

Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF



Speaking to God, Speaking to People

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Adonai, open my lips that my mouth may speak your praise. (Psalms 51:17)

My God, keep my tongue from evil and my lips from deceit. (BT Berakhot 17a, based on Psalms 34:14)

At different stages of my life prayer has been a challenge, but I have found it meaningful to think not just about each individual prayer but how the structure of the service helps us experience different facets of prayer.

One example that I love is in the lines immediately before and after the *Amidah*. Before we begin the *Amidah* we say, “Adonai, open my lips that my mouth may speak your praise.” I understand this to mean that before we begin the most important prayer in our service we are asking God for the *ability to simply pray*. It is as if our ancestors who wrote this prayer left us a clue that it wasn't always so easy for them to pray either. Sometimes it is hard to focus. Sometimes our emotional state makes prayer difficult. Prior to prayer we ask for the ability to express ourselves before God. We assume (or at least I do) that it must have been much easier for our ancestors, but these few words make me reconsider that conjecture, since they have been part of our siddur for many centuries.

At the end of the *Amidah* we say, “My God, keep my tongue from evil and my lips from deceit.” Note that both the opening sentence and the concluding paragraph focus on our lips: we have just spent a few minutes speaking to God, and now, as we imagine ourselves leaving God's presence, we think about how we speak to others. This is what I love best about Judaism—the constant reminder that a life of piety devoid of commitment to treating human beings in a *menschlichkeit* manner is meaningless. Our prayers are only sanctified if the experience leaves us thinking not only about how we speak to God, but also about how we speak to other human beings.



Toledot 5778

תולדות תשע"ח



A Family of Covenant

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The stories of Genesis are presented as family portraits, but simultaneously they describe the origins of a religious civilization. How did the people of Israel acquire and maintain its distinctive religious mission? Genesis offers not only a window into Israel's past, but a blueprint for its future. Implicit is an invitation to contribute to this unfolding narrative, attaching the threads of our lives to the tapestry woven by our ancestors.

Viewing one's story within the scope of Israel's past and future has significant repercussions. Even the most personal decision—the choice of whom to marry—becomes framed in covenantal terms: Will this marriage maintain the family's distinct religious identity, or instead lead it to blend into the surrounding culture? This question plays a tense and tragic role within the first families and drives the central drama of Toledot.

Last week, Abraham demanded that his servant swear “that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, but will go to the land of my birth and get a wife for my son Isaac” (Gen. 24:3–4). In our portion Isaac and Rebecca's first son Esau makes his own marital arrangements, taking Hittite wives who “were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebecca” (26:35). This brief passage is the catalyst for the painful narrative that unfolds in chapter 27. The marriage theme resumes when Jacob is sent off to find a wife who is not from the surrounding nations (27:46). The contest between Jacob and Esau for their father's blessing is an episode within the larger drama of whether or not they will form families dedicated to worshipping the God of Abraham.

The insistence in Genesis that the ancestors not intermarry with the local population becomes even more explicit with the story of Dina and Shekhem.

Skipping the most disturbing material—the rape and its bloody aftermath—the meta-question is: Will Jacob’s children intermarry with the local population, or act to preserve their distinct family identity? Hamor proposes this quite clearly: “Intermarry with us: give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves. You will dwell among us, and the land will be open before you” (34:9–10). It is clear to the people of Shekhem that their larger clan will absorb the newcomers. Intermarriage is both the condition and mechanism for assimilation.

Deuteronomy anticipates the desire to intermarry with the local population after entering Canaan. Inverting the offer of Hamor, God commands, “do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods” (7:3–4). This prediction is fulfilled when King Solomon marries women from many nations, and they “[turn] his heart” away from the God of Israel (1 Kings 11:1–3). The book of Ezra places the policy of endogamy at the center of its plan for the restoration of Israel and the rebuilding of its temple (Chapters 9–10).

From the start to the finish, the Hebrew Bible is concerned with intermarriage, but not from any sense of national superiority. Indeed, the Torah emphasizes that Israel is “the least of the peoples” (Deut. 7:7). It is all about the Covenant—will this little people maintain its distinctive religious culture, exclusively worshipping the God of their ancestors, or will they merge with the larger population that surrounds them, relinquishing their distinctive faith and identity? The Torah commands Israel to dwell apart—and thereby to bring blessing to all families on earth (Gen. 12:3; 28:14).

Despite this clear policy there is also a counterpoint—the successful integration of outsiders into the family and faith of Israel. The most important of these is Ruth, the Moabite woman who marries an Israelite not once, but twice. When her first husband dies early, Ruth does something remarkable—she pledges allegiance to her mother-in-law Naomi, to Naomi’s people, and to their God (Ruth 1:16–17). This moving story is read as a conversion narrative; it leads Ruth back to Naomi’s homeland, and to a second marriage to Boaz. No longer considered an intermarriage, their union produces the grandfather of King David, founder of Israel’s greatest dynasty.

The Talmud builds upon the Torah’s insistence on in-marriage. Rabbi Shimon b. Yochai explains that the concern is that intermarriage will lead

children and grandchildren away from Jewish identity (BT Avodah Zarah 36b). This comprehensive ban on intermarriage has been normative throughout Jewish history. It has been the cornerstone for the survival of Judaism as a distinctive religious civilization despite our settlement as a religious minority around the world. Even Jews who are ambivalent about rabbinic authority over their personal life may concede that this policy has allowed Jews and Judaism to survive in diverse settings and circumstances.

While the Rabbis reinforced the Torah’s insistence on in-marriage, they also developed a mechanism that would allow the best of both worlds—for Jews to marry wonderful people from other religious backgrounds while maintaining the distinctive religious civilization that had sustained them for over three millennia. That mechanism was conversion. The Torah commands Israel to “love the proselyte” (Deut. 10:19), and this remains one of the great obligations of our day. When non-Jews inquire about Judaism, they should be encouraged in their interest. If they commit to join the covenant of Israel, then they are to be welcomed with great honor.

Many of our most knowledgeable and committed Jews have entered the covenant in this way, strengthening the faith of their families and the entire household of Israel. Yet today a rising chorus calls for a new “post-Jewish” identity that will reframe Judaism as a component of spiritual life, rather than as a covenant with distinctive beliefs and practices. This is nothing new—individuals have always blended identities and disappeared from Israel. But three millennia of sacred texts have taught Jews to maintain a distinct religious identity, even while affirming the dignity of all people and respecting other spiritual expressions.

The subject of intermarriage is complicated and often painful. Many Jews intermarry, even if their Judaism is a precious part of their identity. Many non-Jews support the Jewish identity of their spouse and children, even while declining to become Jewish. These realities deserve respectful and kind responses. Yet the Torah’s insistence that its distinctive faith begins and is transmitted in the family is a norm that has defined and sustained the Jewish people since our origins with Abraham. Though unpopular in an open society, in-marriage remains an essential ingredient for the continuation of Judaism and the Jewish people. Only if we maintain our distinct identity and faith can we fulfill the mandate of our ancient covenant—to be a source of blessing to the entire world.

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