

## Why I am studying Kabbalah

Rabbi Daniel Cotzin Burg

*Parashat Lekh L'kha*

10.28.17 ~ 8 Heshvan 5778

If you've been following the news this week, and who wants to anymore, you may have heard about Catalonia's vote for independence and the constitutional crisis in Spain. What you may not know is that Catalonia, and particularly cities within it like Gerona and Barcelona was home to dozens of important Medieval Jewish teachers and thinkers. And not just Catalonia, but regions to the West like Castille and Leon and the South like Al-Andalus. Important Spanish rabbis include Avraham Ibn Ezra, Yehuda Ibn Tibon, Yehuda HaLevi, Nachmanides and, some would argue the greatest scholar since the biblical era, Moses Maimonides. There's a medieval expression about Maimonides: "from Moses to Moses, there was no one like Moses."

Two giants you may or may not have heard of were contemporaries of the thirteenth century, though it's not clear whether they ever met. One was Avraham Abulafia and the other Moshe de-Leon. De-Leon was primarily responsible for the central book of theosophical Kabbalah, the Holy Zohar. Jay Michaelson defines theosophy as "...having to do with knowledge, or wisdom, about the Divine, and so" he says, "theosophical Kabbalah explains, in great detail, the nature of the Godhead, the relationship of the Infinite to the Finite, and how this world came into being. Abulafia, on the other hand, was the chief architect of a different kind of Kabbalah which has been called ecstatic or philosophical. De-Leon remained in Central Spain while Abulafia migrated from Tudela to the Palestine and back to Barcelona. From there he went to Greece and eventually to Western Italy.

This week, Beth Am lost our founding president, Efrem Potts. Efrem was an extraordinary person and I feel privileged to have known him. Because Efrem was also my teacher and *rebbe* in all things Beth Am, and because Jewish learning was so central to his life and the life of this shul, I've been thinking an appropriate way for me to celebrate his legacy is to learn something in his memory. Efrem was a Torah guy, a Bible guy, someone who understood and valued the poetry and prose of our canonical book. So, it would make sense to learn perhaps the prophets or maybe the book of Ruth that he and Debbie read antiphonally each year for many years on Shavuot. But, then I thought, Efrem – the forward-thinking traditionalist that he was – wouldn't want me to learn what he was drawn to but what I'm drawn to. And, I dare say, he'd want me to push myself to learn something less familiar, something that would stretch me intellectually.

So, instead of learning something "Efremy," I'm going to study Kabbalah. My initial plan is to start with Zohar and learn a little each day for at least a month, the period of *Sheloshim*. Why Kabbalah? Well, I've been thinking a lot lately about religion. This week I was called upon to teach the Board of Rabbis/JCC Intro to Judaism class here at Beth Am. The class topic was about *tefilah* and synagogue ritual. Later in the week, I visited my friend and colleague Rev. Kevin Slayton at his church in Waverley to teach a class on Judaism 101. And I've been preparing to teach my Big Jewish Ideas class starting this coming Thursday evening. In each context, I find myself thinking about the ways Judaism is often expected to meet the criteria of a religion. But the truth is we have always been ambivalent, to say the least, about that designation. Mordechai Kaplan called Judaism an "evolving religious civilization." We have

religious elements, to be sure – monotheism was our invention after all! But we are a family, a people, a way of looking at the world, a civilization.

This is where Kabbalah comes in, because I think religion, as many (if not most) people understand it, is about achieving certainty, about finding answers to big and distressing questions. Religion is about knowing. Think of someone you would describe as religious and, chances are they're sort of true believers! But Kabbalah is not about knowing, it's about the possibility of knowing. "If one is truly receptive," writes Danny Matt, the preeminent scholar of Kabbalah and translator of the Zohar, "wisdom appears spontaneously, unprecedented, taking you by surprise." That's why it's called Kabbalah! The word means "receiving," but not like receiving a package, wrapped in paper and tied with a bow. "The magic of the Zohar," says Matt, "lies not in its newness but in a spicy blend of innovation and tradition.... The Zohar is woven out of secrets: new revelations and ancient, hidden truths...." The Zohar even has a name for these secrets: *millin hadettin attiquin*, 'new-ancient words.'" And all of a sudden, Kabbalah DOES sound a bit like Efrem Potts, his blending of innovation and tradition.

So what about those "religious people." I want to be careful not to denigrate religiosity. I'm a proud religious person, but I think there's a real misconception about what constitutes the religious life. And part of the problem is that a lot of people dress up their knowing and pretend it's not knowing. They say it's in God's hands. That God has a plan. But what they mean really is that they KNOW that God has a plan. That God is all-powerful. All knowing. So they become an excuse to reject human agency by claiming that certain humans know certain things certainly about God. In other words, by acting as if God is all-knowing, there's a danger in presenting oneself as all-knowing.

In normative religious thinking, there is a hermetically sealed God and a hermetically sealed universe, a castle and a kingdom. The King shouts orders from the castle. The people obey. And when anything in the kingdom happens beyond our understanding or control gets written off as "God's plan." But what if God doesn't necessarily have a plan? Matt says "According to Kabbalah, every human action here on earth affects the divine realm, either promoting or hindering the union of Shekhinah [the divine feminine] and her partner – the Holy One, blessed be he. God is not static being, but dynamic becoming. Without human participation, God remains incomplete, unrealized." Whoa!

So, let's see how this plays out in the Zohar. How does this 13<sup>th</sup> century Kabbalistic midrash challenge our assumptions about the written text? About biblical characters? About ourselves? I want to read a passage for you from the Zohar on *Parashat Lech L'cha* (Matt, pg. 11):

"Rabbi El'azar was sitting in the presence of his father, Rabbi Shim'on, together with Rabbi Yehudah, Rabbi Yitshak, and Rabbi Hizkiyah. Rabbi El'azar said, "Concerning what is written – *Go you forth from your land, from your birthplace* – since they all departed on the journey, why was he not told that they all should go? For even though Terah worshiped idols, since he was aroused in fine arousal to leave with Abraham, and we have seen that the blessed Holy One desires the sincere return of sinners, and he had begun the journey, why is it not written: *Lekhu lakhem, God you forth?* Why to Abraham alone: *Lekh lekha, Go you forth?*"

“He replied, ‘If you think that Terah left Ur of the Chaldeans in order to turn back to God, not so! Rather, he left to save himself for all his fellow countrymen wanted to kill him. As soon as they saw that Abraham was saved, they said to him, ‘It was you who deceived us with these idols!’ Fearing them, he left. Once they reached Haran, he did not leave, as is written: *Abram went, as YHVH had told him, and Lot went with him* (ibid.,4), whereas Terah is not mentioned.”

In classic midrashic style, the Zohar is solving for two problems simultaneously, one in the text and one theological: the Torah (at the end of last week’s *parasha*) tells us Terah left for Canaan along with his son Abram, his grandson Lot and his daughter-in-law Sarai. But they stopped in Haran (which is about the midway point between Ur and the Land of Israel). And last week’s *parasha* also tells us:

תֵּרַח אָבִיו בְּאַרְצָא מוֹלְדָתוֹ בְּאֹר כְּשֵׂדִים: וַיִּמַּת הָרֶן עַל־פְּנֵי

So, on one hand the Zohar solves for the textual problem which is what happened to Haran back in Ur, and why doesn’t Terah continue on with the family? The theological problem, though, is why doesn’t *God* invite Terah along? Isn’t God interested in new recruits? Isn’t that the point of the Abrahamic narrative?! There must have been some catastrophic rupture, some trauma in this family that would cause Abram, Sarai and Lot to continue on to the Promised Land and Haran (and later Terah) to die?

Remember, the Zohar said “As soon as they saw that Abraham was saved....” Saved from what? Here, we need to know the intertext, that comes from *Midrash Rabbah*, the story of Abraham and the fiery furnace! (*Bereishit Rabbah* 38:13)

*"And Haran died in the presence of his father Terah" (Gen. 11:28). Rabbi Hiyya the grandson of Rabbi Adda of Yaffo [said]: Terah was a worshipper of idols. One time he had to travel to a place, and he left Abraham in charge of his store. When a man would come in to buy [idols], Abraham would ask: How old are you? They would reply: fifty or sixty. Abraham would then respond: Woe to him who is sixty years old and worships something made today - the customer would be embarrassed, and would leave. A woman entered carrying a dish full of flour. She said to him: this is for you, offer it before them. Abraham took a club in his hands and broke all of the idols, and placed the club in the hands of the biggest idol. When his father returned, he asked: who did all of this? Abraham replied: I can't hide it from you - a woman came carrying a dish of flour and told me to offer it before them. I did, and one of them said 'I will eat it first,' and another said 'I will eat it first.' The biggest one rose, took a club, and smashed the rest of them. Terah said: what, do you think you can trick me? They don't have cognition! Abraham said: Do your ears hear what your mouth is saying? Terah took Abraham and passed him off to [King] Nimrod. They said [to the king]: let us worship the fire. Abraham said to them: [rather] let us worship water, for it extinguishes fire. Nimrod agreed: let us worship water. Abraham continued: if so, let us worship the clouds, which provide water. Nimrod agreed: let us worship the clouds. Abraham continued: if so, let us worship the winds that scatter the clouds. Nimrod agreed: let us worship the winds. Abraham continued: if so, let us worship humans who are filled with wind [air]. Nimrod replied: You're just speaking words - I only worship fire. I will throw you into it, and the God you worship can save you from it. Haran was hidden and was of two minds, saying [to himself]: if Abraham is victorious, I will say I am with Abraham, and if Nimrod is victorious, I will say I am with Nimrod. When Abraham was through into the fiery*

*furnace and saved, they asked him [Haran]: who are you with? He replied: I am with Abraham. They took him and threw him into the fire, and his insides burned up and he died before his father Terah, as it says: "And Haran died in the [lit.] on the face of his father Terah" (Gen. 11:28).*

Kabbalah (whether the Zohar or other canonical texts) is really an extension of an equally ancient Jewish approach: to unearth secrets upon secrets buried in the texts of our ancestors – and to remind us those secrets aren't locked in a cage or wrapped in a box any more than we are... or than God is. It begs the question: not what does the Torah say, but what is left unsaid? And why? What does the Torah mean and what can it mean and what shouldn't it mean? In other words, how can Torah's meaning unfurl and radiate out with each pass?

What new stories and lessons and truths will I discover during my learning? I don't know. But I'll be sure to let you know from time to time when I do.

## What Does Torah Imply About Freedom of the Press?

November 4, 2017 ~ 15 Heshvan 5778

*Parashat Vayera*

Rabbi Daniel Cotzin Burg

In 1927, Justice Louis Brandeis wrote (*Whitney v. California*), "If there be time to expose through discussion the falsehood and fallacies, to avert the evil by the processes of education, the remedy to be applied is more speech, not enforced silence." This argument, that the best solution to offensive, even hateful speech, is more and better speech rather than censorship, is a beautiful articulation of the First Amendment's value to a free society and summary of the counter-speech doctrine. This afternoon, after Kiddush lunch, Beth Am's Continuing Education begins a new series called *Press Freedoms Under Siege: The First Amendment and the Jewish Commandments*.

To get us thinking about this topic, I want to look at today's *parasha* to see what we might learn from an ancient book about the, admittedly modern, post-enlightenment concern of free speech – and by extension how the Constitution's prohibition against curtailing speech applies to how we transmit information through vehicles like newspapers, cable news and now social media. We know humanity is gifted the capacity for language, verbal communication, more so than any species on the planet. Words have launched wars, built nations, been arranged into literary masterpieces or devastating propaganda. We humans invent new languages, and new ways of using language. We invent machines that speak languages most humans can't understand, but generate mathematical formulas that run our power grid, send people into space and help solve crimes.

In the Jewish understanding, God created the world with words and chose Abraham with words and gave words to Moses to relay to the people. Jews have been texting for millennia. So what does this ancient wisdom have to say about how we are to use words? I would say there are two forces, in tension with each other, two sets of guiding principles if you will. The first of these is well known to us. Jews like to talk. And we like to argue. There's this notion of *machloket l'shem shamayim*, holy argumentation, that is reflected in our most important body of rabbinic literature: the Babylonian Talmud. The Talmud is, more or less, a record of debates, between dozens upon dozens of rabbis across centuries. *Hazal* argue about how much money to give to the poor, or how many *seah* of water are required for a mikvah or what happens to our soul when we die. There are countless arguments captured in reams upon reams of pages that invite the modern reader into a trans-temporal discourse. And lest we think all this debate and discord is simply an excuse to shout at each other, we have only to look to this week's *parasha*. Because the very first debate in Jewish history is recorded in Chapter 18 of Genesis.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' זַעֲקֵת סֹדִם וְעִמֹרָה כִּי־רָבָה וְחַטָּאתָם כִּי כַבְדָּה מְאֹד:

“Then the LORD said, “The outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grave! I will go down to see whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached Me; if not, I will take note.”

So, God says: “According to reports these cities are so corrupt, so depraved that I am likely to wipe them out. But I want to investigate these reports: Real news? Fake news?” Now, remember if the stories are true, and they turn out to be, God is fully capable of acting on this threat. Just two weeks ago, in the flood narrative, the Almighty destroys pretty much the entire world. So Abraham, hearing this, understands he may be the only thing standing between the Lord and the annihilation of these cities. And he proves equal to the task.

וַיִּגַּשׁ אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲאֵף תִּסְּפֶה צְדִיק עִם־רָשָׁע:

“Abraham came forward and said, “Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?

What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the fifty innocent who are in it?”

הֲלֹלָה לְךָ מַעֲשֵׂת | בְּדַבֵּר הַזֶּה לְהַמִּית צְדִיק עִם־רָשָׁע וְהָיָה כְּצְדִיק כְּרָשָׁע הֲלֹלָה לְךָ הַשֹּׁפֵט כָּל־הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט:

“Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Shame on you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?”

And for this blasphemy, for daring to challenge God’s authority. For accusing the *Kadosh Baruch Hu* of unfairness and injustice, what terrible punishment awaits Abraham? Nothing! The next several verses are the Biblical equivalent of Deal or No Deal! Not angry in the least at Abraham’s impropriety, God simply acquiesces. And not once, but over and over again as the two parties negotiate: 50 souls, 45, 30, 20, 10. The Holy One is willing to suspend the sentence if Abraham can find only ten righteous individuals within the cities. Now, we know this doesn’t happen, and the cities are destroyed and only a small number of people make it out. But think about this for a moment: how extraordinary that the first example of a true debate in Torah is not between humans, but between human and divine and that, for all intents and purposes, on principle, the human wins. If you can talk back to God, you can talk back to anyone!

What is the purpose of debate, according to Torah? To identify the limits of collective punishment and clarify the nexus of personal and societal responsibility. Later Rabbinic literature offers up the “sacred argument” as a tool to hone one’s perspective, refine thinking and celebrate the multi-vocal character of Jewish thought and even behavior. The preservation of majority and minority opinions Justice Brandeis held dear are perhaps best captured in Jewish legal literature. Which is to say, a society informed by Jewish values, much like a university, is one where vigorous debate is not just tolerated but celebrated.

So that’s set of principles #1: a sort of centrifugal force pulling us away from homogeneity and conformity. But, there’s another set of principles, a centripetal force, if you will, that keeps us Jews, at least aspirationally, from being torn apart. And that is the set of speech-related values and mitzvot we call *shemirat halashon*. “*Lo telekh rachil b’amekha. Lo ta’amod al dam rei’ekha...Do not go as a talebearer among your people, do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor*” (Lev. 19:16). Speech can be constructive or destructive, but as we know in all things,

it's easier to destroy than to create. Even the most responsible journalism, if in error, can destroy a person's reputation or their career. All the more so if the intent of the story is to get the facts conveniently wrong. The Talmud (*Arachin, 15b*) teaches: "[Slander and gossip] kill three persons: the one who tells, the one who hears and the one about whom it is said." And what is the range of such devastation? The Gemarra continues: "Rabbi Hama bar Hanina said: what does Proverbs mean when it says "Death and life are in the 'hand' of the tongue?" (18:21)... It tells you that just as the hand can kill, so can the tongue. One might say that just as the hand can kill only one near it, thus also the tongue can kill only one near it, [but we read in Psalms (64:4)]: "Their tongue is a sharpened arrow." Then one might assume that just as an arrow kills only within [a short distance], thus also the tongue...Therefore the book of Psalms reminds us: "They set their mouths against heaven and their tongues range over the earth" (73:9).

Long before Twitter and Snapchat, the printed or spoken word could travel around the world informing the reader, listener or viewer *or* unraveling and destroying lives. The problem, today, much like the days of yellow journalism is that there's decreasing, precipitously falling confidence in the media. A Politico/Morning Consult Poll from last month showed nearly half of all voters believe major news organizations fabricate news about President Trump. 76% of Republican voters think that's the case. Perhaps a small saving grace is that only 28% believe the federal government should have the power to revoke broadcast licenses of major news outlets if the administration believes they're fabricating stories. But before you get too excited, another 21% don't know or don't have an opinion. Which means basically half the country either believes the White House should be able to curtail press freedoms or isn't sure. Not exactly a ringing endorsement of the first amendment!

But I think the problem goes deeper still, because as we've seen throughout American and human history, the manner and extent to which laws are enforced is at least somewhat related to value most people place on those laws. How did the Roosevelt Administration imprison Japanese Americans within some of your living memory? How did federal authorities arrest or blacklist, Jews disproportionately as communists or anarchists in the 19-tens or later under McCarthy? How did Jim Crow reign supreme for decades after Reconstruction or the Ku Klux Klan lynch African-Americans without any fear of reproach or reprisal? Because huge numbers of Americans let these things happen. If we don't mitigate our own biases and prejudices, our elected officials won't either. And then their opinions, their biases or bigotry becomes policy – sometimes *de jure*, more often *de facto* – but to the person with the wrong skin color, gender, religion or sexual orientation, how much does that matter? It's a distinction without much of a difference.

How do people feel about the rule of law? Are Americans willing to apply constitutional protections equally across the board? Unfortunately, not so. There were a series of eight studies published in the September *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* which asked the question "Do claims of free speech provide cover for prejudice?" (White and Crandall, "Freedom of Racist Speech: Ego and Expressive Threats, 2017) The studies found that, by and large, people advocated free speech legal protections for those with whom they agree. So, people high in prejudice against black people, for example, advocated as free speech, racist songs or posting

racist comments on social media. But these same people are less sanguine about defending aggressive or simply negative (but non-bigoted) speech. Racist speech, not cause for dismissal. Unprofessional speech in the same exact context, reason enough for getting canned. But, the reverse is also true. People low in racial bias, are much *less* likely to defend racist or hateful speech as constitutional or permissible. The Antifa movement, I think, is an example of how this attitude can play out.

Now apply some of this thinking to how people feel about the media and it's not hard to see how news I disagree with, or the president disagrees with, all of a sudden becomes "fake news." Tim Wu had an interesting piece in the *New York Times*, one of those "fake news" outlets, last week. It was called "How Twitter Killed the First Amendment." He points out that censorship in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was very different than it is today. It used to be that pamphleteers were arrested for distributing subversive messages and newspapers shuttered by federal agencies. But autocratic regimes, not aspirational ones, but actual ones like China and Russia understand you simply can't control the ubiquitous flow of information. So, instead, they have "web brigades" or "troll armies," humans and bots that "disseminate pro-government news, generate false stories and coordinate swarm attacks on critics of the government."

What happens when those same forces, those same techniques are employed here, on American laptops and smartphones? I think we're finding out. Jonathan Fishman and I traveled to Capitol Hill this week with a delegation of Baltimore Jewish community leaders. During one of our sessions, Senator Cardin, ranking member of the Committee on Foreign Relations, said something that stuck with me. He said, "Russia's game plan is to make fake news acceptable [so that] all news is fake." If fake looks real then it becomes increasingly difficult to know what's real and what's not.

Hevre, I want to be clear, we are doing this press freedoms series not to take a position for or against any party. We're doing it to create a forum where we can wrestle with a significant conundrum of our day. As racist, anti-Semitic and otherwise hateful attitudes become increasingly normalized in our society, how can we ensure the integrity of the all-important Fourth Estate? How significant is it when the US President calls the media the "enemy of the American people?" In what ways might some of the media's wounds be self-inflicted and what are possible solutions? On four separate First Saturday Sanctuary Shabbatot, we'll listen to working and former journalists, media executives, each of them thought-leaders in the field. And we'll learn what Jewish values or principles animate their belief in the fundamental American value of a free press. Shabbat Shalom and hope to see you back here after lunch.

## #MeToo in a Tarbut Ra'ah: Perverse Culture and the Exposure of Predatory Men

Rabbi Daniel Cotzin Burg

December 2, 2017 ~ 14 Kislev 5778

*Parashat Vayishlach*

Harvey Weinstein, Louis C.K., Mark Halperin, Roger Ailes. Bill O'Reilly, John Conyers, Al Franken, Roy Moore, Kevin Spacey, Charlie Rose, Russell Simmons, Leon Wieseltier Garrison Keillor, Matt Lauer.

These are some of the names of men who have been credibly accused of harassment, assault and, in some cases, rape. All, it appears, have abused positions of power and influence, with multiple people, most of them women. The journalists and entertainers have been disgraced and dismissed by media and entertainment agencies who recognize the compromised position further association with harassers and predators would mean. Or, if we're being generous, they've decided to do the right thing. The politicians, so far, seem to be hanging on.

Then there are other names: James, Ji-ho, Andrew, Peter, Ahmed, Christopher: countless names of those who have not been publicly accused, who retain their jobs, their influence and their capacity to abuse. They are doctors who molest patients, who grope nurses or colleagues. They're factory foremen, police officers, teachers, students, therapists, lawyers, CEO's and middle managers. They are postmen and presidents. They are pastors, priests, imams and rabbis. They are husbands and fathers. These are the men whose secrets have remained safe because their victims' risk of sharing their stories is greater than their risk of keeping them secret.

The Talmud has a term for a community or society where abuse is pervasive and moral leadership absent: a *tarbut ra'ah*, a perverse culture.

I used to watch the Today show from time to time. I liked Katie Couric. I really liked Ann Curry. I thought she was smart, at once incisive and emotive. And then Matt Lauer decided he didn't want to work with her. And I stopped watching Today. And, irony of ironies, turned to CBS because there I could see a real journalist and interviewer in Charlie Rose. When you change the channel from one network with an abuser as its anchor to another network with an abuser as its anchor, that's a *tarbut ra'ah*, a wicked culture.

This Shabbat after lunch we'll hear from Ben Jacobs, a reporter for The Guardian, and his take on 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment protections and freedom of the press. But this morning I want to talk about a different kind of reporting, the reporting of harassment, assault and rape of mostly women by mostly men. And I want to suggest that a big problem right now in our society isn't just that these abuses are happening, it's that when we're paying attention at all, we focus too much on the plight of women, and not enough on the culture of machismo that leads so many men to think they can treat women like this in the first place.

And the thing is, we don't have to go far to find a story that illuminates this dynamic. In fact we just read it. Our triennial reading of *Parashat Vayishlach* today began as follows (Gen. 34:1-4):

וַתֵּצֵא דִינָה בַת־לֵאָה אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב לְרְאוּת בְּכַנּוֹת הָאֲרָץ:

Now Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land.

וַיֵּרָא אֶתְהָ שָׁכֶם בְּוֶחֱמוֹר הַחִיטִּי נָשִׂיא הָאֶרֶץ וַיִּקַּח אֶתְהָ וַיִּשְׁכַּב אִתָּהּ וַיַּעֲנֶהּ:

Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country, saw her, and took her and lay with her by force.

וַתִּדְבַק נַפְשׁוֹ בְּדִינָה בַת־יַעֲקֹב וַיֵּאָהֵב אֶת־הַנְּעֹרָה וַיְדַבֵּר עִלְיָהּ הַנְּעֹרָה:

Being strongly drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob, and in love with the maiden, he spoke to the maiden tenderly.

וַיֹּאמֶר שָׁכֶם אֶל־חֲמוֹר אָבִיו לֵאמֹר קַח־לִי אֶת־הַיְלָדָה הַזֹּאת לְאִשָּׁה:

So Shechem said to his father Hamor, “Get me this girl as a wife.”

We’ll get to the brother’s reaction a bit later, but for now I’m interested in Jacob’s response. The text tells us Jacob, Dinah’s father, is the first to find out. And what does Jacob do? Nothing. The *pasuk* reads, “At the time Jacob heard his daughter Dinah had been defiled, his sons were in the field with his livestock, *v’hecherish Ya’akov ad boam*, so he kept quiet until they came back” (34:5). Why doesn’t Jacob say anything? Possibly he is afraid tensions could escalate. Sferno, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian commentator, says “he refrained from starting a quarrel until his sons would have been informed of what happened so that they could be on their guard against adversaries.”

Maybe Jacob is afraid for Dinah’s safety, or for his own safety. Or maybe Jacob isn’t yet clear exactly what’s happened. The Torah is precise when it describes the news that’s been relayed: “*v’Ya’akov shama ki timei et dina bito...*, And Jacob heard that his daughter Dina had been **defiled**.” We’re not told whether he knew she was raped, *per se*. If the sex had been consensual, we could speculate, perhaps, Jacob would have felt differently. Maybe he is angry with *her* as much as with Shechem or Hamor, Shechem’s father. In fact, there are commentators that imagine Dinah was not raped, including a modern midrash in the form of a novel called *The Red Tent*. Perhaps some of you have read it.

The problem though, is the torah seems pretty clear about what happened: “*vayishkav otah vay’aneha*. If he had simply “lay” with her, we wouldn’t need the final verb after “he lay with her.” *Vay’aneha* means “he forced her.” So, what then? What’s the next thing we often hear when a sexual assault has occurred? On whom do we focus? Not the rapist; the victim. Maybe she dressed the wrong way? Maybe she sent mixed messages? Maybe she said “no” but her body language said “yes?” Maybe she was in the wrong place at the wrong time? – something single women ought to be careful of.

Rashi, the great 11<sup>th</sup> century Talmudist and Torah commentator, the one sometimes made out to be a feminist because he taught his daughters to lay tefilin, isn’t all that sensitive to the spurious allegation leveled against rape victims from time immemorial. Why does the verse before the encounter say “*Vateitze Dinah bat Leah*, indicating both that Dinah is the daughter of Leah and using the specific verb “to go out?” Rashi responds: “she is called Leah’s daughter, since she, too, was fond “of going out,” as it is said (30:16) “and Leah went out to meet him.” Rashi bases

his comment on a midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 80:1) which notices the verb *vateitze*, “and she went out” is used to describe the scene in Chapter 30 (v.16) when Leah appears to seduce Jacob (after buying Rachel off with some mandrakes). The next few verses there describe how Leah gives birth to sons 4, 5 and 6... and then to a daughter: Dinah. Do we get the midrashic move? Leah “went out” to seduce Jacob – which produced Dina. Dina “went out” in a similar manner and got raped by Shechem. If Rashi isn’t entirely transparent about what he means, the midrash is crystal clear: “Leah מָקְשָׁטָהּ כְּזוֹנָה [she] went out dressed like a whore.” Which is why we’re also told Dinah “went out.” “Like mother like daughter.”

So, what about Jacob’s silence? Maybe it’s reflective of something bigger, more systemic, a *tarbut ra’ah*, a perverse culture of around sexual violence. You see, the truth is, it didn’t really matter whether Dinah was raped. Her consent isn’t the ancient world’s central concern. Dr. Tamara Ashkenazi offers the following in her *A Women’s Torah Commentary* (p. 191): “The assumption made by most interpreters is that Dinah did not consent to the sexual act. However, the questions of consent, so central to the modern notion of rape and of women’s rights in general, is entirely ignored in this text. Dinah’s consent is not the issue.” She continues, “In our society, forcing a woman to have sex against her will is seen as terrible both for its emotional and psychological consequences, and for the humiliation and debasement suffered by the woman as an individual. The Bible, even in its rape laws, was primarily concerned with the juridical and social-status consequences of the tort involved in sleeping with a virgin without either marrying her or compensating her father.”

Dina, like all women in biblical times, is at least in part a commodity. She, more or less, belongs to her father. When she is deflowered, as it were, she belongs to her husband. But if the person doing the deflowering isn’t her husband, that’s a problem. However Jacob felt about the rape itself (and we can’t really know), at the end of the story, Jacob seems to have been ok with the solution: Shechem is to marry her. Which is why he gets so upset with Shimon and Levi when they trick the Hivites into circumcising themselves. What do they do? When the men recovering from their circumcisions are most vulnerable, they slaughter them, Shechem and Hamor and every other male in the city – and rescue their sister. Is this collective punishment fair? Maimonides says yes because “they saw and knew [about Shechem’s abduction of Dinah], yet they did not bring him to justice” (*Hilchot Melachim*, 9:14). Silence is consent. By that token, Jacob, too, may be complicit in his daughter’s trauma, and maybe Shimon and Levi are the heroes of the story? They at least know, unlike many (ancient and modern), that the victim is not to blame for the crime. They retort to Jacob, “Should he then have been allowed to treat our sister like a whore?”

But before we go too far in defending Shimon and Levi for their vigilante justice, remember, their collective punishment of Shechem’s and Hamor’s fellow citizens includes not just theft of property, riches and livestock but also their women and children. They certainly don’t have a sophisticated appreciation for the importance of treating women and girls with respect. No, as is often the case, we have to look closer at the text to discover how the ancient words of Torah, written for another culture, in another time, might guide us in our time.

Which brings me back to the issue of sexual assault and consent. One of the things we’re hearing a lot in the wake of all these scandals is that women and men are beginning to think differently

about sexual violence. How telling that in the 90's, many prominent feminists sided with President Bill Clinton because, while his behavior was repugnant, it was still consensual. Betty Friedan said in those days, "[Clinton's] enemies are attempting to bring him down through allegations about some dalliance with an intern.... Whether it's a fantasy, a set-up or true, I simply don't care." And the National Organization for Women equivocated about whether the president was a "sexual predator" or merely a "womanizer."

What was not said enough at the time (including by me), what still isn't said enough today, is that consent is only part of the story. The full story is about power and the abuse of power. Lewinsky worked for Clinton. The women Matt Lauer allegedly abused were subordinates – by rank or by circumstance. And that's the story we see playing out again and again – in the media, in entertainment, in politics – and NOT in the many spheres where calling out harassers, abusers and even rapists is riskier for the victims than it is for the perpetrators, because they can lose their jobs, their reputations, sometimes even their lives.

The story of Dinah is instructive because we never hear Dinah's voice. She is utterly silent. She is acted upon. The disempowerment of women by men is an ancient and modern story indeed. Rabbi Laura Geller, a Reform colleague from Los Angeles writes about Dinah: "Her silence is loud enough to reverberate through the generations. We hear it in the reports of other fathers who perceive their daughter's rape as their dishonor, their punishment. Fortunately for Dinah, in Genesis the blame and punishment fall entirely on the perpetrator and his people, not on her. Other women are not as lucky." Rav Geller considers, "What happens to Dinah in the aftermath of her ordeal? We do not know. We never hear from her, just as we may never hear from the women and girls in our generation who are victims of violence and whose voices are not heard. But the legacy of Jacob as Israel, the one who wrestles, demands that we confront the shadowy parts of ourselves and our world.... The feminist educator Nelle Morton urged women to hear each other 'into speech.' Dinah's story challenges us to go even further and be also the voices for all of our sisters."

Well said. And I would add to the men in the room, after listening to women's voices, we also must speak, but less about victims and more about perpetrators, harassers, abusers and rapists. In other words, we must speak more about ourselves. What is it in us, in our masculine culture that has convinced so many men and boys they can objectify or harm women? The *Tarbut Ra'ah* that continues to shape our society is corrosive for all of us, of every gender.

What, ultimately, do we learn from our *parasha*? That consent matters and it doesn't. It matters because every person, having been created in the image of God, has sovereign responsibility for our bodies. We get to choose with whom we share our physical selves. All of us. All the time. And... sometimes the choice, is complicated because we make it complicated. We create situations, power-dynamics that rob women of their full agency. Women and men, together, must begin to unmake the structural and institutional sexism that allows men to earn more money, more upward mobility and more respect. *Vateitzeh Dinah*, Dinah "went out" but not to a level playing field. We must do more to level the field. And we must do it soon.

Because our children are watching us.

*Mai Tzionut?* What is Zionism?  
Parashat Tazria-Metsora  
Iyar 3 5777 ~ April 29, 2017  
Rabbi Daniel Cotzin Burg

One of my favorite jokes about Israel, so it bears repeating for those who haven't heard me tell it, has to do with the old *midrash* about the Temple in Jerusalem. The story goes like this: two brothers lived on opposite sides of a mountain. One was rich but alone, the other was poor but married with kids. Each loved the other so much, he would sneak extra grain from his store to support his brother. Each morning they would find their own stores undiminished due to the brothers' kindness. One night, as both brothers schlepped a sack of grain up his side of the mountain, they met on top. They recognized the other's generosity, dropped their burdens and embraced. It was on that exact site of brotherly love, the holy Temple would one day be built. The Israeli version, though, is the following: Two brothers lived on opposite sides of a mountain; these brothers utterly despised one another. Every night each would sneak to the other's home and steal grain from his store. One night they met on top of the mountain, saw the sacks of grain in each other's arms and realized why their grain stores were still full night after night despite their thievery. They dropped their burden and proceeded to strangle each other dead. And on that very spot, one day, the Knesset would be built.

It's a joke of course; intra-Jewish animosity is real, but thank God even where it exists, here and in Israel, it rarely approaches this level of vitriol. But the story points to a real truth: consensus (whether in or out of Knesset) is not a strong feature of Israeli society or Jewish culture. Neither, frankly has it been a feature of American society of late. Which is why, perhaps, it's so surprising that after yet another deeply contentious week in Washington, there emerged a small but significant bright spot from Congress having to do, not with the ACA, the border wall, North Korea, Russia or Refugees, but with Israel. This week saw all 100 US senators co-sign a letter to the Secretary-General of the United Nations. What did the senators say? They praised Antonio Guterres for disavowing the recent ESCWA anti-Israel report and encouraged him to do much more to change anti-Israel and often anti-Semitic culture and policies at the UN. 100 Senators. Unanimity. Almost unheard of.

This small bit of good news couldn't come at a more calendrically appropriate time since this coming week marks both *Yom Hazikaron*, Israel's Memorial Day, and *Yom Ha'atzmaut*, Israeli Independence Day. In just two days, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of Iyar, we celebrate that day in 1948, just months after Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state was affirmed on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November, 1947, by, of all entities, the United Nations. Israel turns 69 this week and in June we'll mark 50 years of Jewish access to the Old City of Jerusalem, our holy sites there, including *HaKotel HaMa'aravi* (the Western Wall).

The movement that led to *Medinat Yisrael*, is called Zionism, but these days that seems for many almost a dirty word. Not just in the UN, but around the world and in the US, including at times on college campuses, Israel is condemned as an apartheid state and Zionism is equated frequently with racism. Rather than respond to these and other spurious accusations today, I'd like to do something else. I want to explore with you a bit

the origins of Zionism. Who were some of the thought-leaders that shaped the movement and what were their ideas? In the Talmud, in *Masechet Shabbat*, confronted with a Babylonian Jewish community disconnected from the Palestinian story of Chanukah, the Sages pose a question: *Mai Chanukah?* Using the Aramaic term for “*ma/what*,” they ask “just what is Chanukah? Why is it important? What does this story from the land of Israel mean for us in the diaspora? Today, as we approach *Yom Ha’atzmaut*, I wish to pose a similar question: *Mai Tzionut*, what is Zionism?

As many of you know, while *hibat tzion*, the urge to return to our historic homeland, lives within the Jewish psyche and siddur for nearly two thousand years, the modern term Zionism describes a movement whose father and chief spokesman is Theodore Herzl. In point of fact, Leon Pinsker, founds his own movement, called *Hibat Tzion*, years before Nathan Birnbaum coins the term Zionism. Pinsker anonymously publishes a pamphlet, in German in 1882, called *Auto-Emancipation* which encourages European Jews to free themselves from the tyranny of anti-Semitism by rebuilding Jewish autonomy and sovereignty in *Eretz Yisrael*. Herzl, meanwhile, is a journalist in Paris during the Dreyfus Affair and witnesses pervasive anti-Semitism surrounding the trial. It’s possible this was the primary instigator of Herzl’s call for a *Judenstaat*. Or, as Prof. Shlomo Avineri has claimed, Herzl’s sense of urgency may stem from the general rise of nationalism and the 19<sup>th</sup> century spread of democracy which, in turn, gives rise to multiple nativist and anti-Semitic candidates across Europe. Suffice it to say, by 1896 Herzl publishes *The Jewish State* and in 1897 convenes the 1<sup>st</sup> Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, 120 years ago this coming August. The rest, as they say, is history.

*Mai Tzionut?* What is Zionism? For Herzl, a Jewish state is a solution to a problem, an answer to a persistently inscrutable question: namely the Jewish question. In romantic terms, Herzl outlines a utopian vision in which Palestine become a fully modern European state, part of the family of nations. Herzl understands the Jewish people have always identified as a nation. Their problem, he surmises, is they aren’t organized as such. Normalcy is Herzl’s aim: a Jewish state which is seen as just another state. As author Yossi Klein-Halevi has put it, “Perhaps only Jews could conceive of a normal national life in messianic terms” (*Like Dreamers*).

So, if for Herzl, Zionism is an attempt to end Anti-Semitism by normalizing Jewish identity with a nationalist solution, this is somewhat different from David Ben Gurion’s Zionism a generation later. Ben Gurion nuances the message: yes, Israel will end anti-Semitism, not by normalizing Jews per se, but by normalizing Jewish power. Dr. Micah Goodman argues this ironically puts Ben Gurion and Bibi Netanyahu in a similar camp. It is Jewish strength made manifest through Jewish military might that will end Anti-Semitism by vanquishing the Anti-Semites, by pounding them into submission so that they have no choice but to respect us as much as they do themselves.

But a decidedly different approach to the Zionist idea comes from revisionist Ze’ev Jabotinsky and finds its expression a half century later in the person and at least some policies of Menachem Begin. Jabotinsky is sanguine not just about Jewish strength, conviction and identity, but about other peoples as well – most pointedly Arabs. Zionism isn’t about Jewish acceptance, says Jabotinsky. No charm offensive will win the day.

Neither will military strength win any hearts and minds, let alone respect. He's no warmonger and no chauvinist, but he detests Jewish weakness. The 1903 Kishnev Pogrom and the 1920 Arab Revolt are just the beginning, he believes. "If the wolf has to lie down with the lamb," says Jabotinsky, "I want to be the wolf." According to Dr. Goodman, with whom I'm studying at the Shalom Hartman Institute and with whose help I am refining my own understanding of Jewish statehood, whereas Herzl is interested in restoring peace, Jabotinsky is interested in restoring Jewish pride. Jabotinsky, like Pinsker, understands Anti-Semitism as a disease of the mind. Normalization won't cure it. And you can't bomb it out of people. Ultimately, I think he is saying we are not responsible for other people's biases or shortcomings. We can only be our best selves. Anti-Semitism does have one singular benefit though: Jabotinsky says it will motivate more Jews to move to Palestine.

Jabotinsky is a pragmatist: he's utterly convicted the Jewish people, like the German people, the French people or the people who would one day call themselves Palestinians Arabs, are interested first and foremost in self-determination. Where Begin is primarily concerned with armed resistance, Jabotinsky is obsessed with diplomacy. And unlike Netanyahu's race-baiting and segregationist policies, Jabotinsky wants full citizenship and true equal rights for all, regardless of beliefs. A litmus test of ideology for visiting Israel, as many right-wing Israeli politicians support – let alone citizenship – would have been anathema to Jabotinsky. He feels the best course of action is a strong Israel, governed by a liberal democracy, with a sizable Jewish majority, brought about through mass immigration. Unfortunately the Holocaust upends his plans. Aliyah is stymied both by the British mandate's immigration policies and later by the sheer magnitude of the genocide.

*Mai Tzionut?* What is Zionism? It is about safety and security; it's a place at the table and a prayer for peace of mind. Many other thinkers affect the profile and character of Zionism and therefore the state of Israel itself. Herzl understands the existential threat to Jews, but not the existential threat to Judaism. This is the essential role Ahad Ha'am plays as he champions a Jewish cultural renaissance. "Herzl," says Goodman, "solves [for] the problem of Jewish sovereignty. Ahad Ha'am, solves [for] Jewish identity." The list goes on: Micha Josef Berdyczewski who argues Zionism's purpose shouldn't be to save Jews from persecution a la Herzl nor to save Judaism a la Ahad Ha'am, but to save Jews from themselves, to transform the Jewish character from, in his view, passive to active, from weak to strong. Yosef Hayim Brenner feels it's the religious aspects of Judaism that encumber the Jew and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook argues it is the Jewish soul, spirit and person, living religiously in its land that is redemptive.

My point is that Zionism, like Judaism, has never been about consensus nor even consistency, which Emerson called "the hobgoblin of little minds." It should be said, though on this Shabbat marking Israel's birthday that Israel and Zionism have been and continue to be aspirational, a product of the Jewish mind and therefore, part of the inheritance of the Jewish people. We owe it to ourselves to better understand the State of Israel, its history, its people, and its ideas. The musical Hamilton has been a raging success because it has made American history accessible at a time when much of the political energy seems to scoff at historicity and demonstrable facts. You well know

there are forces at play, here, in Israel, in France and around the world. These forces seduce us into believing that fake is worth considering, that fact is subjective, that power gives moral license to those who wield it over those who don't. Zionism is a word and like many words means many things. *Mai Tzionut?* What is Zionism? As the rabbis say, *tze u'lemad*, go and learn, because if we don't, we relinquish definitional control to the likes of the UN Human Rights Council which, the letter signed by all 100 US senators reminds us, "maintains a permanent item on its agenda – Agenda Item VII" – to assess Israel even as numerous other countries, including some represented on the Council, commit egregious human rights abuses against their citizens on a daily basis."

To conclude: two, not so shameless, Israel-related plugs. **First**, we have a wonderful group of families traveling to Israel next June, including three families bringing three generations. We have our schedule, a terrific itinerary and a number of exciting events planned together in the coming months. We have room for a few more families. So if you are a parent, or a grandparent, and you want to come with me to Israel in 2018, call me this week, and we'll discuss details. **Second** plug: on May 10, we have a program with Hopkins political scientist Dr. Robert O. Freedman on shifting US policy toward Israel and the Middle-East. It should be great. Please come!

*Chag Sameach!* Happy Israel Independence Day!

## Leviticus: On Words and Things

Rabbi Daniel Cotzin Burg

April 1, 2017 ~ 5 Nisan 5777

What is your most memorable smell from childhood? Scientists have shown that olfactory memories can be very powerful which is why most of us remember not only sights and sounds of youth, but quite often smells too! You may recall pleasant scents: pine trees or pine sol, your backyard after a rain, wood burning in the fireplace. You may remember unpleasant smells. For me it's burnt gravy. I was on a Boy Scout campout and someone served mashed potatoes with burnt gravy. I can still smell it. I don't typically have gravy and I haven't been around burnt gravy in decades, but I know exactly what it smells like! And when we recall those smells, good and bad, we do so at a deep level, a visceral level, right? We carry that grass or that bubbe's perfume or that burnt gravy not just in our noses but in our kishkes.

So it makes sense that our parasha, one so visceral it deals quite literally with viscera, includes vivid descriptions of smell. "*V'im min hatzon korbano min hak'savim oh min ha'izim l'olah....* If his offering for a burnt offering is from the flock, of sheep or of goats, he shall make his offering a male without blemish. It shall be slaughtered before the Lord on the north side of the altar, and Aaron's sons, the priests, shall dash its blood against all sides of the altar. When it has been cut up into sections, the priest shall lay them out, with the head and the suet, on the wood that is on the fire upon the altar." But wait, there's more! "The entrails and the legs shall be washed with water; the priest shall offer up and turn the whole into smoke on the altar. It is a burnt offering, a gift [here it comes] of pleasing odor to the Lord, *re'ach nichoach laShem*" (Lev. 1:10-13).

Raise your hand if you like *Vayikra*. Some people do. There's something appealing about it at a gut level, something physical, tangible, gritty and real about Leviticus. Much of the Torah is about words, narrative, plot and character development, powerful stories that shape and animate our people's past, present and future. We are a people of the book, which is to say we're a people of words. And we come by it honestly. God creates the world through words. "*Vayomer Elohim yehi ohr*, God said, let there be light, *vayehi ohr*, and there was light... let there be an expanse in the midst of the water... let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land may appear...let the earth sprout vegetation...let there be lights in the expanse of the sky...let us make humanity in our image...." The unfolding narrative of creation is not only related to us through words, the exquisite words of Genesis, but it's made possible by words, the words of God. In the Torah's telling, God quite literally speaks the world into existence. We said it this morning in the first prayer of *P'sukei D'zimra*: "*Baruch Sh'amar v'haya ha'olam*, Blessed is the One who spoke and the world was."

So words are foundational, a tool for creation. And we, humanity, created in the divine image (*b'tzelem Elohim*) lay claim to that same tool to render new creations: ideas, plans, jokes (this is April Fools Day after all). But we also create relationships with words and words coalesce in works of art (plays, poems, novels). On Pesach, we evoke memories with words by telling the ancient story, the core narrative, of our people: we were slaves, we were freed; so we celebrate and serve. Words are important, but no seder would be complete with only words. Pesach is also about things, stuff you can grab onto, interact with in a *tachlis* way. We taste the dryness of

the *matza*, the saltiness with the *karpas*. Pesach is multisensory: we touch and taste and see and hear – and of course we smell - the sweet *charoset* or the bitter *maror* or (if you're a meat eater like me) the unforgettable smell of first-cut brisket. *Re'ach nichoach la'Shem!*

Burnt gravy, disgusting! Brisket, amazing. But there's another smell that clings to my nose from childhood. The smell of sawdust. One of the great things about having my mom in town last week is we got to reminisce about my dad who left the world in 2004. When my parents were young and newly married, my mother started a woodworking business in our basement. Dad had risen through the ranks of a mental hospital in Chicago to handle HR. But after the hospital was bought out by a large corporation, forcing dad to lay off numerous employees, they got rid of Dad too. Feel disillusioned, dad joined mom in the basement where, together, they grew mom's small business crafting personalized coats and picture frames. Their company was called Lettercraft – names of children adorning their products, words transformed into solid, wooden things. Dad traveled from state to state hawking their wares and managed to get their creations in upwards of 200 boutiques around the country. At the height of the business, Phyllis and Larry Burg's company was featured in the Sears and Spiegel catalogues (remember Spiegel?) For someone who spent (and spends) a lot of time with books, treasuring the precious words within them, I have powerful memories of childhood in that basement. The sound of the jigsaw humming while mom cut letters for some kid's name, helping my parents to sand down the rough edges, the indescribable smell of sawdust which got everywhere! In some ways, my sister Wendy and I come by it honestly: two great-grandfathers were most definitely handy. Abe Malk was a cobbler in the old country. Harry (*Yerachmiel*), the man for whom I am named, made wagon wheels. I've never made a wagon wheel. I did manage to install a Container Store wire rack system in our pantry. Mostly though, I've made a life and career of words. But my family, my ancestry, many of them made a living with things.

Words and things were the topic of provocative column this past December by Bret Stephens in the Wall Street Journal. I had the opportunity to hear him Stephens speak about this and other important matters at AIPAC this week. Bret Stephens is an important thinker right now. He's a Conservative-leaning columnist, former editor of the Jerusalem Post, a never-Trumper who gave an exquisite talk at UCLA recently on the value of truth and fact in journalism for the Daniel Pearl Memorial Lecture. In the column, Stephens wrestles with the outcome of the presidential election by contending that those in the "words" business are out-of-touch with those who deal more often in "things."

*"...regulations, he writes, "go largely unnoticed by coastal elites because we're mostly in the business of producing and manipulating words—as politicians, lawyers, bureaucrats, academics, consultants, pundits and so on. But regulations (and those who profit from them) are the bane of anyone who produces or delivers things: jet engines, burgers, pool supplies, you name it." As someone who makes a living with words, I resemble this critique. I tend to support regulation. I get nervous, to say the least, when banks are allowed free reign that leads to predatory lending. I get plenty nervous when the EPA attempts to reverse limits on greenhouse gases. I stand by these beliefs as good policy, but I wonder: have I not been sufficiently sympathetic to individuals who have the more immediate concern of earning an honest day's work? I'm thrilled the Hogan Administration wasn't able to open up Chesapeake Oyster sanctuaries for harvest, but perhaps I haven't given enough thought to how it feels for watermen as they struggle to make ends meet.*

The reason I'm nearsighted in this area, says Stephens, is that "words" people are the beneficiaries of perhaps the greatest market *deregulation* in history. It's called the Bill of Rights. "Words-makers have the benefit of the First Amendment," he says, "that great guard against speech regulation, to keep the government at arm's-length from their work. Things-makers do not. It's one of the reasons our worlds seem politically so far apart."

A year ago, when we read *Vayikra*, I must confess I had not considered its implications for Trump voters, but today, I'm reminded of the power of things. For those of us, who tend to turn up our noses at the detailed description of the sacrifices, the gory articulation of burning flesh or steaming entrails, I want to invite us to look a little closer, to sniff around (if you will). *Vayikra* enters the mind through a different part of the brain. It's nonsensical, illogical even, but real, substantial. When the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed two-thousand years ago, we languished for a while. But then we gained much, mostly by foregrounding the *sefer Torah*, the book, the consumption of words. There have always been *mitzvot* of course, sacred obligations. We are a people of doers, but sometimes were are disproportionately a people of thinkers. There's nothing wrong with thinking, and sometimes I wish people would do more of it – but, as we learn in *Pirket Avot*, "Im ein kemach, ein Torah." Without "flour," without the material, palpable world, there can be no Torah. At some level, it is matter that matters more and those of us who revel in ephemeral palaces constructed with words, would do well to remember God wasn't entirely satisfied with words. *Yehi Ohr*, God spoke in order to make stuff, the stuff of the universe.

The stuff of life is no less a part of being Jewish than the ideas and words that form the framework of our theology. This was the basis for early Zionists who determined our people had spent far too much time poring over manuscripts, squinting at words. A.D. Gordon, the nineteenth and twentieth century labor-zionist spoke of a "religion of labor," the so-called New Jew who returns to the land, pushing the dirt once again between her fingers, rising early in the morning to pungent smells of the *refet*, the kibbutz livestock. To be clear, I'm not advocating those of us in the words business, the lawyers and writers and rabbis among us, I not suggesting we are doing wrong nor that we should hang up our quills. But maybe, in the aftermath of this election, in an attempt to better understand at least some of those who saw fit to put our president in the White House, we should approach conversations about the production or movement of things with a bit more humility.

After all, our parasha begins with *anivut*, with humility. Why is the aleph at the end of *Vayikra* written smaller than the rest of text? Our Sages understand this as a sign of Moshe's modesty, he diminishes himself to make space for God. God may have granted us the precious gift of words, but we are also the inheritors of bodies, of buildings and bridges, of forests and mountains, of earth and sky. There are many words to describe the beauty and horrors of this life and of our world, but life is lived through our five senses. For all the books I've read and cherished in my life, I will always revel in the smell of sawdust.

## **Alone-Together is Good (When We're Really Alone and Really Together)**

*Parashat Vayechi* 5777 ~ Jan. 14, 1017

Rabbi Daniel Cotzin Burg

Earlier, Blanca said the *beracha* for her tallit and kissed the edges of the *atarah*. Why? In fact, why is this called an *atarah* at all? An *atarah* is a crown and, I don't know about you, but I think a crown is usually worn on the head, not the shoulders. Perhaps you've seen some Jews wear their tallit over their head? There are different opinions as to why or when and for how much of service one should do this. (Minimally, it's for the *Amidah* or *Barechu* through the *Amidah*). And there are different opinions as to whether the *tallis*, even assuming you drape it over your head, should have an *atarah* at all, because a pretty crown may distract from the truly important part of the *tallit* which is – the *tzitzit*!

Whatever the case, I want to consider today, not the custom of placing a *tallit* on our heads per se, but the impetus to do so, an instinct which could be construed, in some ways, as completely normal human behavior and in some ways is completely odd. For anyone who's ever *davened* in a place where this is common, it feels like there are a bunch of people praying together, more or less on the same page, but alone, isolated.

What's normal about this? Wanting to focus on one's task, one's own prayers, one's conversation with God, even in a crowded room is reasonable. It's not all that different from going to a restaurant where everyone is talking but to one or a few other people. We are together, but we are also alone. And just as some restaurants have dividers or booths that cordon off space so these dinner conversations are more intimate, so too, the custom in some Jewish circles is to create a space, under one's tallit, in which we can have some measure of privacy and therefore some measure of focus.

But, on the other hand, it is a bit weird, a bit off-putting, to have a bunch of people all saying the same thing at (approximately) the same time but saying it to themselves. Add to this, as I described in my *drasha* last week, everyone is facing the same direction, toward Jerusalem, so we're not even making eye contact. In point of fact, not everyone does it this way. The Reform Judaism of my upbringing – especially at summer camp – was all about the circle. We stood around, we sang together in unison, we harmonized, we made eye contact, sometimes we made *eye contact* (we were teenagers after-all!). Sephardi Jews don't, for most of the service, do this quiet, mumbling thing; they sing aloud, in unison. Even here at Beth Am, our *Keshet* Shabbat and *Keshet L'Neshama* next week is a time for us to focus more clearly on the community, experiencing God, hopefully, in relationship with the other. Think of Buber's insight, that we need proximity, personal interaction to see another as Thou and not It. Or of Levinas who said God is seen in the face of our fellow. We humans are communal by nature. Even the introverts in the room crave human contact, crave attention, crave connection – though admittedly not as much nor as often as the extroverts among us.

It's this need for community that has led to expansion (some would say metastasis) of electronic devices. So let's talk about our smart phones a bit. I want to make a distinction here between social media specifically, including IMing, DMing and texting from other uses of devices. There's a conversation to be had about whether having basically the wealth of human knowledge

available at our fingertips at any time is actually a good thing. I think on balance it is – so long as we can distinguish between real and fake. (I for one am willing to go on record saying CNN is real news, not fake. Not good, but real). But there's a difference between being able to instantaneously read the *New York Times* or an E-Book on your device or learn the major export of Finland (which is paper, by the way. I googled it); there's a difference between information gathering and social media. You see, there's a chemical reaction that occurs in our brains when we hear whatever sound our phone's make to tell us there's a text or a message or a tweet or a new facebook post. That release of oxytocin in our brains can be, for many of us, addictive. And like any other addiction, we begin to crave those affirmations.

But remember there's a difference between a real, flesh and blood human affirming who we are, our truth worth, and a device filled with *avatars* of real flesh and blood humans doing the same. It's completely natural to crave social interaction. We want to be seen, we want to be heard, we want to liked and loved and challenge assumptions and make others think. Wanting to feel relevant is a natural human impulse. The problem is our minds are not entirely able to distinguish between the device making us feel these things and the person writing or saying them on the other end. Tweeting or texting releases oxytocin. What else does that? Hugs. So getting a nice message from a spouse, our parent or our grandkids, is just like a big warm hug – except it's not. Because we are embodied creatures whose brains are different, in many important ways, from computer motherboards.

It's been said that the fundamental problem of existence is human loneliness. In Genesis, after days of creation, much of which is described as *tov* (good), the Torah tells us about something that is *lo tov*. "*Lov to he'ot adam l'vado*, it is not good for man to be alone." So it's completely understandable we would want to create more opportunities for more of us to feel less lonely. Enter the complex cocktail of the smart phone and the social network. Someone who researches and writes about the ubiquitous cell phone is Sherry Turkle. She's worked with countless people who, like many of us (myself included) are on their phones, their laptops, their tablets all the time, in chatrooms, responding to threads and posting photos, videos or articles – and then checking back to see what kind of reaction we get. I've got an OpEd about MLK day and the inauguration, a rework of something I wrote for the shul bulletin, coming in the *Sun* paper this Monday. I know I'll be checking to see, was it picked up by the Tribune? Did it get shared a lot on social media? I, like many, will seek validation of my work, my opinions, my values, through the strangers on the other end of my phone. Seeking validation isn't new. Authors have always had fans and critics. What's new is instantaneous feedback – from anywhere in the world. And what's also new is that what we often post is not our own work. We retweet and repost and people judge us and make assumptions about us based on that content.

Turkle calls this "I share, therefore I am." We feel lonely, cause like Adam it's normal to feel lonely, so (unlike Adam) we reach for a device which gives us that neurotransmitter, that hormonal reaction we so crave. The paradox, though, is when we have a device that helps us never feel alone, we don't learn how to be alone. More than this, our devices are attractive, she explains, because they give us the illusion of control, over our relationships and even over ourselves. Smart phones fulfill three fantasies, according to Turkle: that we can give attention to whatever we wish, that we will always be heard and that we never have to be alone. Raise your hand if you've ever woken up in the middle to night, let's say to go to the bathroom or to get a

snack, and before you go back to sleep, you check your phone. Think about how often we see people texting in meetings, at red lights, in line at Starbucks, in front of a urinal. It happens all the time. Perhaps we ourselves have been guilty of some of these! We're afraid to be alone, but more than that we're afraid to be bored. The problem is that being alone and being bored are important facets of a healthy life. As Sherry Turkle puts it, while "...we use conversations with each other to learn how to have conversations with ourselves," we also need solitude to figure out who we are so that we can have constructive relationships with others. Which is why it's a problem, she says, that so many people are never alone, they are what she calls "alone-together."

So what's to be done? What are the models to which we can look to find solutions to this growing problem, one sociologists and researchers say is radically reshaping our behavior and our society in at least some ways that are not good, but that we cannot yet fully understand. What will it mean, by next Shabbat, for America to have a relentlessly tweeting president? One possible response is Shabbat itself. Think about unplugging for a day each week, putting your phone somewhere other than your pocket and practicing ancient behaviors like "making eye contact." You know in the corporate world people are talking about the importance of learning how to make eye contact – while texting?! So, I mean without texting. The radical notion – and I don't mean to sound smug, because I know this is hard even without beeping, vibrating devices – but the radical notion of giving someone our full and undivided attention. Do that. Put your phone away for a while day, once a week for a month, and see how it changes your life. See how it changes your relationship with the people in your life. Shabbat reminds us to keep things in perspective, that life should be lived in moderation. The regular week isn't bad. Our devices aren't bad. They're just devices, not people, and we should be careful not to give them more attention than they deserve

Another strategy is to look for models of effective "alone-together." Which brings me back to the *tefilah*, prayer, and the *Amidah* in particular. Because whether you put your tallis over your head or not, traditional davening has us being effectively alone-together. We are talking, but not to each other. We are thinking, but not necessary about the person standing next to us. We are silent, but not so silent as to be completely shut out from the rest of the *kehillah*. And there is a methodology to the so-called private *Amidah*. Do you know what it is? It's based on Channah, mother of Shmuel haNavi, who is caught praying alone by Eli the priest, one of the few times our tradition learns specific ritual behavior from a woman. The Talmud in *Berachot* (31a) says:

אמר רב המנונא

Rab Hamnuna said :

כמה הלכתא גברוותא איכא למשמע מהני קראי דחנה

How many significant laws there are to be learnt from the passage relating to Hannah!

וחנה היא מדברת על לבה(שמואל א א, יג)

"Now Hannah, she spoke in her heart (to herself)" (I Sam. i. 13)

מכאן למתפלל צריך שיכוין לבו

— hence it is deduced that one who prays must direct ones heart (meaning, focus one's thoughts).

And another thing...

"רק שפתיה נעות"

"Only her lips moved"

מכאן למתפלל שיחתוך בשפתיו

Hence, one who prays must pronounce [the words] with his or her lips.

And finally....

וקולה לא ישמע

"But her voice was not heard"

מכאן שאסור להגביה קולו בתפלתו

Hence, it is forbidden to raise the voice when praying.

So we have here a model for effective prayer, said with *kavanah*, with focus and intention, not just scanned with the eyes, but also pronounced ever so quietly with the lips. And that's how we pray, is it not?

What I want to suggest is that the discipline of prayer offers us two rewards which help shape us for the better. First, it's important to remember that sometimes, maybe even a lot of the time, we *are* praying together. Beth Am is a participatory place. We encourage singing and not performance-based *tefilah*. The *chazzan* has said many times that it is written into his contract that he's to cultivate a singing community.

But there's also space, and the Amidah is a great example of this, for a sort of dialectical silence, a private conversation with God, if you will. Alone together. And, unlike social media, that conversation is in real time – first, because we're reading from a prepared text which means that our words are not simply our own but reflect our collective Jewish aspirations over many centuries. But also, there is time within the Amidah for spontaneous prayer. In fact, this is the moment in the service where it's encouraged! The reason we move our lips, I would claim, is that we wouldn't want to allow ourselves to think we're just reading a book or thinking a thought, because we're supposed to be having a conversation. Most of our lives those conversations are with people, face to face, but in *tefilah* it's with an invisible presence. And that's weird and counter-cultural and I would say essential, because, as social media shows us, we humans crave quiet spaces in which to converse. But, unlike Facebook, prayer is hard because it's not about instant gratification. Perhaps your experience is different, but I've been *davening* my whole life in some form or another, and I have yet to receive any sort of emoji from God! Not a smiley face, not a wink, not a heart or a frown – nothing!

But, here's the thing: what solitary prayer – granted, as one facet of prayer – but what it can do, is help us focus our minds, temper our hearts, rediscover our purpose, maybe even change the

world. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday we celebrate this weekend, wrote the following in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail:" *"Never before have I written a letter this long -- or should I say a book? I'm afraid that it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else is there to do when you are alone for days in the dull monotony of a narrow jail cell other than write long letters, think strange thoughts, and pray long prayers?"*

In his solitude, Dr. King was seeking God, but he was also fostering community. His yearning for connection became his followers' cry for justice. And I hesitate to think what his message would have been if he had to say it in 140 characters.

## Facing Jerusalem

January 6, 2017 ~ 9 Tevet 5777

*Parashat Vayiggash*

Rabbi Daniel Cotzin Burg

Today is *Tisha b'Tevet*, the 9<sup>th</sup> of Tevet – which means nothing. There's another “*tisha*,” *Tisha B'Av*) that matters a great deal, but not this one. Tomorrow, though, is a date worth mentioning: *Asarah B'Tevet*. The tenth of Tevet is the first in a cycle of minor fasts which include *shiva asar b'Tamuz*, when the walls to Jerusalem were breached by Nebuchadnezzar and *T'zom Gedaliah*, occurring between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which marks the assassination by a fellow Jew of *Gedaliah ben Achikam*, Jewish governor but vassal of the ruling Babylonian Empire. *Asarah b'Tevet*, then, commemorates the beginning of the siege on Jerusalem, a siege that would last a full 18 months and culminate, on *Tisha B'Av*, with the razing and burning of the Temple. (By the way, there is one other minor fast – *Ta'anit Esther*, but it is ahistorical and not connected in any explicit way with the story of Jerusalem).

Jerusalem is in the news a lot, which led journalist Matti Friedman to tweet last week “Sometimes it feels necessary to point out that the state of Israel is one one-hundredth of one percent of the world's surface.” Why so much of the world is so obsessed with Israel is a conversation for another time. Why Jews mention Jerusalem three times a day in our prayers, read about the land of Israel in our *parasha* and *haftarah* today, and – if you're like me compulsively read the Times of Israel, Ha'aretz, the NY Times or Wall Street Journal to see what's going on over there or how Israel is being portrayed – the answer to Jewish focus on Jerusalem begins with King David 3000 years ago, it continues with King Hezekiah and Josiah after him, it was a rallying cry for the prophets of old, a promise of return to Jewish sovereignty and represented the hopes and dreams of Jewish communities in diaspora for nearly two thousand years.

I've been talking about politics a fair amount lately – from the bima and in writing – so I don't want to do that today. I'm not going to dwell on political questions right now like whether the US embassy ought to be moved to Jerusalem nor the ongoing debate in Israel about Netanyahu's alleged corruption, Amona, the United Nations and settlement policy or the current brew ha-ha over whether to pardon Sergeant Azaria after his conviction of manslaughter for fatally shooting an incapacitated Palestinian terrorist. Instead, today, I'd like to revisit this year's thematic question of sacred space and consider our posture – that is that way that we physically acknowledge Jerusalem's centrality during our prayers.

How do we do this? Well, you're doing it right now! What direction do we face when we pray? It's a bit of a trick question because we don't really face east, we face Jerusalem. Maimonides (*Hilchot tefilah u'virvat kohanim* 5:3) puts it this way:

נכח המקדש כיצד היה עומד בחוצה לארץ מחזיר פניו נכח ארץ ישראל  
ומתפלל היה עומד בארץ מכיון את פניו כנגד ירושלים היה עומד בירושלים  
מכיון פניו כנגד המקדש היה עומד במקדש מכיון פניו כנגד בית קדש הקדשים

*“Facing the Temple: What is implied? A person standing in the Diaspora should face Eretz Yisrael and pray. One standing in Eretz Yisrael should face Jerusalem. One standing in Jerusalem should face the Temple. One standing in the Temple should face the Holy of Holies.”*

We understand that our bodies, the very directionality of our posture signals to ourselves, to one another and to God, the centrality of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount where *Beit Hamikdash* once stood. In fact, the Midrash (*Tanchuma Kedoshim* 10) sees a connection between the human form and *Eretz Yisrael*: “just as the navel sits at the center of a person, so too the Land of Israel is situated at the center of the world. This notion, that there’s a *tabor haOlam*, a belly button of the universe, isn’t unique to Judaism, but for us, that belly button is situated firmly in a particular place. Jewish navel-gazing is when we point our own navels toward the ultimate one, the one from which, according to tradition, God fashioned the physical universe. The Midrash goes on: “...and Jerusalem in the center of the land of Israel, and the Temple in the center of Jerusalem, and the heichal, the inner sanctum, in the center of the Temple, and the ark in the center of the heichal, and the Foundation Stone before the ark, because from it the world was founded.”

Now, when we talk about human physiology, the navel is not just centrally located in the front of our bodies; it is of course the part of our bodies from which we were nurtured by our mothers in the womb. So facing Jerusalem when we pray, pointing our belly buttons to the east, is also about confronting our own mortality, that we are created beings – created and nourished by our parents, and fashioned as an extension of the world by the *Kadosh Baruch Hu*. According to the Zohar on next week’s *parasha* (*Vayechi* 1:231), “*The world was not created until God took a stone called Even Shetiya and threw it into the depths where it was fixed from above till below, and from it the world expanded. It is the center point of the world and on this spot stood the Holy of Holies.*” Think of it like Superman’s Fortress of Solitude. Superman throws this one crystal and from that grows the entire fortress. I’m not suggesting Kabbalistic science is the same as comic book fantasy. Alright, maybe I am. What is certainly true is that *Evan Shetiya*, the foundation stone, once formed the center of Jerusalem’s holy Temple and is now the “rock” within the Muslim shrine called “the Dome of the Rock.”

But, that stone plays a role not just in human existence, and not just in the world’s existence, but it plays a central role in Jewish history as well. Our tradition asserts *Evan Shetiyah* is *Har Moriah*, the stone to which Abraham bound his son Isaac with plans to offer him as a sacrifice. And this stone is the stone, according to legend, on which Jacob rested his head while dreaming of that stairway to heaven. “*Achen, yesh Hashem b’makom hazeh va’anochi lo yadati...* surely God was in this place and I did not know it,” he proclaims! Remember, prayer is not just an exercise in ongoing revelation, though it is that, and it’s not just about self-reflection, though it is certainly that (the word *l’hitpalel* is reflexive meaning “to judge oneself”). For Jews, though, prayer is also an exercise in genealogy. Jewish identity is first and foremost about family, that is we are all sons and daughters – biologically and/or ideologically – of Abraham and Sarah. What is the central prayer of the service? The Amidah. How is it said? Standing in respect, with our feet together, and facing Jerusalem. How does it begin? God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, God of Sarah...Rebecca...Rachel...Leah.” We have the right to pour out our hearts before the Holy One because we embed our own experience within the lived experiences of our people over time. Our God is their God. The land toward which we face, was their land.

So, here's an interesting question: the ark containing the *sifrei Torah* is here over my shoulder. What happens if it's not? What if a prayer space is constructed so that the *aron kodesh* is not to the East? Do you face Jerusalem or do you face the *aron*? This is precisely the issue we had in Chicago when I worked there. We had this beautiful sanctuary with stunning stained glass windows, and this enormous wooden *aron kodesh*. The only problem was that the auditorium style seating with its plush seats and graded floor faces most-decidedly west. Why this is, I'm not entirely sure. Sometimes congregations have to use the lot or a remodeled room in a particular way that precludes facing east. In the Chicago case, Anshe Emet, like Beth Am, did not build its building. Unlike Beth Am, however, Anshe Emet's building was built not by another Conservative shul but by a Reform one – Temple Shalom. This is relevant because in 1910 when that sanctuary was constructed, the Reform movement had not embraced Zionism. There were differing opinions, of course, but the Columbus Platform of '37 was when the Reform Movement official adopted a Zionistic policy. But in 1910, the movement still held by the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform which stated: "We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state." So they may have built it deliberately facing west or they simply may not have bothered to check.

But, what do you do if you're a Conservative shul, with allegiance to the State of Israel in your mission statement, and your sanctuary faces west? Some authorities would say try to do both – point your feet generally west but turn your face toward Jerusalem. (I guess that means your bellybutton goes somewhere in the middle!) Others would argue, don't worry about it, face Jerusalem. But, leaving the sloping floor aside, you could imagine it being a bit uncomfortable to simply turn your back to the ark while you pray. Which is why many halachic authorities would say you face the ark, even if your back is toward *Yerushalayim*, the Temple Mount and the Foundation Stone itself!

The truth is, this never used to be a problem. Until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Jewish sacred space did not include a fixed ark where the scrolls were kept. The focus of davening was east (or north from Yemen or west from Persia) but the service leader led from the center of the *beit k'nesset* and the *sefer torah* was read on the central *bima*. Once, though, synagogue architecture began to include a fixed *aron kodesh*, we had a new problem: do you face the spiritual and national homeland of the Jewish people where the Temple once stood or do you face the ark which represents, after the destruction of Jerusalem, the Temple itself? Why are there two pillars behind me? Because *Beit Hamikdash* in *Yerushalayim* included two pillars. They even had names: *Boaz and Yachin*. Why is there a *parochet*, a curtain? Because there was a *parochet* before the *Kodesh Kodashim* in the Temple. Why are there *Menorot*? Clearly, an homage to the menorah in the Temple! Same with the *Ner Tamid* and the Ten Commandments up above which were contained within the *Aron Habrit*, the original *aron* in Solomon's *Bayit Rishon*.

To where did our rabbinic authorities look in order to sort this out? Even though they didn't have the issue of a fixed ark, there were cases in ancient times when one could not guarantee facing the right direction. What if you were blind? What if you were traveling in a caravan and physically couldn't stop to pray the preferred direction? Maimonides (*ibid*) says:

## סומא ומי שלא יכול לכוין את הרוחות והמהלך בספינה יכוין את לבו כנגד השכינה ויתפלל

“A blind person, one who is unable to determine direction, or one travelling in a boat should direct his heart toward the Divine Presence and pray” (ibid 5:3).

Still another consideration is how one even faces Jerusalem considering the curvature of the earth! You might think you're facing Jerusalem when you face east, but that is hardly the most direct route. Anyone who's flown from the US to Europe or the Middle East knows you don't fly due east. You take what's called the Great Circle Route – on a flat map, it appears to be an arc. Michael Broyde of Emory University [points out](#) “The shortest route between New York City and Jerusalem is 5686 miles, and it travels the Great Circle Route from New York with an initial heading of 54 degrees East-North. If one wished to travel to Israel by the compass route from New York, one would have to travel 6091 miles (over 400 miles farther) at a heading of about 95 degrees East-South.” He notes that the main *Bet Midrash* at Yeshivah University faces not east but northeast according to the Great Circle Route. And Beth Am? Only Efrem Potts can tell you if it was intentional that those who initially created the Baltimore street grid put Eutaw Place on a trajectory Northwest so that, one day, Chizuk Amuno would build this sanctuary perpendicular to Eutaw Place, thus facing northeast, our prayers traveling efficiently toward heaven by way of Jerusalem!

So whether we daven in our historic sanctuary, our Kaplan social, or one day soon in our new Beit Midrash (which will face closer to true east), we have the good fortune of having our arks line up with our historic inclination toward Jerusalem and our ideological inclination toward Israel. Tomorrow, some Jews will fast for *asarah b'tevet*, many Jews will not (perhaps because excessive fasting for the cessation of Jewish sovereignty in *Eretz Yisrael* seems a strange response to the reality of Jewish sovereignty in *Medinat Yisrael*). But whatever our practice, today, for the *Musaf Amidah*, just as we did for the *Shacharit Amidah*, we will stand and face the rock (*Even Shetiyah*) and the Rock (God). As we do so today, I would ask that we consider the parasha. Because today, with *Vayiggash*, we encountered the first Jewish diasporic experience. It is in today's portion Jacob establishes the *B'nai Yisrael*, the 70 souls constituting the first extended Jewish family, not in the land of Israel, but in Egypt. We know that story. We know about the years of slavery. We know about the return to the Promised Land. We know the pain of Jewish exile time and again for myriad lands, the return to the land in '48, the return to the Old City in '67. And we also know that for all that time and since, for the many Jews who do not live in Israel, we continue to incline our hearts and our attention there. We may do so by scouring headlines or calling relatives. We may read *Biblical Archaeology Review* or the Jerusalem Post. Or we may be more nostalgic, inclining our thoughts toward a time long past in a place far away, a place where our ancestors first became a nation, a people within which our path has been forged and our destiny realized.

## Despair in the Age of Trump

It is easy in these times to feel despair. We shouldn't run away from despair and we shouldn't act like everything is okay. In fact, this despair might be the source of repair. We see the glimmers of such despair in this week's parsha, the saga -- the picaresque travails, really -- of Yosef, who is both a hero and anti-hero, a boy who makes good and an immigrant who never quite knows who he is, a man who has lost something (the meaning of his dreams, a stable home, a natural connection with his father) and can only with difficulty recover them, and perhaps not even then. In the midst of this despair, when moral footing is lost and it's not clear what is up or down (where is Yosef? What happened to him? What should be done?), Reuven takes stock. He says, why should we kill someone over this? And Yakov cries out, in his despair, his complete unmooring from everything he knew, "Yosef has been torn asunder." The pit was empty -- nothing in it but devouring snakes. (I am not mentioning the despair of Sarah, who has a child only to see him stolen away by incomprehensible ritual; or of Moses, who never makes it into the land he has been promised.)

We can have recourse to midrash in these desperate times, and we can have recourse to halacha. The halachic term for despair is "yeush." It refers to the stance taken by a property owner when losing all hope of recovering property. There are other ways in which property can leave someone's possession - when someone else definitely acquires it, or when the owner abandons the property. To quote the volume "Jewish Law" by Menachem Elon, "For property to be despaired of it must be against the owner's wish, for he despairs because the object has been lost or stolen; but if the owner gives up the object of his own free will, it is abandonment, and not yeush." The male referent is in the original.

I step away from halacha to consider a philosophic position which has some purchase in our present political moment and also in Hasidic Jewish thought. There is no need to be delicate: the despair I am referring to is the effect of Trump, and associated racism, bigotry, and misogyny, on what is already a deeply imperfect American body politic. Faced with such despair, a natural inclination is to throw up one's hands -- give up entirely. This is nihilism, the idea that a significant loss does not matter at all. One can compare this to the opinion of Rebbe Nachman, who famously says in the Likutei Moharan, "There is no yeush at all." As with much of his writing, I find the statement itself recondite, even impenetrable, but I believe this is a

normative statement. There should be no yeush because there is recovery in the end. Yeush is loss of hope. One must not lose hope.

I disagree. Clearminded cataloging of what we have lost, be it hope, identity, body politic, or cherished democratic principles, can help us stage a recovery.

A possible helpful halachic category is found in the tractate Bava Metzia, where the question is considered of an object that is lost without the owner's knowledge. The Gemara says, איתמר: יאוש שלא מדעת. אביי אמר: לא הוי יאוש, ורבא אמר: הוי יאוש. That is, Yeush without knowledge, Abaye says -- it is not despair [yeush], while Rava says, it is Yeush. The question is, whether knowledge of what we have lost is necessary to cause despair about ever recovering the lost object? What if we don't have a clear sense of what we are missing? What if there are so many missing pieces to our polity, to our imagined American community, that we are left with a vague sense of unrightness rather than a clear mark of absence?

The Talmud continues to explain the dispute.

“When they disagree, it is with regard to an item in which there is no distinguishing mark. Abaye said: Despair that is not conscious is not considered despair, as he did not know that the item fell from him; therefore, he cannot despair of recovering it. Rava said: Despair that is not conscious is considered despair, as when he discovers that it fell from him, he will despair of its recovery; as he says upon this discovery: I have no distinguishing mark on the item. Therefore, it is considered from now, when the item fell, that he despairs.”

Yeush is relevant because when an object is found, about which the owner has despaired of recovery, the finder can keep it. Relevant to our current moment, the question is, whether the property, rights, and stability of oppressed persons have been taken unawares, in the rush of events, without specific signs? When we think about what has been lost, are there distinguishing marks? When have we been conscious of the loss?

We have to ask who the “we” is. Who is the assumed audience in the Talmud? That is a matter of dispute among academics, whether the readership of the Talmud was a small group of learned rabbis or some larger audience of Bavel. In our day, in the year 2017 and in the late

stages of the American democratic process (perhaps the waning stages), the referent is clear - African Americans are the population from whom much has been taken, in the past, and even more with the Trump presidency and its associated phenomena.

Is yeush, despair, the proper category for this political loss? We might think the potential approach is gezeilah, theft by force. Indeed there is much in the American political experience to which that category applies. The experience of slavery, desegregation, plunder, extending to our own day, as Ta Nehisi Coates has documented, is eloquent proof of theft which requires recompense.

But there is more that has been lost which is less concrete, perhaps less deadly, but no less serious to those who take the American polity as something worth conceiving of as a whole with a particular set of goals. We have lost the rhetoric on the part of elected leaders that diverse groups of Americans are to be supported in the exercise of their various and unique capabilities, that democracy is meant to support people in their different identities and not merely as atomized individuals. We have lost the illusion that relationships matter in a democracy, in a real and concrete sense involving rights and privileges. (I am not saying our democracy has ever achieved that; I refer to illusions, dreams, and ambitions.)

There are not clear signs of that loss. It has fallen away imperceptibly over the past year. We are despairing at its loss. We can point the finger at Trump, and he has done evil, but he is not the one solely responsible for this state of affairs. The rhetoric of relational democracy has collapsed, and it takes more than one person to undermine it.

What if we are not sure about the level of our knowledge regarding what has been lost? Maimonides describes the practical law in his Laws of Stolen and Lost Property:

“Unconscious resignation, even when the lost object has no mark of identification, is not considered abandonment of hope of recovery. If, for instance, one dropped a denar without being aware that he dropped it, although he is likely to abandon hope of its recovery upon noticing that he dropped it, it is not deemed abandonment of hope as yet, until the owner is aware that it fell out [and disappeared]. If, however, the owner still says: "I may have given it to

so-and-so," or "it is lying in the chest," or "I may have made a mistake in figuring," or something like this, it is not regarded as abandonment of hope."

What have we done with our recognition that American democracy should support the exercise of diverse capabilities on the part of various groups of people? Is it gone? Is it lying somewhere? Have we entrusted it to the wrong parties?

In thinking about where these imagined virtues of American democracy have gotten to, we might be able to figure out whether we have, indeed, lost hope. If we have, we might need to restructure our entire approach to our nation. If we have not, we need to figure out where these virtues lie, how they were taken from us, and decide whether the laws of gezeilah apply -- to retrieve the stolen object.



