

The Jewish ‘Newsroom’

Teasing out the connections (and disconnects) between journalism and Judaism in a noisy beit midrash.

01/06/16 | Ari L. Goldman | [Special To The Jewish Week](#)



The author (center in inset) pores over a Talmudic text in a high-decibel yeshiva study hall. Photos by Menachem Butler

At first I could not take the noise. Arguments, debates, shouting, pounding on the table and the special singsong pattern of speech unique to Talmud study.

I was in the crowded beit midrash, the study hall, of an annual two-day gathering called a Yarchei Kallah sponsored by Beth Medrash Govoha of Lakewood, N.J. The noise was so deafening that I had trouble hearing my study partner, Rabbi Moshe Rockove, who sat just across the narrow table from me.

After almost an hour of this, I told Rockove that I had enough and suggested that we move to the lobby or find a quiet room to continue our study.

But he urged me not to move. “Think of this as a newsroom on deadline,” he told me. “Here someone is debating a lead, there someone is suggesting a new headline and here comes a reporter with a story. It’s a form of organized chaos.”

I have spent years working in newsrooms and less time in study halls, but I never before saw the connections between the two.

Both were, to be sure, noisy places, but also places full of energy, creativity and intensity where people found a shared purpose.

I persevered through the noise and lasted another day and a half in the beit midrash.

Over my career, I have often considered the connections between journalism and Judaism. I think of the journalistic impulse to document events and how our tradition has kept scrupulous accounts of Jewish history. I think about how every Jewish argument has at least two sides, just like a good piece of journalism. I think of the imperative to tell the truth and be fair. But the beit midrash as newsroom was a new one for me.

The sponsor of the two-day event, Beth Medrash Govoha, runs the huge yeshiva in Lakewood, N.J., popularly known as BMG with some 6,500 students. It is associated with the black hat or “yeshivish” brand of Orthodoxy that takes its Torah study seriously. It is one of the largest yeshivot in the world.

The program, which was held over Christmas weekend at a Hyatt hotel in Princeton, and attracted 220 adults, mirrors in a small way the study done in the yeshiva itself. Participants were given source books and were asked to prepare the material with a study partner, or chavruta. Then a rabbi would give a lecture or shiur that expanded and elucidated the material and then wrapped wrap up the session.

But unlike the discussions at the yeshiva, which can get rather theoretical, the discussions here were intended to be practical. The theme was “Compete the Right Way,” and it started with foundational texts from the Talmud and rabbinic literature. Among these were texts that explored the rights of farmers and fishermen, the ability of poor people to shake olives from a tree and the rules for men courting women with intent to marry.

The texts also made it clear that there were different ethical obligations toward Jews, on the one hand, and idol worshippers on the other.

The text study was followed by a panel of rabbis who were dayanim, or rabbinic court judges, who spoke about the ethical implications of the texts. Among the more concrete and contemporary issues covered were poaching clients and employees from competing businesses; persuading a business to switch its credit card processor and the ethics of an out-of-town business competing with local vendors.

Participants were laymen who had studied Talmud, either at BMG or other yeshivot, and who had chosen careers other than the rabbinate or scholarship. Most of the participants were businessmen, but there were also a smattering of professionals, including a dozen lawyers. Since they were learning law, albeit Jewish law, BMG arranged for the lawyers who needed them to get Continuing Legal Education credit, something required to continue practicing in some states. Three pulpit rabbis, one from as far away as Silver Spring, Md., came with groups of congregants who studied together.

“It’s not a vacation in the classic sense,” said the organizer, Rabbi Avi Colman. “It’s more of a spiritual recharge.”

It was also noisy. After Rabbi Rockove, my study partner, made the analogy to the

newsroom, I thought of my favorite journalism movie of the year, “Spotlight,” which is about the Boston Globe’s investigation of clergy sex abuse in the Boston Archdiocese. At one point in the movie, all hell breaks loose when an editor decides to hold a story and a reporter insists that it run immediately. The argument, set in the newsroom, is rather passionate and, well, Talmudic.

Rabbi Rockove, a 45-year-old BMG administrator, knows both the newsroom and the yeshiva. In an earlier phase of life, he was a reporter for Yated Ne’eman, a popular charedi newspaper published in Monsey, N.Y. He told me that the first hour of study was often the noisiest owing to the enthusiasm of the participants. He promised that it would quiet down, a bit. I’m not sure that it did, but I got used to it.

I was at the event as a guest of BMG, which is marketing itself more aggressively to outsiders. In 2013, David Landes wrote a long piece for Tablet about the yeshiva’s exponential growth. And in 2014 Marc Oppenheimer wrote an article for The New York Times magazine on the community’s social network, and noted that the yeshiva is now just a tad smaller than Harvard College.

I went to the event out of a combination of curiosity and nostalgia. I had studied Talmud in the pre-seminary program at Yeshiva University. In my two days of study at BMG I remembered what attracted me to Talmud study: the imaginative tales and the camaraderie of the beit midrash, where discussions were as fluid and fanciful as the Talmud we studied. And I remembered what turned me off: the endless splitting of hairs and tortured logic that existed only here and nowhere else and often without any relevance to the world outside.

If there were parallels to a newsroom, it was to a newsroom long gone. Like early newsrooms, this was an all-male world. No women were in the beit midrash. Wives were not welcome on this vacation, although there was a special lecture offered – via telephone – for those who stayed home. (Colman told me that 136 women called in.) It was also a newsroom of the past because there was virtually no technology. I didn’t see one open laptop in the beit midrash, although there was one computer terminal available that connected with a database called Otzar HaChochmo that can access 76,000 Jewish books. It was rarely in use.

Also it was not a newsroom of today because there was no news. No one mentioned ISIS or the Iran deal or the latest stabbing attacks in Israel. No one mentioned the tornadoes in Texas or the floods in Missouri or even the presidential election. And, perhaps most tellingly, no one mentioned Sheldon Silver or William Rapfogel or other Orthodox felons.

There were just a few acknowledgments of the world outside the walls of the beit midrash. Rabbi Benzion Kokis, a teacher at BMG, emphasized that there is an ethical imperative – and even a self-interest – in treating all people fairly. “If we betray the goyim, they will ask: ‘Is this the people that God redeemed?’” Rabbi Kokis spoke of Toras Emmes, the Torah of Truth. “It is one thing,” he said, “to learn Toras Emmes and another thing to live Toras Emmes.” He said that the task of all those who studied over the two days of the event was to make the transition from learning to living. “It is not easy,” he concluded, “but nothing equals that Kiddush hashem [sanctification of God’s name].”