

Seeking a Torah We Can Lift Kol Nidre 5776

His role as the leader of the children of Israel draws to a close. Moses rises, stands before the congregation and calls them to attention, saying: “You stand here this day, all of you, in the presence of Adonai your God—your tribal heads, elders, and officials; every man, woman, and child of Israel; and the stranger in the midst of your camp; from the one who cuts your wood to the one who draws your water—to enter into the covenant of Adonai your God, and the oath that Adonai your God makes for you this day, to establish you as God’s people and to be your God, as promised to you and your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. **And not with you alone** do I make this covenant and this oath, but with each one who stands here among us this day in the presence of Adonai our God, **AND with each one who is not here among us this day.**” [Deuteronomy 29:9-13]

In the address of Moses, the Torah depicts itself as a covenant extending backwards and forwards in time, knitting together past, present, and future generations. It references the ancestors about whom we read in the Torah portions on Rosh Hashanah. Those Torah portions thus initiate a narrative arc that extends through the generation of Moses and Miriam, to King David, and to the Prophets, to the generations of the earliest rabbis who constructed a revitalized Judaism upon the ashes of a destroyed Jerusalem Temple, to medieval Jews of Spain and Yemen, Iraq and Iran, Turkey, North Africa, Italy, and Ashkenaz, down to the Modern era of our grandparents, our parents and us, an era with both triumph and catastrophe etched into its pages.

On this Kol Nidre evening, the last one in which I will address this congregation in the role of Senior Rabbi, I wish to offer reflections on the nature of Torah and on a disposition of learning that seems crucial to me for contemporary Jews who seek an authentic and honest way to embrace their Jewish identity, to stand, as it were, with Moses, along that same narrative arc, all of us, in the presence of Adonai, our God. In that spirit and in the spirit of the soul audit intended for us during the ten days culminating on this Day of Atonement, I pose a question that should be central to the manner by which we measure and map our lives and through which we engage the world. The question: **What is Torah?** What is this concept, this solid core of the tradition around which we Jews identify ourselves?

To some, the question “what is Torah?” would appear as a *klutz kasha*, a silly question because the answer is obvious. The Torah is the first five Biblical

books, written by hand on a parchment scroll wrapped around two wooden polls. Two such scrolls now reside in the portable ark behind me. Or, a little more expansive, the Torah is what we Jews mean by the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Scriptures containing the content of the aforementioned scroll plus the remaining books of the Bible that do not fit on one scroll but have been deemed sacred from time immemorial.

Or, the Torah is all that plus the post-Biblical teachings attributed to the rabbinic sages of our people, teachings found in the compendia of Talmud and collections of midrashim and legal codes and responsa and the commentaries on all of the above. That is, in the narrowest sense, the Torah is the parchment scroll containing the first five Biblical books. But in its widest and more potent sense, Torah is a continuously unfolding process of engagement in an ever expanding library of sacred literature. Thus, the community that stands before Moses is a timeless community that has covenanted itself to an ever-unfolding Torah.

How, then, may one begin to wrap one's mind around such a Torah?

Rabbi Albie Slomowitz serves a small congregation made up entirely of senior citizens; the youngest are in their upper 80's. I recently heard Albie bemoan the practical challenge posed by the ritual of Hagba, when one member of the congregation lifts the Torah up into the air, turns around, and opens it wide enough so that the entire congregation can view three columns or more of the portion for the day. But, as Albie noted, in his congregation where all the Torah scrolls are large and all the congregants are elderly, "**We need a Torah that we can lift.**"

Indeed, we all need a Torah that we can lift? Where is that Torah that we can lift? What is that Torah that we can lift? Where is the disposition that permits us to at least begin the grasping, the bending, the tilting, the unwinding, the locking of wrists, and the turning? We need a Torah we can lift. Regarding the Torah we can lift, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, of blessed memory, once wrote [Introduction to *Torah Min Hashamayim* vol. 2]:

What is the phrase on which the soul of all Israel depends? *Torah Min Hashamayim*. **Torah from Heaven**. There is no Torah apart from heaven. And **there is no heaven apart from the Torah**. Remove heaven from Torah and you have nothing more than verse. Remove Torah from heaven and all you have is sky.

How can *Torah from Heaven* become a Torah we can lift? If the Torah we desire is infused by the heavenly and if that heaven of infusion is to be more than mere sky, how might we dispose ourselves toward the challenge of finding the Torah we can lift? The word I would suggest that best describes the Jewish disposition I would want us to cultivate in relation to the continuously unfolding Torah is ***Hitlamdut***. ***Hitlamdut***, as the Hebrew grammarians among us know, is the reflexive construction of the root *LaMaD* which in its simplest form means to learn and in its common active construction means to teach. Hence *Limud* is “learning;” a *Talmid* is a student; *Talmud Torah* is the study of Torah as in *Talmud Torah K’neged Kulam* – the study of Torah encompasses all the other mitzvot. Thus, ***Hitlamdut*** means self-reflexive learning, the kind of learning where sacred text invades experience and experience teaches sacred text, the kind of learning that yields a Torah well knit to Heaven and a Heaven well knit to Torah, and a Torah we can lift.

As it happens ***Hitlamdut*** comprises the first of ten rubrics of the **Tikkun Middot Project**, a unique and innovative initiative that brings together the Jewish approach to ethics known as Mussar and a Jewish approach to mindfulness practice, terms that will become more clear as we bring forth each of the ten rubrics to the entire CBI community in the months ahead.

Regarding Torah and apropos of the disposition of ***Hitlamdut***, one of my most influential teachers, Rabbi David Hartman, of blessed memory, [*Mishkan HaNefesh* Vol. I, p. 205] once wrote: “Creativity, adequacy, and boldness of spirit were not permitted by God only to those who participated in the founding covenantal moments; rather, they define the ongoing vitality of the eternal covenant between God and God’s human partners in every generation.” Standing with those of the founding covenantal generation thus means, for Rabbi Hartman and for me and, I hope, for all of us, that Jews of each and every generation have the right, the responsibility and the capacity to unfold new Torah. We may not always sense it, but, as “God’s human partners” of the current generation, we can and we may lift up new Torah.

A few months ago, I sent my friend, Rabbi Steve Sager, a description of ***Hitlamdut***. In response, Rabbi Sager reminded me about the two divergent ways in which Abraham is depicted in Midrash with regard to the learning of Torah. Many Midrashim imagine a youthful Abraham who acquires Torah learning and Torah insights. Some of these Midrashim portray the young Abraham as a student in the Yeshivah of Shem and Ever. That is, in these depictions, like every good Jewish boy, little Abe diligently attends school, reads books and earns the requisite

degrees. Other Midrashim, however, imagine an Abraham with no human teacher but rather one who gains his Torah learning from his kishkes, from his experience, and from his keen observation of the natural world. As Rabbi Sager puts it:

All of this is intriguing to me because it is at the heart of what I think is critical: for people to put themselves into the conversation of Jewish tradition, mindful that each one [i.e., each person] is a text to be taken seriously. The general disposition of our people is that "I am not a worthy conversation partner with my ancient texts." But each life experience is a text to be read, to be learned without stifling, self-deprecating judgment. Learning how to converse with our ancient traditions requires that we strike a comfortable, unembarrassed pose. *Hitlam'dut* is a process by which we can leverage what we know [from] (our own experience) into what we would like to know; it is learning prompted by self-reflective empowerment.

“Learning how to converse with our ancient traditions requires that we strike a comfortable, unembarrassed pose. *Hitlam'dut* is a process by which we can leverage what we know [from] (our own experience) into what we would like to know,” says Rabbi Sager. Furthermore and in practice, one becomes a practitioner of *Hitlamdut* by two means [after Rabbi David Jaffee]:

First, we practice *hitlamdut* when we apply what Buddhists call “beginner’s mind” to a text of Torah, when we read the Torah portion of the week, for example, or a midrash or any sacred text for the umpteenth time, but read it with new eyes, with curiosity, with openness, without pre-judgment and with a willingness to allow the text to speak its own wisdom, to permit Heaven to pervade the verses, as it were.

And second: we practice *hitlamdut* when we regard our experiences as sources of Torah. When our children don’t do what we ask them, when we get an award [or a reprimand] at work, when a storm knocks out our electricity for a week, or the diagnosis we receive is hopeful or dismal, the practitioner of *Hitlamdut*, the *Mitlamed*, receives such happenings as learning opportunities, as texts containing insights of Torah.

Let me illustrate the empowering disposition of *hitlamdut* with one life experience, one text of Talmud, and a closing remark.

The life experience: as a teenager, a friend of mine, let's call him Joe, was a champion swimmer who decided to become credentialed as a life guard. To get credentialed, he had to pass a course in life saving, first by learning the techniques from a manual and then by passing a practicum. He studied the manual diligently. Then, the time for the practicum arrived. Joe had to rescue his instructor who would be simulating a drowning man in a pool. Joe dove in, swam to the instructor, and proceeded to apply the techniques he had learned from the book, putting one arm here, another there, turning this way and that. As he moved into position, the instructor suddenly jerked his body and kicked Joe in the head. The kick caused Joe to become disoriented and to let go of the instructor. After a few moments, Joe again tried to grab the instructor in the manner indicated by the book. As he moved into position, one arm here, the other there, the instructor again lurched, this time kicking Joe in the crotch. Now Joe became nauseated ... and angry. When he recovered enough, he managed to pull the instructor to the edge of the pool.

Once out of the pool, Joe confronted the instructor, shouting, "That is **not** the way it is in the book." It was then that the voice of the instructor spoke and words of Torah issued forth as he said: "People do not drown by the book." People do not drown by the book. Indeed, they do not. Nor do they necessarily grow up by the book or grow old by the book or get sick or become wise or foolish, feeble or strong, kind or selfish, loving or hateful, by the book; people often do not experience life by the book. You have got to read and learn the book, but do not expect people to drown by the book.

The text: the Talmud speaks often of an ever unfolding revelation, an ever expanding Torah, a Torah whose authentic teachers are sometimes not the expected sages: In one Talmudic passage, we read a report by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi who said:

Children came to the *Beit Midrash* and said things the like of which had never been said even in the days of Yehoshua bin Nun: *Alef bet* means teach wisdom (Alef bina!). *Gimel Dalet* means support the poor (gomel dal). What is the reason that the leg of the *gimel* extends toward the *dalet*? It is the way of one who supports with kindness (gomel hasadim) to run after the poor (dalim)... [Babylonia Talmud Shabbat 104 b]

The Talmudic report of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi continues on, extending through an entire curriculum of ethical instruction, each teaching cleverly derived from the order of the alef-bet and the shapes and arrangements of the letters. Thus,

we are taught that even children of future generations teach new Torah, Torah derived not only from its stories and from its injunctions but also from the shapes and order of the letters with which it is written.

So “*what is Torah?*” “*Where is the Torah we can lift?*” What is the disposition we require in order to knit Torah to Heaven and Heaven to Torah? I would offer that when we can humbly engage a sacred text without prejudice, even one we have studied many times, even one that bores us to tears, and engage it with the assumption that it has something to teach us, we allow the text to help us become better conduits for holiness, to channel Heaven into Torah. And when, at the same time, we come to regard our lives as authentic sources of Torah, as sacred texts, we empower ourselves to inject Torah into Heaven. Thus, do we join the ancient conversation that lies at the center of the Jewish enterprise. Thus, do we find ourselves with sufficient strength to lift up Torah and stand alongside those who draw water and those who cut wood, the elders and the tribal leaders, women and men, Jews and non-Jews, young and old, before Moses and the sages of every generation in the presence of Adonai, our God.

May it be so!