

The Re-Gift of Torah
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I would like to begin with a story which you may have heard me tell before. But good stories are worth repeating. And this is a good story for today:

A mother comes into the kitchen in the morning. On the table, is an object, a gift of some sort, irregular in shape and wrapped in the comics section of last Sunday's newspaper. The technique for wrapping was easily recognized as the work of the woman's seven-year-old son, who was hiding in the pantry to watch his mother's reaction to the gift. Since it is her birthday, the mother was not so surprised to find her birthday present on the kitchen table, but she feigned surprise nonetheless.

"Oh my! what a beautiful...wrapping job. I wonder who this is for. Why look", she exclaims,"it has my name on it: Happy Birthday Mommy!"

Carefully, so as not to rip the paper, she unwraps the gift and, wading through layers of the Funnies, she finds the gift: a beautifully polished conch shell.

As she admires the gift, her son pops out from the closet: Surprise! Happy Birthday Mommy! He shouts.

This is so beautiful, says the mother. Where did you get it? She asks.

I got it at the beach.

You got it last week when we all went to the beach?

No, last week dad drove me to the beach and I spent all afternoon looking for the right shell. After I found the perfect shell, I cleaned and polished it.

You went all the way to the beach and spent all of that time on this gift? asked the Mother. Yes, he replied, the trip to the beach was part of the gift.

Gifts attain value, in part, because of the trip. How far did the giver go? What did the giver need to do, in order to give the gift? At times, it is in the journey that the value of a gift can be found.

Personally, I don't like gifts so much, mostly because I already have everything I need and most everything I want. Also, gifts come with strings attached: write a thank you card, buy some batteries, some assembly required, buy some fish food, buy some dog food for the new puppy (after taking the new puppy for shots and paying the veterinarian bill).

There is another type of gift which we receive and give. This gift is given in order to be **re-gifted**. Re-gifting is an interesting process: I have a friend who loves to drink good, vintage scotch and, recently, when we were sitting together, he asked me if I would like to taste a great scotch. The scotch was delicious. I asked where he got it. He told me where he had found it and the unusual way he purchased it.

It seems that my friend has a friend who does not like scotch at all. And, every year, on the occasion of his friend's birthday, he buys his friend a great bottle of scotch. But, since his friend does not like scotch, a couple of months later on his birthday, my friend receives that same bottle of scotch from his friend. Hence my friend, in effect has purchased the bottle for himself. That is an instance of re-gifting.

In fact, full disclosure, yesterday was my birthday. And I really don't want any gifts (but if you insist...). But because it is my birthday, I would like to speak about gifts. Specifically, the gift of the Torah.

In our tradition, we consider the Torah as a gift to be "re-gifted". It is a gift given with the intent that it will be given to the next generation. The following story appears in the Midrash. It is the story of the Gift of Torah:

When God was ready to give the Torah as a gift to one nation, God went looking for a nation which would receive the Torah, cherish it and re-gift it to future generations. According to the Midrash, God went to all of the nations of the ancient world, before offering the Torah to the Jewish People. God offered the Torah to the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Hittites. God asked each to take the Torah as a gift. And yet, each refused for its own reason, each citing a law of the Torah which, if adhered to,

would be a hardship for the “lifestyle” of each nation. For one nation, the objectionable law was murder (that group has since moved to Chicago). For another it was the law against stealing. Another cited the law against adultery as a non-starter. When God came to the Children of Israel, however, according to the Midrash, God asked if they would receive the Torah as a gift and promise to pass it on, the Children of Israel proclaimed: *Na’aseh v’nishma* / we will observe the Torah’s guidelines and laws, even if we do not fully understand them: *Na’aseh v’nishm* / we follow first and, only later, will we come to understand their meaning (Midrash Rabbah). The Torah is God’s gift to the Jewish People.

When we received the Torah, we implicitly agreed to pass it on to the next generation. So, in every generation, the Jewish Community, which has received the Torah as a “re-gift” from the previous generation, agrees to accept the sacred responsibility to pass it on to the next generation. And we have all accepted that premise. The difficulty here, however, is that every generation must find a new and compelling way to continue the pattern of passing this along, re-gifting the Torah to the next generation. And, if the statistics of recent surveys are correct, the emerging generation of Jewish adults, have not yet figured out how they intend to do that.

The results of the most recent surveys commissioned by the Pew Foundation and the American Jewish Congress, AJC, reveal very little about which we can be confident of our abilities to transmit and re-gift the Torah and Jewish Life to the next generation.

Levels of Jewish Identity continue to drop in every category.

The Pew Study of five years ago finds American Jews under-educated when it comes to Jewish knowledge, ritual and practices. It is not surprising then that only a small and shrinking percentage of Jews observe Jewish rituals regularly. And, 22% of Jews in this country, who identify as Jews do not consider Judaism as their religion. It is perhaps a culture or a history but not something observed today.

When it comes to education, half of Jews (52%), say they know the Hebrew alphabet. But far fewer 13% of Jews overall, say they understand the words when they read or pray in Hebrew.

When it comes to Israel, many have made the observation (with which I am not sure I agree) that there is a direct link between adherence to Jewish practice and attachment to Israel. Whether that connection is causative or coincidental, there is no doubt that connections and relationships with Israel are fraying and becoming strained.

And here in the US, there seems to be a growing rift, not just with Israel but between American Jews. Using the metaphor of a family, the Pew Study asked if you consider American Jews as your family:

Siblings – 28%
First Cousins 10%
Extended Family 40%
Not part of my family 22%

And so, on this Holy Day, (Rosh Hashana, not my birthday) I would like to suggest a way for us to come together as Jews, to reestablish the missing connection so that Torah and Jewish Life will be re-gifted in the future. This morning I suggest three inter-related ways that we might actively and meaningfully begin the process by re-gifting Shabbat.

To convey Judaism to the next generation requires action, Jewish activities incorporated into your lifestyle in a meaningful and fun way. And I say “fun” intentionally. Unless we can make Jewish life fun and meaningful for the next generation, they will not accept the gift, and certainly won’t pass it on to their children. And, I believe that the best, most meaningful and most fun tradition we have is Shabbat. And I would like for us to use the coming couple of months to learn with and from each other how to make Shabbat special, meaningful and fun for the whole family. Here’s how:

I. Passing on the Gift of Shabbat

We need to learn the various components of Shabbat observances at home beginning with Shabbat dinner. Serving Shabbat dinner need not be overwhelming. One need not be fluent in Hebrew nor is it a requirement that your home be Kosher. Anyone who has the will to do this can do it and do it successfully.

To learn the Shabbat table rituals, we are offering this year a “Gift of Shabbat” course. It has been twenty years since we have offered such a course. At that time, we taught, literally, hundreds of people the table rituals. Those people are now grandparents. We need to teach these skills to a new generation.

This course will be offered at various times of the week which will make it accessible and convenient for all. And, in our ECC and in our Religious School, our children will be learning the same rituals and, as they do with your *Pesach Seder*, they will help lead the table rituals.

The clergy will **not** be teaching the courses. Real people, normal people, will be teaching, guiding, instructing and modeling. I want this course taught by our members both to demonstrate that one need not be a professional to do this and to provide an opportunity for teachers and participants to widen their own circle of friends in our synagogue.

You’ll find more information about this program and registration instructions in the lobby. But, today, I recommend more than just table rituals.

II. Passing on our Family’s Stories

We each have a unique story to tell. Today, we have the ability to tell that story in greater detail than ever before. And I have a new perspective on this which I have gained recently, in a round-about sort of way.

About a year ago, I received a late-night call at home. Rather evasive at first, the caller was a genealogist by avocation. By the end of a grueling 40-minute call, the caller believed that he and I were distant relatives (which explained why he was mildly annoying). Through his research he found the direct line between me and him and one of the greatest scholars and rabbis of the late fifteenth/early sixteenth centuries whose name was Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Heller. That connection, with a rabbi, who died over 500 years ago (and whom I now, affectionately refer to as Gramps) has led me to some interesting and entertaining discoveries about my family.

Today, from the comfort of one’s home, with the help of your computer, one can do research on genealogy and on genetics to learn more about your distant past.

These discoveries, in addition to the narratives which comprise each family's lore, this information provides insights into, and connections with, our pasts. This can also lead to stories we might know about our more recent past: parents, grandparents and even great grandparents.

Knowing **where** we have come from and sharing those stories with our children will help them to understand their past. But, in sharing those stories, your children become, as well, the next generation to be entrusted with your family's story.

III. Passing on the Songs and Music of the Jewish People

No one can preserve Jewish Life alone. Throughout our long history, the requirements of a Jewish Life and Community render it impossible to do it alone. In every age, in every Jewish community there has always been a place for study / *Beit Midrash*, a burial society/ *Chevra Kaddisha* and a *mikveh*. Today, for these institutions to survive, Jews must live where there are other Jews.

Today, we can do so much Jewishly living in a vibrant and diverse Jewish Community. One need only look in the list of offerings each week in our eHighlights and in our Community Announcements to find options for involvement for you and your family and for you to experience firsthand. That's the power of our community. Community is what we offer. It is not available in the same way on computers, at work or in school. To experience the power of community we must find a way for you to add your voice to others. **And** when we sing together, we feel something different, something that pulls at us and draws us in.

Before the High Holidays, in the article I wrote for our monthly **Pharisee** synagogue newsletter, I included a link to a series of You Tubes of a project called **Koolkulam**. This was a project which brought together thousands (up to 12, 000 in one case) of Israelis, young old, Jew and Arab, religious and secular for the purpose of singing a song of hope. Watching that You Tube, one cannot help but feel uplifted by the combination of voices and deeply moved by voices and people as they merge into a unified whole, singing a song of hope, of unity and of peace.

I want us to come together more frequently to sing, because, whether or not you know the words or don't think that you have a pleasant voice, when we join our voices, we can sing as one. I feel that sense of unity profoundly on the High Holidays when we sing together.

So here is my plan: Let's orchestrate Shabbat dinners at homes throughout our community. This entire community can be divided into two groups: hosts and guests. You will decide if you would like to host or be an invited guest, for a meal which will utilize the skills, blessing and traditions which you will learn in our Shabbat Literacy course. If you say, but I don't have time, no problem. I will have an abbreviated course video which will review all of the parts which the course teaches.

What will you eat for Shabbat dinner? During the five-week Shabbat literacy course we shall offer several workshops which will help to embellish your Shabbat meal. Specifically, we shall offer a series of cooking classes led by a number of experts in our community, beginning with Lori (making cholent and portion control) , challah baking, kugel making and other delights to encourage traditional Jewish cooking. (I'll be leading a special workshop on washing dishes).

What will you talk about at dinner? You will share your family's stories which you have discovered through your research. And to help you with your research, we have arranged for a genealogy workshop which our member, Dan Loeb, will teach us how to expand and deepens our knowledge of our family's history and learn the stories of our family roots.

And, you ask, beyond stories and delicious foods, what will we do at the table?

We will sing: Over the next month or so, we will offer opportunities, for you to learn with me and Rabbi Chaim Galfand, to teach us some songs and *niggunim*, some of which your children know. In short, with all of the pieces together, you will have a wonderful, Shabbat dinner with good food, nice people, good stories to tell and good songs to sing. What could be better?

A member of our congregation forwarded to me a copy of part of a correspondence she is having with a friend who we shall call Mark. Mark, she explains, moved to Israel, served in the IDF. He lives in Tel Aviv where he is a teacher. He seems to know a lot about many things, but next to nothing about

Judaism. When our congregant wrote "You should check out Judaism", he responded by saying, "Show me something new that Judaism has to offer me and I'll become a rabbi!"

I'm not sure that Mark is ready for Rabbinical School, but I believe that Judaism has much to offer. In a mean and selfish world Judaism teaches kindness and sharing. In a materialistic society which promotes superficialities, Judaism can teach us the deeper meaning of life. In a world becoming increasingly isolating as we spend more and more time looking at our phones and sitting in front of our computers, Judaism offers community. I think that Judaism has a great deal to offer. If Mark were a member here, especially if he participated in our "Gift of Shabbat" program, I think that he would be able to answer his own questions.

This morning we read a story which has perplexed and confounded, in certain ways, every serious reader of this text for millennia. One image from that story, however, is particularly poignant: that of Isaac carrying the wood for the sacrifice which Abraham will make. And I wonder what Abraham is thinking. Abraham is the first Patriarch. The Jewish People begins with him. But Isaac is the future, the next generation, without whom there will be no Jewish People.

If Abraham proceeds with the sacrifice of Isaac, Jewish history not only begins with Abraham but ends with him as well. And in that scene, Isaac carries upon his back the wood, the stuff which will determine his fate the future, the stuff with which one can build or burn. What is so frightening about the story is that we don't know whether or not there will be a future for the Jewish People.

Today, the scene may be less dramatic, but we pose the same question. Standing before our children, we say to them: Here is a wonderful gift for you. But tell us:

What will you do with this gift?

Will you cherish it?

Will you pass, and re-gift it on to **your** children, with spirit and with love?

Will you use this gift to build for the future or is this gift little more than kindling, a flash in the pan?

Today, we pray that the next generation will receive this gift with joy and confidence, singing a new song for the future of the Jewish People.

