

Every spring for the past decade or so, I have been invited by Akiva high school director Amnon Ophir and by our very own Rabbi Jeffrey to meet with a group of Israeli teens from Cleveland's sister city, Beit Shean as part of a local rabbinic panel. This annual visit of Israeli youth is part of a program sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Cleveland whose goal is connect Cleveland Jewish teens more deeply with their Israeli peers and with Israeli society as a whole, and to do the same for Israeli teens vis a vis American Jewish culture. And, I think it's important to note that there are a large number of Kol HaLev teens over the years who have been able to participate in this program and who have benefitted immensely from it both in terms of personal growth and an expanded perspective on the Jewish world.

However, our local Jewish teens generally do not participate in this particular meeting with the panel of rabbis since its express purpose is to expand the Israeli's understanding of the wider range of Jewish identity and practice that exists within the American Jewish community, as compared to what they have grown up with in Israel.

And every year, Amnon goes out of his way to make sure I know that he considers having a Reconstructionist rabbi on this panel to be very important since we tend to be the most different theologically from what many of these teens see as normative Judaism. Amnon never tires of encouraging me to be completely straight forward with them about basic Reconstructionist understandings such as Mordechai Kaplan's belief that God is more of a process than a being, that Reconstructionist practice has officially eliminated the idea of Jews as the chosen people from our liturgy, and that our leaning is to view the Torah as a completely human document rather than one that was dictated to Moses by God at Mt. Sinai or intentionally inspired by God using the vehicle of the prophetic mind.

And sure enough, every year, as I present these ideas, there is an impressive degree of outrage among some members of the Israeli group, who protest vehemently that what I've presented cannot be called Judaism. Such a moment, by the way, always brings a satisfied smile to Amnon's face. The string of questions that follow my presentation have become predictable.

There is always at least one student in the group who wonders whether there is anything identifiably Jewish at a Kol HaLev service since he has inferred from my words that we have apparently eliminated Torah and prayer from our repertoire of permitted behaviors. I then have the delightful job of deepening the group's confusion when I inform them that if they were to attend one of our Shabbat or holiday services, they would recognize the majority of what we do as being completely familiar to them from their own synagogues.

While a number of our melodies may be new, the Hebrew that is chanted would be 95% the same. And perhaps most strikingly, they would see that the way we treat our Torah scroll does not differ in any significant way from what they would expect to see in more traditional congregation.

They would see that we keep our scroll in an ark and that we rise as a community whenever the ark is open and whenever the scroll is taken out or replaced. They would see that we march the scroll around the chapel or sanctuary and that many of those in attendance engage in the traditional ritual of touching the scroll with their tallit or their prayer book and then gently put that item to their lips. They would see that a person from our community has prepared diligently to chant from the scroll using traditional cantillation and they would see myself or another community member who stands next to the person chanting to ensure that the letters and vowels are pronounced correctly. Finally, at the conclusion of the Torah service, they would see that we call up two people to lift and replace the cover on the Torah scroll.

And they might even notice the looks of relief on some of the faces in the room, especially at beginning and end of the year when the two sides of the scroll are not evenly balanced, as the scroll is raised in the traditional way, and successfully makes its way back into the ark.

As I describe the surprisingly familiar structure and feel of our service to the Israeli teens, they always seem to relax a little, but there are usually at least a couple of them who feel compelled to push me a little further and ask why we would continue to treat the Torah scroll with such care and honor if we do not view it as having come from a Divine source.

I always tell them that this is a very good question, and that in fact I sometimes get the very same question from members of my own community. However, this question, when it comes from someone within Kol HaLev, has an entirely different trajectory. It comes from a sense of identification with a typical Reconstructionist orientation towards the big questions of religious life, and it can express an uncomfortable tension between that modern philosophical orientation on one hand, and the fairly traditional habits of practice that have become normative for us in our community's ritual life on the other.

So, why do we continue to engage in rituals, and recite words of prayer that to many suggest and reinforce the idea that the Torah is very literally a gift from God when this belief is far from our movement's spiritual center of gravity? And, to sharpen the question even further, going beyond the strictly theological issue, why continue to confer a sacred status on the text of the Torah when we are confronted on a fairly regular basis with examples of narratives and laws with whose content we must mightily struggle to find even acceptable interpretations, let alone inspiring ones?

The traditional readings for the first and second day of this very holiday come to mind as instances of this challenge. In these two Torah readings, we see our founding patriarch Abraham being told by God not once but twice to put each of his son's into a life threatening situation, only to be saved at the last moment by Divine reprieve. I mean, let's face it, it's the kind of thing that in today's world could land you in a court of law if you're not careful.

In the context of an hour long conversation with a group of Israeli teens, this kind of question is certainly interesting and provocative to bat around, but in the context of our own community, it goes to the heart of how we understand ourselves as human beings and as Jews.

And this particular year, such a question presents itself with even greater insistence, given that we collectively are investing a not insignificant amount of financial and human resources into strengthening this dimension of our community's ritual life. In just over two weeks' time, we will be receiving the first of two visits from a professional scribe or sofer, Rabbi Kevin Hale, who will be helping us get to know our current Torah scroll in a completely new way, as well as teaching us about the practical and spiritual elements of scribal work.

Over the course of the year, he will also be involved in repairing our scroll and bringing it up to a level of readability such that it will be considered kosher once again. And last but not least, he may well be involved in helping us to find and acquire an additional used Torah scroll. This would have the effect of significantly increasing the longevity of our current scroll as well as increasing the range of ritual and educational experiences that we can offer to our membership.

Given all of this, it seemed to me that today might be a good time to share some of my own reflections on how I make sense of our community's interesting combination of relatively traditional practice and relatively non-traditional theology, especially as it is expressed in our ongoing deep connection to the most significant ritual object in our people's religious universe.

The beginning of my response has to do with the scroll's undisputed ties to ancient Jewish experience. While the particular scroll that we have here is likely only a century to a century and a half old, it is fairly certain that it very closely resembles the scrolls that were used in synagogues going back almost two millennia and very likely even further than that. The very fact that this object has been a central part of our culture's self-understanding and the core of its spiritual sustenance for such a long period of time gives it a certain emotional heft without even opening up the conversation about its content or the nature of its origin.

I think from this perspective, you could analogize it to a very old family heirloom that may not have the strongest aesthetic appeal, but which is proudly displayed in a person's home because of the powerful message it conveys about connections between the past and the present.

Beyond this is the fact that for all of the places where the Torah's content seems so clearly tethered to and refracted through a society much different from our own, there are also numerous moments in its laws and narratives where this text reaches stunning levels of moral and spiritual insight. So much so that it completely transcends its own original cultural boundaries and continues to provide potent spiritual challenges to us denizens of the 21st century.

What comes to mind for me in this vein is the Torah's repeated insistence on taking care of the strangers in our midst, always reminding us that our own experience as strangers in Egypt places a special obligation on us to exert ourselves on behalf of those who are located in this vulnerable situation.

There are also examples of this in many of the statutes in the portion of Kedoshim in the book of Leviticus, from the requirement not to stand idly by when someone is in trouble, to the expectation that we not exploit the lives of others by using them as fodder for our own social interaction, to what has been called the "greatest principle" of the Torah that states we should treat those we encounter the way we would want someone else to treat us: A deceptively complicated and demanding practice that remains beyond the reach of many of us, much of the time. These and many other Biblical teachings continue to represent a standard of consciousness and behavior that few would have the temerity to claim that they meet in their day to day lives.

In addition to these nuggets of spiritual treasure, there is another dimension of the Torah text that continues to draw many of us back into study year after year. I am thinking of the richness and open-endedness of many narrative passages that just seem to get deeper and more complex the more time we spend with them, even those such as the story of the binding of Isaac, that on the surface present such a jarring and upsetting message. This story has actually become a touchstone for me in understanding the incredibly subtle ways in which the text of the Torah unfolds its meaning, often seeming to create a kind of underground narrative that implicitly critiques the version of the story that resides on the surface. Here is just one small example in connection with that story.

Most people who read this story tend to focus most on the moment when the voice of the angel stops Abraham from carrying out what was apparently God's original request to sacrifice Isaac as an offering to God on the top of a mountain. What they do not typically notice is the fact that Isaac does not actually come down the mountain with Abraham after he is unbound from the altar. Not only that, but it's not at all clear that in the aftermath of this occurrence, Abraham and Isaac ever speak to each other again. And the final subtle but telling piece of evidence for a textually embedded critique of Abraham (and perhaps even God) is that it appears to be the case that Abraham and Sarah take up residence in two different localities following this episode. This can be inferred from the fact that upon Sarah's death, Abraham must travel from his own home town of Be'er Sheva to the city of Kiryat Arba where Sarah had been living, for her funeral.

All of these nuances in the text push us to discern fault lines in Abraham's family that appear to be directly connected with Isaac's experience as a near-sacrifice, and they call us to re-assess the meaning of the story from a very different angle than the typical one which sees a lesson for us in Abraham's heroic submission to the Divine will. And this is but one example of many where reading a Torah text with scrutiny and sensitivity can yield new insights and implications that would otherwise remain undiscovered.

So, I would argue that on both of these levels, the Torah can stand on its own merit as the foundational sacred text of our people and tradition even without assuming its Divine origin, and even as we acknowledge the existence within it of passages that strike us as difficult, if not impossible to embrace on the level of personal inspiration.

If we open ourselves, we do continue to encounter in the content of the scroll, the presence of undeniably compelling spiritual teachings, and we do continue to discover the many narratives of depth and subtlety that speak directly to the dilemmas and ambiguities of the human condition.

However, the value of the raw content of the Torah scroll does not by any means exhaust its continued importance in Jewish life. Because, in addition to being a sacred object, the scroll also symbolizes a sacred process, which is, our ongoing collective commitment, to the search for truth and to the endeavor of living a life dedicated to fostering goodness and pursuing justice. And I think “collective” is truly the operative term here. For while there are many great spiritual traditions that exist in our world, I do not know if there is another one that has placed quite this much emphasis on the communal dimension of spiritual life, both as an incubator for new insight and as the living expression of how spiritual principles must be put into practice.

This strong communal dynamic has generated over the course of our people’s history a mind-boggling amount of thought and teaching on how to live a meaningful and holy life, all of which has been seen as rooted in the original content of the Torah, but much of which has in fact evolved in very different directions from some of the foundational beliefs and practices that we find there. However, to my mind, the distance that we often perceive between Biblical religion and our current ways of thinking and practicing Judaism only lends greater power to this symbolic aspect of our ongoing connection to the Torah scroll.

It clearly stands for the historical and future unfolding of our communal conversation around truth and goodness. And though that conversation has, for millennia, been seen as exclusively internal to our culture, within the last 800 years, there has been a growing conviction that our pursuit of the Torah process must include and integrate the insights that come out of the general quest for knowledge and understanding in the world at large. And I think that we can be proud of the fact that our movement has been at the forefront of fostering this perspective within the Jewish world for the past three quarters of a century.

For me, the bottom line is that the value of Torah for us as modern people is not dependent on any particular story of how it came to be. It proves its worth over and over again on a daily and weekly basis in our conversations, in our study and in our aspiration to improve our world. I don’t think there is any doubt that Torah is alive and well within Reconstructionist Judaism and within Kol HaLev.

As an ancient document that describes the spiritual and cultural foundations of our people, it continues to compel our engagement. And as a trans-generational process of building a repository of wisdom and of motivation to pursue a life of integrity and contribution, it is truly, in the well known words of our tradition, an Eitz Chaim, a tree of life. May we as a community take advantage of the rare opportunity we will have this year to broaden and deepen our relationship to Torah on all these levels and as we do so may we bring blessing into our own lives, into the life of the Jewish people and into the world as a whole.

Shanah tovah Umtukah, Gut Yontif!