

THE JEWISH JOURNAL

Volume 27, Number 23 • 22-28 Av, 5772 • August 10-16, 2012 • jewishjournal.com

The Accidental Talmudist

**How a chance encounter led a
Hollywood screenwriter on a 7-year journey of study –
and all the way to MetLife Stadium**

by Salvador Litvak



Talmud: The seven-year cycle

By Salvador Litvak

Published August 8, 2012

Whoever learns halachos every day is assured that he will be a citizen of the World to Come. For it is stated: The ways (halichos) of the world are His. Do not read halichos, but halachos. (Niddah 73a)

After seven and a half years of daily study, my voyage through the sea of Talmud ended with these words, as approximately 90,000 Jews filled every seat of MetLife Stadium in New Jersey to celebrate the completion of Daf Yomi in an event called the 12th Siyum HaShas. My voyage began with a miracle, and ended in transformation.

On March 2, 2005, I ventured into The Mitzvah Store on Pico Boulevard in Los Angeles. I'd been there a few times, but it was not a regular stop. I grew up

proud to be Jewish, I had a bar mitzvah, and I always considered myself a spiritual person with a rational belief in God (i.e. it made more sense to me that God created the world than that it just happened).

I sought out spirituality in many places and traditions, but I was never satisfied. Then my grandmother, of blessed memory, Magdalena Miselbach, passed away in September 1997, and I felt a deep pull to explore my own backyard. I did not realize then, or until the very moment of writing this paragraph, that her passing coincided with the 10th completion of the Daf Yomi cycle.

In 1997, I simply started going to synagogue, not because I was supposed to, but because I wanted to. I soon became a student of Rabbi Mordecai Finley — a brilliant teacher of Chasidus and the transformative power of our tradition. Learning from him and other great teachers like Rabbis Shlomo Schwartz, David Wolpe, Mark Blazer, David Seidenberg and Jonathan Omer-

Man, I drank in all the Torah I could, and I embarked upon the path described by Reb Springsteen: A time comes when you need to start being the man you aim to become.

Along the way, I often heard about the Talmud. I knew the word, but I never attended a yeshiva, and I had no real sense of what it meant.

On previous visits to the bookstore on Pico, I would look at the long shelves of Talmud and shake my head. Those volumes seemed like bricks in a wall separating the super-religious from everyone else.

After seven and a half years of learning, however, I had a new thought. Why be intimidated? OK, so each set of Talmud looks like three Encyclopedia Britannicas. But I was an English major in college, and they're just books! There must be a book one. I'll get that and see what it's like. I found Berachos 1, and took it to the counter.

The kid at the register said, “So, you’re doing Daf Yomi.”

I said, “What’s Daf Yomi?”

Looking at me strangely, he answered, “It’s a worldwide program for learning Talmud. Everyone reads one page a day on the same schedule, it takes seven and a half years to read the whole thing, and today is day one.”

There are 2,711 pages in the Talmud. I could’ve bought that book on any one of those days. As a spiritual rationalist, the odds against this “coincidence” did not escape me.

“OK, God, I get the message. I’m doing Daf Yomi.”

Many times I thought I would fail. It has been called the world’s longest marathon. I have a family and a high-pressure occupation. Could there be enough hours in the day? Well, if God was so generous as to arrange a miracle

for me to commence Daf Yomi, I figured He would also give me the strength to finish.

After seven and a half years of learning Talmud, much of it under the wise and gentle guidance of Rabbi Mechie Blau, I reached the long-awaited day at MetLife Stadium. MetLife Stadium? Are you kidding me? I grew up in New York. I'm a rabid Giants fan. And on Aug. 1, I joined about 90,000 Jews to fill every seat of the Giants' stadium for a Talmud event? Unbelievable!

Accompanying me were my son, Avi, 7, my brother David and my old friend, Lionel Leventhal. Avi has never known me not to be a Talmud student. David is a cardiologist in Boston who pulled multiple favors to attend. Lionel says he was inspired by me to commence the Daf Yomi in the new cycle. My father, unfortunately, could not attend due to knee surgery, but his ticket went to Bryan Bridges, whom I met through my Accidental Talmudist page on Facebook. He, too, is now embarking upon the Daf.

I was prepared for a wonderful night,
but the reality exceeded the expectation.

If one attends a college for four years,
takes all the required classes and hands
in her assignments, has she not
completed the endeavor? Does the
graduation itself really matter? One
possible answer may be found in the
Talmud.

Tractate Shabbos lists 39 categories of
work from which we must abstain on
the Sabbath. These laws are derived
from the kinds of work needed to build
the Tabernacle. Examples include
planting, plowing, grinding, kneading,
slaughtering, tanning, writing, etc. The
38th category, however, is a bit
surprising: makeh b'patish, or striking
the final blow.

Writing a story is work. Writing the last
word of the story ought to be the same
sort of work, but it's not. When you
strike the final blow, the story becomes a
story, the brisket becomes a brisket, and

in my case, the talmudist becomes a talmudist. Not an expert. Not even a competent talmudist. But at least a person who can be described as such without speaking falsely.

The final blow was not what I thought it would be. Our Team Siyum arrived early — very early. Along with my partners, Eric Chaikin and Nat Rubin, I am producing a documentary about the Talmud and the people who learn it. The idea only came up in the last few months as the Siyum approached, and my role in it thus far has been mostly as a participant because I am so busy completing my film “Saving Lincoln.”

We reached the stadium at 3 p.m. It rained all day. The afternoon prayers, or Mincha, began at 7:30 p.m. As the lights came up, the rain went away, and the stadium became silent: a roaring silence of people focused on God. When we reached Kaddish, and the prayer leader completed the first section, 92,000 answered in unison: Y’hay shmay rabbah m’varach l’olam ul’al’may

al'mayah! (May His great Name be blessed forever and to all eternity!) May we all merit to hear such a great gathering of Jews praying together again and again. There is nothing like it.

The Daf Yomi cycle was proposed in 1923 by Rabbi Meir Shapiro. Could he have imagined such a realization of his dream? MetLife Stadium became a temple, linked to dozens of venues around the world, including the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles, all for the sake of Talmud.

Butchers once filled stadiums to celebrate their plans for annihilating our people. Now we filled the stadium.

Speeches followed, praising the teachers and students who made this moment possible. During one of them, Lionel turned to me and said, "More than the 2,711 pages — I'm proud of you for the person you've become."

"The person I've become?"

“Sal, I’ve known you for 29 years. You’re different now. Not that you weren’t a nice guy before, but I would now hold you up against anyone in terms of respectfulness and kindness to others. It’s in the way you speak to your wife and kids, and everyone. It has to be because of this.”

I was speechless. I knew I was doing a good thing, learning for all those years. I felt the hours of study would bring me closer to God, as I strove to understand His laws and the wisdom of my people. But there were so many days when I was just slogging through complex ideas and retaining precious little. In what way could that change me? And do I really treat people differently?

The night reached its apex: I pulled out Tractate Niddah. All his life Avi watched me proceed from one volume to the next, and this was the moment of reading the final words of the final book. We read them, and then the stadium erupted! Dancing, jumping, singing at the top of our lungs. Avi, David, Lionel,

Bryan, Eric, Nat — we were all exhilarated! Avi said, “Now that’s a Jewish party!”

There was more to the night, including commencing the Talmud again with Berachos 1, as I had so many years and pages ago. Yet it was neither the last page nor the first page that constituted the final blow.

Two days later, Avi and I drove up to a family reunion. This particular branch of the family had often suffered from painful arguments because every member had a different approach to religion. All were dreading the next Shabbat, when the final eruption was sure to occur, thanks to an argument that happened while Avi and I were away. Hearing about it during the drive back, I remembered what Lionel had said to me, and I remembered a phrase we often read in the Talmud: Torah scholars increase peace in the world.

I approached each family member

individually. I asked them what the argument was really about. So much of Talmud study is just that: piercing the veil of words to decipher exactly where viewpoints differ. What is at stake, and is there really a contradiction? I explained to each what I had heard the others say, and proposed a way, a halicha, by which we might navigate this fragile situation.

And it worked! Shabbat was a joy! That is why we study halachos, per the final words of the Talmud. So we can find a halicha.

The 39th and final category of work is hotza'ah: carrying from domain to domain. May we all merit to learn and to teach, to come nearer to God than we were a moment ago, and to carry that knowledge to another domain.

Salvador Litvak writes the Accidental Talmudist blog at jewishjournal.com. He wrote and directed the Passover comedy and cult hit "When Do We Eat?" His

current film, "Saving Lincoln," explores Abraham Lincoln's fiery trial as commander-in-chief through the eyes of his dear friend and bodyguard, Ward Hill Lamon.