

*Bereishit 5774*

*Kove'a Itim*

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Why is Genesis in the Torah? It is a counter-intuitive question – how could the Torah not contain the account of Creation? The flood? The stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs?

But Rashi begins his commentary to the Torah with this question and provides a famous answer. The Torah is a book of mitzvot – there is no need for anything in the Torah before the first mitzvah given to the Jewish people – the mitzvah to sanctify the month, the precursor mitzvah to birkat ha-hodesh that we just recited. However, God wanted to safeguard Jewish rights to the Land of Israel and so the Torah begins with Creation to emphasize that God alone is the owner of all the Earth, and God can give portions of the world to whomever God wants.

For Ramban, the purpose of Sefer Bereishit is to establish the pattern, repeated again and again in world history and in Jewish history that sin will inevitably lead to exile. For Ramban, God's gift of Eretz Yisrael to us is also conditional and contingent on the sort of society that we are able to build there.

The debate between Rashi and Ramban isn't a debate about the centrality of Eretz Yisrael to the Jewish People - that's beyond debate. Their argument is about which paradigm is operative.

For Rashi, the Jewish claim to Eretz Yisrael has *kevi'ut* – it's fixed, established, and permanent. For Ramban, the Jewish claim to Eretz Yisrael is *arai* – it's contingent and temporary. Our religious lives have been navigating those two poles, the fixed, permanent, and established on the one side, and the contingent and temporary on the other side, since Rashi and Ramban—indeed since Creation itself—and that dynamic is especially apparent this week.

The Sukkah is defined as *dirat arai*. A sukkah is not a temporary home – just because – we only live there for one week of the year – but definitively, a sukkah is a home that cannot be permanent. If a sukkah's roof is sufficiently robust that it will keep rain from entering the sukkah, then the sukkah is no longer kosher. During the week of sukkot, this *dirat arai*, this temporary home, becomes the location for our regular, fixed activities. *Achilat Keva* – formal meals – the Talmud tells us, should take place in the sukkah, and only *achilat arai* – snacking – takes place in our homes.

For the week of Sukkot there's a flip. The temporary becomes primary, and the permanent and fixed becomes secondary.

At the very dawn of formal Jewish liturgy, Rabbi Eliezer, the arch Traditionalist of the Talmudic period, opposed the drafting or recitation of a fixed liturgy “One who makes his prayers ‘keva,’” Rabbi Eliezer says, does not have the sufficient element of personal, individual, intense, and meaningful pleading in his praying and has missed the point.

In the centuries since the days of Rabbi Eliezer, we have seen an inexorable march towards standardization, with recurring attempts to restore elements of spontaneity and personalization in our prayer life. And, while I try to add something personal when I pray – I also feel palpable sense of relief each year at this time. After weeks of selichot, and unfamiliar Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur prayers, after insertions and additions for *asseret yamei teshuvah*, after Hallel, Hoshanot and *Ya'aleh v'Yavo* – finally we return to our normal weekday and Shabbat prayers. There is drama and intensity from unfamiliar prayers and melodies, but a lot of comfort from reciting familiar words.

[We are even supposed to have a *m'kom kavua* – a set place to sit - in shul (although the halakhic parameter

for a m'kom kavua is 4 cubits so there's never an excuse to kick someone out of your seat).]

According to the Talmud, after 120 years, when a Jew faces the heavenly court, we will each be asked to account for our time on Earth by answering a few questions: Did you conduct business with integrity? Did you raise children, either your own or someone else's children? Did you yearn for redemption? Did you set aside regular time for Torah study? *Kavata Itim LaTorah*. Was your Torah study *kavu'a*, fixed and regular and a permanent feature of your schedule?

Each of these questions deserves intense investigation and interpretation. But it's noteworthy to see how the concept of *keviut* – regular fixed activity, is incorporated into this heavenly interrogation.

*Kavata Itim l'Torah* – Did you set aside regular time devoted for Torah study? We will not be asked not how much we know and we won't be asked how clever we are. We are judged by our attitude towards Torah study. Why is this?

There is a basic amount of information that a Jew needs to know in order to live a Jewish life. How should I pray? How should I keep a kosher home? How should I observe Shabbat? How do I navigate the world of business in a fair and honest way? Someone who doesn't know enough to answer any of those questions will be deficient in his or her engagement with those elements of Jewish life.

This question is about something else. The Talmud is challenging us to recognize that Torah study gives us a unique opportunity as Jews to connect to God, to perform mitzvot with greater awareness and conscientiousness, and to engage our intellects in the service of God.

We have returned to our *kavu'a* homes after a week of living in the sukkah.

We have returned to our *tefilot kavu'ot* – our familiar prayers - after weeks of special and unfamiliar liturgy.

This is the season to set times for Torah study.

There was once a Torah scholar who, on *Simhat Torah* – perhaps he was a bit drunk – confronted the local *am ha-aretz* – an ignoramus – and said, “Why are you celebrating on Simhat Torah? You haven't studied Torah during the year.” The *am ha-aretz* – who was a sharp and clever *am ha-aratz*, responded, “If my brother makes a wedding for his daughter, shouldn't I dance and celebrate too? I'm rejoicing because of your accomplishments as a Torah scholar.”

That's a beautiful story – but Simhat Torah is over! Now it is our chance to form our own personal relationship to Torah. Whatever topic, whatever medium, whatever time of the week, just make a real commitment to invest time in a serious way.

Next Friday night Anshe Sholom is launching our fall semester with a kick-off festive dinner at Milts. It will be an enjoyable and casual evening, just like all of our community meals and it will be a great opportunity to meet new people and reconnect with old friends. But it will also be a chance to preview some of the ideas and texts that surround that week's Torah portion. Each table will have a brief printed commentary on the table - each one answering the same question, and after we have discussed the text with our table - we will have a chance to share what we have learned with the group. The Torah portion the next morning in shul will be the same for those who attend and those who don't. But sitting in shul and hearing the Torah read on Shabbat morning is qualitatively different for those who set aside some time to study and contemplate in advance.

This coming Wednesday night we will initiate our *beit midrash* night. From 7-8, anyone is welcome to partake of a subsidized dinner and take advantage of open *beit midrash* time to study any Torah topic that interests you. From 8-9 there will be a *shiur*, throughout the year different teachers and different topics will be

featured. But I hope Wednesday night – for those whose schedules allow – will become an important time for our community to connect to each other and connect to Torah.

Finally – if there is a topic, or a book, that you wish to learn about – if you can convince four friends to agree on a time and topic – I will identify a teacher to meet you or teach the class myself.

There are seasons when we embrace things that are *arai* – temporary. And there are moments to embrace things that are fixed and regular. This is the time for Anshe Sholom to connect to the Torah, and the study of Torah, as something *kavna* – something fixed and regular, and a permanent feature in our lives.