

Service of the Heart (בלה תדובע): Exploring Prayer

This week's column was written by Rabbi Samuel Barth, senior lecturer in Liturgy and Worship, JTS.

Simhat Torah: Which Way When the Circle Ends

The annual celebration of Simhat Torah brings great joy to so many of us of all generations, and it is a fitting and triumphant conclusion to the long and multifaceted season of intense Jewish observance and focus that began (a little before Rosh Hashanah) with *Selichot*. In Israel and in congregations observing a single day of festivals, Simhat Torah is blended with Shemini Atzeret, offering the intense experience in the morning of *Hallel*, *Hakkafot* (processions with dancing) and *Geshem* (the prayer for Rain).

At the morning service of Simhat Torah there are four linked biblical readings (three from the Torah), and the relationship among them invites us to think about the flow of sacred text in a multidimensional context. The first reading is *Vezot HaBrakha*, the last chapters of Deuteronomy containing the final blessings from Moses to the community—and the account of the death of Moses, alone with God on Mount Nebo. To receive the final aliyah after everyone else present has been called to the Torah is considered a great honor, and the person with this honor is called up with a special formula (a short version is presented in *Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals*, 215) that affirms, “May it be the will of the One Most Powerful to grant abundant blessings to [insert the name of the one called] who has been chosen to complete the Torah.”

After we have heard the final verses of Deuteronomy, and chanted with joy the traditional formula of “*Hazak hazak venitchazek!*” (Be strong, be strong, we strengthen each other!), we find ourselves at a junction with three pathways forward.

1. The eternal circle of the Torah is affirmed by immediately reading the story of Creation from the beginning of Genesis. This is, perhaps, the deepest message of Simhat Torah—the Torah has no beginning and no end, and if we might discern the hint of beginning and end, these two extremes are juxtaposed—albeit from a different scroll—with a different person uniquely honored (*Sim Shalom*, 216).
2. The ritual continuity with the ancient *Avodah* service of sacrifices I affirmed through the *maftir* from Numbers that specifies the offerings of Shemini Atzeret (for Simhat Torah has no place in the biblical calendar—it is “grafted” onto Shemini Atzeret).
3. A hint of history preserved in the selection of the Haftarah from the beginning of Joshua, offering an element of deference to narrative continuity flowing forward from the end of Deuteronomy.

In the physical world, when we reach a fork in the road, we must make a choice. The world of symbols and ritual allows us to make all three choices, finding many ways forward from a single moment.

May we dance with the Torah—real and metaphorical—with each of these choices, and our recollections of the month of Tishrei as a season of joy and awe.

As always, I am interested in hearing comments and reflections on these thoughts about prayer and liturgy. You may reach me at sabarth@jtsa.edu.

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Torah from JTS

Bereishit 5774

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Dr. David Marcus, professor of Bible, JTS.

Bereishit with a Capital Bet

With this week's parashah, we once again commence the cycle of reading the Torah from the first chapter of Genesis, which begins with the Hebrew word *bereishit*. Attentive readers may note that, in the *Etz Hayim Torah and Commentary*, this first word is printed with a large Hebrew letter, *bet*, and is followed by an asterisk with an explanation stating that the *bet* is written large in accordance with traditional editions of the text. This clarification may have been deemed necessary because this oversized *bet* is not in the manuscript that the editors of *Etz Hayim* use as the basis for their edition, namely the great Leningrad Codex, the oldest complete Hebrew Bible in existence dated to 1008 CE.

However, the *bet* of *bereishit* is not the only letter that is printed in a different font in this week's parashah. In chapter 2, verse 4, the letter *heh* of the word *behibar'am* (when they were created) is printed in small (miniscule) type. In fact, there is a scribal convention that every letter of the alphabet is written somewhere in the Bible large and small and that, in the Torah, every letter of the alphabet is somewhere written large. For example, in traditional *humashim*, or Bible editions, there is a large *aleph* on the word *Ashrekha* at Deuteronomy 33:29, a large *gimel* on the word *vehitGalal* at Leviticus 13:33, a large *dalet* on the word *'ehaD* at Deuteronomy 6:4, and so on. Why are these letters written large and small? The truth is that we really do not know, although many theories have been advanced. It might seem obvious that, in the word *bereishit*, the first letter would be written large because it is the start of a new book in the Torah. But other books of the Torah do not have large letters written with their first words (e.g., the first word of Exodus, *v'eleh*, does not have a large *vav*). Neither do the first words of the other three books, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The only books of the Bible that are written with large letters at the beginning are Proverbs, which has a large *mem* on the first word; *Mishlei*, Song of Songs, which has a large *shin* on the first word, *shir*; Qoheleth, which has a large *dalet* on the first word, *dibrei*; and Chronicles, which has a large *aleph* on the first word, *Adam*.

Various explanations have been advanced for these large letters. One theory is that they mark a significant statistical point in the text. For example, the word *vehitGalal*

of Leviticus 13:33, written with a large *gimel*, is the middle verse of the Torah, or the word *gahOn* of Leviticus 11:42, written with a large *vav*, is the midpoint of the Torah in letters. Another theory is that these big letters emphasize the precision of the reading. A good example of this is in the first line of the Shema' (Deut. 6:4), where there is large 'ayin written in the word *shema'*, and a large *dalef* in the word 'ehaD. The scribe is thereby cautioned: watch out, do not write *shema'* (hear!) as though it were *shema'* with an *aleph*, which would change the meaning to "perhaps" ("Perhaps O Israel!"); rather, be careful to write it with an 'ayin (hear; "Hear O Israel"). Similarly, with the last word, the scribe is warned: watch out, do not write 'ehad as though it was 'aheR with a *resh*, which would change the meaning to "another" ("the Lord is another"); rather, be careful to write it with a *dalef* (one; "the Lord is our god, the Lord is one").

But these reasons apply to a very small proportion of the cases of large and small letters and, because of this, most of these large and small letters have attracted midrashic or homiletical explanations. Thus a popular midrashic explanation of the large 'ayin and *dalef* in the verse containing the Shema' is that these two letters should be joined to form the Hebrew word 'ed (witness). The thought would then be, as expressed in the Hertz *Humash*, that "every Israelite by pronouncing the Shema' becomes one of God's witnesses, testifying to His Unity before the world." Another example of a midrashic interpretation is in our parashah in chapter 2, verse 4, where the letter *heh* of the word *behibar'am* is printed in small font. Here, the midrashic explanation for the small *heh* is that it stands as an abbreviation for "the Lord." Therefore, instead of translating the phrase with the impersonal "when they (the heavens and earth) were created," which is the correct grammatical interpretation, one should translate "when the Lord created them." This would bring God directly back into the Creation story as indeed God is when we read our first verse with the large *bet* of *Bereishit* "when God began to create heaven and earth."

One thing is quite clear: the scribes entrusted with the responsibility to preserve and protect the text of the Hebrew Bible did so with the utmost fidelity to tradition. These scribes were known as Masoretes, and the text they preserved is known as the Masoretic text. To the Masoretes, not only was every word to be carefully guarded, but also every letter: each word had to be written properly with its consonants and full vowels. Each letter had to be written in accordance with tradition, whether in regular, large, or small font. The result of their enterprise is called the Masorah, which not only ensures the accuracy of the biblical text, but is testimony to the sanctity of the Torah. This is a good lesson for us as we commence rereading our Torah. Not only do the words of Torah have significance, but also the letters. When we study the biblical text with its large and small letters, we engage in a spiritual practice symbolizing our love for God and Torah. Our appreciation for the smallest detail of the text that has sustained us for thousands of years is, in many ways, an expression of our joy in God's revelation.

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A Taste of Torah

A commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS.

Mastery = Harmony

This coming Shabbat, we return to the beginning of Torah with Parashat Bereishit. The Jewish calendar's narrative cycle dovetails well with the spiritual renewal celebrated at this season. Having commemorated Rosh Hashanah (the beginning of the new year and celebration of God's Kingship), Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), and Sukkot (the final of the three pilgrimage festivals), we begin whole and fresh. And part of this commencement is reading Torah anew—discovering new messages through new lenses. Parashat Bereishit places us once again in the Garden of Eden—a paradise of fullness and ideal balance: "From the ground the Lord caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad" (Gen. 2:9). Yet, just a few verses earlier, humans are blessed by their Creator and told, "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it" (Gen. 1:28). How are we to understand this notion of "mastering" or "conquering" the earth?

Professor Ze'ev Falk (z"l), who taught at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, notes that this phrase of "mastering it" does not repeat itself in the blessing given to Noah after the destruction of the world. God repeats the same blessing of Genesis 1:28, but the omission is glaring: "God blessed Noah and his sons saying to them, "Be fertile and increase, and fill the earth" (Gen. 9:1). Why the abandonment of "mastery"? Professor Falk explains that the notion of mastery was an ideal by which the first humans were blessed in the Garden of Eden. Once they perverted their ways and spoiled the earth, "this uncategorical merit was stripped from them." Falk goes on to write, "Ecology teaches us today that the freedom of man upon the earth is bounded and therefore this concept of mastery is no longer tenable" (*Divrei Torah Ad Tumam*, 4). In a post-Eden world, we must learn to recognize the limits of our power, embracing a healthy dose of humility.

Interestingly, Falk also points out that the next time the idea of mastery appears in Torah, it is in the context of the Israelite conquest of the Land of Israel. He sensitively writes that in coming to the Land of Israel, the Israelites return to a special status of *adam ha-rishon*, the first human. Dwelling in the Land entails subjecting one's self to special conditions. Falk enumerates, "Caring for the stranger, accepting a servant who requests refuge, being vigilant not to contaminate the land, not destroying trees, and recognizing the rights of Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites, and perhaps others who dwell in the land" (4). Clearly, Professor Falk's reading of "mastery" encourages us all to envision and to aspire to an ideal of harmony in our relationship between ourselves and the earth (ecology) and between ourselves and the Other (seeking peace and pursuing it).

May this coming year be one of constructive mastery—as we conquer wasteful drives and indifference on the way toward building a better Israel and better world.

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