

Peoplehood

A RESOURCE FOR TIKKUN LEYL SHAVUOT

An invitation to learn

The tradition of studying together on Tikkun Leyl Shavuot – the eve of Shavuot – epitomises the Jewish passion for, and commitment to communal learning. The model of Chavruta – exploring Jewish texts with a partner or a group – creates a space for reflection, growth, participation, diversity and tolerance. Through this resource we hope to bring together the tradition of Tikkun Leyl Shavuot and the model of Chavruta to supplement your learning event.

These pages contain six sources which address the theme of 'Peoplehood' – exploring the relationship between choice and recognition, God and scripture, and the diversity of Jewish identity today. Each source consists of one or more texts, plus some discussion questions to get the conversation flowing. We have also included reflections upon beginning and ending your learning.

It is not necessary to explore every text, nor to answer every question. You may wish to study with a partner or in a group (or both) and the session may last for twenty minutes or for hours on end ... the decisions are yours! However you choose to learn or teach the material, we hope that you will find it both stimulating and illuminating.

chavruta@limmud.org

Reflections upon learning with a partner

טוֹבִים הַשְּׁנַיִם מִן־הָאֶחָד
אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁלָהֶם
שָׂכָר טוֹב בְּעַמְלָם

קהלת ד:ט

Two are better than one,
because they have
a greater reward
for their toil

Ecclesiastes 4:9

בְּרֹזַל בְּבִרְזֹל יֶחַד
וְאִישׁ יֶחַד פְּנִירֵיהוּ

משלי כז:ז

As iron sharpens iron,
so too one person
sharpens the wits
of their friend

Proverbs 27:17

THE CHOICE

Ruth 1:15-18

¹⁵And [Naomi] said: "See, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and to her gods. Return with your sister-in-law!" ¹⁶And Ruth said: "Do not urge me to leave you and to turn away from you. For wherever you go, I shall go; wherever you lodge, I shall lodge; your people are my people, and your god is my god. ¹⁷Where you die, I shall die, and there I shall be buried. Thus may God do to me, thus and more if anything but death shall part me from you." ¹⁸And when [Naomi] saw that she was determined to go with her, she ceased to speak to her.

Ruth, The First Convert

Curiously, Ruth's declaration places joining the Jewish people before affirming the God of Israel ... One who converts joins the Jewish people, taking on the culture, history, traditions, and rituals of Judaism as well as the faith of Jewish religion.

Richard Hirsch, jewishrecon.org, 31 January 2017

רות א:טו-יח

¹⁵וַתֹּאמֶר, הִנֵּה שָׁבָה יְבָמְתְךָ, אֶל־עַמָּהּ, וְאֶל־אֱלֹהֶיהָ; שׁוּבִי, אַחֲרָי יְבָמְתְךָ. ¹⁶וַתֹּאמֶר רות אֶל־תִּפְגַּעֵי־בִי, לְעֹזְבֶיךָ לָשׁוּב מֵאַחֲרָיךָ: כִּי אֶל־אֲשֶׁר תִּלְכִי אֵלָי, וּבְאֲשֶׁר תִּלְיִנִי אֵלַיִן עִמָּךְ עָמִי, וְאֵלֶיךָ אֵלֶי. ¹⁷בְּאֲשֶׁר תָּמוּתִי אָמוּת, וְשָׁם אֶקְבְּרָ; כֹּה יַעֲשֶׂה ה' לִי, וְכֹה יוֹסִיף כִּי הַמּוֹת, יִפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ. ¹⁸וַתֵּרָא, כִּי־מִתְאַמְצֶת הִיא לָלֶכֶת אִתָּהּ; וַתַּחֲדֹל, לְדַבֵּר אֵלֶיהָ:

Points to consider

Is Jewish peoplehood a matter of believing or of belonging? Of personal choice or of communal recognition?

Is loving a fellow Jew a good reason to convert to Judaism? Is loving God?

THE COVENANT

Deuteronomy 29:9-14

⁹You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord your God – your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, ¹⁰your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer – ¹¹to enter into the covenant of the Lord your God, which the Lord your God is concluding with you this day, with its sanctions; ¹²to the end that He may establish you this day as His people and be your God, as He promised you and as He swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ¹³I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, ¹⁴but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day.

Translation: NJPS

דברים כט:ט-יד

⁹אתם נצבים היום כלכם, לפני ה' אלהיכם: ראשיכם שבטיכם, זקניכם ושטריכם, כל, איש ישראל. ¹⁰טפכם נשיכם וגר, אשר בקרב מחניך: מחטב עציך, עד שאב מימך. ¹¹לעבך, בברית ה' אלהיך ובאלתו: אשר ה' אלהיך, פרת עמך היום. ¹²למען הקים-אתך היום לו לעם, והוא יהיה-לך לאלהים כאשר, דבר-לך; וכאשר נשבע לאבותיך, לאברהם ליצחק וליעקב. ¹³ולא אתכם, לבדכם אנכי, פרת את-הברית הזאת, ואת-האלה, הזאת. ¹⁴כי את-אשר ישנו פה, עמנו עמד היום, לפני ה' אלהינו; ואת אשר איננו פה, עמנו היום.

Points to consider

Can a Jew be bound by the covenant without assenting? Can a Jew leave the covenant without God's consent?

Who are "those who are not here with us today"?

THE CONVERT

Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Forbidden Intercourse 14:1

How do we accept a righteous non-Jew? When one comes from the gentiles to convert, we check their background and, if we do not find an ulterior motive, we say to them:

"Why did you come to convert? Do you not know that the Jews, at this time, are afflicted and oppressed, despised and confounded, and beset by suffering?" If they say: "I know and I am not worthy", we accept them immediately.

רמב"ם, משנה תורה, איסורי ביאה יד:א

פיצד מקבלין גרי הצדק: כשיבוא להתגייר, ויבדקו אחריו ולא ימצאו עלה – אומרים לו, מה ראית שבאת להתגייר, אי אתה יודע שישיראל בזמן הזה דוים דחופים ומסחפין ומטרפין, ויסורין באין עליהו; אמר אני יודע, ואני פדאי – מקבלין אותו מיד.

Israel's Chief Rabbinate Rejects Conversions Authorized by Top U.S. Orthodox Rabbi

Israel's Chief Rabbinate recently refused to recognize conversions that were authorized by the chief judge of the largest Orthodox rabbinical court in the United States.

In four cases, the Rabbinate did not explain why it rejected the conversions approved by Rabbi Gedalia Dov Schwartz, the head of the Beth Din of America and the chief presiding rabbinical judge, or dayan, of the National Beth Din of the Rabbinical Council of America.

The Rabbinate has often put up barriers to foreign rabbis who are outside of the ultra-Orthodox world, often refusing to accept conversions that they have performed or authorized.

In response to a suit in Jerusalem District court by ITIM, an advocacy organization that helps people navigate Israel's rabbinical bureaucracy, in April the Chief Rabbinate issued a list of foreign rabbis whose conversions and authority on matters of personal status it recognizes. This week, after a public uproar, the Rabbinate agreed to recognize the Orthodox conversion performed by Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, after previously refusing to do so.

Yair Ettinger, Haaretz, 23 September 2016

Points to consider

If Jews are no longer "afflicted and oppressed, despised and confounded, and beset by suffering", then should our position on conversion change? If so, how?

What constitutes an ulterior motive? Who is worthy of joining the Jewish people?

THE MEMORY

Traditional Haggadah

In every generation each person is obligated to see themselves as if they went out from Egypt, as it is said: “*You shall tell your child on that day, saying: it is because of that which God did for me when I went out from Egypt*” (Exodus 13:8).

The Holy Blessed One redeemed not only our ancestors, but also us with them, as it is said: “*God took us out from there in order to bring us to give us the land sworn to our ancestors*” (Deuteronomy 6:23).

[...]

What do the wicked ones say? “What is this service to you?!” To you – and not to them.

Thus, they exclude themselves from the community and deny the essential. Then you shall blunt their teeth and say to them: “*It is because of that which God did for me when I went out from Egypt*” (Exodus 13:8). For me – and not for them. Had they been there, they would not have been redeemed!

Bearing Witness

Second generation writings reflect not only the fact that the Holocaust happened, but that its effects continue to be felt, and that all subsequent Jewish affirmation must be illuminated by the Shoah’s flames.

Alan L Berger, *Bearing Witness: Second Generation Literature of the ‘Shoah’* (1990), *Modern Judaism*, 10(1):43-63

הגדה מסורתית

בְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיֵּב אָדָם לְרֹאוֹת אֶת עַצְמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ הוּא יֵצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם, שְׁנֵאמַר: “וְהַגַּדְתָּ לְבְנֶךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר, בְּעֵבוֹר זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם” (שמות יג:ח).

לֹא אֶת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ בְּלִבְדָּ גָאֵל הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, אֲלֵא אִף אוֹתָנוּ גָאֵל עִמָּהֶם, שְׁנֵאמַר: “וְאוֹתָנוּ הוֹצִיא מִשָּׁם, לְמַעַן הָבִיא אֹתָנוּ, לְתֵת לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְתָּנוּ” (דברים ו:כג).

[...]

רָשָׁע מָה הוּא אוֹמֵר? מָה הָעֲבוּדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם. לָכֶם – וְלֹא לוֹ. וּלְפִי שְׁהוֹצִיא אֶת עַצְמוֹ מִן הַכֶּלֶל כְּפָר בְּעֵקֶר.

וְאִף אֶתָּה הַקְּהָה אֶת שְׁנֵינוּ וְאָמַר לוֹ: “בְּעֵבוֹר זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם” (שמות יג:ח). לִי וְלֹא לוֹ. אִלּוּ הָיָה שָׁם, לֹא הָיָה נִגְאָל:

Points to consider

Is collective memory a mechanism for Jewish peoplehood? Is there more to Jewish peoplehood than collective memory?

Can a person count themselves out of the Jewish people?

THE HERETIC

Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1

Every Jew has a share in the World to Come, as it is said: “*And your people are all righteous, they shall inherit the land forever; the shoot I planted, the work of My hands, to glory in it*” (Isaiah 60:21).

And these do not have a share in the World to Come: one who says that the resurrection of the dead is not [taught] in the Torah, and [the one who says that] Torah is not from heaven; and the heretic.

Rabbi Akiva says: Even one who reads books excluded from the canon, and one who makes incantations over a wound, saying: “*All of the diseases which I placed upon Egypt, I shall not place upon you, for I am God who heals you*” (Exodus 15:26).

Abba Shaul says: Even one who pronounces the unspoken name of God.

משנה סנהדרין י"א

כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשׁ לָהֶם חֵלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא, שְׁנֵאמַר “וְעַמְדָּ כָּלֶם צְדִיקִים לְעוֹלָם יִירְשׁוּ אֶרֶץ נֶצֶר מִטְעֵי מַעֲשֵׂה יָדַי לְהַתְּפָאֵר” (ישעיה ס:כא).

וְאֵלּוּ שְׂאִין לָהֶם חֵלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא, הָאוֹמֵר אִין תַּחֲתֵת הַמֵּתִים מִן הַתּוֹרָה, וְאִין תּוֹרָה מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְאִפִּיקוּרוֹס.

רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא אוֹמֵר, אִף הַקּוֹרָא בְּסִפְרִים הַחִיצוֹנִים, וְהַלּוֹחֵשׁ עַל הַמִּכָּה וְאוֹמֵר “כָּל הַמַּחְלָה אֲשֶׁר שְׁמַתִּי בְּמִצְרַיִם לֹא אֲשִׁים עָלֶיךָ כִּי אֲנִי ה' רַפְאֵךְ” (שמות טו:כו).

אֲבָא שְׂאוּל אוֹמֵר, אִף הַהוֹגָה אֶת הַשֵּׁם בְּאוֹתֵיתוֹ:

Points to consider

Is Judaism more tolerant of diverse beliefs or of diverse practices?

Is there anything a Jew could say that would stop them being a Jew? If so, what?

THE IMPLICATIONS

Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 27b (in all medieval manuscripts)

תלמוד בבלי, סנהדרין כז ע"ב, בכל כתיב יד

Is it not written: “*And they shall stumble one upon another*” (Leviticus 26:37) – one [shall stumble] upon the sin of the other.

וְהִכְתִּיב “וְכָשְׁלוּ אִישׁ בְּאַחִיו” (ויקרא כו:לז) אִישׁ בְּעוֹן אַחִיו – מְלַמֵּד שְׂכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲרָבִים זֶה בְּזֶה.

This teaches that all Jews are responsible for one another.

Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 27b (in the standard Vilna printed edition)

תלמוד בבלי, סנהדרין כז ע"ב, בדפוס וילנא

Is it not written: “*And they shall stumble one upon another*” (Leviticus 26:37) – one [shall stumble] upon the sin of the other.

וְהִכְתִּיב “וְכָשְׁלוּ אִישׁ בְּאַחִיו” (ויקרא כו:לז) אִישׁ בְּעוֹן אַחִיו – מְלַמֵּד שְׂכוּלָן עֲרָבִים זֶה בְּזֶה.

This teaches that all people are responsible for one another.

Points to consider

What does it mean to be responsible for the sin of another person?
For the sin of an entire people?

The two versions of Sanhedrin 27b are identical, except for one word. What, if anything, is the difference between our responsibility to fellow Jews and our responsibility to fellow human beings?

Saying ‘Never Again’ About the Holocaust Means Nothing

So what meaning does it have to say “never again”? Of course, what we have witnessed in Syria is not a direct re-run of the Holocaust. No one is saying that. It’s not the same. But when the world first made that vow, it did not merely mean, “Never again shall a man called Adolf Hitler murder six million Jews.” It meant never again would the world tolerate the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of civilians who had harmed nobody. It meant no more global indifference in the face of such evil. It meant that the world would not stand by – passively, idly, mutely – and let it happen.

Jonathan Freedland, The Jewish Chronicle, 16 December 2016

Closing reflection

Ben Bag-Bag said: בֵּן בַּג־בַּג אָמַר:
Turn it and turn it הִפְךָ בָּהּ וְהִפְךָ בָּהּ
for everything is in it דְּכֻלָּא בָּהּ
reflect on it וּבָהּ תִּחְזִי
grow old and grey in it וְסִיב וּבִלָּה בָּהּ

Pirkei Avot 5:22 משנה אבות ה:כב

Limmud is an international community of Jewish learning founded in the UK in 1980.

Almost every week, there will be a Limmud activity or event somewhere in the world. These are organised by independent grassroots groups following shared values which include choice, diversity and volunteerism. Groups, volunteers, participants, presenters and supporters connect through the Limmud experience and by collaborations such as this Tikkun Leyl Shavuot project.

This material was collected and edited by Mikhael Reuven and Sofia Zway, with support from Jeremy Tabick and Robin Moss. Designed by Uri Berkowitz.

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Limmud promises that wherever you find yourself, Limmud can take you one step further on your Jewish journey.

Find out for yourself and get involved at limmud.org

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