

The Accessibility of Knowledge

Nitzavim – 5782/2022

Many philosophers¹ and thinkers² have pursued the idea that knowledge is our greatest asset.

This idea rings true in the business world, political world, the social world, and of course in the religious world. In tyrannical rule knowledge is granted to only the highest echelons of government. In secretive businesses only to the highest level of management. And in religious orders that rely on a top down power structure only to clergy. For Judaism, this was a no-brainer, the very idea of knowledge, of wisdom, of accessibility to ideas and ideals, was destined to be shared equally through our people. And this idea, that through the accessibility of knowledge, power is shared and society as a whole succeeds in a greater level, this idea, has been tried and proven by our faith and people, and has only now become something relevant within the business and political worlds.

The Torah tells us that this book, these words, this knowledge, is there, right there in front of you, ready to take it. It is accessible as long as you reach out and immerse yourself in it³.

Rashi tells us that the Torah contains everything you need to know, that you need to have to live a fulfilled life is there in the Torah, and you can access it⁴. While the Ibn Ezra explains that it is not some mystical and hidden beast that requires superhuman strength to acquire⁵. Finally, the Torah according to the Ramban is timeless and therefore relevant to all of us no matter our backgrounds, upbringing, politics, identity, or prior knowledge⁶.

Many people ask, “how am I able to properly learn or engage with the Torah, with our host of texts when I struggle with the language, or when it no longer has relevancy to me, or when it contains within it things that stretch beyond my values or beliefs in the world”.

These are of course valid questions, but ultimately they are excuses in the greater scheme of things.

We are fortunate to live in a time where huge swaths of our texts have been translated and commented on, where books have been written, not from some kollel student sitting in Yeshiva, but from serious academic scholars who infuse their real world wisdom into the words of the texts. We have incredible resources like the Artscroll and Koren translations of the Talmuds and the Soncino translation of the Midrash which our Library holds. We have websites like sefaria.org where you can click on any word in the Torah or Talmud and learn the etymology of the word, or where you can click on a verse and every mention of the verse in the commentaries, texts, Talmud, and modern thinkers can be pulled up in a matter of seconds. This is Rashi’s view, the Torah is not concealed from you.

There is a common misconception that Torah learning is for people who have been well versed, previously educated, and willing to devote long hours to master our texts and traditions. Yet over the past several decades learning has been accessed by a far wider range of scholars and students. One of the most incredible projects I have seen is the development of a place called HaMidrasha – run by Professor Moti Zeira, it is a Yeshiva for secular people – aimed at making Judaism accessible, meaningful and relevant to every Jewish Israeli. Another project is that of Zion, founded by Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum, a community of serious scholarship, with no barriers to entry. Even in our own community, the amount of people who join for Limmud, is testament to the evolutionary changes of Torah learning and accessibility. This is the view of the Ibn Ezra – that you do not have to be superhuman to engage with Torah learning.

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We are told by our sages that there are 70 facets of the Torah, that each verse or word, even letter, can be understood and hold multiple intrinsic meanings and understandings. Thus, I believe that it is only when one does not want to see relevancy within our texts, when one wants to dismiss something as archaic, that this excuse comes to the fore. I believe that we have the ability to find relevancy within the Torah on even the most seemingly secular subjects. One of our members shared with me the story of his father – he was a great Talmudic scholar in Eastern Europe, despite the fact that he did not believe in God, nor believed that religion had a purpose in today's world, yet he was able to aptly solve his questions and riddles that life threw at him with the incredible ideas found within the Talmud. He was a kofer b'ikaro, a heretic in all essences of the world, in a religious sense, according to his Son, yet he pursued Torah, because it brought relevancy into his world. This is the view of the Ramban, that the Torah is timeless, as long as you open yourself up to let it solve the issues of the day.

As we enter the New Year, perhaps this should become a focus of our yearning in learning – that we understand that nothing is hidden away from us, that we realise that even us mere mortals can access it, and that we understand and actualise the relevancy of Jewish wisdom.

All citations can be found in **A New Page of Talmud**