

## Torah Connects

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I remember as a young boy the time I saw my father sitting *shiva*. On the face of it, this should not be surprising, he was very traditional in Jewish ritual; except, this was something different. He was not mourning a relative or close friend. In fact, he was not mourning a person at all. My father was in the room where his favorite reading chair was – the place I would often find him and be chided not to disturb him. Peeking into the alcove that day, I saw him sitting not in his chair or even on the footstool, but on a thin cushion right on the floor. Always a very elegant man, it was a shock to see him debased. He had not shaved – a sight I never saw even on vacation and his scraggly face probably scared me the most. At night he would get up and eat, but all through the day and for many days thereafter his hours were spent sitting as low as he could on the floor reading, looking more and more like a stranger to me.

I remember finally getting up the courage to ask what was going on – and he explained to me that he was in mourning, not for a person. He was sitting *shiva* for the Torah.

My father loved Torah. He had grown up in an ultra-Orthodox home in northern Israel – Tsfat, the city of mystics. He learned Torah thoroughly as a child and could recite from any section by heart – or so it seemed to me. “It is a tree of life” he would say. Torah was his guide.

It took some time for him to explain to me why he was in mourning for the Torah. As best I recall, he told me, with deep shame, that the synagogue’s youth group had borrowed a Torah scroll for an event. When they returned it, they did not find my father, the rabbi of the synagogue. So they left the Torah scroll with a maintenance worker. He was a new employee who had never seen a Torah before and had no idea what it was. So he abandoned it on the floor near the trash, hoping someone would figure out what it was. When my father found the Torah scroll dirty and on the ground, he was devastated. But, he decided that he would tell no one – he took upon himself the obligation of mourning that should have fallen to the whole community.

When a Torah scroll is dropped – customarily the community, or at least those who witnessed it, undergoes a fast. Moses, when he was at the top of Sinai, fasted for 40 days while the Torah was written. So when a Torah scroll is desecrated, the community commits to a day-time fast –

sunrise to sunset - for 40 days<sup>1</sup>. This helps to atone for the degradation the Torah endured, by reflecting its own creation.

That image of my father's mourning has always stayed with me. It spoke to the ways that Torah connected for him. Torah connected him to the Divine realm, it was holy and required a commitment. It came with consequences. He would always admonish me, even when I was studying for the rabbinate, not to confuse the object with Torah. "That is a Torah scroll" he would say. "It's not Torah." The scroll is an object. A sacred object, to be sure. And we treat it with great respect. But "Torah" itself is more than a scroll. It is ethereal, it is transcendent. Torah represents all of Jewish knowledge, history, morality and dignity. When we rise for the glory of the adorned Torah scroll, or sit in shame if it is abased, we are honoring all that the physical object represents. The holiness it contains.

Torah connects us to the most sacred.

Last week, after Rosh Hashanah services, one of our board members on the bimah who had been given the honor of holding the Torah scroll during the service, told me that she surprised herself. She felt at first awkward sitting with the large scroll in her lap. But she told me that when the time came for me to take it from her, she felt resentment. She felt possessive. In those few minutes she had forged a connection with the Torah scroll, which she was reluctant to sever.

It can be strange to give such honor to a physical object. Usually that is not the Jewish way. Judaism honors time, not space; people, not things. We should fast for the fallen dignity of a homeless person. We should mourn every day at the realities of poverty and addiction and mental illness, at the hopelessness that confronts us far too often. Torah connects us to our compassion and our passion to make things better, to fix what is broken. *Tikkun Olam* in Jewish parlance.

The term *Tikkun Olam*, which we commonly translate as "repairing the world", does not appear in the Torah. Repairing the world was not on the mind of the Israelites on their journey from slavery to freedom. It does, however, occur over 50 times in the Talmud; although there it is better translated as "social benefit," something that is done for the good of all. But the values that make this ideal possible lie in the text of the Torah – our foundational document. *You shall not wrong a stranger, nor oppress him; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt*<sup>2</sup> Torah says.

Torah connects us to our values.

This year, as we celebrate the 160<sup>th</sup> year of Congregation Beth Israel as the founding synagogue in Oregon and the continuing center of Reform Judaism here, we are turning our attention to the center of our Jewish lives: The Torah. Torah, as I said, exists both as a physical object and as an ethereal ideal. You see it with every Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrated on this bimah. When we

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<sup>1</sup> *Tzitz Eliezer* 5:4 (R. Eliezer Yehuda Waldenberg, 1915-2006)

<sup>2</sup> Ex. 22:20

rise and take out the scroll our young people will read from, we first pass the Torah scroll through the hands of grandparents to parents to b'nei mitzvah celebrant – symbolizing the passing of our tradition *L'dor v'dor* - from generation to generation. 13 years ago, when I was installed as Senior Rabbi of this congregation, Rabbi Rose publicly passed the Torah scroll to me – symbolizing the responsibility of being the guardian of Torah for our community. It is a scroll, a physical object – but Torah is also a representation of who we are and what we stand for. We are “the people of the book” – the book which cannot just live locked in the ark – it has to live in our hearts.

But the reality is that a physical object suffers physical losses. These Torah scrolls, symbols of our Jewish identity, suffer from use and from the elements, even in their protected ark. The parchment darkens, the letters fade, the pages of the scroll begin to separate from each other. We have a duty to protect and preserve the physical – while we honor the metaphysical.

As you heard from our President, Glen Levy, on Rosh Hashanah, 5779 will be a year in which we devote our time and resources to having our Torah scrolls repaired. It is a fascinating process, watching the Torah scribes rework and revitalize the words on the page. Torah has been called “black fire on white fire”<sup>3</sup> – the letters on the page, in some sense, leaping from the background and touching our hearts. This is what it means to preserve and protect our physical Torah scrolls. We will restore the letters on the page, so that the fire can touch our hearts for generations to come.

As we prepare for this year of Torah scroll restoration and rededication, it is worthwhile to think about the ways that Torah connects us. I hold an image of how meaningful it can be to hold the Torah scrolls – passing it through the generations during Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, I see how emotional that ceremony is, often to women who weren't allowed to have a bat mitzvah when they were girls. I see how meaningful it is to have their daughters and granddaughters included in the gift of Torah. Torah can connect to what was once denied and is now included. I think about those who on Yom Kippur day, as we will do tomorrow afternoon, take a meditative moment to stand before the open ark. It has become a favorite moment of mine, seeing the faces of those who take advantage of this opportunity to come close to the most sacred place in our sanctuary. The best part for me is seeing their faces glowing after quietly standing with all that the Torah represents. Everyone has their own story of why that experience is meaningful, but I suspect it is because Torah connects us to a lifetime of Jewish learning and encounter. Torah also connects those who choose Judaism or choose to live a Jewish life with their Jewish family. Encountering Torah can renew our commitment, bring a flash of memory from our childhood, or hold a recognition of who no longer stands with us.

Torah connects us to what is and what was and what may yet be.

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<sup>3</sup> Zohar; *Shemot*, Section 2, Page 84a, 226b; *Bemidbar*, Section 3, Page 154b

We engage with Torah through dialogue. I think of the group of our congregants who gather every Shabbat morning to study the week's portion of the Torah. Although the participants ebb and flow, as the rabbinic and lay instructors change as well – and many thanks to our colleague and teacher Rabbi Shelton Donnell, who has joined the instructors' rotation - inspiring us with his love of Torah; although the individuals may change, the task continues. This group of Torah students has been meeting weekly for decades, long before I arrived in Portland. They are fulfilling the dictum of Johanan ben Bag Bag in Pirke Avot, the Ethics of our Ancestors: "הפך בה והפך בה. דכולא בה." *Turn it over and turn it over, for everything is in it.*"<sup>4</sup> Every time we read Torah we learn something new, even if we do it year after year. The text hasn't changed, but we have. We bring something new to words thousands of years old.

Torah connects us to our intellect and to each other as we struggle with G-d and puzzle out new meanings in an ancient text.

Our ancestors saw Torah as a gift – a Divine connection between G-d and a people who strive to be holy. A gift, as I have said, which creates surprise and gratitude. A Talmudic dictum notes that G-d's gift of Torah is a source of joyful celebration for humans *and* for G-d:

R. Zera says: Come and see how the way of human beings differs from the way of the Holy One, blessed be G-d. It is the way of human beings that when a person sells a valuable object [of their own], the seller grieves and the buyer rejoices. The Holy One, blessed be G-d, however, is different. G-d gave the Torah to Israel and rejoiced. For it is said: *For I have given you good instruction; do not abandon my Torah.* (Prov. 4:2)<sup>5</sup>

Torah connects us to the generous Divine Source of All Being.

But we are not alone when we connect with G-d. The gift of Torah is meant to be shared. Tomorrow morning, students from last year's B'nei Mitzvah class will read from the Torah portion *Nitzvaim*, which begins:

אתם נצבים היום כלכם לפני יהוה אלהיכם. . .

You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord your God—your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to waterdrawer— to enter into the covenant of the Lord your God. . .<sup>6</sup>

The Torah teaches that when it comes to community and our relationship and commitment to the eternal, we are all equal – from tribal chieftain to the water-carrier – We are all standing together. We are seen and known before G-d.

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<sup>4</sup> Mishnah *Avot*, 5:22

<sup>5</sup> Talmud, *Berachot* 5a, Soncino edition. Translation of Prov. 4:2 from Mishkan T'filah, a Reform Siddur; Shabbat, (2007) p. 256

<sup>6</sup> Deut. 29:9-11, Translation New JPS

Torah connects us to our community.

And finally, Torah links us through the generations. Not only in the symbolic passing of a scroll *l'dor v'dor*, from one generation to another – but in the passing on of values. I have been thinking lately about creating an Ethical Will for my children, handing over to them not the financial details of my life, but the morality I want to share. Not to dictate their behavior from the Beyond, but to pass on what I have learned from Torah about how to behave. It is a thought experiment perhaps we've all engaged in, or we should. What values do you want to pass to the generation that will follow you? The values I received from my father come from Torah; I hope they will be passed to my children as well.

Torah connects us as its values which live beyond us.

In the course of this year we will be examining the ways that Torah connects us. I invite you to think about and experience your own connection to Torah, or to forge a new one. I invite you to participate in repairing our Torah scrolls and to help preserve them for the next 160 years. Imagine standing with our Torah scribe, as the scroll is rolled out before you. He points to a verse, or a word that holds a particular meaning to you. Perhaps it is a verse from your Bat Mitzvah, perhaps it is a commandment not to wrong the stranger. Your hand is on his as he repairs a faded letter, making the scroll whole again. The Talmud notes that one who writes a Torah scroll is regarded as if they had received it themselves at Sinai. They are like Moses. Rabbi Sheshet adds: “Even if he corrected a single letter, he is regarded as if he had written [the whole Torah.]”<sup>7</sup> This year you will have that opportunity to receive that credit, as if you, yourself, were the Torah scribe creating a new scroll; as if you were Moses, receiving the words at Sinai. You will have the chance to honor the letters, the words, the verses, the five books of the Torah; to celebrate the physical objects and the metaphysical meaning of it all; you will hold a scroll and not want to let go. This year, you are invited to reflect on your connection to Torah through our congregation and through this community. Most importantly: this year, Torah connects us all.

In this time of isolation, we need an experience of connection. In this time where truth is desecrated, we need a connection to an ancient and living truth. In this time when we are adrift in doubt, we Jews need the anchor of Torah. Decades ago, I saw my father sit in mourning for a desecrated Torah scroll. This year, we will celebrate a renewal of our sacred scrolls.

Tonight, on this the most holy night of the Jewish year, may we feel the connection: to the Holy, to our values, to our past and our future; to our intellect, to the Divine gift, to our community, to the future, to ourselves. Together, today and every day, may we let Torah connect us.

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<sup>7</sup> Talmud, *Menachot* 30a