

Between the Lines

Weekly Midrash Learning with Rabbi Andy Shugerman

Babylonian Talmud—Masekhet Berakhot 7a

אמר מר: צדיק וטוב לו - צדיק בן צדיק, צדיק ורע לו - צדיק בן רשע. איני? והא כתיב: (שמות ל"ד) פקד עון אבות על בנים, וכתיב: (דברים כ"ד) ובנים לא יומתו על אבות ורמינן קראי אהדדי ומשינין: לא קשיא, הא - כשאוחזין מעשה אבותיהם בידיהם, הא - כשאין אוחזין מעשה אבותיהם בידיהם

[In Rabbi Yose's name, Rabbi Yohanan] taught previously: "A virtuous man who has good [fortune] is a virtuous son of a virtuous man; a virtuous man who has bad [fortune] is a virtuous son of a wicked man."

But is this so? For, one verse says: "[I the Lord your God am an impassioned God,] visiting parents' guilt upon their children" (Exod. 20:5); yet another verse says: ". . . and children shall not be put to death for [the deeds of their] parents . . ." (Deut. 24:16). A contradiction was identified between these two verses, but [our Sages] taught us there is no contradiction: the former verse deals with children who continue in the same course as their parents, and the latter verse with children who do not continue in the course of their parents.

Why do bad things happen to good people? That question is one of the oldest in our rabbinic tradition, and one of the thorniest that I have gotten in teaching throughout South Florida, where the concentration of Holocaust survivors and their descendants is especially high. In recent months, however, I have noticed how seldom young Jews raise that query in dealing with their own hardship: the misfortunes of our economy's slow recovery from the Great Recession. My impressions match current demographic research about the kind of resilience and faith that largely define the character of my generation, and also attest to the wisdom of the midrash above regarding our parents' actions.

Many of my peers who have come of age since the turn of the millennium, often called "Millennials," have experienced adversities like debt and un- or underemployment either personally or among their close friends and family. However, these material challenges have yet to erode their trust in family, community, and society. In fact, the Pew Research Center's landmark 2010 survey of Millennials reported that they prioritize being good parents, having a successful marriage, and helping others far above desires for wealth or leisure time. In a number of ways, Millennials express less skepticism about the government's effectiveness and corporations' practices than older Americans.

I see this information as affirming our parents' and grandparents' commitments to raising my generation with optimism and a conviction to make the world a better place to live. Perhaps that is naïve, and maybe we will someday view biblically the mess of the early 21st century as our punishment for the sins of an earlier era. I pray, though, that we will carefully evaluate the values, beliefs, and dreams of our elders for positive lessons, in order to preserve the pride we overwhelmingly feel for our unique identity and heritage as American Jews.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Yitro

Exodus 18:1–20:23

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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Marc Wolf, vice chancellor and chief development officer, JTS.

This past week, The Jewish Theological Seminary was fortunate to host United States Supreme Court Associate Justice Stephen G. Breyer for a public lecture. What struck me most during his talk was how he described his method of constitutional interpretation—the way he approaches a case and sits in judgment.

His latest book, *Making Our Democracy Work*, continues the conversation he started in a previous work, *Active Liberty*. In his writings and at the lecture, Justice Breyer shared that cases that reach the bench of the U.S. Supreme Court are generally directly related to the application of constitutional law. Thus, his method of interpretation of the U.S. Constitution is the key to his understanding of law. Essentially, how he and the other justices read the Constitution determines the outcome of the cases.

Justice Breyer believes that he is part of an interpretive tradition—a tradition that began with the gestation and birth of our nation and continues through its growth. In *Active Liberty* he states,

That tradition sees texts as driven by purposes. The judge should try to find and honestly . . . say what was the underlying purpose expressed in a statute. The judge should read constitutional language as the revelation of the great purposes which were intended to be achieved by the Constitution itself.

When approached with a case, Justice Breyer attempts to understand the original purpose of the statute relating to his case. But it is far more than the general statute. He must seek to understand particular phrases and individual words that are the building blocks of these statutes. In his words, it is "language, history, tradition, precedent, purpose, and consequence" that guide interpretation.

Language, history, tradition, precedent, purpose, and consequence: when I read Justice Breyer's words, they rang true to me. True not only because I consider myself patriotic, but true because they sounded strangely familiar. Breyer was expressing principles that guided more than the interpretation of the Constitution. These are all the essential ingredients for the recipe of how we interpret the Torah at JTS—language, history, tradition, precedent, purpose, and consequence. It is these very same principles that define our vision for study, law, and practice.

In our own language, we call this *text and context*. A text must be understood in its historical context—at some point(s) in time it meant something specific—and our understanding needs to be, rather *must be*, informed by that.

There may be those reading this commentary who are thinking that a Judaism viewed through a historical lens could become a bit boring—it certainly does not sound spiritual, inspirational, or at all divine. Here is where we can learn a deeper lesson from Justice Breyer. His study of the Constitution has, as an endgame, purpose. When he reads the Constitution, he is searching for the *purpose* that originally informed that constitutional text. Our endgame must include that same drive—the one toward purpose—to remain religiously engaging.

I am enthralled by the study of Talmud. I find the conversations and arguments enlightening and energizing. The give-and-take on a page of Talmud sheds a bright light on the core beliefs of Judaism. You may think my love of the Talmud and all of Jewish law, for that matter, somewhat strange. But there is reason.

When I first began the study of Talmud, my teacher asked, “Why do we learn Talmud?” I answered, “So we can figure out what to do—how to observe, what ritual to do, how Judaism tells us to live.” While I sat proud with my answer, having read an introduction to the Talmud, my teacher gave me a warm smile that said, “You’ve totally missed the boat.” The answer that followed was quiet and simple. We learn Talmud because it is a record of conversations endeavoring to determine the essence of Revelation.

The words of the Talmud are searching for meaning, searching for depth, searching for God, searching for purpose. It is that mission that guides us and inspires us daily. It is for that reason we keep returning to our synagogues.

What we learn from Justice Breyer, then, is that every time we approach a text, an issue, a verse of the Bible, we need to read it with those principles in mind. Language, history, tradition, precedent, purpose, and consequence. Text within its context.

What that method of reading teaches us is how to read the text now, today. By applying the principles, we gain an understanding not only of the historical context, but also of the philosophical and, most importantly, the theological underpinnings.

I share these words as a commentary to Parashat Yitro because Revelation was not simply an event experienced by the generation that left Egypt—it calls out to us to be renewed every day. Torah is not only the sacred scroll we hold fast to, but also the underlying purpose of the way we live our lives and teach our children. Interpretation did not end with Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban, it continues today in the pages of our books, the posts on our blogs, and in the sacred conversations in our study groups, classrooms, camps, and homes.

Each and every day, we stand together at the foot of Sinai and seek contemporary meaning to Revelation. Our challenge is how to approach ritual, belief, and law today. Actions, however small, have intention and often a deeper meaning than we can recognize on the surface. Likewise, texts, however ancient, teach us much about the “great purposes which were intended to be achieved” by the Torah.

There is a Hasidic story of a student who approaches his rebbe and questions the annual cycle of the Torah reading. He asks, “Rebbe—I don’t understand, every year we return to synagogue and read the same words over and over. It never changes.” The rebbe gives what I imagine must have been the same knowing smile of my first Talmud teacher and replies, “Yes, the Torah never changes, but you do.”

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

Having experienced the first great moment of liberation by reaching the other shore of the Red Sea, the Israelites now live through the second transformative event: divine revelation on Sinai. While the crossing of the Red Sea represents a physical transition (in literally leaving the land of Egypt), Sinai symbolizes spiritual metamorphosis—propelling the young nation from a mentality of slavery to one of self-determination. As the Ten Commandments are introduced in Exodus 20, God declares, “I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery” (Exod. 20:2). Why must God qualify Egypt as *beit avadim* (the house of slavery)? What does this add to the text as well as to our perception of self?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains,

Beit Avadim, “house of slavery,” describes Egypt as a place in which we were born slaves, where, accordingly, the fact that we had been forcibly robbed of our freedom was completely forgotten, and slavery was regarded as our natural condition and status. Reminding us of this brings into our minds the thought of how complete our social degradation really was when God called us to freedom and independence. From this fact comes our complete and quite special “belonging to” God. It was only directly from God’s Hands that we have our heads, our hearts and our hands, that we have our own personality, and the right to earn, to possess, and to dispose of our own property . . . Whereas other nations are only beholden to God for their actual creation, their physical existence, we are also beholden for our historical and social existence. We passed directly from the slavery of Pharaoh to the service of God and our Hallel hymn sings, “I am Your servant, for you loosened my shackles.” (*Commentary on the Torah: Exodus*, 259).

Hirsch is perceptive in emphasizing two points. First, the qualifier “house of slavery” suggests a psychological state in which slavery is understood as a “natural condition.” In the absence of choice and freedom, routine was defined the suffering and mundane tasks of enslavement. Second, since God, as Redeemer, brought the Israelites out of bondage, there is a keen sense that we are obligated to God for our physical, historical, and social selves. We have become the free and willing servants of God in the hope of bringing God’s *hesed* (loving kindness and presence) into the world. In communicating these ideas, Hirsch prefigures the powerful observation of Bernard Levinson: “Within the narrative structure each former slave, who previously lacked all sense of history and community, acquires an ‘I’ at Sinai. The transformation of the slave into a person in narrative terms points to the direct address as requiring a personal response—the creation of a moral self—on the part of the reader or hearer” (*The Jewish Political Tradition, Volume I: Authority*, 26). May we all merit freedom as our natural condition; and may we truly answer the call of Sinai with a personal, moral, and inspired response.

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