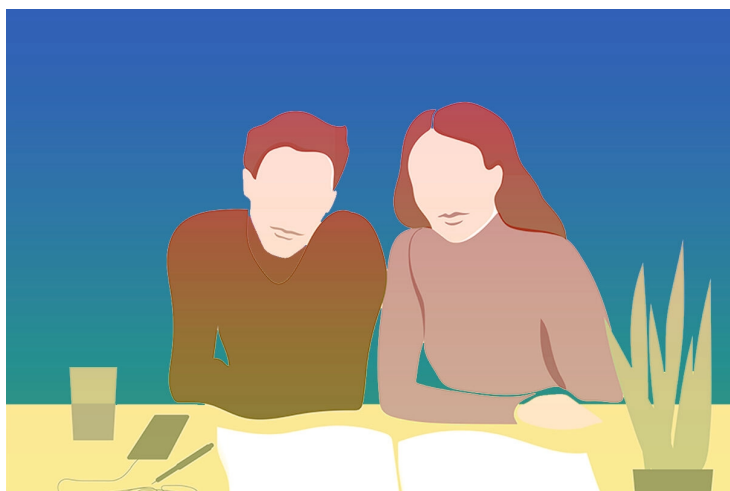


Doing This Daily Jewish Ritual Has Helped Me Cope With Coronavirus

By Rachel Honeyman Aug 7, 2020



On March 8, in a bustling and noisy bagel shop in Lawrence, N.Y., I stood alongside nearly 30 women to recite a prayer called the Hadran. This is a prayer said upon completion of a tractate of the Talmud, a feat most women never achieve. Until very recent history, the Talmud was virtually inaccessible to women. Many believed it was illegal by Jewish law to teach the Talmud to women, while others strongly discouraged it. While there has been a growing movement of women studying Talmud over the past 30 years or so, there are still far more barriers for women than for men. Only a small minority of women begin the process of studying Talmud, and an even smaller minority complete a tractate.

So, this gathering on March 8 was a big deal. All of us had taken on a daily Talmud “challenge,” if you will, called Daf Yomi — we committed to studying one front-and-back page of the Talmud every single day for 2,711 days. That’s seven and a half years, if you’re counting — and that’s how long it takes to complete the entire Talmud. Each tractate completed is an achievement in and of itself, and that gathering in the spring marked the completion of our first tractate (of 38).

As we ate our bagels and got ready to recite the prayer, each of us introduced ourselves and talked about why we’d taken on this challenge. Our backgrounds were about as varied as you could imagine — from unaffiliated women looking to connect with their Jewish roots to ultra Orthodox women doing the Daf Yomi in secret. Modern Orthodox me was somewhere in the middle. But our differences didn’t matter that day; we’d all come together to hug and share food in celebration of this communal achievement. I left the celebration feeling inspired to dive into the next leg of my journey, the tractate that deals with the laws of Shabbat.

The tractate of Shabbat begins by introducing the concept that objects cannot be carried from a private domain, like a house or private courtyard, into a public domain on Shabbat. These laws are generally so complex I couldn't possibly describe them here, mostly because I don't fully understand them myself.

But, just days after beginning this tractate — a 2,000-year-old discussion of public versus private domains — it suddenly became all too relevant, as most synagogues across New York (including our own) shut down services due to spread of coronavirus, and “NY on PAUSE” went into effect shortly thereafter. We'd all be stuck in our private domains for a long time to come.

Now that we're months into the pandemic, so much of this Covid-19 era can be summed up in one word: monotony. Each day feels much like the last, each week bleeds into the next. But for those of us keeping up with the Daf Yomi these past few months, we fortunately have one different thing to look forward to for 30 to 45 minutes each day.

Studying the Talmud is a window into the complex conversations among rabbis who lived 2,000 years ago, and it's an opportunity to participate in those conversations in the present day. Each daily discussion unearths a new layer of thought (and often confusion) behind why we practice Judaism the way we do.

Of course, the experience of studying Tractate Shabbat since March has been colored in every way by Covid-19.

As we learned about the laws of caring for a sick person on Shabbat, I thought of just how relevant this is in the midst of Covid. Discussions about bathing on Shabbat pulled my attention back to my hands, raw and chafing from obsessive cleansing. A common concern discussed in this tractate is what happens if someone forgets it's Shabbat and violates certain prohibitions — this concern doesn't seem so far-fetched these days when it's nearly impossible to tell one day from the next. The virus has been ever present, even in my Talmud study.

A mere two weeks after that March gathering, I was admitted to our local hospital — not with Covid-19, thankfully, but with a facial infection. While New York's Covid-19 numbers were not yet at their peak, the virus still permeated the halls of the hospital. I was not allowed any visitors. My only companion was my trusted Talmud.

When I did finally get home, I had to quarantine from my husband, Tzvi, for two weeks — who knew what I could be bringing home with me from the hospital? We slept in separate rooms and moved our furniture around so we could always have at least six feet of distance between us. Tzvi prepared all of our meals, and I never went anywhere in the house without a trusty package of Lysol wipes. For our Passover seder, we sat at opposite ends of our 10-foot dining table, trying our best to share this experience together, while feeling — literally and figuratively — wedged apart.

Three days of heavy antibiotics in the hospital seemed to take everything out of me, and having to do this quasi-quarantining, especially during Passover, really did a number on my emotional state. As much as I wanted to keep up with the Daf Yomi, I lacked the energy, strength, and motivation to do so. But Tzvi rallied behind me and said he'd join me in this challenge, at least for tractate Shabbat, since he'd be working from home for the foreseeable future anyway.

And so, Tzvi became my much-needed study partner. At first, I just needed his emotional support to keep going — but soon enough, this became a shared journey. For the past four months, as we've sipped our coffee in the early morning, we've weaved our way through the intricate laws of Shabbat, following the meandering discussions and countless tangents as best we could. After 12 years together, this experience has added yet another layer of depth to our relationship, challenging us to examine what

being practicing Jews means to us, especially in a time when we can't participate in our community the same way we used to. And with being "stuck" in the house together for so long, this shared practice has given us something to work on together, to break the monotony.

Now, with the tractate of Shabbat coming to a close on Monday, August, 10, I'm ready, once again, to recite the Hadran prayer along with my fellow Daf Yomi learners. Only this time, I'll be doing so over Zoom or, at best, with a mask on in a socially distant backyard celebration. Like so many of our experiences during Covid-19, community is still there for those of us who seek it out, but it's incomplete, full of chinks.

I'd love to celebrate this achievement of completing my second tractate of the Talmud by standing alongside my friends and others who've achieved this great feat. But, as we all must these days, I'll take what I can get. As I write this, I'm looking over at the volumes of the next tractate, Eruvin, a new challenge that will carry me from August 11 through the next 110 days. It's hard to picture what our world might look like at the end of November, but my dream and hope — remote as the possibility may seem — is to celebrate that achievement by standing in a bagel shop, arm-in-arm with my fellows in this challenge, and recite the Hadran once again.

Image by iriselmo/ Getty Images

© 2021 Kveller All Rights Reserved.