

## Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF



### God, Judaism, and Divine Law

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*What's Divine about Divine Law?: Early Perspectives* by Christine Hayes (Princeton University Press, 2015).

We all know that divine law is supposed to be true, unchangeable, universal, and make sense . . . right? Wrong. In fact, for the Rabbis, precisely the opposite may be the case. As Christine Hayes argues in her book *What's Divine about Divine Law*, many of our preconceptions about what makes Jewish divine law “godly” are, in fact, incorrect.

Hayes sketches two opposing paradigms of divine law. The first, stemming from the Greek philosophic tradition, assumes that divine law must be immutable, rational, and universal. By contrast, divine law in the Hebrew Bible is often changed, devoid of rationality, and formulated particularly for a specific community. After exploring a number Second Temple period and early Christian approaches to locating the divinity of the Pentateuch's laws, Hayes moves to the rabbinic period where we find a clash between biblical and Greco-Roman approaches. As inheritors and interpreters of the Mosaic tradition who lived within the Greco-Roman world, the Rabbis grappled with these two contradictory conceptions of law and often adopted an approach that flies in the face of philosophic expectations for divine law.

Like the Rabbis, we are also the inheritors of both the biblical and Greco-Roman philosophic traditions. Yet, despite this dual inheritance, we often marginalize or reject biblical conceptions of God and law. Hayes's work forces us to actively confront the Greek philosophic assumptions behind many of our beliefs. A must-read for anyone with an interest in theology and halakhah, *What's Divine about Divine Law* provides a clear set of paradigms for thinking about what Jewish law is and what it should be.

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**Shabbat Parah 5778**  
Vayak-hel Pekudei

שבת פרה תשע"ח  
ויקהל פקודי



### The Give and Take of Strength

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Rituals of closure are common in both the secular and religious realms. An example of the first is the sounding of retreat and the lowering of the flag marking the end of the official duty day on military installations. An instance of the second is the *siyyum*, a liturgical ritual and festive meal that is occasioned by the completion of the study of a Talmudic tractate. Closure rituals relate not only to the past but to the future as well. On the one hand, the temporal demarcation of a past event facilitates the emergence of its distinct identity, internal coherence, and significance, thereby providing insight, understanding, and, at times, a sense of accomplishment. At the same time, by declaring an end, a closure ritual creates space in which one can—and must—begin anew; the past is to be neither prison nor refuge.

Immediately after the final verse of Shemot, the book of Exodus, is chanted this coming Shabbat we will call out to the reader, “*Hazak, hazak, venit-hazek*”, which might be translated as, “Be strong, be strong, and we will take strength from you.” (For some reason, it has not become the custom to modify the above declaration and use the gender appropriate “*hizki, hizki*” when a woman is reading the Torah.) The “*hazak*” declaration is a closure ritual, a performative parallel to the graphic demarcation in the Torah scroll of Shemot's conclusion by means of four blank lines. It announces that the first part of the national saga has come to a close with the construction and completion of the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle. In that endeavor all of Israel was united in dedication to a common goal; each contribution of resources, talent, and effort was vital, while none was sufficient.

The *Mishkan* was of course of no worth without the presence of its designated occupant: the Shekhinah, the Divine Presence. “For over the Tabernacle the cloud of the Lord rested by day, and fire would appear in [the cloud] by night in view of all the house of Israel in their journeys” (Exod. 40:38). With the advent of the Shekhinah’s presence the inert structure is animated and a new story begins: “The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting” (Lev. 1:1). Shemot’s static image of the *Mishkan* as a place of rest is replaced with Vayikra’s dynamic one: the *Mishkan* is to be a place where God and humanity meet, where God and Moses converse and where Aaron is to enter the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur.

Clearly, a closure ritual is appropriate as we conclude the reading of Shemot. But why choose “*hazak*” as the ritual? Why the need to urge the reader to be strong and to wish strength for ourselves? A moment of completion is a complex one. We may feel sad that the end has come. In addition, in the moment of completion we often allow ourselves to feel the exhaustion that we have denied in the pursuit of closure, rendering us unready and perhaps unwilling to face the next challenge that lies before us.

So too, with the completion of Shemot. The reading ends with a crescendo, and yet it will be followed by the blessing recited at the end of every aliyah. We the listeners are afraid that, as with the seven lean cows who ate the seven fat ones in Pharaoh’s dream, the drama and power of the words we have heard will be swallowed up by the ordinariness of the blessing that follows. We also know that more lies ahead, including the tragic death of Aaron’s sons, (Lev. 10:1–2) which will mar the dedication of the building the construction of which has been described so lovingly in Shemot. Therefore, we need strength. We need to be saved from the depression that accompanies endings and we need strength to face and navigate the stories that will follow.

Yet let us ask further: Why do we not simply declare, “Let us all be strong”? Why single out the reader? A teaching of Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, the mid-20th century author of *Mikhtav Me’eliyahu*, a collection of *mussar* essays, provides enlightenment. As we all know, says Rabbi Dessler, there are takers and givers. It turns out, however, that some

give in order to take and some take in order to give. Suppose that someone agrees to donate a million dollars to a synagogue but then attaches all sorts of conditions to his gift, conditions that serve the needs of his ego but not those of the congregation. This man is giving in order to take; he’s a giving taker. On the other hand, let’s imagine a dedicated doctor who works night and day to spare his patients from illness and pain. One day, he tells his patients that he is suffering from exhaustion and will be taking a week’s vacation. Only a fool or an ingrate would see this as selfishness. This doctor is taking in order to give; he is a taking giver.

So too with us and our Torah reader. She is our Moses, declaring God’s word to the congregation. Reading Torah is a demanding and exacting task, even for those who have years of experience. (Not incidentally, Vayak-hel Pekudei is the second longest of the weekly Torah readings.) The reading is over, the reader is exhausted. We say: you give us inspiration through your chanting of the Torah. We wish you strength, both out of love for you and because we rely on your strength. You can give to us only if we also give to you.

We want our leaders to give us what we need and desire. Too often we are oblivious to their needs and to the limits of their time and energy. They want to give but unless we give too they will ultimately have nothing to give us. Let us make our leaders strong, through love, encouragement, and material assistance, so that we can be strengthened by them.

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