

Sermon for Parshat Terumah
February 29, 2020; Congregation Sinai, San Jose, CA
Doug Brook

Is nothing sacred anymore? Civility isn't sacred anymore. Facts aren't sacred anymore. The news. Government. Religion. Marriage. Education. Even sports. Music... not even sacred music is sacred anymore. And how far have we fallen when we can't even come together about Star Wars anymore?

Justice isn't sacred anymore. Decency isn't sacred anymore. Respect. Elders. Soldiers. Honesty. Even health isn't sacred anymore. With new rounds of fake bomb scares, even sacred spaces aren't sacred anymore.

Is there nothing left? Should we all just give up on society, throw it to the wind, and become Y*nkees fans? Not so fast, maybe we've still got one.

To borrow from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, you and I are simply passing through history. This (the Torah) *is* history. This scroll has been central to our people more than ten times as long as the United States has been a country. It's more than thirty times older than the oldest of us in this room. It's more than three *hundred* times older than the huddled younger ones in this room. It's nearly twice as old as my jokes.

Something this longstanding – six times longer standing than Shakespeare – would seem to merit special treatment. Something this central to our existence deserves celebration. Not just once a year on Simchat Torah, but more regularly as befits the ways it helps us in our everyday lives. It sounds like it would be great if there were some way to celebrate the Torah, and remember what it's for, every week of our lives.

Fortunately, there's already an app for that. In comes the Torah Service, a celebration that does all this, and more. So, on this leap day, take a leap with me into knowing better how the Torah Service is actually the sacred celebration we didn't even realize we were having. See how at bar or bat mitzvahs the *real* party isn't Saturday night, it's Saturday morning.

Abraham Joshua Heschel – one of the prominent American rabbis of the 20th Century – 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 my help today inspires you, great. If not, after Shabbat please email your complaints to the synagogue office by no later than February 30th.

So, how can I help? The Torah Service is in Hebrew, mostly. The Torah and Haftarah readings are in Hebrew. Many of us don't understand Hebrew, so we can miss the meaning of what's going on – even of what we're saying or singing. 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?”

Tefila is personal. Not everyone prays for the same things, even when using the same prayers. Some pray for the Giants, some for the Mets, and some for the Cubs. So, I'm not going to reveal to you a single, absolute meaning. I'll give you starting points from which you can develop your own.

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Why should we find meaning in it? We get more out of something when we know what's going on. Many people today find Shakespeare incomprehensible, even elitist. But when Christopher Marlowe wrote Shakespeare's plays, he was writing them for the common people. Same for the Torah Service – it's supposed to be for us all. Just over the centuries, something's gotten lost in the translation.

Think of the Torah Service as a weekly re-enactment of the giving of the Torah at Sinai. (The mountain, not right here.) Think about that again. The Torah Service is a weekly re-enactment of the giving of the Torah at Sinai.

A re-enactment of a story, conveyed mostly with songs. Sounds like a musical to me. You'll also see that it has similarities to a movie. There are just seven prayers in the Torah Service, so let's briefly consider each one – and I'll sprinkle some comparison to musicals and films into each, to help understand each tefila's role.

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." You might recall a little earlier in the service we ask "Mi Kamocha" "who is like you?" Now we're answering that by saying Ein Kamocha, there's none like you. In a few minutes, we'll get even more specific and say Ein Keloheinu, there's none like our god.

That's a bigger developmental arc through the Shabbat service, but focusing on the Torah Service, Ein Kamocha 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.) More simply, you can also think of Eyn Kamocha as the opening credits. It praises and recognizes the Big G, the source of the Torah.

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, and we ourselves are set in motion by standing up. 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.

The third tefilla is a selection from the Zohar – 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, and is used in certain other tefilot such as the kaddish. Many of us find Aramaic more arcane and unfamiliar, though ironically it used to be the everyday language of the people.

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Bei Ana Racheitz is what in musicals is called an “I want” song, where the main character establishes what it is they seek for the rest of the show. For example, “If I Were a Rich Man.” Bei Ana Racheitz is in the commoner’s language because it’s for each of us to prepare to be exposed to Torah again. If you listen to the words, they sound almost recognizable in Hebrew, too. “d’tiftach libi” “open my heart” to the Torah. Toward the end it brings all of us individuals together, asking 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 the opening credits recognizing and praising the writer, we’ve opened the ark and sung what Moses said whenever the Ark was about to travel, and we’ve affirmed personal connection to G-d asking for help in opening ourselves up to Torah. Time for a big dance number to finish the first act. We sing a couple of one-liners that dramatically declare the fundamentals of our people – 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. It’s a celebration of the Torah as it moves among us, not just being lorded over us.

Then we get to the Torah reading itself. Unlike most musicals or films, it’s different every time! How great is that? It’s a new, exciting episode every week! What’s more, we get a bonus reading right after it, as the haftarah gives us a shorter reading from a book of the prophets that in some way relates to the Torah reading (or to the day, if a special one) and reinforces what we’ve heard. The Torah Service celebrates the giving of the Torah, and opens our hearts to it. The Torah reading is what the service is for. Appropriately enough to the new Torah project, today’s parshah provides instructions for building the tabernacle in the desert. But we’re not going to dig deeply into that right now. You just heard the reading, you took notes, right?

After the readings, we slip in a few blessings or prayers for people, for the country, for peace, for the ice cream man down the street if it’s a warm day... pretty much everyone. We also do Ashrei, Psalm 145, because we’ve possibly gone forty minutes without a Psalm, which would be in breach of contract. Then, after I finish yammering, we get back to the traditional Torah Service; specifically, the second half of it.

The second half of the Torah Service is mainly the eleven o’clock number. Not that we ever get to it by 11am. 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 reprise of 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 Adonai, “the voice of G-d.”

Then, 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,

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G-d, (whose Torah, by now, we've been clearly reminded that it is), and we'll return again. Chadesh yameinu k'kedem. Renew our lives as before.

It ties together everything that came before it, and gives everyone a message of hope to take home with them.

And that's the Torah Service. Ein Kamocha, praising the author; Vayehi Binsoa, describing the re-enactment; Bei Ana Racheitz, opening our hearts to the Torah; Shema/Lecha, parading and celebrating the Torah. Yehalelu, a brief praise for the author again; Mizmor l'David, a big act two celebration; Etz Chaim, the wrap up.

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 history is an unlimited resource. There's more of it all the time, as long as we're around to make more of it. And to remember it. We have the Torah Service to help keep us around, together, with something in common, so we can make more history. History that reminds us who we are. Who we were. Who we will be. Lessons learned. Lessons forgotten. Lessons to be learned. Or relearned.

We get a different reading every week, but we hear the same thing every year. Why do we read the entire Torah every year? Over and over? Consider this. 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 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. But if you want to know more about that, stick around after kiddush today.

So, now, we'll prepare to march with the Torah again. Not merely 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.

Knowing more about what we're doing, about what's going on, can help us make the Torah Service more special – more of what it's intended to be. We can make it sacred. And what we take from it – who we are and can be, what we've learned and will learn – can help us make other things in life sacred. And then more things in the world can still be sacred after all.

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- *My monthly Jewish humor column, Rear Pew Mirror, available at <http://brookwrite.com>, and on Facebook at <http://facebook.com/rearpewmirror>*
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