

OPEN SCROLL

An Undergraduate Parsha Sheet for the Harvard Hillel Community

PARSHA PEKUDEI

March 4-5, 2011

I Adar 29, 5771

Ilan Caplan

STAND STRONG.

That is how we finish a book of the Torah, standing as a community, shouting strength to the skies. No matter how frustrated we are at the Torah.

There is a lot to be frustrated at. Confused by? Angered by?

The Torah is not just a certain ancient publication; our lives too are our teachers and our Torahs. And there has been a Torah of death recently for the extended Harvard community. This week's passing of Reverend Peter Gomes follows closely the deaths of Gregory Tang, first-year Harvard Law School student, and of Ilya Chalik '11, my scholarly predecessor on these very pages. The end of these lives, the closing of these open scrolls, mark the untimely end of a chapter in ours as well.

What to do with this end? Ilya wrote that "the Israelites were able to continue on their journey,"¹ but can no longer say the same for his own. Reverend Gomes had planned to retire and begin his memoirs; instead he was taken and the memories are ours to create. There is no book following. As this Torah portion begins, "*Eileh p'kudei*" – these are the accounts of our friends. As it ends, "*VaYkhal Moshe et ham'lakhah*" – their work is finished.

In many synagogues, the end of each book of the Torah is marked by a performative moment: as the reader finishes chanting the last verse, the congregation rises and cries out the words "*Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek!*" – "be strong, be strong, and let us be strengthened!" The standing is dramatic; it echoes the other two narrative moments that evoke communal standing during the Torah reading, dramatic moments both.² We have reached a milestone.

Likewise, the phrase "*Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek*" has a great sound: strength thrice. But a progression. "*Chazak*" is not a static "be strong," but a "be strong" in order to move forward.³ The first two *chazaks* push ahead – Strength! Strength! Let your heart take courage *V'nitchazek!* – and we as a community will be strengthened!

The calling – the standing and the shouting and the calling – is a call to inner strength pushing forward into communal support. Here, we find solace as individuals, then holding hands. To the bereaved, many say the traditional phrase "*HaMakom y'nachem etkhem b'tokh avalei Tziyon viYrushalayim:*" May God comfort you within the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. You first. Be strong. Find comfort

in your Place. And then the rest of us. Let us be strengthened. Connect your strength with that of your community's mourners, the world's mourners.

A book closes ambiguously. Why here? Why now? The Tabernacle, the *mishkan*, is completed; and after lists upon descriptions upon lists we arrive at the climactic end which is only a beginning: "... the cloud dwelled upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the *mishkan* ... And with the lifting of the cloud from above the *mishkan*, the Children of Israel would travel ... throughout all of their journeys." The end, however dramatic or however arbitrary, signifies potential for a next action. The glory of the settled cloud contains the potential for future trailblazing.

Our three friends, too, carried strength and so shaped community. Gregory is remembered as "adventurous and enthusiastic ... add[ing] astute, well-grounded legal judgment to our community ... with good humor and respect for others."⁴ Ilya's warmth and smile are iconic to his friends; they created for his communities countless "moments when we love and are loved."⁵ Reverend Gomes' national advocacy of gay rights and personal voice of deep welcome at Memorial Church were outpourings, as President Faust put it, of "his wisdom and appreciation of the human spirit ... a trusted advisor and a true friend."⁶

The end is an awful, solemn, confusing reminder of the sadness of loss and the gifts of life – a funeral and a song. We rise at the end of each book not merely to mark the milestone of circumstantial completion, but to celebrate the strength we have received hitherto, and to invoke the strength we will henceforth fashion. It is a dramatic jarring of the senses, to cultivate those same senses in the moments when we sit back down, throughout our days and our routines.⁷

And throughout all of our journeys.

Let us stand strengthened.

Ilan Caplan '10 is a Winthrop House alum now living in Manhattan. He is psyched for Leviticus.

¹ Open Scroll, *Parshat Beshalach*, January 29-30, 2010.

² Brownie points to those who can identify both. Hint: think of arguably the two most formative narrative moments in the Biblical piece of Jewish tradition.

³ Check out Deuteronomy 31:7, Psalms 27:14, Isaiah 41:6.

⁴ See "Law School Mourns Death of First-Year Student," *The Harvard Crimson*, February 09, 2011.

⁵ See "Friends Honor Ilya Chalik," *The Harvard Crimson*, February 15, 2011.

⁶ See "Remembering Reverend Peter Gomes, Beloved Harvard Spiritual Leader," *The Harvard Crimson*, March 02, 2011, and Drew Faust's e-mail communication March 01, 2011.

⁷ For those interested in this idea, ask your friend the Literature Concentrator about "Shklovskian defamiliarization." You will love it.

Sara Kantor

Pekudei, the last parshah of the book of Shemot (Exodus), reads very nicely as an ending to the book. We hear about the end of the construction of the Tabernacle, the Torah repeats the records, and the exact accountings of each cent donated to the Tabernacle are given. Next we read through each instruction the Children of Israel had been given regarding the Tabernacle and hear that they did it “as the Lord had commanded Moshe”. They bring the whole thing to Moshe, he is given instruction by God on how to put it together and make it operational, and does as he is told.

This is where, logically, the Parshah should end. We've finished building the Tabernacle, it's been put together, Moshe blessed the people. It was all done “As the Lord commanded”. But Pekudei doesn't end here. After we are told that Moshe did as God told him to, the Torah specifically repeats each and every detail as he does it. If no word is wasted in the Torah, why the repetition?

And why, for that matter, does Moshe have a monopoly on the entire second half of Pekudei? For a project that was supposed to be completed by the people, Moshe seems to be doing an awful lot by himself. Not only does the Torah suggest that he did the actual building, but only “when Moshe had finished the work, the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of the Lord

filled the Tabernacle.” Why is the Tabernacle only complete when Moshe finished his work, and not when the people finished their end?

Perhaps the Torah is trying to teach us something about leadership. Most times when we think of leadership, we think of someone who goes before the group, directing them towards something for some greater purpose. However, a leader must also follow his people and learn from them. Only then can he represent them well in the world. A kind and wise dictator who rules over an unruly people is still a tyrant, but Moshe was not. When we are told of how the people gathered their resources and built the different parts of the Tabernacle, the Torah first gives us the instructions, then repeats each step as the people did it. The repetition of the instructions is often interpreted as a reminder to each of us to take care of each detail, large and small. By finishing the Tabernacle, not just beginning it, Moshe proved that he was a real leader who paid attention to every detail of his people and took after their good example.

Sara Kantor is a freshman from Las Vegas in Matthews. She can't wait to find out just how far away from Hillel she'll be living next year.

UPCOMING EVENTS AT HARVARD HILLEL

Saturday, March 5:

7PM, Eurovision Study Break, Hillel Lounge

Enjoy 40 years of Israeli music with your friends – if disco can be considered music, that is!

Monday, March 7:

5:15 PM:

Campus Chai: Finding a Jewish Path at a Pluralistic Harvard, Rabb Hall
Five of Harvard Hillel's rabbinical advisors will be on hand to answer your questions about creating a Jewish identity to the extent that you feel comfortable. .

Tuesday, March 8:

6 PM: Parsha HaShavuah, Hillel Dining Hall

Enjoy dinner at Hillel while exploring the weekly Parsha.

Wednesday, March 9:

6:30 PM: Talmud Class, Hillel Solarium

Learn Talmud in a traditional class that will focus on Tractate Beitzah!

Thursday, March 10:

6:30 PM: Level II Hebrew Course, Smith Hall, Hillel

This free follow-up course enables participants to strengthen their Hebrew reading skills. All participants will receive a student text.

8 PM: Mishmar, Beren Hall, Hillel

Come for the fantastic cholent, come for the intriguing and fascinating Torah learning sessions, or come to just hang out with friends.

Saturday, March 11:

Spring Break! ☺

Friday, March 25:

JPS Book Sale Ends

Open Scroll is brought to you weekly by the Harvard Hillel Education Committee. If you would like to contribute or have questions or comments, please email Samuel Milner at smilner13@college.harvard.edu.