

Doing the *Daf*

By Yitzchok Adlerstein



Something was missing at the Siyum HaShas. For those learned in the usual ways of Madison Square Garden, it seemed eerie that there were no hawkers. Nobody plied scorecards (the Berachot Bombers vs. the Menachot Matmidim?); no one threw bags of OU snacks over the hats of the crowd. The hunger of the “fans” favored *peshat* over peanuts.

There was one exception. Someone was selling **ShasPod**, a cutting-edge device for the *Daf Yomi* learner on the run, an example of the explosion of technology-based products for the *Daf Yomi* consumer. These quality products and services make it easier and more satisfying to connect with the tens of thousands of people getting their daily fix of Talmud. They are especially valuable to the harried student on the run, to those who have to grab bits and pieces of the *daf* while on a coffee break or in a hotel room. They now have a variety of options, ranging from inexpensive to really inexpensive to free!

ShasPod’s (www.shaspod.com) inversion of the usual use of the iPod seems almost deliciously criminal. An

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icon of pop culture, the convenient MP3 player is the gadget of choice for adolescents of all ages who simply must carry hundreds of hours of their favorite music with them. Instead of the latest R&B, the 20GB ShasPod comes preloaded with audio presentations of the entire *Shas*, for not much more than the street price of the plain device. The *shiurim* are by Rabbi Dovid Grossman of Yeshiva Gedolah of Los Angeles, who has generously made his material available in a variety of formats.

If you don’t want a separate device, there are a number of options that work with your computer. The premium way to fly at a very affordable price (\$30 per CD; \$789 for all of *Shas*) is **TES’ Wolfson Talmud Master Daf** series, and it is packed with the options that put the tools of a small *beit midrash* at your fingertips. Wolfson (www.jewishsoftware.com) is perfect for the large number of learners who complain that they retain little if they do nothing more than listen. Each CD comes with the audio of one of the most popular *daf* presenters, Rabbi Avraham Kosman, who navigates the *daf* in about twenty minutes. Wolfson offers both *tzurat hadaf* (a reproduction of the page as it appears in the familiar printed version, with a zooming device to better view the page) and a digital (and therefore searchable) format. Click on the pointers of Masoret HaShas and Ein Mishpat to

Biblical verses, Talmudic passages, Rambam and *Shulchan Aruch*, and you are taken to the source, some of them with translation. Digital versions of the entire *Tanach*, Talmud, Rashi, Tosafot, Rambam and *Shulchan Aruch* are on each CD. You can attach your own keyed or audio notes to any *daf*. The dictionary (good for general translation—very quick—but not for Gemara-related context) and search options (restricted to the chapter that is open) could stand some upgrading. The package is especially valuable for the traveler, for whom Rabbeinu Murphy’s Law dictates that the one time you really want to look at that referenced Rambam, you find yourself sitting in a waiting room with only the Gemara in front of you.

Say you are the occasional user of auxiliary *daf* access. For example, you might be waiting for a delayed flight in a terminal with WiFi service. Your laptop can give you both a *shiur* on the current *daf*, and allow you to follow “inside” with a view of the *daf* on your display. A number of gateways to *daf* material marshal multiple layers of *daf* material under one web roof. Happily, most of them are cross-linked. If you find one you are happy with, it will usually point the way to the others.

My favorite (mostly for visual attractiveness) is **E-daf.com**. When I first

wrote about this topic in *Jewish Action* (“Inspiring Images,” winter 2001), it was the place to go to find any page of *Shas* with *tzurat hadaf*. It still is. When other sites offer a *tzurat hadaf* option, they link to E-daf. The operators of E-daf haven’t sat by idly. They’ve put together a site with many other options, including free audio *shiurim* on any *daf* by the same Rabbi Dovid Grossman. They also provide access to Rabbi Kosman’s *shiurim* for a modest fee. (One of the links they miss is YUTorah.org (www.yutorah.org/daf.cfm), which also provides a daily dose of the *daf*, as well as advanced materials on some tractates. YUTorah has become one of my favorite Internet stops. It transferred hundreds of hours of *shiurim* from tape format to MP3, including those of Torah giants of previous generations. Several times a week I download *shiurim* to my tiny iRiver player, which I keep in my pocket and can listen to through ear-phones or my car speakers.)

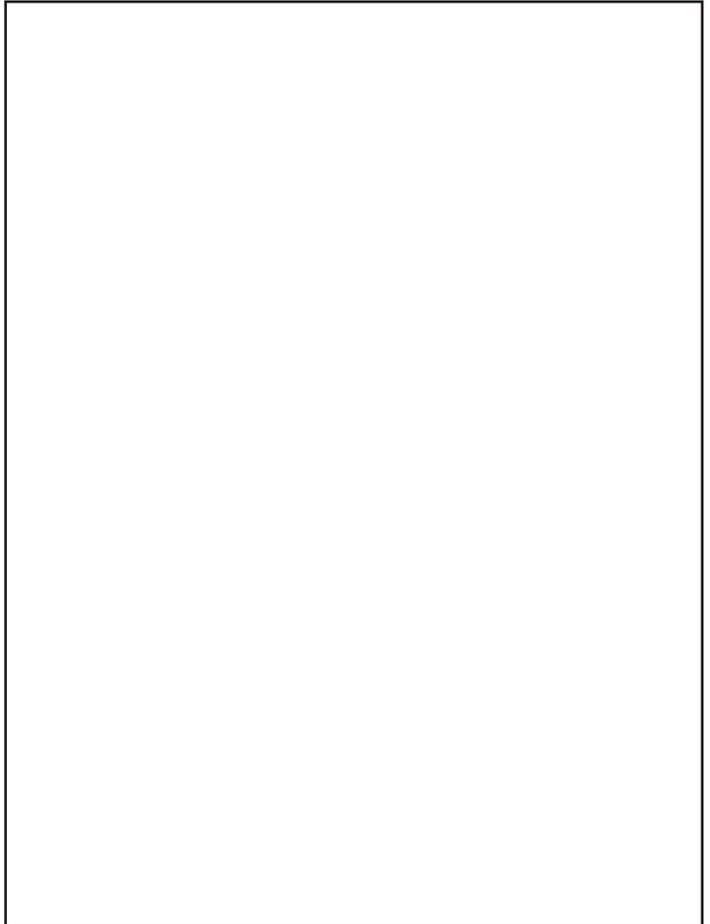
Accessing the *daf* is only the beginning. Like the cabbie asked by a pedestrian how to get to Carnegie Hall—practice, practice and more practice—the way to a satisfying *daf* experience involves review, review and more review. A number of web sites help make review more structured and efficient by offering a variety of supplemental materials.

Kollel Iyun Hadaf’s **Dafyomi Advancement Forum** (www.dafyomi.co.il/main.htm) is a *frum* Disneyland—it turns the *daf* into a Magic Kingdom for the serious student. It offers close to ten enhancement options, including question-and-answer sheets for review (to assist review), background materials, point-by-point summaries and advanced materials to remind the student of how many dimensions of depth he is missing by taking the speed course.

My personal favorite in enrichment material is the venerable AL HaDaf (<http://congalhadaf.tripod.com>), which provides excellent in-depth material connected with the *daf*, all fully annotated in case you want to take matters to the next step. It is now available as an e-mailed PDF, and can be ordered at the site for \$25 a year, a great savings over the snail-mail version.

The most exciting innovation I have seen lately comes from Yeshivat Har Etzion in Israel. Rabbi Amichai Gordon is in the process of developing summary sheets of the Gemara’s content by crafting wonderfully and intuitively constructed flow charts of the development of each *sugya*. By using different fonts and borders, he segregates statements from challenges from conclusions. It holds great promise as an aid to retention, and can be accessed either on the Web (www.etzion.org.il/vbm/dafez-er/index.php) or by weekly e-mail (send a message reading “subscribe *dafyomi*” to majordomo@etzion.org.il)—all free. It is only available, however, in Hebrew. One hopes that some volunteer will come forth to translate the charts in synch with the *daf* cycle and another will help the author colorize his content, which will contribute another dimension of clarity.

All this brings to mind the famous dialogue between Eliyahu HaNavi and the Five Towns commuter on the 6:12 a.m. train to Manhattan (okay, the original dealt with a fisherman and the nets he artfully made, but the point is the same. See



Tanna Devei Eliyahu Zuta, chap. 14.) Traveling incognito, Eliyahu asks his train companion about his recent learning. The commuter demurs to each inquiry: “I never had a head for Gemara; *halachah* is too complicated; Jewish thought is too dense for a simple mind like mine.” Eliyahu then asks about the laptop in front of his new friend, who then regales the prophet with a comparison of various processors, tips on swapping hard drives without losing settings and the best ways to use the new search engines to proper advantage. The commuter, full of confidence and pride in his knowledge, loses himself in conversation, and almost misses his stop. Eliyahu has him where he wants him: “God gave you so much understanding to master the complexities of computer use. Can it really be true that you have no ability to understand Torah?”

For the observant computer user, the challenge is manifest. If you can learn to use a computer and the Internet, you have no excuse not to excel at studying the *daf*. **JA**

OURadio, available through www.ou.org carries a crystal-clear audio *Daf Yomi shiur* given by Executive Rabbinical Coordinator of OU Kosher Rabbi Moshe Elefant. The web page also shows you the *daf* itself, as supplied by **E-daf.com**. The OU’s weekly *Shabbat Shalom* e-mail and www.ou.org carry a weekly column of introductions to the *daf* by noted Talmudist Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz.