

Remember the smaller, lighter Torah scroll, whose delayed arrival in Australia was celebrated along with my delayed-arrival in Australia at our dual-*simcha* back in February?

Well, now that we have a lighter one, it turns out there's a bit of grumbling that happens on the weeks when we opt to use the older, heavier one. The one which, I've only recently learned, is affectionately known as "Old Leady." A fun little bit of NSTE legend and lore – bear it in mind for the next trivia night.

The grumbling isn't off base, of course. The scroll *is unbelievably* heavy, especially, as one *hagbah* pointed out, when we are at the beginning of Genesis or the end of Deuteronomy, when one arm of the lifter has to take the brunt of the weight.

In fact, it's heavier than any scroll I've ever lifted anywhere. And you know what happens if, Heaven forbid, it should drop, right? 40 days of fasting for the entire community who was entrusted with its guardianship. I knew a rabbi who actually fractured an index-finger mid-Torah service, as she rushed in to rescue a tilting scroll before it touched the ground. Dropping the Torah is serious business.

Why such stringency? Because, of course, it's sacred text. God's word, or God-inspired words, depending on what you believe happened at Sinai. That said, it's not *magic* text. It's not that we'll have bad luck if we drop it. The *spirit* of its words is what we *really* must protect. To worship the physical, written words themselves would amount to bibliolatry. And in this modern day and age, we have those same words preserved in countless other places—in our 7 other scrolls, for instance, or in books, even on the "cloud," funny enough. The words are easily replicable, regardless of what happens to one scroll in the sanctuary, so why do we all still tense up when we see a scroll start to slip or teeter? Why the broken finger? Why the fasting? Is dropping a scroll really so consequential?

In a word, yes.

In a sermon, here's how I see it.

There is a *spiritual* consequence. Because not the scroll itself, but the *carrying* of it, is deeply symbolic. The *bearing* of Torah, I'm coming to believe, is the very reason for our existence as a synagogue.

Because what we are bearing aren't just words, laws, the basis for a way of life... what we bear in that scroll is a narrative. And that narrative that we bear in turn bears something on *its* shoulders: hope. On this second of seven Shabbatot of Consolation between Tisha b'Av and the new year, it behooves us to recognize that the synagogue is the keeper and guardian of a sacred story about hope.

I remember during my first unit of pastoral education, working as student chaplain in a hospital, a patient once asked me why I thought religion was necessary. I fumbled over an answer I don't remember, but I'm sure it was dissatisfying to both of us, and then later that evening I consulted an authority. I posed the question to my liturgy and Midrash professor, Rabbi Richard Sarason, who responded that religion is necessary in the world because a religious *stance* is beneficial for the world. "What is that stance?" I pressed him. "A hopeful stance," he replied. His answer has always stuck with me, and I think ever since that night I've

been on the alert as to where and how that stance is articulated in our tradition. Where do we find hope in Judaism?

There are lots of places, it turns out. I find hope in the idea that in spite of his humbling stutter, Moses is chosen to be a prophet and leader. There's hope in the idea that even in the driest desert, one can still experience the spiritual high of Sinai. There's hope in the story of Abraham and Sarah, who thought their best days were behind them, only to learn that the barren can still bear fruit. There's hope in every psalm, hope in the idea that a messianic age is still to come, hope in a legal system based on justice, hope in HaTikvah—life emerging from the ashes.

And, there's hope in our *parasha*, *Ekev*, which suggests that God will take care of us as we traverse the desert, just as God fed us manna in the wilderness and [quote] “the clothes upon you did not wear out, nor did your feet swell these forty years.”<sup>1</sup> In our *parasha*, which goes on to paint the promise of a luxuriant and easier future: *Ki Adonai Eloheicha mviacha el eretz tovah, eretz nachalei mayim, ayanot ut'homot yotzim babik-ah uvahar*—“for Adonai your God is bringing you to a good land, a land of streaming waters, springs, and fountains, flowing through valleys and hills.” *Eretz chitah us'orah v'gefen ut'enah v'rimon, eretz-zeit-shemen udvash*—“a land of wheat and barley, vines and figs, pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey,” where you'll eat without struggle, where you'll lack nothing, a land of iron-ore rocks and copper-filled hills.<sup>2</sup> The desert is hell—no one disputes that—but look at what awaits you on the horizon... keep going.

And it's not just this week's *parasha*, of course. This is the story of every *parasha*. It's the *whole* story! My rabbi used to mourn the fate of Moses, who traversed all that way through the wilderness with his *kvetching* people in tow, never to enter the Promised Land before the Torah ended. “It's not so sad,” I'd try to console her, every year at the end of Devarim. “Because it's not a story about *arriving*. It's a story about how to survive and stay hopeful... in the wilderness.” Now that's a story worth telling every week for generations, isn't it?

And that's the story, our *parasha* teaches, that we MUST NEVER DROP. “Set these words to heart, bind them to your hand.” *V'limad'tem otam et b'neichem l'daber bam*—“teach them to your children, and teach *them* to say them.” This is what a synagogue does. Nowhere but here do we hear this story of hope repeated week after week—in the sanctuary, in our classrooms. We've institutionalized, ritualized the telling of a narrative of hope, in order to protect and preserve and transmit it, *forever*. In order to keep it from falling. For all the other activities a synagogue may do, THIS ONE IS CENTRAL. Like the tribe of Levites whose function, our *parasha* tells us, was *laseit et aron*—“to carry the Ark” which contained the tablets<sup>3</sup>—we, too, are the bearers of a sacred and life-sustaining narrative... of hope. This is the Torah we lift.

And *yes*, it's a heavy load to bear. This is weighty business. But it's our synagogue's business. Our community's load to bear. Whatever you believe happened on Sinai, we've been entrusted with a timeless and life-giving story about hope. God help us, should we ever let it fall.

Shabbat shalom.

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<sup>1</sup> Deut. 8:3-4

<sup>2</sup> Deut. 8:7-9

<sup>3</sup> Deut. 10:3; 10:8