

OPEN SCROLL

An Undergraduate Parsha Sheet for the Harvard Hillel Community

PARSHA NITZAVIM-VAYELECH

DEUTERONOMY 29:9-31:30

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My first idea for this open scroll -- given that I had been quasi drafted into writing it -- was to choose a word at random from the parsha and elaborate on it. Just as I was about to choose this lucky word, I realized that I had no idea what parsha I was writing about, just some vague feeling about being somewhere in the murky waters of Deuteronomy (which is a ridiculously hard word to pronounce and spell, by the way). Some investigation revealed that this week there was actually a double parsha (clearly one just isn't enough some weeks -- especially the one week I attempt to write a dvar torah), and in the midst of solving the case of the extra parsha I had inadvertently read both of them, so I figured maybe my first dvar torah could actually be semi legit.

As I sat here sniffing, it was not surprise that the quote that jumped out at me was the one involving milk and honey. If you are Russian you instinctively understand the relationship among milk, honey and colds; otherwise you're welcome to derive the relationship using my current cold, milk and honey. The verse reads: For when I shall have brought them into the land which I swore to their fathers, that flows with milk and honey; and they shall have eaten and filled themselves, and become fat; then will they turn to other gods, and serve them, and provoke me, and break my covenant (Deuteronomy 31:20). Evidently, my algorithm for choosing a quote to write about had been sound, for I actually had something not snarky to say about this tidbit.

My foray into Hillel and religious observance began when I desperately needed a constant other than hours of circular proofs, or hundreds of lines of badly written code in my life; it didn't begin when my life was flowing with milk or honey (mostly colds flowed those days actually). First, Shabbat dinner became a roped off block in my hectic schedule; then Friday night as a whole became reserved for schmoozing and I began to notice that Friday night services had a soothing effect on me. Two years later, Shabbat lunch is starting to assert itself as a repeating event on my Gcal. My overprotective Russian Jewish parents are now terrified that I will soon transition to keeping Shabbat completely, and they will have to deal with a full twenty-four hour stretch without a phone call from me.

I reached out to Judaism because it became a source of calm and comfort in my life -- a natural antidote to my hyperactive and volcanic nature. Finding Hillel when I needed a tranquilizer filled my life with more milk and honey (not to mention the matzoh ball soup which did its part to protect me from colds). Now, as an upperclassman, who has filled her head with countless more proofs, fought over (and eaten!) many more pieces of kugel, I have no desire to forsake my G-d; I'll stick to provoking my parents.

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Samuel Milner

After wandering in the desert, the Israelites are assembled at the borders of the Promised Land. What message does Moses have for them on this important occasion? Are there yet more laws and conditions to be made clear? Should they make memorial of this important occasion? On the contrary, he tells them that this event belongs not just to them: "And not with you alone will I make this covenant

and this oath, but with him who stands here with us this day before the Lord our God, and also with him who is not here with us this day." (Deut 29:13-14). Who are these others who are not present, and what right does Moses have to bind them in such a way?

Moses belongs to history as one of the great Lawgivers: He has brought down the Torah from the Lord to serve as the Eternal Constitution of the Jewish

People. Some of the laws seem quite quaint today. Maybe the rules surrounding the care of the socially helpless resonate to a modern audience steeped in liberalism, but what of the sacrifices? Likewise, the ban on the Canaanites and their practices: yes, Israel was commanded to be a moral paragon among the nations, but might that become more difficult when there are no Jebusites left?

The answer can be found in what forms one of the most important passages not just in the Torah but in the whole history of the law: “For this commandment which I command you this day, is not hidden from you, nor is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it? Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it? But the word is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it.” (Deut 30:11-14) The Law may be exemplary, the “the true embodiment of everything that’s excellent” as W.S. Gilbert once wrote, but it is up to humans to decide how to implement that and how to interpret it.

The Torah is truly a living document. Yes, elsewhere it forbids any direct amending, but nowhere does it seek to prohibit whole worlds of interpretations. By this, we are no longer constrained to live our lives as our ancestors did thousands of years ago because there is only this one code of law to which we must adhere. Instead, we are protected from being held to a system that is obsolete. By placing the responsibility on each and every generation to interpret the Torah, Moses guaranteed that it would remain a permanent system to suit the needs of its followers. Concepts like electricity, democracy, even turkey, which are so integral to our everyday lives, were unfathomable to our ancestors. Yet we do not claim ignorance and refuse to acknowledge their existence, just as we do not invalid the whole Torah for its failure to explicitly mention these items. Instead, we build upon the text that has been given to us to explain how they may be properly used. Indeed, the Torah is unique in human history in this regard. No law code has been so progressive yet so aware of human limitations as that of Judaism. Moses did not bind the Israelites to anything beyond their capacities:

they were not to turn the other cheek or submit to holding a faith unequivocally. Instead they were given the task of grappling with the text, understanding it through different lenses at different times so that they might achieve the covenant with the Lord in each and every generation, in the Holy Land and in the Exile. It is a tragic irony that the Jew is to this day accused of corrupting a holy book into a set of ethical laws and precepts when those leveling that charge have only now come to realize the importance of ethical behavior that the Jew has put into application for millennia!

The Torah is truly a model Constitution. Think of America’s own founding documents. The Declaration of Independence begins “In Congress, July 4, 1776;” the Constitution, “We the People.” Therein is contained the reason that the United States has been guided by the Constitution and not the Declaration of Independence for over two centuries. The latter is dated: it applies specifically to one day, one event, one Revolutionary War. It may inspire us with patriotic flourish and natural rights, but the document never lets us forget its origin and purpose. The Constitution, in contrast, is timeless, able to apply, and indeed to be adapted, to any period. Discussions of quartering may mean as little to us today as banning the Canaanites or presenting sin offerings, but that does not invalidate the text as a whole. Instead, Moses found a worthy heir in Madison, a Lawgiver who created a document that is binding on all future generations not by force, and not out of respect for ancestors, but because it is versatile enough to take on meaning in each and every age of man. Just as the Torah is described as a Tree of Life, it is, as Lincoln said, “for us the living” to contend with it as our Constitution, not out of the merit of our ancestors and not for the sake of our own glory, but for the future, yea the integrity, of the Jewish people.

Samuel Milner '13 is a history concentrator in Dunster House, the Vice President for Education at Harvard Hillel, and the Editor-in-Chief of Open Scroll and Mosaic: The Journal of Jewish Thought and Culture. He hopes that you'll all write for Open Scroll this term and enjoy the great educational programming that Hillel has to offer.