

# Introduction

## By Abigail Pogrebin

I used to resist the metaphor I kept hearing from rabbis: that “we all stood at Sinai.”

It wasn't just because I'm a literalist and know that we weren't actually there 4000 years ago. The symbolism felt remote, alien: how could I have inherited a document I do not live by? How can I possibly honor a contract I've never signed? I'm an involved Jew, but not a *halachic* one. Sinai is more a parable than a pledge.

But instead of rejecting out of hand the idea that the Torah was given to me, too, I began a very simple act: talking about it. And lo and behold, doors started to unlock, windows started to swing open. I spotted or stumbled upon its verses and stories everywhere – in fiction, comedy routines, song lyrics, election stump speeches. In my quotidian activities and in the hardest questions in my head. In my parenting and my politics, my friendships and my failures. This ancient, stubbornly-enduring tome literally came to life –in conversation.

I admit it didn't hurt that the person on the other end of this dialectic was a rabbi who knows the document backwards and forwards, who has committed his life's work to teaching it, but most importantly, who has a core belief in the God it describes.

Dov Linzer and I met back in 2009, when he was dean of the Orthodox seminary, Chovevei Torah (he's now its president,) and I was a freelance journalist writing for publications about Jewish identity (or a lack of it). We were fortunate to be invited by *The Jewish Week* to a conference on Jewish ideas called – appropriately – The Conversation.

We've been talking ever since.

But our *chevrutah* (study partnership) isn't an obvious one. We come from different ends of the spectrum when it comes to observance:

Dov prays three times a day, I pray once a week if I make it to synagogue;

he fasts six times a year, I fast once, on Yom Kippur;

he is Sabbath-observant, I'm not;

he keeps kosher, I don't;

he sees the *mitzvot* (commandments) as binding, I do not.

We gently spar as much as we agree; part of what has kept us talking is that we push each other – often to a more honest realization of a personal roadblock we didn't admit, or a spiritual challenge we share.

It's not a shock that an Orthodox rabbi would choose to parse Torah with a non-Orthodox Jewish journalist – of course that's possible.

What's less probable is that our partnership has endured on equal footing. Neither of us claims to be teacher or student. Each of us listens as much as we talk (unless we're interrupting each other.) And despite disparate perspectives of how this sacred text obligates us, each conversation feels sacred. Not just because it connects me to my heritage of learning and disputation, but because it reminds me that this is what it means to sign up for meaning: it doesn't just land in our laps, but if we find a study-mate and prioritize the hours, this story can fire our brains and speak to our lives right at this moment.

Three years ago, Dov and I proposed a podcast that would allow us to take on one parsha at a time –with the discipline of just ten minutes each, zeroing in on one verse or passage which animated or flummoxed us both.

*Tablet* Magazine graciously produced that podcast, called "Parsha in Progress," and we're grateful to editors Alana Newhouse, Wayne Hoffman, Jacob Siegal and producers Josh Kross and Shira Telushkin for all their wise support through that adventure.

But it felt like something was left unfinished. We kept hearing from friends, fellow congregants and intrigued strangers asking if the full Torah adventure existed somewhere in print in one place. They wanted the chance to walk through the entire Torah via these accessible 10-minute exchanges, perhaps using our discussions as springboards for their own.

Publisher Fredric Price of Fig Tree Books gave us the gift of making that book a reality, and he masterfully edited our real-time transcript for clarity and concision so that it has become a very different full journey on the page.

In the Torah-dive you're about to read, Dov and I disagree on everything from whether Reuben – Joseph's brother – is courageous or a coward, whether welcoming the

stranger means welcoming the non-Jew or solely the convert, and whether Moses was unjustly barred from ever seeing the Promised Land.

We ask whether punishment can be holy, whether a loan preserves more dignity than charity, whether faith can give us a kind of armor.

We try to square the *Sotah* ritual (I still can't) which forces a woman accused of infidelity to drink ink. We ask each other – when discussing the ornate tabernacle – whether we personally need a fancy prayer space to feel prayerful. And we look at the key fact that it was human hands, not God's – which were used to inscribe the second set of Torah tablets, just as Moses later instructed the Israelites to "inscribe every word."

What I took away from this ride was not just how relevant Torah remains, but how indelible is the experience of traveling the entire story out loud, with someone else. Judaism has persisted not just through its study, but the interrogation and inwardness it requires.

It also became clear to me that the Jewish tradition is an invitation. It beckons, in a sense, to get into the fight. Not to see the document as something fragile, untouchable or fixed, but durable, reachable, responsive to our struggles. "Kick its tires," Dov always encouraged me; "wring every word."

These conversations proved again and again that the Five Books of Moses were meant to toss us together. We should not study in silence or alone. If you speak to these stories, they *will talk back*.

Torah lives on in repartee and in combat.

It takes two, indeed.

And of course, it took so many generations who came before us.

# Introduction

## By Rabbi Dov Linzer

“It’s about being a lifelong learner.”

That’s what Abigail said to me when we reached the section in the end of Deuteronomy that commands the king to have a Sefer Torah with him at all times. It’s right there in the verse: “And it shall be with him, and he shall read from it all the days of his life” (Deut. 17:19)!

But here’s the funny thing: I, who have been a lifelong learner – someone who has been immersed in the study of Torah since my teens, spending hours each day with my head in one of the five books of Moses or Talmud, sometimes even to the point of being so caught up inside my head with the ins-and-outs of a Talmudic discussion that I would wind up bumping into telephone poles – I never saw that verse in that way.

For me, the verse had always been about what comes at the end: “in order that he learn to fear God to observe all the words of this Torah.” The point was that the king had to be constantly reminded that there is an authority and power greater than he, that even a monarch is under God and bound by God’s Torah. And all of that is still true about what this text teaches. But how did I miss that key message of being a lifelong student, which Abby rightly highlighted?

I missed it because I had overlooked part of what being a true learner is really about. It’s not just the hours spent, or having your head in a book. It’s about engaging other people, other perspectives, ones that can at times be radically different from your own and asking yourself –what can I glean from this other way of seeing? It’s about cultivating genuine curiosity, stepping outside your echo chamber and comfort zone.

In the world of the yeshivot, the learning of Torah is not an individual pursuit, but always studied *bi’chavruta*, in pairs. Two people, often sitting on opposite sides of a table with the same text open in front of them, work together to plumb its depths and argue back and forth, even yelling at times, in the pursuit of arriving at the true meaning of a particular piece of Torah.

The daily partnership of study is a beautiful image and powerful to experience. And yet. The difference in perspectives – which each member of the pair brings to the

conversation – is often extremely slight. The *chavruta* arrives at a deeper understanding, but within very bounded parameters of shared theological and religious commitments.

Abby taught me – through the many years that the two of us have been learning, laughing, sharing and challenging one another – that to be a committed learner requires not only going deep, but going wide. Otherwise, your field of vision will be so narrow, you will keep on walking into telephone poles.

That said, for me, learning Torah has always been more than an intellectual exploration. It is inexorably intertwined with my core religious beliefs and how I live my life. Like the king of the above-cited verse, I learn Torah “to fear God” – because I believe that study is a *mitzvah* and orients me towards a constant and ongoing relationship with God.

Learning Torah elevates me out of the urgency of the moment, the busyness of the mundane and the quotidian. At the end of the day, the stories and laws in the Torah are all about what it means for us to be human, to be created in the Divine Image, with a mandate to choose good, to choose life. Making the time to study a story in the parsha, whether on my own, or – much better – with a *chavruta* and sparring partner, gives me the space, the breathing room, to be reflective about myself, my life, my world, and the people around me.

The Torah pulls you in with its messy stories about imperfect human beings, doing what God wants them to do (or not), acting towards their spouse or a stranger in ways that are awe-inspiring or horrific, or a little bit of both. And in the middle of all of that, I find it drawing me back to the same questions, again and again: How would I act in these situations? How do these issues play out in my family, friendships, and work? What are my values and priorities and are they the right ones? What is it that I want from God and what does God want from me?

Part of what it means to see the Torah as coming from God is that I approach the text with reverence, which does not mean silent submission. Learning Torah for me is an exhilarating experience of challenging and being challenged, of arguing and being persuaded, of struggling and embracing. But all done with a deep recognition of this book as a God-given text, one that not just guides, but obligates me.

The Torah for me is a blueprint for how I should live my life: “He shall read from it all the days of his life... to observe all the words of this Torah.” I am bound by its *mitzvot* and its laws. When a question arises about a commandment in the Torah, it is, in the end, a question that will directly impact my actions and practice. This makes it alive and

pressing. Every minute detail of every law fully matters. It also makes it more than a little bit daunting. Because there are some laws, for instance stoning adulterers, that I am not so eager to incorporate into my daily life.

This is where “the Rabbis” come in. By “the Rabbis” – a phrase you will hear me say often in my discussions with Abby – I mean the rabbis who lived in the Talmudic period, from about 100-450 CE, after the Second Temple was destroyed and the locus of Judaism moved from the Temple to the centers of Torah learning – in the Land of Israel and the diaspora.

These rabbis of the Talmud were committed to the belief of a divine and binding Torah. And they understood that it was their task to interpret the Torah and its mitzvot in a way that was actionable and applicable while staying true to the text, true to life, to the tradition and its deepest values. Their commentary went a long way in smoothing out the rough edges of the text.

I am trained to read the Torah through the lens of the Rabbis. This means that a lot has already been “pre-solved” for me, whether morally vexing narratives or *mitzvot* that seem dated and alien. To some degree, the more the text matters, the more it has been tamed.

Thank God, then, for Abby. She has shaken me out of my over-familiarity with one way of reading and learning the Torah. Abby is one of the most incisive, insightful, informed and intelligent people –not to mention kind, caring and funny – who I have had the privilege of learning Torah with, a woman who has devoted her life to thinking, talking, asking, challenging and writing about what it means to be Jewish. And she doesn’t let anyone – not the superstars whom she interviews and not her Torah study-partner – get away with complacency or wishy-washiness. Abby has kept me honest and helped make me, truly, a lifelong learner.

Our Rabbis teach us that when two people sit together to learn Torah, the *Shechina*, the Divine Presence, dwells among them. When two people challenge one another to understand Torah, they connect with something bigger than either one of them. They can even achieve a degree of transcendence. That has been my experience, and it can be your experience as well.

I hope you will consider joining us as we talk and debate our way through the Torah. Pull up a chair – there’s room for one more. Feel free to argue with us; we can take it. Better yet, find a study partner and read this book together – maybe a chapter a week,

that's not a heavy lift – and see how the world opens. I guarantee you'll start to see Torah everywhere.

To cite the famous Rabbinic Chinese proverb: The journey of a thousand verses begins with a single word. So let's begin.