

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

needs to focus its adherents on the core text in order to sustain its identity. Built into the very concept of a closed canonical culture is the notion that at a certain point the story will stop. When we reach the end of the Torah we put the story of Joshua to one side, along with the entire historiography of the conquest of Canaan; turning our backs on the future we will head back towards pre-history. The biblical canon is brought to life, or better, "given a constantly renewable lease on life" (Yerushalmi, "Zachor"), by our predetermined relationship with re-reading.

The return to Bereshit is a source of eternal youth, but it is also filled with an anxiety that Jung alludes to. As the snake twists its head back into pre-history to consume its tail, the particularist tale of Exodus and Sinai is forced to confront the shadow of its universalist beginnings.

So imagine for a second what it would be like if, instead of heading back to the start of Bereshit, we allowed ourselves to read on into the book of Joshua. We would surely have to confront the crisis sparked off by Moses' death and described by the Amora Rav in Masechet T'murah 16a:

Rav Judah reported in the name of Rav: When Moses departed [this world] for the Garden of Eden he said to Joshua: 'Ask me concerning all the doubts you have'. He replied to him: 'My Master, have I ever left you for one hour and gone elsewhere? Did you not write concerning me in the Torah: "But his servant Joshua the son of Nun departed not out of the tabernacle?" (Ex. 33, 1) Immediately the strength [of Moses] weakened and [Joshua] forgot three hundred laws and there arose [in his mind] seven hundred doubts [concerning laws]. Then all the Israelites rose up to kill him. The Holy One, blessed be He, then said to him [Joshua]: 'It is not possible to tell you. Go and occupy their attention in war...

Rav understands that the death of Moses generates a huge sense of loss of continuity amongst the Israelites, which is then sublimated in violence towards the other inhabitants of the land. The book of Joshua deals with the Israelites' anxiety after Moses' death.

Additionally, were we to continue reading onwards instead of turning back to Bereshit, we would soon lose our sense of the coherence of the canon. Where does our story end? Why stop at the end of the Tanach - what about the rest of the Jewish story? Closed canonical cultures seem to be doing well in the contemporary world partly because they provide a sense of safety and closure. Central to the creation of such cultures lies the moment of "swallowing our tail".

Whether we read on after the death of Moses, or whether we choose yet again to return our shoulders to our Sisyphean stone and go back to the start of Bereshit, we will be beset by tension and anxiety. Either way we will need to

steel ourselves to the challenge: "Chazak, Chazak V'Nitchazek" – "Be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another!"



TORAH SPARKS

Simchat Torah & Bereshit

October 13-14, 2017 | 23-24 Tishrei 5778

Simchat Torah | Deuteronomy 33:1-34:12, Genesis 1:1-2:3
(Etz Hayim p. 1202-1212, 3-12; Hertz p. 909-917, 2-6)

Maftir | Numbers 29:35-30:1 (Etz Hayim p. 936; Hertz p. 698)
Haftarah | Joshua 1:1-18 (Etz Hayim p. 1266-1268; Hertz p. 984-986)

Shabbat Mevarechim Hahodesh | Parashat Bereshit | Genesis 1:1-6:8
(Etz Hayim p. 3-34; Hertz p. 2-20)

Triennial | Genesis 2:4-4:26 (Etz Hayim p. 12-29; Hertz p. 6-16)
Haftarah | Isaiah 42:5-43:10 (Etz Hayim p. 35-40; Hertz p. 21-25)

Dvar Torah

Rabbi Joel Levy, Rosh Yeshiva, Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem

The image of a serpent biting its own tail is prevalent in many different mythologies. It appeared as early as 1600 BCE in Egypt, and then later amongst the Greeks who called it the *Ouroboros*, meaning "devouring its tail".

The psychologist Jung saw the *Ouroboros* as an innate, universal, idea:

In the image of the Ouroboros lies the thought of devouring oneself and turning oneself into a circulatory process...The Ouroboros is a dramatic symbol for the integration and assimilation of the opposite...it is said of the Ouroboros that he slays himself and brings himself to life, fertilizes himself and gives birth to himself. He symbolises the One, who proceeds from the clash of opposites, and he therefore constitutes the secret of the prima materia which [...] unquestionably stems from man's unconscious. - C.G.Jung, Collected Works, Vol. 14 para. 51

Does this imagery help us to understand what is happening at that fateful moment when we turn, yet again, from the end of the Torah back to its very beginning? That instant, when we return to the start of Bereshit, is the moment when Judaism "slays itself and brings itself to life."

(Dvar Torah continued on back page...)

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In cultures not based around a primary canonical text there is a free choice of stories and they can be read in any order. However a closed canonical culture

Dvar Haftarah

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Prophets were often very unpopular characters, saying things people did not want to hear, often in particularly painful ways. In Isaiah's opening prophecy, before the Babylonian Exile, he is instructed to tell the people, sarcastically: "Hear, indeed, but do not understand; see, indeed, but do not grasp." (6:9) These bitter and biting words would not draw Israel closer to God, nor were they intended to, as God wanted Isaiah to "Dull that people's mind, stop its ears and seal its eyes – lest seeing with its eyes and hearing with its ears, it also grasps with its mind and repents and saves itself." (6:10) God's anger at Israel's disloyalty had reached the point that punishment was necessary and inevitable.

But in our Haftarah, some hundred or so years later, we find that the now exiled people STILL hear without understanding and see without grasping. This time, however, what they miss are the signs of their impending redemption! The prophet takes them to task, saying "Listen you who are deaf; you blind ones, look up and see! Who is so blind as My servant, so deaf as the messenger that I send? Who is so blind as the chosen one, so blind as the servant of the Lord? Seeing many things, he gives no heed, with ears open, he hears nothing." (42:18-20)

A modern Israeli biblical scholar, Amos Hacham, takes an interesting approach to this verse, reading it as a *dialogue*, a bitter exchange between the prophet and his audience. The prophet calls them blind and deaf and they retort in kind, calling him blind and deaf! He tells them they are missing the truth - that the same God that caused their exile also desires, and will enable, their return. But they say that HE is missing the truth - that they are a ruined people living under the boot of a great power.

At this point, the prophet sums up the tragic situation: "The Lord desires His [servant's] vindication, that he (the servant - Israel) may magnify and glorify [God's] Torah." But because Israel "... is a people plundered and despoiled: All of them are trapped in holes, imprisoned in dungeons." (See A. Hacham, Isaiah, Daat L'mikra, pp. 451-3)

Too often, we are certain that we hear and understand, see and grasp. Being called "deaf and blind" could and should shock us into re-examining "our truth" but more often we become defensive and double down. This can not

only make bad outcomes inevitable, but can also delay or defer good outcomes.

Isaiah reminds us that when we are being our own worst enemies, even sarcastic and insulting messengers can be the conduit for the divine message.

Table Talk

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Parashat Vezot Habracha, read only on Simchat Torah and never on a regular Shabbat, brings the Torah and Moshe's life to a close.

- 1) The blessings/personal mentions that Moshe gives to each tribe (chapter 33) might have been his last words to the people. Why do you think that Moshe does not give one blessing to the entire nation together?
- 2) Moshe goes up on the mountain alone (34:1). Who might we have expected to go up with him at this point? Why do you think that no one is going with him?

Chazak Chazak VeNitchazek!

On Shabbat, we return again to Parashat Bereshit.

- 3) The first creation story (Bereshit 1:1-2:3) ends with the Seventh Day (2:1-3). What Does God do on that day? How do you think the Seventh Day/Shabbat is related to all the days that preceded it?
- 4) In the second creation story (2:4-25) Adam (the Human) is placed in the Garden of Eden. What is the purpose of placing him there (v.15)? What do you think is included in that definition? What does it teach us about the Torah's view regarding an ideal existence for Humans?
- 5) By the end of this Parasha we meet Noah, born 10 generations after Adam (5:28-29). Why is he named Noah? (Try to look at the Hebrew. You may notice that in *Midrash Shem* – interpreting a name - the sound of the name is more important than the grammatical meaning of it.) What is the situation of humanity at this point (see also 6:1-8)?

At the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem we offer students of all backgrounds an opportunity to engage with Jewish texts in a dynamic, inclusive, and collaborative environment. We help students gain the skills necessary for Jewish learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in

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