

Orthodox Jews finally mark end of 7-year Talmud study, 2,711 pages later

August 31, 2012

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. (RNS)—Some have called their efforts a spiritual calling, a labor of love, a rich opportunity to connect with thousands of years of Jewish history and religion. Others have viewed them as a relentless endeavor and a marathon of study, with no vacations, no shortcuts.

Nearly 100,000 Jews stand to pray at MetLife Stadium. Worshippers celebrated completion of a Talmud study, reading one page a day for the past seven and a half years. (RNS PHOTO/Saed Hindash/The Star-Ledger)

For seven and one-half years, day-in and day-out, Jews around the world have studied a new double-sided page of the [Talmud](#), the biblical commentary that, written over centuries, serves as a guide to spirituality and practical life.

In what was billed as the largest celebration of shared Jewish learning in history, some 90,000 people recently crowded into New Jersey's MetLife Stadium to read portions of the Talmud's 2,711th—and final—page.

The celebrants, mostly Orthodox Jews from across the United States and beyond, closed out the seven and one-half-year cycle with prayer, speeches and, when the final line was read, an explosion of jubilation that shook the cavernous stadium more than 20 minutes.

Erupting into song, they swayed arm in arm, danced in circles and formed a conga line that snaked along the field level. Others danced and swayed in the stands.

"This is what unites us together as Jews—the study of the Torah and the Talmud and its lessons," said Simon Weinstein, 47, of Lakewood, N.J., who grew emotional as he explained what daily study of the Talmud has meant to him. "I learned to always have gratitude for everyone and everything. I'm much more appreciative in my life."

It was a graduation ceremony of sorts for the page-a-day study program, known as Daf Yomi, which has grown exponentially over the decades. In addition to the 90,000 who took part at the East Rutherford stadium, tens of thousands of others watched via satellite broadcasts in more than 80 cities in 15 countries.

The immense crowd put an equally immense strain on nearby roads, snarling traffic for hours around the stadium and on the New Jersey Turnpike, where a four-mile delay lingered well past the scheduled 7 p.m. start. As reports grew of motorists abandoning their vehicles and walking toward the stadium, organizers pushed back the start by 30 minutes.

Orthodox Jews in attendance wore their traditional black suit jackets, black yarmulkes and wide-brimmed black hats. In accordance with tradition, men and boys were separated from women, who do not take part in organized Talmud study.

The women were seated in several upper-level sections on one side of the stadium. During prayers, large curtains on poles were drawn closed, blocking their view. The men congregated at field level and in the lower- and mid-level seats.

Shaina Weitz, 39, a West Orange resident who came to support her uncle, called the celebration an "incredible experience."

Her eyes lighting up, Weitz said she was struck by one of the speakers, who pointed out the stark difference between how Hitler spoke to a crowd of thousands at a stadium in Germany during the 1936 Summer Olympics, and how there was an equal number of Jews listening to very different speakers at MetLife.

"It shows we're still here," she said. "It's the exact opposite of that moment."

For Rabbi Daniel Oppenheimer, 57, the event brought great pride over completing the cycle, the 12th since the Daf Yomi began in the 1920s.

"It became the major item I did any day," said Oppenheimer, who traveled to New Jersey from his home in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

As religious Jews will often say, they do not "read" a page of the Talmud so much as "study" it, taking hours, days or sometimes more than a week to examine groups of commentaries that delve into Jewish laws and interpretations on everything from holiday celebrations, candle-lighting and agriculture to business, ethics and sexual relations between spouses.

A page of the Talmud usually consists of the writings of different rabbis from different eras. Historically, study of the Talmud from start to finish was accomplished by a select few, taking decades. But [Daf Yomi](#)—initiated in 1923 by a Polish rabbi, Meir Shapiro—encourages Jews who have secular jobs to study in their own way.

Typically, those who take part devote an hour or more a day to the study, making time even amid the most challenging schedules.

Jacob Schlanger studied with a group of men at 5:30 every morning at Bnai Yeshurun synagogue, a few blocks from his home in Teaneck, N.J. Schlanger called the daily effort a challenge, but one that was well worth the effort.

"It's the same reason people climb Mount Everest," he said. "Because it's there."