

Sermon for Parshat Pinchas
July 11, 2015; Congregation Sinai, San Jose, CA
Doug Brook

I could talk to you today about Pinchas, the grandson of Aaron who – in impaling a prominent Israelite along with his Midianite girlfriend – reminded us that sometimes you just have to put a stake in the ground.

I could tell you about how this week the Book of Numbers gives us yet another census, and how this time it was almost two thousand fewer than the start of the book of Numbers, and why. Or how this parshah introduces the first government sanctioned lottery, to divide the land. Or how the five daughters of Tzelaafchad made an early feminist stand, and inherited the land of their father who had no sons.

I could mention how this reading is when Moses named Joshua as his successor, to lead the people into the Land of Israel.

I could stump you with the trivia question: Which parshah is read most often during the year. It's this one, thanks to its long list of daily sacrifices – parts of which are read on every Rosh Chodesh and major holiday throughout the year.

But I won't say any of that to you. You just imagined the last sixty seconds. Or you were daydreaming. Either way, you didn't hear it from me.

I won't say any of that to you because a year or so ago, standing right here, our rabbi quoted Abraham Joshua Heschel – one of the prominent American rabbis of the Twentieth Century.

Specifically, he spoke about the chasm between sermons and prayer. "Preaching is either an organic part of the act of prayer, or profanity in the domain of the sacred..." Think about that. A lot of sermons are profanity in the domain of the sacred. Makes you want to pay attention more often, doesn't it?

Heschel went on to say, "Preach in order to pray. Preach in order to inspire others to pray. The test of a true sermon is that it can be converted to prayer."

So, I'm going to take that literally. Not by teaching you to pray for the end of this sermon. If you've heard me up here before, you already have that down.

But this sermon will be about prayer. Not everyday prayers we all know, like "please don't turn red... please don't turn red... thank you!" or "please don't tell me I sent that email to the wrong person..." or "please let Chewbacca have a good role in the next film" or "please, I've been a Cubs fan for SO long..."

The Chewbacca line was a drop-in, based on a dare (from the Cubs fan) immediately before the sermon, to use the word Chewbacca somewhere.

Instead it's about prayers that were once just as familiar, but these days aren't... at least not for nearly as many people. Some of you won't already know what I'm about to say, so this might give you context. Some of you might know what I'm about to say, but a reminder is always good. Or maybe the old man is crazy, but I teach this to your kids, so you can take it, too.

I'm talking today about the Torah Service. Specifically, that the Torah Service is a musical.

This is not my own contrivance. It's actually supported by one of the texts they've had me use to teach your sixth graders.

This is not a sneaky way of promoting my current theatrical endeavors. If it were, I'd be saying things like how our summer Shakespeare season continues in two weeks with Antony and Cleopatra, and then the comedy Shakespeare in Hollywood that I'm directing, both playing through August in Saratoga Hills.

But I'm not saying any of that, either. This is legit. The Torah Service is a musical.

This is a tough thesis for some people. Over the years, around the country, whenever I've mentioned to rabbis even something small about improving the experience of services by polishing what we call "performance values," they bristle.

Most rabbis put a hard wall up against any hint of a notion that a service is a performance. And rightly so, to a point. They don't want services to seem fake, or insincere. They want services to be genuine experiences, and not entertainment. And I agree.

The disconnect is a mistaken definition of performance. Performance doesn't have to equal fake. In fact, many of the very best performances in theatre are the most real – the most honest, the most sincere. The ones where the people inhabit who they're being and what they're doing. They have the most impact on their audience. They draw their audience in as participants, by eliciting their audience's engagement, their emotions, their enthusiasm. Just like a service leader can, to share what they're expressing with the congregants they represent when they stand right here.

As a very experienced theatre practitioner, and teacher and participant of Jewish ritual, I observe that both theatrical performance and services are enhanced by similar types and levels of immersion in and commitment to sincerity, intent, and depth.

If you don't agree, that's okay. It's actually tangential to my point today. Back to the Torah Service.

Why do we do the Torah Service? I'm asking. Why? <take answers>

It's a re-enactment. It is a weekly re-enactment, a musical play that retells the giving of the Torah at Sinai. According to Midrash, we were all there. You don't remember being there? The Torah Service is a weekly reminder. You don't believe that you were there? The Torah Service is a weekly re-enactment to give you a taste of that faith-defining, birth-of-a-nation experience.

Our opening number is Eyn Kamocha. In it, the community sings the praises of the Big G, who is about to give us – again – His teachings, to help our lives. We ask “Eyn Kamocha” – “who is like you?” to express that there is nobody like the Big G. We say that the Big G is everywhere, and is for all time – past, present, and future. (That “... melech, ... malach, ... yimloch” line.)

Now that we've just praised the Big G, reminding ourselves from whom these teachings come, and have asked for the Big G's help for all of Israel to live by His teachings, we rise and open the Ark. The re-enactment itself begins.

When the Israelites traveled in the desert, they followed the Ark of the Covenant, which the Big G led. (That pillar of smoke by day, pillar of fire by night thing.) So, we open the Ark and sing “Vayehi Binsoa HaAron” – “And when the ark traveled.”

And then we get some dialogue, “vayomer Moshe” or “and Moses said...” “Rise up, Big G, and scatter your enemies, and those who hate you will travel from before you.”

And then appear the prophets Isaiah and Micah, who tell us their prophecy – “Ki MiTzion Teytzey Torah” – “from Zion comes the Torah” and the Big G's word from Jerusalem. This all sets the stage for the Torah itself to travel with us, and us with it.

Third, we sing Bei Ana Racheytz. This is the end of a prayer from the Zohar, describing how when we, the congregation, prepare to read from the Torah, the gates of heaven open, and the Big G is reminded of His love for us. In Aramaic this time, we sing about trust, and ask our hearts to be opened (His and ours), “I'tav, ul'chayin, v'lishlam” or “for good, for life, and for peace.” This, in musical theatre, is called the “I Want” song. It's the song, a few songs in, where now that the people and setting are introduced, we hear what the protagonist wants – their motivation that drives the rest of the story. Open our hearts, for good, for life, and for peace.

Now, the re-enactment gets physical. The Torah is taken from the Ark, held before us all, and the grandest, most fundamental declaration is sung. The Shema – a one-sentence summation of the entire Torah. A second line reinforces it, and then another grand moment is mentioned.

We face the Torah to the Ark for Gadlu, a quote from the Psalms, reminding that when David brought the Ark up to Jerusalem it was such a massive parade that he stopped and had a celebration every six steps.

Think about it. If the Giants did that in their victory parade, we'd still be there. From the 2012 championship.

And then, have Torah, will travel. It is carried through us all. Having already heard how the Big G would lead the Ark through the desert, it's fresh in our mind that it could be happening now, too. While it parades through us, Lecha alludes to David announcing that Solomon will build the Temple in Jerusalem. It then refers to when the Temple Mount was established as the home of the Torah. Does it say these things literally? No. It quotes lines from those stories, which people once knew offhand – it's the biblical equivalent of pop culture references.

With those four prayers, you have the first part of a three-act musical. Now, the centerpiece. We hear a part of the Torah itself. Just as this re-enactment brings us across time to the giving of the Torah at Sinai, it also brings us across to every Shabbat of the year. So while we hear only part of the Torah any given week, we feel that we hear the entire Torah across the entire year.

We listen to the chanting of the Torah, whose trope – whose melody – colors the story, the drama of what we're hearing. We're reminded of our origins.

We then raise the Torah, reminding that “zot haTorah” this is the Torah that Moses put before the people of Israel. That's us, remember? This service is the longest running musical in history – even longer than *Wicked* – and it's about us!

Then, with the Torah sitting right there as a reminder of its presence, we hear a reading from the prophets. Every haftarah ties in to that day's Torah reading, showing even more how the Torah has related to us throughout the ages.

And now the third act of our re-enactment. We return the Torah to the ark. Before, we declared the Shema and then did a processional with the Torah. This time, we do the same thing, in different words. “Yehallelu” we praise the Big G. Why? To make Him stand out? Yes, in fact. The next line says “to make his name stand out alone.”

We're doing what we did at the start, in reverse, in bringing the Torah back to where it came from.

This is the big eleven o'clock number, though we usually do it around 11:15. We do a processional, in the opposite direction, during which we sing a psalm that repeatedly celebrates “Kol Big G” – “the voice of the Big G.” Where does that voice come from? The Torah, we just heard it. The entire psalm is a celebration of the voice we just heard (the Torah) and the source of that voice (the Big G). It's a party, a parade, and much like was described before, we periodically stop with it along the way, to extend the celebration a little longer.

At last, the Torah is put back in the Ark. “Etz Chayim Hi” – “it's a tree of life.” Ironically, the wooden poles on which the Torah is scrolled are called the etz chayim.

This is our big finale. Very often the finale leaves us with the moral of the story, the extension of the metaphor into our lives as we leave. “Dracheha darchei noam” – “its roads (or ways) are pleasant roads” and lead to peace. Everything we just celebrated, everything we just re-enacted, all its roads lead to peace. That’s the big takeaway.

And the final line of the story shows that the story isn’t ending at all. “Chadesh yameinu k’kedem” – “renew our days, as of old.” It’s an ending that’s really a new beginning, one that’s supposed to stick with us long after we leave. The equivalent of a song you can’t stop humming long after you’ve gone home.

So, how is this supposed to help you pray? Not just because you heard a little more about the extensive meanings of each prayer. How does viewing it as a re-enactment help you pray? Context.

Everything in life, everything in the world, is about context. So many of us miss out on so much of Judaism, because we lack the context of why Judaism is the way it is. Is that fixed by learning melodies? Learning Hebrew? Spending lots of hours at services? Sure, all these help. But to make the most of using them, even those things ultimately depend on having the context for why we use them.

Even more, what about people who don’t do any of those things? Those who don’t have as much knowledge or skill need the context more than anyone else. What else is there to get them interested? The tuna salad isn’t *that* good. We don’t give you, we don’t emphasize, the big picture context – the forest for the trees, the ten thousand foot view – nearly enough. Not nearly enough. I don’t mean here specifically, I mean everywhere. Think outside the box about the box that we’re sitting in right now. Demand to know why we originally walked into it. Why someone originally built it.

Maybe knowing the bigger context of why the Torah Service exists makes you more comfortable with it. Or more curious about it. Or more interested in it. Or maybe the old man’s crazy. Whichever it is for you, it’s because you now have new context. Keep demanding more of it.

(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/the.beholders.eye>.)