

Torah Then and Now

Sermon by Rabbi George Gittleman

The narrative of creation we just read is as controversial a portion as any in the whole Hebrew Bible. The crux of the matter is whether the account of creation in the Torah relates in any way to scientific understandings of how the earth was formed, life emerged, and so forth.

This conflict between creation and evolution is not one that we as a progressive religious community are engaged in, for the simple reason that we accept as axiomatic the basic premises of evolution. In fact, if we engage in this issue at all, it is to fend off fundamentalist trying to force schools to either abandon the teachings of evolution all together, or to include what they now call “Intelligent Design” in the curriculums for our kids. It’s hard to believe that this is where we are in our country, and it is scary to believe that depending on the outcome of the election this might become more of an issue in the years ahead.

This morning, I am not interested so much in that debate – creationism vs. evolution. I am interested in a broader question and that is “What is Torah? What is scripture to us?” If it’s not history, if it’s not science, then what is it? As a congregant in New Iberia Louisiana asked me when I was a student rabbi there 17 years ago, “What’s all the fuss about the Torah?”

At first, when she said that I thought “What a silly question – how could anyone ask such a question?” But the truth is, we liberal Jews – and Christians by the way- are not very clear about what scripture means to us, nor are we that engaged in the study of sacred texts. This leaves us both bereft of the wisdom they offer, as well as vulnerable to the use and abuse of these same texts by others who do not share our values. So this morning I want to address head on the question, “What’s all the fuss about the Torah? What does the Torah mean to us? What does it mean to be Shomrei Torah, the name of the congregation, which means Guardians of the Torah?” And I am going to be more of an educator than a preacher this morning, which means it could go on for a while. (laughter from congregation)

Okay, so we need to start with definitions: Let’s start with the word, the word “Torah.” Where does the word Torah come from? Where do you first find the word Torah? Do you know? It’s in the Torah actually. But the Torah does not know its own name. In fact the Torah is very unaware of itself. For example the creation story we just read...who’s the narrator? Who’s saying, “In the beginning God created”? It’s very eerie. You know when you read a novel, or for that matter a history book or a text book, you know who the narrator is...the Torah is very unaware of itself. So actually the Torah does not know it is called the Torah. But the word “Torah” exists in the Torah, and it means usually something like “Toraht Kohanim,” for example, the law or the rules of the priests; or “Toraht Moshe,” the regulations of Moses. It means rule or law or instruction. That’s its root meaning, when you first encounter it in scripture. Okay that’s the word.

How about Torah the book ...when we say Torah – the book – what do we mean? Actually we mean many things. It can be very confusing. Who has ever been confused by this? (The Rabbi is asking the audience, who respond by raising their hands.) For one thing we also say sometimes

“chumash” which means “five” for the five books. But Torah, the book, can mean either the first five books of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. And they have different names in Hebrew, by the way. Okay that is the first meaning of Torah. Then we have scroll versus book. But sometimes when people use the word Torah they actually mean “Tenach” or Hebrew Bible, which some call the “old testament.” But we don’t really like the name “old testament” because if you had to choose between the “new” or the “old,” right? So really, the preferred term is Hebrew Bible. In Hebrew it is actually called Tenach, and that is an acronym like IBM – International Business Machines. Tenach means: Torah; Nevi’im, which means prophets; and Ketuvim, which means writings. So now we have Torah the word, and Torah the book – the first five books – or sometimes people say Torah the book, but they actually mean not just the first five books, but all of the books of the Hebrew Bible. Are you guys with me so far?

Okay now it gets more confusing because some people say “Go study Torah,” and they mean all of Jewish knowledge. And I’ll tell a story I have told many of you before about how to understand this.

When I got into rabbinical school I was a salesman working for a living. I applied, and got into rabbinical school and when I got accepted I was very excited and surprised and I received a long list of books to read before entering seminary. Well I was really happy to read the books, but there was one book on the list, it was a history of the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion. The history of the seminary, it was about 540 pages.

So I had chutzpah, I was not very politically adept then, and I called the Dean of Admissions and I said, “You know I am so excited to be entering the class to become a rabbi, and I love this list of books, but given all the stuff I need to know and I don’t know, it seems silly for me to read this one book, this history of the college, it’s like 540 pages, and there are so many other things I need to study.” And he said, “Well, you know, I wrote that book.” (much laughter from congregation) It’s a true story. He said, “I wrote that book, to me history is Torah, go and study it.” He actually was nice to me over time.

So we have the word, we have the book in its many forms, but it gets even more confusing because there is this concept in Judaism: the difference between Torah Sh’bictav the written Torah vs. Torah Sh’b’alpeh the oral Torah. You have to hold on to your benches now.

According to Jewish tradition, when Moses was up on the mountain he didn’t just receive the Commandments, he also received the whole written Torah, and what’s called the oral Torah. He came down the mountain with the Commandments; he wrote the rest down, that we have in written form. Then he told the rest orally to Joshua. Joshua passed it down to the Judges, the Judges to the Prophets, and the Prophets gave it to the Rabbis in the first 500 years of the Common Era, and they wrote it down. That oral Torah eventually got written down, and that is called the Talmud, which is actually the core set of documents that makes up the Judaism that we know.

Now this is important to understand because this oral Torah is pretty much what defines us as Jews. For example: almost all the rites for the Holy Days, there is a little mention in the Torah,

but most, like 95% of the instructions are in the Talmud. We wouldn't know how to celebrate any of our Holy Days without the Talmud. Let's take Shabbat, where does it say in the Torah or the rest of the Hebrew Bible to light the Shabbat candles? I will give you my life savings, which is now a lot less, if you can find where it says to light Shabbat candles. It doesn't. How about the prayers, where are the prayers? The rubrics of them are not found in the Hebrew bible, they are found in the oral Torah... in the Talmud, and other books like the Talmud. One other example is Hanukah. Hanukah is nowhere in the Torah, the story of the miracle of light...it's in the Talmud. Now there is what is called the apocryphal literature, which is part of the Catholic cannon, it has the book of Macabbis but that does not have our Hanukah story in it. So to really understand where Judaism comes from you have to at least begin to understand this concept of the written Torah vs. the oral Torah.

So here are some definitions. Of course the Torah is much more than definitions. There is Torah the symbol. Symbols are beyond words...so for example: what is a symbol that is beyond words? The American flag is a powerful symbol. Depending on when you grew up and what you went through it will mean different things to you. But it would be very difficult to describe how you feel about the symbol of the American flag.

Torah, Torah is a very potent symbol for us. Think about it. What happens when we open the doors of the Aron Ha Kodesh. We stand. How about when I walked around with the Torah, which is such a phenomenal experience? It is so powerful right? Can you describe that in words, can you write that down for people and would they understand it? Not really, because symbols are beyond words. Torah as a symbol encapsulates so much of our Jewish experience. It is a symbol of our antiquity our perseverance and our suffering.

I want to tell you another story that I know some of you have heard many times. When I was in rabbinical school Dr. Gotchalk was the president of the seminary, a great scholar, a big Germanic man. He grew up in Berlin, he fled as a child, but he was there during Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass. His father was taken away, but he was spared and so was his grandfather. He was too young, his grandfather was too old. Their synagogue was destroyed. And when it was not in flames anymore, but it was smoldering, he went with his Grandpa, his Grandpa held him by the hand, and they went to what was left of their synagogue to try to find the Torah. They couldn't find the Torah, but they went to the stream right next to the synagogue and the Torah had been torn up and thrown in the stream. And his Grandpa would hold him so that he could get the fragments of the text out of the stream. No this is this very rigid, brilliant, austere man, who told us this story at least two times a year, for the five years that I was at HUC seminary. Why? Why would this man tell this gut wrenching story over and over again? Why? Because it is the symbol of everything Jewish and as a child he witnessed this desecration. He could not get over it, it left a scar, and the way he dealt with it was to pass it on, at least the story to us.

Now according to Jewish tradition, the Torah in its symbolic form, is the closest thing to God. God's eminence. God's presence here. The Divine mind. The blueprint of creation.

Nachmonides, the great medieval rabbi, he believed if we really knew Torah, we could use it to create things. And in fact in the Talmud there are these great wild stories of Rabbis that change the letters and use them in different ways and create monster like creatures like a Golem and

other things. They even create animals to eat. They do some really wild things. The Talmud has a lot in it.

So the tradition has a rather grand sense of what Torah means, which I love to explore, but which I honestly have trouble fully embracing. So what can we say about Torah without suspending disbelief? Torah exemplifies the Jewish value of Talmud Torah, of study. As one of my professors, Mark Washosfky says, “We praise God through the use of our minds.” Torah may not hold the truth, capital ‘T’, but it does represent the ongoing and never ending search for the truth. I believe Torah is no more or less true than any other sacred teaching. Rather, Torah is our home page. It’s our story. It’s the nexus point, the ground for the Jewish search for meaning.

Now this sounds really good until you pick up the book and read it. That is to say that Torah as a symbol is everything you want it to be, but the actual book is something else all together. Yes there are a number of essential, universal, profound teachings in the Torah: the Ten Commandments, the concept of betzelm elohim, that we are created in God’s image; love your neighbor as yourself; love the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; tzedek, tzedek tir dof, justice, justice we shall pursue; these are all great passages. And by the way there are many challenges as well. It is really instructive to watch b’nei mitzvah students work with their torah portion. You know if they get one of the narratives, one of the stories in the Torah, it’s really going to be okay. But, if you get for example, in the book of Leviticus, tazria metzora which is all about leprosy...then you end up studying “I have a bald spot on the top of my head, and it is leprous with spots.” And actually you can work with that. But how about you get this instead: the commandments to the Israelites to commit genocide when they enter the Holy Land. So in the book of Deuteronomy it says, “When the Lord brings you to the land you are about to invade and occupy... you must doom them (that is the current people there) to destruction; grant them no terms and give them no quarter” (Deut. 7:1) And then it says to kill everyone: men, women, children and even cattle. That’s the Torah? That is when it gets hard. And that is when you are all the sudden surprised. We thought it was the tree of life! You told me all good stuff was in the Torah! But that is the Torah?

It is essential to understand that the Torah is not Judaism but rather the story – history, myth, rituals, laws and lore of the Ancient Israelites. Judaism develops from the Torah, but they are not synonymous. The Torah in its narrowest sense is the headwaters of a great river that has been flowing for centuries. But the Torah itself is not the river. In fact Torah in its raw form can be dangerous, is dangerous. As Shakespeare so aptly put it, “the devil can site scripture for his purpose,” and in fact he does.

arises through, in my opinion, a “no holds barred” study of Torah, utilizing the lens of Tradition, what our sages saw in it – how centuries of Jews have understood the text – and our own contemporary moral sensibilities as well. Actually, we come as equals to the page. And when we do this God shows up; community is formed; people’s hearts open and they talk about what really matters. Values are clarified and tested and our ancestors are brought back to life, resurrected like the dried bones of Ezekiel.

That's a little bit about Torah the word, Torah the books, Torah as a symbol, and a clarification about what it actually means to read Torah. Now I want to go to the question, "What does it mean for us to be Shomrei Torah?" guardians of the Torah.

That's a great question for us especially because we are calling this year Shanat Hatorah, the Year of The Torah. Do you know why? It is because we are having a Torah Scroll written for us in this coming year. Did you know that? Our own Torah, it is very, very exciting. It's a one in a life time opportunity, to be a part of the writing of a new Torah scroll and we have an exceptional year of programming planned around what we hope will really bring us all together. Before I tell you more, let's return to our question: what does it mean to be Shomrei Torah, guardians of the Torah?

I think being Shomrei Torah for us means being connected to the past while at the same time pushing out to the very edge of the future. As the late great Jewish Scholar another teacher of mine, Dr. Eugene Moholy would say, there are our "moorings and our reach".

The moorings are tradition – the laws and teaching that our ancestors lovingly and so carefully transmitted to us. This includes things we relate to like "loving the stranger" (at least we think we relate to that) and things we struggle with like the fact that as good as crab cakes or bacon taste, they're not kosher!

Another mooring is our history; remembering the past. Our Czech Torah for example, which is to us a sacred heirloom, we treasure and derive meaning from even as it's writings fade and the parchment becomes brittle with age and use.

The Czech Jewish community was murdered by the Nazi's but we have one of their Torahs and thus, they still live on in us. And you know there are, I think, 4000 Czech Torah scrolls and they were able to refurbish about 2000. Most of them are not being used anymore. If you go on line and Google Czech Torah scrolls you will find the amazing story of them. They were found in a warehouse. I guess when the Nazis destroyed the communities in Czechoslovakia they gathered all the artifacts of the soon to be extinct Jewish race, and maybe there were planning to have a museum, we are not sure. But, when they lost the war, those Torah scrolls were left. They were found and a British philanthropist from a London synagogue raised the money to have them moved to England. And what was found in those Torah Scrolls was unbelievable, little notes that said, "please, help us" "please remember us", tears, blood. I mean the stories of these Torah scrolls are really, really something.

Our relationship with our Czech Torah, out of necessity must change, but even when we have our new scroll to use every week, our Czech Torah will remain an essential part of our heritage, our history, what it means for us to be Shomrei Torah. We will display it, and we will occasionally read it, and maybe at Simchat Torah maybe we will be able to unroll it completely so we that can feel our Czech ancestors smile with us as we dance with their Torah.

So, those are a few examples of our moorings, tradition, history, but what about "the reach?"

The “reach” for us are our lives in dialogue, and at times in confrontation with the text. Our current environmental crisis is a good and relevant example of the opportunity for dialogue with Torah because, as it turns out, our ancient Israelite ancestors were very much connected to the land.

Our forefathers and mothers were indigenous people, very much like the Native Americans, we are tribal. They saw themselves as part of a living, organic whole. They knew that their behavior had a direct affect on their environment. They left us, believe it or not, a “green” legacy. What we need to do is re-discover it. If we are willing to engage with the text, the Torah can teach us how to be a “greener” people as well. That is an example of dialogue, how about confrontation?

An example of confrontation would be the Torah’s admonition in the book of Leviticus that a man should not lie with another man like he lies with a woman. That phrase is the basis for the Traditional Jewish antipathy towards homosexuality.

Now here as progressive Jews, we must confront the text, challenging the legitimacy of its teachings, and ultimately, I believe, rejecting what it has to say altogether.

And sometimes our confrontation of the text leads to action as it should this November; it’s essential that we all turn out to vote in November against Proposition 8. And if you want to find out more about why we should do this, and how important it is, come to Shomrei Torah on Sunday afternoon. I will be speaking, as will a number of other people. We would love to see you there. We will fit you in somehow.

Dialogue, confrontation, those are just two of many examples I could give regarding how the Torah can be a living covenant for us, a grounding connection to our past – a mooring – and a load star for our future – a place to reach out towards.

This year, 5769, is Shenat HaTorah, the year of the Torah, for us!

It will be a great opportunity to explore and experience every aspect of what Torah means – we have classes for adults. It is not just pediatric Judaism. Seriously, it is one thing to be Jewish for your parents, and it is another thing to be Jewish for your kids. It is quite another thing to be Jewish for yourself.

We are also going to get to learn more about the history of Torot (our two Torahs) because it turns out that our Czech Torah is very interesting, but we also have a Torah that is even older, we didn’t know it, but it is older. It is probably from Yemen or Morrocco, and it is maybe close to 300 years old. They are not going away. They are a part of our precious legacy, and we are going to use them when we can. But we are also going to get to enter into the world of a sofer, a scribe and a rescuer and restorer of ancient texts. This guy’s name is Rabbi Youlus. I am not exaggerating, he is the Indiana Jones of Sophrim – he has risked his life to rescue Torahs. He has gone to Eastern Europe to save this Torah scroll that this guy said he would burn if no one would buy it off the internet. Rabbi Youlus went to Eastern Europe, and got his front teeth kicked out, and got beaten senseless. He did survive and he brought the Torah scroll back. He has a hundred other stories like this. This man is so committed to Torah in every form it is really something. He

is a little exhausting to be around, but he really is an exceptional man. He is going to come regularly, at least three or four times during the year, with the scroll in progress. And we will actually get to participate in the writing of this scroll. So, most of it a scribe in Israel is doing, but Rabbi Youlus is going to outline the letters of one section for us, and we: men and women, Jewish and not Jewish, members of our community, and by the way members of the whole Jewish community because we want this to be for anyone in the Jewish community who wants to participate, everyone can participate in filling in a letter. Every one of us could fill in a letter of the Torah. Can you imagine what that is like? Imagine, what that means? How many centuries? You know the Dead Sea scrolls were found in these caves in Israel, they are at least 2000 years old, and they look very much like our Torah scroll today. So you fill in a letter, and then imagine... your kid's grandkids come to Shomrei Torah, and they read the letter that you filled in. And then you know that your memory will be for a blessing.

To be Shomrei Torah is to be both a guardian of the past and a guarantor of the future – the moorings and the reach. Creating our own new Torah Scroll together is a profound way to be true to our name – Shomrei Torah – in the fullest sense of the word, in the year ahead.

Shanat HaTorah, the year of the Torah, Shanah Tovah, a good year to us all.