

REVIEW ESSAY

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LERNEN WITHOUT LEARNING?*

Samuel Heilman, Professor of Sociology at Queens College, specializes in ethnography. Rather than designing and evaluating questionnaires, or engaging in sociological theory, an ethnographer describes what he sees, trying to fathom what is “really” going on. By acting as a participant-observer within the group he wishes to study, he becomes enough of an insider to gain acceptance by the group, yet remains detached enough to sustain the degree of objectivity needed for scholarly work. A skilled ethnographer can perceive the seemingly meaningless detail that is, indeed, full of meaning. In Heilman’s words, he “tries by way of deduction, generalization, extrapolation, supposition, intuition, imagination, and observation to draw large conclusions about culture, society, or religion from small but very densely textured facts.”

Having already published a deservedly acclaimed book on the modern Orthodox synagogue (*Synagogue Life* [University of Chicago Press, 1976]), Professor Heilman in *People of the Book* applies the ethnographic technique to groups of Jews who regularly gather to study Torah. He does not study the yeshiva, but rather the adult Talmud study circle—the *hevra shas*. At first glance this seems an odd choice. In our day a resurgent Orthodoxy and a growing *baal teshuva* movement have helped make the yeshiva the central educational force in Orthodox life. In contrast, one wonders, in opening Heilman’s book, what there could be of interest to say about Jews who meet a few evenings a week to study Talmud. But *The People of the Book*

**The People of the Book: Drama, Fellowship, and Religion* by Samuel C. Heilman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

shows that there is indeed much to say about these groups. Heilman's sharp eye and clear style bring them to life for the reader, while his analytical skill raises a number of implications for Orthodoxy and for the broader Jewish community which, unfortunately, he does not consider in the depth they deserve.

Heilman participated in six different study groups, one in his American home town, and the other five in Israel, where he spent a sabbatical year. Since Heilman had studied Talmud previously, and the groups are open to virtually all comers, he had no trouble gaining acceptance, despite his ubiquitous tape recorder. In choosing which circles to join, Heilman sought out groups representative of the various cultural alternatives on the Orthodox continuum, the better to measure both the similarities among and the differences between them. For good measure, he attended Talmud classes at the Jerusalem Social Club in order to see what happens to *lernen* when it is divorced from the ambience of the traditional *hevra shas*.

The book is organized by topics, the same material being presented from six different perspectives. The chapters deal with Talmud study as a social drama where we see participants vie for power and prestige; a cultural performance in which the *lerner* acts out his Jewishness by speaking the words of the Talmud as if they were his own; a kind of play in which each "actor" strives to get his lines right: a language game where every linguistic nuance betrays cultural facts about the speaker; an opportunity for good fellowship, without which *lernen* would peter out; and an expression of the religious imperative of study as fulfillment of God's will. Each chapter contains vivid descriptions and verbatim transcripts of what went on in the different study groups, and a final chapter sums everything up with a charming depiction of three *siyyumim* Heilman witnessed in the course of his research.

Yet *The People of the Book* is far more than the sum of its chapters, for Heilman has a message to give us. The overriding theme is that this sort of adult Jewish education works. Without the benefit of modern educational techniques, without gimmicks or even lesson plans, the traditional *hevra shas* fulfills the Jewish needs of the participants. It provides warm fellowship, the chance to act out Jewishness and express their feelings about it, the opportunity to speak the "language of *lernen*," the satisfaction that comes from doing God's work. These people feel good about being Jewish. One of the photographs reproduced in the book is worth the proverbial thousand words. It shows a grinning Jew with luxuriant mustache who appears to be in a state of euphoria. The caption gets Heilman's message across: "The satisfied look of a man who has just returned from a *siyum*, sated with his *lernen*."

Granted that Heilman makes a great contribution to our understanding of the dynamics of group Talmud study, a puzzling paradox nevertheless lies at the heart of *The People of the Book*. The author is presenting Talmudic learning, that most intellectually demanding branch of Jewish scholarship, in a most positive light, using all the sophisticated social science tools at his disposal. And yet the book promotes a deeply anti-intellectual point of view in two important ways.

First, one does not have to be an unreconstructed *Litvak* to appreciate that traditional Jewish learning emphasizes cognitive understanding above all else. Though Heilman tells us all about the social, psychological, linguistic and religious benefits of the *hevra shas*, should he not also let the reader know how the study circle makes participants more knowledgeable Jews? Not only does the author not treat the *hevra shas* from this angle, but he even downgrades explicitly the importance of *lernen's* intellectual component. "Many of those I watched," he notes, "had been *lernen* for years but seemed still unable to review the texts on their own, or recall very much of the content in front of them." This does not lessen his admiration, though, since he believes that Jewish study is effective even in the absence of comprehension! Heilman writes: "Its sound, format, the resulting communion with others and the implicit attachment to Judaism it generates takes religious precedence over comprehension." Incredibly, he considers the search for "novelty and intellectual development" alien to traditional *lernen*. and consigns it to the university classroom.

A second sense in which the book fails to confront intellectual issues is Heilman's treatment of the dissonance between the presuppositions of the Talmudic mind and those of modernity. To be sure, the book is dotted with repeated outbreaks of the conflict, and, as an ethnographer, the author shows how the discrepancies get more jarring in those study circles most attuned to modern ways. He cites two ways in which the problem was handled. Either the participant simply imagined himself back into the intellectually untroubled past (i.e., he made believe he was a priest in Temple times arranging sacrifices) or else he interpreted the old texts in contemporary terms (i.e. the first-century Zealots were equivalent to the Jewish Defense League).

Yet the examples Heilman provides of this cultural dissonance give little hope of achieving any solutions. On the contrary, they leave us with ongoing tension that looks unresolvable. He recalls his own difficulties: "In order to share in the feelings of moral fellowship, I found myself during the *shiur* tacitly accepting premises—that women, for example, are in the same legal status as slaves and cattle, or that it is important to know the precise order of the priestly sacrifices at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, or that divine voices can be heard

descending from heaven in order to engage in Talmudic disputation—which were at odds with my contemporary ideals and emotionally distant from my modern consciousness.” The pull of the learning experience was so strong, he tells us, that these Talmudic assumptions became his during the sessions. But what is the long-term result? Heilman implies that Judaism calls on man to set aside twentieth-century sensibilities while *lernen*, and allows him to reassume them when the class ends. Granted, many Orthodox Jews live this kind of intellectual double life. Yet surely there are other possibilities.

The problem of cultural contradiction, ticking away like a time bomb throughout this book, finally seems about to explode in the last chapter. One of the study groups reaches the famous *agada* about the “*salamandra*,” a being that cannot be destroyed by fire, because, explains Rashi, it is created out of a fire that has burned for seven years. Heilman records the expressions of disbelief voiced by the participants, and the rabbis scornful response that “anyone who learns *gemore* knows of this creature.” The *lerner*s then back off to avoid a cultural clash, assuming, according to Heilman, that “this is apparently not the place or time for a theological debate about miracles.” But a book about *lernen* should definitely be the place for a serious discussion of the tension evident here. This the author does not provide.

Several factors may explain Heilman’s neglect of the cognitive side of Talmud study and his reluctance to analyze contemporary challenges to Talmudic assumptions. The author admits that in his youth he never enjoyed the study of Talmud, and today is far from proficient in it. Such a participant-observer is virtually bound to emphasize the affective rather than the intellectual side of *lernen*. This biographical fact would also explain Heilman’s decision to study the avocational *hevra shas* rather than the *yeshiva*, which presumably provides a more intellectually demanding kind of study. On a deeper level, though, one gets the sense that ethnographic methodology simply cannot do justice to intellectual constructs. By affording detailed but narrowly focused attention to actions, gestures, words, intonations and interactions, the ethnographer can have little to say about ideas. In Heilman’s study circles, then, what counts is that the participants are happy to be doing a Jewish “thing.” It becomes irrelevant to inquire whether they are learning anything substantive or whether their exertions promote or clarify theological confusion.

The emphasis on non-cognitive Jewish experience in *People of the Book* also stems from the cultural climate. The contemporary movement toward greater Jewish traditionalism, whatever its undeniable contributions, can hardly be described as a triumph of Jewish intellectuality, even though more people are studying Jewish texts. Rather, many of those attracted to the tradition are seeking a hasidic-

style emotionalism, a way of denying modern culture, or an opportunity for immersion in an alternative life-style that evokes Jewish “authenticity.” This has begun seriously to effect Jewish education, as both day schools and supplementary schools move toward a stress on warm Jewish feelings at the expense of cognitive Jewish knowledge. Heilman’s book, then, partakes of the *zeitgeist*: the Talmud study circle, he writes, succeeds by creating “another world to live in,” one radically different from that of the nine-to-five job.

The psychological benefits of “another world to live in” are undeniable. But it is doubtful, to say the least, that this is what *Talmud Torah* has meant historically, and whether the process of *lernen* oneself into “another world” a few nights a week is likely to provide the tools necessary to confront the intellectual and spiritual problems posed by the *real* world Jews live in.

CORRIGENDA

In the Summer 1983 issue (vol. 21, no. 2), the last to be published by Human Sciences Press, the following omissions unfortunately occurred. The Table of Contents, under Communications, omitted the names of Rabbi Louis Isbee and Rabbi Aaron Reichel. Rabbi Isbee's name was also left out of the text on p. 180. In addition, the following biographies were missing:

JUDAH DICK is an ordained rabbi and a practicing attorney. He is also a founding member of COLPA.

NAOMI Y. ENGLARD-SCHAFFER is a doctoral candidate in Talmud at Yeshiva University and is currently teaching at Bar-Ilan University.

DR. AARON RABINOWITZ is a member of the faculty of the Department of Psychology at Bar-Ilan University.

DR. DAVID SCHNALL is a Professor of Health and Public Policy at the C. W. Post Center of Long Island University. He has written several books on current Israeli politics.

DR. HILLEL GOLDBERG has lectured and written widely on Jewish Philosophy. He is Senior Editor of the *Intermountain Jewish News* in Denver, Colorado, and is also a member of our Editorial Board.