



The Ziegler School
of Rabbinic Studies

Walking with History

Edited By
Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson
and Rabbi Patricia Fenton

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UNIT 6: SYNAGOGUE AND SIDUR

RABBI SUSAN LEIDER

The reading of the Torah is a central part of Jewish liturgical life. At the heart of every *sidur*, or Jewish prayer book, we find the liturgy that guides the way we read from our most sacred book. As we gather around the reading table and welcome members of our community forward to bless, read, lift or dress the Torah, we participate in the pageantry that symbolizes our deep connection to Judaism. As this connection comes to life before our eyes, we cleave to the Torah physically and prepare to encounter it on an intellectual level. We elevate the presence of Torah by covering it in beautiful materials, crowns and ornaments. We escort the Torah through the community and bring it to rest on the reading table, carefully undressing it. Joy and awe permeate the congregation as we prepare ourselves to glean wisdom from Torah. As we touch the Torah with our tzitzit, the ritual fringe of our tallit/prayer shawl, and bring it to our lips, we physically enact our hope to fulfill our covenant with God: we literally choreograph our desire to bring the *mitzvot*, the commandments, as close as possible to our lips, expressing our intent to internalize and actualize Torah in our everyday lives.

We are commanded to hear the reading of the original Torah text and to study it in our primary language. As our ears absorb the Hebrew chanting and our eyes take in the translation, we have the opportunity to be transformed. It is in this liturgical moment that we celebrate a Bar or Bat Mitzvah coming of age, and welcome a bride and groom to celebrate on the Shabbat before their wedding. We pray for healing and for the well being of our community in the presence of the Torah as it lies directly before us.

In this essay, we will explore the history and the background of the Torah Service, the centerpiece of the Jewish liturgical experience. Biblical and rabbinic texts will guide our journey to understanding how and why this part of the prayer book developed the way it did and what it can mean to us today in our own spiritual odyssey as Jews.

“TORAH” AS SEEN THROUGH BIBLICAL EYES

The word *torah* literally means “instruction”. It appears many, many times in the Bible. We see the word *torah* in Exodus 24:12, for example, in the context of God speaking to Moses. God tells Moses to come up to the mountain and to wait there. This promise follows:

וְאֶתְנֶה לְךָ אֶת-לַחַת הָאֲבָן, וְהַתּוֹרָה וְהַמִּצְוֹת, אֲשֶׁר כָּתַבְתִּי לְהוֹרֹתֶם

And I will give you the stone tablets with the **Torah** and commandments, which I have inscribed to instruct them...

In Deuteronomy 1:5, we read:

הוֹאִיל מֹשֶׁה בָּאֵר אֶת-הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת

Moses undertook to expound this **Torah**...

And in Deuteronomy 4:44, we read these stirring words that the rabbis later wove into the liturgy of the Torah service itself:

זֹאת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר-שָׂם מֹשֶׁה לְפָנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

And this is the **Torah** that Moses set before the children of Israel...

In the Bible, then, *torah* is instruction imparted by God to Moses, and it is Moses' role to teach Torah to the people. It seems that Torah and Moses as teacher of Torah are almost indivisible in the biblical mindset. In the choreography of the Torah service, we reenact the giving of the Torah at Sinai and the covenantal drama of receiving and accepting it as a people.



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Kings and priests had a special relationship to Torah. This “instruction” was an especially powerful presence in the lives of the priests. The word *torah* is used over and over in chapters six and seven of the biblical book of Leviticus, as instruction is given concerning the different categories of sacrificial offerings. A repeating pattern appears, in which God gives Moses the “instruction” which Moses, in turn, should “command” to his brother Aaron and Aaron’s sons. We see again the near-identification of Torah and Moses as teacher of Torah, as God “spoke” to Moses, while Moses is to “command Aaron and his sons”.

This “instruction” was also a powerful presence in the lives of the Israelite kings. In Deuteronomy 17:18-19, we find this passage among the special commandments incumbent upon rulers:

יח וְהָיָה כְּשִׁבְתּוֹ עַל כִּסֵּא מַמְלַכְתּוֹ, וְכָתַב לוֹ אֶת מִשְׁנֵה הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת
עַל סֵפֶר מְלִפְנֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים הַלְוִיִּם. יט וְהִיְתָה עִמּוֹ וְקָרָא בוּ כָּל יְמֵי חַיָּו,
לְמַעַן יִלְמַד לְיִרְאָה אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו לְשֹׁמֵר אֶת כָּל דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת
וְאֶת הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה לַעֲשׂוֹתָם.

18 When he is seated on his royal throne, he shall have a copy of this Torah written for him on a scroll by the levitical priests. 19 And it will be with him and he will read it all the days of his life, so that he will learn to revere the Lord his God, to faithfully observe every word of this Torah and these laws.

The first recorded Torah service in Jewish tradition is found in the eighth chapter of the Book of Nehemiah, in the part of the Bible known as Ketuvim, or Writings. After the destruction of the first Temple in 586 B.C.E., the Jews were exiled to Babylonia. During the reign of Persian King Cyrus, around 539 B.C.E., Ezra the priest was given a royal mandate to lead the Jews back to Jerusalem, which was then under Persian rule. There they were to rebuild the Temple. Among the many tasks that Ezra faced in returning the exiles to Jerusalem, was the charge by Persian King Artaxerxes to buttress their Jewish identity (Ezra 7:12-26). Many had intermarried and were no longer strongly identified with Judaism.

With this background, we read the text in Nehemiah, and we begin to see a picture of what this very first Torah service might have looked like. Throngs of people gathered. Ezra stood upon a wooden tower, with 6 men on his right and 7 on his left. He opened the scroll, and as he did so, all the people stood up. He blessed God, and the people raised their hands and responded: “Amen, Amen”. The Torah was read, translated and explained. And the people wept when they heard the reading (Nehemiah 8:1-9).

What did the word *torah* mean in Ezra’s day? In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, Torah is variously called the “Teaching of Moses” or *Torat Mosheh* (תּוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה, Ezra 7:6, Neh. 8:1), the “Teaching of the Lord” or *Torat Ha-Shem* (תּוֹרַת ה', Ezra 7:10), “Teaching of God” or *Torat Ha-Elohim* (תּוֹרַת הָאֱלֹהִים, Neh. 8:8), the “Book of Moses” or *Sefer Mosheh* (סֵפֶר מֹשֶׁה, Neh. 13:1) and simply “The Teaching” or *Ha-Torah* (הַתּוֹרָה, Ezra 10:3). This Torah, this instruction, was meant to shape the returned exilic community into a cohesive people, and the ritual of public Torah reading was one of the ways in which Ezra hoped to achieve this goal.

RABBIC SHAPING OF THE TORAH SERVICE

When the rabbis came onto the stage of Jewish history, they took Ezra’s goal to even greater heights. In the centuries between the period of Ezra and Nehemiah (around 600-400 B.C.E.) and the codification of the Mishnah (around 200 C.E.), we can surmise that regular Torah reading was established as a permanent part of



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the liturgy of emerging Rabbinic Judaism. The laws for Torah reading are outlined in the Mishnah in tractate Megillah, and later rabbis expounded upon these laws in the Talmud.

The rabbis placed Ezra in a central role in establishing the primacy of Torah and Torah study in Judaism. One example of rabbinic expounding and buttressing of Ezra's historical influence is evident in a text from the Babylonian Talmud Tractate Bava Kamma, pages 82a-82b. In this text, the rabbis affirm Ezra's role in establishing Torah reading for the community on Mondays, Thursdays and during the Shabbat afternoon service. Interestingly, they also ascribe to Ezra other traditions which are not attested in the Bible, but are a reflection of the rabbis' priorities for their own time and their own place. Central among these was the idea of Torah as a source of life, analogous to water. In the rabbinic mindset, Jews needed Torah like they needed water and would perish without Torah as they would perish without water.

THE TORAH SERVICE TODAY

In our own lives and communities, the Torah service can be a vehicle that allows a community to express its values. This was Ezra's vision and in the best of our communities, this is lived on a weekly basis. The Torah service is also a model for communal leadership, and it provides roles for many participants. A minyan, or quorum of ten adults is required to be present when the Torah is read, and in addition, there are many special roles, roles that Jews consider to be honors. There are Torah readers and *gabbaim*, those who know the rituals of the reading and make sure that all goes smoothly and correctly. Community members open and close the doors of the ark, recite the blessings over the Torah reading, and lift and dress the Torah when the reading concludes. In rabbinic times, a translator stood with the Torah reader and transmitted the text to the people in a language they understood. Today, this role is filled by our printed text. The *darshan*, the one who expounds upon Torah for the purposes of instructing and teaching, plays a central role in most of our communities.

In her description of the first Torah service, scholar Tamara Cohn Eskenazi states, "Intense emphasis on the people as a whole marks the opening scene (Nehemiah 8:1-12). . . The people remain unequivocally in the foreground. . . The word **עַם** 'people' occurs thirteen times in the first twelve verses"¹ Through personal and communal exploration of our Torah Service and its development, we deepen our connection to *Am Yisrael*, the People of Israel, and to our traditions, and we join in an unbroken chain of history as we ponder the questions: "What does Torah mean to me? What does Torah mean to my community"?

¹ Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988, p. 97.



UNIT 6: SYNAGOGUE AND SIDUR – TEXT 1

נחמיה ח:א-ג,ה,ו,ט

א...וַיֵּאָסְפוּ כָּל הָעָם כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד אֶל הַרְחוֹב אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵי שַׁעַר הַמַּיִם, וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְעֶזְרָא הַסֹּפֵר לְהָבִיא אֶת סֵפֶר תּוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל. ב וַיָּבִיא עֶזְרָא הַכֹּהֵן אֶת הַתּוֹרָה לִפְנֵי הַקְּהָל מֵאִישׁ וְעַד אִשָּׁה, וְכָל מִבִּין לְשֹׁמֵעַ, בְּיוֹם אֶחָד לַחֲדָשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי. ג וַיִּקְרָא בּוֹ לִפְנֵי הַרְחוֹב אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵי שַׁעַר הַמַּיִם מִן הָאֹר עַד מַחְצִית הַיּוֹם נֶגֶד הָאֲנָשִׁים וְהַנְּשִׁים וְהַמְּבִינִים, וְאֶזְנִי כָּל הָעָם אֶל סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה... ה וַיִּפְתַּח עֶזְרָא הַסֹּפֵר לְעֵינֵי כָּל הָעָם כִּי מַעַל כָּל הָעָם הָיָה, וַכִּפְתָּחוּ עִמָּדוֹ כָּל הָעָם. ו וַיְבָרֶךְ עֶזְרָא אֶת יְהוָה הָאֱלֹהִים הַגָּדוֹל, וַיַּעֲנוּ כָּל הָעָם אָמֵן אָמֵן בְּמַעַל יְדֵיהֶם וַיִּקְדּוּ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לַיהוָה אֲפִים אֲרָצָה... ט וַיֹּאמְרוּ נַחֲמֵהּ הוּא הַתְּרַשְׁתָּא וְעֶזְרָא הַכֹּהֵן הַסֹּפֵר וְהַלְוִיִּם הַמְּבִינִים אֶת הָעָם לְכָל הָעָם, הַיּוֹם קֹדֶשׁ הוּא לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֶל תִּתְאַבְּלוּ וְאֶל תִּבְכוּ, כִּי בּוֹכִים כָּל הָעָם כְּשִׁמְעֵם אֶת דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה.

NEHEMIAH 8:1-3, 5,6,9

1 Then all the people assembled as one man into the open place that was before the water gate, and they spoke to Ezra the scribe to bring the scroll of the Torah of Moses which the Lord commanded to Israel. 2 And Ezra the scribe brought the Torah before the congregation of men and women and all who could hear with understanding on the 1st day of the 7th month. 3 And he read it facing the open place that was before the water gate from the first light until midday, before the men and the women and all who could hear with understanding, and the ears of all the people were focused on the scroll of the Torah...5 And Ezra the scribe opened the scroll in the sight of all the people for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood up. 6 And Ezra blessed the Lord the great God, and all the people answered "Amen, Amen" with their hands upraised and they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground...9 And Nehemiah the Tirshata and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, today is holy to the Lord your God, do not mourn and do not weep, for all the people wept when they heard the words of the Torah.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Both men and women are mentioned in this section. Does this surprise you? How can this inform conversations about roles in our own synagogues?
- In what ways is this text reminiscent of today's Torah service?
- Imagine that you are Ezra, looking out over the Israelites as you read from the Torah. When you bless the Lord, they answer you "Amen, Amen". What do they mean? Why are their hands upraised? Why are they weeping?
- In what ways is this text "history"? How does it fit into the 6-sided matrix of history described by Rabbi Artson in his introductory essay?



SYNAGOGUE AND SIDUR – TEXT 2

תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא קמא פב:א

עשרה תקנות תיקן עזרא: שקורין במנחה בשבת, וקורין בשני ובחמישי... שיהו קוראין במנחה בשבת משום יושבי קרנות. ושיהו קוראין בשני ובחמישי עזרא תיקן? והא מעיקרא הוה מיתקנא! דתניא: "וילכו שלשת ימים במדבר ולא מצאו מים" (שמות ט"ו:כב). דורשי רשומות אמרו: אין מים אלא תורה, שנאמר: "הוי כל צמא לכו למים" (ישעיהו נ"ה:א), כיון שהלכו שלשת ימים בלא תורה נלאו, עמדו נביאים שביניהם ותיקנו להם שיהו קורין בשבת ומפסיקין באחד בשבת, וקורין בשני ומפסיקין שלישי ורביעי, וקורין בחמישי ומפסיקין ערב שבת, כדי שלא ילינו ג' ימים בלא תורה.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, BAVA KAMMA 82A

Ezra instituted 10 measures: That we read the Torah in the afternoon service on Shabbat, that we read the Torah on Monday and Thursday...In the afternoon service on Shabbat on account of the shopkeepers [who are too busy on Monday and Thursday to hear the Torah reading]. And that we would read on Monday and Thursday – did Ezra institute that?! It was instituted at the outset! As it is taught: "They went 3 days into the wilderness and they did not find water" (Ex.15:22). The interpreters of Torah said "water" means "Torah", as it says: "Ho! All who are thirsty come for water" (Isaiah 55:1). Since they went 3 days without Torah they were exhausted; the prophets among them stood up and instituted for them that they would read on Shabbat and leave off on Sunday, and read on Monday and leave off on Tuesday and Wednesday, and read on Thursday and leave off on Friday, so that they not go 3 days without Torah...

STUDY QUESTIONS

- On Shabbat afternoons we begin the Torah portion for the coming week. Other than the shopkeepers, what are some other reasons for doing this?
- Why do the rabbis of the Talmud compare the Torah to water?
- Rabbi Leider talks about the requirement for 10 adults to be present when we read from the Torah scroll. What is the purpose of this? How do you feel about this requirement?
- How can we make the Torah service more vital today, so that we will yearn to read it 3 days a week, the way the Israelites yearned for water in the wilderness?



SYNAGOGUE AND SIDUR – TEXT 3

HERMAN WOUK, THIS IS MY GOD¹

One cool observer has said that the worship of the Torah is the idolatry of the Jews. It is a sharp half-truth. Denied a visible image to worship, denied any divine messenger or prophet on whom to lavish their affection and heap their burdens and supplications, denied any intercessor at all...denied all but the word of God written in a scroll, the Jews have given to that scroll all the loyalty, love, and honor that men are capable of.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What does Wouk mean when he says that “the worship of the Torah is the idolatry of the Jews” is a “sharp half-truth”? Is it true that Jews worship the Torah scroll? Half true? Not true at all? What is the evidence for your answer?**
- **How would the significance of the synagogue Torah reading change for you if, instead of reading from a Hebrew scroll, it was read a) from a scroll, but in the vernacular of your country (English in the United States, for example), b) from a printed book, in Hebrew? in the vernacular?**
- **Why is the Torah scroll Jews’ most sacred object? Why do other Jewish ritual objects, like the sidur, the shofar, the menorah, etc., have lesser sanctity?**
- **How does dressing the Torah in ornaments detract from, distract from or enhance your appreciation of its contents?**

¹ Herman Wouk, *This is My God: The Jewish Way of Life*. Garden City, New Jersey: Doubleday, 1970, p.182-183.



SYNAGOGUE AND SIDUR – TEXT 4

משלי פרק ג:יח

עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה ותמכיה מאשר.

PROVERBS 3:18

It is a tree of life to those who hold it, and those who support it are made happy/blessed.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- We sing these words at the end of the Torah service. Think about your family and about the Jewish people as a whole. What does it really mean to you to say that the Torah is a “tree of life”?
- How is Torah both a tree and, as we learned in Text 2, water? What do these metaphors teach us about Jewish history and/or collective memory? Why would the Torah and the rabbis choose these particular metaphors?
- How do you feel about the Proverb’s assertion that “those who support it are made happy/blessed”? What do you think this means?
- We end the Torah service by asking God “Return us, Lord and we will return; renew our days as in days of old” (Lamentations 5:21). What does this mean to you?



SYNAGOGUE AND SIDUR – TEXT 5

KAREN G REISS MEDWED, PRAYER¹

After the Torah is placed in the Ark, Numbers 10:36, followed by Psalm 132:8-10 and Proverbs 4:2, are recited. The Ark is then closed and, finally, three verses beginning with *eitz hayyim hi* (Proverbs 3:18) are sung aloud. The third of these verses is Lamentations 5:21 and so the Torah Service concludes with a plea for the future, described as a time when a penitent and regenerated people will be restored to its former glory, ringing in the ears of the congregation. This hymn is a reminder that Jewish living is not done in isolation, that it is a real partnership between God and the Jewish people. The Torah is thus appropriately described as a living entity that adapts to its surroundings while staying true to its core values, and we, as a people, can access faith in God through holding tight to this living Torah. This idea of a living Torah means a life of dynamic change. It does not imply that each and every individual must immediately embrace all that there is to living a life of Torah. Instead, it is the never-ending plea that each day bring a renewed commitment to this life, toward this kind of spiritual fulfillment, toward this sacred journey.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **How do the ideas in this text relate to Rabbi Artson’s graphic representation of Jewish history in the first essay in this volume? Look at the labels of his six-sided matrix, and discuss each as it relates to Rabbi Reiss Medwed’s text on the Torah service.**
- **Discuss Rabbi Reiss Medwed’s observations on the end of the Torah service in light of Rabbi Leider’s essay about the history of the Torah service itself. How does knowing about the origins and setting of the first Torah service affect your understanding of what Rabbi Reiss Medwed says about the Torah service today?**
- **Rabbi Reiss Medwed says that “The Torah is thus appropriately described as a living entity that adapts to its surroundings while staying true to its core values, and we, as a people, can access faith in God through holding tight to this living Torah”. In her essay, Rabbi Leider talked about the word “Torah” itself. What do you think Rabbi Reiss Medwed means when she uses the word “Torah”?**
- **What does it mean to you to hold tight to a living, adapting Torah? What are some other things in life that change and adapt even as you hold them tight? How do those things relate to your idea of Torah?**
- **How does Torah help us access our faith in God? Does the Torah service itself help you in this way? If yes, how? If no, how could the service be made more meaningful for you?**

¹ Karen G Reiss Medwed, “Prayer”, in *The Observant Life: The Wisdom of Conservative Judaism for Contemporary Jews*, edited by Martin Samuel Cohen and Michael Katz. New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2011, p. 43.





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AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

15600 MULHOLLAND DRIVE • BEL AIR, CA 90077