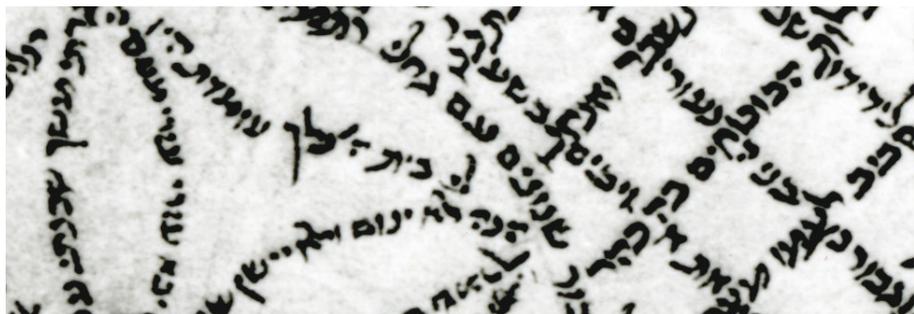


Jews, who habitually ignored the second commandment), preferring to create their “images” with the words of scripture (in their case, the Quran). Here, the Hebrew scribe does the same thing, using the words of his scripture to create a beautiful (and very “Islamic”) “carpet page.”



Now, this is of course evidence of cultural influence—a phenomenon we have seen before. But it is more than that as well, for this Hebrew scribe, along with the Muslim artists he emulates, understands that true beauty is embodied in the words of God. It is the gift of God’s revealed word (as each religion understands it) that is beautiful, so the beauty of the word deserves to be beautified through beautiful and intricate creations that employ the words themselves. If only we understood the importance of this nexus, we would never again create a mundane, unbeautified book! To accomplish this, the student and the scholar need the brilliance of the artist, whose art can enrich all our hearts.

Beha'alotekha 5778

בהעלתך תשע"ח



Body Language

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Jews love words. We love to talk and we love to read. It is telling that we celebrate our holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur, by gathering and reading aloud a 250-page book.

Parashat Beha'alotekha reminds us there is more to religious observance than words. There is profound power in body language—in nonverbal rituals that involve, even mark, the body. The beginning of the parashah describes the ritual the Levites must undergo before they can handle the sacred objects associated with the tabernacle. The ritual involves washing the Levites' bodies and clothes, and full-body shaving (Num. 8:7). Why must the Levites ritually shave their whole bodies before beginning their sacred service? How do we understand the meaning of this “body language”?

This is not the only place in the Bible that presents shaving in a ritual context, although not always full-body shaving. As is currently true, shaving is a ritual associated with mourning practices in the Bible. Today the Jewish custom is *not* to shave during the first 30 days of mourning, which finds Torah support in Deut. 14:1–2. Interestingly, other biblical passages (Amos 8:10, Isaiah 22:12, Jeremiah 16:6, and Job 1:20) suggest that shaving, particularly bald spots on one's head, was a common mourning practice in ancient Israel.

Shaving also can be viewed as a purification rite in the Bible. Once a person who was diagnosed with leprosy is healed, they bathe and shave before being declared clean enough to enter the camp (Lev. 14:8). As Rashi notes (on Num. 8:7), this ritual is strikingly similar to the Levite's rites described in our parashah, suggesting that there is either a commonality in the leper and the Levite or in the purpose of the ritual. Since it is hard to see an obvious connection between a leper and a Levite (unless, of course, the Levite has

leprosy), it seems more likely that ritual shares the common purpose of purification. Once the Levites have bathed and shaved, they are pure enough to handle the sacred cultic objects.

I offer an additional way to understand the ritual of shaving that does not prevent seeing shaving as a mourning practice in some contexts, or as a purification rite in others, but adds another dimension to its ritual potency that applies to the case of the Levites. Shaving may purify the Levites for service, but it also marks a transitional moment in their status. Levites are born Levites, but they are unable to perform the levitical duties until they prepare their bodies ritually to do so. Shaving is a ritual that enables and indicates this shift in their status. In this way, it functions as a transitional ritual that helps an individual move from one state to another.

Similarly, shaving marks a transition in the status of an individual who vows to become a *nazir*. According to the laws found in Num. 6:1–21, a *nazir* is a man or a woman who assumes a sanctified status by adopting priest-like behaviors for a prescribed period of time during which the *nazir* is prohibited from cutting his or her hair. Upon fulfillment of the vow, a *nazir* shaves and offers the hair on the altar along with a sacrifice of well-being. For both the Levite and the *nazir*, shaving is a ritual of transition. Yet, whereas shaving helps transition the Levite into holy service, shaving transitions the *nazir* back into secular life.

These multiple ways of understanding the ritual meaning of shaving—as a mourning, purification, or transitional rite—illustrate how body language is a powerful mode of expression. Body language is both blunt and imprecise. It makes a strong emotional statement and yet is open to interpretation. Naturally, all forms of language are subject to interpretation, but I argue that body language has an intentional flexibility and is more willing to contain multiple meanings than written or spoken language. Unlike verbal language, body language does not try to spell things out. It intends to be experienced and witnessed more than to be understood. Even more remarkable is that those who experience body language and those who witness it can have very different reactions to it, though both reactions are intended. This intentional ambiguity is central to its potency. Body language can be cathartic to those who “speak” it while disturbing to those who “read” it. I imagine that the shorn Levite might have felt clean and vulnerable, while an observer of his hairless body might have felt shock or even disgust.

Jews are people of the book, but we are also people of the body. The ritual of shaving is just one example of embodied practice. Circumcision may be the most obvious other example. But there is also the mikveh—the ritual bath in which Jews immerse their bodies—as well as moments of body choreography such as bending our knees when we recite certain prayers. And of course there are ritual meals. In fact, eating may be Jews’ most favorite form of body language.

I would like to see more embodied Jewish practice—more rituals that involve the body, maybe even temporarily mark the body. I certainly am not advocating that full body shaving become a standard ritual practice, though hair manipulation is an easy and powerful way to mark transitions since it usually grows back. I am thinking more along the lines of the Yemenite marriage practice of henna tattoos.

In general, I am advocating finding ways to use our bodies more in ritual Jewish life. I love coming to shul on Yom Kippur and reading together that 250-page book. I love listening to and reciting the ancient words of my tradition, but my most favorite moment of Yom Kippur, the moment that always brings me to tears, is the moment when I drop full-body to the ground during the *Aleinu* prayer, signaling my acceptance of God’s regal power. In this moment, my body speaks more for me than my mouth ever could.

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Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF

The Beauty of the Word

The Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary

Take a look at these pages from a volume in our collection (Manuscript L58) that includes the Pentateuch and Psalms, along with Masoretic notes and a grammatical introduction. It will not surprise you to learn that it was written in Yemen in 1325. Locating the manuscript in this time and place doesn’t surprise, because, stylistically speaking, it is so similar to Islamic art of the same period. As you may know, Muslims overwhelmingly avoided representation of living creatures in their art (the same cannot be said of