

Mysteries and Mental Exercises?

Sadly, many people—Jewish and not—have not been exposed to the wisdom of the Talmud. To some, it seems like a mysterious and closed book. Those who are not members of the Jewish faith might feel that plumbing the depths of the Talmud is inappropriate, or that they won't find anything of relevance there. Others are disinclined to dig into the Talmud because they view it as a collection of mental exercises, logic, and deduction that can be manipulated by the reader any which way he or she desires, as illustrated by the following story.

A young man comes to visit a noted rabbi, and expresses his desire to study Talmud. "Do you know Aramaic?" the rabbi asks. "No," the young man answers. "Hebrew?" "No." "Have you studied the Torah?" No, Rabbi, but don't worry. I graduated Columbia summa cum laude in philosophy and just finished my doctoral dissertation at Harvard on Socratic logic. So now I would just like to round out my education with a little study of the Talmud."

The rabbi tells the young man that he doesn't think he's ready to study Talmud. "If you wish, however, I am willing to examine you in logic. If you pass the test, I will teach you Talmud." The young man readily agrees.

The rabbi holds up two fingers. "Two burglars break into a house through the chimney. One lands inside with a clean face, the other with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?"

"The one with the dirty face," the young man answers.

"Wrong," the rabbi says. "The one with the clean face washes his face. Examine the simple logic: the one with the dirty face looks at the one with the clean face and thinks his own face is clean. The one with the clean face looks at the one with the dirty face and thinks his own face is dirty. So, the one with the clean face washes."

"Very clever," the young man says. "Give me another test."

The rabbi asks the same question, to which the eager would-be pupil responds, "We've already established that the one with the clean face washes his face."

"Wrong again," the rabbi says. "Each one washes his face. Examine the simple logic. The one with the dirty face looks at the one with the clean face and thinks his own is clean. The one with the clean face looks at the one with the dirty face and thinks his own is dirty. So the one with the clean face washes his face. When the man with the dirty face sees the clean-faced man washing, he also washes his face."

"I didn't think of that," the young man says. "Test me again."

The rabbi again repeats the question of the two men and the chimney, to which the young man replies, "Each one washes his face."

"Wrong again," the rabbi says. "Neither washes his face. Look at it logically. The one with the dirty face looks at the one with the clean face and thinks his own face is clean. The one with the clean face sees the dirty face of his companion and thinks his own face is dirty. But when the one with the clean face sees the one with the dirty face doesn't wash, he also doesn't wash his face. So neither one washes."

The young man is desperate. "I am qualified to study Talmud," he says. "Please give me one more test." Again, the rabbi asks the same question. And the young man gives the obvious answer. "Neither one washes his face."

"Wrong," says the rabbi. "Do you see now why Socratic logic is an insufficient basis for studying Talmud? Tell me how it is possible for two men to come down the same chimney, and for one to come out with a clean face and the other with a dirty face."

The young man is totally exasperated and challenges the rabbi. "Now, wait a minute. Haven't you just given me three mutually contradictory answers to the same question? That's impossible!"

"No, my son," the rabbi says. "That's the Talmud."