

There's a big party coming and everyone's invited. Sadly, most of the invitees are unaware.

Hundreds of thousands of Jews are looking forward to an occasion that occurs only once every seven and a half years. August 2 will mark the conclusion the "Daf Yomi" cycle of learning one page of Talmud each day, for the twelfth time since the programme's revolutionary inauguration in 1923. The "Siyum" (completion) will be marked by gatherings large and small across the world, including 100,000 men and women filling a New Jersey stadium - estimated to be the largest ever celebration of Jewish learning – and similarly vast festivities in Israel. Melbourne's siyum will be a little modest, but with 1000 expected it will still be Australia's largest event of its kind. Sydney will host another 200.

These numbers of participants – comprising those who have themselves studied each page of the Talmud and others who merely wish to join the event and show their support – are indeed overwhelming, yet remain only a small fraction of Jews. For the great majority, these giant celebrations are irrelevant or unknown, as the Talmud remains, literally, a closed book. Tragically, this unparalleled repository of Jewish law and lore, of which the learning itself is a profound intellectual experience, is alien and foreign for so many of "the people of the Book". The gulf between the haves of Jewish literacy and the have-nots cannot be highlighted more clearly.

The Daf Yomi programme itself has begun to transform that. As a consequence of its establishment and popularity, Talmud study has emerged from the exclusive world of Yeshivot and into communities. Thousands of congregants with little or no formal Jewish learning join accomplished students in daily Talmud classes that have become a standard feature in most synagogues. Melbourne alone has at least 14 such classes, catering to the entire range of experience and scholarship, and additional groups are found in Sydney.

Yet this expansion is still largely limited to those who attend synagogues and have an affinity for traditional learning. But this too is changing.

The popularity of the Daf Yomi programme has been assisted and accompanied by a series of publishing booms. Some new editions of the Talmud are designed for scholars – offering reset images of classical pages providing improved clarity, together with extra commentaries on commentaries. But other versions are targeted specifically at audiences outside of the study halls, and aim to significantly widen access to the text.

Until recently the gold standard of English translations was set by the Artscroll Publishers; text in the vernacular facing the original Hebrew folios; copious explanations and detailed introductions offered access to the world of Torah scholarship to every Jewish bookshelf. With this edition, participants in classes, or those studying by themselves, could explore the finest details of Talmudic debate while bypassing, if they chose, any Hebrew or Aramaic.

But coinciding with the new cycle of Daf Yomi, yet another new publishing venture targets a very different niche of the market. The Koren Edition offers an English translation of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz's elucidation and much more. It consigns the classical Hebrew pages to the back (albeit

enhanced by punctuation and vowels) and puts at the front the brief and easy-to-digest Hebrew and English text, surrounded by biographical notes, geographical and even botanical information, and beautiful colour pictures, generating the strapline, “Talmud isn’t just black and white”. This is not a Talmud for the study hall or even the synagogue; this is for the coffee table, and for all who sit round it.

And the revolution does not stop there. Both Artscroll and Koren are offering their works in the form of ipad apps. Enticing adverts promise the harnessing of the best in twenty-first century technology to aid the study of the ancient yet timeless text.

There will be critics. Each new edition has disappointed some who preferred the “old ways” and Talmudic translations have met ideological objections from those who insist that the text remain the domain of the learned elite and inaccessible to the masses.

But they are wrong. Textual study has always been accorded exceptional value within Jewish life, with Talmud learning the most highly prized of all, but exoteric and democratic at all times. No text has ever remained the secret preserve of a priestly or rabbinic caste; all are invited to “come and learn”. A question over women’s Talmud learning may have arisen in the past, it has today been answered in nearly all communities with a resounding affirmative.

Big, black, Hebrew-only books were the only way of learning in days gone by, and they remain ideal for some environments. But with the Talmud now available and explained in English, in colour and on an ipad, the celebrations of the thirteenth Daf Yomi siyum in 2020 look set to be even bigger than this year’s.