

Learning to live wisely together: Talmud Torah *keneged kulam*, lifelong learning, and your Jewish identity

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Talmud Torah *Keneged Kulam*: Lifelong Learning as the Heart of Jewish Growth

There is a famous line in the Mishnah (Peah 1:1) that lists the great *mitzvot* - honoring parents, acts of kindness, hospitality, visiting the sick, bringing peace between people - and concludes with a surprising claim: "Talmud Torah *keneged kulam*" - the study of Torah is equal to them all.

At first glance, this seems puzzling. How can study outweigh deeds of compassion, justice, and care? The rabbis explain that Torah study is not an escape from life, but the very practice that shapes all other *mitzvot*. Learning is what refines our vision, deepens our empathy, and equips us to act with wisdom. In other words, study is not the opposite of doing - it is the wellspring of doing.

Lifelong Learning as Inclusive Growth

One of the most radical aspects of Jewish tradition is that learning is not reserved for the elite. From the youngest child reciting Shema to the elder poring over a verse of Psalms, every Jew is invited into the circle of study. Unlike wealth, status, or physical strength, learning is available to all who are willing to listen, question, and wrestle with the text.

This makes lifelong learning the most inclusive path of Jewish identity. It does not depend on where you were born, how fluent your Hebrew is, or whether you can fast on Yom Kippur. It depends only on curiosity and openness. When we gather to learn, we sit as equals before the text - elders and teens, scholars and beginners, those who come with faith and those who come with doubt.

And as we age, learning becomes not only inclusive but also transformative. Psychologists speak of "wise aging" as the art of integrating experience, loss, and hope into a deeper sense of self. Torah study is one of Judaism's greatest tools for this work. Each time we return to a familiar verse, it meets us differently. The text has not changed, but we have.

Qohelet in the Sukkah: Fragility and Joy

This fall, our community will gather in the sukkah to study Qohelet (Ecclesiastes). There could hardly be a more fitting setting. The sukkah itself is fragile, temporary, open to the wind and rain. Qohelet too confronts us with impermanence: "*Hevel havalim, vanity of vanities, all is fleeting.*"

Yet within that fragility, Qohelet also urges us to embrace joy: "Eat your bread with gladness, drink your wine with a merry heart." To study this text in the sukkah is to practice wise aging together - to acknowledge life's limits while savoring its gifts. It is

to learn that wisdom is not about denying mortality, but about living fully in its light.

Eshet Hayil: The Quest for Wisdom

Later this season, we will turn to *Eshet Hayil* (Proverbs 31), the poem traditionally sung on Friday nights. Too often it is read narrowly as a tribute to the "woman of valor" in the household. But the rabbis also understood *Eshet Hayil* as an allegory for Torah itself, for Wisdom personified.

In this reading, the "woman of valor" is not only a spouse, but the embodiment of a life lived in pursuit of wisdom - resilient, creative, generous, and strong. To study *Eshet Hayil* is to ask: what does it mean to live wisely, to build a life of integrity and care? How do we honor the wisdom of our ancestors while also cultivating our own?

Why Study Together

When we gather for these classes, we are not only learning texts. We are practicing community. Each voice adds a layer of meaning. Each question opens a new doorway. In a world that often prizes speed and certainty, Torah study invites us to slow down, to dwell in complexity, and to honor multiple truths.

This is why the rabbis insisted that Talmud Torah is equal to them all. Because study is not just about knowledge - it is about shaping the kind of people and communities we become. It is about cultivating humility, resilience, and joy. It is about learning how to live wisely, at every stage of life.

An Invitation

As the High Holiday season flows into Sukkot and beyond, I invite you to join us in the sukkah for Qohelet and later in our study of *Eshet Hayil*. Come with your questions, your stories, your laughter, and your doubts. Whether you are a seasoned learner or opening the text for the first time, your presence enriches us all.

Together, let us embody the truth of Talmud Torah *keneged kulam*: that study is not a luxury, but the beating heart of Jewish life, the most inclusive and transformative practice we share, and the path toward wise aging and enduring joy.

