דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

"Like Tefillin Straps, Roads"

Dr. Yitzhak Lewis, Adjunct Instructor, JTS

הַלְבִּישִׁינִי אִמָּא כְּשֵׁרָה [...]
וְעִם שַׁחֲרִית הוֹבִילִינִי אֱלֵי עָמָל.
עוֹטָפָה אַרְצִי אוֹר כַּטַּלִּית
בָּתִּים נִצָּבוּ כַּטוֹטָפוֹת.
וְכִרְצוּעוֹת-תְּפִלִּין גּוֹלְשִׁים כְּבִישִׁים
סָלְלוּ כַּפַּיִם. [...]
וּבַבּוֹרְאִים—בְּנֵךְ אַבְרָהָם,
פַּיְטָן סוֹלֵל בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל.

Dress me, kosher mother [. . .]
And with *Shaharit*, lead me to labor.
My land is wrapped in light as a tallit
Houses stand like phylacteries
And like tefillin straps, roads ride on that
hands have paved. [. . .]
And among the builders, your son Abraham
A poet-paver of Israel.

—From "Labor," (1927) by Avraham Shlonsky, trans. Y. Lewis

This week's haftarah is heavy on the themes of consolation and redemption. A fitting tone for the Shabbat after Tishah Be'av, the fortieth chapter of Isaiah opens with the call "be comforted, be comforted, my people." Given its implications for Jewish national redemption, it is not surprising that this chapter has had extensive allusive presence in modern Hebrew literature. H. N. Bialik's famous pronouncement of disillusionment with the political stamina of his folk, "indeed the people are as hay," is taken from verse 7. The title of one of S. Y. Agnon's most prominent works, "And the Crooked Shall Become Straight," is from verse 4.

The image of rolling out redemption as an infrastructure project—paving highways through the desert, flattening mountains and raising landfills—is invoked in verses 3–4 of our haftarah as divine fiat.

A voice rings out:
"Clear in the desert
A road for the Lord!
Level in the wilderness
A highway for our God!
Let every valley be raised,
Every hill and mount made low.
Let the rugged ground become level
And the ridges become a plain."

In the poem quoted above, essayist and poet Avraham Shlonsky (1900–1973) draws upon this image of infrastructure as redemption. Displacing divine fiat with human labor, he alludes to the divine redemption of Isaiah 40 through the actions of a day laborer in 1920s Palestine. In the poem, the manual labor of paving roads and building houses takes on a theological significance of sanctifying the Land, while the religious symbols of tallit and tefillin become metaphors for infrastructure.

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Shabbat Nahamu שבת נחמו

Ve'ahavta: A Pedagogy for Thriving

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What teachings of Judaism are helping you thrive in today's world? How can you better keep these teachings in front of you at all times? And how can we help our children find in Judaism that which helps them thrive?

These are the questions that we think about as Jewish educators today. It's good to know that these same educational concerns have been with Jews from the beginning. In this week's parashah, we once again read (a version of) the Ten Commandments. God instructs Moses to teach them to the Jewish people so that "you may thrive and that it may go well with you, and that you may long endure in the land you are to possess" (Deut. 5:30).

The learning of Judaism is meant to help us thrive as people in our daily lives. Only through that process will the Jewish people and Judaism survive. Yet, too much of today's Jewish education reverses the equation: It has become more concerned with continuity and survival than with the relevance and meaningfulness of Jewish values, stories, and practices for contemporary life. It sets forth a pre-ordained curriculum, teaches by rote, and expects students to learn just because someone (God, the Rabbis, the teacher) said so. It has forgotten how to construct learning experiences that enable children (and adults), of their own volition, to "take to heart these instructions" (Deut. 6:6) that God has set forth.

So, what pedagogies does the Torah offer us for educating our children so that they take to heart these instructions for living and can thus thrive in today's world? Here we turn to one of the most famous parts of the parashah—the first paragraph of the Shema, the *ve'ahavta*:

> Impress [pierce] them upon your children. Recite them [speak with one another] when you stay at home and when you are

> away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign upon your hand and let them serve as a symbol between your eyes. Inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and your gates. (Deut. 6:7–9)

In the world-renowned early childhood centers of Reggio Emilia (from which many Jewish schools have begun to learn), teachers are attuned to following the lead of the children in designing "emergent curricula" for them. If one day the students encounter the awesomeness (for example) of worms and snails that live underground in the backyard of their school, then the "curriculum" for the next few days may involve exploring the life under the dirt. Yet teachers also create "provocations" that aim to elicit a sharp response from the children to guide their intellectual, social, and emotional development. Thus, teachers may provide students with a terrarium and ask them to research what they would need to build the worms an indoor home. Or, conversely, in response to the children's wish to bring the worms into the classroom, the teacher may simply ask, "How do you think the worms will feel?"

In this last example of a provocation, we can imagine the children talking about whether it's right to take worms out of the ground, or perhaps about the benefits to worms of being in a protected environment. Here the teacher may also join the conversation, inquiring to better understand the experience of the learners and to help them deepen their own self-reflection and illuminate the ways Judaism can offer insights. Our exemplary teacher may talk about a Jewish scholar named Heschel, who, in addition to walking with MLK, taught us the importance of responding ethically to experiences of awe. Imagine the students, throughout the year, asking themselves, "What would Heschel have done?" Internalizing the learning means having it become a regular part of the students' everyday conversations.

While offering this rich pedagogy of experiential education, the Torah asks us to consider another way learners can and should experience Judaism so as to thrive. Sometimes we can only take something to heart by doing it repeatedly without first understanding or desiring it. We see this all the time in education, again particularly (but not solely) in early childhood education. If children are to freely discover and express themselves, they also need structures that bracket and transition the spaces and times of their learning. Thus, their days are bound by rituals—opening and closing circles, cleanup time, celebrations—that bind them together as a group and reinforce the day's learning and the values of the community.

Moreover, there are practices and values best learned through the doing—*na'aseh venishma*. Instructing the students to engage in daily tzedakah may seem forced and strange at first. But they come to value and understand the "commanded" practice of giving to others in need as a way of enriching their own lives by becoming responsible people. We also know from spiritual education that you cannot just hear how to live, for example, a life of gratitude. To live gratefully, you must bind your days with ritual practices—such as the recitation of *Modeh Ani* every morning—so that you come to see the world through a Jewish lens of gratitude, as if you have "a symbol between your eyes," which alters your perceptions and in turn your choices and actions.

Last, we all recognize that no matter how much we have taken these teachings to heart, we will falter and forget. We need reminders, especially at those times when we enter and leave the different physical and cultural spaces that demarcate our contemporary lives. Judaism is not the only source of values that our children will encounter in their lives. Even as adults, every day we are influenced by other ideas, and our desires are provoked by the advertisements and temptations in which we are daily immersed. We need reminders of that which we have taken to heart. Imagine if on the doorposts and gates of your life—every place and every time you move across a cultural threshold from one "space" to another—you were able to touch an inscription that brought you back to those valued Jewish teachings that have enabled you to thrive in the contemporary world. What would you inscribe?

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