

Take 5 Minutes Each Day To Deepen Your Jewish Knowledge
Rosh HaShanah 5780
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Shanah Tovah!

Let's begin the new year with a joke:

There was a man named Sidney who called the rabbi the day before Rosh HaShanah. He said, "Rabbi, I know tomorrow is Rosh HaShanah, but it's also the date of baseball's Wild Card Playoff Game. I've been a baseball fan as long as I've been a Jew. I have to watch the game on TV.

The rabbi answered, "Sidney, that's what DVR recorders are for."
Sidney paused, surprised. "You mean I can tape Rosh HaShanah services?"

No, Sidney. There's no taping services here. But you can and should use your technology to deepen your Jewish connection. Today I want to show you that the Jewish knowledge you always sought is more accessible than ever before.

Let's begin with some facts:

Fact: Many of us as children did not have the Jewish education we wished we had attained.

Fact: With your computer and smartphone - and the classic library if you prefer - you can access an unprecedented library of essays, lectures, podcasts, books, and videos on Jewish subjects, many of them for free.

Fact: Spending five minutes every day on a single task will make a profound and lasting impact on you. It sure did on me.

Today I want to make the case that each of you take five minutes every day to learn something new about the Jewish tradition or Israel. You pick the topic, you pick the media, you pick the teacher, and you *will* acquire the Jewish knowledge you actually seek as an adult.

Let me tell you a story about myself: I was a student at Wash U and attending some after-hours Torah study class with a rabbi. I remember that one day he said the Torah can be learned in just five minutes a day.

Wait, that's it? Just five minutes a day? This was a huge paradigm shift for me. I had wanted to read the whole Torah but assumed I needed a large block of time. In college I didn't have that. But I did have five minutes.

So I started a routine my sophomore year living in my dorm on the South 40. Every night right before bed I pulled out my Humash and read one Aliyah of Parshat HaShavua, the weekly Torah

reading. That's it. I first read it in English. And in one year I actually read the whole Torah, because there are seven Aliyot in the weekly Parsha reading and seven days in the week. By carving out just five minutes and making it a habit, I discovered that the Torah is accessible and attainable.

Maybe that's what Shammai had in mind 2000 years ago when he said, in Pirkei Avot, "*Aseh Torat'cha Keva* (Avot 1:15). Make your Torah study a regular habit."

I now want to share a note and a disclaimer. The note: I don't share this story to show off but rather to demonstrate that I've actually done what I'm encouraging you to do. And my disclaimer: Don't worry, when you set aside 5 minutes a day, you won't turn into a rabbi! You'll turn into a Jew who knows what you always wanted to know about being Jewish. Period.

Why should you care about deepening your Jewish knowledge? We must *know* our story in order to *tell* our story. And we must tell our Jewish story to our children *and to ourselves* in order to ensure the legacy and vitality of the Jewish People.

Your nuclear family has a story. Think of where your parents and grandparents grew up and what they experienced. And how it shaped who you are in major ways. And how you are a part of their story too. And how it is ongoing. Each of you is anchored to your family story.

All of us here are part of the same family, the Jewish family. Together, we have our own shared story. A magnificent story filled with ups and downs, laughter and tears, triumph and sacrifice, and success against all odds. Our Jewish family has a sensational story, and it is ongoing. It bursts with life and creativity, and we all are part of it. We connect ourselves to our people through this story. But we can only connect to this story when we know our story. So let's discover and rediscover our story.

What more do *you* want to know about being Jewish? I'm speaking to everyone here, whether you are a Jewish learning beginner or veteran. Just like there is at least one book in every library that interests you; just as there is at least one ice cream flavor at Graeter's Ice Cream that calls your name - yeah, it started in my hometown Cincinnati; you're welcome, Chicago - there is at least one subject connected to being Jewish that interests *you*. Hopefully more.

Some of you might want to learn classic subjects about our religion, like Torah, Talmud, the Jewish Holidays, theology, and Jewish Law. Others of you would rather deepen your knowledge about our people more than our faith: Jewish History, the Holocaust, History of Israel, Israeli culture, Modern Hebrew. *All* these subjects are important as *all* of these touch on the Jewish experience. Or maybe it's something I didn't mention here. That's OK, these are just examples. The important thing is that *you* decide what to learn about.

One of the core tenets of Judaism is that studying is a quintessentially Jewish experience. It can be a spiritual experience: Torah study is a way of encountering G-d. The task of Torah and Talmud study is not to memorize information but rather to interpret and add our voices to timeless conversations. Also, throughout Jewish history, non-religious Jews and families too

placed a premium on general education. The desire to learn about the world is in our Jewish DNA.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks sums it up wonderfully. He writes: “To defend a country, you need an army. But to defend a free society, you need schools. So Jews became the people whose passion was education, whose citadels were schools and whose heroes were teachers.”

(By the way, if you like this, you too can subscribe to his free weekly Dvar Torah by email.)

Let me now open up four doors into this amazing world of Jewish knowledge and creativity. Don't worry about remembering all of them, as I made a list of recommendations you can pick up on your way out today. I'll also send it out in next Thursday's Beth El email. Many of these learning opportunities utilize the best of today's technology.

Here's the first door: Say you want to know what happens the weekly Torah reading. Wouldn't it be nice if there were a video that told you the highlights of the Parsha? In five minutes? Well, you're in luck because I am producing this video series.

The collection is called Five in Five: the Five Books of Moses in Five Minutes. These days I am teaching about the fall holidays. In a few weeks I'll switch to the Torah readings beginning with the very beginning, *Breishit*. Each video begins with the Top Five, where I recap the basics of the Parsha into five bullet points. Then we do the Deep Dive, where I take one verse, share a commentary ranging from ancient to contemporary Israeli, and connect it to today. All in under five minutes.

Where can you find such a video series? Netflix? Amazon? No and no. Hulu? Uh uh. E.S.P.N. Plus? N.O. One media giant outbid all these others: nssbethel.org! Look for these Five in Five videos in the Beth El Thursday email, the shul website, or the Beth El Facebook page.

I know I'm asking you to step up your learning. So this is my way of stepping up my teaching. Let's do it together.

By the way, there is plenty more terrific Jewish content on internet videos. So consider taking your five minutes watching videos on your computer or phone, possibly during a work break.

The second door: Consider podcasts. There's an awesome podcast series called Responsa Radio. It asks and answers questions of Jewish Law in 2019. Rabbi Ethan Tucker of Hadar really shines when he answers questions like: Can non-profits accept money from crooks? Or, what do I do if my relative insists on being cremated? This is Halacha, Jewish Law, at its best, responding to the real needs of real people in real life. Consider taking your five minutes listening to this podcast - or another - in the car or on the computer.

The third door: Say you want to know more about Israel, the spectacular start-up project of Jewish self-determination. If you want to learn more about Israel's *past*, check out its history. My favorite is a book by Daniel Gordis called Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn. It

balances nicely the politics and battles with culture and literature. This is a great option if you prefer to take your five minutes with a book rather than a screen.

Buy this book - or another Jewish one of your choice - and leave it on your nightstand to read before bed for 5 minutes.

If you want to stay more current on Israel's *present*, check out the Israel news for 5 minutes each day as part of your computer routine. Times of Israel.com is a fantastic place to start.

And the fourth door: Say you want to read or speak Hebrew. Maybe it's to better understand the words in our prayerbook, or to talk to Israelis. Or maybe it's to better understand Israeli TV shows you can now watch on Amazon and Netflix, like Shtisel. *Shkoiyach!* Consider a Hebrew language training program, like Ulpan Or.

Those are four doors that open into the vault of Jewish learning and knowledge, but they're not the only portals. Let's say you want to learn *something* but aren't sure where to begin. First, you can always ask me. Checking out Beth El's library is another place to start. Or browsing a terrific website called myjewishlearning.com. Or try leafing through a book by Joseph Telushkin, who writes fantastic compendiums like [Jewish Wisdom](#) and [Jewish Literacy](#). It doesn't matter exactly where you start, so long as you take that first step and set your five minutes.

This project is as easy and as difficult as anchoring these five minutes into a *Zman Kavua* every day.

This is a great Hebrew expression to know, *Zman Kavua*. It means a fixed time. Something that always happens at that time. Like I have a *Zman Kavua* for a snack, at 3 PM. Wherever I am, whatever I'm doing, I'm grabbing a Costco trail mix and Lara Bar at 3 PM. Nothing can stop me...except Yom Kippur.

That's the attitude the Jewish Tradition wants us to have about learning. Nothing can stop us. We have to make our *Zman Kavua* a habit, part of the daily routine.

When we make something a habit, we show it's a priority. But if we just try to fit it in, we know it's not. Consider going to the gym. When I was in the mode of, "I'll go to the gym if I have time," I made it... sometimes. But when I put it in my calendar and worked around that workout schedule, I made it to the gym a whole lot more. I bet that's true for many of us. That 5 minute *Zman Kavua* must be anchored.

The Talmud also shares this wisdom. The Rabbis imagine that G-d asks us six questions when we reach Heaven. The second question is, "*Kavata Itim LTorah? Did you fix times for Torah study?*" (Shabbat 31a). Note that the question isn't "How much Torah did you study?" Or "Did you study a lot?" The question is, Did you fix times for Torah study? And one day I'll give my honest answer, "5 minutes a day." And I'll be proud of it. Because while five minutes in a given day is nothing, five minutes every day for all these years is significant.

While the Talmud imagines Torah as being classic Torah, I want to broaden it to Jewish knowledge in general.

You pick the time for your *Zman Kavua*: maybe it's in the morning as you first turn on the computer. Maybe it's during lunch or a snack or work break. Possibly it's what you listen to in the car. Or maybe it's before bed, which is what I do. *You* pick the time, but make it stick every day. Then your five minutes will add up into a life-enriching experience. You will know our story and feel connected to our story.

Here's a classic story from the Talmud about how something as insignificant as a drop of water can make a huge impact over time. There was once a man named Akiva. Not Akiva Shtisel, just plain Akiva. He was a shepherd who at 40 years old didn't know the letters of the Hebrew Aleph Bet. One day he was with his flock by a brook and noticed something really odd. There was a giant stone that had been completely hollowed out by water. Not by the crash of a waterfall but the slow drip-drop-drip-drop of single drops of water. This one encounter motivated him to begin studying Judaism at age 40, and he went on to become the legendary teacher and sage, Rabbi Akiva.

What was it about that water? I believe he saw these drops and internalized that these small, singular drops possessed colossal strength over a long period of time. Enough to cut through rock. Rabbi Akiva understood that the soft drops of Jewish learning would eventually penetrate his heart, and that it wasn't too late to begin learning as an adult.

Rabbi Akiva is a wonderful paradigm for us. Whether we are 40 years old, younger or older, now, this year of 5780, is the perfect time to begin, resume, or enhance our Jewish learning. Just as single drops of water carve through rock, five minutes every day can also make an indelible impression on our hearts and in our lives. Make *our* story a bigger part of *your* story.

You pick the time for your 5 minute *Zman Kavua*. You pick the topic. You pick the media. You pick the teacher (I'm here to help too with my 5 in 5 videos and in person). And you *will* attain the Jewish knowledge you seek as an adult.

We must know our story in order to tell our story. Consider this final thought from an iconic American Jewish storyteller, Ira Glass. He says, "Great stories happen to those who can tell them."

Shanah Tovah!