.

TJA: The next cycle of Daf Yomi begins in 2020. Is it on your schedule?

Kurshan: I am now well into my second cycle of Daf Yomi. Part of what has been so exciting about learning it all again is that often I will remember not just something from that particular page of Talmud, but also where I was when I learned it. T.S. Eliot famously wrote in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "I have measured out my life in coffee spoons." Well, I have measured out my life in Talmudic tractates — I remember various experiences in my twenties and thirties based on what I was learning in Daf Yomi at the time, and I associate Talmudic passages with what was going on in my life when I learned them.

My husband and I recently celebrated our Daf Yomi anniversary. Now, on our second read through the Talmud, we just came to the daily page from the date of our wedding. We don't really celebrate our anniversaries — we have never really made the time — but this anniversary felt significant for us both, and it was a reminder for me of just how much of my life has unfolded against the backdrop of the Daf. So yes, I expect that I'll continue learning.