

Nitzavim 5765 Torah

Shabbat Shalom.

One of the great privileges of being a congregational rabbi is the opportunity to share with individuals and families some of the most significant moments of their lives. At some occasions – like a Bat Mitzvah, naming a newborn, or asking for God’s blessing upon a couple who is about to be married – we celebrate publicly, reciting a traditional liturgical formula at the Torah. This prayer, the *Mi Shebeirakh*, literally, the One who blessed, includes our hope that the child (or for the couple, that one day they will have a child who) will grow to a life of Torah, *huppah*, and *ma’asim tovim*.

Most of that phrase is pretty clear. *Ma’asim tovim* - good deeds - include: helping people, giving to *tzedakah* - charity - and participating in social justice and activism. The *huppah*, having a Jewish wedding, represents the continuity of the Jewish people. But, what is that third element? What is a life filled with Torah? Just the other day, I was asked, what exactly is the Torah? That is, in essence, both a simple and complicated question because Torah exists on so many different levels.

The word Torah comes from the verb *l’horot*, to instruct, to teach, and thus, the Torah is the instruction, the teaching, sometimes translated as the law.

So, one way of understanding the Torah is that it simply is “The Teaching.” When anywhere in the five books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy, it mentions “Torah,” it refers to the teaching, the instruction that God has given to us, normally through Moses as an intermediary.

Thus, Torah, on its most basic level, is simply a teaching. Later it expanded to include the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy and then it becomes The Torah, the *Humash*, Pentateuch, the The Five Books of Moshe, which constitute the first element in the key acronym “TaNaKH,” the other two pieces being the *Nevi’im*, the Prophets, and the *Ketuvim*, the Writings - all three together making up the word Tanakh or the Hebrew Bible.

So, now, we have two definitions. One is instruction, the second is the first component of the Hebrew Bible, but there really is another level. When people mention, “I’m studying Torah,” or “Are you learning Torah?” or “That was a really nice dvar Torah!” they often are not limiting themselves to the first five books of the Bible. We might deduce that “Torah” should then mean “teaching,” our first definition. But, that teaching refers solely to God’s teaching. Torah has come to encompass the Jewish tradition as it has developed over the last three millennia and continues to this very day, to this very moment.

When we say we are involved in Torah study, it could be any Jewish religious study and any Jewish religious text including the Torah, the entire Tanakh, and continuing through the rabbinic period, medieval period, and, of course, today. Thus, Torah comes to mean any of our sacred texts in any period of Jewish history.

I still want to dig a little bit deeper and understand a little bit more about what and where is our Torah. This week’s Torah reading, *Parashat Nitzavim*, discusses the location of Torah. As Charlene mentioned in her dvar Torah, the Torah states that it is “*lo bashamayim hi* – not in the heavens or across the sea.” (30:13, 23)

The Torah is instructing us that God’s teaching is not something that should be distant from us, but is something that should be very close to us. It wasn’t making a geographic point.

By the way, in Eastern Europe a few generations ago, there was a wry rabbinic remark on this verse: “The Torah is not across the sea;” i.e., that there was no Torah in America, which they saw as the land full of assimilation and other temptations.

Nevertheless, the import of the Torah not being across the sea is that it is a gift to the Jewish people. In the ancient world, some civilizations kept their sacred texts locked up, often at the base of a mountain. Only certain elite members of society were allowed to look at it and study it. Judaism was quite appealing to many in the ancient world since its teachings were not only available to everyone, but everyone was commanded to study it. This is cited as one of the three reasons many converted to Judaism in the first century of the Common Era and why many are attracted to our tradition today.

The Midrash, our rabbis, take the phrase “The Torah is not in the heavens” to mean that God is no longer the possessor of the Torah. It is now given to human beings to interpret, to fulfill, to learn, or, God forbid, to forsake. The Torah, our divine revelation, is really simply a foundation, and it is up to all of us to build it a home that will make it ever relevant to our lives.

But, what do these two characterizations “not across the sea” and “not in the heavens” really have in common, and why does the Torah use them both to describe itself? Both of these places are distant, unattainable. For the ancient Israelites, the heavens were clearly unreachable, the sea was not navigable.

The Torah, here, is taking issue with making the central religious text accessible only to an elite, to a priesthood. Similarly, a common misunderstanding is that the Torah is solely in the hands of our rabbis and teachers, that they are the ones who have the keys to unlock its secrets. But that is not the case. Where is the Torah? Our parashah states: “*Ki karov eilekha* – the Torah is close to you, more than that, the text continues: “*b’fikha uvlvavekha* – it is in your mouth and in your heart.” Thus, the Torah should be seen as something that is so integral it is enmeshed in your very body and soul.

Rashi divides the verse “in your mouth” to mean the oral law and “in your heart” to be the written law. Another great commentator, the Sefat Emet, adds, “the written law is in your heart because the Torah is inscribed in the heart of every Jew.” This inwardness forms the core of the Sefat Emet’s notion of spirituality, but if Torah remains solely external, far away, somewhere out there, in the heavens or across the sea, then we have not grasped its essence. We have left it in the heavens and beyond the sea.

The mitzvah of *tefillin* literally ties the words of Torah to our bodies each weekday morning when we take small boxes with pieces of parchment containing four paragraphs of the Torah and strap them on. The Prophet, Ezekiel, takes this even further. He physically ingests the Torah scroll. While not something I hope you will do, Ezekiel acts out for all ages the central truth that what does not become part of you may be scaffolding or some kind of external law, but it is not Torah. Torah must be part of our very being. When we ask, “Where is the Torah?” hopefully, the answer is that it has penetrated our own intellect and heart; it is within us.

Thus, we see that Torah has different meanings on different levels. It grew from laws and instructions to five books to the whole spectrum of Jewish learning and Jewish texts.

But, Torah at its core is something much deeper, it has to effect some intense internal process. Today, a mere two and a half days before Rosh Hashanah, we are keenly aware of how our tradition seeks to do internal work as well as external.

It is not enough to study Torah, it is not enough to fulfill the commandments, which, of course, might be what a Torah life is all about. Torah and studying commandments are integral, our ritual mitzvot are critical, and, of course, the interpersonal mitzvot are also at our very center of what it means to be a human being and to be a Jew. But, Judaism demands even more than that. It seeks to work on the inside of every person, infusing our thought processes, changing our way of relating to ourselves.

As we approach these High Holy Days, we are aware of the fact that we all need to do introspective and internal work. All of us need self-examination. We need it throughout the year at intervals, but we need it intensely every year during this time of the Hebrew month of Elul and as we come near to the High Holy Days. We need to do this *teshuvah* – to consider what is within us. How do we live our lives? How do we see the world? How do we relate to other people? How can we look at the world more and more through a Torah lens? That's what it means to live a life of Torah. It is one where we have connections with other people and understand that everything is not about us and ourselves. It is looking beyond ourselves. That is truly what Torah is about.

Torah involves self-empowerment because it is given to all of us. Rabbis are not any closer to God or Torah than anyone else. We, hopefully, have a degree of mastery over the texts of our tradition. But, my goal as a rabbi is to share that mastery, to light a fire underneath each and every one of you to study Torah so that you will be inspired to learn and fulfill God's mitzvot and live God's will. Torah is all about seeking to change ourselves and through that, change the world.

And so, every time we recite that prayer for a new child or for a new couple, when we ask for the blessings of Torah, *huppah*, and *ma'asim tovim* – good deeds - we seek not only a life of a mitzvot, commandments, observance, and Torah study, but also the internal change that, God willing, will lead every Jew, one day, to the wedding canopy for a healthy relationship and will enable all of us to do the great acts of loving kindness – the *hesed* that we are all in need of during the entire year and most especially, during this most intense period.

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