

The Meaning of Repetition, Repetition

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When it comes to reading the Tanakh, much is lost in translation, so even a bit of knowledge of Biblical Hebrew can go a long way. Here is one grammatical insight into this week's parashah, Parashat Re'eh.

According to Deuteronomy 14:22, Israelite farmers must tithe the produce of their field שנה שנה, *shanah shanah*, which at first glance means "year, year." Later in the parashah, Deuteronomy 15:20, we are told that firstborn animals shall be eaten at God's chosen place שנה בשנה, *shanah veshanah*, which apparently means "a year in a year." What does the repetition mean in these two verses?

In Biblical Hebrew, repetition conveys a sense of plurality often translated as "every," "each," or "any." Joseph resisted the sexual advances of Potiphar's wife יום יום, *yom yom*, "every day" (Genesis 39:10). Samson awoke from his sleep thinking he would again break free from Delilah as he had done כפעם בפעם, *kefa'am befa'am*, "each time" (Judges 16:20). We are told that איש איש, *ish ish*, "any man" who curses his parents shall be put to death (Leviticus 20:19).

Returning to our parashah, what do the phrases שנה שנה, *shanah shanah*, and שנה בשנה, *shanah veshanah* convey? They mean the Israelites were supposed to visit God's place "every year." This phrase has a similar meaning to לדר דר, *ledor dor*, in Exodus 3:15, in which God reveals his name to Moses "for every generation." As the years and generations pass, God is still waiting to be served.

If we look closely, sometimes we find syllables repeating themselves within a single word. This has a slightly different nuance. Instead of meaning "every," "each," or "any," this type of repetition occurs when a great plurality is to be imagined. The תל-תל-ים, *taltallim*, "locks of hair" in Song of Songs 5:11 convey a full head of hair with bountiful locks; קל-קל-ות, *akalkallot*, "twisted" in Judges 5:6 suggests a road

with frequent turns; עפ-עפ-י, *af'appay*, "my eyelids" in Psalm 132:4 connotes blinking repeatedly; the name דר-דר, *dardar*, "thistle" of Genesis 3:18 warns of its many thorns; and the גל-גל-יו, *galgillav*, chariot "wheels" in Isaiah 5:28 implies spinning round and round.

With this knowledge we can better understand a noun in the second half of the parashah (Deuteronomy 14:9):

אֶת־זֶה תֹאכְלוּ מִכָּל אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם כָּל אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ סַנְפִיר וְקִשְׁקֶשֶׁת
תֹאכְלוּ:

This you all shall eat from everything in the water:
everything that has fins and **scales** you all shall eat.

Whereas the plurality of שנה שנה, *shanah shanah*, means "every year," the repetition of קש-קש in קשקשת, *kasketet*, conveys the hundreds, if not thousands of individual scales on each fish. The repetitive form suggests abundance.

Looking beyond the parashah, repetition can be found in some of the most well-known verses in the Tanakh. For example, the angels surrounding God are described in Isaiah as follows:

וְקָרָא זֶה אֶל־זֶה וְאָמַר קָדוֹשׁ קָדוֹשׁ קָדוֹשׁ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת מְלֵא
כָּל־הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹדוֹ:

And each one called to another "*kadosh kadosh kadosh*" is the Lord of Hosts, his honor fills the entire world! (Isa. 6:3)

What does *kadosh kadosh kadosh* mean? Most translations have something like "holy, holy, holy!" but our approach adds new meaning to the repetition, rendering it "holy in every way" or "infinitely holy." This happens to be the understanding of the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, which adds that God is "holy" in the heavens, "holy" on the earth, and "holy" for all eternity. God is holy in every conceivable way.

In next week's parashah we will read that judges must be fair and righteous:

צֶדֶק צֶדֶק תִּרְדֹּף לְמַעַן תַּחֲיֶה וְיִרְשַׁת אֶת-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-יְהוָה
אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לָךְ:

Pursue *tzedek tzedek* so that you may live and possess the land which the Lord your God is giving you (Deut. 16:20)

What does *tzedek tzedek* mean? Some translations have “justice, justice,” but our approach suggests “every type of justice.” Justice for the rich and the poor. Justice for your friend and your foe. As it turns out, this is the approach of the King James Bible, which translates *tzedek tzedek* as “that which is *altogether* just.” The way to say “altogether” in Biblical Hebrew is to repeat.

Repetition is so uncommon in the English language it is underlined in red in Microsoft Word. This is not the case in Biblical Hebrew. As we have seen, some of the most familiar and influential verses contain repetition, and our approach can be applied to each and every one. All you have to do is repeat, repeat.

Lessons of Idolatry

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Parashat Re'eh looks forward to the entry of the Israelites into the Land. While there is excitement and anticipation that the Israelites will become a settled nation, the Torah expresses deep concern with regard to the native peoples and idolatrous practices. Deuteronomy emphatically declares,

You will utterly destroy all the places where the nations you will dispossess served their gods, upon the high mountains and the hills, and under every leafy tree. Tear down their altars, destroy their monuments and burn their devotional sites with fire. Cut down the graven images of their gods, and destroy their names. You will not do likewise to the Lord your God. (12:2–4)

This chilling legislation is historically bound, and must be understood within the biblical context. As a young nation still insecure in its path, Israel is fragile. God fears that the practices of the native peoples will lure the Israelites into idolatry. And so, by wiping out the devotional sites of the Canaanites, they express their loyalty and devotion to the Israelite God. Yet, is there more that can be gleaned from this understandable but disconcerting command?

The classic medieval commentator Rashi shares two interesting insights sparked by [Deuteronomy 12:4](#), “You will not do likewise to the Lord your God.” He writes, “It is a prohibition addressed to one who would blot out the name of God from any sacred writings or would pull out a stone from the altar . . . Another possible meaning is that you should not behave like the native peoples so that your sins would cause the sanctuary of your ancestors to be laid waste” (*Commentary on [Deuteronomy 12:4](#)*).

Far from rooting the verse in its literal context, Rashi chooses a midrashic route so as to make this text more relevant to his contemporary audience. He teases out two central messages for us. First, the legislation of Deuteronomy 12:2 to 3 commands the Israelites to blot out of the names of the gods that were being worshipped by the Canaanites. Clearly, one should “not do likewise to the Lord.” God’s Name in the Hebrew language is sacred. And so one must respect the Divine Name so as to draw a clear distinction between the way we treat our God and the way we are commanded to treat idolaters and their gods. Second, Rashi employs an ethical and moral spin in understanding our verses. The Israelites must act ethically. Violation of the commandments leads not only to one’s own depravity, but also carries with it the potential to destroy God’s sanctuary. Rashi’s brilliant and timeless insights allow us to embrace a most troubling passage of Torah and find the relevance that resonates with our modern souls and ethical Jewish living.

This piece was published originally in 2014.