

The Path of Promise Turns Back to Creation

The Torah is genius on many levels. Among them is the curious and indispensable feature that the story is over before it ends.

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Moses overlooks the Promised Land, miraculously viewing it from north to south, east to west and then dies without stepping foot inside. God personally buries him in a secret grave, and the Hebrews mourn him thirty days. The Torah ends with unparalleled praise of “the great might and awesome power Moses displayed before all Israel” (Deut. 34:12). This brings a fitting conclusion to the saga of our people’s greatest prophet, but the larger story is profoundly incomplete. Ever since the twelfth chapter of Genesis, when God swore to Abraham, “To your offspring will I give this land” (Gen. 12:7), we’ve been waiting for the Hebrews to settle Canaan. And now, as they prepare to cross the Jordan and fulfill their long-awaited promise, the plot suspends in midair.

And this, I suggest, is central to the religious message of the Torah.

The Torah is about incompleteness, recognizing that dreams of paradise can never truly be fulfilled.

The Torah is about wandering and wilderness, characterizing the People of Israel as fundamentally dislodged though ever yearning for settlement and security.

And the Torah is about prophecy and law, purity and faith, ruminations on the primordial past and mythic reinventions of who we might become. It is *not* a record of events as they occurred, and it cuts off sharply before venturing into territory that might start to resemble the life and times of its authors, readers, and heirs. Through its establishment as the most essential scripture of the Jewish People, the Torah teaches us how to read and understand all other Biblical texts, namely, to continually remind ourselves that memory is not history, stories are not facts, and morality is at heart an ongoing quest for truth rather than a simple assertion of right and wrong.

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On Simchat Torah, we move straight from the wilderness wandering to the first day of creation. And there we see another fundamental Jewish value, imbedded in the cycle of returning to Genesis at Deuteronomy’s end. To see it, though, requires envisioning the alternative.

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Buried in the verses about Moses's death is a foreshadow of the story to come – a single sentence in a chapter otherwise all about Moses: “Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands upon him; and the Israelites heeded him, doing as the Eternal had commanded Moses” (Deut. 34:9). This is the hero ready to take the mantle of leadership and bring the Hebrews into Canaan. The next book of the Bible bears his name, and the Book of Joshua begins:

After the death of Moses, the servant of the Eternal, the Eternal said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' attendant: “Moses, my servant, is dead. Get up and cross the Jordan, you and all this people, to the land I am giving to the Children of Israel” (Joshua 1:1-2).

And thus commences the story often referred to as the Conquest. Joshua reenacts many of the Torah's most iconic scenes, including the Splitting of the Sea (Josh. 4:23) and the revelation at the Burning Bush (Josh. 5:13-15), though the bulk of the book is devoted to recounting the purported dispossession of Canaan's native inhabitants. Time and again, the Israelites annihilate a city – slaying its inhabitants, impaling (or hanging) its king, and torching its buildings to the ground. In such a way *וַיִּכָּה יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֶת-כָּל-הָאֶרֶץ*, “Joshua smote the entire land” (Josh. 10:40; see also 11:16 and 11:23 and Chapter 12).

Reading as the Torah has taught us to read, we see these tales as myths crafted to depict the Hebrews as impossibly strong. The Children of Israel claim through God's martial potency the land promised to their ancestors, justifying – in a world where might makes right – Israelite habitation in Canaan. Archaeology has proven these texts are fantasy, though reading them closely on their own terms reveals the same.¹ It is a vast and violent “just so” story, in which the Israelites reign supreme.

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But that's not the way the Torah goes.

Our reading practice is to follow the death of Moses with the creation of the world, to remind ourselves immediately that Israel is only one of many nations who share space on this glorious earth. The Biblical text is there, warts and all, but the Torah pulls us away. Simchat Torah is a sacred diversion, pushing us from the particular to the universal and contextualizing our national history and myth within the larger workings of the world.

A foundational midrash teaches, *וַיִּבְרָא אָדָם יְחִידִי ... מִפְּנֵי שְׁלוֹם הַבְּרִיּוֹת*, “The human being was created singly ... for the sake of peace among creation so that one person could not say to their fellow, ‘my ancestor was greater than your ancestor’” (M. Sanhedrin 4:5). In other words, one of the principal lessons of Genesis is that Jews are

¹ For instance, God's words to Joshua in 13:1 suggest that the supposed conquest as depicted in Josh. 10-12 was exaggerated. (See also Judges 1:27ff.) On the granular level, to take one more example, Joshua 15:63 admits that Jebusites remain in Jerusalem despite their purported defeat in Chapter 10.

no better than anyone else. Our story is unique and precious – to us – but it is not one of superiority. To be chosen is not to be better; it is simply to be special among the species.

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A straightforward reading of the Book of Joshua might lead us to think otherwise. Yet we are tempered by the Torah's constant return to the universal, conditioned to see the rest of the Bible through Torah-tinted glasses. When texts collide, the Torah wins, and the wisdom of Simchat Torah prevails. Our foundational orientation is one of searching and striving, not achievement and success, and the timeless national project of the Jews is ever to humbly recall that – though we see ourselves as beloved in God's eyes – we know that God sees and loves everyone else as well.

Simchat Torah turns us away from the temptation of taking what we want. May we accept the wisdom of the day, honoring our place in the grander scope of all the world.