BASIC KNOWLEDGE
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Temple Sholom – Vancouver BC
February 12, 2021

This week I experienced two momentous events

1. I passed my Canadian Citizenship Test
2. I officiated, via zoom at the conversion of a young man who has chosen to join covenant of the Jewish people.

Upon reflection I realized that these two events are deeply instructive of each other and together they highlight an important teaching from this week's Torah portion, *Mishpatim*, in the book of Exodus.

First with regard to the Citizenship Test and the Conversion.

I've taken a lot of tests in my life, many of them on subjects I was only vaguely familiar with at the time and some in a language that I was far from fluent in.

I'm thinking particularly of rabbinical school; where for my six years of graduate studies I was frequently asked to identify terms; explain complex Talmudic arguments and conjugate verbs in various forms of Hebrew and Aramaic. I was a diligent student in rabbinical school; but test taking has never been my strong suit.

I joked with my friends and colleagues this week that I was more nervous for the Canadian Citizenship Test than any exam I took throughout my academic career, including a notorious Hebrew grammar final my first year in Israel.

Part of my anxiety about the citizenship test is that I really want to be a Canadian citizen (mind you I wanted to be a rabbi back then and now). I've waited 8 years to take this test and though I could fail and take it again; is it un-Canadian of me to say I was tired of waiting in line?

I passed with a perfect score. If you heard a scream of joy at about 12:15a on Thursday morning coming from the Mount Pleasant area of East Vancouver that was me as I clicked the final question on the online exam and instantaneously received my score. I'm not yet a citizen, I still have to take my oath and with COVID that may not be scheduled for a few months but I've passed the test.

I'm not allowed to tell you the questions that were on the exam, but I can share some of the practice questions that are in the study guide.

Let's test your knowledge of Canadian History, Culture and Government:

1. Name two key documents that contain our rights and freedoms

    a. *Magna Carta, Charter of Rights and Freedoms*
2. Who was Sir Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine?
    a. *first Premier of the United Province of Canada and the first head of a responsible government in Canada.*
3. What does the word "Inuit" mean?
    a. *The people*
4. What does it mean to say that Canada is a Constitutional Monarchy?
    a. *We swear our loyalty to the Queen*
        i. Which as an aside is really quite interesting when we think about the impeachment trial going on in Washington; some of the debate hinges on the fact that American politicians swear the oath to a document, the US Constitution, not a person or the President. That last part was not on the test.

How did you do? If you missed a few or all of them, take some comfort that you are not alone. In 2019 those same questions and 6 others were asked of more than 1,600 Canadian citizens on the eve of Canada Day (that's the day that celebrated our confederation on July 1 if you were wondering). Only 12 per cent of respondents got eight or more correct answers, the threshold to pass the test. The average score was five out of 10.

If you fail the test does that make you a bad Canadian? Should you lose your citizenship? Your right to vote? Your Tim Horton's Points Card?

Should you have to go back to school; study these things? What are the obligations for civic and historical knowledge of a Canadian citizen?

I'll leave those questions – like the others on the test – unanswered for the moment.

Let's turn to the other momentous event of my week, though arguably it was more momentous for the conversion student.

When a person wants to join the Jewish people the typical path of conversion is to:

- Study for about a year in a class with other similarly inclined students.
- Be mentored by a rabbi
- Attend and participate in the functions of a synagogue and the Jewish community
- and then at the end of all of that you take a test, write an easy and sit before a rabbinic court of three rabbis called a Beit Din, literally a House of Judgement who ask you questions about all of the above in attempt to ascertain your knowledge, commitment and preparedness to live the rest of your life as a Jew.

Given that we are in the midst of a pandemic, the first in our lifetime but not the first in Jewish history we have adapted this process to the modern version of a correspondence course; we hold the classes on zoom. Students attend services online, invariably some are worshiping with us right now and the Beit Din is also on zoom.

Here are some of the questions we ask our students:

1. Of the holidays that you observed during the conversion process, which was the most meaningful to you and why?
2. Describe how you celebrate Shabbat. How has your observance of Shabbat influenced your life as a Jew?
3. What is your relationship with God? (i.e. Do you believe in God? Is God active in the world today?)
4. How does the existence of the State of Israel fit into your Jewish identity?

Granted these questions are a little more subjective than those I faced from Immigration Canada, but they are nonetheless fundamental to what it means to live as a Jew.

We also test the student on their knowledge of Jewish History, a little bit of Hebrew, stories and lessons from the Torah and the rules and customs of Jewish holiday observance.

1. Who was Rebecca?
2. What does the holiday of Shavuoth celebrate?
3. Name the five books of the Torah in Hebrew and in order
4. How many commandments are there?

If a conversion student fails any of these or does not satisfy the *Beit Din* we inform them to study some and come back again in six months to a year. It doesn't happen often, but it has happened a few times in my 20+ years as a rabbi.

What if every Jew had to take this test, like they were asked in the Canada survey? Do you think our people would pass the test? Would you? If you fail do we send you back to Hebrew school, take away your Bar or Bat Mitzvah? Require you to attend 8 hours of synagogue like its driver's education for a speeding ticket?

Of course, the point of these two tests is the same; inherent in their purpose is that with the rights and privileges of citizenship as a Canadian or as a Jew comes responsibilities; perhaps chief among them is to be an informed citizen so that you can uphold the values and principles of either system for yourself and safeguard them for the next generation.

And so I come to this week's Torah portion, Mishpatim, which literally means "Laws". Last week our people received the Torah on Mt Sinai, a moment celebrated by the holiday of Shavuoth (that's an answer to a previous question if you are scoring at home).

This week Moses details many of God's laws to the Israelites. These include laws about worshiping other gods, kashrut, business ethics and treatment of animals. God outlines the details of three holidays: Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot. God provides an angel to protect the Israelites from their enemies and warns the Israelites not to worship other gods.

Unlike the citizenship test or even the beit din, failure to observe these laws often results in either being put to death or severe financial and social penalties.

Sadly, if unsurprisingly, the ancient Israelites were no better at passing the test than many of us. They continually violate the laws or commandments, often out of ignorance, there are 613 of them after all (that's another answer from earlier) and much of the Torah and the whole of Rabbinic Judaism beginning with the Mishnah and the Talmud is dedicated to trying to explain and encourage these laws in the Jewish people so they will faithfully observe them from generation to generation.

When I have asked people that were born Canadian or raised Jewish about their knowledge of their country or their religion, I often hear the same answer. "I think I knew that answer once, long ago, but I don't remember it anymore."

The reason is obvious – to the aspiring Jew or aspiring Citizen they have reason and motivation to know these things; they need them to fully embody the identity they seek to inhabit. But to the one who was "born into it" its value, like so many things in not apparent until it is perhaps in jeopardy. If you needed it to survive or succeed you would know it for sure.

And this is where the study of Torah is instructive as a model. Judaism has long held that you never graduate from being a Jew, it's a lifetime of study. The great rabbis of our tradition were always studying, they were students of Torah even as they were teachers of Torah.

I can tell you that as a soon to be Canadian and as a student and teacher of Judaism everyday what I know about either enriches my experience of both identities. Seeing the rights and responsibilities of a Canadian with a Jewish lens and seeing how Canada strives to protect and align with my Jewish values gives me great appreciation for the history and ongoing struggles of both civilizations. Similarly, I wouldn't know where either fall short or need my active help to improve if I didn't know and appreciate the foundation upon which they stand.

There is a blessing for the study of Torah, you are supposed to say it every time you sit down to learn about Judaism, which is every day.

Baruch attah Adonai, elheynu Melech haloam,
asher kidashanu, bmitzvotav vitzivanu la'asok b'divrei Torah.

Blessed are you Adonai our God who has made us
holy and commanded us to engage with the words of Torah.

I would add, "and to engage with our rights, responsibilities and history as Canadian citizens."

Both are a daily task; both are a mitzvah, and both give meaning and purpose to our life.

It’s a test we pass simply by studying for it; but it’s also a test that never ends. You never graduate and that’s the whole point of being a Canadian and a Jew – we are always learning, growing and improving.