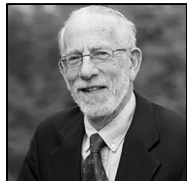


Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF



What's the Masorah for?

Dr. David Marcus, Professor of Bible and Masorah,
JTS

The Masorah of the Former Prophets in the Leningrad Codex (Vol. 1: Joshua) by David Marcus (Gorgias Press, 2017)

The Masorah reflects the combined efforts of thousands of scribes known as Masoretes, working over hundreds of years, to establish a uniform and fixed version of the Hebrew Bible in the 6th-10th centuries CE. In order to ensure that the text they established would be transmitted correctly, the Masoretes counted every word, made copious lists, and wrote thousands of notes on the margins of the manuscripts.

I have transcribed, translated, and annotated some ten thousand of these notes in my multi-volume work, the first volume of which has just recently been published. This work represents the first time that these Masorah notes are being presented to the English-speaking public.

Many people ask why contemporary readers of the Bible would want to study the Masoretic notes. I think these are the most significant three benefits:

- Because the Masoretic notes list the exact number of occurrences of forms and phrases, checking out these other occurrences gets one familiarity with other parts of the Bible. So, looking at the Masoretic notes helps **deepen our knowledge of the Bible**.
- Many Masoretic notes touch upon details of Hebrew grammar whether it be phonology (the writing of words with or without a *vav* or *yod*); morphology (how a noun or verb is formed); or syntax (how nouns or verbs act in a sentence), so perusing the Masoretic notes helps **reinforce our understanding of Hebrew grammar**.
- Finally, the *raison d'être* of the Masoretes was preserving a text held to be so sacred that, even when it was thought to be incorrect, it was not changed. Our engagement with the Masorah, with its appreciation for the smallest details in the text, can inspire us to **connect in a profoundly spiritual way** with that sacred text.

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Terumah 5778

תרומה תשע"ח



An Edifice Complex for Our Time

Marc Gary, Executive Vice Chancellor and Chief
Operating Officer, JTS

Several years ago, while traveling far from home, I found myself in an affluent suburban community on Shabbat. I decided to attend the local Conservative synagogue in the morning and brought along a friend who I was visiting. The synagogue was newly constructed and architecturally magnificent with a ski-slope ceiling, beautiful stained glass windows, and much ornamentation in gold and silver. The ark was stunning, with a brightly colored tapestry *parokhet* above which hung a modernistic *ner tamid* (eternal light). The rabbi stood at a hand-carved lectern and delivered his sermon, which that week happened to be on Parashat Ki Tissa and the lessons of the Golden Calf. As the rabbi reached the climax of his sermon, his voice rose into a crescendo and he declared: "And the Golden Calf lives today!" At which point, my friend leaned over and whispered to me, "Yes, and I think we are sitting in it."

We Jews have an odd ambivalence toward the construction of sacred spaces. It is an ambivalence that is not generally shared by our Christian neighbors. No trip to a European country would be complete without visits to the magnificent Catholic and Protestant cathedrals of France, Italy, or Germany. Nor could one imagine a tour of Russia that would exclude the beautifully onion-domed Orthodox churches. Closer to home, such breathtaking structures as St. Patrick's Cathedral or the Cathedral of St. John the Divine beckon to New Yorkers as they rush by to their next business meeting. Somehow the phrase "no expense has been spared" does not begin to capture the resources and craftsmanship contributed to make these buildings truly "cathedrals of the Divine" for the purpose of inspiring awe in every worshipper who enters.

Judaism, at least as reflected in Jewish life from the Middle Ages to the present, does not seem to share this tradition. To be sure, there have been some magnificent synagogues built, such as the Great Synagogue in Budapest. But in general Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel accurately captured the traditional Jewish view of the construction of sacred spaces when he wrote: "While others

carried their piety, fervor, faith into magnificent songs of architecture, our ancestors had neither the skill nor the material necessary to produce comparable structures. . . . But there were Jews who knew how to lay bricks in the soul, to rear holiness made of simple deeds, of study and prayer, of care, of fear and love. They knew how to pattern and raise a pyramid that no one could see but God” (*The Earth is the Lord’s*,14–15).

This week’s parashah, Terumah, seems to undercut this traditional Jewish view. Here, we read of the construction of the tabernacle with all its opulence. The Israelites are instructed to bring gifts of gold, silver, and copper, fine linen, dolphin skins, and acacia wood (Exod. 25: 3–5). The ark is to be made of acacia wood, overlaid with pure gold inside and out with a gold molding around it (Exod. 25:10–11). The two cherubim should also be made of gold, as should the ritual objects such as the bowls, ladles, jars, and jugs for the offering of libations (Exod. 18, 29). The instructions go on and on, in fine detail, specifying the use of regal-colored yarn, fine twisted linen, silver, and much gold and acacia wood.

So from where does the Jewish ambivalence—the so-called “Jewish edifice complex”—derive? Perhaps we can trace its roots to a rabbinic debate over chronology: which came first—God’s instructions to build the Tabernacle or the incident of the Golden Calf? The Torah, of course, puts the Tabernacle first (Parashat Terumah comes two weeks before Parashat Ki Tissa this year), but for Rashi and other biblical commentators, that sequence is not dispositive of the correct chronology. Rashi (on Exod. 31:18) states: “There is no chronological order in the Torah; the story of the Golden Calf took place many days before the command to make the Tabernacle.”

What were Rashi and the other commentators who hold the same view trying to teach by asserting that the story of the Golden Calf preceded the instruction to build the Tabernacle? At bottom, the lesson of the Golden Calf lies in the realization that humans are unable to grasp abstract monotheism; they need a tangible representation of God’s presence. Without direction, they will create their own representations and, forgetting what God’s presence truly means in this world, they will distort God’s image.

A poetic midrash from Shemot Rabbah (33:3) suggests that after the Golden Calf episode, the people of Israel were estranged from God and as a result they fell into a deep sleep of despair. But then God relents and knocks on Israel’s door to awaken them. In the words of our parashah, he says to them “Bring Me gifts” and “Make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them” (Exod. 25: 2, 8).

The building of sanctuaries, synagogues, and other sacred spaces, then, is understood not as a structural fetish, but rather as a God-ordained means for people to sense God’s immanence, to understand that God dwells among us, that we are not estranged from God but in intimate contact with the divine. The challenge is ensuring that our structures—whether modest or grand—remind us of the presence of God.

Our Rabbis taught that when Moses threw down the tablets of the Ten Commandments in anger upon seeing the Golden Calf, the tablets were broken but their letters remained suspended in space (BT Pesachim 87b). Or in Rabbi Heschel’s phrase: “The stone is broken, but the Words are alive” (*The Earth is the Lord’s*,14). That is our challenge as Jewish builders: to ensure that our new sacred spaces are places where the words of Torah are kept alive.

Here at JTS we are building a new campus for the 21st century. We have retained famous architects and they have designed a stunning building that will be completed in the summer of 2019. To build it, many stones will be broken, but the question is: will the new structure aid us in our overarching mission of keeping the words of Torah alive?

With that challenging question in mind, we are building a new “library of the Jewish experience,” so that the words of Torah contained in our thousands of rare manuscripts and other treasures are more readily accessible to scholars, students, and interested members of our community. We are building a new auditorium and performance space because we know that words of Torah cannot be confined to a page but must live in music, in the dramatic arts, and in the spoken word. We are building a new residence hall because we know that words of Torah live most meaningfully within a community that observes sacred time, learns together, and regularly engages in deeds of lovingkindness. And we are building a structure that meets high environmental standards and reflects other Jewish values, including advanced safety protocols and good wages for construction workers; an inclusive and diverse work force; and maximum accessibility for disabled members of our community

In these ways and numerous others, we are building a new JTS so that God “may dwell among us” where it is most important: in our hearts and in our deeds.

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