

### Who Wrote the Torah - Part 3

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick, May 11, 2013

Today we are honoring our Beth El members who have been part of our shul for many years. They have seen a lot of changes here at Beth El. I was speaking recently with Eli Kahn, with whom I am very close, almost like a brother. (By the way, Eli became a grandfather two weeks ago. Tova had a girl in Israel and they named her Yehudit after Judy!) Eli and I were talking about the changes I made here at Beth El and he said his father would have, for the most part, approved. Whenever I would ask Rabbi Kahn (whose yahrzeit was three weeks ago) about something new I wanted to try he always asked the same thing, “Is it good for Beth El?” And if the answer was “yes”, he was all for it.

There are many things that have changed over the years both here at Beth El and also in the world as a whole. I was thinking recently about the movies and how my children can now watch a movie on their cell phones. If someone had told me twenty years ago when I started at Beth El that we’d soon be able to watch movies on our pocket phones I would not have believed it... Much has changed... But there are some things that don’t change very much, and one of them is, in fact, the movies. Since the Golden Age of cinema there is one plot line that keeps repeating over and over. It’s the same whether it’s Bogie and Bacal or Di Caprio and Scarlett Johanssen. It’s “Boy Meets Girl – Boy Loses Girl – Boy and Girl are Reunited.” Sometimes they live happily ever after like “Silver Linings Play Book”, and sometimes Boy Loses Girl Again, like the Great Gatsby or Romeo and Juliet. (Since Shakespeare’s time things haven’t changed that much.) And the reason this plot line works so well – far better than simply “Boy Meets Girl and Falls in Love” is that by losing the girl and THEN GETTING HER BACK, the boy appreciates the girl and their relationship in ways he never would have had he not suffered the loss. And I bring this up to you now because it dovetails nicely with our sermon series about “Who Wrote the Torah.” (Today is the third and final installment of that series.) And my answer to this question of “Who Wrote the Torah” goes something like that “Boy Meets Girl” theme I just mentioned. (Once you hear what I have to say I think the same might hold true for you, too.)

Once upon a time I learned that Gd wrote the whole Torah. The Torah I was going to read at my bar mitzvah was, letter for letter the same one we have had since Moses’ time. And I was fine with that. It made me feel good. It was “Boy Meets Girl.” It was an easy and enchanted time of life... Then I learned that the Torah seemed to have all kinds of human influences in it – that it could have had multiple authors who wrote it over time. And these theories, literary criticism, made good sense to me. I could see the proof for myself. Besides that, the more carefully I read the Torah the more I realized that some of what it said just didn’t seem that “heavenly” to me. (I always wished, for instance, that somewhere in all the laws, the Torah taught that slavery is always immoral. It doesn’t and that bugged me.) And while it made sense to think that human beings wrote the Torah (I mean, it felt intellectually honest) and therefore it had the flaws of human authorship, I couldn’t help but be a bit disappointed. I felt a sense of loss. That was my “Boy Loses Girl” period and it lasted well into my twenties.

But, as I said, what makes the “Boy Meets Girl” plot twist so interesting is that when Boy DOES Get Girl Back he appreciates her more than he did when they were together the first time. He has a deeper appreciation because he has had to endure the loss. And that’s where I am at theologically now. I am stronger in my faith for having gone from enchantment, to doubt, to faith renewed (albeit altered). So now I don’t believe that the Torah was entirely dictated to Moses; that not one letter was added or deleted from his divine stenography. But I also don’t believe that the whole thing is just a great work of literature, entirely man-made. Here’s what I believe: I believe in a historical Moses who led our People out of Egypt and that Moses had an encounter with Gd in the desert. And some of that encounter (how much I can and will never know) is indeed recorded in The Torah in the ark behind me. But some of it was also added later as that first encounter was “fleshed out”. I don’t know if it was just the 10 Commandments that Moses wrote, or just the Shema, or most of the Book of Exodus. I just don’t know. All I know is that the impact of that encounter set off a ripple effect of sensing the divine in the world that continues to this day.

And I’ll tell you honestly, it took me a long time to get to where I am today. I was a child full of enchanted faith. But then I got older and became a skeptical young man. And now, in my middle age I have learned to be comfortable with my faith; accepting of some divine and supernatural intervention, and skeptical about other parts. In other words, my relationship with the text has evolved as my life evolved. I couldn’t be comfortable with miracles until I saw some with my own eyes. And maybe it was the result of giving my heart over to another person in love. Maybe it was the result of becoming a parent and raising children of my own, but something inside me changed; my heart and eyes were opened wider, and the miraculous, the divine, the heavenly became real to me in ways I had never imagined. I came to know Gd in a whole new way and found Gd in the Torah in ways I had never anticipated. But it took time to come see the world that way, to see our “holy” text that way.

As an adult, you don’t have to be taught to be skeptical. I find that that comes naturally. But to see the divine in the ordinary takes practice. And it is a struggle to find the proper balance, between the miraculous and the mundane. But you know what, all of life is like that. You have to learn how to find the balance between the things you simply accept on faith and the things you question. Finding that kind of stability; the natural and supernatural rhythm of your life takes time... So how do you know what the proper balance is? There’s only one way to find it: Experience.

Every encounter with Torah is a deeply personal one. You see in it what you are willing to see. The contours of your own mind shape your experience of the text. If there is a feeling of awe and wonder and holiness in your life, well, you tend to see more of that in Torah. If you are searching for deep wisdom and timeless guidance, well, you tend to find that, too. And sometimes, (in fact, I suspect, quite often) the very experiences that cause you to question your faith also make you want to reengage and appreciate Torah even more. You may start out with a complete and unquestioning faith like I did. But then you go to the school of hard knocks, you suffer a loss, you see suffering in the

world, you are overwhelmed by the unpredictability of the world. And what you hunger for is not the new and different and exciting, but the familiar, the reassuring, the stable and enduring. That return after questioning and skepticism is a sign of spiritual maturity.

And that's what makes this Shabbat so special. We are honoring those who have put in the time and effort, who have the life experience to have a deeper faith; a faith and commitment that can only come through experience. There is a reason why we venerate our elders even though society worships eternal youth. There is no substitute for life experience when it comes to making sense of the world, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually.

Torah has been lovingly passed down from generation to generation not only by those who have complete and unquestioning faith, but also (and perhaps more often) by those who have struggled to find meaning and keep coming back to the wonder and awe, the mystery of our sacred traditions and our holy Torah. That is what they have passed down to those who have followed.

And so today we not only honor them, but we symbolically reenact that process of handing Torah from one generation to the next...

(At this point our Torah passing ceremony was explained and began...)