B'NAI
DAVID-JUDEA

The Shavuot Project

• THIRD EDITION •

5781 / 2021

A collection of Torah essays researched & written
by members of B'nai David-Judea

Contents

חלום דניאל

The Daniel Barach z"l Shavuot Program at BDJ

Daniel Barach (1955-2018) was a member of B'nai David-Judea since 1995 along with his wife Terri and eventually their three children, Dana, Eitan and Michael. He grew up Orthodox on the North side of Chicago, the middle of five brothers. Daniel reconnected with several BDJ members who attended his high school Ida Crown Academy in Chicago. He also spent two years at the Himmelfarb High school in Jerusalem and then went to the Hebrew University for his undergrad degree, where he discovered his lifelong love for Israel. He then received his MBA at University of Michigan, where he paid for his living expenses by teaching Hebrew to undergrads.

Daniel worked as a mortgage broker, and was an avid horseman, cyclist, and photographer. His three children were his greatest pride. Unfortunately, he was diagnosed with young-onset Parkinson's disease at age 40, the same year as Michael J. Fox. Despite his ever-increasing challenges, he soldiered on, being the best father, husband, and community member that he could. He was a wonderful husband to Terri, an involved and caring father, a loving brother, and great Shabbat table host and guest, always ready with a hysterical comment that no one was expecting!

Daniel's eldest brother, Philip Barach is pleased to sponsor this Shavout Project Journal and our scholar-in-residence Shavout learning in honor of Daniel as he loved Shavuot, learning, and BDJ. He is missed every day.

Welcome!

Welcome to BDJ's third-annual Shavuot Divrei Torah Project! In this booklet, you will find original, well-researched, and passionate articles and source sheets written by our own BDJers.

This is our second Shavuot living with the reality of COVID-19, but thank God we are in a much better place than we were last year. This year, we look forward to staying up together, studying both with our BDJ friends and with our scholar-in-residence. In our shul building, we will relish in learning Torah with all ages. And while it will be on a smaller scale than usual—it will undoubtedly result in intimate and much needed connections through Torah.

With that said, our Torah learning at home will still be a major part of our Shavuot experience. And this is the immense importance of our Shavuot Project.

We thank our talented and insightful writers (Nick and Eytan Merkin, Michael J. Mendelson, Zev Hurwitz, Robby Helperin, Rav Yosef Kanefsky, Daniella Plutchok, Cindy Kaplan Abrookin, Mark Rothman, Alex Fax, and Rabbanit Alissa Thomas-Newborn) and our editors Batsheva Kasdan, Cindy Kaplan Abrookin and Ellen Wintner. We would especially like to thank Cindy Kaplan Abrookin for organizing this project from beginning to end with her trademark diligence and passion—it would not have happened without her!

We also want to thank Adynna Swarz and Avigayil Metal for organizing the logistics of disseminating this project. And finally, a HUGE thank you to Sarah Abraham for creating an accessible and beautiful layout!

If you were not able to contribute this year, do not fear! It's never too early to start! To join, please contact Rabbanit Alissa at rabbanitalissa@bnaidavid.com.

Without further ado, please enjoy this matan Torah—this gift of Torah from our beloved BDJ family!

Chag Sameach,

Rav Yosef and Rabbanit Alissa

The Gift that Keeps on Giving: The Relationship between Shavuot and Matan Torah

By Nick & Eytan Merkin

Shavuot is distinct among the *shalosh regalim* in its almost complete lack of unique *mitzvot*. In contrast to its treatment of *Pesach* and *Sukkot*, with the exception of the *mitzva* of *bikkurim,* the bringing of first fruits to the *Beit HaMikdash*, the *Torah* does not prescribe specific practices for *Shavuot* other than the festive meals, *korbanot*, and abstention from work common to all *chagim*. In fact, the *Shulchan Arukh* devotes only one chapter -- located at the end of *Hilchot Pesach* -- to discuss the order of prayer on *Shavuot.* Why is it that on *chag matan torateinu*, the anniversary of the day on which we received the *Torah*, we have no *mitzvot* with which to commemorate God's ultimate gift?

As *Chazal* discuss in *Pesachim 68b*, *Shavuot* marks the anniversary of the giving of the *Torah* at *Har Sinai.* The giving of the *Torah* is the most important event in Jewish history: the completion of our long journey to nationhood that began in Egypt. At *Har Sinai*, the Jewish people was born. In the words of R' Saadiah Gaon, *"ein umateinu umah ela beToratah,"* "*our nation is not a nation without its Torah."(HaEmunot VeHaDeot).* The key to making sense of the lack of *mitzvot* commemorating the giving of the Torah on *Shavuot* is understanding that the giving of the Torah wasn't a one-time event. As R' Yitzchak ben Moses Arama puts it in his commentary to the Torah, the *Akeidat Yitzchak,* " The commemoration of the giving of the Torah cannot be limited to a particular time, like other matters connected with the festivals, but it is a precept that applies at all hours and at all times, as it is written (Yehoshua 1:8), "*Lo yamush sefer haTorah hazeh mipicha vehegeita bo yomam valayla,"* "*This book of the Law shall not move from your mouth and you shall meditate in it day and night.*" The Torah serves as a guidebook to our lives, something studied and practiced each and every day. We are meant to live our lives through the lens of Torah and celebrate every day as if it was the day we had received it.

Ultimately, although the Torah may have been given on a specific historical date (the fifth or sixth of *Sivan*), the process of receiving the Torah is still ongoing. Remembering the giving of the Torah with specific *mitzvot* as if it were a single event would concentrate our appreciation for the Torah onto one day as opposed to a year-long commitment. Such an approach would minimize our connection and relationship to the Torah.

One could question, based on the ideas presented above, the importance of our various *minhagim* celebrating the giving of the Torah on *Shavuot*. If the Torah is constantly being given anew, why mention the historical beginning of that process at all?

We suggest that the purpose of our Torah-themed celebrations on *Shavuot* is an amplification and refocusing of our Torah learning. As humans, we are prone to forgetting and losing concentration on our goals without periodic reminders. Therefore, we use certain *minhagim* -- such as *tikkun leil Shavuot,* in

which we stay up learning Torah all night, and the special *Kriat HaTorah* for *Shavuot* day -- as a way to refocus our learning and reinvigorate us to push through another year of growth on *Shavuot*. Renewing the excitement of the initial reception of the Torah -- that first *"na'aseh ve'nishma"* -- every *Shavuot* ensures that we fulfill the words in *Yehoshua,* and "meditate in [the Torah] day and night" throughout the rest of the year.

For the Love of G-d

Michael J. Mendelson

Oprah Winfrey attributes her phenomenal success to having listened to her inner voice.

In the late 1990's, I recall watching several episodes of The Oprah Winfrey Show. Oprah described how she had achieved her success. She said she listened to her inner voice. Her claim was that her millions of daily viewers -- anyone in fact -- could and should do the same thing.

People she met often seemed to go through life without knowing or realizing their higher purpose. They were working at a job they weren't sure they liked or for which they were ill-suited. They pursued a career they never intended to pursue. Their personal situation often seemed to be the result of random circumstances -- life happened to them with no direction or choice -- and they woke up some mornings wondering why they were in this place.

Oprah contended that if you spent some time looking inwards and listening to your inner voice, you could hear your own self telling you what you really wanted from life. What pursuit to follow. What career or vocation to seek out. What your higher purpose is. How to change your life and become the best you.

This idea -- that within you is all the information you need to make good choices, to realize your potential, to thrive, and to direct your inner compass accordingly -- is actually a Jewish idea.

We learn in Breishis that G-d created man in His image. Further, G-d gave us the Torah and the mitzvot contained therein, so that man could help perfect the world. We believe that we are in partnership with G-d, in a covenant, and that we follow in his ways. So too is G-d in a partnership with us. G-d needs us as much as we need G-d.

This becomes apparent when we consider: What makes us human? What distinguishes us from all other living creatures? The answer is: G-d gave us a soul, a small part of G-d. It lives inside every one of us. This makes us distinct.

It is with this special attribute in mind that the Torah proclaims us to be "Am kadosh" (a holy nation) and "Mamlechet Kohanim" (a priestly kingdom). Even after we go on to the next world, as Jews, our bodies still maintain some measure of this Kedusha. The Torah tells us that a Kohen may not come within six feet of a dead Jewish body. How do we make sense of this? There must be something special left that impacts the Kohen that would render him impure and temporarily unfit to serve in the Temple. That is proof of the sanctity of what G-d has bestowed upon us.

How does our relationship with G-d manifest?

To see how our relationship with G-d manifests, look no further than the siddur -- the liturgy. We learn

(from the text of the Shma itself) that the Torah commands us to say the Shma twice daily. The Shma is intrinsically connected to our partnership with G-d. In fact, while the connection is literally staring us in the face, it may come as a surprise to see just how clearly it is expressed.

We know that the main command in Shma is to love G-d -- "Ve'ahavta". But it goes further.

Rewind one paragraph. The blessing we recite immediately before Shma starts: "Ahava rabah ahavtanu..." (With great love does G-d love us). The way we as Jews relate to G-d is hiding in plain sight, but let's spend a moment pondering this in a slightly deeper way.

It would be logical for us to expect that since G-d is the Creator of the universe, which includes us, that we should be grateful to, and love G-d. What may not be as obvious is that even before we can love G-d, G-d loves us.

And G-d does not merely like us, as someone might admire the object they create. Certainly G-d's love for every one of us is as great as the love of a parent for a child, but maybe it reaches at an even higher level. G-d's capacity to love us, to forgive us, to embrace us, is unbounded and unconditional. Read the paragraph before the Shma.

> "[With] everlasting love You have loved us..." The Kuzari writes, "When reciting the blessing Unbounded Love, אהבה רבה one should bear in mind that God's Divine influence is especially directed at the Jewish People who receive it as naturally as a mirror receives rays of light. He should also bear in mind that the Torah is the expression of God's will and through it He establishes His dominion on earth as in heaven. Whenever an individual or a community attains a high degree of spiritual purity, they become worthy of receiving the Divine light to guide their destiny in a miraculous manner far removed from the ordinary course of events which affect the world. This special relationship with the Creator is called "love."

G-d's love for us is infinite, unbounded, everlasting. It is a special love that only the Divine can propel. G-d loves all Her creations, true, but the Kuzari takes it one step further, suggesting that G-d's love for Her Chosen People is even more special, unique, and unbounded. It is supernatural, beyond nature, and different from the type of love that we feel as humans.

Take a moment to breathe into this notion. G-d loves you. G-d's embrace is all-encompassing. G-d accepts you. Whoever you are.

With this in mind, let's now read the first paragraph of the Shma. We are commanded as follows:

"And you shall love your G-d with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your wealth."

First, G-d loves us infinitely. Second, we love G-d in every possible way.

And here is the rub: Inside each of us is a soul -- a divine component -- our G-d part! This has two interesting implications.

One is that in being commanded to love G-d we are actually being commanded to love ourselves too. Since G-d is part of us and G-d loves us and we love G-d -- ipso facto -- we should love, embrace and accept ourselves completely -- the same way that G-d loves, embraces, and accepts us.

Second, within each of us is our G-d part. Oprah's "inner voice". That which, if we listen to it carefully, will guide us and reveal to us what is our true path, and our higher purpose.

Yes, that's right. Judaism tells us that Oprah is referring to none other than the part of G-d that is in all of us. To listen to our own inner voice is to listen to G-d. It should come as no surprise that within our very selves, all the answers lie.

This idea may be simple, or even obvious, but it is not an idea that we often think about. It bears repeating. My realization after connecting the Oprah show with the Shma, was that my "inner voice" is actually my G-d part. G-d is in all of us. G-d loves us with a big love. In exchange, we are commanded to love G-d (and thereby ourselves) with all our heart, our soul, our plentiness. In the morning and in the evening. When sitting in our house and when walking on our path. When we go to sleep and when we awaken. All the time and everywhere we go, G-d walks with us -- and within us.

If this is the case, then to know my own true heart -- what I myself should do -- I need to listen to myself. To my G-d part. Inside. My soul. That which G-d bestowed in us and that which makes us human and children of G-d.

There is another prayer we say three times a day that refers to the same concept. At the end of the first paragraph of Aleinu, we read:

> "Va'hashayvota el levavecha..." - You should listen inwards to your heart, and know that G-d is King in all the land and there is no other.

The oneness of G-d is embedded within ourselves. It is our greatest gift, our greatest legacy, our greatest strength. There is no other. It is where we should go to seek the answers to life's questions.

The idea of the oneness of G-d is brought alive by this love triangle in which we are each entangled: G-d loves us, we love G-d, we love ourselves.

To view this concept through another lens, consider the last episode of Westworld, Season 1, in which the famous painting by Michelangelo, "Creation of Adam," is deconstructed. As legend has it, 500 years passed before someone noticed that the shape behind Michelangelo's anthropomorphic depiction of G-d is the human brain. The message is that the Divine gift comes from our own minds. We bring G-d alive everytime we look inward. G-d exists in us -- in our minds, in our hearts, in our beings -- "B'chol levavcha, uv'chol nafshecha, uv'chol m'odecha." In a sense, we bring G-d alive in the world.

One final confirmation of this connection between G-d's oneness, our love for G-d, G-d's love for us, and our love for ourselves can also be found in Shma. The Gematria of the words Ahava and Echad, is

the same - 13. Love and oneness are intrinsically connected. Love creates oneness. Through loving each other (and ourselves) and G-d, we contribute to the manifestation in the world of the oneness of G-d.

So, the next time you're not sure what to do next, what job to aspire to, what to do with your free time, or what should be your life goal, look inward and give your G-d part a quiet listen. What is your heart, your inner voice, telling you to do? Follow your inner voice.

Contemporary Herem: Reconciling Cancel Culture with Teshuva

By Zev Hurwitz

In an age where "cancel culture" dominates news cycles and affects who we see on television, read in *The New York Times* or even allow on our campuses or shuls, Judaism may shed some important light on the phenomenon and how (or if) we should engage with those we fundamentally disagree with. Cancel culture is the denial of platforms to individuals for subjectively abhorrent ideology or past behavior. In recent months, public figures have been "cancelled" from high profile platforms including hosting *The Bachelor* (racially charged rhetoric) and appearing on Disney+'s *The Mandalorian* (misguided Holocaust comparisons).

Of late, the issues over de-platforming have ranged from the purely partisan ("so-and-so from the *other* party should not be allowed to address my community") to the ideological (a USC student told she cannot hold a student government position because she is a Zionist) to moral corrections/censorship of historical racist representations in literature or media (decades-old Dr. Seuss books pulled from production lines or Peacock deleting the scene from *The Office* with a character in blackface).

Emotions and opinions play big roles here, but there are stark differences between an ideological not asking a Square to serve as scholar-in-residence for Congregation Beth Circle, and members of said congregation organizing a national petition to ban Squares from operating Twitter accounts or speaking on any campus. Few are cancel culture "purists;" we as Jews find ourselves, at times, on opposite ends of this debate—as cancelees in some spaces for our opinions on Israel, and in others as cancelers, calling for convicted terrorists to be barred from Zoom webinars.

Where does Judaism come in on such a contentious issue? Context is typically important for determining matters of Halacha—(has the sun already set?, is the person over bar/bat mitzvah age?, is the oleh a Cohen?, etc.). Certainly, when it comes to the discussion of cancel culture, the expectation is that context plays a key role in determining whether Judaism supports de-platforming individuals.

Of course, consensus Jewish opinion embraces the concept of דִּינָא דְמַלְכוּתָא דִּינָא reverence for the "Law of the Land"[1]. In the United States, this means the First Amendment rights to free speech covers most speech as permitted, however offensive (with exceptions for incitement to violence, driving chaos, etc.). However, cancel culture is mostly concerned with what speech is *socially* allowed, rather than what is *legally permissible*, and in this context, affects non-state actors or independent institutions (private schools, social media corporations, publishers, etc).

Judaism is very clearly supportive of active, raucous debate. This can be found not only in the Talmud's incessant chronicling of disagreements, but even in the canonization of both the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds or in the well-documented rivalry of Hillel and Shammai. Pirkei Avot notes the significance of such a productive rivalry:

כָּל מַחֲלֹקֶת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, סוֹפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם. וְשֶׁאֵינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, אֵין סוֹפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם. אֵיזוֹ הִיא מַחֲלֹקֶת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זוֹ מַחֲלֹקֶת הִלֵּל וְשַׁמַּאי׃

Every dispute that is for the sake of Heaven, will in the end endure; But one that is not for the sake of Heaven, will not endure. Which is the controversy that is for the sake of Heaven? Such was the controversy of Hillel and Shammai. [2]

Debate is legal. Debate is encouraged. But what about speech that isn't "for the Sake of Heaven?" Would Judaism ask us to take away the platform of a murderer? A liar? A cheater? A blasphemer? An *apikoros?* In fact, it does.

Herem –literally "censure"—refers to biblical excommunication, a punishment of isolation exacted on perpetrators of heinous acts, including embarrassing others, disparaging sages, or passing off non-kosher food as kosher. Maimonides enumerates the full list of 24 offenses found in the Talmud in his Mishnah Torah[3]. Iironically, the Rambam was also "cancelled" by some in his time for his deviation from traditional thought on the factuality of biblical events[4]. More recently, the Chief Rabbi of Israel exacted a *herem* against the Neturei Karta in 2006[5] for participating in a Holocaust denial summit in Iran.

How do we reconcile a Judaism which "cancels" its violators but also holds וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֲךָ כָּמוֹךָ "love your fellow as yourself"[6] as a core value? Again, context is key. A cursory glance at the Rambam's twenty-four examples reveals a fairly even split between offenses between individuals and offenses between one and Hashem. Judaism endorses cancellation for sexual purity violations as much as it does for those who disparage their peers (eerily mirroring cancel culture of our politicians and entertainers in 2021). In this sense, Judaism holds its core values of respect for others and for Hashem to such a high level that violation merits excommunication (canceling!).

But with this power of cancellation comes a responsibility to not abuse the power—in fact, one of the cancelable offenses the Rambam discusses is misuse of exacting *herem. Herem,* in principle, is not a permanent cancellation save for repeat offenders (those who do not learn from their errant ways) and the most egregious violators. Those allowed to re-enter the community from *herem* do so with an opportunity for *teshuva*, repentance.

Judaism, therefore, must be all right with temporary Twitter bans and disabled YouTube accounts for those who break the rules, but is also open to redemption arcs for deserving, repentant folks. Last year when television personality Nick Cannon came under fire for expressing antisemitic beliefs, he lost jobs and sponsors almost immediately. Rather than indefinitely excommunicate him, various Jewish clergy and community leaders invited Cannon to learn more about the faith and peoplehood, culminating in a series of public apologies, Sukkot visits and panel conversations which proved a deeper understanding. The value of a good redemption arc is much more powerful for our community than successful canceling of a provocateur or an opposing idealogue.

Jewish tradition encourages us to cancel when we must, but also to redeem when we can.

[1] Nedarim 28a and elsewhere

[2] Pirkei Avot 5:17

[3] Mishnah Torah Chapter 6, Halacha 14

[4] https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/excommunication

[5] https://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/117448

[6] Vayikra, 19:18

Searching for G-d on Shabbos Morning -- Psalm 19

by Robby Helperin

There's one psalm we say every Shabbos that always grabs my attention and immediately fills me with delight -- Psalm 19. The psalm's opening lines begin with awe and love, in utter exultation of *HaShem's* glory as reflected in nature.

הַשָּׁמַיִם מְסַפְּרִים כְּבוֹד־קֵל וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדָיו מַגִּיד הָרָקִיעַ׃

The heavens declare the glory of God, the sky proclaims His handiwork...

As the psalm continues, however, my mind wanders. By the end, I have no idea at what point I lost the thread of the psalmist's narrative, and my *kavanah* has dropped to nil. Where did my mind go during that time?

Recently, one Shabbos, I decided to carefully concentrate on the *entire* psalm, to see what thrilling parts I had been missing. Lo and behold, I was a little let down by the direction the psalm took, and I suddenly understood why I always tune out in the middle. Here's what I noticed:

I found the psalm contains three parts; each is so distinct that I wondered if they were originally separate psalms that were at some point forcibly combined.

The first part is all about the undeniable, unceasing glory of HaShem, as attested to by the majesty of the sky, and the reliable, life-giving trajectory of the sun as it traverses the sky:

וְהוּא כְּחָתָן יֹצֵא מֵחֻפָּתוֹ יָשִׂישׂ כְּגִבּוֹר לָרוּץ אֹרַח׃

[...the sun…] who is like a groom coming forth from the chamber, like a hero, eager to run his course.

The sun simply follows the rules of the universe that HaShem set up. No backtalk, no monkey-business. It does so with such beauty, and it *radiates* confidence in the world we live in! *Chasdei HaShem!!*

The second part turns on a dime. It abruptly stops talking about the natural world and suddenly speaks of the Torah:

תּוֹרַת ה׳ תְּמִימָה מְשִׁיבַת נָפֶשׁ עֵדוּת ה׳ נֶאֱמָנָה מַחְכִּימַת פֶּתִי׃

The teaching of the LORD is perfect, renewing life; the decrees of the LORD are enduring, making the simple wise;

All of a sudden we're no longer outdoors experiencing nature's beauty. We're inside our tent studying Torah. This part glorifies how perfect our Torah and its lessons are — just as perfect as the sun outside.

It's not as natural (pun somewhat intended) for me to relate to this part. Certainly, we'd be nowhere without the moral and ethical guidance of the Torah, but we do occasionally encounter *chukim* and *mishpatim*

that we struggle to understand. As grateful as we must be for law, it doesn't always immediately inspire a hearty *"Amen!"* the way the silent prayer of the sun does in its constant daily path. The subject of the psalm has changed from appreciating the Universe (which can be *universally* appreciated) to appreciation of our people's written history and law (which is a more subtle and particularist value).

Part three:

שְׁגִיאוֹת מִי־יָבִין מִנִּסְתָּרוֹת נַקֵּנִי: גַּם מִזֵּדִים | חֲשֹׂךְ עַבְדֶּךָ

Who can be aware of errors? Clear me of unperceived guilt and from willful sins keep Your servant...

Another sudden shift. Now not only have we moved into a dark tent, but we're not even so sure we've followed the laws we were just praising correctly. We could all be in big trouble, having transgressed the principles of the universe without even knowing it. Our position is quite insecure. It's the exact opposite of the confidence in the world at the beginning of the psalm!

So, in one short psalm, we've moved from divine beauty and rock-solid confidence outdoors, to scholarly study indoors, to shivering in a dark corner of our tent. It reads like a recipe for anxiety: the psalm invites us on a path that starts in confident beauty, quickly turns to the topic of exacting jurisprudence and ends in self-doubt and insecurity. Oy! No wonder my mind chooses to wander!

I reached out to our clergy for insight on Psalm 19. Rav Yosef responded, "That's one of my favorite psalms!" Clearly, I had come to the right place.

He pointed out that the first verse — one that I had a habit of ignoring — is "*Lamnatseach Mizmor L'David."* This is a psalm of David, and not necessarily a divinely ordained path from joy to fear for us all to follow. King David starts by expressing complete confidence in his relationship with HaShem. But, said the Rabbi, "In the midst of his rhapsody, it suddenly occurs to David that his own life journey is something less than the lofty aspirations that he has described in parts 1 and 2. If he truly believes everything he has said up until now, if he really does feel the presence of G-d in both the world and in law, then in a moment of abject honesty, he must recognize that he's not living up to walking the walk all the time. You can watch David's conscience slowly unwind" — from unintentional or unknown mistakes to outright transgressions. Yet "the ascription to David means this is a lesson for everybody: We all have inspiration, aspiration, failure, and the tension between what we want to be and what we are."

Armed with Rav Yosef's perspective, the next Shabbos, I again concentrated on the whole of Psalm 19, and this time, I saw a new way to look at the verses that felt powerful and resonant.

Step one: There is absolute divine perfection and beauty in the world.

Step two: Humanity has been given powerful tools to reach toward the divine.

Step three: It is only with G-d's forbearance, encouragement and assistance that we can aspire to partner with Him as he originally intended.

The three steps don't need to be seen as a chronological progression, going from confidence to fearful paralysis, but three links in a chain that connects us back to HaShem. Through our religion (Greek for *"re-linking"*), we link our imperfect humanity to what is incontrovertibly divine.

In this reading, we are not like sheep being herded through the gates of anxiety. On the contrary, not unlike the celestial bodies that keep time with their daily movements, we too are keeping time with our lives, our learning and our deeds--like a pocket watch connected to HaShem by a golden chain, the chain of our *Mesorah*, our *Torah*.

Meaningful and Beautiful - But a Mitzvah?

By Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky

Few rituals compare with Friday night candle lighting's sheer emotional and spiritual power. Jewish women have created innumerable *techinot* (personal prayer petitions) to be recited in conjunction with candle lighting. I have childhood memories of watching my mother circling the candles with her arms three times prior to reciting the *bracha*, as she thought about her family and our well-being. And who can forget the candle lighting scene in *Fiddler on the Roof*?

But is this cherished ritual actually a Mitzvah? Is the act of lighting a sacred act? Yes, the *bracha* explicitly references a mitzvah "to kindle the light of Shabbat", but where and when did this *bracha* originate? The earliest classical sources - and some of the not so early ones! - give us much reason to wonder.

Let's begin our journey of discovery with the references to candle lighting in the Mishna and the Gemara. The second chapter of Mishna Shabbat is dedicated in its entirety to light that illuminates our homes on Friday night. But its interest is not in the details of a candle lighting ritual whatosover. Its main concern, rather, is how, technically speaking, we can have light burning in our homes on Friday night without this causing or leading to inadvertent desecration of Shabbat. The penultimate Mishna in the chapter assigns the task of lighting (in rather severe terms!) to the woman of the household, but nowhere is the lighting itself described as a Mitzvah. Clearly, the Mishnayot reflect a strong desire that our homes *be illuminated* on Friday nights, which is something that necessitates lighting lights before Shabbat begins, but it seems no different in category from the immediately following mishnayot, which advise us as to how we can prepare our stoves on Friday afternoon, so that we can enjoy hot food on Shabbat day without violating the prohibition of cooking on Shabbat.

Moving forward in time into the pages of the Gemara, we discover (on page 23b) a significant advance beyond the utilitarian approach to candle lighting found in the Mishna. There, Rava establishes priority for the lighting of lights for Shabbat over the fulfillment of other significant rabbninic commands. Rava teaches that, if due to lack of resources, a person must choose (on the Friday during Hanukkah) between buying oil for Shabbat lights and buying oil for the Hanukkah lights, the Shabbat lights take priority. Similarly, if the choice is between oil for the Shabbat lights and wine for Kiddush, the preference again is for the Shabbat lights. Why? Because the Shabbat lights, Rava says, enhance the *shalom bayit*, the sense of peace in the home, as everyone feels more relaxed and at ease in a home that is illuminated (recall that homes were often pitch dark at night in Talmudic times!).

Both halachically, and rhetorically, Rava enhances the stature of the Shabbat lights here. But it is only in a second teaching of his (found on page 25b) that he begins to introduce language that signals that the *act* of candle lighting might actually constitute something of a bonafide *mitzvah.* In his next comment, Rava explains why the Mishna had disqualified tar *(itran*) as an acceptable fuel for the Shabbat lights.

"Tar smells bad, and the Mishnaic sages were concerned lest the people leave the room where the lights are burning because of the bad odor." When questioned by his colleague Abaye as to what would be so terrible if the people were to leave the room, Rava delivers his somewhat enigmatic but very important-sounding punchline. "Well, I am of the position that the lighting of the lights is an obligation (*chova)*."

How is Rava answering Abaye's question, and what is the full halachic import of his response? Both Rashi and Tosafot understand Rava to mean that (a) the primary location of the Shabbat lights is the dining area, that (b) by dining on Friday night in the light rather than in the dark, a person is fulfilling the rabbinic Mitzvah of honoring the Shabbat and delighting in it (per Isaiah, 58:13), (c) that for this reason the lighting of candles was imposed as an "obligation," and (d) it matters a lot if people flee the room due to the foul-smelling fuel, for in doing so they will be failing to fulfill this rabbininc Mitzvah, and also thwarting the purpose for which candle lighting was - in Rava's opinion - mandated.

But without meaning to split hairs, is an "obligation" the same as a "Mitzvah"? Would it be warranted or legitimate to recite a bracha that acknowledges our having been "sanctified with mitzvot, and commanded to kindle the Shabbat lights?" Numerous Ahkenazi *rishonim* (medieval scholars) did not think so. Their opinion is recorded in the Tosafot's commentary on Rava's explanation on 25b. Tosafot insist that when Rava declares candle lighting to be an "obligation" he is placing it into the same category as *mayim acharonim*, the rabbinically-imposed "obligation" to wash our hands after eating, prior to *bentching.* Significantly, there is no bracha associated with discharging the obligation of *mayim acharonim*, and even more significantly, the obligation to wash *mayim acharonim* is completely functional / situational. The obligation was originally imposed by the Talmudic rabbis, because in their time and place food was routinely preserved through being salted by a particular kind of salt that they identified as "melach S'domit, which if inadvertently came into contact with the eyes could be very harmful (Hulin 105a). Thus the "obligation" to wash one's hands immediately after eating. But as the Shulchan Aruch acknowledges (Orach Chaim 181:10), with "melach S'domit" no longer being used as preservative, the "obligation" of *mayim acharonim* is no longer practiced by many Jews. Similarly, these authorities assert, there is no bracha recited over candle lighting on Friday afternoon, and in fact the "obligation" of candle lighting, too, is functional / situational. If, for example, lights had been lit on in the house on Friday morning for whatever reason, and these lights have sufficient fuel to last well into the night (electric lights, anyone?!?), then there is no obligation to light anything on Friday afternoon whatsoever!

Whence then, our universal embrace of candle lighting as a bona fide *Mitzvah* (technically and emotionally!), one that is accompanied by a *bracha* which explicitly reflects this lofty stature? For this, we must credit Rabbenu Tam, the dean of the Tosafist school in medieval Ashkenaz. Rabbenu Tam single-handedly parries the above approach to candle lighting favored by so many of his peers. He insists that there are many rituals described as "obligations" which nonetheless do have a bracha associated with them (though no examples are cited in this Tosafot). And beyond that, he argues that the notion that candle lighting is functional / situational is flat-out wrong, and that as a matter of halacha, if lights with hours and hours of fuel in them had been lit on Friday morning, it would not be sufficient

to simply have those lights serve as the Shabbat lights; rather, it would be necessary to extinguish these lights and relight them on Friday afternoon, while reciting the bracha referencing the Mitzvah of lighting the Shabbat lights!

As support for this final point, Rabbenu Tam cites the ruling of an unnamed sage (simply referred to as ההוא סבא , "a certain elder" that the Shabbat candles should not be lit "too early" on Friday. (The context of the "certain elder's comment, on Shabbat 23b is fascinating. Rav Yosef's (the Rav Yosef of Talmudic times) wife is described as habitually waiting for the last minute to light candles. Rav Yosef, in the effort to persuade her to light earlier, offers her a beautiful homily about God's pillars of fire and cloud, which each arrived a little bit early for duty...And a "certain elder" cites a brayta for her, which specifies that the candles should be lit neither too early nor too late.)

In staking out this ground-breaking position about candle lighting, Rabbenu Tam is pursuing a legal approach that is familiar to us from other areas of his teaching. He also ruled - contrary to prevailing opinion - that we ought to recite a bracha over the recitation of Hallel on Rosh Chodesh despite the fact that this Hallel is labeled as a "custom" by the Talmud. And that women ought to recite a bracha when performing time-bound Mitzvot, despite the fact that they are legally exempted from performing these Mitzvot. Rabbenu Tam believed in and legally promulgated an expansive notion of what kinds of acts constitute a "Mitzvah" and need to be acknowledged as such. The religious experience of the performer is to be regarded as a determinative factor, alongside the evidence that may or may not exist within Talmudic texts.

The religious experience of Shabbat candle lighting is indeed powerful, and it is reasonable to hypothesize that Rabbenu Tam was not, with his ruling, *promoting* the religious quality of candle lighting as much as he was *responding* to it. Indeed, the religious experience associated with Shabbat candle lighting has continued to push the ritual into unexpected Halachic territory, generating the not-obvious practices of multiple people lighting candles (and reciting brachot) in the same house (see Orach Chaim 263:8), and the entire practice of lighting Yom Tov candles, a practice that is nowhere to be found in the Talmud at all. Candle lighting is a ritual with a unique spiritual resonance, and has muscled its way into our collection of cherished and passionalely practiced mitzvot.

If I had to speculate as to the source of candle lighting's spiritual resonance, I would point to its gradual evolution (surely parallel to its evolution into a "Mitzvah") from a ritual that was merely a preparatory step for Shabbat, to the ritual through which women literally / halachikly inaugurated Shabbat in their homes, and implicitly accepted Shabbat upon themselves. How could a ritual that is experienced as the very creation of sanctified time *not* become laden with emotional and spiritual resonance?

As a married man, I rarely actually light the Shabbat candles. As a result, I lack the intimate appreciation of the ritual that I know so many of us enjoy. But I know as well as anyone that it is the Shabbat candles, more than any of the day's other ritual objects, that capture Shabbat's essence and express the delight and honor of the day.

How we accept the "other / outsider" in our society

Daniella Plutchok

One of the hardest challenges for me when we first moved to LA 5 years ago was loneliness -- the feeling that no one other than my husband really knows who I truly am. I resonated with the Pasuk (כי גר היית בארץ מצריים" (דברים, י', י"ט). I felt like a stranger in a new land. Though our BDJ community welcomed us with much kindness, it still took time and effort to feel belonging and loved.

Now, after many years, a dear friend may say to me "Oh, that dress is so you, Daniella" or "I think you'll really enjoy this book." It's a wonderful feeling. In those moments, I really feel seen and understood, and know I belong. But that was not so in the first year or two. It took time and effort to get to know people in the community and for them to get to know me well.

I imagine this is how Ruth felt when she walked into Bethlehem with her mother-in-law for the first time. As she walks into Bethlehem with Naomi, the village women do not even approach her or speak her name. The text says in Ruth chapter 1 verse 19:

וַתֵּלַכְנָה שְׁתֵּיהֶם עַד־בֹּאָנָה בֵּית לָחֶם וַיְהִי כְּבֹאָנָה בֵּית לֶחֶם וַתֵּהֹם כָּל־הָעִיר עֲלֵיהֶן וַתֹּאמַרְנָה הֲזֹאת נָעֳמִי׃

"*And the two went on until they reached Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole city buzzed with excitement over them. The women said, "Can this be Naomi?*""

The women of the town called out Naomi's return, but they don't even mention Ruth's name. It's as if they don't even see her, as though she wasn't there. A stranger, an outsider, other, not us, not worth the time or effort. Strikingly, even Naomi herself describes the emptiness and bitterness of her return without a single reference to Ruth (Ruth 1:20-21).

וַתֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶן אַל־תִּקְרֶאנָה לִי נָעֳמִי קְרֶאןָ לִי מָרָא כִּי־הֵמַר שַׁדַּי לִי מְאֹד׃ אֲנִי מְלֵאָה הָלַכְתִּי **וְרֵיקָם** הֱשִׁיבַנִי יְהוָה׃

"Do not call me Naomi," she replied. "Call me Mara, for Shaddai has made my lot very bitter. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back ***empty****."*

The Midrash goes so far as to tell us that Naomi might not have wanted her daughter-in-laws to follow her because of their "otherness," because they would be easily identified as foreigners by the way they dress as Moabites, not Jews.

"And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, ['Go, return']." Why is she sending them back? So that she should not be embarrassed by them. (*Ruth Zuta* 1)

Naomi's return to Bethlehem with two Moavite daughters-in-law in tow certainly could have made her homecoming more difficult. It may be for this reason that Naomi objected so strenuously to the company of her daughters-in-law upon her return to Bethlehem.

As the story progresses, the women of Bethlehem call Ruth "the Moabite." They acknowledge her existence, but she's still "the other," very much perceived as different from "us", the in-group.

וַתָּשָׁב נָעֳמִי וְ**רוּת הַמּוֹאֲבִיָּה** כַלָּתָהּ עִמָּהּ הַשָּׁבָה מִשְׂדֵי מוֹאָב וְהֵמָּה בָּאוּ בֵּית לָחֶם בִּתְחִלַּת קְצִיר שְׂעֹרִים׃

*Thus Naomi returned from the country of Moab; she returned with her daughter-in-law **Ruth the Moabite**. They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.* (Ruth 1:22)

Even when the narrator relays communication between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, presumably intimate, personal conversations, it specifies Ruth the Moabite, not just Ruth. For example (Ruth 2:2):

רוּת הַמּוֹאֲבִיָּה אֶל־נָעֳמִי אֵלְכָה־נָּא הַשָּׂדֶה וַאֲלַקְטָה בַשִּׁבֳּלִים אַחַר אֲשֶׁר **אֶמְצָא־חֵן בְּעֵינָיו** וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ לְכִי בִתִּי׃ וַתֹּאמֶר

***Ruth the Moabite** said to Naomi, "I would like to go to the fields and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone **who may show me kindness**." "Yes, daughter, go," she replied;*

Another interesting point in this example is that when Ruth asks for Naomi's permission to go to the threshold, she clarifies that she isn't looking just for food. She is looking for a human connection. She's heading on a journey to find someone who will like her, אמצא חן בעיניו. This text shows us some of the level of loneliness and lack of love she was feeling at the time.

When Boaz is in his field and asks his worker, "Who is this lady?", the worker simply says: a Moabite.

וַיֹּאמֶר בֹּעַז לְנַעֲרוֹ הַנִּצָּב עַל־הַקּוֹצְרִים לְמִי הַנַּעֲרָה הַזֹּאת׃

הִיא הַשָּׂבָה עִם־נָעֳמִי מִשְׂדֵה מוֹאָב׃ וַתֹּאמֶר הַנַּעַר הַנִּצָּב עַל־הַקּוֹצְרִים וַיֹּאמֶר **נַעֲרָה מוֹאֲבִיָּה**

Boaz said to the servant who was in charge of the reapers, "Whose girl is that?"

*The servant in charge of the reapers replied, "She is **a Moabite girl** who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab.* (Ruth 2:5-6)

Only Boaz notices her, speaks to her, and calls her by her name (Ruth 2:8):

וַיֹּאמֶר בֹּעַז **אֶל־רוּת** הֲלוֹא שָׁמַעַתְּ בִּתִּי אַל־תֵּלְכִי לְלָקֶט בְּשָׂדֶה אַחֵר וְגַם לֹא תַעֲבוּרִי מִזֶּה וְכֹה תִדְבָּקִין עִם־נַעֲרֹתָי׃

*Boaz said to **Ruth**, "Listen to me, daughter. Don't go to glean in another field. Don't go elsewhere, but stay here close to my girls.*

Perhaps for the first time since her arrival in Bethlehem, in this dramatic moment, Boaz acknowledges the humanness in Ruth! He is the first person from this town to shed a light on her, by not calling her a Moabite -- no boundaries, no definitions, no restrictions, just her name. He treats her as a welcome, honorable, respectable guest in his field, not as some stranger, a foreign beggar. He gives her more than just food, he gives her protection, dignity, and acceptance in society.

His “seeing” her, as a person, as a human , not as “the other” moves her to tears as she falls down and says to him in response:

וַתִּפֹּל֙ עַל־פָּנֶ֔יהָ וַתִּשְׁתַּחוּ אָ֖רְצָה וַתֹּ֣אמֶר אֵלָ֑יו **מַדּוּעַ֙ מָצָ֣אתִי חֵ֔ן בְּעֵינֶ֖יךָ לְהַכִּירֵ֑נִי וְאָנֹכִ֖י נָכְרִיָּֽה**׃

*She prostrated herself with her face to the ground, and said to him, “**Why are you so kind as to single me out, when I am a <u>foreigner</u>?”*** (Ruth 2:10)

We can imagine how much she’s craved that, being noticed, loved, seen. Her response to this small act of kindness of noticing her as a person is so powerful. Falling on her face, kneeling down on the floor. It is so lowly, so demeaning, and shows a lack of self worth. It is as if she has internalized the external view of herself as “other”, as less worthy, less than -- נוכריה (foreigner). Interestingly, the Hebrew word להתנכר means to alienate someone. Ruth has been completely alienated from the people around her, until now.

The reasons for her being in the “other” group are manyfold: she is not Jewish, she’s poor, and a widow. Ruth was a convert in a foreign land, where people treated Moabites in general with suspicion, and her particularly. Ruth’s strangeness in the Judean surroundings is emphasized throughout the Megillah. This is not unusual in the larger scheme of human behavior; it’s a well-known principle in social psychology that people define themselves in terms of social groupings and are quick to denigrate others who don’t fit into those groups. Those who share our particular qualities are our “ingroup,” and those who do not are the “outgroup.” In this case, grouping is determined by factors intrinsic to our racial/ethnic identity: We are Jews, Ruth is a Moabite.

Perhaps there is some survival mechanism at work in formulating ingroup-outgroup distinctions. As Susan Krauss Whitbourne writes in *Psychology Today*[1], in our desire to feel safe, we bond together with those whom we see as most like us so that we can protect ourselves from those who might do us harm. The virtual fences we build keep the outsiders away and allow us to go on with our daily lives feeling protected and secure. However, it is precisely these fences that keep us from bonding with our fellow human beings and in this way, undercut our true security. Our sense of security is false, and only kept while we remain within the limited and narrow world of our familiarity. Once we step out, or in this case, <u>*someone*</u> steps into our circle, our entire being feels unsettled, unsecure, unclear.

We can learn from the Ruth narrative that acceptance and love of the stranger to us takes time, but it is possible. Even more so, the Megillah teaches us that great things (such as future kings) can come to those who take a chance and open their hearts to strangers with compassion and kindness, like Boaz did for Ruth. In fact, once Boaz and Ruth marry, the Megillah refers to her only as Ruth (4:13), dropping the qualifiers “the Moabite” or “the stranger” to fully embrace her as part of the Jewish people.

That’s what the BDJ community has been to our family -- a community of acceptance, love, tolerance and striving to include everyone. I’d like to take this opportunity to show my appreciation and

gratitude to Rav Yosef and Rabbanit Alissa for their exceptional courage and truth of heart to lead the way and shine the light on what it means to be a kind, welcoming human being in this world. I have personally learned so much hesed and graciousness from both. From my experience, I feel that there is no “us” and “them” in Bnai David, only “you” and “I” and what we can do for each other. We feel blessed to be part of this community. Miss you all. Chag Sameach!

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Language: The Tool of Creation

By Cindy Kaplan Abrookin

Of all the ways God could have created the world, He chose speech. We take this for granted -- in the text of creation, we gloss over the keyword, "ויאמר." God said -- He didn't lift His hands or point a finger or click His heels three times. He didn't form, fashion, mold, or craft. God spoke, and the world came into existence.

Why use language? Why words?

We see God use language as a creation tool again in the story of Migdal Bavel/The Tower of Babel. After the near-total destruction of the earth with the flood, we encounter a troubling scene. We've just learned the genealogy of Noach, and that: ומאלה נפרדו הגוים בארץ אחר המבול "From these, the nations were separated across the land after the flood."

That could have been enough of an explanation for how the world repopulated post-flood. But instead, the Torah shares a very unusual story.

וַיְהִי כָל־הָאָרֶץ שָׂפָה אֶחָת וּדְבָרִים אֲחָדִים: וַיְהִי בְּנָסְעָם מִקֶּדֶם וַיִּמְצְאוּ בִקְעָה בְּאֶרֶץ שִׁנְעָר וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ הָבָה נִלְבְּנָה לְבֵנִים וְנִשְׂרְפָה לִשְׂרֵפָה וַתְּהִי לָהֶם הַלְּבֵנָה לְאָבֶן וְהַחֵמָר הָיָה לָהֶם לַחֹמָר: וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָבָה ו נִבְנֶה־לָּנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַּשָּׁמָיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה־לָּנוּ שֵׁם פֶּן־נָפוּץ עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ: וַיֵּרֶד ה' לִרְאֹת אֶת־הָעִיר וְאֶת־הַמִּגְדָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' הֶן עַם אֶחָד וְשָׂפָה אַחַת לְכֻלָּם וְזֶה הַחִלָּם לַעֲשׂוֹת וְעַתָּה לֹא־יִבָּצֵר מֵהֶם כֹּל אֲשֶׁר יָזְמוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת: הָבָה נֵרְדָה וְנָבְלָה שָׁם שְׂפָתָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שְׂפַת רֵעֵהוּ: וַיָּפֶץ ה' אֹתָם מִשָּׁם עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ וַיַּחְדְּלוּ לִבְנֹת הָעִיר: עַל־כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ בָּבֶל כִּי־שָׁם בָּלַל ה' שְׂפַת כָּל־הָאָרֶץ וּמִשָּׁם הֱפִיצָם ה' עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ

Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard."—Brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world." The LORD came down to look at the city and tower that man had built, and the LORD said, "If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach. Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech." Thus the LORD scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel, because there the LORD confounded the speech of the whole earth; and from there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

All the people initially spoke the same language. You'd think that would be ideal -- no communication barriers meant total unity, a goal we're certainly still striving for today. This story seems like it's about effective teamwork, until God feels threatened and punishes the perpetrators by confusing their words,

misaligning their goals, and scattering them across the earth. It's not clear from the pshat what the people were doing wrong and why this was an appropriate punishment.

But if we look deeper, we realize that God is creating a new world order. A world in which people are all of one language and one mind is a world that stagnates. They may build the tower...and then what? God says, "I have given them unity -- and this is what they do?" Build a tower to the heavens, for the purposes of waging war against the heavens (the most common drash)? Even per the pshat, in which they are simply building a tower to make a name for themselves -- is that all humanity should be capable of, building self-serving monuments? Is that what we were put on Earth to do?

I posit that by giving people the "punishment" of different languages and communication styles, different goals and objectives, different philosophies and worldviews, God is actually bestowing the gift of continued creation to humans, and recreating what it means to be a sociable human in the world. With language, we can evolve and continue to mold the earth, rather than shoot on up to the heavens with dubious purpose. With Bavel, God created us anew, as partners in creation.

This idea continues in Judaism's evolution. We were given the Torah in two pieces -- the written Torah and the oral Torah. The written Torah uses specific words (language) to create an overarching view of a just, holy, Jewish society. Each word, each letter, each crown, contains a multitude of meanings, which we can only access through the oral Torah. It would have been simpler, probably, to give us the whole kit and caboodle written in a detailed form. No questions needed. No debate. Just a static, obvious code of laws. But this would be the essence of Bavel -- unity without creativity, without evolution.

The oral Torah, in its oral-ness, is a living Torah that we can continue to create. We can debate, communicate, converse, argue, pontificate, and expound for eternity and recontextualize Torah as the physical world evolves.[1]

However, our oral tradition is no longer oral. A new form of Judaism was created when Rebbe Yehuda HaNasi codified the mishnah. What was once a tradition passed down generation to generation, with context and all the idiosyncrasies you'd find in a classic game of telephone became a multi-volume document replete with the conversations of the rabbis. Elements of the oral tradition were preserved, to be sure. Rebbe Yehuda HaNasi could have easily written a list of Do's and Don'ts, his own version of a codified halachic system like the Shulchan Aruch. Instead, he preserved the conversations the rabbis had so that we could have a model for what healthy debate and discussion looks like. Learning the Talmud

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1 Which it inevitably will. We see that God created His creations with the ability to form themselves.
וַיֹּאמֶר ה תַּדְשֵׁא הָאָרֶץ דֶּשֶׁא **עֵשֶׂב מַזְרִיעַ זֶרַע עֵץ פְּרִי עֹשֶׂה פְרִי לְמִינוֹ אֲשֶׁר זַרְעוֹ־בוֹ עַל־הָאָרֶץ** וַיְהִי־כֵן: וַתּוֹצֵא הָאָרֶץ דֶּשֶׁא **עֵשֶׂב מַזְרִיעַ זֶרַע לְמִינֵהוּ** וַיַּרְא ה כִּי־טוֹב: **וְעֵץ עֹשֶׂה־פְרִי אֲשֶׁר זַרְעוֹ־בוֹ לְמִינֵהוּ**
God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, **grass yielding seed, fruit trees yielding fruit each after its own kind, containing its own seed on the earth**." And it was so. And the earth brought forth vegetation, **grass yielding seed after its kind and trees yielding fruit, each containing seed after its kind.** And God saw that it was good.
This is a whole separate dvar Torah, but notice how the words God uttered about grass and trees differ from what happened with the grass and trees, and nonetheless, it was good. Seeds of grass evolved into multiple types, and fruit trees to bear fruit became trees that bear fruit and seeds of many kinds.

as we have it now is as much learning the oral Torah as it is learning *how* the oral Torah -- how to ask questions, how to engage, how to interpret. Minority opinions were preserved so that they wouldn't be lost to time, in case a new context where they needed to prevail emerged. The Talmud is a blueprint for healthy societal communication.

However, something critical was changed (arguably lost) when the oral Torah was written. A good parallel to this is found in language -- linguist John McWhorter, in his book *Words on the Move*, argues that language is constantly evolving and changing, and our anger at the changes -- like "literally" coming to mean "figuratively," or "irregardless" being a word at all -- are unfounded. He writes:

Samuel Johnson's gift to the language [the dictionary] was also, in an unintended way, a curse upon its speakers. We are accustomed to writers opening an exploration of a concept by citing a word's definition in the dictionary, with the implication that words have eternal meanings just as numbers have values and atoms have certain combinations of subatomic particles. Dictionaries are large; the densely printed pages packed with information are fine music to any book person; dictionaries also tend to smell good. One loves them. Yet the weird truth is that for all their artificial splendor, dictionaries are starkly misleading portraits of something as endlessly transforming as language. In terms of how words actually exist in time and space, to think of a word's "genuine" meaning as the one you find upon looking it up is like designating a middle-aged person's high school graduation snapshot as "what they really look like." There's a charming whimsy in it, but still…

Language is a constantly evolving creation, thanks to God's new design for the world following Bavel. The Torah was meant to follow that same path and avoid the trap of stagnation. As is written in Devarim 30:12 - 30:14:

לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הִוא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה־לָּנוּ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְיִקָּחֶהָ לָּנוּ וְיַשְׁמִעֵנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה: וְלֹא־מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם הִוא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲבָר־לָנוּ אֶל־עֵבֶר הַיָּם וְיִקָּחֶהָ לָּנוּ וְיַשְׁמִעֵנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה: כִּי־קָרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדָּבָר מְאֹד **בְּפִיךָ** וּבִלְבָבְךָ לַעֲשֹׂתוֹ׃

"It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?' No, the thing is very close to you, in your **mouth** and in your heart, to observe it."

The Torah is in our **mouths**, just like our lips -- שׂפתנו -- and our tongues -- לשׁוננו, the two bases for the words "language." The Torah is meant to be ours, in every generation, in every context. It is our tool to manifest the fully created world God intended us to be partners in.

And He did intend for us to be partners. We are commanded to be קדושׁים because God is קדושׁ.

What does that actually mean? We could consult a dictionary, but...well, see above. There are many interpretations for what makes something קדושׁ -- holy, separate, and distinct are all popular contenders -- but ultimately, the commandment is to be like God. God, who has seven names, each with a different attribute -- God is not of one mind, but contains all the infinite multitudes of the universe. God, who

understands everything within our hearts, and transcends all bounds of time, space, and physicality. God, who is a constant Creator. We are not able to become God, as we are limited by our humanity; this is one of the fallacies attributed to the builders of Bavel. But we can strive to be more like God by embracing our own multitudes and multitudes of others, by communicating to understand one another better, and by continuing to adapt ourselves as part of and partners in creation. קדושה is realizing the gifts of language and Torah: אד שְׂפָתַי תִּפְתָּח וּפִי יַגִּיד תְּהִלָּתֶךָ ה׳ -- "God, open my lips and let my mouth declare your praise." Not because God needs our praise; He needs us to use our mouths in His service. We bestow praise to God and continually manifest *kiddush Hashem* (the sanctification of God) by uttering words of Torah, communicating with one another, and adapting the world to create a more holy society. Unlike the builders of the Migdal Bavel/Tower of Babel, we are not put on earth to make a name for ourselves, but to glorify Hashem's name as we strive for holiness.

Why We Sing of Sore Thumbs at Hallel

By Mark Rothman

This article is based on a drash I gave on the 5th yarzheit of my mother, גולדה אשקה בת הוה, and is dedicated to her memory.

Many of us will recall the hit song "Escape," better known as *The Piña Colada Song*. It tells the story of a man who is, in the lyrics of the song, "tired of his old lady." The narrator/singer publishes a personal ad listing all the things he likes to do but isn't doing, including drinking piña coladas. The man admits "me and my old lady" had fallen into the same old dull routine.

At the end of the song, the woman who answers the ad is the same one he'd grown tired of. The songs message is clear: when we take each other for granted, we hide the opportunities for true connection.

We can often take our liturgy for granted as well; Psalm 118 may be one example . Even though it comes at the climax of Hallel, and we sing it with a rousing *nusach*, we can connect to more of its spiritual power when we take it out of the Hallel context and examine it closely. Let's look simultaneously at its structure -- the way the verses are organized -- as well as the many repetitions of language (double *lashon*) within and between the verses themselves.

Structurally, we can break the Psalm's 29 p'sukim into several smaller sections. The first verse,

1) הוֹדוּ לַה' כִּי־טוֹב כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ

Praise the LORD, for He is good, His steadfast love is eternal

tells us pretty clearly and simply to praise God. "OK," you might say, "Good idea. But who has to praise God?"

2) יֹאמַר־נָא יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ׃
Let Israel declare, His steadfast love is eternal.

3) יֹאמְרוּ־נָא בֵית־אַהֲרֹן כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ׃
Let the house of Aaron declare, His steadfast love is eternal.

4) יֹאמְרוּ־נָא יִרְאֵי ה' כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ
Let those who fear the LORD declare, His steadfast love is eternal.

Verses 2-4 make it clear: Israel, the house of Aaron, and those who fear God. Is there anyone reading this psalm who would not consider themselves either God-fearing, a member of the house of Aaron, or part of Israel? So the psalmist is pretty much talking here about the obligation of every Jew to praise God.

If we have any doubt the psalmist takes as his audience the entirety of the Jewish people, the repetition of specific phrases makes it clear. Repetition, of course, emphasizes the words that are repeated. But it draws particular attention to the words that are *not* repeated. In this introductory section of the Psalm, those words are the categories of Israel, House of Aaron, and God-fearers. In both its structure and its diction, the psalm is answering the famous question from the film *Taxi Driver*, "Are you talking to me?" with a resounding, "Yeah, I'm talking to **you**! Everyone within the sound of my voice can declare that God's love is steadfast and eternal."

The psalmist has established an audience. But *why* should we make such a declaration? Versus 5-9 begin to explore the why. Verse 5,

מִן־הַמֵּצַר קָרָאתִי קָהּ עָנָנִי בַמֶּרְחָב קָהּ׃

From the straits I called upon God; *God answered me with expansiveness*
makes one of the most powerful statements for why we should praise God. The verse juxtaposes our narrowness and God's expansiveness; when we are most limited, God has the most to give. Verses 6-9 elaborate on God's expansiveness.

6) ה׳ לִי לֹא אִירָא מַה־יַּעֲשֶׂה לִי אָדָם׃ When God is with me, what can man do to me?
7) ה׳ לִי בְּעֹזְרָי וַאֲנִי אֶרְאֶה בְשֹׂנְאָי׃ With his help, my foes will fall.
8) טוֹב לַחֲסוֹת בַּה׳ מִבְּטֹחַ בָּאָדָם׃ Refuge in God is better than trusting man
9) טוֹב לַחֲסוֹת בַּה׳ מִבְּטֹחַ בִּנְדִיבִים׃ It is even better to trust God than to trust noblemen.

The repetition of לי ה׳/*God is with me* at the beginning of verses 7 and 8 and טוב לחסות בה׳/*it is better to take refuge* at the beginning of verses 9 and 10 further emphasize that God's power is far greater than man's.

Then, to provide more understanding of why God deserves our praise, the psalm moves into a description of attacks from which the psalmist has been rescued. In this section, verses 10-12, the repetitive *lashon* accentuates the drama of these attacks.
All nations have beset me; by the name of the LORD I will surely cut them down .
10) כָּל־גּוֹיִם סְבָבוּנִי בְּשֵׁם ה׳ כִּי אֲמִילַם׃
They beset me, they surround me; by the name of the LORD I will surely cut them down.
11) סַבּוּנִי גַם־סְבָבוּנִי בְּשֵׁם ה׳ כִּי אֲמִילַם׃
They have beset me like bees; they shall be extinguished like burning thorns; by the name of the LORD I will surely cut them down.
12) סַבּוּנִי כִדְבוֹרִים דֹּעֲכוּ כְּאֵשׁ קוֹצִים בְּשֵׁם ה׳ כִּי אֲמִילַם׃

In this section it's not just double *lashon*, but actually quadruple *lashon*, as the word סבוני/*beset* or *surround* is repeated 4 times. The psalmist has been beset or surrounded by *גוים/nations*, but God has cut them down. And in verse 12, the attacking nations have surrounded the psalmist as a swarm of bees. The psalmist turns to the dramatic metaphor דֹּעֲכוּ כְּאֵשׁ קוֹצִים/*they will be extinguished as a fire does thorns* to describe how God will save him.

Furthermore, the idea of סבוני, of being surrounded, extends the idea begun in verse 5, of being rescued from our straits or our narrowness by God's expansive power. While this concept is not represented in the repeat of a word or a phrase, it is a thematic repeat that extends the importance of repetition in this psalm. Verse 13,

דַּחֹה דְחִיתַנִי לִנְפֹּל וַה׳ עֲזָרָנִי *You pressed me hard, I nearly fell; but the LORD helped me*

relies on the double use of the idea of דחוה, of being pressed. What is "pressing" if not another form of being surrounded, and of being cast in a strait or place of narrowness?

The psalm now turns to an extraordinary double *lashon.* but instead of duplicating language within the

psalm itself it stretches across Tanakh, to שירת הים, the Song of the Sea. Verse 14,

עָזִּי וְזִמְרָת קָהּ וַיְהִי־לִי לִישׁוּעָה God is my strength and might; he is my deliverance

continues the theme of narrowness. It connects the psalm's themes directly and explicitly to what was really the ultimate narrowness of the Jewish people. Recall the scene that gave rise to the Song of the Sea. We are beset by the Egyptian army, chasing after us to return us to slavery. They press us as we stand on the shores of Yam Suf, overwhelming us with the likelihood they will soon recapture us. Then, the sea parts and we pass through a narrow path, with waters on our right side and on our left. We emerge on dry land, safe on the other side. We are reborn, both metaphorically and actually. We have travelled through a narrow passage to a new life. God's salvation through the miracle of the parting of the sea metamorphoses us from a tribe of slaves into a nation of Israel. Immediately, we become defined not just by our past history of suffering at the hands of the Egyptians, but by our unique relationship with God -- a relationship based entirely on God's singular involvement in our fate as demonstrated by his redemption of us.

Verses 15 and 16 remind us of the euphoria of the rescue brought about by the miracle of the parting of the sea and the vanquishing of the Egyptian army that followed. The voices referred to are obviously those of the Israelites who survived that experience. But the psalm also may suggest that anyone who is under the big tent of righteousness can proclaim God's triumph.

The voices of joy and salvation are in the tents of the righteous, "The right hand of the LORD is triumphant!

15) קוֹל רִנָּה וִישׁוּעָה בְּאָהֳלֵי צַדִּיקִים יְמִין יְהֹוָה עֹשָׂה חָיִל:

The right hand of the LORD is exalted! The right hand of the LORD is triumphant!"

יְמִין יְהֹוָה רוֹמֵמָה

16) יְמִין יְהֹוָה עֹשָׂה חָיִל:

The beginning of verse 15 describes the shouts of joy the righteous express in their tents; the end of the verse begins what becomes, with verse 16, a triple *lashon* of the word יְמִין highlighting the power of God's right hand, i.e., God's ability to create wondrous acts in our world.

Verse 17 highlights the salvation from death God's redemption brought.

17) לֹא אָמוּת כִּי־אֶחְיֶה וַאֲסַפֵּר מַעֲשֵׂי יָהּ: I shall not die but live and proclaim the works of the LORD.

It also suggests the possibility of immortality through the attestation of the Lord's eminent acts. When we praise God for all he has done, we become another link in a long chain of those who have also proclaimed God's actions before us, and who will do so after us. Through this praise our voices become not just ours alone, but part of a chorus across generations. Though, inevitably, we as individuals will be silenced one day, the commitment to God for which we stood will live on.

Verse 18 brings forward a reprise of the suffering described earlier in the psalm, as it reminds us that even when we are punished, God saves us from death:

לֹא אָמוּת כִּי־אֶחְיֶה וַאֲסַפֵּר מַעֲשֵׂי יָהּ: The LORD punished me severely, but did not hand me over to death

It is possible to read this verse as a continuation of the theme in verse 17 that we connect with or can participate in a kind of eternal life. The psalm suggests the possibility that through our praise, we become part of the legacy of praise, that as long as the nation of Israel exists, praising God is our lifeblood. As long as we are part of that stream, that chain, our souls cannot die.

Another way to read this verse is to think that although we, as mortal humans, must submit to the inevitable punishment of death, as long as the people of Israel endures and praises God, we have escaped death's finality.

Now we come to verses 19 and 20, two of the most memorable verses of the psalm.

19) פִּתְחוּ־לִי שַׁעֲרֵי־ Open the gates of righteousness for me that I may enter them and praise the LORD
צֶדֶק אָבֹא־בָם אוֹדֶה י־ה

20) זֶה־הַשַּׁעַר לַה׳ צַדִּיקִים יָבֹאוּ בוֹ *This is the gateway to the LORD— the victorious shall enter through it.*

The verses echo each other with the repeated metaphor of a kind of gateway through which the righteous pass through so they can praise God. Gates define space. They separate one area from another and control our ability to pass between those two areas, and from the point of view of this psalm, these gates seem to separate holy space from unholy space. The idea of gates separating profane and sacred areas was certainly an idea known to Melech David, who is assumed to be the author of the Psalms. He lived before the creation and destruction of the First and Second Temple. But for those of us living after the Temple periods, when we think about gates, we are immediately thinking about the Gates of Beit HaMikdash. That was our primary place to praise God. It was our central place for connection and relationship with God. These verses connect us with our desire to pass through those gates again, where we can actually stand with and deliver this praise.

In contrast to its two preceding verses, verse 21 is written in the first person.

אוֹדְךָ כִּי עֲנִיתָנִי וַתְּהִי־לִי לִישׁוּעָה *I praise You, for You have answered me, and have become my deliverance*

Verse 21 reminds us we've always had a personal ability to connect with God as well as a communal one, and that God can deliver us personally. This personal connection leads us to verse 22, which may be the most powerful of the entire Psalm. It may also be its thematic crux or turning point. Verse 22,

אֶבֶן מָאֲסוּ הַבּוֹנִים הָיְתָה לְרֹאשׁ פִּנָּה The stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone

has no structural companion. It cannot be paired with any other verse, nor does it repeat or continue a theme of any other verse the way many others do. Furthermore, it has no linguistic companion. The other verses in the psalm are literally woven together with double, triple and even quadruple *lashon* either within each phrase or between phrases and verses. In comparison, אֶבֶן מָאֲסוּ stands out like a sore thumb.

Its isolation demonstrates the extraordinary power of repetitive language. When so much is being repeated and echoed in virtually every other verse, the *absence* of the repetition is stunning. It's as if the psalm is yelling, as loudly as possible, *pay attention to this verse!*

This verse stands alone to tell us that no matter how rejected we may be, no matter how much we feel like the ugly duckling, the downtrodden, the forgotten, we can become the רֹאשׁ פִּנָּה, the cornerstone of the whole enterprise. That, of course, inspires each of us personally, because who among us has not felt cast out, rejected, or spurned? It also reminds us to treat with compassion those who may be the most rejected, criticized, or ostracized and those victimized by xenophobia, prejudice, or racism. This verse suggests that as part of God's eternal plan anyone we have ever seen as the "other" may be the most important among us.

It also summarizes us nationally, as the Jewish people. I'm grateful to my *chavruta* on this psalm, David Grubard, who pointed out this is exactly who the Jewish people have been throughout history -- a people cycling between utter rejection and triumph. We were slaves in Egypt, and then redeemed from there to become God's chosen people. We arrived in Egypt because Joseph was spurned and thrown in a hole by his brothers, but he became the chief steward to Potiphar. He was imprisoned -- אֶבֶן מָאֲסוּ— only to rise to be the viceroy saving Egypt from a seven year famine. His family of 70 souls grew to become a numerous people, only to then be rejected again through 400 years of enslavement.

Our Torah, as well, Midrash tells us, was rejected by all the nations to whom God offered it, until we accepted it wholeheartedly. The Torah is the cornerstone of the mission of ethical monotheism, which brings into the world the embrace of the holiness of each individual. In this world, there will never be again an אֶבֶן מָאֲסוּ, a rejected stone, but instead every person will be valued as if each were their own cornerstone.

Having articulated this vision, which is nothing less than messianic, Verses 23 through the end of the psalm comprise a series of triumphant declarations. Verse 23 through 27 are written in the 2nd person plural, which echo the kind of national obligation we saw in the psalm's opening verses. In these verses,

23) מֵאֵת ה׳ הָיְתָה זֹּאת הִיא נִפְלָאת בְּעֵינֵינוּ׃ This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our sight.

24) זֶה־הַיּוֹם עָשָׂה ה׳ נָגִילָה וְנִשְׂמְחָה בוֹ׃ This is the day that the LORD has made- let us exult and rejoice on it

25) אָנָּא ה׳ הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּא אָנָּא ה׳ הַצְלִיחָה נָּא׃ O LORD, deliver us! O LORD, help us succeed!

we are called up as a group to proclaim the marvels that we've seen. That may be one reason we sing these four verses out loud as a congregation during Hallel. Hazal also recognized the importance of repetition in this psalm, and decided the *nusach* should give these verses the duplication they don't otherwise receive.

Verse 26 and 27 return to the idea of entering a sacred space:

26) בָּרוּךְ הַבָּא בְּשֵׁם ה׳ בֵּרַכְנוּכֶם מִבֵּית ה׳

May he who enters be blessed in the name of the LORD; we bless you from the House of the LORD and

27) קֵל ה׳ וַיָּאֶר לָנוּ אִסְרוּ־חַג בַּעֲבֹתִים עַד־קַרְנוֹת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ

The LORD is God; He has given us light; bind the festal offering to the horns of the altar with cords

Verse 27 clarifies what that sacred space is: the space where a sacrificial offering is bound to the horns of the altar. As modern Jews, we understand, with the acute sorrow we express on Tisha b'Av, that we no longer have the Beit HaMikdash, the space of sacrifice referred to in the psalm. Nor do we have a single "House of the Lord" from which we can praise God as envisioned by Melech David as he composed these verses. But it does seem possible to imagine that just as God has restored the rejected stone to its place of triumph throughout Jewish history, one day we will again be able to experience the direct connection with God emanating from those spaces where we could offer sacrifices. Not only will the weakest become strong, but we will see again the prominence of a nation with a unique relationship with God.

Finally, verse 28 conveys us to the assertion of one person's singular and intimate connection to God:

קֵלִ֣י אַתָּ֣ה וְאוֹדֶ֑ךָּ אֱ֝לֹקַ֗י אֲרוֹמְמֶֽךָּ

You are my God and I will praise you; You are my God and I will extol You

And then Verse 29 returns us precisely to where we began, as it is an exact repetition of the first verse:

הוֹד֣וּ לַ֭יהוָה כִּי־טֽוֹב כִּ֣י לְעוֹלָ֣ם חַסְדּֽוֹ׃ Praise the LORD, for He is good, His steadfast love is eternal

In case we had any doubt that double *lashon* was critical to the main structure of the psalm, the repetition suggests that after the journey we've taken, we have no other response than to simply say, "Praise the Lord for He is Good, His steadfast love is eternal."

One of our greatest theological paradoxes as Jews is our obligation to love God, as we are commanded in the Sh'ma. Can a person truly be commanded to love? And what is the value of that love if we are doing it out of obligation? Psalm 118 resolves that paradox. The psalm challenges us to recognize all the things that God has done for us, both as individuals and as the Jewish people. It provides a systematic and logical proof that if we do fully acknowledge what God has bestowed upon us, our vociferous affection will simply spring out of our hearts.

The Religious Character of Rosh Chodesh

by Alex Fax

Of all the Biblical holidays, Rosh Chodesh has by far the least developed religious identity. Other than minor modifications to our *tefillot*, we effectively do nothing ritually to mark the passing of the day. Given the richness of our other holidays in terms of philosophy and practice, this absence is striking. In this article, we will try and develop an approach to deriving meaning from Rosh Chodesh.

We can understand Rosh Chodesh's comparative lack of identity after reviewing the Torah's treatment of the day. Commandments regarding Rosh Chodesh occur only twice – once in listing the required public sacrifices (Bemidbar 28:11-15), and once, briefly, in conjunction with "days of happiness and festivals" (Bemidbar 10:10) as a day to sound the *chatzotzrot*[1]. This stands in stark contrast to the other holidays: Shabbat, Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot are discussed in Shemot, Vayikra, Bemidbar, and Devarim, and the Yom Kippur service is described in great detail in Vayikra. Rosh Hashana also gets a comparatively slight treatment, but it is at least mentioned among the other holidays in Parshat Emor, where it is designated as a *Yom Teruah*, from which we derive its central mitzvah, the blowing of the Shofar. If we were to restrict ourselves to the Torah in developing our understanding of Rosh Chodesh, we might excuse our current lack of well-developed practice.

Reviewing the treatment of the holidays in the *Nevi'im*, however, we see that the relative importance of Rosh Chodesh and the other holidays is reversed. We first encounter Rosh Chodesh in *Nevi'im* when David, who suspects that Shaul has turned against him, needs to fabricate an excuse for not attending King Shaul's Rosh Chodesh meal (Shmuel 1: 20:5-6):

וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל־יְהוֹנָתָן הִנֵּה־חֹדֶשׁ מָחָר
וְאָנֹכִי יָשֹׁב־אֵשֵׁב עִם־הַמֶּלֶךְ לֶאֱכוֹל
וְשִׁלַּחְתַּנִי וְנִסְתַּרְתִּי בַשָּׂדֶה עַד הָעֶרֶב
הַשְּׁלִשִׁית: אִם־פָּקֹד יִפְקְדֵנִי אָבִיךָ וְאָמַרְתָּ
נִשְׁאֹל נִשְׁאַל מִמֶּנִּי דָּוִד לָרוּץ בֵּית־לֶחֶם
עִירוֹ כִּי זֶבַח הַיָּמִים שָׁם לְכָל־הַמִּשְׁפָּחָה:

David said to Jonathan, "Tomorrow is the new moon, and I am to sit with the king at the meal. Instead, let me go and I will hide in the countryside until the third evening. If your father notes my absence, you say, 'David asked my permission to run down to his home town, Bethlehem, for the whole family has its annual sacrifice there.'

From Rosh Chodesh's presence as a plot device, we learn several things: we see that Rosh Chodesh is accompanied by sacrifices and a festive meal, and that the day is of sufficient importance that David's family would choose to hold their annual sacrifice on that day. We also note that the narrative does not feel the need to explain Rosh Chodesh to us: it is a given that David, Shaul, and we the readers understand that Rosh Chodesh is a regular part of the fabric of their religious lives.

This contrasts starkly with the treatment of the *shalosh regalim* in the *Nevi'im:* when they appear, it is

1 I do not count Shemot 12:2, "החדש הזה לכם ראש חדשים" as a reference to Rosh Chodesh – in that context it refers to the "first of months," not the New Moon per se. Chazal derive from this verse the practice of *kiddush haChodesh*, sanctifying the new moon, and indeed Rosh Chodesh does inherit a religious identity from its role in marking Jewish time. This role is a means to an end, though, and we do not in practice meaningfully celebrate today Rosh Chodesh as such.

to inform us that as a rule they were not observed at all, and the decision to observe them was a major departure from their regular religious practice. Consider the following passage when King Yoshiyah decides that the people should observe Pesach (Melachim 2 23:21-23):

וַיְצַו הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־כָּל־הָעָם לֵאמֹר עֲשׂוּ פֶסַח לַיהוָה אֱלֹקֵיכֶם כַּכָּתוּב עַל סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית הַזֶּה: כִּי לֹא נַעֲשָׂה כַּפֶּסַח הַזֶּה מִימֵי הַשֹּׁפְטִים אֲשֶׁר שָׁפְטוּ אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכֹל יְמֵי מַלְכֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמַלְכֵי יְהוּדָה: כִּי אִם־ בִּשְׁמֹנֶה עֶשְׂרֵה שָׁנָה לַמֶּלֶךְ יֹאשִׁיָהוּ נַעֲשָׂה הַפֶּסַח הַזֶּה לַיהוָה בִּירוּשָׁלָם:

The king commanded all the people, "Offer the passover sacrifice to the LORD your God as prescribed in this scroll of the covenant." Now the passover sacrifice had not been offered in that manner in the days of the chieftains who ruled Israel, or during the days of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah. Only in the eighteenth year of King Josiah was such a passover sacrifice offered in that manner to the LORD in Jerusalem.

Despite Pesach's centrality to our religious identity, apparently in the time of *Bayit Rishon* it simply did not exist in practice.

We can deduce other aspects of Rosh Chodesh's identity from later episodes in the *Nevi'im*. In the story of the Shunnamite woman, we read that as she races to seek out the prophet Elisha to revive her dead son, her husband asks why she is leaving (Melachim 2 4:23):

וַיֹּאמֶר מַדּוּעַ אתי [אַתְּ] הלכתי [הֹלֶכֶת] אֵלָיו הַיּוֹם לֹא־חֹדֶשׁ וְלֹא שַׁבָּת וַתֹּאמֶר שָׁלוֹם:

But he said, "Why are you going to him today? It is neither new moon nor sabbath." She answered, "It's all right."

Again, we note from context that Rosh Chodesh observance was clearly common practice. We further note the custom of going to a holy person (or place) on Rosh Chodesh, and the pairing of Rosh Chodesh with Shabbat. These motifs recur in the prophetic writings as well. Consider the following passages from Yeshayah 66:23,

וְהָיָה מִדֵּי־חֹדֶשׁ בְּחָדְשׁוֹ וּמִדֵּי שַׁבָּת בְּשַׁבַּתּוֹ יָבוֹא כָל־בָּשָׂר לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת לְפָנַי אָמַר ה׳:

And new moon after new moon, And sabbath after sabbath, All flesh shall come to worship Me —said the LORD.

and Yechezkel 46:1-3:

כֹּה־אָמַר ה׳ שַׁעַר הֶחָצֵר הַפְּנִימִית הַפֹּנֶה קָדִים יִהְיֶה סָגוּר שֵׁשֶׁת יְמֵי הַמַּעֲשֶׂה וּבְיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת יִפָּתֵחַ וּבְיוֹם הַחֹדֶשׁ יִפָּתֵחַ:... וְהִשְׁתַּחֲווּ עַם־הָאָרֶץ פֶּתַח הַשַּׁעַר הַהוּא בַּשַּׁבָּתוֹת וּבֶחֳדָשִׁים לִפְנֵי ה׳:

Thus said the Lord GOD: The gate of the inner court which faces east shall be closed on the six working days; it shall be opened on the sabbath day and it shall be opened on the day of the new moon … The common people shall worship before the LORD on sabbaths and new moons at the entrance of the same gate.

In both instances, Rosh Chodesh and Shabbat are paired as days when the people come to the Beit HaMikdash, even though neither is described as such in the Torah itself.

How did this practice evolve? The passage from Yechezkel provides a clue: note that the text contrasts both *Shabbat and Rosh Chodesh* with *sheshet y'mei hama'aseh*, the six work days. The phrase *yom ha'ma'aseh* appears in the David and Yonatan story as well (Shmuel 1 20:19) in contrast to Rosh

Chodesh. It appears that at that time, the custom had developed that Rosh Chodesh, like Shabbat, was a day off of work. We have hints of this in the Rishonim as well: while neither the Torah nor halacha designate Rosh Chodesh as a day we refrain from *melacha*, the Shulchan Aruch and Rem"a (Orach Chaim 417:1) do note – and endorse – the *minhag* that women refrain from some forms of work on that day. If we consider the possibility that the custom did in fact evolve, we can conjecture as well the custom to visit the Beit HaMikdash that day arose for practical reasons – a day off work is simply the easiest day to go to the Beit HaMikdash and offer personal *korbanot*. Over time, this practical solution to the need of people to visit the Beit HaMikdash became ingrained in their culture, though never quite codified as law. And thus we arrive at a possible religious identity for Rosh Chodesh: a monthly opportunity to attend to our personal religious needs in a holy public setting - the Beit HaMikdash.

This insight into Rosh Chodesh's character is actually embedded in our prayers. The musaf service describes Rosh Chodesh in the following way:

רָאשֵׁי חֳדָשִׁים לְעַמְּךָ נָתָתָּ. זְמַן כַּפָּרָה לְכָל תּוֹלְדוֹתָם. בִּהְיוֹתָם מַקְרִיבִים לְפָנֶיךָ זִבְחֵי רָצוֹן. וּשְׂעִירֵי חַטָּאת לְכַפֵּר בַּעֲדָם. זִכָּרוֹן לְכֻלָּם יִהְיוּ. וּתְשׁוּעַת נַפְשָׁם. מִיַּד שׁוֹנֵא

You have given New Moons to Your people as a time of atonement for all their offspring. They would bring You offerings of goodwill, and goats as sin-offerings for atonement. May it serve as a remembrance for them all, and a deliverance of their lives from the hand of the enemy.

The designation of Rosh Chodesh as a "day of atonement" at first appears to be a reference to the inclusion of the *korban chatat*, the sin offering, among the Musaf sacrifices. But the text says otherwise: the offerings in question are brought by "Your people", and include "offerings of goodwill" as well as sin offerings. In other words, Rosh Chodesh Musaf chooses to define Rosh Chodesh not via its public *korbanot*, but by the personal *korbanot* that in practice were brought that day.

Today we no longer bring personal *korbanot,* and the meaning Rosh Chodesh inherited during Bayit Rishon has atrophied. We mark meaningful events in our lives in other ways religiously: being called to the Torah, sponsoring kiddush or seudah shlishit, Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, and so on. But we would do well, when Rosh Chodesh rolls around, to pause before davening Musaf and ask ourselves: what took place the last month - for good or bad – that should be a moment for religious reflection, and that in an earlier time, would have motivated us to leave our village and make our way to the Beit Mikdash, knowing we would find the doors of the eastern gate open and awaiting our arrival.

Tzipporah's Quiet Return: A Deep Dive into the Intersection of Moshe's Family Dynamics and Torah Leadership

Based on Parsha Plug: Parshat Yitro

By Rabbanit Alissa Thomas-Newborn

In this source sheet, we will explore the following questions:

- *Tzipporah is an underrated leader of courage and conscience.*
- *How does her story help us notice other such leaders in our lives?*
- *What does she teach us about Jewish female leadership?*
- *What does Moshe and Tzipporah's family dynamic teach us about the marriages and relationships we personally want to have?*
- *Why do you think Tzipporah's return in Parshat Yitro occurs in connection with the giving of the Torah?*

Shemot 18–1–7	**שמות יח:א–ז**
1 Now Moshe's father in law, Yitro, the chieftain of Midian, heard all that God had done for Moshe and for Israel, His people that the Lord had taken Israel out of Egypt. **2** So Moshe's father in law, Yitro, took Tzipporah, Moshe's wife, after she had been sent away, **3**and her two sons, one of whom was named Gershom, because he [Moshe] said, "I was a stranger in a foreign land," **4** and one who was named Eliezer, because [Moshe said,] "The God of my father came to my aid and rescued me from Pharaoh's sword." **5** Now Moshe's father in law, Yitro, and Moshe's sons and his wife came to Moshe, to the desert where he was encamped, to the mountain of God. **6** And he said to Moshe, "I, Yitro, your father in law, am coming to you, and [so is] your wife and her two sons with her." **7** So Moshe went out toward Yitro, prostrated himself and kissed him, and they greeted one another, and they entered the tent.	**א** וַיִּשְׁמַע יִתְרוֹ כֹהֵן מִדְיָן חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֱלֹקִים לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ כִּי־הוֹצִיא ה' אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם: **ב** וַיִּקַּח יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֶת־צִפֹּרָה אֵשֶׁת מֹשֶׁה אַחַר שִׁלּוּחֶיהָ: **ג** וְאֶת שְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר שֵׁם הָאֶחָד גֵּרְשֹׁם כִּי אָמַר גֵּר הָיִיתִי בְּאֶרֶץ נָכְרִיָּה: **ה** וַיָּבֹא יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה וּבָנָיו וְאִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הַמִּדְבָּר אֲשֶׁר־הוּא חֹנֶה שָׁם הַר הָאֱלֹקִים: **ו** וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֲנִי חִתְנְךָ יִתְרוֹ בָּא אֵלֶיךָ וְאִשְׁתְּךָ וּשְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ עִמָּהּ: **ז** וַיֵּצֵא מֹשֶׁה לִקְרַאת חִתְנוֹ וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ וַיִּשַּׁק־לוֹ וַיִּשְׁאֲלוּ אִישׁ־לְרֵעֵהוּ לְשָׁלוֹם וַיָּבֹאוּ הָאֹהֱלָה:

Why does the text say "After she had been sent away?" And why is Yitro the subject in our reunion text? What is the family dynamic here?

Mechilta DeRebbe Shimon bar Yochai 18:2	**מכילתא דרבי שמעון בר יוחאי י"ח:ב**
From when was she sent away? At the time when God said to Moshe, "Go and take Israel out of Egypt", Moshe took his wife and his two sons with him and they rode on the donkey. At that time God told Aharon, "Go to greet your brother in the desert" (Shemot 4:27). So he went and began to greet, embrace, and kiss him. Aharon then said, "My brother, where were you all of these years?" Moshe replied, "In Midian". "Who are these?" Moshe answered, "This is my wife and these are my sons." "And where are you taking them?" Aharon asked. "To Egypt," he replied. Aharon retorted, "We are suffering with the first ones, and you come to add to them?" Immediately Moshe said to Tzipporah, "Go home to your father's house." She immediately took her two sons and went to her father's house. There the text says, "after she had been sent away, and her two sons".	אמתי שלחה בשעה שאמר לו המקום למשה לך והוציא את ישראל ממצרים לקח את אשתו ואת בניו והרכיבם על החמור אמר לו המקום לאהרן צא לקראת אחיך המדברה יצא לקראתו חתחיל מגפפו ומנשקו אמר לו משה אחי היכן היית כל השנים הללו אמר לו במדין אמר מה טיב אלו בני אדם שעמך אמר לו אשתי ובני הן ואמר לו להיכן אתה מוליכן אמר לו למצרים אמר לו על הראשונים אנו מצטערין עכשו אתה מביא את האחרונים מיד אמר לה חזרי לבית אביך מיד נטלה שני בניה וחזרה לבית אביה לכך נאמר אחר שלוחיה ואת שני בניה.

Let's explore the beginnings of the story of Moshe and Tzipporah from our rabbinic tradition:

Yalkut Shimoni 168:2	**ילקוט שמעוני על התורה קס״ח:ב**
Moshe went to Midian because he was afraid to return to Egypt because of Paro. He came to Reuel (Yitro) and he told him that he was fleeing from Egypt... Yitro—who was an advisor to Paro at the time—threw him into jail and left him there for ten years. Tzipporah the daughter of Reuel had compassion on Moshe and brought him bread and water. After ten years, she turned to her father and said: "This Hebrew who has been jailed in the pit for the past ten years, nobody has come around asking for him [and so it is no longer a danger to have him here]. Father, if it is good in your eyes, let us send for him and see if he is alive or dead!" Reuel hadn't known of his daughter's kindness to Moshe, so he was shocked: "Is it possible for a man to be locked up for ten years and not eat and still be alive?" His daughter replied: "Father, haven't you heard that the God of the Hebrews is great and awesome, and does miracles for them all the time? He saved Avraham from the fire, Yitzchak from the sword and Yaakov from the angel who wrestled him. And how about this very Moshe who was saved from the Nile and from the sword of Pharaoh? I'm sure that God could have saved him now as well." Reuel agreed and went down to see, and there they found Moshe alive, standing and praying to the God of his fathers. He was taken out, cleaned, given a haircut and brought to the family table for a meal...Moshe took Tzipporah the Midianite as his wife in marriage and Tzipporah went in the ways of the House of Israel, and she was not lacking in righteousness compared to Sarah, Rivka, Rachel, and Leah. She quickly had a son and Moshe named him Gershom, but they were not able to circumcise him because of Reuel's ruling. After three years they had another son and they circumcised him and called him Eliezer.	וילך משה מדינה כי ירא [לשוב] מצרימה מפני פרעה ויבוא אל רעואל ויספר לו משה את אשר ברח ממצרים...ויקחהו אל בית הסוהר ויהי כלוא שם עשר שנים. ויהי בהיותו עצור שמה ותחמול עליו צפורה בת רעואל ותכלכלהו לחם ומים ויהי מקץ עשר שנים ותאמר אל אביה לאמר האיש העברי אשר כלאתו זה עשר שנים בבית הסוהר ואין דורש ואין מבקש אליו ועתה אם טוב בעיניך אבי נשלח ונראה אם מת ואם חי הוא ואביה לא ידע כי כלכלתהו ויען ויאמר רעואל הנהיה כדבר הזה להעצר גבר בבית הכלא עשר שנים ולא יאכל ויחיה. ותען צפורה את אביה לאמר הלא שמעת [אבי] כי אלקי העברים גדול ונורא הוא ומפליא להם בכל עת. הוא הציל אברהם מאור כשדים ואת יצחק מן החרב ואת יעקב מן המלאך בהאבקו עמו. וגם עם זה רבות עשה ויצלהו מיאור מצרים ומחרב פרעה גם מזה יכול למלטהו. וייטב הדבר בעיני רעואל ויעש כן כדבר בתו וישלח אל הבור לראות מה נעשה בו. ויראו והנה האיש חי ועומד על רגליו ומתחנן אל אלקי אבותיו. ויוציאוהו מן הבור ויגלחוהו וישנו את בגדי כלאו ויאכל לחם. ויהי האיש אל גנת רעואל אשר אחרי הבית...ויקח צפורה המדינית לאשה ותלך צפורה בדרכי בית ישראל לא חסרה דבר מצדקת שרה ורבקה רחל ולאה גבעות עולם ותהר בן ויקרא משה שמו גרשום וגו' רק לא מל את בשר ערלתו בגזרת רעואל חותנו ויהי בעת ההיא מקץ שלש שנים ותהר עוד ותלד בן שני וימל את בשר ערלתו ויקרא שמו אליעזר וגו'.

How does this text change/add to how you view Tzipporah?

Was Moshe and Tzipporah's story one of romance, courage, faith-- or something else?

Tzipporah does for Moshe what he is called to do for B'nai Yisrael. Why do you think this is?

There is a biblical story (below) in which Tzipporah saves Moshe (again).

What do you make of her role in this puzzling text?

The Mechilta teaches that this story immediately precedes Moshe sending Tzipporah and their sons back to Yitro -- what's the connection?

Shemot 4:24-27	שמות ד:כד–כז
24 Now he was on the way, in an inn, that the Lord met him and sought to put him to death. **25** So Tzipporah took a sharp stone and severed her son's foreskin and cast it to his feet, and she said, "For you are a bridegroom of blood to me." **26** So He released him. Then she said, "A bridegroom of blood concerning the circumcision." **27** The Lord said to Aaron, "Go toward Moses, to the desert." So he went and met him on the mount of God, and he kissed him.	**כד** וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בַּמָּלוֹן וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ ה׳ וַיְבַקֵּשׁ הֲמִיתוֹ׃ **כה** וַתִּקַּח צִפֹּרָה צֹר וַתִּכְרֹת אֶת־עָרְלַת בְּנָהּ וַתַּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי חֲתַן־דָּמִים אַתָּה לִי׃ **כו** וַיִּרֶף מִמֶּנּוּ אָז אָמְרָה חֲתַן דָּמִים לַמּוּלֹת׃ **כז** וַיֹּאמֶר ה׳ אֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵךְ לִקְרַאת מֹשֶׁה הַמִּדְבָּרָה וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ בְּהַר הָאֱלֹקים וַיִּשַּׁק־לוֹ׃

In the text below, Tzipporah is mentioned again in a moment of familial tension. How does this part of their story impact your understanding of Tzipporah and her role in our tradition?

Bamidbar 12:1	במדבר יב:א
1 Miriam and Aharon spoke against Moshe regarding the Cushite woman he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman.	**א** וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמֹשֶׁה עַל־אֹדֹות הָאִשָּׁה הַכֻּשִׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקָח כִּי־אִשָּׁה כֻשִׁית לָקָח׃

Rashi Bamidbar 12:1	רש״י במדבר יב:א
Miriam and Aaron spoke:...How did Miriam know that Moshe had separated from his wife? Rebbe Natan says: Miriam was beside Tzipporah when Moshe was told that Eldad and Medad were prophesying in the camp. When Tzipporah heard this, she said, "Woe to their wives if they are required to prophesy, for they will separate from their wives just as my husband separated from me." From this, Miriam knew and told Aharon. **For he had married a Cushite woman:** What does this mean to say? You find a woman who is beautiful in appearance, but unpleasant in deed; in deed, but not of beautiful appearance. This one, however, was pleasant in every respect. (Therefore, she was called Cushite). **Cushite woman:** [She was a Midianite, not a Cushite] Because of her beauty she was called "the Cushite" [the Ethiopian], as a man would call his handsome son "Cushite" to negate the power of the evil eye. **For he had married a Cushite woman:** And had now divorced her.	**ותדבר מרים ואהרן:...**ומנין היתה יודעת מרים שפרש משה מן האשה, רבי נתן אומר, מרים היתה בצד צפורה בשעה שנאמר למשה אלדד ומידד מתנבאים במחנה, כיון ששמעה צפורה, אמרה אוי לנשותיהן של אלו אם הם נזקקים לנבואה שיהיו פורשין מנשותיהן כדרך שפרש בעלי ממני, ומשם ידעה מרים והגידה לאהרן. **כי אשה כשית לקח:** מה תלמוד לומר, אלא יש לך אשה נאה ביפיה ואינה נאה במעשיה, במעשיה ולא ביפיה, אבל זאת נאה בכל: **האשה הכשית:** על שם נויה נקראת כושית כאדם הקורא את בנו נאה כושי, כדי שלא תשלוט בו עין רעה: **כי אשה כשית לקח:** ועתה גרשה:

How does this ending to their relationship strike you?

What does this tell you about the sacrifices leaders and their families make?

How does Tzipporah-- as both a strong defender and protector and as a heartbroken wife-- add to your understanding of Jewish heroines?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Women as Leaders (Shemot 5781)

The daughter of a Midianite priest, [Tzipporah] was nonetheless determined to accompany Moses on his mission to Egypt, despite the fact that she had no reason to risk her life on such a hazardous venture. In a deeply enigmatic passage, we see it was she who saved Moses' life by performing a circumcision on their son (Ex. 4:24-26). The impression we gain of her is a figure of monumental determination who, at a crucial moment, had a better sense than Moses himself of what God requires…How then, if women emerge so powerfully as leaders, were they excluded in Jewish law from certain leadership roles? If we look carefully we will see that women were historically excluded from two areas. One was the "crown of priesthood", which went to Aaron and his sons. The other was the "crown

of kingship", which went to David and his sons. These were two roles built on the principle of dynastic succession. From the third crown – the "crown of Torah" – however, women were not excluded. There were Prophetesses, not just Prophets. The Sages enumerated seven of them (Megillah 14a). There have been great women Torah scholars always, from the Mishnaic period (Beruriah, Ima Shalom) until today. At stake is a more general distinction. Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron in his Responsa, *Binyan Av*, differentiates between formal or official authority (*samchut*) and actual leadership (*hanhagah*). There are figures who hold positions of authority – prime ministers, presidents, CEOs – who may not be leaders at all. They may have the power to force people to do what they say, but they have no followers. They excite no admiration. They inspire no emulation. And there may be leaders who hold no official position at all but who are turned to for advice and are held up as role models. They have no power but great influence. Israel's Prophets belonged to this category. So, often, did the *gedolei Yisrael*, the great Sages of each generation. Neither Rashi nor Rambam held any official position (some scholars say that Rambam was chief rabbi of Egypt but most hold that he was not, though his descendants were). Wherever leadership depends on personal qualities – what Max Weber called "charismatic authority" – and not on office or title, there is no distinction between women and men. Yocheved, Miriam, Shifra, Puah, Tzipporah and Batya were leaders not because of any official position they held (in the case of Batya she was a leader *despite* her official title as a princess of Egypt). They were leaders because they had courage and conscience. They refused to be intimidated by power or defeated by circumstance. They were the real heroes of the Exodus. Their courage is still a source of inspiration today.

Let's now return to our original questions with fresh eyes:

How does Tzipporah's story help us notice other such leaders in our lives?

What does she teach us about Jewish female leadership?

What does Moshe and Tzipporah's family dynamic teach us about the marriages and relationships we personally want to have?

Why do you think Tzipporah's return in Parshat Yitro occurs in connection with the giving of the Torah?

Chag Sameach!

B'NAI DAVID-JUDEA

The Shavuot Project

• THIRD EDITION • 5781 / 2021 •