

“BECOMING A BOOK”

Once when studying with Rabbi David Weiss Halivni, my class came across a misquotation by a great Talmudic commentator. We were perplexed until Dr. Halivni asked each of us how many sets of the Talmud we owned. One student had a single set; another had two, still another, three. “There was not a complete set of the Talmud in his whole town” Dr. Halivni explained, “he was quoting from memory.”

In Ray Bradbury’s novel *Fahrenheit 451* the firemen are there not to save houses but to burn books. The great societal project is to wipe out the book. But there are a precious few whose job it is to preserve the collective memory. So this person "is" Dante, because he has memorized Dante’s poetry. Another is Milton, a third Shakespeare. People have become living books because society has lost respect for the printed word. Parchment and paper are preserved by memory and by love.

In describing the burial of Rabbi Eleazer the Talmud says, “A scroll of the law was hidden away today.” Certain sages have so embodied the ideals of the book, so thoroughly absorbed its contents, that they are identified with it. Like Bradbury’s fictional rebels, they become the repositories of wisdom for a society desperately in need of enduring wisdom.