

Shabbat Shalom!

Before I share any words from *Beha'alotekha*, our Torah portion today, I would like to say a special *yishar ko'ah* and *todah rabbah* to Suzan Rosen who worked hard on coordinating today and making Graduate Shabbat such a special celebration. And, of course, I would like to wish a *mazzal tov* to all those who, like I, are completing this spring with celebrating the achievements we've attained in our education. Of course, Minyan M'at is not a crowd that needs to be reminded of the importance of education. In fact, Minyan M'at is a space where sometimes it's also good to remind ourselves of all the wonderful parts of life that might fall outside the realm of education—*has veshalom*, God forbid! Of course, were I to give a *devar*

torah today that had no educative component, I would have redefined what a *devar torah* is, given that it is literally a *devar*, “an utterance of” or “a matter of” *torah*. The word *torah*, which has the *shoresh*, or root, of *vav-reysh-yod*, or, better yet, *weak-reysh-weak*, comes from the same root of the word *moreh*—a teacher—or a *horeh*—a parent—or a *yoreh*—one who is shooting forth something. Although I realize it might not be intuitive, and it certainly isn't popular, I like to translate the word *torah* as meaning “projection.” *Torah* is not something static, but something that is a truth or value with a progressive trajectory that moves forward. Because a *devar torah* is “a matter of projection,” a *devar torah* is effectively a projectile. In the Rabbinical School of the

Jewish Theological Seminary, from which I recently was ordained as a rabbi, I was encouraged in my Communications class to try start off *divrey torah* with something other than “Shabbat shalom.” So I’d like to start over. Keeping in mind that a *devar torah* is a projectile, when I say “Incoming!” you say “Run!”

Incoming!

<Space for congregation to respond “Run!”>¹

Anyway, while we’re on the subject of motion, I want to consider the titular upward motion of *beha’alotekha*. Now, if I were to look exclusively at the Hebrew, I would translate the term *beha’alotekha* as

1. It could be that if we say “Run” in response to “Incoming,” we are better representing the way some people feel towards *divrey torah*. Though there are those who would run away from opportunities to learn Torah, there are those who run towards opportunities of learning *torah*.

something like “as you raise up.” The text reads: “בְּקַעֲלֹתֶיךָ²
:אֶת־הַנֵּרוֹת אֶל־מוֹלֵ פְּנֵי הַמְּנוּחָה וְאִירוּ שְׁבַעַת הַנֵּרוֹת:² which I’d
translate as “Let the seven lights of the Temple’s
candelabrum illuminate as you raise up the candles each
facing the center.”³ But I want to turn our attention away
from that candelabrum⁴ and turn our focus towards the
trajectory of *beha'alotekha*: both its physical and its
spiritual velocity. Even though I know how I would
translate the term *beha'alotekha* were I composing a
literal translation of the Torah that were informed by zero
exegetical commentaries, I want to be careful to note that

2. Numbers 8:2.

3. I am sure there are other meaningful ways to translate “אֶל־מוֹלֵ פְּנֵי הַמְּנוּחָה,” which feels awkwardly worded to me—literally something akin to “towards opposite the face of the candelabrum.”

4. For what it’s worth, “candelabrum” is a word that is only slightly more useful to conversations about a *menorah* than the word “phylacteries” is to conversations about *tefillin*.

beha'alotekha means far more than merely “as you raise up.” James Kugel—towards the end of *How To Read The Bible*⁵—advocates that when we read the Torah, we do the best justice to the text by reading it through the lens of what Kugel has termed “the pre-Bible.”⁶ That “pre-Bible” comprises the entirety of the oral and the written traditions of the Israelites and their Ancient Near Eastern neighbors. It is from our ancient Israelite ancestors and their Ancient Near Eastern neighbors to whom we can attribute many, if not all, of the *mythoi* (which is the plural of *mythos*) that stand at the foundations of our *TaNakh*, our so-called Hebrew Bible⁷. Rabbi Louis

5. And elsewhere.

6. See, for example, Benjamin Sommer, “Two Introductions to Scripture: James Kugel and the Possibility of Biblical Theology” in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100 (2010), 153-82, fn. 1 on p. 153; whereat Sommer cites James Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 894–95.

7. Even though it records words and phrases in Aramaic and other languages

Ginzberg preceded Kugel in noting the canonical import.

Ginzberg, who passed away when James Kugel was a mere 8 years old, highlighted that the early rabbis and the early Church Fathers shared many similar, if not identical, exegetical interpretations and eisegetical creative readings of their common text of the Old Testament (not that the Jews really needed a New Testament).⁸ Kugel would argue that *Midrash*—the classical process and corpus of exegetical, eisegetical and non-diegetic (or, effectively tangential) law, lore, values, visions, and speculations of the rabbis of old—must contain traces of that sacred pre-Bible. That is to say, in order for us to understand the ambiguities of the Bible's text, we need to study the Bible

8. Sommer, pp. 154-155.

in its context. For the religious seeker, reading the Bible alone in order to understand the Bible's context falls short of the goal of finding underlying meaning. Understanding the Torah must transcend any one moment in time. In order to study the pre-Bible, we have to read post-Biblical interpretations. And in order to understand the post-Biblical words of the rabbis and of other religious leaders, we need to investigate the textual, physical, and orally alleged artifacts of several millennia of the diverse Ancient Near Eastern cultures who funneled and filtered to our ancestors an ever-changing *torah*.⁹

9. Just as the pronunciation of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet have undoubtedly changed over the last four millennia, so too, the words, the phrases, the literary structures, and the lessons of the Torah have evolved for as long as there was ever a Torah of which to speak. These changes were perhaps the most dramatic before the Torah was first written down, and changes became continually less drastic once the Ben Asher school of Masoretes created the highly detailed *Masorah*—or transmission—of our Projectile—our *Torah*. The *Masorah*—the so-called proper vocalization, the so-called correct grammatical *ta'amey hammikra* (literally, the “tastes of the Scripture,” that figuratively now serve as the grammatico-musical stops and starts of our cantillation) is a work of tremendous creativity. The Masorah is the gramaticization and the

All of this is to say that we must expand our understanding of the word *beha'alotekha*; it means far more than just “as you raise up.” That is why Targum Onkelos chooses the word בְּאֲדֹלָקוּתָךְ (*be'adlakutakh*), “as you kindle,” ergo, “Let the seven lights of the Temple’s candelabrum illuminate as you **kindle** the candles each facing the center.”

What the Torah saw as a raising up of candles becomes the act of kindling candles for Onkelos. The eleventh century French commentator, Rashi gives us several glosses for the term *beha'alotekha*. First, he

aesthetic intoning of a previously unpunctuated, sometimes unspaced, collection of letters on parchment. But the *Masorah* is on the other hand the dulling of utter static—the cyrogenic freezing of a once-living religious text, the tight clasp of a scribal tradition holding captive written letters that used to stretch and to be stretched as the rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud in Berakhot 10a debated whether the line between the *tzadi* and the *reysh* was condensed as a short *yod* or enlongated a long *vav*: whether God was *tzadi-vav-reysh* a *tzur* (an unmovable Rock at the foundation of the completed earth), or *tzadi-yod-reysh*, a *tzayyar* (an ever-moving and an ever-moved Artist whose universe is but a work in progress).

clarifies for us what this *menorah* has to do with anything.

He notes the non-sequitur that proceeds from the dedication of each of the heads of the Israelite tribes at the end of last week's *parashah* as this week's *parashah* opens with Aaron lighting a candelabrum. Rashi notes that it the Levite tribe, to which Aaron the High Priest belonged, had no head who was initiated in the sacrificial rituals that concluded last week's *parashah*. God, says Rashi, has designated that Aaron's work and standing as a tribal leader to be even higher, above and beyond, the service and status of any other Israelite tribal chief.

Aaron's super-sacred status will be demonstrated in his caring for the *menorah* on a *tamid*—daily—basis:

Aaron's attention to the container of the mysterious but

sacred light that will illuminate the entirety of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. That's what we would learn from Rashi's gloss. In his second gloss, Rashi seems to agree with Onkelos' translation of the term *beha'alotekha*.

Rashi sees Aaron's assigned action of raising up candles as synonymous with "kindling." Of the word *beha'alotekha*, Rashi says "שֶׁהַלֶּהַב עוֹלָה," "for the flame itself has to rise"—from the candle itself. When Aaron the High Priest is raising up candles, he's raising the flame out of the candle itself.

The hasidic master Kalonymos Kelman HaLevi Epshtein was very interested in Rashi's commentary, both here and in general. His homiletic commentary on the Torah *Ma'or VaShemesh*—Luminary & Sun—highlights

Rashi's use of the term להב, *lahav* being the “flame” that is subsumed and presumed—the unspoken product of Aaron's kindling or raising of the candles. *Ma'or VaShemesh* argues that Rashi is introducing to us the unsung hero of the Temple rite surrounding the High Priest's lighting of the *menorah*. In the spirit that knowing the word *keves* and the word *kesev* both mean sheep,¹⁰ *Ma'or VaShemesh* follows the great rabbinic tradition, an especially mystically-inclined rabbinic tradition to be more precise, of believing that two words composed of the same letters, arranged in different orders in the two words, must be on some level synonymous. *Ma'or VaShemesh* therefore notes that the letters *lamed-heh-vet*,

10. Which *Ma'or VaShemesh* does not mention.

lahav (flame) can be rearranged as *heh-vet-lamed*, *hevel*

(vapor).¹¹ It is worth recalling that Ecclesiastes says that

everything is *hevel*—which we could translate as:

vaporous, airy, vain: the vanity of vanities: *hakkol havel*:¹²

all in the world today is vain.

But *Ma'or VaShemesh* sees a different breath of life inhabiting the word *hevel*, for *Ma'or VaShemesh* chooses

to rearrange the letters of the word again. He refers us to

gimatriyyah, the Hebrew numerological system whereby

every letter of the alphabet is equated with a number.¹³

Samuel Sambursky has written about *gimatriyyah* as a

rabbinic corruption of the Greek term from which we get

11. These teachings in Epshtein's name are drawn from near the beginning of the commentary in *Ma'or VaShemesh* on *Beha'alotekha*.

12. Ecclesiastes 1:2 and elsewhere.

13. *Ma'or VaShemesh*, *ibid.*.

geometry: literally the measuring of the earth.¹⁴ When the rabbis cite *gimatriyyah*, they are not coming up with random equations that have peripheral meanings to the words in question. The rabbinic turn to *gimatriyyah* is a serious calculus that seeks to discover the formulae that uphold God's universe as made manifest through the letters that compose our speech—especially the speech of what is to the rabbis, the most sacred tongue, *leshon hakkodesh*, Hebrew.

Let's rewind though. *Ma'or VaShemesh* notes that the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *heh*, which is the first letter of the word *hevel*, is representative in

14. Samuel Sambursky, “מקורו ומשמעותו של המונח 'גימטריה'” (“The Term Gematria: Source and Meaning”) in תרביץ מה: ג/ד (Tarbiz 25:3/4) (ניסן-אלול תשל"ו) (Nissan-Elul 5736 A.M.; spring-fall 4/1976 C.E.), pp. 268-271.

gimatriyyah of the number five. The number five has many sacred meanings to the Jews, but the one that is of greatest import here to *Ma'or VaShemesh*, is the meaning of five in a section of the addendum to the Zohar, the *Zohar Hadash's* commentary on the Book of Ruth, where the rabbis present their own analysis of Hebrew linguistics. They identify five sources of the sounds the human can produce when speaking the sacred tongue of Hebrew. There are the guttural sounds (אחה"ע); the labial sounds (בומ"ף); the palatal sounds (גיכ"ק); the lingual sounds (דטלנ"ת); and the dental sounds (זסצר"ש)¹⁵¹⁶. So, we understand the *heh* of the word *hevel* as representative

15. By the way, it seems that for the authors of the *Zohar Hadash*, the *reysh* must have been a rolled *r* like the one in Spanish, which just goes to show that Argentinian Jewry is speaking good Hebrew!

16. מדרש רות מאמר כמו שיש הוי"ה בז"א כן יש באדם

of the full plenum of Hebrew letters that can be spoken in order to design the sacred reality we discuss in Jewish language. But what do we make of the last two letters of the word *hevel*? We see the letter *vet*—which is numerologically equal to *bet*—and the letter *lamed*. *Ma'or VaShemesh* thoughtfully reminds us that the letter *bet* is the first letter of the *torah*, and the letter *lamed* is the last letter of the *torah*. The *vet* and the *lamed* of *hevel*, of vapor, contain within and between them the allusive and elusive ideals of our Torah. When we speak of *hevel* therefore, we are speaking of the holy reality we construct through speech and the holy ideal that is described within the sacred mystery of the Hebrew language as codified in our Torah. The word *hevel* alludes simultaneously to the

mechanics of the human production of the Hebrew language, and to the magic of the divine revelation of the Hebrew Bible. *Hevel* is the nexus of human thought and Divine thought: the process of the human vocal cords trying to sing along to the unknown song of the Divine spirit.

When we take a step back, we can consider *hevel* as the air that penetrates the inversion of itself: the allusive flame we call a *lahav*. To the best of my understanding of how fire works, fire is hardly composed of the same chemicals as air. Fire, in terms of the red-yellowish glow we might seek, is not so much a stable compound of which we can speak. Fire's glow is the unstable process of red-heated soot working its way towards the

decomposition—or affecting change—of other material and the yielding of combustion products—or new outcomes. And the fire of *lahav* needs air of *hevel*. That which will sustain the fire is actually *hevel*, for if air, along with gravity, were not present to keep the flame flickering, the fire would merely extinguish, and the inspiration we might draw and the warmth we might feel from the fire would be nought.¹⁷

So, on Graduation Shabbat, I am actually thinking a lot about the interplay between and the intermingling of *hevel* and *lahav*: the intangible supporting the unstable, the ineffable pronouncing the verbal, the sacred word

17. All misunderstandings here of how fire work are entirely my own. Any sense I've gotten for how fire does in fact work can be credited (in no particular order) to Karla Worrel, Lake Kubilius, Brian Albert, Kristine Dizon, Ben Dreyfus, and Kenneth Chan, who each chimed in upon my request for assistance.

bespeaking the sacred spark, the human tongue burning
with the passion of the flammable, and the scribal graft of
torah that cuts the wick just right—letting loose a fire
whose mystery is sustained cyclically and sickly by our
own breath, even though we could extinguish what we've
worked so hard to build and so hard to burn—only in
order to create something new.

Since graduation is the moving from grade to grade,
rising from gradation to gradation, going from degree to
degree; in Jewish language, this upward motion is a
kindling of yet another flame along the candelabrum in
the Temples of our lives. At Minyan M'at, we are—like
all Jewish communities—a *mikdash me'at*, a small
sanctuary—and we know well that there is always more

to know well. Graduation should never be confused with completion or consummation. Graduation should always be construed as rising to the occasion, rising from one occasion to another, and seeking a higher *da'at Adonai*—knowledge of the Divine—than the one with which we woke up yesterday. We have to let the seven candles that each light up the seven days of our week shine forth, with a reminder that we are always facing inward towards an unknowable, unfindable center of mystery that is the locus and focus of our *menorah*. We have to light the Divine spark and let its *hevel*-spirit carry us into worlds of knowledge, of *divrey torah*, of projectiles of indubitable yet ineffable truths that are yet to be revealed.

Yehi ratzon millefanayikh, May it be Your will,

Nishmat Kol Hai, the Breath of All Life: that new discoveries in our Torah be revealed at the liminal moments of transition when we transition from mystery to mystery: in times of instability, in times of stability, in the times when we long to rise higher to yet another gradation: in the inevitable and ever-sacred times of graduation.

Amen.