

WOMEN'S DIVREI TORAH PROGRAM SOURCEBOOK

October 18, 2020 | Via Zoom

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The Shaarei Shomayim annual Women's Divrei Torah Program usually takes place on Simchat Torah morning. This year, like so much else, the program took place in a slightly different venue – the shul's Zoom channel, after Simchat Torah. For those who were not able to join us on October 18, 2020, as well as those who did, we compiled all of the Women's Divrei Torah in this booklet.

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Sofia Freudenstein

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Eliyahu HaNavi and Burnout

By Sofia Freudenstein

One wonders what kind of Torah resonates during a time of pandemic - what can seem relevant to us now? I'm going to take you for a bit of a journey, and hope you'll join along for the ride with me.

One of the most powerful stories for me in Tanach is the story of Eliyahu HaNavi encountering God on Har Chorev. Let's set the scene: Eliyahu HaNavi has just finished performing miracles on Har Carmel, where he disproved the priests of the Ba'al by showing that his sacrifice to God was consumed by a heavenly fire. The people of Israel are astonished and fall to their faces, exclaiming "*Adonai Hu HaElohim! Adonai Hu HaElohim!*" - which you might recognize from the end of the Neilah service on Yom Kippur. But then comes Izevel, King Achav's wife, who hears that Eliyahu has defamed the priests of Ba'al and seeks to kill him. Eliyahu runs away to the desert walking a 40-day journey all the way to Har Chorev. He enters a cave and the word of God comes to Eliyahu, asking "Why are you here, Eliyahu?"

Eliyahu responds: "*קָנָא קְנִיאָתִי לַיהוָה* - I am moved by zeal for the LORD, the God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and put Your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and they are out to take my life."

God then tells Eliyahu to go outside the cave, and he experiences a fantastical event of divine wind that is strong enough to break mountains, the ground shudders, fire manifests, and then, silence.

God once again asks: "Why are you here, Eliyahu?" One would think after that fantastical experience, **maybe** Eliyahu would have been in awe and amazement at what occurred in front of him. **Maybe** he would have gained some perspective about his frustrating current situation by seeing the beauty of God's fantastic universe. **Maybe** he would have been silent, taking it all in.

Yet, he responds: "I am moved by zeal for the LORD, the God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and put Your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and they are out to take my life."

Well, that's a bit odd. Didn't we just read that? Did Eliyahu not learn anything new from this divine intervention and experience? It's almost as if Eliyahu is... a little **burnt out**.

The term "burnout" was coined in the 1970s by American psychologist Herbert Freudenberger. It is used to describe the feelings caused by severe stress and high ideals, such as feeling exhausted, listless, and unable to cope. The psychological understanding is that burnout can affect **anyone in any context**, when **overworked and overbooked**.

It shouldn't be a surprise to us by now that a worldwide pandemic with no clear end in sight, would raise stress levels that make us feel overwhelmed and overworked. It might be hard to admit, but I think maybe all of us here at some point between March 15 and now have experienced some form of this, here and there.

So, back to Eliyahu. Eliyahu feels stressed, scared (and justifiably so!), and is having difficulty coping. When one experiences burnout, it's difficult to try and find a way out of it, and put things into perspective. Sometimes, experiencing burnout means feeling stuck.

Eliyahu seems to be experiencing a kind of **fixed** mindset, as opposed to a **growth** mindset. *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* expands on Eliyahu's words to show how stuck he is in a mindset that is unhealthy and destructive to him. It records the dialogue, having the *pasuk* Eliyahu says with an added response from God:

Eliyahu says: *The Israelites have broken God's covenant/But God says: Is it then your covenant?*

Eliyahu says: *They have torn down Your altars/But God says: But were they your altars?*

Eliyahu says: *They have put Your prophets to the sword/But God says: But you are alive.*

Eliyahu says: *I alone am left/But God says: Instead of hurling accusations against Israel, should you not have pleaded their cause?*

God is reminding Eliyahu in this *midrash* to look at the bigger picture - these problems are making Eliyahu feel so downtrodden, and he is taking them so personally. He is forgetting about the good that **does** exist: the Israelites **did** bow to God after the miracle at Har Carmel, Eliyahu says the Israelites are out to get him when in fact it is **only** Izevel, Eliyahu is **alive** after wandering for 40 days in the desert! And he doesn't even advocate for the Israelites unlike Moshe, who **even when** the Israelites created the Golden Calf, **still** advocated for the people to not be destroyed by God!

Yet Eliyahu's burnout mindset forces him to only focus on the negative. **Burnout not only makes us feel bad and hopeless, but it affects how we view the world - seeing it as a glass half-empty instead of half-full.**

Ultimately, Eliyahu's burnout response is enough for God to reconsider Eliyahu's position. God tells Eliyahu in response to his burnout to anoint Elisha, who would become the next prophet for the Israelites. Eliyahu's attitude is not leadership worthy, because it is stubborn, unproductive, and is unable to see the good in a situation. **Being passionate is positive, but if it stops you from seeing the bigger picture and having patience, what good is it?**

Contrast then to the scene we meet Elisha in - he is plowing the field with 12 yokes of oxen. When Eliyahu approaches him with his new life mission, he immediately stops his work, kisses his parents goodbye, and begins his new vocation as prophet. As Rabbi Soloveitchik describes at the end of his book *The Lonely Man of Faith*: "Suddenly, the mantle of [Eliyahu] was cast upon him.... The strangest metamorphosis occurred. Within seconds, the old Elisha disappeared and a new Elisha emerged... [from then on] Elisha never despaired or resigned." (104-105). What is so striking about Elisha's shift in attitude is his resilience - his entire life

changes extremely, yet he handles it gracefully. **Resilience is what makes him stand out as having good leadership qualities.**

Now, resilience is not easy for all of us, and I am definitely not looking down upon those who find it difficult, because I myself can have difficulty remembering to be in a growth mindset instead of a fixed one. Contrasting the Eliyahu and to Elisha stories reminds us not only of what our ideals for leadership but also for life should be: **That** whenever we feel stuck, we can ask ourselves: Are we feeling stuck? And what might we do to feel **less** stuck? That whenever we feel negative, we can ask ourselves: What about the bigger picture? And what is the good in my life that I am currently forgetting? That we, unlike Eliyahu, can step outside and experience the natural wonder of God in order to ground ourselves when we feel despair, even in our very own backyards.

Like Eliyahu, we all have moments of burnout, and sometimes - especially now - things can feel out of control. But unlike Eliyahu, and as Rabbi Diamond said on Rosh HaShanah, we can realize that although we cannot control what happens **to** us, we **can** control how we react to what happens to us. My bracha for all of us is to remember that whenever we feel stuck, Judaism can remind us there is always another outlook we can adopt, in order to empower us to become our best selves.

Emily Goldberg Winer

Emily Goldberg Winer is a third year student at Yeshivat Maharat in NY. She's a Wexner Graduate Fellow and currently works as the intern at Congregation Beth Sholom/Talmud Torah in Potomac, Maryland. She lives in Riverdale with her husband Jonah Winer, where they can be found dreaming up ways to make the Jewish world more inclusive, taking walks, and FaceTiming Jonah's Bubbie. They are currently on an extended visit in our community with Jonah's parents.

Dance Floor for One

By Emily Goldberg Winer

When I think of the completion of another cycle of Torah, I think of the books on my shelf that I read and reread. I know their plots by now and the characters speak to me with warmth through the text of their well-worn pages. I think of the page turners and the slower chapters alike, all bound in their used paperback editions I promised I would not keep buying on Amazon.

The Torah, similarly, glimmers in the holy bookcases of the *aron* eager to be celebrated by its readers. The Rambam explains that there are three crowns gifted to Bnei Israel: the crowns of Torah, *kahuna* (Aharon's priesthood), and *malchut* (David's kingship). The latter two are designated to certain categories of people, but the Torah?

משנה תורה, הלכות תלמוד תורה ג:א

כְּתֹר תּוֹרָה, הֲרִי מִנָּח וְעוֹמֵד וּמוֹכֵן לְכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל. כֹּל מִי שִׁירְצָה יְבֹא וְיִטֵּל... הָא לְמִדַּת שְׂפָתַי תּוֹרָה
גְּדוֹל מִשְׁנֵיהֶם

“But the crown of Israel, behold, there it lies ready within the grasp of all Israel... whoever wants it may come and take it... and be instructed that the crown of Torah is greater than both of the others.”

Maimonides, Laws of Torah Study 3:1

And we celebrate this esteemed crown of Torah by running toward it, wrapping our arms around it, and dancing it through our shul aisles and onto the streets. I won't speak for all of you, but some of us break all boundaries with the candy men of the pews, getting sugar highs faster than it takes us to even begin *hakafot*. Amidst the hecticness, the Jews embrace the completion of the Torah with full *zrizut*, or eagerness to fulfill mitzvot, sharing our message of pride to the world: the Torah is in our hands and etched into our minds, and its scrolls are well worn and well loved. And like our favorite paperbacks, we will pick it back up and read it again and again, taking with us the texts' peaks and valleys.

This is the Simchat Torah of what we should have called “precedented times.” Where holding hands and sharing air was a means of simcha. Where the Torah was - 10 feet apart from us. Where celebrations called for boldness in our joy. But we have passed this milestone - like countless others - with compromise, distance, and - for the safety of our world, bereft of one another.

I want to use the Torah that is so accessible to us as a way to shift our boldness, from the *aron* to the bookshelf. Rather than shamelessly dancing in circles, perhaps this time can allow us to step back and reflect on the boldness of those for whom we dance. May we think of the confidence of Avraham and Sarah literally running to welcome strangers into their tents. May we think of the fervor of Chana who davened for a son like no high priest was watching. May we think of Ruth who insisted to cleaving to her mother-in-law and the Jewish faith. May we

think of Yalta who spilled hundreds of barrels of wine in a fearless holy rage. Without the hectic noise of community, we have this moment to approach our texts with complete intimacy, reading and rereading their stories to our hearts' content.

While the Torahs must remain dressed and distanced, the Torah of our bookshelves and photo albums can find homes in our grasp and on our unmasked lips. Simchat Torah in unprecedented times calls for us to seek out the everyday wisdom that has become like Torah to us. Stories of justice, coming-of-age, and compassion are wellsprings of God's *middot*. We are invited to dance not only with our forefathers and mothers, but also with Atticus Finch, Ramona Quimby, and the Giving Tree.

Also in the holy *aron* of my living room is a picture of my grandfather, Stuart Wagner *alav hashalom*, playing the saxophone with gusto. He played that very saxophone in James Madison high school when during one Friday football game, he boldly strutted over to the cutest cheerleader on the football team squad and asked her out. She responded open-endedly, saying she was busy that weekend, but he should try calling again next week. He took that as a rejection and proceeded to date, marry, and live a full life with my grandmother. Years later when I asked him what he liked about that cheerleader, he smiled and said, "she was known to kick the highest on the team. They called her Kiki because of it. Kiki Bader." My eyes widened. "Grandpa!! You could have been married to a Supreme Court Justice?!" He smirked and crossed his arms. "Actually, Ruth Bader Ginsberg could have been married to a refrigerator technician in South Florida!" My grandfather's boldness and love is, too, part of the canon of Torah for which I dance year after year.

If you haven't had the opportunity to hug the Torahs in your own living room yet, this new cycle of *kriyat haTorah* is the perfect moment. Bereshit introduces us to the boldness of Adam, the first man created. His action of eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, while considered the first act of disobedience, can from a different angle be seen as the first embodiment of *zrizim makdimim l'mitzvot*, racing to fulfill mitzvot. Reb Mimi Feigelson paints a beautiful image of the moment that Chava bit from the forbidden fruit of the Etz HaDa'at: "After Eve ate from the tree of knowledge, she started to die. She told Adam that she was afraid to die alone, and Adam said to her: 'You don't have to die alone, I will die with you!' It is for this reason that he, too, ate from the tree of knowledge, so that they would die together!"

I love that. Adam's willingness to take that bite of that fruit was to ensure that his partner would not feel alone. He did the mitzvah of *zrizut* in fulfilling *ratzon Hashem*, the will of God, to eat the fruit, and making sure that his wife would not suffer alone in mortality. This story gives me chills every time. And I don't even need to imagine what kind of eagerness for mitzvot that would look like today. All of us have replaced our *hakafot* around the sefer Torah with 6-feet apart *hakafot* around our living Torahs: the most vulnerable loved ones in our midst.

Simchat Torah in these unprecedented times calls us to expand our definitions of the Torah we run to. It challenges us to channel the *zrizut* we feel for our Torah scrolls to the other reminders of our tradition and wisdom: be it the memories of our resilient grandparents, the beginning *parshiyot* in our *chumashim*, or even Atticus Finch.

Raquel Kaplan Goldberg

Raquel Kaplan Goldberg is a Wills and Estates lawyer who came to Toronto from New Jersey 16 years ago. She, her husband, and their children are active members of Shaarei Shomayim, where Raquel sits on the Board and various committees.

Sefer Yonah and the Question of Consequences

By Raquel Kaplan Goldberg

The book of Yonah opens with a mystery. God tells Yonah, through prophecy, to go to the city of Ninveh and tell the people that their evil ways are on God's radar, as it were. Yonah's response is to run away from God and this mission. The obvious and immediate question is "Why did Yonah run away?" And the text answers this question. At the end of the third *perek* and beginning of the fourth *perek*, God sees the people of Ninveh repent of their evil ways and decides not to carry out the punishment he had threatened, and Yonah angrily says (I'm paraphrasing) "This is exactly why I tried to run away! Because I knew you would forgive them and not punish them!" So we know why Yonah ran away – he didn't want the people of Ninveh to escape punishment.

But why didn't he want the people of Ninveh to escape punishment? This is really the central mystery of the book, and you know it's a good question because the commentaries offer all sorts of answers. Some interpret Yonah's concerns through a nationalist lens, where Yonah cares about the fate of Ninveh only because of its effect on the Jewish people. In this category, we see the Metsudat David, who explains that Yonah wanted Ninveh, as the capital of Assyria, to continue in its evil ways precisely so the people would merit destruction and thus not be in the future position to conquer the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Similarly, we have the Radak, who says Yonah worried that Ninveh's repentance would "גורמת רעה לישראל" - cause something bad for the Jews, who themselves "שלא שבו מדרכם הרעה" - had not repented of their evil ways. Whether the "רעה" he is thinking of is, like the Metsudat David, the Assyrians' eventual conquest of the Northern Kingdom, or more simply that Ninveh's repentance made for an unflattering contrast with the Jewish people that would cause them to lose esteem before God and the other nations, the issue is the effect on the Jewish people.

And then we have Rashi, whose interpretation is at once so simple and so puzzling that I couldn't get it out of my head. According to Rashi, Yonah didn't want the people of Ninveh to repent and avoid punishment because he was worried that, if that happened, then he, as the one who had prophesied their destruction, would be called a false prophet. In Rashi's words,

"אמר עכשיו יאמרו העכו"ם שאני נביא שקר... יודע אני שאם יחזרו בתשובה לא תחריבם ואהיה שקרן
בעיניהם."

"Yonah said, now the nations will call me a false prophet... I knew that if they repented, they would not be destroyed, and I would be a liar in their eyes."

At first glance, there's something appealingly minimalist about this interpretation. It focuses on Yonah and his feelings about and experience with prophecy, which do feel like the propelling forces of the book as a whole; it doesn't try to place on centre stage the moral or political fortunes of the Jewish people who are absent from the text; and it doesn't require that Yonah had an additional prophecy – unstated in the text – about the future Assyrian conquest.

But the more you think about it, the stranger this idea becomes. Isn't it understood that the whole point of God giving a "doom and gloom" prophecy to serve as a warning, to encourage people to course-correct? As Radak says:

“כי כל דבריו שאמר להרע לבני האדם בתנאי אם לא ישובו אבל אם ישובו יסלח”

“Whenever God warns of future punishment, it's conditional on the people not repenting. But if they do repent, then he will forgive.” And so we see from the words of Yirmiyahu and Yechezkel, which Radak also cites.

So why is Yonah worried about being called a false prophet if the people repent and the punishment doesn't materialize? Why wouldn't Ninveh see what happened, and interpret it correctly? The prophecy of destruction was if they didn't repent, and they did repent, so that's why the prophecy didn't come to pass. And lest one say that Yonah worried that Ninveh, as an idolatrous nation, didn't understand the “rules” of prophecy or didn't believe in supernatural consequences for sin, the text shows the opposite. Yonah gives a single, five-word prophecy: “עוד ארבעים יום וְנִינְוָה נֶהְפָּקֶת” – “Forty days more, and Ninveh shall be overthrown!” – and immediately the text tells us that “The people of Ninveh believed in God and declared a fast and donned sackcloth, great and small alike.” Not only that – the king hears of the prophecy and he gets off his throne, takes off his royal robe, dons sackcloth, sits on the floor, and commands the people to pray to God and repent of their evil ways. These don't sound like people who wouldn't understand the cause-and-effect of Yonah's prophecy. Why would he worry they would call him a false prophet?

I think the answer lies not in how Ninveh would relate to Yonah's prophecy in the short-term, but in the long-term. Surely, the people felt relief when Ninveh was not destroyed on the 40th day. And they probably understood that reprieve as a reward for their repentance. But a month later – when the new moral behaviour became tedious, did they start to wonder if just maybe they'd been had? Did they question what evidence they had that destruction would follow if they returned to their old ways?

We can understand this dilemma in a different context today. Not morals, but public health. If preventative measures – like wearing a mask, or social distancing – contain a virus so successfully that the dire outcomes never come to pass, there will be those who, tiring of the restrictions, question whether the dire outcomes were ever real to begin with. Without coming face to face with consequences, at least in part, and seeing different behaviours change the tide, it is easier for people to dismiss the reality of those consequences and the associated importance of the encouraged behaviours.

So for Yonah, punishment had to follow sin, before repentance could set the people on a new path. Not because he was vindictive, but because Yonah believed that without experiencing any punishment for sin, people cannot internalize the connection between the two, and without that connection, their long-term resolve to do right is tenuous, it is weakened.

This perspective also explains Yonah's behaviour on the ship. After defying the word of God, Yonah sees the storm begin. He knows he has disobeyed God, and that the storm is his punishment. But unlike all the other sailors who pray feverishly to their gods to calm the sea, Yonah placidly descends to the ship's hold to sleep. Why? Why doesn't he pray? The captain commands him to pray, and still he doesn't! Why not? Why doesn't he do teshuva and ask

God to suspend his punishment right then and there? Because Yonah doesn't believe in trying to prevent punishment through repentance. He believes in the necessity of punishment, with repentance to follow. Yonah, having sinned, believes the only thing he can do is wait passively for the punishment he knows is his due, and only after that is complete is it the time for repentance. And so we see from the words of his prayer as related in the text: only after he is punished, after he is thrown into the water, tangled in weeds and on the brink of drowning, does he pray to God who provides the fish to swallow him.

There is something about Yonah's logic that resonates. And that's why God's response at the end of the book is so powerful. God does not explain His choice to save Ninveh by saying that Yonah misunderstands the role of *midat hadin*, of judgment, or that Ninveh's repentance was complete and permanent. What He says is that notwithstanding Yonah's concerns, God cares about the 120,000 people of Ninveh "who do not know their right from their left" - that their immediate individual wellbeing matters even if they still lack understanding of the ways of God's world; that when making decisions for society, we have to be mindful of the future in a way that is also mindful of the individuals in front of us; that we show compassion without demanding perfection.

Shayna Kravetz

Shayna Kravetz is a writer and Jewish educator. She has been giving divrei Torah at Shaarei Shomayim since the 1980s, and is one of the founders of the shul's Women's Divrei Torah Program for Simchat Torah. This dvar Torah is gratefully dedicated to the memory of her parents, Rabbi Abraham & Rebbitzin Shosha Kravetz, who gave her a wonderful Jewish education over her considerable opposition.

Shmini Atzeret and the Poor

By Shayna Kravetz

The Torah reading for Shmini Atzeret - an excerpt from Sefer Dvarim, Parshat Re'eh - presents us with an apparently pure contradiction about the ongoing existence of Bnei Yisrael in Eretz Yisrael.

In Dvarim 15:4-5, in describing part of the economic structure of the shmitah year, we are told:

אָפֹס , כִּי לֹא יִהְיֶה - בְּךָ אֲבִיּוֹן : כִּי - בְּרַחֵם יְבָרְכֶךָ ה' בְּאֶרֶץ , אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן - לְךָ נַחֲלָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ
“Surely there shall be no needy among you, for Ha-shem will bless you - bless you! - in the land which Ha-shem your God gives you as an inheritance to possess it”.

וְרַק אִם-שָׁמַעְתָּ תִשְׁמַע בְּקוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשָׁמֵר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת-כָּל-הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם ;
“Only if you listen - listen! - to the voice of Ha-shem your God to keep by doing all this mitzvah which I command you this day”.

Yet, in verses 7-11 of the same chapter we are told that we must make loans to the needy because:

כִּי לֹא - יִחְדַּל אֲבִיּוֹן , מִקְרֵב הָאָרֶץ ; עַל - כֵּן אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה , לֵאמֹר , פְּתַח תִּפְתַּח אֶת - יָדְךָ לְאֶחָיִךָ לַעֲנִיב וְלֹאֲבִיבְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ-ךָ.

“For the needy shall not cease from within the land. Therefore I command you, saying: Open - open! - your hand to your brother, your poor and your needy in your land.” (v. 11)

How can the Torah promise that there will be no needy among us, and state that the needy will always be with us? The contradiction leaps off the page.

We are not the first to notice. Rashi comments on the contradiction in v. 4:

אֲלֹא בְּזַמַּן שְׂאֲתֶם עוֹשִׂים רְצוֹנוֹ שֶׁל מְקוֹם אֲבִיּוֹנִים בְּאֶחָד מֵהֵם , וְכִשְׂאִין אֶתְּם עוֹשִׂים רְצוֹנוֹ שֶׁל מְקוֹם אֲבִיּוֹנִים בְּכֶם

“In the time when you do the will of the Omnipresent, the needy will be among others and not among you. And when you are not doing the will of the Omnipresent, the needy will be among you.” In Rashi's view, the prosperity of Israel depends on our enacting the mitzvot, as v. 5 suggests. This is consistent with the structure of the section as a whole, which includes numerous references to the land and Israel's existence there.

R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch takes a different view. In his Torah commentary, he notes that the promise refers to **מִקְרֵב הָאָרֶץ** - “from the midst of the world”, and not “from your midst” or “from the midst of your land”. It is the way of the world that inequalities arise - whether from external circumstances such as where and into which family one is born, with what physical and mental abilities, etc. or from choices in the course of a lifetime. R. Hirsch says: “It lies quite in the course of the natural development of things that - left to itself - the greatest difference in fortunes, want and surplus, poverty and riches should exist next to one another.” (transl. Isaac Levy)

But God requires us to remedy such inequalities in the land of Israel and not allow people to fall into misfortune. “This condition of need which naturally arises elsewhere in the world, you are not to allow to occur in your land בארצך.” In Hirsch’s view, the promise in verse 4 entails an obligation to use wealth to eliminate the need of others as described later on in the chapter.

Both of these approaches seem to assume an absolute scale of wealth and poverty. Yet, human experience suggests that we measure our own position relative to others. Rashi himself hints at this in his explanation of the word אָבִיוֹן – “needy”. Comparing אָבִיוֹן to עֲנִי “poor”, Rashi relates אָבִיוֹן to the root א-ב-ה “to want or desire” and says that the אָבִיוֹן , being even poorer than the עֲנִי , wants everything.

The idea that wealth and poverty are relative finds its strongest expression in Pirkei Avot, where we are told:

אִיזְהוּ עֲשִׂיר , הַשְּׂמֵחַ בְּחֵלְקוֹ , שְׂנֵאָמֵר
יָגִיעַ כַּפְּיָךְ כִּי תֹאכַל אֶשְׂרְיָךְ וְטוֹב לָךְ
(תהלים קכח)

Who is rich? One who rejoices in his portion, as it is said:

When you eat of the toil of your hand, it will be fortunate and good for you
[Tehilim 128:2]

Reading this idea back into our passage in Dvarim 15, we can understand that while absolute poverty may disappear in a prosperous land of Israel as v. 4 promises, relative poverty – i.e., the desire to have what others have and the comparison of one’s own situation to that of others – will persist and need to be addressed, as in the later verses.

This can also expand the connection between these verses and the chag of Shmini Atzeret. As has often been remarked, Shmini Atzeret is uniquely bereft of mitzvot, its bareness contrasting with the adornments of Sukkot such as a sukkah and the arba minim. What then is left for the observant Jew to observe on this last day of yom tov? Simchat yom tov – the rejoicing of the holiday. The finding of joy in the world – the rejoicing in the portion that has been given to the Jews, both metaphysically in the gift of the mitzvot and physically in the gift of the land and prosperity – are both embodied in the holiday of Shmini Atzeret.

Michelle Landy-Shavim

Michelle practices law in-house, specializing in consumer protection law and litigation. She is a skilled negotiator, which is often tested at home with her three kids.

Learning Yonah with my Children

By Michelle Landy-Shavim

The pandemic has forced me to take on tasks that I am completely unqualified to do, including teaching Torah to my children. Before the pandemic started, I wouldn't say that I learned Torah with my children regularly, but, like many other things over the last eight months, I have had to face a different reality and make different choices.

I thought the story of Yonah would be well-tolerated by my six-year-old and eight-year-old. We would read the story on Yom Kippur and learn the classic lessons about teshuva. Yom Kippur is a perfect time to consider Hashem as *Av Harachamim* - our merciful father. My usual vision is really only of Hashem as the benevolent parent and us as his children. What I didn't expect was that the story of Yonah was going to be so relatable from a parenting perspective.

Just to refresh your memories, the story begins with Yonah being told by Hashem to go somewhere, and without a word, he gets up and goes somewhere completely else. And he seems to think that Hashem won't notice (this probably happens on an hourly basis in our house...). Also, the kids thought it was uproariously funny that Yonah went to sleep while everyone else on the boat was completely freaking out. Again, quite relatable - my three year old will often cause destruction, and then attempt to sleep through the aftermath.

A significant part of the swallowed-by-a-large-fish narrative for my children was the davening. Yonah doesn't daven to Hashem after he deliberately disobeys the instruction to go to Ninveh. Yonah doesn't daven to Hashem after he falls asleep while being whipped around in what is literally a biblical tsunami. Yonah doesn't even daven to Hashem after getting thrown overboard by a bunch of pagans. It takes being eaten by a whale for Yonah to actually start davening. This made sense to me, given the extent of the threats made in my house to get my children to start davening. And this beautiful resolution of Yonah's prayer concludes with the enticing description of a giant fish vomiting Yonah onto dry land. Cue the six-year-old humour here.

So again, Hashem says to Yonah, "Go to Ninveh." And this time he actually goes. And they repent and Hashem relents, like the compassionate God he is. And then Yonah does something I recognize very well. He gets cranky and throws a tantrum. He explains his feelings in a somewhat over the top speech: "...for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in kindness and relenting from evil. And now, Lord, take my life, pray, from me, for better my death than my life." It is hard to understand why Yonah is so upset based on his words, but as a parent, I think it is just great that he is using his words.

Commentators try to explain what Yonah was trying to say. University of Berkley professor and biblical scholar, Robert Alter, suggests that Yonah was an Israelite nationalist and had little compassion for Assyrians so Hashem's compassion towards Israel's enemies was untenable for him. As much as my kids are wild about Assyrian history, I focused more on Hashem's sympathetic response, which sounded oddly familiar. "You sound angry, Yonah. Are you angry?" Hashem isn't trying to solve Yonah's problem (and maybe there is no problem to

solve). He is just willing to be there with him and feel bad with him, until maybe Yonah starts to feel better.

But Yonah... runs away. Hashem grows a plant for him – a *qiqayon* - and Yonah is thrilled about it. We love plants too. We have named our Mulberry tree, “The Malbim.” And just like every plant I have let my children care for, it dies. Then it’s windy and hot and Yonah asks again to die. And Hashem again asks Yonah if he’s angry, and He suggests, encouragingly, that maybe it’s about the plant. The answer is, shockingly, “Yes, and please leave me to die.” Hashem provides the famous answer, which completes the lesson. Yonah, who found such delight in the *qiqayon* and was so heartbroken by its death, should understand that Hashem has compassion for all living things who don’t “know their right hand from their left.” I can assure you, my children don’t know their right from their left on any consistent basis. I am working on finding my own compassion for those around me, especially during such trying times.

We don’t hear Yonah’s response to Hashem’s lesson and it’s interesting that Yonah, as the protagonist of the story, may not have even learned the lesson that we are supposed to take away from the book of Yonah--that Hashem is compassionate to all peoples, and he really wants us to daven. Maybe part of the message is that we can learn lessons by watching people who are not self-aware – those individuals who can’t seem to see past the end of their nose. Truthfully, I’m not sure my children learned the lesson either, but they are just kids. I do think they’ll remember the fish vomit though.

Zahava Stadler

Zahava is a public policy professional who works on education funding fairness issues. She is originally from New Jersey but moved to the community two years ago with her Torontonion husband, and has since added a new dual citizen to the family. She is also a member of the Shaarei Shomayim Board.

It's a Wonderful Life? What if We'd Never Been Born?

By Zahava Stadler

When I was growing up, the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* would play on television every winter holiday season, so I saw it a number of times over the years. The basic plot is that George Bailey, a hardworking guy and pillar of his local community, is facing a personal crisis. At the point of despair, he wishes he'd never been born. His guardian angel then shows him what the world would be like if he'd really never been born: how much worse off his family, his friends, and his community would be. He's astonished to find out how much of a difference he's made. He re-emerges into the land of the living to find out that his friends have come to bail him out of his crisis, and he realizes that he does matter, and that it really is a wonderful life.

But does Judaism agree? I was struck this year by something in the Yom Kippur liturgy. Late in *Mussaf*, we say,

מְנוּיָהּ וּגְמוּרָהּ בְּסוּד חֲכָמֵי תוֹרָה, אֲשֶׁר־י מִי שְׁלֹא נִבְרָא!

It was voted and decided in the council of Torah sages, fortunate is the person who was never created!

That is quite a striking thing to say on Yom Kippur, just as we're asking for a good life. Would we really be better off with no life at all?

Following the footnotes in my *machzor*, I found out that this line is a reference to a passage in the Gemara in *Eruvin*, page 13b, which reads,

תָּנוּ רַבָּנָן: שְׁתֵּי שָׁנִים וּמֵחֻצָּה נִחְלְקוּ בֵּית שְׁמַאי וּבֵית הִלֵּל. הִלְלוּ אוֹמְרִים: נוּחַ לוֹ לְאָדָם שְׁלֹא נִבְרָא יוֹתֵר מִשְׁנִבְרָא, וְהִלְלוּ אוֹמְרִים: נוּחַ לוֹ לְאָדָם שֶׁנִּבְרָא יוֹתֵר מִשְׁלֹא נִבְרָא. נִמְנוּ וְגָמְרוּ: נוּחַ לוֹ לְאָדָם שְׁלֹא נִבְרָא יוֹתֵר מִשְׁנִבְרָא, עַכְשָׁיו שֶׁנִּבְרָא — יִפְשָׁט בְּמַעֲשָׂיו

The Sages taught: For two and a half years, Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. [Beit Shammai] said: It would have been preferable had humanity not been created than to have been created. And [Beit Hillel] said: It is preferable for humanity to have been created than not to have been created. Ultimately, they were counted and concluded: It would have been preferable had humanity not been created than to have been created. However, now that they have been created, one should examine their actions.

Reading this source text, I realized that the choice to include this line in the Yom Kippur service is probably not because of the beginning of the Gemara, but because of the end. After all, if the conclusion is that people must examine their actions and do their best to improve and make amends, that certainly seems appropriate for Yom Kippur. But still, it's not an encouraging message for this pivotal moment in our year. "It would be better if you'd never been born! Oh, well, now that you're here, I guess you should make the best of it." Is that really the lesson we're supposed to take away from this Gemara, and from this part of our davening?

I went looking for further commentary about this idea, and I came across a passage in a Chasidic work called *Shaar HaEmunah Ve'Yesod HaChassidut*, which was written in the 19th century by Rabbi Gershon Chanoch Henoch Leiner, the first Radzyner Rebbe. It pointed to a different Gemara with a contrasting message. In the Gemara in *Rosh Hashana*, page 11a, it says,

אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: כל מעשה בראשית לקומתן נבראו, לדעתן נבראו, לצביון נבראו

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: All the acts of Creation were created with their stature; they were created with their knowledge; they were created with their form.

The comments on this passage from Rashi and Tosafot say that "created with their knowledge," "לדעתן נבראו," actually means "created with their consent." Before anything comes into the world, it is asked if it wants to be created, and it says yes. In an important way, being born is a choice.

How do we reconcile that with our original Gemara in *Eruvin*, which comes out *against* the creation of humanity? Let's take a closer look at the language there. The statement is, "נוח לו לאדם שלא נברא יותר משנברא." Not that it is *better* for us not to have been created, but that it's less "נוח," less comfortable. It's not easy.

And this year, that may resonate especially. Sometimes, things are hard. They're uncomfortable. Being in the world demands a lot of us. Being a person, a friend, a parent, a daughter or son, a Jew—all of that is a huge responsibility. It would be easier sometimes not to have to meet that challenge. But that doesn't mean it's *better*. And if we take the other Gemara in *Rosh Hashana* and its commentaries to heart, about being created with consent, we know that it must be truly better to be here, because it's a choice that we ourselves made. If you exist in the world, it is only because you were asked whether you wanted to be here, and you did.

To take it one step further: Rabbi Leiner points out that elsewhere in the Gemara, in *Masechet Chulin* (page 60a), Rashi actually comments that when the Gemara says that everything was created "with their form," "לצביון", that actually means with the form that the particular creation *chose for itself*. In other words, we each saw what it meant to be in the world, and we decided not only to be there, but what self we wanted to be. We designed ourselves to meet this challenge.

Yom Kippur is a tough day, and this year has been a tough year. And sometimes, confronting those challenges, we get tired. We get frustrated. We say, just like the liturgy says on Yom Kippur, just like George Bailey said in *It's a Wonderful Life*, "I wish we didn't have to do this. Maybe this was all a mistake. It just seems too hard."

In those moments, I am finding it encouraging and empowering to remember that, at least according to Rashi, we crafted ourselves for this challenge. We set ourselves up for success. Not for ease, not for comfort, but for success. We don't just have it within ourselves to make it as a person in this world. We're built for it.

Anna Urowitz-Freudenstein

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From Goads to Girls' Ball Games: Midrash and Kohelet 12:11
By Anna Urowitz-Freudenstein

One of the most difficult books of the bible to understand is Kohelet, or Ecclesiastes, which is traditionally read on the Shabbat of Sukkot. In addition to the difficult, often pessimistic philosophical concepts in it, there are also challenging words and phrases. The latter are often addressed by rabbinic commentaries in order to provide clarity and to find more meaning in them. One of the difficult verses begins -

The words of the wise are as goads... (Ecclesiastes 12:11)

דְּבַרֵי חֲכָמִים כְּדַרְבָּנוֹת... (קהלת י"ב:יא)

For those of us who do not keep flocks of animals in our yards, one of the first questions about this verse might be 'what is a goad?'. This might be quickly followed by the question 'why are the words of the wise compared to pointy sticks?' Avoiding such a negative comparison with a potential lethal weapon, the rabbis of the midrash (Tanchuma, Beha'alotcha 15:1) propose a paronomasic** interpretation of the unusual plural Hebrew noun כְּדַרְבָּנוֹת, by splitting it into two words - כָּדוּר בָּנוֹת, which transforms goads into "girls' ball."



The midrash explains that the "words of the wise", that is the Torah, was passed to the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai from Hashem, as girls pass a ball to each other as they play. Presumably, these words also are expected to be continued to be passed, from generation to generation, from teacher to student, from parent to child, in a careful, purposeful, and joyous manner.

* Cow goad
Horvat Rosh Zayit
Iron Age II, 9th century BCE
Iron
L: 53 cm
Israel Antiquities Authority
IAA: 1996-2612
Archaeology/Israelite & Persian Periods



Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, by Amalyah Oren

**** paronomasia**

noun (Rhetoric)

1. the use of a word in different senses or the use of words similar in sound to achieve a specific effect, as humor or a dual meaning; punning.
2. a pun.

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