

A Daf a Day, in Quarantine

By Jesse Bernstein (<https://www.jewishexponent.com/author/jberbstein/>) - May 8, 2020



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South Philadelphia Shtiebel's Rabbanit Dasi Fruchter

(<https://www.jewishexponent.com/2019/02/07/south-philadelphia-shtiebel/>) and a coterie of students — numbering more than a basketball team, but fewer than a minyan — connected via Zoom on April 30 for their *daf yomi* study, as they have for the duration of quarantine.

Fruchter and her students had to clear up some old business involving Rebbe Elazar ben Arayza and a cow before they could begin the day's Talmud study, which concerned the question of one's responsibility for the sins of their community. Suffice it to say, there was much to discuss.

Fruchter and her group have met daily via Zoom to continue their *daf yomi* study, a practice that many of the students began in earnest in the last year. Though online learning and teaching can be taxing, according to Fruchter, her group is not alone in continuing *daf yomi* study during uncertain times.

"There was no question in my mind that this class would continue," Fruchter said.

In January, Jews the world over celebrated the beginning of a new *daf yomi* cycle, the daily (*yomi*) study of a page (*daf*) of Talmud. The full text fills a little more than 2,700 pages. At a page a day, that's a little over 7½ years from start to finish, at which point, you begin again. It's a daunting commitment, even in calmer times. And yet, for relatively new learners like Debbie Albert, *daf yomi* can give shape to shapeless quarantine days.

Albert, who owns a strategic communications firm and serves as president of the Ramah in the Poconos board of directors, had been familiar with the concept of *daf yomi* study for years. She credits a memoir of *daf yomi* study called "If All the Seas Were Ink" with solidifying her growing interest in finally taking the plunge, which she did in January.

Each day, for the first few months of the new cycle, Albert found the time to study a page on her own, leaning on *daf* summaries and analysis sent out by the national Ramah organization, MyJewishLearning and a daily podcast from Tablet, an online Jewish magazine.

Early on in quarantine, Albert, who lives in Dresher, sat down on a Sunday afternoon, girding herself to catch up on the three days of *dafs* that she had missed. Rather than feeling like she was completing a chore, Albert said, she felt like she was "coming home."

"It felt warm and familiar and inviting," she said.

Nachi Ward, of Merion Station, said the difference between in-person *daf yomi* study and the current Zoom-based reality is like that between a live concert and listening to music through headphones. Ward had taught the Thursday class at Lower Merion Synagogue, covering the day's *daf* and half of the Friday one, too. He's continued

with his class, and though the experience has changed — “There’s nothing like in-person,” he said — important aspects remain static.

“The text is obviously the text,” Ward said.

According to Fruchter, daf yomi has been “a pillar of the Shtiebel’s operations” since October, when she launched the Greater Philadelphia Women’s Talmud Project with a grant from The Covenant Foundation. Her class started with Niddah, the *masechet*, or tractate, that covers questions relating to a woman’s reproductive cycle.

Some of her students are local, and some are from far off, Fruchter said, but they’re united in their dedication to a daily routine of Talmud study.

“It’s been a big part of what it means to have ongoing and regular learning that you just show up to, no matter what,” she said.

“It’s incredible, really,” Albert said. “I love it.”

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