

Breishit - 5779.

As some of you know, I've been doing a lot of networking and job interviewing in the past few months. At a recent job interview, the interviewer asked me to talk about a large project I'd completed or was involved in. Candidly, the first thing that came to mind was the Layning Project (which Avi spoke about on RH - and no, we didn't collude on our d'var torah topics - I actually started writing this before RH). However, it occurred to me that a discussion of global consolidations, operational efficiencies, cost savings, and the ridiculousness of French labor law was probably the safer way to go, so that was the answer I gave.

But it did get me thinking more about the the Layning Project. To the vast majority of the world, it's really hard to explain what the project is and what it takes to do it, week after week, for six-plus years. Luckily, I have a community that understands it, and so you all have the fortune (misfortune?) of hearing my once-every-seven-or-eight-years d'var torah. Some of us are slightly shulled out, I think, or maybe I'm just projecting, but either way, I'm keeping this short.

Avi won't take credit for things, but at a Ritual Committee meeting in January/February 2014, Avi mentioned a running blog piece he'd read about setting big goals (I believe "audacious" was the word), and making them public for the sake of accountability. He offhandedly said that maybe he'd try to layn every Aliyah in the torah. It was a big goal, and he was going to tell people about it. I'm competitive and goal-oriented by nature, and this

seemed like a good challenge, so I pretty quickly glommed onto Avi's project. A few others did, as well, and a handy Google sheet was cooked up to track our comings and goings. Sarah makes sure it's public by posting updates on Facebook five times a year - at the end of each Sefer.

What started out in my mind as purely a competition has turned out to be not that. (Well, ok. It is still a competition. Who am I kidding?) But really, it's more about accomplishing something substantive and substantial, and even more than that, it's about being engaged.

As we start a new communal cycle of the reading the torah with Breishit, I'm still in my own private cycle. Kind of daf yomi-ish, but really aliyah-or-two-weekly. These days, I don't necessarily layn every week anymore, as I have been finishing off parshiyot. But the patterns of most of my weeks still revolve around ensuring that I set aside enough time to work on my laying. The Torah is always with me - I carry a small tikkun in my purse in case I have a few spare minutes somewhere.

One of the first brachot we are supposed to make each morning is a bracha over torah study. But how does that bracha actually read? It starts out "baruch atah Hashem elokaynu melech ha'olam asher kidishanu b'mitzvotav vitzevanu **la'asok** b'divrei torah." To busy ourselves with the words of the torah. To be busy with. To be engaged in. It isn't necessarily the same thing as "study" or "learn" - there are different words for that. In fairness, there are other parts of the bracha, including gratitude to G-d for giving us the torah

and teaching us the torah; the three different parts of the bracha - or the three brachot - that has become standard in our davening is due to a debate - set out in Brachot 11b - about what is the proper bracha for torah study, when to make the bracha, what type of study requires a bracha, whether it's a bracha over a mitzvah or a bracha of thanksgiving; after discussing the pros and cons of the various options, they ultimately agreed that we should say all three. But, while we are grateful to G-d for granting the Torah to us and teaching us, the actual commandment on us - vitzevanu - is to "busy" ourselves with the Torah.

Brachot 21a tells us that the bracha over torah study is one of two brachot that are from the torah (the other being benching), with the derivation for it coming from Ha'Azinu, which we read the other week. Pasuk gimel reads "Ki Shem HaShem ekrah, havu go-del l'Elokaynu" ("When I call out the name of HaShem, give glory to our God"). In the finest of Jewish traditions, there is, of course, a debate on whether the obligation to make the bracha is mi-de'orayta or de'rabbanan. Nonetheless, making a bracha over torah study is part of our daily liturgy.

Our Sages asked why the word la'asok is used rather than the more conventional lilmod (Orach Hayyim 47:1). They answer that, while not everyone has the time or energy to study the Torah as implied by the word lomed, everyone should be able to be engaged in and otherwise be busy in matters of practicing the Torah as a routine aspect of their lives. Hence, the use of the word la'asok. The Maharal taught that brachot are said

over an action, not over knowledge. In this sense, la'asok b'divrei Torah is not theoretical. It is not really about study of Torah; it is about living a life that is engaged with Torah.

The Torah is not simply a book of facts and figures to be memorized; most of us are long past kind of study that involves tests and grades. The Torah is supposed to provide us with the foundation for spiritual guidance and a way of life, and that type of engagement doesn't have to stop when we graduate from grade school, high school, college, rabbinic school. When we read the three parts of the bracha as a whole, we can understand that though not all of us can be great scholars of Torah - I most certainly am not - we can all be engaged with Torah on a regular basis as a fundamental aspect of our spiritual lives and as a way of engaging with G-d.

Last year, I was working on learning the layning that we heard on RH and will hear again in a few weeks - the story of the akayda. As I was practicing it, I had a very emotional reaction to the story. I could practically see Avraham telling his servants to stay with the donkeys, then walking up the mountain together with Yitzchak, and Avraham building an altar on which he planned to sacrifice his son. I could hear Yitzchak say "Hinei ha'aysh v'ha'aytzim, v'ayay ha'seh l'olah?" and I could hear Avraham saying "hineni" when the malach calls out to him just as he's about to do the deed. It struck me then that that even though I'd heard that passage layned - by other people - twice a year every year for most of my life, I experienced it quite differently when I spent time really reading it - repeatedly - and then layning

it publicly. It was much more powerful and I found it easier to connect with the awe and emotion of the story.

Being responsible for precision in each word and its proper pronunciation has caused me to pay attention to words and phrases in the Torah. The summer before last, Doug and I were in Israel, and had a lovely brunch at a wonderful little restaurant in Yerushalayim down the street from our hotel called T'mol Shilshom. I didn't really think about the name of the restaurant until I was working on some laying a few weeks later - and there it was. In fact, that phrase (or a slight variant) is in the Torah 18 times. Being regularly engaged and busy with the torah had the knock-on effect of me ending up learning things I hadn't necessarily set out to learn. And in that way, "la'asok" actually did become "lilmod."

And so, a Public Service Announcement: consider enhancing your own engagement with the torah - be busy with the torah - this year by laying. There are short aliyot and long ones. Whatever works for you. You can sign up for something six months down the road if you need time to practice. If you don't know how to layn, but would like to learn, there are people in this community who would be glad to teach you. However you choose to do it, make some time this year to think about the brachot we say every day and give meaning to them. Make some time to really engage with, and in, and be busy with, the Torah.

One final comment. As many of you know, my family is a two-shul household and has been so ever since Kol Sasson's inception. Doug davens and gabbais at SVAJ, I daven and gabbai at KS, and the kids float back and forth and are comfortable participating in both minyans. We are lucky to live in place that can support a number of shuls, and particularly the special communities that are KS and SVAJ, and we are not the only ones who are members of both. Though Ari and Gabriel have unofficially already celebrated their bar mitzvah by, among other things, counting toward a minyan here at KS, they will officially celebrate next week by leading davening and laying parshat Noach. For a variety of reasons, they will do this upstairs. Doug and I are both fairly informal about occasions like this, as you can tell from my list serve email last week. If anyone wants to pop in upstairs and see two super-cute boys wearing suits and ties for the first time, I'd love it, but I'm also cognizant of the need to ensure a minyan here, so hopefully, everyone can keep an eye on that. Either way, everyone is invited to join us to celebrate at kiddush after davening. There will be cholent. And maybe herring.

Shabbat shalom.