

Torah Studies

I wake from a dream—anxious—thinking it’s time for my daughter’s Bas Mitzvah. The anxiety doesn’t seem to come from any specific dream image—showing up at the temple without my skirt, for instance, or finding that the caterer has added ham sandwiches to the luncheon trays, or worst of all, seeing my daughter drop the Torah on an unsuspecting *zayde* during the procession through the sanctuary. *Clunk*. It’s a sweaty, uncomfortable feeling that might only mean that I need to go to the bathroom or that I forgot to turn the heat down before going to bed.

But why the Bas Mitzvah? A year has passed since that event—that festooned reflection of a particular time in a family’s life, a sigh of relief for the elders that, yes, the child has been launched on the path of Jewish continuity.

I adjust my position in bed, straighten my blankets, roused as I am from my sweaty slumber. My thoughts swirl. They tug me further still from the peaceful oblivion I seek and back into the profane anxieties—the *misbegoss*—of the months and days before the Bas Mitzvah: finding a room for the party, planning for out-of-town relatives, mailing invitations (six weeks in advance), having the last-minute argument with this relative or that. The biggest struggle of those weeks and months, though, had been to keep my mind on the true focus of the Bas Mitzvah: the Torah and its 613 commandments. For its people, a yoke, a weight, an honor, a passion. A tree of life.

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The Torah is a scroll—50 yards long when unrolled--that contains the five books of the Hebrew Bible. When not being read, the scroll is rolled tightly around two wooden poles, then belted with a velvet strap, cloaked in brocade satin or velvet, and adorned with silver jewelry—a breast plate, a crown, or perhaps finials with tiny bells, and a yad, the pointer

used while reading. Together, all this silver makes quite a commotion when the Torah is carried or moved—the tinkle of the bells, the clang of the unstable finials, the shifting of the breast plate and yad. When the Torah is going to be read, honored individuals carry it and undress it: first removing the crown, then the cloak, then the belt. Although girls and women have most of the practical experience with these tasks—gained by dressing and undressing dolls and babies; carrying them close to their chests—throughout most of Jewish history, only men handled the Torah.

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The parchment for the Torah is made from the skins of kosher lambs or goats, soaked, scraped, and pressed until they are soft enough to receive the writing. Since a Torah usually contains 248 columns, and one rectangle of parchment yields space for only 3 or 4 columns, the scroll may require more than 80 skins.

The ink for the Torah must be black and very durable. It is made from a mixture of soot, honey, and crushed gallnuts, boiled together. Then, gum arabic and copper sulfate are added. Long ago, the Torah was written with a reed. Today a quill may be used. The feather quill comes from a kosher bird, usually a goose or turkey. A second quill may be used for writing only God's four-letter name. This is attention to detail. This is a human endeavor, assured of a higher purpose.

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The *sofer*, who is traditionally a man, prepares the skins and then does the writing. First, he divides the empty parchment papers into squares, ruling the lines carefully with a stylus. Then he uses a thorn to draw lines on the parchment. He writes the letters below the lines, as if they hang from them.

If the sofer makes a mistake, he scrapes off the ink with a piece of glass. However, a mistake in one of God's seven holy names cannot be corrected, because God's name cannot be erased. So the sofer trims off the column with the error. This sheet is stored until it can be disposed of properly--buried with other unuseable holy texts. This is reverence for the written word.

When the writing of the Torah is complete, the sofer, or scribe, sews the pieces of parchment together using a thread called *giddin*, which is made from the leg sinews of a kosher animal, most commonly a cow, a sheep, or an ox. The scribe makes one stitch after every six lines of text, sewing the backs of the parchment sheets, so that the stitches are not visible from the front. Then the scroll is attached to wooden rollers called *Eitzzei Chayim* (trees of life).

The Torah or Torahs (some congregations have several), heavily clothed, are stored in the Ark, a sacred cabinet on the *bima*, or stage, of the sanctuary in a shul or temple. When the rabbi or cantor opens the Ark, the congregation stands to show respect, but not everyone feels it. My brother-in-law, for example:

“Ha,” he says. “They worship a bookshelf.”

And many feel this alienation—this estrangement and irreverence—while others experience some powerful mix, a cocktail, of feeling for the sacred bookshelf. My mother, for example.

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Approaching age 70, my mother decided to have a Bas Mitzvah. This rite of passage marks the taking on of the 613 commandments embodied in the Torah. In most congregations today, the readiness for this taking on is demonstrated by a certain level of learning, and in particular, the ability to read and interpret a portion, or *parsha*, from the Torah. A person can

perform this rite at any age, though the typical age is 12 or 13. In 1928, in Detroit, when my mother was 12, the idea of the Bas Mitzvah had not yet been conceived, though the boys had the Bar Mitzvah. In 1985, when my mother embarked on this project of learning, girls had been celebrating the Bas Mitzvah for over 20 years, although they were still not allowed to read from the Torah scroll. Instead, they read from the Haftorah, writings from the biblical prophets that are loosely matched in theme with the weekly portions.

To prepare for a Bas Mitzvah, a person must learn the special vowel-less Hebrew used in the Torah. Also, to strictly observe the traditions, she must study cantillation and tropes, the ancient systems of fusing speech with melody. And so my mother began. She studied with a rabbi, she was assigned her Haftorah, and she had a date set for her Bas Mitzvah.

She loved her Haftorah. She chanted it to herself throughout her day--while she swept floors, made beds, folded laundry, cooked supper. If I was at home, visiting, I heard her humming the melody as she got out of the shower, as she dressed in the morning. If she woke in the middle of the night, anxious, she lifted her cassette recorder from the bedside table, put on her headphones, and listened to the Haftorah tape, humming quietly so she wouldn't disturb my father.

At every Bar or Bas Mitzvah I've been to, it is the sweet, open voice of the child, carrying across the congregation, that moves me. But my mother's voice was deep and raspy—a voice for torch singing. When I was a girl, long before my mother had her Haftorah to take her through her day, she sang “Stardust.” In the kitchen, preparing supper, she glanced at her image, reflected in the kitchen window, and she sang.

Sometimes I wonder why I spend the lonely nights

Dreaming of a song,

*The melody haunts my reverie,
And I am once again with you.
When our love was new,
And each kiss an inspiration . . .
But that was long ago, and now my consolation
Is in the stardust of a song.*

But my mother never chanted her special torch-song Haftorah to the congregation. One February morning, only months before her Bas Mitzvah date, she arrived at her health club, changed into her workout clothes, and felt the killing chest pains. By night, she was gone.

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In December, the month of my daughter's Bas Mitzvah, the Torah scroll is turned to Genesis—the book with the family stories: stripped-down tales of betrayal, conflict, misunderstandings, wrong moves, even murder. Good. Part of the Bas Mitzvah process involves interpreting what one reads from the Torah. The interpretation—usually a sermonlike speech—is crucial: It demonstrates understanding rather than rote learning. And a story with conflict has more to muck around in than one without. My daughter's portion tells of Jacob and Esau: about family estrangement and disconnection, unacknowledged tensions and subterfuge.

As my daughter studies, I struggle. I need this event to have meaning—to gracefully merge the sacred with the profane, to balance the material with the spiritual. I become preoccupied with her *parsha*. Why, in the midst of this celebration of connectedness, are we presented with a tale of failed reconciliation? Why is this the *parsha* that has come to our family? I apply myself to the text.

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Two brothers—Esau and Jacob—meet on a dusty road. They are twins, but not identical: Esau, born first, has red hair; Jacob has dark. They have been estranged for 20 years. Both brothers have prospered. Jacob is surrounded by wives, children, servants, animals. Esau leads 400 soldiers. Which one has more?

The reason for the estrangement is a betrayal: All those years ago, Jacob disguised himself as Esau and sat beside Isaac, their blind and failing father. Fooled perhaps—perhaps not—Isaac gave his final blessing, intended for Esau, to Jacob. Now Jacob, not Esau, will become the patriarch of the Jewish people.

But another reason for the estrangement, deeper, is that the parents carried their own scars into the parenting. As a boy, Isaac, young and trusting, followed his father, Abraham, up the mountain, where his father planned to sacrifice him. What has Isaac made of this experience? How has it shaped his fathering?

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My family has dwindled. My parents are gone. Those who remain—sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins—are scattered. I have no one to tell me family news. People die or are born, move away, and I don't hear about it. I long for my family, or for what family stands for in the imagination. I carry my family stories, but I do not know what they mean. When I am with my family, I often lose the person I think of as myself. I become a thorn, a gallnut, a piece of glass for scraping. Who passed me this legacy of discomfort?

If life has been kind to her, a young girl, 12 or 13, may not yet know any of this: How a grudge can stick. How a wound can heal but the scars remain. How a person can die and an opportunity be lost forever. And the mother? She can read stories, see mistakes that others make. Still, she continues to make her own. Her family gathers, and she is joyful that

they have come all this way, but when they get here, she is so busy that she barely has time to be with them.

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When Jacob and Esau meet, Jacob is plagued by guilt. He dances around Esau in a nervous way. He is obsequious. He bows seven times; he offers gifts.

Esau declines. He doesn't *want* gifts.

Jacob presses. He needs to *give* gifts.

The brothers talk, but only a little, and not at all about the history, the estrangement, what the father or the father's father has wrought.

They weep. They embrace.

But Jacob fears the physical closeness, while Esau seems to want it. He asks Jacob to travel on with him.

Come to my home, Esau says. *Let's go now*.

Jacob demurs: He has the women and the children. *They are frail*, he says. *They can't be pushed*, he points out; *they can't walk at a soldier's pace*. *You go on ahead*, Jacob says. *We'll follow later*.

What is Esau to do? Jacob has rejected his invitation, but still . . . he could press. He could even insist that two brothers, apart for so long, could surely compromise on something so simple as a walking pace. But he doesn't. Perhaps he is not *that kind of person*; perhaps he is hurt by the rejection. We do not know. He takes his men and leaves for home.

When Esau is gone, Jacob gathers his brood and sets off. But he does not follow Esau, as promised. With no explanation to anyone, he goes elsewhere. He *can't* live with Esau because they have not done the work of healing, of asking forgiveness and forgiving. There is no cause for celebration here.

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Simchas Torah is a holiday of wild abandon. Jews celebrate this holiday when they have read through the entire Torah scroll and are about to begin again. The congregation's elite carry the Torahs out among the congregants, and they dance; they twirl with the Torahs and the people to rousing Yiddish music. Children run among the Torah dancers and up and down the aisles of the usually staid sanctuary. People perspire and laugh. Their faces turn red, they throw off their jackets, they mop their foreheads, they roll their eyes.

When I was a girl, I went with my mother to many such celebrations and watched men dance with Torahs. I'd been raised in a rich marinade of Galitzianer culture, but I became estranged from the rituals and celebrations of the shul. Didn't learn Hebrew. Didn't have a Bas Mitzvah. Went to work on Yom Kippur. Lived with a roommate who had a Christmas tree. Only years later, as an adult with a child of my own, did I feel drawn back. By what? the need to expose my daughter to the full expanse of Jewish life, my husband's sense that this was the right thing to do, the comfort I'd felt from well-established Jewish rituals of death and mourning when my parents had died.

We took my daughter to a Simchas Torah celebration at a local temple. Here, the Torah was for everyone. At the rabbi's instruction, we formed a large circle in the social hall, and he passed in front of us, turning the Torah's wooden poles, unrolling the broad ribbon of text, placing it in our hands. Each person in the circle supported a portion of the stiff parchment--one hand, raised, to lift its top, and one hand lowered to allow its bottom to rest there. I looked closely at the parchment section before me, the long, straight stitches that held the sheets together, the white surface with its black dancing letters.

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The Torah is an object, created in a prescribed manner by the sofer. He transforms skins into parchment, gallnuts into ink. He measures, rules, writes, stitches. The finished object is lavishly dressed.

The Torah is a text. Rolled inside it are stories, laws, commandments, instructions for living. The human beings who inhabit this text are stumbling and inadequate, blind and misguided: our matriarchs and patriarchs.

The Torah is a symbol—the repository of all that has been divinely revealed, of divine revelation in general.

And *Torah* (without the article) is something broader still—all Jewish learning and interpretation, a way of life.

The Ethics of the Fathers, or *Pirke Abot*, says this: “Study it, and study it over and over again, for everything is contained in it. Reflect upon it, and grow old and gray over it, and do not stir from it!”

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At the Simchas Torah celebration, the scroll stretched around the perimeter of the room, and the rabbi moved from panel to panel, pointing out this *parsha* and that. “Here, we’re in Exodus,” he’d say. “Here, Numbers.”

After the scroll was re-rolled and re-clothed, all the Torahs were brought out from the Ark for the dancing, and they were passed from hand to hand. Here, women danced with Torahs, and someone offered a Torah to me. I took it, cloaked in velvet, rested it on my shoulder, gripped it tight against my chest. *It’s like a baby*, I thought. I tried a few dance steps. Its silver finials rattled and clanked. *It’s not like a baby*, I thought: *Too rigid*. I looked around, to see if anyone was eyeing me, whether I had done anything wrong yet. *It’s like a baton*, I thought, *in a relay race. I’ll give it to someone else*. When I found someone to take it, I

made a big show, said, *It's heavy*. But the truth was, it hadn't seemed heavy enough, not for something like that.

* * *

The date of my daughter's Bas Mitzvah was December 16. We did not pick this date with the numbers in mind, but still, this was our date, and even this could be given meaning. The one and the six in the date make seven, and my mother's Jewish name was *Sheva--seven* in Hebrew.

Sheva is my daughter's Hebrew name as well:

Seven.

Seven days of creation.

Seven brothers and sisters in my mother's family.

Seven blessings at a Jewish wedding.

Seven days of Jewish mourning.

Seven bows to Esau.

Seven names of God.

Although the sevens echo through the occasion, and I point this out to my daughter, she forgoes this theme of numbers in her Torah interpretation. In fact, she forgoes a word-centered approach to interpretation entirely. She interprets the story of Jacob and Esau through dance—hardly a conventional choice in our cerebral bookshelf-worshipping religion. So her choice demonstrates courage, and I bless her for this.

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One of the parents' final assignments in the Bas Mitzvah celebration is to compose a blessing for the child. Having learned from Isaac the injury inflicted by a misplaced blessing, I approach this challenge with great care. What do I have to draw from? My daughter's character, her Torah portion, my history, and one of my mother's favorite verbs: to probe.

All through my school years, I hated to write. I never felt I had anything to say, and I dreaded writing assignments and the inevitability of facing the blank page. I suppose my mother understood this, so when I was in elementary school, she would sit with me at the kitchen table, pull her little green portable typewriter up in front of her, and say, “What do you want to write about?” And I would say, “I don’t know.”

“Well, what do you *have* to write about?” she would ask.

And I would mumble something like, “Fish.” Who knew where these topics came from?

And she would say, “Well, what about it?”

And I’d mumble something. And she’d be my *sofer*. She actually typed it for me, spun out the sentences. I am free to admit this now.

Then she’d say, “So why is that *important?*”

She could be a little gruff and impatient, but she’d stick with me. And she’d challenge me to look beyond the basic facts about fish, to probe for what was important. So, in some sense, my mother was at the table when I wrote the blessing for my daughter.

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When my daughter chanted her *parsha*, her voice filled the sanctuary. Her interpretation through dance evoked the fear and suspicion that hung between the brothers. Afterward, I stood beside my daughter on the *bima*, to give my blessing. I put my arm around her, tight, and we looked into each other’s faces. I remembered the morning when first I looked at her this way, when she was only hours old, and we were first alone together. I know now that the eyes of a newborn are not yet capable of sharp focus, so she cannot have seen me clearly then. Perhaps I am still a blurred vision to her, with all the power I have to shape her life—

to make her this, not that; to take her here, not there. But our gazes seemed locked together nonetheless, awash in a moment of pure trust and connection, and here is what I said:

The number seven is significant in our family, and in many areas of Judaism. So my blessing has seven lines.

Then I asked the congregation to support me in my blessing by saying amen at the end of each line. And I began:

Bless your sweet voice, a sound of purity and hope and wonderful promise.

Bless your keen mind, able to probe and interpret the conflicts of the human family.

Bless your brave heart, able to stand and speak and dance before all this congregation.

And bless your deep soul, journeying on a path toward wisdom and wholeness.

May you grow to adulthood in a time when families and tribes and generations mix freely, for the enrichment of all.

May you grow to adulthood in a time when the voices of girls and women all over the world are nurtured and encouraged.

May you grow to adulthood in a time when Esaus and Jacobs, sisters and brothers, parents and children, friends and enemies, can meet, speak openly, voice their wounds and their worries, and then heal together as they bathe in the sweet, soothing balm of forgiveness.

And the congregation said *Amen*.