Dad, We Heard

Bex Stern-Rosenblatt

Parashah

There is a way of understanding the Shema, recorded in both in the Talmud (Bavli Pesachim 56a) and in midrash (Sifrei Devarim 31) as the words of Jacob’s sons, assuring him that all is well and they will follow in his footsteps. We read them speaking the words, “Hear, oh Israel,” as a direct address to their father.

This is a reading that only midrash could come up with. After all, the words of the Shema are recorded in this week’s parashah, spoken by Moses to the Israelite people hundreds of years after the death of Jacob and his sons in the story. To read them spoken by Jacob’s sons invites us to fall down the rabbit hole of midrashic imagination.

Jacob and Moses bear striking similarities. Both spend time as shepherds, both meet their wives by a well, both have a real relationship with God. Jacob leads our people into Egypt and Moses leads them out. Most pertinently, both Jacob and Moses know the bone-shaking anxiety and hope of having to pass on tradition and promise to the next generation. Both Jacob and Moses were bearers of God’s covenantal promises. Neither of them will live to see the promises fulfilled. Rather, they have to pass on the obligation and reward to the next generation. They become teachers to those who come after them, Jacob to his twelve sons and Moses to the twelve tribes who bear their names. Jacob will leave something like blessings for his twelve sons just as Moses will do for the twelve tribes.

The midrash picks up on these connections, allowing us to imagine a link between the two men. The entry point is Genesis 35:22, the report that Jacob’s eldest son has slept with Bilhah, one of Jacob’s concubines. We read, in that verse, “and Israel heard.” Outside of Deuteronomy, this is the only time in the Torah that we get the particular phrase, “Israel heard,” which, of course, is like the language of the Shema, “Hear, oh Israel.” As we read in the midrash, having heard the devastating news of what his son has done, Jacob is worried, not for himself, but for Reuben. He is worried that just as Abraham and Isaac each produced a child who was unworthy of carrying on the covenantal promise, Ishamel and Esau respectively, so too had Reuben proved himself to be unworthy. But the verse continues, saying, seemingly superfluously, “And the sons of Jacob were twelve,” confirming that somehow Reuben would redeem himself to be counted as a worthy child of Jacob.
The midrash understands that from this moment on, Reuben repented. He fasted and did not partake of the meals shared by his brothers when they threw Joseph in a pit. He abstained from all pleasure. It is not until the very end of the Torah that Moses will confirm that God does in fact forgive Reuben. We read in Deuteronomy 33:6, “let Reuben live and not die.” He is fully accepted back into the children of Jacob. Jacob need not have worried that his progeny will prove unworthy.

The midrash continues, using the moment in Genesis 49 when Jacob calls his sons to his deathbed to listen to his final blessings with the words “Hear, oh sons of Jacob.” It is not until we reach Deuteronomy 6, the Shema, that the midrash imagines the sons of Jacob as replying. Their father asked them to hear his words and they respond with the word “hear,” restating the fundamental point of his blessings. As the early writer of piyyutim, Yannai, writes, “he called to them with the word ‘hear’ and they answered him with the word ‘hear.’” This moment is proof that we, his progeny, are worthy, that we will continue upholding our side of the covenant.

It is also an explanation of the strange phrase from Genesis 28:21, when Jacob appears to make his acceptance of God conditional on God providing him safe passage home. In place of this problematic understanding, the midrash would have us read the condition that “God will be my God” as the hope that his children would also say that God would be their God.

Hearing us make this vow, hearing his children recite the Shema, Jacob then, in the midrash, bows at the head of his bed in Genesis 47:31. He releases himself from his existential worry. He has passed on the promise and can leave the earth in peace.

Likewise, Moses faces the same existential worry. He leaves the Israelites as the carriers of the covenant when he dies in Deuteronomy. Millenia later, we are both Jacob and his sons, both Moses and the Israelites. Saying the Shema, we address those who came before us, “hear, oh Jacob and Moses, we, your descendants, are still here, still faithful” and also we address those who come after us “hear, oh future generations, we have an obligation and a promise to pass to you.”
Redemption with No Fine Print
Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

Haftarah

“Comfort, comfort My people, says your God” (Isaiah 40:1) so opens the haftarah that stands in sharp contrast to the harsh haftarot of the weeks leading up to Tisha B’Av.

Isaiah 40 was chosen to start a period of seven weeks of haftarot taken from Isaiah’s prophecies intended to comfort the people sitting in exile. Prof. Yair Hoffman, in Olam HaTanakh, Isaiah (Heb.), wonders how the message of comforting in this chapter might be different from that of other prophets, making this the ultimate prophecy of consolation. The midrash Pesikta d’Rav Kahana poses the same question in story form, presenting various prophets as trying to console Jerusalem, only to be rebuffed because Jerusalem does not know which of their prophecies to believe: the ones about the looming destruction or the ones giving hope.

Isaiah is different, suggests Hoffman, in that he does not demand anything from the people. Implicit in other prophecies of future hope is the idea that the people have done something to deserve the change, that the problem of the past has been corrected. Isaiah says, “her hard labor is fulfilled, her iniquity is settled, for she has taken from the LORD’s hand double for all her offenses.” (v. 2.) The nation has suffered all that it was meant to endure as part of their punishment. They need not fear that more is about to come. They have justly earned their redemption and therefore it must come.

The prophet understands that this approach is necessary. A broken nation, having experienced things that they believed could not happen, has no endurance left for more struggles. The disillusioned nation does not have the inner strength to be proactive in its own redemption. They are likely to just walk away. Isaiah turns to the nation with a promise from God: He will do all that is needed to redeem His people.

If this idea invokes an earlier episode in Jewish history, it is not by chance. Isaiah follows this initial voice entreating or commanding the people to be comforted with a second one: “A voice calls out: In the Wilderness clear a way for the LORD’s road, level straighten in the desert a highway for our God!” (v.3) It is not the first time that God has redeemed the people of Israel through a trek in the desert. Awakening memories of the Exodus gives hope. Such a trek across the punishing desert that stretches between Babylon (Iraq) and the land of Israel is impossible, just as the Exodus from Egypt was impossible – but impossible deeds are God’s trademark.

While Isaiah describes world-altering events to come, he ends this part of the prophecy (v.11) with a beautifully gentle picture bringing us back to the images of the nation’s early leaders: “Like a shepherd He tends his flock, in His arms He gathers lambs…” But this time our shepherding leader who is taking us out is not human, it is God Himself.
**Forgetting Shabbat**

**Ilana Kurshan**

*Adventures in Mishnah with My Kids*

*Mishnah Shabbat 7:1*

Matan and I have just begun learning the seventh chapter of masechet Shabbat, which feels like it ought to be the first chapter instead. After six chapters dealing with specific activities that are prohibited on Shabbat—carrying, lighting fires, cooking, warming food—the seventh chapter begins with more general, overarching principles about what it means to observe and to remember Shabbat.

We learn in the fourth of the Ten Commandments that we must “remember Shabbat to keep it holy.” The Mishnah understands that if keeping Shabbat is about remembering, then failing to observe Shabbat involves “forgetting” Shabbat in one way or another. A person might “forget” Shabbat and accidentally perform a form of labor that is prohibited on Shabbat; such an individual would be required to bring a sin offering in Temple times. But how many sin offerings would he or she need to bring, and how does that relate to the various ways in which Shabbat might be forgotten?

As I began explaining this Mishnah to Matan, I noticed that he looked increasingly skeptical. “How can a person forget it’s Shabbat? It always feels so different on Shabbat from the rest of the week. There’s no school. There’s hardly any traffic on the road. The stores are closed. There’s even a siren that goes off when it’s time to light candles. Everyone knows when it’s Shabbat.” I suppose that living in Jerusalem, we have a somewhat skewed perspective. I remind Matan that in the rest of the world, Shabbat does not feel so dramatically different from all other days. In theory a person might confuse Shabbat with another day of the week, and inadvertently light a fire or cook or perform other forms of forbidden labor. The Mishnah explains that such an individual would be obligated to bring a single sin offering for all the labors he or she performed on any given Shabbat, since each Shabbat involves one act of forgetting.

Suddenly Matan understands what I mean. “Sometimes Yitzvi does that,” he tells me, referring to his three-year-old brother. “Sometimes when Yitzvi wants to listen to music before bed, he tells us it’s not Shabbat. He knows that if it’s Shabbat, he can’t listen to music. But since he really wants to listen to music, he convinces himself that it’s not really Shabbat that day.” Matan, who often puts his younger brother to bed, knows how much Yitzvi enjoys falling asleep listening to music. On Shabbat, when we can’t play music for him, he gets very upset. “No! It’s not Shabbat! Turn on my songs – it’s not Shabbat today,” he’ll insist, until we persuade him to let us sing to him instead. Even then, he’ll balk if we try to sing a Shabbat song: “Not that song! No Shabbat songs! I want a firetruck song,” he’ll tell us, and we have to make up a song about fighting fires to sing to him on the one day of the week when it’s forbidden to kindle a match.

The Mishnah explains that a person might alternatively remember that it is Shabbat, but forget that a particular labor is prohibited. Such an individual has to bring a sin offering for each category of labor performed. For instance, a person might light candles, daven Kabbalat Shabbat, and then forget that it’s forbidden to cook, and heat up a pot of soup. Matan reminds me that Yitzvi makes this mistake as well. Next to his bed is a special reading lamp that we keep on all
Shabbat—the lamp has a cover, and so we can simply cover up the bulb when we know longer want light on Shabbat. We refer to it as Yitzvi’s “Shabbat light,” but it seems that he doesn’t quite understand what we mean. “This is my Shabbat light. It’s not a regular light. It’s a Shabbat light, so I can turn it off on Shabbat,” he’ll explain to us proudly, turning off the switch. He knows it’s Shabbat, but he “forgets” that it’s forbidden to turn the light on and off.

Finally, the Mishnah notes that a person might forget Shabbat by being unaware of the very concept of a day of rest. Such an individual has to bring only one sin offering, because each and every labor he or she performs on Shabbat results from a single act of forgetting. For instance, a young child who was kidnapped and raised by non-Jews might “forget” Shabbat because he or she never learned about Shabbat in the first place. Thankfully all of my children were raised with an awareness of Shabbat, but even so, I can remember a time when the concept had not fully sunk in. I remind Matan that when he was little, I used to tell him, “No, you can’t press that button, you can’t turn that switch on – it’s Shabbat.” On weekdays he would point to those same buttons and switches and ask, “Is that Shabbat?” I realized that he thought that “Shabbat” referred to the buttons and switches themselves, rather than to the reason we are prohibited from turning them on. My son, at that age, did not yet have a concept of Shabbat.

Masechet Shabbat as a whole is much more focused on what is prohibited on Shabbat than on what we are obligated to do to honor the day. But as a parent, I want my kids’ experience of Shabbat to be more positive than negative. Yitzvi knows that Shabbat is a day when we can’t turn on lights and listen to music, but he also knows that it’s a day when he gets to drink his favorite sweet grape juice at dinner and lunch. In fact, he looks forward to Kiddush all week, and will sometimes tell us on a Sunday or Monday, “Today is not Shabbat. I can’t have grape juice.” In such moments I’m relieved to know that in spite of all of his “forgetting,” my son also has good reason to remember Shabbat and keep it sweet.