Talmudic Logic: Thoughts on Parashat Tazria

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Tazria

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Question: why do Jews answer a question with another question?

Answer: why shouldn't Jews answer a question with another question?

There's something about the Jewish mystique that likes questions. Every question seems to generate another question; every answer engenders another question. How did we get to be so question-oriented?

One answer might be our long history of Talmud study. The Talmud is a veritable treasure house of questions. It analyzes every statement from different angles. It asks: why does the text use this word, but not that word? What are the implications? Why did this rabbi hold that opinion and why did the other rabbi disagree? Does the statement in one place contradict a statement in another place? How can we resolve the contradictions?

Some years ago, the Israeli newspaper, Yediot Aharonot, discussed a fascinating phenomenon in South Korea, the home of nearly 50 million people. Intellectual leaders in South Korea wondered why Jews have excelled so incredibly--winning a high proportion of Nobel Prizes, major national and international awards in the sciences, math, literature, medicine etc. They concluded that the secret of the Jewish "genius" is the Talmud! Because Jews study Talmud, they become analytical, logical, and they ask a lot of questions. They search for truth, and analyze every detail along the way.

The Talmud has been translated into Korean, and thousands of South Korean children are now studying Talmud. Many Korean homes reportedly have sets of Talmud, so that adults can study along with their children.

While I am all in favor of Talmud study and I agree that this study is intellectually enriching, I think Talmud study in itself will not generate more Nobel Prize

winners for South Korea, or Israel or anywhere else. First, one can sharpen analytic skills by studying math or logic or analytical philosophy. Second, many Jewish "geniuses" who have made impressive intellectual achievements have never opened a volume of Talmud in their lives!

It is not the Talmud itself that can make us wise; but the "Talmudic method" that is the key. Over the centuries, this method of asking questions, and more questions, and then more questions--has become ingrained in the Jewish psyche. Whether or not a Jew has studied Talmud, the Talmudic method is the tradition which he/she has inherited from parents, grandparents etc. This method is applied to all areas of intellectual inquiry, and this method reaps vast results.

The "Talmudic method" goes further than logical analysis of data and opinions. One of the six divisions of the Talmud is Toharoth--dealing with laws relating to ritual purity and impurity, including, for example, topics in this week's Torah portion. Ritual purity and impurity can not be detected in a microscope, and are not derivable by logic or math. They relate to another dimension of reality, a dimension that transcends what we see and what we can quantify. They are intellectual abstractions.

Thus, the Talmudic method--and the Torah itself--pushes us to think beyond the obvious. It teaches us to consider abstract concepts that reflect different dimensions of reality. In studying the laws of ritual purity, we enter a different zone of awareness and sensitivity. Although these laws seem so strange to many moderns, they actually are important elements in the development of the "Jewish mystique". They teach us to look beyond the apparent, to imagine different realities, to envision things that can't be seen with our eyes.

I am not sure if the South Koreans will plumb the depths of the Talmudic method; but it is to their credit that they are trying.

Question: Should we Jews devote more time and energy to studying Talmud and teaching it to our children?

Answer: Shouldn't we be at least as interested in Talmud as the South Koreans?
Angel for Shabbat