

Pesach @ the DC Beit Midrash

Monday, March 29, 2004; 8 Nissan 5764

Welcome to the DC Beit Midrash!

The *Chumash* (Five Books of Moses) is divided into 54 portions, which Jews read sequentially each week in services. This Shabbat, we will be reading *Parashat Tzav* from the book of *Vayikra* (Leviticus).

Tonight, a member of our community will lead us in a text-study on the upcoming holiday of *Pesach* (Passover). The voices of both past and contemporary interpreters will inform our discussion.

Below you will find a summary of this week's *Torah* portion, along with brief biographies of the commentators cited. The presentation will be followed by *chavruta* (paired) study on a subject of your choice.

This week's parsha (Torah portion): Tzav, Vayikra (Leviticus), 6:1-8:36

Parshat Tzav (Leviticus 6:1-8:36) begins with God continuing to teach Moses many of the various laws relating to the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) service. However, while last week's Torah portion described the *korbanot* (offerings) from the perspective of the giver, this week the Torah focuses more directly on the attending *Kobanim* (priests), providing further detail about their service. After first describing the maintenance of the fire which continuously burned on the altar, the Torah discusses in great detail the various kinds of *korbanot* which Aaron, his sons, and the succeeding generations of *Kobanim* would be offering in the *Mishkan* and the Temple. The *korbanot* must be brought with the proper intentions and eaten in a state of spiritual purity. Finally, Moses performs the detailed *melu'im*, consecration service of the *Mishkan*, and anoints and inaugurates Aaron and his sons for their service in the *Mishkan*, in front of the entire congregation of Israel.

(<http://www.tfdixie.com/parshat/tzav/000.htm>)

This week's sources:

Talmud Bavli

The Babylonian Talmud (Talmud Bavli) is a compilation of discussions on the Mishna, discussions which had been going on some three hundred years already at the time they were written down. Because the Babylonian edition is far more extensive than its Palestinian counterpart (Talmud Yerushalmi), compiled around 400, it has become the most authoritative compilation of Jewish law. When people speak of studying "the Talmud," they almost invariably mean the Bavli.

The Talmud's discussions are recorded in a consistent format. A law from the Mishna is cited, which is followed by rabbinic deliberations on its meaning. The Mishna and the rabbinic discussions (known as Gemara) comprise the Talmud, although in Jewish life the terms Gemara and Talmud are usually used interchangeably. The rabbis quoted in the Gemara are known as Amora'im, explainers or interpreters. In addition to extensive legal discussions (halacha), the rabbis incorporated into the Talmud guidance on ethical matters, medical advice, historical information, and folklore (aggadata).

(Excerpted from Telushkin, Jewish Literacy, p 150-153.)

Tractate Bava Batra

Mishna

Coming from the Hebrew word for "repetition," the Mishna is a compilation of precepts passed down as an oral tradition and collected by Yehudah ha-Nasi (Judah the Prince) in the north of the Israel a little bit more than a century after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. The scholars cited in the Mishna are known as the Tannaim. The Mishna forms the earlier part of the Talmud. Pesachim is one of the sixty-three tractates of the Mishna, and it concerns the holiday of Pesach (Passover) and the Passover sacrifice.

Tractate Pesachim

Rashi (1040-1105)

Shlomo Yitzchaki, more commonly known by his acronym, Rashi, is one of the most important rabbis of any generation. He is known for his commentaries on the Torah and the Talmud, which are generally considered to be the most important Jewish commentaries on either and are included in many printed editions of those texts. His commentary of the Torah, which in traditional circles is often understood to be the basic meaning of the text, draws upon many traditional sources and interpretations that preceded him. His commentary on the Talmud is an incalculable help to the learner, elucidating the give and take in the Talmudic argumentation and providing background information often crucial to the correct understanding of the passage.

Rambam (1135-1204)

Mishneh Torah

If one did not know that Rambam (Maimonides) was the name of a man, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, one would assume it was the name of a university. The writings and achievements of this twelfth-century Jewish sage seem to cover an impossibly large number of activities. Maimonides was the first person to write a systematic code of all Jewish law, the Mishneh Torah; he produced one of the great philosophic statements of Judaism, The Guide to the Perplexed; published a commentary on the entire Mishna; served as physician to the sultan of Egypt; wrote numerous books on medicine; and, in his "spare time," served as leader of Cairo's Jewish community.

Maimonides' major contribution to Jewish life remains the Mishneh Torah, his code of Jewish law. His intention was to compose a book that would guide Jews on how to behave in all situations just by reading the Torah and his code, without having to expend large amounts of time searching through the Talmud. Needless to say, this provocative rationale did not endear Maimonides to many traditional Jews, who feared that people would rely on his code and no longer study the Talmud. Despite sometimes intense opposition, the Mishneh Torah became a standard guide to Jewish practice: It later served as the model for the Shulkhan Arukh, the sixteenth-century code of Jewish law that many Jews still regard as authoritative.

(<http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/biography/Maimonides.html>)

This week's teacher:

Sarah Beila Chankin-Gould

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Sarah Chankin-Gould is currently a Scoville Fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, Strategic Security Project. She graduated from "a little slice of heaven in Los Angeles" known as Occidental College with a double major in Diplomacy and World Affairs, and in Spanish.

This week's food sponsor:

Margie Klein

This week's red, white, and blue refreshments are sponsored by Margie Klein, who is returning from a long voter recruitment trip. She is sponsoring in honor of her upcoming birthday, and her return to her beloved Washington D.C. in all its cherry blossom glory.

Wanna teach, think about teaching, or suggest a teacher? teachers@dcbeitmidrash.org

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