

SAME PAGE,

by ILANA KURSHAN

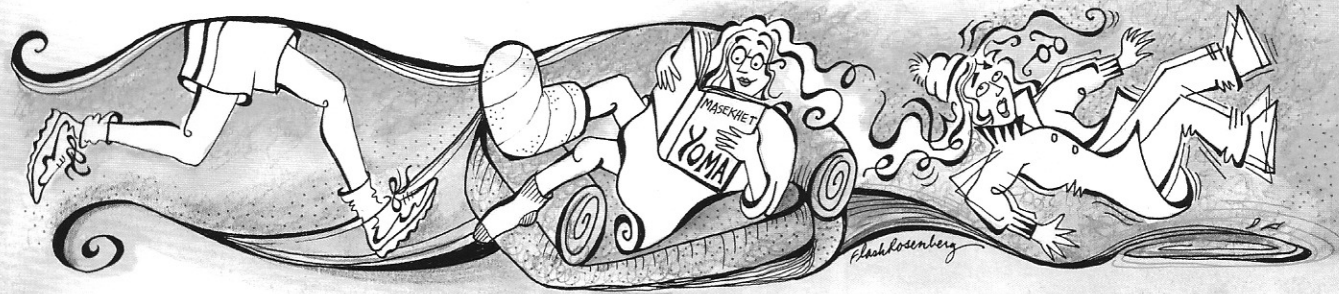
The day I completed the Talmud section *Masekhet Yoma*, I had my cast taken off. Six weeks before, I broke my arm during the big Jerusalem winter storm, which began the same day we learned in *daf yomi* (the daily study of a page of Talmud) about Hillel's ascent to the top of a snowy roof to listen in on Shmaya and Avtalyon's class in Talmudic Babylonia (35b).

I was heading out to the garbage to deposit a bag of dirty diapers when I slipped on black ice and tried to block the fall with my hand. Under ordinary circumstances, this would have been inconvenient; but with three kids under the age of three, two of whom can't walk (and one of whom rarely walks where you want him to), it was nearly impossible. Daniel and I joked that we had a one-working-arm-to-child ratio. I learned to carry the twins in the crook of my arm, to cut vegetables with one hand, and to fold laundry with my elbow. All the while, in my reading, I was following the high priest through the chambers and courtyards

spent the next few weeks on my couch with my leg propped up and *Masekhet Yoma* on my lap, making my way into the holy of holies and then back out to read Torah in the Temple courtyard.

In order to heal, bones have to set, and so I find myself wondering what has set in my life in the time between my two encounters with *Masekhet Yoma*.

The word *yoma* is Aramaic for "the day," and refers to Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. But in Hebrew the word for "the day," *hayom*, is also the word for "today," which points to a significant difference between my study of *Yoma* then and now. Seven-and-a-half years ago, when I learned *Yoma* for the first time, I never had any doubts about how I was spending "today." Each morning I would learn Talmud with a study partner at the Conservative Yeshiva and then head to my job (at the literary agency where I still work) from noon until 7 P.M. In the evenings I would attend various classes throughout the city—a



of the Temple, observing as he gathered up the incense to take into the holy of holies. He took a pan in his right hand and a ladle in his left, a task which I could not have completed without two working arms. Nor could I have performed *kemitza*, which involves scooping up the incense underneath the middle three fingers of the hand while extending the thumb and pinky (47a). The rabbis describe *kemitza* as the most difficult part of Temple ritual—even without a cast extending from elbow to knuckles.

I have broken two bones in my life, and, ironically, the previous injury took place seven-and-a-half years ago—when I learned *Masekhet Yoma* for the first time. Then, it was my foot that I broke, probably from too much running and not enough stretching. I remember receiving the x-ray results just as I was learning the famous story in the Mishnah about the two priests who raced each other up the ramp of the altar to clear away the ashes; one pushed his friend in an effort to get ahead, and his friend stumbled and broke his foot. From this point, they decided to conduct a lottery to determine which priest would perform the various parts of the Temple service (22a). Presumably the priest who had broken his foot was then barred from the Temple on account of his injury, because priests, the *cobanim*, had to be in perfect condition to perform their ritual duties, whereas I

parsha shiur (a class on the weekly Torah portion) one night, a discussion on Jewish philosophy the next. Other evenings I would go to my book club, where we read and discussed a different Hebrew novel each month. When I came home late in the evening, I would learn *daf yomi* and collapse in bed so that I could wake up early to jog the next morning (until I broke my foot, of course). Each day had its own schedule, mapped out like the order of the priest's activities on Yom Kippur. And each day was full of activities I enjoyed—learning Torah, working with books, exercising, attending classes, spending time with friends.

Even so, I could not have told you where my life was heading—and it wasn't just because I had one broken foot. I did not know if I would ever advance in my job, or fall in love again, or become a mother, or stay in Israel. All the big questions were still unanswered. I enjoyed how I spent each day, but I had no idea what life would look like someday in the future. Indeed, part of the reason I began learning *daf yomi* in 2006 was an attempt to shore up against a terrifying future in which nothing seemed certain except that I was getting older. If I learned a page of Talmud each day, I thought, then with each passing day I would not just be one day older, but also one day wiser. By the time I finished the cycle, I'd be 35. This seemed terribly old to my 27-year-old self. If

SEVEN YEARS LATER

I hadn't had children by then, I thought, then surely I never would. And if I hadn't reached a satisfying place in my career, I thought, then surely it was all over for me professionally. All future Yom Kippur observances would be full of regret at missed opportunities, and I would never be able to forgive myself.

Returning to Yoma for the second time, after seven Yom Kippur holidays have elapsed in the interim, I see it all in a very different light. The night before Yom Kippur, the young priests were responsible for ensuring that the high priest did not fall asleep, lest he become impure from a seminal emission. If he started to drift off, they would beat him with their fingers and tell him to stand up and then lie himself down on the cold floor so as to jolt himself awake (19b). This is not unlike what Matan does when he wakes up before dawn and wants us to come play with him. Daniel taught him that he is not allowed to wake up until the sun rises, and we leave his shade open a crack at night so that

think about them as I edit articles, translate books, and proofread translations before submitting them to the original authors. I enjoy my work, but I would not say that I have discovered my true calling in life, or that I am engaged in divine service. From the moment the high priest immerses himself in the mikvah for the first time on Yom Kippur morning until the people of Israel accompany him to his home at the end of the day, the Talmud details every single step he takes. As such, Masekhet Yoma is a model for what it means for all our steps to be directed towards the service of heaven. In this sense I have a long way to go.

On the other hand (and I'm grateful to have just received that other hand back), while I can't say I'm satisfied or proud with how I spend each and every "today," many of the larger questions of "someday" seem to have resolved themselves. There is no doubt in my mind that when I married Daniel, I won the lottery. I could not imagine a kinder, wiser, more loving person



he can make this determination for himself. In this sense, Matan is like the high priests charged with determining exactly when the sun rises on Yom Kippur morning, at which point they would announce "*Barkai*," the sun is shining (28a). Matan bounds into our room in his furry one-piece pajamas and announces, "Sun is up! Time to play! Get up, Imma!" And before I can look at my watch or even open my eyes, he is tapping with his fingers on my forehead, encouraging me to come help him with a puzzle. The rest of the morning unfolds in a tired blur of diaper changing, nursing, dressing the girls in their pink (*Liav*) and purple (*Tagel*) outfits, and reheating the French toast that I fried in a pan the night before by dipping leftover challah in egg and milk and scooping in some cinnamon with my middle three fingers.

These days I have significant doubts and insecurities about how I spend each "today." Rarely do I feel like I am using my unique talents to make a contribution to the world, nor do I feel a sense of satisfaction when I look back at any given day. When we drop off the three kids at their various child care places at 8 A.M., I feel guilty about the time I am not with them and concerned about whether I am doing what is best for them. I wish I could say that I forget about the kids entirely and immerse myself in writing and studying until the 3 P.M. pickup. But I continue to

with whom to spend my life—even if I rarely have time to tell him that anymore. Our children are beautiful and beaming and seem to be healthy, though not a day passes when I don't worry about the one who refuses to feed himself, or the one who still won't crawl. We have made a home in Jerusalem where, from our back window, we can see the Temple Mount where the high priests once performed the Yom Kippur service. If given the opportunity to enter the Holy of Holies and offer only a short prayer, as the high priest was instructed on Yom Kippur (53b), I would use those precious moments to thank God for all these blessings. It took two cycles of *daf yomi*, but I feel that I have finally learned the lesson of this tractate, namely that *Yoma* is about the convergence of both meanings of *hayom*. It is about the day that "today" is "the day," the most important day on the Jewish calendar. But it is also about realizing that this convergence happens every day—that our lives at this moment are not a prelude to a future someday, but that this is it, *Barkai*, the sun is up, Imma! No sooner does this realization dawn on me than I get out of bed, extend my arms to embrace my son, and step forwards into the rest of my life. ■

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