

The "Beit Midrash": Learning How To Learn Together

By Dr. Howard Morgan

Attached to every synagogue is a place devoted to the study of sacred writings and Holy Scripture. This area is called the Beit Midrash, the house of learning or study. Midrash literally means "investigation." Here the Jewish people would gather to investigate, study, learn and argue the meanings and proper applications of their revered texts. In this environment, rich spiritual opportunities for learning are given to the participants that can never be obtained alone, or by simply listening to a lecturer give his or her own opinions. The opportunity to express one's own thoughts and feelings, and engage in oftentimes very passionate and heated debate is a very stimulating intellectual and spiritual experience. It is also an extremely necessary and vital part of studying the Word of God, and growing in your personal relationship with the Lord. Without it the opportunities for "iron to sharpen iron" (Proverbs 27:17) will be limited and spiritual growth stunted. Being part of a Beit Midrash can literally transform not only the way you learn the scriptures but your personal relationship with the Lord.

The dynamic that learning together brings is one of the missing vital ingredients in most churches that follow a Greco-Roman rather than the scriptural Hebraic model. If these expressions are foreign to you, let me try to define them. When the church rejected her Jewish roots (and then the Jewish people) and opted instead for a root system in Greek philosophical thought, she lost all of the sources of spiritual nourishment that those roots were intended by God to provide. One of the sources of nourishment is this Hebraic model of learning together, which we will call the Beit Midrash style of Bible study. The Greco-Roman model, which most churches basically follow, tends to foster a clergy-laity division that, directly or indirectly, advertently or inadvertently, suppresses or minimizes the spiritual growth and maturity of the members of the congregation. People tend to observe the "theater" of religious services, rather than be trained to actually partake in ministry. "Anointed" leaders perform their sacred duties, while "lay" people merely sit and observe the proceedings. Those who sense a call to ministry typically are sent off to study in the relative sterility of academically-, rather than ministerially-, focused Bible schools and seminaries instead of being mentored, disciplined and trained by spiritual fathers and mothers as they deal with the realities of everyday life in the local setting. This model also tends to minimize the place of learning, because learning is the key to knowledge, growth and power. The learning that is allowed to take place is that which is limited to local church and/or denominational doctrine. The "we believe this and they don't" mentality is what is accentuated and fostered. How many people have been told "we don't believe that in this church, and if you believe that you should leave or keep it to yourself." In other words there are subjects whose study is forbidden. This sounds to me like the dictates of a Caesar, not the commands of Christ to study the Word of God (Deuteronomy 11:19, 1 Timothy 2:15).

This clergy-laity division is not always intentional or even done consciously. Many pastors are frustrated that their people are not growing and doing more. By far the great majority of pastors are sincere men and women of God who are earnestly seeking the Lord for ways and means to effectively minister to their people so that they would grow in their faith. The fault lies in the model in which we have been trained and involves the cultural dynamics that influence everyone. The people in the congregation have a mentality that fosters their own spiritual immaturity by insisting that the church be run in a certain way. Many people just don't want to grow spiritually; they are happy to be spectators.

I believe that God is looking for people who want to break out of old stereotypical ways of doing things, explore what their Jewish roots offer them, and pray and see if the Lord will lead them to try new things. The Beit Midrash is part of the Hebraic model for the church that has been lost to us through the centuries. Will you be part of its restoration?

The Beit Midrash is not your typical Bible discussion group that has a group leader, a workbook, fixed agenda, and doctrinal correctness. This is a very free flowing, open, and often passionate environment that is geared to giving people maximum freedom to think, feel, and express their points of view. Yes, it is true that some will advocate heretical and strange doctrines. First Corinthians 11:19 says that it is important that they do – so that those who are approved can be clearly seen. Others will proclaim bizarre revelations, obscure interpretations and weird applications of the Bible. Doctrines of demons will try to make inroads (so what else is new?), and lots more "stuff" will all surface at your Beit Midrash. But the Holy Spirit will also minister His authentic revelations and impart life-changing truths. Rich spiritual nourishment will be supplied by the Head of the Body. People will have opportunities to be challenged to earnestly study the Word for themselves, and thereby truly grow and change. All the negative "stuff" will be exposed to the light of serious study, examined thoroughly, and disposed of forever. First Thessalonians 5:21 and 1 John 4:1 will be key verses for everyone who studies this way: "Test all things, hold fast to that which is good" and "Believe not every spirit but test them...."

In order to have an effective Beit Midrash, everyone who attends must have the same basic motivation. It is not, as some think, the attainment of knowledge for knowledge's sake or the seeking of an opportunity to show how much they know, but a sincerely heartfelt desire to deepen their personal relationship with the Lord and be changed into His image (Romans 8:29, 2 Corinthians 3:18). Developing keener interpersonal relationships with other members of the study group can happen as a result of studying together but is not a primary motivation. Every member of the study group must come with the same motivation if the times of study will prove to be fruitful instead of mere intellectual ramblings or the strutting of egos. Other motivations will be clearly revealed in due time. One of the marvelous benefits of this kind of study is that Hebrews 4:12 is seen in operation: "The thoughts and intents of the heart are revealed." Self revelation, which is the beginning of true repentance by which we receive grace to change, is one of the fruits of this kind of study. What a wonderful thought for those who truly are His disciples and want to change into His image! The Beit Midrash model is designed to enhance the spiritual life of those who are sincere disciples of the Kingdom of God. A disciple, simply defined, is someone who honestly wants to learn, grow and change into the image of the Lord. They are not focused on themselves, or on their reputations, or on how others perceive them; they really want to deepen their relationship with the Lord and change into His likeness. The Beit Midrash is not about convincing others of the rightness of your interpretations or the erroneousness of theirs. It is about opening your heart to the work of the Holy Spirit so that you can learn, grow, and change. The dynamic of sharing the insights and truths you have learned, and receiving the same from others, will be a rich source for your spiritual growth.

The sincerity of our motivation, our patience and tolerance for others who hold different views, and the sincerity of our desire to see everyone grow in the truth that God gives them will be tested in these study times. The Beit Midrash presents to us those wonderfully difficult moments where we have a divinely given choice to act in our old nature or quietly open our spirit to the loving ministry of the Holy Spirit and allow Him to change us, or at least show us places where we need to change. From there we can get alone with the Lord and let him do His work of transformation in us. That is, if we want to!

Let's look at some practical ways we can actually get started in forming our own Beit Midrash. The first thing you need to understand is that the leader of this kind of study does not need to have all the answers, or any of the answers, for that matter. This is one reason why some pastors are hesitant to get involved with this kind of study. They are in the old Greco-Roman model that dictates to them that they have to have all the answers to everyone's questions. An absurd position for anyone to think they have to be in. Pastors who lead a Beit Midrash simply come as a student with other students. He does not come to necessarily give answers, but to ask questions, to learn, to grow, to change. He, as well as the more mature members of the study group, will naturally have more to share from the depths of their experience and years of study.

The attitude that you are merely a student in the "School of the Spirit" (whether at a beginner or advanced level) is wonderfully freeing. There is so much liberty in being able to say "I don't know; let's study that some more." We come to the Beit Midrash to learn from whosoever the Lord chooses to use. I have personally learned so much from the insights of children and new believers. The freshness they bring to their understanding of the Word and to their relationship with the Lord is always very stimulating.

If you want to start this kind of a study, see yourself simply as a facilitator (to use a modern term) of the discussion, someone who can keep some semblance of order (like when to say, "Goodnight, Gracie") and who is given authority by the group to end arguments when it becomes profitable to do so. Some disagreements are good because they stimulate more study. Others are counterproductive: for example, those kinds of immature emotional outbursts that have people calling each other names, or manifesting various forms of emotional manipulation such as ignoring someone or sulking. The levels of spiritual and emotional maturity of those in the study group will determine how much disagreement they will be able to handle. As people learn how to participate in this kind of study they will be able to handle more and more "Godly friction." You will learn about facilitating as you go on. Remember, learning is what this Beit Midrash experience is all about. You can't fail at this because it is all about learning, asking questions, and promoting further study. This is new ground for many believers, so give yourself permission to make mistakes and learn and grow. After all, if you don't try it you can never learn it, and your spiritual life and those who would have joined you in this adventure will be poorer instead of richer.

The group should be not larger than twelve and can be as small as two. Gather around a table, where there is easy access to Bibles, concordances, books and other study aids and of course plenty of pens and paper. Keep some light refreshments available because once you get started you will be there a while...believe me!

The Beit Midrash study can be likened to someone who steps off the dry land anywhere on the earth and into the water. The Bible says that one day "the glory of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea." Jesus said that those who believed in Him would have "rivers of living water flowing from their innermost being." From these, and other scriptures, we can see that God likens himself to water. As we study the natural so we can learn about the spiritual (1 Corinthians 15:46). All the rivers of the earth eventually flow into the sea, and all the waters of the sea are really one huge ocean, vast, deep and teeming with life. Sometimes the ocean is so incredibly calm and serene, at other times it is horrendously violent. There are paths in the sea, tides and currents that circle the earth. You can literally put a note in a bottle and throw it into the ocean at any place on the earth, and if that bottle catches the right currents it can go around the world. So it is with the Beit Midrash Bible study. You can start anywhere in the Word of God with a question or a comment; just step out into the vast ocean of God's spirit and be carried along to discover the "unsearchable riches of Messiah Jesus" (Ephesians 3:8).

Let me give you an example of how this works. A few years ago I was teaching a group of Bible school students in London about the Beit Midrash study. I had a group of them come forward to have an impromptu experience of it. Their pastor and associate pastor joined in also. As the twelve of them sat in a circle in the front of the room, I asked them if any one had a question. After a few moments of silence a rather shy young lady raised her hand rather timidly. (This by the way is something you never do in a Beit Midrash study, you just speak out. The art of interrupting is a very Jewish thing to do. The heated flow of discussion in the Beit Midrash study is such that interruptions become the normal, natural way for the flow, like the currents in an ocean, to proceed. What you have to learn to do is just interrupt the interruption and bring the discussion back to the direction you want it to go. The facilitator can use his authority here to guide the flow. As you can see the Beit Midrash study has its own rules of etiquette!). When I told her not to raise her hand but just to speak out whatever was on her mind, she asked a simple but very profound question. "What is a calling?" In the traditional Bible study setting the question would have been directed to the leader, but here it is directed to the group. (If you only ask one person you only get one person's perspective.

The Bible says that in the multitude of counselors there is wisdom. God will confirm things to you via more than one witness.) So I asked everyone to offer an answer. Well, let me tell you that we stepped into the waters in London and the currents of the Holy Spirit took over. The anointing of the Spirit began to move in people's hearts as new revelation and understanding began to emerge not just about "callings," but about a myriad of subjects. At one point the associate pastor literally jumped out of his seat yelling, "Hallelujah, praise the Lord, I just got an answer to something that I have been seeking from the Lord for a long time." He shared that it was a very personal matter and did not want to discuss it at that time. (This by the way is another very important element in the Beit Midrash study; we always respect each other's thoughts and feelings and never press anyone to share anything they do not want to. The Beit Midrash study is not about exposing anyone or making anyone feel uncomfortable. It is about creating a very positive environment for learning, discussing, investigating and growing). He did share, though, that it had nothing to do with the initial topic that began our Beit Midrash study. The Lord used that merely as an entrance point into the waters of the Spirit, and the currents of God brought revelation to this man. God will use the Beit Midrash study as a means of bringing revelation to you.

The Beit Midrash operates according to some basic principles, which if applied consistently will make your experience very positive and spiritually enriching. The first and most basic principle is that of respect for your fellow students and their points of view. You must show respect in tone and attitude for each other. Respect does not mean agreement, but it does mean that you conduct yourself in a particular way that keeps the atmosphere free from opportunities for the enemy to come in and affect people's thoughts and feelings. We don't want to make people feel bad, we want to continually encourage more study. As I shared earlier, this is a place we get some wonderfully difficult opportunities to grow into the image of Jesus. Showing respect for the person, while disagreeing, even disagreeing vehemently (and this will happen!) with their opinion, is not easy. But the fruits of the Spirit can be cultivated fairly quickly through this type of spiritual experience.

A Beit Midrash study group can degenerate into a "Yes, we all believe the same thing and isn't that boring" home meeting fairly quickly if we alienate those whose points of view are different than our own. If we treat those who disagree with us in a disdainful manner they will not return to our study group and we will be the poorer for it. We have to learn how to learn from each other. Learning from one another is an aspect of the Hebraic model of the church that has been lost to us. But God is restoring it!

God uses the natural world to reveal himself to us (Romans 1:20). All throughout the natural world we see the constant theme of variety and diversity. God did not create one kind of flower or bird or fish or person. He created vastly different kinds. (Especially insects, have you ever looked at one of those bugs with a magnifying glass? They are seriously ugly! Whatever was God thinking when he created those things!) The scripture teaches us that the Body of Christ works like the human body. Our bodies are made up of organs and tissues and cells that are vastly different from each other in both structure and function. No one part of your body can say to another part of your body, "I don't like what you look like, or sound like, or what you do for the body so keep your 'stuff' away from me." Can you imagine what would happen to your index finger if it said to your liver, "Keep your liver 'stuff' away from me"? After a while that finger would be dead!

This variety and diversity is also seen in the Body of Christ. Just as every part of your physical body needs every other part of your body, so we need what every other member of the Body of Messiah supplies for us (Ephesians 4:16). We need people in our lives who think differently than we do. Different points of view, different interpretations of the Bible, different applications of the Bible, have to be examined, discussed and evaluated. With the right attitude and understanding, these different points of view can be sources of spiritual nourishment for each other. It is absolutely essential for our spiritual growth that we have this diversity as a part of our spiritual diet.

This is what the Beit Midrash can do for us. It can create an environment where the Word of God in all of its wonderful complexity can be investigated. Like the Bereans of Acts 17 we can come together to investigate the Word of God and the words of men "to see if these things be so."

The ancient rabbis expressed their comprehension of the realities of diversity of understanding, and the necessity for it, by analogizing it this way. They said that studying the Word of God was like having a group of students examining a huge diamond set in the middle of a table. As the light of the Lord came upon the diamond everyone from their own position and perspective saw different radiant and glorious colors. As they saw the magnificent colors and shared what they saw, they began to realize that what they were seeing was the manifold wisdom of God being revealed in part to everyone, and that together we get a full picture. No one individual has all of the wisdom or revelation. While it is true that you may know more than anyone else at your study, remember what the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:9: each one only sees in part and knows in part. So no matter how much you know, all you know is a part. Every point of view is also many points of blindness. No one can see behind him, no one has eyes in the back of his head (no, not even your mother or sixth-grade teacher even if they convinced you that they did!). We all need someone to see what is going on behind us. We need each other, and we need each other's point of view.

Another analogy the Rabbis had that expressed the same understanding was the likening of the Word of God to a rock, and studying the rock was equivalent to hitting it with a hammer. The small pieces that flew off the rock landed in the hands of those who were studying. Each student could examine his little piece with its own unique shape. He could arrogantly and ignorantly argue that his little piece was all there was to the rock, and that his little piece with its own particular shape was the shape of the entire rock. An absurd position, but it clearly illustrates the foolishness of so many Christians who adamantly hold on to their own little pieces (their pet doctrines) and ignorantly proclaim that that is what the whole rock is like. Let us study the pieces we have and all the other pieces, so that we can all truly come to the "fullness of Messiah" (Ephesians 4:13).

When discussing divergent points of view there will come the time when some passionate disagreements will be voiced. This is normal and actually very healthy. It means that people are really engaging the Word of God on a deep and meaningful level. Jesus said that it was passionate people who would take the Kingdom of God. Too many Christians, too much church activity, and church services in particular, lack any kind of passion. Far too much done in the name of Jesus is vapid, insipid and, quite frankly, booooring. The authentic ministry of the Holy Spirit is anything but boring. The Word of God is alive, active and powerful. It is like a fire, and when it ignites a human soul, that person will be full of the zeal of God (Psalm 69:9 & John 2:17). God desires to ignite those fires in every one of His children. I believe that the Beit Midrash is a means that God uses to ignite those fires and to keep them burning.

A vital part of our Hebraic heritage that has been lost to the church is the ability to, and the acceptability of, arguing the Scriptures. This was the common way for people to study the Word of God in the time of Jesus. When he was twelve he is seen doing exactly that with the doctors of the Law. Throughout his ministry Jesus was arguing the Scriptures with his adversaries and his disciples. The picture that comes to most of our minds when we read the word "argue" is a violent verbal display of emotion in which the arguers are very angry with each other. This is not the case here. To argue the Scriptures does not mean that you are angry with anyone, or they with you, it just means that you both have strong, passionate feelings about your position. Nothing in this world is ever accomplished without passion. It is a missing ingredient in many lives. However, allowing your passion for your understanding of the Scriptures to make you angry with your brother or sister is sin. It opens the door for the devil to barrage your emotions with all kinds of negative influences. Bitterness and resentment will surely follow and will defile you and many others (Hebrews 12:15). The usual result is separation, disunity, mutual recrimination and vilification. The past and present history of the church is replete with examples of this. A Godly attitude of humility, coupled with an understanding that you only know in part, and that the part you know is incomplete, will help you mitigate against negative attitudes toward your brethren.

Your own humility will say to you, "I could be wrong; maybe I don't see all there is to see; maybe there is some merit in what my brother is saying; after all, I only know in part." Humility does not pray prayers that sound like, "Lord, show them how wrong they are and how right we are." It does inspire prayers that sound like "Lord, show us all more of yourself and the truth of your Word."

In the movie *Yentle*, there are many scenes depicting the students arguing the Scriptures very passionately. Although there could be great disagreement about the meaning or application of the text, there is never the accusation that someone is not a Jew because they didn't see the others' point of view. Yet in the church we are so quick to brand someone a heretic because they disagree with us. This kind of thinking is inspired by the devil. We must learn how to investigate God's word with an attitude of humility if we are ever going to come to maturity.

Dealing with disagreements in a positive way is very important for personal spiritual growth, for attaining a greater knowledge of the Word of God, and for building unity in the Church. A Beit Midrash study principle that is very helpful is this: when disagreements arise, record all of the points of view. Then have everyone in your study group investigate each one of them (do I smell homework?). After you have all completed this assignment, you bring together the results of your research and discuss the matter further. The issue is resolved when everyone is convinced in their own mind what the fruits of their own and the others' study have revealed. Apply the truths you have learned to your own life and allow yourself and the others to observe the fruits of what you believe. Is your relationship with God increasing? Is your life bearing more fruit for the Kingdom? This, after all, is why we are studying the Word of God in the first place, isn't it?

I have a personal conviction that if theology is not practical it is not Godly. If it does not cause the fruits of the Spirit to be cultivated and manifested in our lives then we risk being seduced by doctrines of demons that produce knowledge but no fruit, with lives focused on ourselves rather than on God and His Love and His purposes.

This strategy for dealing with disagreements leaves plenty of room for the Holy Spirit to bring more understanding and revelation into our lives. Instead of simply parroting what our ministers believe, we are impelled to study the issues for ourselves. The Beit Midrash study group agrees to temporarily set aside the disagreement in the hope that more information will be forthcoming that will give us new insight and understanding. We must be open to whomever, or however, the Lord will choose to bring more truth to us. Moses taught in Deuteronomy 1:7 that we should not "recognize the face." The KJV translation reads, "Ye shall not respect persons in judgment, but ye shall hear the small as well as the great, ye shall not be afraid of the face of man, for the judgment is God's." In other words truth can come from anyone--even from the mouths of babes (Psalm 8:2).

I think another story from our Jewish heritage will help illustrate the point of the necessity and validity of arguing the Scriptures. There were two elderly rabbis who, whenever they were together, would always argue with one another about the meaning and applications of the Scriptures. They spent many years doing this and finally one of the old rabbis died. The other rabbi was so upset at the news of his friend's passing that his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, why are you so upset at the news of this man's death? All you ever did was argue with him." The Rabbi looked at his disciples and said to them, "You don't understand, now I don't have anyone to argue with." These men were never angry with each other, they were like iron sharpening iron for each other. They stimulated each other intellectually and spiritually. They enriched each other's life.

We do more than agree to disagree--we go one step further. We agree that both of us only know in part, and that we should continue to study and pray for further revelation. Who knows who will be the vessel, or what manner, the Lord will use to bring us into more understanding. This attitude can make our walk with the Lord and with our brethren very exciting.

You give God great opportunities to instruct you, and create very enriching spiritual relationships with brothers and sisters, when you conduct yourself in this manner.

No longer are you at odds with your brethren over doctrinal differences, but together you become fellow explorers, investigators of the Word and the Ways of the Lord. Unity can actually come out of diversity because you now see each other as sources of spiritual nutrition, exciting catalysts that provoke deeper study and greater insights into the Word of the Lord. Instead of satan getting the victory and causing separation. Jesus gets the victory and creates unity in His Body.

For too long the Body of Christ has done terrible damage to itself by trying to create unity based on agreement of doctrine or interpretations of the Scriptures. What we have done to the Body of our Lord is criminal. We are all guilty of this, either by association with, or misplaced loyalty to, a group and its progenitors, or directly by our own words and actions. Ranging from verbal assassination to outright murder we have vilified, castigated, branded as heretics and apostates, even martyred, those who disagreed with our theology or our practices.

What we have to do is search for and find ways to overcome this deeply entrenched historic demonic stronghold that has literally controlled and manipulated the Church for centuries. The prayer of Jesus for our unity will be answered. I believe that part of the answer is the present day work of the Holy Spirit in restoring to the Church this Hebraic model of Bible study.