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Olam Tikvateinu



A place to share Torah

Congregation Olam Tikvah

3800 Glenbrook Road

Fairfax, Virginia

Olam Tikvateinu

Editors

Cary Schwartzbach, Lisa Friedman

Editorial Advisory Board

Rabbi David Kalender, Rabbi Joshua Ben-Gideon

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Olam Tikvateinu

Conceived as a supplement to the existing experiences of Jewish study and reflection central to our community, the journal's statement of purpose is as follows:

Olam Tikvateinu, our Olam Tikvah, our world of hope, is a place for individuals of our congregation to share their Torah. It is to be a forum for original ideas and thoughts on Jewish themes—Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), Talmud, Jewish history, philosophy, ethics and actions/behavior.

Its motto is:

ה' חָפֵץ לְמַעַן צְדָקוֹ יִגְדִיל תּוֹרָה וַיִּצְדִּיק

For the sake of God's righteousness,

God desires that Torah grow and be glorified.—Isaiah 42:21

My hope is that this journal will inspire you to develop your own ideas, and I encourage you to use this forum to share with all of us. Please contact me or Rabbi Ben-Gideon, so we may begin thinking and studying together toward your article.

Looking forward to enjoying your Torah,

Rabbi David Kalender

Submissions for Volume 2, Number 2

Please submit your article by Wednesday, March 1, 2005 for Volume 2, Number 2, to be published 1 Nissan 5765. Articles should be typed, double spaced, in MS Word and submitted by e-mail to Lisa Friedman, Lisafriedman@cox.net. Write "Olam Tikvateinu" in the subject line. The *upper* length limit is 1500-2000 words (6-8 pages).

If your subject is related to the Jewish calendar, please use this paradigm:

Tishrei for subjects including High Holidays through Purim (include Elul, Chanukah, Tu B'Shevat). Nissan for subjects including Pesach through Av (include Yom Hashoah, Lag B'Omer, the Omer, Yom Ha'atzmaut, Yom Yerushalayim, Shavuot and Tisha B'Av).

Who Is God's Mother?

By

Caroline Frankil Warren

Talking about God with my then-eight-year-old son produced a question typical of a child's striving to understand the mysteries of life: "Mom, if God created the heavens and the earth, who created God? Who was God's mother?" Of course, in his world, everyone had a mother, so why shouldn't God?

So, who is God's mother—in the sense of whatever came first, that then brought God into being.

Several interesting theories and discussions exist around the subject of the ultimate creation. The traditional Jewish approach is that God *is*—always *was*, always *has been*, and always *will be*—as we say in the Rosh Hashanah prayers—"Adonai Melech, Adonai Malach, Adonai yimloch l'olam va'ed." When God reveals Godself to Moses in *Exodus*, God says, "I Am That I Am." The book of *Genesis* begins with the presupposition God's existence. Indeed, the very word "bereshit" means "in the beginning of," "from the start," so we are to think that this is the source of it all.

But there is that nagging question—where did God come from? There had to be something there first, for God to come into being. Didn't there?

Bing Bang Blow It Up

Among the many scientific theories of the creation of the universe, the most popular currently held hypothesis is the Big Bang theory. It posits that the universe began as a singularity, a tiny dot sitting quietly in space for eons until an outside force caused it to blow up, thus creating the universe we know. But what was the motivating force for the explosion? If all the matter and energy in the universe was contained in that tiny singularity, then nothing natural existed outside of the dot to make it explode. Perhaps the catalyst was a supernatural energy force.

Although Einstein's $E=mc^2$ equation demonstrates that energy changes into matter, we don't know how that transformation happens. The catalyst that effects the change of matter into energy remains a mystery to us.

Dr. Robert Jastrow, a noted astrophysicist and Director of NASA's Goddard Center for Space Studies, spent 15 years studying the Big Bang theory. On June 25, 1978, he released his finding that there was only one massive explosion, rather than cyclical ones. Thus we now have a scientific confirmation that time, space, matter and an unknown catalyst came together several billion years ago to make our universe. In an article in the *New York Times Magazine*, Jastrow said:

This is an exceedingly strange development, unexpected by all but the theologians. They have always accepted the word of the Bible... [but] for the scientist who has always lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; [and] as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries.

Pagan World Views

Biblical Hebrews did not exist in a vacuum. They were Semites, with historical and cultural ties to other Mediterranean peoples, notably the Sumerians and the Akkadians. It is logical to suppose that Jewish concepts of divinity were somewhat influenced by the beliefs of the peoples among whom they lived and from whom they emerged. Studying some of those primitive creation beliefs, we may see similarities between many of the stories, although the societies involved were separated by oceans and continents.

Many ancient origination theories imagined an initial void. The Egyptians called it NU, the dark swirling chaos before the beginning of time. The Greeks believed that in the beginning was empty darkness, except for Nyx, a bird with black wings. The Japanese and the Hindus shared similar concepts. The Japanese thought that initially all the elements (fire, air, water, earth) were mixed together, with one germ of life that eventually separated the heavy from the light. Hindus believed that water incubated a small seed, planted by a trinity of supreme beings, which grew into an egg from which emerged Brahma. The discarded shell split into two pieces, heaven and earth.

The Sumerians conceptualized God's mother as Nammu (a formless abyss), who curled in upon herself and gave birth to An, the god of heaven, and Ki, the goddess of earth. The first of the

Sumerian deities, Nammu was considered the goddess of the primeval sea that gave rise to heaven and earth—the universe.

Many references to the “mother” goddess bear a strong relation to water—the source of life. Water equals life—our world is made up of $\frac{3}{4}$ water, and our bodies are composed of even more. Note the recent excitement in the scientific community when we discovered that there was once water on Mars. Water is a life force on our planet. A child grows in the watery safety of its mother’s womb.

Also running through almost all pagan philosophies was the concept of duality—two gods coming together to create one really *big* god, who then created either the world or many more gods, who were then delegated the task of creating pieces of the world, like the sky, earth, rivers, mountains, etc. Perhaps this duality came from the universal observation of a female and a male together creating life, so that pagan theorists inferred that the entire universe was initiated in the same way—two forces coming together. But primary to the Jewish philosophy is monotheism, the idea expressed in the *Shema*. “Hear O Israel, the lord our God, the lord is ONE!”

Kabbalah and Maimonides Weigh In

About 500 years ago, the Kabbalist (Jewish mystic) Isaac Luria posed a theory of God’s origins. He thought that initially there was not really a void, but an existence filled with a “simple, higher light,” the *Ein Sof* (“without limit”), that had no beginning or end. This light contracted upon itself, creating a microscopic point of darkness. From the light opened an “unformed line, embedded in a ring,” which led to the creation of the cosmos, which took place via ten dimensions. This reasoning seems to suggest that God created Godself. Luria’s idea resembles the ancient Egyptian creation legend, where Atum created himself, using his thoughts and the sheer force of his will.

Maimonides, in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, argues that the universe is not empty, and we can be sure that the perceptions of our five senses do exist. Of necessity, a Supreme Being is needed to ensure that the universe continues to grow and evolve. This Being must be self-caused, because if It owed Its existence to something else, It would no longer be necessary to the growth and evolution of the universe. Two such Beings could not exist, because in

sharing a common nature or essence they would become part of the whole, and not independent anymore. Maimonides concluded that this primary Being must have derived Its existence from Itself. Thus, God's mother was actually God Him or Herself.

Nothing Plus Nothing Equals—Everything

Logically speaking, trying to find God's mother is the ultimate chicken-and-egg conundrum. Which came first, the all-powerful being, or the material from which that being was created? Nothing can come from nothingness; but since there was God, there was something there. If the universe was created from a Big Bang, what was there before the bang?

One metaphysical theory suggests that in the beginning was the Great Spirit, the essence of everything in the universe. With a little touch of divine energy (again, the duality—two entities creating a third), a physical mass was formed. Happy with what it had done, the Great Spirit wanted to expand again, and with more divine intervention the Big Bang happened and galaxies were created. This theory also holds that God is *in* all things because God used a part of Godself to create all things, so we each embody a God-spark.

Apply these ideas to the Big Bang theory, and you get a picture of a swirling void of nothingness, surrounding a small speck of concentrated mass and energy. The swirling void brings to my mind the inside of the womb, and the small speck the seed of human life, or “egg.” Perhaps we could look at the void as the mother image, the raw space in which God existed before God created the universe. Then we need the outside force to activate the speck and explode it into what is now our universe. Maybe God was the superhuman or metahuman energy that was the catalyst to ignite the Big Bang.

Because each of us is created in God's image—b'tzelem Elohim—perhaps each of us embodies a “God-spark.” This trace of God-like power resides within us, complete with the ability to create and destroy. We each have the means to create mini-universes ourselves—perhaps that is what we call “children.”

Caroline Frankil Warren and her family have been OT members since 1994. A recent Sisterhood President, Caroline has studied both Bible and Mishnah in Rabbi Kalender's Sisterhood Study Groups, and she looks forward to next year's Parasha Study Group.

The Importance of Being Ethical

By

George D. Billinson

This past spring, as I was preparing to teach a Jewish Business Ethics course with Rabbi Ben-Gideon, it occurred to me that as a threshold matter, it would be helpful for us to address the question, *why study Jewish business ethics?* That question, in turn, breaks down into two sub issues: (1) why study business ethics in the first place, and (2) if we are going to study business ethics, why *Jewish* ethics?

Why Study Business Ethics?

Studying business ethics as part of a Jewish Adult Education class seemed a natural thing to do. The importance of business ethics is deeply rooted in Jewish tradition. In fact, the *Talmud* teaches that when we die and are called before the Heavenly Court, each of us will be asked whether we conducted our business affairs honestly.¹ But to me, there was an even more urgent reason to do so.

Over the past few years, we have witnessed a corporate world seemingly devoid of ethics. There have been scandals the likes of which this country hasn't seen since the days of the early 20th-century robber barons—Enron, WorldCom, Martha Stewart, Dynegy, Adelphia Cable. The list goes on and on.

These scandals have wreaked havoc with our economy, crippling the nascent energy market, shaking consumer confidence to its core, and throwing the stock market into a downward spiral from which it has yet to recover. They have taken an incalculable toll in human terms as well: thousands of people lost their jobs and countless more lost their life savings; lives were destroyed; there has been at least one suicide; people went to prison; and families were torn apart.

The judge in the Enron bankruptcy case retained an independent examiner to determine what had gone wrong at Enron. After the examiner and his staff spent 19 months conducting their investigation, at a cost of nearly \$100 million, he determined that the problem at Enron was “an integrity failure.”² In other words, the problem at Enron was *a lack of ethics!*

Around the same time, *The New York Times* ran an article reporting on a survey of leading business schools in this country. The consensus was that while most schools believe it is important to teach business ethics, they are simply not sure what to teach.³ This question is more difficult than it appears at first glance, which leads to the second part of our inquiry.

What Is An Appropriate Framework For Business Ethics?

There are a number of potential frameworks on which to base business ethics. However, most are woefully inadequate, because they do not provide a workable standard for ethical behavior.

First, business ethics in their most basic form might leave the determination of what constitutes moral behavior to the individual's view of "right and wrong." This approach is, of course, completely unworkable, because it provides no standard at all. At best, such an approach results in a lack of consistency; at worst, it leads to complete anarchy.

Second, business ethics could conceivably require nothing more than compliance with civil law. After all, there are literally thousands of laws dealing with business transactions. Tens of thousands of pages of federal statutes and millions of pages of regulations address matters like antitrust and trade regulation, unfair competition, tax, securities, banking, truth-in-lending, credit and collections, employment law, product labeling, fraud, etc. State laws and even local ordinances cover many of the same subjects. Finally, hundreds of millions of pages of court decisions deal with all these subjects, as well as others, such as contract law—how a contract is formed, what constitutes a breach, the remedies for a breach—business torts, conversion of property, etc. Couldn't a workable system of business ethics be based on this legal framework?

The answer is a resounding no. Although unquestionably essential for a well-functioning society, civil law simply does not provide an adequate basis for meaningful business ethics. The law prescribes the *minimum* duty we owe each other as human beings. Ethical behavior demands something more. In other words, legal does not necessarily equate to ethical, and in many instances, the two concepts diverge. Moreover, as we have seen, people regularly

ignore the law. Why then would they obey a moral code based on compliance with the law?

A third alternative would be to base business ethics on principles of competition and free-market economics. However, that is an equally unsatisfactory basis for business ethics.

Classical economic theory teaches that business decisions are motivated by self-interest. Storekeepers sell products to make money, not because they want to do good for society. In fact, rational economic behavior requires that they profit-maximize and charge what the market will bear. Thus, they don't sell goods at the cheapest price to benefit society: they put merchandise on sale to get people into their stores.

Likewise, consumers don't buy products or pay more money for goods simply because the merchant is a "nice guy." They buy products they want or need, and how much they are willing to pay is dictated by their perceived value of the product.

Viewed in this light, it becomes apparent that principles of competition and free-market economics provide an inadequate base for a workable code of business ethics. As one commentator has noted, "market ethics does not promote a level of honesty higher than profit considerations dictate."⁴ Indeed, we have seen throughout history that business conduct limited only by economic or profit motives has produced disastrous results, leading to revolutionary movements such as communism and ultimately to regulation such as the child labor laws, when governing authorities realized that the only way to ensure desirable behavior was to legislate it.

There must be some framework on which to base a code of business ethics. Yet nothing we have explored so far seems to provide a satisfactory basis. What are we to do?

Why Jewish Business Ethics?

We as Jews have an alternative framework, based on the Torah and the discourse of Jewish law found in the *Mishna*, the *Talmud* and the *Shulchan Aruch*. That framework is at the same time realistic and idealistic. While it does not deny one's self-interest or the profit motive, it relies upon *Yirat Shamayim*, our being in awe of God,⁵ to temper those interests.

Jewish law teaches that we have two competing inclinations—the *Yetzer Ha'tov* (the good inclination) and the *Yetzer Ha'rah* (the evil inclination). The *Yetzer Ha'rah* leads us to desire and take steps to acquire that which we don't have. Such urges are not all bad. Indeed, to some extent, society depends upon them. If no one wanted anything better or different, there would be no innovation, no desire to improve one's lot in life. Thus, the rabbis realized that without the *Yetzer Ha'rah*, a person would not marry, build a home, or raise a family.⁶ Similarly, in the Book of *Kobellet* (*Ecclesiastes*), the authorship of which is generally attributed to King Solomon, we read, "Again, I considered all labor, and every skill in work, that it comes from a man's rivalry with his neighbor."⁷ The problem, of course, is how to keep the *Yetzer Ha'rah* in check. That is where the *Yetzer Ha'tov* comes in.

The *Yetzer Ha'tov*, represents our spiritual impulse and desire to do the right thing. Judaism teaches us to use the *Yetzer Ha'tov* not to completely eliminate the urges fueled by the *Yetzer Ha'rah*, but rather to temper them. When we successfully do so, we can prosper and lead ethical lives at the same time.⁸

Just as it is both realistic and idealistic, the framework of Jewish business ethics is also simultaneously both simple and complex. The *Talmud* contains extensive discussions of any number of situations that might arise in a business context. Most of these discussions require the reader to apply principles involving ancient practices to modern-day business. Yet, the ethical framework is based upon concepts as basic as *Hin Tzedek*—the imperative to act in good faith—which is really nothing more than what we were taught as children. If you make a commitment to do something, you must truly intend to carry it out.

While I believe that Jewish business ethics provide a good, workable framework for defining socially acceptable norms while permitting people to succeed in business, there is an even more fundamental reason why we, as Jews, are obligated to study and live by those ethics.

In Parashat *K'doshim*, God tells the Jewish people, “*K'doshim t'biyu ki kadosh ani adonai elohechem*” (“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy”).⁹ This is the cost of being the “chosen people.” We as Jews are required to act in a way “that will sanctify the mundane, *i.e.*, behavior that will contribute positively to the moral climate of society.”¹⁰

Although this concept transcends all of our behavior, its significance to our business dealings cannot be overemphasized. Thus, it behooves each of us to study and apply Jewish business ethics to our business affairs.

Regrettably, Jews have not escaped inclusion in some of the financial scandals mentioned above. Most notable were former Enron Chief Financial Officer, Andrew Fastow, and his wife, Lea, the company's former Assistant Treasurer. He pleaded guilty to conspiracy, admitted to manipulating Enron's finances and engaging in self-dealing at the company's (*i.e.*, the shareholders') expense, for which he was sentenced to 10 years in prison. She pleaded guilty to filing a false tax return to help hide her husband's ill-gotten gains.

Lea Fastow was supposed to be sentenced on April 7 of this year, but asked the judge to delay sentencing until after Passover. Although I do not profess to judge these people and it is impossible for us to know just how involved Ms. Fastow was in all of this, her request struck me as incredibly ironic. She wanted to observe an important Jewish holiday by postponing the imposition of punishment for conduct at odds with basic Jewish law. I could not help but think, how much of this pain and damage to her family, which includes young children, could have been avoided if only she and her husband had been guided in their business affairs by the fundamental principles of Jewish business ethics? And therein lies my answer to the question, why study Jewish business ethics?

Notes

¹ *Shabbat* 31a.

² Associated Press, “Enron Investigator Blames ‘Integrity Failure’ for Company’s Collapse,” (March 15, 2004).

³ C. Stewart, “A Question of Ethics: How to Teach Them?” *The New York Times* (March 19, 2004).

⁴ A. Levine, *Economics and Jewish Law* at 5 (1986).

⁵ Although *Yirat Shamayim* typically is translated as “fear of God,” the phrase really does not mean fear in terms of being afraid of God. Rather, the better translation is “to be in awe of God.” For a thoughtful discussion of this concept, see G. Taubman, “Love and Fear,” *Olam Tikvateinu*, Vol. 1, No. 2.

⁶ *Genesis Rabbah* 9:7.

⁷ *Kohellet* 4:4.

⁸ An excellent discussion of the relation between the two concepts can be found in *Economics and Jewish Law* at 5-6.

⁹ *Leviticus* 19:2.

¹⁰ *Economics and Jewish Law* at 9.

George Billinson is Olam Tikvah’s Ritual Committee Co-Chair. He has taught both Religious School and Adult Education classes at OT. He is an attorney, practicing litigation and commercial law for the past 26 years.

The Joy of Torah

By
Debbie Weber

Should every Jew in the community who is capable be allowed to chant Torah publicly on Shabbat morning?

I would answer emphatically yes to this question. However, traditionally, halachah (Jewish law) does not permit certain handicapped people to do so. There are specific halachah regarding public Torah reading on Shabbat morning, particularly with respect to the congregation's obligation to hear the reading.

Traditional Proscription

The *Talmud* states that “words that are written must not be recited from memory” (*Gitin* 60b). Sages interpret this maxim to mean that not even one word of Torah can be recited from memory for the congregation. Ray Natronai Gaon, a ninth-century sage, states that “the people cannot fulfill their obligation by hearing the Torah from memory, but we need to hear from one reading the text, and not from memory...” Even today, many Rabbis and congregations will not permit the Torah to be read from memory.

Under this interpretation, people who are blind would be precluded from chanting Torah publicly on Shabbat, because they are not permitted to chant their Torah portion from memory. I am legally blind. My lack of peripheral vision prevents me from being able to read out loud. Thus, when I chant Torah, I must do it from memory.

Chanting Torah is a mitzvah, however, which I believe everyone who is capable should be allowed to experience. The congregation is commanded to hear the Torah read on Shabbat. I believe we can find a way to permit the congregation to fulfill its commandment, while still affording a blind person the opportunity to chant Torah.

Other Guidelines

“Do not separate yourself from the community.”

(*Pirkei Avot* 2:5)

“Do not look at the container but what is in it.”

(*Pirkei Avot* 4:27)

“Every member of the people of Israel is obligated to study Torah—whether one is rich or poor, physically able or with physical disability.”

(Maimonides, *Mishne Torah, Hilchut Talmud Torah*, Ch. 10)

With these phrases in mind, we should not turn anyone away from fulfilling their obligation to chant Torah. Gabbais stand over the Torah while it is being read. They ensure that every word is read perfectly from the Torah. I believe that if the Torah must be chanted from memory for a valid reason, the gabbai can help to fulfill the congregation’s obligation of knowing that the text is actually being read. In fact, another individual can stand next to the blind Torah reader and actually read the words silently, directly from the Torah, while it is being chanted. (This is the method used at Olam Tikvah.)

“You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind.” *(Leviticus 19:14)*

We should open doors to people with all special needs to allow them to become full and complete parts of the Jewish community. We should try to encourage their participation, and find ways to make that happen.

Hillel said: “Be like the disciples of Aaron: Love peace and pursue it; love people and bring them close to Torah” (*Pirkei Avot* 1:12). The closest one can be to Torah is chanting it from the Sefer Torah on the bimah so that all can hear. So let’s find a way to allow that to happen, while still enabling congregants to fulfill their obligation.

Ben Azzai taught: “Do not disdain any person; do not underrate the importance of anything—for there is no person who does not have his hour and there is no thing without its place in the sun” (*Pirkei Avot* 4:3). Let us all have our place in the sun, whatever that may be. Make room for all of us to feel whole and complete in what we do. Let us all participate equally. Let us share the joy of Torah.

Those of us who cope with challenges daily have little control over some of the restrictions we encounter. We must adapt our lives accordingly. There may be many things we want to do to be like everyone else, including being able to do things that are physi-

cally unsafe for us—like driving a car, or riding a bicycle in traffic, if one is legally blind. Each handicapped person must personally come to terms with these limitations. But other goals may be attainable for us, presenting challenges that are not physically unsafe or harmful to anyone. The only difference is that, depending upon one's physical challenge, to achieve some of these challenges or goals, rules may have to be adapted to afford the opportunity. In these areas, open the door for us. We have a lot to offer.

The Door Was Opened, and I Entered

When my father died, Rabbi Kalender explained that it is customary to perform a mitzvah in memory of a loved one. I thought hard about what I wanted to do. I asked if reading Torah would be appropriate, for this was something women were not permitted to do when I became a Bat Mitzvah. Rabbi Kalender was delighted. He did not tell me this was something I could not do because of my disability. He did not discuss the traditional prohibitions that would have prevented me from reading Torah. With his help and my hard work, we made it happen.

Chanting Torah on Shabbat morning is an amazing experience—one of the most special and joyous that I have ever felt. It is my way of connecting with God, and the feeling is quite mystical. As I write this essay, I have read three times, and I am working on my fourth. My feelings and connections to God just seem to grow—each reading is special to me in its own way.

If this is something you want to try, I urge you to find a way. I urge all of you to seek the things in life that are important to you. It may be difficult to achieve, but if it's something you really want to do—*work at it!* It is time well-spent, and if you procrastinate, it may be too late. Whatever it may be for you, find your own “Joy of Torah”.

Debbie Weber grew up in Silver Spring and minored in Hebrew at the University of Maryland. Debbie and her husband Mark moved to Virginia in 1981. She is active in the Northern Virginia Jewish community, currently serving as Vice-President of Membership at the JCCNV.

Psalm 29 (Mizmor L'David)

1 A Psalm of David.

Ascribe unto the LORD, O ye sons of might,
Ascribe unto the LORD glory and strength,

2 Ascribe unto the LORD the glory due his name,
Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.

3 The voice of the LORD is upon the waters;
The God of glory thunders,
Even the LORD upon many waters.

4 The voice of the LORD is powerful:
The voice of the LORD is full of majesty.
5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
Yea, the LORD breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.

6 He makes the also to skip like a calf;
Lebanon and Sirion like a young wild-ox.

7 The voice of the LORD hews out flames of fire.

8 The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
The LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

9 The voice of the LORD makes the hinds to calve,
And strips the forests bare;
And in His temple all say: 'Glory.'

10 The LORD sat enthroned at the flood;
Yea, the LORD sits as King forever.

11 The LORD will give strength unto His people;
The LORD will bless His people with peace. ¹

Can You Hear Me Now? Good!

Psalm 29 (Mizmor L'David) and the Voice of God on Shabbat

By

Lisa Friedman

As a poem, *Mizmor L'David* (Psalm 29) is challenging and intriguing. When I first mastered its translation and syntax, it left me in shivers of awe. I immediately recognized the source of its effect on me—the repetitions of the phrase “the voice of God” and the curious manner in which that voice is described.

The evocation of God’s voice contains no actual similes, symbols, images or full metaphors. The closest we come to any of those poetic structures is the first set of descriptions:

Kol Adonai al ha-mayim, Eil ha-kovod birim, Adonai al mayim rabim.

The voice of the Lord is upon the waters;

The God of glory thunders,

Even the Lord upon many waters.²

Even here, however, the images are ambiguous—God’s voice is not rendered as thunder itself, nor as the sound of water, but as “upon water,” whatever we may take that to mean. We hear a collection of verbs and adjectives, with no word-picture of the owner of the voice. Nor do we hear the voice’s sound; instead, we hear about the its attributes and effects. In this way, each reader or listener is led into an interior mediation, to mentally supply the sound he or she imagines. For example, the *Soncino Psalms* and the Silverman siddur both gloss Psalm 29 as “a storm picture,” while other explications do not, yet all offer compelling and satisfying readings.

From these realizations, it is only a small step to the following questions: what is Psalm 29 doing in the final procession back to the Ark? Who placed it there, and why has it endured in that position?

Psalm 29 Enters the Shabbat Liturgy

The siddur as we know it had already begun to exist by the tenth century. Although it was obviously not yet in print, it in-

cluded a service consisting of two basic elements, instruction (Torah reading) and prayer. However, Psalm 29 did not enter the liturgy until the sixteenth century. At that time, a group of Jewish mystics living in Tzfat (a town in the Galilee) created the Kabbalat Shabbat sequence we still use today.

Living in Tzfat was Rabbi Isaac Luria, who developed the branch of mysticism known as the Kabbalah, and among his group was Solomon Alkabetz, who wrote *L'chab Dodi*. His theme of welcoming the Sabbath bride came from the Talmudic description in *Shabbat* 119a:

R. Hanina robed himself and stood at sunset of Sabbath eve [and] exclaimed, 'Come and let us go forth to welcome the queen Sabbath.' R. Yannai donned his robes on Sabbath eve and exclaimed, 'Come, O bride, Come, O bride!'

Alkabetz is also thought to have initiated the group's custom of going into the fields just before sunset on Friday, to physically welcome the Sabbath bride and escort her back to the synagogue.

The group of mystics chose Psalms 95-99 and Psalm 29 to precede *L'chab Dodi* in the Kabbalat Shabbat service. In this context, the psalms were seen as a series of "nature" poems, each one depicting a successive day of creation, culminating in *L'chab Dodi*, and followed by Psalm 92, the only psalm which actually deals with the Sabbath.³ Nearly 500 years later, independent of the changing popularity of the Kabbalah itself, this sequence is prayed before Friday night Ma'ariv in shuls around the world, complete with ritual behaviors (rising on the last verse of *L'chab Dodi*, facing the door and bowing to the bride) recalling the original custom.

Receiving the Torah, Hearing God's Voice

While Psalm 29 functions in the Kabbalat Shabbat sequence as a representative of the sixth day of creation, on Shabbat morning it stands alone, apart from any sequence, and has a different function. We sing it as the Torah is carried in procession to return to the Ark. It was probably placed in this position in the service around the same time as Kabbalat Shabbat was written, and perhaps by the same people. Three main lines of reasoning seem to have informed the Psalm's Shabbat morning selection and placement, each stemming (as is typical in Jewish liturgy) from the psalm's content.

1. We Sing What David Sang

Havu lardonai b'nai elim, Havu lardonai k'vod va-oz,

Havu lardonai k'vod sh'mo, Hishtachavu lardonai b'hadrat kodesh.

Ascribe unto the Lord, O ye sons of might, Ascribe unto the Lord glory and strength,

Ascribe unto the Lord the glory due his name, Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.

The opening lines of Psalm 29 are almost an exact replica of King David's song as he transferred the Holy Ark to the Temple in Jerusalem.⁴

Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name, bring tribute and enter before Him,

Bow down to the Lord majestic in holiness. (1 Chronicles 16: 28-29)⁵

Thus it is an appropriate song of joy as we return the Torah to the Ark, making our weekly Shabbat services a reenactment of that time in David's life.

2. The Numbers Add Up—But Who's Counting?

But if it were simply another joyful processional text, Psalm 29 could just as easily be placed before the Torah reading as after it. Why was it placed at the end of the Torah service?

Rashi taught that the 18 mentions of God's name in Psalm 29 gave rise to the choice of 18 blessings for the *Shimone Esrei* (18 Blessings-Amidah). In addition, the phrase "the voice of God" appears in the text seven times, defined in seven different ways. Talmudic thinkers linked the Psalm's first three descriptions of the voice of God to the first three benedictions of the *Shimone Esrei*. Later thinkers explained that the Shabbat *Amidah* contains seven benedictions, and that the number is derived from this Psalm, thus justifying the placement of Psalm 29 in the service, directly prior to Musaf.⁶

3. Once Again, We Stand At Mt. Sinai

Centuries before Psalm 29 entered the liturgy, the midrashim of Maimonides and others held that Psalm 29 is about the giving of the Torah, and refers explicitly to *Exodus* 20:15-17 and *Deuteronomy* 5:1-5, 19-24.⁷ Using it at this place in the service thus makes our Shabbat Torah service a reenactment of the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai. This usage would be consonant with Heschel's general concept of

Shabbat being a sacred moment in eternal time. Psalm 29 would then offer us one more way of being at once ourselves and every Jew, in our time and at Mt. Sinai, even as we are being “godlike,” resting as God did on the seventh day of creation.

About That Voice

15 All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance. 16 “You speak to us,” they said to Moses, “and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.”

(Exodus 20, 15-16) ⁸

Still more interpretation is available from the Midrash, this time addressing not only the content but also the psalm’s poetic form. Rashi stipulates that Psalm 29 says, “The voice of God in strength,” instead of “in full strength,” because God modulates His voice according to the koach of each individual—that each hears according to his or her capacity, because God does not wish to overwhelm His creations.⁹

Hence as we sing the psalm, we are affirming that in the Torah reading, each of us has just heard God’s voice, according to our respective innate capacities. Furthermore, each has assimilated the Torah reading according to our own capabilities as well. Another argument for Heschel’s eternal moment in time—and maybe also an argument for the raw power of the poem.

Although the liturgy makers did not think like moderns—deconstructing syntax to appreciate emotional value—we may assume that as human beings, they experienced the impact of Psalm 29’s structure. Listening and singing, they, too, dipped into their imaginations to supply the sound of thunder, majesty, strength, splendor, the cedars breaking, the wilderness convulsing, the hinds giving birth. The ambiguous imagery hints at both destruction and creation, in a way that confounds our logical minds and causes powerful feelings to spring up in us. No wonder some of us shiver as we contemplate the words we sing.

A final thought on the placement of Psalm 29 at the end of the Torah service. From a certain point-of-view, its function is like that of the man in the television commercials, wandering randomly, holding a mobile phone and periodically saying, “Can you hear me now? Good.” He visits several remote places, but no matter how

odd the location, the person on the other end of the phone seems always able to hear him. These scenes are followed by a deep voice, naming the corporate sponsor.

We return the Torah with a meditation on the voice we have just heard, and are meant to hear forever. The text turns us inward, and we create our own images from the words we are given. Curiously, this process allows us to do exactly as the *Shema* enjoins us, “Hear O Israel.” My emphasis is on the opening command—we are to *hear*. We must tune in to the feared voice, and we must further be aware, in replacing the Torah, not only of what we heard, but also of the fact that we have heard.

We return the Torah with an internal question...Did I hear Him then? Can I hear Him now? Good.

“If you will obey My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all the peoples.”

Notes

¹ *The Soncino Books of the Bible: The Psalms*, ed. Rev. Dr. A Cohen (New York: Soncino Press Ltd, 1992), pp. 83-8.

² *Ibid.* The available translations all differ slightly. Because the language of the *Soncino Psalms* translation is most closely aligned with that of the *JPS Tanakh*, I use it here. I have modernized the verb endings.

³ Abraham E. Milgram, *Jewish Worship* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1971), Chapter 19: “The Mystic Stream in Jewish Liturgy,” pp. 474-506.

⁴ *Tehillim, Book I*, ed. Rabbi Abraham Chaim Feuer (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., June 1985-January 2001), p.347. This edition provides voluminous citations to the Talmud and the Midrash.

⁵ *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publications Society, 1999), p.1924.

⁶ *Tehillim, Book I*, pp. 348-349.

⁷ JewishGates.org, *Ramban on Yitro*, http://www.jewishgates.com/file.asp?File_ID=1420

⁸ *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, p. 156.

⁹ *Tehillim, Book I*, p. 350.

Lisa Friedman, a psychotherapist in private practice, edits the Olam Tikvah *Contemporary* and assists with other publications projects.

Olam Tikvateinu

Congregation Olam Tikvah
3800 Glenbrook Road
Fairfax, Virginia 22031-3199

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