

I Read This Over Shabbos
Reading Jewish History in the *Parasha*



David Bashevkin

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READING JEWISH HISTORY
IN THE *PARASHA*

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*We are honored and humbled to be able to dedicate
this book in honor of our incredible Country Club/
Young Israel of Teaneck community.*

*We are not just a group; we are a heartbeat. A mismatched,
wholehearted, one-of-a-kind family bound not only by tradition,
but by love, respect, laughter, kindness, resilience, and way
too many WhatsApp groups. Together, tradition comes alive.
Every holiday becomes a homecoming, and being together
feels like the truest kind of sanctuary. We've added chairs to
our table and have taken far too many away. We sing together.
We cry together. Most of all, we create sacred, everyday
magic simply by showing up for one another. Thank you.*

*Our community would not be the same without our
amazing friend, Rabbi Dr. Dovid Bashevkin, a scholar of
heart and mind, whose wisdom is as deep as the questions
he never stops asking. He teaches all of us that sacred texts
live not only in books but in the way we listen, challenge,
laugh, and show up for each other and for the world. His
life is a commentary written in kindness, a shiur shared
between bourbon shots, and a prayer that begins with
presence. We are so very grateful for our friendship and for
his gift of sharing his wisdom with us and klal Yisrael.*

*With incredible gratitude to Hashem, our
community, and Dovid Bashevkin,*

Janet and Lior Hod and family

We are proud to dedicate this sefer in honor of Rabbi Dovid Bashevkin. In 2009, as we were starting a new hashkama minyan at YILC, I turned to my rebbe and friend, Rabbi Aryeh Lebowitz, for a recommendation of a magid shiur. His answer was simple and confident: "Dovid Bashevkin." When I asked about his background, Rabbi Lebowitz smiled and said, "Don't worry – he'll be great at whatever he does."

He was right. From the very first weeks, Rabbi Bashevkin's shiurim brought energy, warmth, and excitement to the minyan, helping shape it into what it is today. He continues to be one of our most beloved and anticipated magidei shiur, and his early influence helped inspire a chevra that has since shared in over 850 shiurim together.

Lynn and Joel Mael



Dedicated in memory of our Fathers

Paul Peyser

פינחס בן דוד



Sherman J. Horowitz

שבתי יוסף בן ראובן

Mindy and Alan Peyser and Family

In honor of

Joel Mael

Without him this all would not have happened.

Esther and Nachman Goodman



In honor of our wonderful children

*Elie and Alyssa, Ayelet and Chaim, Eliana and Moshe,
and Shmuli and Etty*

*And in gratitude to Dovid for all that he does to ensure
the continuation of our precious Jewish heritage.*

*With admiration,
Mandy and Rubin Brecher*



In honor of our parents and grandparents

Mandy and Rubin Brecher

And in gratitude for Dovid's friendship throughout the years.

*Alyssa and Elie Brecher
Millie, Jack, and Theo*

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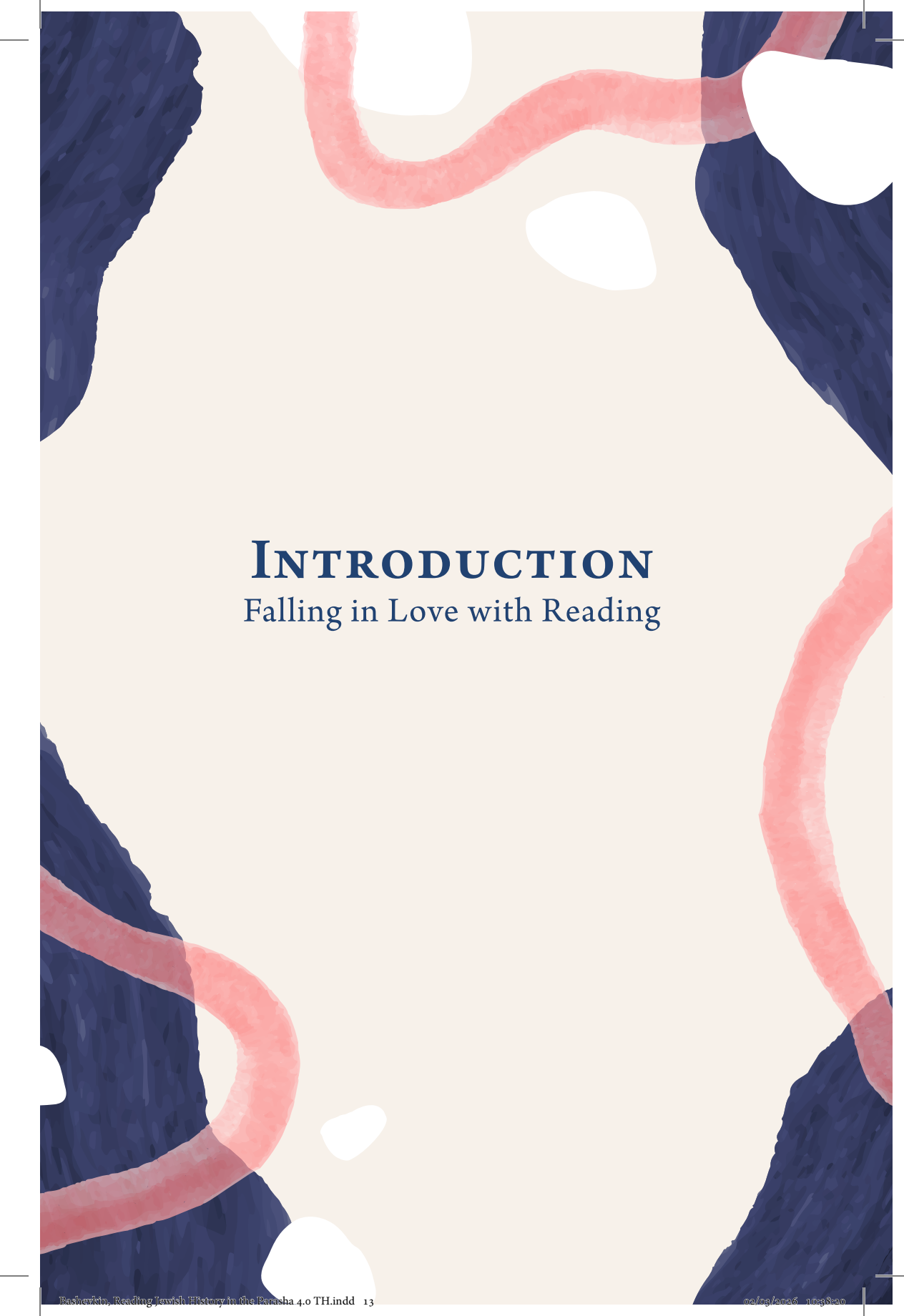
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INTRODUCTION

Falling in Love with Reading



There are many reasons why I consider myself very blessed, but the top of the list is undoubtedly my parents. As I've said many times, I could put all of my teachers from every school and institution I have ever attended on one side of the scale, and what I have learned from my parents would still outweigh them. Of course we have our quirks and dysfunctions like any other family, but there is one particular love they instilled in me that I am ever grateful for – a love of reading and learning. To this day, any Shabbat afternoon in my parents' home my father sits in the living room with a *Humash* or Gemara studying, while my mother is on the couch with a more eclectic mix – *New Yorker* articles, a *Humash*, a book she checked out of the library (my mother was always close with our local librarians). I grew up surrounded by books. And that undoubtedly is why my love of books and reading endures today.

My first memory of reading is from before I could read. My mother would read to us next to the nightlight, which she affectionately called “the campfire.” She didn't do the voices in the books, but her intonation and emphasis gave books their narrative flavor. When I read to my own children, it is her voice that I am channeling. (“Well,” I can still hear her reading aloud; she has a distinct way of saying the word “well.”) And we went through the classics – *Berenstain Bears*, *Miss Nelson is Missing!*, and anything by Louis Sachar.

A while ago I shared¹ my favorites books from when I was a kid on Twitter (now called X).

And as I grew up, my love of books grew with me. The first time I saw a grown up book, so to speak, was David McCullough's biography of Harry Truman. My father was reading it during one of our family vacations at Loon

¹ David/Dovid Bashevkin (@DBashIdeas), “Top 5 Best Children's Books OF ALL TIME,” X, March 18, 2020, 10:01 p.m., x.com/DBashIdeas/status/1240367673994813440?s=20&t=t9y7diW5G_heiRo3_B2GNg.



David/Dovid Bashevkin
@DBashIdeas

Top 5 Best Children's Books

OF ALL TIME.

1. Marvin Redpost, Why Pick on Me?
2. Sideways Stories from Wayside School
3. Matilda
4. Molly's Pilgrim
5. Moog Moog Space Barber

This is the definitive list that shaped my childhood. If you argue, you're destroying my childhood.

Mountain in New Hampshire. I was in awe. The book felt like a mountain – it wasn't something you read, but hiked. But soon enough, I learned not to be intimidated, no matter how formidable the size of the book.

So I began reading *The Great Illustrated Classics*, which were literary classics rewritten for a younger audience. There was a picture on each page, so that helped. I graduated to larger books – I read the novelization of the death of Superman. I started reading John Grisham and Michael Crichton. My fifth grade diorama was a scene from *The Client*. I buried a Lego man underneath a Lego boat.

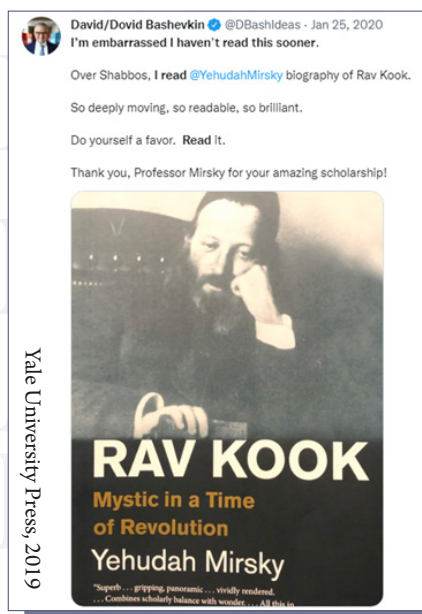
I READ THIS OVER SHABBOS

In 2020, I was invited to join the *Meaningful People Podcast* soon after it launched.² During our conversation they asked me how many books I have read in my lifetime. My response makes me cringe.

"I am trying to do very very basic math. I don't know, ten thousand? Five thousand?" I answered. My nephew Ephraim, who is quite gifted in math, called me out on this. There's no way I have read ten thousand books. He's right. I am just very bad at math. But I always tried to read a book each Shabbos. So, I figured, you know what, maybe the numbers were wildly off, but maybe I should start sharing my weekly Shabbos reads on Twitter. So, I did.

² Meaningful People, "The Story of Dovid Bashevkin | Meaningful People #12," *YouTube video*, 1:11:32, published on July 1, 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=euv3oDH3Bfo.

I first shared³ this lovely book:



I shared it rather innocently. It's a fantastic book, readable, enjoyable, and you can totally finish it over a Shabbos. I didn't plan on doing this every week. In fact, I forgot to share anything about what I read over Shabbos for almost 3 months.

Then I read a book I simply had to share. So I decided to pick up posting my Shabbos reads again.⁴

I shared a few follow up thoughts and questions and waited for the next Saturday night to share what I read. The next time, I was less wordy. I just wrote, "I read this over Shabbos."⁵

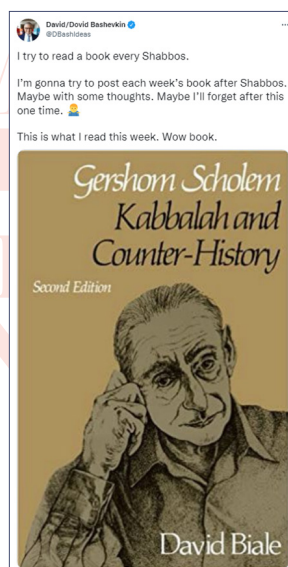
And so it began. I shared a book the next week. And the week after. And every week since.

3 David/Dovid Bashevkin (@DBashIdeas), "Over Shabbos, I read @YehudahMirsky biography of Rav Kook," X, January 26, 2020, 1:30 a.m., x.com/DBashIdeas/status/1221213842539192323.

4 David/Dovid Bashevkin (@DBashIdeas), "I try to read a book every Shabbos," X, April 18, 2021, 4:48 a.m., x.com/DBashIdeas/status/1383598218391347202?s=20&t=_d4SBbEDrYCMEqVp4pykGA.

5 David/Dovid Bashevkin (@DBashIdeas), "I read this over Shabbos," X, May 9, 2021, 4:16 a.m., x.com/DBashIdeas/status/1391200284257529859?s=20&t=PuzzZLIngshijlYphnhoJA.

GERSHOM SCHOLEM KABBALAH AND COUNTER- HISTORY



It has been several hundred books since I started posting, and thank God it has caught on. That's the best part. Others have begun to share as well, and some of my favorite reads have come from other's recommendations.

Of course, as with any online trend, the "I Read This Over Shabbos" community does have its fair share of doubters and jesters. We love both.

There's the old "I redt this over Shabbos," a pun based on the Yiddish word *redt*, meaning matchmaking. People share pictures of their siddurim, cereal boxes, Febreze instructions, and just about anything that you can read. I love it. Part of building culture is making fun of it.

Still, there are some lingering questions: *Is this just a big flex? What is the point of posting what you read over Shabbos?*

Some people tease that sharing what you read over Shabbos is more than a tad egotistical. Like a peacock puffing its feathers.

I hear it. But that's not what this is about.

People share all sorts of things on social media. Avocado sandwiches, flyers for programs, or vacation pictures. Sharing what you read has two goals:

1. It reframes social media as a place to share ideas. People log on Saturday night and instead of arguing about politics, we share books, many of which relate to Jewish life and history.
2. It reframes Shabbos. In place of seeing Shabbos as restrictive or a day that can be enjoyed only by those fully observant, "I Read This Over Shabbos" became a movement to see Shabbos as a day to connect with your favorite books – regardless of denomination or even religion.



It reminds me of that fantastic book I read as a kid, *Drop Everything, It's D.E.A.R. Time!* Shabbos becomes a time to D.E.A.R – drop everything and read.

READING JEWISH HISTORY IN THE *PARASHA*

On a Thursday night sometime in 2001, I was a senior in high school sitting in on a Thursday night *mishmar*, the late night learning organized by my high school, DRS Yeshiva High School. The speaker that night was a young new rabbi, still in his first year of teaching. His name was Aryeh Lebowitz. Since that night he has become a world-renowned rabbi, who serves as the dean of Yeshiva University's Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary. But on that night, he was a guest speaker in a *mishmar* slot – not exactly prime time. Characteristic of the Jewish leader he has become, R. Lebowitz always came prepared – regardless of the prestige of the slot. He retold the story of R. Yaakov Emden and R. Yonatan Eybeschutz, where the former accused the latter of being a covert follower

of Shabbetai Tzvi.⁶ I was mind blown. Rabbis accused of heresy?! Maybe I did have a future in the rabbinate (kidding!). My love for Jewish history was born that night. It is the story I am still in love with – the story of the Jewish people.

Thankfully, my love for Jewish history was further nurtured by my dearest friend and former debate partner, Menachem Butler, whose treasure trove of PDFs, infectious curiosity, and endless creativity shaped my love for and knowledge of Jewish history to this day. He was the first to show me that you could study the Jewish people with the same joy and inspiration as we study rabbinic texts. I remain ever grateful.

Every Shabbos, in my childhood *shul*, Shaaray Tefila, there was a *shiur* delivered by my mentor and teacher R. Dr. Ari Bergmann. I used to sit in the back, next to Pinny Steiglitz, also an early mentor of mine in the study of Jewish history, and listen enthralled. Seamlessly weaving Kabbala, halakha, *lomdus*, and Jewish history, R. Ari's *shiurim* became the model for my future *shiurim* and the very basis for the structure of this book. I consider it a privilege to have grown up in an environment where a local neighbor in my community became my *rebbe*.⁷

There are all sorts of different works that use the *parasha* as a springboard – there are many works on halakha in the *parasha*, *lomdus* in the *parasha*, stories in the *parasha*, *Hasidut* in the *parasha*. The *parasha* is basically a rabbinic trampoline – it is used to jump all over the place. Curiously enough, with one exception, there are really no works that discuss the *parasha* through the lens of Jewish history.⁸ Integrating Jewish history within the *parasha* is more than an exercise in rabbinic word association. I believe there are two primary reasons why these two disciplines should be coupled together more.

In 1727, the writings of R. Yehuda ben Shmuel Rosanes, who had recently passed away, were published under the title *Parashat Derakhim*. It popularized a new form of *parasha* study, analyzing the stories of the *Humash* through the

6 R. Lebowitz later told me that the class he gave was based on a taped lecture he heard from Professor Shnayer Leiman. It is also available in print, "Mrs. Jonathan Eibeschuetz's Epitaph: A Grave Matter Indeed," in *Scholars and Scholarship: The Interaction Between Judaism and Other Cultures* (New York: The Michael Scharf Publication Trust of the Yeshiva University Press, 1990), 142–143.

7 I wrote about my relationship with Ari Bergmann, as well as my other teachers, Professor Yaakov Elman of blessed memory and R. Moshe Weinberger, who introduced me to the world of *Hasidut*, specifically the writing of R. Tzaddok of Lublin, in "Jewish Thought: A Process, Not a Text," *Tradition* 52 (2020), 5–14.

8 Special mention to R. Evan Hoffman, whose work *Parashah Themes in Historical Perspective*, which is the first and only – to my knowledge – book of this genre that has been published. As an aside, his classes on Jewish history, available for free on yuTorah, are outstanding.

lens of rabbinic disagreements from the past two millennia. So, for example, the fight between Joseph and his brothers is interpreted as a disagreement about whether they should be treated by halakha as Jews or non-Jews. Many find this type of analysis strange. Are we supposed to believe that Joseph and his brothers – a story that happened well before the giving of the Torah – were fighting over interpretations on the Talmud?! In fact, I once heard R. Hershel Schachter mention that there was public opposition to the *Parashat Derakhim* shortly after it was published due to this novel approach to *parasha*.

In 2010 a similar disagreement erupted online in response to a video entitled, “Yeshiva guy says over a vort,” posted by someone named KrumBagel. In the video, produced using a now crude text-video service, a cartoon bear tells over a *devar Torah* that assumes the Torah with all of its details was kept even before the Torah was given. And, as the video describes in a subtitle, “chaos ensues.” The *devar Torah* does not make all that much sense, and the listener in the video just stares blankly as the idea of the Patriarchs keeping the Torah is stretched to further and further past the point of credulity. One rabbi, my dear friend Gil Student, even created a response video explaining why such discussions are more reasonable than the original video depicts.⁹

There is a separate argument to be had whether the video is sufficiently respectful or too cynical, but I want to focus on the underlying question: What are we doing when we superimpose talmudic dialogues on pre-talmudic characters? Are we really supposed to believe that Joseph and his brothers were arguing about their halakhic status? I believe there is a significant theological goal to such exercises, which in turn explains why Jewish history and the *parasha* make such natural companions.

I don’t think anyone thinks we need to believe that characters in the Torah were literally having talmudic arguments – not the *Parashat Derakhim* or any other works of that nature, like R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk’s *Meshekh Hkchma*. R. Moshe Sofer, known as the *Hatam Sofer*, writes in his introduction to his work on *parasha*, *Torat Moshe*, “To say that Moses and Pharaoh were having the same argument as Maimonides and Raavad is something very strange in the eyes of the masses.”

So what exactly are we doing?

I believe we are deliberately collapsing time and superimposing the present onto the past in order to recognize the ultimate underlying unity to existence

9 See Gil Student’s *Articles of Faith* (Kodesh Press, 2024), 227–231, which discusses in detail the original video and the controversy surrounding the *Parashat Derakhim* and outlines a different albeit related approach to my own in order to explain the significance of this approach.

itself. That's a mouthful, I know. But what we are really doing with these sorts of exercises in interpretation is disintegrating the boundaries of time and acknowledging that there is a unified spirituality to existence itself. Joseph and his brothers may not have actually had a talmudic argument, but the essence of their dispute relates to the same spiritual principles as what was described even centuries later. It is not divinity that changes over time, but the language we use to express it. And this is why I think exploring *parasha* through the lens of Jewish history is so important. We should not just superimpose talmudic concepts onto the past, but we should see the very fabric of the Jewish story as a cohesive unit, a cosmological journey, where present, past, and future unify. We don't just see Torah in our contemporary lives, we discover our contemporary lives within the Torah.

There is another reason why I think the study of Jewish history, particularly at this moment, is so important. And, bear with me, it relates to my understanding of Messianism.

"God, the Torah, and the Jewish People, are all one" writes R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, known by the acronym Ramḥal, based on the Zohar.¹⁰ Divinity, according to this formulation, is expressed in three ways – through God, the Torah, and the Jewish people. Someone who accesses the Divine directly from God is called a prophet. Perhaps nowadays such a person would immerse themselves in prayer. Someone who accesses the Divine through Torah is called a *talmid ḥakham*, a scholar. What does it mean to discover the Divine among the Jewish people? What would such a person even be called?

I believe this is the path of Messiah. Redemption arrives when we discover divinity in one another.

R. Tzaddok of Lublin explains that the numerical value of the Hebrew word *ye'ush*, meaning despair, is 317. In contrast, *siah*, which has a numerical value of 318 – just one more – represents transcending despair.¹¹ Unlike other Hebrew terms for speech, such as *amira* or *dibbur*, which focus on spoken words, *siah* signifies mutual understanding at the deepest level. When we view one another as divine beings without hierarchy, despair becomes impossible. If your life has inherent divine meaning, there is never a reason to despair. If we are alive, we are expressing divinity in some form. The word *Mashiah* can be read as *MiSiah*,

¹⁰ See, for instance, Ramḥal's *Adir BaMarom*, p. 61. For the Zoharic formulation, see Zohar 3:73a. See also R. Chaim of Volozhin's *Nefesh HaḤayim* 4:11, who cites the formulation of Ramḥal.

¹¹ See R. Tzaddok's *Divrei Soferim* 16.

meaning “from that place of mutual understanding.” Redemption, therefore, is the realization of the inherent divinity within our lives.¹²

And this is why I think the study of Jewish history is especially important at this moment. How does one fall in love with the Jewish people? Not just with our *tzaddikim* and *talmidei hakhamim* – but really fall in love with the entirety of the Jewish people? When I want to connect with God, I open a siddur. When I want to connect with Torah, I walk into a *beit midrash*. Where should we go when we want to study the Jewish people? I would like to submit that the best vehicle to fall in love with our people is through the study of Jewish history. We have forgotten our story – how did we even end up here? The story of our survival through exile, R. Yaakov Emden writes in the introduction to his siddur, is a greater miracle than the splitting of the sea. And the only way to appreciate the miracle of our story is by learning it! Let’s learn to fall in love with the story of the Jewish people by learning our history through the lens of the Torah.¹³ Let’s learn to find redemption within our story.

FINDING A HOME: BETWEEN THE FIVE TOWNS AND TEANECK

On a personal level, this book is not just about the *parasha* or Jewish history. This is a very personal book about how I found and fell in love with my community.

As I mentioned, I grew up attending the weekly Shabbos morning class of my teacher R. Dr. Ari Bergmann. It was more than a class for me; it was a hope and a dream that someday I would be able to share my own excitement and

12 See R. Dov Kook, *Yosef Hashem Aleikhem, Parashat Ki Tissa*, p. 208, who explicitly connects the three manifestations of divinity – God, the Torah, and the Jewish people – to the three epochs that the Talmud (*Avoda Zara* 9a) divides the six thousand years of world history into: two thousand years of chaos, two thousand years of Torah, and two thousand years of Messiah. The two thousand years of chaos, beginning with creation, was the period when humanity had direct access to God, so to speak. God’s presence was felt within the world. The next two thousand years, which began when Abraham started teaching of God to the world until the canonization of the Mishna (see R. Baruch Epstein’s *Torah Temima* on Gen. 12:5), was the period when divinity was primarily accessed through Torah. The final two thousand years, the Talmud states, correspond to the two thousand years of Messiah. What does that mean? Couldn’t *Mashiah* have come sooner? And what does it mean that these are the two thousand years of Messiah – we are currently in the middle of that period, and yet Messiah has not arrived. Many commentaries discuss these questions. R. Dov Kook suggests something amazing – the final two thousand years of Messiah is the period when we learn how to find divinity within each other. The expression of divinity through the Jewish people corresponds to the two thousand years of Messiah. I am grateful to R. Yisrael Wilk for sharing this source with me.

13 For more on this, see my article, “Forgive Me, My King, I Did Not Know You Were Also a Father,” *The Benjamin and Rose Berger Torah-To-Go Series*, September 18, 2024, 40–43.

love for Torah in a similar way. And yet, most of my twenties were spent quite lost – I wasn't married, I was very insecure about my own career trajectory, and in most ways I looked at myself as a failure.¹⁴

One night, while I was in *semikha*, living in the YU dorms – one of the lowest points in my life – I got a phone call from R. Aryeh Lebowitz, the same one who first ignited my love for Jewish history. He told me a lay leader named Joel Mael was interested in beginning a shiur following the 7:30 minyan at the Young Israel of Lawrence Cedarhurst (YILC). Joel and I spoke for a few minutes, and we agreed to have the first *shiur* for *Parashat Lekh Lekha* in 2010. The first *shiur*, held in the library at YILC, had about seven attendees if my memory serves me correctly. Joel, Nachman Goodman, Alan Peyser, Ruben Brecher were all there, and they each have continued to graciously support my work over the years (most notably this book!). I spoke about Abraham's prayer for Ishmael to repent and whether such prayers are a violation of free will – but more than what I said, the experience changed the course of my life. The *hevra* gave me the encouragement to rediscover my faith in myself. There was a period when the only time I would show up to *shul* was to give the *shiur*. But every time I did, I would walk away with so much encouragement and inspiration – it restored my love for learning and sharing Torah and gave me the reassurance to continue building my life as a Jewish educator. There is no way I would have had the stamina, confidence, and patience with myself to continue on this path were it not for the opportunity given to me by the *hevra* at YILC so many years ago.

I got married in 2014 and immediately moved into a home in Teaneck. Before I got married I could probably count the amount of times I had previously even been to Teaneck. And now, finally married, I was moving directly into the community. Initially, it was a disaster. We had never checked out the community, I knew only one couple who already lived there, and honestly, living in a suburban Jewish community right after marriage can be very lonely. I wasn't sure how to make married friends. And being a Jewish educator just compounded my sense of isolation. People would call me rabbi – I wanted to be anything but. I was deeply insecure as a rabbi. Like the film *The Departed*, I wasn't sure if I was a rabbi posing as a regular communal member or a regular communal member posing as a rabbi. When you're insecure, as I was, you often also become very judgmental. And I was insecure, judgmental, and lost trying to figure out how to fall in love with my community.

14 No surprise that the subject of my first English book was sin – *Sin-a-gogue: Sin and Failure in Jewish Thought*.

When I moved in, my next door neighbors were George and Bonnie Silfen. George used to give a small *shiur* before davening at our *shul*, Young Israel of Teaneck, that I along with a handful of others would attend regularly. A year or so after I moved in, George and Bonnie moved out – they assured me that his new neighbors had nothing to do with it. A member of the community, Labe Feldman, approached me and asked if I wanted to take over what had been affectionately called “George’s *Parasha Shiur*.” I obliged. After a few years of desperately trying to find my place in the community, I felt like I had found a home. The model for *shiurim* I learned from R. Ari Bergmann and later adapted for the *hevra* at YILC would join me in Teaneck. The early months of the *shiur* were fulfilling but somewhat slow. Who wants to go to *shul* a half hour before davening to listen to a *shiur*? That changed when Janet and Lior Hod began joining regularly. For anyone who knows them, Janet has an infectious enthusiasm and love of *Yiddishkeit* that sweeps away all those in its path – just ask Lior! They modeled a love for every Jew – we affectionately call their home “The Chabad of Janet.” They brought unsuspecting guests to my *shiur*. I always loved seeing Ryan Turrel at 8:30 a.m. and just hoped the early timing of the *shiur* would not have a deleterious effect on anyone’s love for Judaism. More than anything else, they taught me how to fall in love with community. And for that gift I will be forever grateful.

The contents of this book were born in Ari Bergmann’s *shiur* in Lawrence, NY, raised in YILC, and finally matured at the Young Israel of Teaneck. These ideas have grown up with me and I am so grateful to all those who gave me the encouragement, patience, and love to finally reach this point where I can share them in print. More than a *sefer* on the *parasha* or a book on Jewish history, this is a love letter to all the communities and individuals who have loved me into being – showing me how to build lifelong friendships anchored in Torah ideas.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The best part of writing a book is getting to show appreciation to all those who helped you along the way.

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Sometimes realizing your dreams can be a nightmare. It is easier to blame everyone else for never being given a shot to realize your dreams – but once

you have the opportunity, it's scary, because ultimately there is no one to blame if it fails except yourself. I am living such a dream because of Mitch Eichen – my partner in launching 18Forty. When we began five years ago, neither of us could have imagined what it has become today. This vision would have never come into fruition without the support and patience of Mitch, his lovely wife Annette, and their son Andrew. I am so grateful to be building this dream with you – even when it sometimes can feel like a nightmare.

Thank you to our 18Forty team, led by my childhood friend Duvi Stahler, our intern who became our leader Sruli Fruchter, our incredible editor Denah Emerson, as well as the creative Yehuda Fogel and Cody Fitzpatrick. Special thank you to my editor for this work, Rivka Bennun Kay, whose care and diligence made the entire editing process a true pleasure. Thank you also to all of our incredible supporters – without you we never would have realized our dream.

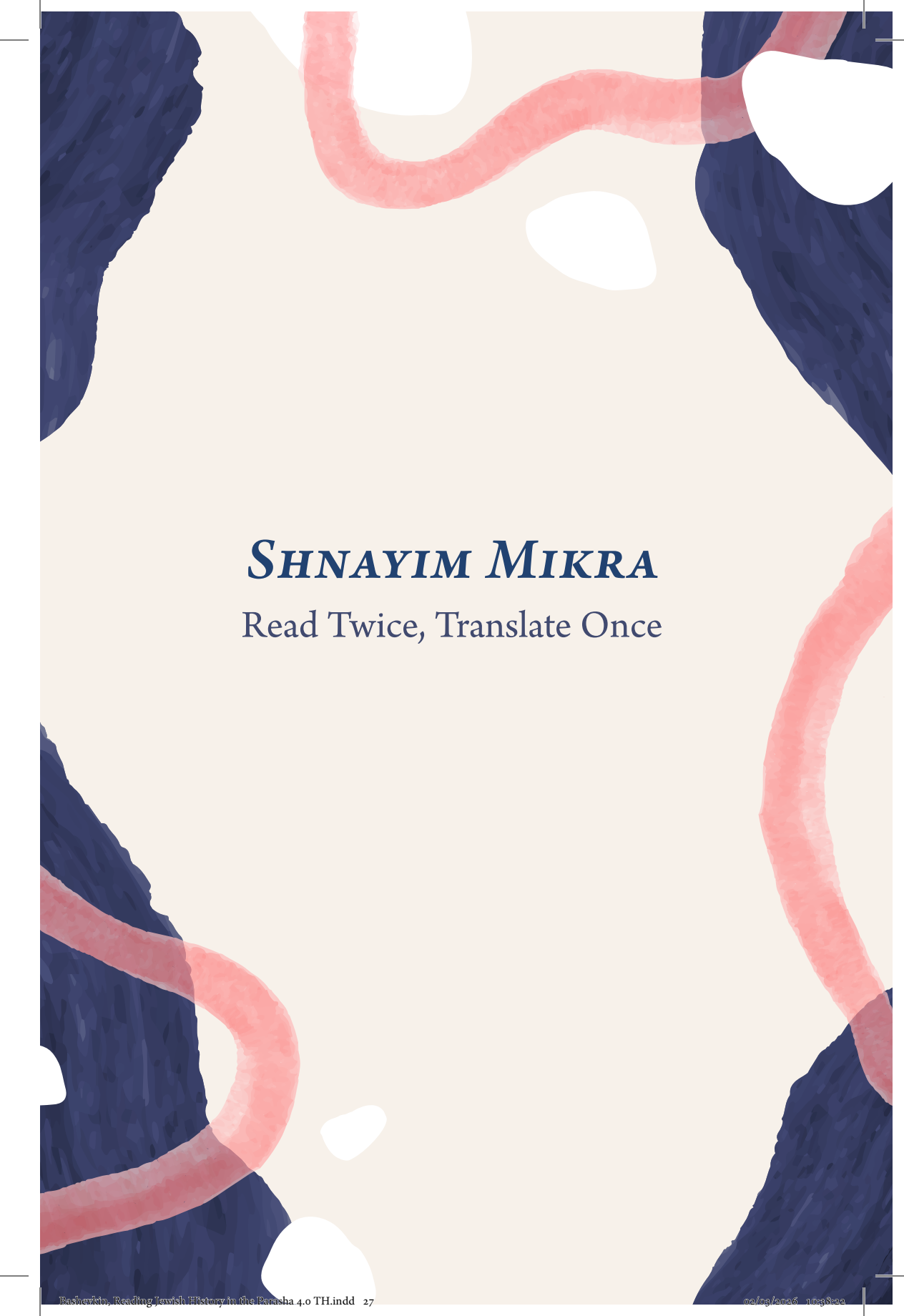
I am so grateful to all of my teachers and mentors, most especially my personal zen master R. Moshe Benovitz – every time I had a great fall, he put me back together again; to R. Yaakov Glasser who never gave up on me, even after I gave up on myself. Their Torah still animates my life.

“A friend is someone who knows all about you and still loves you,” writes Elbert Hubbard. I am so grateful to all my friends who continue to show me love: Yoni Sonnenblick, Rabbi Gil Student, after the word Sonnenblick, Akiva Diamond, Egregious, Liel Leibovitz – my Daf Yomi chavrusa, editor, and fearless friend – the *Baal Sass Anochi* Reb Jake – so *chashuv* - R. Aryeh Westreich, Matos, Simcha, Reb Eli Rubin who introduced me to the Rebbe's social vision – singing with your eyes open, The Bus – even Elliot Tanzman, Moshe “Options” Hager, Elie Schulman – who showed me the meaning of life and language, Yoni Feiner, The Benj – whose greatest obstacle in Wordle is the sheer vastness of his vocabulary – and his incredible wife Elisheva, Alon Amar, The Schriebies, Josh Weinberg – for fully embracing my true self and providing much needed relief, Rav Judah – who taught me that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing, Reb Ari Segal, Avi Helfand, Jeremy Apfel, and my chavrusa and weekly confidant JJ Brukner.

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And finally, my family. The Holy of Holies of my life is my family, and I am so grateful to my in-laws, my holy siblings, and my parents. You loved me into being. My wife Tova created a home surrounded by *berakha* – and at the heart of that *berakha* are our children, Zevi, Kira, and Gavi. My entire life is dedicated to my wife and children – they are my reason for living. Love you.



SHNAYIM MIKRA

Read Twice, Translate Once



Three years ago, I began studying *Daf Yomi* – a page of Talmud a day in order to complete all of Talmud every seven and a half years. It rightfully gets a lot of attention. There are apps dedicated to *Daf Yomi*, I write an essay at the end of each tractate, and there is a well-deserved sense of heroics surrounding those committed to studying *Daf Yomi* each day. I don't want to diminish that. But – and hear me out – I think we need to celebrate those who study the *parasha* each week.¹

The original Shabbos read was and always has been the weekly *parasha*. But the Talmud (Berakhot 8a) actually has a very specific way that we are supposed to review the *parasha*: *Shnayim Mikra Ve'ehad Targum* – read the Torah text twice and translate once.

There is a somewhat well-known allusion to this at the beginning of *Parashat Shemot*. The second book of the Torah begins with the Hebrew words, “*Ve'eleh shemot Bnei Yisrael*” (Ex. 1:1), and many commentators see this beginning as an allusion to the obligation of *Shnayim Mikra*.² It helps that the word *Shemot* can also be read as an acronym for *Shnayim Mikra Ve'ehad Targum*.

But this leaves me with two questions: Firstly, what exactly is the point of *Shnayim Mikra*? Why read twice and translate once? Why are we told to study *parasha* this way? To be fair, this is not my own question. In his discussion of the laws of *Shnayim Mikra*, the *Arukh HaShulhan*³ essentially says we don't really know the reason why. Surely there must be more to this.

1 David/Dovid Bashevkin (@DBashIdeas): “I have respect for people who do daf yomi. I'm in awe of people who do shnayim mikra.” X, September 30, 2021, 6:09 p.m. x.com/DBashIdeas/status/1443593898287317007.

2 See *Baal HaTurim* on Ex. 1:1.

3 *Orah Hayim* 285:2.

Additionally, why is *Shnayim Mikra* alluded to at the beginning of the book of Exodus? Aside from the super cute acronym, why is this the place where we find an allusion to this particular obligation? I can think of a bunch of other stories that would more neatly connect to this obligation. And I am sure with enough creativity other words could be found that would have worked equally well to build such an acronym. So why is this allusion found specifically at the beginning of the book of Exodus?



Translation is not a matter of words only; it is a matter of making intelligible a whole culture.

– Anthony Burgess

To better understand the obligation to read twice and translate once, let's talk a little bit about translation and its relationship to Jewish texts.

Translation is much more than just taking a word from one language and inserting a different word from another language. As Douglas Hofstadter demonstrates in his incredible book, *Le Ton Beau De Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language*, one piece of writing can be translated in an endless variety of ways. This poses a particular problem when it comes to the text of the Torah, where the very language is divine. Can the Torah be translated without losing its essence?

The most comprehensive overview I have ever found on the history of Torah translations is Leonard Greenspoon's *Jewish Bible Translations: Personalities, Passions, Politics*. And like any discussion of a translation of the Torah, it begins with the first translation of the Torah, the Septuagint, which was the translation of the Torah into Greek. The Talmud (Megilla 9a–b) actually recounts this story whereby King Ptolemy separated seventy rabbis into different rooms and miraculously they all emerged with the same translation – carefully altering any potentially offensive or easily misunderstood passages.⁴

Much of what we know about the origins of the Septuagint derives from the “Letter of Aristeas,” which purports to be a contemporary account from the third century BCE. Some of the letter is even quoted by Josephus. The story, as told through the letter, is that King Ptolemy was urged by the chief librarian of the magnificent Library of Alexandria to procure a translation of the Torah. The letter goes into great detail about their translator's daily schedule and the gifts that were in turn sent to the *Beit HaMikdash*. It is a fascinating letter, but

4 R. Hutner once joked that it would have been a bigger miracle if the seventy rabbis were placed in the same room and were able to emerge with a consensus on the translation!

later scholars have cautioned that it should be taken with a grain of salt. Much of the letter may have been written centuries later, and it clearly is trying to assert that the status of the Septuagint should be immutable. The letter ends with a curse upon anyone who adds or deletes anything from the Greek translation.

In many ways, the Septuagint set the stage for all future translations and the enduring hesitation the Jewish community has had with the act of translation itself.

English translations of the Torah did not bode much better. The first person to translate the Bible into English was William Tyndale. But as detailed in Rebecca Romney's fun book *Printer's Error: Irreverent Stories from Book History*, the Church did not look kindly at English translations of the Bible. Tyndale spent much of his life as a fugitive and was eventually burned at the stake. But it was Tyndale's translation that eventually paved the way for the most famous rendition of the Bible into English: the *King James Bible*. Printed just seventy-five years later, over seventy-five percent of the *King James Version* (KJV) was based on Tyndale's translation. Christian influence is not hard to detect in the KJV translation but, as Robert Alter writes in his work *The Art of Bible Translation*, the advantage of the KJV translation was its "inspired literalism." The translators believed in the sanctity of the text of the Bible and therefore that one should not "play games with God's words."

Of course, modern times have seen an explosion of markedly Jewish translations of the Torah – from R. Aryeh Kaplan's *The Living Torah*, the Artscroll revolution, and Koren's brilliant additions to the art of translation.

Still, hesitancy for translation remains – perhaps not as much as it should.

There is a letter from R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, preserved in his collected letters, *Community, Covenant, and Commitment*, that I think articulates the necessary concern that Torah translations should evoke.

In 1953, R. Soloveitchik was asked about the RCA's participation in the Jewish Publication Society's effort to produce a new translation of the Torah. The JPS wanted to form an interdenominational committee to oversee the project.

R. Soloveitchik, ever gracious, explained that he could not sanction such participation. His concern, he explained, was that the translation would need "to satisfy the so-called modern scientific demands for a more exact rendition in accordance with the latest archeological and philological discoveries."⁵ Allowing for the influence of critical Biblical studies was not something that "we, representatives of *Torah SheBe'al Peh* [the Oral Torah], can lend our name to such an undertaking."

5 Soloveitchik, *Community, Covenant, and Commitment*, 110.

And what if all of the other major Jewish rabbinic bodies participate? Would it not feel strange if Orthodox Jewry were left out of this endeavor? R. Soloveitchik did not mince words in response to this question. He writes:

I noticed in your letter that you are a bit disturbed about the probability of being left out. Let me tell you that this attitude of fear is responsible for many commissions and omissions, compromises and fallacies on our part which have contributed greatly to the prevailing confusion within the Jewish community and to the loss of our self-esteem, our experience of ourselves as independent entities committed to a unique philosophy and way of life. Of course, sociability is a basic virtue and we all hate loneliness and dread the experience of being left alone. Yet at times there is no alternative and we must courageously face the test.⁶

In the very same letter, R. Soloveitchik addresses a different point, which I think actually relates even more directly to the larger role of translation in Jewish thought. In 1954, there was a push for American Jewish communities to set aside a specific Shabbat to commemorate the tercentenary of Jewish community in the United States, which began in 1654 when Asser Levy and a group of twenty-three Sephardic Jews fled Brazil for New Amsterdam to seek refuge from the Portuguese Inquisition. It was a moving idea, but one which R. Soloveitchik raised concerns about. He writes:

As to the Thanksgiving Sabbath set aside by the Tercentenary Committee, I must say that such action is very disturbing for two reasons. First, traditional Judaism looks askance upon synthetic prayers and artificial services. We should avoid as much as possible the arbitrary proclamation of a day of prayer and supplication which is typical of religion whose supreme authority rests with a hierarchy.⁷

This concern, I believe, relates even more centrally to the role and concerns related to translation. Here, R. Soloveitchik is not concerned about translation in the classical sense – taking words from one language and rendering them into another – but a deeper form of mistranslation – the translation of experience. A Jewish celebration cannot be simply translated into the typical language and programmatic sensibilities of American societies. A religious celebration cannot be declared in the same way the government might dedicate a day of

⁶ Ibid., 111.

⁷ Ibid., 111.

remembrance or erect a new street sign. Imposing American sensibilities, however noble, onto Jewish ritual would be, in effect, a mistranslation.



For Rebbe Nachman the light of translation is the possibility of the “essence” undergoing a process of change so significant that it can now be found in the “inessential,” yet through some impossible power it retains its “essential” nature.

– R. Joey Rosenfeld, based on *Likkutei Moharan*, 19⁸

Let’s return to *Shnayim Mikra*. We are told to read twice and translate once. We are not simply translating, many commentaries explain, but we are recreating the giving of the Torah itself. When the Torah was given, it was first given at Sinai to Moses, it was then repeated to the people, and the people then “translated” and perpetuated the values of Torah within each generation. Translation – the ability to remain connected to an original text regardless of language – actually highlights the immutability of Torah. Remaining connected to Torah regardless of language, society, or circumstance, writes the Maharal, allows us to connect to the Torah ideas that transcend language itself.⁹ The translation embodies the highest form of Torah: the one that lives within our hearts and minds.

And this may be why the initiative for *Shnayim Mikra* is couched in the story of the Jewish people descending to Egypt. We were entering a new society and an antagonistic culture. How can we remain tethered to our values under such circumstances? The answer, of course, is through translation. Whenever the Jewish people descend into the Egypts of our lives, we have the reminder of *Shnayim Mikra*. No matter the place, no matter the circumstances, the power of translation ensures we can always remain tethered to the original.

We are about to begin an exciting journey – reading twice, translating once. And I hope the connections and ideas we share here serve as a translation of sorts for our collective lives – a reminder that the ideas of Torah continue to endure and reverberate through our history.

8 Joey Rosenfeld (@jorosenfeld), X, February 5, 2020, 7:23 p.m., x.com/jorosenfeld/status/1225107576372764672?s=20.

9 *Tiferet Yisrael*, 13.

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