

Rosh Hashanah Morning Talk
“Literacy” by Elisa Robyn

I would like to build on what Marilyn said about literacy...that the more she learns the more she is encouraged to put learning into practice. That Knowledge breeds a thirst for knowledge. I have had exactly that experience my entire life, but especially in the area of Jewish study

Four years ago I realized that my vast pools of unconnected knowledge about Judaism might be getting deeper, in that I had more information, but I still had only a surface level of understanding. So, I committed to a year of study with the Florence Melton adult mini school...and then another... and then another... and just year, yet another. At the same time I started weekly study with my friend Rabbi Sandra Cohen, reading books whose titles I could not even have pronounced a few years ago.

I actually started to study because I was tired of knowing more about sweat lodges than mikvahs, more about astrologic charts than the Jewish calendar, more about academic evaluation than prayer. I was tired of knowing that someone was mis-portraying Judaism, but not having the strength of understanding, (koach b'da'at), to respond articulately. I had read volumes of Hassidic stories, and could experience the expansiveness or chesed of the stories, but I couldn't bind them together with meaning, give them definition, or bring them into myself. There was no gevurah.

So I started to study, and an interesting thing happened. The more I learned the more I wanted to know. I always tell my graduate students that if they leave my class with more questions than when they walked in the door, the class was successful. Learning is not about answers, it is about exploring at a deeper level.

So there I was diving deep into those now connected pools of knowledge, asking more questions and searching for more answers.... having a wildly good time doing it....when I realized that some answers can only be found in the practice. Jewish thought does not exist in a vacuum. Rather it exists, unfolds and expands in the

world of doing. There are things that we can never learn from a book, things we can only learn from experience.

Let me give you an example. I love to sail and could read books all day about handling the helm, adjusting the sheets, how to tack, or how to sail on a close reach, and so on. But until I am in the boat dealing with capricious winds and rhythmic waves, all of that is abstract information. More importantly there is a point-of-view that I have from the middle of Lake Dillon, or off the California coast that I can never have except from the deck of a ship. There are sounds I will never hear, rhythms I will never feel and stories I will never understand, unless I put my learning into practice.

The same is true of Jewish study. Without lighting Shabbat candles I can never really know the peace of Shabbat. Until I engage in the discipline of regular davaning, I will never understand the meaning of the prayers or build an intimate relationship with G-d. Building and deepening my practice, whatever that means on an individual level, is a pathway to chochma, deeper wisdom and learning.

There are many ways that to deepen this study and practice at CBE. There are study groups on Shabbat morning, the Mussar study group, and an adult Bnei Mitzvah class starting in October. There is the dvar Torah that Joanne puts in the newsletter every month, as well as the message from Reb Jamie. Learning and practice opportunities abound, it is up to me, to us, to engage in them.

I wanted to end with a Hassidic story, but in the interest of time decided to use a short quote from the Baal Shem Tov instead.

“Everyone is unique. Compare not yourself with anyone else lest you spoil God's curriculum.”

Which means what? It means that G-d has a plan for our learning, and it does not include grades or certificates or degrees. It is about our own path, our own choices. If I may paraphrase another of the Baal Shem's quotes, learning is an opportunity to “let a spark of the holy fire burn within you, so that you may fan it into a flame.”

L'Shana Tova

