

Tzohorayim tovim; good afternoon.¹

Before I begin, I want to thank my friends, family and teachers who have come to JTS today in honor of this big day for me. Were it not for your love, support and teachings, I would not be able to stand here today. Special thanks are due to my family who is here today: my in-laws (in all the way from Skokie, Illinois), my sister Shuli, my great-uncle Irving, and my parents, whose love for Judaism rubbed off on me so much that I decided to make Judaism my lifework, just as they did. Of course, a special thank you is in order to my father for being my first rabbi, and for having agreed to mentor me in writing this senior sermon. As someone very attached to my

1. Footnotes in this senior sermon were not read aloud. This is such an example.

family, I am also thinking of my family whose schedules did not permit them to travel to the Seminary today: my brother and all my siblings-in-law, my nephews, my nieces, my cousins, my uncles, my aunts, and Grandma, to whom I used to give Hebrew lessons when I was in 1st grade. I am also thinking today of my family who no longer walks this earth: in particular, my grandfather Pop, without whose love and generosity I never could have had the gift of a day school education or the opportunity to have studied at JTS for 9 years. And, you know, you spend enough time going to minyan at JTS, you eventually meet your life-partner. Or at least I did. Raysh, thank you for being my daily inspiration, my teacher, my rabbi (may your official ordination come speedily and in

our days), my best friend, and my קְשׁוּרָתִי, my
soulmate, who renews everyday my relationship with
Torah, with the pursuit of justice, with the pursuit of
happiness, and with life.

When I was in first grade, my father asked me what
book I had read for the book report that was due that day.

“*Nothing At All*,” I replied.

“You didn’t read anything?” asked my father,
shocked by the idea that I hadn’t done my homework.

“No,” I said. “I read *Nothing At All*.”

“You didn’t read a book!?” My father was concerned.

I was really trying my best to express myself, but
apparently, my father was unfamiliar with Wanda Gag’s
children’s book *Nothing At All*. Though my mother had

been entertaining herself listening to the conversation from across the room, she eventually did intervene and clarify that I had actually read something; I had read a book called *Nothing At All*.²

In first grade, I learned the power of words having more than one meaning. Little did I know in first grade that I was destined for a lifetime of wordplay. For me, wordplay is one of the most exciting and meaningful parts of the Jewish religion. Rabbi Akiva would argue that every single word in the *Torah* hid within it a teaching that no other word in the *Torah* intended to teach. Rabbi Yishma'el is said to have argued the opposite:

דִּיבְרָה תוֹרָה כְּלִשׁוֹן³ בְּנֵי אָדָם.

2. Although this is the version of the story I did tell at my senior sermon, I have now been informed by my sister Shuli that she was most likely the one intervened and clarified.

The Torah spoke in the language of humans.⁴

Though a lot of early rabbinic literature agreed with Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Yishma'el's counter-argument came to be adopted by the entire rabbinic collective.⁵ That being said, Rabbi Yishma'el's assertion—that “the Torah spoke in the language of humans”—still bears multiple meanings. On one level, this aphorism reminds us that our Sacred Teachings were ultimately transmitted through the words of imperfect humans. Hence, our teacher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel of blessed memory would fondly teach that the Torah is a *midrash*—a rabbinically sanctioned allegory for, or an interpretation of—in this

3. I thank Rabbi Dr. Joel Roth for calling to my attention (after the sermon) that my selection of the version of this teaching with the reading of כלשון (literally, “as/like/as-if the language”) rather than בלשון (literally “in the language”), as seemingly later traditions would put it, is essential for the theological and literary stance I am purporting.

4. Seemingly attributed to Rabbi Yishma'el in the Babylonian Talmud, Kereyot 11a.

5. Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 41b.

case, revelation itself.⁶ The Torah is not *the* revelation,
but it is *our attempt at recalling* revelation.

I want to suggest yet another reading of Rabbi
Yishma'el's principle for how we read Torah:

דִּיבְרָה תּוֹרָה כְּלָשׁוֹן בְּנֵי אָדָם.

The Torah spoke in language referring to *beney adam*, to
humans, to express its deepest feelings.

The Torah spoke in the language of humans, which is
to say, the Torah anthropomorphizes: It makes human that
which is not human. A clear example of this principle is
how the Torah speaks of God. In the Torah, God has a
mighty hand that strikes our enemies, an outstretched arm

6. Saying that the Torah is an interpretation of our encounter with the Divine, and not a record of our encounter with the Divine might lead us to question how trustworthy our Torah is. It might beg us to ask: Had all of us in this room been standing at Sinai 3 millennia ago, would we have written the same Torah that we read in our synagogues today?

that releases us from Egypt, a face we cannot see, a nose that snorts anger, and feet in need of a footstool. God talks and God even walks. God is anthropomorphized in our Torah. Though God is not a human, the “Torah speaks of *beney adam*, of humans, to express its deepest sentiments,” and, thus, the Torah turns God into a human.

I believe that this storytelling device—turning characteristics into characters, principles into principals (spelled with an A at the end)—is a very powerful tool of pedagogy and communication. There is a reason that Oscar the Grouch is a character on *Sesame Street*, but Grouchy the Mood is not.⁷ Anthropomorphism lies at the

7. Grouchy the Mood would be some invisible, nebulous entity who overcomes certain characters at different points. Instead, the only character on *Sesame Street* who is grouchy is Oscar the Grouch, the embodiment of Grouchy the Mood *par excellence*.

very core of Judaism's foundational myths. Were it not for our ability to anthropomorphize moods and ideas, we would hardly have any true stories to tell that took place before the 8th Century B.C.E.—and probably even later.⁸

Jews do not read the Torah literally. We leave literalism to literalists. Instead, we inherit traditions of interpretation. When we read the Torah, we uncover the layers of interpretation that inhabit each word.

About 200 years ago, Rabbi Naftali Tz'vi Yehudah Berlin taught that the entire Torah is poetry—multi-faceted, aesthetic, illusive, and allusive.⁹ About two centuries before him, the Ba'al Shem Tov drew on a

8. Within my understanding of early Jewish religion, our mythology owes more credit to transformers than Michael Bay's Internet Movie DataBase profile. (Because I realize that I am delivering this sermon at the premiere institute of critical Jewish studies in America, I hereby note that Michael Bay directed four live-action *Transformers* films. I will now return to my senior sermon.)

9. See *Ha'amek Davar: Kidmat Ha'amek III* (העמק דבר: קדמת העמק ג').

Jewish teaching that was perhaps 1,000 years old in his own day: that every person is a small universe, a microcosm in which the Torah takes place.¹⁰

Arguably, the most famous part of this week's Torah reading, *Lekh Lekha*, comes when *Avram* first receives a sacred communication. This is a communication from the God whose four-letter-name yod-heh-vav-heh seems to be, as the Biblical scholar William Albright noted, a causative verb that means "Making Become." The God of Becoming says to *Avram* "*Lekh lekha*," meaning "Go for yourself," or perhaps, "Go towards your self." In essence, the Being of Beings, or perhaps better yet the Becoming

10. For a historical exploration of this tradition, see my "When Humanity Became the World: When You Became the Torah" at the *BIMA Artists Beit Midrash Source Blog* (published June 28, 2012 and accessed October 21, 2014) at <http://bimaartistsbeitmidrash2012.wordpress.com/2012/06/28/when-humanity-became-the-world-when-you-became-the-torah/> .

of Becomings, tells Avram, “Now is your time to come into this world—to become who you really are.” The God of Process promises to show *Avram* an undefined place at an undefined time. So here was *Avram*, setting out on a journey, seeking the *Torah* of the God of Becoming, and where does he end up? In Shechem, beneath a tree made famous by pagans: *Elon Moreh*. What kind of place was that for a nice Jewish monotheist?

In his JPS commentary to Genesis, Professor Nahum Sarna picks up on the common translation of *Elon Moreh*, “the terebinth of Moreh” (a terebinth being a kind of tree). He notes that Shechem must have been famous for its “traditions about trees of special significance.”¹¹ He

11.P. 91 of his commentary.

enumerates five other points in our TaNaKH where Shechem is mentioned alongside a special tree. Sarna reads the word *Moreh*, meaning “teacher,” as indicative that we should read *Elon Moreh* not as a place-name, but as a reference to a tree that was known as a sort of oracle.¹² Indeed, rabbis throughout the ages read this

12. Focusing on the word *Moreh*, the Zohar suggests that *Elon Moreh* was a place of teachers and students: a sort of public *beit midrash*—a Jewish house of study (I: 80a). Scholars are doubtful that there was a *beit midrash* in Abraham’s time because: How could Abraham have studied Torah if neither Jewish Lights Publishing nor ArtScroll had been founded in his time? Nonetheless, this idea that *Elon Moreh* was a place of insights can resonate without us having to imagine a place of Torah study.

The words *Torah* and *Moreh* come from the same Hebrew-root of *Yod-Resh-Yod*, meaning “projection.” The Torah is a teaching, and a teacher is one who projects information. This idea of *projection* must have interested the grammarian, Rabbi David Kimḥi of the late 12th Century and early 13th Century. He elaborated a teaching of his famous predecessor Rashi (at Genesis 12:6), suggesting that *Elon Moreh* was a place whereat *Avram* projected a prophecy—a troubling vision of how *Avram*’s great grandchildren would come to fight with the people of *Shechem* in response to *Shechem*’s torturing *Avram*’s great granddaughter Dinah. At that place of prophecy, says Kimḥi, *Avram* prayed that *Avram*’s fourth generation would be saved in the events of this catastrophe; and *Avram*’s descendants did indeed persevere. In fact, Kimḥi writes that it was revealed to *Avram* here that *Elon Moreh* would become the site of the revelation of the Torah. After all, as many mystics would later note, that “oracle tree” of *Elon Moreh* might be an allusion to the *Ilan Kadosh* (“the holy tree”), which is that *Etz Chayyim*, that Tree of Life for those who hold onto it: a.k.a. the Torah itself. Attributing even more power to this site, the Chasidic master Rabbi Kalonymos Kalman Epstein, who lived in the late 18th and early 19th Century, suggested that *Elon Moreh* must be related to the Hebrew word *Harah*—pregnancy. Rabbi Kalonymos Kalman Epstein taught that *Elon Moreh* was an allusion to *Harat Olam*—the Divine pregnancy that gave birth to our world.

place-name similarly. The Zohar suggests that *Elon Moreh* was a place of study, and other sages would come to teach that *Elon Moreh* was a place of prophecy, or even the place where the *Torah* would be revealed. But again, what would a place of pagan idolatry have to teach a person as radical and iconoclastic as Avram?

The Ba'al Shem Tov's understanding of the Torah as a narrative that repeats in our own lives is true. Our Torah was not created in a vacuum. Our religion was not created in a vacuum. And we were not created in a vacuum. Reading that Avram rested beneath a pagan tree is a startling reminder that none of us exist in a vacuum, and even a personality as great as *Avram* had what to learn from the pagan world. It is foolish to presume that any of

us could be where we are today were it not for our living in environments that offered ideas and values that we can identify as Other. It would be equally foolish for us to presume that we must entirely remove ourselves from the Other. And according to the rabbis, we don't.

You might recall that *midrash* where *Avram* smashes the idols in his father's shop.¹³ *Avram*'s father's name is *Terah*—which is no coincidence! *Terah* is the utterance of the idol-maker who builds his god of clay, looks that figurine in the face and says, “*Terah!*”—meaning “Breathe!”¹⁴ Only centuries later would a Psalmist come

13. Genesis Rabbah 38:13 on Genesis 11:28.

14. Here, I must note that I am indebted to Dr. Choon-Leong Seow, whose commentary on the Book of Job is, as he is (as I learned from studying the Book of Job with him in my first year of JTS), inclined towards a particular and relatively conservative yet creative approach to reading the text of the Hebrew Bible that I have found meaningful. I hope that I can here do some justice to explaining some of the reasoning behind—or at least the method of—one of his principles of reading the *TaNakh*. Through such a lens as Seow's, the reader is inclined to work with the presumption that there is rarely a problem with the consonants of the Hebrew text; however, the reader may be willing to doubt whether the Masoretic notations of vowels

along and say of idols:

has been transmitted without error. Such an approach might appear unfavorable towards Masoretes; however, it does not deny the authority or the rigorous effort of the Masoretes of the Ge'onic era in their attempting to systematize a grammar for the Hebrew Bible. In a way, this approach of Seow's and others is a theory that requires us to acknowledge some degree of *yeridat haddorot* ("the decline of generations")—that while the consonants were preserved well, the vowels were obscured. We know this to be somewhat true, for the pronunciation of God's four-letter-name was lost. Moreover, we can believe that regional differences in dialect led over time to people pronouncing the same words differently (both in terms of consonants and vowels)—such that the original pronunciations of words would get muddled over time. While *midrash* as a genre often suggests the changing of vowels (and sometimes the changing of consonants) in particular words, so as to yield meanings a more common reading of the text would suggest, we can believe that some of these readings were not mere rhetoric, but were matters of serious debate, affecting personal practice. We read a literally striking example of this, in the Babylonian Talmud, at Bava Batra 21a-21b, where one such debate leads to one Jew literally killing over another based off of one's misvocalization of a single word. In short, we have reason to believe that the vocalization of the Masoretic text was, for centuries, in critical flux. Because of this, we have reason to trust the consonants of the text we have inherited more than we have reason to trust the vowels of the text we have inherited. In light of phenomena of conservative orthography—that is to say, when the scribes of our tradition selected to write fewer consonants and not to write the *matres lectionis* (the non-consonantal appearances of symbols that, in other contexts would be consonants, but thereat indicate, without effecting, vowels, such as the א in ראשית, the ו in הוין or מוים, or the י in הַשִּׁיב)—the reader of an unvocalized text of the *TaNaKH* might note instances wherein the consonantal text could have been vocalized differently by Masoretes had the consonantal tradition they inherited included the *matres lectionis*. It then becomes the duty of the reader of the *TaNaKH* to note when a word's meaning is allusive, especially when the vowels that the Masoretes attributed to the consonants render the word less meaningful than the way in which we might choose to vocalize a text, had we ourselves been Masoretes living a millennium ago, attempting to vocalize a text that, in its oral transmission, had been misvocalized at times to the point of incoherency. Thus, it is my assertion that תָּרַח may be a misvocalized name. After all, when it comes to those same "weak letters" that also constitute the *matres lectionis*, it is nothing short of common when one of these letters disappears for reasons that can only be summed up as: exceptional, or following a pattern culturally determined as that which sounds subjectively euphonic (patterns that do not repeat in all eras of the Hebrew language). It is my belief that תרר is a name plagued either by the vocalization of תָּרַח being an exceptional second-person masculine singular imperfect *hif'il* verb form (as uttered by a proto-Semite, as opposed to today's conjugation of תָּרַיִח) or another similar verb; or the letters of תרר having been intended only ever to be pronounced, differently from תָּרַח, as, sans *matres lectionis*, תָּרַח or the like.

I thank Rabbi Dr. Joel Roth for calling to my attention (after the sermon) that it is helpful for the grammatically inclined to have my translation of *Terah* be grounded in something.

אף להם ולא יריחון

They have a nose, but they cannot breathe.¹⁵

Terah would never hear such a song sung in his own lifetime. Instead, the principle of Faith In Idolatry, which the Torah personifies, anthropomorphizes and names “*Terah*,” eventually gives birth to *Avram*. But then who exactly is this *Avram*?

Avram is an idea. *Avram* is made up of two words: *Av*—“parent;” or better yet, a “source”—and *ram*—“exultantly great.” *Avram* is The Great Source. *Avram* is The Great Source of The Idea we call not “monotheism,” as you might expect, that is, belief in one God, but “henotheism”—that no matter how many gods

15. Psalm 115:6.

there are, we serve only One God.¹⁶

It may be the case, as some have argued, that neither *Avram* nor *Terah* ever walked this earth in the body of a singular human being. Yet, humans living long ago must have latched onto expressions of *Avram*—of henotheism—and expressions of *Terah*—of idolatry. So *Avram* certainly existed, and *Terah* certainly existed—as movements, as tendencies, as philosophies, though not necessarily as individual humans. דִּיבְרָה תוֹרָה כְּלִשׁוֹן בְּנֵי אָדָם. The Torah speaks in the language of humans—turning characteristics into characters,

16. You might recall that God in the beginning of Genesis says, “Let us make humanity in Our own image.” Though God may be speaking in the Royal We, the quotation may also be the Torah’s acknowledgement that our neighbors had many gods. Our Torah never speaks fondly of our neighbors’ gods, but it does not deny their existence.

In Pirkey Avot 4:1, Ben Zoma teaches: (“איזהו חכם? הלומד מכל אדם.”) “Who is wise? One learns from all humans.”

Our henotheism does not immediately excuse xenophobia.

principles into principals (again, spelled with an A at the end). When we anthropomorphize, it makes for far better storytelling than a psychology textbook, or a philosophic treatise.

But we might still be wondering what *Elon Moreh*—the teaching tree—could have taught *Avram*. For this we move to the 15th Century, to the Spanish commentator Isaac Arama. In *Akeydat Yitzchak*, Arama writes that *Avram* arrived at *Elon Moreh*...

בְּשָׁלוֹם וּבְהַשְׁקֵט,

In peace, and in quietude,

אֵין שָׂטָן וְאֵין פְּגַע רַע,

Without adversary, and without the harm of evil,

עִם הַיּוֹת שֶׁהֵיטָה שְׁעַת הַיְרוּסִים.

Though it was an alarming moment in time.

As *Avram*'s worldview was turning upside down, Isaac Arama says *Elon Moreh* was a place of peace; in a world of metaphysical static and noise, *Elon Moreh* was a place of silence.

So, our hero *Avram* sought peace and could only find it along the once-trodden path of idolatry, from which *Avram* had fled not too long ago. But this should not startle us too much; our rabbis often attempted to turn places of idolatry into places of Torah. After all, in *Elon Moreh*, at least people thought about powers greater than themselves. For *Avram* and for our sages, *Elon Moreh* deserved a little credit—for giving us a starting point for a great idea. *Terah* begat *Avram*; idolatry gave birth to

henotheism.¹⁷

But, what drew *Avram* to *Elon Moreh* specifically?

Did *Avram* go there to fill a space of no god with the

Oneness of the One true God? Did *Avram* go there

because that Divine Lure had uprooted *Avram*, leading

Avram and *Avram's* family along a challenging journey,

leaving *Avram* worn and exhausted—in need of a place of

peace and quiet where our ancestor could meditate?

In *Elon Moreh*, *Avram* brought along not the God of
the outstretched arm or the snorting nose, but the God

17. *Terah* brings into this world *Nahor*—whose name essentially means “nostril:” a succinct reminder of the idol-ideology, that an ideal idol breathes. Unfortunately *Avram's* kin (הָרַר) *Haran*—meaning literally “the joyous one”—dies, perhaps having gone too far in exploring the ecstasy of spiritual mystery. Indeed, just as *Haran's* life is shrouded in mystery, *Haran* produces the child *Lot*, whose name means “enveloping,” “cleaving,” and even “mystery.” It is the cleaving youngster *Lot*, the Enveloping Mystery who accompanies *Avram* on their journey of bringing new follows along to aspire towards a sacred ethical, henotheistic life. Though *Lot's* name may have signified different mysteries throughout the life and times of *Lot*, it is telling that *Avram*—the philosophical Great Source Idea—needed to be accompanied by, and balanced by the wonder and awe of *Lot*. When *Lot* accompanied *Avram*, henotheism found company in mystery.

who requires no anthropomorphisms—the god of Process, of Being, of Energy, of Courage, of Righteousness, and of Intellect; the God who moves us to deeper levels of sensitivity and inspires us to develop great ideas for humanity. At *Elon Moreh*, Avram found the peace to meditate on the God who defies all description and metaphor, the God who is almost Nothing at All. Avram went to *Elon Moreh* to listen: to listen in silence—to listen in silence for the Oneness of the God who embodies nothing yet encompasses the universe. In the silence of *Elon Moreh*, Avram listened for the God who looks, sounds, tastes, feels and smells like Nothing at All, but at the core is Something: the God who is the Something that is All.