INTRODUCTION

One Day Wiser

The house was quiet and the world was calm.
The reader became the book . . .

—WALLACE STEVENS

It is early in the morning—the house is quiet and the world is calm, and I steal out of bed and tiptoe to the bathroom. I wash my hands and reach for my toothbrush, but in the predawn light it is hard to distinguish my turquoise toothbrush from my husband's white one, so I hold them up to the faint rays of sunlight struggling to make their way through the window. I put on my slippers and open the door as quietly as possible—my twins sleep in the bedroom across the hall, and if one of them stirs, my gain will be canceled out by my loss. The rabbis of the Talmud say that every night is divided into three watches—in the first watch, the donkeys bray; in the second watch, the dogs bark; and in the third watch, the mother nurses her child and whispers to her husband. But my husband and children are blessedly still asleep; no dog whets its tongue, and I don't even hear the first honks of morning traffic from the highway down the hill as I open the volume of Talmud waiting for me on the couch. This quiet is part of the meaning, part of the mind, my access to the perfection of the page. King David, too, used to study while it

was still dark, roused by the dancing of the wind on the strings of his Aeolian harp at exactly midnight. But David, like all kings, had the luxury of sleeping three hours past dawn, whereas I must soon begin my day. I know that I have to learn quickly, that the Talmudic page is like a ruined Temple and that Elijah will hurry me along if I linger. I lean over the page, want to lean, want most to be the scholar to whom this book is true. And just when the reader is becoming the book—just when I think I can hear the Holy One Blessed Be He wailing like a dove, moaning the destruction of the Temple and the banishment of His children from His table—I realize that the moaning is in fact my daughter, and she is hungry and crying, and it is time for another watch to begin.

My commitment to studying Talmud began nearly a decade ago, on another early morning, when my friend Andrea and I were running hills—the only kind of running one can do in Jerusalem. The air was cool and crisp, but we were already sweating in the knee-length shorts we wore in deference to the city's unwritten modesty code. As we huffed and puffed up the steep hill to the Knesset, I turned to Andrea and joked, "We will ascend Jerusalem at the height of our joy"—a paraphrase of a biblical verse recited at traditional Jewish weddings. I thought briefly about how I'd recited those words at my own wedding one year earlier, a moment I winced to recollect. But my quotation made Andrea think of the text and not its marital context, or so it seemed, because she turned back to look at me, a few paces behind, and casually remarked, "Did I tell you? I've started learning a page of Talmud a day."

My jaw dropped. "What did you say?" I pushed myself to keep up because I wanted to hear more. The Andrea I knew enjoyed hanging out in bars, reading paperback thrillers, and staying in shape. It was hard to imagine why she'd be interested in the Talmud, a vast compendium of Jewish law and narrative dating back to the first few centuries of the Common Era. The Talmud

is famous for its nonlinear argumentation, sprawling digressions, and complex analysis of the finer points of Jewish religious law. A far cry from the latest Stephen King. What business did Andrea have with the Talmud?

"It's called *daf yomi*," she told me, and I recognized the phrase, Hebrew for "daily page," though it's more accurately translated as "daily folio," since every page of Talmud consists of two sides, back and front, with no square inch lying fallow—each page brims with printed Hebrew letters, leaving only the narrowest margins. Just recently there had been a widely publicized daf yomi celebration in Madison Square Garden, with thousands of Jews gathering to mark the completion of their study of the Talmud. They were mostly men in black suits and white shirts, with corkscrew curls hanging down over their ears. "Anyone can do it," Andrea added, as if reading my thoughts. "You go through a page of Talmud a day, and you finish in seven and a half years. How cool is that? In seven and a half years you've read what is arguably the most important book of Jewish law."

"But why?" I asked her. "Why do you care so much about Jewish law? I mean, you don't keep Shabbat, you've dated non-Jewish guys—why do you want all these rabbis peering over your shoulder?"

"Because they're not just talking about legal stuff. They're arguing with their wives, insulting their students, one-upping their colleagues—and when talking about law, they're not telling you what to do. They're figuring it all out, invoking not just the Bible but also folk tales, fables, and cultural myths. On yesterday's page I read about the three entrances to hell—one of which was in Jerusalem." Andrea smiled at me from beneath the brim of her baseball cap.

"I guess," I said, wondering where exactly that gateway to hell was located as we wove through the streets of the ancient city. "But what do you hope to get out of it? All that Talmud, I mean."

"I don't know," Andrea said and shrugged, rivulets of sweat

trickling down her shoulders. "I think it's partially the thrill of the challenge. You know, like running a marathon. It's fun to set impossible goals and then slowly make them more possible." I thought of the story of the great second-century sage Rabbi Akiva chipping away at a mountain stone by stone, gradually uprooting it and casting it into the Jordan River (Avot de Rabbi Natan, version A, chapter 6). It is a metaphor for how this sage, who began learning relatively late in life, came to master the whole Torah. But that was Rabbi Akiva.

We finished running by 7:00 a.m. and parted ways, but I couldn't stop thinking about what Andrea had told me. What would it be like to take on a seven-and-a-half-year project? It was almost impossible to imagine my life in seven and a half years. Would I still be living in Israel? Would I still feel saddled by the pain and shame I carried around with me? Would I finally manage to "move on," as everyone kept assuring me I would? "Time does not bring relief / you all have lied," wrote Edna St. Vincent Millay in a sonnet I often quoted to myself. Time did not bring relief but seemed to stretch inexorably, and I couldn't bear the thought that in seven and a half years I might still be grieving.

At the time I could barely get through the days, let alone commit to getting through the entire Babylonian Talmud, a text divided into six orders (or sections), 37 tractates (or volumes), and some twenty-seven hundred pages. But then I thought about how moving on is about putting one foot in front of the other, or turning page after page. If every day I turned a page, then eventually a new chapter would have to begin.

One chapter would lead to another, and then another, and before long I'd have completed an entire tractate. What a healthy relationship to time, viewing it not as a mark of age but as an opportunity to grow in wisdom. If I learned a page a day, then instead of resigning myself to being one day older, I could aspire to be one day wiser. Eventually I learned that this is in fact the Jewish view of time: the rabbis teach in tractate Avot (5:23) that five is

the age for studying Torah, ten is the age for studying Mishnah, and fifteen is the age for studying Talmud.

At that point I was nearly twice the age stipulated in Avot, but as we learn elsewhere in that text, "If not now, when?" (1:14). Perhaps it was time to step on the treadmill and let the pull of the daf yomi schedule carry me along. At least I might stop feeling so stuck and ashamed of how the past year had unfolded. The previous summer Paul and I had married and immediately boarded a plane for Israel. I left my job and my community in New York to follow him—all too willingly—to a place I did not know. In the romanticized version of the Exodus story related by the prophet Jeremiah, the Israelites follow God through the wilderness, and God later tells them, "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown" (Jeremiah 2:2).[1] I loved Paul and followed him to a land barren of family and friends, a land where I'd have to try to put down new roots. But by spring, the season of growth and rebirth, any love we'd known had been uprooted, like a patch of grass ripped out of the soil. Paul and I soon cut off all connection, and I was on my own. Days would go by when I spoke only to the lady who checked coats at the library or the man at the corner store who sold me my milk and bread.

Even Andrea, one of my few friends, soon became too busy to jog with me. But the Talmud teaches that "[o]ne who is walking on his way and has no companion should occupy himself with Torah study" (Eruvin 54a). And so I did, in incremental steps. When I began learning daf yomi, I did not even own a volume of Talmud, nor did I buy one right away. Heading out to the bookstore seemed too presumptuous, as if in buying Yoma—the volume that the daf yomi community was up to at the time—I were committing to the full seven and a half years. After so recently marrying and divorcing, I was reluctant to commit to anything. And so instead I found a podcast with a daily fifty-minute class on the daf, and I started listening on my morning runs.

Sometimes it was difficult to keep track of the line of argumentation without the Talmud page in front of me, but I followed the directional cues of the text as I wound my way through the city. The names of the streets in Jerusalem are organized thematically with each neighborhood depicting a particular historical period, set of characters, or field of scholarship. The leafy hills of Rehavia are named for medieval biblical commentators; the narrow alleys of Baka are named for the twelve tribes; and the quaint side streets of the German Colony are named for nineteenth-century European rabbis. I did not follow a predetermined course when I jogged; instead, I followed the text wherever it led me. I took a left on Rabbi Akiva and then a right on Hillel and noted how, in a moment of concession, Rabbi Hisda turned into Rabbi Meir at a quiet intersection.

Eventually one morning I ended my run at a religious bookstore, where I was conspicuously both the only woman and the only runner. (At least my sporty bandana looked like a modest head covering.) Acting quickly, I pulled out some bills from my pocket and left with my own copy of tractate Yoma. Yoma is Aramaic for "the day," and this volume of Talmud deals with Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. But I studied it on unremarkable summer evenings, as the sweltering days cooled off into clear, bright nights. I sat in bed next to an open screenless window with the Talmud perched on my bent knees, reading its marginal notes and adding my own, the moonlight casting a glow on my page.

In the classic printing of the Talmud, which dates back to nineteenth-century Vilna, the Talmudic text appears in the center of the page and is surrounded by commentaries in the margins. I learned not from this classic printing but from an edition published by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, whose modern Hebrew commentary explicates and elucidates the text. Hebrew is the language of the oldest sections of the Talmud (which also includes Aramaic, the lingua franca of the rabbis who wrote it), and it is the language of

the Jewish people living in the modern State of Israel, where I was making my home. But the Talmud is also a book of the diaspora, and Jews studied it for two thousand years wherever in the world they found themselves. Even when Jews did not have a homeland, and even when hardly any Jews spoke Hebrew, they continued to study Talmud. I had immigrated from the diaspora, and by studying Talmud in Hebrew in Israel, I was in my own way bringing the text back home.

However, one need not know Hebrew to study Talmud, a text that is available in multiple English translations. One need not even be Jewish, or at all religious. Indeed, sometimes the rabbis are so bold and heretical that their statements may be best appreciated by those who are not themselves devout. "Were it not written, it would be impossible to say it," they sometimes warn, and then go on to twist a verse written in the Bible into a startling theological conclusion. Unlike later works that followed from it, the Talmud is not a law code intended to tell Jews how to behave but a record of rabbinic legal conversations in which many of the questions are left open and unresolved. It is a text for those who are living the questions rather than those who have found the answers.

Still, that is not to say that I didn't try to figure it all out for myself. My copy of Yoma—and of all subsequent volumes, which I continued for a long time to purchase one by one—became filled with penciled notations that rained down the margins: question marks where I was confused, exclamation points where I was taken by surprise, boxed summaries of the major topics under discussion, and underlined references to other texts that came to mind while I was learning. Various passages of Talmud resonated with works of literature I'd studied previously—as an undergraduate at Harvard, as a graduate student at Cambridge, and as a book editor and literary agent in New York and Jerusalem. I'd spent my whole life reading books, but here was a book I could imagine spending my whole life reading.

A teacher once told me that nothing is as exciting as the next page of Talmud, and this rang true for me. The Talmud is a highly discursive text, proceeding primarily by association rather than by any rational scheme. Often there is no way of knowing how the stream of rabbinic consciousness will flow from one page to the next: the text meanders from a discussion about marking time to the dating of legal documents to a map of the night sky on the eve of the flood—all in the space of the opening pages of tractate Rosh Hashanah. The Talmud surprised me at nearly every turn, and while there were topics I found less interesting than others, there was something that caught my eye on almost every page—a folk remedy employed to heal an ailing sage, a rude insult leveled at one rabbi by another, a sudden interjection from a rabbi's angry wife. Often I was less focused on what the rabbis were discussing than on how they transitioned subtly from one subject to another, such that a discussion of sex with a virgin suddenly morphs into a discussion of how to avoid hearing something untoward by sticking one's fingers in one's ears—as if to suggest that all acts of penetration are one and the same. I found myself carried along for the ride, caught up in the flow of the argumentation and tossed around like a rough wave when the back-and-forth between the rabbis became particularly stormy.

I began to feel increasingly at home in the world of the Talmudic rabbis, who spent their time gathered in study groups to learn and debate the Mishnah. Contemporary scholars disagree about the social role the rabbis occupied. Were they a class of intellectual elites or just isolated members of society? At least some had day jobs, like Rabbi Yohanan the sandler and Rabbi Yitzhak the smith. The more prominent sages, like Rav and Rabbi Yohanan, were the heads of large Talmudic academies with numerous disciples. As I got to know the individual rabbis through my encounters with the text, many became as familiar to me as old friends: Ben Azzai, who loved studying Torah so much that he couldn't bear to sacrifice precious learning time to raise a

family; Rabbi Eliezer, who left his family's huge farming estate against his father's will to go learn Torah in Jerusalem; and Rabbi Yehoshua, who developed his love of Torah in the womb because his mother used to pass by the study house when she was pregnant with him. I'd been working in book publishing for years, but driven by my interest in the Talmudic sages, I began moonlighting as a translator of rabbinic biographies. I learned about the individual rabbis, as well as about their wives and daughters and the women in their communities who sought their guidance.

As a woman, I grew excited about the possibilities open to me when encountering this text that for fifteen hundred years has been regarded primarily as the province of only the male half of the population. In the past few decades, more women have begun studying Talmud, both in the yeshiva, an institution for the religious study of Jewish texts, and in the academy—but this is only a recent phenomenon, and there are still very few women with enough years of learning under their belt to rival their male counterparts. I was raised with a strong feminist sensibility. My father served for decades as the rabbi of an egalitarian synagogue in which men and women participate equally in the service, and my mother worked as a top executive in the Jewish nonprofit sector. My parents always taught me that women had the same intellectual capacities as men. The Talmud, though, teaches otherwise.

The sages of the Talmud explicitly state that women are not obligated in the commandment to study Torah (Kidushin 29b), and Rabbi Eliezer declares that "anyone who teaches his daughter Torah teaches her frivolity" (Sotah 20a). But the Talmud includes a dissenting opinion, attributed to Ben Azzai, who insists that a man is obligated to teach his daughter Torah so that, were she to be rightfully accused of adultery, she would understand that though her merits might delay her punishment, it would inevitably come. As this example reflects, most of the women in the Talmud are sexual objects who are seduced or raped or subjected

to virginity tests. Those few women who are depicted as learned—Yalta, Beruriah, Rav Hisda's daughter—have surprisingly violent streaks, perhaps a testament to their force of personality. But they are rare exceptions in a text whose heroes are almost all men, not to mention men who considered themselves experts in women's psychology and anatomy.

As a modern woman reader of Talmud, I was fascinated by the rabbis' assumptions about women's attitudes toward marriage and children, and I wondered whether they still resonate with women today. After my divorce, I thought about whether it is still true, as the rabbis insist, that *tav l'meitav tan du m'l'meitav armelu*—that a woman would prefer to be married than to be alone, even if, as the rabbis go on to assert, her husband is "the size of an ant." Does this principle hold in an age when, at least in many parts of the world, women can own property, live independently, and have children out of wedlock without undue social sanction?

It soon became clear to me that by the Talmud's standards, I am a man rather than a woman—if "man" is defined as an independent, self-sufficient adult, whereas "woman" is a dependent generally living in either her father's or her husband's home. In some ways this was a relief because I could regard the Talmud's gender stereotypes as historical curiosities rather than infuriating provocations. The Talmud did not offend me because I was defying its classifications through my very engagement with the text. So many of the classical interpretations of the Talmud reflect gendered assumptions, and these texts have the potential to take on radically new meaning when regarded through feminine eyes. Though plowed through by generations of scholars before me, the Talmud was fertile ground for gleaning new insights and fresh perspectives.

I kept a journal about what I learned, where I learned it, and what moved me most deeply. Learning daf yomi is like zooming through a safari on a motorbike; there is so much to take in, but

you are moving along at an impossibly rapid clip. By writing, I was better able to remember some of my favorite passages. And so I set for myself the challenge of writing a limerick or sonnet corresponding to each page I learned. These poems served as mnemonics that enabled me to summon, even years later, those passages I'd particularly enjoyed, such as the following from the end of tractate Rosh Hashanah (35a):

> Rav Yehuda did not like to pray
> He preferred to learn Torah and say:
> "You may call my soul dirty
> But one day in thirty
> Is better than three times a day."

The rabbis of the Talmud, too, often relied on mnemonic devices, which were essential given the text's oral transmission. Though in some ways I was rewriting the Talmud by rendering it in verse, in another sense I was doing just what the sages of the Talmud had done—I was trying to make my learning so much a part of me that I, like Rabbi Eliezer, might someday be able to refer to "my two arms, like two wrapped Torah scrolls" (Sanhedrin 68a)—as if I, too, could inscribe Torah on my heart.

On the cover of my journal I wrote "Dyo ilu yamey," a quotation from the Aramaic poem *Akdamut,* composed in the eleventh century and traditionally recited on Shavuot, the holiday celebrating the giving of the Torah at Sinai. The author of the poem, Rabbi Meir bar Yitzhak, plays off a trope that appears in variant forms throughout rabbinic literature: "God's eternal glory could not be described even if the heavens were parchment, and the forests quills; if all the seas were ink, as well as every gathered water; even if the earth's inhabitants were scribes and recorders of initials." My journal was an attempt to set my quill to parchment, to try and capture some of what I learned each day—always fearing that, as Rabbi Eliezer declared on his deathbed, "I skimmed

only as much knowledge as a dog laps from the sea" (Sanhedrin 68a).

Looking back now, I see that these journal entries unfolded as a record not just of my learning but also of my life, drawing from deep wells of sadness and fear and, with time, from overflowing fountains of joy. I began learning as a divorced woman living alone in Jerusalem, with no idea of what the future might hold. It took me a while—quite a few tractates—before I found my stride. (And yes, like T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock, who measured out his life in coffee spoons, I have come to measure out mine in tractates, referring to periods in my life by what I was up to in the Talmud.) Eventually I began to make a home for myself in Jerusalem, even though I was thousands of miles away from my family and closest friends. One day I saw a sign for a morning daf yomi class in a synagogue down the street, and I decided to join. I was the only woman, but the rabbi greeted me with a welcoming smile and I soon became one of the guys—the rest of whom were retired old men. After class the men went to pray in the synagogue sanctuary and I slipped my Talmud into my bag and headed to the local pool, where I swam laps while reviewing in my mind the page I'd just learned.

Daf yomi, though initially a solitary pursuit, soon brought community into my life. Perhaps this should not have been surprising. Tens of thousands of Jews around the world learn daf yomi, and they are all literally on the same page. This is because daf yomi is not just about learning a page of Talmud a day. It's about learning a specific page, the same page that everyone else is learning, following a schedule that was fixed in 1923 when Rabbi Meir Shapiro of the Lublin Yeshiva first conceived of the program. Rabbi Shapiro described his vision of daf yomi as a way of unifying the Jewish world:

> What a great thing! A Jew travels by boat and takes gemara *Berachot* [the first volume of the Talmud] under his arm. He

> travels for 15 days from Eretz Yisrael [the land of Israel] to America, and each day he learns the *daf*. When he arrives in America, he enters a *beit midrash* [study house] in New York and finds Jews learning the very same *daf* that he studied on that day, and he gladly joins them. Another Jew leaves the States and travels to Brazil or Japan, and he first goes to the *beit midrash,* where he finds everyone learning the same *daf* that he himself learned that day. Could there be greater unity of hearts than this?[2]

For Rabbi Shapiro, the whole world was a vast Talmud classroom with students connected by a worldwide web of conversational threads. Invoking a similar image, the rabbis of the Talmud described the class as a vineyard, with students seated in rows like an orderly arrangement of vines. I experienced daf yomi as a way of inhabiting a virtual classroom, sitting in a seemingly empty row and learning by myself while at the same time sensing the ghostly presences of those in the front rows who had studied those same passages in previous generations. And there were other presences, too, because my row was not in fact empty; it was populated by fellow daf yomi learners sitting just a few seats over—on the other side of Jerusalem, in Bnei Brak, and farther down the row in Europe, America, Australia, and wherever in the world there were people of the book.

Those connections only deepened. A year after I started daf yomi, I began dating again—just when I got up to the order known as Nashim (Women), a large section of the Talmud encompassing seven tractates that deal with issues of marriage and personal status. Over the course of Seder Nashim (the Order of Women) I fell in and out of love several times. Four years after my divorce I met the man I would go on to marry—who also began studying daf yomi—at a class on the weekly Torah portion, the section of the Torah that would be read in synagogue on the upcoming Shabbat. And so Torah became a companion, but it also

brought my companion into my life. Daniel and I married just a few months after we met, and by our third anniversary we had three children, a son and twin daughters. When I finished my first daf yomi cycle at age thirty-five, our son was two and a half, our girls were approaching their first birthday, and I was stealing those predawn hours to learn before they woke up.

Throughout it all, daf yomi has remained a constant in my life. I have never missed a day of learning, though that learning has taken different forms over the years. When I was single I learned over dinner, careful not to drip tomato sauce upon discussions about the sprinkling of blood on the Temple altar. Once I got married to Daniel we learned together, one of us reading the daf aloud while the other washed dishes or folded laundry. After our children were born, I came to the end of my learning not at the bottom of the page but whenever the baby woke up; the pages from these months are filled with sudden slashes that mark the points where I was interrupted. Then I picked up later, in bed, falling asleep with the rabbis still arguing in my head about just how late a person can recite the bedtime Shema prayer.

And so I followed the text, but the text also followed me through the various twists and turns my life took. During particularly tough periods, on days when it was hard to remember why I bothered to get up in the morning, my daily Talmud study was an anchor, if not a life raft. Even if I accomplished nothing else that day, I managed to get through the daf. And on the most wondrous days of my life—when I gave birth to my children—daf yomi reminded me that I am, first and foremost, a reader and a lover of texts. I read Talmud aloud to each of my infants while they nursed at my breast, and they imbibed words of Torah with their mother's milk.

The Talmudic rabbis famously teach that "one is not obligated to complete a task, nor is one free to desist from it" (Avot 2:16). And so I kept learning regardless of where I found myself. Over the past seven and a half years, I've learned Talmud in li-

braries, cafes, airplanes, supermarket lines, and hospital waiting rooms. Whenever possible, I tried to learn with a pencil in hand so I could jot down my thoughts. Those pencil jottings formed the basis for this book, an effort to trace the path of my learning and living these past seven and a half years—from those initial jogs with Andrea, when I thought I'd never be happy again, to this morning, when I managed to fit in half a page before I heard my daughter's cries. Seven and a half years ago I felt only despair for what lay ahead; looking back, I feel blessed by the lessons I have been privileged to learn—from the text, from the world beyond the text, and from the ever-widening intersection of text and life in which I write these words.