

Sermon for Parshat Mikketz  
December 31, 2016; Congregation Sinai, San Jose, CA  
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Shabbat Shalom. This is pretty good. The Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah usually has a very small attendance. Of course, since it will be the first day of the new year, we expect a large showing tomorrow morning, at minyan, 9am in the Mirkin Chapel.

I could talk about Israel. The U.N... Settlements. Politics. Or Chanukah. Menorahs stolen in San Francisco. Or even my nephews getting a photo op lighting Chanukah candles with the governor of Mississippi the other night. (True story.)

Instead, I'll talk about us. Here. In this room. Because all those other things are out there, and we're in here. And while we can do something about those other things, if nothing else talk about them for hours on end, we sometimes focus on those other, external things at the expense of the things right here. Things that only *we* can do something about.

So, what about us. Some of you have heard me stand here before and quote Abraham Joshua Heschel – one of the prominent American rabbis of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century – who said about sermons, “preach in order to pray. Preach in order to inspire others to pray.”

I'm going to shift that quote slightly, from “inspire” to “help.” If the help inspires you, great. If not, after Shabbat please mail your complaints to the synagogue office. To be considered, the Post Office must deliver them by the end of the year.

So, how can I help? These services are in Hebrew. The Torah and Haftarah readings are in Hebrew. Many of us don't understand Hebrew, to varying extents. This brings a whole new meaning to the question from the Wicked Son (or, as I refer to him, the tragically misunderstood son) at the Passover Seder, “what does this mean to you?”

No, I'm not going to give a vocabulary lesson. I'm going to contextualize services in terms of how they are set up, to give us a different way of looking at them and, perhaps, enhance our experience with them.

Some of you have heard me say *this* before. The Torah Service, which we're currently in the middle of, is a weekly re-enactment of the giving of the Torah at Sinai. (The mountain, not right here.) A re-enactment of a story, conveyed with songs. Sounds like a musical to me.

And it is. The Torah Service has two halves. The second half is shorter than the first. These are traits of most musicals. And the structure and purpose of the prayers are similar to songs in a musical. There are really just a few, so let's consider them.

The first half of the Torah Service has four prayers. The first one, Eyn Kamocha, is all about G-d. “Eyn Kamocha,” “there's none like you.” It establishes the context of everything to follow – it sets the stage by establishing that it is all under the umbrella of

connection to G-d. Much like in “Fiddler on the Roof,” where the opening song establishes that everything to follow is about the connection to tradition. Or “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum,” where the opening song establishes that everything to follow is about a comedy tonight. (In fact, “Comedy Tonight” was written at the last minute because initial audiences didn’t laugh during the show. They thought it was a serious Roman play. “Comedy Tonight” was added to tell people they’re supposed to laugh. “Tradition” was similarly written later for “Fiddler,” to give audiences that show’s context.) Eyn Kamocha tells us that everything that follows, whether it sounds like it directly or not, is about various aspects of connection with G-d.

Then the re-enactment itself begins. Vayehi Binsoa Ha-Aron, vayomer Moshe. And when the Ark traveled (in the desert), Moses said. And then it tells us what Moses said. This is the re-enactment in motion. We open the ark, preparing the Torah to travel. As we do that, we sing about what Moses said when the Ark was about to travel.

Third comes a selection from the Zohar. For those of you thinking, “wait, I’ve heard that name... I know this one, but don’t want to admit I don’t remember...” it’s the main, original work at the root of Jewish mysticism, Kaballah. It’s not in Hebrew, but in Aramaic – the main language spoken in the Second Temple era (500 BCE to 70 CE). It’s the language of the Talmud, which was assembled soon thereafter.

Bei Ana Racheitz is the end of that excerpt from the Zohar. It’s about G-d again, but in a different way. Where Eyn Kamocha just talked about G-d, and asked for things that He’d do for all people, Bei Ana Racheitz is more personal. It talks, in first person, about putting trust in G-d. It asks “open my heart,” “answer my prayers,” and so on. At the very end, it does tie back in to everyone, about “answering the prayers of all the people of Israel.” And for those of you who get stuck on Aramaic seeming so different, consider the last few words. L’tav, l’chayin, v’lishlam. L’tav, l’tov, to the good. L’chayin, l’chaim, to life. (No, I won’t do the song.) v’lishlam, ul’shalom, to peace.

So, we have our original context of our people’s connection to G-d, we’ve opened the ark and sung what Moses said whenever the Ark was about to travel, and we affirmed personal connection to G-d. Then comes the act one finale. A couple of one-liners that dramatically declare the fundamentals – the Shema. Then an upbeat processional, L’cha, carrying the Torah through the people – representing how the Ark did travel, amid the people, in the desert.

Then we get to the Torah reading itself, but more on that in a minute.

The second half of the Torah Service begins, actually, with what we just did before I started yammering. Ashrei, Psalm 145. Many musicals have a love story. Not all, but many. Now, this isn’t exactly that – it’s not Song of Songs. But it is a lyrical, poetic expression of the relationship between people and G-d, which further develops the connection that was established earlier.

Then we have the eleven o'clock number. In the days of yore, curtain on Broadway was 8:30. So, the spectacular, final production number near the end of the show would happen around 11 o'clock. Hence, the eleven o'clock number. In this case, after Yehalelu – a brief introduction praising G-d – we do another upbeat processional, marching the Torah through the congregation while singing Psalm 29, Mizmor l'David. "A song of David." It's all about spectacle, with many vivid, impressive descriptions of Kol Ado, "the voice of G-d."

At last, we have the finale. The summation, the culmination of the re-enactment. Etz Chayim, "a tree of life" is what we call the Torah here, in the end. The Torah is a tree of life for those who hold it. Its path is pleasant, and all toward peace. Help us turn to you, G-d, (whose Torah, by now, we've been clearly reminded that it is), and we'll return again. Renew our lives as before.

That's a paraphrase, but even with that... I know a lot of musicals. This is fodder for lyrics for a show's wrap-up finale with the best of them. It succinctly ties together everything that came before it, and gives everyone a message of hope to take home with them.

And there's your re-enactment. We've answered most of the five W's about the Torah Service, except for one.

Why do we read the Torah every week? To remind us. Remind us of what? It depends on the person, depends on the week. But, fundamentally, to remind us of who we are. Who we were. Who we will be. Lessons learned. Lessons forgotten. Lessons to be learned.

Today's Torah reading is based on the popular Andrew Lloyd Weber musical, "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat." The musical overlaps three weeks' readings, having started last week and concluding next week. Today, it went through Joseph interpreting Pharaoh's dreams, preparing Egypt for famine, Joseph's brothers coming to Egypt for food, Joseph insisting that they return with his younger brother Benjamin, and then Joseph framing him for theft. In other words, it goes from the Pharaoh's Song (the Elvis one) up to "Grovel, Grovel."

Now, we heard the same thing a year ago. So, "*you may ask,*" why do we read the entire Torah every year? Over and over? Have you ever seen a movie more than once? Did you notice anything different the second time? What about something you saw again ten or twenty years later? Whether a year or a decade later, you're in a different place. Different things matter to you. You know more. (Or, in some cases, you might usefully know less.) What you come away with is different, because you're different. The same with the Torah. And if you don't come away with something different, maybe we (I'm not saying you, and not saying I... it's Chevruta – a partnership)... maybe we didn't do it well enough.

So, how does the Torah reading engage us? If you don't know the Hebrew, we have the English. But there's also the trope – the melody that structures the language and, in a

perfect world, is sung in a manner that's expressive of what's going on in the reading. (Of course, that's easier said than done.) But with that, you can feel, to some extent, what's going on even if you don't understand the words. It's like listening to opera, without subtitles, and with a lot fewer costumes.

Consider this. If the Torah trope were written today, perhaps it would sound more like this. These are the first two verses of today's reading, where Pharaoh has his dreams about cows and ears of corn.

*Sing two verses, to the tune of "The Song of the King":*

[פרשת מקץ] א וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ שְׁנַת־יָמִים וּפְרָעָה חָלַם וְהִנֵּה עֹמֵד עַל-הַיָּאֵר:  
ב וְהִנֵּה מִרְהֵיָאֵר עֹלֵת שֶׁבַע פְּרוֹת יְפוֹת מְרֹאָה וּבְרִיאַת בָּשָׂר וְתִרְעִינָה בְּאָחוּ:

That's how it sounded when Weber got his hands on it. Am I saying the melody should be updated for the times? No. Trying to keep up with the latest fads in this hyper-accelerated, social media-laden, instant gratification-induced, short-attention span 21<sup>st</sup> Century we live in... is best left to dogs chasing their tails.

Opera was written for the language of its audience. Its music was in the style of its time. It's still performed, and appreciated in that way. Torah trope is not some arcane melody. It was similarly conceived, with its audience in mind. It's still sung that way, too. How much is it appreciated? Well...

But everyone gets at least some feel of the reading from the trope they hear, even if they don't know it. For example, you can know no Hebrew, know no trope, and still hear where sentences end. That might not sound like much, but it is. It's the foot in the door. If we're on our game, you hear the slightly shorter break at mid-sentence. You hear some fancier notes placed meaningfully on particular words. The music colors them. It's a starting point, that you're given for free. Now, it takes some effort to divine the details beyond that. But, again, it's a partnership.

Not to be forgotten, though so often it's not mentioned, is the haftarah. This reading from the prophets always somehow parallels the Torah reading. For example, the normal haftarah for today's parsha also begins with a king – in this case, Solomon – having a dream that gets interpreted. Of course, today we had a special haftarah tied in to Chanukah – it's from Zechariah, from just before the building of the Second Temple. The one rededicated in the Chanukah story.

The Torah and Haftarah readings have their own potential for dramatic retelling. Some more obvious than others. They don't quite fit into the two-act musical mold outlined for the overall Torah Service, but their potential for dramatic inspiration is hopefully more apparent now.

I've taught and Torah read across the country over many years now. I've worked with numerous rabbis who seldom liked even a hint of services being a performance. And I

agree. It's not merely a performance. However, it can benefit from *performance values* – that is, something that moves along at a good pace, has clean transitions, and sounds good. All to the goal of engaging, and inspiring. A couple of generations ago, the early/mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century was what's regarded as the golden age of the Cantorate. These were significant talents, with significant voices, trained to know what they're expressing, and how to express it to people with all levels of knowledge and understanding. People would go to services in no small part to hear the Cantor sing. That was part of the appeal. Is that getting people in the door just for a performance? Maybe. To some extent. But they were in the door. What got them in was an enhanced experience of what we traditionally do, and not some superficial, fad-based throw-out-the-baby-with-the-bath-water attempt to be trendy.

Am I saying to hire a Cantor? No. Am I saying to adapt melodies based on pop trends? No. I'm saying that knowing more about the service, and the context of where it comes from, can increase our connection to it. I'm saying that a cohesive service, with performance values, can be a better experience for people than the alternative. It doesn't have to be longer to achieve that, either. It's not about putting on a good show, to the exclusion of all else. It's not about keeping things casual enough for everyone's comfort, no matter how acquainted with services, to the exclusion of all else. As with all extremes, reality – and, in this case, the ideal – is somewhere in between. People can see through the superficial when they want to – even if only subconsciously. They are eventually turned off by a lack of substance. We need people to want to look for reasons to show up, rather than look for reasons not to. It's no different than anything else in the world: Information breeds confidence, lack of information breeds fear, or at least alienation. I could say much more about that, but I said I wouldn't talk about politics.

So, now, we'll prepare to march with the Torah again. Not to take it through the congregation before we put it back in our ark, until next week when we read the Torah again – but to re-enact traveling it amid all of Israel, as it traveled through the desert, until the next time it moved on the way to the promised land.

*(My past sermons are available at <http://brookwrite.com/sermon/>. You might also like my monthly Jewish humor column, *Rear Pew Mirror*, available at <http://brookwrite.com>, and on Facebook at <http://facebook.com/rearpewmirror>.)*