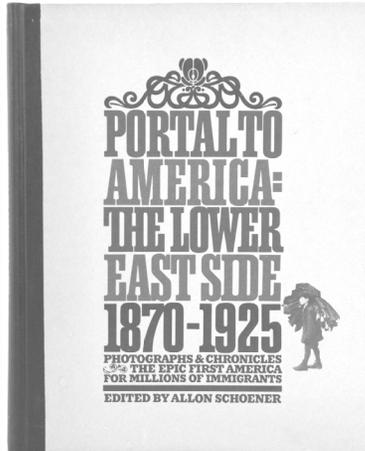


דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Journeying through Jewish History

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I first encountered this book in my supplementary Hebrew school at Temple Emanuel of Great Neck when I was a teenager. The documents, photographs, newspaper reports and Yiddish language characters entranced me then, and still do. At that tender age, I thought I wanted to grow up to be a marine biologist. Instead, embedded in my young soul, those images of East European Jews who had journeyed—like our forebears in this week’s parashah (Numbers 33:1–37)—from far away to a land they did not know, propelled me on a lifelong journey as a historian of the Jews of Eastern Europe.

I am writing this in the week before I embark, once again, on a trip to Poland and Ukraine. The first leg, with congregants from Congregation Anshe Chesed, will journey from Warsaw to Kazimierz na Dolny (Kuzmir in Yiddish) to Krakow, and—with profound difficulty—to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The second leg will take me to L’viv (formerly Lwów/Lemberg/Lvov) in western Ukraine and eastward to Khmelnytsky, Ternopil, Kolyban’, Medzhybidz, Yarmolintsi, Zin’kiv, Kamyanetz-Podolskiy, Sataniv, and Mykolayiv. This was the heartland of European Jewry until the Holocaust.

Like Ramses, Succoth, Etham, Pi-hahiroth, Migdol, Dophkah, Kehelath, etc., the landmarks of the Israelites’ journey in the parashah, the cities and towns of Jewish Eastern Europe are echoes of places most of us do not know. Yet, they have indelibly shaped who we are. For American Jews of Ashkenazic descent, the Eastern European landscape of today is a palimpsest, which, scrim-like, lays over our received memories of the East European past. When we journey there now, the traces of a thousand-year-old civilization can be felt as we also feel the presence of today’s small but dynamic East European Jewish communities.

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Mattot-Masei 5777

מטות-מסעי תשע"ז



Upgrading the Torah—and the World

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Is God’s law perfect? Most of us would assume that anything created by an omniscient and omnipotent being must have no flaws. But a story in today’s parashah suggests otherwise—in a manner that shows a surprising similarity to a key concept of Jewish mysticism.

At the end of the reading for this Shabbat (Num. 36:1–9) and in four other passages in the Torah (Lev. 24:10–23, Num. 9:1–14, 15:32–36, and 27:1–11), the Israelites and Moses confront a situation in which the law is unclear, or in which some Israelites seem dissatisfied with the existing law. Moses asks God to clarify the law relating to the situation, and God responds to Moses’s request. For example, a story in last week’s Torah reading (Num. 27:3–4) tells of the daughters of a recently deceased man named Zelophehad, who had no sons. Because women could not inherit under the existing law, his landholding was set to pass to his closest male relative. As a result, his land and his name were going to disappear forever. The daughters approached Moses to ask why their father’s name should be lost, and they requested the right to inherit his land so that the family’s plot, and hence Zelophehad’s name, would endure.

The daughters’ query was not open-ended. They respectfully presented an objection to the existing law of inheritance, and they made the solution they were looking for explicit. God’s response when Moses brought the question to God’s attention is fascinating. God did not declare, “I am perfect, and My law is perfect, and who are these women to tell Me how to run My universe?” Instead, God agreed to their plan: כִּן בְּנוֹת זֵלֹפְהָד דִּבְרֹת (‘‘The daughters of Zelophehad speak rightly,’’ Num. 27:7). God agreed to modify the existing law of inheritance to allow a sonless man’s property to be divided among his daughters. That way, the property would stay together, forever associated with the deceased man’s name. This story from last week’s parashah presents the law as malleable and open to improvement.

As if to underscore this point, the revision God issued to the law of inheritance is itself revised in this week's Torah reading. In Num. 36:2–4, the leaders of the tribe of Manasseh (to which Zelophehad's family belongs) approach Moses to point out a wrinkle in the solution that God set forth back in Num. 27. What would happen, under the revised inheritance law, if one of the daughters marries a man from some other Israelite tribe? In that case, the children of that marriage will inherit Zelophehad's land, and a piece of Manasseh's territory will pass into the permanent possession of the other tribe. The tribal leaders object to the apparently unforeseen consequence of the legal revision reported in last week's parashah.

Again, God does not respond angrily, insisting that there can be no consequences unforeseen by God's all-seeing eyes. Rather, God responds precisely as God had done earlier: **כִּן מִטָּה בְּנֵי יוֹסֵף דִּבְרִים** (“The tribe of Joseph's sons speak rightly,” Num. 36:5). The originally imperfect law had been improved in light of the daughters' plea, but the tribal leaders' subsequent plea reveals that God had not improved it enough. So the amendment is amended: the daughters may inherit, but not if they marry a man from outside their tribe. If they are to exercise their right to inherit, they must marry members of the tribe of Manasseh. In that case, Zelophehad's land will stay with his descendants through the female line, while also remaining with his tribe. This amendment does not undo the earlier revision; before that revision, the land would have gone to Zelophehad's closest male relative. Under the new law, the daughters may marry a much more distant member of their tribe, and the children of that more distant relative will end up owning the land. But the amendment to the amendment solves the problem that concerns the tribal elders.

In presenting these stories of legal revision, the Torah acknowledges without embarrassment or discomfort that what God has wrought is not always set in stone. The law, we might say, is 1.0, and it can be upgraded—as can the upgrade. The narrative makes clear that God does not find this insulting. God seems perfectly satisfied with a situation in which the Israelites participate along with God in allowing the law to develop over time.

Much the same thing can be said about the world itself in the Torah. As has been widely noted, the opening chapter of Genesis is in many respects a classic example of an ancient Near Eastern creation account, sharing with its Mesopotamian counterparts several features of plot and style. But Gen. 1 differs in some crucial respects. Many ancient Near Eastern creation myths conclude with the construction of the highest god's temple by the lower-ranking gods. To a reader who has noticed the many elements of the ancient

Near Eastern creation myths in Gen. 1, the world created there appears lacking, because it never arrives at its expected culmination, the erection of God's palace or temple. That absence is remedied several thousand years later with the completion of the Tabernacle in the last two chapters of the Book of Exodus. The opening narrative of Genesis and the closing narrative of Exodus are linked by extensive verbal parallels, which indicate that Gen. 1:1–2:4 and Exod. 39–40 are the bookends of one long story that reaches its culmination in Exod. 40.

The world that God created in Gen. 1, then, was deliberately imperfect. It was “good”—and parts of it were “very good” (as Genesis 1 states several times)—just not perfect. God seems to have regarded Godself as free to desist from bringing creation to its ultimate goal, and it was the task of the Israelites to complete the work. Significantly, the deficiency is made right not by the gods who build the divine palace in other ancient Near Eastern myths, but by human beings.

In light of the story of Zelophehad's daughters, it becomes clear that what is true of the world that God created is also true of the law God gave Moses: God's handiwork wants improvement, and the expectation of the Torah is that the Israelites will provide it. This idea is not only present in the Bible. It is also central to Kabbalah. Especially in the teachings of one of the greatest Kabbalists, Isaac Luria (1534–1572), Jews are responsible to help God improve the world, and they do so by observing the mitzvot or commandments. Luria calls improvements generated by observing commandments *tikkun*.

We can restate the message of the story from today's parashah in Lurianic terms: The original law needs *tikkun*, as does the original cosmos. Enacting that *tikkun* is the role of the people Israel—today, no less than in Moses's own time. This classically Kabbalistic, and also classically Conservative, idea was well phrased by Abraham Joshua Heschel in his book *God in Search of Man*: “There is a partnership of God and Israel in regard to both the world and the Torah: He created the earth and we till the soil; He gave us the text and we refine and complete it. ‘The Holy One, blessed be He, gave the Torah unto Israel like wheat from which to derive fine flour, or like flax from which to make a garment’ [quoting Midrash Tanna devei Eliyahu Zuta 2:1]” (274). This week, as we read about Zelophehad's daughters, is an ideal time to commit ourselves anew to this partnership, and to the responsibilities it entails.