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"He Who Increases Not His Knowledge,
Decreases It"

Hillel

by Hillel Gamoran

Jewish life is based on three pillars, God, Israel, and Torah. Since the earliest days in our history Judaism has been dependent on one or more of these ideas. At first it was Israel the nation that made the Jewish people, and later, when the idea of one God of the universe was initiated, this also helped to maintain the solidarity of the Jews. When the Jews returned from their Babylonian exile, the third characteristic of Judaism became important in their lives. This was the time when they began to let their lives be governed in accordance with the Torah. It was no longer only priests and Levites who studied the Torah. It became the duty of all the people to study and guide their lives by the Torah.

For many centuries it was God, Israel, and Torah which determined the Jewish way of life, but events occurred which were destined to change this. First there were born the daughter religions of Judaism. Christianity and Islam also accepted the concept of one God, so although the Jews still held their idea of God, it was no longer unique, and did not serve as well as it had as a binding force between Jews. The Jewish people, which had long before lost its national independence, was driven from the land of Israel and became a people without a homeland.

However there was one foundation of Israel which was still retained to the fullest. The Jews were dispersed to every continent and to every land, and where ever they went they took with them the Torah. They studied the Torah and clung to it, for they knew that as long as they kept the Torah the Jewish people would survive.

Torah in Jewish life became to mean more than just the five books of Moses. After the sealing of the Canon, Torah meant the Bible, and later the Mishnah and the Talmud were also included in the definition of Torah. Finally the study of Torah came to stand for all phases of the study of Judaism. This is what Torah means today. Any Jewish book that is read or any discussion or lecture on a Jewish subject that is heard is the

study of Torah.

If there is one quality that has characterized the Jewish people throughout history, it is their study of Torah. For this reason we are called the "people of the book." Also, Jews, more than any other people have a deep respect for knowledge and for scholarship.

In most countries in ancient times the rulers were either successful generals or powerful political leaders, but in Eretz Israel the situation was different. The laws of the land, both civil and religious, were based on the Torah; therefore the leaders of the country were those that were most learned. At the beginning of the common era Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shannai were the chief judges of the people. These men were not powerful or wealthy in the material sense, but they owned a wealth of knowledge which made them honored throughout Israel.

We are all familiar with the story of when Hillel listened to a lecture through a skylight on the roof even though it was snowing at the time. What brought him to do this was the same love of Torah that caused him to study and become one of the greatest sages our people has ever known. Hillel is famous for his wisdom, his patience, his liberalism, and his exceptionally fine character, but the most important reason that we know so much of him today is because he was such a great scholar and a fine teacher.

If we had to give the factor which contributed most to the survival of the Jewish people, it would unhesitatingly be its study of the Torah. If the Jews had forsaken the Torah, their customs and ceremonies, their language, and their way of life would have been neglected also; in fact, all that is Judaism might have perished.

However the Jew knew the worth of the Torah and studied and absorbed it, just as a man eats and absorbs the food which keeps him alive. Let us rejoice in study and exalt in knowledge and be thankful to the Lord who gave the Torah to Israel.

The need for study today is as great as it ever was, and many opportunities are open for college students in Cincinnati who are interested in learning about Judaism.