

Study Guide – If All the Seas Were Ink

Questions for Discussion

1. Kurshan explains in her introduction that she began studying Talmud during a difficult time in her life, when she had trouble putting one foot in front of the other. Can you think of a time in your life when literature helped you find a way forwards? What was the literature, and how did it speak to you? j
2. Kurshan writes about several episodes in her life that took place before she began studying daf yomi, such as her graduate studies at Cambridge and her college experience with anorexia. How does she tie these experiences in to her recounting of her study of Talmud? Is there anything else you wish Kurshan had shared about her earlier life experiences?
3. Kurshan writes that by the Talmud's standards, she is a man and not a woman (p. 10). What does she mean by that? Do you find it convincing?
4. In the chapter on Rosh Hashanah, Kurshan explains her relationship to journal writing – she says, for instance, that she tended to write more when she was sad or worried than when she was happy and carefree. In what way is this book like a journal, and in what ways is it different? How does Kurshan speak to this difference?
5. In describing how she came to meet her husband, Kurshan writes that “there are multiple versions of every story, and ours, too, has a take two.” (p. 284) Do you have multiple versions of any of your own life stories, and how do you account for the multiplicity?
6. This memoir is set in Jerusalem. How do you come to know various aspects of the city through this novel? Regardless of whether or not you have been to Jerusalem -- how does Kurshan's account fit in with your sense of the city?
7. Does Kurshan's relationship to the Talmud and to her practice of daily study change after she becomes a wife, and then a mother? How so? What changes, and what remains the same? Why does Kurshan keep learning even after she is no longer feeling depressed and lost?
8. Kurshan explains that she is a very private person, and yet she has written a deeply personal memoir about many of the intimate aspects of her life. How does she explain this contradiction? Is her explanation convincing?
9. Kurshan describes the various tractates of Talmud and gives a sense of what they are about. If you have not studied Talmud before – which tractate seems most interesting to you, and why? And if you have studied Talmud, does this book enable you to see any aspects of Talmud study in a new light?

Why does Kurshan continue studying Talmud once she has completed the full text of the Talmud? Have you ever finished a project and felt compelled to begin all over again?

For Further Reading

Limericks about Daf Yomi: <https://ilanakurshan.com/category/daf-yomi-limericks/>

How to begin learning daf yomi: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/9-things-to-know-about-the-daf-yomi-daily-page-of-talmud/>

Creative readings of rabbinic stories: *A Bride for One Night* by Ruth Calderon

Biographies of the rabbis of the Talmud: *The Sages* series by Binyamin Lau

Memoir about the transformative power of Jewish learning: *Houses by Study: A Jewish Woman Among Books* by Ilana Blumberg