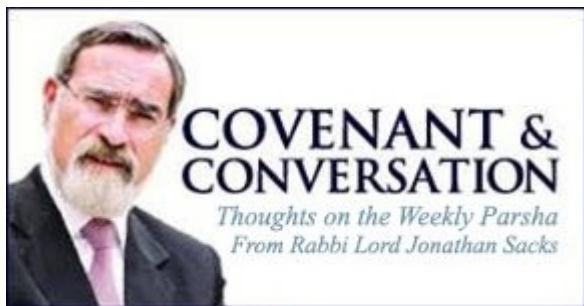


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The Torah as God's Song

At the end of his life, having given the Israelites at God's behest 612 commands, Moses gave them the last, as we saw in the previous essay: "Now therefore write down for yourselves this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be My witness against the people of Israel" (Deut. 31:19).

According to the plain sense of the verse, God was speaking to Moses and Joshua and was referring to the song in the following chapter, "Listen, O heavens, and I will speak; hear, O earth, the words of my mouth" (Deut. 32:1). As we saw in the previous essay, however, Oral Tradition gave it a different and much wider interpretation, understanding it as a command for every Jew to write, or at least take some part in writing, a Sefer Torah:

Said Rabbah: Even though our ancestors have left us a scroll of the Torah, it is our religious duty to write one for ourselves, as it is said: "Now therefore write down for yourselves this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be My witness against the people of Israel." (Sanhedrin 21b)

The logic of the interpretation seems to be, first, that the phrase "write down for yourselves" could be construed as referring to every Israelite (Ibn Ezra), not just Moses and Joshua. Second, the passage goes on to say (Deut. 31:24): "Moses finished writing in the book the words of this law from beginning to end." The Talmud offers a third reason. The verse goes on to say: "That this song may be My witness against the people" - implying the Torah as a whole, not just the song in chapter 32 (Nedarim 38a).

Thus understood, Moses' final message to the Israelites was: "It is not enough that you have received the Torah from me. You must make it new again in every generation." The covenant was not to grow old. It had to be periodically renewed.

So it is to this day that Torah scrolls are still written as in ancient times, by hand, on parchment, using a quill - as were the Dead Sea Scrolls two thousand years ago. In a religion almost devoid of sacred objects (icons, relics), the Torah scroll is the nearest Judaism comes to endowing a physical entity with sanctity.

My earliest memories are of going to my late grandfather's little beit midrash in North London and being given the privilege, as a two or three-year-old child, of putting the bells on the Torah scroll after it had been lifted, rolled, and rebound

in its velvet cover. Even then, I had a sense of the awe in which the scroll was held by the worshippers in that little house of study and prayer. Many of them were refugees. They spoke with heavy accents redolent of worlds they had left, worlds that I later discovered had been destroyed in the Holocaust. There was an air of ineffable sadness about the tunes they sang - always in a minor key. But their love for the parchment scroll was palpable. I later defined it as their equivalent of the rabbinic tradition about the Ark in the wilderness: it carried those who carried it (Rashi to I Chr. 15:26). It was my first intimation that Judaism is the story of a love affair between a people and a book, the Book of books.

What, though - if we take the command to refer to the whole Torah and not just one chapter - is the significance of the word "song" (shira): "Now therefore write down for yourselves this song"? The word shira appears five times in this passage. It is clearly a key word. Why? On this, two nineteenth-century scholars offered striking explanations.

The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, 1816-1893, one of the great yeshiva heads of the nineteenth century) interprets it to mean that the whole Torah should be read as poetry, not prose; the word shira in Hebrew means both a song and a poem. To be sure, most of the Torah is written in prose, but the Netziv argued that it has two characteristics of poetry. First, it is allusive rather than explicit. It leaves unsaid more than is said. Secondly, like poetry, it hints at deeper reservoirs of meaning, sometimes by the use of an unusual word or sentence construction. Descriptive prose carries its

meaning on the surface. The Torah, like poetry, does not.[1]

In this brilliant insight, the Netziv anticipates one of the great twentieth-century essays on biblical prose, Erich Auerbach's "Odysseus' Scar." [2] Auerbach contrasts the narrative style of Genesis with that of Homer. Homer uses dazzlingly detailed descriptions so that each scene is set out pictorially as if bathed in sunlight. By contrast, biblical narrative is spare and understated. In the example Auerbach cites - the story of the binding of Isaac - we do not know what the main characters look like, what they are feeling, what they are wearing, what landscapes they are passing through.

The decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasised, what lies between is non-existent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed, only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed towards a single goal, remains mysterious and "fraught with background." [3]

A completely different aspect is alluded to by Rabbi Yehiel Michel Epstein, author of the halachic code Aruch HaShulchan. [4] Epstein points out that the rabbinic literature is full of arguments, about which the Sages said: "These and those are the words of the living God." [5] This, says Epstein, is one of the reasons the Torah is called "a song" - because a song becomes more beautiful when scored for many voices interwoven in complex harmonies.

I would suggest a third dimension. The 613th command is not simply about the Torah, but

about the duty to make the Torah new in each generation. To make the Torah live anew, it is not enough to hand it on cognitively - as mere history and law. It must speak to us affectively, emotionally.

Judaism is a religion of words, and yet whenever the language of Judaism aspires to the spiritual it breaks into song, as if the words themselves sought escape from the gravitational pull of finite meanings. There is something about melody that intimates a reality beyond our grasp, what William Wordsworth called the sense sublime/Of something far more deeply interfused/Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns/And the round ocean and the living air.[6] Words are the language of the mind. Music is the language of the soul.

The 613th command, to make the Torah new in every generation, symbolises the fact that though the Torah was given once, it must be received many times, as each of us, through our study and practice, strives to recapture the pristine voice heard at Mount Sinai. That requires emotion, not just intellect. It means treating Torah not just as words read, but also as a melody sung. The Torah is God's libretto, and we, the Jewish people, are His choir, the performers of His choral symphony. And though when Jews speak they often argue, when they sing, they sing in harmony, as the Israelites did at the Red Sea, because music is the language of the soul, and at the level of the soul Jews enter the unity of the Divine which transcends the oppositions of lower worlds.

The Torah is God's song, and we collectively are its singers.

Shabbat Shalom.

NOTES:

1. "Kidmat davar," preface to Ha'amek Davar, 3.
2. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 3-23.
3. *Ibid.*, 12.
4. Aruch HaShulchan, Choshen Mishpat, introduction.
5. Eiruvim 13b; Gittin 6b.
6. Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798" (*Favourite Poems* [Mineola, NY: Dover, 1992], 23).



The Idea of Rosh Hashana

It is common knowledge that Rosh Hashana marks the Jewish New Year. The Mishna in Rosh Hashana teaches us that Judaism actually recognizes multiple years and new years. Just as secular society has a first day of school, a first day when the government meets, a first day when taxes are collected, so does Judaism recognize different "new year" days to mark different occasions.

There are four new years. On the first of Nissan is the new year for kings and for festivals. On the first of Elul is the new year for the tithe of cattle. Rabbi Eleazar and Rabbi Simeon, however, place this on the first of

Tishrei. On the first of Tishrei is the new year for years, for release and jubilee years, for plantation and for [tithe of] vegetables. On the first of Shevat is the new year for trees, according to the ruling of Beit Shammai; Beit Hillel, however, place it on the fifteenth of that month.

BEGINNING OF TIME?

A "new year" day marks a passage of time which is based on either an objective criteria or a subjective perspective, what is it that the Jewish new year demarcates?

The traditional response to this question would be that Rosh Hashana commemorates the creation of the world. One would therefore assume that Rosh Hashana, must delineate the beginning of time.

The Talmud, however reports the following difference of opinion regarding creation:

Rabbi Eliezer says: "In Tishrei the world was created" ... Rabbi Joshua says: "In Nissan the world was created." (Rosh Hashana 10b-11a)

The opinion of Rabbi Eliezer is clarified in the Midrash, where it is explained that in fact the world came into existence on the 25th of Elul.¹ Therefore when Rebbe Eliezer referred to the creation which took place on the first of Tishrei ? he was referring to the sixth day and the creation of man - of Adam.

Nonetheless, we see that these two great luminaries Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua argue whether creation took place in the fall or spring. It seems strange that so fundamental an

issue as the day of creation could be subject to debate.²

Rabbenu Tam however remarkably sees no contradiction between the opinions of Rabbi Eliezer, and Rabbi Yehoshua, he sees these opinions as not being mutually exclusive, he declares:

"These and these are the words of the living God, and one may say that the thought to create was formed in Tishrei, while the actual creation did not take place until Nissan." (Tosfot Rosh Hashana 27a)

According to Rabbenu Tam, the two rabbis do not disagree, creation involves a process. The question is do we commemorate the beginning or end of the process? Their argument is only in emphasis -- which aspect of creation is dominant, the thought of creation, or the actual creation? According to Rabbenu Tam Tishri was the time that God thought of creation. What is the significance of such thoughts?

This idea of a "thought of creation" has a parallel teaching which should shed light on this passage. Rashi in his commentary to the very first verse in the Torah notes that the name of God used to describe creation is *Elokim* which refers to the aspect of God from which justice emanates. Later on in Genesis (2:4), when the creation is recapitulated, the Torah uses a different terminology to describe God, using the unpronounceable name of God, the Tetragrammaton, plus *Elokim* -- a combination that is usually translated as "the Lord God." In this name, both aspects -- judgment and mercy -- are expressed.

The Midrash explains why both terms are used side by side in this verse in Genesis.

The Lord God [made earth and heaven]. This may be compared to a king who had some empty glasses. Said the king: "If I pour hot water into them, they will burst; if cold, they will contract [and snap]." What then did the king do? He mixed hot and cold water and poured it into them, and so they remained [unbroken]. Even so, said the Holy One, blessed be He: "If I create the world on the basis of mercy alone, its sins will be great; on the basis of judgment alone, the world cannot exist. Hence I will create it on the basis of judgment and of mercy, and may it then stand!" Hence the expression, *the Lord God*. (Midrash Rabbah - Genesis 12:15)

The Midrash explains why both terms are used, but it fails to explain why in the first verse in the Torah only the term *Elokim* is used, thereby implying exclusively that justice was used to create the world.

Rashi explains that the idea of creation is represented by *Elokim*, and that idea is based on justice. The actual creation though contains both mercy and justice fused together as described in the Midrash.

Rav Gedalya Shore (Or Gidalyahu) suggested that we may draw the following conclusion: The thought of creation is based on justice, the actual creation is based on mercy and judgment. The thought of creation took place in Tishrei while the actual creation took place in Nissan. Therefore Tishrei is a time of judgment, while Nissan is a time of mercy.

JUDGMENT VS. MERCY

We can take this conclusion one step further, the strict aspect of judgment, based on God's creation via thought, is limited to thought. Hence the strict judgment which man undergoes is for his thoughts. However, when it comes to man's actions, God's judgment of man is tempered by mercy.

This leads to a major conclusion regarding the quality of judgment on Rosh Hashana, and man's obligation.

The major objective of Rosh Hashana is related to thought. The objective on Rosh Hashana is to come up with a plan, just as God designed a plan for creation, man needs to come up with a plan for his creation ? his life. This plan is judged by God with incredible strictness. Whether man lives up to his plan or not is judged with mercy, for the world of action God fuses strictness with mercy. God understands human frailty.

Perhaps there is another meaning of the term "Rosh Hashana" in its most literal sense -- the "head of the year" is the time to think.

This is the time of year that each of us has to come up with a plan for living our lives, by using our heads, our intellect -- the *Tzelem Elokim*, the "image of God" within us.³ We are judged strictly for this plan, since it directly reflects to what extent our *Tzelem Elokim* is utilized.

However the implementation is another matter. There are times that man fails due to his animal instincts; this is something that God understands. But we can make no mistake about it, we are judged for these failings -- it's

just that the judgment is one which is tempered by mercy.

This concept of a plan seen as an independent entity from the actual reality is reflected in the *Akaida*, where Abraham was called upon to sacrifice his son. Once Abraham was willing and set a plan for the deed to be done, it was no longer required for him to follow through with that deed. We are told that God considers the positive thoughts of the righteous as if they were accomplished.⁴

On Rosh Hashana all mankind stands before God in fear and in dread of the awesome Day of Judgment. May we all have the acumen to formulate the proper plan to lead our lives, may we all be given the strength to implement our plans, and may God judge us with mercy on those occasions that we fail.

May we all be immediately written and sealed in the book of life.

Shana Tova from:

Ari, Naomi, Mattityahu, Hillel, Yishi, Yosef, and Elisheva

NOTES

1. See the teachings attributed to Rabbi Eliezer found in Pirki Drebbe Eliezer chapters 3-7.
2. In Judaism, creation - or the "mysteries of creation" is a subject which can not be taught publicly - see Mishna Chagiga 2:1 and the Talmud's comments Chagiga 11b.
3. See Rambam in the Moreh Nevuchim 3:8 where he makes the identification between intellect and Tzelem Elokim. See also my book *Explorations* (Jerusalem: Targum Press, 2001) p. 222ff.b.
4. Kiddushin 40a.



Torah Teasers Parshat Vayelech

1. What is unique about this parsha with regard to the annual Torah reading cycle in the synagogue?

Vayelech is the only parsha that can be read in its entirety twice in one year. This can happen if parshas Nitzavim and Vayelech are read on separate weeks, in which case Vayelech is read *after* Rosh Hashana. Then in the following year, if the parshas are read together, Vayelech is read *before* the Rosh Hashana - i.e. twice in one year.

2. In this parsha, Moshe passes away at the age of 120 years. Where from the Torah do we see an explicit verse that 120 years is an appropriate age to die?

In parshas Bereishis, Hashem explicitly states that the days of mankind should be 120 years (Genesis 6:3, according to the Ibn Ezra; see Rashi).

3. What holiday is explicitly referred to in this parsha?

The festival of Sukkot is explicitly referred to as the time when the mitzvah of Hakhel takes place, following the Sabbatical year (Deut. 31:10).

4. What two words found in this parsha are also names of parshios in the book of Genesis?

The words "*miketz*" (Deut. 30:10) and "*vayera*" (31:15).are also names of parshas in the book of Genesis.

5. To whom are the encouraging words "be strong and courageous" said in this parsha? (2 answers)

Moshe encourages the Jews to "be strong and courageous" in their war against the Canaanites (Deut. 31:6). Moshe also encourages Yehoshua to "be strong and courageous" in leading the Jews into the land (Deut. 31:23).

6. In this parsha, where do women and small children appear in the same verse? What 4 other places in the book of Deuteronomy are women and small children mentioned in the same verse?

Regarding the command of Hakhel, women and children must come to Jerusalem to hear the king read the Torah (Deut. 31:12). Elsewhere in the book of Deuteronomy: (1-2) Twice in parshas Devarim when Moshe recalls the destruction and occupation of Cheshbon and Bashan, women and small children are mentioned together (Deut. 2:34, 3:6). (3) In parshas Shoftim, regarding the rules of conquering a city, the Jewish army may keep alive the women and small children (Deut. 20:14). (4) In parshas Nitzavim, Moshe lists groups of people who are "standing" before Hashem - including women and children (Deut. 29:10).

7. What four items are described in this parsha as a "witness"?

The parsha describes as a witness: (1) The song that Moshe will write in the next parsha (Deut. 31:19). (2) The Torah Scroll placed with the Holy Ark (Deut. 31:26). (3-4) Heaven and Earth (Deut. 31:28).

8. Where in this parsha is an *a fortiori* argument (*kal vechomer*) mentioned? What 3 other places does this appear in the Torah?

Moshe tells the Jews that "since you rebelled when I was alive, surely you will rebel after I die" (Deut. 31:27). Elsewhere in the Torah: (1) In parshas Vayigash, when the brothers are accused of stealing Joseph's silver goblet, they respond: "We brought back the money that we found in our sacks... so how could we have stolen from you silver or gold?" (Genesis 44:8). (2) In parshas Va'erah, Moshe says to Hashem: "If the Jews did not listen to me, why would Pharaoh?" (Exodus 6:12). (3) In parshas Behaalosecha, Hashem tells Moshe: "If a father would spit in his daughter's face, she would be humiliated for 7 days; surely Miriam should be outside the camp for 7 days" (Numbers 12:14).

From Rabbi Moshe Atik's Torah Teasers, available at amazon.com.



Writing Our Own Sefer Torah

"And now write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the Children of Israel..." (1)

The Rabbis teach us that the song referred to in this verse is the whole Torah and that every Jew is commanded to write his own Sefer Torah.(2) The Gemara in Sanhedrin tells us that even if a person inherits his ancestors' Sefer Torah, he still must write his own Sefer Torah for himself. (3)

The commentaries offer a number of explanations for this law:(4) The Ktav Sofer explains that this mitzvah is teaching us that it is not sufficient for a person to observe the Torah simply because his parents habituated him to Torah observance,(5) rather he must create his own personal relationship with God based on a genuine recognition and appreciation of Torah. Writing one's own Sefer Torah and not relying on that of his parents indicates that a person is striving to develop his own path in serving God and not blindly follow that of his parents.

The Ktav Sofer uses this principle to explain another saying of the Sages about the mitzvah of writing a Sefer Torah: The Gemara in Menachot says about one who writes a Sefer Torah for himself, that it is considered as if he

accepted the Torah at Mount Sinai . The Ktav Sofer explains that there are three levels of people who keep the Torah; He writes, "there are those who do it from love, there are those who do it from fear and there are those who only do it because they are habituated to it and the habit has become part of their nature." He continues to argue that since a person in the third category would not observe the Torah if not for habit then it is logical to say that had he been at Mount Sinai he would not have wanted to accept the Torah! In contrast if a person takes it upon himself to write his own Sefer Torah and not rely on that of his parents, he demonstrates that he wants to accept the Torah based on his own decision, rather than purely because he was brought up to do so. Accordingly, had he been at Mount Sinai he would have accepted the Torah anew and would not have needed anyone else to force him to do so, hence the Rabbi's statement that one who writes their own Sefer Torah is considered as if he received the Torah himself.

The lessons from this mitzvah are very relevant in these times. An essential element of genuine *teshuvah* (repentance) is a desire to develop our relationship with God and to eliminate the sins that harm that connection. In order to do this it is vital that a person strengthen his faith and thereby remind himself of why he keeps mitzvot. Throughout the year a person may try to observe the Torah but there is the constant danger that he will fall into the trap of habit and lose focus on why he is keeping the Torah.

There is another key lesson that can be derived from the Ktav Sofer's explanation of why each person must write his own Sefer Torah. It is not

enough that a child mimic his parents' form of serving God rather he must forge his own unique relationship with God, developing his own traits and talents to their fullest. At the same time, the mitzvah requires that he write the exact same Sefer Torah as that of his forefathers, teaching us that the degree of innovation that he makes cannot go beyond the boundary of the Torah that he inherited from his parents.

All Jews are born into a line of Tradition that goes back to Abraham; we are obligated to faithfully adhere to the instructions and attitudes that we receive from this line of tradition. A person cannot make up his own set of values or lifestyle; there is a Tradition that guides him how to live his life. But, at the same time, this does not mean that each person in the chain of the Tradition is identical in every way - there are many ways in which a person can express himself in the fulfillment of the Tradition.

This idea is also highly significant in the High Holy days. A person is not only judged for his mitzvah observance, there is also a judgment as to whether he is fulfilling his own personal purpose in life. This is expressed in the prayers of these days when we say that we are judged, '*maaseh ish upekudato*' - man's actions and his purpose. '*Maaseh ish*' refers to a person's mitzvah observance, but what does *pekudato* mean? Rav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz explains that it refers to a person's *tafkid* (purpose).(7) A person is judged as to whether he utilized his own talents to the greatest ability. It is not enough for him to mimic his ancestor's lifestyle rather he must strive to find his own niche in serving God.

The Ten Days of Repentance is an excellent time for contemplation of one's life purpose and direction. May we all merit to break out of habit, reinvigorate our Service of God and reach our own unique potential.

NOTES

1. Vayeilech, 31:19.
2. The *poskim* discuss whether women are obligated in this mitzva.
3. Sanhedrin, 21b.
4. See Sefer HaChinuch and Darchei Mussar, Parshas Vayeilech.
5. Ksav Sofer Al Hatorah, Vayeilech, 31:19.
6. Menachos, 30a.
7. Heard from Rav Yissochor Frand *shlit"a*.

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