

A D'VAR TORAH FOR BEHA'ALOTCHA: THE SEARCH FOR EVOCATIVE HISTORY

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This essay originated as a d'var Torah, delivered at Congregation Beth Israel in Charlottesville, Virginia on June 7, 2014. A d'var Torah means "a word of Torah," and is usually a homily on the weekly Torah reading. For the week of June 7, the Torah portion (also called the Parashat) was Beha'alotcha (Numbers 8:112:16).

In Parashat Beha'alotcha, chapter eight of Numbers describes the ritual purification of the Levites as a sacrificial offering to God. The passage goes on to establish that the Levites are eligible to work between the ages of twenty-five and fifty, and it ends with their job description, which is to assist the priests in the tent of meeting.

Levitical service also happens to be a key topic in the book of Chronicles, but there is a big difference. In Chronicles, the Levites, not the priests, receive the lion's share of responsibilities. This fact is owing to the way Chronicles portrays David and his special interest in the Levites. In the book of Samuel, David has no hand in the Temple construction—that task falls instead to Solomon (2 Sam 7:4-16). In Chronicles, however, David undertakes all the preparations, including the organization of the Levites

(1 Chr 22-23). He lowers the minimum age of service to twenty (1 Chr 23:24, 27; 2 Chr 31:17) and expands the scope of their tasks to include serving as officers, gatekeepers, bakers, and musicians (1 Chr 23:4-5, 28-32; 2 Chr 17:8-9).

Of these duties, the most extraordinary is the Levites' obligation to make music. According to David, the Levitical singers and musicians are not only a divinely authorized choir; they are also prophets (1 Chr 25:1). David's expansion of the Levites' role may have served to affirm and sanctify the ritual practices of the Chronicler's day.¹ Some speculate that the Chronicler himself was a Levite and perhaps even a member of the Levitical choir.²

In this and many other respects, the author of Chronicles was a true original. Writing in the Second Temple period, after the composition of the books of Genesis through Kings, he composed a history of Israel that reconfigured and supplemented these earlier accounts. To the extent that modern biblical scholars consider the treatment of the monarchy in Samuel/Kings to reflect, in some sense, real events, they usually consider Chronicles to be less trustworthy. The correspondence in Chronicles between faithfulness and God's favor appears to follow a deliberate theological design. They therefore debate whether the Chronicler was a

¹ In the eighteenth century, when a forceful faction within the German church rejected playing musical instruments in worship, Johann Sebastian Bach relied on Chronicles to defend it. In the margin of his Bible, alongside the description of the cymbals, harps, and lyres with which the Temple musicians performed their sacred service, Bach wrote, "NB. Dieses Capital ist das wahre Fundament aller gottfälliger Kirchen Music (N.B. This chapter is the true foundation of all God-pleasing church music)." (Robin A. Leaver, *J. S. Bach and Scripture: Glosses from the Calov Bible Commentary* [St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1985], 93).

² Gerhard von Rad, "The Levitical Sermon in I and II Chronicles," in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. E. W. Trueman Dicken, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 267-80; Morton Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics That Shaped the Old Testament* (London: SMC Press, 1987), 3; Simon J. de Vries, "Moses and David as Cult Founders in Chronicles," *JBL* 107 (1988), 636.

historian or a storyteller.³ For my part, I would characterize the Chronicler as a “history-teller”—meaning, he made Israel’s past into a story worth remembering and repeating.⁴

Why tell another history? The Chronicler may well have been attempting to revitalize his community’s connection with its sacred origins. Through selective recollection and strategic forgetting, the Chronicler mined the received tradition for elements that possessed untapped significance for his time and circumstances. An example is Chronicles’ David. Its Torah-observant king is very different from the flawed warrior who commits adultery and worse in Samuel. Nevertheless, as in Chronicles, Samuel’s David also sometimes displays great piety. In a poetic section at the end of 2 Samuel, David says, “The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me...I was blameless before him, and I kept myself from guilt” (2 Sam 22:21, 24a; cf. Ps 18:21; 24 [Eng. Ps 18:20; 23]). It is this David that the Chronicler retrieves and brings to life.

In the end, Chronicles leaves us an account in which David, Solomon, and the Levites—looking familiar yet nonetheless very different—hold center stage. The patriarchs, Moses, and the exodus are pushed far into the background.

Remembrance of the past has always been vital for the maintenance of Jewish identity, but determining what constitutes Jewish identity in the modern era has become increasingly difficult. The proliferation of sects

³ Scholars who consider the Chronicler to be, in some fashion, a historian include Gary N. Knoppers, “History and Historiography: The Royal Reforms,” in *The Chronicler as Historian*, eds. M. Patrick Graham, Kenneth G. Hoglund and Steven L. McKenzie, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 178-203; Isaac Kalimi, *The Reshaping of Ancient Israelite History in Chronicles* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns), 407; and Sara Japhet, *I & II Chronicles*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 32. Steven Schweitzer, however, argues Chronicles is best classified as utopian literature, the goal of which is to foster reevaluation of the present in light of an idealized past. In this assessment, Chronicles’ record of events is a literary foil (*Reading Utopia in Chronicles* [New York: T&T Clark, 2007], 29-30).

⁴ The term comes from Walter Benjamin’s essay, “The Storyteller” (Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000*, ed. Dorothy J. Hale, [Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2006], 370).

within Judaism makes it is nigh impossible to reach a collective agreement on who is a Jew, and there is much disagreement about the status of the Torah. Ours is an age of widespread disaffection from revelation. As a result, many twenty-first-century Jews are turning not to sacred history, but to secular history. The hope is that the recounting of the Jewish experience through the ages without the apparatus of revelation will sustain a sense of community in the present. These narratives would be no different in kind than professional historians' surveys of the Greeks, the Russians, or the English. The question, however, remains: once one removes a sense of divine purpose and Jewish election, will the mere act of remembering be enough?

After all, left to its own devices, secular history does not play favorites. In the bid for universal and objective truth, modern historiography grants no special status to any individual or people. Secular history also often contradicts traditional remembrance. Contemporary biblical scholarship routinely challenges conventional wisdom, be it the Bible's contention that the Israelites went down to Egypt or that there ever was a king named David.⁵

What, then, is the remedy? Many religious Jews respond by asserting that cultural Jews—meaning those who look to secular history for their Jewish identity—are living off the capital of their forebears. Without revelation in the mix, the argument continues, it is only a matter of time

⁵ Robert Coote declares that "the periods of the patriarchs, exodus, conquest, or judges...never existed" (Robert B. Coote, *Early Israel: A New Horizon* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990], 2-3). J. Maxwell Miller and John Hayes contend that "the main story line of Genesis-Joshua...is an artificial and theologically influenced literary construct" (*A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986], 78). In an article for *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Philip Davies claimed, "I am not the only scholar who suspects that King David is about as historical as King Arthur" ("'"House of David' Built on Sand: The Sins of the Biblical Maximizers," *BAR* 20 [July/August 1994]: 55). And he is right—at least about not being alone in his beliefs. Niels Lemche and Thomas Thompson, in their review of the archaeological evidence for David's existence, conclude, "David may have to go..." ("Did Biran Kill David? The Bible in the Light of Archaeology," *JOT* 64 [1994]: 21).

before cultural Jews assimilate.⁶ Such an observation offers no solution, however, other than to say “Believe!” to those who do not. If only believing were so easy.

The modern Jewish historian Yosef Yerushalmi was concerned with trying to help secular Jews remain Jewish. As he writes in his beautiful book *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, “Those who are alienated from the past cannot be drawn to it by explanation alone; they require evocation as well.”⁷ He urges his fellow Jewish historians to look at points of rupture—times of near annihilation or radical disorientation—that Jews have endured throughout their history. In reviewing how Jews have come to grips with such moments, Yerushalmi believes historians may find something new and powerful that can seal the bonds of Jewish unity and identity today.⁸ I take this to mean that Yerushalmi thinks that a closer look at reformulations of tradition may bring to light neglected memories that are meaningful for the present. In continuing to look to history rather than to the Bible to identify the constituent elements of modern Jewishness, however, Yerushalmi runs into a fundamental difficulty. The historical chain of Jewish tradition transmission—even when reformulated—ultimately leads back to revelation, whereas a reading of the full Bible, paradoxically, may or may not.

Chronicles illustrates what an updating of Jewish history within the framework of received tradition looks like. The Chronicler speaks to the people of Israel in the aftermath of the traumatic events of the Babylonian exile. His retelling is particularly compelling because it recharges the same battery, so to speak, as the tradition it adapts. Even though the Chronicler presents a new version of events, his account, no less than that of Genesis

⁶ See, for example, Antony Gordon and Richard Horowitz, “Will Your Grandchildren Be Jews?” *Judaism Online*. Cited 18 July 2014. Online: <http://www.simpletoremember.com/articles/a/WillYourGrandchildrenBeJews/>. See also Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 51.

⁷ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 100.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

or Samuel or Kings, continues to bear out the same theme: God's involvement in the salvation of Israel.

Perhaps, then, what is needed is a deeper consideration of the source of all tradition. It is in the Bible itself that one discovers a ground for evocative secular Jewish history. There are many occasions in the biblical narrative when people seem to act outside the sphere of divine oversight. The best known is found in the book of Esther, which famously bears no mention of God. Here we read of assimilated Jews who, when threatened by Haman, band together, save themselves, and commemorate their victory with a self-generated covenant. This story could now serve as a collective autobiography: Jews are Jews by virtue of what they do with and for each other while living as world citizens. And in fact, many Jews today are likewise drawn to the idea of recounting persecutions and triumphs as a basis for generating solidarity.

In the account in Chronicles, when David nears the end of his life, his final address to God is a haunting and poignant reflection: "For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers. Our days on earth are as a shadow, and there is no hope" (1 Chr 29:15). The Bible contains its own mix of absolute faith and scorching doubt. In the search for a common Jewish identity in the modern era, perhaps the Torah is the place to begin after all.