

The Torah as God's Song: Parshat Vayelech

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At the end of his life, having given the Israelites at God's behest 612 commands, Moses gave them the final mitzvah: "Now, therefore, write down for yourselves this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be My witness against the people of Israel" (Deut. 31:19).

According to the plain sense of the verse, God was speaking to Moses and Joshua and was referring to the song in the following chapter, "Listen, O heavens, and I will speak; hear, O earth, the words of my mouth" (Deut. 32:1). However, Oral Tradition gave it a different and much wider interpretation, understanding it as a command for every Jew to write, or at least take some part in writing, a *Sefer Torah*:

Said Rabbah: Even though our ancestors have left us a scroll of the Torah, it is our religious duty to write one for ourselves, as it is said: "Now, therefore, write down for yourselves this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be My witness against the people of Israel." (Sanhedrin 21b)

The logic of the interpretation seems to be, first, that the phrase "write down for yourselves" could be construed as referring to every Israelite (Ibn Ezra), not just Moses and Joshua. Second, the passage goes on to say (Deut. 31:24): "Moses finished writing in the book the words of this law from beginning to end." The Talmud offers a third reason. The verse goes on to say: "That this song may be My witness against the people" – implying the Torah as a whole, not just the song in chapter 32 (Nedarim 38a).

Thus understood, Moses' final message to the Israelites was: "It is not enough that you have received the Torah from me. You must make it new again in every generation." The covenant was not to grow old. It had to be periodically renewed.

So it is to this day that Torah scrolls are still written as in ancient times, by hand, on parchment, using a quill – as were the Dead Sea Scrolls two thousand years ago. In a religion almost devoid of sacred objects (icons, relics), the Torah scroll is the nearest Judaism comes to endowing a physical entity with sanctity.

My earliest memories are of going to my late grandfather's *little beit midrash* in North London and being given the privilege, as a two or three-year-old child, of putting the bells on the Torah scroll after it had been lifted, rolled, and rebound in its velvet cover. Even then, I had a sense of

the awe in which the scroll was held by the worshippers in that little house of study and prayer. Many of them were refugees. They spoke with heavy accents redolent of worlds they had left, worlds that I later discovered had been destroyed in the Holocaust. There was an air of ineffable sadness about the tunes they sang – always in a minor key. But their love for the parchment scroll was palpable. I later defined it as their equivalent of the rabbinic tradition about the Ark in the wilderness: it carried those who carried it (Rashi to I Chr. 15:26). It was my first intimation that Judaism is the story of a love affair between a people and a book, the Book of books.

What, though – if we take the command to refer to the whole Torah and not just one chapter – is the significance of the word “song” (*shira*): “Now, therefore, write down for yourselves this song”? The word *shira* appears five times in this passage. It is clearly a key word. Why? On this, two nineteenth-century scholars offered striking explanations.

The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, 1816–1893, one of the great yeshiva heads of the nineteenth century) interprets it to mean that the whole Torah should be read as poetry, not prose; the word *shira* in Hebrew means both a song and a poem. To be sure, most of the Torah is written in prose, but the Netziv argued that it has two characteristics of poetry. First, it is allusive rather than explicit. It leaves unsaid more than is said. Secondly, like poetry, it hints at deeper reservoirs of meaning, sometimes by the use of an unusual word or sentence construction. Descriptive prose carries its meaning on the surface. The Torah, like poetry, does not.[1]

In this brilliant insight, the Netziv anticipates one of the great twentieth-century essays on biblical prose, Erich Auerbach’s “Odysseus’ Scar.”[2] Auerbach contrasts the narrative style of Genesis with that of Homer. Homer uses dazzlingly detailed descriptions so that each scene is set out pictorially as if bathed in sunlight. By contrast, biblical narrative is spare and understated. In the example Auerbach cites – the story of the binding of Isaac – we do not know what the main characters look like, what they are feeling, what they are wearing, what landscapes they are passing through.

The decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasised, what lies between is non-existent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed, only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed towards a single goal, remains mysterious and “fraught with background.”[3]

A completely different aspect is alluded to by Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein, author of the halachic code *Aruch HaShulchan*. [4] Epstein points out that the rabbinic literature is full of arguments, about which the Sages said: “These and those are the words of the living God.”[5]

This, says Epstein, is one of the reasons the Torah is called “a song” – because a song becomes more beautiful when scored for many voices interwoven in complex harmonies.

I would suggest a third dimension. The 613th command is not simply about the Torah, but about the duty to make the Torah new in each generation. To make the Torah live anew, it is not enough to hand it on cognitively – as mere history and law. It must speak to us affectively, emotionally.

Judaism is a religion of words, and yet whenever the language of Judaism aspires to the spiritual it breaks into song, as if the words themselves sought escape from the gravitational pull of finite meanings. There is something about melody that intimates a reality beyond our grasp, what William Wordsworth called *the sense sublime/Of something far more deeply interfused/Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns/And the round ocean and the living air.*[6] Words are the language of the mind. Music is the language of the soul.

The 613th command, to make the Torah new in every generation, symbolises the fact that though the Torah was given once, it must be received many times, as each of us, through our study and practice, strives to recapture the pristine voice heard at Mount Sinai. That requires emotion, not just intellect. It means treating Torah not just as words read, but also as a melody sung. The Torah is God’s libretto, and we, the Jewish people, are His choir, the performers of His choral symphony. And though when Jews speak they often argue, when they sing, they sing in harmony, as the Israelites did at the Red Sea, because music is the language of the soul, and at the level of the soul Jews enter the unity of the Divine which transcends the oppositions of lower worlds.

The Torah is God’s song, and we collectively are its singers.