

Introducing a Year of Torah:

A Peninsula, a Word, and a Holy and Broken Hallelujah

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When I was in high school, I belonged to the Bob Dylan club. This was long before I had ever been to Minnesota or had any connection with our great state. We would simply listen to Dylan and be in awe of his creative mind and soul. Few rise to Dylan's genius level of lyricism. Leonard Cohen is one of those few. Cohen just turned 80 years old and last month came out with his latest album, *Popular Problems*. In his lyrics, he does what we all try to do: make sense of our lives, accept what cannot be changed, reflect on struggles with love and faith, and seek to praise life as it is.

His popular song, *Hallelujah*, was first turned down by his record company in 1984. Dylan was among the first to cover it the late 80s. Since then it has been sung by millions and is considered, on many lists, as one of the greatest songs of all time. The Israel Defense Forces plays it on their radio station every Saturday night. In the song, Cohen ends with the stanza:

*I did my best, it wasn't much
I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch
I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you
And even though it all went wrong
I'll stand before the Lord of Song
With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah*

Before he arrives at this moment of acceptance and even praise, he admits:

*There's a blaze of light in every word
It doesn't matter which you heard
The holy or the broken Hallelujah.*

Hallelujah means literally, praise God, but in Cohen's lyrics it may mean praise of life no matter how broken. In this way, he channels Psalm 51. Right after the verse: "*Adonai sfatei tiftach*, Adonai, open up my lips, that my mouth may declare your praise," – which begins every Amidah - the psalmist says, "... My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart." At our core, we all have some brokenness. Even still we will praise Hallelujah.

The question is whether we simply accept our brokenness or whether we will seek some sense of wholeness. Is the Hallelujah a shrug of the shoulders? Or is our final Hallelujah sung because we have done our best to make our lives whole and, in the end, accept ourselves as holy and broken?

In Cohen's wrestling with faith, he offers one verse devoted to the possibility of change that may help us on these Days of Awe: "There's a blaze of light in every word."

Light comes from the 'word', he writes so Jewishly.

We Jews know something about words. We have honored the word. Our texts have been as dear to us as our lives. There is a wonderful new book called *Jews and Words*, written by Fania Oz-Salzberger and her father Amos Oz. I heard Dr. Oz-Salzberger speak about it this summer in Jerusalem. She reflected on the light that comes from our words and that words saved us in more ways than one. We put our differences into words not the sword. Descended from Abraham who argued with God over Sodom and Gomorrah, we deal with conflict through debate. Words also maintained our culture.

In other societies, the brightest boy in a village was sent to Athens to study with Socrates or the Vatican or other centers. Jews kept their brightest boys at home. Books were on the family dinner table. Didn't matter how poor the family. Books were a value. Words were standard fare, the common denominator. At age three, the mother would place honey on her son's Hebrew letters to make the aleph-bet sweet. And it worked. And since it was at home around the table, the sister could learn too.

You also learn what is most important to you in times of crisis, and we have had our share over the centuries. When you run for your life, you hold your dearest possessions in your arms, your child and your scroll.¹ The Torah scroll behind me – at the top of the ark – is a memorial to the Jewish community of Divisov, Czechoslovakia. The Jews there are no more as they perished in the Shoah. Only their scroll is saved, on permanent loan to us from the Memorial Scrolls Trust in London which has sent 1600 Czech scrolls around the world to remember. Their story is placed in the center of our sanctuary.

“Being Jewish means you are never an island but always a peninsula,” said Fania Oz-Salzberger, “We are connected to a continent called Jewish textuality and Jewish memory.” Other cultures have caught up but we still have a legacy, something to teach, as the people of the book.

Leonard Cohen teaches that we each can praise life even with our faults, even with our brokenness. Fania Oz-Salzberger teaches that our secret as a people has been our devotion to words, to our texts. These same words can heal our brokenness.

The word, a blaze of light, is symbolized by Torah, begun with the Torah, the five books of Moses, our earliest wrestlings with life, and continuing through millennia of reflection and practice and writing.

This is a year we are focusing on Torah in a similar way to our focus on Israel a few years ago and then *Tzedek*/Justice for a year.

Our way into our text, our words, is through our regular study groups that we already have, where the connections between text and life happen every time we sit together. We are also listening to our words in a new way through a part of our tradition called Mussar.

Rabbi Adler put it succinctly on Rosh Hashanah: “Mussar is a way to engage with Torah text in order to really live its values.” In the words of a Mussar teacher Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian, Mussar “is making the heart feel what the intellect understands.” We can know that we should be more patient and kind, forgiving and humble, but how do we actually incorporate these values into our day to day lives?

Mussar literally means “instruction” or in Modern Hebrew “ethics”, and it refers to a movement that developed in the late 19th century in Lithuania by Rabbi Yisrael Salanter. One of the most remarkable quotations is attributed to him. It is one of those statements you want to savor and with satisfaction say it reflects your view of the world, something from Judaism that makes you proud: “A pious Jew is not one who worries about his fellow man’s soul and his own stomach; a pious Jew worries about his own soul and his fellow man’s stomach.” Our theology is to care about our own spirituality and, for everyone else, social justice.

The premise of Mussar is that each one of us is a soul. We do not acquire a soul. We may have a body, a personality, a history, but at our core self we are a soul. As a soul, we have traits that blemish our divine image. This is what Salanter says we should worry about.

¹ http://hartman.org.il/Blogs_View.asp?Article_Id=1411&Cat_Id=518&Cat_Type=Blogs

There are things we do to ourselves or to others that are cold and broken. We know it and sometimes it is hard to change the patterns of behavior. Our soul is good, worthy of Hallelujah, yet we need not simply accept our brokenness. We can become more whole, more patient, grateful, kind, and generous. We can take more responsibility and show more moderation. These are some of the traits we work on with Mussar. It is about the balancing of character traits. Too much kindness, for instance, can become sentimentality. Humility is good but if we have too much our self-esteem will suffer. Mussar is about practicing in our day to day lives – and taking note – how to live the way our texts teach.

It is not easy making changes to what we think are our core characteristics. We tend to cover up our faults and make the best of things. Others unwittingly help by saying, “That is just how she is” or “He’s always been like that.” Change is hard and we find all kinds of ways not to do it. Joan Rivers, may her soul rest in peace, said, “I’ll be happy to take up jogging as soon as I see a jogger smile.” Even if we want to change, we want to see results right away. “Quitting smoking is easy,” a smoker once said, “I’ve done it hundreds of times.” Change takes effort and time, often a lot of time. The Alter of Novarodok cautions: “The problem with people is that they want to change overnight – and have a good night’s sleep that night, too.”²

And yet we change all the time. We are not the same people we were five years ago. That is impossible. The question is how to change intentionally? How do we work on our character traits with wisdom?

We know we should. Again that is the mind speaking. How does your heart feel about this: Dr. Amit Sood, author of the "Mayo Clinic's Guide to Stress-Free Living," says that the best way to improve your health is by alleviating stress. How? “Gratitude, compassion, acceptance, forgiveness and focusing on the meaning of life are key.”³

What makes all of this hard – to get the heart to feel and thus do what the mind knows – is that we all have a voice within that is expert at finding an out. That voice is called our *yetzer hara*, our evil inclination. It rationalizes, cajoles, and exceptionalizes. “Who’s counting? Who will see? How could one hurt? You deserve it.’ It will flatter, cajole, seduce, or come up with whatever it takes to induce you to step over the line.”⁴ There is a way to fight back: human nature has not changed in millennia which is why we can learn about our humanity from our texts. Our words, our texts, our Torah, offers ways to cause our second nature to align with our values, to triumph over our *yetzer hara*.

In Pirke Avot, we are given forty-eight ways to acquire Torah. The goal is not to *learn* Torah, it is about acquisition, bringing Torah into your life, owning it, living it. You will know that you have succeeded if you find yourself in a situation where you would normally react in a predictable, habitual way and all of a sudden you realize you have another option and you choose a different way of being. Our tradition has a way, grounded in our texts, lived in our interactions, refined through our practice that will make life more meaningful, real, and enjoyable for you and those who are in your life.

Rabbi Alan Morinis discusses all of this in his book, *Everyday Holiness*, which we will use as the basis for our Mussar groups at Mount Zion. These groups are more than just opportunities to learn this tradition; they are at their core about relational Judaism, being with others in meaningful ways, and they are not only for people who are Jewish. All partners and spouses who are not Jewish will just as likely find meaning in this study. For those not participating, there will be many ways we will share some of the wisdom of Mussar this year. In February, for instance, Rabbi Morinis will be our scholar-in-residence with sessions open to everyone.

² Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*, (Trumpeter Books, Boston: 2008). p. 36.

³ http://www.mprnews.org/story/2014/09/02/mpr_news_presents

⁴ Ibid. p. 26

One final story from Morinis:

Rob is a Mussar student who found himself caught in one of the most primitive of situations, one that is so ancient the Torah actually warns us against it directly, “Do not bear a grudge,” we are told. But how could he not?

Eighteen years ago, he and his wife were blessed with the birth of their first child, a son. They planned the circumcision ...and they happily invited all their friends and family to the celebration. As it happened, Rob’s father did not get along with Rob’s wife’s parents and so, when he called his father to invite him to the ceremony, Rob added, “And, Dad, please make an effort to be civil to Sarah’s parents.”

Well, Rob’s father took such offense at this comment that he did not attend the circumcision of this own grandson. Not only that, he stopped speaking to his son, who was only too happy to reciprocate the favor. As a result, father and son did not speak for eighteen years. In that time Rob’s father never met his own grandson.

One of the soul-traits Rob worked on in his Mussar practice was forgiveness, which, one might have expected would bring up the deep grudge he was bearing and provide an opening for healing. But that actually wasn’t what happened. When he thought of forgiving, the grievance seemed, on a deep inner level, too unjust. Wasn’t his father responsible, after all?

While forgiveness didn’t actually create illumination for Rob, when the soul-trait of generosity came into focus, a light went on. Confronted by the Mussar’s understanding of generosity, which entails stretching yourself to give beyond the boundaries of the comfortable or usual, a new course opened before him.

Rob wrote a letter to his father as an act of conscious generosity. And his father wrote back. Rob and his wife had been married for twenty-five years by this time and decided to celebrate with a party. Rob invited his father, who lived in a distant state. His father came and met his grandson for the first time. Mussar had opened the way to healing, inwardly and in relationship.

It had provide Rob with the tools he needed to free himself from the dictates of his primitive, grudge-bearing nature and to entrust the governance of his life to his higher self, the soul, which seeks both *sh’lemut* (wholeness) and *shalom* (peace). This was a fruit of his Mussar practice.⁵

On this holiest of nights, we seek wholeness. To be Jewish is to affirm that our world is broken and we too are broken, but we do not stop there. We can do our best, and it will be more than ok; it will be holy. We need each other and we need our texts. We are not meant to walk this path alone. We are not islands but peninsulas connected to the continent of our words, our memories and wisdom, our Torah should we embrace it. Our texts have within them the blueprints of values that are eternal and of ultimate significance, and can make our lives whole and worthy of praise, even in our brokenness. *Hallelujah.*

⁵ Ibid, p. 42.

Hallelujah by Leonard Cohen, sung by Cantor Jennifer Strauss-Klein

I've heard there was a secret chord
That David played, and it pleased the Lord
But you don't really care for music, do you?

It goes like this
The fourth, the fifth
The minor fall, the major lift
The baffled king composing Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah
Hallelujah, Hallelujah

Your faith was strong but you needed proof
You saw her bathing on the roof
Her beauty in the moonlight overthrew you
She tied you to a kitchen chair
She broke your throne, and she cut your hair
And from your lips she drew the Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah
Hallelujah, Hallelujah

Maybe there's a God above
But all I've ever learned from love
Was how to shoot at someone who outdrew you
It's not a cry you can hear at night
It's not somebody who has seen the light
It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah
Hallelujah, Hallelujah

You say I took the name in vain
I don't even know the name
But if I did, well, really, what's it to you?
There's a blaze of light in every word
It doesn't matter which you heard
The holy or the broken Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah
Hallelujah, Hallelujah

I did my best, it wasn't much
I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch
I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you
And even though it all went wrong
I'll stand before the Lord of Song
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