

Pirkei Avot, 1:4

Yose ben Yoezer of Tz'redah said: Let your house be a meeting place for scholars; sit at their feet in the dust; and drink in their words thirstily.

At first glance this Mishna looks like it's saying that we should grovel before those whom we consider to be scholars. We should invite them into our homes, sit on the floor in front of them and believe everything they tell us.

There is nothing about Judaism that I know which would convince me this is the correct interpretation. We give too much credence to each and every person being learned, having their own opinions. We all know the saying, 'two Jews, three opinions.'

What I think this Mishna is actually saying is for each of us to make learning the centerpiece of our lives. If we cannot invite scholars into our homes, we have to go to wherever they are and make our homes there. We have to acknowledge that learning is the most important thing that we do. And we have to continue learning no matter what else we do in our lives.

But even more than that, it says that we have to learn even when what we are learning doesn't go along with what we already believe. It's so easy to stay in our own little belief bubbles never venturing outside of them.

That was certainly what I did until my brother died. He was only 32, much too young and I was devastated. We had just begun to become close. I had so much to learn from him. But he was gone and I had to figure out what to do with all my grief.

One of my friends gave me a book of wisdom and prayers about death which I read with great thirst, just like our Mishna suggests. Most of the writings were about people dying in old age, about the pain of loss, trying to make sense out of what for me was completely senseless.

None of them spoke to me at all. But there was one that jumped out at me. The first few lines said,

God make me an instrument of Your peace;
where there is hatred, let me bring love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith...

and toward the end

God grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
To be understood, as to understand;
To be loved, as to love...

This was finally a prayer that I could feel in my heart. One of the reasons I couldn't move beyond my raw pain was that I had no control over it. I couldn't make it go away. I couldn't even diminish it. But this prayer told me there were positive ways I could affect the world at the same time that I was grieving. This prayer gave that give to me. I could make peace, give love, understand others and console them in their grief. That's what I did and it was immensely comforting.

What I haven't said yet is who the author of that prayer is. Had I not been in so much pain, I never would even have read it when I saw who wrote it. It's commonly known as the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi.

As a Jew who had been raised in a Catholic city and taunted by Catholic school children, I had no respect for how the Church hurt people including its own. Had I not been in so much pain, I would not have allowed myself to learn from someone I considered to be the enemy. I would have simply gone on to the next prayer in the book.

I feel lucky that I did read that prayer. It's one that I have used many times in my life when I needed to remember that I had something to give even when I didn't feel like I did. And even when I didn't feel like giving.

It was one of the first times I remember allowing myself to learn outside of my comfort zone. And I try hard to remember this lesson.

It's so easy to stay in our comfort zone, whether it's religious, political, cultural or anything else. We tend to find a niche and stay there, having a hard time expanding our world. But the more we expand it, the fuller we become as people. And the fuller we become, the more we can give to the world from the perspective of wisdom.

That's what this Mishna tells us. Make every place we go into a study hall. Learn from everybody even if we learn what not to do or what not to believe in. We can learn from the rich history and heritage of Judaism. And we can learn about other religions. We can learn from the books and music that bring us pleasure. We can also read books and listen to music that we may grow to appreciate. Our Rabbis two thousand years ago tried to instill in us a love and respect for learning. Let all of us continue that tradition and become more and more aware of all the facets of our world.