

## **My Chavruta with President Obama**

One week ago the President of the United States visited Congregation Adas Israel in Washington, D.C. to give a speech.

That is not what I am going to talk about.

Rather, it is what happened before the speech, in a part of the synagogue that is known as a "Beit Midrash," the Hebrew term for a "House of Study." The Beit Midrash is the place where, in antiquity, the rabbis met, with their students, and with each other, to parse over Jewish text, to do what is known as "pil-pul", to extract from Torah as much meaning and understanding as possible.

Over time, in our American synagogues, we have created spaces for study. At ICM, this includes, of course, the Doris Bass Memorial Library, the tables right next to where you are sitting, and, in a new twist, a table in the social hall back by the doors where we do our weekly "Come as You Are." For our community, our Beit Midrash encompasses much of our building. And in our study, we often use a concept known as "chevruta"--studying with a partner. This is part of the power of what makes looking at Jewish texts--from antiquity and today--compelling.

So back to DC.

When Rabbi Gil Steinlauf, the senior rabbi was asked by the president "Is there a requirement or expectation that the adults come here and study as well?" Rabbi Steinlauf thought to himself: "dayeinu"--"it would have been enough," if the President of the United States came to visit his synagogue, as he did last Friday.

What Rabbi Steinlauf never anticipated was to have the chance to be in chavruta, in a moment of a Torah-study partnership, with the President.

He wrote beautifully about it--and tonight I am going to share with you Rabbi Steinlauf's eloquence about the power of learning together, in a true I-Thou relationship.

Rabbi Steinlauf explained as they entered that a Beit Midrash is a place where people come to study Torah in chavruta in a very special relationship and dthat when Martin Buber wrote I and Thou, Buber's reference to seeing the sacred in another human being, in true relationship, was based in the traditional Jewish idea of chavruta.

He further explained to the President that we are doing something special at Adas Achim in taking the traditional I-Thou relationship of chavruta and bringing it into 21st-century discourse in their Beit Midrash.

They don't just study the Talmud and other classical Jewish texts in the traditional format. Rather, they create formats for people to encounter, to argue, to dissect, and expound upon core Jewish texts and ideas. The goal of today's chevruva is not simply book-learning, but making personal meaning, and coming into true dialogue as Jews about what it means to be fully human, moral and just.

At this point in their conversation, the President and Rabbi Steinlauf were standing in front of the Amud (lectern) at the Eastern Wall of the Beit Midrash. The rabbi opened a Sefer Torah (a Torah scroll), and pointed out to him last week's Torah-portion, Bamidbar, the very beginning of the Book of Numbers, and explained that Jews everywhere in the world were all reading this section of the Torah together. And it was here, at the Torah, that he writes that their real chavruta began.

The President asked Rabbi Steinlauf to elaborate on the concept of chavruta. He asked, is it obligatory? The rabbi explained that the value of Torah-study is considered the most basic and essential Jewish act, that we must go back to our core narrative and classical texts to ground us in our values, and to guide us in our choices. Obama was fascinated by the idea of study as an obligation. "So," he asked, "I know that your children have to come to Hebrew School and study. What about the adults? Is there a requirement or expectation that the adults come here and study as well?" (Inwardly Rabbi Steinlauf thought *halevai* — "would that it could be" — that all our adults would come and study all the time.)

His answer: "In our times, it's difficult to bring many people to Torah by holding an obligation and expectation over them in a hierarchical way. Instead think about the metaphor of this moment: we are standing here, and the Torah is in front of us, and it is literally an open book. And here, now, we are in chavruta. In the immediacy of relationship, with the Torah literally before us, we are seeking a deeper understanding together. This is our goal for our Beit Midrash. Both literally and metaphorically, our job is to open up the books, the texts, the ideas, and the values for people so that together we can learn them, question them, challenge them and each other. And then it is up to us to find how our discourse motivates us to live our lives more fully and deeply."

So what happens with those ideas that you generate together, Obama asked? Rabbi Steinlauf answered by explaining that the power of chavruta lies in its ability to be at the nexus of ideas and action. “I know that you already know well the power of the ‘One-on-One’ to connect people and motivate them to action through responsibility one to the other.” He smiled and nodded enthusiastically. “That’s chavruta. Only in chavruta, our responsibility to act is reinforced not only through our shared partnership, but also in our shared connection to our sacred texts, our shared history and values, and in our shared relationship to our God who exhorts us to justice.”

The president thanked the rabbi warmly for this brief discussion. Dayeinu, it would have been enough to have had this incredible conversation with the President. But then in his speech, the President made the following remarks:

“Before I came out here, the rabbi showed me the room that’s been built to promote scholarship and dialogue, and to be able to find how we make our shared values live. And the reason you have that room is because applying those values to our lives is often hard, and it involves difficult choices. That’s why we study. That’s why it’s not just a formula. And that’s what we have to do as nations as well as individuals. We have to grapple and struggle with how do we apply the values that we care about to this very challenging and dangerous world.”

In reflecting on this experience, Rabbi Steinlauf wrote: “In that moment, the President’s visit to Adas Israel become not only historic, but sacred. When the President of the United States sees the potential for justice and peacemaking in the very technology of Judaism and chavruta, then we truly know that there is indeed great hope for the Jewish people, for Israel, and for the world.”

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